

INTERFACE

Finding hope in unpromising times: Stories of progressive planning alternatives for a world in crisis

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Figure 1. ‘Hotel’, visual art installation by Harmen de Hoop. *Source:* Photograph by Harmen de Hoop, used with permission. www.harmendehoop.com.

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Figure 1. Block 11, Can Batlló. *Source:* Photograph by Maria Casado used with permission.

work with professional tools. The idea behind these workshops and others (e.g. a motorcycle mechanic, a brewery and iron works) is to revive traditional crafts that can in the future be labour cooperation projects: a cooperative city of trades. The property ownership of all the warehouses remains municipal, but the use of the spaces will be for the community without state interference.

What we have learned

The current crisis in which we are immersed has decapitalised the main players who traditionally built the city. On the one hand, promoters and landowners have no more credit to carry on with their speculative projects. On the other, the municipality and other public administrations have frozen most of their investments on urban transformations due to the fiscal austerity measures. Because some of these investments were paid for by the promoters as a result of taxes on their gains, this situation has paralysed urban projects such as Can Batlló and many others.

The main differences in the Can Batlló case are, firstly, the ability of the urban movement to form a broad grassroots coalition for taking advantage of this paralysis. It is not a coincidence that this broad grassroots coalition was formed in the former municipality of Sants – a neighbourhood with a long tradition of trade unions, cooperatives, neighbourhood associations, squats and other social movements. These historical movements, locally rooted, have been reinforced with new ones, such as the 15M movement (*Indignados* movement). The enlisting of new members by the Platform, such as a group of architects, provides more resources for counter-planning and advocacy.

A second lesson is the use of the “countdown” tactic as a way of putting pressure on the municipality and, even more importantly, setting the pace and legitimising the occupation. Instead of occupying the site by surprise like a squat movement would; Can Batlló Platform announced the occupation two years in advance to coincide with the municipal elections of May 2011. This was a strategic political moment for the movement as it offered leverage. As a result of those elections, and after 32 years of socialist hegemony, the local government of Barcelona changed from a leftist coalition to a weaker government headed by the Catalan Nationalist right wing party (*Convergència i Unió*). The agreement to cede the use of Block 11 was signed 20 days after the local elections. The relative inexperience of the new government helped Can Batlló Platform achieve this important goal.



Figure 2. The encounter space at Can Batlló. *Source:* Photo by Maria Casado, used with permission.

Thirdly, once inside, another thing to learn is how to sustain, organise and enlarge the common urban life of the neighbourhood. In this regard an important moment was the agreement among of the users of Can Batlló on some common rules, values and responsibilities for life in Block 11. This agreement also stresses the importance of Block 11's economic self-sufficiency and stipulates what type of social or economic return the general project is expected to receive from the groups and activities set up there. In this sense we can consider Block 11 as an urban common (Harvey, 2012): an urban space self-managed by an open community who organise themselves to take care and enlarge the urban life of the site based on the practice of commoning and the necessities of the residents. The users are organised around small groups that collectively constitute a larger general assembly (with about 70 people on average and over 300 people involved), which is held every 15 days. The smaller groups meet to discuss and make decisions on things such as the site's finances, activities, library, and infrastructure. At the general assemblies the small groups account for their activities.

A final lesson is that the possibility to develop alternative urban planning and force the decisions of the municipality is much greater when you have already occupied the site. This is one of the important lessons learned in Can Batlló: the possibility to put in practice a cooperative urbanism based on the capacities and the needs of all who want be involved. It started in Block 11 but now it is spreading around the Can Batlló site. This includes the rehabilitation of new warehouses where facilities and productive activities will be located, the planning of a cooperative housing development, urban gardens and the improvements made in accessibility and connectivity with the rest of the neighbourhood. In opposition to, or even beyond the logic of modern planning, the insurgent Can Batlló process incorporates elements of indeterminacy, learning by doing, incrementalism, ambiguity, conflict, and self-management. It all happens in continuous tension and negotiation among neighbours, users and residents and between the Platform and the municipality. This is a mode of urbanism where any surplus collectively created will not be individually appropriated: where the right to the city and the generalisation of communitarian self-management (Lefebvre, 1970) are being practised and expanded. This means prioritising the rights of use ahead of the rights of owning for the present and future of re-appropriated spaces.

