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Autor: Crawford, Margaret / Howe, Lindsay Blaire

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EXPERIMENTAL UTOPIAS

Margaret Crawford and Lindsay Blair Howe

168

‹Everyday Urbanism›, **edited by John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, analyzed contemporary urban life emphasizing the primacy of human experience and close observation of lived realities. Its goal was to posit a new way of reading and planning the city between philosophy and common sense. Their theory of Everyday Urbanism is grounded in the terminology of Henri Lefebvre, where the everyday city is considered to be a social product representing the dynamic accumulation of differences and exchange. In his increasingly popular essay** ‹The Right to the City› **Lefebvre**[1] **advocates the building of** ‹experimental utopias› **as the first step in the urban resident's right to dwell in the city and determine its future; this represents a re-imagining of urban life based on the everyday patterns and pathways of people. As such, Everyday Urbanism speculates that** «design… must start with an understanding and acceptance of the life that takes place there».[2] **The scope of the essays collected in this volume range from a theoretical definition of the everyday in architecture and urban planning (top-down strategies) to visual essays exploring the production of space by localized actors (bottom-up tactics).**

In April 2014, Lindsay Blair Howe met Margaret Crawford in her office at the University of California, Berkeley to discuss the theory of Everyday Urbanism in its current context, its relationship to design practice, and how it has evolved over the twenty years since the 1994 symposium in L.A., where the authors began to formulate an alternative vision of public space and urban design.

Lindsay Blair Howe (lh): Central to the definition of Everyday Urbanism is the «primacy of human experience» in urban encounters, delineation of public space, and zones of transition and possibility. What would ‹utopia› look like according to this description and does it relate to the Lefebvrian concept of the ‹experimental utopia›?

Margaret Crawford (mc): The actual concept of utopia to my knowledge is actually a statement about the present – rather, a dissatisfaction with the present so powerful that one needs to project a completely alternative future, one based on the present but completely inverted. What interests me much more, however, is the idea of the ‹experimental utopia› – I think it's a fantastic concept! Why not try out things that seem implausible, impossible or even preposterous on a small scale? These practices may even already exist and can be used to inform and be expanded upon in normal circumstances. This relates to my conception of capitalism, which is very different than say, that of David Harvey. Many theoreticians see capitalism as all-powerful and completely organized; in order to combat it one must come up with movements that are equally coordinated and powerful. I actually see capitalism as kind of tattered fabric containing many holes. Within these holes there are many practices that, if not anti-capitalist in an active and resistant way, are what I would at least call ‹non-capitalist›. If you focus on these activities you don't become overwhelmed by the incredible power of capital. In a way these holes are what might be considered to be experimental utopias. This includes phenomena such as the garage sale, because it is actually a paradoxical practice that is totally non-capitalist in nature but disguised as a commercial activity![3] I think that's why I see the significance. I know that David Harvey, for example, is very dismissive of activities such as small-scale art interventions and urban space projects often created by small groups of young people, because they aren't coordinated and don't add up to a unified movement. In fact, they are often contradictory. But they can be individually important and significant in an additive process, through which many different small, specific ideas and activities accumulate. This signifies agency rather than adherence.

lh: This phrase «agency rather than adherence» is quite interesting. How would you evaluate, for example, the Occupy Wall Street movement according to these terms?

mc: It was an important and transformative movement because it actually changed the way people thought about and talked about inequality. I confess that, as someone who should have considered this topic more, it was very revelatory! It's completely changed discourse at all levels in the United States and introduced new phrases like the ‹1%› and ‹99%›, putting inequality on the front page and the discussion has not stopped since. I also think it was a wake-up call for professionals studying

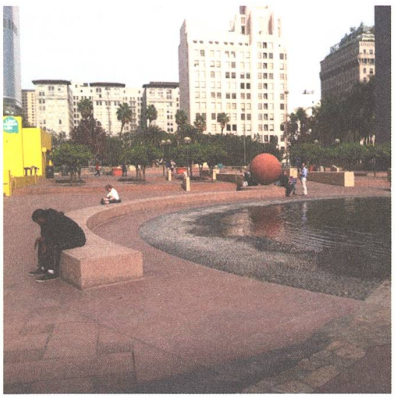

fig. a
Pershing Square, Los Angeles, state in 2014.
Photography: Lindsay Blair Howe.

