Cities within the City: Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City

KURT IVESON

Abstract

In many cities around the world we are presently witnessing the growth of, and interest in, a range of micro-spatial urban practices that are reshaping urban spaces. These practices include actions such as: guerrilla and community gardening; housing and retail cooperatives; flash mobbing and other shock tactics; social economies and bartering schemes; ‘empty spaces’ movements to occupy abandoned buildings for a range of purposes; subcultural practices like graffiti/street art, skateboarding and parkour; and more. This article asks: to what extent do such practices constitute a new form of urban politics that might give birth to a more just and democratic city? In answering this question, the article considers these so-called ‘do-it-yourself urbanisms’ from the perspective of the ‘right to the city’. After critically assessing that concept, the article argues that in order for do-it-yourself urbanist practices to generate a wider politics of the city through the appropriation of urban space, they also need to assert new forms of authority in the city based on the equality of urban inhabitants. This claim is illustrated through an analysis of the do-it-yourself practices of Sydney-based activist collective BUGA UP and the New York and Madrid Street Advertising Takeovers.

Introduction

In many cities around the world we are presently witnessing the growth of, and interest in, a range of micro-spatial urban practices that are reshaping urban spaces. These practices include actions such as: guerrilla and community gardening; housing and retail cooperatives; flash mobbing and other shock tactics; social economies and bartering schemes; ‘empty spaces’ movements to occupy abandoned buildings for a range of purposes; subcultural practices like graffiti/street art, skateboarding and parkour; and more. At present, we are not quite sure how to describe what is happening. Those seeking to come to grips with such practices have begun to group them together for consideration under banners such as ‘insurgent’, ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY), ‘guerrilla’, ‘everyday’, ‘participatory’ and/or ‘grassroots’ urbanism (see for example, Haydn and Temel, 2006; Borasi and Zardini, 2008; Chase et al., 2008; Burnham, 2010; Hou, 2010; Zeiger, 2011a).

The search for an appropriate language to describe these practices reflects the fact that we are not quite sure what, if anything, connects them across their diversity. This
conceptual question of commonalities and connections is of more than academic interest. I think it gets to the heart of a crucial question. Zeiger (2011b) puts it this way: ‘how do we measure the impacts of ambiguously defined and informal activities?’ As she notes, this cannot be a matter of simply evaluating individual practices and projects. It must also be a matter of discerning whether a larger picture is emerging across these practices and projects, and asking about the nature of this bigger picture if it does exist. To what extent are these practices helping to ‘give birth’ to a new kind of city, as is sometimes claimed by their practitioners and supporters, and what might this city be like? To ask this question another way: is there a universal that threads these particulars together across their differences in some way, something that is bigger than the sum of its parts, and what is (or should be) the nature of that universal? Here, I think considering these myriad practices or ‘experimental utopias’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 151) in the context of the ‘right to the city’ is useful, for it begs the question: is there, or can there be, a shared politics of the city that connects the practices?

These are the questions that I want to address in this article. I will argue that ‘appropriating’ urban space for unintended uses does not in itself give birth to a new kind of city. There is no guarantee that the proliferation of DIY experiments with appropriation and alternative uses of urban space will coalesce into a wider politics of the city. However, the prospects for such a politics do exist and must be teased out if small-scale projects are to coalesce into large-scale change. I argue here that building a politics to connect the practices is a matter of both appropriation and political subjectivization, in which practitioners make themselves parties to a disagreement over the forms of authority that produce urban space. Such a politics will only emerge to the extent that participants can find ways to make connections with each other across their diversity. Here, I suggest that an explicit focus on enacting the ‘right to the city’ is one of the ways in which such connections can be made. Enacting our right to the city is a matter of building ‘cities within the city’, by both declaring new forms of authority based on a presupposition of the equality of urban inhabitants, and finding ways to stage a disagreement between these competing forms of authority. This claim will be illustrated with reference to a past experiment that could be considered an antecedent of today’s DIY urbanism — the billboard activists group BUGA UP — and to a contemporary example of DIY urbanism that follows in BUGA UP’s footsteps — the New York and Madrid Street Advertising Takeovers.

‘Beneath the road, a beach’: the practice of DIY urbanism

To start with the key lesson of Lefebvre (1991), the production of space is a contested process. The shaping and reshaping of urban spaces is a product of complex power-geometries, as different actors seek to determine who and what the city is for. Among the resources mobilized in these power struggles are capital, property rights, planning codes, spatial design, law, various policing techniques and technologies, education, socialization, and labour. Of course, the capacity to mobilize these resources is not limited to one group. This is not to say that the city is free of power imbalances, just to observe that there is no operation of power that is beyond subversion and/or appropriation for a range of different (and possibly unintended) uses (Iveson, 2007).

These possibilities of subversion and appropriation are illustrated by a range of contemporary urban practices that are emerging across a variety of urban contexts, key examples of which I have listed above. At first, it may not appear that such practices have much in common at all. Scholars like Crawford have begun the important work of developing typologies to capture some of the shared dynamics of the myriad DIY urban practices across different cities. For her, key dynamics involved in these emergent ‘everyday urbanisms’ include:

- Defamiliarization (in the sense of identifying new possibilities in taken-for-granted spaces of the city);
Refamiliarization (in the sense of re-occupation of alienated spaces in the city);
Decommodification (the assertion of use values over exchange values in urban space);
Alternative economies (such as recycling and gifting economies);
Collaboration across difference (in the sense that involve emergent rather than pre-constituted subjects) (Crawford, 2011b).

