Flavia Alice Mameli, Franziska Polleter, Mathilda Rosengren, Josefine Sarkez-Knudsen (eds.)

URBAN APPROPRIATION STRATEGIES
Exploring Space-making Practices in Contemporary European Cityscapes

[transcript] urban studies
In the past years, the transiency of European city-making and dwelling has become increasingly hard to disregard. This urban flux calls for a methodological rethinking for those professionals, social and natural scientists, artists, and activists, with an interest in the processes of remaking and reclaiming urban space. With a practical and empirical emphasis, this anthology brings forth a variety of perspectives on urban appropriation strategies, their relation to public space-making, and their implications for future city development, exploring how ideas and practices of appropriation inform and relate to cultural narratives, politico-historical occasions as well as socio-ecological expressions.

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Urban Appropriation Strategies
An Introduction

MATHILDA ROSENGREN WITH FLAVIA ALICE MAMELI,
FRANZISKA POLLETER AND JOSEFINE SARKEZ-KNUDSEN

Often [appropriated] space is a structure – a monument or building – but this is not always the case: a site, a square or a street may also be legitimately described as an appropriated space. Examples of appropriated spaces abound, but it is not always easy to decide in what respect, how, by whom and for whom they have been appropriated. (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]:165)

How are we to make sense of urban appropriation strategies? What traits – spatial, socio-cultural, politico-historical – define the appropriations behind these approaches? Furthermore, how can an interdisciplinary assessment of such strategies work as a potential means to uncover and unpick the ambivalent, ever-changing nature of our present urban landscapes?

These were some of the initial questions that we, the editors, grappled with when we initiated the one-day conference Urban Appropriation Strategies, held at the University of Kassel in November 2016. All coming from different academic and professional backgrounds, we nevertheless converged in the ways our work and research interests all seemingly circled around debates, tensions and relations between urban space and the movements, expressions and settlings of its dwellers – human and other-than-human alike. In a sense, perhaps this disciplinary cross-over of interests is not very surprising. As Henri Lefebvre, more than 40 years ago, duly noted: It is not difficult to find a variety of cases of appropriated space in a city (1991[1974]:165). Accordingly, this abundance is most likely to also be re-
flected in the range of manners and approaches used to investigate such spaces – the diverse empirical contributions in this book, spanning artistic, academic and professional practices, providing yet another element of confirmation to this statement.

It is in a similar vein that architectural scholar Ralf Pasel-Krautheim argues that “urban society can only genuinely be reflected through a multitude of different approaches and projects.” (this book, page 110) Nevertheless, what we have found is that it is also this diversity of spatial interactions – and the array of practices and theories growing out of, as well as shaping, such spaces – which make urban appropriations so hard to pin down to a single concept or theory. As opposed to meticulously planned and developed urban spaces – that is, spaces with municipally assigned and specifically articulated intentions and purposes – appropriated spaces, with their informal and fluctuating identities, many times lack the legitimacy granted their official counterparts. They are, in architect Dougal Sheridan’s words, “[i]ndeterminate spaces [, which] ask questions rather than deliver fixed answers.” (2012:206) Through their very existence, they put the idea of the cityscape as a site defined by permanence, formality and functional planning into question (Von Schéele 2016). And by providing alternatives to a structured, top-down controlled urban space, they then also encourage, as Sheridan puts it, “the subjectivity, appropriation, development, adaptation, and expression of those occupying these indeterminate environments.” (2012:206)

