

Insurgent Public Space

Guerrilla urbanism and the remaking
of contemporary cities

Edited by Jeffrey Hou

Sawako Ono is Professor of Landscape Architecture at Chiba University. Her research field is the cultural history of gardens. She is especially interested in the opening mechanisms of gardens, which are primarily enclosed. Her principal publications include *Flower-viewing in Edo* and *We Want a Park Like This*.

Andrew Pask is Director of the Vancouver Public Space Network (VPSN), a non-profit organization based in British Columbia. Trained as an anthropologist and urban planner, Pask has worked on urban issues, community-based research, design and planning projects in cities across Canada. Information on the VPSN can be found at <http://www.vpsn.ca>.

Devon G. Peña is Professor of Anthropology and American Ethnic Studies at the University of Washington, and is Founder/President of the Acequia Institute. He is the author of several books, the most recent being *Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida*, published by the University of Arizona Press.

Jeannene Przyblyski is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the San Francisco Art Institute and Executive Director of the San Francisco Bureau of Urban Secrets, a public art studio and think tank dedicated to exploring the multiplicity of urban pasts and charting the manifold futures of cities (<http://www.bureauofurbansecrets.org>).

Michael Rios is Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Design at the University of California, Davis. Previously, he taught in the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University, where he was inaugural director of the Hamer Center for Community Design from 1999 to 2007.

James Rojas is a nationally recognized urban planner who examines Latino cultural influences on urban design. His influential Massachusetts Institute of Technology thesis on the Latino built environment has been widely cited. For the past eighteen years Mr. Rojas has lectured extensively and written on this subject.

Ryoko Sato is Associate Professor at Ehime University in Japan. She teaches tourism and community development in the faculty of law and literature. Her main research interests include partnerships between urban and rural areas and community development with farmers' markets. She worked as a journalist until spring 2009.

Janni Sorensen is Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. She received her PhD in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She worked with the East St. Louis Action Research Project at the University of Illinois.

Erick Villagomez is a founding editor at *re:place* magazine. He is an educator, independent researcher, and designer with interests in human settlements at all scales. His private practice, Metis Design Build, is dedicated to a collaborative and ecologically responsible approach to the design and construction of places.

Pina Wu graduated from the Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, National Taiwan University. She also received a master's degree in Public Policy and Urban Planning at Harvard University. She likes to walk around in the city, observe, and enjoy life in the public spaces.

Preface

This book came to being in a way that was not unlike the stories of ad-hoc, informal, incremental, and yet purposeful actions that you are about to read. In 2007, Isami Kinoshita and I put together a panel, titled "Variations on the Public Realm," at the 6th Conference of the Pacific Rim Community Design Network, which produced the initial set of working papers. The Pacific Rim Community Design Network is a loosely connected group of community-based activists and scholars around the Pacific Rim who meet every two years or so to exchange and debate the practice of community design. Conceived by Taichi Goto, with support from Randy Hester, the network was formally launched in 1998 at a working conference at the University of California, Berkeley, followed by consequent meetings in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Seattle, and China. I am indebted to my colleagues from the network for the inspirations and lessons over the years in engaging citizens and communities in grassroots planning and design. The discourse of insurgent public space could not have emerged without the generous sharing and exchanges of ideas among those within the network. Specific thanks go to Dan Abramson for spearheading the organization of the 2007 conference in Quanzhou that snowballed into this project.

Following the 2007 conference, I was invited by Min Jay Kang and other colleagues at the Organization for Urban Re-s (OURs) to lead a working group as part of the "Do-It-Yourself, Design in Yangminshan Charrette" in Taipei, Taiwan. The design charrette brought together ten faculty members and over fifty students from different universities in Taiwan and the University of Washington. The five-day-workshop examined ways to transform the former American military housing quarters in Sanzihou, one of the last green spaces in the dense metropolis, into a space for communities and citizens. The experimentation and discussion during the charrette that centered on the making of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) urban spaces solidified the concept of insurgent public space and the motivation to turn the initial set of 2007 conference papers into a book.

To expand the scope of the book, I initiated a call for papers to those outside the network, several of whom in turn introduced others to join this collaborative effort. My sincere thanks go to Blaine Merker and David Hohenschau, whom I got to know respectively at the Design Activism symposium at Berkeley organized by Randy Hester and the 5th Conference of the Pacific Rim Community Design Network that I organized in Seattle. Both put me in touch with their respective colleagues in San Francisco and Vancouver. The additional contributors have immensely widened the breadth and perspectives of this project. With each new author and new chapter that tells a story from a different social and cultural context, we further articulate and capture the wide-ranging instances of insurgent public space in the increasingly interconnected global villages. I am grateful to the contributing authors, whose

intense passion and interest in the work of insurgent public space has kept this project going. I hope this book is only the beginning of our collaboration.

There are many other individuals and institutions that were also critical in making this book a reality. Specifically, the book could not have been completed without the Johnston/Hastings Publication Support from the College of Built Environments at the University of Washington in Seattle. I thank Dean Daniel Friedman for his generosity and support of this project. I am also indebted to Mark Francis and Sergio Palleroni who assisted me early on in seeking funding support for this project. During the many years of teaching at the University of Washington, my colleagues in the Department of Landscape Architecture have provided me with an engaging and supportive environment that enables me to pursue this work. Thank you, JoAnne Edwards, Kristina Hill, Julie Johnson, Lynne Manzo, Kelley Pagano, Vicky Reyes, Iain Robertson, Nancy Rottle, Luanne Smith, Ben Spencer, David Streatfield, Nhon Troung, Fritz Wagner, Thaisa Way, Daniel Winterbottom, and Ken Yocom.

The initial manuscript of this book was completed during my sabbatical leave in Taiwan in fall 2008. I am grateful to Professor Chao-Ching Yu for hosting me in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the Chung-Yuan University. Special thanks also go to Shenglin Elijah Chang and Jingyong Wu at National Taiwan University for sharing with me their office (and humor) where I edited many of the chapters – a much needed relief from having to work on crowded planes, trains, buses, subways, and other forms of true and pseudo public spaces during my travel. Immense thanks go to Alex Hollingsworth, my editor at Routledge, and the anonymous reviewers for recognizing the value of this work. Upon returning to Seattle, my research assistant Sarah Ferreter was instrumental in assembling the final manuscript and in bringing the project to the finish line. For my own chapter in this book, I am grateful to Stella Chao and Joyce Pisanant for the opportunity and rewarding experience of working with the youths of the WILD program in Seattle's International District and in making me a part of the community.

This book is a collective effort. It is a space for us to share our stories, lessons, ideas, and critical perspectives. With this book and its many narratives, we intend to inform, instigate, and enable other instances of insurgent placemaking.

Jeffrey Hou, Seattle

CHAPTER 1

(Not) your everyday public space

Jeffrey Hou

With a sixteen-foot statue of Vladimir Lenin standing in a street corner, a salvaged rocket sitting on top of a building, a car-eating troll crawling under a bridge, Fremont is undoubtedly one of the most eccentric neighborhoods in Seattle. One day in 2001, the neighborhood (a.k.a. the Center of the Universe) welcomed yet another addition to its treasured collection – an eight-foot-long metal pig that was anonymously planted on a sidewalk overnight.

The pig became an instant celebrity. Neighbors wondered who left it there. The local press followed the news for months – trying to identify the instigator(s), how the pig was erected without permission, and then why it mysteriously vanished two months later, just one day before it was to be moved to a new location following complaints by several business owners. It turned out that the pig was the work of two anonymous artists. The artwork was meant as an anti-consumerism statement, mocking the official "Pigs on Parade," an art and fundraising event that featured decorated pig sculptures in malls and streets of Seattle.

Planted on a public sidewalk, Fremont's pig was not only a social and artistic statement, but also an attack on the official public sphere in the contemporary city. Although the pig did not physically alter the space except for its footprints, its unauthorized presence challenged the norms of public space by defying the city's requirement for a deposit to put art on a sidewalk. Although its actual production did not involve the so-called public process, the work engaged the public through the media and everyday conversation. Through the space it occupied and the debates it engendered among neighbors, citizens, and the media, the pig renewed the discursive instrumentality of public space as a forum for open discussion. It gives meanings to the full notion of publicity in a public space.

In cities around the world, acts such as the pig installation in Fremont represent small yet persistent challenges against the increasingly regulated, privatized, and diminishing forms of public space. In Portland, Oregon, activists from the group City Repair painted street intersections in bright colors and patterns, and involved neighbors in converting them into neighborhood gathering places. In Taipei, citizens frustrated with rocketing housing costs staged a "sleep-in" in the streets of the most expensive district in the city to protest the government inaction. In London, Space Hijackers, a group of self-proclaimed "anarchitects," has performed numerous acts of "space hijacking," from "Guerrilla Benching" – installing benches in empty public space – to the "Circle Line Party" in London's Underground (till they were stopped by the police).

Rather than isolated instances, these acts of insurgency transcend geographic

boundaries and reflect the respective social settings and issues. In cities from Europe to Asia, residual urban sites and industrial lands have been occupied and converted into new uses by citizens and communities. From coast to coast in North America, urban and suburban landscapes have been adapted and transformed by new immigrant groups to support new functions and activities. In Japan, suburban private homes have been transformed into “third places” for community activities.¹ From Seattle to Shanghai, citizen actions ranging from gardening to dancing have permanently and temporarily taken over existing urban sites and injected them with new functions and meanings.

These instances of self-made urban spaces, reclaimed and appropriated sites, temporary events, and flash mobs, as well as informal gathering places created by predominantly marginalized communities, have provided new expressions of the collective realms in the contemporary city. No longer confined to the archetypal categories of neighborhood parks, public plaza, and civic architecture, these *insurgent public spaces* challenge the conventional, codified notion of public and the making of space.

What can we learn from these acts of everyday and not-so-everyday resistance? What do they reveal about the limitations and possibilities of public realm in our contemporary city? How do these instances of insurgency challenge the conventional understanding and making of public space? How are these spaces and activities redefining and expanding the roles, functions, and meanings of the public and the production of space? These are the questions we intend to address in this book.

Public space: democracy, exclusion, and political control

Public space has been an important facet of cities and urban culture. In cities around the world, urban spaces such as plazas, markets, streets, temples, and urban parks have long been the centers of civic life for urban dwellers. They provide opportunities for gathering, socializing, recreation, festivals, as well as protests and demonstrations. As parks and plazas, urban open spaces provide relief from dense urban districts and structured everyday life. As civic architecture, they become collective expressions of a city as well as depositories of personal memories. As places where important historical events tend to unfold, public spaces are imbued with important, collective meanings – both official and unofficial.

