Reclaiming Public Space. A Critical Architecture.

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Abstract: The theme of this paper is to consider the increasing commodification of space and the role of architecture and urban design within this schema. It will examine public space and consider where it resides and how this is shifting. It will look at the mechanisms that operate to control and recover public space and how architects' representations are bound up within this process.

The paper will expand upon architectural proposals and constructions of real space. It will examine an ongoing project of 'The travelling panorama rotunda', which aims to offer a resistance and critique of these design practices, through the construction of an event space, using architectural representation. It will propose a theoretical investigation through an architectural practice.

The paper will look at the work of Henri Lefebvre, and examine how public space is being capitalized. It will also consider the role played by redevelopment strategies, as defined by Neil Smith in his analysis of the processes of gentrification. The project also offers a reconsideration of the ideas of the Anarchist Architect Colin Ward and grass roots movements from the 1970s for reclaiming and occupying and how these might be reinterpreted in the contemporary context, through an 'Open school' proposal.

The architectural projects that have been developed as part of this process use event architecture, drawing and other architectural representations and these will be analysed in order to project a utopian analysis of public space and the potential reclamation and occupation of public space.

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Space as Commodity

If it is accepted that architectural representation prefigures actual built space then it is clear that not only does public space become subject to reclaiming in the ongoing privatization of space, but it is also occurring within the space of its representations. This paper will examine architectural projects and will describe a theoretical investigation through spatial practice.

It is important to describe in some detail the categories of space that will form the framework for analysis. For the purpose of this analysis the term 'space' will be prioritized over time or place and might be considered through Gottdiener's discussion of Lefebvre's notion of praxis, where he argues that:

> "Space cannot be reduced merely to a location or to the social relations of property ownership- it represents a multiplicity of socio-material concerns. Space is a physical location, a piece of real estate, and, simultaneously an existential freedom and a mental expression. Space is both the geographical site of action and the social possibility for engaging in action. That is, on an individual level for example, it not only represents the location where events take place but also signifies the social permission to engage in these events.[1]

From this theoretical position the all pervasive nature of space can lead to considerable shifts between concepts which may have been set up or considered as entirely separate, for example the difference between space and the image of a space.

Lefebvre's analysis of space was predicated upon notions of the occupation of space, as is this work. His analysis was based around three concepts: Spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. The definitions of each are, that spatial practice is about the everyday occupation and production of space, representations of space is about conceptions of space devised by the scientific disciplines and it is the dominant form of space and representational space is that which may be directly experienced through its' images and this leans towards the visual or physical rather than verbal or other symbols.[2] Significantly for this study Lefebvre also suggests that the spatial contradictions inherent in society are those which lie within the confrontation which exists between abstract space (the externalization of both economic and political practices) and the space of use values, which are produced through everyday life and the density of social occupation of space.

While Lefebvre's notions of space are complex, it is clear that the emphasis on the production of space depends upon an ongoing articulation between cause and system and occurs within society at every level. This thesis is taken up through the spatial projects proposed with a detailed consideration of Lefebvre's analysis, where the manifestations of capitalism are not merely occurring within space but more fundamentally are about space.

Raymond Ledrut, in Speech and the Silence of the City (1986) examined notions of urban signs, of the lived space of the city, as an environment created by the interaction and integration of differing practices or actions. Significantly he identifies the new ideology of capital relations of production within the city and its resultant social reduction. He also described the power mechanisms of the city, arguing that "The dominant class of today is closely linked to the state and very feebly rooted: this is the neo-bourgeoisie which transforms all places into a space both commercial and planned, the space of organized quantity. There is no longer any land there are only plots"[3]

Lefebvre's argument is that the same state of advanced capitalism creates a distinctive type of space that is capable of producing all social relations and is, as a consequence, ideological.[4] He further develops the idea that space is the field that constitutes the concealed processes of capitalism, focusing upon the reproduction of the social relations of production. The fact that the processes are concealed identifies its location and that it is the visible rather than the invisible that held the most significant ground for analysis for Lefebvre. His analysis is of particular importance to this study because he develops a critique of urban design professions and their specific role concerning the visual within drawing, especially their use of the perspectival image.

