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 activities 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.

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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 homogenized, 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 streets 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.

URBAN TYPOLOGIES

Initiated as a creative collaboration between the urban theorist Giovanni La Varra and art curator Martí Pera, the Post-it City project began as a series of workshops and seminars at Barcelona’s Centre d’Art Santa Monica in 2000. The work sessions involved both local and international architects, urban plan-
Spanish retirees have taken their own initiative to create illegal paths between the rocks 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 Porras have produced a visual diary 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 centers that run courses, host parties and exhibitions, and provide a venue for baptisms and weddings. While the more recent and more peripheral Barcelonina 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 Barcelonina’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 layers 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 Anne Recesses and Alex Brath, 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: a temporal 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.” Combining their research data, they charted out a map of sexual disorders acknowledging the diverse forms of sexual activity (crusening, dogging and prostitution) taking place all over the city at different times. Through photographs and videos, the team documented how this sexual dissonance reconfigured the public face of the city and adopted urban spaces for all usages. 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**

Brath and Recesses’s case study, Urban Intimacy, reveals how individuals can re-script ‘rigid’ spaces by defining their implied behavioural codes to fulfill 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). Recesses considers
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. Migrant immigrants passing through Paris exploit tall trees beside the main station to store personal belongings. In the Post-It City video Gardi I Est, Francisca Berizzi 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 the 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 opera in the abandoned football stadium. The colossal stadium, Jamska Europa, serves as an ‘empty carcass’ for the market traders and shoppers to appropriate for their specific uses.

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 Jerzma Europa case study, Maddal Ghiidoni 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 4500 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 recognize 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.ciuatocasional.net

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

La Ciudad. Jambarta (The Refited City): www.laciuatjambarta.net