

## Re: growth - a spatial agitation

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses an urban design proposal that investigates how interventions can activate residual space through a spatial form of agitation. Agitation is discussed in relation to architecture and spatial practices, and it is proposed that agitation can occur not only through people, in the role as agitators, but also through inanimate space, artefacts, networks of people, spaces and things.

Residual spaces are defined as spaces of obsolescence; unproductive, dysfunctional, urban territories that do not any longer meet conventional, aesthetic and economic expectations. It is these spaces that require agitation in order to be highlighted, and to provoke the public and local authorities into considering alternative forms of redevelopment and occupation.

The illustrated proposal, re: growth, is an installation involving a performative spatio-temporal event at a residual site in the City of Wellington, New Zealand. The ensuing agitation, it is proposed, will grow awareness about how the site can grow back into 'existence', how and in what form it can be folded back into urban life. In that way the design of the space performs a subtle form of agitation, politically, physically and emotionally.

### Re: growth - a spatial agitation

Jeffrey Inaba and Mark Wigley in a recent issue of *Volume*, both argue that architecture has lost its potential role for agitation and describe the current discourse as suffering from a 'profound agitation deficit'.<sup>1</sup> Agitation, they say, is needed to provoke dissent over spatial issues and to generate discussion, debate and engagement amongst the professionals, clients and the public.

We are interested in how an intervention can activate residual space through a spatial form of agitation. We have defined residual spaces as spaces of obsolescence; unproductive, dysfunctional, urban territories that do not any longer meet conventional, aesthetic and economic expectations. The spatial design / art proposal described and illustrated in this paper responds to the conditions of such a residual space located within the City of Wellington, New Zealand. It addresses in particular how the public can be made aware of such unused and forgotten spaces. The aim of the proposal is to provoke people to think about alternative urban redevelopment and occupation possibilities, by engaging them in the dialogue of such renewal practices.

The proposal demonstrates an application of performance based design agitation strategies that acknowledge and intervene with the social, economic and political systems that have created such residual spaces.

### Agitation leads to action

Inaba distinguishes three forms of agitation when translated into the practice of architecture, "a physical technique, an emotion, and a form of politics".<sup>2</sup> Both Inaba and Wigley observe that the current culture of architectural debate is impoverished, and that

there is little lively disagreement or challenging of established values. They suggest that this might be due to a growing suspicion about agitation, that when negatively applied it means that someone is dissenting with the establishment, with a political authority. Therefore they are regarded as disturbers, no more than dissenting trouble-makers and naysayers.

More so, Wigley actually identifies the role of the architect as the one that can calm and handle the turbulent confusion of forces, from private clients to “the cauldron of the technical, legal, social, economic and psychological factors impacting a public project”<sup>3</sup> in order for projects to be designed and built.

He suggests that the architect has been assigned a calming, ordering role in order to find a process through this agitated state associated with the process of building, as opposed to the role of questioning and instigating debate. But it is really this cauldron of confusion, as Wigley calls it, consisting of a network of stakeholders and the forces of the market logic that requires careful attention and a good degree of agitation. It is exactly within that realm where public projects, their spaces and forms of occupation are determined, come into being. It is the realm where a good degree of dialogue should occur. Too often the processes involved in designing and managing public space, is characterised by a lack of transparency and guided by a path of least resistance by avoiding potential difficulties, debate, and political confrontations.

In recent modern history, agitation came to prominence through its use during post-revolutionary Soviet Union as Agitprop. This was subsequently taken up and practiced by communist and socialist political systems of states in Eastern Europe such as in the former GDR, the socialist based German Democratic Republic. Agitation and Propaganda were the two main mechanisms through which the key ideas of Eastern Germany’s political leadership were communicated to the masses. While Propaganda provided the definitions of the key ideas, Agitation disseminated and clarified the ideas on a community level. This was done by official party members that were referred to as ‘agitators’. Agitation, and agitators, regarded in this way, perform and act out their role to persuade the individual, and community, thereby leading to action by others.

What if such an agitator is a spatial intervention, a spatial experience, instead of a person? This is a central question this paper explores. We are putting forward that agitation in our design proposal is not only a person, but that it is part spatial experience, part physical form, part emotion, part network of stakeholders and systems.