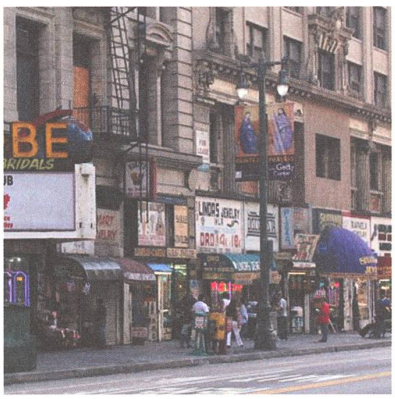

fig. b
Broadway, Los Angeles, state in 2014.
Photography: Lindsay Blair Howe.

public space, because many public spaces that had been dismissed as uninteresting or unimportant such as Zuccotti Square acted as key sites with public potency. Afterwards, it of course turned out that they were not intended for the public at all![4] The ways in which to rethink public space and address a different set of concerns became a topic of discussion for design professionals, as well as initiating widespread discussion of public space and place. In spite of its down sides, this aspect of the movement was successful.

lh: Along that same line of thought, it seems that often highly designed public spaces are less enlivened than those that are ‹appropriated›, or rather, intensified through the difference created by everyday activities of daily life (fig. a–d). Can urban qualities be prescribed or must they happen organically? And is the idea of a ‹heteroglossia›[5] a more accurate vision for an ideal society?

mc: This is a great but very complicated question. There are theorists and practitioners such as Jan Gehl who would label these spaces simply as badly designed, and try to correct them with their patented version of ‹vibrant› orchestrated public spaces. I am quite skeptical of this approach because these spaces often appear vibrant simply due to the number of people there – however, in other ways it is conceived for a very limited amount of activities and a very reduced number of behaviors. As a result, it can never become a truly lived space; this is why many unexpected spaces can be more effective. I am not convinced design is the issue at all. It is much more about location, significance, meaning, and occupation.

A good example of this, although it is becoming a cliché to cite, are the immigrant maids in Hong Kong who occupy corporate squares for their Sunday picnics. These are places that, on weekdays, look a lot like your Max-Bill-Platz, but on the weekends evolve into a sort of concrete meadow for Filipino picnics (fig. e)! In a way, sometimes even terrible spaces are indeed quite lively and can be utilized – it just depends on the motives and the needs of the population.

lh: In a way, the difference of use is what animates the space. Could this difference even be the crucial factor for creating a truly public space?

mc: Difference is the operative element in public space. If we look at pictures of American downtowns in the 1940s or 1950s one sees people from different races – they aren't openly segregated – but the point is that actually there is a distinct code of behavior that stifles difference and imposes the will of the majority (at that time white, middle-class downtown people) on everyone else. It isn't really a diverse public space at all! One can only be there under the sufferance of the dominant class or dominant group. When difference appeared on those streets, the result was the Zoot Suit Riots.[6] That shows how limited that kind of public sufferance can be. One of the most visibly lively public squares I've ever seen is in Potenza, Italy. Basically, it's a town controlled by the mafia and any outsider coming in has to be carefully examined. We were stopped by the local residents and asked where we were from. It is a highly gendered experience. Men and women have different codes of behavior to obey – and like 1940s L.A., everyone is behaving according to a social code, which is completely embedded into the public space itself whether or not this code is stated. So it's not just the number of people assembled or the co-presence of differences that is required for space to be public. People have to be able to behave as they like and carry out the activities they would like to do.

lh: Contestation over urban space has remained a topic of much debate in the San Francisco area, for example in relation to the corporate commodification of lower-income, inner-city spaces and the ‹Google Bus›[7] discussions. What does this increased spatial separation of socio-economic differences mean for people generating temporary uses of space like street vendors, or even the homeless?

mc: This is a complex and even contradictory issue. The Mission district in San Francisco wouldn't be such an attractive target for transformation if it didn't have ethnic residents. When they disappear, will it just become another middle-class street? The Google Bus phenomenon has become an interesting story because it is a public symbol. It is a struggle about public space because the sidewalk, the bus stop and the demonstrators around it embody exactly what public space should be. Some of the demonstrations have been very clever, for example when an art student at U.C. Berkeley created an intervention challenging the legality of the buses by pretending to be an official from a non-existent San Francisco city department. It began as an art and political project but once many uninvited participants joined in, it became a genuinely democratic and public event. There are still some interesting contradictions left in San Francisco. One of our PhD students is currently working on an ethnographic project at the Google Bus stops, because he noticed that these same corners were shared with immigrant day laborers. So, there are still juxtapositions of ‹multiple publics› in the city.

