

The Qualities of Informal Space: (Re)appropriation within the informal, interstitial spaces of the city.

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Abstract: This article examines the characteristics of informal spaces within the contemporary city, and highlights creative ways in which they are appropriated. Furthermore, it challenges prevalent critical discourse about place-making and the character of social order in the city in relation to these informal spaces. Such spaces punctuate the homogenous, staged, controlled, 'official' public spaces and the everyday, ubiquitous spaces of the contemporary city. However, they are overlooked, and are often relegated as 'wastelands', 'derelict areas' and 'urban voids' (Doron, 2000). They represent socio-economic abandonment and dereliction and are excluded from the ideal, as they run contrary to the dominant desired image of the city. Using the writings of Fraser, Crawford, Doron and others, and some examples from Manchester, the article will identify these 'counter public' interstitial, informal spaces and the ways in which they are appropriated by 'marginal groups' to show how their original, but now defunct, function is transgressed. Correspondingly, we will illustrate how such activities and their participants are designed out of the formal public spaces of the contemporary city. In refuting claims that such spaces are valueless, we rethink these informal spaces as social breathing spaces. They enable a diverse range of activities and question the limited notions within current discourses that conceive the relationship between public and private space and planned and non-planned spaces as binary.

Keywords: informal space; public space, appropriation, homogenous, dereliction, transgressed.

Introduction

Numerous discourses focus upon the transformation of public space. Sorkin (1992) alludes to the death of public space, though other contemporary accounts locate new forms of public space within private spaces for example, shopping malls and museums. These authors suggest that such public and quasi-public urban spaces are becoming increasingly privatised, commodified and sanitised (Bryman, 2004; Davies, 1998; Chaplin and Holding, 1998). Defined by a decidedly 'disingenuous set of cultural imperatives' (Ferrell, 2003)¹ it is posited that these spaces, described by Chatterton (2002)² as 'corporate play spaces' prioritise object over subject, exchange over use value, and ignore other social and aesthetic qualities, lead to the creation of spaces that are increasingly scripted and homogeneous. Such environments, it is suggested, render the individual as a passive body within urban space, rather than an active creator or participant (Chaplin and Holding, 1998, Edensor, 2007). Furthermore, Gehl (1996)³ maintains that developmental trends in society and planning have created a 'functionally segregated city structure' where space is increasingly zoned and managed by city authorities. In accord with such claims, evidence exists (Dehaene and De Cauter: 2008, Hajer and Reijndorp: 2001) to suggest that town centres are now borrowing the management techniques of malls/shopping centres as they increasingly provide the model for the organisation of public spaces. City centre management teams formed from key private and public

agencies promote and manage public space, appear to be increasing, as do the number of laws that criminalise certain marginalised groups such as the homeless. These laws and acts attempt to remove the symptoms of disorder without addressing their causes.

MacLeod and Ward argue that such consumption-orientated spaces are leading to 'new sociologies and geographies of exclusion' (2002)⁴. They suggest that these exclusionary spaces lack notions of liberal tolerance due to the absence of a social mixture and are governed by a hegemonic socio-spatial strategy that encourages what they term 'spatial apartheid'. Citing Davies (1998) they use the phrase 'Interdictory space' to describe spaces which are 'designed to systematically exclude those adjudged to be unsuitable and even threatening ...or people whose class and cultural positions diverge from the developers and their target markets (MacLeod and Ward, 2002)⁵. Hubbard supports this view and explains how, when groups do challenge conventional coding of city space, their presence and actions mean they risk conflict with the forces of law and order. Those who transgress are frequently 'forcibly ejected or asked to leave specific places' (2006)⁶. In this sense, it would appear that cities are attempting to sanitise their streets in the name of image and marketing, not in a genuine attempt to encourage a more 'civic urban populace' and a more insightful and civilized approach to urban issues of poverty, marginalisation and welfare. Kern claims that 'public spaces are the last domains where the opportunity to communicate is not something bought and sold' (Kern, 2008: 112)⁷.

