What Can We Do With(out) Action?

Christopher Austin Roach
California College of the Arts

More than two years after the global financial collapse, architecture is still waking up with a hangover. As we continue to grasp for effective ways to bring our disciplinary knowledge to bear on the challenges of global urbanization, social justice, and climate change, architects remain caught in the limited field of possibilities delineated by earlier academic and professional discourses. Even if we have passed through the "semantic nightmare"[1] of postmodernism, played out the self-referential indulgences of autonomous architecture, and awakened from the decade-long fever dream of "postcritical" production, we still seem to find ourselves without a normative framework for what can be done with architecture, and in particular, what architecture can do for the city.[2]

A whole host of architects and urban theorists have offered a response to this paradoxical state by positing various forms of direct action as alternatives to these perceived ideological dead ends of theory and practice. The energy and interest devoted to these explorations is both admirable and formidable, and rather than address the entire terrain of thinking and writing that has developed, I have selected a particular work that I argue is somehow symptomatic of the various texts and positions that have been fielded within the discourse to date. I will take the liberty of using criticism of this text as an opportunity to elucidate these positions and unpack the possibilities and pitfalls that they represent.

Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi's *Actions: What You Can Do With the City*[3] is a prime subject, offering us not only a milestone event and publication within discourse, but also a transect of the various writers and actors plying this field. First published by the Canadian Centre for Architecture as a catalog for its eponymous exhibition in 2008, *Actions* presents a cross section of the alternative spatial practices that have emerged from the groundswell of so-called "guerrilla urbanism."[4] Editors Borasi (who is CCA's Curator of Contemporary Architecture) and Zardini (CCA's Director) frame these practices within an argument for *action itself* as an ideological position uniquely available to both architects and ordinary citizens. By documenting a selection of these actions in the exhibition and catalog, and by

having a host of critics reflect on their implications in a series of essays, the editors aim to capture the imaginative power of this renewed populist discourse and stake out new territory for design practices in the city.

Actions documents how the recent increase in urban activism and its multivalent expression through "guerilla gardening," urban agriculture, "pop-up parks," and other acts of reclaiming public space (including the "Occupy" movement) represents localized popular responses to the dismantling of the welfare state and a frustration with the inability of urban professionals in public and private sectors to adequately address pressing issues of everyday urban life such as malnutrition and a deficit of truly public spaces.

Activist and amateur horticulturalist Richard Reynolds characterizes his own path to guerrilla gardening in precisely these terms. In "Guerrilla Gardeners and Public Space Professionals: Between Conflict and Co-operation," Reynolds claims that the spontaneous greening of neglected public spaces by ordinary citizens for the purposes of seeking food and pleasure has become a necessary response to tightening municipal budgets, corrupt contractors, and the slow moving hand of bureaucracy. Reynolds characterizes these illicit gardens, installed by clandestine crews of amateur horticulturalists in the dark of the London night as typical of what he calls as a more "tactical" response to the lack of green space in the modern metropolis (83).

Similarly, Spanish architect Santiago Cirugeda's *Recetas Urbanas* ("urban prescriptions") operate under the assumption that the activist architect must shift to operate within the interstices and gaps left by market-driven urban development. Like recreational versions of guerrilla gardens, his temporary parks, parasitic structures, and other public installations use vacant lots, recycled material, or repurposed public works equipment to provide amenities in the undeveloped blind spots of the city (123).

These actions and many others documented in the book celebrate the potential of everyday life activities (walking, gardening, playing, recycling) to open up new avenues for imagining alternatives to the dominant social and spatial order. While clearly drawing on a legacy of urban theorists and activists whose roots can be traced back to the *dérives* and *détournements* that the Situationist International was promoting more than fifty years ago, the editors have nonetheless put their finger on the pulse of a "DIY Zeitgeist" that has proliferated in urban culture, culminating in its potential apotheosis at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. Perhaps more importantly, they have attempted to recover a connection between design practice and the objective conditions of urban life that had been previously (though incompletely) explored by groups such as Team X and Archigram. While the book's clever design (incorporating a fold-out anamorphic stencil into the dust cover) and the accessible tone of the writing seem intended to make it attractive to both architects and the general public, having the CCA as the patron and sponsor of both the exhibition and catalog locates its message squarely in the realm of architecture culture.

