Consumption as control: historical relationships between regulated and unsanctioned practices of consumption in public squares

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Abstract

This paper discusses the historical development of different practices of consumption at two case study sites, Trafalgar Square in London and Federation Square in Melbourne. The sites demonstrate the often fraught, historical relationships between regulated forms of consumption that are sanctioned as dominant cultural practice, and unsanctioned practices that are performed by marginalised subcultures. This extends to a discussion of the commodification and consumption of the sites themselves. This discussion aims to demonstrate that regulated consumption is used as a tool of control. Trafalgar Square has historically been a site of unsanctioned consumption in the form of public drinking, prostitution and sociopolitical uprising. These practices have been marginalised over time and the site is now dominated by regulated consumption including busking, commercial trading and events (including sanctioned political protest). Federation Square, on the other hand, is a recent construction where regulated commercial businesses precluded the emergence of unsanctioned consumption. In both cases, regulated consumption adds a complementary layer of control to existing security strategies that marginalise unsanctioned consumption. Consumption as a control measure includes the commodification of the site, which is then consumed as an iconic landmark and tourist destination. The site is marketed according to preferred identities and historical spatial narratives that further marginalise unsanctioned subcultural practices.

Introduction

In recent years cities around the world have witnessed increased efforts to control and secure public spaces, particularly in response to the perceived threat of terror attack and waves of social unrest in the form of demonstrations and occupations globally (Vigneswaran, Iveson & Low 2017). Attempting to secure cities by controlling threats and risks is not a new phenomenon. It is the modes, technologies and justifications for controlling security measures that change over time. Trafalgar Square in London and Federation Square in Melbourne demonstrate how security functions as a multi-layered field of control strategies within public open space. By examining the historical development of regulated consumption at both sites, this paper aims to demonstrate that consumption is a tool to control and marginalise unsanctioned subcultures.

The concept of consumption in this article covers a range of practices including marketing, selling, purchasing and consuming a range of products, events, activities, performances and the sites themselves. Furthermore, sanctioned consumption fixes a preferred identity to public spaces and closes them against negotiated alternative meanings. The forms of consumption that are sanctioned within public space vary over time and according to the dominant culture but can include retail outlets, hospitality businesses, tourism, busking, public events, protests and demonstrations. Regulating consumption, and other activities, in public space is an
attempt to sanction preferred dominant cultural practices while marginalizing and controlling subcultural practices in order to stabilize conduct for the benefit of wider society (Garland 2012). Unsanctioned consumption and subcultural practices include prostitution, street drinking, rough sleeping, unregulated busking, rebellious protest and sociopolitical uprising. Both sites demonstrate the commodification and consumption of the place itself as a symbol of the city and a tourist landmark as part of this process of fixing identity.

Data about the nature and extent of controlling security features at both sites was collected through site visits and archival historical research. Site visits were conducted over several weeks in 2017 during varied conditions, times and events; with results recorded as maps, photographs and field notes. Historical sources included original drawings, early site photographs, descriptions and policy documents that illustrate the historical development of security features and practices of consumption at each site. Observed security strategies are broken into three broad strategic categories: fortification, surveillance and regulation. Each strategy is then further broken into individual measures or techniques. Fortification involves controlling physical access, spatial segregation, restricted hours of operation and privatization. Surveillance measures include CCTV, private security, police or military presence, and opportunities for passive surveillance. Regulation includes the visibility of site rules, the enforcement of site rules, accepted behavior implied by design, and privatization. At both sites sanctioned practices of consumption work to control the space, involving each of the strategic categories. This is a subtle policing of space that indicates what sorts of activities are ‘normal’ and by contrast, what activities are counter to the dominant culture and likely to be marginalised (Iveson 2017).

Examining public spaces through this lens of control and consumption reveals new insight into motivations behind their historical development. Trafalgar Square’s notorious history of vice, immorality and violence was gradually sanitised as unsanctioned consumption (particularly prostitution, street drinking and ‘vagrancy’) was increasingly marginalised and excluded. Federation Square demonstrates an opposing situation, whereby the space was designed from its outset to marginalise unsanctioned behaviours. This precluded undesired spatial practices, such as those historically experienced at Trafalgar Square, from organically emerging. Trafalgar Square’s identity and usage practices were contested and negotiated over time. The preferred identity of Federation Square was designed into it from the beginning and informed the set of behaviours allowed in the space; although this did not preclude contested meanings at the site. Negotiations around conflicted and contested spatial meanings is a key process of place-making that reveals power balances between the dominant culture and alternative subcultures (Iveson 2013, 2017; Garland 2012).

