

The Right to Shape the City

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The city is no more the sum of its architecture, the stuff of bricks, mortar, pre-cast concrete, thoroughfares, service lanes, private and civic spaces, than it is a place defined by speculators and institutions which plan, build and govern on its behalf. Rather it is a place inhabited, and as such is coloured as much by breath, gesture, act, as by design and legislation. People have recognised this, from philosophers to designers, social theorists to psychogeographers, and subsequently have rejected the idea of space as 'container', as static, as something immutable or monumental which may be objectified and apprehended from a distance. Instead, with an understanding of space as malleable, contingent, and variable, an “environment

Santiago Cirugeda, Scaffolding, 1998.



formed by the interaction and the integration of different practices,”ⁱ it is perceived as something 'produced', a state of affairs always in the process of being 'made'.

Although heavily implicated in this 'space-making', (who is it after all that interprets, transforms, uses, re-uses, appropriates and reconfigures the inert matter of buildings?) we are hardly immune from the impacts of any given environment. Relations are reciprocal. We influence the spaces through which we move, “through our daily actions....our political, intellectual and economic engagements”ⁱⁱ and in return, mediated and adulterated, the landscape responds, affecting our impressionable bodies. Yet even as we note this reciprocity, this tendency for space and self to be shaped in the intermingling of words, gestures, policy and built form, it is not a balanced affair. The

avenues for participation and expression are both contested and complex, frequently delimited by role.

Within *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau discusses the myriad ways in which we may 'insinuate' ourselves back into our environment, irrespective of the roles assumed by, or assigned to us. How it is we affect - even if it be in nominal and fleeting ways (having no 'power' or 'autonomy' as the basis of our actions) - influence over a given situation, appearing all the while to be doing nothing more than carrying on with our daily lives. For de Certeau profane acts such as walking, speaking, reading, shopping and cooking, may all disguise the various ruses we employ that enable us to fashion acts to our 'own ends', to become manipulators of the things at our finger tips. De Certeau refers to such acts as an 'art of manipulating and enjoying',ⁱⁱⁱ the result not of a malevolent streak or a penchant for deviousness, but rather, a reaction to those freedoms and constraints which are our daily reality. Employing ruses or tactics, we each afford ourselves small opportunities in which to realise moments that are commensurate with our desires. Employing, what could be called 'sleight of hand' techniques, we afford ourselves liberties with a small 'l', meaning that while subject to all the usual laws of governance etc, we are not merely 'passive agents' - 'bit players', 'end users' or 'spectator consumers' - but rather, taking stock of everything that transpires around us, 'active participants'.

The right to space

Having recently attended a presentation, half of which was devoted to a discussion of the crowd-funding of architectural projects, I was surprised by an apparent 'throw-away-comment' made by the speaker. Two slides were shown, the first being a protest, an intense one, replete with heavily armed police, barricades, stuff on fire. The second, sans commentary, was of a cluster of uniformly blue tents, erected within an urban setting. It may have been an *Occupy* encampment. The speaker said something to the effect that 'they there (being the protesters), they are the 1%'. At the time I merely noted in his reversal ('We are the 99%') a disinclination toward a 'type' of public expression, yet later, unpacking it's content, I wondered if he was not expressing something which was more problematic. What he seemed to be stating, as a design professional, was that the opinions of this group – an allegedly marginal one – were not to be taken seriously.

Deeming a sector of society as 'irrelevant' is the antithesis of what Ian Borden is suggesting in the following comment. "The right to the city is not the right to buildings or even public space, but rather the right to be different, the right to not be classified forcibly into categories determined by

homogenising powers”.^{iv} It is an easy enough request to digest, that personal preference be afforded tolerance, that people not be marginalised or constrained on the basis of their appetite. David Yencken along similar lines suggests that, “order must not be destructive of richness and complexity” as it is “variety and complexity which give health to social and cultural systems”.^v But it is evident, given even a cursory perusal of the public sphere, that such thinking, as I’m certain Yencken understood, is ideal. A society which is truly variegated, in persuasion, cultural practice, and aspiration, which allows a means of being and expression outside of that which falls under the rubric of sanctioned expression, say 'cultural festival', is required to do much more than pay lip service to the idea of diversity. A generally tolerant society should refrain from possessing any particular notion of an 'ideal' public (a public as 'consumer' for example – self-restrained, mannered, pliant, heading home at the close of shop and theatre door).

