This is the published version of a paper published in *Re-Public. Re-Imagining Democracy*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

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Rethinking public space: Hybrid collaborative art practices and spatial piracy in the urban realm.
*Re-Public. Re-Imagining Democracy*, February 2011

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

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http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-80981
It seems as if the city, its space, its future, its production, were almost exclusively the result of a series of processes and flows taking place at unreachable distance, in un-known locations, mostly determined by the interests and wills of un-localized powers, actors and flows. As if the city could no longer be produced and shaped after the desires of its inhabitants, articulating one or another form of collective will. As if the city was no longer the soul and reason of urban politics but just the mere object of a kind of witty and hygienic managing that understands built space as a market and a product, placing economy at the very center of society.

Urban agendas no longer include distributive and social considerations but focus now on economic growth, competitiveness and entrepreneurship. Creative flexibility, efficiency and strategic partnership exclude dissent, conflict and radical criticism nearly foreclosing the political from the face of the city. Cityspace anesthetized.

Public space today is planned, designed, defined, segregated, policed, and set up in order to be easily controlled, 'secured', and 'marketized', in ways that lead to homogenous, uninteresting, smooth and clean surfaces that differ very much from the inherent characteristics of the very idea of public.

Moreover, hegemonic spatial practices have operated and continue to operate from the basis of a very narrow understanding of public space that focuses almost exclusively on its physical dimension. As if the public sphere was only the actual space of the square, the street or the piazza, instead of the complex set of interactions, conflicts, social and human exchange and intercourse, love and debate that constitutes its essence.

As if it were no longer possible to imagine diverse collective actions and energies giving shape to a much richer and socially productive public realm. As if the political was no longer present as the basic constituent of the various and complex assemblages of flows and actors that articulate society.

In order to resist the pessimism, cynicism and opportunism of the post-utopian, post-political, and post-democratic condition denounced by Ranciere and others, one must search for and actively produce alternative ways towards a political dimension of architecture, urbanism and spatial practices in general. Re-activating city space is still possible.

The ongoing de-politicization of the city is in fact contested and resisted by numerous actions that spontaneously surge and articulate from individual or collective experiences, dreams and desires, that evolve then into something else, a hybrid, a network, an energy in motion. These energies are, more often than we tend to acknowledge, influencing and transforming the established power structures in ways that are difficult to map or assess, but nevertheless capable of affecting the actual making of the city. Many of these actions surge in or around specific urban settings, pieces or spaces, in relationship to special, often undefined characteristics and potentials of these locations. Latent spaces, in-between spaces. Different spaces. Other spaces.

Certain kind of radically critical spatial practices sensitive to the potentials of such public places
manage to detonate complex processes of community reactivation and empowerment while rehearsing alternative urban models and city-making approaches. Quite often, through the articulation of creative processes of collaboration with groups and communities, these practices adopt tactics and techniques close to those of the pirate, mixing art with space in seemingly harmless ways that later lead to serious political debate, involvement and activation.

It is possible to imagine, following De Certeau, a city that stages an endless, constant and silent battle between the apparatuses that produce disciplinary space, i.e. spatial practices, responsible for a secret structuring of the conditions of social life, and the various individual modes of re-appropriation, multiple and "multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised." (De Certeau, 1984: 96)

These re-appropriation tactics and practices open up the way to another city, to another space, a space away from the clear text of the planned, readable or visible city. A space where another, invisible city lies. Such an 'invisible' city belongs to the realm of lived space; more precisely, life, the actual practices and relations taking place in space, the people inhabiting space, are sometimes able to imagine, engender and produce yet another type of space, or better still, a multiplicity of 'other spaces' that provide the locus for 'other' desires, needs, ideas, transitions, 'becomings', changes, actions and processes that would not find their place otherwise: a somewhat 'invisible' but fully lived space.

That might be the case of the interventions that took place around the public washing basins in Caldes de Montbui\[^1\]\[^2\] – a Roman thermal village in the outskirts of Barcelona – fostered by a group of friends, curators of the local art show. Sensitive to the delicate condition of one of the borders of the historic core that was in contact with a water stream and some agricultural fields, they decided to propose it as a study and working area for the group of selected artists in the 2008 and 2009 art show editions.

