

## 8 Urban Events Under the Post-Political Condition

### (Im)Possibilities for Emancipation in a Small-Scale City of Switzerland

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#### Introduction

Cities are spaces of imbrication of forms of belonging, constituting a platform for identification and for articulating world culture locally. Anne Raulin suggests that urban identity is confronted with new challenges by being “faced with the abstraction of national identities somehow outdated . . . , faced with a certain decline of class identities, faced with the distrust against ethnic and religious identities suspected of fundamentalism” (2001: 170). In this chapter, we investigate the urban event *La Grande Table* in order to show the actors’ appropriation and redefinition of public space through the performance of multiple belongings. The highlighting of translocal and transnational ties during this event leads us to interrogate these practices as forms of emancipation and community building at the local scale under the post-political condition.

Urban events represent privileged entry points for researching processes of co-construction of social and political spaces. Indeed, events hold transformative power as they appear in a particular time-space, enabling the staging, negotiation and reconstruction of urban identities (Salzbrunn 2011b). *La Grande Table* in Morges constitutes an event displaying culinary specialties and multicultural folklore promoted under the label of “Morges World City: flavours from here and there” (CCSE 2014). The biannual celebration is organized by the city’s Swiss-Foreigner Consultative Commission, following the integration policies of the public authorities, and provides a space for strategies of visibilization for different national communities represented in Morges. *La Grande Table* is organized in collaboration with the ‘foreigners’<sup>1</sup> affected by these policies, and the event uses a participatory dimension.

Numerous studies have investigated processes of migrant settlement in Swiss metropolises by focusing on integration, political participation or social cohesion. Consequently, the urban environment is considered mere scenery for individuals to inscribe their presence upon. For several years, however, certain scholars have suggested that the city should also be considered a research object in its own right. While authors question

the emancipatory potential and ambivalences of (urban) spaces, they also highlight actors' capacity to perform emancipatory acts despite hegemonic city planning practices.

Based on interviews and ethnographic observations carried out during and around *La Grande Table*,<sup>2</sup> we interrogate the way public space is thought, negotiated or consumed by its various actors—from organizers and craftspeople to performers and the public. We finally seek to understand if this event has emancipatory potential capable of changing power relations on a local level.

According to Wilson and Swyngedouw, “in post-politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance” (2015: 6). In this context, we ask to what extent *La Grande Table*, which symbolizes a participatory process aimed at facilitating foreigners' integration, is a mere expression of the post-political condition, or if it is actually repoliticized by its protagonists through the staging of (multiple) belongings as a practice of emancipation.

### ***La Grande Table* in Morges: Implementing Integration Policies in a Super-Diverse Town**

Morges, a small town of 15,400 residents (Statistiques Vaud) in the Canton of Vaud, is part of the broader metropolitan region around Lake Geneva. Switzerland's official entry into the Schengen Agreement in 2008 as well as a liberal tax policy aimed at attracting multinational firms have led to a considerable diversification of the population in Morges. In 1974, about 24% of the city's population was of foreign nationality, but the number had climbed to 35.4% in 2014 (Statistiques Vaud). While immigration to the Swiss Confederation during the post-war boom years was predominantly characterized by male labour migration, comprised of mainly Italian and Spanish blue-collar workers, as well as German blue- and white-collar workers (Efionayi et al. 2005), family reunification policies in the 1970s contributed to the settlement of migrant populations (D'Amato 2008). The 1990s were characterized by the arrival of refugees fleeing conflict in former Yugoslavia and a decline of labour migration due to the economic crisis (*Ibid.*). At the same time, with the neoliberal turn, selective immigration policies have increasingly aimed at attracting highly skilled professionals (Afonso 2006). In the Canton of Vaud, more than half of all newcomers are highly skilled migrants from EU (European Union) and EFTA (European Free Trade Association) countries (Statistique Vaud 2014). Meanwhile, matters of immigration have been growing increasingly tense as right-wing parties have put this theme at the centre of public debates since the 1960s, and the system of direct democracy has given them considerable influence on immigration policymaking (Skenderovic 2007).