### **Event and Performativity**

It is useful, in this case, to comprehend space as an ‘event’, a term developed by Bernard Tschumi, and which aligns architecture with people’s actions in space. He identifies a disjunction between the form of space and use of space, which he seeks to transcend through his notion of the event. He describes the form of space as ideal space, a conceptual cognitive aspect of space that is in disjunction with real, inhabited or practiced space. Space as a concept therefore becomes a live, site-specific place through the inhabitation of its users. The actions are based on social and cultural spatial practices, which are about “the everyday social/spatial patterns of people in particular places”.<sup>4</sup> These practices describe habitation patterns based on our customs and routines. By

acting out these practices, the occupant of space is making the space a specific place. This is a continuous event of locating through performative acts. This idea frames spatial experience as one that is informed by past experiences, current interests and values, habitual behaviour and actual sensory perception. To conceive of spatial design as event, can emphasise a visitor's role in interpreting space or displayed work such as in our proposal described shortly, and the inherent uncertainty of meaning that is created in this process.

A visitor's role then is performative by emphasising their presence, by them being there. The performance paradigm however also regards cultural artefacts as performative. They are active, rather than descriptive, and this paradigm therefore expands into inanimate places and things which are, and I quote from the recent publication *Performance Design* edited by Dorita Hannah and Olav Harslof "inextricably bound to performance through notions of embodiment, action and event".<sup>5</sup> The two notions, event and performativity, help acknowledge the significance of the actions of the network-like involvement of people over time, that constitutes a key part of the process in making a public space. At the same time event and performativity, recognise the role that the inanimate can play for understanding and experiencing a place. These various constituent parts all play a role for agitation, and become agitators themselves.

The design proposes an intervention that uses agitation as its strategy, to increase people's awareness of publicly owned residual spaces that exist in urban environments. It seeks to set into motion actions that involve people and processes, spanning from the general public to the local authority and the media, to begin a dialogue on issues of urban redevelopment. The art / design strategy for this proposal is to provide a deliberately queer, off centre and unconventional spatial experience to prompt contemplation about other ways of occupying urban space and how space can perform.

### **Re: growth**

At the beginning of this project, several sites were identified and tested for a potential intervention and ranged from sunny alleyways and unoccupied buildings to various locations within the Wellington Town Belt. The following site, an enclosed bridge / walkway, was eventually chosen for its prominent, public location, a still intact architecture, but significantly too, because of a perceived lack of redevelopment action by the managing council administration.

The bridge was originally designed to link the Wellington Town Hall building complex and Convention Centre on the north side of Wakefield Street with a car parking building and a public access way on its south side (fig.1-2). It was built in 1988 in concrete, steel and glass. The bridge has been shut off from public use for several years now due to increasing vandalism and crime during the time when it was accessible. Due to its 1980s aesthetic it is perceived as lacking charm and of having little or no architectural value and it has been unused for so long that it has virtually become invisible to the general public. These conditions make it a difficult and awkward site that doesn't fit into typical or normal real estate redevelopment processes. We are interested in exploring what such a marginalised site may reveal in terms of urban occupation.