The recent growth of the village has generated new areas of 'urbanity', diversity and complexity that create a concentration of urban life far away from the historic core and the barrier represented by the physical edge of the city along the discontinuous water stream, on the west border. This separation has given rise to an excluded fringe, that, taking-in the whole historic core, configures a sort of backside of the city, a back side looking towards the gardens and the fields, a backside that provides evidence of its own neglect, of its lacking of infrastructures, of its lacking of unity.

Nevertheless, the new urban plan for the village very clearly shows the keys of the urban policy fostered by the local government. An initial analysis of the drawings describing the uses of non-urban land (i.e., all kinds of natural, agricultural, landscape and protected areas) reveals a shockingly huge piece of non-urban land changed into a new facility that affects fertile agricultural fields, gardens and dwellings, with the aim of transforming them into a huge so-called 'thermal city'. A sort of thermal water ‘theme-park-like’ development of the size of the historic core, encroaching on the green land outside the edge of the city.

In the eyes of the local government, the new facility would reveal the backside condition of the border, turned into a façade for the tourists and visitors of the thermal-theme-park. A facade that, according to the approved plan, should be then treated 'properly' through superficial 'beautification': an exclusively visual transformation, oblivious of the small and fragile interactions and micro-ecologies inherent to the place, regardless of memory and indifferent to the various specificities of the micro-spaces formed along the border.

Several public spaces in the village have been already transformed, privatized and divested of their original and inherent publicness, as a result of the implementation of such a project. In contrast, a number of 'other spaces', excluded pieces of public, semi-public, or once-public spaces, can be identified along the edge of the city, some of them literally embedded in the wall that separates the fringe from the fields below. Among them, many are charged with an undefined, special potential, related to their form, their condition, their location, their use, the memories they hold or a combination of them. One could call them ‘latent spaces’. 'Other spaces', somehow excluded, but carriers of special potentials and latent memories.
“Spatial practice is neither determined by an existing system, be it urban or ecological, nor adapted to a system, be it economic or political. On the contrary, thanks to the potential energies of a variety of groups, capable of diverting homogenized space to their own purposes, a theatricalized or dramatized space is liable to arise.” (Lefebvre, 1991:391)

This piece from Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* frames the presence and existence of groups and individuals, sometimes capable of identifying latent potentials, sometimes capable of triggering them, sometimes capable of setting the conditions for ‘other’ lived spaces to arise. The group behind the Independent Urban Art Show in Caldes de Montbui might be one of these groups. The ‘apparatus’ itself contains small spaces that make reactions against its own actions possible: in the case of this Urban Art Show, the show exists thanks to a grant-program started by the local government precisely aiming at the reactivation of the city core in cultural terms. One can foresee here important differences between the meaning of the word ‘cultural’ for the municipality and its meaning for our ‘pirate’ friends.

As a result of the growing spatial conflicts detected in the village the Art Show tried to foster critical interventions and encouraged interaction with the place as well as its transformation by announcing a call for projects interested in challenging the institutional view and the plans for a superficial beautification of the edge of the city. The proposal of the Art Show was to invert the situation through another gaze, committed to a much more attentive, perhaps ethnographic approach, oriented to the landscape and the ‘huertas’ (gardens), based on the edge.

Two of the artists decided to intervene in two pieces of public space among those previously identified as ‘latent spaces’. They were both public ‘washing-places’ or ‘laundry-basins’ but very different from one another. The biggest and best preserved of the basins hosted the proposal of Japanese artist Atsuko Arai, entitled ‘Vine a Fer Safareig’. Through this action, a basin that was open to the public only during a few hours a day as part of the local city tour of guided visits, was transformed into a festive meeting to wash clothes and have breakfast together, while talking and chatting, while sharing the moment and while sharing the experience of space.

The artist identified the potential of the social and relational spaces emerging from the coexistence of the participants, and set it in motion to foster the transformation of the inhabitant-spectator, for whom ‘themed’ space is designed by the institutions, into an inhabitant-user, or even an inhabitant-maker of that space.

Atsuko proposed a joyful breakfast in order to recover the public condition of the space: everyone could go in for free, all throughout the day, and not only to visit it but to experience it washing clothes. She found the old women still using the space and encouraged them to share their knowledge with the rest in a meeting of different generations around the fact of doing the laundry as a social event. Atsuko’s action managed to foster the activation of a latent energy, pushing the space back into a ‘controversial’ state that brought it closer to everyday life and away from spectacle.

