

City 2.0

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The city—that object of ever more detailed study—is once again the focus of our attention. With this book we would like to get everyone to observe, experience, and undertake new adventures in their day-to-day surroundings. In doing so, we invite you to take a very close look at things you're already familiar with. This is a new type of search, in which we can all assess new ways of defining emerging means of thinking "urban."

Cities, megalopolises... conurbations of every size are where stimulating, new, creative, and inventive phenomena continue to percolate, but they are also where today's social tensions most often flare up. They're home to the world's most glaring economic extremes, along with contradictions and absurdities of all types. The system we live in has made our daily city experience extremely complicated: we rarely eat anything that hasn't travelled by plane, train, or boat on its way to our plate; we produce huge quantities of waste that we no longer know where to hide; we persist in using a mode of transportation that occupies about eight square metres to move a single person.

Our "quality of life"—living space, pollution, garbage, traffic congestion, grocery prices, the general cost of living—essentially define our urban experience. While these have been longstanding features of this experience, a multitude of proposals, reactions, projects, and ideas have emerged from almost every corner of the globe to address them. The most interesting are those that envision a different urban reality structured around the mitigation of these problems. Given that these problems persist or are even becoming greater challenges than ever before, it is in our interest to investigate solutions today, and rethink some of our urban fundamentals and explore new ideas about the city. If we look at problem resolution as the starting point, we can no longer rely on the canonical tools of modern planning when designing and managing our urban space. The tools needed are new, and they come with no instructions in the box. They were developed not as ideals, but as answers. As such, these tools are created by new attitudes: they are born of necessity. They are imbued with

the ethics, motivation, and deeply felt commitment of all those who (re)invented and (re)applied them.

To consider this scenario more closely, we decided to concentrate on particular actions that define—though perhaps not obviously—our everyday reality: walking, playing, recycling, and gardening. We posit that starting from *these* actions (and not others) to create new tools and prospects might provide a springboard for imagining our cities along different lines. In Western culture, these four actions are not currently ranked as essentials of planning and managing the urban, or at least not in the way that fundamentals like working, sleeping, and eating are. In a fit of *reductio ad absurdum*, we could assert that for many municipal officials (likely urban residents themselves), walking, gardening, playing, and recycling paradoxically constitute no more than four lines on a spreadsheet in the annual budget, never entering the realm of real-life, human "actions." Beginning from ideas, projects, initiatives, research, and essays generated around these specific actions, we are in a position to discover an incredibly varied range of possibilities we have not yet thought of or turned to, in order to radically rethink the urban experience.

Very often, it is simply a question of giving a new undertone to the significance of these actions: what does it mean today to walk, cultivate, play, and recycle in our cities? What value do these actions have in other cultures? It is a matter of finding within these "simple" actions (or in the meaning we attribute to them) the tools for introducing new priorities into our society. In fact, all these projects call for the triggering of changes only rarely physical (and if physical change occurs, it doesn't necessarily constitute the action's ultimate purpose): they all seek a new take, a new positioning on the issues raised, or they seek answers currently out of sync with the conventional wisdom(s) surrounding the issues themselves.

We are not interested in simply documenting these projects—presenting statistics and data to be analyzed. We are not out to shake you up. We are not interested in writing the history of the present.

Rather, we wish to note what is going on and in turn, allow the book itself to be one of the "motors" of change, like those persons and concepts we have involved in this project. Many of the texts and adventures replayed in this book share this approach. None provides a detached, coldly clinical analysis of what is happening out there; they instead reveal a direct, sincere, and personal involvement. Often, the people who write about and act directly on the urban space have personally experienced what they are talking about and actively participate in introducing new practices to our cities by experimenting in the first person.

So who are the human motors of this project? Architects, engineers, university professors, students, children, pastors, artists, skateboard enthusiasts, Sunday bicyclists, root eaters, pedestrians, municipal employees—in a word, everyone. That is, everyone who is ready, alone or in groups, to trigger radical changes in today's cities. They distinguish themselves through their readiness to take a completely different look at the problems in contemporary urban life. These actors and their activities interest us for various reasons.