To this list, I would add that we could diagram DIY urbanist practices across a range of vectors — they range from:

- Temporary to permanent
- Periphery to centre
- Public to private
- Authored to anonymous
- Collective to individual
- Legal to illegal
- Old to new
- Unmediated to mediated

So, for example, the ‘Empty Shows’ that took place in Melbourne in the early 2000s involved temporary, illegal, and hence largely anonymous, installations of art in abandoned privately owned buildings in Melbourne (Civil, 2010). On the other hand, the regular Critical Mass cycle rides in Melbourne as well as other cities are perfectly legal (if controversial!), take place regularly, are organized (if not led) by an identified collective actor, and occupy public rather than private space. Some, such as squatting, have a long history, while others such as flash-mob occupations of public space organized via social media are comparatively new interventions. Some, such as poster- or graffiti-artists interventions in public space, might be the illegal effort of lone individuals, while others such as ‘parking day’ in which thousands of people across the world coordinate their efforts to occupy and convert car parking spaces into park spaces for people, are very much the product of legal and collective efforts to transform space.

So, what if anything do the diverse practices being grouped together as ‘insurgent’ or ‘DIY’ or ‘guerrilla’ urbanism have in common across these vectors? For Zeiger (2011a), a growing number of emergent small-scale do-it-yourself interventions in the city ‘hold at their heart a belief that change is possible despite economic or political obstacles, or disciplinary or institutional inertia’. For Zardini (2008: 16), the singular actions emerging between the cracks of formal urbanism have in common a shared desire to ‘propose alternative lifestyles, reinvent our daily lives, and reoccupy urban space with new uses’. For Hou (2010: 2), what gives these various experiments some kind of unity is that they explore, and potentially reveal, the alternative cities within the existing city, occupying urban spaces and ‘injecting them with new functions and meanings’. This kind of claim for DIY urbanisms — which is part description and part aspiration — is emerging as a key trope in the growing discussion around their significance, so it is worth considering in some more depth.

Of course, the notion that there exist all sorts of potential ‘cities within the city’ is not a new one for urban theory in general. Indeed, urban practices such as those considered here have helped to inspire, and to some degree have been inspired by, critical theorizations of the city that seek to conceptualize the ways in which the meanings of urban space are contested and transformed. De Certeau (1984: 96), for instance, talked about the existing order of the city as being like a sieve full of holes — ‘the created order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning’ which for him were the result of ‘procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised’.

Lefebvre’s (1996) work on the ‘right to the city’ has also enjoyed a revival (see for example, Dikec, 2002; Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 2003; 2008; Marcuse, 2009; Mayer, 2009; Crawford, 2011a; Zeiger, 2011b). His phrase ‘beneath the road, the beach!’ neatly encapsulates the notion of ‘cities within the city’, and was taken quite literally by
Reclaim the Streets protesters in London several years ago when, during one of their actions, they dug up part of a motorway and dumped several tonnes of sand on it to create a temporary beach (Jordan, 1998)! Like de Certeau (1984), Lefebvre pointed out the gaps in existing urban systems which are open to be exploited — for him, the production of space is a ‘trialectical’ process in which conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences of space interact (Lefebvre, 1991). Here, the conceptions or ‘representations’ of the proper uses of urban spaces that are authored by urban authorities are powerful but not all-powerful, and spaces are always available for reappropriation. This is a point echoed by contemporary urban theorists such as Amin and Thrift (2002: 108), who argue that efforts to order the city in particular ways are never complete:

forms of governmentality may be totalizing projects, but they are not totalizations. Thus city populations can escape some of their inclinations and find new angles of declination.

However, in his book The Right to the City, Lefebvre’s optimism about the possibilities for transformation that might arise out of experimental appropriations of the city remains cautious. As the following passage shows, he was not entirely convinced that experimental appropriations would coalesce into radical transformation. Certainly, he says, the city is never completely closed off from the possibility of appropriation, its order is never total:

there are holes and chasms. These voids are not there due to chance. They are the places of the possible. They contain the floating and dispersed elements of the possible, but not the power which could assemble them. Moreover, structuring actions and the power of the social void tend to prohibit action and the very presence of such a power. The conditions of the possible can only be realized in the course of a radical metamorphosis (Lefebvre, 1996: 156).

Here, then, Lefebvre is searching for a way to ‘assemble’ these ‘floating and dispersed elements of the possible’ into something bigger than the sum of their parts, something that might give birth to a more radical urban transformation. In The Right to the City, Lefebvre is typically suggestive but elusive on what this power might be. In his effort to figure out how these cities within the city can be nurtured, what power might sustain them, and how they might articulate with a ‘politics’ of the urban that does give birth to a different kind of city, Lefebvre seems to offer two related but distinct possibilities.