**Trafalgar Square**

**Description and history**

Trafalgar Square is located in central London’s West End within the City of Westminster borough. It is close to major civic institutions such as the National Gallery and Parliament, and to the city’s theatre district. It is central to London’s civic, political and social life. Trafalgar Square is approximately 1.2 hectares, covering two distinct sections – the narrow North Terrace, and the main body of the Square to the south. These sections are across two levels separated by staircases. The site is highly organised and regimented, with rigid lines of pavement and fittings, orthogonal geometry and balanced symmetry (Figure 1).

The open area that became Trafalgar Square was first laid out by John Nash as part of his Metropolitan West Strand Improvements Plan and large-scale urban redevelopment during the 1820s building boom (Hood 2005). Nash’s plan created the intention of a publicly accessible open space within the area of the Great Mews and Crown Stables which had served the Palace of Whitehall (Hargreaves 2005). In 1840, Sir Charles Barry designed the formal space of Trafalgar Square as a memorial to Admiral Lord Nelson and his naval victory at the Battle of Trafalgar; it opened to the public in 1844 (Conservation Architecture and Planning 2003). Nelson’s Column and the statues, fountains, memorials and other features within the site were designed and built between 1840 and 1861 with upgrades to the fountains (to a design by Sir
Edwin Lutyens) carried out in the 1930s. These were small alterations that did not drastically change the form of the Square nor how it accommodated the activities within it. A major upgrade was carried out in 2003, to a design by architects Foster + Partners, that involved the pedestrianization of the North Terrace. This area was previously a roadway, and Trafalgar Square was little more than an isolated traffic island. Pedestrianizing the North Terrace created an extra controlling threshold that restricted vehicle access to the space, and increased the public open space in which busking, demonstrations and street trading could occur.

The historical development of consumption practices at Trafalgar Square reveals a shift towards increased regulation and control; with a parallel marginalization of unsanctioned subcultures. During Victorian times and through the early twentieth century Trafalgar Square was a notorious site of vice and was well known for prostitution and rough sleepers (Arnold 2010; Mace 1976; Orwell 2001). This reflects the social upheavals of work and public life in London, particularly the West End, during the late Victorian period that changed how public space was used and by whom (Walkowitz 1998). During the twentieth century, Trafalgar Square became a regular site for the performance and consumption of civil celebration, protests and riots. Suffragettes, anti-war marches, anti-apartheid rallies and pro-rights protests across the century all focused on the Square (Hood 2005; Hargreaves 2005). The violent chaos of the Poll Tax Riots in 1990 being the most dramatic public gathering in the space, as police attempts to control marchers inflamed tensions and a peaceful protest became a riot (Stott & Drury 2000). Due to its size and proximity to major rail services, Trafalgar Square became an informal gathering place for soccer fans after major matches. These gatherings could turn violent as opposing supporters with high emotions came face to face (Hargreaves 2005). Trafalgar Square remains the nation’s main site for protest and public democratic expression (Greater London Authority 2017); it is an ideal site because of its central location, publicness, open layout, and ability to absorb and sustain a crowd, which can easily disperse. Trafalgar Square’s history of volatile behaviour has become part of its folklore and identity. Authorities have, to a degree, accepted this identity but now regulate and monitor the performance of democratic expression, protest and celebration in an attempt to control it.