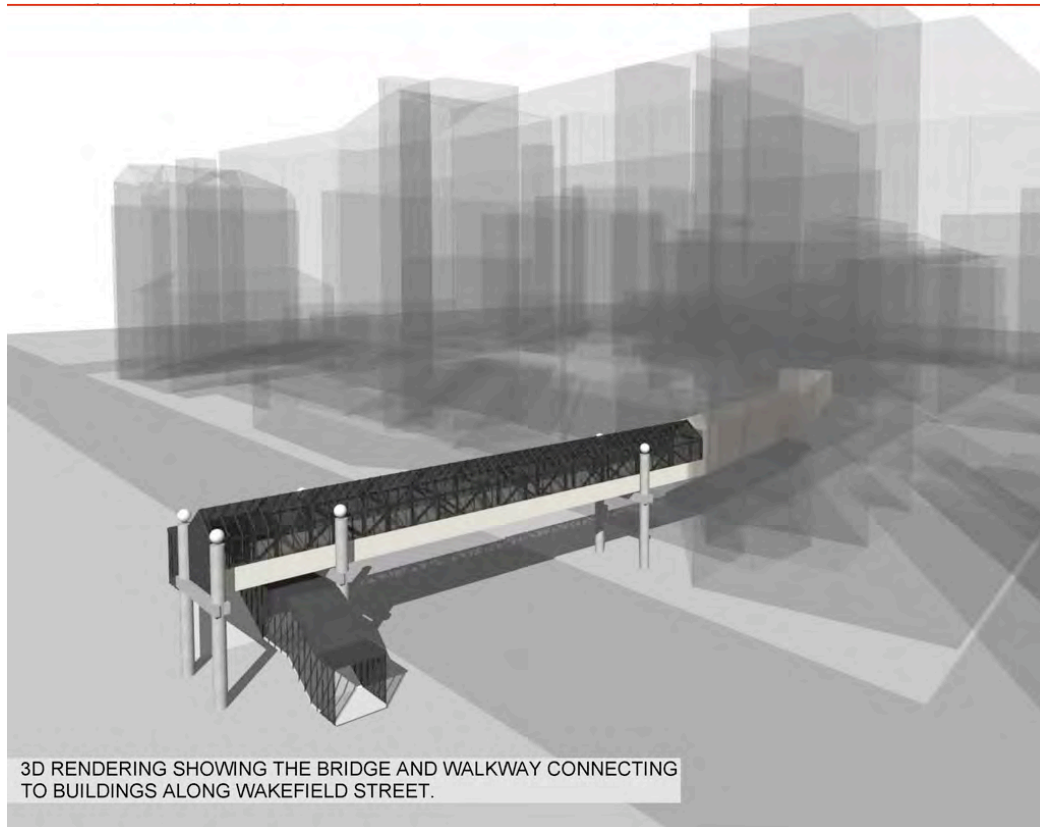


Fig. 1 Site: 3D Rendering showing bridge and walkway



Fig. 2: Site: Street view of bridge and walkway as existing

The intervention proposes an installation and event that over a period of 14 weeks temporarily transforms the council owned Wakefield St pedestrian bridge into a garden of sunflowers. The installation draws on the potential association between the bridge's characteristics and that of greenhouse architecture. Furthermore the bridge constitutes an uncommon typology in this city and is a natural platform from which to perform a dialogue that exposes the complex network of relationships that things, objects and spaces have with people; historically, socially politically

SITE

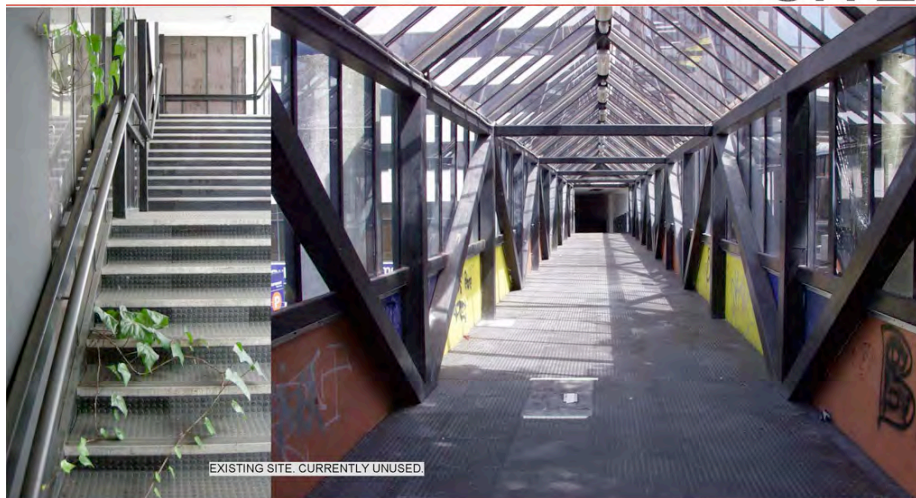


Fig. 3: Site: Interior of bridge as existing

The bridge's steel and glass construction of the walls and roof give it a lofty, transparent and light filled interior (fig.3). The floor area of the bridge itself measures approximately 33m x 2.6m. The proposed installation is to be placed within that floor area and is made up of planters containing soil and seeds, a basic watering system as well as ventilators, to create an environment for growing sunflowers (fig.4-5). Over time, the flowers reach a height that makes them visible from Wakefield Street (fig.6). Subtle internal lighting will further attract attention during the evenings (fig.7). At the point when the installation is clearly established as a flower garden, public access to the inside will be given during day-time. The bridge entry at ground level lies adjacent to a council owned garden area and the installation is in that way functionally extended to become a covered section of the public park (fig.8). A few of the planters will be replaced with garden benches on which the public can sit among the flowers, while eating lunch and while being sheltered from a typically gusty Wellington day. The installation will finish when the flowers die.

