

Urban Interventions: Art, Politics and Pedagogy

DAVID PINDER

Abstract

Challenging perspectives on the urban question have arisen in recent years from beyond academic realms through the work of artists and cultural practitioners. Often in dialogue with urban theory and political activism, and employing a range of tactical practices, they have engaged critically with cities and with the spatialities of everyday urban life. They are typically concerned less with representing political issues than with intervening in urban spaces so as to question, refunction and contest prevailing norms and ideologies, and to create new meanings, experiences, understandings, relationships and situations. Such interventionist practices may rarely be seen as part of the traditional purview of urban studies. Yet in asserting their significance here, this essay argues that growing dialogues across and between urban and spatial theory, and artistic and cultural practice, have considerable potential for inspiring and developing critical approaches to cities. The essay highlights a number of specific challenges thrown up by such interconnections that are of political and pedagogical significance and in need of further debate.

To put art at the service of the urban does not mean to prettify urban space with works of art. This parody of the possible is a caricature. Rather, this means that time-spaces become works of art and that former art reconsiders itself as source and model of *appropriation* of space and time (Henri Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]: 173).

Introduction

How can views of a city be challenged by walking the routes of its buried rivers? What might be the impacts of contemplating the hidden waters that run underneath its asphalted surfaces? How can urban geographies be re-imagined by tracing the journeys that bring a light bulb into the home? How can different understandings of urban politics be gained by exploring on foot the historical influence of transnational corporations, or the webs of companies and institutions involved in international oil? These are some of the questions posed by performances in London by the arts collective PLATFORM since it was founded in 1983, with a commitment to social and ecological justice. I will return to them shortly but I start with them here to signal my aim in this short essay to address urban questions from the perspective of artistic, cultural and performative practices, and to consider how they might speak in challenging ways to wider concerns about theorizing, researching, understanding and struggling for better cities.

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There has been a remarkable surge of interest in cities and urbanization in recent years across a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. This has been associated with a profound reconsideration of the relationship between social and spatial relations indicated by references to a 'spatial turn' and a 'reassertion of space in critical social theory' (Soja, 1989), whereby urban spaces are seen not merely as containers for or outcomes of social processes, but as a medium through which they unfold and as having constitutive significance themselves. Much work in this field has been interdisciplinary, the result of efforts to work across and between disciplines, to combine and rework insights and methods derived from different specialisms. Indeed, the complexity of cities and the processes through which their spaces are produced *demands* approaches that, if not necessarily identifying as interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary or postdisciplinary themselves, at least without considering carefully the distinct challenges and contexts signalled by each of those terms (Sayer, 1999; Schoenberger, 2001; Rendell, 2006: 10–12), are as a minimum open to the perspectives of different disciplines. Rather than exploring urban questions in these disciplinary or interdisciplinary contexts, however, I turn here to critical engagements emanating from another significant site; that is, contemporary arts and cultural practice.

When art is considered in relation to the urban it is often in terms of works designed to enhance public spaces aesthetically, and more generally of products and practices that are part of cultural strategies of urban redevelopment and 'regeneration'. Such public art has gained important economic, social and cultural status and has attracted considerable discussion and debate. Some of this has been critical, drawing out the selective practices often favoured in such work, as well as the particular social interests served. As Malcolm Miles comments, 'much of what has been published in urban studies, cultural and urban geographies, and cultural policy emphasizes the role of cultural institutions in urban regeneration while ignoring more radical forms of practice that irritate those institutional structures' (2004: x; see also Deutsche, 1996). In referring to intervening in cities, my focus is on such radical practice that has developed in recent years alongside and at times in dialogue with critical urban theory and that has also been associated with other terms that include 'critical spatial practice' (Rendell, 2006), or what I have termed 'arts of urban exploration' (Pinder, 2005). These terms have their own histories and geographies, but at the most general I have in mind practices that are *critical* and *politicized* in relation to dominant power relations and their spatial constitution, that are involved in but frequently disrupt everyday urban life, that make use of artistic and creative means to question and explore social problems and conflicts without necessarily prescribing solutions, and that resist the processes through which urban spaces are currently produced in the interests of capital and the state as they seek out and encourage more democratic alternatives. While reviewing such diverse practices is clearly beyond my scope here, I want to argue that attending to them can bring out important ways in which urban questions are currently being engaged.

