

Street Policy

Could explorative urban behaviour shape spatial planning?

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with Lottie Child

There is currently very little relationship between the way we behave in cities and the way our cities are planned and built. This paper is about how this relationship could be made better, with particular focus on a project called 'Street Training' by the artist Lottie Child.

Street Training is a participatory performance based on the idea that our surroundings have a profound effect on our thoughts, behaviour and ways of being, and that we can mobilize those aspects of our selves to effect our environment. The artist has developed the project over a period of seven years, through a range of institutions and events, most recently at the British Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2010.

The project takes the form of 'sessions' which fall into two general types. The first, led by the artist, involves 'educating' an invited public into a greater involvement in their streets. Using her charisma and a large bag of 'tools' drawn from situationism, urban play and adventure, the artist leads her 'team' on a journey through a particular slice of the city, along the way exploring forms of training which all involve an interaction between the human body and its environment- from skip diving to the sensory re-use of textured public realm materials.

The second type of session involves the artist not as 'street trainer' but as 'street trained', drawing out from local people, frequently children, the ways by which they achieve safety and joy in a particular place. Tools and lessons learned from these events become part of a lexicon of the street which Child then deploys in further sessions.

In these latter sessions, the project generates both local expert street trainers, and an array of explorative urban tools and pastimes. Both are revealed and developed through an open source website.

Lottie, the artist, functions as an enabler, bringing out explorative and subversive skills in people who might not otherwise categorise themselves as urban explorers. The project aims to achieve a change in the head and body of its participants (including the artist) and also to draw out, collectively, a form of multisensory urban knowledge.

Recently, Child has begun to deploy the Street Training project more strategically. Over a two year period between 2009 and 2011, she is working with a group of local children on a Camberwell Estate and has already brought their findings (through the mouths and bodies of the 'trainers')

themselves) into the spaces and audiences of the South London Gallery. The most interesting aspect of this project so far was when Child and her new team of Street Trainers led a session attended by local policy makers and law enforcers. What had simply been antisocial behaviour became, through the Street Training process, a shared and physical understanding of the spaces of the estate, an opportunity for turning the tables of professional/public and adult/child relationships. The project is a way of developing and sharing knowledge – physical and mental - of an environment, through paying attention to the voices and movements of those who usually listen rather than tell. By pushing at the edges of acceptable behaviour, it finds the limits of a space, both literally and figuratively. In each context it generates a shared language for communicating a place's qualities. Behaviours which could be categorised merely as anti-social, or subversive, are given value and become legitimate tools for understanding place. Or, as described by the South London Gallery, "train[s] the local police in the difference between creativity and anti-social behaviour."

Did you see their faces when the female police officer started to dance in the puddle?

In the context of the vast array of 'urban subversions' discussed at today's conference, the project's most useful lesson is perhaps that that physical and emotional intimacy with our environment is not the realm of specialist provocateurs or the professionally skilled and that, drawing on Michel de Certeau, we are all potentially urban subversives.

Subversive urban behaviour is defined by its contrary position to the state and to the orthodoxies of a society. Street Training suggests ways by which this adversarial position might be transcended.

Another highly adversarial phenomenon in the urban public realm, and one which could do with some transcendence, is the planning system. Planning in the UK is a twin-headed monster. One head is about policy, the development of strategic plans for a given area and the establishment of rules and guidance for their development and preservation. The other head is about enforcing these policies, on a case-by-case basis. The results of this process are well documented. In today's context I can only show these two books, published by the same press by the same authors, 'How to Stop and Influence Planning Permission' and 'How to Get Planning Permission'¹ – the different graphic qualities of which are striking. After years of discourse, garden cities, Corbusian tracts and utopian thinking, this is where planning has got. Not In My Back Yard.

In the UK, the commonest planning process involves a local population already predisposed against change, a developer with financial imperatives who is uninterested in the views of anyone else, and an architect who attempts consultation based on a predetermined design. The ensuing process is a chess game of extraordinary complexity where, very rarely, a

word of sense is spoken, and the result is a simple *permitted* or *refused*, frequently on the basis of planning policy determined long before the present development was even proposed.

There are currently a number of individuals who are interested in breaking the planning system out of this adversarial situation.

One such practitioner is Finn Williams, who also works as an urban designer in the Planning department at Croydon Council. A project that Finn is currently working on, and which we began developing together, is useful here in terms of imagining how the chess game model of planning can be transcended.

