



# Playing with the Built City

**Eleanor Saitta**  
**@dymaxion**





# Playing with Built City

- **We are an urban species**
- **Cities are power systems**
- **Cities change their residents**
- **We want to change our cities**
- **Urbanism is political**
- **Causing change for a more alive city**
- **Acting outside the state and capital**





# Three Ways to Understand the City

Tools to understand the subjective, human city





# The City We See

- **People live in different cities**
- **We navigate via different mental maps**
- **The concept of an “imaginary”**
- **The imaginary is a cultural object**
- **Change the imaginary and you change the city**





# Affordances

- **Properties of objects determine their use**
- **Affordance mismatch**  
—the door handle
- **Affordances for life**  
—the city bench



# Affordances

- **Properties of objects determine their use**
- **Affordance mismatch**  
—the door handle
- **Affordances for life**  
—the city bench



# Affordances

- **Properties of objects determine their use**
- **Affordance mismatch**  
—the door handle
- **Affordances for life**  
—the city bench



# Affordances

- **Properties of objects determine their use**
- **Affordance mismatch**  
—the door handle
- **Affordances for life**  
—the city bench





# The Liveness of Space

- **How well a space supports life**
- **Subjective but general and cross-cultural**
- **Two city squares**
- **A concrete aspect of space**
- **Small changes and large effects**



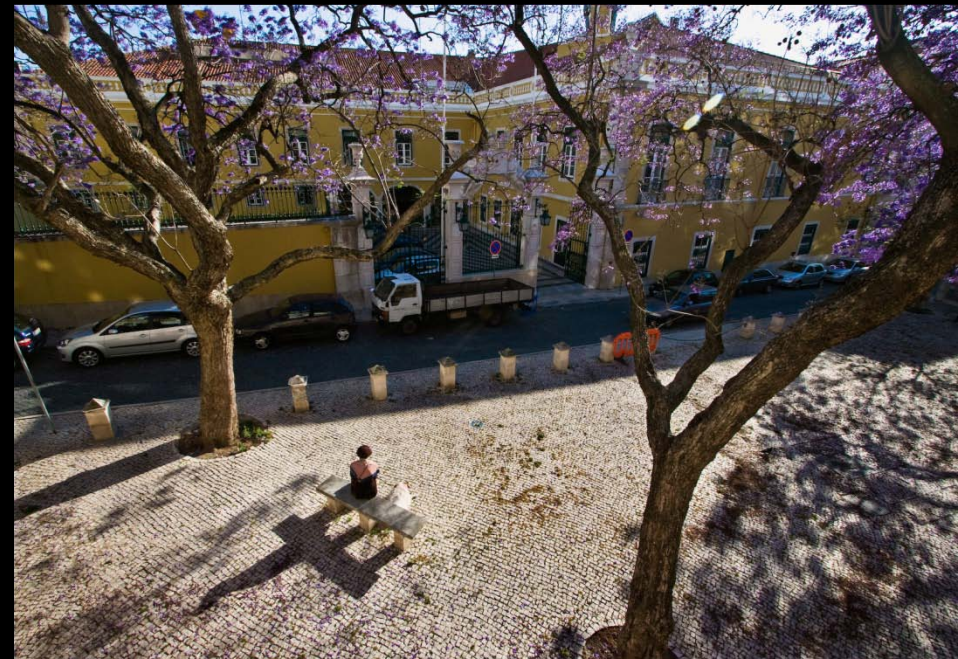
# The Liveness of Space

- How well a space supports life
- Subjective but general and cross-cultural
- Two city squares
- A concrete aspect of space
- Small changes and large effects



# The Liveness of Space

- How well a space supports life
- Subjective but general and cross-cultural
- Two city squares
- A concrete aspect of space
- Small changes and large effects





# Forces on Cities

**Understanding the shape of our cities**

**Context for change**





# Capitalism and the City

- **Cities are economic structures**
- **Capital forces the valuation of space**
- **Highest and best use vs. quality of life**
- **Short time scales**
- **Coercive efficiency**



# Capital and Urban Renewal

- **Control of the working class**
- **Providing an outlet for capital**
- **Large-scale urban destruction**



# Suburbanization and Zoning

- **Zoning laws appear as transport alters cities**
- **Zoning enforces class segregation against the integrative threat of cars**
  - **Capital preservation**



# Suburbanization and Zoning

- **Open space laws and homeowners' associations**
- **Variations as selective enforcement**
- **Non-living “public spaces” cause by incentives**



# Gentrification and the New City

- Flight from the urban core
- Countercultural  
“urban pioneers”
- Cycle of gentrification
- The Viennese counterexample
- Common ownership as an  
effective response



# Commercialization of Public Space

- The plaza, king, and creation of publics
- Public space is intellectually contested
- Restricted access and reasonable actions
- Retail desirability and private-public spaces
- Private-public space in the city



# Architecture of Fear

- **Fear as a byproduct of modernity and control**
- **Controlled environments for commerce**
- **Gated communities and office parks**
- **Technologies of control**
- **Abuse and silence**





# Responding to the City





# The Right to the City

- **How do we justify our intervention?**
- **Self-determination in urban environments**
- **Spatial justice**





# Working with the Inclusive City

- **The right to the city is founded on equality**
- **Limited resources claimed by intervention**
- **Reaching across race, sex, gender, ability, orientation, language, nationality, etc.**
- **Imagining others out of “our” space**
- **Working with others**





