# Instant Cities

A MEMO TO OUR TIMES

The messy vitality of modern urban life is well represented by the idea of Post-It Cities. Multiple uses, subversions, transformations and reappropriation are just some of the activites that take place outside of the constraints of formal planning. In a project that does not confine itself to the fringes, the spontaneous and flexible character of the world's cities is revealed to be both a means of survival and form of personal and collective expression.

Text by Alexander McSpadden
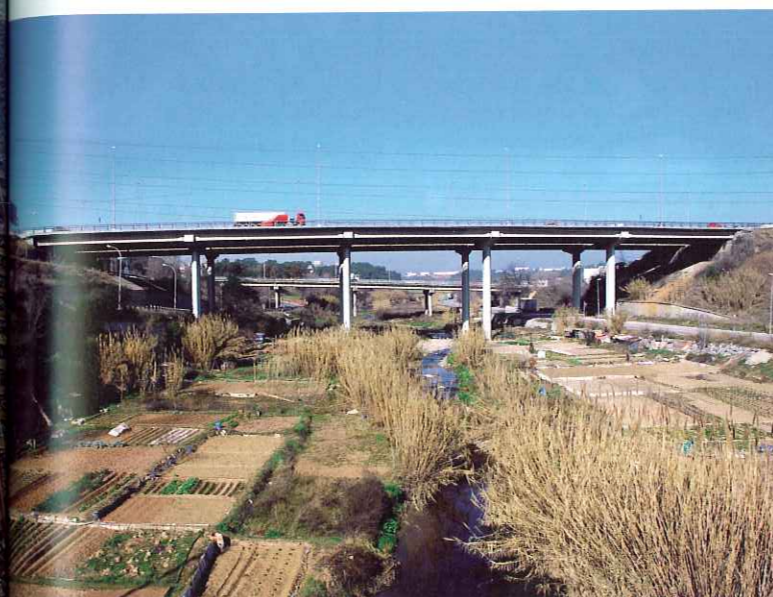
Urban managers of all kinds (architects, property developers, police, commercial interests, building owners) dictate the social character of public spaces. Yet even as urban activities and identities have become increasingly prescribed, controlled and homogenised, there still exist many spaces in the city that are unpredictable and which people use in ways that transgress the purposes intended by designers and regulators. Viewing the city as a living and changing organism, the Post-it City project explores the ephemeral occupation of public spaces and promotes flexible and informal models for urban planning. The term Post-it City comes from Giovanni la Varra's notion that city dwellers, through improvisation, put another use onto the city, like a post-it, according to their particular needs - immigrants who transform sidewalks into street markets; the homeless who convert bridges into shelters, or retirees who make abandoned junkyards into gardens. These situations reveal the city's full potential as a dynamic place for constructing an infinite number of cartographies and depart from the concept of the city map as fixed and static.

Facing page and this page:
La Ciudad Jubilada (The Retired City), Barcelona, Pau Faus, 2007

URBAN TYPOLOGIES

Initiated as a creative collaboration between the urban theorist Giovanni La Varra and art curator Martí Peran, the Post-it City project began as a series of workshops and seminars at Barcelona's Centre d'Art Santa Mònica in 2005. The work sessions involved both local and international architects, urban plan-

Spanish retirees have taken their own initiative to create illegal paths between the nooks of the roads and train tracks to access the land and cultivate their own individual gardens. In the Post-it City case study the La Ciudad Jubilada (The Retired City), Pau Faus, Elanora Blanco and Julie Poirtras have produced a visual dictionary that documents the social dynamics at play in the construction of these informal garden communities. Retirees primarily from rural origins clean up these wastelands – frequently full of rubbish and debris - and invest the territory with new meaning. A similar Post-it City case study on New York City gardens shows how the East Village's community gardens (located in abandoned city lots) have become much more than gardens: they have transformed into community centres that run courses, host parties and exhibitions, and provide a venue for baptisms and weddings. While the more recent and more peripheral Barcelona gardens have yet to show the same promise of coalescing into real social networks, Faus asserts that the river gardens, by demonstrating how groups of people can autonomously manage land and resources, 'represent a challenge to the essential parameters of urban planning and invite us to imagine a more flexible and active relationship between city residents and their surroundings.'

TEMPORAL IN NATURE
While the lack of officially assigned uses make leftover spaces, like Barcelona's river beds, particularly receptive to post-it actions, these actions can also take place within codified environments, where rules and meaning are more explicit and relatively fixed. Since post-it phenomena are temporal in nature, they unfold in a particular time-span with the presence of temporary participants. An urban square may have formal and informal activities that spatially overlap, but happen at different times: a site for commercial use by day and family use on the weekends and evenings, becomes available to lovers by night. Though, in many cities, civic municipal codes (which promote 'normalised' behaviour) have worked to suppress public displays of passion and sexual identity.

