The Street Painted in Red Herrings

What can we learn about graffiti in seeking a more valued, more creative and more authentically negotiated ‘street’?

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Graffiti Dialogues Network

‘Safe’ workshops and forum for debate and contest

Welcome to Graffiti Dialogues

Seminar series and Debates, supported by DACRC practice-led research.

Dialogues With Graffiti for the Twenty First Century City

Presentation by Lorraine Gamman, Marcus Willcocks, Spike Spindike, Adam Thorpe, James Woodward (2009). This document introduces some of the background research conducted that is related to this project. Download PDF
1. Why is graffiti a red herring?

In the context of ‘The Street’, there is a lack of affordance for authentically negotiated common space. Graffiti variously symbolises its impossibility and its realisation.

The suppression and seduction currently bound to graffiti draw our focus away from really pressing issues related to design and the politics of the street.
Why is graffiti a red herring?
2. Why is ‘The Street’ a red herring?

**Abstract space** - ‘The Street’ of planning and urban design; a transitional space rather than a place; an environment where people are largely encouraged to move-along, rather than stop to use it as any kind of social opportunity or physical destination.

**Myth and Culture** - Multiplicities of subcultures, rather than any physical space. This is ‘The Street’ as adjective, invoking intimate relations with the physical street. Stigmatised in practice yet mythologised and recuperated as commodity.
The street as Abstract space

“You cannot play, you cannot touch the grass, you cannot breathe!

‘No dogs’, ‘no skating’, no nothing!”

Urban Lexicons participant, 2009
The street as Abstract space

“There is a complex interplay between the surface and the inscription. The planes of the metropolis do not determine the writing, but equally the inscription cannot completely govern the meaning of the abraded concrete or metal canvas. Rather what is at stake in these forms of urban graphology is an emergent struggle over inclusion, citizenship, entitlement and belonging.”

Michael Keith (2005)
“Public spaces cannot exist without instances of public address oriented towards a horizon of strangers.”

Kurt Iveson (2007)
The myth of the street: Subculture and Counterculture

‘The Street’ is a lived space of milieu and affect; the site of an everyday cultural politics that takes the form of symbolic action, culture-making, appropriation of spaces for lifestyle, and more.

It is also the site of ‘street’ politics and protest, engaging the forces of political power and hierarchy, but also acts of deliberative and direct democracy.

Each of these has a mythic aestheticised status in popular culture. Graffiti traverses both these subcultures and countercultures.
The myth of the street: Subculture
The myth of the street: Counterculture
3. Commodity

The commodification of graffiti appeals to the continued faith in the existence of a thriving oppositional, non-commodified, subcultural sphere.

Student protesters, Paris (1968)  
Nike Paris ‘68 campaign (c.2008)
Commodity

“Without the slightest hint of suppression or intolerance, the spectacle ensures that the appearance of real dissent precludes its real appearance. It becomes a part of that which it criticised, and [...] returns packaged to those who created it.”

Sadie Plant (1992)
Commodity

Hackney Gazette (Sep. 2010)

Ben Eine, “Twenty First Century City” gifted to Barrack Obama by David Cameron (Jul. 2010)
Commodity

“This is the graffiti paradox: whilst governments and cultures celebrate the form via the exchange of tokens of international or local treatise, the walls that serve as nurseries for these creative oaks are indiscriminately whitewashed by private companies and paid for from the public purse.”

Adam Thorpe, Graffiti Dialogue Network (2011)
Commodity

“Do something extraordinary” - NZ Police Campaign
“Seductive representations that excite imaginary investments conveyed through lifestyle media are routinely juxtaposed and integrated with themes imposed by government rationalities”

“Individuals are induced to apply themselves to specific tasks, or to imagine themselves transformed as they are exposed to the discourse of experts or the imagery of advertising.”

Sam Binkley (2007)
4. Control

Control: Graffiti and ‘The Street’

- **Suppression** - of ‘incivilities’

- **Seduction and Permission** - of ‘civilities’
Control: suppression

“Symbolic divisions are inscribed, and indeed replicated into physical space”  
Loïc Wacquant (May 2012)
Control: Seduction and Permissions

“There is no real or symbolic wilderness, just the omnipresent community into which the deviant has to be unobtrusively ‘integrated’ or ‘reintegrated’”

Stan Cohen (1993)

“To govern is to presuppose the freedom of the governed [...] not to crush their capacity to act, but to utilize it for one’s own objectives” Nik Rose (2005)
Control: suppression and seduction

How can a city and its dwellers “recognise that their ways of being as a public are not the only ways of being together as a public”?

Iris Marion Young (1990)
5. An ‘Agonistic Commons’

“For some every act of graffiti is an act of vandalism ... for others it is an affirmation of life in the city... The question becomes how should we handle this disagreement.”

Iveson (2009)
Street Art Dealer

Self-regulating contest and value, among urban artists and other publics
Southbank Undercroft

Research and pilots for cultural programming
Southbank Undercroft & Neil Ayling

Replaceable panels leading to sculptures
An Agonistic democracy

“This presupposes that the ‘other’ is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question”

Chantal Mouffe, (1999)
Loughborough Junction Action Group
7 Bridges Project

7 BRIDGES: A REGENERATION PROJECT FOR LOUGHBOROUGH JUNCTION

Overview

Loughborough Junction is located in the Borough of Lambeth between Brixton and Camberwell in South East London. The defining feature of the neighbourhood is a series of 6 railway bridges which are all visible from one particular point at the Junction.

7 Bridges is an arts-led regeneration project (and is hence the 7th bridge, connecting and reaching out to the community) which aims to turn each physical bridge into an artwork or event that will define a sense of place and engender a sense of community and identity.

The 7 Bridges project is overseen and led by Loughborough Junction Action Group. This Group is made up of diverse members of the community who are working towards the renaissance of the area, with the support of Lambeth Council, Awards For All through the National Lottery, London Community Foundation, the Evening Standard Dispossessed Fund, and other agencies and smaller grant making bodies.

http://www.loughboroughjunction.co.uk/

“...No performance so far, but a tremendous promise. This place is a busy road junction in the centre of a triangle of high-level railway lines. Each road has a bridge a few yards along it. This unique signature could so easily be an enrichment instead of an embarrassment, the bridges accentuated and dramatised instead of disregarded. It is a natural centre, so that there would be no fear of tickling up an artificial relationship.”

Loughborough Junction Action Group

7 Bridges Project
Perhaps an agonistic commons, one that is structured to afford creative and playful debate, disagreement and ideas testing, in public space, would help demonstrate and more authentically negotiate value for our streets.

“My city is not grey” Mene Tekel