Serving as a vehicle of social relationships, public discourses, and political expressions, public space is not only a physical boundary and material setting. Henaff and Strong (2001: 35) note that public space “designates an ensemble of social connections, political institutions, and judicial practices.” Brill (1989: 8) writes that public space comes to represent the public sphere and public life, “a forum, a group action, school for social learning, and common ground.” In the Western tradition, public space has had a positive connotation that evokes the practice of democracy, openness, and publicity of debate since the time of the Greek agora. Henaff and Strong (2001) further argue that the very idea of democracy is inseparable from that of public space. “Public space means simultaneously: open to all, well known by all, and acknowledged by all. . . . It stands in opposition to private space of

special interests” (Henaff and Strong 2001: 35). Landscape architecture scholar Mark Francis (1989: 149) writes, “Public space is the common ground where civility and our collective sense of what may be called ‘publicness’ are developed and expressed.” Fraser (1990) argues that, as a public sphere, public space is an arena of citizen discourse and association. Furthermore, I. M. Young (2002) sees public space in a city as accessible to everyone and thus reflecting and embodying the diversity in the city.

However, contrary to the rhetoric of openness and inclusiveness, the actual making and practice of public space often reflect a different political reality and social biases. Agacinski (2001: 133) notes that, before the French Revolution, “the public” in the Western tradition referred to the “literate and educated” and “was never thought to be the same as the people.” Even in recent Western history, some have argued that, “despite the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility,” the official public sphere rests on a number of significant exclusions, based on gender, class, and race (Fraser 1990: 59). The gender division of public and private, in particular, has been a powerful instrument of exclusion as it relegates women to the private sphere and prevents them from fully participating in the public realm (Drucker and Gumpert 1997). By delineating what constitutes public and private and by designating membership to specific social groups, the official public space has long been exclusionary, contrary to Young’s (2002) notion of a public space that embodies differences and diversity.

Aside from the practice of exclusion, public space has also been both an expression of power and a subject of political control. Under medieval monarchy in the West, public space was where political power was staged, displayed, and legitimized (Henaff and Strong 2001). In the totalitarian societies of recent times, large public spaces serve as military parade grounds – a raw display of power to impress citizens as well as enemies. In modern democracies, as the power has shifted to the people, public spaces have at last provided a legitimate space for protests and demonstrations – an expression of the freedom of speech. But such freedom has never come without considerable struggles and vigilance. In the post-9/11 world of hyper-security and surveillance, new forms of control in public space have curtailed freedom of movement and expression and greatly limited the activities and meanings of contemporary public space (see Low and Smith 2005).

Across the different cultural traditions, the functions and meanings of public space have varied significantly, illustrating the varying means and degrees of social and political control. In recent Western democracies, public space and the formation of public opinion have been important components of the democratic process. Through opportunities of assembly and public discourses, political expressions in the public space are important in holding the state accountable to its citizens. This distinction between the public and the state has been an important ingredient in democratic politics. By contrast, in countries influenced by Confucianism in the East, social and individual life is dictated predominantly by obligations to state and family, with little in between. The official public space is traditionally either non-existent or tightly controlled by the state.

A useful illustration is Edo-era Tokyo. Under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate, the city was spatially divided between *Yamanote* (consisting of large private estates

occupied by ranking officials in the upland) and *Shitamachi* (the compact and tightly regulated quarters for the commoners in the flatland). In *Shitamachi*, gated streets and waterfront markets served as the only recognizable form of public gathering space. To escape from the gated quarters and regimented pattern of everyday life, one had to go to the pleasure grounds that lay outside the official quarters of the city (Figure 1.1).

In many Asian cities, public space has been synonymous with spaces that are representing and controlled by the state. In contrast, the everyday and more vibrant urban life tends to occur in the back streets and alleyways, away from the official public domain. Seoul's *Pimagol* ('Avoid-Horse-Street'), narrow alleys that parallel the city's historic main road Jong-ro, serve as an example (Figure 1.2). To avoid repeatedly bowing to the noble-class people riding on horses on Jong-ro, a requirement back in the days of feudal power, the commoners turned to the back alleys, away from the main road. Over time, restaurants and shops began to occupy the back alleys, which became a parallel universe and an important part of the vibrant everyday life in the city.

The development and design of public parks in America provides yet another illustration, showing how public space has long been an ideologically biased and regulated enterprise contrary to the rhetoric of openness. In the United States, Cranz (1982: 3, 5) argues that early parks were built from "an anti-urban ideal that dwelt on the traditional prescription for relief from the evils of the city—to the country." The emergence of reform parks in the United States further demonstrated this bias. Located in mostly dense, immigrant and working class neighborhoods, they were designed to move children and adults from the streets (Cranz 1982). With the goal of social and cultural integration, and provisions for organized play, the parks and

Figure 1.1 Popular with tourists today, the Asakusa temple district was once one of Edo-era Tokyo's pleasure grounds that lay outside the city quarters. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

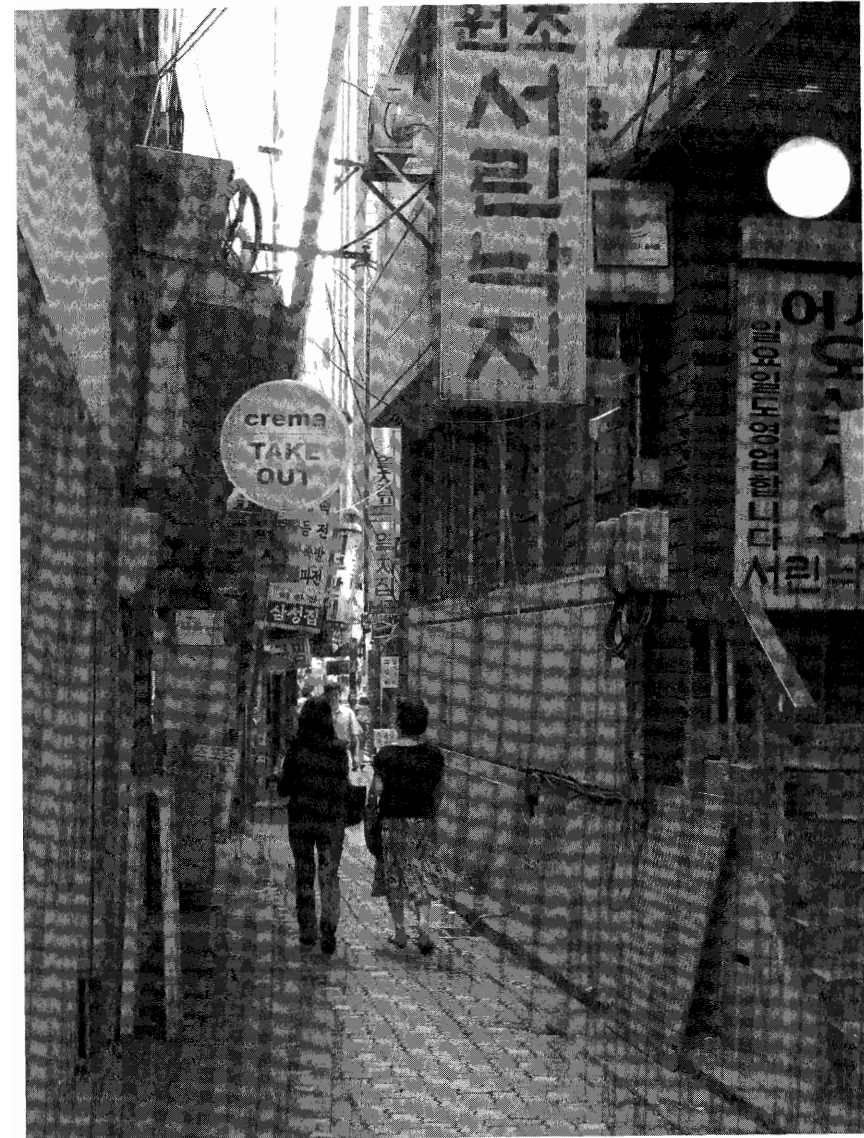


Figure 1.2 Seoul's disappearing Pimagol was once an important passage and gathering space for commoners and the city's unofficial public space. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

palygrounds were also designed to assimilate immigrants into the mainstream American culture (Cranz 1982). Today, although multiculturalism is more widely acknowledged, the historic bias continues, as Low, Taplin, and Scheld (2005: 4) found that "restrictive management of large parks has created an increasingly inhospitable environment for immigrants, local ethnic groups, and culturally diverse behaviors." Observing how different cultural groups use the neighborhood parks in Los Angeles, Loukaitou-Sideris (1995: 90) writes that, contrary to the notion of inclusiveness, the "contemporary American neighborhood park does not always meet the needs of all segments of the public."

Erosion of public space and public life

In the literature on public realm in recent decades, the erosion and decline of public space and public life have been a predominant theme. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennet (1992/1978) argues that public life has become a matter of formal obligation in modern times. More importantly, the private and personal have taken precedence over the public and impersonal, as society became less interested in public matters and more driven by private interests and personal desires. He further states, the "unbalanced personal life and empty public life" are manifested in the dead public space of modern architecture, with few opportunities for social interactions (Sennet 1992/1978: 16). More recently, Putnam (1995) uses the metaphor of "bowling alone" to characterize the decline of civic engagement in American society. Using evidences in decreased voter turnout, attendance in public meetings, and memberships in traditional civic organizations, including labor unions and church groups, he argues that such decline undermines the working of democracy (Putnam 1995).

In the last few decades, a number of practices have further challenged what is left of public space in both its physical and political dimensions. Most notably, the growing privatization of public space has become a common pattern and experience in many parts of the world where downtown districts as well as suburban lands are transformed into themed malls and so-called festival marketplaces. To emulate successful urban spaces of the past, neo-traditional streetscapes and town squares are reproduced but segregated from the rest of the city to create a supposed safe haven for shoppers and businesses. Whereas the physical form and appearance of the spaces may look familiar to the traditional public space in the past, their public functions and meanings have become highly limited.