REDWatch: Monitory democracy as a radical approach to citizen participation in planning¹

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Redfern/Waterloo: residents' right to place under threat

The thing about Redfern-Waterloo is that we are basically four suburbs that have our own (State Government) minister, and (planning) authority, which have taken planning controls away from the City of Sydney . . . primarily to ensure that they can do what they want to with the Government land. (Adair, 2010, p. 1)

These are the words of “The rebel of Redfern – His name is Geoff Turnbull . . . Redfern’s resident ratbag” (Adair, 2010, p. 1). Geoff is the spokesperson for local resident action group REDWatch. The organisation’s name is formed from an acronym combining the first letters of the Sydney suburbs of **R**edfern, **E**veleigh, **D**arlington and **W**aterloo with the word “watch”. These four suburbs, colloquially known as Redfern/Waterloo, are located 3 km south of the central business district of Sydney. The New South Wales (NSW) State Government holds large tracts of public housing and public land in the area. Within the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy (see Figure 1), a city-level strategic planning document, Redfern/Waterloo is located squarely within the “global economic corridor” of “Global Sydney” (NSW Government, 2013a, p. 4).

Property markets in high value areas like Redfern/Waterloo see not only the increasing presence of international investment but fundamental changes in planning and governance processes in order to facilitate it. The NSW State Government has been preparing extensive

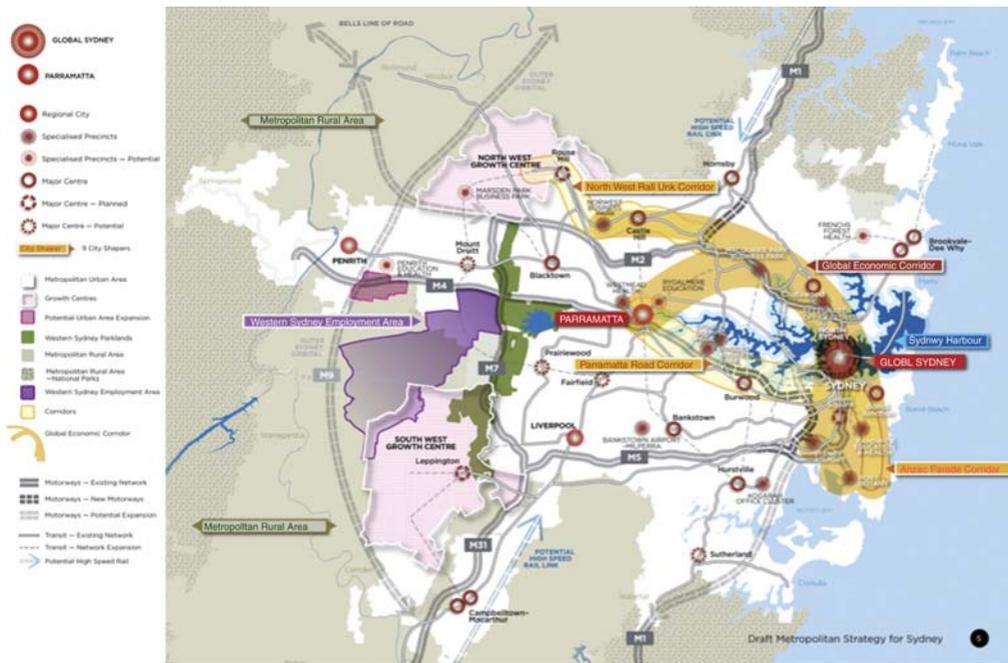


Figure 1. Redfern/Waterloo is on the southern edge of “global Sydney”. *Source:* NSW Government (2013a).

redevelopment plans for the Redfern/Waterloo area since the mid 2000s. The Sydney Metropolitan Strategy and Urban Growth NSW texts outline the use of market-centric approaches to urban planning to unlock private sector investment by coordinating and delivering lead-in infrastructure and services in development areas, and by planning and fast tracking urban renewal projects (Urban Growth NSW, 2012, p. 1).

