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Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city

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Abstract

This paper engages with a recent set of critical arguments concerning the 'post-crisis city' and the political economy of 'austerity urbanism'. The focus of the discussion is on practical interventions in the vacant and disused spaces of recessionary cities, and in particular on temporary designs and provisional uses. In this way it opens a further line of argument about urbanism under conditions of austerity, alongside analyses of the formal politics of austerity or the possibilities of urban activism in these settings. Its concern is with forms of urban intervention that re-work orthodoxies of urban development as usual: in particular the time-scales that inform conventional development models; the understandings of use around which sites are planned and designed; and the ways in which value is realised through the production of urban spaces. The argument centres on European contexts of austerity urbanism, drawing on critical examples of urban design and occupation in the region's largest economies. Such urban strategies are concerned with a politics and a practice of small incursions in material spaces.

Key words: austerity, temporary use, interstitial urbanism, urban design

But there are several utopianisms. Would not the worst be that utopianism which does not utter its name, covers itself with positivism and on this basis imposes the harshest constraints and the most derisory absence of technicity? (Lefebvre, [1968],151)

'Why not oppose ephemeral cities to the eternal city, and moveable centrality to stable centres? All audacities can be premised.' (Lefebvre, [1968], 155)

This paper engages with a recent set of critical arguments concerning the 'post-crisis city' and the political economy of 'austerity urbanism'. Cities, having been key sites for the production of crisis, have since become key targets for a punitive politics of austerity. Given downturns in speculative investment on one hand, and the turning screws of government austerity on the other, many cities

are bearing the physical scars of disinvestment, disuse and decline; in vacant and abandoned spaces of private rescission and public retreat. The focus of the discussion is on practical interventions in the derelict or disregarded spaces of such recessionary cities, and specifically on temporary designs and colloquial uses that remake space in provisional or rigged up ways. In this sense, it seeks to open a further line of argument about urbanism in conditions of austerity, alongside critical concerns with the formal politics of austerity (Peck, 2012), or the problems and possibilities of urban activism in such contexts (Mayer, 2013).

This is a recession that has been bad for developers, terrible for many architects and terminal for some, but something of a mixed bag for more activist urbanists – some of whom at least have had a reasonably ‘good’ crisis, given the spatial cracks that have opened up in what had been an unbroken field of accelerated development. My interest here is with forms of design intervention which, in their critical practice, re-work certain orthodoxies of urban development: in particular the time-scales that inform conventional development models; the understandings of use around which sites are planned and designed; and the ways in which value is realised via the production of urban spaces. The discussion takes the concept of the interim or ‘makeshift’ city to highlight modes of urban practice that work in the margins between formal planning, speculative investment and local possibilities. It also uses this concept more critically to contrast the provisory making of space with the cataclysmic investment cycles and distorted time-frames of urban development-as-usual. It is not clear, given the sharp-in/ sharp-out model of *normal* development processes, why small-scale and auto-initiatives that embed quickly in place should be seen as merely ‘temporary’.

The discussion that follows is in four parts. It begins by outlining core ways in which policy and planning systems in the context of austerity respond to – or react against – self-managed and improvised urban interventions and occupations. It goes on to consider a type of interstitial urbanism that goes to work in margins both physical (at urban edges and infill sites) and conceptual (mediating public and private uses, or between different scales of urban practice). In these senses, the ‘in-between’ character of such urban strategies is expressed both spatially, in edge or infill conditions, and temporally, in forms of interim use and transitory occupation. A third section considers the ways in which a provisory urbanism raises critical issues of time, use and value, disrupting standard assumptions about temporalities of development and designs on use. Finally, the discussion takes up the notion of ‘the possible city’ in considering the minor practices and ordinary ‘audacities’ that remake urban space in immediate, if

impermanent, ways. The argument centres on forms of critical spatial practice in European contexts of austerity urbanism, drawing on urban design interventions which are set against the poor-mouth politics of the region's largest economies. These makeshift urban strategies have less to do with countering austerity urbanism via a frontal 'politics of transformation' (Peck 2012, 651), if the latter is understood in systemic, societal or even metropolitan terms. Rather, they are concerned with the politics and practice of small incursions in material spaces, the possibilities these open up, and the forms of sociality they might entail.