Maps for the outside

The work of PLATFORM referred to above questions and unsettles understandings of cities and specifically London by uncovering elements that are hidden or buried. This may be by proposing the restoration of lost rivers, by excavating the pre-history of the city, or by tracing international flows of trade, finance and investment. The group combines art and collaborative research with campaigning, and it frequently draws together different collaborators depending on the specific project. Much of its recent research and practice has centred on the oil industry through a long-term initiative entitled *90% CRUDE*, and on 'unravelling the carbon web' to use the title of one of the projects from this. A recent manifestation is an operatic sound walk entitled *And while*

London burns, written by John Jordan and James Marriott and produced by PLATFORM in 2006, which leads participants through the financial city on the scent of one of its largest companies, BP. Attention is directed to offices and buildings that house individuals, institutions, agencies and corporations connected to BP, and to the 'intimate dance' between them as they court each other or enter into a 'warm embrace' within the so-called square mile of the city. Elements of this carbon web are revealed through the unfolding story of an anguished finance worker whose disillusionment has led him to the verge of quitting. He is haunted by images of collapsing civilizations, of ruins, of his own broken relationship, of 'the warm stinking breath of this simmering city', of 'a sprinkling of black dust everywhere' resulting from endless burning, of minuscule parts of Nigeria, Iraq, Siberia and other places 'lodged inside my lungs, pumped, refined, burned from oil field to blood stream' (PLATFORM, 2006).

Walking is also used by PLATFORM to investigate aspects of public space and corporate culture in a less apocalyptic and more dialogic register through group walks and associated discussions. Creating spaces or routes for public conversation has long been a key concern of the organization, including through an earlier related project entitled *HOMELAND* in 1993. Described as a 'nomadic public dialogue', this explored Londoners' ideas of home and their emotional connectedness with lands and peoples on which their lives depend. Focusing on the metaphor of a light bulb, it addressed the routes taken by that commodity's components and the energy needed for its illumination. Such performative events enable novel ways of conversing about the interconnectedness of cities and of re-imagining their spaces collectively, in particular rendering palpable the connections between London and other places, and opening them to critical reflection and debate. In this way they complement maps that use more conventional means to show international connections, for example, 'The Niger Delta in London', which traces companies and institutions connected with Shell's activities in Nigeria, and that was produced in connection with PLATFORM's 'living memorial' to Ken Saro-Wiwa. This memorial marks the 10th anniversary of his execution along with eight Ogoni colleagues, by the Nigerian state, for their political campaign against the actions of oil companies in the Niger Delta (Rowell *et al.*, 2005). Commenting on the awareness-raising potential of such maps of 'global implication' and of related campaigns, Doreen Massey notes how they are 'an engaged attempt to rearticulate relations', a 'way of encouraging a politics, and even more fundamentally a sensibility, that is outward-looking' (2007: 206). The distinctive geographical imagination they embody throws open questions of the identity of London and Londoners in productive ways, she argues, demonstrating the need to understand the city in terms of wider connections and relations while at the same time suggesting the potential of the city as a site of political responsibility and an arena for political engagement.

Insightful urban mappings are also emerging from a range of other current experimentation in visual culture, art and activism. Among them are radical cartographies of collective and collaborative research groups, which include Bureau d'Etudes, Multiplicity and the Counter-Cartographies Collective. The first of these, for example, has produced extraordinarily complex wall charts or 'organigrams' to depict transnational power structures and to make visible ties between corporations, government agencies and numerous other organizations. Based on an oppositional stance to capitalist globalization, the group's charts aim to serve a pedagogic function in conveying information to a wider audience. Unlike many traditional forms of cartography, however, they aim not merely to reflect or to represent neutrally aspects of the world, but also to intervene in its conditions. As Brian Holmes puts it, they are meant to act as 'subjective shocks, energy potentials, informing the protest-performances as they are passed from hand to hand, deepening the resolve to resist [whether] they are utilized in common or alone' (2003). He thus describes them as 'maps for the outside, signs pointing to a territory that cannot yet be fully signified, and that will never be "represented" in the traditional ways' (Holmes, 2003; see also Pinder, 2007).