Increasingly, to spur economic development, public funds are used to subsidize development of private venues, while developers are generously rewarded for providing spaces with limited public use. As streets, neighborhoods, and parks become malls, gated communities, and corporate venues, public space becomes subjected to new forms of ownership, commodification, and control. Davis (1992: 155) observes, "The 'public' space of the new megastructures and supermalls have supplanted traditional streets and disciplined their spontaneity." Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee (1998: 278) further write, "American downtown is a product of purposeful design actions that have effectively sought to mold space according to the needs of a corporatist economy and to subordinate urban form to the logic of profit."

The control of public space is now a worldwide phenomenon that shows how form follows capital. From Los Angeles's Bunker Hill to Sandton in Johannesburg, private interests have created fortified downtowns and urban sub-centers, protecting an increasing array of pseudo-public and private properties against the possible intrusion of the "undesirables" (Whyte 1980). In addition to the limited public functions, the privatization of public space has important implications for the political sphere of contemporary cities. Kohn (2004: 2) writes, "When private spaces replace public gathering space, the opportunities for political conversation are diminished." Mitchell (2003: 34) also argues that, "in a world defined by private

property, the formation of public sphere that is at all robust and inclusive of a variety of different publics is exceedingly difficult." Barber (2001: 203) notes that the privatization and commercialization of space have turned our "complex, multiuse public space into a one-dimensional venue for consumption." He further writes, the "malling of America has sometimes entailed the mauling of American civil society and its public" (Barber 2001: 201).

Insurgent public space: momentary ruptures and everyday struggles

Given all the historic limitations and contemporary setbacks, is it still possible to imagine a public space that is open and inclusive? Mitchell (2003) offers an important argument that the making of public space and its associated freedom and openness always requires vigilance and actions. He writes, "[The idea of public space] has never been guaranteed. It has only been won through concerted struggle" (Mitchell 2003: 5). Similarly, Watson (2006: 7) argues, "public space is always in some sense, in a state of emergence, never complete and always contested." Mitchell (2003: 5) further argues that struggle "is the only way that the right to public space can be maintained and only way that social justice can be advanced." To him, it is through the actions and purposeful occupation of a space that it becomes public.

Today, even as more and more public spaces have become heavily regulated and privatized, there are attempts by individuals and communities at greater freedom. These acts, despite their momentary nature, defy what Sorkin (1992) characterizes as the "end of public space." In San Francisco, throngs of cyclists form Critical Mass to reclaim public streets from cars. The movement now has a presence in over 300 cities around the world where cyclists engage in regular acts of civil disruption. In Beijing (where cyclists once inspired their counterparts in San Francisco), even after the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square, the square remains a tense political stage, ruptured periodically by individual acts of dissent that recall the massacre of 1989 and the continued political oppression. In Taipei, students demonstrating against police brutality under the Kuomintang government during a recent protest camped out in the city's Liberty Square in 2008. To show their determination to stay and to demand a government response, the students began building a village on the square, complete with a kitchen, classrooms, a vegetable garden, a webcast station, and tents for sleeping (Figures 1.3 and 1.4). In Hong Kong, Filipina guest workers occupy the ground floor of Norman Foster's signature HSBC building (an icon of global capital) every Sunday, and transform it from an anonymous corporate entrance to a lively community gathering space where migrant workers picnic, chat, and reunite (Figure 1.5).

On a different front, while new technologies in telecommunication and media have undermined the importance of place-based public space, they have also enabled new types of actions and means of public dissent. Since 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has built strong international support for its struggle against the Mexican state, using the Internet as a means of communication. Starting with the anti-WTO protest in Seattle in 2000, anti-globalization activists have relied on globalized technology to communicate with each other around the world

Figure 1.3 Students of the Wild Strawberries Movement occupied the Liberty Square in Taipei to protest against police brutality and a law that restricts the freedom of assembly and demonstration. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

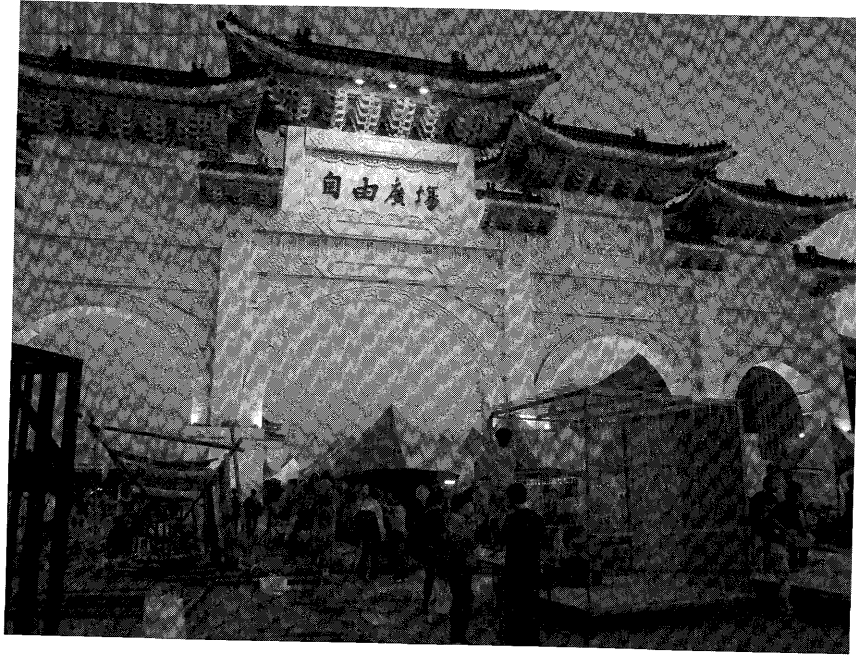


Figure 1.4 A temporary memorial built by the students to mourn the loss of democracy, mocking the memorial of the former Nationalist Chinese dictator Chiang Kai-Shek in the background. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.



and stage protests at the gatherings of world leaders and international financial institutions. More recently, in the coastal Chinese city of Xiamen, text messaging enabled thousands of citizens to gather instantaneously in a street protest against the building of a chemical complex. The large turnout forced the local government to reject the development. Lately, social networking tools such as Twitter have been linked to mass mobilization and communication in protest events in Iran and Moldova (Cohen 2009). Together, these examples testify to Mitchell's argument that the end of public space argument is "overly simplistic in that it does not necessarily appreciate how new kinds of spaces have developed" (Mitchell 2003: 8).

On a more everyday level, citizen initiatives and informal activities have created other new uses and forms of public space. They include spontaneous events, unintended uses, and a variety of activities that defy or escape existing rules and regulations. These everyday practices transform urban spaces into what Watson (2006: 19) calls, "a site of potentiality, difference, and delightful encounters." A case in point is the community garden movement in North America and elsewhere in which hundreds and thousands of vacant or abandoned sites (including both public and private properties) have been transformed into productive plots and as places for cultivation, recreation, gathering, and education by communities (Lawson 2005, Francis *et al.* 1984; Figure 1.6). These and other forms of community open spaces have emerged as an alternative park system in cities and towns (Francis

Figure 1.5 Every Sunday, Filipina workers transform the ground floor of the HSBC building in Hong Kong into a community gathering place. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.



et al. 1984). Through personal and collective uses that provide both private and public benefits, these community gardens function as “hybrid public spaces” that are distinct from their conventional and official counterpart (Hou et al. 2009).

Although these everyday expressions of public space activism might not have the appearance of radical insurgency, it should be noted that many of the outcomes would not have been possible without extensive grassroots struggle. For instance, in the Mount Baker neighborhood of Seattle, gardeners and community activists joined to defend a well-used community garden from being sold by the city for private real estate development. Teaming up with supporters and open space advocates around the city, they petitioned the City Council to pass an ordinance that requires the city to compensate sale of park property with an equivalent amount of open space in

Figure 1.6 Community gardens such as the Danny Woo Garden in Seattle’s International District were created by residents and community organizers and are distinct formally and socially from the typical public open space. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.



the same neighborhood. The ordinance effectively saved not only their garden plots but also all other similar park properties in the city (Hou et al. 2009). Across the Pacific, in the Shilin Night Market in Taipei, one of the largest and most popular evening markets in the city, illegal vendors find ways every night to escape police enforcement. The vendors develop their own monitoring protocols, make-shift apparatus, and temporary storage sites so that, when the policemen approach the market from a distance, they can easily detect them, signal each other, disappear in a matter of seconds, and then converge again once the cops go away (Figure 1.7). The informal mechanism and the drama that unfolds several times in a night enable the vendors to create one of the liveliest and most dynamic marketplaces in the city, bypassing regulations and enforcement.

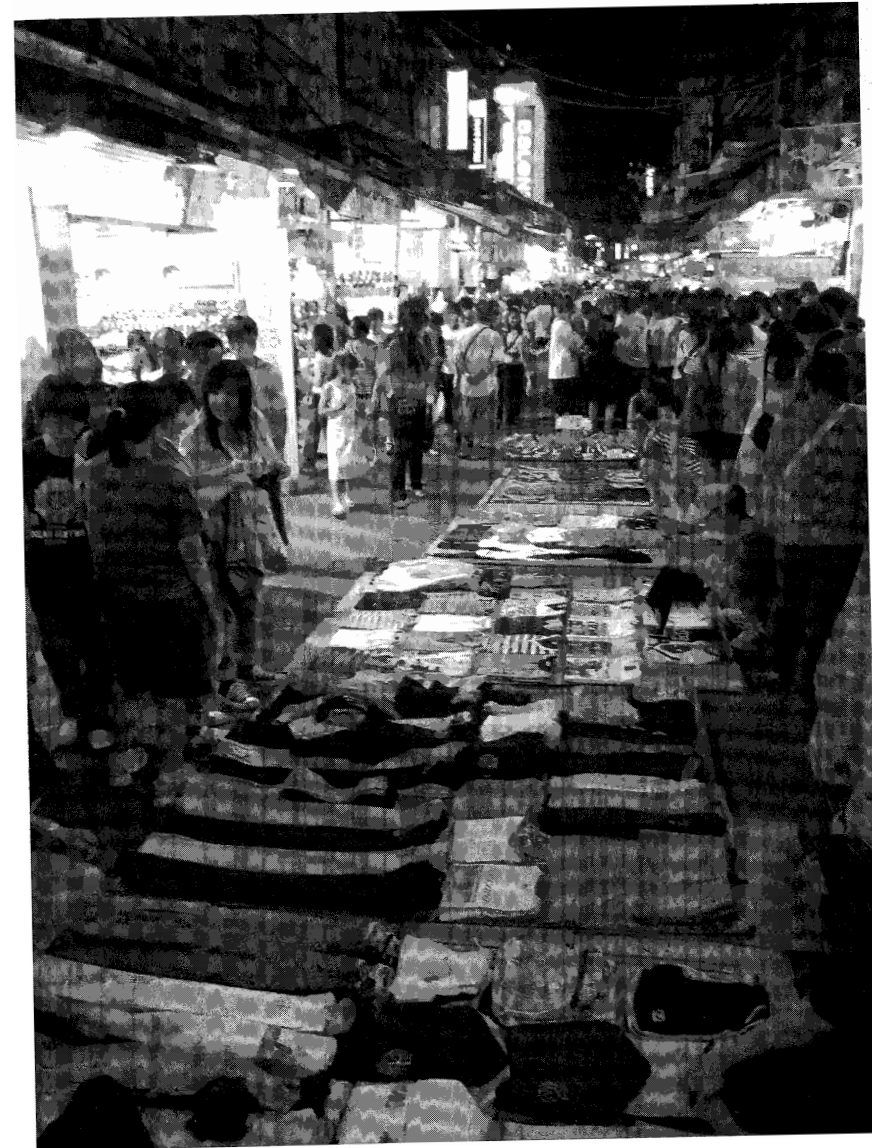


Figure 1.7 Vendors in Taipei’s Shilin Night Market can disappear with their merchandise in a matter of seconds to escape law enforcement, adding drama to the already colorful night market. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