At some points in The Right to the City, the ‘power’ or universal on which this radical transformation depends is said to be the power of the working class:

Urban strategy resting on the science of the city needs a social support and political forces to be effective. It cannot act on its own. It cannot but depend on the presence and action of the working class, the only one able to put an end to a segregation directed essentially against it . . .

This does not mean that the working class will make urban society all on its own, but that without it nothing is possible. Without it integration has no meaning and distintegration will continue under the guise of nostalgia and integration (Lefebvre, 1996: 154).

Clearly, the prospects for action by a mobilized working class look quite different from our position now than they did from Lefebvre’s perspective in late 1960s Paris. Nonetheless, the notion that the right to the city is, at its heart, a class project has certainly been picked up in some recent pronouncements on the right to the city which emphasize the need to assert use value over exchange value in shaping the city. Harvey’s (2008) formulation of the right to the city in his essay on the topic for the New Left Review is resolutely focused on the ways in which capital shapes the city, and the need to democratize the surplus. In a similar vein, Marcuse (2009) has also argued that the right to the city is a matter of asserting use value over exchange value in the city. Marcuse is a little more explicit than Harvey on who might take such action — he believes the project of building ‘Cities for People, Not for Profit’ might help to unite coalitions of the oppressed and the alienated to give birth to a new city.
But Lefebvre also hints at another ‘universal’ at play in the politics of urban transformation — his notion of inhabitance in and of the city — a concept that for Lefebvre speaks to ‘the plasticity of space, its modelling and the appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 79). Like Purcell, I think this aspect of Lefebvre’s work on the right to the city is particularly promising for progressive urban politics, and deserves more careful scrutiny and elaboration. For Purcell (2002: 101), Lefebvre’s concept of the right to the city ‘reframes the arena of decision-making in cities’ towards a radical form of enfranchisement based on nothing more than inhabitance of the city. Picking up on Lefebvre’s comment that the right to the city is designed to further the interests ‘of the whole society and firstly of all those who inhabit’ the city (Lefebvre, 1996: 158), Purcell (2002: 102) argues:

Whereas conventional enfranchisement empowers national citizens, the right to the city empowers urban inhabitants. Under the right to the city, membership in the community of enfranchised people is not an accident of nationality or ethnicity or birth; rather it is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the spaces of the city.

Now, as Purcell (2002: 103) goes on to argue, the notion that the right to the city should be grounded in an ‘urban politics of the inhabitant’ raises more questions than it answers. In what follows, I want to expand on the ‘urban politics of the inhabitant’ which is at the heart of this reading of the right to the city, because I think it offers a particularly promising lens through which to sympathetically but critically review the politics of the city that might connect DIY urbanist practices. For the emergence of such a politics out of diverse practices is not an automatic process — there is no guarantee that a range of practices which appropriate urban spaces for unintended uses will pose a political challenge to the authority of the authorities. I want to argue that those engaged in DIY practices could in fact build this politics by asserting inhabitance as the principle that should underpin the exercise of authority in the city. An urban authority based on inhabitance is potentially a powerful democratic antidote to the forms of authority or ‘titles to govern’ based on wealth, nationality, technocratic expertise, and even electoral popularity that pertain in actually-existing cities.

Inhabiting the city: the politics of DIY urbanism

What would an urban politics of the inhabitant look like? In answering this question, I believe Rancière’s work is particularly useful in helping us to elaborate how a politics of the city founded on inhabitance might be enacted. In this section, I want to show how Rancière’s approach to politics might help us understand how diverse ‘experimental utopias’ could give birth to a transformative politics of the city in which the authority of the authorities is democratized.

One of the most powerful aspects of some of the practices being grouped together under the banner of DIY urbanism is that their participants are not content with lobbying for a better city some time in the future, and they often refuse to wait for permission to do things differently. Walls and billboards are appropriated as spaces of communication. Roads are appropriated as spaces for gathering. Benches and rooftops are appropriated as spaces for play. Verges are appropriated as spaces for gardening. In such practices, the right to appropriate the city is not something that is requested or even demanded of the existing order. Rather, the right to appropriate urban space is something that is declared and verified in practice. Of course, in many instances, this right is not officially recognized — rather, permission from the owner and/or regulator of a space must be sought for its use to be legitimate. So, in Rancière’s terms, we might say that in these practices people ‘demonstrate ... that they do have the rights denied them’ (Rancière, 2006: 61), and in doing so they find ‘another space within that space’ (Rancière, 2009: 282). ‘Politics’, says Rancière, ‘is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds’ (Ibid.: 42).
But what kind of space is created within the space of the existing city? This is not just to ask: what are people actually doing in/with that space? Crucially, it is also to ask: what is the alternative form of authority which is asserted when a given space is appropriated for alternative uses? To put this question another way, embracing Rancière’s distinction between power and politics, we could ask: do interventions which contest the power of existing authorities also challenge the basis of their authority? Rancière’s work is useful here because it helps us to interrogate the different forms of authority that characterize DIY urbanisms and their relationship to a democratic politics. For Rancière, there is one form of authority that is quite different from the rest, because it is founded on the absence of a foundation — democracy. He argues that the only democratic form of authority or ‘title to govern’ is one based on a presupposition of equality, such that anyone has as much right to govern as to be governed. Democracy thereby differs from other forms of authority such as meritocracy, technocracy, aristocracy, gerontocracy, etc., because its presupposition of equality contracts with the notion that one’s entitlement to govern should be based on merit, education, wealth, age or any other foundation.