Whilst we acknowledge these dominant notions of public space and have directly and indirectly experienced tactics of social cleansing brought about by an authoritarian desire to design out elements that would appear 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996) and thus against the dominant order, we intend to argue for a more nuanced approach to urban space. In addition to these dominant forms of power, innovative forms of socio-political subjectivity are emerging, which initiate creativity and innovation in the urban environment. Pervasive dichotomies of public/private, planned/non-planned and power/resistance, we believe, are inappropriate. We suggest the city's continuing transformation cannot simply be defined by built form that is planned and managed by an elite group of professionals, nor is it merely defined by 'the people'. We argue that it is an interplay between all forces, and in subtler ways, can be shaped by changing urban cultures and collective actions, which we will highlight in subsequent examples. Fraser (2007)⁸ offers an alternative view and questions concepts of 'public' and 'space' and concedes there is never simply 'one public sphere, but rather a number of public spheres' or 'multiple counter publics' (2007)⁹. Franck and Stevens (2007)¹⁰ offer a further counter to the concept of a homogenous, universal, rationalised view of urban space; they argue that there exists a host of more fluid spaces, what they term 'loose space'.

Informal, counter public space

Interstitial, dilapidated, dis-used and marginal sites punctuate the staged and controlled official public spaces and the everyday, ubiquitous spaces of the contemporary city. They are referred to in various discourses from the realms of architecture, planning, design and urban theory as 'terrain vagues' (De Sola Morales:1995), 'dead zones' (Doron: 2000), 'parafunctional space' (Papastergiadis: 2002), 'superfluous landscapes' (Nielsen: 2002), 'spaces of uncertainty' and 'the margin' (Cupers and Miessen:

2002), 'landscapes of contempt' (Giot: 2005), 'voids' (Armstrong: 2006) 'ambivalent landscapes' (Jorgensen and Tylecote: 2007) 'actual territories' (Lang 2008, citing Stalker) and 'the urban interstices' (Tonnelat: 2008). These terms indicate the same or similar urban and non-urban spaces and refer to a variety of spaces that are seen as empty and meaningless by authoritarian figures as a result of their 'temporary absence of attributed function,' (Tonnelat: 2008) and thus they exist in contrast to the ordered and controlled spaces of the city in which, it can be argued, (Doron, 2000; Cupers and Miessen, 2002) identities are continuously fixed and differences are erased.

These spaces lie outside the zones of official use and occupation, existing somewhere between the commercial, recreational and residential zones of the city. By definition, such spaces are non-prescriptive. According to Doron (2000: 247, 252)¹¹, they are neither slums, open spaces within the city or natural but are, for example, abandoned industrial sites, disused train yards, spaces at the edge of thoroughfares and under bridges. Such territories, he claims, are the effects of 'post-industrialism, the passing of time, wars, the nature of capitalism and parsimonious speculation.' According to De Sola-Morales (1995)¹² these 'strange places exist outside the city's effective circuits and productive structures,' and, from an economic point of view, they represent places, 'where the city is no longer.' Their layers reveal multiple and shifting social, aesthetic, political, economic, ruderal meanings as opposed to clarity of function and distinct identity. Whilst these spaces are constantly reshaped and redefined by both humans and nature, we focus on human intervention, highlighting how these users reorganise and reinterpret space by spontaneous, often temporary activities. They emerge via peoples' actions in a variety of urban locations. Their qualities and characteristics are increasingly overlooked within the built environment and have come to be seen, in the discourse of architectural practice, as a negative 'thing' and consequently are labelled detrimentally. Doron argues that labels such as, 'void' and 'terrain vague' turn a consequence of the planning system and processes intrinsic to the urban environment and urban renewal into a negative, stigmatising space, rendering it as waste, generally marked on plans as white areas (Doron, 2000). Armstrong (2006)¹³ echoes Doron's sentiments and claims that within growing cities the qualities of the void, often unique to each spatial context, are frequently overlooked and lost to, 'unrelenting development occupying these spaces within the urban form of late capitalism.' They are places that have been used but are now abandoned or given up, and thus represent, to an authoritarian viewpoint, unacceptable socio-economic abandonment (Lévesque, 2002) and dereliction. Tonnelat (2008)¹⁴ claims that they are viewed as a, 'hindrance to the city,' and that they are thought of as merely waiting for a better use as governments and other hegemonic forces in the city look for solutions for their redevelopment. Excluded from the ideal, these spaces run contrary to the dominant desired image of the city.