This allowing of alternative articulations of urban activities and bodies runs like a red thread through the chapters of this book. In different ways, the essays show how such informality and indeterminacy affect the spatial identity of an area, but equally they touch upon how socialities, ecologies, temporalities and histories are inherently entwined in very making of the urban; urban appropriations may be materially fleeting, but their effects and affects have the potential to be far more long-lasting. Thus, this anthology does not address appropriated places solely in their spatiality, but also in the processes that abound inside and around them. In fact, in many of the contributions, space itself has had to take a back seat. This shift of focus, away from spatiality to the practices, presences and politics that make up the urban landscape, is intentional. It acts as a means of thinking outside the often taken-for-granted binaries of urban life: urban / rural, nature / culture, formal / informal, structured / unstructured, planned / unplanned and so on.
For, as we will see in many of the contributions, though urban appropriations often contest the formalised articulation of a city, they also have the ability to work “with it.” As a diverse line of critics have pointed out, (informal) practices of appropriation frequently end up becoming encapsulated in, or eradicated by, the official flows of powers, policies and economics of the city (see for example Patrick 2014; Sandercock 2005; Thörn 2013). And, unsurprisingly, the resistance against such forces form a persistent strand in the narratives surrounding appropriations (see, for instance, the example of the Dragoner Areal below). Nevertheless, as some of the contributions show, this is not always the case. For instance, many urban planners and landscape architects have, on various occasions throughout the 20th century, turned to spontaneous or informal urban practices and ecologies to inform and shape their work, both in theory and in practice. Consequently also inviting municipal and administrative bodies to engage in these practices. As Stefanie Hennecke points out, in an ideal world, the municipality “should not be understood as an opponent to appropriation but as the patron of it.” (this book, page 32) Thus, balancing on the fence between the public and the private, theorising and practicing urban appropriations highlight the ambivalence of the urban. It shows how indeterminate, informal spaces of city-living may have always existed alongside the formal ones and how the city can at once be a habitat of individual freedom and socio-cultural segregation, economic growth and destitution, democratic movements and oppressive regimes – and many phenomena in between.

1 In fact, the concept of appropriation as a source of creativity for architects, planners and designers, has been present in urban theory throughout the past century. It is particularly noticeable in the planning ideas of the 1960’s and 1970’s, when the notion was consciously brought to the fore in discourses on the theory, practice and politics of urban development. This was also the time when designer Victor Papanek (1985) started cultivating the idea that “everybody can be a designer”, paving the way for more articulated do-it-yourself approaches in urban space.
This ambivalence, not only in the urban but also in the theorisation and practice of urban appropriations, resonates in the etymology and contemporary definition of “appropriation” itself. The Latin origin of the noun is *proprium*, meaning “property”. The contemporary definition of the noun “appropriation” can either mean “the making of a thing private property, whether another’s or [...] one’s own” or “the assignment of anything to a special purpose, [...] esp. a sum of money set apart for any purpose.” (Oxford English Dictionary 2017) “Appropriation” is consequently linked, on the one hand, to the idea of a material entity (to which someone has a rightful claim). Yet, on the other hand, it denotes a possibly illegal “seizing” of an external body or notion, or a “setting aside”, an exclusion, from a general whole. Subsequently, it is not surprising that different disciplines have defined and approached “appropriation” in various ways. Today, it is mainly in the jurisprudence, psychology, philosophy and the social sciences that the concept of appropriation denotes specific definitions and meanings (Deinet and Reutlinger 2004): Law scholars speak of appropriation when describing the acquisition of property without prior association. In psychology, the term appears, in the majority of cases, in the context of education and is used primarily for the learning of skills and the appropriation of knowledge (Nolda 2006). Furthermore, in the context of philosophical dialectics, the process of appropriation is understood as the conscious shaping of human living conditions (Jaeggi 2002).

This latter point is something that several of the contributions are contemplating and is particularly highlighted in the first section of the book, *Appropriation as a Means to Create Citizen-centred Urban Spaces*. Here, in an interview with Flavia Alice Mameli, Annette Geiger and Stefanie Hennecke discuss, among many other things, the importance and relevance of both individual and collective imaginations in the appropriation of “open” spaces in the city – that is, the envisaging of the urban, the social, and the political. Such socio-political imaginaries can take many different expressions: As a refashioning of a dilapidated house in South-East London (as in the case Austin-Locke describes in this book), as a counter-cultural “underground” in a Berliner trailer park (Schwanhäußer, this book) or as a temporary, embodied engagement with a former Cold War radar station...
...places that appear to be most fixed in social, material, and architectural terms can support highly mobile or fluid collective imaginaries, while more fluid and transient places, whose architectures may be more lightweight and fragile, can sustain more grounded and fixed imaginaries.

Through a manifestation of both abstract and physical appropriations, the urban thus becomes a site of present political contestations and future potentialities in equal measures.