Preoccupied by the morality laws passed by Barcelona's City Hall in 2005, a Post-it City team set off to investigate the different uses of the city for sexual practices. The team, headed by Anna Recasens and Alex Brahim, found that people's behaviour becomes more transgressive at certain times and locations in the city: 'The different behaviours in the different spaces have one feature in common: transience, an informal and temporary use of the public space, imprinting for a short time another map on top of the city zones; re-zoning and humanising urban space; exercising micro-politics in order to answer basic human needs.' Compiling their research data, they charted out a map of sexual dissidence acknowledging the diverse forms of sexual activity (cruising, dogging and prostitution) taking place all over the city at different times. Through photographs and videos, the team documented how this sexual dissidence reconfigured the public face of the city and adapted urban spaces for ad hoc uses. Their captivating images show spontaneous appropriations of the urban landscape, like bus shelters transformed into changing rooms for prostitutes or apartment entrances converted into intimate spaces for quick sexual encounters for couples.

SOCIAL HACKERS
Brahim and Recasen's case study, Urban Intimacy, reveals how individuals can re-script 'rigid' spaces by defying their implied behavioural codes to fulfil one's desires (for instance, a gay guy who goes to a shopping centre not to shop but pick-up other men pursuing the same activity). Recasens considers

ners and visual artists, who formed over 20 different teams to investigate post-it phenomena worldwide. Working in a decentralised network, the project teams were given autonomy and freedom on how to identify and document ephemeral activities in their respective cities. The fruits of their explorations and reflections have led to an innovative exhibition of 78 case studies on post-its from diverse cities (including Hanoi, Paris, Tel Aviv, Santiago, Kinshasa, Denver) at the Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB). The Post-it City project's bottom-up approach has resulted in the documenting of a kaleidoscope of urban typologies: a warehouse that becomes an illegal race circuit on the weekends; the use of industrial wastelands for occasional meetings (nomad camp, rave); the use of a dumpster as a child playground; and the conversion of a daytime campus into an night-time area of sexual transactions.

NO-MAN'S-LAND
One of the exhibition sections explores abandoned spaces and draws attention to the vitality of their multiple potentials. The residual character of the city's periphery, its indifference to the traditional network, leads to fertile conditions for post-it situations. The urban fringes provide ambiguous territories that have been left undefined. Specifically, Perán points to the diversity of life and activity hidden beneath designers' dead zones: 'the dykes around urbanised zones - spaces that the planner's gaze has left untouched - …offer the possibility of new collective spaces.' Throughout Spain and many other countries, these types of void spaces can often be found along major infrastructures. Since motorways, railways and electric lines are designed to run parallel to rivers (which provide natural passages across territory), hundreds of kilometres of strips of land are left unbuilt and empty for security reasons. In Barcelona the barren no-man's-lands along the peripheral Llobregat and Besós rivers have given way to an extensive patchwork of garden plots.

these types of individuals 'social hackers' because they break the 'coded' space and re-program it for other uses: 'These hackers anonymously create social locations or reclaim old ones, rebelling against an urban landscape that tilts the balance of empowerment from the private citizen to private enterprise.' Through antagonistic spatial practices that confront mainstream life, different publics test the limits of socially acceptable behaviour. Their transgressions can help establish new standards of acceptability for the use of urban space and promote a more open and heterogeneous public sphere.
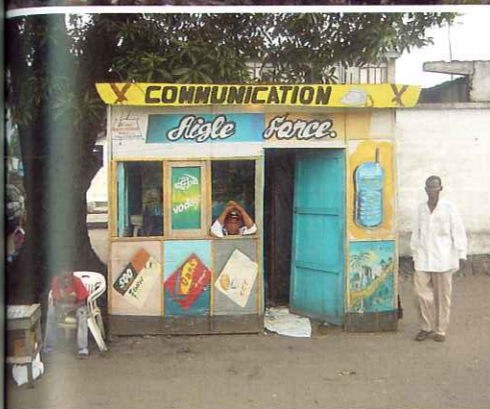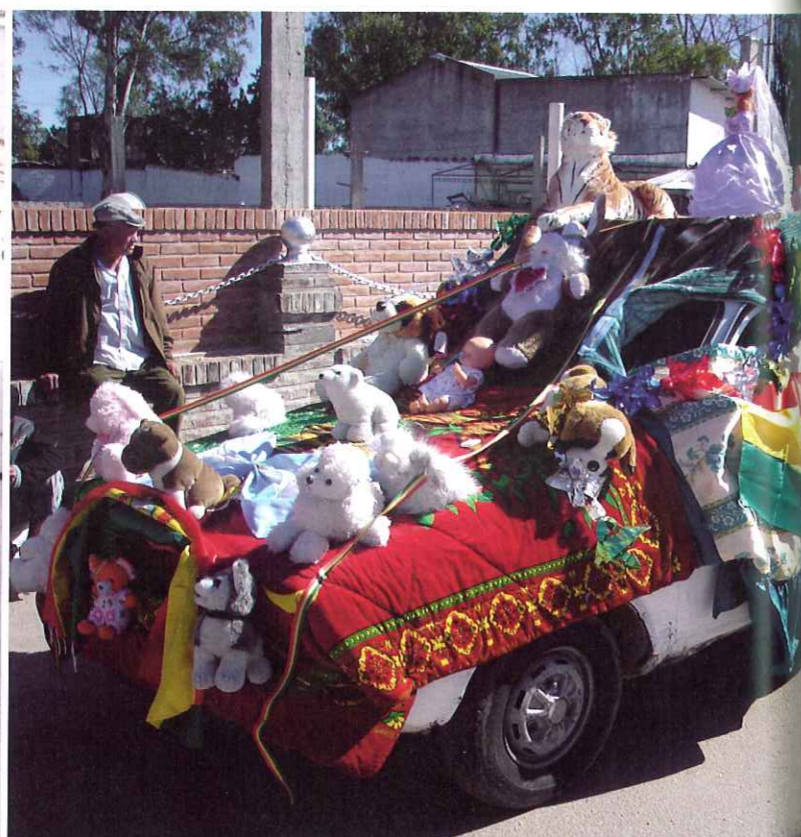
While public displays of sexual behaviour can be seen as implicit forms of dissent against a 'normalised' public space, the temporary use of street corners by prostitutes to offer their services and park benches by homeless people to sleep, speak less to political protest and more to survival practices. These groups take to the streets not to reclaim them but rather because of the bleak reality of their social marginality. In the face of precarious conditions, individuals often find innovative ways to adapt urban environments to meet their basic needs. Afghan immigrants passing through Paris exploit tall trees beside the train station to store personal belongings. In the Post-it City video Garde l'Est, Francisca Benítez films each tree by the station, slowly panning up from the ground to the trunk to reveal knapsacks, mattresses, and clothes tied to the upper branches. The tree trunks poignantly connect two parallel realities, French society and the 'floating' illegal immigrant community. Living in the city, yet apart from it, their belongings hanging from the trees embody this community's suspended situation.

