

*Resisting Precariousness, Reclaiming Community:
Contemporary Art, 'Unitary Urbanism' and Urban Futures*

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Abstract

This paper examines instances of contemporary art shaped by the socio-spatial urgencies of capitalist-urbanism, which frequently steer urban communities into precarious conditions such as, exclusionary development, gentrification and housing expropriation. Such works have demonstrated art's potential to assist communities in acquiring agency over urban futures – even in the context of neo-liberalism's significant inflammation of said urgencies. This urban-embedded, socially engaged art practice often involves the macro-level discourse of urban regeneration being creatively poached from private, economic interest and handed over to communities. The aim of this paper, however, is not to provide an exhaustive description of this practice, but rather to argue that the Situationist International's concept of 'unitary urbanism' may be repurposed into a critical framework and vocabulary with which it may be examined. The debates of 'public' / 'new genre public art', 'street art' and 'site-specific art', for example, have disputably failed to establish a specialised framework for examining contemporary art's responses to the displacing, expropriating forces of capitalism-urbanism, exacerbated by neo-liberal production. Therefore, this paper proposes that the Situationist's leftist transmutation of urbanism could function as a potential repository for a qualified theoretical framework and lexicon. The Situationists were a 20th century avant-garde collective who had aimed to critique advanced capitalism and transform the city – two unified objectives, as they had recognised the capitalism-urbanism nexus. In opposition to official urbanism's dispossessing and displacing dynamics, unitary urbanism had proposed principles (participation, use-value, unity and détournement), which could assist communities in reclaiming urban futures.

Keywords: Capitalist-Urbanism, Neo-Liberal, Regeneration, Situationist, Unitary Urbanism

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Introduction

The capitalist-urbanism nexus of the West is a locus of socio-spatial urgencies, which embody the precariousness of our contemporary urban moment. Indeed, central to this nexus between capitalist production and urbanism, are the socio-spatial urgencies of urban regeneration such as, exclusionary development, gentrification and housing expropriation, which, of course, frequently steer communities into precarious conditions. The deregulatory, privatising forces of neo-liberalism and its municipal counterpart, urban entrepreneurialism, have inflamed said urgencies to striking levels. In the late 1980's it had become increasingly apparent that neo-liberalism had contributed to the rise of an entrepreneurial urban governance form. As Harvey (1989) had described, urban entrepreneurialism prioritises “investment and economic development with the speculative construction of place rather than the amelioration of conditions within a particular territory as its immediate (though by no means exclusive) political and economic goal” (Harvey, 1989, p.8). This amplified prioritisation of cities as economic growth machines had therefore intensified urban regeneration's status as a vehicle for capitalist accumulation. Neo-liberal production and its correspondent form of urban governance have consequently exacerbated the precarious nature of urban living. However, in this urban neo-liberal landscape, contemporary art has emerged as a key site of resistance. This paper will examine instances of contemporary art, which have responded to the urgencies of neo-liberal regeneration through urban-embedded forms of socially engaged art. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to provide an exhaustive description of this practice, but rather, to argue that it currently lacks a qualified framework for examination.

The existing debates of ‘public’ / ‘new genre public art’, ‘street art’ and ‘site-specific art’, have disputably failed to establish specialised analyses for this urban-embedded work. Therefore, this paper's aim is to argue that the Situationist International's idea of ‘unitary urbanism’ may be repurposed into a critical framework and lexicon for examining contemporary art's responses to neo-liberal urban regeneration. Undoubtedly, production has developed enormously since the Situationists. Nevertheless, this paper will demonstrate that, even in our present era of neo-liberal production and urban entrepreneurialism, unitary urbanism remains a vital repository of urban-centric art theory, invaluable to the works addressed. The Situationists were a predominantly European organisation of artists and social revolutionaries whose work had aimed to contest advanced capitalism and transform the city – two unified objectives, as they had recognised urbanism's crucial status as a spatial extension of capitalist production (Debord, 1967/2014, p.90). From their post-Marxist perspective, urban space was considered a site from which capitalist ideologies were exerted at the most insidious level. Via their concept of unitary urbanism they had imagined a spatial programme alternative to that of the Western capitalist city (Kotányi & Vaneigem, 1961/2006, pp.86-89). Admittedly, the Situationists had existed amongst many other experimental post-war groups, whose debates were also opposed to the ubiquitous capitalist culture of the cold war years. Avant-garde groups such as the Happenings, Fluxus and GRAV had similarly offered experimental contestations towards the inherent contradictions of capitalist-urbanism. Nevertheless, the Situationist's conception of unitary urbanism offers a decidedly urban-centric toolkit of artistic lexicon and theory, which is simply unavailable in the other post-war avant-garde.