Focusing primarily on these abandoned, interstitial spaces within the city; those that look empty and appear as though they no longer have any use, we think it important to highlight how creativity has emerged from these often disregarded spaces that are constructing what Franks, citing Bey, (Franks, 2000)¹⁵ terms, 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (TAZ), distinct spatialities that provide the context for the materialisation of new meanings, in which official and original architectural functions are transgressed. Such spaces, we argue, epitomise creative transformations of the urban landscape. Papastergiadis, (2002)¹⁶ refers to such spaces as 'parafunctional spaces' arguing, 'social life is not simply abandoned or wasted; rather it continues in

ambiguous and unconventional ways.' This opportunist creativity does not rely on any authoritarian approval, for it is often covert and spontaneous.

These informal spaces are not created by an act of destruction, but by a time gap (Urban Catalyst: 2007) or what Doron (2000)¹⁷ terms an act of suspension. This may be caused by, for example; planning restrictions, problematic site conditions and lack of perceived demand. Planning restrictions and orders are an integral part of the modern planning process and a strategy of spatial organisation on behalf of local authorities. As such, developers and architects are forced to wait, (and at times choose to wait longer for potential economic gains), until their new plans for an area can be realised. Also, problematic site conditions where contamination, a space that is too small or of irregular shape, tricky ownership rights or there is inaccessibility, may negate any profit, leading to sites being overlooked or ignored, contributing to this idea of a time gap and opportunist chances for transgression. City officials, planners and developers have future plans for any area currently not yet utilised within the built environment. They view the city as a piece of real estate, rather than a space for opportunity and imagination.

Within the city there is little opportunity for alternative practices to exist, or at best, be tolerated. Citizens navigate through the environment modifying their behaviour, evidenced by an increasing number of methods of control including surveillance via CCTV and policing, community support officers, security guards, fortified buildings and restricted hours of access which coerce normative modes of movement. Marginalised communities and those deemed less desirable – 'the homeless, the skaters, the goths, and punks, the kids hanging out- those in general who do not have consumerism as their main reason for participation in the city' (Chatterton, 2002)¹⁸ find this consumptive city less inviting and less open. In an attempt to (re)claim space such groups, transgressing architectural boundaries and normative behaviour, find ways to produce space otherwise away from the undemocratic, regulated centre and towards the periphery where they are less scrutinised.

However, interestingly in the current recession, with little prospect of developers moving onto many sites, there are an increased number of opportunities that exist for acts of transgression to unfold. Transgression valorises different strategies of spatial use, encouraging openings in a realm that was always there yet hidden within the confines of the boundaries of architecture and planning. It also reveals the limits and restrictions of these two practices, representing a missed opportunity as architects and planners fail to learn from the transgressive acts that demonstrate individual and creative ways to inhabit space.

Acts of transgression

We propose these suspended, informal zones represent animated territories and help sustain a multitude of 'other' cultural and social practices that, demonstrate various alternatives to the corporate vision for the city. They provide openings for transgression and subversion as sites are reappropriated, reprogrammed and reused, new uses emerging from their original functions. Such acts of engagement, according to Landau, are preceded by a desire to 'collage one's collage onto another collage.' (Petrescu, 2005)¹⁹, to utilise what is already there to meet one's own needs and creativity. The following examples demonstrate how both individuals and groups who are 'extraneous to the normal life of the city' (Stalker: 2005) transgress space and

produce alternative environments. We examine three types of interstitial space; underpasses and spaces of infrastructure, abandoned buildings and left over space. Whilst we acknowledge that numerous types of informal spaces exist, we have focused on these particular examples as we encounter them on a regular basis whilst moving through our city, observing the differences between these counter spaces and the regulatory, controlled environment, for example, train stations, university buildings and the commercial city centre.

Underpasses and Spaces of infrastructure

On the edge of the city centre, The Mancunian Way, Manchester's inner relief road, built in two stages from 1964 – 67 and again in the early nineties, contains eighteen pedestrian subways and large traffic islands. Originally intended to organise the flow of pedestrian traffic, separating this from vehicular movement whilst facilitating passage from one area of the city to another, the underpasses are now inhabited by transient people and an array of sub-cultural groups, offering an alternative spatial ownership for those displaced from the corporate and bureaucratic organisation of the city. This is made explicit by evidence of appropriation. Inhabitation and shelter is revealed by discarded sleeping bags, the remains of acts of consumption including food, drink and drugs from the local homeless population who can be regularly seen sleeping, sheltering and socialising.