1. Planning under austerity

Existing planning and policy arrangements relate to informal and self-managed urban practices in variable ways, and the degree to which they facilitate alternative urban strategies does not map straightforwardly onto relatively more progressive or conservative planning regimes. To simplify, it is possible to identify four approaches, which variously work to promote, permit or prohibit these tactics of urban intervention, and which assume different countenances in different urban settings:

i. A *positive* model of policy and planning creates the conditions for informal, interim and auto-agencies through various legal, property and policy measures. This might include securing the legal structure and promoting the preferred bidder status of Community Land Trusts or Community Interest Companies, housing or local energy co-operatives; offering temporary and low-cost leases of under-used public land or property; providing building and planning permits for temporary structures and uses; making land and asset transfers to community ownership and management; and integrating community planning into formal decision-making processes. Such measures use the powers available to local and city governments variously to legitimize, capitalize and incorporate self-organization and informal action. In many contexts, these policies have a particular concern with 'creative' uses and organizations, as in the much-cited cases of the *broedplaatsenbeleid* ('breeding ground' or incubator policy) in Amsterdam, or *Raumpioniere* (land pioneers) strategy in Berlin (see Shaw, 2005; Owens, 2008, van der Geyn and Draaisma, 2009; Colomb, 2012; Mayer, 2012, 11-12).

ii. Secondly, a *permissive* mode of planning and policy does not necessarily seek to facilitate these possibilities, but does not exclude them; allowing some latitude for self-organization and improvised spatial solutions. Whether founded in economic or social liberalism, or in basic regulatory incapacity,

such a planning attitude allows for unconventional and extra-legal occupations and initiatives – for example, by providing minimal protections for the rights of urban squatters, or a certain tolerance for temporary structures, physical re-toolings or informal economies.

iii. Thirdly, one can point to a model of *proscription* that precludes these possibilities altogether: a kind of over-planning that allows little or no space for negotiation, improvisation, initiative, or the collective expression of energy – including through the criminalization of squatting, the punitive use of evictions, aggressive lock-outs and the over-policing of demonstrations and assemblies. While there may be an obvious association with authoritarian modes of urban planning and policy, such proscriptive approaches to the regulation and use of space are increasingly apparent in ‘postliberal’ regimes in which the securing of both public order and private property figure among the chief tasks of urban governance (see Smith, 2001).

iv. Fourthly, a politics of *abandonment* cedes the urban territory entirely to independent agency, leaving even very basic forms of provision to self-generation and social effort. While this may have the look of poor-world urbanism, such an ‘extreme economy’ of urban governance is now the reality for numerous US cities at the ‘leading and bleeding edge’ of austerity policies which have bitten hard into municipal budgets (see Peck, 2012), incapacitating local governments – by choice or by force – and rendering auto-urbanism an urbanism of last resort.

In practice, these different protocols for planning under austerity come together in various combinations in different cities at different moments. In British cities, the last two are currently high in the mix. The ceding of the urban field to voluntary effort under the crass rhetoric of the Big Society, in parallel with aggressive retrenchments of local public budgets, tends to outrun any substantive efforts by city governments to more positively promote alternative urban strategies and solutions. Meanwhile, the politics of proscription saw residential squatting criminalized in England and Wales in 2012. At the time of legislation, it was estimated that there were around 20,000 squatters in the UK; raising a reasonable question as to why the Coalition government should expend legislative effort on such a ‘problem’ in a period when the number of empty homes in the country stood at more than three quarters of a million – making empty homes one of the few parts of the housing market that is consistently over-supplied. That the Big Society was not big enough to accommodate 20,000 squatters

underlines Margit Mayer's (2013) observation of the way that 'inclusive' and 'repressive' strategies of neoliberal urbanism are given to work in lock-step.