Unitary urbanism can be succinctly defined as the Situationist's distinctive critique of official urbanism, as well as their provisional terms and conditions for an alternative model. Their resentment of urbanism being a spatial extension of capitalist production had birthed a set of principles for a leftist, 'alter-urbanism' (Kotányi & Vaneigem, 1961/2006, pp.86-89). Unitary urbanism's key principles were (yet not limited to) the following:

- Participation: The city's spaces and its architecture would be inclusive of the desires and needs of its common publics.
- Use-Value: The social use-value of urban space would be favoured over its conversion into quantifiable exchange-values.
- Unity: Rigid separations prescribed by capitalist urban planning would be negated in favour of a more 'unified' environment.
- Détournement: In the context of unitary urbanism, the Situationist's acclaimed concept of détournement had suggested the tactical subversion of the narratives and operations embedded in urban space.

Contemporary Art, 'Unitary Urbanism' and Urban Futures

For the purposes of this paper, only a selection of unitary urbanism's most vital tenets are outlined. This paper by no means aims to represent a total overview of the Situationist's proposal for reforming urbanism. The tenets outlined above are arguably the most qualified for the works, which will be discussed – contemporary, urban-embedded practice shaped by the socio-spatial urgencies of neo-liberal regeneration. Arguably, these principles for a radical, leftist transmutation of urbanism form a qualified framework for examining works such as Harbour Edge Association's *Park Fiction* (1994 – Ongoing). When developers made a bid on a riverbank property in St. Pauli, Hamburg, locals risked losing their only remaining space for public use (Park Fiction, "Park Fiction Introduction", 2013). Instead of protesting against the gentrification and validating the developers' influence, locals began picnicking on the site as if it was already a public park (Park Fiction, "Park Fiction Introduction", 2013). Demonstrating the power of 'direct action' over 'protest', these picnicking activities kick-started a community-led planning process, which eventually deterred the developers' plans. Micro-level actions of locals had infiltrated urban regeneration's macro-level discourse, infusing it with participatory values. According to the Situationists, urban planning reiterated the non-participatory nature of what they had called the spectacle (Kotányi & Vaneigem, 1961/2006, p.87). The spectacle is a late capitalist economy in which our lives are no longer primarily defined by consumption, but by the passive reception of images that the media-economy alliance broadcasts to us in a unidirectional stream (Debord, 1967/2014). Representing something in which participation appeared impossible, urban planning therefore reaffirmed the spectacle's 'unidirectional discourse'.

Situationist texts such as *New Babylon* (1974/1997) and *Formulary for a New Urbanism* (1953/2006) feature explicit demands for a city in which pedestrians would be able to modify architectural forms and urban ambiances. The participatory characteristics of these imagined urban utopias had served to critique and counter the non-participatory nature of official urban planning. *Park Fiction* had namely reiterated unitary urbanism's demand for participation through its development of special tools, which made the planning process accessible to the whole community,

such as a plasticine office, an 'archive of desires', questionnaires, maps and a telephone hotline with answering machine for those get creative at night (Park Fiction, "Park Fiction Introduction", 2013). The planning process was therefore rendered game-like, negating urban regeneration's exclusionary thematics. Acclaimed Situationist Guy Debord (1957/2006) had stated, "...the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectator's psychological identification with the hero, so as to draw them into the activity" (Debord, 1957/2006, pp.40-41). Actualising this statement, Harbour Edge Association had handed out a game board, displaying all of the playful ways that locals could get involved (Park Fiction, "Park Fiction Introduction", 2013). *Park Fiction's* tools had therefore shattered the community's identification with the so-called 'heroes' of urban governance, highlighting that they could become active agents of the city.

