

Occupation within Urban Conditions

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Abstract: Public space is defined by being accessible to anyone at anytime, it is the space of community and social interaction, the space in which public life unfolds. Public space does not pre-exist, it only emerges once it becomes activated through inhabitation and occupation. It is within this context that I investigate the potential design can have for opening up new sites for the social and political formation of public space. The question arises as to what role design can play in the creation of public life? What are the strategies that the designer can develop to contribute to the spatial conditions that would allow people to experience, use, activate and occupy public space? The role of the designer might be described as a facilitator or catalyst, while the role of the public that forms in relation to a site can be to perceive, react, occupy, activate, extend and adapt the design intervention. Through the engagement of individuals and collectives with the design interventions in public space, a process will evolve that allows for new relationships to occur, between people and people, between people and places, and people and things.

Introduction

Contemporary public space tends to be increasingly commercialized and homogenized. These conditions turn public space into a programmed space for organized commercial, cultural and sport events, directed primarily at entertainment. These activities do not necessarily reduce the opportunities for free occupation, but spontaneous events and activities, open political debate, and the free exchange of ideas are ever more subject to approval by government authorities. The overregulation of public space tends to turn it into either abandoned or commercialized space or into an anonymous non-place. The threat of the forces of commercialization and privatization to public space as a place of community and identity is often accelerated by the lack of public financial resources.

According to René Boomkens the public sphere relates to different localities or parts of urban space, but the public sphere first and foremost is a specific series of cultural and political practices.¹ Public space does not pre-exist, it only emerges once it becomes activated through practices of inhabitation and occupation, and is often described as public life, rather than public space. Public life comes into being where people, the individual and the collective, encounter each other in public space. The projects within this paper are all located in the public sphere and aim to engage and interact with the public, and to support the emergence of public life. The projects use strategies, such as installations, actions and performances, which we might be more familiar with in contemporary art practice. These interactions aim to create provocations, irritations, and disturbances across the fabric of the everyday, and in addition they offer tools to learn, test, and expand the understanding of public space, the social and political space, we are designing for. With the projects in my own practice as well as in teaching I am currently developing a relational approach rather than a participatory approach. The former term refers in part to Nicholas Bourriaud's somewhat controversial book *Relational Aesthetics*, from 1998, in which he develops an understanding of art practice that challenges the art object or commodity fixation of previous art production:

The setting is widening; after the isolated object, it now can embrace the whole scene: the form of Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham's work can not be reduced to the "things" those

two artist "produce"; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures...²

Through the projects I will present below I am developing a relational approach to design for the urban condition in order to establish new, formerly hidden, forgotten or never existing, relations between people and people, people and places, and people and things.

It is within this context that I investigate the potential design can have for opening up new sites for the social and political activation of public space. Site in this context refers to a specific locality; it does not only refer to the physical site, but extends its meaning to the cultural, social and political aspects of site, and it should be noted that some of these aspects are less obviously material.

What I would like to venture in this paper through the medium of design research is the possibility of renewed political ownership, authorship, and occupation based on changing needs, social interaction and different encounters that are socially, politically and culturally diverse. The projects presented in this paper describe place as an activated space formed in contact with issues surrounding perception, identity and community. This paper argues for an appreciation of space that challenges habitual approaches to design and inhabitation, which generally require an excess of program, as well as formal and material fixity. Part of what I would like to question is the assumption that design can only deal competently with what I call the hardware of a situation, that is the material palette and the way one material meets another, the associated set of construction details, requisite dimensions, issues of composition, proportion, and so forth.³ Instead, I am interested here in forwarding how design can also manage what I call the software of spaces, by which I mean all of those qualities that are so difficult to capture, encounters between people, traces left behind through inhabitation, the change in program through the diversity of occupation by people at different times, the aural feedback of a room, as well as the complex layering of memories and perception, both voluntary and involuntary, that individuals and collectives carry with them. This requires that we consider the crucial role that the perceiver, inhabitant, or occupant, comes to play in a design scenario, that is, that a design is not complete once a project is built, but continues to be adapted in unexpected ways through use and inhabitation. Therefore I am interested in a design that has a certain openness, and allows for adaptation, interpretation, manipulation, and occupation by people.

