Public Interventions
The Shifting Meaning of the Urban Condition

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Saskia Sassen, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, is specialized in the influence that globalization and digitization processes have on the transformations of urban space. In this essay, she looks at the possibilities of artistic practice to 'make' public space that can produce unsettling stories and make visible that which is local and has been silenced. [1]

The enormity of the urban experience, the overwhelming presence of massive architectures and dense infrastructures, as well as the irresistible utility logics that organize much of the investments in today's cities, have produced displacement and estrangement among many individuals and whole communities. Such conditions unsettle older notions and experiences of the city in general and public space in particular. While the monumentalized public spaces of European cities remain vibrant sites for rituals and routines, for demonstrations and festivals, increasingly the overall sense is of a shift from civic to politicized urban space, with fragmentations along multiple differences.

At the same time, these cities contain a diversity of under-used spaces, often characterized more by memory than current meaning. These spaces are part of the interiority of a city, yet lie outside of its organizing, utility-driven logics and spatial frames. They are *terrains vagues* that allow many residents to connect to the rapidly transforming cities in which they live, and to bypass subjectively the massive infrastructures that have come to dominate more and more spaces in their cities. Jumping at these *terrains vagues* in order to maximize real estate development would be a mistake from this perspective. Keeping some of this openness might, in fact, make sense in terms of factoring future options at a time when utility logics change so quickly and often violently – an excess of high-rise office buildings being one of the great examples.

This opens up a salient dilemma about the current urban condition in ways that take it beyond the fairly transparent notions of high-tech architecture, virtual spaces, simulacra, theme parks. All of the latter matter, but they are fragments of an incomplete puzzle. There is a type of urban condition that dwells between the reality of massive structures and the reality of semi-abandoned places. I think it is central to the experience of the urban, and it makes legible transitions and unsettlements of specific spatio-temporal configurations. Architecture and urban design can also function as critical artistic practices that allow us to capture something more elusive than what is represented by notions such as the theme-parking of cities.

Here I examine these questions through the actual making of public space and through the shifting meaning of the urban condition.

Public Making Against the Privatizing and Weaponizing of Urban Space

The making and siting of public space is one lens into these types of questions. We are living through a kind of crisis in public space resulting from the growing commercialization, theme-parking, and privatizing of public space.1 The grand monumentalized public spaces of the state and the crown, especially in former imperial capitals, dominate our experience of public space. Users do render them public through their practices. But what about the actual making of public space in these complex cities, both through architectural interventions and through users' practices?

Dwelling between mega buildings and *terrain vagues* [2] has long been part of the urban experience. In the past as today, this dwelling makes legible transitions and unsettlements. It can also reinsert the possibility of urban making – poesis — in a way that massive projects by themselves do not. The 'making' that concerns me here is of modest public spaces, constituted through the practices of people and critical architectural interventions that are on small- or medium-level scales. My concern here is not with monumentalized public spaces or ready-made public spaces that are actually better described as public-access than public. The making of public space opens up questions about the current urban condition in ways that the grand spaces of the crown and the state or over-designed public-*access* spaces do not.

The work of capturing this elusive quality that cities produce and make legible, and the work of making public space in this in-between zone, is not easily executed.[3] Utility logics won't do. I can't help but think that the making of art is part of the answer – whether ephemeral public performances and installations or longer-lasting types of public sculpture, whether site-specific / community-based art, or nomadic sculptures that circulate among localities. Further, the new network technologies open up wide this question of making in modest spaces and through the practices of people. One question that might serve to capture critical features of this project is: How can we *urbanize* open-source?

Architectural practices are central here, specifically those that can take place in problematic or unusual spaces. This takes architects able to navigate several forms of knowledge so as to introduce the possibility of architecture in spaces where the naked eye or the engineer's imagination sees no shape, no possibility of a form, pure infrastructure and utility. The types of space I have in mind are, for instance, intersections of multiple transport and communication networks, the roofs of recycling plants or water purification systems, small awkward unused spaces that have been forgotten or do not fit the needs of utility driven plans, and so on. Another instance is a space that requires the work of detecting possible architectures where there now is merely a formal silence, a non-existence, such as a modest and genuinely undistinguished *terrain vague* – not a grand *terrain vague* that becomes magnificent through the scale of its decay, as might an old unused industrial harbour or steel factory.