The underpasses have also historically been used local graffiti artists, one being dubbed the 'Loxford Hall of Fame.' They are constantly covered in tags and more creative graffiti pieces as writers practice their art, honing their skills, hoping to gain status within their community away from the scrutiny of the city centre, where they are criminalised and risk prosecution. The underpasses have also been appropriated on numerous occasions by skaters and bmx-ers who, by constructing ramps and half pipes under the protection of the roadway above, have creatively utilised this realm.

A brownfield site for many years, the area on the banks of the Bridgewater Canal located only minutes away from Manchester city centre has been recently developed into apartments and named St Georges Island. Its footprint lies below the tram and train tracks which cut through the border between Salford and Manchester. Adjacent to the St. Georges' Island development, within the derelict arches, numerous informal activities take place without the knowledge of planners and city officials. The arches provide the backdrop to an ever changing array of colourful interventions as tags and more elaborate graffiti pieces cover the walls (figure 1). The local homeless population also find refuge beneath the mass brick structures.



Figure 1 Derelict Arch

Further down the canal approaching Castlefield and the soon to be realised Potato Wharf development, with apartments advertised as 'trend leading style, forthright individuality and an inimitable attitude' (Crosby Homes: 2008), an abandoned arch acts as impromptu studio space for a local artist, occupied by a large artwork featuring an oversized figure and cityscape. Assembled from string and nails like a three dimensional dot to dot, it watches over the surrounding city (figure 2). This work has remained untouched for a number of years, as it sits both relatively hidden and respected by others who use this space.



Figure 2 Cotton Girl

Abandoned buildings

Abandoned buildings, supposedly off-limits, designated as useless yet dangerous spaces still provide venues for a host of alternative social activities. Marginalised groups transform derelict spaces into places of creation, encouraging possibilities for new spaces to emerge. These tactics of reappropriation allow them to take back space for improvised activities that could not otherwise happen in our over-commercialised society, whilst also highlighting the point that land and space should not only be available to developers (figure 3).



Figure 3 - An otherwise meaningless architectural structure has been transformed into an impromptu urban gallery as the buildings surfaces act as a canvas for local graffiti writers.

Manchester's Mayfield Station was opened in 1910 and used as a passenger station until 1960. It reopened in 1970 as a parcel depot but has remained disused since subsequent closure in 1986, when Parcel Force decided to abandon rail transport in favour of road haulage. The train station has since been reoccupied by homeless groups as it provides refuge close to the city (figure 4). The interior of the station has also been used in the TV series 'Prime Suspect', the director using the space as a metaphor to represent the 'underbelly' of society.



Figure 4 - A disused train station has been reoccupied by homeless groups as they exploit the fact that the space is otherwise abandoned. Here we can see evidence of cigarette butts, newspapers, beer cans, discarded socks and a burnt out mattress.

Manchester based artist Jane Samuels (2008) makes performative interventions in such spaces. She explores houses, lunatic asylums, hospitals and schools in various stages of decay. Taking with her 'a human cast of characters, wearing costumes inspired by folklore and urban legend', she then creates theatrical, often unsettling photographic images that respond to each sites' suggested narratives, reminiscent of childhood dreams and fantasies. The affordances of sites of abandonment persuade bodies to act more expressively. For Edensor (2007), encounters with these spaces recall playful experiences of childhood, as opposed to the regulated spaces of the

city, with its commodified often unsensual experiences.

Squatter groups transform derelict spaces into places of living creativity and encourage possibilities for radical social change. Doron argues that it is these transgressive communities who 'truly produce the space...and show the allusiveness of architecture and planning.' (2000)²⁰. As planners and developers refuse to acknowledge the latent potential within these spaces, these buildings remain in a state of suspension, and represent a wasted opportunity by their unimaginative owners and council officials. One example, the Okasional Café, formed by a lively collective, provided space for creativity, political activity and affordable sustenance with '...stacks of information about alternative radical stuff going on in Manchester and further afield.' (Loombreaker, 2001). They were forced out of their Charles Street squat in 2001, yet the building still remains in a state of suspension and deterioration.

