Symbolic power and urban inequality - Taking Bourdieu to Town

**Graffiti and the “commons” of the city:** what approaches to informal and creative practice could nudge us towards more valued shared environments?

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**Abstract**

How can we really demonstrate value within the shared spaces, or ‘commons’, of our built environments? How might we encourage spaces to emerge that work better as catalysts of voice and creativity, or, or even accept a level or creative disorder in the city?

Chantal Mouffe (2000) compellingly argues for spaces that host an agonistic plurality but Kurt Iveson (2007) insists our spatial and social commons are still defined by a presumed social totality, whereby anyone unable or unwilling to embrace its values must be anti-social. He asserts ‘for some every act of graffiti is vandalism, [whereas] for others it is an affirmation of life in the city… The question becomes how [to] handle this disagreement’.

In respect of graffiti, social totalities as alluded to by Iveson, may assume graffiti practice represents ‘symbolic violence’ in all contexts. However, the Graffiti Dialogues Network hosted from the Design Against Crime Research Centre, understands from diverse makers of informal visual street interventions, that they also experience symbolic violence via aggressive or unsustainable strategies to prohibit practices or physically remove their work. Further, city strategies and environmental specifications to control such behaviour can inadvertently exert symbolic violence over the voices of wider publics.

This paper discusses learning from workshops and research recently conducted through the Graffiti Dialogues Network at Central Saint Martins. It presents recent examples suggesting the commons of our cities are brimming with scope for sustainable and resilient spaces to afford non-negotiated engagement and open argument, about graffiti and creative practice in the city.
Introduction

This paper is organised in seven sections. In the first section I review six projects which offer an alternative vision of how the public space might be shared and how the “commons” could be understood. In the second section I argue that it will take advanced practices of creativity and informal play, acted out as agonistic kinds of discourse, within the widest sense of the spatial urban “commons” in order to really give people a voice and to allow cities, as I describe in the third section, to hear what citizens actually value from their shared spaces. In doing this I suggest, in section four, that we can learn from a number of approaches related to graffiti and street art practices, to be able to move things forward from what I can only describe in section five as exaggerated scenarios of control in the public realm in terms of who is permitted to do what and the resultant ideas about “spatial injustice”. Also, to allow more people to feel included by the material environment. Finally, in section six and seven I argue we need to re-imagine multiple possible interpretations of the public realm, in order to better dovetail valued experiences with everyday experiences.

Before proceeding I wish to provide some definition of a few of the term I use within this paper.

Agonism

This draws on an ancient Greek term defining organised spaces for contest where even if there is only one winner, there may be many participants. Chantal Mouffe (1999) and others since, have proposed agonistic space as spaces where truer democratic a struggle can legitimately take place.

Spatial justice

As an antidote to urban inequality, this draws on ideas of fairer distributions of opportunity, power and social connections, accessible within shared built environments, as alluded to but not named by Jane Jacobs (1961), and described in more detail, for example by Brown, Griffis, et al (2007).

Commons / Publics

In this paper I am not aiming to make a specific distinction between the term commons, or publics. However I have chosen to refer mostly to the term commons, as representative of the ways of organising value and shared interest, where activities and responses are created together, willingly or unwillingly, even if individuals are fuelled by self-interest. Boiller (2008) states ‘a commons arises whenever a given community decides that it wishes to manage a resource in a collective manner, with special regard for equitable access, use, and sustainability’.

Graffiti Dialogues Network (GDN) www.graffitidialogues.com

An unusually diverse commons of invited participants, connected through online and a series of themed workshops and related events as ‘safe’ spaces for debate and sharing practice, hosted via the Design Against Crime Research Centre at Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design. All involved in the GDN share a common interest or specialism related to graffiti but represent hugely disparate agendas in this field. Participants include graffiti writers, but also other artists, designers, urbanists, local authorities, police, crime prevention professionals, place managers, cultural and social engagement representatives, urban geographers, anthropologists, ethnographers, and more.

1. 6 OF THE BEST?

I start my account in a positive spirit and offer six examples of projects I learnt about through the Graffiti Dialogues Networks (GDN), which show interesting signs of how values and ideas might be negotiated in the public realm.

In response to local authority action on street art in Barcelona, DIFUSOR set up a festival of street art, using key, agreed and numbered walls around the city. Some of these ended up being maintained as semi-regulated spaces for graffiti writers or artists, and in collaboration with the council of Barcelona, they set up the “Open Walls” cultural initiative. There is an online database where artists can subscribe and are subsequently allocated a wall that they can use for painting their own murals. Difusor’s description for how the process negotiates the anonymity desired by some of the writers or artists and the permission desired by the authorities is as follows:

1. You can download, freely and immediately, authorisations to paint each of the walls.
2. When getting the authorisation, you can choose date and location.
3. Authorisation is valid, both in paper or digital format, for two consecutive days, including the selected date.
4. If the user sends us a picture of the mural, the system will show it on the website. Authorisation is generated in PDF format. It shows the name, surname of the user, and the date of the intervention.
5. At the same time, the system also sends a message to the authority hosting the project and to the local police as well. This message shows no personal information. It’s only a notification about an intervention taking place on the specified date.