*La Grande Table* can be seen as a response to increasingly tense politicization of diversity (Vertovec 2007) by displaying multicultural folklore that

promotes the consumption of cultural otherness through shared food, dance and clothing. The event is organized by the Swiss-Foreigner Consultative Commission of Morges, founded in 1981, which counts 22 members of Swiss and foreign nationality who, according to the Commission's website, constitute "representatives from the political class, professional and confessional milieus and associative and athletic spheres active in Morges" (<http://ccse-morges.net/pages/qui.html> [Accessed 4 October 2014]).

Chaired by Yves Paccaud, municipal councillor and member of the Socialist party, the Consultative Commission implements the recommendations on integration of the Federal Commission on Migration. One of its objectives is the "fostering of mutual recognition of all residents of the region of Morges, wherever they come from" (*Ibid.*). The Commission also seeks to "offer spaces and moments of conviviality" by organizing regular "cultural activities" such as "tropical nights" or "evenings of discovery" (*Ibid.*) featuring different countries for each event. Coordinated by a sub-commission comprised of a small group of active core members of the Consultative Commission, *La Grande Table* is the main event. Renato Santacruz is in charge of the artistic programme of the event, and he emphasizes that his engagement is not of a political nature as the Commission acts in a consultative capacity without exercising decision-making rights.

We consider that the Commission's approach holds a paternalistic dimension, not only because of the hegemonic conception of conviviality, but also because it holds a vision of integration inherited from the 1970s when integration was conceived in terms of assimilation into a purportedly homogeneous national body. The shift towards the diversity paradigm (Salzbrunn 2014) means society is increasingly thought of as being intrinsically heterogeneous and that public policies should aim at promoting equality among residents regardless of their origins, gender or sexual orientation in order to favour social cohesion. Diversity policies refrain from the use of the term 'migration' and adopt a semantic shift towards 'cosmopolitanism'. Furthermore, despite the local authorities' awareness of the changes in migration patterns, the national integration policies still reproduce their own bias by almost exclusively addressing the low-skilled labour migrants from southern countries. The highly skilled professionals seem to not be framed as migrants and do therefore not face the same hegemonic injunction to integration (Faist 2013). This raises the question of the local potential for emancipation that is expressed symbolically and materially under these conditions.

We define an emancipatory process as one that occurs when actors are able to act outside of or redefine the categories they are assigned to. We will see that *La Grande Table* can be considered as a stage where multiple belongings are expressed and perceived, thereby offering a space for emancipatory action and incorporation processes (Salzbrunn 2011a). But how can the notion of cosmopolitanism allow us to rethink the emancipatory potential of displaying multiple belongings? Martha Nussbaum (1994: para IV), referring to Diogenes Laertius's story about the marriage between Crates

and Hipparchia, states that “the life of the cosmopolitan, who puts right before country, and universal reason before the symbols of national belonging, need not be boring, flat, or lacking in love”. However, from an emic point of view, *La Grande Table* is full of various signs of national belonging (like flags). Consequently, we explore the ways in which the appropriation of urban space by different groups of migrants as well as non-migrants can be read as a form of self-empowerment, despite of the paternalistic framing of the event.

### **Performing Multiple Belonging in Urban Public Space: The Use of Food, Dance and Clothes**

The seventh edition of *La Grande Table* took place on a rainy Sunday in June 2014 on the main street of the pedestrian city centre framed by the temple of Morges on one end and the Château on its other. The official programme announced 40 food stands and cultural performances provided by nine sociocultural groups and associations, representing approximately 25 nationalities. Unlike the first edition of the event, where one long banquet-like table was set up in the middle of the street while all the food stands were lined up on one side of the road, the following editions have featured interspersed food stands and tables. Due to an electric overcharge caused by all the booths drawing from the same power line, the organizers were forced to rearrange the setting of public space. The original conception of the popular street event came from the adaptation of a Barcelonian version over a decade ago. Today, the appropriation of the city space by the vendors and sociocultural associations offering food and folklore influences the visitor’s interpretation of space and precipitates the practice of grouping, which the original conception of the event sought to avoid.