The possibility of this type of making, detecting, and intervening has assumed new meanings over the last two decades, a period marked by the ascendance of private authority / power over spaces once considered public. Furthermore, over the last five years especially, the state has sought to weaponize urban space and to make it an object of surveillance. At the same time, the increasing legibility of restrictions, surveillance and displacements is politicizing urban space. Most familiar, perhaps, is the impact of high-income residential and commercial gentrification, which generates a displacement that can feed the making of a political subjectivity centered in contestation rather than a sense of the civic on either side of the conflict. The physical displacement of low-income households, non-profit uses and low-profit neighbourhood firms makes visible a power relationship – direct control by one side over the other as expressed directly in evictions or indirectly through the market. This politicizing of urban space and its legibility is also

evident in the proliferation of physical barriers in erstwhile public spaces, perhaps most pronounced in US cities, and most visible since the attacks of 11 September 2001.US embassies worldwide increasingly resemble medieval fortresses. In this context public-access space is an enormous resource, and we need more of it. But let us not confuse public-access space with public space. The latter requires making – through the practices and the subjectivities of people. Through their practices, users of the space wind up making diverse kinds of publicness. [4]

In brief, several trends are coming together, enabling practices and imaginaries about making, rather than merely accessing, public space. One concerns some of the conditions discussed above. Specifically, the fact itself of today's wider unsettlements of older notions of public space. These unsettlements arise from the limits of public-space-making in monumentalized spaces as well as from the shifts towards politicizing urban space and weakening civic experiences in cities. Both conditions produce openings to the experience and the option of making.

A second trend is the option of making modest public spaces, which may well be critical for recovering the possibility of making spaces public. This type of making was historically significant in European cities and diverges as a project from the making of grand monumentalized spaces: it entailed making in the interstices of the spaces of royalty and the state. Today this type of making is geared to the interstices of private and public power, and adds a novel dimension: the repositioning of the notion and the experience of locality, and thereby of modest public spaces, in potentially global networks comprising multiple localities.

A third trend is the delicate negotiation between the renewed valuing of diversity, as illustrated in multiculturalism, and the renewed challenges this poses to notions and experiences of the public.

Cities as Frontier Zones: Making Informal Politics

The other side of the large complex city, especially if global, is that it is a sort of new frontier zone where an enormous mix of people converges. Those who lack power, those who are disadvantaged, outsiders, discriminated minorities, can gain presence in such cities, presence vis-à-vis power and presence vis-à-vis each other. This signals, for me, the possibility of a new type of politics centred in new types of political actors. It is not simply a matter of having or not having power. There are new hybrid bases from which to act. By using the term presence I try to capture some of this.

The space of the city is a far more concrete space for politics than that of the nation. It becomes a place where non-formal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is much more difficult at the national level. Nationally politics needs to run through existing formal systems: whether the electoral political system or the judiciary (taking state agencies to court). Non-formal political actors are rendered invisible in the space of national politics. The space of the city accommodates a broad range of political activities –squatting, demonstrations against police brutality, fighting for the rights of immigrants and the homeless, the politics of culture and identity, gay and lesbian politics. Much of this becomes visible on the street. Much of urban politics is concrete, enacted by people rather than dependent on massive media technologies. Street level politics makes possible the formation of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system.

Through the new network technologies local initiatives become part of a global network of activism without losing the focus on specific local struggles. It enables a new type of cross-border political activism, one centred in multiple localities yet intensely connected digitally. This is in my view on one of the key forms of critical politics that the Internet and other

networks can make possible: A politics of the local with a big difference – these are localities that are connected with each other across a region, a country or the world. Because the network is global does not mean that it all has to happen at the global level. Digital networks are contributing to the production of new kinds of interconnections underlying what appear as fragmented topographies, whether at the global or at the local level. Political activists can use digital networks for global or non-local transactions and they can use them for strengthening local communications and transactions inside a city or rural community.