When one of the first of these open galleries was established, it is reported that as different pieces were applied, the diversity of practices and approaches increased. Subsequently the number of tags in the surrounding areas reduced and residents have apparently said they value the more diverse variations of practice, compared with the occasional tagging that was the only format before. Xavi Ballaz of Difusor describes the project as centred on a model to manage non-commissioned painting in public space, which makes a positive contribution to social, cultural and artistic life in the areas where interventions occur. In 2011, Difusor organised the Open Walls Conference inviting practitioners from international locations to share parable practice and they are now seeking funding to evaluate their impact and are working with others, to explore how to expand the opportunities, to make this model scalable to other cities and neighbourhoods.

ii) STREET ART DEALER (C6)
www.c6.org

Street Art Dealer is an unusual hybrid of thinking, intended to benefit both the commercial and the public in regards to how each context consumes (or rejects) visual media. The system provides artists with a QR code to stick next to their work located in a shared space of the city. If a member of the public takes a picture of that code with their phone, they can access the online gallery to purchase prints of the work and find out more about its creator. The scheme marries ambitions to get more valued artwork on the streets and in people’s homes, to allow any talented but struggling or wanna-be artists to prove and earn their merit, via this form of on street gallery that allows viewers to vote with their credit cards. Created and piloted by c6.org, and set up with help from through Bristol's Media Sandbox, the concept hosts potential for all kinds of applications where different publics can draw on market-led competition between those making interventions to express in favour or even against items they find on the street, and promote healthy contests where the winner earns his or her way onto the street.

iii) SOUTHBANK UNDERCROFT

Starting in 2009 some of the Graffiti Dialogues Network team were commissioned by the Southbank Centre to investigate opportunities to get to know and work with young people who are using the Southbank Undercroft space as a public tagging/ graffiti art site, and other stakeholders to promote arts practice and mitigate stakeholder conflicts. This partly covered urban landscape is internationally known by skaters, bmx-ers and graffiti writers but the Southbank Centre (the owners of the space) only knew skaters and bmx-ers but none of the visual practitioners.

Following nine months of conversations and observations at the space, the GDN team proposed a series of measures exploring how to link the previously unassociated painting and graffiti writing activities more closely into the cultural programming of the Southbank Centre. The site was already embedded in the
consciousness of many visitors to the area, who stop and freely wonder at the painters who perform their interest there.

One of the unexpected outcomes to follow, was a connection with Royal College of Art sculptor Neil Ayling who affixed blank panels to the walls in the space and once they had been covered by graffiti writers over a short matter of weeks, he removed the panels and used the colours and outlines defined, to cut the panels and re-sculpt them into three dimensional forms, which he exhibited in different contexts. The opportunity for this kind of reappropriation of graffiti into other practices and new contexts of publics throws open a myriad of possibilities to debate, disagree, become aware or simply ask questions of what other people in the spaces we share are doing and thinking.

iv) USCreates and LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

This collaboration started when Brent Council were forming their first graffiti policy in 2006 and included social change agency UsCreates. Brent had established a Graffiti Partnership board which was seeking to reduce graffiti but in parallel to develop social and cultural alternatives. The outcomes of their engagement have first, introduced a series of measures allowing young people to ‘rant’, while they debate and play, to make forms of creative practice, and second, have reportedly permitted a 25% reduction on spend on resources used to clean up graffiti tagging, and. With ongoing ambitions to develop inventive responses to issues of social health, education and sustainability, UsCreates approached street artists from Monorex, who had created popular rule-bound street art competitions, called Secret Wars. They developed this into versions of agonistic space for Brent via ‘Rantbox’ and ‘School Wars’.

Graeme Maughan of London Borough of Brent, explains:

‘UsCreates developed a RANTBOX, whereby young people could give differing views and opinions about graffiti and tagging. We took these views on board and used them views and other consultation responses in an interactive policy co-design event. The resulting thinking, actions and ideas has shaped Brent’s pioneering approach to dealing with graffiti.’

The rules of the School Wars workshops, which followed in response to the Rantbox, were contests of:

- 60 minutes
- No pencils
- Black and white only

Under these conditions, participants had to create a visual piece simultaneously against another contestant; the pieces are then voted for by others.

Prior to 2006, London Borough of Brent’s residents were reportedly profoundly dissatisfied, as their borough was at the bottom list for graffiti cleanliness and had an ineffectual police policy. The approach previously taken by Brent Council was simply to clean off the graffiti reported by the general public and local traders. However, it had become apparent that this was not tackling the issue effectively. This intervention formed part of a partnership approach, working with the police and the local community. There have continued to be multiple graffiti-driven arrests and anti-social behaviour orders issued, before and after the introduction of the more creative and playful elements to this project. However the council and police have acknowledged that the murals created have remained free from tagging or other associated forms of vandalism, which has certainly been helped by the rants and contests staged with UsCreates.

v) MURAL ARTS PROGRAM, City of Philadelphia

The initiative that has become Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program emerged from Jane Golden’s response to a commission from the city Mayor in the early 1980’s. Initially a component of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network, the approach was formalised as a City of Philadelphia program in 1984. Todd Bressi, currently
special advisor and interim director for the scheme, sees that the Mural Arts Program brings together ‘artists and communities to change people’s lives and to change public spaces, through a creative process that has its roots in mural-making’ (as stated at the Open Walls Conference, Barcelona, 2011).