It was this democratic form of authority that Lefebvre detected in his investigations into urban politics and the right to the city in Paris in the 1960s, and one that we can detect (and potentially encourage) in some instances of contemporary DIY urbanism. In advancing a notion that rights to use and shape the city should belong to people on the basis of their inhabitation in the city, Lefebvre is advancing a form of authority which is equally available to everyone in the city. Here, the assertion of inhabitation as the basis for authority inscribes a part for those who have no part in cities where authority is based on wealth, or birth, or technical expertise, or national citizenship, or some other non-democratic source of authority.

Lefebvre’s notion that the ‘right to the city’ is founded on an urban politics of inhabitation is suggestive of how a democratic urban politics might emerge from appropriations of the city. In other words, one way in which the practices of DIY urbanists might begin to construct a democratic politics of the city is through the declaration of a right to (appropriate the) city based on nothing more than their shared inhabitation of the city. The city is as much ours to use as it is anyone else’s, and as much anyone else’s to use as it is ours. Importantly, then, the declaration of a right to the city based on inhabitation is not only a matter of appropriating a space for ‘alternative purposes’. Crucially, it is an appropriation of space founded in a particular kind of authority.

Further, DIY appropriations will only generate a politics to the extent that practitioners are able to stage a confrontation between the city in which rights to the city are based on inhabitation and the city in which it rights are based on some other undemocratic form of authority. The staging of such a confrontation is a crucial step in political action. This is a matter of making the city public, not just through physically occupying its public spaces, but also through making those occupations a matter of public interest and debate in a procedural sense (see Iveson, 2007 on this distinction). It involves the formation of public spheres where naturalized forms of order and authority are rendered unnatural through struggle, where the ‘part which has no part’ is recognized as a party to a disagreement rather than marginalized as being without political voice. For Rancière (1999: 41), this requires ‘an ability to produce these polemical scenes, these paradoxical scenes, that bring out the contradiction between two logics, by positing existences that are at the same time nonexistences — or nonexistences that are at the same time existences’.

From this perspective, it is important that democratic cities created through DIY urbanisms actually confront the city in which they have no proper part. To me, this

---

1 It is interesting that the events of May/June 1968 in Paris served as key moments for both Lefebvre and Rancière in developing their approaches to (urban) politics. While their frameworks are by no means identical, their writing is shaped to a large degree by the complete inability of existing Marxian theory to come to grips with these events.
militates against the romanticism of the ‘micro-scale’ tactical intervention that is common to much commentary on DIY urbanism. To give birth to a new city by acting politically will require us to make public claims on behalf of small-scale tactical interventions in the city which often thrive on a form of invisibility. To use the language of de Certeau (1984: 38), slightly against the grain, this necessitates the bringing together of ‘the tentative moves, pragmatic ruses, and successive tactics that mark the stages of practical investigation and . . . the strategic representations offered to the public as the product of these operations’ (see also Iveson, 2007).

To date, I think this aspect of politics as the staging of a disagreement about the ‘authority of the authorities’ has been more of a challenge for DIY urbanists. These ‘tactics’ and ‘strategies’ are too easily held apart, with the former romanticized and the latter avoided for their essentializing or universalizing tendencies. But I would argue that bringing such universals into play is a necessary part of emancipatory politics. This does not require us all to join the party, sign up to a manifesto, or paper over our differences — but it does involve finding ways to engage publicly with the unjust city as it exists by asserting our equality, not just transgressing its order. Of course, making the city public and being recognized as the party to a disagreement is not just a matter of will. It is also a matter of organization and strategy. Here, we can learn from the efforts of activists who have had some success in this regard, in different times and places.

In what follows, I consider two examples of DIY urbanism in the form of graffiti and street art interventions. The first involved a group of activists from Sydney who came together for a time in the 1980s under the banner BUGA UP — Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions. The second involved a group of activists who in the 2000s were involved in collective appropriations of outdoor advertising space in New York and Madrid. These examples are pertinent to my argument in several ways. First, these two examples fit squarely within the continuum of do-it-yourself micro-spatial urban interventions that are the subject of this article. As Scott Burnham has argued, the recent history of graffiti and street art could be read as the development of a ‘form of DIY urban design’:

If we were to consider the dialogue of design in the same way we do the linguistic development of a culture’s language, then just as street-level vernacular has innovated and filled in the gaps of a culture’s formal language, the street has as well developed its own vernacular to fill the gaps in the city’s formal design. This new street-level language of design—non-commissioned, non-invited interventions in the urban landscape—transforms the fixed landscape of the city into a platform for a design dialogue (Burnham, 2010: 137).

Second, the examples demonstrate the historical continuities and discontinuities of contemporary urban appropriations. I think it is particularly important to draw out the historical as well as geographical connections between instances of urban politics in our assessment of DIY urbanisms — while our cities and their authorities might differ from those of times past, we have much to learn from previous attempts to establish ‘cities within the city’. Finally, as we will see, the two examples I discuss here not only appropriated privately owned infrastructure for do-it-yourself or guerrilla public communication — they also enacted a politics of the city through collective (and contested) declarations of democratic forms of authority.