# Informality and Tactical Urbanism

- **Informality subverts control**
- **Tactical urbanism works, at a cost**
- **State responses to informality**





# Interventions

- **Intentional actions changing their spaces**
- **Limits to design for social issues**
- **Returning to first principles**
- **Space as an event; thin space**
- **Altering imaginaries; play, not shock**
- **Creating affordances; invisible intervention**
- **Material hierarchy:**  
data, light, paint, fabric, brick





# Examples





# Mapping and Imaginaries



# Urban Exploration

- Exploring the empty places
- Remaking the city as a place of wonder
- Breaking out of routines
- City games and psychogeographic walks
- Existing community





# **AR as Architecture**

## **Functional Graffiti**

- **Video overlays and locative computing**
- **2D barcodes to project information into space**
- **Visualizations; WTC on iPhone**
- **Community organization; FixMyStreet**
- **AR to tell stories**
- **Class division and consumer mindset**



# Mapping Resources

- **Cities are rich; we don't know what's there**
- **Small resources maps are easy**
  - **The Fallen Fruit Map**
- **Mapping breaks down barriers**



# Public Art

- **Art makes people think, especially street art**
- **Getting permission can rob it of power**
  - **Not having consent can cause a bad reception**
- **Temporary art can be productive**





# Guide Book

- **What a Woman Must Know about Berlin**
- **Introduction to a way of interacting with the city**
- **Guidebook to the hacker's city**





# Infrastructure





# Semi-legal WiFi

- **Information is citizenship**
- **Free mobile access democratizes space**
- **Point-to-point links for non-profits**
- **Shadow infrastructure projects care**





# Citizen CCTV

- **CCTV is a tool of social control and police power**
- **Rarely works against police, even in police brutality cases**
- **Decentralized cameras with off-site storage**
- **Admissible in court; consult your lawyer**
- **The right to the city is the right to be heard**
- **Safe demonstrations encourage ownership**



# DIY Bike Lanes

- **Bikes make good cities**
- **Bike lanes aren't perfect but can be the only safe option**
- **Not always forthcoming, even when critical**
- **Why wait? Just paint them**
- **Reflective vests, planning, and familiarity with other actions**





# Street Furniture

- **Streets determine the degree of life**
- **Furnishing a street lets it live**
- **Add a table and chair, bench, or hammock**
- **Work cheaply, or match the originals**



# Guerrilla Gardens

- **Concrete and bare dirt don't make cities live**
- **Gardens desterilize cities**
- **Vegetables grow fine on abandoned lots**
  - **Easier with land owner permission**
- **Cement looks better covered in ivy**
- **Work with existing movements**





# The Event City



# BART Swings and Subway Tea Parties

- Mass transit is considered purely functional space
- Events on mass transit show anywhere can be fun and playful
- The transit experience as theater
- Don't put on a spectacle, involve strangers



Thanks to Mike Burnstein





# Public City Games

- **Using the city as a playground changes imaginaries**
- **Games let us tell stories directly**
- **Single evening like Journey to the End of the Year**
- **Large and ongoing, like SFZero**
- **Need to escape a subculture**



# Parking Day

- **Turning parking spaces into parks**
- **Draws attention to limited open space in cities**
- **Function as real parks**





# Temporary Art Spaces

- **Space for art is more scarce now than ever**
- **Commercial real estate sits empty**
- **Owners don't want it empty too long**
- **Putting on events is hard but useful**





# The Inflatable Cafe

- **Third spaces don't need bricks**
- **Sheets of plastic, cargo bikes, a blower, and LED lights**
- **Goes up in a park or a parking lot**
- **Disappears quickly**





# Affordances for Life

How our frameworks scale up





# Third Spaces and Hackerspaces

- **Temporary spaces don't accumulate resources**
- **It's hard to build lasting culture**
- **Physical spaces matter**
- **Hackerspaces are good, but exclusive**
- **Partially unavoidable, but new spaces aren't the only answer**
- **Ignoring our neighbors recreates class**



# Squats

- **Direct subversion of capital control of land**
- **Very difficult without community support**
- **Almost impossible in many places**





# Housing for Non-Normative Families

- **Housing only accommodates a few types of households**
- **Single largest expense; can't customize**
- **Poly families, groups of single parents, etc.**
- **Groups of households; co-op or cohousing**
- **More housing stock variety means more family variety**





# Unselfish Building

- **The human city happens step by step**
- **If you are involved in a project, do the right thing**





# Photo Credits

**All photos from Flickr and either CC or with rights secured.  
Usernames, in order by slide number:**

**6, mtsofan; 7, darrensnow; 8, Troy Holden; 10, mallix; 11, szeke; 14, Makz; 15, Telstar Logistics; 16, Clément Guillaume; 17, holycalamity; 18, Pieter Musterd (bezoek onze tentoonstelling); 19, Myxi; 27, reflets de vert; 29, Flavio@Flickr; 30, nickgraywfu; 35, seanbonner; 37, urbanwild; 39, y3rdua; 41, Scott Beale / Laughing Squid; 46, Vandallo.**



**Go change your city! Right now!**

**Questions?**

**Special thanks to my editor and partner  
Ari Lacenski**

**Eleanor Saitta  
ella@structurelight.com  
@dymaxion**

**<http://sldrc.com/talks/Notacon7-PwtBC-slides.pdf>  
<http://sldrc.com/talks/26C3-built.pdf>**