The second action took place in the smaller laundry basin of ‘Santa Esperança’, a neglected and forgotten space, left aside on the very edge of the city. A piece of public space of great value and huge potential that has been listed-out, ‘cancelled’ and placed under control to be replaced and occupied by a new project: a parking space by the church.

This basin, now a dumping-place for all kinds of trash and waste, abandoned and dirty, turned out a perfect opportunity for another of the artists. ‘Somanyprojects’ threw herself into a solid quest for the recovery and reactivation of the place and its potentials, announcing the official opening of the new ‘Washing-Place Swimming Club’ for the key day of the Art Show. She then started a long and quiet process of selective cleaning, classifying each piece of trash and waste as she was taking them out of the basin, fixing-up pipes and re-opening the flow of thermal water that had been blocked.

As soon as thermal water flowed again and started filling the basins, people came to the meeting
in groups. They jumped into the water and started sharing some very intense moments during which everyone was surprised to rediscover that space.

Going back to the idea of latent space, as a place that is somehow excluded but holds interesting and/or undefined potentials, the cases presented here illustrate a transformation of such latent spaces into something else, by means of the incorporation of an energy generated from the interaction of the curators and the art show, the artist, and their corresponding gazes, as well as with the inherent characteristics and potentials of the space itself.

All of these energies combined perform a transition from the original latent space into something else: a different and even more attractive in-between space that re-gains its 'publicness' as a space for discussion, as a space discussed, as a space that is neither excluded, nor included. As a space that the community is willing to inhabit again, a space in which interaction can happen again.

One could describe and name this process as a hybrid and collaborative-art practice. A regime of enhanced encounter, interaction and exchange that goes beyond the collective experience of the artistic event. A neighborhood meeting, a collective bath or swim, the re-opening of a once neglected public space, an artistic performance, a discussion and a conversation are all happening at the same time.

The effects of such an intensified regime of interaction and relations supersede the limits of the space proliferating network-like in all spheres of the public realm. And some of those effects, consequences and their derived branches lead to a redistribution of the sensible in many ways, stemming from the intensification of the interaction among the participants and including: their own re-discovery of that space and the subsequent process of re-appropriation through the cooperative construction of an alternative and collective 'imaginary’, a desire to tell ‘others’ about this new ‘imaginary’ and this ‘new’ place, a growing awareness of their ability to act for themselves and interfere in the definition of their environment and lives, and finally, a process of un-deliberated realization of their disagreement with reality that leads to real and genuine dissent.

These ‘pluses’ are still alive after some time, and currently evolve and take shape in many ways: a new proposal for a participatory and community-driven development and management plan for the orchards and garden, which came about after a visit to the place and helped bringing the community close to their own orchards in order to rediscover this space, trying to open up dialogues among newcomers and those who already take care of this land; the imminent re-opening of the second basin for periodically scheduled collective baths; a very nice project about the memories related to the movements and bodies of the women using the basins; another very successful night bath held at the basin, resulting in organized voices asking for periodical re-editions of such a ‘public-meeting’; a transdisciplinary research project on the issues of space and gender related to the bigger basin, and the return to discussion of the proposed transformation of the historic core edge; the ‘hope’ that appeared as a graffiti in one of the walls; the interviews we held with different people related to these spaces (artists, inhabitants, urban planners, social-workers…); the celebration of a round table that allowed all these different agents to meet and discuss, creating new possibilities while facing each other; and the possibility of a more stable group or ‘platform’ that could drive the proposal of new uses for these historic spaces.

Collaborative artistic practices are creative processes that should be considered for design purposes. In the cases described above, but also in many other situations, these practices operate by means of three interesting concepts: on the one hand, “resilience”, the capacity of a community to slowly adapt to changes; on the other hand, “transition”, a new way to new possibilities and changes; and finally, “inclusion”, i.e., everyone -group or individual – is needed during the process.

This intervention might be a good example of a hybrid collaborative practice that goes beyond other examples of greater commercial success and media attention. It is far more interesting regarding its greater ability to transform the social realm, but above all, it is an example of
collaboration and collective work around the idea of recovering ‘memories’ deposited into urban spaces, into pieces of public space, into those little ‘urban artifacts’ that rather than an institutionalized heritage tag are in much more urgent need of an updated use, that is, of everyday life.