An interventionist stance is similarly apparent in approaches to urban questions in much contemporary arts and cultural practice more generally since the 1990s. This is especially among artists who cross over into activism or collaborate with activists, and who have moved beyond a focus on representing political issues to infiltrate and intervene in urban situations tactically for critical ends. While the intentions, means and effects of these practices vary, there is typically a concern to resist the commodification, surveillance and control characteristic of neoliberal cities, to prise open spaces and opportunities for collective critical engagement and participation, to provoke active involvement in and questioning of urban conditions, and to experiment with the means of artistic production itself, including through appropriating tools from the informational economy and spectacle through forms of tactical media. In the process such artist activists shift the emphasis away from art objects and towards situations and processes so that the city becomes 'a laboratory for dramatic experimentation' (Loftus, forthcoming).

In underlining the potential significance of artistic interventions for developing critical perspectives on urban questions, there are risks of simplistic celebration or romanticization. The ability of the art world and cultural industries to marginalize or absorb oppositional practices has long been well documented. Also in need of critical consideration are the ways in which art has become a prized asset for capitalist urban development, from processes of gentrification to prominent discourses of the 'creative city' and the 'creative class'. In part this is precisely because of its associations with creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship that are depicted as such vital ingredients of a vibrant economy. It is further important to recognize the highly circumscribed political reach of projects that remain in the realm of tactical and symbolic incursions, unless they are able to connect at some level with social movements committed to strategic action to bring about progressive change. Yet connections with radical political mobilizations are being made, especially through collectivist and networked ways of operating that cross aesthetic experimentation with political organizing in interesting and potentially subversive ways (see, for example, Holmes, 2007).

In this regard it is worth stressing that the political efficacy of projects and practices is not an intrinsic quality, for it can only be assessed in relation to particular contexts, connections and situations. It is nevertheless apparent that interventions of the kinds evoked in this essay can and at times do address urban questions in a challenging and provocative manner, confronting issues that go beyond narrow conceptions of the artistic or cultural to include struggles over rights to the city, and the potential for democratic participation in the appropriation and production of urban space and time. It is for this reason that I advocate attending more closely to existing and potential cross currents and collaborative ventures between urban theory, empirical research and artistic and activist practice, so as to deepen and widen the analytic and political edge of these interventions (Loftus, 2006; forthcoming; Rendell, 2006). Note, however, the reference is to cross currents and collaborations for, as a number of thoughtful commentaries on collaborative work have recently shown, it is through acknowledging distinct perspectives and bringing them together in particular ways that sparks of illumination are most often generated, rather than by simply collapsing them, wishing away their differences or instrumentally using one for another.

Cities of possibility

A number of challenges could be highlighted in conclusion. A prominent one concerns how the extensive critical theoretical work on urban space and processes of urbanization of recent decades, especially that concerning the social production of space and the politics of public space by writers such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Neil Smith and Rosalyn Deutsche, as well as by groups like the situationists, may further inform artistic practice, performance and intervention. The channels for such a dialogue

are varied. Publishing in print and online is an obvious means, but others stretch beyond university and art world institutions to include the physical, virtual and textual spaces and platforms provided by international art and activist collectives such as 16Beaver, the Center for Urban Pedagogy and Glowlab in New York City, City Mine(d) in Brussels, Barcelona and London, Sarai in Delhi and the Free University of Copenhagen among many others. In different ways they facilitate connections and collaborations around projects and initiatives.

