A Study of Community-driven Interventions in Redesigning Urban Furniture

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1 INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to "The Seduction of Place", architectural historian Joseph Rykwert is insistent on the impact made upon the face of a city by its inhabitants. To Rykwert, the design and material qualities of a city are not passive, impersonal constants; instead, "you and I also made the decisions, however small...that go to make up the physical shape of the city" (Rykwert, 2004, p. 10). When considering the face of a city, many theorists are quick to establish the inherent inequalities in urban planning and design, and the way in which these inequalities manifest themselves in the space. Built discrimination based on gender, class, and mobility issues, and the intersections thereof, have been of particular critical importance (Jarvis, Cloke and Kantor, 2009; Petty, 2016; Evans, 2009). As one physical manifestation of urban planning, urban furniture reflects these same inequalities, in both its material design and its provision – or lack thereof (Lapalud and Blache, 2016). However, as this essay will demonstrate, urban furniture represents an arena in which Rykwert's principles of community-driven urban shaping are made explicit. By examining the various forms of discrimination present in urban furniture design, particularly through a feminist lens, this essay will provide examples of methods that disrupt the reciprocal nature of discriminatory urban planning.

2 INEQUALITY IN URBAN FURNITURE
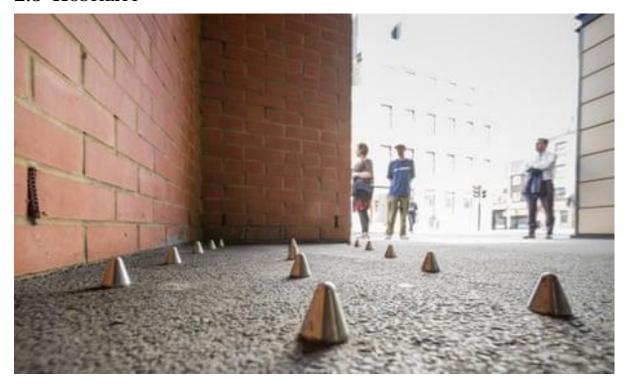
2.1 WHY URBAN FURNITURE?

The use of urban furniture as a tool for analysing urban inequality presents several advantages. Firstly, in what may be a fairly obvious point, urban furniture is materially realised. As artefacts of the design processes that shape cities, they hold true to Winner's technologies that reflect and embody political systems (Winner, 1980); indeed, Winner's own example of low-rising overpasses in New Jersey heavily overlaps with examples of hostile street furniture that will be discussed later in this essay. Secondly, despite being much smaller-scale spatial interventions than replanning road layouts or large architectural works, urban furniture can have outsized impact on its surroundings. Under an optimistic evaluation, appropriately designed furniture can foster local identity, reclaim space for urban residents, and promote safety (Yücel, 2013). It stands to reason that furniture influenced by unequal societal structures will provision these benefits in a similarly unequal fashion.

2.2 GENDER

The difference in experience of urban space according to gender provides one possible lens with which the inequalities in said space can be examined, as broader societal structures appear in material and analysable forms. As Kern writes, "As a woman...my gender identity shapes how I move through the city, how I live my life day-to-day, and the choices available to me" (Kern, 2019), as succinctly (but far from exclusively) elucidated in the experience of pregnancy, in which Kern notes her feelings of visibility, a lack of mobility, and – crucially –

of suddenly enforced embodiment. This is particularly apparent when discussing seating: the importance of seating for pregnant women, especially on public transport, is well-documented (O'Toole and Christie, 2022), but it has been shown that women with mobility issues are hesitant to assert their right to it (Olkin et al., 2019). Lapalud and Blache, of the Parisian architecture consultancy Genre et Ville, link this same embodied inequality to the more specific example of male-centric street furniture. Their forms – skate parks, pétanque fields – and their use, in which groups of men routinely dominate the provided infrastructure, are key indicators of the androcentrism of urban planning (Lapalud and Blache, 2016). As Lapalud and Blache make clear, urban furniture does not need to explicitly ban women from using it, but their design and usage lead to women feeling uncomfortable in taking advantage of their provision.

2.3 HOSTILITY

Anti-homeless spikes in South London (Corbishley/Demotix/Corbis, in Andreou, 2015)

The domination of space that Lapalud and Blache reference leads neatly to the punitive ways in which the targeted user group for an item of urban furniture is further reduced, by restricting its use by groups including "teen-aged boys, homeless and, above all, non-white men" (Lapalud and Blache, 2016). The devices used to discourage such usage include 'pig ears' on public furniture in order to discourage skateboarders (Howell, 2001), 'mosquito' noise deterrents that are designed to reject young people from public space (Little, 2015), and – in, perhaps, its most publicly recognisable form – spikes that prevent unhoused people from sleeping in visible areas (Petty, 2016). Petty draws particular attention to this last example, which he states as an "intelligible form of violence" that acts not as the avoidance of an encounter with homelessness, but as "an encounter with the forced absence of homelessness". Vitally, Petty also recognises an aspect of hostile architecture that is similarly