In 2008 the collective Urban Village Melbourne (UVM) set a couch upon the footpath of Collins St in Melbourne's CBD, thereafter to sit upon and mill around this piece of domestic furniture. It is evident, even from the photo documentation, that in making this gesture, which in their words was 'a deliberately provocative research project,'^{vi} they effected a notable rupture and re-purposing of what is predominantly a commercial space. A rationale for this project was posited in the following question; 'Is non-consumer behaviour excluded from active street frontages?'^{vii} The response was unambiguous and forthcoming. Firstly a bank manager requested they take up their furniture and leave, and a couple of hours thereafter, a senior constable reiterated the same.

Forays into Public Space

There are innumerable forms of expression which make their way into the public sphere, visible or otherwise. From the skater transforming utilitarian structures into pleasures and challenges, to the lone walker who at every turn refuses the allure of billboards and shop windows, to adults who pause to fashion something unexpected, a moment of play perhaps, as they walk the city. As de Certeau was aware, people locate numerous ways by which to 'make do', satiate needs, flourish. But what of spatial practices specifically? Interventions which are undertaken for the purposes of enjoyment, necessity, critique, or provocation. Ruses are every bit as relevant here, especially considering that such expression is often the domain of just a handful of professions. In speaking of 'forays' into public space, I am thinking of actions which are temporary, experimental, materially light, which are introduced to the public realm irrespective of invitation, or official sanction. An example of this is the previously mentioned *Couch Sit*, where things are erected quickly, with

minimal fuss and dismantled just as readily. Or perhaps opportunities for the creation of unexpected and unconventional forms arise in scrutinising existing structures, as in the case of 'social architect' Santiago Cirugeda^{viii} who has exploited on a number of occasions, the fine-print of by-laws, planning and building codes. Cirugeda once graffitied a building with the express purpose of applying for a permit to erect a scaffold to repair his own vandalism. Once the scaffold was insitu however, he proceeded not to make the stated repairs, but rather built a one room dwelling using the scaffold as sub-structure. Thereafter he made use of this space intermittently, for the next several months, stating that technically the permit could have been renewed indefinitely. He effected a similar gesture that same year when he transformed skip bins, permitted for the roadside, into a playground for children, replete with see-saws. Or perhaps a foray into public space may take an equally brazen and direct, but not-quite-so-legal approach, such as the one initiated by Sydney artist collective Squatspace. In early 2001 Squatspace moved into a row of abandoned terraces in South Sydney and after making the necessary repairs, resided, exhibited creative work, and ran a café for a short in time in one of the terraces.

There are however no exemplary forms. These innovative and often provocative works and projects are mentioned only by way of example. Expression and response is a nuanced affair, contingent upon personality, circumstance and context. For Squatspace, who were making manifest their objections to rental scarcity, inflated rental prices and urban development which made exclusions along economic lines, to locate and squat within a council-owned row of terraces, ear-marked for development, was a fitting expression.^{ix} For Cirugeda who is committed to carrying out, amongst other things, intermittent acts of “personal emancipation from urban control structures”^x the exploitation of loopholes serves as an elegant statement to this end.