**Regulation and control**

Trafalgar Square is subject to multiple regulatory jurisdictions and is a heavily controlled space. While the Square is located in the City of Westminster, it is administered by the Greater London Authority, and supreme legislative authority is maintained by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Trafalgar Square was initially controlled by the Trafalgar Square Act which gave the Controller of Works power to regulate the proper uses of the Square (Channing 2015). In 2012,
the Trafalgar Square Byelaws were introduced under the Greater London Authority Act (1999) and the Local Government Act (1972) (Johnson 2012). The byelaws are necessary for ‘securing the proper management of Trafalgar Square, and the preservation of order and the prevention of abuses there.’ (Johnson 2012) The byelaws are brief and define acts which are prohibited within the square (such as camping); acts for which permission is required; and controls activities such as feeding birds and street trading. The byelaws are actively enforced by police and are posted up and visible within the Square, as shown in Figure 2. Rough sleepers can be arrested under the provisions of the 1824 Vagrancy Act; despite arrest being an anachronistic approach to homelessness this legislation can still be enforced. Trafalgar Square is located within two conceptual control perimeters: the ‘congestion charge’ zone and the ‘ring of steel’ which act as virtual perimeters of digital surveillance that monitor and control vehicle behaviour for environmental and security reasons (Haw 2005; Coaffee 2004). Trafalgar Square is listed by English Heritage as a conservation area and registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act (1953). Heritage Wardens at Trafalgar Square act under the control of the Greater London Authority. They monitor and protect sites of significant historical or national importance but have limited authority; their role can be seen as preserving the significant historical narratives and identity inherent in the built fabric of heritage places.

Trafalgar Square’s layers of regulation combine with fortification and surveillance measures to create a highly controlled space for activities such as busking and performance. In the past, busking could be performed and consumed throughout the Square; today the pedestrianised North Terrace is the only part of Trafalgar Square with available busking pitches, despite it being legal on most public land elsewhere in the city (Busk in London and Mayor of London 2015). Busking’s restriction to the North Terrace came about due to concerns about crowding and conflict between performers and visitors. Regulations control busking by restricting it to a smaller area where competition for pitches is fierce. Access to busking pitches is largely negotiated amongst buskers themselves, generally following the ‘Buskers Code’ created by performers, the Mayor of London, councils, businesses and the police. The Code also sets out appropriate ways to perform and resolve problems (Busk in London and Mayor of London 2015). As the North Terrace is known as a lucrative site for busking, unsanctioned street traders and beggars congregate there to take advantage of the audiences attracted by buskers, as seen in Figure 3.

The performance of protest and democratic expression is possible at Trafalgar Square, but controlled. Organisers of protests or demonstrations must inform police of the planned event six days in advance, and the Square needs to be booked for events (UK Government 2018; Greater London Authority 2018). Protests, rallies and demonstrations are supported by the Greater London Authority and Mayor of London as part of the city’s democratic traditions, but authorities must be consulted prior to the planned event. Only two demonstration events were observed during site visits: a memorial rally within the Square for the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, and a protest march against fox hunting which passed by the Square’s west and south

![Figure 2: Trafalgar Square Byelaws (2012) on display within the site. (Photo by the author)](image-url)
boundaries. Both events included visual and audio material that could be politically sensitive. Both resulted in a significant increase in visible police presence, including police liaison officers who specialise in a permissive, communicative approach to crowd management (Waddington 2013). Protests and rallies that have been planned in advance with the support of the Greater London Authority and the police are a type of regulated performance. They can be consumed by participants and visitors and they occupy the site with a temporary identity, excluding other behaviours and meanings from emerging during that time.

The 2003 upgrade works included the addition of a café; the first time that a formal space of consumption was built into Trafalgar Square. The café provides opportunities for visitors to dwell in and observe the space. Café staff also become passive observers to activities in the Square through the nature of their daily work. Additional passive surveillance opportunities complement the existing surveillance provided by the extensive CCTV network and adds a layer of private interest invested in maintaining control at the site. Curation, through regulation, of activities has fixed Trafalgar Square’s identity as a landmark tourist destination and symbolic memorial to important events in British military history. This closes opportunities to renegotiate spatial identity, making the Square more easily commodified and marketed. ‘Trafalgar Square is a space which is redolent of British history, as well as the nearest approximation to civic space that London will allow’ (Hood 2005, p7), this suggests a tension between the desire for public space and the need to control the public. Historically, Trafalgar Square enticed and accommodated unsanctioned subcultures such as rebellious protest and prostitution. It is now controlled against such forms of consumption through regulation, surveillance and the marketing of a legally sanctioned preferred identity that erases subculture while profiting from its echoes.