01

Figure 1: Cover of *Actions*

02

In this context, we must more closely interrogate *Actions* and peel back the layers of hype to ask how these activities can actually lead to new forms of material practice in architecture. This is a question that the mini-movement coalescing around guerilla urbanism has so far failed to adequately address; these exciting and vivid examples of crowd-sourced urbanism are too often taken at face value as being inherently good and not critically assessed for their potential to address the enormity and seriousness of urban challenges. Like the proponents of Everyday Urbanism, its prophets focus on finding alternative meanings and interpretations of the city and avoid any deep responsibility for how the shaping of physical space can engage the forces of urbanization at an adequate scale.[5] How can this everyday urbanism, operating in the "fine grain" of the public realm, ever add up to more than the sum of its parts and truly improve societal norms?

Zardini sets our critical expectations high in his opening essay, with an erudite summary of the geopolitical conditions of contemporary architecture practice that leads to a compelling argument for why we should reexamine the idea of social practice now. According to Zardini, we have passed into an "urban age" not only because the majority of humans live in cities but also because the entire world is effectively organized by urbanism, and therefore, "the only possibility of action now lies within the urban world" (12). Zardini argues that functionalist twentieth-century paradigms of urbanism have ultimately resulted in a city optimized for capitalism, while the post-Fordist economy has transformed the modern city from center of production to center of consumption, swallowed up by free market forces. The result of this shift, according to Zardini, is the fragmentation of the public into identity-based communities based on consumption patterns, paralleled by an increasing marginalization of "defective consumers" (those unable to participate legally in consumer society because of their economic or political status). The fragmented and fortified urban territory is littered with massive amounts of the waste generated by capitalist accumulation.

Zardini suggests that the first step in reversing this decline is to change our perceptions of consumerism and to challenge conventional notions of progress and development. In parallel, he argues that we must confront the deteriorating social fabric of cities, which has produced a loss of meaningful citizenship and a resulting passivity in the populace. Zardini insists that the search for such a "post-development" model for the city requires not only a radical reconsideration of the growth-oriented mode of urbanization, but also a profound recognition of limits, including the limitations of rationalist planning itself. He recalls how Team X offered a counterpoint to the rational–functionalist urbanism of CIAM by attempting to connect architectural ideals to "everyday life," thereby enabling citizens to participate in the design of the city. He proposes that while "participation" is no panacea, it is a means by which this search for a new model can begin from the ground up, where the "microbe-like, singular, and plural practices" that emerge from individual actions can combine to form a more complete picture of this new paradigm (14). Zardini argues that previously untapped sources of imagination and opportunity are emerging from individual everyday activist practices resurfacing after their post-'70s hibernation.

In "City 2.0," Zardini's co-editor, Borasi, expands this thesis and further explains the editors' rationale for why we should focus on these "everyday" actions now: They are important both as tools for reinterpreting the city in ways accessible to everyone and as practices that are "invisible" to planning authorities. She claims that it is precisely because they are outside the typical framework of planning that these actors have the power to "radically rethink the urban experience" (21); she has faith that more forms of practice can be "teased out" of these actions, inspiring "a new modus operandi, promoting a *productive* critical attitude" among designers who seek to act in and on the built environment (23). As Borasi states, "all our research tends to demonstrate that it is possible to find potential actions, actors, and instruments with this intentional energy to help devise new arrangements and to see beyond simply feeding into the systems already set in place" (23).

While all this potential is quite enticing, it relies on a Habermasian faith in the ability of activities in the "lifeworld" to recode the city and resist the "system,"[6] yet it is never clear how these changes in meaning at the level of the everyday can allow us to develop concepts that are necessary for developing a new framework for practice. If there is indeed a beach underneath these cobblestones, we can only hope to find it by willingly suspending disbelief, and, by briefly immersing ourselves in this realm of the quotidian imaginary, attempt a closer reading of the book.

With this in mind, we can now turn to an examination of the actions themselves. Though the editors allude to a multitude of creative everyday actions outside the scope of the book, they have reduced our lens to the four they find most typical of everyday life: walking, playing, gardening, and recycling. The CCA show exhibited ninety-eight of these actions, some thirty-four of which are documented in one-page crib sheets interspersed between the essays.