evident as far back as Whyte's "Social Life of Small Urban Spaces", which documented, in part, the attempts of people to use seating decorated with spikes and railings (Whyte, 1980) – in the name of an imagined 'public', public use of a space is reduced, and public spaces become "hostile and fortified against certain groups" (Petty, 2016).
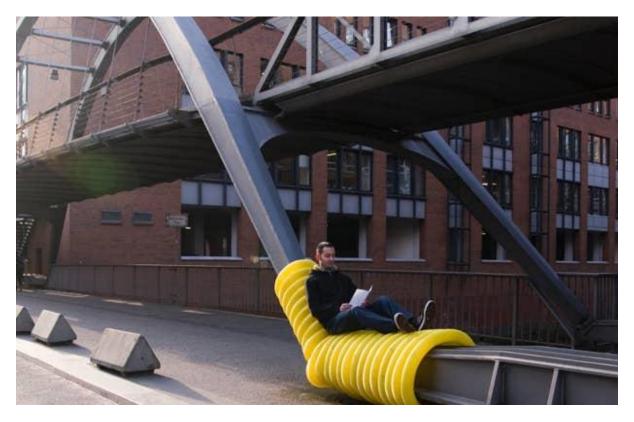
3 INTERVENTIONS

3.1 RE-CLAIMING SITTABLE SPACE

A man converting a spiked surface into a sittable area (Whyte, 1980)

As Whyte points out in his film, shortly after demonstrating how seemingly un-sittable many public environments are, "people are very adaptable". A folded coat or newspaper, as shown above, may effectively neutralise certain forms of hostile architecture, discovering possible seating in previously inaccessible places (Whyte, 1980). In a design context, this is mirrored in the guerrilla interventions of Oliver Schau in Hamburg: by clothing existing metal infrastructure in bright yellow pipes, harsh and strictly functional environments become whimsical and welcoming sitting areas (Henderson, 2012), as seen below. This also translates to so-called "guerrilla benching" movements, such as those of Chapitre Zero in Paris (Lisa, 2014). Over the course of several nights from 2012 to 2014, local volunteers would recycle street refuse such as wooden pallets into large seating arrangements, either

pre-assembled or produced ad-hoc, and these pieces of furniture have remained in situ for months at a time, acting with an impact far exceeding their expense.

Oliver Schau's sittable infrastructure, made from discarded drainage pipes (Henderson, 2012)

3.2 RE-CLAIMING FEMINIST SPACE

When attempting to reclaim space, operating through a feminist lens, choice of material becomes a key element of the design process. Yarnbombing, the practice of dressing public spaces in crochet and knitted pieces, is one such example; as a material practice intertwined with traditionally feminine societal roles, using such a fabric as a direct tool of spatial reclamation serves to "[stitch] a stereotypically feminine practice into the urban fabric" (Crang, 2014, in Mann, 2015, p. 66). This mirrors an example in our own studio work. With the project "Femini-city", we invited attendants to a workshop to bring an old item of clothing, recount a story about it, and then cut and stitch the fabric to clothe existing furniture, as well as generally dressing hostile elements of the space, that would then be left in place indefinitely. The aim of this project was to use the yarn-bombing principles of space reclamation with even more personal construction materials, using the clothing-clad furniture as physical manifestations of the lived experiences of our participants.

A completed chair as part of the "Femini-city" project. Photo: Cyrus Han

3.3 MATERIAL AS MESSAGE

A theme that emerges across many examples of community space reclamation is in the careful choice of materials. Community interventions are often immediately visible through the use of ad-hoc, recycled and, above all, whimsical construction practices. Petty's example of anti-homeless spikes are discomforting, in part, as they aesthetically "[disrupt] the intended meanings of the space", bringing the discriminatory mechanisms of control into more obvious focus (Petty, 2016). The above interventions have a similar effect, but with more positive outcomes; the hostility and inaccessibility of public spaces is highlighted through what Mann describes as a whimsical "breaking [of] the blasé" (Mann, 2015). The emphasis on decidedly fun space reclamation is claimed by Phadke to be a pointed undermining of neo-liberal interpretations of space ownership (Phadke, 2020). While these interventions range from those of immediate necessity to those with less immediate functionality, their use of the nostalgic, at-hand, discarded and, chiefly, visible materials of the city serve as active disruptors of quietly unwelcoming and imbalanced space.

4 CONCLUSION

When discussing original plans for the future of Barcelona's now highly successful "superblocks", largely pedestrianised areas in the middle of the city, community-led infrastructure was clearly on the mind of ecology director Salvador Rueda, as he hoped for the arrival of "neighbourhood-organised inflatable swimming pools" (Bausells, 2016). While somewhat jokingly optimistic, Rueda's comments highlight a newfound interest in public space design that recentres democratic, community-driven interventions in reclaiming space and combatting entrenched environmental inequalities. This essay aims to give examples of

several lenses through which designers and activists have worked in changing the face of their urban surroundings. If, as Rykwert believes, "we all get the faces we deserve" (Rykwert, 2004, p. 10), the actions of communities in reshaping the faces of their cities is a necessary step in producing urban environments that more accurately reflect the social fabric from which they spring.

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