A recent case highlights this dual logic of cutback and crackdown all too sharply: in September 2012 a group of squatters decamped from empty housing to squat and service a public library in North London (since re-named the Friern Barnet People's Library) which had been shut following local government cuts, and was slated to be sold off for residential or commercial development. Squatting of non-residential properties is not, at least so far, a criminal act – although government backbenchers have called for legislation to be extended to business premises, given Occupy London's 'public repossession' in late 2011 of empty bank offices, a number of informal lock-ins at shutdown pubs, and the fact that the criminalization of residential squatting kicked in during a recession which has increased levels of commercial vacancies. Having faced an eviction order, been joined by assorted Occupiers, and garnered a significant degree of local support, the Friern Barnet group handed over stewardship to a Community Library Trust in February 2013¹. That the service is now run voluntarily, on a temporary lease from the local authority, has opened the group to criticism that their self-organization is doing the work of austerity *for* the Coalition government; while it is probably true that running the local knitting group is not exactly taking over the commanding heights of the economy, armchair occupiers can set very high standards for political success.

As the anti-squatting legislation made its way through the parliamentary process, other kinds of 'meanwhile use' became part of mayoral policy in London – some sorts of temporary occupation and re-use, that is, win municipal backing, while others attract criminal charges. In March 2011, London's mayor announced four winners of a design competition for temporary use of sites in East London's Royal Docks, in the run-up to the Olympic Games and as loss leaders for future investment in these areas (see Killing Architects, 2012). Mayoral patronage, however, may have proved the kiss of death for urban innovation: the temporary leases had been intended to run between one and five years, but before the Olympic Games was over in mid-August 2012, one project had gone into voluntary administration carrying large losses and unpaid debts; a second had turned out to be even more temporary than planned, closing several months early after struggling with a series of thefts as well as the costs of security guards and CCTV installations; and another remained unbuilt. As *useful* as meanwhile uses can be, it is important to note how quickly the pop-up can become the tear-down, and the fine margin that at times separate the pioneer use from the urban land-grab, or the creative

incubator from the developer demonstration project. As Mayer notes (2013, 12), ‘principles such as self-management, self-realization and all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity ... have lost the radical edge they used to entail in the context of the overbearing Keynesian welfare state—in today’s neoliberal urbanism they have been usurped as essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programs.’

It is hard to contest an argument that such social movement principles have proved quite consistent with a species of ‘roll-with-it’ neoliberalization in which precepts of self-reliance, entrepreneurialism and flexibility have become normalized and generalized (see Keil, 2009; Long, 2013). Improvised urbanism takes its place among various other ‘backfilling efforts’ on the part of voluntary, non-profit and private actors given conditions of state withdrawal which serve ‘to deepen the reliance of cities on symbolically resonant, market-oriented and low-cost initiatives that marry aspirational goals (creativity, sustainability, livability, etc.) with projects that work with the grain of localized incentives and business-as-usual interests’ (Peck 2012, 629, 648). What case can be made, in such contexts, for practices of improvised design and temporary use, beyond offering a kind of compensatory or diversionary urbanism in the face of political retreat and economic recession?

2. Seed beds and sell-outs: interstitial urbanism

‘Le jardinage offre un modèle pour un certain type d’agencement attentif à la singularité, qui implique patience, régularité, disponibilité et imprévu.’ (Petcou and Petrescu, 2007, 107)

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1 Prinzessinnengärten, Berlin Kreuzberg, Nomadisch Grün and others, 2009 (Photo: Marco Clausen/Prinzessinnengärten)

On what was once waste ground near Moritzplatz in Berlin’s Kreuzberg, the Nomadisch Grün organization has been at work since 2009 cultivating the Prinzessinnengärten. Inspired by the agricultura urbana of Cuban cities, the group is committed to the creation of ‘mobile gardens’: mobile in the sense that much of the planting is itself portable, as well in the larger sense that the gardens are understood as temporary interventions in disused or degraded spaces. Alongside the work of gardening – by the end of 2012 involving 30,000 hours of voluntary labour each season – there is the collaborative work of

gathering, clearing, learning, cooking and eating. Such mundane local practices are understood to sit within a broader, indeed international movement: one that is concerned not only with food self-sufficiency but also with ‘neighbourhood activism, reduction of non-ecological transportation, means for those in declining neighbourhoods to help themselves, education for sustainable development, and new forms of urban cohabitation.’ (Clausen, 2012, 11; see also Atkinson, 2013). The site has been held since 2009 on a series of annual leases from the city government. While the ephemeral nature of the project is designed into a garden grown in packing crates and cartons, the embedding of the Prinzessinnengärten over time prompted the group to lobby the Berlin Property Fund – mandated by the Berlin Senate to market the plot – for an extended lease. Their argument was for a ‘sustainable real estate policy’ for city-owned land, based on the reckoning of social and environmental values rather than the pursuit of narrowly economic returns. At the end of 2012, the Property Fund agreed to transfer stewardship of the site to the local authority (Bezirksamt) of Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain.

