

Blue Fence Actions

Tiny Revolutions at the Blue Fence in East London

Urban acts: Who builds cities?

The Docklands in the 1980s and 90s, King's Cross from the 90s to the present and recently: the Lower Lea Valley in East London, especially Stratford, Hackney Wick and over to Dalston, where a new transportation hub complete with monumental residential, business and shopping centre is being built to be completed before the opening of the Olympic Games in 2012. Little by little the so-called metropolitan "eyesores" are physically, infrastructurally and demographically regenerated. However, the often rapid changes resulting from large-scale urban and social regeneration draw increasing criticism. There is talk of a purely economically oriented tabula rasa principle which totally ignores the historical, ecological and sociocultural qualities of a place and considers neither the knowledge nor the needs of local residents. Furthermore, complaints are being voiced about the disappearance of heterogeneous zones and the increasing impossibility to appropriate urban space apart from existing patterns of action. While some are profiting from the "upgraded" areas and can fulfill and reflect themselves in them, others are forced to quietly disappear or are brought face to face with the loss of familiarity and identification. Between the profiteers and losers an ever increasing field of actors is opening up who are demanding alternative strategies to such more and more investor-oriented urban planning activities. Just as during the golden age of urban criticism of modernistic paradigms of progress (from Guy Debord to Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett), one demands the democratic right to the city and public participation in the shaping of urban spaces.

Never before were there so many transdisciplinary urban projects intermediate between art, architecture and theory, some already well integrated, devoted to a "bottom up" approach to urban development. In view of the increasing pressures of transnational capital interests which now frequently form partnerships with local governments (keyword: private public partnership), demands for civil rights are once again on the rise, participative models are reconsidered and local instruments of active participation are put to the test. "Urban Act" is a publication that provides detailed insight into the latest international developments. It presents groups, initiatives and projects in the field of alternative urban development, discusses strategies and

tools, indicates problems and limitations, and strives for the formation of local and international alliances. Numerous examples from different cities are given ranging from playful interventions to the development of powerful participative instruments. Common denominator is the search for new ways of urban action with clear emphasis on existing power relations and basic structural conditions. When the actual effectiveness of these “new” ways of urban action are clearly questioned, reflexivity not naivety is called for: “Are they temporary or lasting? Are they only critical, confrontational, oppositional? Or could they also be transformative, proposing something else, while radically questioning the existing laws, rules, policies, models and modes of working and living in the city?”

Adaptive Actions

For several years, the Canadian architect and artist Jean-François Prost, a member of the “Urban Acts” platform (PEPRAV, European Platform for Alternative Practice and Research on the City, <http://www.peprav.net/tool/>), is devoting himself to these questions. “Adaptive Actions,” his latest project, has brought him to the Blue Fence in East London (cf. SonnTAG 250, see link). Like many other artists and architects, he was both fascinated and irritated by the aesthetic and symbolic force of this blue architectural security structure. Apart from predefined instructions, can such a controlled area, planned using a strict “top-down” approach, provide opportunities for the appropriation of space? This was the question that Prost investigated both empirically and practically, on his own and through collaborative efforts during his six-month stay as artist-in-residence (from September 2007 to March 2008) at the renowned art institution SPACE in London. He researched local traces of subversive appropriation of space and documented graffiti, prohibited practices and other anonymous statements of protest and dissent. At the same time, he initiated “Adaptive Actions”: On one of his walks he found an empty can of paint which enabled him to determine the exact nature of the blue colour of the fence. He then purchased the same blue paint and started to paint components, plants and objects that he found in the immediate vicinity of the fence. To this day one can find occasional traces of his “space-activating micro acts”: blue-colour plastic chairs, rocking horses or ornamental palm trees, located in abandoned places within eyeshot of the Blue Fence.

For Jean-François Prost the area around the Blue Fence in East London was one of many urban settings for his project “Adaptive Actions.” In more than 20 other places from Amsterdam to Miami and Sheffield to New York this professional architect investigated and tested strategies

for the reinterpretation and reutilisation of existing spatial structures. His website www.adaptiveactions.net contains a photo archive of activities that he either discovered or carried out himself: anonymous trails, improvised shelters under bridges, tents on the roofs of high-rises, openings in demarcation fences and other traces of individual conversions of architectures which were originally intended for other purposes. Documented using numerous pictures and only short comments, the simple urban anthropological law is thus made visually comprehensible: a city is not just buildings and plans, but develops through its people making use of it. People who do not necessarily adhere to the laws of design and construction, or aesthetic specifications, but may well adapt existing architectures to their own needs.