lh: You're currently in the midst of a multiple-semester grant from the Mellon Foundation called the ‹Global Urban Humanities› project. When your design studio course

visited Los Angeles in the context of this research, interventions such as the ‹Frogtown Futuro›[8] project emphasized in particular the capacity of art and media to communicate about and even transform understanding of spatial issues.

mc: This is precisely why I find it so mistaken when scholars such as David Harvey dismiss these forms of public engagement. Art can open up a space of discourse, awareness, and interaction. Because it's often open-ended, it can actually incorporate and change according to what sort of public reaction occurs. This capacity to engender debate is very productive; it's exciting and points things out, and as such is a very valid form of politics.

lh: At the ETH Zurich we try to avoid words like ‹gentrification› as well as ‹informality› because they aren't very descriptive terms. To use one of the terms we've coined, popular forms of urbanization, or «insurgent citizenship» as you've called it in past publications, is particularly present in lower-income countries or countries with high levels of inequality. Do these demands, for example with street vendors, embody a more democratic vision of society?

mc: I also avoid using the word ‹informality›. It implies a duality with the ‹formal›. That said, less visible, alternative forms of commerce have just as much a place in the city as stores, industrial factories, or other kinds of workplaces. One of my major long-term projects has been the legitimation of street vending because people need to be able to claim their place in the city. Their citizenship can't be narrowly defined in a political way; economic citizenship, or claiming the right to space in the economy and the right to live in the city, and not be expelled to some other, faraway place, is a key element of citizenship. In the case of a place like San Francisco that seems to be almost impossible. However, in the developing world and particularly in China, my current area of focus, urban villages have a distinct political, economic, and spatial identity. Unlike urban dwellers, village residents have ‹rural› identities and passports; they can vote and have a specific set of rights even if their village has long since been surrounded by a city (fig. f). Ironically, even paradoxically, their rights may turn out to be more important than those of urban residents. They are the only people in China who can elect their own leaders and build their own houses. Thus, they have much more agency and self-determination than the urban dwellers who look down on them. This is a unique opportunity for an alternative urbanism – and a big hole in the Chinese system that the government is currently trying to close! This seems to be one of the few ways in which people can acquire some form of agency as well as to make money, because they construct buildings up to twelve stories on their small plots and rent them out. Urban villages provide most of the affordable housing in China. It's an important alternative to the very generic, developer-produced form of Chinese urbanism that is currently dominant.

lh: An experimental utopia?

mc: It is an unintentional experimental utopia! Villages also offer some of the most ‹cosmopolitan› spaces in China. Urban villages in Guangzhou, which would normally be overwhelmingly Cantonese, now have people from all over China living there. Migrants open stores and restaurants; we've studied the incredible array of excellent foods available for affordable prices in these places. ‹Difference› has significantly changed these villages. The original villagers remain deeply Cantonese, but they now live in a highly diverse environment.

lh: You transitioned from studying typical American cities like L.A. to the Pearl River Delta. How would you describe the key differences between these urbanized areas?

mc: L.A. is a much more open city than any place in China. It's not nearly as controlled. There are big changes happening in both places but in China, the heavy hands of the central and municipal governments are visible everywhere. Los Angeles is a very fragmented city with multiple jurisdictions. This produces multiple possible differences within a very large city. There are still debates in L.A. about what the city should be. In China there are practically no debates because urban development is so rapid and all encompassing. There really isn't time for debate. Chinese architects and urbanists protest, but are rarely successful. In Los Angeles there is still a lot of room for maneuvering and changing the way things are on an everyday basis.

lh: In your book, you mention «since everyone is potentially an expert on everyday life, everyday life has never been of much interest to experts». Along similar lines, critics such as Duany, Speaks, and Upton have criticized the aesthetics (or lack thereof) of Everyday Urbanism. What is the beauty of bottom-up socio-spatial products?

mc: In Los Angeles in particular, where the public realm is not particularly beautiful, spontaneous activities are actually domesticating urban space in a way that can be beautiful. I have a great set of photographs that show the empty corner of an asphalt parking lot without anything there. But, for a few hours a day, a truck comes and sets out tables covered with checkered tablecloths and chairs; all of a sudden it becomes a habitable, cheerful, and even beautiful space. I think these critics need to

fig. c
Max-Bill-Platz, Zurich, state in 2011.
Photography: Daniel Stastka.