Writing to the city: the urban politics of BUGA UP

BUGA UP was a relatively small and loose group of 20 or so individuals who were very active in modifying billboard advertisements during the late 1970s/early 1980s. They targeted tobacco and alcohol advertisements during the late 1970s/early 1980s. They targeted tobacco and alcohol billboards mainly, but not exclusively — car advertisements, media advertisements and sexist advertisements were also in their sights for parody and modification (Chapman, 1996) (see Figure 1). During the years in which
they were active, they modified thousands of billboards, and at the height of their engagement were estimated to be costing outdoor advertising companies over $500,000 annually (Sydney Morning Herald, 28 June 1982). In engaging in this practice, BUGA UP activists demonstrated the alternative possibilities of billboards — usually reserved for uni-directional communication from advertisers to inhabitants — as spaces for two-way public communication. As one of the first organized attempts to stage unauthorized interventions in the urban landscape through artistic practice, BUGA UP's influence on the contemporary DIY urbanist scene has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Klein, 2001). What is particularly interesting about BUGA UP for my purposes here is the way in which this practice of billboard hacking was connected to a politics of the city.

BUGA UP emerged out of a period of political turbulence in Sydney — the decade of the 1970s had witnessed mass mobilization against Australia’s involvement in the war in Vietnam and the conscription of Australian soldiers, the ‘green ban’ movement which contested urban development in Sydney through squatting, strikes and occupations, and a strong anti-apartheid and growing anti-nuclear movement among others. According to one BUGA UP activist, ‘the late 1960s early 1970s climate had radicalized people into understanding and accepting civil disobedience’ as a form of politics. Various individuals who came to be associated with BUGA UP came to the activity of billboard graffiti from different directions. Some were involved in the incipient anti-smoking movement, but frustrated with the lack of progress and radicalism in that movement. Others had been involved in leftist politics more generally, and were actively targeting what they saw as the exploitative activities of large corporations. Yet others had more of a concern with the urban environment itself and issues of ‘visual pollution’ they associated with outdoor advertising.

As these individuals came to find each other through their shared participation in billboard graffiti, they eventually came to agree upon the need to establish a collective identity to enhance their individual efforts. As one of the ‘founding members’ of BUGA UP put it, while lots of billboards were being repurposed:

> it all just seemed like random actions. You know, like, this billboard would be done, and that billboard would be done, but there was nothing to link them. So, that’s when one night . . . it was a bit too wet to go out, and we were sitting around chatting, and we thought that we should

‘New. Mild. And Malboro’ was refaced to say ‘New. Vile. And a bore’ with ‘Taste like horse dung’ and a dollar sign added for good measure.

**Figure 1** BUGA UP Billboard modification, Sydney, 1970s (photo courtesy of Ric Bolzan)
develop an acronym for ourselves. Get some branding. So, that’s when we came up with the name of BUGA UP. It was essentially launched on a billboard, it was opposite Sydney on Parramatta Rd where there’s a large sandstone wall . . . That’s the one where we just spelled the whole thing out. We did it with a ladder and the whole shebang, so we could get up quite high and completely fill the billboard. And we spelled it out: Billboard Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions.³ (see Figure 2)

In relation to the discussion of the right to the city above, BUGA UP’s practices are a good example of how the right to the city is not so much demanded as declared through political action. In a manner that might now be described as ‘do-it-yourself’ or ‘guerrilla’ urbanism, BUGA UP activists took the concept of public space very literally to mean that, as members of the public, they had just as much right to use urban public space as a medium for communication as advertisers or anyone else — the alternative possibilities dormant within a particular piece of urban infrastructure (the billboard) were realized as it was repurposed and refaced. The equality of BUGA UP activists as members of the public, as inhabitants of the city, was presupposed in their practice. They did not ask anyone’s permission to have this right, or lobby for it, or purchase it; rather they declared this right through their actions. In their city, then, not only were billboards there to be altered — the activists also assumed the authority to author their own messages on billboards, asserting what they called a ‘write of reply’. Here, we see the establishment of another city within the city — for of course in the police order of the city, members of the public had no such right at all. Property and criminal law define graffiti as illegal, and both money and planning permission are required to use public space to address the public.

But one of the most important lessons we can draw from BUGA UP activists, I think, is that they did not settle for simply putting billboards to alternative uses. They also actively sought to stage a confrontation between two cities — the city in which they had the right to do what they were doing simply because they inhabited the city, and the city in which they did not have this right. To put this another way, they worked to establish themselves as parties to a disagreement with both the tobacco companies and with the urban authorities whose job it was to police the existing order of the city. BUGA UP activists did this in a range of ways.

First, by giving themselves a collective identity as BUGA UP, despite the many differences between those who were involved, the activists gave their actions a public,

political purpose beyond that which might be associated with a lone (private) individual vandalizing a billboard. As one of the original BUGA UP activists told me, when previously lone graffitists got together and started signing off their work with ‘BUGA UP’, this:

gave it a focus, and it seemed like there was this movement, and all these billboards that you would see around had this name. So people started thinking ‘oh, there is some group, some guerrilla group out there doing this, and they’re called BUGA UP. Who are they? What are they? What do they do?’