This book

This book is an attempt to better understand such everyday and not-so-everyday making of public space that defies the conventional rules, regulations, and wisdom. It focuses on alternative spaces, activities, expressions, and relationships that have emerged in response to opportunities, constraints, and transformation in contemporary society. The rubric of "insurgent public space" provides a way for us to define and articulate these expressions of alternative social and spatial relationships. Rather than bemoaning the erosion of public realm, this collective body of work focuses on the new possibilities of public space and public realm in support of a more diverse, just, and democratic society.

This edited volume represents the voices of individuals who have been active in realizing such possibilities through their practice, research, teaching, and civic involvement. They are anthropologists, communication scholars, and geographers, as well as architects, artists, community organizers, landscape architects, and planners. All of the essays focus on actual struggles and examples. They offer lessons and explore further possibilities based on experiences and encounters on the ground. To provide a comparison of the parallel and widespread occurrences around the world, this book takes on a deliberately cross-cultural approach and includes diverse cases from the different geographic regions and social contexts.

Some recent publications have addressed or informed aspects of our investigation. The phenomenon of unintended uses of urban public space in particular is a subject of growing academic interest represented by the publication of *Loose Space* (Franck and Stevens 2006) and *Everyday Urbanism* (Chase et al. 1999). Franck and Stevens (2006: 4) argue that unintended uses "have the ability to loosen up the dominant meanings of specific sites that give rise to new perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors." They define loose space as "a space apart from the aesthetically and behaviorally controlled and homogenous 'theme' environment of leisure and consumption where nothing unpredictable must occur" (Franck and Stevens 2006: 3). In *Everyday Urbanism*, Crawford (1999) presents a similar concept. She writes, "everyday space stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated and often underused public space that can be found in most American cities" (Crawford 1999: 9). It represents "a zone of social transition and possibility in the potential for new social arrangement and forms of imagination" (Crawford 1999: 9).

In *The Ludic City*, Stevens (2007: 196) explores the playful uses of urban spaces that are often "non-instrumental, active, unexpected, and risky." Yet they provide new experiences and produce new social relations (Stevens 2007: 196). Similarly, in *City Publics*, Watson (2006: 7) focuses on "marginal, unpretentious, hidden and symbolic spaces" and "often forgotten subjects." In *The Informal City*, Laguerre (1994: 2) explores urban informality "as site of power in relation to external discipline and control power." In contrast to the formalized spaces and practices, "urban informality is the expression of the freedom of the subject" (Laguerre 1994: 24). In the field of design and planning, a number of recent publications reflect the resurging practice of design activism (see Architecture for Humanity 2006, Bell 2003, Bell and Wakeford 2008, Bloom and Bromberg 2004, Palleroni 2004). The work often involves professionals working with citizens and communities in transforming

spaces for community and public use. In *Design for Ecological Democracy*, Hester (2006) envisions the human stewardship of an even greater public space – the planet and its social and ecological systems. Finally our conceptualization of insurgent public space is indebted to the notion of "insurgent citizenship" or "insurgent space of citizenship" from John Holston (1998: 39). Similar to the opposition to the state's legitimization of the notion of citizenship, the insurgent public space is in opposition to the kind of public space that is regulated, controlled, and maintained solely by the state.

This volume seeks to build upon these investigations and interpretations of alternative urban practices and forms of activism to imagine a different mode of production in the making of public space, a public and a space that are heterogeneous, fluid, and dynamic.

The stories

The book is organized around a typology of actions and practices that shape the different stories of resistance. This typology is not meant to be exhaustive or categorical but rather is a way to highlight the specific characters and purposefulness of the actions.

Appropriating represents actions and manners through which the meaning, ownership, and structure of official public space can be temporarily or permanently suspended. Here, three case studies examine ways through which citizens transform the public realm by repurposing the existing urban landscapes. From Beijing, Caroline Chen examines how local residents cope with rapid urbanization and make use of existing urban infrastructure and residual spaces for their everyday recreation and socialization. From Los Angeles, James Rojas examines how Latino immigrants improvise and reinvent the notion and practice of public space in the city through new use of streets, sidewalks, vacant lots, and other spaces. From San Francisco, Blaine Merker describes how the artist and designer group Rebar has identified "niche spaces" within the framework of public and quasi-public spaces and claimed them as sites for social and artistic discourses.

Reclaiming describes the adaptation and reuse of abandoned or underutilized urban spaces for new and collective functions and instrumentality. From Berlin, Michael LaFond describes the work of eXperimentcity, which turns vacant lots in the city into venues for cooperative, ecological housing, and youth projects. From Tokyo, Shin Aiba and Osamu Nishida present work from their Re-city project, which reutilizes the existing building stocks in the Kanda district and transforms them into new neighborhood public spaces. From Vancouver, Erick Villagomez examines strategies to incrementally enhance and diversify the existing urban fabric through the exploitation of residual and neglected spaces.

Pluralizing refers to how specific ethnic groups transform the meaning and functions of public space, which results in a more heterogeneous public sphere. Michael Rios considers the prospects for a distinctive Latino Urbanism in the United States and the different ways Latinos make claims to public spaces in the city. Jeffrey Hou examines how the making of a Night Market in Seattle's Chinatown-International District has engendered a physical, social, and cultural reconstruction

of the public realm in the neighborhood. From Taiwan, Hung-Ying Chen and Jia-He Lin examine how Southeast Asian immigrants negotiate their identities and place through the making of their own collective space. Using ChungShan as a case study, Pina Wu examines how Filipino guest workers in Taipei find refuge in the streets, alleys, shops, restaurants, and offices of an alienating city.

Transgressing represents the infringement or crossing of official boundaries between the private and public domains through temporary occupation as well as production of new meanings and relationships. Here, three case studies from Japan explore the potentiality of a new public space that straddles the public and private realms. Using cases in the Setagaya Ward of Tokyo, Yasuyoshi Hayashi considers the network of community-based non-profit organizations as the basis of a "new public" in Japan. Isami Kinoshita examines how the concept of *niwa-roju* (Garden Street Trees) transforms the boundaries between private properties and the public streets and the social relationships inside the community. Sawako Ono, Ryoko Sato, and Mima Nishiyama describe the conversion of private farmhouses both for new quasi-public uses and as an intermediary between city and country.

Uncovering refers to the making and rediscovery of public space through active reinterpretation of hidden or latent meanings and memories in the urban landscapes. From Seattle, Irina Gendelman, Tom Dobrowolsky, and Giorgia Aiello of Urban Archives present how their project uses the city as a laboratory to research diverse and often unconventional forms of urban expression that address the complex relationships of power. Jeannene Przyblyski presents three projects by the San Francisco Bureau of Urban Secrets that engage citizens to experience cities as "sites of recovered memory and a repository of competing histories." From Taipei, Annie Chiu examines how a movement to preserve a brothel as a city historic landmark challenges the mainstream historic preservation discourse and conservative social values, as well as the boundaries between private sites/bodies and public memories. Also from Taipei, Min Jay Kang investigates the potentiality of fallow or underused spaces for a different imagination in the making of an urban landscape.

Finally, with *Contesting*, the book returns to the theme of struggle over rights, meanings, and identities in the public realm. From Canada, Andrew Pask looks at how growth of public space activism has unfolded in Vancouver and Toronto to challenge the privatization and surveillance of public space. Teresa Mares and Devon Peña examine two cases of urban farms in the United States, as illustrations of the insurgent uses of public space for food production and community organizing. In East St. Louis, Laura Lawson and Janni Sorensen describe the long-term struggles that the community has to endure to reutilize abandoned vacant land to address flooding, expand community services, and spur economic development.

Guerrilla urbanism: towards smaller yet grander urban public space

The stories in this book represent struggles by communities and individuals to find their place and expressions in the contemporary city and in doing so redefine the boundaries, meanings, and instrumentality of public sphere. The individuals and groups include activists, architects and landscape architects, community organizers,

graffiti artists, homeowners, immigrants, parents, planners, sex workers, squatters, students, teachers, and urban farmers. The list goes on. As the variety of cases in this collection suggests, there are diverse means through which individuals and groups can engage actively in the contestation and remaking of public space, and the city by extension. From conversion of private homes into community third places to the occupation of streets for alternative uses, each of these acts may seem small and insignificant. But, precisely because these acts do not require overburdening investment or infrastructure, they enable individuals and often small groups to effect changes in the otherwise hegemonic urban landscapes. Although the actions may be informal and erratic, they have helped destabilize the structure and relationships in the official public space and release possibilities for new interactions, functions, and meanings.

Because of the scale and mode of production, the making of this alternative public space is more participatory and spontaneous, and therefore more open and inclusive. The insurgent public space that they have created is therefore both a smaller and a grander public space. These smaller yet grander public spaces reflect the subjectivity of its multiple actors and the broader instrumentality of space as a vehicle for a wider variety of individual and collective actions. Although these individuals and groups do not all fit the likely descriptions of what Fraser (1990: 67) calls the "subaltern counterpublics," by resisting against the hegemonic regulations of the contemporary public space and the notion of an undifferentiated public they become active participants in "a widening of discursive contestation" in the public space and public sphere of the contemporary society.