From 2004, the NSW State Government has been rescaling regulatory planning powers for the area and removed significant planning approval responsibilities from the City of Sydney. Under the guise of “state significant planning”, they relocated these planning powers within the NSW State Government (2013b) planning bodies. As explicitly stated by the NSW State Government, these measures were taken to “fast track” large infrastructure projects with the private-sector. The NSW State Government’s redevelopment plans propose population changes that could result in the loss of up to 700 public housing dwellings in the area. Private-sector developers are expected to redevelop the area to release the “land value” through public–private partnership deals with the government. REDWatch has closely monitored the statutory and regulatory planning decisions of the City of Sydney and NSW State Government since 2004. REDWatch believe that some long-term residents’ rights to place in Redfern/Waterloo are under threat.

REDWatch: we’re watching you, always watching...

REDWatch is comprised of local public, social and private renters and private homeowners. Representatives from local non-government organisations and several major political parties attend REDWatch meetings. The organisation was formed following a meeting in Redfern focused on the 2004 inquiry into issues relating to Redfern/Waterloo. A REDWatch member I interviewed in 2012 stated that the organisation wanted “to move beyond a ‘submission approach’ to citizen involvement into the inquiry, aiming instead to become a ‘pressure group’” that soon developed into an organisation with “multi-partisan membership and no political affiliation.” REDWatch members argue that they needed to empower themselves as a collective but to renounce, as much as possible, common ideological, political, economic or “interest positions” that typically structure local resident action groups. Their name (i.e. *to watch over their suburbs*) and mission statement encapsulates the organisation’s focus as a *monitoring* civil society collective (Keane, 2009).

REDWatch exists to monitor Government involvement in our area and to push for outcomes that benefit the community and not just the Government. (see: <http://www.redwatch.org.au>)

Monitored democracy as citizen participation in planning

REDWatch are enabling a diverse suite of local actors to produce knowledge about the social and urban planning of Redfern/Waterloo. REDWatch share information and encourage other individuals, community groups, journalists, academics, and even different (local, state, federal) government employees to “do their own research and analysis” to “monitor” the power, politics and actions of the government and the private sector (interview, 2012). REDWatch members often provide counterpoints to contemporary policy and planning narratives about public housing. Initially, the monitoring focus of REDWatch was not structured around a consensus/interest position.¹ Nor did the organisation emerge to necessarily participate in the government-orchestrated participatory planning and consultation events in Redfern/Waterloo. When REDWatch launched their website in 2004 (Figure 2), to circulate government documents about the area to their members, the organisation found there was “a broad range of people out

Making space for public ownership: The re-municipalisation of public services through grassroots struggle and local state action

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Introduction

The twentieth century was dominated by two contrasting utopias: one, a vision of centralised state ownership that could overthrow capitalism and deliver the fruits of their labour to the masses; and the other, Hayek's market-driven nirvana of individualism, democracy and freedom underpinned by private ownership. Ultimately, both visions ushered in centralising dystopias in the form of the totalitarian command economies and state planning of the Soviet Union and China on the one hand, and a corporate-driven elite project of privatisation and globalisation on the other.

As the twenty-first century begins unpromisingly – with a financial crisis, economic recession and reheated neoliberal regime of fiscal austerity – there is an urgent need for a more democratic, egalitarian and participatory politics that reclaims public services and assets from their appropriation by elite interests. Yet, whilst private ownership is largely discredited, so too are older models of public ownership. Although there is a popular uprising, taking different forms, but nonetheless a genuinely international set of movements against corporate-driven globalisation and its supervision by political elites (Mason, 2012), there remains a paucity of alternative thinking about how a progressive reclaiming of public assets might take place.