**Federation Square**

**History and description**

Federation Square is located at the southern edge of Melbourne’s central business district, at the city’s busiest intersection of Swanston and Flinders streets. The site sits between the main city grid and the Yarra River, adjoining transport infrastructure at Flinders Street train station and tram routes along Flinders and Swanston streets. Federation Square’s role is defined as a central public meeting place for Melbourne and a focal point for civic arts and cultural activities (Federation Square Pty Ltd 2017). The rectangular site covers 3.2 hectares incorporating built
form around three sides and a central, open plaza space opening out towards Swanston Street at the west. It was planned for Federation Square to be complete in time for the centenary of Australia’s Federation in 2001, however construction delays meant that it did not open to the public until 26 October 2002.

The Federation Square development was initially mooted in November 1994 within the Victorian Government’s strategy document *Creating Prosperity – Victoria’s Capital City Policy* (Melbourne City Council and Office of Major Projects 1996). The underutilised site that became Federation Square had been the focus of various redevelopment proposals since early in the twentieth-century (Rados 1997). In March of 1996, Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett officially announced plans for Federation Square as part of a larger redevelopment of nearby rail yards (Barrymore 1996). An international architectural design competition was won by London-based firm Lab Architectural Studio in partnership with local firm Bates Smart (Millar 1997). The competition brief outlines the aims and objectives to guide the site’s design. These included: to create a social space, fill a gap in Melbourne’s civic infrastructure, celebrate Victoria’s role in federation, create an architectural icon, physically link the city to the Yarra River, extend parkland, and to be financially sustainable (Melbourne City Council and Office of Major Projects 1996). The competition brief holds commercial tenants responsible for the control and security of leased spaces during business hours while public spaces and out of hours security are the responsibility of the operator (Melbourne City Council and Office of Major Projects 1996). The competition brief called for an open and accessible space that would draw in pedestrian traffic, use active frontages (retail and hospitality outlets) to enliven open areas, and physically and visually connect the site to the rest of the city (Melbourne City Council and Office of Major Projects 1996).

From the brief stage, therefore, spaces and practices of consumption that were regulated and for private profit were included in the space as a mechanism for achieving preferred spatial outcomes. In this case, the intention was that private retail and hospitality businesses would draw people into the space so that they may populate frontages and enliven the central open space, as shown in Figure 4. Sites of consumption are used to control preferred spatial use outcomes by excluding other, subcultural uses from emerging. While regulating consumption is not overtly a security measure, it is a control technique that complements broader security strategies.

When colonial Melbourne was established in the mid nineteenth century, public gathering spaces such as plazas and squares were not included in the city plans. Aaron Magro argues that this was a deliberate move across colonial-era Australia to prevent meetings of large groups

Figure 4: Hospitality outlets and visitor information within the Square. (Photo by the author)
that could turn rebellious and foment dissent against a distant government (Magro 2017). The large open spaces that were provided (parks and gardens) were fenced and gated so that access could be controlled. This strategy did not preclude the emergence of subversive behaviours in Melbourne, but it did marginalise them in restricted areas (Leckey, 2003). It was not until Federation Square opened in 2002 that Melbourne had a genuine public open gathering space. Using Federation Square as an example, Magro argues that where public spaces were included in Australian cities they remain controlled against large gatherings and are designed to discourage dwelling. They are spaces in which one goes to do things, not simply to be (Magro 2017). While it is true that Federation Square provides things to do, including sites of consumption, this programme actually does encourage people to dwell and occupy the space. It could also be argued that Federation Square became a preferred site for protest as it provided an alternative location that kept marchers off city streets. Public gatherings thus moved to an open space wherein they are more easily monitored and controlled.

Federation Square has attracted controversy and public debate since its inception. The architecture has always been polarizing and the site critiqued, despite its success as a public gathering space (O’Hanlon 2012). Recent alteration proposals have revived public debate about the site’s role and meaning. Temporary concrete blocks were installed in 2017 to fortify the site’s perimeter in response to the perceived threat of hostile vehicle attacks (Andrews 2017). The existing visitor centre building at the north-east of the site is to be demolished and replaced with an entrance to a new underground train station, currently under construction (Rail Projects Victoria 2018). However, the most significant public debate and backlash has been towards a proposal to demolish the Yarra Building at the south of the site and replace it with an Apple flagship store. One of the major concerns of those opposed to this idea is that public space is being sacrificed for private gain (Ogden and Florance 2017). This is seen as a loss of an important community resource that sets a dangerous precedent for corporate interest in civic infrastructure. Another concern is the lack of public consultation in the process of approving the proposed works; this was felt across the community from the public to academics to planning and design professionals. The extent of the controversy sparked an entire special issue of *Architect Victoria*, the journal of Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter (Smith 2018). However, Federation Square has always been a privately managed, for-profit space that prioritised commercial interests. The proposed store would therefore fit within an existing paradigm of consumption and private profit. The public backlash is evidence that Federation Square is viewed primarily as a shared, civic asset and that commercial interests should not be allowed to dictate its form and use.