The scheme relies on walls that are typically donated from private citizens or institutions to be painted. But prior to the interventions taking place the Mural Arts Program delivers workshops and takes on board desires and arguments from locals, city agencies, grassroots organizations, schools, philanthropies, non-profit organizations and creative practitioners, about what, who and how they want paintings to represent in their spaces.

Originally, the aim was mainly about redirecting graffiti writer’s energies to more accepted alternatives, after Jane Golden befriended them and challenged them to think in new ways. However the scheme also now encompasses multiple levels of making, engagement, and educational level activities and seeks to use the ‘restorative power of art to break the cycle of crime and violence in communities’. This ethos is summarised as ‘Art Saves Lives’. Perhaps unusually, the scheme has become so significant in the city that those without artist-painted walls are asking for their space to be re-visualised next, and graffiti writers and artists are lining up to get involved and make work too.

vi) LOUGHBOROUGH JUNCTION ACTION GROUP 7 BRIDGES project
http://loughboroughjunction.wordpress.com and www.7-bridges.org

According to the Census Deprivation Score, Loughborough Junction in London is one of the most deprived wards in the UK. It also ranks among the lowest levels of wellbeing, according to the Mayor of London’s wellbeing index.

The Loughborough Junction Action Group (LJAG) was set up by members of the community to seek positive responses rather than just allowing the area to become a harbour for concerns; to put Loughborough Junction on the map (as distinct from Brixton, Herne Hill and Camberwell); to foster the community around Loughborough Junction and celebrate the area, and to facilitate social events to achieve these things. Over the period of a year, various community groups were asked to define their aspirations for Loughborough Junction. Interestingly, many of the diverse views given pointed to some transformation or other of the area’s public realm. The residents wanted the environment to afford a wider mix of activities. Their combined ambitions suggested creative approaches to the publically shared landscape, is one of the keys to the area’s economic and social development.

The centre of Loughborough Junction is defined by six railway bridges, visible from one position at the junction of the two main roads. 7 Bridges is described as ‘an arts led regeneration project that aims to turn these bridges into a sequence of events which can start to define a place, engender a sense of community and identity’.

The 7 Bridges project was established to draw on the area’s artistic difference and social richness, to begin to creatively contest some of the previous challenges.

7 Bridges Project officer, Lois Acton’s aim is to ‘unlock the creativity of young people through grassroots initiatives’ and her efforts have begun to allow local people to express their views via drama, music, performance and art, in ways that are youth-led.

At the time of writing, she explained that of the interventions to date, a giant Ford Maddox Brown style mural (funded by the Lambeth Forum Network) was about to be completed, visualising local life, with the aim of highlighting the Loughborough Junction area and demonstrating that improvements can happen and are on the way. Additionally mosaic fossil murals made by local schools were now being finished, for mounting with other artists’ work on the walls of the Cambria Road bridge; music made by local children with local group Basement Jaxx, and great animations done by local schools have all been made available to be seen and heard via the 7 Bridges website, and commented on via the LJAG online blog. This blog provides an agonistic virtual space through which interested groups can also suggest or contest ideas, and are
encouraged to submit stories and proposals that may help nudge things forward, in their view.

While initiatives such as these have not been designed as agonistic spaces in the city, they represent an expanding pool of approaches that are throwing forward diverse opportunities to trial ideas and explore a symbolically more equal public realm. These kinds of approaches may also provoke in us other ideas about permitting open models of contest, through creative and playful practice in urban spaces. Viewed together, these examples suggest that spaces that challenge what was previously accepted as valued by all, or as the only form of ‘social’ or ‘acceptable’, should and can be allowed to defend or develop themselves.

The examples I have just discussed offer an account, to some extent, of how to address permissions to express value within the built environment and the urban inequality - or ‘spatial injustice’, as some might call it - represented by the lack of evidence, choice or even voice in decisions that are made in regards to what different people might do or even be able to dream of from our city spaces. I will go on further to discuss spatial conditioning that has occurred where we numbly accept the roads, streets and spaces that we are given, without questioning or contesting how they are used, configured or prioritised. I would suggest that the approaches given in this paper and those I have identified through my work with the GDN present possible formats for agonistic spaces that allow for formal and informal events of debate. The creative forms of contest or play I believe could provide workable outlets for different users of a space, to state or show more clearly on a level field what they think or would like from their material-social shared environments. The six project examples show that varied and contestable commons of a city can establish new uses and opportunities to realise value in physically shared environments. At its broadest, graffiti represents one commons among many, but interestingly, one that is continually dabbling in varying levels of creative practice and play, in attempt to represent what it values in built environments.