Berlin, the capital of Germany, features heavily here as a unique, but also pertinent, example of this urban constellation. Here, appropriation as a method has long played a strategic role in urban developments in the city. So much so that, in 2007, the book *Urban Pioneers: Stadtentwicklung durch Zwischennutzung* was published by the Senate Department for Urban Development (*Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung*), presenting over 40 examples of appropriation projects in Berlin (*Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung Berlin 2007*). The articles in the book intended to give a comprehensive insight into the discourse about appropriation and to advertise new models of action for urban development through informal and especially interim usages. Nevertheless, these intermediate appropriations have not always adhered to the idea of informal and temporary structures as a transitional means that smoothly paves the way for more formal and permanent constructions, as envisioned by the senate or municipality.

One recent example, where appropriation is used to counteract formal urban developments, is the *Dragoner Areal* in the borough of Kreuzberg. As an area predominantly utilised by small-scale manufacturing companies and car mechanics, local Berliners were disappointed and angered by the announced sale of this federal property to any highest bidder, and consequently a petition against the sale was initiated in 2014. Since then, the citizens’ initiative *Stadt von unten* (roughly translated as “City from below”) has organised demonstrations, temporary appropriations and occupations of parts of the area, as well as art exhibitions on the site. Linked to this fight for keeping space free for informal appropriation is also the demand for affordable living space for the lower-income inhabitants of the increasingly-gentrifying Kreuzberg – adding a further layer to the already politically
contentious situation. As a response to this dispute, researchers and students from the Institute of Architecture at the Technical University Berlin have analysed the potential of appropriation on the grounds to define future usages of these “commons.” The map on the front cover of this book is a tracing of the present usages, and their varying intensities, of the common areas at the Dragoner Areal – investigating the architecturally given borders, the temporarily appropriated zones, as well as the areas of established, long-term use.

**APPROPRIATION AS A STRATEGY**

Within such contested urban landscape, the act of appropriation can then be considered as a strategy for expressing, exploring, but also managing, the spaces and processes in question. This notion of an “urban appropriation strategy” may seem like a strange constellation, at least if read through a Lefebvrian lens. A strategy, per definition, is after all closely associated with a structured master plan, which in turn is deeply connected to the concept of domination – a notion Lefebvre introduces as the antithesis to the more “free flowing” workings of appropriation (1991 [1974]:164-165).

Admittedly, to a certain extent, we are indebted to Lefebvre’s reasoning around spatial appropriation in our own understanding of the term and its processes. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, we remain sceptical about relying too heavily on a binary structure such as the one of domination/appropriation. As a matter of fact, several of the empirical accounts in this book do indeed point to a more nuanced idea of urban spatiality and its processes, where informal and formal planning practices overlap or merge and human agencies intermingle with other-than-human ones.

These entwinements of urban appropriation are very much highlighted in the human attempt to master other-than-human nature – both in an actual as well as metaphorical sense. As political ecologist Maria Kaika contends: “Expressions, such as ‘the urban wilderness’ and ‘the concrete jungle’ invoke images of an out-of-control urbanization process and an uncivilized ‘nature’, both of which need control and mastering.” (2012:15) The second section of the anthology, *Appropriation of Nature, the Urban and Urban Nature(s)*, thus focuses on the ways in which we approach and value nature in the city, touching upon the politically contentious right to urban green
space as well as the possibilities in integrating aspects of other-than-human patterns of living into urban planning and landscape architecture.

The former is addressed in Beatrice Walthall and Tilman Reinhardt’s account of the studies that their interdisciplinary course, the Impact Lab, conducted in relation to the redevelopment of an informal East Berliner wasteland. In 2017, it was integrated into an international garden exhibition, much to the dismay of many locals who had frequented the area on a regular basis and exposing the precarious state of “public” green space in an ever-increasing privatised urban landscape. The latter is reflected in, firstly, how Jan Edler proposes a reimagining of both social, ecological and historical significance, through the reappropriation of urban water – making a part of the river Spree in Berlin swimmable to the general public. And secondly, how the founders of Stellepolari Landscape Architecture, Greta Colombo and Lorenza Manfredi, speak about paving the way for “spontaneous” appropriations by urban nature itself as a crucial part of their practice. Thus, urban appropriation strategies can many times be found to look beyond the solely human in the city, but it is no less imbued in political struggles and economic incentives. As Matthew Gandy aptly sums it up in the interview of this section (this book, page 66):

[U]rban nature [should be considered] as this diversity of potential appropriations, which also have political implications: from more inclusive or sensitive responses to urban nature, to attempts to simply use nature, or symbols of nature, as part of the speculative dynamics of capitalist urbanisation.