The making of insurgent public space suggests a mode of city making that is different from the institutionalized notion of urbanism and its association with master planning and policy making. Unlike the conventional practice of urban planning, which tends to be dominated by professionals and experts, the instances of insurgent public space as presented in this book suggest the ability of citizen groups and individuals to play a distinct role in shaping the contemporary urban environment in defiance of the official rules and regulations. Rather than being subjected to planning regulations or the often limited participatory opportunities, citizens and citizen groups can undertake initiatives on their own to effect changes. The instances of self-help and defiance are best characterized as a practice of guerrilla urbanism that recognizes both the ability of citizens and opportunities in the existing urban conditions for radical and everyday changes against the dominant forces in the society.

As cities and their social, economic and political dimensions have continued to change, the functions, meanings, and production of public space have also evolved over time. As urban populations and cultures become more heterogeneous, a growing presence and recognition of cultural and social differences have made the production and use of public space a highly contested process. Reflecting the current cultural, economic, and spatial changes of cities, insurgent public space represents a growing variety of actions and practices that enable and empower such contestation. If public space is where identities, meanings, and social relationships in cities are produced, codified, and maintained, it is through insurgent public space that alternative identities, meanings, and relationships can be nurtured, articulated,

and enacted. Through the variety of actions and practices, insurgent public space enables the participation and actions of individuals and groups in renewing the city as an arena of civic exchanges and debates. Through continued expressions and contestation, the presence and making of insurgent public space serves as barometer of the democratic well-being and inclusiveness of our present society.

Note

- 1 The concept of "third place" was introduced by Ray Oldenburg (1989) to describe the places that anchor community life between home and work place.

Bibliography

- Agacinski, S. (2001) 'Stages of Democracy', in Henaff, M. and Strong, T. B. (eds.) *Public Space and Democracy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Architecture for Humanity (ed.) (2006) *Design Like You Give A Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crisis*, New York: Metropolis Books.
- Barber, B. R. (2001) 'Malled, Mauled, and Overhauled: Arresting Suburban Sprawl by Transforming Suburban Malls into Usable Civic Space', in Henaff, M. and Strong, T. B. (eds.) *Public Space and Democracy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bell, B. (ed.) (2003) *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service through Architecture*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Bell, B. and Wakeford, K. (eds.) (2008) *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, New York: Metropolis Books.
- Bloom, B. and Bromberg, A. (eds.) (2004) *Making Their Own Plans/Belltown Paradise*, Chicago: WhiteWalls.
- Brill, M. (1989) 'Transformation, Nostalgia, and Illusion in Public Life and Public Place', in Altman, Irwin and Zube, Ervin H. (eds.) *Public Places and Spaces*, New York: Plenum Press.
- Chase, J., Crawford, M., and Kaliski, J. (eds.) (1999) *Everyday Urbanism*, New York: Monacelli Press.
- Cohen, N. (2009) 'Twitter on the Barricades', *New York Times*, 21 June. Online. Available HTTP: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/21/weekinreview/21cohenweb.html?_r=1&sq=iran%20twitter&st=cse&sq=1&pagewanted=print (accessed 22 June 2009).
- Cranz, G. (1982) *Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Crawford, M. (1999) 'Introduction', in Chase, J., Crawford, M., and Kaliski, J. (eds.) *Everyday Urbanism*, New York: Monacelli Press.
- Davis, M. (1992) 'Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space', in Sorkin, Michael (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park*, New York: Hill and Wang.
- Drucker, S. J. and Gumpert, G. (eds.) (1997) *Voices in the Street: Explorations in Gender, Media, and Public Space*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Francis, M. (1989) 'Control as a Dimension of Public Space Quality', in Altman, I., and Zube, E. H. (eds.) *Public Places and Spaces*, New York: Plenum Press.
- Francis, M., Cashdan, L., and Paxson, L. (1984) *Community Open Space: Greening Neighborhoods through Community Action and Land Conservation*, Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Franck, K. A. and Stevens, Q. (eds.) (2007) *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, London: Routledge.
- Fraser, N. (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 25/26: 56–80.
- Henaff, M. and Strong, T.B. (eds.) (2001) *Public Space and Democracy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hester, R. T. (2006) *Design for Ecological Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Holston, J. (1998) 'Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship', in Sandercock, L. (ed.) *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hou, J., Johnson, J. M., and Lawson, L. J. (2009) *Greening Cities, Growing Communities: Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Kohn, M. (2004) *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*, New York: Routledge.
- Laguerre, M. S. (1994) *The Informal City*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lawson, L. (2005) *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (1995) 'Urban Form and Social Context: Cultural Differentiation in the Uses of Urban Parks', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 14: 89–102.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. and Banerjee, T. (1998) *Urban Design Downtown: Poetics and Politics of Form*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Low, S. and Smith, N. (eds.) (2005) *The Politics of Public Space*, New York: Routledge.
- Low, S., Taplin, D., and Scheld, S. (2005). *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space & Cultural Diversity*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Mitchell, D. (2003) *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, New York: Guilford Press.
- Oldenburg, R. (1989) *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day*, New York: Paragon House.
- Palleroni, S. (2004) *Studio at Large: Architecture in Service of Global Communities*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Putnam, R. (1995) 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6 (1): 65–78.
- Sennett, R. (1992/1978) *The Fall of Public Man*, New York: W. W. Norton.
- Sorkin, M. (ed.) (1992) *Variations on a Theme Park*, New York: Hill and Wang.
- Stevens, Q. (2007) *The Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Space*, London: Routledge.
- Watson, S. (2006) *City Publics: The (Dis)enchantments of Urban Encounters*, New York: Routledge.
- Whyte, W. H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation.
- Young, I. M. (2002) 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', in Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (eds.) *The Blackwell City Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Community gardens create strong social networks and reinforce family values by allowing multigenerational gardening between parents/grandparents and their children and grandchildren.

The fourteen-acre South Central Farm, which is now closed, was a model for the type of open green space that Los Angeles needs to meet the demands of LA's growing Latino population. Projecto Jardin is a medicine community garden located in a very urban neighborhood. The garden also serves as an open-air classroom for users and nearby residents.

Conclusion

The March 25, 2006, Gran Marcha immigrant rally in downtown Los Angeles drew more than half a million immigrants and their allies to protest against legislation that would have increased penalties for entering the US illegally and for assisting or hiring undocumented workers. Whereas for years people have lamented how LA lacks a center or public space, within a few hours public space was created out of asphalt streets of downtown Los Angeles. People and vendors were roaming freely in the streets. In a city that is increasingly dense and increasingly Latino, downtown remains the center for this community. The Gran Marcha illustrates how Latinos are retrofitting the urban/suburban form of LA on both a micro and macro level.

Los Angeles's growing Latino population is transforming the auto-oriented built form into pedestrian-oriented places. From walking, biking, riding transit, street vending, and hanging out in the streets, Latinos retrofit the built environment to promote these activities. Without the help of government or formal architectural interventions, the do-it-yourself urban designers construct front yard fences, paint murals, and add porches to homes. All these interventions turn streets into plazas rich in social neighborhood activity. Latino growth is occurring at a time when California is conflicted between two urban development models: developing compact cities and preserving undeveloped spaces, or increasing urban sprawl and slums. Latino urbanism offers a model for urban improvisation and reinvention that addresses the issues of sustainability, public life, social justice, and the economic needs of the diverse urban dwellers and embraces the everyday acts of individuals, families, and communities. It suggests innovative ways for sustainably retrofitting our cities and suburbs from the ground up.

Bibliography

- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House.
- Rojas, J. T. (1991) 'The Enacted Environment: The Creation of Place by Mexicans and Mexicans/Americans', unpublished master's thesis, Department of Architecture and Planning, MIT.

CHAPTER 4

Taking place

Rebar's absurd tactics in generous urbanism

Blaine Merker

On a sunny October day in 2005, Rebar, the San Francisco-based collective of artists, activists, and designers, paid a curbside parking meter in downtown San Francisco and built a temporary park within the white lines of the parking space – complete with lawn, a large shade tree, and a park bench (Figure 4.1). For the legal duration of our "lease," we reprogrammed the public right-of-way: no longer a space dedicated to the movement and storage of private automobiles, for two hours this seven by twenty-two feet of street became a place for rest, relaxation, and socializing in an area of downtown San Francisco previously underserved by public open space.¹ At first, passersby reacted with a mix of indifference and curiosity. Eventually several people ventured into the "park," found a place to sit and took advantage of the novelty of cool grass and shade. Some of the strangers enjoyed

Figure 4.1 This image of Rebar's first experiment in *Park(ing)* quickly circulated through the blogosphere and became a readily transmittable meme. Source: Rebar.



some unplanned social interaction by exchanging a few words with each other; others took the occasion to rest or read. After two hours and having generated 24,000 "square foot-minutes" of public open space, Rebar dismantled the park and returned the space to its normative function. All that remained of the incident were the photos and video footage shot. We posted these on our website as a record of the experiment.

Within several weeks a seminal photo had appeared in dozens of references on the Internet and news stories. Within six months Rebar had received hundreds of inquiries about the project, which we dubbed *Park(ing)*, from individuals and groups around the world. The combination of the iconic image of parking-space-as-park and its accompanying descriptive name created a "sticky" idea that transmitted readily across electronic media. Without much explanation, other groups disposed to guerrilla intervention quickly grasped the basic tactic. Still, the amount of interest Rebar received warranted some codification of the idea, so we posted a short "how-to" manual on our website to help others get started. The essence of the tactic was to legally claim a parking space using materials that were symbolically associated with parks: trees, lawn, and a bench. Rebar treated the idea itself as open source and applied a Creative Commons license: as long as it was not used for profit, we encouraged people to replicate and reinterpret it.²

The following year, Rebar organized a one-day, global event in which participants – mostly in San Francisco but now joined by groups in other cities around the United States and Europe – built temporary parks in parking spaces, in a coordinated effort to produce a greater critical mass and to demonstrate solidarity with the effort to reprogram urban parking spaces. In each of the forty-seven cities where *Park(ing) Day* took place in 2006, different legal codes had to be negotiated by the participants: the traffic codes in San Francisco were different from those in London, New York, or Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Nowhere, however, did participants meet with significant opposition to their installations, which ranged from a do-it-yourself lemonade stand through stormwater demonstration gardens to a seed giveaway (Figure 4.2).