First of all, as you will have grasped, we are quite naturally fascinated by the fact that *everyone* can take part in proposing a new interpretation of today's urban lifestyle. Bottom-up proposals and ideas that contribute to defining a new way of thinking about many aspects of our daily lives are explored, often in the first person. What interests us is that they offer a plurality of responses that would be impossible if they were formulated the other way around, from the top down. At the same time, because these strategies are proposed by users themselves, we can easily imagine them evolving in harmony and step with changing urban communities, from beginning to end, and being linked more fundamentally to the necessities of the specific here and now.

But though we have selected actions that are "simple," we don't intend to imply that they are necessarily easy. In fact, many require a tremendous amount of

discipline, motivation, and taxing work. Nor do we exhort you all to participate in some of the new uses for our cities. Since university, Fergus the Forager has lived on what is found “in nature” in the peri-urban environment he inhabits: roots, plants, roadkill, and so on. In talking to him, it becomes obvious he doesn’t intend to suggest this as the route everyone should take (perhaps only a restricted community). His choice is an experiment that shows us a new way of fostering discussion and, at the same time, of relating to today’s reality of production and economics. The same could be said of the many newly converted “freegans” who are becoming more prevalent in our cities. Or of the many who decide to look for (or donate) a saucepan or a bed at zero cost on freecycle.org, instead of going shopping at the mall. Or of anyone who ascribes to the philosophy of The Compact, which takes the idea of reuse to even more radical extremes, critiquing and “threatening” our consumer society by exhorting us to go for at least twelve months without buying anything new.¹ Admittedly, this and many of the other practices proposed exist in the urban space as a criticism of social and economic models, but at the same time they could not exist without that (imperfect) model, or if the city wasn’t there to sustain this new economy of exchange, barter, and reuse.

Nor are we suggesting participatory or collaborative models as a solution for all the tensions and problems raised by cities. We know well the limits of these approaches. At the 2008 Venice Biennale of Architecture, Markus Miessen, one of the editors of the book *Did Someone Say Participate?*² and an old hand at setting up alternative project models, shed a cynical light on the limits of these approaches. Having tested them in the first person, he asserts that a project based on democratic participation or the bottom-up model needs the interference of an outside voice in order to be carried out effectively. Miessen even advanced the controversial hypothesis that when an urban planner, or any entity, decides to put a participatory process of this type into action, perhaps they really do so only in order to take part in a process they would otherwise be excluded from—or perhaps to ensure positive

local reception (a measure of success) by discussing it in advance with all affected.³

What seems important here, and what these individuals and the urban phenomena they set in motion perhaps have in common, is their prolific capacity to trigger a “disturbance,” a certain discomfort in the predefined system. They contribute to an erosion of some established notions of urban comfort; they undermine conventional wisdom but don’t necessarily confront it head on. Many of the projects presented here arise in a definite territory of friction and tension between the daily lives of urban residents and what would otherwise be considered the norm proposed by the city. In its physical presence, urban space today attests to the tensions between the various realities at play. We think of the countless protruding metallic turtles or starfish that are starting to populate our public spaces in order to prettily prevent “inappropriate” users, like skateboarders, from using parts of the shared environment that might ideally suit their needs. Reacting to news that his New York Times building had been scaled by a series of daredevils, architect Renzo Piano admitted he hadn’t thought of this type of interaction between buildings and people (he was concerned about graffiti). But basically, Piano feels that buildings are not built for climbing.⁴

Our cities are filling up with barriers that shine light on the friction between a will to welcome and, at the same time, to regulate the use of its spaces: sonic deterrents aimed at youth, metal bench dividers that let one to sit up but not lie down. Sarah Ross’s solution to the latter: wear foam-enhanced bodysuits that allow a person to find a little peace where the city would impede it. Other impediments to occupying urban space can be overcome by the recetas or sly self-buildable “prescriptions” of Spain’s Santiago Cirugeda, an architect whose repurposing of disused urban space is featured herein. Cirugeda’s recetas find creative ways of legally getting around something the law prohibits. For instance, in most densely packed cities, getting permission to add a room or storey likely involves a lengthy bureaucratic nightmare. So Cirugeda simply refined his question:

“How do I add a room without adding a room?” His answer is a compromise: ask the authorities for a permit to build scaffolding in order to remove some graffiti from your building’s walls—city hall will likely thank you for your proactive beautification efforts and grant you a permit for a few months. Cirugeda’s “scaffolding” effectively gets rid of the graffiti, yet it functions fully as an extra room for the building.⁵ You have no graffiti? Again, we remind you that this book calls on your own creativity—we’re certain you could solve that problem. By reformulating the definition of what legally “enlarging one’s home” might mean, the recetas provide a lovely summer addition to any suitable dwelling.