2. PERMISSION TO EXPRESS VALUE?

Graffiti is problematic because, despite much debate, nobody has really worked out how to establish what “interventions” and what “control measures” are really of value, and to whom. But the same can be said for our built environments. Neither discourses appear to have established any proven rigorous methodologies for demonstrating the worth of their approach in ways open enough to give others a chance to comment, contest the so called “evidence”, or make new proposals,

A 2005 CABE Space publication asserts that:

‘any of the people who use public spaces perceive themselves as being helpless in the hands of the government, the council, and anyone who may have power. They say they never vote because their vote would make no difference’ (Cabe Space, 2005).

Steve Chalke, founder and chair of international charities the Oasis Trust and Stop the Traffik, with MBE for services to ‘social inclusion’, says that poverty should be understood as the lack of choice or opportunity. The Graffiti Dialogues Network (GDN) have listened and recorded diverse perspectives on the topic of graffiti, and heard evidence from different agendas, suggesting there are still two dominant discourses about graffiti. The first comes from those who view graffiti as evil who think ‘it’s selfish, it doesn’t have permission, it’s not fair on the others in the city’, and needs to be cleaned up as it is a form of vandalism. The second comes from those who make the interventions, the graffiti writers themselves who think ‘we are some of those others, the system is selfish, it’s not fair on me or my peers, why should we need permission to make public communication? ’ These latter groups and individuals may assert that they are suffering from what Lefebvre refers to as spatial injustice (Lefebvre, 1972), caused by symbolic violence of the former groups, or present market and state driven forces, controlling the public realm.

In this context Chantal Mouffe recommends we make way for an agonistic democracy, where in the built environment, there is space given over, or afforded, for the diverse voices of urban struggles to disagree.
This presupposes that the “other” is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary,” i.e., somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question” (Mouffe, 1999, 4).

In his 2012 publication, Adversarial Design, Carl DiSalvo, works to build on Chantal Mouffe’s propositions and suggests we can embrace agonistic practice, as a generative structure for involving people via participatory design [and deriving form from this approach]. He highlights that ‘new sites and practices of contestation must always be portrayed and contestation never ends or is resolved’ (DiSalvo, 2012), and that these characteristics are both representative of adversarial design and core to agonism. But as a democratic strategy to avoid symbolic violence, might we not be over-interoperating Chantal Mouffe, in wholly embracing the need for spatial and social structures, which can only ever contest but never resolve? Or are we to understand here that material urban culture can only hold value while it provokes or facilitates dispute? If any other kind of proposal or intervention does reach a resolution, be it physical or political (small ‘p’), and is experienced in a context shared among strangers, is it only bowing to established power structures, or can we demonstrate value of particular interventions, without exacerbating symbolic violence to some groups?

Carried to an extreme, one could argue that any notion or practice intended to influence particular ways of behaving in a city always represents symbolic violence (through a limiting choice over what is experienced), motivated by desires for power within a field, according to bourdieuan interpretations of thinking, because some actor(s) can not control but rather only feel controlled by a particular formal or strategic urban shape. As a design practitioner, I struggle with the possible consequences of such a logic which could imply, for example, that a new proposal for street seating, a repositioned public service, or sustainable innovation for a transport system, are each exclusively driven by hierarchical ideals of social engineering, even nihilistic control/dominance.

For this reason I suggest that innovative practices such as those identified above, be given the space and opportunity to pilot and ultimately demonstrate how they can be used as specific tools to explore, re-imagine and debate in-situ new possibilities for how public space is used.

3. CONDITIONING

The symbolic power of the urban streetscape is unavoidable. For many of us the formalised ‘mark making’ (two- or three-dimensional) in public space goes unnoticed as we become used to environments or conditioned to use the most convenient routes and stop noticing what is there. For the most part, it is easy to adapt our activities and expectations on public space to what is afforded, yet most hold within them some dream about other uses of the city, other opportunities they would like, even if they are not exactly sure what those opportunities could facilitate (Delgado, 1999). Activities designed into the spaces we occupy are often still about controlling human behaviour as we transition between private environment A and private environment B. Do our dominant cultures perhaps train us to be used to leaving where we live at A; locking the door, walking, driving or riding along the road or transport system to get to work or shop, or socialise at some ‘destination’ at B, - and then returning to be able to expect the same next time we go out? While in theory we have democratically elected the shape and activities of the spaces we share, the marks and layout around us very much determine, or limit, the choices presented to us about what we can actually do and how we feel (Willcocks, 2008). In terms of how this conditioning affects our perception of informal elements we find in the street, urban geographer, Kurt Iveson suggests that:

‘the constant representation of graffiti as a sign of degradation and danger also serves to generate the very perceptions it claims to reflect … these representations create the reality in which many people feel uncomfortable in the presence of graffiti because they perceive it to be an indicator of danger’ (Iveson, 2009).

Under these circumstances, it can be very difficult to even begin to imagine or wish for significant alternatives. We are either ‘anti-social’ or we are ‘social’. This perhaps translates as, we either paint graffiti or we eliminate it. There could be another way, which, ironically could draw a lot from some innovative
strategies from those making and working with graffiti, to allow a greater mix of voices and values to be conceptually and spatially contested.