A Critical Architecture

The Panorama
 http://sites.google.com/site/panoramatoniacarless/video/mpeg

The panorama of 'Independent Tropical Wales' was the display of an enlarged print of a colour perspective painting depicting a one hundred and eighty degree view of a contested territory and ideological front within the Cardiff Bay redevelopment space, at a particular moment in time. The image was contained within a rotunda, a temporary architecture, on a public space in Butetown (also known as Tiger Bay) in Cardiff, for a period of twenty-four hours. It was intended as a space for occupation, as well as a mode of representation of the architectural and other space of the location.

Fig 1. The panorama rotunda, Butetown. Tonia Carless 2000

It was constructed and presented within the space, to use the words of Certeau, as a brief event "constituted through the fleeting and unexpected appropriation of the spaces of established power"[5]

The drawings and image production of the panorama view was an examination of the given values and the means by which to construct a spatial discourse. It was intended as a critique of the surrounding, planned space of Cardiff Bay docklands and had a politicizing intention to develop analysis of the surrounding, thematic forms of entertainment as spectacular consumption, as well as the increasing privatization and controlled exclusivity of use of leisure space. Some of this was developed through the use of sounds recorded within the leisure complex that were set against sounds of industrial space of the area.

The image and construction of the panorama were also to consider the processes of the re-use of space under consumer capitalism, for example the precise processes of gentrification,

as well as the spaces outside of Neil Smith's "Frontier of Profitability"[6] The text and images worked to reintroduce both economic and political practices to the space. This could be evidenced through the exchanges during the event that were towards the recent loss of use of the space through the redevelopment program and its causes. This should be set against the main frame of discourse and imaging of Butetown of earlier histories of Tiger Bay and a nostalgic historical reconstruction.

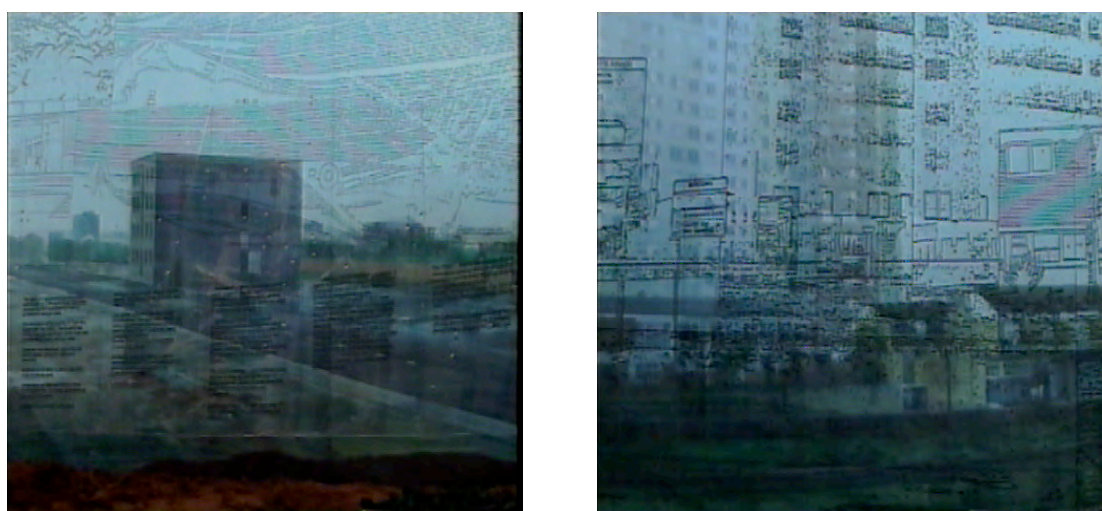Fig 2. Panorama image view before faux terrain construction. Tonia Carless 2000