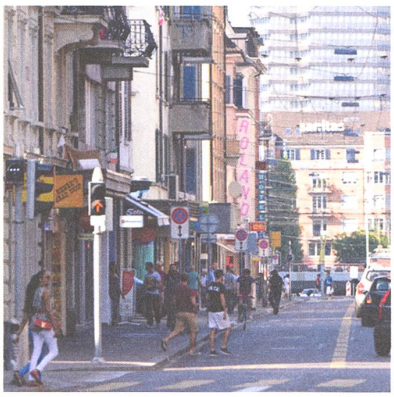

fig. d
Langstrasse, Zürich, state in 2014.
Photography: Lindsay Blair Howe.

expand their aesthetic boundaries. In particular, New Urbanists are linked to a super-clean, upper-middle class idea of what's attractive. Others might call it boring! I find activities such as a host of dresses hung on a chain link fence to be very beautiful. They bring color, life, and meaning to places that in many respects would otherwise be desolate. It's the same in Singapore, which is a controlled and clean place. Everyone likes to go to Little India, where there are groups of immigrant workers standing around watching television in the streets. That kind of urban life is stimulating and appealing. Others may see it as messy and chaotic but I find it extremely attractive.

lh: I agree that it's hard to connect with spaces that are so sterile, referring back to our previous examples of Pershing Square or the Max-Bill-Platz. Is there a middle ground an architect should occupy between strategies and tactics – and between observation and practice?

mc: When people make their own spaces, they don't necessarily do a bad job. Architects and planners who pay attention to what's already there are going to be much better off than those who don't. There's a deep kind of paying attention that pays off if one wants to build, change, and engage with a particular location. A fantastic example that will soon be written about in the New York Times is a group of former Harvard GSD students[9] who came up with the idea of «productive public spaces» for the Kibera slum in Nairobi Kenya. There, local people act as their clients. They send out a call for proposals and help the residents become the practitioners of their own ideas. They use public spaces in multiple ways, including elements that generate income for local people and that will improve the living standards of many, many other people. They are also engaging with migrant workers in the Coachella Valley in Southern California. There's a real need for knowledgeable professionals able to come up with these types of creative solutions.

lh: How has the concept of Everyday Urbanism evolved over the past 20 years since the initial emergence of ideas resulting from the 1994 symposium, which was part of the ‹Urban Revisions› exhibition at the L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art? For example, in the introduction to the 2008 edition of the book, you mention a move away from the ‹theoretical› and towards a ‹sensibility about the city›.

mc: Everyday Urbanism began as a critique of existing urban design approaches because they completely ignored or rejected the urban lives around them. With time, it became a methodology for teaching – ultimately, the aim of Everyday Urbanism is to sensitize larger numbers of people to become aware of and appreciate what is going on around them. A much larger movement is now concerned with ‹users›, which means the same thing: placing human experience at the center of the enterprise. We basically rejected the 1960s and 1970s human factors approach, which was very scientistic and tried instead to emphasize a more ethnographic approach to urban design. It has now trickled down to a large number of people.

lh: Do you consider your primary impact to be through teaching, your publications, or some other medium?

mc: The book has been distributed worldwide and it certainly had a significant impact on multiple levels. Students have been extremely important. John Kaliski and I have both taught for many years and have had many students tell us years later that they still use Everyday Urbanism in their professional work. All of the different mediums have been productive, but, as I said in the book, we captured a sensibility that existed but did not yet have a name. There was no word or phrase that described the things people were seeing and were interested in, and Everyday Urbanism became a term people could use to describe this set of interests.

lh: Where is Everyday Urbanism headed today and where do you see its application?

mc: I'm currently examining how the design discourse on public space evolved, beginning with Jane Jacobs to William Whyte to Jan Gehl. This discourse is now dominant and widely considered to be progressive. Although it is rarely questioned, I believe many aspects of it are very questionable! Also, the Chinese urban villages project is an extremely urgent investigation, because the government has announced it wants to destroy all urban villages and eliminate the rights they now possess.

