

# Remaking the City: The Occupy Movement and Its Urban Resonances

KEVIN D. MURPHY

Vanderbilt University

SALLY O'DRISCOLL

Fairfield University

**The Occupy movement in lower Manhattan, and its later offshoots, challenge the way urban space is used and policed. This article examines the self-representation of Occupy and its relationship to an organization of space, designated for various uses with cultural and political significance. This essay asks architects and urbanists to consider the implications of such occupations for conceiving the democratic city.**

## THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

When people come together to occupy space in political protest, they lay bare their desire to claim that space in a fiercely intentional way: they are determined to shape it to meet specifically articulated community needs. Thus an examination of such protests, ephemeral though they may be, reveals a trove of information about the desires of a particular section of the community in relation to developing a new vision of public urban space. As such, these projects constitute “counter-hegemonic architectural practices” that resist the economics, aesthetics, and politics of urban building as it currently exists.

The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 in New York City offered an excellent example of what can be learned about the social priorities of the protesters: the ways they transformed Zuccotti Park (formerly known as Liberty Square), made clear what they considered the best uses of urban space when mobilized by the community at large rather than by a Wall Street elite. They created a library; spaces for consensus-driven decision making and educational discussion; food; sleeping places; a grey water recycling system; and art, performance, and entertainment – all offered regardless of ability to pay. Observers also noted an iconic style of visual and textual self-representation emerging from those protests – a style of representation that functioned as shorthand for the protesters’ sociopolitical goals.

At a distance of some years, it is now possible to see how certain elements of the Occupy movement’s reorganization of space and the related self-representation of that space were picked up and used over and over again in other protests and occupations around the world, indicating their importance in the lexicon of progressive desire for a different kind of urban life; it is also fascinating that the idiosyncratic self-representational style of Occupy has been faithfully repurposed in occupations

such as Nuit Debout in Paris, 2016. These efforts were not directed by professional urbanists or architects, but rather by grass-roots groups. Nonetheless, the disciplines of architecture and urban planning that now aspire to foster community-based design have much to learn from these provocations of the urban status quo. The last time the potential of “anonymous architecture” (to borrow Bernard Rudofsky’s term) to change professional practice was recognized was, unsurprisingly, in the nineteen-sixties, when “the philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders” was believed to present “the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration for [post?]industrial man.”<sup>1</sup>

One could say that the visual/textual self-representation developed at Liberty Square was a guidepost to the deliberate reshaping of public urban space that formed the core of the Occupy mission. The visual/textual style speaks for the desire to use urban space in new ways that were enacted in those protests – the style carries the enormous cultural weight of a visionary deployment of progressive politics in the city. The emphasis here on “desire” is key, for although Occupy has often been characterized as a politically strategic, even necessary, movement, it has less frequently been thought of an expression of desires of many kinds on the part of its participants. In discussing the significance of New York City as a crucible for the formulation of Latino identity (a decade before Occupy), Agustín Láo-Montes noted that the “right to the city” came not just from the “need” to create political communities in different ways, but also from the “desire” to do so.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the urban intervention constituted by Occupy grew not only from the need to make political action spatial and visible, but also from a frequently expressed desire to create new communities to challenge the dominant values of the neoliberal capitalist society.

## ENACTMENT AND REPRESENTATION IN THE OCCUPY WALL STREET MOVEMENT

Although Occupy, and later Nuit Debout, had manifestations in many other cities, the specific places in which the occupations took place informed how they worked politically and spatially. Occupy and the later movements had the power to temporarily reshape public space not only because physical people were actually in the space but because they marked it in deliberate, significant ways that enabled the community to recognize and define itself. In this essay we focus on the physical occupation rather than on the social media/internet driven organizing



Figure 1: Occupy Wall Street – the grey water system, courtesy Lisa Guido.

that formed a related sense of community. Both aspects of Occupy have been discussed by Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder, who conclude that as powerful as online communities and organizing are, “Bodies in the street still matter for commanding attention and galvanizing engagement.”<sup>3</sup> The physical occupation of space remains a powerful tool, which works on multiple levels and resonates with individuals and communities, and in the political realm. In an earlier essay on the visual/textual work produced by Occupy Wall Street, we labeled this form of physical manifestation an ephemeral intervention: an event that involves print (itself possessing textual and visual elements), sound, movement, and interaction between actors and spectators, all enacted within a particular public space that is mobilized for political purposes. These multimedia interventions are important civically and cannot be understood except as a totality: the various elements function synergistically.<sup>4</sup> Ephemeral interventions are a crucial aspect of public life in the modern period. They are most often used as a mode of resistance, played out in public space, against state power—although they can also be demonstrations of state power used to control the populace, using the very same strategies.<sup>5</sup>

Ephemeral interventions are crucial to social, political, and cultural processes because they are particularly powerful in producing affect and identification in the participants. So doing, ephemeral interventions have the potential to change the nature of public space, if only temporarily. For instance, in Manhattan, Occupy shifted the meaning of public spaces that formerly represented the power and authority of the state and corporations—and where individuals felt relatively unimportant—to one in which the people present felt themselves to be powerful participants in democracy. In Paris, *Nuit Debout* appropriated the Place de la République, a space that was produced by government administrations overseeing urban development in the nineteenth century, but is also associated with republican revolution.