In this paper I argue that a revitalised model of decentred and diverse public ownership is essential to this task. Older forms of public ownership, hand in hand with the emergence of state-driven forms of modernisation and economic development, were often over-centralised, undemocratic and just as alienating for the ordinary citizen as the more recent neoliberal corporate capture of common resources and assets (Cumbers, 2012). However, in contradistinction to the rescue of the banking sector through top-down forms of nationalisation, there is an interesting and growing movement around the re-municipalisation of public assets and resources, which offers hope for dealing with progressive policy goals such as tackling climate change.

While events such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the recent protests in Istanbul have grabbed the attention of those looking for signs of coherent urban protest, a quieter but arguably more effective counter-revolution against neoliberalism has been taking place in many cities and regions worldwide. From Argentina to Mali, to Germany, but also including some US cities, there is a growing network of urban and regional authorities that are not only rolling back the tide of privatisation that swept the globe in the 1990s, but are also developing innovative new models of local public ownership that strengthen democracy and public participation.

The reclaiming of public services and “public-public” partnerships in Latin American cities

The city of Cochabamba and its “Water War” have become iconic symbols within the pantheon of alter-globalisation struggles and movements. It was here that the attempt by the Bolivian government in 1999 to privatise the municipal water system – raising the average charge to consumers by around 35%¹ – set off one of the first successful acts of rebellion against neoliberalism. After mass protests, strikes, the imprisonment of many demonstrators and the death of one at the hands of the police, the escalation of violent demonstrations to other Bolivian cities led to the reversal of the privatisation process and the reinstatement of a municipal company to run water services in the city.

Cochabamba is one moment in a wider struggle, starting in Latin America but spreading to other continents to reclaim public services at the local, city and even regional scales in the face of



Figure 1. Neighbourhood Inquiry at Speirs Locks Cultural Quarter. *Source:* Photograph by Bechaela Walker, used with permission.

Glasgow City Council’s instrumentalist “arts-led property strategy” (Gray, 2009) subsuming artists’ labour and the creative economy in growth-based urban development strategies: a familiar process globally (Peck, 2005; Zukin, 1988). The four-hour walk included brief presentations by seven other activists and urban researchers, with more informal discussion and exchange taking place between the 50 strong group of invited speakers and public walk participants as we progressed.

A central consideration was developing reciprocity and exchange between existing and emerging networks of “community activists”, “artists” and “researchers”, while at the same time questioning the specialist assumptions and divisions underlying these “roles”. Routes were chosen to challenge bounded discourses of “cultural regeneration” and “creativity” in a wider relational context of land and property speculation and widespread poverty, and speakers were selected to interrogate actually existing class composition in a time when “cultural regeneration” has become an increasingly hegemonic policy script.

In what follows, I describe some of the areas we visited and present some reflections arising from the walk.

Notes from a walk in the fictional city

The neighbourhood inquiry must seek to resist the problems of “micro-sociology” that Panzieri (1965) identified: the isolation of selected themes from their wider socio-economic context. In this sense it is better to think of neighbourhood(s) in the plural. Urban development is routinely framed in fragmented and bounded terms, disavowing a wider context of neoliberal urbanism. Transgressing those boundaries, and their artificial divisions, is an important strategy of the neighbourhood inquiry. In the walk described here, the goal of the loss-leading “arts-led property strategy” was underscored when we visited several enormous adjacent brownfield sites representing a potential “new urban frontier” for urban investors (Smith, 1996). Mass demolition of extant social housing and the clearance of local populations, we found, form the obscene underside of “cultural regeneration” strategies. Many people on the walk, though users of the cultural quarter, were unaware of these neglected and devalorised parts of the city and their close proximity to the cultural quarter – suggesting a basic pedagogical empiricism in strategic walking as critical practice.