**Making sense of transient European cities through appropriation**

The third and final section of the anthology, *Appropriation of the Urban in the Context of Migration*, focuses on migration in Europe. The migrant flows, generated by the past years’ devastating conflicts and famines in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, have profoundly challenged the ways in which newcomers are cared for, accommodated and included into western European societies. This has confronted issues of socio-cultural access, use and appropriation of urban space, raising questions of what role the urban plays in the context of migration. Bringing together the seemingly con-
tradictory concepts of architecture and migration – the former often associated with “groundedness” and demarcated places and the latter with “up-rootedness” and mobility – Cairns argues that, though migrants may be seen as deeply connected to “nomadic styles of mobility, their aspirations [are] oriented towards stability and settlement.” (2004: 1) As such, rather than leading a life of itinerancy, the aspirations of newcomers are predominately (and perhaps unsurprisingly) to settle and become legitimate citizens at their place of arrival. In order to enable this process, architects, designers and many more are working on structures and concepts that will allow newcomers to swiftly appropriate the space they find themselves in – thus, encouraging an individual agency oftentimes found wanting at the arrival in a new setting. Here, as the onus is put on easy-to-build and readily available constructions, the designs in question borrow heavily from do-it-yourself notions of temporary appropriation strategies. For instance, in the interview of this section, Ralf Pasel-Krautheim describes the work to design a mobile workshop space for a refugee welcome centre in Munich, giving the residents of the centre both an opportunity to leave their relatively cramped lodgings and a reason to interact with locals in the area.

This need for spaces that encourage encounters between locals and newcomers is also emphasised by Rabea Haß. Haß’s account of her project Kitchen on the Run – which turned an old shipping container into a mobile kitchen and drove it through various cities in western Europe – explores how even a single night of cooking together, in a space formerly unknown to everyone involved, can foster understandings and create bonds between newcomers and locals. This resonates with literary theorist Ackbar Abbas argument that, “migrancy means […] not only changing places; [but also] the changing nature of places.” (2004: 131) Abbas is at odds with the expectation that migrants would simply arrive, settle, and assimilate, and suggests that migrants might settle in their new destinations in ways that openly acknowledge, express and sustain links to their own cultural origins. Forms of urban appropriations may thus flow in multiple ethno-cultural directions. This is something that Malte Bergmann and Laura Kemmer shine light on as they examine transnational planning initiatives and (post-) migrant entrepreneurs’ public place making practices in the Berliner borough of Neukölln. Comparing two parallel streets in the neighbourhood, Bergmann and Kemmer explore “the dilemma of urban participatory planning to intervene in the streetscape while remaining sensitive to trans-local place-
making.” (this book, page 114) Thus, different planning approaches reflect not only ideas of planning itself but also the notions and definitions of the European urban.

This latter point is something we wish to address all through the anthology, be it directly or indirectly. Admittedly, all contributions centre around western and southern European cities and nations (and moving outside the European framework would bring with it additional sets of questions that this book is too small to adequately address). But though we are staying in a western-centric, European context in terms of geographical locations, the contributions’ accounts of academic and artistic exchanges, processes uncovered and traced, flows of bodies, politics and economics – all in relation to urban appropriations – put the notion of a physically bounded, socio-culturally defined European cityscape strongly into question. Though this insight is not always an articulated claim in the essays, we would argue that, when addressing urban appropriation strategies at large this theme is in one way or another always present. When assessing all of the contributions as a multi-layered whole, they present in no way a holistic image of how to look at urban appropriation strategies. (And the question remains whether this is ever an achievable, or desirable, goal!) Rather, they provide glimpses, or fragments, of contemporary European urban dwellings and relations, and in this process also denote the transience of such ways of life. They tackle urban appropriation strategies as socio-cultural narratives, politico-historical occasions and socio-ecological expressions – as theory, practice and empirical reality – without for that matter dictating an exact definition of the urban, nor the practices of appropriation within. In short, they maintain (some more forcefully than others) the democratic, open-endedness of appropriation strategies, and in the process perhaps also connoting the notion of an open-ended Europe? Ultimately, it is for you, dear reader, to decide what you make of it.
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