Gardening, as Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu suggest, offers a broader model for a certain kind of urban intervention – attentive, painstaking, regular and open to contingency. In the face of what can seem like inexorable and unyielding logics of development, accumulation and exclusion in the city, we must cultivate our various gardens in unlikely spaces and unpromising conditions. Rather than a resort to quietism, however, this sort of persistent and inventive urban practice seeks to prize open the cracks in the hard surface of austerity urbanism. In a recent piece in *CITY*, Stuart Hodkinson (2012) drew on John Holloway’s anatomy of ‘crack capitalism’ to think about urban struggles against new enclosures – the catalogue of privatizations, evictions, dispossessions and lockdowns of sites (housing, open land, infrastructure, public spaces and services) that once were held or used in public or in common. Forcing open the cracks in these contexts involves identifying the weaknesses, the joins, the blind spots and inconsistencies in a given strategy or settlement, and working both against and within them. The metaphor of the crack takes on material form as a marginal urbanism that goes to work on edges and in tight spaces in the lacerated cities of austerity economies. Crack capitalism, that is to say, has its spatial expression in an interstitial urbanism, as captured in Petcou and Petrescu’s (2007, 104) reworking of that older formulation about scalar politics with the new exhortation: ‘agir intersitiel’.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2 ‘Eco-interstice’: self-managed space on rue Saint-Blaise, Paris 20, *aaa*, 2005-2008 (Photo: *aaa*)

This call to act interstitial is built out in projects such as the ‘Eco-interstice’ designed by Petcou and Petrescu’s *atelier d’architecture autogérée (aaa)* in a neglected wedge between two buildings in the Saint-Blaise quartier of eastern Paris. An urban slit, left over after an existing passage was blocked up, has been re-made as a collective site self-managed by local residents as a meeting-place, cultural venue and productive garden, among other uses. At just 200m², it variously serves as market-place, debating chamber, classroom, allotment, park, exhibition space, distribution centre, theatre, office, salon and dining-room – its collective character mediating any obvious demarcations between what is properly ‘public’ or ‘private’ space or use. The (lightly) built interstitial structure gives material shape to everyday practices and critical politics that cut through these standard distinctions; which both are ingrained in local sites and link to other – often quite distant – places where related practices and politics break the surface. Such linkages might be understood less as ‘nodes’ in an inter-urban network than as lines in a series of urban *cracks*.

In their immediate urban context, however – in cities such as Berlin and Paris where austerity urbanisms are rolled out against the backdrop of ongoing gentrification and accelerated inflation of rents – such infill spaces sit uneasily between different modes of occupation and activation. The site that Prinzessinnengärten now holds stood a few hundred metres from the Berlin Wall checkpoint at Heinrich-Heine-Strasse. The Eco-interstice in rue Saint-Blaise is just over 500 metres from the Boulevard Périphérique on the eastern edge of Paris. These kinds of border-zone have provided critical testing grounds for urban experimentation and derailments. They have also become subject to intense valorization, as the gestures of occupying and remaking *terrains vagues* and leftover spaces now come as readily to property developers, alert to the speculative possibilities of ‘acting interstitial’, as they do to green nomads and architectural co-operatives. Indeed these different agents tend to move in tandem as ‘squatted buildings, open spaces and other “biotopes”, which precarious artists made interesting or anarchists spiffed up and furbished, become harnessed by clever city officials and (especially real estate) capital as branding assets that contribute to the image of “cool cities”’ (Mayer, 2013, 11). Alongside their uses as cut-price locational boosters, such interventions provide local services and spaces that substitute or compensate for absent or inadequate public provision. When community gardening – like community libraries or community anything else – can be seen as part of a wider ‘neoliberal strategy’ for outsourcing municipal services to (unpaid) private actors (Rosol 2012), the distance between seed-bed and sell-out becomes very tight indeed.