As another put it:

So, that sort of process — one of kind of promoting ourselves and identifying ourselves as a group — was perceived by the advertising industry and the billboard people as a bigger threat, not just random graffiti. So, yeah, that was like a deliberate strategy really, and that’s when the community started to understand that there’s something different between ‘just graffiti’ and the anti-smoking/anti-alcohol graffiti that they’d see on the billboards.

This collective identity was established in a particular way, operating more as a kind of affinity group than a conventional political organization:

Of course, the idea was that it wasn’t a group as such, but that it was a movement. You would subscribe to the concept of BUGAUP and go out and do it, you wouldn’t pay a membership fee and go to meetings. It was not like that at all.

Second, BUGA UP activists asserted their right to write very publicly, thereby staging a confrontation between their city (in which they were in the right) and the city of law and private-property (in which they were in the wrong). For example, they frequently did their work in daylight hours as well as at night. In doing so, they performed their activities before the public in a manner that demonstrated to others that they did not believe they were doing anything wrong:

I found that doing billboards in daylight, people could see me doing it. It was often a thrill for people, the public were generally supportive. Or, it wouldn’t quite click — ‘what’s that person doing, it’s broad daylight, what’s happening? Should that person be doing that? Maybe they’re just fixing the billboard?’

And when individuals were caught, they used court cases to raise the profile of the activities and to stage their disagreement with the existing order, by refusing to acknowledge any wrongdoing in their pleas and statements before the court (and the media):

at first it was thought, if you take these people to court, you sort them out, charge them. But then the arrests and the court became a podium, it was great! And I think eventually the last thing these companies wanted was another person going through the courts.

Of course, while this strategy was effective, it also came at some personal cost to those who were arrested, some of whom served short periods in custody rather than admit guilt and/or pay a court-imposed fine for their actions (e.g. Sydney Morning Herald, 10 April 1981). In order to try to reduce the possibility of arrest, some BUGA UP activists even took to distributing leaflets about their activities to police stations, in an effort to

demonstrate to the police that BUGA UP writers were not simply ‘vandals’ with no purpose other than to wreck the billboards.9

Third, BUGA UP remediated their billboard hacks by embracing a variety of other forms of public address to publicize their actions and agenda. They gave in-depth interviews to mainstream media and medical journals (e.g. Sydney Morning Herald, 14 February 1981; New Doctor 1980, http://www.bugaup.org/press/NEWD1980.pdf). They printed posters of their billboard hacks, they distributed these posters across the city in doctor’s surgeries, school classrooms, and other spaces where sympathetic professionals and others were prepared to support their cause. They printed catalogues and ‘how-to’ guides for distribution at political events such as protest marches, and listed a Post Office box address on some of their billboards if people wanted to request these resources. They staged an awards night, the ‘Winfaileds Cup’, where prizes were given for the worst billboard advertisement, and for the best alterations (‘Winfield’ is a leading cigarette brand and was a major outdoor advertiser at the time). They staged protests at art and sporting events sponsored by tobacco companies, and distributed literature at these protests (e.g. The Australian 16 August 1982). They established a temporary ‘embassy’ outside a prominent advertising agency and distributed material to passers-by and the media (The Australian, 14 May 1984). They even gave talks to school students whose teachers were sympathetic to their cause. One of those involved, a GP himself, gave an address on BUGA UP’s activities to the Fifth World Conference on Tobacco and Health in Winnipeg in 1983, garnering international media coverage (Chapman, 1996). And of course, they now have a website, on which images, interviews, press clippings, and instructional material can be found (www.bugaup.org).

Now, while BUGA UP activists had some success in using these strategies to develop a specifically political dimension to the practice of billboard modification through these strategies, this did not guarantee them success. Certainly, BUGA UP had some significant success with the eventual banning of outdoor advertisements for tobacco (Chapman, 1996: 179). Nevertheless, there were still limits to the extent to which BUGA UP activists were able to infiltrate and replace the existing city with their own. And yet, this should not mean that we write BUGA UP off as a political failure. Just as we should not reduce politics to power relationships, neither should we reduce it to some fantasy of total systemic transformation.

Most importantly, it seems to me, for a time in Sydney it was impossible to dismiss their graffiti as simply the anti-social behaviour of maladjusted individuals. Even a judge handing down a fine for two convicted members of BUGA UP was reported to have expressed sympathy with their aims, and stated that ‘The commission of this crime is of the highest idealistic nature’ (Daily Telegraph, 26 February 1982). Instead, a group of graffiti writers were grudgingly acknowledged to be parties to a disagreement, to be political. As one BUGA UP activist reflected recently:

over the period that BUGAUP was going, there was a change in society’s attitude from ‘oh, this is graffiti’, both from the general population and also police. After a couple of years or so, the police understood that there was a difference between BUGA UP people who were painting on billboards and graffitists who were painting railway carriages. There was a difference.

And this difference is significant. Any individual who picks up a spray can or marker and writes unauthorized graffiti does indeed assert a kind of right to the city in a manner that could be understood as a ‘performance critique’ of the actually-existing city (Borden, 2004; Iveson, 2010). But not all necessarily become parties to a broader, political disagreement about the nature of authority in the city.