To explore how this might have an impact on design within the public sphere I present design research that has been developed within two projects, one undertaken in 2008 with the Design Research Institute (DRI), RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, and one undertaken in 2009 at the Architecture Design Innovation Program (ADIP) at TU Berlin, Germany.

The first project involved a collaboration of researchers, undertaking a series of installations entitled, *Have You Seen It?* The project was supported by the Design Research Institute at RMIT University. We created a series of installations distributed around a busy commercial and civic intersection in central Melbourne. These installations were intended to extend the quotidian perception of the city as a physical and built environment through creating an awareness of temporal, ephemeral, and intangible elements and sensations of the urban environment. The second project, *Urban Occupation: Berlin*, was developed as part of an

architecture design studio I taught with Dr. H  l  ne Frichot at the Technical University in Berlin. In *Urban Occupation: Berlin* students were asked to explore through actions and occupations the political and social dimension of public space. Both projects engage with public urban spaces on a sensory and experiential level and aim to produce atmospheres that emerge as the result of mixtures of design hardware and software. While both projects consider ways in which public space can be disrupted, even if only subtly, these two different approaches will give me the opportunity to assess the difference between installing designed objects in the public arena and situations framed by inhabitants and passers-by.

To become activated these occupations rely on the role of the urban occupant who fulfils a task that is merely commenced by the designer. I argue, using Victor Burgin's essay *Situational Aesthetics*,⁴ that our ideas about urban environments can only be generated in the space of possibility between the experience of the perceiver, the inhabitant, the occupant and the potentiality framed by the designer.

The first project, *Have You Seen It?* is primarily an installation, based on 'things' installed in public space, engaging with the passer-by in their capacity as perceiver. Its primary aim is to highlight existing conditions, and to offer new ways of looking at them, mainly through disturbances and manipulations. The second project, *Urban Occupation: Berlin*, explores the concept of actions and performance-based occupations of public space by 'people'. It creates encounters, stimulates and activates others and provokes reactions.

State of Design Festival Melbourne, 2008

The urban installation *Have you seen it?*, presented as part of the Melbourne State of Design program in July 2008, acted as a disturbance across the surface of the city of Melbourne. The fragmentary installation took its specific site of play at the intersection between Latrobe Street and Swanston Street, Melbourne. This intersection has at each corner very specific forms of urban infrastructure that collide and circulate with different social groupings. Together the four blocks around the intersection represent a cross-section of urban inhabitation. These are places of history, education, connection, consumption, the quotidian, and the banal. It is an intersection where institution of higher learning (RMIT University) meets civic archive (State Library of Victoria) meets entertainment and shopping complex (Melbourne Central) meets fast-food, car-parking, sundry items and miscellanea. In this collaborative project existing infrastructures and sites of display were appropriated so that the urban irritations that were created maintained some ambiguity of intention. In most of the interventions the installation hijacked existing infrastructures or interfaces and changed their content. Through this intervention or disturbance of our experience the series of installations investigated the ephemera and flux of everyday existence within a particular area in central Melbourne. Some of the urban disturbances included: A traffic sign that asked pedestrians and drivers, Have you seen it?; a stretch of bill posters on a small lane between Latrobe and Little Latrobe, which reiterated the question through disjointed graphic collage. In addition, screens shimmered in the RMIT University INFO corner with textures of the city in haptic vision; pamphlets briefly appeared and disappeared at the popular caf   Mr Tulk; domestic digital picture frames popped up at another caf  , Sixteen, and so on. Together all this activity briefly bound the collaborative interests of a design research group called, Team Z.



Image 1 State of Design Festival, Melbourne 2008. *Photo by the author*
The installation hi-jacked existing infrastructures or interfaces and changed their content.

The question, “Have you seen it?” was more a provocation to attend to the act of perceiving and sensing the city at this busy intersection at Latrobe and Swanston Streets, and the ‘it’ in question was really up to whoever decided to make a response, even if that response was merely to pause briefly. What do you apprehend when you pause for a moment in the midst of your daily rounds? For the most part such interventions are passed over in silence, they come and they go and they risk remaining an indistinguishable part of the goings on of the day. After all, how many minor irritations can one intersection handle? Nevertheless, what our collaborative design investigations allowed us to explore was how the city, so improbable in its social and material conjunctions, and yet so ineluctable, is not simply a singular moment of sensory apprehension. The project *Have you seen it?* aimed to shift our perception of the city as a physical and built environment by extending our awareness and disturbing our routine of perception through temporal, ephemeral, intangible elements and sensations that might inform and reshape our experience of place. Through this urban installation we hoped that people would experience Melbourne city, and themselves within it, as being caught up in an ongoing process of negotiation between the thought, the known, the remembered, the forgotten, and the imagined. In that sense the installation highlighted the temporal dimension of space, and led to new urban narratives derived through a process of questioning everyday behaviour as well as habitual preconceptions regarding urban space.