The proposed changes to the site prompted the National Trust of Australia’s Victorian branch to nominate Federation Square to be listed on the Victorian Heritage Register. While it is unusual for a relatively young site to be granted heritage protection, the nomination reveals the extent of the site’s cultural significance (Gard’ner 2018). Heritage Victoria has since applied temporary heritage protection to Federation Square meaning that any demolition or construction works would require a heritage permit. If permanent heritage protection is applied, Federation Square would have a legally defined significance and value to the State of Victoria, further fixing its identity against renegotiated meanings. The controversy reveals contested spatial identity and desires for use of the site related to a sense of public ownership (Goad 2018).

**Regulation and control**

Federation Square operates under several jurisdictional layers of regulatory control: federal, state and local government laws; as well as site-specific regulation. Federation Square is operated by Fed Square Management Pty Ltd (FSM) a private company owned by State Trustees Limited on behalf of the Victorian State Government. It is therefore a publicly owned, privately managed public space (O’Hanlon 2012). Federation Square operates under a constitution and a Civic and Cultural Charter devised by the Victorian Government and the City of Melbourne that guides the use of the space for accessible, cultural and civic programming (Federation Square Pty Ltd 2017). Public events, demonstrations and performance, such as busking, in the Square are controlled by FSM rather than the City of Melbourne, which is responsible for street trading and busking in all other public open spaces in the city (City of Melbourne 2011, 2015).
Due to Federation Square’s site specific regulatory framework it can be controlled against forms of performance and trading that could legally be conducted at other open spaces in the city. Certain activities which would be perfectly acceptable in private become unsanctioned when performed in public (Bird 2016). Drinking alcohol is prohibited in Federation Square but is allowed in privately managed bars and venues. Unsanctioned public drinking risks the profitability of sanctioned private drinking and is therefore controlled against by site management.

Federation Square is a highly controlled site with extensive security features that nevertheless functions as a civic open space. Surveillance measures include extensive CCTV, the presence of private security, police, and extensive provision for passive surveillance through its deliberately activated edges and site furniture. Fortress measures include access control through physical barriers and vehicle restrictions. The site is privately managed and it can be spatially segregated during different times or for events. Regulation includes visible rules and a defined identity or brand. Sanctioned consumption, both permanent tenancies and temporary events, complement existing control measures in several ways. Private tenancies are responsible for their own security and may use their own CCTV surveillance to complement that within the site. Temporary events may require spatial segregation and restricted hours of operation. As they draw people into the space, permanent sites of consumption and temporary events increase the amount of passive surveillance of the site.

In line with its design brief and Charter, Federation Square’s open space is programmed with events and activities, as shown in Figures 5 and 6. Events occurred at the Square during every site visit made, which included weekends, weekdays and evenings. The cultural events and festivals held in the Square vary but usually involve temporary insertion of consumption and performance such as food stalls, markets and musicians. Events led to an increased private security and police presence, as well as crowd management through barriers and segregation. Events must be booked six months in advance and require prior approval (Federation Square Pty Ltd 2017). FSM has been accused of censoring approved protest events by requiring potentially politically sensitive visual material to be removed before events can go ahead (Slezak 2017). The visual consumption of political propaganda or protest material can be more easily prevented at Federation Square because it is privately managed. In such cases, material is either altered to FSM’s requirements or the protest must move elsewhere. Either way, consuming subversive or volatile material is marginalised and excluded, and this is made possible by controlling spatial regulation supported by private management and site-specific rules. Programmed events are a consumable performance that contribute to control strategies in two ways. Firstly,
events provide a reason to increase the operation of existing control strategies—fortification, surveillance and regulation. Secondly, if the site is occupied by a specific programme it is not open to be occupied for other uses and its identity is fixed, marginalizing subcultural practices that might renegotiate the meaning of the space.

