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EDITOR'S PICK ALERT

Tucson Opinion

Tucson Opinion: An archaeologist on why we instinctively gather in public spaces

By Jessica MacLellan Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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The following is the opinion and analysis of the writer:

The coronavirus pandemic changed our relationship to public spaces, as our communal life took place virtually for over a year. But when major tensions in society emerged, as happened after the killing of George Floyd, Americans turned to our physical public spaces — streets and government buildings.

In reaction to these protests, Republican legislators have proposed laws targeting protesters and threatening rights to assembly and free speech. As we debate speech on Facebook and Twitter, it's imperative to protect access to our physical public spaces. They are as important to our democracy as online spaces.

As an archaeologist, I study how people throughout history constructed and used public spaces. From Göbleki Tepe, Turkey, to Ceibal, Guatemala (where I conduct research), we find evidence that egalitarian groups came together to create monumental, ceremonial spaces. At those plazas and platforms, people from different backgrounds gathered and exchanged ideas, just as the ancient Greeks did in their agoras. Communities were formed.

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Modern societies seem to have largely replaced in-person gatherings with mass media, following the invention of the printing press, television and now the internet. We belong to communities so vast that we could not possibly physically interact with every member. Why, then, do we return to physical public spaces at moments of political crisis? Why did Black Lives Matter protesters take to the streets, and why did the Biden administration insist on an in-person inauguration ceremony, despite a pandemic?

The answer lies partly in the emotional and sensory effects of physical presence and interaction in spaces built for our common good. Participating in the Women's March in Washington in 2017 was a more inspiring and empowering experience for me than retweeting or arguing on social media.

Although I do not share their views, I'm sure the Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol four years later felt some of the same emotions. Meanwhile, the rest of us were shocked by the effects of that attempted coup, including the desecration of a public space that symbolizes the ideals of our democracy.

Online forums and networks have facilitated important social movements — from the Arab Spring to protests against police brutality that often begin with a shocking viral video. Our technology allowed us to connect throughout social distancing and quarantines. But it is unlikely that we will ever move past the need for physical gatherings.

Comparing the architecture of archaeological sites to that of modern cities, I'm convinced that the need for public spaces endures. Although we consider ourselves rational debaters, we are drawn to communal events that heighten emotions, like the builders of early Mesoamerican ceremonial centers were. Not content to argue about history, we create and destroy monuments that shape our collective memories, like the ancient Maya did. Public constructions affect our movements and senses, while conveying symbolic information. But this is not a one-way relationship. Through our actions, we change public spaces and our society.

The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 shifted public opinion about systemic racism and policing in the United States. We are now having nationwide conversations about police reforms that would have been impossible a few years ago. Although the overwhelming majority of protests were peaceful, Republican state legislators are using the demonstrations as an excuse to limit future protests. Some proposed laws would make it easier for police to arrest protesters, impose harsh punishments for the destruction of Confederate monuments, and give immunity to drivers who hit protesters with cars. We must reject this assault on the rights of people to assemble and be heard.

As the pandemic wanes and our spaces reopen, we should appreciate the power of public gatherings. Coming together to express different views has been vital to societies for millennia, and it is necessary to improve our democracy going forward. While we grapple with

controversies involving online speech, we cannot forget to protect access to our built environment.

Jessica MacLellan is an archaeologist studying the role of ritual in ancient Mesoamerican societies. She holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Arizona and is currently an ACLS Emerging Voices Fellow at UCLA.