The notion of conviviality is key and is used to advertise the event by highlighting the idea of an encounter and ideal interaction with the ‘exotic other’ through the shared consumption of food and folklore. Given that the aim of the event is to “facilitate the integration of migrant populations” (CCSE 2014: 3), *La Grande Table* incarnates the idea of incorporating foreign nationals through their normalization (Régnier 2006). The proposed consumption of an exoticized alterity seeks to encourage curiosity for the other, rather than its rejection, by offering an experience of the extraordinary through the transgression of food norms (*Ibid.*) for the specific time-space of the event. Indeed, the organizers emphasize that they wish to display a great variety of culinary specialties and folklore attractions. Thus, the most highly sought-after artists are those coming from the most faraway places, as Renato Santacruz explains (personal interview conducted by Aleman, 24 September 2014). For each edition, the organizers seek to display culinary and artistic exoticism. There are norms and discussions about which food stands may or may not be accepted in order to avoid repetition and the ‘ordinary’. This year, for example, the organizers reduced the amount of

Asian food on offer, as it has become over-represented and is a type of cuisine already easily visible in public space, therefore reducing its exotic attraction, according to the coordinator (*Ibid.*).

Two associations are particularly visible during the event and provide folk dance, music and culinary specialties since its foundation. The *Cultural Association Teuta* from Lausanne attracts attention through their display of a national community by proudly presenting their national flag, tightly tucked to their food stand and regularly waved during parades. Performing 'traditional dances' from Kosovo and offering food such as *burek* and *qebapa*, *Teuta* have made themselves visible through their folkloric clothes and political symbolism as well as their relatively high number of members, who gather around their food stand and regularly parade up and down the street. Interestingly, no religious signs of belonging are visible, which stands in contrast with our observations the night before. After a long day of setting up tables and food stands for the following day, the Commission invited all volunteers to join them for some appetizers and wine. We observed that the Kosovarian volunteers didn't eat the appetizers made with pork; we attempted to address this apparent 'oversight', when they quietly shrugged: "They should know better, but perhaps it's best this way" (Kosovarian volunteer, personal communication, 28 June 2014). This episode is emblematic for the way groups and individuals with a Muslim background adopt invisibilization strategies specifically within the context of the Canton of Vaud. This observation of invisible religious signs of belonging, especially amongst Muslims from the Balkans, who are the largest group of Muslims in Switzerland, confirms previously published findings from our research project (see Salzbrunn 2016).

The *Folklore Group Coração do Minho* from Geneva is equally visible and performs multiple and transnational belonging. They represent a region of Northern Portugal and the Swiss Confederation by waving both national flags as well as the emblem of the association visibly during processions. These two associations are intentionally chosen to be part of the festivities time and again because, as Renato Santacruz explains (personal interview conducted by Aleman, 24 September 2014), they bring visitors from other parts of the country such as Geneva, Yverdon or sometimes even as far as Zurich with them. Thus, the Group *Coração do Minho* arrives with two coach buses full of members of the association but also of the Portuguese community, who tag along in hopes of being able to enjoy the music, sounds and flavours from their home country. These two groups not only reflect the population of the town, where Portuguese and Balkan nationals have a significant presence among foreign residents, but they are also considered an important pillar for the symbolic and economic effectiveness of the event.

Borce Tupanoski, of Macedonian origin and one of the youngest members of the Commission, also stresses how much he enjoys reviving flavours "from home" during the time-space of the event (personal communication, 29 June 2014). This tendency can be observed at several places such as the

Peruvian or Dominican booths. The *Macedonian Association Aleksandar Makedonski* from Yverdon set up their food stand right beside the stand of the Commission. Branislav Trajchevski, the president of the association, speaks with a heavy accent and a calm voice that doesn't conceal his enthusiasm when talking about his country of origin and the work of the association. Besides his involvement in the community, he is also a member of the Swiss-Foreigner Consultative Commission in Yverdon and thus takes part in numerous sociocultural events throughout the canton. The president states that the mission of his association not only consists in displaying Macedonian culture, preparing *cevapcici* and offering imported wine at *La Grande Table*. He also stresses his ambition to enable local Macedonian nationals to get to know their place of residence by organizing excursions to the Swiss countryside, when the association's small budget allows it, and by offering French and Macedonian language classes.

While dishes sold at numerous food stands run by associations evoke the image of a home-cooked meal, the six Southeast Asian and Indian food stands, which include Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese and Singaporean cuisine, are all run by professional restaurants. Here, no groups can be found gathering around the stands chatting, consuming or listening to music.