It is important to note that this publication does not intend to be a direct criticism of mayors, urbanists, planners, lawmakers, and so on in conducting, managing, and planning life in our cities. On the contrary, our goal is to tease out the wealth of new ideas that have come from select solutions, and to enable a look at our surroundings with brand new lenses. These new lenses include a wide range of urban phenomena not often considered. We are intrigued by Ocean Howell’s essay, which exposes how the controversial relationship between skateboarders and municipal authorities has developed over time, and how skateboarders can rather cynically be used by planners as “deterrents” to keep individuals considered even more detrimental to public order from venturing into urban space.

The guerrilla actions undertaken by Richard Reynolds and his growing army are aimed at establishing a new relationship with the decision-makers (as well as introducing aesthetic variety and bringing biodiversity back to the city). The same may be said of the Urban Repair Squad, a group that acts in the city’s place, designating their own crosswalks and bicycle lanes. While municipal authorities may rush to repaint the streets as they were, it seems that persistence can eventually wear down city hall. When these unofficially stencilled lanes are left untouched, they are generally respected by drivers. It is a story that continues to unfold in several cities: a plurality of responses where the city only sees clearing the streets.

We think that the authors of all these projects, ideas, and writings contribute to broadening our perspective on new possibilities and new practices. We would like to collect all these strategies, ideas, and projects as a sort of manual (and we know that our toolbox could be bigger) for use by those who wish to start thinking differently about the everyday and perhaps even contribute to our research one day.

Like all those we asked to contribute, we are interested in inspiring a new modus operandi, promoting a *productive* critical attitude, becoming involved in a world that in reality is already there, at everyone’s disposal. In many cases, it is enough simply to change the way we look at an object or a material—its purpose or how it works. Who says we must always start by drawing up a blueprint to understand how to plan a public space or must view recycling as merely an industrial affair? Why continue to produce new materials and not begin using what already exists and is readily available, as Omar Freilla has proposed with his ReBuilders Source, and Fölke Köbberling and Martin Kaltwasser have proposed in *City as a Resource: One Man’s Trash Is Another Man’s Treasure?*⁶

This book intends to show that there are simple means at our disposal, and all we have to do is come up with one of the infinite ways of applying them. Who says that a pair of pants can’t become an improvised swing for resting anywhere we like in the city, or that a pair of shoes can’t be a means of generating energy, or that the city can’t be a big plaything for exploring, or that a cardboard horse’s head is a useless tool for planning a park, or that recharging your fluorescent lamp at a neighbour’s for twenty minutes isn’t perfectly capable of halting an unpopular building from going up in your neighbourhood? How many things can you do with an adhesive, a spray, or a plastic bag? In reality, all our research tends to demonstrate that it is possible to find potential actions, actors, and instruments with this intentional internal energy to help devise new arrangements and to see beyond simply feeding into the systems already set in place. This transports us into a marvellous, more adventuresome, almost

magical world, where your garbage bag takes on a new significance and actually becomes something else.

These actions and the new phenomena they refer to often spawn fanciful neologisms and confer new meanings upon existing expressions: freegans, trash safari, green workers, critical mass, shared space, guerrilla gardening, precare, Dumpster diving, and parkour are some of the terms that refer to new ways of eating, using abandoned urban space, conducting exploratory tours in search of cast-off but potentially useful items in the garbage, and creating new forms of employment. Taken together, though some are new and some are retooled, the very names of these notions work to inventively render them amenable for *everybody's* use. Some, like "critical mass," have been around for ages, but in their new context, they are no longer abstractions of academic discourse, but new names of creative events and movements for people to explore, should they wish. Others terms are cleverly pragmatic: a "trash safari," translated here from the Spanish *safari basura*, is a more compelling way, perhaps, to say "stealing the good trash before the trucks get it." These terms engender an innovative atmosphere and a new attitude: they are well worth acquainting yourself with. We hope to open the door.