Fig 3. Stills from panorama film. Interior view. Emma Hedditch 2000

Ledrut,[7] stresses the primacy of action, if 'a work of life' is not produced then abstract space is maintained. Lived space can only emerge through historical action. He also describes how this abstraction is maintained through planning projects that merely recall social happening. He is critical of the commodification of the city and describes the unreal (or hyper real) cities as those that have lost relation to historical action. While this paper can then describe and catalogue historical action, and can examine the site's social processes and effects upon every day life, the panorama intervention enters the lived worlds of the city as a spatial practice.
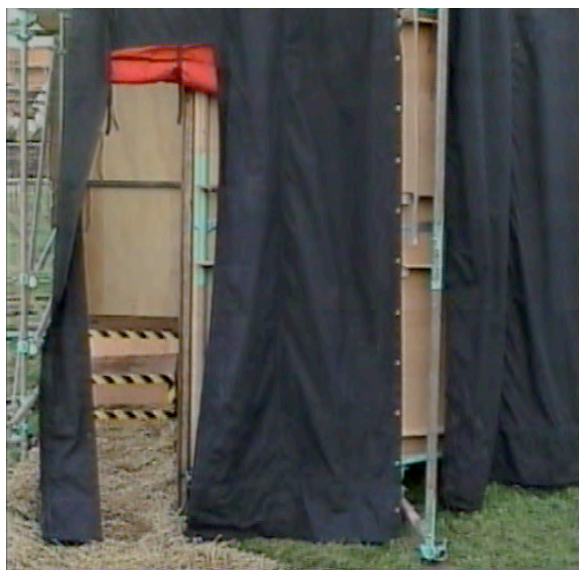
Fig 4. Still image from panorama film. Entrance. Emma Hedditch 2000

The reconstruction of space within 'Cardiff Bay' as recently commodified leisure and tourist space forms a disjunction with the space of the everyday, and with the previous categories of spatial use. The existing economies of space are therefore either displaced, or reconfigured as tactics of spatial practice, that which is revealed, "not in its own products, but in an act of using those imposed upon it"[8] The notion of lived space here is about unregulated, non-capitalizing practices, which occur in opposition to the controlled and limited circulation of the tourist within the space, whereby all that is experienced is firmly determined and regulated by the tourist economy.

The panorama design and production was based upon the eighteenth century form of entertainment and precursor of the cinema, constructed to provide a particular public viewing point, in order to achieve the illusion of a real space or view. Most significantly the image was about visual information as much as representation, it was often used as propaganda and later to depict military events connected to the expanding nineteenth century empires.

The illusion of a real space is created in the panorama using a number of devices, as well as the realistic and panoramic format painting and the use of compositional effects and the selection of appropriate subject matter. The rotunda has some initial degree of disorientation upon entering the space, combined with darkness, followed by natural illumination of the image. The viewer is carefully positioned in relation to the painting surface. Its' wide view, larger than the natural cone of vision, along with the removal of the frame or edge of the painting and replacement with canopies and a faux terrain, gives it the appearance of a limitless view. It was a device bound up with property relations, territories and occupation, in Stephan Oetterman's words

> "This purely 'visual appropriation of nature' is the basic principle of the panorama, and no other art form of the time demonstrates it as clearly. After access to nature has been bought up by the propertied classes, the property less are permitted visual appropriation in return for a small fee."[9]

In this intervention the panoramas' use has been inverted in relation to its' functions as propaganda and visual appropriation. Its role here is to consider the cultural imperialism of the urban renewal programs in the reclaiming of docklands space as tourist commodity, where

> "Everyday life has replaced the colonies. Unable to maintain the old imperialism, looking for new instruments of domination and having decided to bid on the internal markets, capitalist leaders treated the everyday as they had treated the colonial territories."[10]

Using the panorama as a medium in this context enabled the development of an analysis of space and of the space of its' representations. It is therefore an ideal medium to examine the images used for the construction (or reconstruction) of space. Its form as a public space and spectacle also allowed it to become an intervention within the space and a public event, or action, an "arts de faire"[11] The work or practice, is as much about the construction of the traveling panorama, as about the space and view within it.

Fig 5. Panorama under construction. Tonia Carless 2000

The deployment of the panorama within the space of Butetown, which is a largely Local Authority owned and managed residential estate, and an undeveloped island site within the Cardiff Bay redevelopment space, was to invert the social relation of those who occupy the space into the position of those who view the space.

> The perspectival image marks the point of exchange of information from the architect to a public view; it is used as an anticipatory mapping of the future, a projection of the proposed spatial configurations. The panorama here was to reclaim the visitor centre as a public space.

The panorama as a tool of power and surveillance is important when recognizing that the space is subject, during its' reprogramming, to increasing procedures of control and regulation through surveillance and this is precisely the method of reclaiming public space which might be taken up as a point of resistance.

'Public' art plays a significant part in the increasing privatization of space and the previous forms of spatial and social occupation. The panorama was imagined as a critical apparatus and an architecture of resistance. The panorama's construction deviated from the capitalizing schemes of the surrounding redevelopment space to create an oppositional public realm. This was achieved in many ways, but perhaps most significantly through the negotiation of territory with local children and their ad hoc participation in the construction and dismantling process, as well as the event itself.

