

PUBLIC-MAKING AND SPATIAL JUSTICE

By Design Studio for Social Intervention



On August 8th in Times Square, motorcycles backfiring triggered a panic, with people running in all directions from what they apparently thought were gunshots. Later police confirmed that there was no active shooter involved. This scene was just two days after the back-to-back mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton.

Panic, Anxiety and Public Atmosphere

The producing of terror is a production of atmosphere. It remains between us and inhabits space. Terror is meant to have social and spatial effects, to make social life feel a certain way, to affect society and space. The space we inhabit and the atmosphere we affect and are affected by is political. The shootings are extreme examples of atmospheric politics, contestation and power. These contestations happen in smaller ways every day, when multiples forms of social life butt heads over things like who gets to be, thrive and express themselves in the public realm, who gets to perform the ownership of public space and public life, what sounds are condemned and what sounds are condoned, whose public presence is policed and whose is celebrated, whose is represented and whose is erased.

When we wrote our Spatial Justice paper in 2012, we broke down spatial justice into our rights to be, thrive, express, and connect in and through space. Those rights are more vulnerable now than ever, whether it's the spiraling rise of white supremacist violence, the tearing apart and caging of immigrant and refugee families at our border, the increase in surveillance and spatial control tactics, the displacement caused by gentrification in our cities, or the fascist actions, policy and rhetoric coming from the White House. What's at stake is literally our rights to be, thrive, express and connect at every level.

What happens when most or all of what we experience is the experience of injustice? What happens if we succumb to the atmospheres of despair, anxiety, isolation and fear with no atmospheric balance or counterpart?

Current Spaces and Atmospheres

Most of the patterns of interaction available to us once we cross the threshold of the home into the broader public (particularly in the USA) are ones of one way exchange, using money to buy a thing, an experience, food or the like. And those experiences have social or cultural edges on them that discourage extended exchange across that pattern: the vertical exchange of money for things is structured, and the horizontal exchange between consumers or between consumers and vendors is to a large extent taboo. If you buy a meal, you might acknowledge the people next to you buying a meal as well, but it would be culturally transgressive to assume you and that other table are sharing what you buy, or that you'd invite a stranger in to said place to also partake of your food and other people's food. Our tacit interaction patterns don't allow for that. The outcome of these interactions is that being in public doesn't ease any sense of loneliness, fear or fracture; in fact, it's just as likely to increase it.

Relational Aesthetics and Spatial Justice in the Public Realm

We leave too much of our social lives up to the market sectors—mainly the malls, restaurants, shops and movies that shape the qualities and contours of our daily exchanges. The logics of the market sector can't account for the robustness of our lives, nor will they be accountable to our demands to be, thrive, express and connect.

Even for those of us who are activists—spending much of our time fighting the status quo—it is hard to avoid the pervasive corporate aesthetic and capitalist opportunities that shape our social lives. We fall into them in many quotidian ways. Looking in the windows of stores, wearing sports paraphernalia, going to the movies, etc. These are the social affordances and cues we always already have at our disposal. These kinds of affordances and spaces take up so much of our local landscapes that it's hard to imagine otherwise. And those opportunities for interaction simply aren't enough. Currently, even if we are looking to intentionally counter these kinds of interactions, it's up to us as individuals—perhaps with our family, friends, and loved ones as a unit—to go out, to escape that set of commercial interactions for something out there, like the beach, hiking or the like. However, in this set up, the same contours of interaction remain. There's a tacit private bubble around you and yours, them and theirs. The private bubble is further amplified with the addition of the device in the public realm. Whether it's all of our heads down while we walk about our neighborhoods or the dance parties where everyone is dancing together to their own music, the device produces a space of many I's instead of an us or a we. We experience proximity without togetherness.

We believe the current overall production of public culture (and its correlated production of public loneliness, isolation and fracture) is something that we can and should take on. We believe it is an urgent matter of spatial justice. We believe activists, artists and regular folk should feel themselves entitled to creating a more truly public social life, one in which people from all backgrounds and ways of life can interact, belong and express themselves. To us this means we need to imagine and test other arrangements and affordances of sociability, including more opportunities for interaction patterns that are free and that purposefully break the tacit cultural barrier between me and you, ours and theirs.

Public-making, Sociability and Spatial Justice

We situate what we call public-making—the collective creation and activation of public spaces for interaction and belonging—as a way to organize and take on new forms of sociability. This is not to say that all public-making is radical or transformative. Indeed, the market sector engages in its own forms of public making. They make places to drink and socialize, for example, like the current trend of outdoor beer gardens, complete with “cornhole” games or adult swings. However, these spaces look public yet are extensions of business, corporation and their logics of market exchange.