All these actions with their infinite facets also introduce to the urban space a new dialogue among the individual actors, the group, the crowd, and the others. Many of these actions are no different from those we all perform every day, but their meaning changes because they are performed en masse.

Such is the strength behind Critical Mass,⁷ for example. From participating in this regular monthly rendezvous for several years, I have become aware of the phenomenon's incredible capacity. If you are alone on your bicycle, you are a small object on a paved street that all the motorists think belongs to them. (Who knows why?) You are a sort of marginal annoyance. But if along side of you, in front of you and behind, there are another five hundred or a thousand like you, the balance tips: the cars are suddenly

lost in a sea of bicycles, and it is the motorists who are uncomfortable, forced to proceed at the speed of a bicycle, relegated to the leftover space. The sensation is intoxicating for the cyclists involved, and the next day, when you are again alone on your bicycle, you feel prouder and safer, and that maybe you don't have to squeeze over so close to the curb, that you can take up space and go at your own speed. This spirit is what interests me in this action—a simple, temporary, legal action that fosters a radical change in our ideas about the street, its roles, within a pre-defined system. Critical Mass was not founded to lobby for physical change in the urban structure to benefit cyclists or for bicycle routes, but to simply suggest that we rethink the organization of public space, to place cyclists and motorists on the same footing, to dislodge the fixed idea of an established hierarchy. As playwright Tiziano Scarpa noted, not without a touch of irony, in Italy's *Abitare* magazine, "Bikes are part of the city. They're no less part of the city than anything else. They are part of the chaos. They look like transport for losers, the most vulnerable and the defenceless, but they are more heroic than a motorbike or a car... Bicycle lanes are a big joke. If a city is a city, there shouldn't be any protected areas, safe streets, protected routes, or pedestrian zones."⁸

The viability of this idea is obvious from the experiments by the Shared Space project in the Netherlands, where through the "simple" elimination of the distinction between bicycle lanes, sidewalks, and roads, a new idea of urban space is achieved, where not only the various roles—the hierarchy of motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians—are questioned, but also the commitment and will to guarantee a fundamental difference in speed among them.

What all these ideas offer is a parallel system. They make no claim to represent a new world that could arrogantly replace the one now in our cities. The essays and interventions collected here do not constitute a unison response but offer *everybody* a system of possible alternatives, to wit: City, version 2.0.

Notes

- 1 William Booth, "Nothing New Here—And That's the Point: In California, 10 Friends Eschew Consumer Culture to Live Secondhand," *Washington Post*, December 18, 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/17/AR2006121701122_pf.html (accessed October 26, 2008).
- 2 Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, eds., *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
- 3 Tomislav Medak, Marko Sančanin, Markus Miessen, Damon Rich and Joseph Grima, "Beyond the Singular into the Collaborative: How We Work" (video stream of round-table discussion, Venice Biennale of Architecture, September 11, 2008), *Archiphoenix Faculties for Architecture*, www.facultiesforarchitecture.org/program.php (accessed October 26, 2008).
- 4 Sewell Chan, "Architect Supports Changes to Times Tower," *New York Times*, July 11, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/nyregion/11building.html?_r=2&ref=business&oref=slogin&oref=slogin (accessed October 26, 2008).
- 5 "Strategies for Subversive Urban Occupation: House Enlarging with Scaffolding" (Seville, 1998), *Recetas Urbanas*, www.recetasurbanas.net/ref_a/a2/a2_eng.php (accessed October 26, 2008).
- 6 Fölke Köbberling and Martin Kaltwasser, *City as a Resource: One Man's Trash Is Another Man's Treasure* (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2006).
- 7 Chris Carlsson, ed., *Critical Mass: Bicycling's Defiant Celebration* (Oakland: AK Press, 2002).
- 8 Tiziano Scarpa, "We have bike races in the middle of the traffic," *Abitare*, no. 475 (September 2007), 205–206.