Site As Product

Trafalgar and Federation Squares demonstrate different historical approaches to regulated consumption and the negotiation of site identity. However, both sites regulate preferred consumption practices as part of broader strategies of spatial control and identity formation. Control strategies at Trafalgar and Federation Squares create spaces that are both themed and secured (Van Melik et al. 2007). Regulated consumption functions to secure the site against certain behaviours while creating a consumable site identity or brand. The marketable brand of each site is easily found in advertising and visitor information. Federation Square’s official website’s ‘about’ page describes the site:

It’s hard to imagine Melbourne without Federation Square. Home to major cultural attractions, world-class events, tourism experiences and an exceptional array of restaurants, bars and specialty stores, this modern piazza has become the heart and soul of Melbourne. (Federation Square Pty Ltd 2017)

The ‘vision’ for Federation Square is:

To be recognised internationally as a contemporary world site and Melbourne’s inspirational public space. (Federation Square Pty Ltd 2017)

Visitor information for Trafalgar Square highlights its iconic features, and its role as military memorial and host to cultural events:

Trafalgar Square is named after Britain’s victory in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Although Britain won, war hero Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson was killed during the battle on his ship, HMS Victory. Nelson’s contribution was remembered with Nelson’s Column, a key feature of the square.

During its history, the square has been a place for protests, demonstrations and large-scale events, which continues to this day. (Visit London 2017)

Both sites are highly controlled spaces that employ layers of security measures. Furthermore, a fixed identity is commodified, promoted, and used as a control technique to marginalise alternative identities and spatial meanings that could run counter to the dominant narrative.
The site identity, or brand, at both Trafalgar and Federation Squares is demonstrated to visitors through their naming, spatial design and the types of activities that are allowed to happen there. Trafalgar Square presents an identity of national pride and memorial. Its prominent location and proximity to other important sites give it a symbolic status at the centre of London, and by extension, the nation. The identity imbued by spatial features has historically had to negotiate with an identity formed through usage patterns. A historical reputation for disadvantage and immorality characterized by unsanctioned behaviours such as street drinking and prostitution combined with rebellion, riot and public gathering provide a lived identity to the site that opposes sanctioned spatial identity. Regulation now controls what performances (protests, buskers) and what products (street trading, café) may be consumed at the site. Controlled and sanctioned spatial uses marginalise those which are unsanctioned through a process of negotiating and fixing spatial identity. The historical site experience of rebellious and celebratory gathering is part of its valued heritage and has been preserved, albeit in a controlled way or as a historical echo. Trafalgar Square can then be presented to locals and visitors as an iconic product imbued with a particular meaning. Federation Square’s identity has had fewer opportunities to be contested. The site’s name identifies its memorial function, but its history of tight regulation and private management means that alternative place meanings have been excluded. Retail and hospitality spaces activate the site edges and programmed events fill the open interior; meaning that the space is permanently occupied by sanctioned activity, leaving little opportunity for unsanctioned behaviours to emerge. Federation Square’s identity as a cultural event space is a marketable product for itself and the wider city of Melbourne.

Conclusion

The regulation of consumption forms part of broader security strategies that control the site and marginalise unsanctioned practices. Trafalgar Square’s history of vice, violence and disadvantage parallels its history of national celebration, commemoration and public protest. Busking, protest and demonstration, which are a consumable performance, are supported and controlled by the Greater London Authority which also regulates them. Federation Square has a less historically contested identity; however, consumption is regulated in similar ways. Private management enables greater site control and restrictions on what practices are sanctioned. This was successful until the recent public backlash surrounding the proposed Apple store which sparked public debate and negotiation of the site’s identity, value and meaning to the city. Regulation is not a highly visible or overt form of control when compared with fortification or surveillance. But it is a powerful tool that can be used to control spatial use and users in a way that solidifies a preferred, uncontestable identity, based around the events and products that can be consumed. The commodified site broadcasts its identity, and therefore the sanctioned practices, to its visitors and users. These subtle forms of identity creation, regulation and sanctioning (by government and society) work to marginalise potentially subversive unsanctioned consumptive behaviours and control the space against them.

References


