

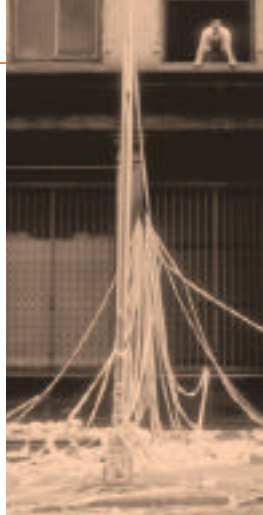
OCCUPIED SPACE

Ariel Krasnow, collaborating partner with Julia Mandle on **VARIABLE CITY: Fox Square** is an urban designer committed to exploring creative alternatives to the study of architecture and urban planning. Here she reflects on the key sources for her approach to this project, and how her experience has underscored the importance of striving to incorporate everything from daily life to art performances into her approach to urban design.

The character of a place is expressed through the activities of its inhabitant and the nature of the structures built to accommodate them. The dynamic between these two components, “the ephemeral” and “the solid,” are intimately bound and continuously in flux. The ephemeral agent is the people—how they use, interpret and transform the environment over time. The solid is the manmade landscapes they create and its means of construction. The play between the ephemeral and the solid is an often unrecognized potential in the shaping of space.

“The built environment comprises not only physical forms—buildings, streets, and infrastructure—but also the people acting on them. If built environment is an organism, it is so by virtue of human intervention: people imbue it with life and spirit of place.” **John Habraken**, *The Structure of the Ordinary*, MIT Press, 1998.

These perpetual transformations within the constructed world tell the story of our lived-in



“The happenings within spaces in the city... are as important, possibly more important than the built environment, the built demarcation of space.”

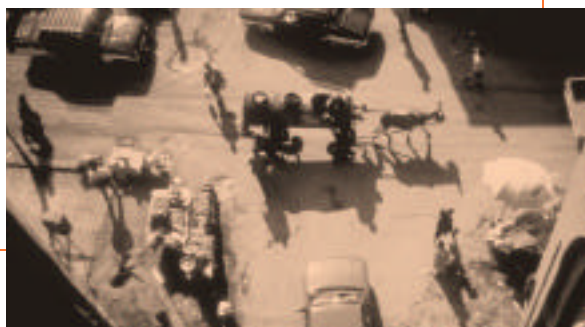
WARREN CHALK, “HOUSING AS A CONSUMER PRODUCT,” ARENA, 1966.

SOHO, NYC, 1983
PHOTO: ARIEL KRASNOW

environment. The cumulative effect of what occurs creates a cultural landscape that layers the place, its use and the expressions of the resident population to become a reflection of that society.

People create many of the conditions that shape the man-made environment such as form of authority, historic legacies, artistic endeavors, societal values and economic capacity. These actions are in addition to regional circumstances of climate, materials and natural resources. Of the range of man-made landscapes, towns and cities are where, per square inch, the greatest number of people and the constructed forms they produce and inhabit are located. This accumulation of people produces more incidences of public displays and a higher frequency of spatial adaptation. Given the greater density of the urban configuration, it is where the maximum overlapping of personal and public spaces occur.

CAIRO, EGYPT, 1990 PHOTO: ARIEL KRASNOW



The United States has had an historic lack of concern for communally utilized public space. The idea of public space as a resource runs counter to the primary vision of individual ownership of space that has guided American ideology and land development policies. The rebirth of downtowns over the past 20 years has strengthened the attraction of a more densely built environment as a desirable alternative. In North American cities, government agencies and development pressures typically dictate the parameters of change possible to the larger scale physical environment. But alternatives to that cycle are also available. To utilize those options, the public, in addition to practitioners, must be knowledgeable, sensitive and motivated to exert their opinion.

Of the multiple agents of spatial change, **VARIABLE CITY** focused on the following determinants:

- The significance of perception; how people act, consciously or unconsciously, regarding existing conditions and the potential for change.
- The influence of the arts in developing an enlightened force for change; from neighborhood activists, to public agencies and design practitioners.