*Figure 8.1* The Cultural Association *Tenta* performing 'traditional' dances and music from Kosovo, visibly displaying their national flag

Photograph by Barbara Dellwo, 2014



Figure 8.2 The Folklore Group *Coração do Minho* parading in folkloric costumes, holding the logo of the association featuring the Swiss and Portuguese national flags

Photograph by Serjara Aleman, 2014



Figure 8.3 Food stand of the Macedonian Association *Aleksandar Makedonski* displaying not only the Swiss and Macedonian national flags but also the flag of the canton Vaud, with its slogan '*Liberté et Patrie*' (Liberty and Patria)

Photograph by Serjara Aleman, 2014



*Figure 8.4 Ly Thành Asian catering restaurant advertising professional menus*  
Photograph by Serjara Aleman 2014

By advertising their menus, the restaurants pursue a commercial strategy and display business logos rather than symbols of (national) belonging. In this case, the foreign nationals gain from cultural difference, positioning themselves in a market of ethnic consumption. This might be understood as appropriating the strategy of marketing urban diversity, implemented through local policies used to manage and capitalise on cultural difference. Thus, the restaurants contribute to the professionalization of the event. As the security and hygienic requirements (e.g. the installation of a refrigerator) expand, vendors' expenditures rise to fulfil them. Consequently, non-profit associations and craftspeople have difficulties affording the costs of setting up a food stand and are therefore increasingly excluded from the event.

### **Urban Events as Spaces for Emancipation?**

The approach that we propose accounts for the co-constructions of social spaces involving a multitude of actors, such as members of the city council, craftspeople, vendors, residents and visitors who, at the time of the event, rearrange the defined borders of identity and territory. Events are spaces of privileged observation to analyze social ties as the result of common actions of individuals in a social space (Salzbrunn 2010) as they manifest a form



of social bond more or less ephemeral, as they crystallize the social (in)visibility of a cause (e.g. the national project of the Kosovarian association or the apparent transnational nationalism of the Macedonian association) or as an occasion whose social consequences can have a more or less important impact.

The multiplicity of actors needs to be taken into account in order to understand the multi-scalar dimension of *La Grande Table* and provide a situational analysis of each actor involved. This leads us to raise the question of the emancipatory potential of this event: What are the power dynamics at stake and which strategies are deployed by the different actors in order to gain agency and empower themselves?

*La Grande Table* pursues a double objective: first, to “facilitate the integration of the foreign population” (CCSE 2014: 3); second, to enhance the attractiveness of the city by promoting an image of openness in the sense of urban marketing of diversity. This double aim results in a variety of configurations during the event: sociocultural groups are present because their food is considered attractive, others because of their dance and folklore, others because their community is numerically important to include. Consequently, there are several Southeast Asian, Indian, Turkish, Syrian and Italian restaurants and catering services. These are already established businesses, occupying an ethnic niche and therefore attesting to their attractiveness. In the same way, there is a market for a specific kind of folklore performed at *La Grande Table*, such as Flamenco or belly dance. Other sociocultural groups and associations, whose cultural or culinary productions appear to be less popular, are nevertheless present due to other reasons: because of their numerical weight, e.g. the Portuguese, the largest foreign community in Morges, or because of their access to power positions, e.g. the Macedonians, who are numerically few but were invited by Borce, a member of the Commission. Likewise, there were a significant number of Latin American food stands despite the comparatively low population of those communities.

Consequently, we can think of these modes of (in)visibilization as strategies of empowerment through the acquisition or confirmation of certain types of capitals. As mentioned above, the Southeast Asian and Indian restaurants pursue a commercial strategy and confirm their economic capital, without seeking political and symbolic recognition as a foreign community. On the contrary, the Portuguese, Kosovarian and Macedonian associations use the event as a public arena to display their national flags or traditional dances and clothes to gain political recognition. By displaying foreign flags in the locality of Morges, they contribute to creating a transnational social space. The display of regional flags, such as the one of the canton Vaud, indicates their rooting in a local space which is connected to other localities and part of a translocal social space (Salzbrunn 2011a: 170). This practice is also demonstrated by the stand of the *Café Vaudois* which exclusively advertises Portuguese food products.