Contemporary artistic and cultural practices in turn pose challenges to theoretical and empirical research within urban studies. Of these, I will briefly highlight three. The first concerns methods and ways of knowing the urban. Included here are questions about exploring, researching, representing and writing cities, and about finding suitable forms and textual strategies for particular projects. The kinds of experimentation that are the hallmark of much creative cultural practice, and their willingness to take risks with different forms, media and performative practices, are significant in this regard, not for laying down a path to be followed, which would be strewn with pitfalls for those lacking training in those fields, but rather for encouraging reflection on modes of presenting, writing and pedagogy within urban studies, on the interconnections between the poetics and the politics of textual strategies (Pred, 1995), and on the technologies through which cities are made visible as cities (Pile and Thrift, 2000). In addition to searching for new strategies, there is a need to reconsider earlier practices from which there is still much to learn, for example the radical 'geographical expeditions' developed by Bill Bunge and associates in Detroit and Toronto in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Bunge, 1971).

Part of what made Bunge's expeditions so challenging were the ways in which they called into question academic institutional norms and structures. This leads into the second issue that I want to highlight, which concerns the institutional means and structures through which studies of the urban are conducted. Too rarely the subject of critical self-reflection, the individualized and hierarchized modes of operating predominant in universities as well as the art world are thrown into relief when counterposed with aspects of the collectivism to which some past and present artistic-activist practice has aspired, though it has not necessarily realized it. This is especially at a time of the widespread corporatization and neoliberalization of universities when certain kinds of collaboration, team work and interdisciplinarity are actively encouraged, while a collectivist approach that might call into question the commodification of knowledge production and the deepening of competitive procedures is viewed as an altogether more dangerous proposition (Smith, 2000).

The third challenge concerns urban conditions themselves and attempts to forge paths beyond the closures of present. Critical urban interventions and spatial practices are based on the refusal to accept current conditions as inevitable and natural. Through imaginative means, they explore possibilities and enter the register of *as if*: 'as if I were another, as if things could be otherwise' (Donald, 1999: 19). Sometimes this is through collective practice; at other times it is through more individual experience. To return to PLATFORM's audio walk *And while London burns*, after participants have threaded through the streets of the financial quarters while following the scent of BP, and after they have listened to the tale of an increasingly disillusioned finance worker who quits his position in revolt against the system to which he has been contributing, they are finally led up the steps of a memorial for the Great Fire of 1666. From there they look out over the city. Having been assailed with visions of impending disaster, of spiralling temperatures and of floods submerging vast areas below, they hear the main protagonist pledge to stay in London and to struggle for a better city. Voices rise up. They sing no longer of apocalypse but of a 'city of possibilities'. At which point we might ask: what senses of possibility animate contemporary urban studies, and how might they enable the building of better urban futures?

David Pinder (d.pinder@qmul.ac.uk), Department of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, UK.

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Résumé

Récemment, d'intéressantes perspectives sur la question urbaine se sont dégagées au-delà des sphères de recherches, à travers le travail d'artistes et de professionnels de la culture. Dans un échange fréquent avec la théorie urbaine et le militantisme politique, et à l'aide de toute une panoplie de pratiques tactiques, ils se sont impliqués dans les villes et les spatialités de la vie urbaine au quotidien. En général, ils se soucient moins de représenter des thèmes politiques que d'intervenir dans les espaces urbains pour remettre en question, rediriger ou contester les normes et idéologies en vigueur; et pour créer de nouvelles significations, expériences, compréhensions, relations et situations. Il est rare de pouvoir inscrire ces modes interventionnistes dans le champ traditionnel des études urbaines. Toutefois, cet essai défend leur importance en soulignant le potentiel

considérable d'une accentuation du dialogue à travers et entre les théories urbaine et spatiale, et les pratiques artistique et culturelle, pour inspirer et élaborer des approches critiques des villes. Ce travail met en avant plusieurs enjeux spécifiques nés de ces interconnexions, significatifs sur le plan politique et pédagogique, et appelant à un débat approfondi.