Contemporary street advertising takeovers: NYSAT and MaSAT

There are echoes and extensions of BUGA UP’s political approach to graffiti in the actions of some contemporary do-it-yourself urbanists who have similar concerns about the urban media landscape. Consider for example a series of orchestrated outdoor advertising ‘takeovers’ that have taken place in New York City, Toronto and Madrid. These advertising takeovers also transform individual instances that appropriate urban public space for do-it-yourself public communication into a political claim which seeks to give birth to a new city.

The first of these orchestrated takeovers took place in New York City in April and October of 2009. On both occasions, the New York Street Advertising Takeover Project (NYSAT) organized dozens of artists and activists to whitewash over 100 billboards, to replace them with a non-commercial public communication, and to document these replacements (see Figure 3). The NYSAT project pointedly and cheekily targeted billboard sites maintained by NPA City Outdoor, a company that itself operated illegally, with over 500 illegal billboard sites across the city. As with BUGA UP, such efforts can be positioned in the continuum of do-it-yourself urbanisms, with their explicit focus on direct citizen action in appropriating and repurposing urban space. As the NYSAT website puts it:

NPA City Outdoor operates over 500 illegal street level billboards in the 5 boroughs of NYC. Despite this the city has been either unable or unwilling to deal with this problem directly. As engaged citizens the participants in this project have taken it upon themselves to remedy this problem. In doing so they have realized their potential as public citizens by taking it upon themselves to create an environment that is a direct result of their actions.10

The New York Street Advertising Takeover (NYSAT) emerged as an extension of Jordan Seiler’s PublicAdCampaign. For several years, Seiler has been replacing outdoor advertisements in New York City with his own art, and doing so quite publicly. His interventions on outdoor advertising infrastructure have not been clandestine, but are often made during daylight hours in full view of the public. He documents his efforts (and reports on similar efforts by others) on a website using his real name, where he explains and justifies his actions. His mission statement says in part:

Outdoor advertising is the primary obstacle to open public communications. By monetizing public space, outdoor advertising has monopolized the surfaces that shape our shared environment. Private property laws protect the communications made by outdoor advertising while systematically preventing public usage of that space. In an effort to illuminate these issues, PublicAdCampaign uses outdoor media venues for public art, chronicles the activities of artists intent on challenging public/private relationships, as well as other engaging contemporary issues in outdoor advertising and public space. Through bold acts of civil disobedience we hope to air our grievances in the court of public opinion and witness our communities regain control of the spaces they occupy.11

As with BUGA UP participants, Seiler acts on the basis that he has the right to use public space as a space for communication. In his ‘city within the city’, he is doing nothing wrong — and his actions are staged in such a way as to stage a confrontation between his city and the city in which access to the public realm for communication is regulated by planning laws and property rights.12

This very public aspect of Seiler’s practice was built into the NYSAT projects. As he explained:

The NYSAT projects were done in full daylight for a few reasons. The first is that hiding in broad daylight was less suspicious than operating at night when our actions might look less than appropriate. The second, and more important reason, is that by operating during daylight hours, participants had the opportunity to engage the public. Many participants were asked what they were doing while in the process of whitewashing or creating their work. This afforded them the opportunity to explain the project and use the public space to begin a dialogue between individuals. Lastly operating in daylight allowed the city to see the NPA illegal advertising locations whitewashed, removed, and set back to zero. These blank canvases then became empty spaces on which the public could project their own thoughts and desires.13

Importantly for this discussion, Seiler and other street artists and graffiti writers who participated in NYSAT presented their work as part of a coordinated, collective campaign to change the city. In doing so, the individual artworks and messages of those involved add up to more than the sum of their parts through their connection to a shared vision of a city free of enclosed spaces for commercial advertising, where the public realm is freely available for non-commercial public address by any of the city’s inhabitants. Here, a democratic form of authority is declared and enacted in the face of forms of authority based on wealth or technocratic expertise. This vision was publicly circulated through the numerous media reports that the takeover attracted (e.g. New York Times 26 October 2009; New York Post 26 October 2009), and through the careful documentation of the action, and reasons for the action, on the NYSAT website. Those involved in NYSAT acted politically, not simply because they appropriated space or because the individual works that they produced necessarily had explicit political content (many did not), but because they collectively and publicly staged an alternative ‘city within the city’. As Seiler’s account of the actions makes clear, this required a great deal of organization and involved their participants in a degree of risk — nine participants were arrested, serving over 300 combined hours of prison time before their cases were dismissed.