PERCEPTIONS OF PLACE

Ten different people will view the same thing and describe it fifteen different ways. What people see, how they hear (smell, taste, feel) and how they react, are intimately entwined with personal, environmental and cultural factors.

Expectations and reactions to present environments are based on experience. As **John Berger**

wrote in his 1972 book, *Ways of Seeing*, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” Amid familiar surroundings the need to acknowledge immediate conditions is not essential, since within a stable environment we confidently anticipate a degree of consistency. But there are times when it is necessary to view the ordinary with a fresh eye or consider the commonplace differently.

At Fox Square in downtown Brooklyn, many people familiar with the area, admitted to having never thought about the location before, but were intrigued by the scope of **VARIABLE CITY**—an artistic endeavor and an exchange of information about a spot they had encountered hundreds of times in their daily routines. People with reference points outside of Brooklyn brought those insights to bear in responding to ideas for the future. Though many people suggested seating and trees, two Europeans envisioned a city “square”: a man from Switzerland described, “a fountain in the square with chairs and more greenery” and a woman from France commented that the space “would never be leftover in Europe, there would be a fountain, flowers and benches.” A woman from Guyana compared the negative aspects of the area to her native home saying, “It looks like Guyana, dirty and people sleeping in the street.” The majority of respondents were African American. One of them, a writer from Baltimore, reflected on how he wished the area reflected the complexity of African American culture.

The framework through which we view the world is also the basis for what we offer back to it. The writer, **Lucy R. Lippard**, describes the landscape in her 1998 book *The Lure of*

the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society as a narrative. “The story is composed of mythologies, histories, ideologies—the stuff of identity and representation.” Multiple accounts and past histories of daily life permeate the surroundings in which they unfold, but it may not be obvious to those within the local narrative that they are an essential part of the larger story. When confronted with a departure from the norm however, people are quick to acknowledge differences and may become more aware of how they relate to an altered environment. Change happens to us, or we can actively participate and contribute to the change. The relationship between the known and the new, between existing conditions and prospective aspirations, between the expected and the unforeseen, is about acknowledging what is there, what is different and what might be.



BERLIN, GERMANY, 1998 PHOTO: ARIEL KRASNOW

City planners, urban designers and architects vie with other powerful non-form-making forces to anticipate and influence physical and functional changes to the built environment. They are in a unique position to have a disproportionately large effect on the transformations of physical space. At the same time, their work must be grounded in

the needs of the people being served. Urban observers like **William H. Whyte** investigated how people act in public with a scientific rigor that uncovered many surprising patterns. The information he revealed has become invaluable in planning productive and dynamic public spaces. The premise of **VARIABLE CITY** is to survey the existing conditions of a place and based on those findings, test how temporary, aesthetic alterations might shift perceptions and generate new considerations for it. The immediate objectives were to impact the location while the broader goals are to affect the disciplines that will make those decisions. **VARIABLE CITY: Fox Square** is a prototype project in which downtown Brooklyn was selected as the initial location. The intention is that the project can be replicated at alternate sites.

Altering people’s perceptions can be a persuasive agent of change, particularly within a democracy. As more and more people perceive that an action, condition or a person has become either a positive force or a negative drawback to the current state, they can ideally act to voice opinion and to instigate change.

ART AS A SPATIAL GENERATOR

The creative arts can occur under any condition, but a flourishing of the arts is often considered a barometer of social well-being and civic freedoms. Artistic endeavors and ideas that prevail throughout centuries can become defining characteristics of a civilization. At this moment of urban expansion worldwide there is an opportunity to embrace broader fields of inquiry and strengthen the links between urban development, architecture and, as in the case of this



VARIABLE CITY PERFORMANCE AT FOX SQUARE, 2003
PHOTO: EMILY DRAZEN

“Public art participates in the production of meanings, uses, and forms for the city.”

ROSALYN DEUTSCHE, *EVICIONS: ART AND SPATIAL POLITICS*, MIT PRESS, 1998.

experiment, artistic enterprises. The arts have the ability to impact not only the aesthetics of a particular condition, but also the process of creating it.