How might we move beyond this kind of established, rehearsed relating in space to still less explored spatial and relational imaginaries? What would happen if people had places that connected public space and public discourse, outdoor play and collective healing, pop-up performances and shared food, movie nights and performance art? What if we used public space for the collective creation of opportunities for interaction, laughter, dialogue, learning and surprise? We imagine the possibilities for multi-textured and joyous counter-atmospheres that challenge this moment of increased isolation, tension and repression. We believe public-making—especially by those who regularly experience spatial injustice—is both radical and transformative. Our informal “Public Making Manifesto” goes like this:

**WE ARE THE PUBLIC.
WE BELONG IN PUBLIC SPACE.
WE CAN CREATE OUR OWN PUBLIC LIFE.
PUBLIC-MAKING CAN CHANGE THE FUTURE.**

SPECIFIC WAYS OF EXPLORING PUBLIC-MAKING

We'd like to propose some areas of investigation for those of us concerned with spatial justice, public culture, urban and placed experience, and the aesthetics of social life.

More public discourse in space

How might we explore the production of public discourse in space? When and where can we talk about things and practice learning how to engage with people we haven't met? These kinds of practices are a major part of civic engagement, but those opportunities aren't often situated in the public in such a way that they are permeable. And when events that have a focus on discussion happen in public places like libraries, they are often only attended by those already on some list to find out about them. In that sense they are only permeable for a pretty limited public, one that is seeking that kind of space.

Perhaps public making that lends itself to more low-threshold dialogue and conversation with strangers would be a draw for people that haven't identified themselves as such. If we built it, who would come? We want informal, public community conversation and sense-making; we imagine things like Claudio Prado's whimsical "Rua Augusta" project in Sao Paolo, where he'd bring his living room furniture out to the street ever Saturday night to make his community's own version of Saturday Night Live—complete with audience participation, star cameos, humor and information sharing.



Claudio Prado's "Rua Augusta" Project, Sao Paolo, Brazil

WHEN AND WHERE CAN WE TALK ABOUT THINGS AND PRACTICE LEARNING HOW TO ENGAGE WITH PEOPLE WE HAVEN'T MET? HOW MIGHT OUR PUBLIC LIVES BE CHANGED BY THESE OPPORTUNITIES?

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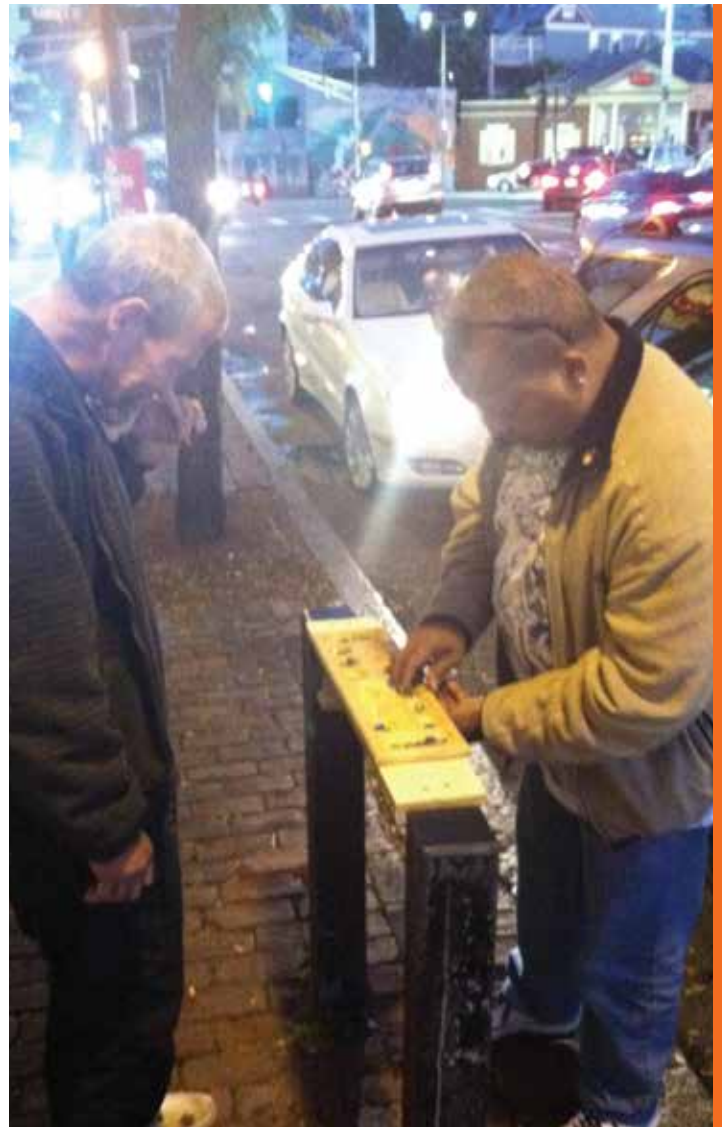
More opportunities to dance, sing, and play together.

Most of the dancing we see in the streets in the US context tends to be street performers with routines they run in touristy areas for tips, along with the occasional one-off more produced event. The most inviting “jump in and join us” experiences tend to be limited to annual celebrations like Carnival, Caribbean Festival and Gay Pride events. How might we explore and create different spaces and increased opportunities for collective participation in singing, dancing, acting and playing?