Does qualification, skill, or position, qualify or disqualify one from making a public expression, be it speech or act? Santiago Cirugeda once remarked that if you are an artist or an architect and you make a request to do something in public, mostly you will be able to do so. His reaction to this was to say that he neither wants to be seen as an artist or an architect, but rather as a 'citizen'.^{xi} The point being that fundamentally he views design as a 'social art', an affair in which we are all implicated. Expression and place-making should not be the sole domain of professionals, especially considering the readiness by which people and communities offer opinions. Cirugeda's ceding of privilege, a de-professionalisation of sorts, makes a potent statement. It is a critique of any form of expression which extensively ignores (refrains from extending itself toward) the very public for whom it is intended. Dr Karen Burns referencing UVM's project *Stick.Brick.Crate*. (2008) (in which they

invited the public to create from re-purposed waste, assemblages and architectures on which to stage live performances), points out the significance of UVM's efforts to engender working relationships with communities. She suggests that *Stick.Brick.Crate*. (and their practice generally) addresses at its crux, the “difficult business of building a social body, the understanding that relationships and temporary accommodation are the stuff of public life”.^{xii}

What is design (or expression) if it is not fore-mostly the creation of a space in which to hold a conversation? A negotiation of where it might be desirable to head next? To facilitate opportunities that discuss, and act to accommodate a diverse array of interests? Anything else runs the risk of missing the mark, acting as imposition, more top-down meddling. Ideally, as autonomous^{xiii} subjects, able to question ourselves as well as society, our critique and our modes of expression will be diverse, idiosyncratic, and forthcoming. Even as we strive for models which are horizontally rather than vertically orientated, which do away with hierarchies which limit opportunities and place restrictions on participation, ruses continue to be useful. Creative responses, clever negotiations, provisional acts, gestures which are fleeting and ephemeral, are equally pertinent and meaningful. It is not only the permanent and the impressively-scaled which leaves its mark, which stains memory. As we dream ourselves onto the city (and beyond), through personal and collective means, we ensure that those critical and creative 'muscles' do not atrophy, and in so doing, offer a reminder to those who are tempted to mediate on our behalf, that the city is a complex affair ■

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- i Raymond Ledrut, '*Speech and the Silence of the City*' in M.Gottdeiner and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (ed.), *The City and the Sign: An introduction to Urban Semiotics*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986. p122
- ii David Harvey, '*The Right to the City*' in Loretta Lees (ed.), *The Emancipatory City? Paradoxes and Possibilities*, Sage Publications, London, 2004. p 237
- iii Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Every day life*, University of California Press, London. 1984. pp xxii
- iv Iain Borden (ed.), *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social space*, MIT Press, 2000. p11
- v David Yencken, *The Creative City*, Meanjin, Vol 47, No 4. University of Melbourne, 1988. pp 597
- vi <http://www.urbanvillagemelbourne.net/project/couch-sit/> accessed 7/5/13
- vii *ibid*
- viii For a previous article I penned on Cirugeda: Jason Workman, *Architecture on the Fringes of Legality: Santiago Cirugeda and Kyohei Sakaguchi*, Un 5.2, Melbourne, 2011
- ix For more on this issue and the practice of Squatspace see: Lucas Ihlein, *An unReal Estate Guide to Finding Your Own Gallery*, (unabridged version), 2004 <http://www.lucazoid.com/bilateral/an-unreal-estate-guide-to-finding-your-own-gallery/>
- x Santiago Cirugeda, '*Urban Recipes: The Need to Invent a Home*' in *Zehar Magazine* #52, January, 2004.
- xi Santiago Cirugeda cited in Benedict Grosjean, *Futurehouse*, Archilab, Thames and Hudson, London, 2002.
- xii Dr Karen Burns, *Wheelie Bins and Social Bodies*, Ammon Beyerle (ed.), Urban Village Melbourne, The Bulle[n]tin #22, Monday 26-7-2010. pdf, p 24
- xiii Autonomous in the sense of seeing oneself as “sovereign in deciding what to believe and in weighing competing reasons for action” Tomas Scanlon, *A theory of Freedom of Expression*, Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 1, No.2. (winter, 1972), pp 215