Image 2 State of Design Festival, Melbourne 2008. *Photo by the author*
One of the urban disturbances, the pamphlets at the popular café Mr Tulk.

The installation *Have You Seen It?* projected a question into the public sphere by appropriating the familiar objects and interfaces of an urban environment. This allowed us to explore how objects are perceived in a complex layering of memories and perception, both voluntary and involuntary, which individuals and collectives carry with them.

Urban Occupation Berlin, 2009

Within this design studio, undertaken at the Architecture Design Innovation Program (ADIP) at the TU Berlin, students were encouraged to develop an understanding of public space as one of the essential characteristics of urbanity. Freely accessible to anyone at any given time it is as much an aesthetic and architectural space as it is a political and social place. The design proposals within the studio dealt with aesthetic and architectural qualities as much they interrogated the political and social conditions. We asked participants to create a space that allowed for political ownership, as well as for adaptation and change in order to create a place with multiple identities, and a diversity of urban life and active inhabitation.

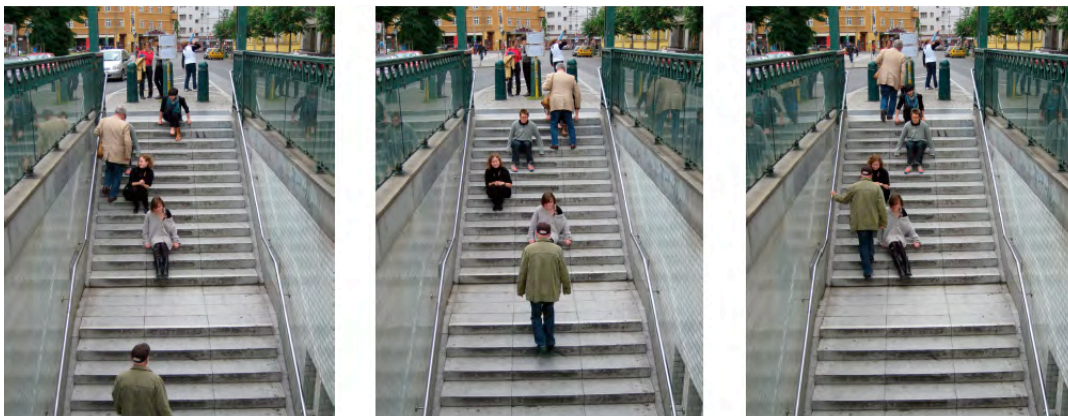


Image 3 Urban Occupation Berlin, *Photo by the author*
Actions used as a strategy to engage with the passers-by.

In the Berlin Urban Occupation design studio we explored the potential of a public square, Rosa Luxemburg Platz, with a rich, almost overwhelming history as a political place. Students developed strategies, which included very little in the way of material designed objects, but articulated and highlighted the potential of hidden, 'unseen' spaces. What one group called "consequent spaces".

In the design studio environment we tested two concepts, 'Actions' and 'Urban Occupations', experiential approaches both of which draw on art practice.



Image 4 Urban Occupation Berlin, *Photo by the author*

The Consequence Spaces project by Elba Garcia-Clark (ESP), Caitlyn Parry (AUS), and Laure Severac (F). The students were active occupants and inhabited hidden, almost 'unseen' spaces and therefore articulated and highlighted their potential.

The first concept, actions, is about an active engagement with people. These actions and performances in public space use strategies we might be more familiar with from art practice, such as *Fluxus*, the *Situationniste Internationale* (SI) and the happenings of the 1960's and 70's. Through these actions we engage and interact with the public. While these actions aim to lead to interactions, they also create provocations, irritations, or disturbances in habitual and daily public life. Within the studio environment we primarily focused on performances like happenings, active ways of interacting with the random passer-by or inhabitant/user of public spaces. Students approached people in a public space, on the street, or literally rang their doorbells; they actively approached others in order to create an encounter between them, the students, and the public. This strategy led to a level of interaction, often conversations developed or reactions followed and in turn patterns seemed to become apparent. Through these actions the students learned through first hand experience something about the people in the localities they were investigating.