I would like to argue, linked to what has been learnt to date through the GDN, that to insist on actually engaging in battle with the two key discourses around graffiti, is somewhat missing the point. Before being able to demonstrate value of one perspective or another, we at very least, need a more level field, where voices are heard by all sides. Some practitioners associated to this area, are actively contesting spatial (in)equality and regaining wider social, environmental, and in some cases, economic terrain and there is much scope to explore how to develop this further. Via a variety of informal, playful, even creative practices, such approaches are forging possible models for wider agonistic debate both within and about shared urban spaces.

4. A CONTESTABLE COMMONS?

However, despite such evidence of good practice, in their wrestle against ‘the system’, angry graffiti writers continue to find no room to demonstrate or even communicate any value of their ideals to those who do not ‘play on their terms’. Conversely, the authorities charged to manage the environments they use, feel they have only the choice to respond to this anger, in controlling ways. This ritual dance and repetitive cycle leaves little space for either side to develop ideas further.

Outlining the process which led to the creation of the ‘creative commons’ for digital media, David Boiller describes the following.

‘The commons—a hazy concept to many people—is a new paradigm for creating value and organizing a community of shared interest.

It is a vehicle by which new sorts of self-organized publics can gather together and exercise new types of citizenship. The commons can even serve as a viable alternative to markets that have grown stodgy, manipulative, and coercive... The commons is a means by which individuals can band together with like-minded souls and express a sovereignty of their own.’ (Boiller, 2008)

Whereas virtually connected social networks have recently been able to work out and live through some ‘glory years’ in terms of freedom to choose, the opportunities for networks in the physical city have been largely pushing in a different direction, [perhaps necessitated by management /and calls to avert risk, rightly to keep people safe]. This has been justifiably motivated to keep people safe, but arguably executed in ways which leave decreasing margins for non-prescribed activity in our shared spaces.

Many graffiti writers consulted through the Graffiti Dialogues Network of workshops and research, allude to the idea that the present lack of choice over permitted interpretations and uses of shared urban space is detrimental at multiple levels of social, cultural, even economic development. A frequent argument is that public advertising constitutes symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984), and that its effects are abrogated by those who perceive all graffiti as deviance, property crime or antisocial behaviour, rather than artistic, creative or social practice. But some projects, identified through the GDN, have been exploring different ways of mediating conflict in public space around the issues of graffiti, as identified by Gómez (1993), Iveson (2010) and Gamman and Willcocks (2011).

Iveson does not recognise agonistic approaches per-se in his accounts, but what he proposes does nod in this direction.

‘Rather than assuming all graffiti writers are simply anti-social, we need to recognise that many graffiti writers care deeply about the aesthetics of their environment… Why not, then, put graffiti writers together with others who are attempting to beautify environments? Surely there would be disagreements about standards of beauty! But an airing of these disagreements would mean that they have the potential to be democratically negotiated… Certainly, this is to accept and even embrace a level of disorder in the city, to relinquish the fantasy of total control where everything remains
In terms of measures to ‘restrict’, ‘manage’, ‘accept’, even ‘promote’ graffiti, many continue to be proposed and implemented and rapidly rejected as ineffective or inappropriate, according to what is valued by one field, or another. In 1993, Marisa Gómez presented a significant account, juxtaposing ‘methods used to combat graffiti’ with a series of proposals ‘towards an integrated solution that recognises and meet the needs of the writers’ (Gómez, 1993). Over the decades since her account, there appear to have emerged few truly original strategies to negotiate this terrain. Rather, most have represented variations and developments on similar themes as she laid out, some with impressive outcomes, others less so. What I am saying is that there seems to be nothing new now regarding approaches graffiti and oddly, no one seems to be learning from anyone else! As Iveson says, ‘for all the resources that are devoted to reducing and eliminating graffiti, current approaches are demonstrably failing to achieve their goals’ (Iveson, 2009). Most graffiti writers and city powers alike are measuring success of their interventions according to their own yard-sticks. But these diverse measures range from a simple counting of visits or comments to a blog containing photos of your work; to collecting anecdotes from participants in a project; contrasting sold-values or clean-up costs of similar activities; right through to monitoring, tracking and prosecuting with counter-terrorist level technology, and more. Being so very different, such measures are near impossible to compare, especially while only selected other parties are allowed a say over what is being measured. We do not just need to get innovative about what material-social uses might be afforded in our urban environments, but first we need to get innovative about how to better understand and contest what is of value and to who.

5. BROKEN RISK SYNDROME

We are reminded of alternative challenges, in respect of perceived risks or threats in urban places, by CABE Space (2005):

‘The simultaneous rise of the risk and creativity agendas is one of the great paradoxes today … cities need to be inventive to adapt to 21st-century needs… Risk-consciousness rises when conditions of uncertainty the perception of powerlessness increase. Unable to control pressing issues from environmental degradation to crime, health hazards, or the imbalances created by globalisation, it mirrors the scenario of technology out-of-control… This affects public perceptions and the emotional frame which guides perceptions independent of the reality of risk, so overwhelming objective risk calculations. The sense of powerlessness, vulnerability and impotence begins to shape self-identity’. (CABE Space, 2005)

The ‘Broken Windows’ theory of Wilson and Kelling (1982) posits that failing to control ‘incivilities’ such as graffiti can lead an area to undergo a ‘spiral of decline’ into serious crime; but evidence is mixed. As discussed in the second Graffiti Dialogues Network workshop, held in 2011, graffiti also features in ‘fear of crime’ research and ‘reassurance strategies’ that aim to increase perceived community safety; a leading approach is that of ‘signal crimes’ (Innes, 2004). Increasing attention is paid to the crime/art balance (e.g. Halsey and Young 2006; Sutton et al. 2008) even within administrative circles (Morgan and Louis, 2009). From a methodological perspective, evaluation of crime prevention interventions have long addressed vandalism (e.g. Clarke, 1978) from a purely criminal perspective (and nowadays measurement techniques are advanced in this dominant paradigm).