Left Over Space

Left over spaces are perceived as blank spaces by city officials (Doron, 2000), these areas are left over from planning and can be found in a variety of contexts. They may be found at the edge of transport routes; canals, roads or railways, at the edge of new developments or empty plots nestled between occupied spaces and buildings. Once having had a definite function they now exist as empty spaces overtaken by nature. One such plot is a small area of land that lies between a busy roadway, a pedestrian link to the city centre and the canal. The site is partly obscured by the surrounding topography, by nature and an advertisement hoarding, and offers a haven for members of the local homeless community, away from the authoritative gaze of the city, in which to rest, sleep or shoot up (figure 5). In this residual space, which lies at the edge of the newly regenerated St George's Island area of Manchester, on the banks of the River Medlock, an impromptu mountain and bmx bike track with jumps formed from found objects and piles of earth has been constructed.



Figure 5 Store Street

Conclusion – Transgressing boundaries

To reiterate, these actions highlight just some of the ways in which the boundaries set for the use of space are transgressed. These alternative occupations, momentarily subvert the determinism of the planned environment, encouraging a counter public space to emerge. The occupation of such sites highlights how the users of these places, either people or nature; are outside either the law by these acts of transgression, or deemed not worthy of consideration because it is the speculative estate value that developers, planners and architects value and act upon. As a consequence of occupying space in creative and unofficial ways, the transgressors put into question who has the right to the city, as they show alternatives versions of inhabiting places within the city's boundaries. Their actions highlight how restrictive land and property laws are. Some acts of transgression put the perpetrators at risk of criminalisation, yet there is quite evidently an overriding need to pursue these activities. These alternative reuses of space could teach architects and planners to rethink their own value judgements. New opportunities for urbanity could arise, and a humanitarian approach to the uses of space could be adopted, providing these marginalised groups with a legitimate presence, allowing their often ignored, alternative voices to be heard, so that they and their space of appropriation are re-imagined as a creative response to a challenging situation as opposed to them being represented as worthless, dangerous and dirty.

Repositioning these acts and actors in less negative terminology highlights just how strong ideologies assertions of 'wrongness' constitute the 'rightness' of authorities, resolutely wiping out qualities of otherness as having any value. Mary Douglas explains that such uses of space are seen as 'out of place.' They act as reflections of rebellion to disturb the sensibility of ideological systems of governance (Douglas, 1966). Transgressive acts, by their very nature, challenge these systems of governance and the pre-existing order of society. Accordingly, the terminology used to describe such practices is often cloaked in negative terms such as 'dirt', 'violence' and 'disorder'.

As highlighted earlier, 'public' places are becoming increasingly mono – functional: exact use is specified and limits are imposed on the identities of users. Designed by an 'elite' of urban designers, planners and architects, responding to the requests of their clients with their often 'totalitarian ambition to regulate social spaces' (Papastergiadis, 2002)²¹, these exclusionary spaces are often a reaction to, or pre-emptive strike against, a fear of contamination of these 'public' places by outsiders (homeless, urban nomads, skateboarders, graffiti artists, groups of young people) or anyone that may attempt to use such spaces in a way that might undermine or invert authority.

In these examples of transgression, we have drawn attention to people's attempts to momentarily subvert the determinism of the planned environment and have highlighted how these informal spaces provide the contexts that encourage a counter public domain to emerge. Although we acknowledge that the activities themselves may be seen as exclusionary to some, we aver that they represent sites of expression, where creativity and innovation is evident, promoting notions of social equality and cultural diversity. It is useful to reflect on how these tactics of appropriation have assisted in constructing and revealing an alternative logic of

public space, one which restructures space, identifies a new political arena and produces other forms of, 'insurgent citizenship' (Crawford, 1999)²².