The large city of today, especially the global city, emerges as a strategic site for these new types of operations. It is a strategic site for global corporate capital. But is is also one of the sites where the formation of new claims by informal political actors materializes and assumes concrete forms.

Rethinking the Notion of Locality

It will not be long before many urban residents begin to experience the 'local' as a type of microenvironment with global span. Much of what we keep representing and experiencing as something local – a building, an urban place, a household, an activist organization right there in our neighbourhood – is actually located not only in the concrete places where we can see them, but also on digital networks that span the globe. They are connected to other such localized buildings, organizations, households, possibly on the other side of the world. They may indeed be more oriented to those other areas than to their immediate surroundings. Think of the financial centre in a global city, or the human rights or environmental activists' home or office – their orientation is not towards what surrounds them but to a global process. I think of these local entities as microenvironments with a global span. [5]

There are two issues I want to pursue briefly here. One of these is what it means for 'the city' to contain a proliferation of these globally oriented yet very localized offices, households, organizations? In this context the city becomes a strategic amalgamation of multiple global circuits that loop through it. As cities and urban regions are increasingly traversed by non-local, including notably global circuits, much of what we experience as the local because locally-sited, is actually a transformed condition in that it is imbricated with non-local dynamics or is a localization of global processes. One way of thinking about this is in terms of spatializations of various projects – economic, political, cultural. This produces a specific set of interactions in a city's relation to its topography. The new urban spatiality thus produced is partial in a double sense: it accounts for only part of what happens in cities and what cities are about, and it inhabits only part of what we might think of as the space of the city, whether this be understood in terms as diverse as those of a city's administrative boundaries or in the sense of the multiple public imaginaries that may be present in different sectors of a city's people. If we consider urban space as productive, as enabling new configurations, then these developments signal multiple possibilities.

The second issue, one coming out of this proliferation of digital networks traversing cities, concerns the future of cities in an increasingly digitized and globalized world. Here the bundle of conditions and dynamics that marks the model of the global city might be a helpful way of distilling the ongoing centrality of urban space in complex cities. Just to single out one key dynamic: the more globalized and digitized the operations of firms and markets, the more their central management and coordination functions (and the requisite material structures) become strategic. It is precisely because of digitization that simultaneous worldwide dispersal of operations (whether factories, offices, or service outlets) and system integration can be achieved. And it is precisely this combination that raises the importance of central functions. Global cities are strategic sites for the combination of resources necessary for the production of these central functions. [6] Thus, much of what is liquefied and circulates in digital networks and is marked by

hypermobility, actually remains physical – and hence possibly urban – in some of its components. At the same time, however, that which remains physical has been transformed by the fact that it is represented by highly liquid instruments that can circulate in global markets. It may look the same, it may involve the same bricks and mortar, it may be new or old, but it is a transformed entity. Take for example, the case of real estate. Financial services firms have invented instruments that liquefy real estate, thereby facilitating investment and circulation of these instruments in global markets. Part of what constitutes real estate remains very physical; but the building that is represented by financial instruments circulating globally is not the same building as one that is not.

We have difficulty capturing this multi-valence of the new digital technologies through our conventional categories: if it is physical, it is physical; and if it is liquid, it is liquid. In fact, the partial representation of real estate through liquid financial instruments produces a complex imbrication of the material and the digitized moments of that which we continue to call real estate. And the need of global financial markets for multiple material conditions in very grounded financial centres produces yet another type of complex imbrication which shows that precisely those sectors that are most globalized and digitized continue to have a very strong and strategic urban dimension.

