

# The tactics behind 'taking to the streets'

November 27 2018

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The cover of 'The Design of Protest' by professor Tali Hatuka of Tel Aviv

University. Credit: AFTAU

Public protests are a vital, common tool for expressing grievances and creating communities. The political and social aspects of protests have been extensively studied, but little attention has been paid to the physical spaces in which they take place.

The Design of Protest, a new book by Prof. Tali Hatuka of Tel Aviv University, addresses the crucial role of place in influencing both the dialogue between institutions and participants and the dynamics among the participants themselves. In her study, published in August by University of Texas Press, Prof. Hatuka presents the first extensive discussion of [protest-as-design](#)—a planned event in a space whose physical geometry and symbolic meaning are used and appropriated by its organizers to different ends.

"The book is about the ways in which protesters envision their actions and plan them in a specific space," says Prof. Hatuka, Head of the Laboratory of Contemporary Urban Design at TAU's Department of Geography and Human Environment. "Protesters often develop spatial strategies to both help achieve their goals and to overcome any potential organizational, legal and/or social challenges. They create displays that allow them to express their beliefs and ideas. It's important to understand what kind of dynamic they create and what kind of opportunities they open. The book investigates the details of specific events as aesthetic manifestations as well as political tactics."

Prof. Hatuka explores "spatial choreography," or protest tactics, from case studies around the world: Tiananmen Square in Beijing; the National Mall in Washington, DC; Rabin Square in Tel Aviv; the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires; and more recent protests in the United States,

the Middle East and South America.

The spatial choreography tactic she calls "theater," for example, refers to the most common type of protest, characterized by a static performance and a hierarchical relationship between protest leadership and its captive audience. "Synchronicity," another common spatial choreography tactic, is an orchestrated, rhythmic spectacle that takes place in multiple locations, as did the 2003 protests in around 800 cities worldwide against the Iraq War. Another kind of spatial choreography Prof. Hatuka delineates is "city design," which focuses on territorial claims as a display of power, exemplified by the Poor People's Campaign, led by Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement, in which people settled on the National Mall in an encampment called "Resurrection City."

"I tried to emphasize the advantages and disadvantages of the various spatial choreographies involved and the limits of contemporary forms of protest," says Prof. Hatuka. "Varied choreographies may be useful in terms of getting an image into the newspaper, but they don't guarantee lasting change."

For her book, Prof. Hatuka conducted archival research on the sites and events in question; physical and architectural analyses of the sites; interviews with key figures in the cities; and interviews with the activists involved in the protests.

"The performance of protest and dissent is a creative task, and contemporary activists today face numerous challenges," she says. "First, the dynamics between the citizens/residents, municipalities, and state and global powers have dramatically changed—many local concerns today stem from global dynamics. A second challenge is the normalization of protests. Protests are not rare or unique events anymore. Instead, they've become a 'normal' communicative practice.

Finally, another challenge is the power of social and traditional media, which enhances the supremacy of images, sight and visibility over text, meaning and processes."

Prof. Hatuka is continuing to research protests relating to the refugee crises in Israel and Germany.

"There is no compatibility between the design of contemporary protests, which tend to be diffused and open, and the structural, often closed, system of political power," concludes Prof. Hatuka. "To a certain extent, this is a comfort to political powers because contemporary protests don't pose a real threat to their security or ideology."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

Citation: The tactics behind 'taking to the streets' (2018, November 27) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-tactics-streets.html>

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