Since the original NYSAT action in 2009, further street advertising takeovers have taken place in Toronto and Madrid. In Madrid, Seiler worked with local artist/activists NEKO and Alberto de Pedro to develop a slightly different takeover model. In Madrid

12 I first met Seiler at an activist workshop on resisting the enclosure of public space hosted by the CUNY Graduate School. Running a session on his work, Seiler took participants downstairs onto Fifth Ave in the middle of the day to show us how it was done, expertly replacing an iPhone advertisement with one of his artworks in a matter of seconds while we stood around and watched.
in 2011, the takeover targeted bus stop advertising panels maintained by outdoor advertising company CEMUSA. At the request of Madrid-based organizers, replacement content was restricted to text communications only, and a targeted call for participation generated 106 submissions that were installed on the streets. This call for text submissions generated responses from a diverse range of artists, activists, academics and others, and the submissions themselves reflected this diversity — some had simple (and occasionally obscure) messages of only a few words, others took the form of paragraph-long messages and even essays of several hundred words (see Figure 3). Reflecting on his involvement in MaSAT, Seiler noted that:

NEKO proposed that instead of artwork submissions we ask only for text. In this way the project would step outside of the artistic arena and become public in an entirely different way than we had conceived of before. I was ecstatic about this idea and together we created a list of artists, sociologists, teachers, lawyers, gallerists, bloggers, and other individuals who think deeply about what it means to have an open public environment. Each individual was asked to submit text via email. This text could be in any language and of any length but could not include the individual’s name, logo, or website. I was overwhelmed by the nature of people’s submissions which included heartfelt sentiments, critical public space theories, short stories, and unique text design work. In this way the streets of Madrid were covered with public works made to create conversations and dialogues without promotion and as a gift to the city.14

Here again, we see how the process of working collectively involved public discussions within an artist-activist counter-public about the vision which animates an action, and the staging of a claim on the city directed towards the wider horizons of the city of Madrid and others who read about the action from afar (including you, if you have made it this far through the article!).

Conclusion: the challenge of urban politics

Will a democratic urban politics emerge out of diverse DIY urbanisms, giving birth to a new kind of city? To write an unauthorized message on a wall, to plant a vegetable in a median strip, to install a piece of furniture on the street, to convert a disused warehouse into a temporary gallery — such appropriations certainly point to the alternative possibilities of public space, they show us the potential ‘beach beneath the paving stones’. Such practices do contest the power of authorities to dictate the uses of urban space, and their radical potential is evidenced by the extraordinary lengths that urban authorities go to in order to shut them down.

However, I have argued in this article that DIY practices of appropriating urban space and infrastructure for alternative purposes do not necessarily constitute a democratic urban politics that will give birth to a new city. Certainly, such practices have the potential to establish democratic rights to the city. But for this potential to be realized, new democratic forms of authority in the city must be asserted through the formation and action of new political subjects. In the case of BUGA UP and NYSAT/MaSAT, DIY practices were made political by establishing ‘cities within the city’, through the linking of urban practices with an urban politics of the inhabitant. This politics of the inhabitant involved a presupposition of equality, a declaration of rights to (appropriate the) city as inhabitants or ‘members of the public’, and the staging of a disagreement between the city in which those rights existed and the city where they did not through the formation of new political subjectivities.

To me, this is the important lesson of the examples discussed in this article, and of others who have forged a politics out of DIY urban interventions. They teach us how we

might transform the localized possibilities that are being explored through individual practices of DIY urbanism into a wider politics of the city which challenges existing forms of authority and titles to govern, thereby contesting the very order of the city. Without finding ways to stage such disagreement, it will be too easy for urban authorities to marginalize DIY urbanist practices as the inconsequential products of ‘arty-types’ or ‘inner-city creatives’ or ‘hipsters’ (or ‘slum-dwellers’ or ‘vandals’ etc.) who are just playing their ascribed role in the existing urban order, or to commodify and reinscribe those practices within the existing city of inequality. Here, while the use of a space might change, the forms of authority or ‘titles to govern’ that pertain in the city may remain the same.

In making this point, my aim is absolutely not to dismiss the importance of small-scale experiments in urban change — quite the opposite. Rather, it is to argue that such experiments will only give birth to a more democratic city if we can find ways to politicize them. There are important differences between individual, anonymous and uncoordinated acts of appropriation, and collective and public actions such as BUGA UP and NYSAT/MaSAT which assert new rights to the city as democratic forms of authority based on inhabitance. I think it is crucial that we pose these questions about politics, even as we take inspiration from various practices which demonstrate the possible cities within the city.

Of course, to act politically in this sense is never easy, or simply a matter of will, or guaranteed to succeed. So, part of this process of politicization must involve sharing and reflecting on our experiences, as part of the ongoing effort to make them public by building platforms on which we can stage a disagreement with existing urban authorities and their associated ‘titles to govern’. I think framing these practices within the broader political context of ‘right to the city’ that I have outlined in this article is useful precisely for raising questions about whether or not a politics is taking shape through DIY practices, and for suggesting some stances or orientations which might assist DIY urbanists who dream of giving birth to a new and more democratic city. The ‘right to the city’ premised on an urban politics of the inhabitant holds much promise in this regard, as a ‘universal’ which can thread together the diverse particulars of DIY urbanisms without recourse to problematic essentialisms of party or class. The need for a new city to emerge out of our present dysfunctional and unjust urban condition is just as urgent now as it was in Lefebvre’s time.

Kurt Iveson (kurt.iveson@sydney.edu.au), School of Geosciences, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.

References

Crawford, M. (2011a) Rethinking ‘rights’, rethinking ‘cities’: a response to David Harvey’s ‘The right to the city’. In

Crawford, M. (2011b) The right to the city: keynote lecture. Presented at The Right to the City conference and exhibition, University of Sydney, 8 April.