Modernism's functional and rational approach to urban planning was largely criticised by the Situationists, as much akin to capitalist regeneration, its standardised designs had suggested an oppressive collectivism, which ignored individual needs and desires. Unitary urbanism's principle of participation had therefore specifically proposed a collectivism, which not only responded to common social urgencies, but had also promoted the expression of individual identities (Sadler, 1999, p.7). Similarly, in *Park Fiction*, whilst the project's co-producers worked towards the common goal of resisting gentrification, they had simultaneously enabled individual locals to fulfill their own unique needs and interests. For example, a drawing made by a local boy in 1997 had inspired the site's now iconic artificial palm tree island (Park Fiction, "Park Fiction Introduction", 2013). Countering gentrification's separating forces, the project had also reiterated unitary urbanism's aim to create conditions of unity. As locals were united through collective, playful planning activities, the project therefore mitigated gentrification's socially fragmenting effects. Also analogous to unitary urbanism, was *Park Fiction's* favouring of the lived, use-value of space over capitalism's 'spectacle' of space. Urban regeneration prioritises space's exchange-values, transforming it into a mere 'image-commodity', that is mostly 'looked at', being it privatised, or caught in the machinations of speculative capital. *Park Fiction* had therefore opposed the spectacle of urban regeneration, with directly lived activities. 'Spectatorship' was replaced with 'direct action'. Speculative exchange-values were undermined by social, community-centred use-values.

Granby Four Streets (1998–Ongoing) had also actualised unitary urbanism's favouring of space's use-values, but with a particular focus on housing struggles. This project had responded to a community's twenty-year struggle against the local government's attempts to expropriate and demolish their homes (Granby Four Streets CLT, "History of the Four Streets", 2015). This socially engaged art project had enabled residents of a neglected inner city area to develop a thriving urban community outside of the housing profit motive. Remarkably, Granby residents had initiated the project themselves. It was only in more recent years that artist collective, Assemble, supplemented the creative groundwork that locals had produced (Assemble Collective, "Granby Four Streets", 2013). Therefore, again, we witness a true mirror of unitary urbanism's core value of participation – non-artists 'commanding art for their community'. Around the mid-2000's, Granby locals began forming their everyday, creative methods of gentrification resistance. Residents began planting greenery, occupying the streets through social activities, redecorating boarded up buildings and, most vitally, developing knowledge of housing and property laws.

Much akin to *Park Fiction*, this project reiterates unitary urbanism's participatory tenet via its use of quotidian activities as tools for aesthetic activism. However, by reinstating housing's use-values and negating its irrational position as a 'cash cow' for speculative capital, *Granby Four Streets* is, first most, an underscoring of unitary urbanism's rejection of urban space's exchange-values. The houses in Granby would not be demolished (the more profitable solution), they would be restored and inhabited by locals who would naturally reinstate their use-values as 'homes' – as repositories of shelter, security and community.