The event could be read at many levels, as entertainment, spatial occupation, or as oppositional to the existing artworks of Cardiff Bay, in its aesthetic, in its positioning (within Butetown) and in its' partial use of the representational (against for example, conceptual or avant-garde art). The event dealt with the immediate politics of site and the causes and effects of the re-planning strategies upon the space, but it has the possibilities of a spatial extension beyond the frame of this local reading.

Both projects described here take up Michel de Certeau's "Practice of Everyday life"[12] which considers how space is produced through social action and occupation. De Certeau's notion is demonstrated through the strategies that work directly at the structures of power, so to create space that is outside the dominant forms of space, the space of non-capitalizing, or transfigured knowledge; in his language is an "arts de faire".

Open School
The significance of the world market means that under the system of Late Capitalism all values become subordinate to the market and all things quantifiable because of their reduction to commodity form and this then penetrates spatial politics at every level. If the commodification of space is based upon the concept of limited or restricted access and the increasing privatization of the public realm then to reclaim it is to oppose such a reading of space. More directly it might be about its opposite of unlimited access and the creation of a socially permeable space.

Utopian proposals were made through an architectural practice that expanded upon the accessibility of space, both within the educational institution and within the sphere of public space. Its origins are through a reconsideration of the work of the Anarchist Architect Colin Ward and grass roots movements from the 1970s and strategies for reclaiming and occupying and how these might be reinterpreted in the contemporary context.

The space of the city reclaimed by children as a school, or its opposite, the dismantling of the educational institution in favour of a public realm are ideas put forward in the 1970s by Colin Ward for a 'school without walls'[13]. By this he meant that the city itself could be the ground for

children's education, with children roaming the existing spaces of the town and learning within an open environment. Behind this idea is one which recognises that undesignated space can often hold the most significance, interest, pleasure and therefore, ultimately, the greatest opportunity for education. Ward refers to Drs Harrison and Burgess' investigations of values and beliefs about the green environment, noting that "groups, regardless of social class, income or residence, 'gained great pleasure from the natural world', less in parks or playing fields than in daily life."[14] This can also be understood to be descriptive of the spaces that have been taken up or occupied outside of the dominant or main frame of open/public space, the social action of de Certeau.

'Open school' was an architectural project which looked at the possible construction of space through Ward's 'school without walls', a space of flow through the city, town or countryside to be occupied by children. One agenda was to propose a school for a pier and island site, as part of an existing architectural competition to redesign the disused Birnbeck Pier in Weston Super Mare. The project was then taken into an existing school in the form of a number of spatial events, such as the reconstruction of the pier, magic tricks and lantern show and the reconstruction of the pleasure beach. Results included the invisible school where the island and its derelict buildings become temporary dwellings for school and where the caves at the back of the beach become explored and inhabited by the children.
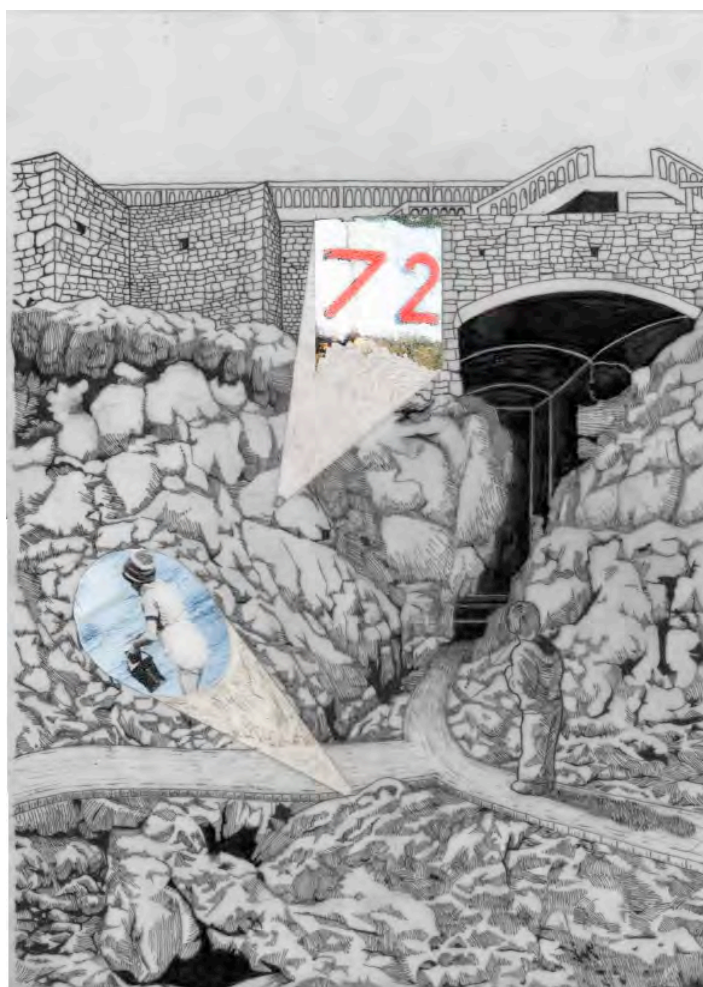