The event effectively operated within an undervalued niche space and successfully exploited a legal loophole – a tactic at once radical but superficially unthreatening to the system of spatial commodification it critiqued.³ Although the space we collectively allocate to parking – how much, where, for whom, and at what cost – is usually hotly contested, *Park(ing) Day* operated within a discrete unit of that contested terrain, neutralizing potential backlash with a sense of humor and the honest application of a simple and uncontested market rule: just as it is completely within the rights of individuals to buy up shares of a publicly traded company, *Park(ing) Day* participants paid meters and exercised their option to do something other than park cars in real estate that they, for the moment, owned.

In 2007, ongoing widespread interest in *Park(ing)*, concentrated in San Francisco but also now coming from Europe and other American cities, led us to organize an even larger scale event when people around the world would temporarily turn parking spaces into parks. With help from partner organizations such as The Trust for Public Land and Public Architecture, Rebar set a date for the event and facilitated the participation of hundreds of volunteers by holding community organizing



Figure 4.2 Early grassroots *Park(ing)* installations explored creative new uses of spaces previously given over to the doxa of automobile use. This park from 2006 offered lemon trees and presses for do-it-yourself lemonade. Source: Rebar.

sessions in San Francisco and distributing how-to information on the web. Rebar itself built the *Parkcycle* (Figure 4.3), a human-powered "park" that could deploy 250 square feet of green open space at the whim of its pilots, and we took the day to visit some of the fifty-eight parking space parks built around San Francisco.

In all, more than 200 parks were constructed on September 21, 2007 – entirely by volunteers – in over fifty cities worldwide. The installations ranged from dinner parties to croquet courses, dog parks to massage parlors, community health clinics to urban micro-farms. Some participants did insinuate advertising and business promotion into their installations (in Florida, for example, a Starbucks set up a park). But what most of the *Park(ing)* installations had in common was a sense of humor and the promotion of some kind of artistic, ecological, social, or cultural agenda (Figure 4.4). The playful yet passionate tone of the event first set in 2005 continues to resonate each year.

What, exactly, had taken place in these playful acts of transgression in the broader context and construction of urban landscape and the so-called public realm? How can we begin to articulate these actions and events as ways and maneuvers for repurposing the landscapes of our contemporary city? Can the tactical maneuver on the part of Rebar and the specific instances possibly becoming a turning point that could lead to larger changes in the way public spaces are used and perceived?

This chapter explores these questions by examining some core themes in Rebar's projects, including *Park(ing)* and other artistic work. Specifically, the chapter addresses these questions by relating the projects to the problems we have grappled with in our own understanding of public space and our agency within it.

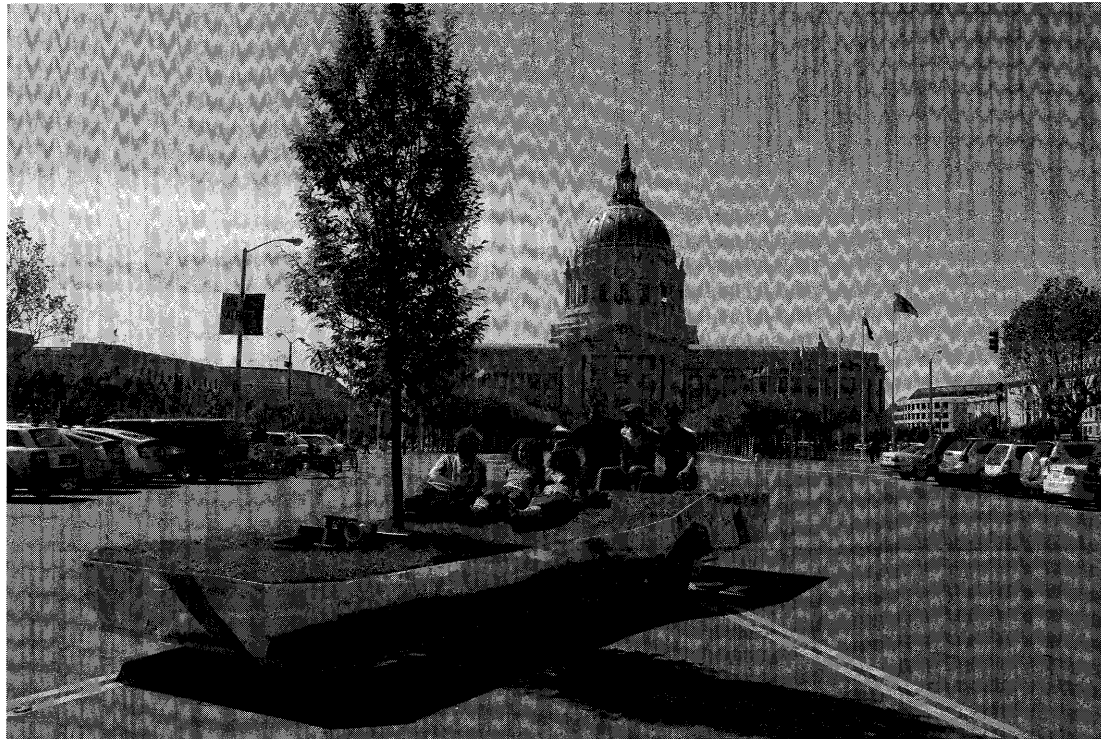


Figure 4.3 The *Parkcycle* incorporated a water-storing skin and solar panels to power the brakes and lights, and used almost all recycled materials. Although pedal-powered, it used no bicycle parts. Source: Rebar.

Figure 4.4 This park built by volunteers/participants in San Francisco in 2007 explored a theme common to many installations: an interactive element (in this case, a library) to encourage social exchange. Source: Rebar.



Niche spaces

The evolving *Park(ing)* project is typical of the medium in which Rebar works: “niche spaces” are undervalued, or valued inappropriately for the range of potential activities within them. We believe that such niches – once identified – can be opened up to reevaluation through creative acts. *Park(ing)* identified the metered parking space as just such a niche within the urban landscape, and redefined it as a fertile terrain for creative social, political, and artistic experimentation. It was only through the replication of this tactic and its adoption by others that a new kind of urban space was measurably produced, as it was in the two years following Rebar’s first *Park(ing)* experiment. With Rebar providing others with “permission” to act, new users rushed into this niche, challenging the existing value system encoded within this humble, everyday space. The parking space became a zone of potential, a surface onto which the intentions of any number of political, social or cultural agendas could be projected. By providing a new venue for *any* kind of unmet need, revalued parking spaces became instrumental in redefining “necessity.” Thus the creative act literally “takes” place – that is, it claims a new physical and cultural territory for the social and artistic realm.

As artists, the *Park(ing)* phenomenon ignited our curiosity about the street. We saw that the street could be defined as a territory inscribed by a greater number of interests than the landscape has room to accommodate. It is only by the tacit *undervaluing* of certain activities (such as, say, play or eating or socializing) that other activities (such as parking and driving) can thrive. *Park(ing)* set up an operational precedent for intervening in such a contested, value-laden space and proposing a new system of valuation. Embedded within this approach are what have emerged as three core strands of our practice so far: tactics, generosity, and absurdity.

Tactical urbanism

Rebar defines tactical urbanism as the use of modest or temporary revisions to urban space to seed structural environmental change. Our use of tactics is based on a belief that deep organizing structures (social, cultural, economic, and other) have a two-way relationship with the physical environment: they both produce the environment and are reproduced by it. Rebar has been consistently interested in the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the *doxa* and *habitus* as ways of explaining how we perceive this highly coded landscape. According to Bourdieu, “every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” (Bourdieu 1977: 164). These *doxa* are deep, self-evident beliefs that not only explain the way the world works but are reinforced by the physical environment and our ways of operating within it – that is, *habitus*. “The *habitus* is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be nonetheless ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable’ ” (Bourdieu 1977: 79). *Doxa* favor the power relationships of the status quo because it is those relationships that have produced the landscape itself. The landscape’s apparent neutrality requires justification: the *doxa*. Thus, when Rebar considers a parking space, the allocation of space to sidewalk or utilities, an enclosed corporate atrium, or the vocabulary of materials

and symbols in the city, we think of these things as engaging in a dialogue with the doxa. The environment and habitus are locked in a mutually reinforcing and self-referential cycle. This is the field in which tactical urbanism, as an interruption of habitus, operates.

There are also ways in which institutions and other actors, such as government and corporations, actively reinforce the doxa. Michel de Certeau contrasts two ways that power is exercised in space: *strategies* and *tactics*. Strategies “conceal beneath their objective calculations their connection with the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of its own ‘proper’ place or institution” (de Certeau 1984: xix). Artifacts of strategies, for example, are the painted markings in the roadway, the invisible boundaries of property, or the zoning laws that control whether a neighborhood is made up of houses, factories, or brothels. In other words, strategy is power working at a distance upon the landscape. This power in turn shapes the doxa and reinforces our perception of the “neutral landscape.” Because it both projects power and obscures its source, strategy depends on contriving a convincingly self-evident environment.

In contrast, tactics “are isolated actions or events that take advantage of opportunities offered by the gaps within a given strategic system . . . Tactics cut across a strategic field, exploiting gaps in it to generate novel and inventive outcomes” (Wikipedia 2009b). A tactic (deployed, for instance, in an urban niche space) “insinuates itself into the [strategy’s] place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (de Certeau 1984: xix). Deploying a tactic means one “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that . . . open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them” (de Certeau 1984: 37). In doing so, the tactic disrupts the doxa and temporarily projects a new set of values onto a space. Rebar’s choice tactic has been to *remix* environmental signs and symbols, often within the official vocabulary that gives doxa its force and meaning.

Generous urbanism

Contemporary industrialized societies have generally accepted the banishment of unscripted, generous exchange in the public realm in favor of a hyper-commercial alternative. In this preferred mode of relationship-building between strangers in public space, generosity’s converse is omnipresent in the signs and artifacts of economic transaction. When the transaction is complete, the voluntary bond between buyer and seller is severed; both go their separate ways without obligation. In the North American city, public behaviors unrelated to commercial exchange or economic production fall into two basic categories: loitering or other illegal and disruptive activity; and assembly, celebration, and cultural spectacle, which are heavily scripted and contained by permits and other official permissions. (“Leisure” pursuits are another possible exception, but do not necessarily involve relationship-building between strangers.) When an unregulated act of generosity is interjected into this environment of commercial consensus, the result is a cognitive disruption – a “blow against the empire” (Purves 2005: 22–44). Offering the public something

without expectation of anything in return is at once subversive, suspicious – and potentially profound and transformative. Stripped of commercial adornment, the “generous” public act foregrounds its own assumptions: it says, *this is possible, and it need not be bought or sold*.