3. Ameliorative urbanism? Time, use and value

There is a real danger, of course, that critical forms of urban intervention provide alibis (or, worse, seed-funding and ground-breaking) for more conventional rent-seeking development. Such urban alternatives are routinely compromised, frequently co-opted, sometimes corrupted, and often doomed. Temporary projects are integrated into an austerity agenda so as to keep vacant sites warm while development capital is cool; to provide circuses – and in some cases bread – in the absence of public as well as private investment. At best this can be seen as an ameliorative urbanism that makes the insupportable a little more liveable, at least for a while. At worst, ‘crack’ urbanism acts as the leading edge for the wedge of speculative development. Perhaps the most ambivalent form of urban failure, after all, is to be the victim of your own success.

There are two related issues that are worth posing more critically in this context. The first concerns the question of *time*. This has to do with how to think the category of the temporary, as well as that of development. It bears on how we should understand effects, evaluate outcomes, measure impacts – whatever the preferred language might be. Urbanists have become very used to thinking about matters of scale in complex spatial ways. It is less clear that urban time-scales are always conceived in similarly subtle fashion. The city-bound collective (2012, 605), writing about their NEOutopia project in *CITY*, questions the effects of ‘development’s incessant appeals to the future’. This is an appeal, it must be said, which often comes as naturally to critical urban analysts as it does to speculative developers, whether derived from certain *longue durée* reflexes, a residual commitment to final causes, or a theoretical taste for conspiracy. In either world-view – the developmental or the teleological – that which is short-term can appear trivial, ephemeral, epiphenomenal. It can be easy to dismiss makeshift urban practices as merely ‘temporary’, as if that in itself were a bad thing. But it is not clear why anyone should be ready to discount the near future, given not only its practical immediacy but the ways in which it might help set the terms for what happens later. The city-bound collective gets at this well in looking to ‘a future that is not inherently better: a future that does not hold abstract utopian promises’, but rather is grounded in ‘the possibilities and harsh realities of the lived urban environment’ (ibid).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3 Cricket nets, Ruskin Square, East Croydon, muf architecture/art 2012 (Photo: Katherine Spence)

On another patch of waste ground, this time next to East Croydon station in outer London, the architecture/art practice muf has been at work in a bit of an 8.5 acre site that awaits the speculative development of half a million square feet of residential and nearly one million square feet of office space by a partnership of the developer Stanhope and the exempt property unit trust of asset manager Schroders. This well-capitalized *agencement* goes under the name of the Croydon Gateway Limited Partnership, and could be a poster child both for the financialization of property and for some of its vicissitudes. The scheme lost its architects when Foster and Partners were sidelined by the developers in mid-2012; muf, brought in with them to work as landscape architects, 'has not yet been sacked' (Fior, 2012). Stanhope plc has some form when it comes to temporary uses during fallow investment periods. It moved on the former Middlesex Hospital site in Central London after the original developer (or rather, demolisher) Candy and Candy's plans fell victim to the 2008 credit crunch and the site's majority owner, Icelandic bank Kaupthing, went into administration – the Candy brothers swapping their stake in the site for Kaupthing's share of a more promising scheme in California. In March 2009 Stanhope took over the redevelopment with a proposal for local residents to have temporary use of the site for allotments while they waited out the downturn. A year later, Kaupthing had sold on, Stanhope was out, and the allotment idea (at least in Fitzrovia) was finished. Back in Croydon in 2012, muf laid out two cricket pitches on the empty development site, for use – among others – by Afghani refugees waiting for their asylum applications to grind through the bureaucracy at the nearby UK Border Agency headquarter. This kind of self-described 'strategic sell-out' (Fior, 2012) involves vast disparities in scale between corporate behemoths and small actors – something of which is evident in the gap between a projected office development of 900, 000 square feet, and a couple of cricket pitches of no more than 200 square feet each. But the roll-call of failed banks, ex-investors, dropped architects and shelved schemes that is so characteristic of *normal* development processes – dealing more in destruction than in creation, it would seem, as if caught in some especially perverse Schumpeterian gale – goes on in the distance while the small acts in the foreground persist, ball by ball. The cricket pitches exist; the office towers, as yet, do not. Creating these kinds of ordinary reality on the ground aims to encourage 'a habitude of use' which means something might stick. As Fior (2012) points out, speaking of the small-scale projects that muf deals in: three or five years is a short time in the life of a city, but quite a long time in the life of a child – or an asylum-seeker, for that matter. Better a cricket pitch, then, than an empty lot.