Transgressive acts and their actors demonstrate the latent possibilities that exist within the contradictory territory of informal space. This space offers a context for spontaneous, creative appropriation where a rich diversity of activities can occur. Actions including play, artistic creativity, dwelling and refuge, economic transaction and political expression, challenging perceptions of architecture, planning, spatial ownership, regulation, strategies of appropriation and use as they tease out the inherent complexities, hidden contexts and social situations within this informal space. Moreover, such spaces offer a place open to alternative ways of sensing and experiencing the city, creating spaces with a different order, in contrast to 'planned' public space which contributes to the (re)imagining of the space as one which people are active architects of their own environment, rather than passive recipients of authoritarian policy making and urban design.

The social lives of cities should be assessed in part by the quality of their lived spaces and the extent to which numerous interactions between multiple 'counter publics' can exist. A city, in order to evolve, must incorporate difference. These explanations of transgression allow us to contemplate whether we can rethink the public domain as less of a permanent attribute of place, and rather as an opportunity to allow constantly changing experiences and interactions with other groups, as a chance to meet 'otherness' and mediate an understanding of mutual difference. We argue that 'a sense of identity' – who we are – is, in part, informed by our surroundings and the places we inhabit. Harvey believes 'cities are critical to understanding the current human condition' (LeGates and Stout, 1996)²³. We oppose the authoritarian cleansing of the city's image, which promotes a 'branded' identity whereby officials attempt to remove any trace of otherness. Furthermore, Papastergiadis (2002) claims that for us to form a connection to place, there needs to be a degree to which the space reflects back to us our own unique relationship to the 'here and now.' We suggest that informal spaces offer, to those who may feel excluded from society, a soft, malleability that 'public' spaces do not possess thus offering to its occupants, a sense of belonging.

To conclude, this article has attempted to propose a rethinking of the ways in which urban spaces are categorised. Could planners, architects and developers adopt Stalkers' approach to these territories and 'let go of these spaces, stepping back from the temptation to interfere in their destiny, through their rearranging or erasure, to prevent the negation of that something which exists inside the spaces, not demarcated or assigned with official value' (Lang, 2008)²⁴. We contend that prevalent concepts of 'public', 'private', 'abandoned,' 'waste' spaces and developed space are unable to incorporate informal spaces, and we further suggest that these spaces should not be evoked in such negative ways.

Endnotes

¹ Ferrell J, *Tearing down the Streets: Adventures in Crime and Anarchy*, p229

² Chatterton P, *Squatting is still Legal, Necessary and Free: A Brief Intervention in the Corporate City*, p2

- ³ Gehl J, *Life between Buildings: Using Public Space*, p87
- ⁴ MacLeod, G & Ward, K, *Spaces of Utopia and Dystopia: Landscaping the Contemporary City*, p156
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p162
- ⁶ Hubbard, P, *City* p,111
- ⁷ Kern K, cited in Dehane M & De Cauter, L, *Heterotopia and the City: public space in a post civil society*, p112
- ⁸ Fraser, N, cited in During S (ed) *The Cultural Studies Reader*, p488
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p497
- ¹⁰ Franck, K and Stevens, Q (eds), *Loose Space; Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, p39
- ¹¹ Doron, G, *The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression*, p247, p252
- ¹² De Sola Morales, cited in Davidson, C, *AnyPlace*, p120
- ¹³ Armstrong, H, *Time, Dereliction and Beauty*, p116
- ¹⁴ Tonnelat, S cited in Franck K & Stevens Q, *Loose Space*, p292
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p42
- ¹⁶ Papastergiadis, P, cited in Van Schaik, L *Poetics in Architecture*, p45
- ¹⁷ Doron, G. (2000) *The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression*, p260
- ¹⁸ Chatterton, P, *Squatting is still Legal, Necessary and Free: A Brief Intervention in the Corporate City*, p2
- ¹⁹ Petrescu, D, cited in Blundell-Jones P, Petrescu D, and Till J, *Architecture and Participation*, p45
- ²⁰ Doron, G, *The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression*, p253
- ²¹ Papastergiadis, P, cited in Van Schaik, L *Poetics in Architecture*, p51
- ²² Margaret Crawford, John Kaliski, (eds) *Everyday Urbanism*, p24
- ²³ LeGates, R & Stout, F. (eds), *The City Reader*, p225
- ²⁴ Lang, P, cited in Dehaene M, and De Cauter L, *Heterotopia and the City: public space in a postcivil society*, p223

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