The actions begin with the leisurely pace of walking, echoing the footsteps of Benjamin's *flâneur* and drawing us into the most familiar of spaces for public action, the streets. In "The Pedestrian as Urban Actor," Lausanne-based lecturer Sonia Lavadinho draws on her anthropological research to position the urban pedestrian as the generative subject of the city, one who creates urbanity through the act of moving through space. Celebrating an extreme subjectivism, as if only internal experience mattered, she writes: "Pedestrians *make* the city through the act of walking" (33); her city of personal experience emanates from the body outward. Walking as a "spatial practice" (Michel de Certeau's phrase[7]) ascribes the pedestrian with a more immediate power to appropriate and transform space than the abstract prospective vision of the planning professional. Lavadinho advocates both a literal and symbolic inscription of these transformations through the creation of a "culture of the pedestrian" that accommodates both practical infrastructures (pedestrian-oriented streetscapes, tighter transportation networks, better signage) and artistic practices (such as those of Robert Smithson or the Italian group Stalker) that make the walking city more visible.

03

Figure 3: The Walkmobile

Walking takes a more collective and overtly political turn in the hands of architect and urban designer Tali Hatuka. As one of the foremost thinkers on urbanism, protest, and public space, Hatuka, from Tel Aviv University, has identified "walking politics" as the various forms of collective walking such as parades, picket lines, or protest marches, which she distinguishes from perambulation for locomotion or pleasure. Hatuka claims that the political power of this collective walking emanates from its ability to visibly disrupt and threaten the normative contexts, codes, and regulations that are written into the spaces of the city produced by the dominant sociopolitical order. Furthermore, walking not only remains relevant in the world of information and communications technology, but according to Hatuka, is also instrumental, in an increasingly globalized and fragmented world, in connecting bodies together through physical encounters. It is in this space of the encounter that she finds the essential power of collective walking, where both the interaction of participants with each other and spectators, as well as the group's direct engagement with power through the display of solidarity, act to extend and transform the symbolic role of public space.

Yet it seems that in our era of speed (in both transportation and communications), the slow pace of the *flâneur* (or even the mob) can effect only a phenomenal or symbolic spatial transformation of the horizontal spaces of the city, whose outward expansion and vertical extrusion remain driven by the economic engines of urbanization. Enter the *traceur,* protagonist of David Ker Thompson's essay "La Belle Époque," and practitioner of the more vertically inclined and fast-paced form of urban drifting called *parkour.* Thompson's lyrical paper traces the opportunistic urban gymnastics of *parkour* (or "free running"), a form of high-speed acrobatics in which participants use urban landscapes to perform aerial movements among its structures. Thompson situates *parkour* squarely within the lineage of Debord's psychogeography, claiming it as a new mode of anti-capitalist resistance through its embrace of unproductive play and media-ready reinterpretation of urban spaces. Just how *parkour* can affect concrete societal conditions other than by capturing the startled attention of a few onlookers is never clarified, and even if the *parkour's* high-flying arc does hint at some post-capitalist future, Thompson's own imaginary leap falls disappointingly short of this utopia, describing a sci-fi urbanism of buildings shaped like the parabolic curve of freefall and a soft architecture of moveable walls.

After all this walking and leaping, we are still left without a clear picture of the *material dimensions* of these everyday practices. However, as the essays then pivot from walking to play, I want to note a similar progression traced by the artist Constant Nieuwenhuis, who broke from the pack of Situationist drifters in the 1960s to follow the ascending trajectory of his *homo ludens*, the "playing man."*8* The elevated urban megastructure of Constant's *New Babylon* was the utopian realm of this playing man, liberated from labor by technology and dedicated to the eternal construction of a floating city of "atmospheres" above the decaying corpus of capitalist production below. As compelling as *New Babylon* was as image and critique, its refusal to come back down to earth left it with limited agency for

intervention in the historical city. Nonetheless, the potential of this ludic city was recognized by Constant's fellow Dutchman and Team X member Aldo van Eyck, who was actually able to appropriate the space of play as a viable territory for urban intervention. Van Eyck channeled the spontaneous development of Amsterdam's postwar playgrounds into a scalable model of urban regeneration in Amsterdam West, a strategy that author and architect Henk Döll continues to put to use in Holland today. In his essay "Play as a Design Tool," Döll draws upon his colleague Liane Lefaivre's research on van Eyck's playgrounds and the history of play in urban development to develop practical principles for deploying "polycentric play networks" as the organizing infrastructure of public space in both new and existing developments (216). It is this deployment of the spatial dimension of play that we finally begin to see a more concrete example of how action (or as Tschumi might say, "event") can generate urbanism, even if bringing *homo ludens* down to earth to be put to use as an agent of urban regeneration may seem a banal application of Constant's *New Babylon.*