In 2011, New Zealand Police, commissioned the Saatchi advertising agency to create a campaign which used graffiti mimicking the style of an internationally known stencil artist on the walls of Christchurch, to recruit new police in order to do something ‘extraordinary’ and presumably ‘keep the peace’ and uphold the country’s zero tolerance policies on graffiti, too.

When in 2008 Kees Keizer and colleagues from the University of Groningen published the results of their ‘Spreading Disorder’ experiments. This research looked like the case for urban disorder being defined through the knock-on effect of selected ‘incivilities’ that inspire greater and more serious ‘non-social’ activities and crime in the city –coined as the ‘Broken Windows’ theory (Kelling and Wilson, 1892) which
had once again been demonstrated, this time with statistical significance! The study appears to allude that a social totality, as described by Iveson (2007), really could be achieved if only we could rid a specific set of ‘non-social’ ingredients from the street.

‘The notion that graffiti writers are anti-social is simply wrong. Graffiti writing is a profoundly social activity’ (Iveson, 2009).

Some the project examples detailed above, represent some of how these supposedly non-social ingredients, may in fact be useful as methods to discuss some of the contentions around current assumptions of what the street should be.

6a. INFORMAL CREATIVITY

‘Of the many who find fault with it, a small minority will actually propose an improvement, which is then subjected to the same process, except that the original proponent gets to weigh in as a critic. Anybody who cares enough to keep the idea moving owns it. Over time, competing variants and improvements are adopted and discarded by ad hoc groups, which themselves persist, peter out, or mutate over time.’

This quote is not written about graffiti but about open source software outworking an agonistic process, as described by digital media practitioner, Carl Skelton.

According to Tim Brown of IDEO design agency, a key route to achieving open and change-making ideas is playfulness, because playfulness helps us feel better and helps us reach new creative solutions. Johan Huizinga tells us that human culture can only blossom through play, and in that form it develops itself (Huizinga, 1955). So what should this combination look like in the city? I do not want to insinuate here that every form of graffiti is creative in and of its own right. Rather, I am at least in part interested in what graffiti points towards, in terms of opportunities to openly address and rebalance urban inequalities.

GDN workshops, desk based research and conversations with practitioners - from crime prevention, academia, local authorities, place management, community engagement, and many forms of artists, designers and creators - led us to learn about an apparently growing pool of exploratory and creative interventions, formal and informal, that work hard to open up debate and opportunity to propose alternatives regarding who ‘gets up’ where and how to ‘grant voice’ to both graffiti writers and communities in manageable ways.

The project examples, described in more detail earlier, by no means form a definitive or even inter-related set. However, they do represent interesting and diverse opportunities to potentially demonstrate or contest what is valued in public space and certainly de-restrict opportunities for discussion, in terms of how our environments are engaged with. They are examples that, given the chance, show promise to translate to wider contexts, as forms of agonistic approach for negotiating our choices and opportunities within our urban environments.

6b. INFORMAL PLAY

Johan Huizinga’s (1955) approach to humans as characters that can only really develop themselves, their relationships and their culture through ‘ludic’ activity, can begin to help us think understand why informal play is perhaps the way that [some kinds of] agonism can best work themselves out among different and adversarial urban commons. Architects and academics from Queensland’s University of Technology Rawlinson and Guaralda suggest that ‘The ability to play freely in our cities is essential for sustainable wellbeing … [but that] while Urban Play is essential, it also finds itself in conflict with the city’ (Rawlinson and Guaralda, 2011)
Software designer and media theorist, Warren Sack’s interest in agonism is that it is ‘the ancient Greek word for a contest with a prize. In the sense we’re using it, it’s a way of understanding life and politics as a game or contest’\textsuperscript{16}. Similarly Hsokyns (2005) identified that ‘the agon comes from the ancient Greek meaning ‘struggle’, ‘fight’, ‘contest’, and ‘trial’. It is also a word used in Greek theatre describing a particular type of play that has conflict as the central theme’\textsuperscript{17}.

Of informal sporting kinds of ‘play’, urbanist Francesc Magrinyà (2008) identifies the case that the social relations among the participants emerge within public space, where the space affords them their particular preference of informal ludic activity. Both Magrinyà (2008) and Willcocks (2008) suggest that this active, informally conducted play, posits a series of codes for establishing interaction between strangers [and works out a familiar stage from which contest can happen].