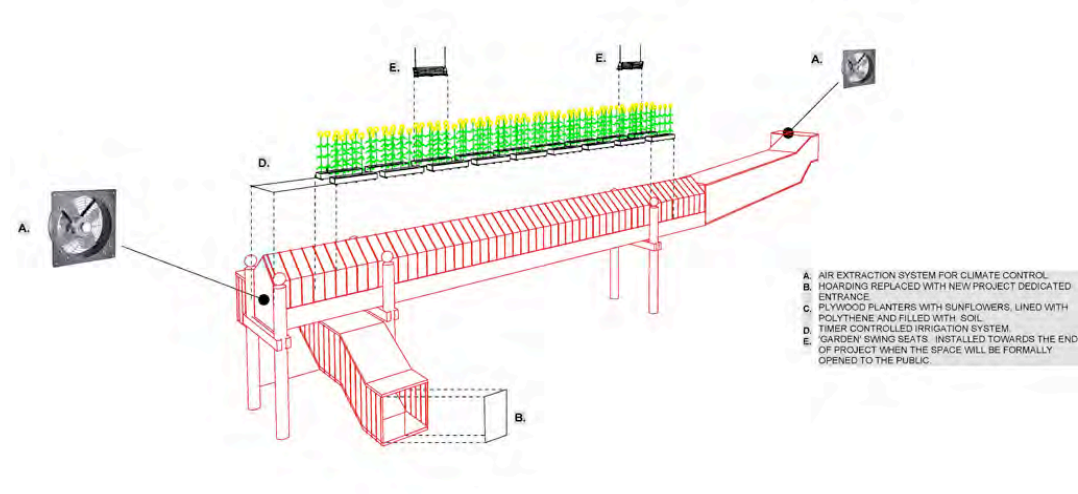


Fig. 4: Project: Composite image showing intervention with flowers close to full growth





Fig. 5: Project: Plan of intervention with bridge and context



Fig. 6: Project: Interior of bridge with intervention



Fig. 7: Project: Street view of bridge with intervention at night

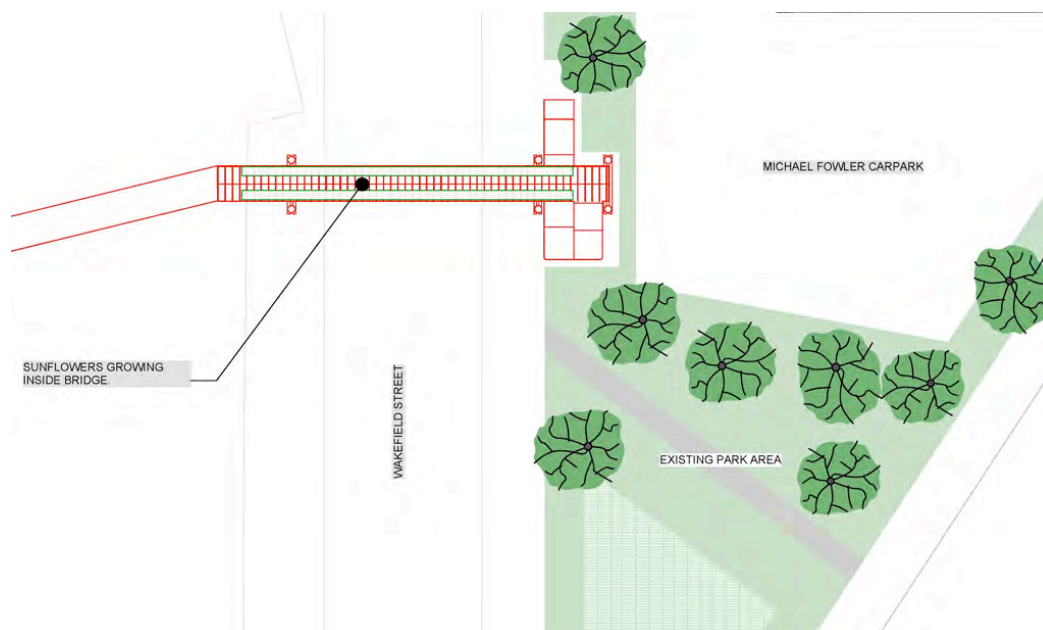


Fig. 8: Project: Diagramme showing components of intervention

### **Agitation as a strategy**

This installation is an experiment in germinating a discussion on how to consider urban occupation and the renewal of public space. It seeks to stimulate the public to contemplate residual sites such as this bridge, to provoke the deconstruction of firmly held beliefs like that of conventional ideas of how urban, public space should be used and redeveloped. The installation seeks to provoke the residents into considering how the space can grow back into 'existence', how and in what form it can be folded back into urban life. In that way the design of the space performs a subtle form of agitation, politically, physically and emotionally.