Visibilization can also lead to empowerment through the acquisition of the symbolic capital of being part of the locality of Morges. But interestingly, foreign nationals are perceived to be part of the locality and able to participate in the public display of a diverse local community by being on stage as an exotic other and highlighting alterity. Finally, these sociocultural associations are invited as representatives of their ethnic or national communities. While they gain symbolic capital within their respective communities by participating in the event, they are folklorized and exoticized, which encourages community building based on ethnic or cultural otherness.

Interestingly, the second most important foreign community in terms of numbers, the French, were visible neither in culinary nor in folkloric performances at *La Grande Table*. Likewise, we could observe the presence of several English-speaking and German visitors among the public at the event but no German, British or American food stand. This can be explained by the fact that they are solicited as consumers without having to empower themselves by making their presence visible. Also, the more recent and skilled migrants from EU and EFTA countries are not framed by the hegemonic discourse as ‘migrants’ aimed by the national integration policies. In addition to raising the question of why they are not exoticized and folklorized, this also highlights the implicit class-based distinction of integration policies, according to which the migrants that need to be integrated are the unskilled ones, located at the bottom of the social ladder (Dellwo in press).

While the Swiss-Foreigner Consultative Commission has no decision-making power in terms of local or national politics, the organizers of *La Grande Table* gain social and political recognition by their involvement in the planning and execution of a public event of local significance that increases the attractiveness of the town within the neoliberal scheme of global scaling of cities (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011). Swiss organizers gain symbolic legitimacy by publicly shaking the mayor’s hand during the event and being on familiar terms with local authorities. Through their involvement in the Commission, the foreign organizers are integrated into a political structure that enables them to express their opinion on local affairs concerning the foreign population even though they don’t necessarily have the right to vote.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the community-making effects of the event integrate them into the local social fabric and allow them to publicly perform their integration. Consequently, by participating in democratic processes and community building at a local level, the Swiss or foreign national organizers increase their ‘capital of autochthony’, conceived as the resources and powers that stem from their incorporation in localized networks of relationships (Renahy 2010: 9).

Swyngedouw, in his analysis of urban insurgencies, recalls that for Rancière, “democratizing the polis is inaugurated when those who do not count stage the count, perform the process of being counted and thereby initiate a rupture in the order of things” (2015: 170). He thus insists on the disruptive nature of democratizing processes, because “a political space is a space of contestation” (2015: 178). In terms of political participation, the foreign

protagonists of *La Grande Table* can be considered as aiming to count themselves by using a highly symbolic portion of the urban space to make themselves visible through the performance of their multiple and trans-local belongings. There is still a limit to the otherness they are expected to display during such an event, namely a consumable one: artistic folklore and food. The context of *La Grande Table* isn't the place to express dissent or make explicit claims, particularly very political ones such as claiming the right to vote, challenging the integration policy or contesting exoticization and consumption. The waving of the Kosovarian flag is perhaps the most political act we observed during the event, with the community claiming their right to display the symbol of their national identity even if Switzerland already recognized Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state in 2008. Hence, by acting consensually and conforming to the roles they are ascribed to by either themselves or others, *La Grande Table*'s protagonists would not be considered by Swyngedouw as challenging the established order.

Nevertheless, in our opinion, the emancipatory dimension of the practices we observed rather lies in the very structure of the event. Contrary to the political protests discussed by Swyngedouw, here the protagonists didn't spontaneously take to the streets but rather responded the Commission's invitation and participated in the organization of the event. Thus, it is not a bottom-up claim to "the right to the city" (Dikeç 2009: 83), but rather symbolizes the complex articulation of hegemonic policy-making through the federal integration policy, a participatory process through the organization of the event and the appropriation of urban public spaces by foreign communities. If the political is "the demand to be counted, named and recognised, theatrically and publicly staged by those 'who do not count', the inexistent" (Swyngedouw 2015: 174), then this goal is achieved by *La Grande Table*'s protagonists. They indeed use the time-space of the event to claim their belonging to the locality and act strategically to develop several forms of capital depending on their interests and positions. In addition, the ties that they create before and during the event foster their local recognition in the long term.

Finally, the concept of integration on which the event is based not only favours vertical assimilation but also creates spaces of encounter and participation, suggesting some degree of horizontality. Therefore, considering migrants as performers and hence highlighting their agency allows us to observe how they participate in broader community-making.