Hypermobility and digitization are usually seen as mere functions of the new technologies. This understanding erases the fact that it takes multiple material conditions to achieve this outcome. Once we recognize that the hypermobility of the instrument, or the dematerialization of the actual piece of real estate, had to be produced, we introduce the imbrication of the material and the non-material. Producing capital mobility takes state-of-the-art built environments, conventional infrastructure – from highways to airports and railways – and well-housed talent. These are all, at least partly, place-bound conditions, even though the nature of their place-boundedness is going to be different than it was 100 years ago, when place-boundedness might have been marked by immobility. Today it is a place-boundedness that is inflected, inscribed, by the hypermobility of some of its components / products / outcomes. Both capital fixity and mobility are located in a temporal frame where speed is ascendant and consequential. This type of capital fixity cannot be fully captured in a description of its material and locational features, that is in a topographical reading.

Conceptualizing digitization and globalization along these lines creates operational and rhetorical openings for recognizing the ongoing importance of the material world even in the case of some of the most dematerialized activities.

Digital Media and the Making of Presence

New media artists using computer-centred network technologies are enacting political as well as artistic projects in a growing number of cities worldwide. What I want to capture here is a very specific feature: the possibility of constructing forms of globality that are neither part of global corporate media or consumer firms, nor part of elite universalisms or 'high culture'. It is the possibility of giving presence to multiple local actors, projects and imaginaries in ways that may constitute alternative and counter-globalities.

These interventions entail diverse uses of technology – ranging from political to ludic uses – that can subvert corporate globalization. We are seeing the formation of alternative networks, projects, and spaces. Emblematic is, perhaps, that the metaphor of 'hacking' has been dislodged from its specialized technical discourse and become part of everyday life. In the face of a predatory regime of intellectual property rights we see the ongoing influence of the free software movement. [7] Indymedia gain terrain even as global media conglomerates dominate just about all mainstream mediums. [8] The formation of new geographies of power that bring together elites from the global south and north find their

obverse in the work of such collectives as Raqs Media Collective that destabilize the centre / periphery divide. [9]

Such alternative globalities are to be distinguished from the common assumption that if 'it' is global it is cosmopolitan. The types of global forms that concern me here are what I like to refer to, partly as a provocation, as non-cosmopolitan forms of globality. When local initiatives and projects can become part of a global network without losing the focus on the specifics of the local, a new type of globality takes shape. For instance, groups or individuals concerned with a variety of environmental questions – from solar energy design to appropriate-materials-architecture – can become part of global networks without having to leave behind the specifics that concern them.

In an effort to synthesize this diversity of subversive interventions into the space of global capitalism, I use the notion of counter-geographies of globalization: these interventions are deeply imbricated with some of the major dynamics constitutive of corporate globalization yet are not part of the formal apparatus or of the objectives of this apparatus (such as the formation of global markets and global firms). These counter-geographies thrive on the intensifying of transnational and translocal networks, the development of communication technologies which easily escape conventional surveillance practices, and so on. Further, the strengthening and, in some of these cases, the formation of new global circuits are ironically embedded or made possible by the existence of that same global economic system that they contest. These counter-geographies are dynamic and changing in their locational features. [10]

The narrating, giving shape, making present, involved in digitized environments assumes very particular meanings when mobilized to represent / enact local specificities in a global context. Beyond the kinds of on-the-ground work involved in these struggles, new media artists and activists – the latter often artists – have been key actors in these developments, whether it is through tactical media, Indymedia, or such entities as the original incarnation of Digital City Amsterdam [11] and the Berlin-based Transmediale. [12] But new media artists have also focused on issues other than the world of technology. Not surprisingly perhaps, a key focus has been the increasingly restrictive regime for migrants and refugees in a global world where capital gets to flow wherever it wants. Organizations such as Nobody is Illegal, [13] the Mongrel web project, [14] *Mute Magazine*, [15] the Manchester-based Futuresonic, [16] and the Bonn / Cologne-based Theater der Welt, [17] have all done projects focused on immigration.