Fig 6. Open School. Ompei. Manebo 2007

The programme embraced Ward's notions of 'Wild play', which was about the "waste places" which provide space "where children can have adventures, experience independence for the first time, enjoy the companionship of other children, and discover the natural world"[15]. This education through discovery was further developed through architectural devices, inflatable clothing and survival equipment,
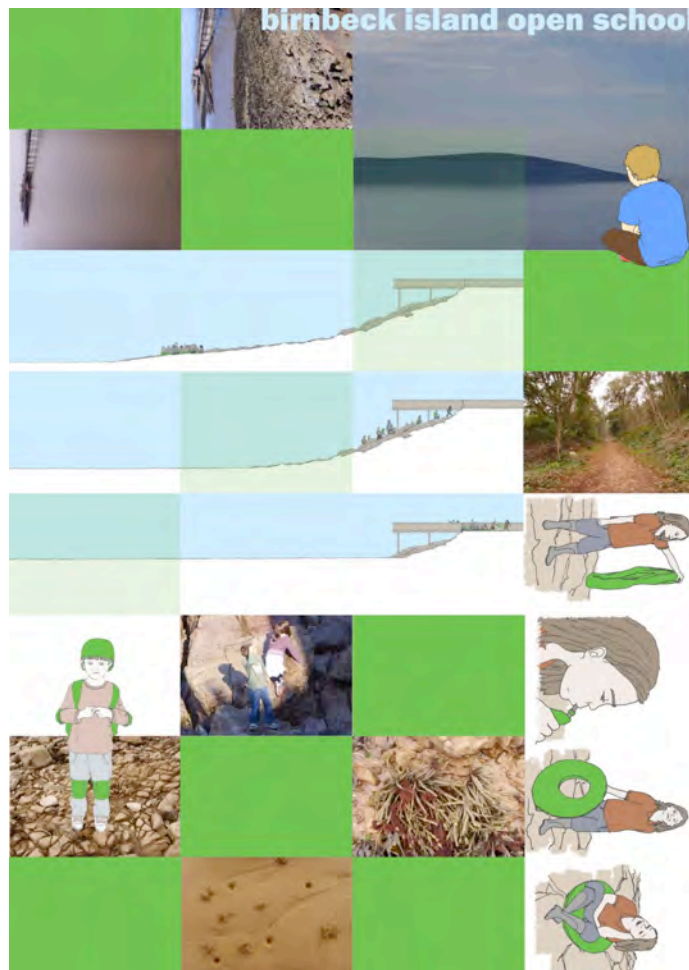

Fig 7. Open School. John Lewiki 2007

the extension of the field of space and school was further imagined to extend out into the Bristol Channel, as far as the Pembrokeshire coast. The project understood that children are able to work outside the increasing commodification of space and the space of the beach clearly allows for this. The programme then returned these spaces to the institution, which is to the existing school and back into the city.

The 'Open School' project also developed architectural drawings that might be considered to be outside of the main frame of representations of space. Invisible architecture of the beach is represented by an etching to show child on the beach with bucket and spade and the process of appropriation of space. The architecture itself disappears and only its shadows and reflections on the sand or surfaces of the site remain. The vastly extended field are proposed through the careful rendering of miles of section of coastline out into the channel to Pembrokeshire. These are the imagined spaces of occupation.

Fig 8. Open School. Long section. John Lewiki 2007.

Another proposal for 'Open school' was to set up sites for school children to construct and occupy pavilions as part of a refurbishment of their existing school and for them to make models of these which would then appear as interventions in central, public spaces in the city, with a supporting virtual connection to the school site and back.