## **Conclusion**

The multiplicity of actors and the variety of the groups' strategies forces us to adopt a nuanced and situated answer to the question of the emancipatory potential of this event. In fact, depending on their specific position in power relationships, social actors strategically chose to foster different forms of capital, but their room for manoeuvre is limited by the expectations of the

Commission and the roles they are assigned to. The event approach enabled us to seize how individuals take part in the city, how networks of sociability come to life, and how and under what circumstances these ties are (un)made, as we have mentioned in previous works (Salzbrunn 2004, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2016). This approach also allowed us to capture another form of discourse apart from the official and/or institutional and to compare different accounts of a shared experience.

We have shown to what extent different groups of migrants have acquired, alongside political actors, an important role in the ongoing rescaling process by appropriating and valorizing a locality since they have become ‘scale-makers’ and therefore contribute to shift power relations in cities in a context of neoliberal global restructuring processes (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011: 10; Salzbrunn 2011a: 172). In this respect, they have participated in the reconfiguration of the socio-spatial order of the urban space through a reappropriation of an institutionally designed event. In addition, by attracting thousands of visitors and creating a sense of community (Salzbrunn and Sekine 2011) among the Morgian population, the protagonists of *La Grande Table* go far beyond the Commission’s expectations of ‘eating together in order to accept each other’, by rendering the urban space more cosmopolitan and attractive even though the organizers control the visibilization of certain groups. However, under the post-political condition, these emancipation processes go along with the display of national or ethnic belonging. This essentializing way of showing cosmopolitanism differs from antique concepts to which researchers like Martha Nussbaum (1994) refer, inviting the consideration of right and universal reason before nation and national symbols of belonging. Hence, an open question remains: Can national symbols become less important than cosmopolitan ideals of a *vivre-ensemble* or do they coexist without contradictions? In the eyes of a range of actors with a migration background, pride in national belonging is compatible with a political, cosmopolitan engagement in a locality and therefore part of political participation and emancipation processes—but the passport and the right to vote still make an important difference between symbolic means of participation and equal rights. The Morgian population is not necessarily aware of the shifting political power relations since they attend the event as consumers of essentialized performances of alterity. Nevertheless, this aspect is not contradictory to the empowerment felt by the performing actors who maintain their translocal and transnational ties by staging their cultural differences. The active participants with a migration background are subject to both ascriptions of belonging to the imagined group of the ‘exotic other’ and to the legal definition of ‘foreigner’. The participants’ feelings of (non-)belonging are thereby configured by both urban policies and social ascriptions. Nevertheless, they remain actors for the entire event. Among and within the migrants’ groups on display, the differences lie in the consciousness of each actor’s agency, degree of emancipation and impact on urban rescaling processes.

## Notes

1. It is a common term used to distinguish non-nationals in the Swiss legal context, where the procedure to obtain a passport is long and expensive, and can only be applied for after 12 years of permanent residence. As the *ius sanguinis* prevails, the naturalization is not automatic, and descendants of immigrants often don't have citizenship rights even if they were born in Switzerland. The term 'foreigner' holds a strong exclusionary dimension and reinforces an understanding of the nation as a homogeneous body.
2. These are part of the research project '(In)visible Islam in the city: material and immaterial expressions of Muslim practices within urban spaces in Switzerland', directed by Monika Salzbrunn and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. More information is available at [www.unil.ch/issr/home/menuinst/recherches/religions-migration-diaspora/lislam-in-visible-en-ville.html](http://www.unil.ch/issr/home/menuinst/recherches/religions-migration-diaspora/lislam-in-visible-en-ville.html)
3. In the Canton of Vaud, foreign residents obtain the right to vote on a local level after ten years of registered residency, whereas citizenship can be applied for after twelve years.

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EDITED BY  
SABINE KNIERBEIN AND TIHOMIR VIDERMAN

# Public Space Unbound

URBAN EMANCIPATION AND THE  
POST-POLITICAL CONDITION



ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN

ROUTLEDGE  


# Public Space Unbound

Urban Emancipation and the  
Post-Political Condition

Edited by Sabine Knierbein  
and Tihomir Viderman



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