



## A Dictator's Guide to Urban Design

By Matt Ford

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Reuters

Ukraine is the size of Texas, but for the last three months its [burgeoning protest movement](#) has largely crowded into the space of [10 city blocks](#).

The name for the movement itself, [Euromaidan](#), is a neologism fusing the prefix *euro*, a nod to the opposition's desire to move closer to the EU and away from Russia, with the Ukrainian (and [originally Persian and Arabic](#)) word *maidan*, or public square. And the term is about more than situating the demonstrations in Kiev's Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*). Ukraine may be located in Europe geographically, but many of the protesters also [see Europe as an idea](#), one that "implies genuine democracy, trustworthy police and sincere respect for human rights."

"Mubarak understood that a true midan is a physical manifestation of democracy."

The name speaks to an increasingly universal phenomenon as well: the public square as an epicenter of democratic expression and protest, and the lack of one—or the deliberate manipulation of such a space—as a way for autocrats to squash dissent through urban design.

Not all revolutions have been centered in public squares, but many recent ones have, including several in former Soviet states. Georgia's [Rose Revolution](#) in 2003 toppled President Eduard Shevardnadze from Tbilisi's Freedom Square. Kyrgyz protesters seized Ala-Too Square from police in 2005, then promptly [stormed the nearby presidential palace](#) and ousted long-time President Askar Akayev. Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 took place in the same Independence Square where protesters have now engaged in [bloody clashes](#) with government forces, [wringing promises](#) from President Viktor Yanukovich for early elections and a return to the 2004 constitution.

The symbolism of the public square gained new potency during the Arab Spring. An essayist writing in the heady days of the Egyptian revolution, shortly after Hosni Mubarak's downfall in 2011, [eloquently explained](#) how [Tahrir Square](#) represented the broader repression of Egyptian civil society. The square was [originally built](#) in the 19th century based on a "Paris on the Nile" design for Cairo, and renamed Tahrir (Liberation) Square when it became a focal point for the Egyptian revolutions of 1919 and 1952:

Indeed, in the past few weeks Tahrir has become a truly public square. Before it was merely a big and busy traffic circle—and again, its limitations were the result of political design, of policies that not only discouraged but also prohibited public assembly. Under emergency law—established from the moment Mubarak took office in 1981 and yet to be lifted—a gathering of even a few adults in a public square would constitute cause for arrest. Like all autocracies, the Mubarak government understood the power of a true public square, of a place where citizens meet, mingle, promenade, gather, protest, perform and share ideas; it understood that a true *midan*—Arabic for public square—is a physical manifestation of democracy. A truly public Midan al-Tahrir would have been feared as a threat to regime security, and so over the years the state deployed the physical design of urban space as one of its chief means of discouraging democracy.

In Tahrir this meant erecting fences and subdividing open areas into manageable plots of grass and sidewalks. To cite one prominent example: the large portion of the square that fronts the Egyptian museum was, until the 1960s, a grassy plaza with crisscrossing paths and a grand fountain. Here families and students would gather throughout the day; it was also a notorious meeting point for lovers on a date in the heart of the city. But in the 1970s, the government fenced off the area—and more, it never offered any clear explanation of what was to be the fate of this favorite meeting spot. Cairenes speculated that perhaps it was closed to allow for construction of the Cairo Metro or other infrastructure projects. Sometime in the past decade a sign appeared, announcing that a multi-level underground parking garage was being built. During the protests in Tahrir Square, activists took down the fence and used it to build barricades to protect themselves from the attacks of pro-Mubarak thugs—and the removal of the fence revealed that none of the promised construction had ever taken place. The area had been taken away from the public sphere precisely to avoid the possibility of large crowds congregating in Tahrir. Such was Mubarak's urban planning legacy.

Cairo's layout also made Tahrir Square the perfect place to launch a revolution. Centrally located in Egypt's largest city, Tahrir sits near the Egyptian parliament, Mubarak's political party headquarters, the presidential palace, numerous foreign embassies, and hotels filled with

international journalists to broadcast footage of the protests for audiences around the world. After Mubarak stepped down, large public squares in other Arab capitals became revolutionary battlegrounds as well.

For Libya, Tripoli's main public square has come to symbolize the success of the country's 2011 revolution. Originally named *Piazza Italia* under Italian colonial rule (Western European-inspired central squares are a common theme in this part of the world) and then Independence Square by the Libyan monarchy, it had been renamed "Green Square" after Muammar Qaddafi's political ideology. Libya's transitional government [promptly renamed](#) it Martyrs' Square after those who died fighting Qaddafi's regime in Libya's civil war.

But these public spaces don't always survive the revolutionary moments that make them famous. Bahrain's most prominent public square (or circle) met the same fate as the uprising that once filled it. After demonstrators marched to Manama's Pearl Roundabout in March 2011, the Bahraini government retook the circle in a bloody crackdown, then [tore up the grass with backhoes and demolished the central Pearl Monument](#) to reassert control.