Rather than the possibility of sheltering closed and ‘static’ resistance, the most important characteristic of these ‘other’ liminal spaces is their potential to be used and re-appropriated and, away from control, be articulated through the spontaneous (or carefully staged) actions of different groups and individuals, with diverse aims that escape those of the hegemonic order. Most importantly, they often have unexpected, and thus difficult-to-control, effects and results. Such spaces can be transformed into spaces of collaboration, spaces in which individuals and groups meet and perhaps discover hidden potentials and values of not only space itself, but also of their own situated knowledge and differences. Through the sudden realization of these potentials and the meeting of their holders with an equally potential space, an incredibly rich landscape of possibilities unfolds.

The task is then to re-code all those possibilities and potentials, to actually ignite diverse processes of collaboration, finding and identifying ‘differential space’, discovering its potential, fostering these meetings, sharing and connections, and articulating them towards one or several collective projects, which ultimately, should aim at some form of forward action against the alienating, all-pervasive, mutant and seemingly uncontested forms of power and control: an action towards life.

Sometimes though, re-coding potentials and igniting processes in space requires careful, silent steps, and intentions or final aims be camouflaged, hidden or disguised as something else, embracing tactics and techniques that avoid ‘principled’ stances or positions that are too clear. Tactics that render those aims and actions apparently ‘harmless’, dragging more and more people and groups into the collaboration and knitting of a more and more complex net of relationships and connections that begin with everyday life events and issues and build up to the most essential and genuine ‘matters of concern’,[4] [5] to end up unexpectedly challenging the most rigid structures and institutions of power.

Sometimes, it is perhaps necessary to inhabit a makeshift mask of a pirate, mastering his skills, tricks, procedures and abilities, and appropriating them for other purposes.

The hybrid practice can be used to camouflage political activism, mobilizing the community for an initially ‘harmless’ event that allows the community itself to recognize, revalue and re-appropriate its own memories and spaces. The hybrid practice might produce rhizomatic and equally hybrid processes of agency leading to the transformation of existing space and/or the production of ‘other’ space/s.

As described by Rànciere, the political process of dissent through which the established order of perception or ‘distribution of the sensible’ is confronted with the inadmissible, is here camouflaged, and rendered much more effective, in the midst of an initially ‘poetic’ and ‘appealing’ event that nevertheless creates a fissure in the sensible order and opens up previously unseen spaces of contestation.

The fissure is possible once the artist identifies the hidden potential of a previously ignored or neglected space, transforming the economically unproductive ‘in-betweens’ of Marx into a socially and politically productive spatial gap, by deconstructing, re-appropriating and re-presenting public space through a hybrid action, that is both artistic and collaborative.

The poetic instant subtly deploys such potential allowing the community to recognize and identify the hidden values and potential of ‘their’ own domain, driving the people to an experience of the artistic event that meets the everyday life. This recognition activates both the people and the site, fostering a multiplicity of subsequent connections, actions and reactions that become a new social actor: an enormous transformative energy that unfolds virus-like, progressively influencing all spheres of society through a highly political complex process.
Radical political activism may be thus camouflaged within one of these hybrid practices and be then progressively deployed not only within a liminal thirdspace – which might well be the 'locus’ for conspiracy and incubation – but also in the very essence of urban life, becoming an alternative but effective way of actively producing space, ultimately giving shape to the city.

Notes

[1] Caldes de Montbui is a small Roman village that has slowly grown on the basis of its natural resources, namely agricultural land and thermal water, until recent waves from the inner rings have taken it to a population of 15,000 inhabitants.

[2] The ‘Mostra Independent d’Art Urbà de Caldes de Montbui’ (MIAU) is curated by Vicenc Ferreres, Helena Pielias and Marta Serra. The art show is financed through a grant program created by the municipality in order to foster cultural reactivation of the historic core.

[3] ‘Vine a fer safareig’. In her “Doing the Laundry and Having Breakfast at the Washing-Place Party” she brilliantly incorporated all the possible translations of the original catalan ‘fer safareig’: the traditional, Catalan expression referring to the act of talking and sharing (to chat, to gossip), and the literal translation that a visitor could make reading a ‘making’ or a ‘building-up’ of the place itself.

[4] See the works of Bruno Latour, in particular We Have Never Been Modern where he addresses this issue at length.

References

  - ______ (2003), The urban revolution, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).