lh: We actually have a doctoral student investigating this same issue at the ETH Zurich as part of her dissertation.[10] It's unfortunate that the regular exchange that once existed with U.C. Berkeley and our school has been discontinued.

mc: PhD students like yourself contribute so much in exchanges. There would be great potential in future Berkeley-ETH exchanges, particularly in areas such as urban design where the ETH Zurich has such a strong reputation. Our PhD program is called ‹History, Theory and Society›. This combination could interest many students in Switzerland. Since we're on the Pacific Rim, exchanges with the ETH Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore could also be valuable. California as an environment is a very interesting area to experience and investigate!

fig. e
Maids picnicking in a corporate square, Hong Kong, state in 2014.
Photography: Michael Howe.

fig. f
Urban Village, Mainland China, state in 2012.
Photography: Karen Adler.

1 Henri Lefebvre, ‹Right to the City›, in: Leonore Kofman and Elisabeth Lebas (Eds.), ‹Writings on Cities›, Oxford: Blackwell 1996 (1968), pp. 63–81.
2 John Chase, Maragaret Crawford, John Kaliski, ‹Everyday Urbanism – Expanded›, New York: The Monacelli Press 2008 (1994).
3 The term ‹non-capitalist› is intended to encompass activities that do not embody capitalist principles of an impersonal market relationship, although they may be influenced by capitalism or part of the capitalist reproduction of space. Examples include states, families, and academic institutions. See David Kotz, ‹The Erosion of Non-Capitalist Institutions and the Reproduction of Capitalism›, in: Robert Albritton, Bob Jessop, Richard Westra (Eds.), ‹Political Economy and Global Capitalism: The 21st Century, Present and Future›, London / New York: Anthem Press 2007, pp. 160–176.
4 It was a public-private partnership where the public was not technically allowed to assemble.
5 The term ‹heteroglossia› is a play on Michael Foucault's term ‹heterotopia›, its etymology composed of the Greek ‹hetero› (‹different›) and ‹glossa› (‹tongue›, ‹language›). It is intended to describe the presence of distinct varieties of use within a non-hegemonic space.
6 The Zoot Suit Riots were a series of conflicts in Los Angeles in 1943 between military personnel and Mexican-American youth population. The name originates from the style of suit popularly worn by this demographic group. See also Richard del Castillo, ‹The Los Angeles ‹Zoot Suit Riots› Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives›, Mexican Studies 16(2) 2000, pp. 367–391.
7 The discussion centers on buses sent to areas of San Francisco to transport predominantly tech-workers to compounds like Google and Apple, which are located about 45 minutes south of the inner city. Districts such as the Mission, one of the city's most ethnically diverse areas, are undergoing significant urban change due to the rapid influx of higher-income, young residents, for example demographic change and skyrocketing rents. See also Andrew Gumbel, ‹San Francisco's guerrilla protest at Google buses swells into revolt›, in: www.theguardian.comworld/2014/jan/25/google-bus-protest-swells-to-revolt-san-francisco, retrieved: 01.06.2014.
8 Frogtown Future is a nickname for the Clockshop neighborhood of L.A. inbetween the Freeway 5 and the L.A. River. It is considered representative of difference commodification: www.clockshop.org/frogtownfuturo.html, retrieved: 01.06.2014.
9 KDI-Kounkuey Design Inititative: www.kounkuey.org/, retrieved: 01.06.2014.
10 Tammy Wong, D-ARCH, ETH Zurich, is currently writing her doctoral dissertation on urbanization processes in the Pearl River Delta with Prof. Dr. Christian Schmid. See: www.soziologie.arch.ethz.ch/de/urbanization-processes-hong-kong-shenzhen-and-dongguan, retrieved: 01.06.2014.

Margaret Crawford, born 1961, received a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley and a Master's degree from the Architectural Association before completing her doctoral degree in Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has published widely on topics related to the evolution, uses, and meanings of urban space. She currently teaches at UC Berkeley, and has previously taught at Harvard GSD, the Southern California Institute for Architecture, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, and the University of Florence. She is on the scientific advisory committee of the ETH Future Cities Laboratory, Singapore.

Lindsay Blair Howe, born 1984, received a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Virginia and completed her Master of Science in Architecture at the ETH Zurich. She is pursuing her doctoral degree in architecture with Prof. Dr. Christian Schmid on the topic of cooperative urbanism in Johannesburg, South Africa.