The installation is also to be understood as a 14 week event that begins at the moment of filing an application to the City Council to fund this public art project. What ensues is an agitation through people's involvement with the installation as an idea, or space, be it as an administrator, council manager, builder, gardener, the media, as a passive passerby or outspoken resident.

The experience of the installation offers a surrealist-type moment, by recontextualising a flower garden into a bridge as an urban greenhouse. It is a strategy that results in drawing attention to that which usually goes by unnoticed. It is making strange that which is overly familiar in our everyday life, thereby "rescuing the everyday from conventional habits of mind", and in this case drawing attention to this council owned, residual but potentially valuable public space.

### **A representation of agitation and the everyday**

The growth of the flower garden over the duration of the installation represents an analogue for the public's growing awareness about the space in question, and therefore represents its coming back into existence. By virtue of its blossoming into being, and through its performance, it effectively demonstrates and represents other forms of redevelopment and use of space.

It questions what public art forms can be and the emphasis is not so much on object, but on performativity and event. In Proxemics, Liam Gillick discusses to what degree a work of art should be informative and instructive by describing the work by artist Rirkrit Tiravanija:

He could have made a didactic gesture. He could have overdetermined the moment of exchange. He could have spelled everything out and crystallised relationships. But instead he has stretched and compressed time to provide a new matrix of interactions - among people who are normally forced to remain focussed on a simple relationship between 'viewer and producer'.<sup>6</sup>

The matrix of interactions and the varied and changing intensity of time, so Gillick writes, are providing an unstable condition rejecting complete control over the reading of works of art, but in turn opens up a dynamic interaction amongst the contextual forces within which the work might reside. It is such a time based, changing, network-rich condition that constitutes the intervention proposal. The installation and event as a representation of space is not one that has crystallised its relationships, but it is left open to be subjectively interpreted. It becomes a performative subjective way of viewing and engaging with the issues. In a way the installation becomes a representation of agitation, and of everyday life, not in a static form, but rather as a presentation, as a live event. It perhaps forms an aesthetic of everyday life as described by Ben Highmore, one that is concerned with the experience of the everyday and the form such experience takes when it is communicated. "It is an aesthetic of experimentation that recognises that actuality always outstrips the procedures for registering it".<sup>7</sup>

While the proposal is of a highly conceptual kind, the literal flower garden grounds the installation firmly within the everyday context through a quotidian aesthetic and its readily accessible meaning making processes. On that level, the installation is of a convivial kind that can be easily engaged with at first sight and can be further probed when accessing the functional, covered, internal public garden space. The design draws on the social and spatial practices of the general public. But at the same time, the public is also confronted with issues beyond those practices, issues around spatial politics, and one's own responsibility to contemplate and care about public spaces.

"Just as concrete needs agitation before it is poured, architecture needs agitation before it can set"<sup>8</sup> Inaba writes. While I wouldn't say that this proposal falls into architecture as such, but could be described as a spatial practice, Inaba's quote is nevertheless reminding us of our responsibility to initiate and engage with a robust debate and dialogue about the planning and making of urban, public spaces and occupation. I guess that this paper however, really argues for a kind of space making and concept of space that is rather transient, unfixed and event based, and therefore is the sort of space that never sets.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Inaba (2006) 'Agitation.' and Wigley (2006) 'Towards turbulence.'

<sup>2</sup> Inaba (2006) 'Agitation.' p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Wigley (2006) 'Towards turbulence.' p. 6.



<sup>4</sup> Liggett, (1995) 'City sights/sites of memories and dreams,' p. 249.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah & Harslof, (2008) 'Introduction,' p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Gillick, L. (2006) *Proxemics: Selected writings (1988-2006)*. p. 268.

<sup>7</sup> Highmore, B. (2002) *Everyday life and cultural theory*. p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Inaba (2006) 'Agitation.' p. 3.

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All images were produced by the authors.