Tim Brown of IDEO design agency, also recognises that even with informal play come rules - among children for example, he identifies that if one is playing ‘house’ and another is playing ‘store’ in the same space, the activity will fall down and the chances are they will disagree. Equally, he says we also need rules about creativity, rules such as ‘defer judgement’ and ‘go for quantity’, in order to start to break with those old rules which may not be working\textsuperscript{18}.

Brown highlights three kinds of play as important to generating creative responses: exploratory play, which encourages quantity and expression; constructive play, which encourages a hands-on involvement, to build, show and prototype ideas; and thirdly, role-play which can help prototyping in relational and social scenarios and help us understand where we fit in the discourse. He cites Bob McKim (Stanford Program in Design, Emeritus) who highlights that by adulthood, we are too often embarrassed; we often make apologies when communicating our wildest ideas. As children become formed into adulthood, they lose that inhibition and confidence to play and to try what comes to mind.

McKim’s approach helps us think about why we have found it so hard for so long to really express and understand what people might value or despise in built environments. Lifelong political, symbolic and material conditioning of how we can behave in towns and cities has strictly limited opportunities to play, to create, to express or to envision more innovative futures. If agonism could work in spatial practice, it would have to accommodate more varieties of uninstructed practices, for people to be able to try-out, to disagree and importantly to develop and prove worth of their ideas.

What would physical and social urban spaces look like if we could more easily and quickly prototype in them and debate those prototypes? Some of the examples presented through the Graffiti Dialogues Network offer strong hints, in response to this.

7. CONCLUSION: A COMMON SHAPE OF CHAOS

While many current dominant powers of the shared social and physical spaces of our cities may wish to project order and cleanliness (considering any matter or activity found out of place as a threat to society), others with less power criticise them that this excess of control is the very threat to humankind which poses many of the problems. If symbolic violence and urban inequality is about lack of representation or being heard in our ‘democratic spaces’, it is surprising that very few however, from either one side, or the others, seem to have realised workable, sustainable responses that demonstrate how more inclusive kinds of order, or disorder, in physically shared contexts, could better represent and allow argument over the expanding range of what is valued.

According to key authors including Jane Jacobs (1961), Richard Sennett (1992), Iris Marion Young (1990), Chantal Mouffe (1999), more recently Carl DiSalvo (2012) and others, a bit of chaos in the city is good for us, as people.
When Sennett, for example, intimated that the adult selves of humanity are suffocating under excessive structure, planning and purification, he proposed that dense, disorganised cities could lead us to be more sensitised to each other and grow into adults in the way we each manage our public lives. Under his calls for apparent calamity, there seems to lie a desire for people to relate and communicate to another more maturely, to escape from the varieties of symbolic violence which he identified as having emerged in public urban life.

Arguably, we still find the shared structures of our built environments a very long way from such models of ‘organised chaos’ as propounded by Sennett and others. Nonetheless, we do seem to be reaching a crescendo of trends towards consideration for other people in the generation of policies and interventions to manage or recreate places. Terms such as participatory, respect, consultation, community, collaborative, and others related, have now spread virally through disciplines of local authorities and government, of academia, health, social-science, urbanism, design, architecture, etc. We still specify our city spaces as divisions compartmentalised between private space and carefully selected, permitted activities in our shared spaces, many of which are centred on moving us along from private space A to private space B [especially in the UK]. Yet ever more we hear that we want to include others [through the strategies, practice and interventions related to urban place-making]. This ‘wicked problem’ (Churchman, 1967) is understandable since the public realm defines itself by a suggested connection between people who may not otherwise have anything to do with each other. But as urban anthropologist Manuel Delgado describes, individually we are public animals in public space (1999), and writer and psycho-geographer, Will Self has also asserted that there are problems related to violence and mistrust, that fall in line with our still-growing individuation and anonymity in cities (Speaking on BBC R4, 27 Aug 2008). As Sennett (1992) infers, community does not necessarily mean positive social bonds will be created among strangers. Accordingly, there will often be struggle over what actions and uses we can and cannot ascribe to the places where we coincide.

The ‘touch points’ of a design, an environment, system or service are where that device is encountered (interacted with) and the conditions of those touch points, in context of an urban commons, will present the resolution of the device in question and unavoidably effect particular behaviours and emotive responses (power or dominance over others), whether we like it or not. We cannot introduce ideas, designs or systems into a shared field of diverse actors and expect it not to form an ‘experience resolved’ and consequently be interpreted.

What would our cities really look like should we remove, or at least contest, every absolute that has come to define the systems and places we live in?

My point is that the commons of a city - the tangible shared spaces, even socio-physical ‘fields’ - are always experienced as resolved by those who share them in whatever state they are found in a given moment, no matter what level of ‘resolution’ the dominant power over that space hopes to have achieved or averted. A local environment that has evolved through disjointed plans and informal interventions will present a stage through which we are forced to take on an emotive experience, just as much as a brand new streetscape, finished precisely to its designers’ or planners’ will.

Indeed, agonism can only materialise via value-driven agendas to establish its approach. It is in itself a strategy that lies in competition with many others, and we need to trial and demonstrate in practice if it can work flexibly and sustainably.