This bears on the second issue that such makeshift urbanism raises: that of use. It opens the question of who one thinks urban spaces are to be made *for*. It may be a basic urban error to think about spatial

interventions in terms of end-users. These elusive objects of planning desire – given to bicycling through shared space schemes while maintaining a live/work balance – are less easy to spot beyond their stock architectural renderings. There is no such thing as an ‘end-user’: there are only users over time. In the long run, of course, we are all dead, but it’s not certain the end-user ever actually exists. The fallacy of the end-user, what is more, assumes a division between the makers and the users of space that may be true for large house-builders and retail developers but is less true for housing co-operatives or urban gardeners. The discounting of the temporary and the abstraction of the end-user shore up conventional modes of urban development based on skewed time-scales and narrow conceptions of use. The category of temporary use should be opened to critical question, less because it has been hijacked by boosterist mayors and architectural style-mags, than because it implies an alternative which is characterized by long-term development and sustained uses. In fact, the orthodox model of urban development – business as usual – has long been a model of temporary use: large developers in London are still building new housing with forty-year life expectancies. The ‘cataclysmic’ money cycles that Jane Jacobs (1961) wrote of over fifty years ago have been only more acute in recent investment histories marked by over-sized credit bubbles and break-neck sudden stops.

In this sense, what Marco Clausen of Prinzessinnengärten calls ‘spaces of deceleration’ refer not only to how particular sites slow the accelerated pulse of cities given over to retail consumption and rapid transit, but to how they help retard the frenetic cycle of urban obsolescence, investment and intervention. Hodkinson (2012, 515), similarly, speaks of ‘the power to delay’ as a key weapon available to the weaker parties in contested spaces of development. If time is money, then ‘[e]ach delay creates new costs and new risks and uncertainties, not only hitting the financing of schemes but also radically altering the context in which enclosure is being pursued, downgrading its expected profitability and making it seem far less desirable to its protagonists and backers’. There are various tactics of delay available to different actors, from the long haul of formal planning and legal processes², to stubborn or spectacular modes of occupation, to the gradual transformations of space and cultivation of habitudes of use that seek to ‘forger une durabilité par le temporaire’ (Petrescu, *et al.*, 2007, 14). The polite language of interim use belies the tenacity of use typified by persistent, regular and attentive urban *jardiniers*, in their different guises. In makeshift and marginal urban interventions, you have a set of agents working with an economy of means, and in small physical gestures, but who want the spaces they make to embed in the city. Under normal development conditions, you have actors dealing in vast credit values, but working to very compressed time-horizons on a sharp-in/sharp-out mode. These

alternative reckonings of time and value are important: on one side, a model using slow money and non-monetary investments to produce gradual spatial, social and economic value and continued returns to actual users. On the other side, stands an orthodox model of ‘cataclysmic money’ leveraged to produce rapid returns to investors (most of them very distant) and to build the physical and economic ruins of the crises to come. In the cracks of a high-end urbanism geared to big money and private interest, and an austerity urbanism premised on financial retrenchment and public retreat, there labours a critical urbanism based on an economy of means and alternative calculations of value.

4. The possible city

The aim here is not to underplay the realities of austerity urbanism in order to make pious gestures towards the pocket park or the crowd-sourced start-up – right-thinking urban design so often providing instances of what Tony Judt (2012) called, in another context, ‘the banality of good’³. The virtuous orthodoxies of the mixed-use development, the linear park, the post-industrial atelier, the urban allotment, the creative hub and the un-programmed public space remind us that the ‘spatial proposals’ of social utopians can become just ‘as banal and conventional as are the architects’ thoughts of society’ (Lynch, [1975], 789). In contrast, Lynch goes on, ‘we find strong descriptions of place in most anti-utopias, where physical oppression abets social oppression in a very direct and circumstantial way’ (Lynch, [1975], 789). The devil, it seems, gets all the best designs.