Rebar defines *generous urbanism* as the creation of public situations between strangers that produce new cultural value, without commercial transaction. This isn’t to say that money doesn’t play a role in the execution, since materials may still be bought, and grants or commissions distributed. However, the ultimate value is produced independently of commerce. It’s possible to call this activity art production (“art” being a convenient category for cultural goods that are ends in themselves), but there are no absolute “consumers” or “producers” for this type of art, only participants with varying levels of responsibility for instigating the situation. This kind of cultural practice has an established pedigree in San Francisco, and includes activities of groups such as the Diggers, the Free Stores movement, and even the more recent free summer bluegrass festival in Golden Gate Park. A notable example of generous urbanism is Critical Mass, which began as a spontaneous group bike ride and has swelled, in the last fifteen years, to a monthly global event. There is always the danger among the more successful forms of generous situations that they will be absorbed by the dominant cultural milieu and, once absorbed, their critical dimension diminished as they join familiar, acceptable, and potentially commercial categories of festival and spectacle.

Rebar’s second major urban project, *Commonspace*, employed a generous urbanism by crafting eight experimental interventions in San Francisco’s privately owned public open spaces (or “POPOS”). With slight presumption, we guessed that a certain tolerance for generous urbanism was the acid test for true public space, and set forth to discover *just how public* POPOS were (Figure 4.5). The eighteen-month project began with a physical and social mapping of the spaces produced as a result of Section 138 of the San Francisco Planning Code. The code requires that new downtown developments make 2 percent of their area available “in order to meet the public need for open space and recreational uses” (San Francisco Municipal Code Sec. 138). The spaces take the form of rooftop terraces, corporate atriums, plazas and breezeways, and even some oddly shaped snippets connected to public streets where the “public” seems to be neither aware of POPOS nor in great need of them. We loosely positioned our approach within the Situationist tradition of *detournement*, the creative repurposing of familiar elements to produce new meaning (which is not that different from the remixing we’d been doing to date).

Working from our web-based survey of the physical and psychogeographic terrain of the spaces, we launched a series of events in them: public tours, rooftop kite flying, an interactive game of “Assassin,” a “Napping” for underslept office workers and other accidental participants (Figure 4.6), a game of “counterveillance” in response to security cameras, and a public workshop for teaching Balinese monkey chant, or Kecak (Figure 4.7). In each instance, public participation was encouraged through outreach before and during the event. We saw the events as opportunities to recast spaces that had often become, by virtue of their literal

Figure 4.5 This POPOS in the headquarters of the C-Net building provides indoor seating in a corporate lobby. The privilege of public use comes with a caveat, though: Big Brother is watching. Source: Rebar.

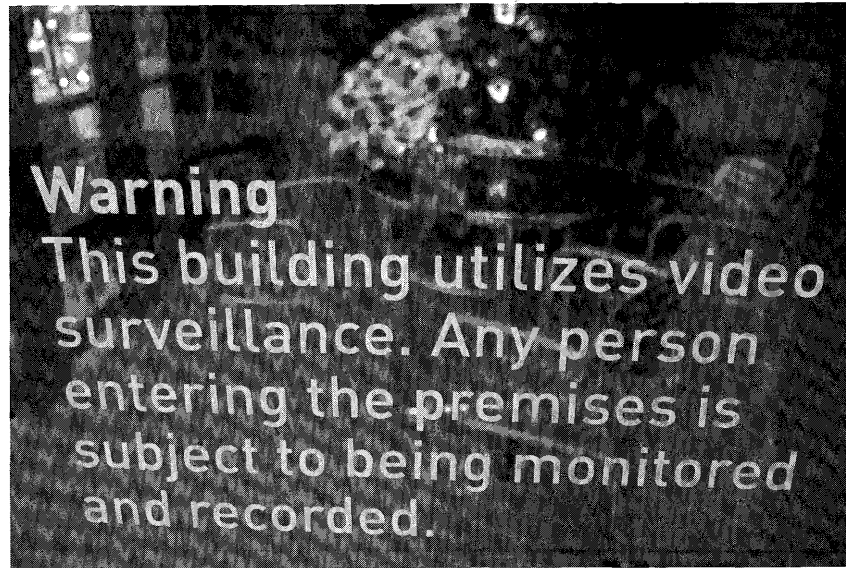
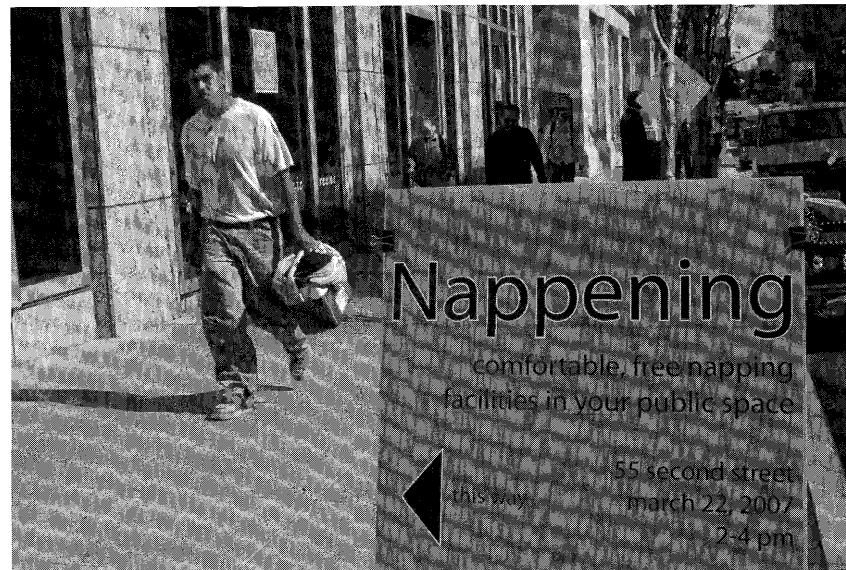


Figure 4.6 Rebar advertised the *Napping* on the street and by flyers the offices of the law firms above the POPOS. The free event quickly "sold out," and many participants inquired if it could be a permanent service. Source: Rebar.



enclosure in corporate space, de facto private realms. By deploying generous acts that fulfilled various unmet needs we had identified in our mapping (such as the need for rest, play or community), we created a "rupture between the expected and the unexpected" where participants might experience "not just the subject of the dissent, but also the structure that supports the world and worldview that contains both the dissent and the status quo" (Purves 2005: 28).

This active, generous approach to urbanism contrasts with the paternalistic "generosity" implied in the wording of the plaque posted outside the POPOS at 235 Second Street:

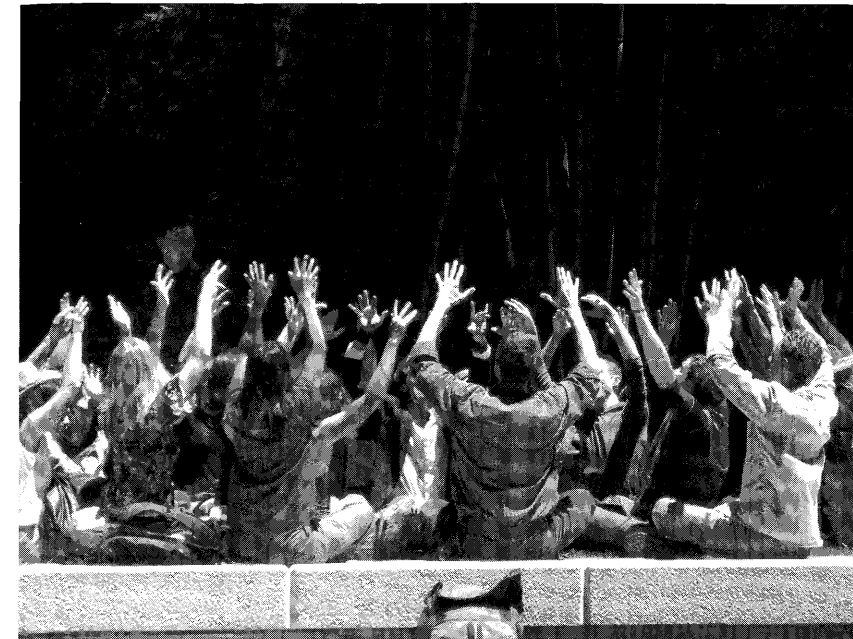


Figure 4.7 Rebar held Kecak workshops in POPOS where the public had been discouraged from lingering by private security. Legal observers from the American Civil Liberties Union also watched the event. Source: Rebar.

The plaza and inside seating area of this building is provided and maintained for the enjoyment of the public. The interior seating area is open to the public Monday–Friday 8am–6pm. Warning. This building utilizes video surveillance. Any person entering the premises is subject to being monitored and recorded.

We discovered that some POPOS indeed warranted recent critiques of "institutionalized generosity on an unprecedented scale" that "reveal[s] that when the act of giving is not only enforced but completely rationalized, the result is nothing more than a representation of the public sphere." All are highly socially codified spaces, and many seemed steeped in doxic expectation that "nothing is supposed to happen, apart from perhaps pondering the philosophy of all the contortionist formats modern life makes us fit into" (Fowle and Larsen 2005: 23).

However, we eventually found the social dynamics of POPOS to be as complex and varied as the governance structures and publics that operated in each of them.⁴ Most are overseen by private security employed by the building management, and it was with these actors that we most often came into contact when trying to reach out to the "public." We realized that they indeed *were* a part of the public we were trying to engage. Whereas some were suspicious of our activities and even unaware of their obligation to provide an open space to the public, others responded positively to the generous spirit of the activities we initiated. In fact, it seemed that framing our activities as a "free" gift was so unexpected that it gradually overcame the institutional resistance by the management overseers to non-commercial acts in commercial space.