BREEDING GROUNDS

The improvised tactics employed in these types of post-it interventions may provide some solutions for everyday needs, but they are fleeting ones, and they fail to address the underlying problems experienced by these marginal communities. The Post-it City exhibition recognises the need to integrate the informal with the formal more effectively and presents several case studies that highlight process-based urban planning – a type of planning that does not have a fixed end result but unfolds in several directions over time. In post-communist Warsaw, the city government has allowed a private company to host an open-air market in the abandoned football stadium. The colossal stadium, Jarmark Europa, serves as an 'empty carcass' for the market traders and shoppers to appropriate for their specific uses.

Bottom, left:
Sicília, Daniele Pario Perra, 2005

Bottom, right:
**Mercado de La Salada,
Buenos Aires, Julián D'Angiliollo
and Pío Torroja, 2007**

Since the fall of the communist block, rampant unemployment among former state functionaries has obliged many people to become street merchants and small-scale entrepreneurs in order to support themselves. With the re-conversion of the stadium into a market, these people have been given a physical place within the city and the possibility of developing more stable and legitimate businesses. The market takes them off street corners and makes it possible for them to reconstruct their future in the capitalist state. In the Jarmark Europa case study, Matteo Ghidoni documents how this former collective

representation of the communist state has been transformed: 'The stadium acts as a quasi-formal place within Polish society and provides a sense of community and belonging to the traders and shoppers.' Generating over 4000 new businesses and integrating a neglected population and site back into the urban fabric, the project serves as a model for future directions in urban planning.

The Post-it City case studies push architects, urban planners, and residents to recognise temporary uses as a catalyst for positive urban social change. The process of de-industrialisation has left cities with countless void spaces and unused buildings that can become vehicles for new temporary activities. Unplanned appropriations of these leftover urban spaces transform banal and everyday sites into the breeding grounds for informal economic development as well as new forms of art, music and pop culture. By defining urban 'spatial frameworks' that can absorb different forms of appropriation and emerging uses over time, city governments can create post-it friendly places enabling residents to actively fashion public settings for desired ends. The messy vitality of the urban condition comes from this unpredictable intermingling and negotiation of different classes, races, and social and cultural groups making their own places in the city. #

Post-it City Project: www.ciutatsocasionals.net
The Post-it City: Occasional Urbanities exhibition remains open at the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) www.cccb.org until May 25th and will travel to Milan, New York, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires.
La Ciuadad Jubilada (The Retired City): www.laciudadjubilada.net

Top:
**Jarmark Europa, Warsaw,
Matteo Ghidoni and Kasia
Teodorczuk, 2007**

Above, from left to right:
**Brakin Mobile Phones, Brazzaville,
Congo, SMAQ (Sabine Müller and
Andreas Quednau), 2006**

**Jarmark Europa, Market stall,
Warsaw, Matteo Ghidoni and Kasia
Teodorczuk, 2007**

**Inhabited Tombs, Cemetery, Cairo,
Sandi Hilal, Charlie Koolhaas, and
Alessandro Petti, 2006**