One intervention we created and tested was Dance Court, where we posed the question: “What if Dance Courts were part of the ubiquitous landscape, like basketball and tennis courts? How would you use them?” Dance Court participant Terry Marshall described one test this way:

DJ Keith Donaldson starting playing old soul and house music and feet began to move. As more Dance Court participants showed up and filled up the [basketball court], the music became more intense....that energy cast a net that eventually caught up some of the regulars around the park. Many of the folk who hang around the park in the daytime can be seen drinking their days away. They are usually the ones who society casts off as hopeless. But on this day they were dancing their days away. They brought some of the most intense dancing. Dance Court seemed to become this safe space in the park. The social aspect of the music and dancing seem to create a different environment.

Dancing is just one way to join each other in joy and movement. What are other ways we might want to prototype opportunities for collective singing, drumming, playing and healing together? We don’t mean the sanitized and “upscale” adult playgrounds such as Boston’s “Lawn on D”, but ones that might feel more site specific and culturally relevant. One example we tried of this was installing an “ouril” board in front of a grocery store in a largely Cape Verdean neighborhood.



Cape Verdean gypsy cab drivers playing ouril while waiting for customers.

WHAT OTHER PLAY AFFORDANCES MIGHT APPEAL TO ADULTS OR TO FAMILIES? HOW CAN PLAY MIX UP THE DELINEATIONS BETWEEN MINE AND YOURS, OURS AND THEIRS?

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More opportunities to make and learn

When do we get to make things together in public? And what would we make? There’s fabulous float-making culture related to Carnival, but that is still fairly enclosed. There is sand-castle making culture at beaches, but that is also enclosed, usually by family. We explored using co-creation as a tool for both co-imagining a space and exploring collective authority over micro-spaces in a community that felt little authority to be, let alone to express themselves in public. With Street Lab: Upham’s, we invited residents to choose small public spaces and re-imagine them together. Here’s an alley that they turned into a temporary art gallery and a hand-knitted railing they made to show the city that a real railing was needed:

But making can look all kinds of ways—from collective cooking to learning how to do t-shirt printing, carpentry and construction, bike-fixing, button-making and more. Making events could build a

collective form of expression, like a mosaic or barn-raising, or perhaps the shared nature of the event is more in the multi-directional flow of knowledge.

What about creating other porous opportunities to learn and share knowledge? The internet has largely turned into an echo chamber, so views and new information are narrowly shared amongst circles of users. Could we use physical opportunities in space and time to better democratize the kinds of insights that one might come across? How could we democratize information, whether it’s health insights like healing uses of honey, knowledge about products or practices that are earth-friendly, or new ways to engage in our state’s budgeting or policy-making? What new conversations and friendships might arise over a found passion for cooking with purple peas or debating the latest pop craze?



STREETLAB: UPHAM’S

Engaging local residents, artists, makers and merchants in transforming small public spaces around Upham’s Corner



HOW MIGHT MORE POROUS OPPORTUNITIES TO FIND OUT ABOUT THINGS YOU NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT CREATE OR PRODUCE A PUBLIC?

These are just a few examples of what public-making might include. There are many others already out there, and many still to be imagined. As we consider public-making as a strategy for spatial justice, it's important to not just have a diversity of content but a diversity of scale. To us, there's no such thing as "too much" public-making. If our next Public Kitchen bumps up against someone else's collective reading event, which is down the street from a block party, that's across from a mobile pottery kiln next to the neighborhood skate park, we are creating not just individual spaces of belonging and connection but a whole web of it. Similarly, if one event is a one-off, while one happens monthly and one happens every day or night, we have another type of web of duration and frequency. We believe that the more instances of public-making that folks bump into, the more they will also feel the authority and inspiration to create their own.

PUBLIC-MAKING CAN CHANGE THE FUTURE

What can the production of counter atmospheres through public-making do to public culture and spatial justice? We'd argue that public-making from a place of self-determination and spatial justice can create spaces of connection, belonging and joy for people who are made to feel fearful or alienated by spatial inequities and spatial domination. We'd argue that these kinds of enactments charge social space with another kind of world, one with compelling and attractive intensities and qualities of life. And when the switch from feeling alienated to feeling connected happens, it does many things to those experiencing it. One way to cut it is to say it can feel like collective healing. When the world seems set on being a certain way that leaves you out of it, it's easy to forget the possibility of another world. The brief experience of alterity reorients, it reassures and encourages those attracted to it to fight for it, to make it so. In this sense public-making is where the political, aesthetic and social making of our future all meet. Done well, it can foreground the immediacy--and frankly the urgency--of what being in a sample of the desired world does for our ability and hope to create and sustain that world. It can create an embodied experience that helps us see (and feel, hear and sense) what is possible. Public-making can create temporary spaces of being, thriving, expressing, and connecting that mobilize our imaginations towards greater instantiations of spatial justice.

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