

## Hoardings around Hackney: Sociology, Art and Barriers

by MSc Sociology student, **Lucy Wood**



I recently did a piece of research on construction hoardings. The primary function of hoardings is to keep the public safely out of construction sites, but the boards also provide a surface for advertising – for communicating ideas. It seemed to me that these hoardings share many of the same characteristics as evangelical Christian texts, particularly in the way they deal with time and the future. Both encourage speculative, faithful investment in a future of some kind, with a requisite buying into something immaterial.

Construction hoardings and religion can also both act to establish a state of imminence around an unspecified date of arrival – of a building or of a messiah. They engender a sense of urgency, and a need for vigilance. In religious terms, this encourages vigour in devotional practices; in property, it superheats the market, pressuring potential buyers into action. I also considered another similarity – that between the reliance of the property market on debt, and the foundation of much religious practice on guilt.



I chose to look at hoardings in Hackney, London, which is a borough characterised by very unequal development – combining high levels of social renting, rapid gentrification and dramatic house-price increases. The area's designation as “up and coming” attracts buyers who want investment properties and second homes; developers exploit Hackney's reputation for artistic creativity, presenting the a wealthy elite with a chance to buy cultural capital.

A day after handing my research project in, I was told about Iván Argote – a Colombian artist who had been commissioned to do a piece of work about the area by a local gallery, Space Studios. After spending time in the neighbourhood and speaking to residents, Argote chose construction hoardings as his subject (or as he says, they chose him, being a standout characteristic of Hackney). The centrepiece of Argote's project, *An Idea of Progress*, is a large banner, covering the façade of the gallery. It depicts, in his words, a “real-estate smoothie” of fantastical

development tropes, and also includes a video, collage, and interactive programme of workshops and performance. Argote led a tour around controversial construction sites in Hackney, during which participants performed “rough music” – an old English form of noisy social protest. The group was encouraged to call forth alternative visions for each of the sites as a way of objecting to the mediocrity of developers’ rendered futures – homogenous models of consumerism.

By immersing himself in the area and interviewing locals, Argote had undertaken a kind of ethnography, albeit an unscientific or “irresponsible” one, as he called it. Discovering that he as an outsider had come to the same conclusions as me, a long-term resident, was vindicating to me of my sense that hoardings were a defining feature of the borough and a legitimate subject for research. It was obvious to both of us that depictions of the future on these hoardings influence outcomes; their purpose and effect is not merely to predict the future but to shape it.

Although we had considered slightly different angles, researching imagery on construction hoardings allowed both Iván and me to look in new ways at the wider issue of urban gentrification. I certainly wouldn’t be the first to point out that sociology and art share a potential to engage with such subjects. But on reflection it struck me that the two disciplines also share something else – namely a tendency to appeal to an intellectual elite. The academic and art worlds can be pretty insular. We regularly describe how a sociological phenomenon or artwork “speaks to” a subject. It’s a telling turn of phrase – we’re not speaking to people, we’re speaking to ideas in (a bit of) a vacuum.



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Practitioners in both sociology and art often have good intentions for society – indeed, some are social activists hoping that their work will help change the status quo. Argote certainly falls into this camp; his work is open and direct, much of it uses humour as a form of intervention. But it can’t be denied that at worst academia and art are both exclusionary, feeding off their own mystique, using obscure language or making inside jokes that few understand. It should perhaps be an aim for everyone researching sociology to find new ways of making the subject accessible and interesting to all.



An Idea of Progress – piece by Iván Argote