Ocean Howell returns our focus once more to the transgressive potential of the body in motion and at play by casting the skateboarder as a kind of modern *homo ludens* on wheels. In "From Public Nuisance to Instrument of Revitalization," Howell traces the changing perception of skateboarders in urban environments, from rolling hoodlums and vandals to agents of urban transformation, whose repurposing of neglected or derelict sites into skate parks have slowed these sites' decline or even led to their gentrification.[9] Howell, an architecture doctoral candidate at the University of California at Berkeley, explains how this tactical pivot has been mirrored by a transformation in the strategies of public officials, who have turned away from deterrence and quarantine to accommodating and even leveraging skaters to occupy areas in decline as part of a long-term redevelopment strategy. Although Howell makes claims for skateboarding similar to those of Thompson makes for the *parkour* (as forms of play "resistant" to consumer capitalism), he acknowledged that skaters' co-option by planning officials in sanctioned skate-park developments "has put them into the service of those same economic relations" (64).

Nonetheless, Howell's connecting tactical action with strategic planning offers an insight into how these singular practices might be made productive. But if we return from playing man to guerilla gardening, we can see how an activity that has grown out of the cracks and spaces left in the city after the retreat of the public sphere under late capitalism has been positively co-opted by city governments and other "public space professionals" (architects, planners, maintenance personnel). Just as New York's illegal community gardens from the 1970s have been legitimized and turned into public–private adjuncts to the city's official parks,[10] so have our contemporary opportunistic gardeners begun to shift the scale of their appropriation of open space. A key component of this shift has been reconsidering the role of urban green space as one of production rather than solely of recreation or beautification. Debra Solomon and Hans Ibelings turn our attention to food production in "The Edible City," contrasting the small-scale and fragmentary

04

Figure 4: Parkour Montréal, 2007
© Rachel Granofsky

05

gardening practices prevalent in European and North American cities with the more significant role that urban agriculture plays in cities of developing nations. They fervently advocate architects and planners implementing urban agriculture at a large scale as both a way to provide sustainable food security and as an agent of urban transformation, arguing that a more substantial and well-designed form of gardening could replace the predominantly ornamental green spaces of our cities.

This reconceptualization of the city's open space as a productive infrastructure is radicalized in Andre Viljoen and Katrin Bohn's "Everything Is Continuous." Their concept of a "Continuous Productive Urban Landscape" (CPUL) originates from a recovered awareness of the historical tie between food and the city[11] and attempts to channel environmental awareness and the growing enthusiasm for urban agriculture into a coherent urban design strategy. In the CPUL, the urban landscape's productivity is predicated on a reconception of the city's open spaces as a matrix that operates on the order of infrastructure, and it is here that the tie between small-scale action and real transformation at the urban scale seems the most promising.

This conceptual reunification of city and country into a cohesive infrastructure of nutrition has driven some of the most compelling investigations into urban agriculture in recent years. Like Viljoen and Bohn in their groundbreaking research on the urban organic gardens (*organopónicos)* in Cuba,[12] Nina-Marie Lister has conducted a thorough investigation of the Toronto city-region conceived as a "food shed," where the bounds of the metropolis are defined by the area it takes to feed itself. Lister, a professor at Toronto's Ryerson University Centre for Studies in Food Security, has done extensive research on the city's food systems. Her essay "Toronto's Foodscape" condenses her conclusions into a compelling argument for considering the city and its surrounding food shed as an "edible landscape," where the multiplicity of infrastructures, supply chains, and modes of consumption are considered as part of a broad tapestry that supplies nutrients to the entire urban ecology.

While it is a stretch to claim that this regional infrastructure is a form of "gardening," the potential to weave individual landscape practices into a strategy for larger-scale transformation is the most plausible evidence yet that "actions" could begin to open up new conceptual frameworks for urban planning and design. It is in these essays on urban agriculture that the scalar leap from individual garden plots to the reorganization of the city around food infrastructure is most forcefully made, and they come closest to answering Zardini's call to connect the interest in tactical actions to strategic visions necessary to address the global crises he outlines.