In conclusion, both the work of making the public and making the political in urban space become critical at a time of growing velocities, the ascendance of process and flow over artefacts and permanence, massive structures that are not at a human scale, and branding as the basic mediation between individuals and markets. The work of design produces narratives that add to the value of existing contexts, and at its narrowest, to the utility logics of the economic corporate world. But there is also a kind of public-making work that can produce disruptive narratives, and make it legible to the local and the silenced.

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Footnotes

1. There is an interesting scholarship on this issue. It is impossible to do justice to it. Let me just mention a few texts that show the diversity of approaches: Richard Lloyd, *Neobohemia: Art and Commerce in the Post-Industrial City* (New York / Londen: Routledge, 2005); Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds.), *Territorial Investigations* (Amsterdam / Atlanta: 1999); Mari Carmen Ramirez, Theresa Papanikolas and Gabriela Rangel, *Art* (International Center for the Arts of the Americas: 2002); George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Roger A. Salerno, *Landscapes of Abandonment: Capitalism, Modernity and Estrangement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); John Phillips, Wei-Wei Yeo and Ryan Bishop, *Postcolonial Urbanism: Sout East Asian Cities and Global Processes* (New York / Londen: Routledge, 2003); Joan Ockman (ed.), *Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking about Things in the Making* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001); Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (New York / Londen: Routledge, 1997); Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds.), *The Ends of Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Thad Williamson, Gar Alperovitz and David L. Imbroscio, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era* (New York / Londen: Routledge, 2002); Andre Drainville, *Contesting Globalization: Space and Place in the World Economy* (Londen: Routledge, 2005); Linda Krause and Patrice Petro (eds.), *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and Londen: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
2. For one of the best treatments of such *terrains vagues* see Ignasi de Solá-Morales, *Obra*, vol. 3 (Barcelona: Editorial Gigli, 2004). For an example of an intervention in one of these *terrains vagues*, in this case in the city of Buenos Aires, see Kermes Urbana, an organization that seeks to produce public space by reactivating such *terrains vagues*. (see: www.m7red.com.ar).
3. E.g. Arie Graafland, *The Socius of Architecture* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2000); John Beckmann, *The Virtual Dimension: Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998); Kester Rattenbury, *This is Not Architecture: Media Constructions* (Londen / New York: Routledge, 2002); Susannah Hagan, *Taking Shape:A new Contract between Architecture and Nature* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2001).
4. See, for instance the types of projects at www.transgressivearchitecture.org
5. Elsewhere I have shown in detail the complex imbrications of the digital and the material, and of flows and places. Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chapter 7.
6. There are other dimensions that specify the global city; see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2001), 2nd edition.
7. See www.gnu.org for more information.
8. Indymedia is 'a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of the truth'. See www.indymedia.org.
9. See www.raqsmediacollective.net.
10. They are also multivalent, that is, some are 'good' and some are 'bad'. I use the term as an analytic category to designate a whole range of dynamics and initiatives that are centred in the new capabilities for global operation coming out of the corporate global economy but used for purposes other than their original design: examples range from alter-globalization political struggles to informal global economic circuits, and, at the limit, global terrorist networks.
11. The Digital City Amsterdam (DDS) was an experiment facilitated by De Balie, Amsterdam's cultural centre. Subsidised by the Amsterdam Municipality and the Ministry of Economic Affairs it allowed people to access the digital city host computer and retrieve council minutes, official policy papers or visit digital cafes and train stations. See reinder.rustema.nl for documentation; see the chapter by Lovink and

Riemens in *Global Networks,Linked Cities* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) for the full evolution, from beginning to end of DDS.
12. An international media arts festival. See www.transmediale.de.
13. A campaign carried by autonomous groups, religious initiatives, trade unions and individuals to support refugees and undocumented immigrants. See www.contrast.org for more information.
14. London based media activists and artists. See www.mongrelx.org.
15. See www.metamute.com.
16. A festival exploring wireless and mobile media. See www.futuresonic.com.
17. A theatre festival. See www.theaterderwelt.de.

Tags

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