It therefore seems important to imagine more specifically how agnostic spaces can work in real-life scenarios ‘where one side may win but the sides do not reach agreement’, as architect, planning practitioner and UCL academic, Teresa Hoskyns described at the Political Spaces workshops in 2005.

The Urban Lexicons project, realised by Rosanna Vitiello and myself (Vitiello and Wilcocks, 2011), has taught me that formally planned interventions and strategies play only a small part in ‘resolving’ how an urban space is emotively decoded and how it affects behaviour. The multitude of unanticipated, informal or unpredictable details inevitably also play an important part. These informal and formal elements have to combine to ‘resolve’ a shared environment that is experienced, interpreted and consequently acted in.
In terms of communication through the commons afforded by public spaces, Iveson puts it that ‘Public address’ and ‘public spheres’ are fundamentally dependant on each other … public spaces can not exist without instances of public address [that are] oriented towards a horizon of strangers’ (Iveson, 2007, 22).

We interpret every common or shared environment that we come into contact with, whether it hosts any formal attempt at ‘public address’, or not.

Subsequently, to suggest that all attempts to affect a particular response or behaviour simply reflect desires to symbolically exert power over a given field, or commons of the city, would stand on questionable terrain. Even to pursue the apparent idyll of agonistic spaces is to insist on one way of sharing the city rather than another. The outworking of agonism, in physical space for example, will infer new forms or strategies, which may or may not conflict with any other proposal, be it ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’. A street can only host one complete set of objective characteristics at any moment in time. Continual contestation with specific desire for no-resolution, in space will also be experienced as a resolution.

Even Christiania in Denmark\(^2\), arguably one of the most agonistic and alternative places to have emerged through recent European history, has had to establish a specific and agreed order in its disorder.

My understanding is that more agonistic approaches could help us develop inclusive and resilient strategies for the creative, playful and ultimately more inclusive place-making of many commons, not just graffiti, but for all kinds of activities hosted through multiple commons of a city. Flexible and resilient places are bound to be socially and economically more sustainable than non-propositions or stand-off approaches. But we need to try various developments from proposals such as those highlighted early on in the paper, to better understand what will work in different contexts and how. David Boiller (2008) argued that the ‘virtual commons’ rescued itself through a kind of open innovation. I believe we could learn from this approach to mature our take on negotiating and shaping the ‘material commons’ of the city?

Is a piece of graffiti symbolically violent because it has made an unpermitted or unsightly mark in space, or on your front door, over which you had no choice? Or is greater dominance of power and inequality represented by blanket implementation of streets with functionalist furniture, fortress security, and more space allocated to powered vehicles than those wishing far less transient, uses to be afforded within their spaces? I propose that we cannot know until we have the opportunity to creatively play at trying a wider range of approaches in different contexts to help people both argue about and envision what could be.

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1 Symbolic violence is defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a form of soft violence that represents an extension of the term “violence” to include various modes of social/cultural domination.

2 [http://www.difusor.org](http://www.difusor.org)


4 [www.graffiti-dialogues.com](http://www.graffiti-dialogues.com)

5 Some of the specific aspirations suggested, included

- Improve the street scape by fixing the pavements and introduce more trees and planters.
- Better shops to bring much needed employment.
- Increased mix of retail outlets to help increase local spend.
- Short term free parking to help sustain businesses.
- Improved health benefits by encouraging walking and cycling routes.
- New pubs and clubs to provide a night time culture which will reduce the sense of threat at night and draw people into the area.
- Improved pedestrian crossings over the busy roads particularly at the intersection of Coldharbour Lane and Loughborough Road and Hinton Road.
- Improved waste management.
- Introduce further green and public spaces.
- Improved infrastructure - free Wi Fi, better broadband as some of the area is at the limit of the Brixton exchange.
- Better and co-ordinated use of community centres.
- Additional facilities for the elderly.
- Improved transport connections - increased use of train links with better accessibility - bus shelters with time display for bus arrival.
- Reduce crime and gang membership by providing opportunities for training and development.
- Training and personal development.
- Improved locall networking.
- Improve educational and childcare facilities

6 www.7-bridges.org
7 www.graffitidialogues.com
8 http://loughboroughjunction.wordpress.com/category/the-l-j-action-group/ and www.7-bridges.org
9 This draws on ideas of spatial justice as an antidote to urban inequality, as the alluded to but not named by Jane Jacobs (1961), and described in more detail by Brown, Griffis, et al (2007)
10 A clear definition of discourse, as usually associated with Michel Foucault’s writing has been defined as follow:
‘A discourse is a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking). A discourse involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulations that characterise it. The discourse of “common sense” is quite distinct, for instance, from the discourse of modern physics, and some of the formulations may be expected to conflict with the formulations of the other. Ideology is inscribed in discourse in the sense that it is literally written or spoken in it: it is not a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of “ideas” and is subsequently embodied in words, but a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing’. Belsey (1980 pp.5)
12 www.graffitidialogues.com
13 Ibid.
14 http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2012/agonism-politics-consensus-art-democracy
15 http://www.ted.com/talks/tim_brown_on_creativity_and_play.html
16 http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2012/agonism-politics-consensus-art-democracy
17 http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~ucwagpa/politicalspaces.htm
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