Relational Aesthetics, Open Source and Structural Exclusion

In addition to photographs taken by the artist, this website also contains numerous entries from other “adaptive actors.” His call for public uploads of found or personal adaptive alterations points to the central theme of Jean- François Prost’s *modus operandi*: “relation building” and “resident collaboration.” Prost tries to involve as many local residents and interested people as possible and motivate them to discover or create other “adaptive actions.” He posts open calls for collaboration and the submission of contributions, and arranges workshops, group walks and joint dinners at various localities. About 20 people participated in two workshops and an Olympic Perimeter Walk in London. For two days the group, consisting mainly of artists, activists, architects, theorists and local residents, was engaged in an intensive exchange to “explore singular ways of thinking and activating disused, divided and controlled areas.” By actively involving both experts on urban matters and everyday lives in these discussions and actions, Prost tries to counter the predominance of autonomous authorship in arts and architecture with the formation of networks. In addition, both the physio-spatial work (Adaptive Action) and its visual representation (photography, video) are removed from the marketable copyright cycle. The temporary, transient actions at various locations remain anonymous while the photographs on the web are considered open source products and are thus accessible to all users.

What sounds temptingly simple in the currently dominant discourse of “relational aesthetics” (Nicolas Bourriaud) has its structural limitations in practice. In spite of the open call and the strictly democratic, non-elitist standards, the participants were positioned in similar areas of social space. Although they came from different geographic regions, ranging from Japan and Finland to Austria, and had different professional backgrounds and motivations for

participation, most had academic degrees and specialized knowledge about current urban discourses in general and about specific local situations. They used the same language, shared similar visual and verbal competencies and had read the same books. Most participants were also familiar with the field of contemporary art and had an extensive understanding of architecture. Current economic, political and social power relations and their physical and symbolic manifestations in urban areas were critically analyzed. While issues involving social exclusion and gentrification were intensively discussed in the context of “urban regeneration”, the social homogeneity of the group was taken for granted. Nobody was surprised about the structural exclusions of social actors who were not familiar with the discourses and institutions of contemporary art and architecture.

Institutions: SPACE!

The structural and institutional setting for the project “Adaptive Actions / London was the renowned art institution SPACE located in the Olympic borough of Hackney, about 2 km from the future Olympic village. SPACE was founded in 1968 by a group of artists around the op-art painter Bridget Riley in the then unused but now completely gentrified St. Katharine’s Docks, northeast of the Tower Bridge. To this day the initial intention of SPACE to adapt empty buildings to provide artist studios is still the most important mission of the now 40-year-old institution. SPACE calls itself “the leading provider of studios for visual artists in London.” Affordable studio space in 18 buildings is rented to up to about 600 artists. Most studios are located in empty industrial and commercial buildings in East London. In addition to providing studio space, SPACE also plays an active role in the cultural life of Hackney. It administers a gallery, an artist-in-residence programme providing living and studio space, and a collaboration programme especially for the integration of marginalized local residents. Since 2005, SPACE holds “Legacy Now!”, an event which aims to “address the need to consider the impact of the Olympic Games and redevelopment on the East End.” The “Olympic Artists Forum,” which is also closely associated with SPACE, is defined as “an information and events platform for artists and creative practitioners engaging with the Olympics and the changing cultural landscape of London.” (www.spacestudios.org.uk)

From the very beginning of Jean-François Prost’s stay as artist-in-residence, urban regeneration, art and Olympic Games was the omnipresent theme at SPACE. It is therefore not surprising that his attention was directed toward the Olympic Park and the Blue Fence. At the end of his stay Jean-François became directly involved in the Olympic activities of SPACE:

During the 3rd Olympic Artist Event in March 2008, he presented a video documentary of his “Adaptive Actions” project in London (<http://www.adaptiveactions.net/information>) which was very much liked by the official representatives of London 2012. Although Jean-François Prost and the participants of his workshop were looking for counterstrategies to official spatial and visual policies in the vicinity of the future Olympic Park, they ultimately became a legitimized and much appreciated part of them. How the integration of numerous micro revolutions can result in a powerful bottom-up movement against economically oriented top-down planning remains to be seen. From today’s perspective the numerous “tiny revolutions” at the Blue Fence seem to be more than romantic, playful or defiant responses which can now symbolically comment on the prevailing system of rigorous demolition.

Judith Laister

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Translated from German by Herald Keller