Rebar has benefited from the level of authenticity and street cred that the framework of generous urbanism imparts on a creative act, but to be motivated by the knowledge that generosity is a powerful and transformative tactic is not to

say that we use it cynically. Most of what Rebar does takes place outside galleries and outside traditional valuation systems for art, design, and urban infrastructure. We “give away” our work (that is, set up situations for people to use and enjoy, or to fulfill an unmet need) for anyone nearby enough to experience it because that is the only way we can do our work. The primary recipients are the inhabitants of the public realm, but there are many more who will experience this non-commercial transaction through images and descriptions of the work. This secondary, mediated experience is probably more important to the goals we are trying to achieve. Simply by communicating that such an exchange took place, the work influences people’s notions of what is possible and acceptable in public space, far beyond what was communicated at the moment the work is made. If generosity is the medium of this kind of work, then the medium does become the message. Recently, other actors have taken up their own explorations of POPOS based on the groundwork laid by Rebar: the San Francisco Urban Research Association (SPUR) is engaged in an extensive evaluation of the spaces and is hosting public forums on their place in the downtown public space network, and several other individuals and groups have launched their own generous repurposing of POPOS, ranging from lunch-hour picnics to free figure-drawing classes.

Figure 4.8 Rebar’s Matthew Passmore inspects the contents of the *Cabinet National Library*, which includes a guest book, snack bar, and all back issues of *Cabinet* magazine. Source: Rebar.



Absurd urbanism

Rebar holds that deep within every rational system holding societies together are assumptions that, if taken to their logical conclusion, tend toward absurdity. As such, they are highly fertile terrain for artistic exploration. Property ownership, arguably the mother of absurd ideas, served as the jumping-off point for Rebar’s first project, the *Cabinet National Library*. For its Spring 2003 issue on “Property,” *Cabinet* magazine, a non-profit art and culture quarterly, purchased a half-acre of land site unseen for \$300 on eBay. The land was part of a failed 1960s residential development called the Sunshine Valley Ranchettes, now a desolate tract of desert scrubland outside Deming, New Mexico. *Cabinet* dubbed their new purchase Cabinetlandia and divided it into manageable sectors: Readerlandia, Editorlandia, Nepotismia, and so forth. Magazine-sized parcels were offered to readers for a penny for a 99-year lease.

Upon our reading the Cabinetlandia article, it occurred to us that Cabinetlandia would obviously require a *Cabinet National Library* (i.e., a library containing all and only back issues of *Cabinet*). What better way to establish a civilization than to create a repository for its organizing documents (Figure 4.8)? Fortunately, we were the first to propose the idea to the magazine. The editors published our library proposal and a sketch in Issue 12 (Winter 2003–2004). From the outset, it was paramount to us that the project be an actual, usable library, aside from (or in addition to) being an odd spectacle and a play on words. Moreover, it was crucial that the project express its library-ness down to the last minute detail; this idea guided the project at every stage of its development. The *Cabinet National Library* is built from a three-drawer file cabinet and is laid out thus:

- top drawer – the Card Catalog, Guestbook, and Guest Services.
- middle drawer – the Collection: back issues of *Cabinet*.
- bottom drawer – the Snack Bar.

Among the strands of Rebar’s practice, absurdism often acts as the lightning rod; since its construction, the *Library* has attracted its share of pilgrims, detractors and even pillagers.⁵

In the summer of 2006 Rebar made its first foray onto the rarified world of the institutional art gallery with its *EnCanment* project. *EnCanment* was a performance installation included in the “Between the Walls” exhibition at San Francisco’s Southern Exposure art gallery, a non-profit art space with a thirty-four-year history and reputation as a perennial mainstay on the cutting edge of the San Francisco art scene. “Between the Walls” was the final show in 2006 before the gallery closed for seismic retrofitting and, given this, the gallery administration put the entire interior structure of the gallery up for grabs: the walls, the floor, the very space itself was offered up as an artistic medium. Participating artists were encouraged to consider ideas of migration, transition, improvisation, and community.

In response to the concept of the exhibition, and in celebration of Southern Exposure’s rich history in this space, Rebar created a temporary industrial canning operation that harvested, processed, and canned the gallery itself. Rebar systematically mapped and cored sections of the gallery wall and, utilizing traditional

assembly-line technology, canned the cores in metal cans on site during the opening and closing night events. Cans were then labeled and sold to support SoEx and Rebar. (*EnCanment* is situated in the historical context of the gallery, which occupies a former industrial site that once housed the American Can Company. The earliest incarnation of SoEx called itself the "American Can Collective.")

In extending the commoditization of art objects to its logically absurd conclusion, Rebar sought to industrialize the production of gallery art, and simultaneously to invert the traditional commercial art-world exchange: in *EnCanment*, the cultural value embedded in the gallery itself was offered as a commercial art object, draped though it was in the banal trade dress of a mass-produced, canned good. And, standing in open revolt to a system that prizes mystique, unmoored valuation, and, above all, unrestrained consumption, *EnCanment* was designed to reduce the art gallery, *qua* institution, to a fungible unit of general commerce.

And here one may find traces of a nascent insurgency. *EnCanment* sought, playfully and absurdly, to insert a sliver of democracy into an otherwise deeply hegemonic system. Rebar harvested the gallery wall together with its associated cultural value (and the insular space it encloses), and distributed the wall to the public in an easily transportable, affordable package: the tin can. As one purchaser remarked, "I've always wanted a show at Southern Exposure. I'm hosting an open studio this weekend and one of my photographs will be hung on a piece of Southern Exposure procured from the *EnCanment* project. My first solo show in an art gallery!"

Conclusion

Although we've identified some of the key themes in our work to date here, this is done winkingly *ex post facto*. We can't pretend to have had any of this in mind during the work itself, except at the intuitive level fostered by the kind of late-night discussions that take place at Rebar's choice meeting spot, a pub in San Francisco's Mission District. Absurdity, generosity, and a tactical approach have been the hallmarks of our projects thus far but hardly the test of an idea's validity prior to its execution. In fact, what seems to have driven our thinking as much as anything else has been the sense of *niche*, *loophole*, and *opportunity*. These tantalizing gaps in the urban structure – these *necessary* pieces of the urban structure, as long as that structure is generated by strategic forces seated in power and authority – are what feed our practice. As long as we have the right eyes to see them, the cracks in the system will continue to elicit our curiosity. The landscape itself is a field for experimentation and play about space but also about structure, one where the final results of that experiment can lead to broader conclusions.

To conclude then, we come back to one of our early questions in this chapter: can the result of this play become a tactical turning point in the structure itself, more than a specific instance of absurdity in public space? We could judge this not by how many others engage in repeating a spatial meme, but by how possible it becomes for anyone to use the public landscape as a field of experimentation and play. The rules of that game are an open secret.

Notes

- 1 The San Francisco Planning Department's Downtown Plan, Recreation and Open Space, Map 3 – Major Open Spaces indicates which areas of the city are considered deficient in open space. Rebar chose one of these areas in a highly visible part of downtown as an ideal test site for its first *Park(ing)* intervention.
- 2 According to Wikipedia (2009a), "Creative Commons has been described as being at the forefront of the 'copyleft' movement, which seeks to support the building of a richer public domain . . . [some] have credited Creative Commons with generating interest in the issue of intellectual property and contributing to the re-thinking of the role of the 'commons' in the 'information age'. Beyond that Creative Commons has provided 'institutional, practical and legal support for individuals and groups wishing to experiment and communicate with culture more freely'. Creative Commons works to counter what the organization considers to be a dominant and increasingly restrictive permission culture. According to Lawrence Lessig, founder of Creative Commons, it is 'a culture in which creators get to create only with the permission of the powerful, or of creators from the past'. Lessig maintains that modern culture is dominated by traditional content distributors in order to maintain and strengthen their monopolies on cultural products such as popular music and popular cinema, and that Creative Commons can provide alternatives to these restrictions."
- 3 In this and many other endeavors, we have been inspired by other artists whose work engages interstitial urban space, in particular Gordon Matta-Clark's "Fake Estates" project.
- 4 In other words, each POPOS has its own unique governing ecology to be uncovered, unlike a "properly public" city park in which the rules are public, codified, and relatively consistent (see Amoss 2007).
- 5 In spring 2007, art students from a joint program of the University of New Mexico and the University of Texas launched an attack on the *Cabinet National Library* in order to erect their own archive atop the site. They were repelled by a sudden storm, common in the area at that time of year. See Taylor (2007). In July 2009 Rebar returned to Cabinetlandia to repair and expand the *Library*, which itself had suffered from storm damage, and added a drawer-sized white-wall art gallery (for itinerant exhibitions). Rebar's 2009 expedition to Cabinetlandia also included an experiment in projecting the dreamworld of the *Library* onto the upward-blown dust of the New Mexican desert at night: using a high-powered projector, fractured images of architectural speculation were cast onto/into a churning miasma of wind-borne sand, evoking the eerie specter of weightless and ephemeral libraries of fantasy.

Bibliography

- Amoss, M. (2007) 'Challenging the Commons: A Yearlong Experiment Tests a New Breed of Urban Public Space in San Francisco', *The Next American City*, 16 (Fall): 11–12.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Nice, R. (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fowle, K. and Larsen, L. B. (2005) 'Lunch Hour', in Purves, T. (ed.) *What We Want is Free*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kayden, J. (2000) *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience*, New York: New York City Department of City Planning.
- Najafi, S. (ed.) (2005) *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*, New York: Cabinet Books.
- Purves, T. (ed.) (2005) 'Blows against the Empire', in Purves, T. (ed.) *What We Want is Free*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Roach, C. (2008) 'Urban Guerillas: Streets and the Sociopolitical Architecture of the Public Realm', *On Site*, 19 (Spring/Summer): 27–33.
- Sadler, S. (1999) *The Situationist City*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association. (2008) *Secrets of San Francisco: A Guide to Our City's Privately Owned Public Open Spaces*. Online. Available HTTP: http://spur.org/publications/library/report/secretsofsanfrancisco_010109 (accessed 15 September 2009).
- Taylor, C. (2007) 'Projecting ARTLIES Into the Void,' *ARTLIES: The Texas Contemporary Art Journal*, 53 (Spring).
- Wikipedia. (2009a) 'Creative Commons'. Online. Available HTTP: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_Commons (accessed 20 July 2009).
- (2009b) 'Tactic (Method)'. Online. Available HTTP: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tactic_\(method\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tactic_(method)) (accessed 1 December 2009).

PART TWO

RECLAIMING