“Structures don’t take to the streets” claimed the graffiti of May 1968 (Ross, 2002) – but those involved in neighbourhood inquiry do. Not confined to interview, survey or questionnaire (though these remain valid tools), walking as inquiry involves a partisan, experiential, embodied process facilitating collaborative co-production as reciprocal exchange: researchers transferring specialist knowledge in an accessible and engaging manner, engaged community members disseminating locally specific knowledge where they have their own embedded level of expertise, memory and experience (see Figure 2). One tenant described the systematic neglect of social housing in Hamiltonhill (an estate in close proximity to the “cultural quarter”) thereby disclosing deeply uneven local (dis)investment strategies. Others spoke of the systematic disposal of public land and property assets by arms’-length external organisations (ALEO’s) and the city-wide privatisation of housing, creating a productive critical dialogue between subjectivity and material conditions.

In a “post-political” context of pseudo-participation and recuperation, the inquiry process must be a process of deconstructive *self-inquiry*, inoculating against consensual incorporation into capitalist plans that typifies the post-political diagnosis. A level of reflexive autonomy must be maintained from market-led “sustainable” discourses (Temenos & McCann, 2012), and governmentalised community councils, housing associations, and other “third sector” organisations (Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans, 2007). The inquiry approach makes no false claims to “objectivity”; it is partisan and engaged; it entails uncovering, discussing and disseminating the experiences of those who struggle against urban inequities. During the walk, one speaker noted that council-led “Transformational Regeneration Areas” (TRA’s), widely posited as a city-wide panacea for disadvantaged communities, will in fact lead to a loss of 8000 social homes in the city. This was given material weight by our presence at the territorially stigmatised Sighthill estate, where tenants await demolition and removal via “transformational regeneration”. Likewise, we found that a seemingly progressive “sustainable eco-village” masterplanned for rundown Cowlares Park, was notable for its marked social housing deficit.

Crucially, the inquiry process must attempt the difficult task of understanding the perpetually shifting composition of capital. Processes of urbanisation and gentrification now constitute a “global urban strategy” (Smith, 2002). Thus close attention to the financialisation/urbanisation nexus and the workings of land and property markets must be central to the neighbourhood inquiry.



Figure 2. Neighbourhood Inquiry at Cowcaddens redevelopment, Glasgow. *Source:* Photograph by Bechaela Walker, used with permission.

Struggles over housing, social services and social reproduction (“the social factory”) can no longer be seen as “ancillary” to struggles over the sites of production – they are central to the new capital relation. Notably, we found that *no* new production bases were planned for an area covering over 100 acres of land apart from a so-called “creative factory” in the “cultural quarter” which is very marginal and socially discretionary in terms of job creation.

Summary

In a context described by many as “post-political”, we must be careful to distinguish who is being post-political and why. I have briefly discussed the de-politicising effects of governmentality. A post-political *politics*, however, must aim to find solutions for urban crisis within itself. This was the meaning of post-political politics in the extra-parliamentary Italian autonomous movement – a radical rejection of representation, but by no means a rejection of organisation. The walk described here presents an initial formulation of the neighbourhood inquiry. In terms of deconstructive work it provided an effective basis for understanding the instrumental role of targeted and uneven “cultural regeneration” in land and property markets. The “hot” moments of “great transformation and conflict” that Panzieri (1965) identified as foundational to the inquiry process are increasingly related to large-scale urban regeneration as an immanent process. The neighbourhood inquiry, with its emphasis first and foremost on the struggles of those most affected by urbanisation, provides a collaborative, experiential, investigative means for understanding the contours and contradictions of actually existing contemporary class composition under these conditions. The challenge for further inquiry processes is to advance and generalise those struggles.

Notes

1. *Austerity urbanism: A walk through the fictional city*. <http://strickdistro.org/2012/08/22/austerity-urbanism-a-walk-through-the-fictional-city/>
2. An artist-run group supporting the development of independent research in art-related and non-institutional practices. I have been a member of this group since its inception in 2010: <http://strickdistro.org/>.
3. <http://strickdistro.org/2012/08/22/knowledge-is-never-neutral/>.

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