Public spaces find definition within a framework of legal terms; they are also always determined by their social use and political dimension. Yet their urban role differs considerably, depending upon whether controlled, enclosed “shopping malls” are involved, or inhospitable spaces in unprivileged areas where insecurity threatens or, conversely, planned and freely accessible quality public spaces, intensely appropriated by a variety of users of both sexes. Such differences in the role of public spaces and their social use demonstrate the open-ended nature of opportunities for development offered by urban living spheres – even to the point of contradiction: they comprise the danger of growing social polarisation just as much as they provide opportunities for social synergy and integration.

There are numerous publications dealing with the ubiquitous tendency towards social polarisation and segregation (Heitmeyer, Dollase, Backes 1998; Universita de Lleida 1998). Social polarisation, poverty and marginalization are on the increase in the majority of cities, due to the emergence of a twofold labor market and the strengthening of economic power structures within a context of technological innovation and economic globalization. As a result, there is a merger of two processes: socio-spatial segregation, and small-piece fragmentation of urban structures.

The process of segregation in urban spaces is characterized by two differing socio-spatial dimensions. The one dimension concerns intentionally planned bulking-off of high-income population groups. Retreat into gated residential communities goes hand in hand with a tendency toward the privatization and control of public space through legal regulation and methods of urban design. Privatization of public space, together with the simultaneous creation of a contrived commercial “artificial public nature”, is furthest advanced in US American cities, as a safety measure against criminality and violence – and also as a means of avoiding the mere presence of undesirable third parties. The exclusion of undesirable individuals and groups is achieved by designing introverted, enclosed spaces, where formal surveillance is omnipresent (Davis 1994). The buying power and life style of a “happy few” determines social use within this
so-called “citadel culture” (Lieser, Keil 1990). I presume that, in European and Latin American cities alike, one of the biggest dangers to public space is emerging out of the tendency toward privatization.

The second dimension of segregation relates to the imposed exclusion of population groups affected by economic impoverishment and social marginalization. These are concentrated in, or have been herded away into underprivileged urban zones. Socio-spatial islands of poverty are developing, mainly in run-down, desolate inner city areas and in peripheral zones, which are increasingly being severed from the surrounding urban environment. To high-salaried groups of the population these areas of the housing market have become unattractive, mainly due to widespread deficits in commercial and social infrastructure, or to such things as a site being isolated, a lack of public transport, and shortcomings in urban planning and architecture.

In under-privileged areas such as these, public spaces usually have a low social use value. Lack of environmental and design qualities, low security and vandalism in public spaces, all result in potential users seldom visiting them. This poses an insufficiently considered problem, mainly as far as women are concerned. Girls and women avoid public spaces, especially if unaccompanied, since they perceive them as being menacing and dangerous; fear affects individual behavior in squares and streets. In the socially excluded ghettos of US American towns, as well as in the wide-ranging and badly equipped barrios of Latin America, access to urban resources is made extremely difficult for women living there – even more so than in Europe. Their access to urban amenities is seriously restricted, and their possibilities of action and participation in city life are limited (Sabaté Martinez, Rodriguez Moya, Diaz Munoz 1995). There is a big danger of women being excluded from paid employment, becoming isolated within their domestic sphere, and socially marginalized.

Despite these dangers, numerous scholars point to the chances being generated by the development of urban living spheres. More regard is being paid to potentialities offered by social and cultural interaction – something that has a considerable influence on the process of social integration (Ascher 1995). In urban living spheres, effects of social synergy are free to develop, and these are crucial to economic and cultural innovation. Urban living, particularly from the point of view of women, promises liberation from social control, from traditional gender roles and spatial designations (Rodenstein 1994; Becker, Neusel 1997). Seen from this perspective, the urban role of high quality public spaces is of greatest importance. Within them, social, cultural and gender-specific differences are perceived and experienced as an enhancement of urban living; even protests and conflicts gain an outlet and can take place openly. In Germany, mainly feminist authors emphasize that public spaces represent places in which a culture of difference and tolerance is made possible, owing to the wide variety of life styles which are perceived in them (Sturmf 1997).