*Bahraini government workers demolish the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain's capital Manama, in March 2011.  
(Hamid I Mohammed/Reuters)*

In many ways, France pioneered the conscious use of urban design for political purposes. Paris in the early 19th century was essentially a medieval city, suffocating from overcrowding and poor infrastructure. Baron Haussmann's urban renovations under Napoleon III in the 1850s and 1860s gave the City of Light a modern sewage system, beautiful suburban parks, and a network of train stations. He also took the opportunity to [demolish unruly lower-class neighborhoods](#), banish their impoverished inhabitants to suburbs, and replace their cramped, narrow alleys with spacious, grand boulevards. In the event of an uprising, like those that took place in 1789, 1830, and 1848, French authorities [hoped the wider streets](#) would be both harder for revolutionary Parisians to barricade and easier for columns of French soldiers to march through to suppress revolts.

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Similar calculations are still made today. In 2005, Burma's ruling junta moved the government from Yangon, a sprawling metropolis of 5 million people, to the new inland capital at Naypyidaw [for security reasons](#). Isolated from other population centers, Naypyidaw is populated mostly by government functionaries and military officials who spend as little time as possible in the eerily desolate city. Burmese officials claim almost a million people live there, although the true population is [likely far, far lower than that](#).

When the Saffron Revolution erupted two years later, in 2007, the large-scale protests that rocked other Burmese cities never took hold in Naypyidaw, and the country's military rulers remained in power [after a brief but brutal crackdown](#). Even if the city's population had been large enough for demonstrations, where would they have taken place? Broad boulevards demarcate the specially designated neighborhoods where officials live, with no public square or central space for residents, unruly or otherwise, to congregate. A moat even [surrounds the presidential palace](#). One journalist described the city as "[dictatorship by cartography](#)."



*Calling Naypyidaw's many boulevards spacious would be unfair to space. The largest of them, located outside Burma's parliament, is 20 lanes wide. (Saul Loeb/Reuters)*

Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, meanwhile, relocated his seat of power to Astana, a capital deep in the Kazakh steppe [filled with futuristic architecture](#) to dazzle visitors. Russian President Vladimir Putin looked to the past for inspiration: In 2008, he [revived the Soviet tradition of massive military parades](#) in Moscow's Red Square to project strength. Not blunt enough? Saudi authorities use Riyadh's Deera Square to [carry out official public beheadings](#).

Burma's new capital is "dictatorship by cartography."

Others are more subtle. In Pyongyang, the austere, imposing capital of the world's last totalitarian state, conformity oozes from every hulking mass of concrete. Only the most loyal North Koreans are [allowed to reside](#) in the city's many identical apartment blocks, a common

characteristic of Stalinist urban design. North Korea's largest city is [defined by](#) the "large monuments of questionable taste [that] dot the cityscape ... linked by absurdly wide Haussmannian boulevards and colossal public squares devoid of an actual public." The abundant public space exists solely to glorify the state and the Kim regime's personality cult.



*A picture of North Korean founder Kim Il Sung decorates a building in Pyongyang.  
(Damir Sagolj/Reuters)*

If too much public space can be a bad thing, then China's Tiananmen Square is the worst offender. The world's fourth-largest square can paradoxically be considered "the opposite of a public space," wrote Tim Waterman and Ed Wall [in their book on landscape architecture](#). Tiananmen's "totalitarian scale dwarfs the individual and forces them to feel subservient to the power of the state. It is a space best suited to parading troops and weaponry, not to active citizen participation in the daily life of a metropolis." The 1989 tank-led suppression of pro-democracy activists occupying the square serves as a stark reminder of how mass demonstrations can fail.

Not all authoritarians are as adept at urban design. Romanian autocrat Nicolae Ceaușescu's grandiose redesign of Bucharest in the 1980s obliterated one-fifth of the historic city to install a [sprawling mess of concrete structures](#), including [the world's largest parliamentary building](#), which dominates Bucharest's skyline. None of this stopped a massive crowd from [turning against him during a speech](#) in Revolution Square in December 1989. Days later, he was captured, convicted, and executed by firing squad.

In Cairo today, three years after the fall of Mubarak, the army appears to be pursuing pre-revolution normalcy. Crowds returned to Tahrir Square last summer and demanded the overthrow of Mohammed Morsi, the country's first democratically elected president. He is [currently on trial](#) for inciting murder and using violence against protesters, while General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the military leader who overthrew Morsi, is expected to seek the Egyptian presidency. He will probably win.

Tahrir Square is now empty. Workers are busily [erecting 10-foot-tall gates](#), adorned with spikes and painted in Egypt's national colors, around the birthplace of the Egyptian revolution and the epicenter of the Arab Spring. Public squares can be cradles for democratic movements but, to paraphrase Tsiolkovsky, one cannot live in a cradle forever. Will Ukraine's *maidan* meet a similar fate?

*Top image: An aerial view shows Ukraine's Independence Square during clashes between anti-government protesters and riot police in Kiev, on February 19. (Olga Yakimovich/Reuters)*

*This post originally appeared on [The Atlantic](#).*

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### ***About the author***

Matt Ford writes for and produces *The Atlantic's* Global channel.