Fig 9. School Interventions. Ompei Manebo 2007

The city is Oxford with its rarefied academic space, the school is a primary school on the very fringe of the city and an area of extreme social deprivation and isolation. The programme and architectures proposed the reclaiming of the site in the centre of the city and the relocation of the children within the space, both physically through their models and virtually through the web sites.

Fig 10. Children's Gifts to the city. Ompei Manebo 2007

Proposing children as appropriators of city space has greater possibilities, as they are more easily able to work outside of the mechanisms of control and consumption through the act of play. They also return to the city with their models as the producers rather than consumers of space. The giving out of these objects is a generous act, the gift or 'potlatch', a term taken up by the Situationist International from the Native American. The models set up a space of unregulated or partially regulated. Both of the 'Open school' proposals set up a 'critical social imagination'[16] where physical and representational architectures reclaimed public space.

The proposal for 'Open school' was further extended into the realm of the architectural school, where the diminishing physical studio space might itself be replaced with the expanded field of the city. Students, like the urban children in Colin Ward and Anthony Fyson's 'Exploding School,'[17], might begin to re-inhabit the city and re-appropriate it for public use and exchange. The studio is reinvested with the real space of the city and the studio itself is subject to a physical and social permeability. Taking this idea further would be to look again at Colin Ward's ideas for the urban studies centre, but in the contemporary context, as a physical or virtual space where the city can be studied and used as an investigative and educational resource, but where the walls of the institution disappear and the spaces of the city are the newly formed creative project.
social exchange.

Conclusion
The proposals described here consider two very different city sites, as well as space on the very periphery of the city (of the school) and space at the farthest edge, the seaside. Both the city and many coastal and other towns in the UK have been subject to massive spatial re-planning strategies, many of which have an accelerated claim upon public space. Neil Smith has modelled this mapping of the "frontier of profitability" and, in the process, hopes to expose

the ideology of the new urban frontier which has been so effectively mobilised to justify not only gentrification but urban restructuring more broadly"[18]

All of the proposals described here have attempted to cross-reference other economies of space and to bring one into another, through appropriation and the reclaiming of public space. They are spatial practices and this is the ground for analysing space highlighted by Lefebvre. All of the projects prioritise lived space, with the foregrounding of action and lived space is understood to be that which can only emerge through historical action. Without this abstract space is maintained, like the corporate 'public' space of the newly commodified docklands, cities or seaside towns where social action is merely evoked. Both the panorama and the constructions of the children enter the lived space of the city as a spatial practice and, most significantly, they offer up resistance to the dominant forms of space.

Meanwhile, in Weston Super Mare, the diggers remove the sand from the beach to make way for its massive redevelopment, as the space of new leisure consumption. Small spaces in the rocks further up the coast are made by children for their 'Open school' and back in the city, at the school and in the heritage laden urban centre, with its freshly cleansed cobbled street we remember that beneath the paving stones lies the beach.

Fig. 11. Weston Super Mare Beach. Tonia Carless 2007

Endnotes

[1] Gottdiener, M. (1985) The Social production of Urban Space. P 121.

[2] Lefebvre, H. (1991, 1974) The Production of Space. P 38-39.

[3] Ledrut, R. (1986) Speech and the Silence of the City. p 125.

[4] Lefebvre, H. (1991,1974) The Production of Space.

[5] Certeau, M.de (1984) The Practice of Everyday Life. p 93.

[6] Smith, N. (1996) The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City. p 113.

[7] Ledrut, R.(1986) Speech and the Silence of the City, p114-134

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[8] Certeau, M. de (1984) The Practice of Everyday Life. p 93.

[9] Oetterman, S (1997) The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium. p 47.

[10] Lefebvre, H. (1963) Explosions. Marxism and The French Revolution. p 93.

[11] Certeau, M. de (1984) The Practice of Everyday Life. p 93.

[12] Certeau, M de (1984) The Practice of Everyday Life.

[13] Ward, C (1990) The Child in the City. pp 152-154

[14] Ward, C (1990) Welcome Thinner City. pp 101-102

[15] Ward, C (1990) Welcome Thinner City. pp 101-102

[16] Miles, M. (2008) Reclaiming the Public Sphere

[17] Ward, C., et al. (1973) Street work. The Exploding School

[18] Smith, N. (1996) The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City. p 113.

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