

Column: "A Word ..."

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by Tim Waterman

'Customer'

As a teacher, I am told by many that I should treat students as customers despite the clear conflict between the fact that a customer is always right, and that students often learn more from getting things wrong than they do by regurgitating 'right' answers. What educators do is to help the public be more thoughtful and engaged in society and government. Education as such is a true public service. The British public service model, however, never truly engaged with the real public, but rather has long seen itself as providing for the public in a paternalistic way. It has been all too easy to subvert this approach to cast civil servants as 'service providers' for a public made up of 'customers'. This has fundamentally changed the way we provide for the common good

It's worth thinking more deeply, though, about what a customer actually is. A customer is not just a consumer. They are one who gives their custom; who makes a habit of regular patronage. A healthy commercial street or district is a rich web of interacting customers. These are people who find comfort and support in regular associations and recognition, and in the assurance that those businesses that they frequent are reliably good. I think of the consumer, on the other hand, as the mouth that can't stop feeding and the ever-swelling stomach. The consumer needs choice, because otherwise the endless consumption becomes boring, but the customer needs only the assurance that their habitual rounds will continue to richly serve their needs and satisfy their desires. The customer and the consumer might share the same street, but their motives are utterly different. The consumer is not part of a relationship. The role of the customer includes mutual support.

How does this relate to the provision of public services, in particular of landscape? How, you might ask, can a park user be envisioned as a customer or a consumer? A park consumer would need to visit every park, hungrily using up as much of each park's experience on each visit as possible. This, though, is preposterous. Public parks aren't like Disneyland. A park customer, however, might expect regular visits of similar quality. This is closer to the point, but to be a customer involves a private transaction - an exchange of currency for goods or services. A public park is a shared creation, and it is owned, emphatically, by the public. A restaurateur might buy a sandwich in her own cafe, but she cannot be her own customer. Public taxes that pay for parks are not fees for admission, but rather a contribution for upkeep of public property. We talk about 'ownership' as an abstraction when we speak of public space, but in fact it is a concrete reality.

Blurring the lines between public and private can be at the very least confusing, and at worst dangerous and destructive, as evidenced at Istanbul's Gezi Park in the tensions generated over the co-option of public space this summer. This would never have happened if there was a clear division between public and private interests. Dan Hind puts it well in 'The Return of the Public' when he writes that the public service see itself as working on behalf of the public rather than at their behest. As landscape architects we must accord communities full voice as owners in the process of public landscape design. The public is not a customer.