Transformations to established modes will invariably occur; how actively and in what capacity people act will affect the course of those transformations. The movement of environmental, land and site-specific art has taken up the issue of altering the landscape to entice people into viewing their surroundings (and the art) differently. The cumulative effect of public art, from street level guerrilla arts to independent artists working in the public realm and private or government initiated public art projects is a positive influence overall on the general public’s awareness and appreciation of both space and art.

Performance art is a transitory alteration to an existing site with the capacity to inhabit

space quickly and in a big way. It is an instantaneous layer of inhabitation. But unlike a block party, a street fair or even a blanket of snow—events that also briefly transform space—performance and other temporary public art forms embrace the possibility of the astonishing, the unusual and the ingenious. They are more likely to transmit purposeful intent and challenge the bounds of accepted wisdom.

“The newly acknowledged reciprocity between artwork and site changed the identity of each, blurring the boundaries between them, and paved the way for art’s participation in wider cultural and social practices.” **Rosalyn Deutsche**, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, MIT Press, 1998.

VARIABLE CITY, as part of that effort, is also trying to broaden the initiative of direct collaboration between the public, the arts and the planning process. The urban planning process, which has shifted away from a post-war technocratic assault on the environment, desperately needs to continue widening its doors to incorporate multiple viewpoints. There has been a change in attitude over the past decade (most notably the inclusion of landscape design), which is creating a more holistic design environment. In New York City, the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site (despite the political minefields) has had a huge impact on garnering public response and striving to integrate a publicly reviewed aesthetic component into the planning scheme.

While not all artistic endeavors in the public realm seek to affect public opinion for social or political purposes, some are explicit in their goal. The **Obey** campaign consists of

publicly placed stickers bearing the French wrestler Andre the Giant's silhouetted face. The project is eloquently described by its creator **Shephard Fairey**. "The first aim of Phenomenology is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The Obey campaign attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the campaign and their relationship with their surroundings."



OBEY CAMPAIGN, NEW YORK PHOTO: ARIEL KRASNOW

Another example of a subtle unexpected adjustment to the landscape is the project "Flirting with Boundaries" by **Kirsten Kucer**. The artist wrapped one hundred multicolored skirts around trees that straddled adjacent but physically and socially distinct neighborhoods on either side of Church Avenue in Brooklyn. Her hope was to encourage perceptual and social links that "would induce neighbors...to stop and talk together."

Whether intended or not, displays of public art have the capacity to reconfigure the normal, if only for a moment. They make people stop and wonder, ignore or reconsider their experience and relationship to the surroundings. Underlying the themes addressed here, of raising awareness of public spaces and the potential for the arts to contribute to its form and intent, is the

ever-ambiguous concept of "public." Implicit, in the description above of "occupied space" is that multiple individual articulations give rise to a kind of collective cultural rendering. The multitudes of incidences that occur transcend standard divisions of "public" and "private" by appropriating space in both visible and implied ways. The famous **Nolli** plan of Rome favored the public street over building delineations, blurring the distinctions of inside and outside, public and private. VARIABLE CITY's working title was "Pedestrian Traces" in which we hoped to map not just observable paths, activities and perceptions of people, but something of their presence, real and intangible. If we were to map the imprint left by people across three dimensions, including time, the configuration of public space might look quite different from its assumed demarcations. VARIABLE CITY's unexpected moments of art attempted to harness some of that unknown by engaging people to perceive things a little differently, and imagine. If those responses can help to galvanize ideas for the future, then this first phase of the project will have been successful. The next step is to reactivate the site again through a performance intervention based on the findings of this first phase. In theory, the development process of VARIABLE CITY is a prototype to be applied at other sites here and in other cities. The goal of this method is to make another step towards the integration of resources in the description, delineation, development and use of space. Potentially, the more a population is aware of its environment, the more it will strive to influence that space as an expression of its needs and aesthetics.