In London, there is a document called the London View Management Framework, which documents the various protected views across the city as determined by heritage lobbyists and commissioned research. Frameworks like this have a massive impact on the shape of the city. Subjective viewpoints, literally, can impede or radically alter the form of development, for good, bad, or indifference. The example I show here is of the view from King Henry's Mound in Richmond Park to the dome of St. Paul's.

This document is the result of extensive consultation with experts and the London electorate, but the data on which it is based was gathered beforehand, with a particular view toward its final end.

But, Finn suggests, what would happen if we abandoned the received urban wisdom inherent in this kind of report, and looked beyond conversations about planning? Using a website like flickr, which geotags photographs and subjects with sometimes frightening precision, could we instead generate a view management framework based on actual views? An example of the richness of this approach are the maps of Eric Fischer² which include local and international photographers.

What's interesting here is not just the democracy of the new information, but also the fact that the data is gathered from people taking photographs of things. They are not thinking about view corridors, of heritage, preservation, or development. They are not remembering the words of Prince Charles. They are not even consciously giving information. *Is it worth protecting the view of something if nobody looks at it?*

Such data rolls on and updates itself. A Flickr View Management Framework would evolve constantly, argue amongst itself like a wiki, and provide a dynamic setting for planning London, contrary to the inevitable unwieldiness of any fat PDF document issued by a local authority.

Finn's proposal is one example of a knowledge-gathering exercise which involves data which is public, dynamic, democratic and no longer project-specific. Others are mapping tweets, foursquare logins³, silence⁴, and other

bits of data which are widely used and which have a definite consequence on the potential shape of the city. Such data sources, applied at the policy level of the planning system, could bring our way of planning far closer to our way of life. They could cut out whole levels of procurement and the time lags of the way we currently plan.

In this context, I became interested in the Street Training project, and its method of encouraging and capturing behaviour on the limits of the normal and the acceptable. I would suggest that such behaviour could be of direct application to planning policy, through means similar to those proposed by Finn Williams. With Lottie Child I am developing a project which, for the sake of today's conversation, I'm calling Street Policy.

As an urbanist I am interested in shaking up the processes of planning and exploring alternative models of development already built into the legal landscape of planning- most recently this involved an investigation into the new Permitted Development laws in England and Wales, which dramatically alter what the general public can build without planning permission but conceal this permissive with appalling legalese.⁵

With Street Policy, we're investigating ways by which the discoveries of Street Training, typified by a child's game in a public space, can have an impact at the top-most level of planning policy. We're in the early stages of this project but it is currently being explored, not at the level of policy but at the level of project, in a collaboration between Lottie Child and the architecture practice muf, curators of the British Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. Muf are redesigning parts of Mile End Road in East London as part of the 'High Street 2012' scheme, which will see the route from central London to the Olympic site improved as a collateral project to the 2012 games. The Street Training programme in this context deployed local children's relationships to the existing road, transferred them to Via Garibaldi in Venice as part of the Biennale programme, and is now in the process of mapping the play of Venetian children over the Mile End site, with the aim of improving the place's capacity for public use over and above car traffic.

"With less than 5 playgrounds in Venice, the children occupy the streets. Lottie initially embarked on her research by asking the questions, "How do you feel safe in the streets?" and "How do you feel joyful in the streets?" Many people had answers to the first question, as fear mediated their experiences, but only the children had ideas on strategies for joy."⁶

This results of this project remain to be seen, but we hope that it may lead to an expansion of the project into the realm of policy. We don't yet know exactly how this will work, but we feel that the goal, of behaviour influencing city form, is more than worthwhile. We propose that crime is only 'designed out' where crime is known to exist. We propose play areas that sit within the city rather than as demarcated territories. We propose keeping trees where birds or bats are known to exist. We propose that muddy desire lines

become paths. And that these new places, in turn, are questioned through everyday life.

¹ <http://www.stonepound.co.uk/>

² <http://www.flickr.com/photos/walkingsf/>

³ <http://urbagram.net/archipelago/>

⁴ http://www.simonelvins.com/silent_london.html

⁵ <http://www.dk-cm.com/projects/sub-plan-a-guide-to-permitted-development/>

⁶ http://archinect.com/news/article.php?id=100954_0_24_0_M