Kevin Lynch remained convinced, however, that there were ‘grounds for utopia’ in thinking about the design of real urban spaces. The aim of the present discussion has been to trace out some of these contours of the ‘possible city’, grounded not in some better future to come *after* austerity, but produced within current conditions and tight corners. Henri Lefebvre asked, at another moment of urban crisis, whether the worst form of utopianism was that ‘which does not utter its name, covers itself with positivism and on this basis imposes the harshest constraints and the most derisory absence of technicity?’ (Lefebvre, [1968], 151). It reads as a fair summary of an austerity urbanism that brooks no alternative, cuts urban governments to the quick, and – in the British case – takes advice on new school buildings from property experts in the fields of supermarket and electrical retail. In this context, the kinds of interstitial and temporary urbanism with which I have been concerned might better be understood not as utopian but *anti*-utopian projects, given their commitments to making actual places in the void spaces of grand designs, and their readiness to live with urban imperfection.

Urban interventions such as these speak very directly to Lynch's [1968] conception of the 'possible city', an evocative idea outlined in an intriguing essay in which we find arguments that have since become more familiar in debates over urban design. Still, they do not lose their force in thinking against some of the unexamined assumptions of urban business-as-usual. Lynch's argument works through inversions of social power and privilege that in turn require the re-centring of the city around unregarded sites of alternative value. The grounds for utopia, that is, are to be found not in some ideal version of urban space, but in the re-working of existing places whose capacities are unrealised and whose sources of value are overlooked. In particular, Lynch ([1968], 780) wanted to aim off 'the protected and expensive, committed environment' – over-designed, over-valorized, and over-programmed – so as to focus on the *uncommitted* places that allow for greater autonomy and creativity in the making of space. He is an early advocate of what is now called urban 'retro-fitting': one critical strategy for

dealing with the existing city is the search for underused space and time, and its readaptation for a desired activity. We can explore the use of streets as play areas, or the possibilities for using roof tops, empty stores, abandoned buildings, waste lots, odd bits of land, or the large areas presently sterilized by such mono-cultures as parking lots, expressways, railroad yards, and airports. (Lynch, [1968], 776)

The design of the possible city involved not only physical interventions in space, but the remaking of space *in time* – such that different sites can decelerate the rhythms of the city, hold activity in place, or stage temporary, cyclical or seasonal processes. Substantive adaptations of latent or empty space in this way go together with designs on underused time. At the same moment, Henri Lefebvre ([1968], 151) was calling – in an equally enigmatic essay – for 'experimental utopias' that might 'oppose ephemeral cities to the eternal city, and moveable centrality to stable centres.' The empiricist planner and the Marxist sociologist, writing on opposite sides of the Atlantic in different configurations of urban crisis, were thinking in a kind of concert about the potential of the temporary and the mobile to refigure the city around spaces that were dormant, disregarded or dead.

In arguing for the idea of utopia to be 'considered experimentally', Lefebvre's concern is with actual places rather than ideal projections. 'Why limit these propositions', he goes on, 'only to the morphology of time and space? They could also include the way of living in the city and the development of the urban on this basis' (Lefebvre, [1968], 155). Just so, places like Prinzessinnengärten are 'places where we can test out the possibilities for local micro-economies and other models for a better way of life. In such

gardens, we continually question how we will live in cities in the future, how we eat, and how we want to learn' (Clausen, 2012, 11). This is to point to the possibilities of urban spaces that are not simply residual and can be made in various ways *commonable* – through practice, if not always under the law. An urbanization of (and by) enclosure is a keynote of austerity politics: seen in the privatization of common or public space, of collective provision and services; as well as in the criminalization or harassment of various acts of 'commoning' – squatting, occupations and assemblies, informal settlements, and common-pool resourcing of ecosystem services including water, agriculture and fuel (Hodkinson, 2012; Jeffrey, *et al.*, 2012). As realised in practice, sites of commonalty subvert both the exclusions of private property and the prescriptions of the state. It follows that it is neither property law nor public policy but situated social action that will extend the range of land, things and resources that may be made commonable at different times and places – through collective occupations of space, shared access to goods, or de-privatizations of information, resources and energy. The urban common, Paul Chatterton (2010, 626) contends, is 'relational'; as an effect of practice, it is 'as much a verb as a noun.' Moreover, it deals in often very mundane verb – as Revel and Negri (2007, 9) put it: making, producing, participating, moving, sharing, spreading, enhancing, inventing, rekindling⁴. Such acts of commoning constitute many small designs on the city. They become visible in the appropriation of physical spaces: in gardens, greens and allotments; along riverbanks; in the uncommitted spaces carved out by infrastructure; in spaces of abandonment, vacancy or dereliction; in re-toolings of redundant space; in shared spaces of meeting and exchange; in improvised markets; or in occupations and encroachments of proscribed spaces. They are also evident in the provision and distribution of urban resources – food and produce, goods and materials, fuel and water, but also care and social support, labour, information and know-how. These spaces and practices can recede behind the exigencies of the private and the standard scripts of public life, but they form an infrastructure of common life that provides sites of autonomy, creativity and collectivity in the making and remaking of cities and subjects.