Nuria Güell's *Intervention Series* (2012) had also responded to the urban housing crisis in the West. This series of work made visible the legal strategies used by banks in Spain and Italy to expropriate housing from the state and, most vitally, urban communities. In Spain thousands of evictions were conducted in 2011 and a significant majority of these were caused by real estate speculation from the *Mediterranean Savings Bank* (Arte Útil Archive, "Intervention #1 – Archive Entry", n.d.). Güell specifically responded to this situation in her piece *Intervention #1* (2012). In this piece, the artist had set up a cooperative, and through this cooperative, she had contracted a construction worker to remove doors from expropriated properties (Arte Útil Archive, "Intervention #1 – Archive Entry", n.d.). As the process was implemented through a legal entity, this prevented the construction worker from being legally viable and also, of course, enabled the formerly displaced residents to re-access properties. Much akin to unitary urbanism, Güell criticises how urban space is irrationally reduced to exchange-values at the expense of basic social needs. As Güell's intervention had opened up enclosed, expropriated space, it had boldly dismantled the principles of private property and had also brought to life unitary urbanism's aim to abolish separations in favour of a unified environment. In other words, *Intervention #1* had reinstated unitary urbanism's value of 'unity' over categorical separations. Capitalism is characterised by separations – divisions of labour, specialisation and class. As Debord (1967/2014) had claimed, "separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle" (Debord, 1967/2014, p.8). Unsurprisingly, this tendency is also continued throughout urban space, as it is fragmented and divided according to function and, in the worst case, according to the economic standing of urban communities.

Poverty and social urgencies are often moved into more peripheral zones away from the sumptuous, upmarket areas of the city (Savage, Warde & Ward, 2003, p.72). Güell had not only exposed the separating forces of capitalist production in the urban sphere, but more vitally, had directly problematised them. Finding loopholes in the legal system, which disrupt the expropriation of urban space could be understood as a form of *détournement*. Situationist *détournement* was an activity in which one radically altered or misappropriated the meanings of capitalist cultural forms (Maxwell, 2015, p.288). Capitalistic media would be turned against itself or have its significations negated altogether so that new, subversive meanings could be produced. Güell's legal interventions demonstrate how even non-artists can, in their modest, everyday experiences of the city, actively subvert existing conditions in their favour. *Intervention #1* was a tactical manoeuvre in the enemy's territory, using its own apparatus against itself. Güell had demonstrated how the imposed system of real estate speculation does not have to be passively accepted. Rather, via *détournements* of the laws governing urban space, it can be radically problematised. As *Granby Four Streets* had encouraged activities not usually undertaken in spaces planned for

demolition and redevelopment, it had also arguably produced spatial détournements. Likewise, in *Park Fiction*, modest picnicking activities on a site planned for redevelopment were fantastically transformed into a means of occupation, which ultimately prevented gentrification. The Situationists had characterised détournement as “a real means of proletariat artistic education...” (Debord & Wolman, 1956/2006, p.18). Correspondingly, in all of the works addressed, the détournement of urban space was an accessible artistic strategy – a tool with which even non-artists could resist gentrification and housing expropriation. Quotidian, micro-level activities have, in all cases, by virtue of their imaginative and creative employments, become détournements of the seemingly untouchable meta-narrative that is neo-liberal urban regeneration.

Conclusion

The key principles of unitary urbanism (participation, use-value, unity and détournement) illuminate a common and vital thread of all the works addressed – giving communities the tools to transform urban living conditions themselves. Urban communities are not ‘shown’ or ‘told’ what to do; rather, they are guided towards their own potential for radical agency. As Guy Debord (1961/2006) had claimed, “revolution is not ‘showing’ life to people, but bringing them to life. A revolutionary organisation must always remember that its aim is not getting its adherents to listen to its convincing talks by expert leaders, but getting them to speak for themselves...” (Debord, 1961/2006, p.396). Repurposing unitary urbanism has highlighted how the works addressed have, in every circumstance, encouraged communities to work on their own terms. This arguably reaffirms the value of repurposing unitary urbanism – it not only functions as valuable critical framework and lexicon, but also effectively illuminates the major continuities in the works addressed. To conclude, this paper has contended that, unlike existing debates, unitary urbanism offers a qualified framework and lexicon for examining contemporary art, shaped by the socio-spatial urgencies of urban regeneration. In spite of the Situationist’s dissolution in 1972, it is clear that unitary urbanism’s radical aesthetic activism lives on through instances of contemporary art, which resist precariousness and reclaim community in the context of neo-liberal urban regeneration.

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