It is this expansion of the imagination outside conventional frameworks that we need most in the first years of the "urban age," and *Actions* has appeared at an opportune time. In this moment, when a combination of optimism and extreme hardship has renewed belief in the power of small-scale local actions, architects and planners are turning to these alternative practices as a potential source of creativity. The catalog format of *Actions* makes it

Figure 5: Victory garden trike and gardener, January 2007© Amy Franceschini

New Constellations New Ecologies

an accessible primer on such individual practices, but this is also its weakness: It offers up a banquet of actions and options that are each individually stimulating or inspiring, but that collectively suggest no solid overall reformist programs—the disadvantaged remain disadvantaged in all these scenarios. *Actions* makes room for a plurality of contributions, throwing in the more practical advice of Thomas Leo Ogren on allergy-sensitive urban forestry along with Emily Ruhala's provocative description of dumpster-diving professionals and Fergus "the Forager" Drennan's recipe for road kill. While the short essay form is easily digestible and allows for a multitude of voices, the contents rarely venture beyond description. Even Borasi's essay, which comes closest to offering a definitive statement, concludes in a kind of anti-manifesto: "What all these ideas offer is a parallel system. They make no claim to represent a new world that could arrogantly replace the one now in our cities. [They] do not constitute a unison response but offer *everybody* a system of possible alternatives" (24).

But perhaps utopian dreams of new worlds are crucial; there are times that call for utopian thinking, when incrementalism, "muddling through," and change from within simply won't cut it. These times reveal the weakness of pluralism: Its individualized solutions produce a fragmented and segregated environment. Alternatively, even if utopia is not workable or even desirable, imagining it allows us to directly engage in the conceptualization of radical otherness. Fritz Haeg captures the spirit of the book's struggle with this choice in "Architecture After the Front Lawn," his manifesto for the transformation of urban space one lawn at a time. Haeg succinctly lays out the paradoxical choice we face: "Between the utopian fantasy of starting over and the impossibility of continuing in the direction that we are headed, there lies a middle ground in which we come to terms with the urban decisions that have already been made and repurpose aspects of our existing built environment in strategic ways" (90).

Zardini and Borasi imply an answer in the book's subtitle "What You Can Do with the City," suggesting the inevitability of the city as an artifact, and the belief that "you" (the ordinary citizen) have both the power of a user and an agent of change. For the design professions, the answer has become even more urgent, for if the various adjectives that have recently preceded urbanism (*new, landscape, everyday, ecological,* etc.) have yet to provide a clear framework for action, what exactly are we to "do" with the city? While the actions that the book details offer some compelling suggestions, it is not clear that they provide us with a tangible set of strategies within the material practice of architecture. But even if these individual actions don't address the scale and complexities of design practice in the urban age, they give us plenty to "do" while we think about it. ◆

ENDNOTES

1. Rem Koolhaas, quoted in Stan Allen, *Points and Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

2. George Baird, "'Criticality' and Its Discontents" in *Harvard Design Magazine* 21, Fall 2004/Winter 2005, pp. 16–21. See also Wes Jones, "Big Forking Dilemma" in *Harvard Design Magazine* 32, Spring/Summer 2010, pp. 8–17.

3. Giovanna Borasi & Mirko Zardini, eds. *Actions: What You Can Do With the City* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, and Amsterdam: Sun Publishers, 2008).

4. Various manifestations of this guerrilla urbanism, also known as "tactical urbanism," "insurgent urbanism," or various other monikers, have proliferated in the years since Margaret Crawford's *Everyday Urbanism* first marked out this popular domain. See John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999). For more recent examples see publications such as Jeffrey Hou, *Insurgent Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2010), and Florian Haydn and Robert Temel, *Temporary Urban Spaces* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), as well as in the *New York Times Magazine*'s architecture issue, *Guerrilla Gardening* (June 8, 2008), and numerous blogs such as Santiago Cirugeda's *Recetas Urbanas* (http://www.receta-surbanas.net/).

5. Michael Speaks, "Every Day Is Not Enough" in Douglas Kelbaugh, *Everyday Urbanism: Margaret Crawford vs. Michael Speaks* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture + Urban Planning, 2005).

6. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1984–87).

7. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1984), describes walking as an "enunciative" practice that actualizes the spaces and forms of the city, in contrast to the conceptual or symbolic practices of the planning professions.

8. Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1998).

9. In addition to Howell's own examples in Portland, Walla Walla, San Francisco, and Louisville, see also the *Bajo Puentes* program developed by Mexico City's Authority of Public Spaces. www.aep.df.gob.mx.

10. For instance, Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project owns and operates over 100 community parks and gardens that were sold off by the City of New York in 1999; http://www.nyrp.org/.

11. For an excellent account of this history and its implications in the modern city, see Carolyn Steel's *Hungry City* (London: Vintage, 2009).

12. In André Viljoen, Katrin Bohn, and Joe Howe, *Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes: Designing Urban Agriculture for Sustainable Cities* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2005).