The urban interventions I have cited here are both good and bad cases for these arguments concerning alternative urban practice. Good, because they realise in material forms certain critical principles concerning the value of the provisional and the politics of the interstitial. Bad, it might be said, because these projects are all complicit – more or less knowingly – with the kind of 'roll-with-it' regime which supports urban practices that are self-managed, low- or no-cost, and picturesquely counter-cultural. They all sit easily enough with an austerity agenda for 'the imaginative pursuit of what is possible, within the necessary adage of using less to build more.' (Hall, 2011,3). What is more, they are all implicated in,

indeed dependent on, various elements of the mix that passes as 'neoliberal' urbanism in these rich world cities: planning retrenchment, subsistence funding, blind-eye regulation, corporate patronage, late-stage gentrification, co-opted creativity, redundant space. The point, however, is not to limit conceptions of the possible city to the politically irreproachable, the financially untainted or the culturally un-hyped, if such could be found. It is rather to think about critical modes of urban practice that seek to make better, though imperfect, urban spaces; which work both under and against current economic and political constraints; which take chances when they can be made to present themselves. Arguments about co-optation are very hard to gainsay in this connection. But co-optation, in settings such as these, is not simply a danger spotted by sharp-eyed and disabused social critics; it is a condition of the work these practitioners do if they want to make space. It is too easy to bring down a judgement of extended guilt by association with the city manager's take-home version of Richard Florida. Pessimists of the intellect may rue the many minor tragedies of the commons, as well as the travesty of the cool. But when 'roll-with-it neoliberalization enters the picture', as Roger Keil writes (2009, 232), 'neoliberal subjects of all kinds co-construct, sustain and also contest a now normalized neoliberal social reality.' Under such conditions, the interventions considered here work outside a perverse progressive logic of damned if you do, right if you don't.

For these forms of critical urban practice, the possible city is grounded in the lineaments of the existing one. It finds space at the margins, and room for manoeuvre in the cracks in geographies of urban power – taking up its ground in seeking to '[t]racer des diagonales dans l'espace rectiligne du contrôle: opposer des diagonales aux diagrammes, des interstices aux quadrillages, des mouvements aux positions' (Revel and Negri, 2007, 10). This is an urbanism that works against the orthodoxies of normal development; the temporalities given by urban investment cycles, conventional built life-spans, and messianic end-users. Exploiting powers of delay and embedding habitudes of use, these makeshift urbanisms are characterized less by 'temporary' than by persistent and regular use. This is an urbanism of minor practices, small acts, ordinary audacities and little anti-utopias that nevertheless create material spaces of hope in the city (see Novy and Colomb, 2012). Such spaces may matter most when urban prospects are most bleak. If a notion of critical urban practice is to remain meaningful, then it seems important to defend the spaces in which it becomes possible, even if temporarily, and only ever imperfectly. 'The guerrillas of the future', after all (Lynch, [1968], 780), 'will need a base of operations.'

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Notes

¹ <http://fbpeopleslibrary.co.uk/>

² As the West Kensington and Gibbs Green Tenants and Residents Associations note, of their campaign against the proposed redevelopment of the Earls Court site and nearby estates in West London, 'The developer and the Council are hurling £50,000 a day at us. Thanks to our campaign, the Council's and the developer's lawyers and financial consultants are raking in a fortune. But, we're bleeding the scheme dry.'

<http://westkengibbsgreen.wordpress.com/>

³ The reference in the architectural and planning context is Wouter Vantisphout's.

⁴ 'Nous sommes ce commun: faire, produire, participer, se mouvoir, partager, circuler, enrichir, inventer, relancer' (Revel and Negri, 2007, p. 9).