Actions are additional or alternative tools to the more traditional approaches for designers to develop knowledge about the context they operate in. They are helpful tools to interact, learn, test, expand our understanding of the social and political space we are designing for. Nevertheless, combined with the experience of these actions, we also undertook research following traditional trajectories, like analysis of data, mappings, and so forth. With the knowledge we gained from both, the analytical and the empirical, we developed an active engagement with a specific locality, a place or a context, which led to the second concept,

Urban Occupations.

Urban Occupations are about an active engagement with places. Students became self-active in public space, physically inhabiting or occupying public space through means they found not only interesting and stimulating, but revelatory of the place they occupied. These active urban occupations were based on an interest in the social and political potential of public space. They were undertaken by students alone or in collectives, allowing the public to join in if they chose to do so.

In Berlin these urban occupations included the project Consequence Spaces by Elba Garcia-Clark (ESP), Caitlyn Parry (AUS), and Laure Severac (F). The students did not design anything physical for that square but actively inhabited hidden, almost 'unseen' spaces and therefore articulated and highlighted their potential.

One could describe the concepts of action and urban occupation as a relational approach to the public and community, rather than a participatory approach. As noted above, this is a concept Bourriaud develops in his book on *Relational Aesthetics*. The distinction between relational and participatory approaches is one that I plan to investigate further.⁵

I believe that a relational approach has the potential to establish strategies, methods and tools to build new, formerly hidden, forgotten or never existing, relations between people and people, but also people and places and things (such as designed things, but also things we do not necessarily associate with design). On the other hand participatory design requires a more thoroughgoing involvement of all the identifiable stakeholders. While I see this approach as having offered an invaluable contribution to design from the 1970's onwards, I am more interested in the provocative potential of relational aesthetics.

Final remarks

With respect to the above projects, ephemeral and temporal qualities of space are foregrounded, helping me to formulate the argument that these mutable qualities shape our experience of the spaces we inhabit or occupy. Both installations focus on questions of perception over time. They occupy space, both interior and exterior, but ultimately aim to leave the spectator as passive inhabitant or perceiver behind in favour of a more active occupant.

In the paper I have explored how, in the first case the perceiver, in the second case the occupant, could be encouraged by design interventions to shift their role in our daily experience of the public sphere. The intention is to enable perceiver and occupant to contribute to the emergence of public life through their active occupation, engagement and adaptation of public places, which will contribute to the experience and understanding of place, community and life. In such a context public space has to allow for activities to evolve, in order to become the space of community and social interaction. In such a sense it can also be a space of productive conflict, as a more and more diverse as well as individualized or atomised public needs to negotiate their diverse and sometimes contrary agendas.

Can design insertions into public space support the development of new relationships, between people and people, between people and places, even people and things? In other words: how can we stimulate public life in public space through design? As relationships are

constantly being renegotiated and redefined as they develop and emerge, design in public spaces would have to allow for a viable degree of change, adaptation and openness to interpretation.

The question arises: what role can a designer play in the creation of public life? What are the strategies one can develop to contribute to the spatial conditions that allow people to use, activate and occupy public space? Can design activate public life, or at least, augment an engagement with a public space?

The designer in this context should be less concerned with form per se than with what potential or options his or her design opens up for public life. In other words, the design needs to be activated by the occupant to be relevant for public life and it needs to be open to change, adaptation, and manipulation, for instance, by the diverse public who come to inhabit and use it.

Endnotes

¹ Boomkens, R. (2009). 'The Temporalities of the Public Sphere', *Oase* 77, 8-20.

² Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with Mathieu Copeland, France: Les Presses du Réel.

³ Hinkel, R. U. (2008). 'Spatial Hardware and Software', *AD (Architectural Design) : Interior Atmospheres*. 82-87.

⁴ Burgin, V. (1969). 'Situational Aesthetics'. *Studio International*, vol. 178, no. 915, reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds) (2003), *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, 894-896.

⁵ See Bourriaud (1998), From Relational Aesthetics - Relational form:

Art is the place that produces a specific sociability. It remains to be seen what the status of this is in the set of "states of encounter" proposed by the City.