In the current essay, we turn our attention to the aspects of Occupy that have demonstrated their cultural power by being replicated in other protests: visual/textual signs that point specifically to the significance of a reorganized use of space. These elements convey an enduring political message – specifically, a vision of what the protesters desire to see as a new use for urban space. The city is a key venue for the expression of emerging desires; New York, as Láo-Montes says, is “a strategic link in the

global configurations of the coloniality of power.”<sup>6</sup> Signage is ephemeral, and for that reason it can be produced and deployed quickly to change the meaning of a space, where new buildings and monuments would take years to design and build—assuming there were agreement on what they should be and represent.

### THE AESTHETICS OF OCCUPY AND THEIR CONTINUED CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Ephemeral interventions such as Occupy and *Nuit Debout* have spatial forms that can be analyzed and that distinguish them from earlier street protests from which they, to some extent, developed. The modern occupations do not, for instance, consist of hastily assembled barricades as was the case for nineteenth-century protests. For Occupy New York, we have the careful spatial analysis conducted by Massey and Snyder. Borrowing the term “taskspace” from anthropologist Tim Ingold, they have described the kind of space adapted by Occupy from the existing hardscape in Liberty Plaza. They showed that the Occupiers organized their encampment according to functions or “tasks,” along a “gradient” from northeast to southwest that “shaded from public to private, mind to body, waking to sleeping, and reason to faith.” The camp capitalized on the contours of the park as well as on its hardscape to dictate the location of its various components.<sup>7</sup>

Its urban plan was only one dimension of Occupy’s aesthetic, which was also reflected in the character of much of the ephemera produced by the movement and which accounts for some of its political effectiveness. While the open-endedness of Occupy’s platform—flexible enough to accommodate oppositions to income disparity, unequal access to higher education, student debt, unemployment, and more—and its canny deployment of the “99%” slogan have been cited as reasons for which it gained traction, the specific organization of urban space and visual strategies used have been given relatively less credit. As participant Michael Ellick observed, “Occupy’s approach was not to organize by policy but to organize by spectacle, and by archetype, and by emotion and idea, and to find a different way of speaking to the people.”<sup>8</sup> In the wake of Occupy, all of its aesthetic characteristics and practices have been replicated in more recent protests.

The spatial configuration of Occupy New York, which depended upon the particularities of Liberty Square, was only one aspect of its aesthetic. Where the organization of space was far more formalized than with earlier street protests, the styles of many of Occupy’s print pieces evoked

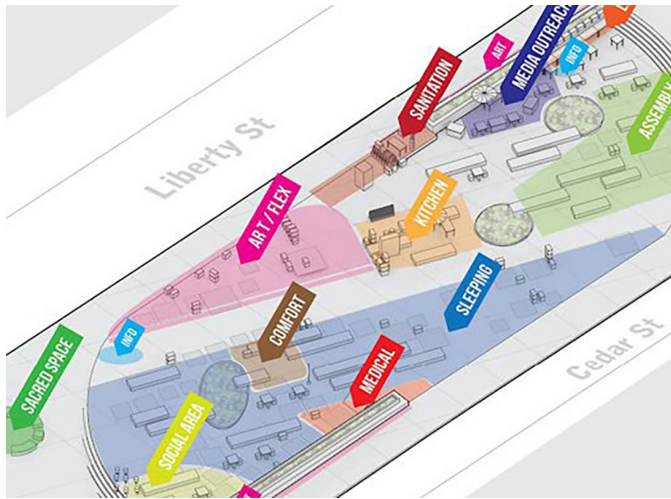


Figure 2: Map of Liberty Plaza by Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder, courtesy of the makers.

political posters of the late 1960s and '70s. Many Occupy posters participated in what might be called a “de-skilled” aesthetic – a term we adapt here from contemporary art discourse to describe works that mimic the technical imperfections of earlier popular art. As far back as the late seventeenth century, cheap print emerged in Europe and Great Britain as an important aspect of public discourse and the exercise of power. Its visual “crudeness” did not distract from its effectiveness in conveying political, social, and other kinds of messages. Despite the massive alterations in reproductive technology since the eighteenth century, humble methods are still effective in making an emotional appeal to the public, as the producers of Occupy’s visual culture demonstrated. The visual aesthetics of Occupy’s self-representation position the political claim of resistance against corporate slickness, and against Wall Street.

Artists who produced works for the Occupy movement engaged in different sorts of de-skilling strategies that echoed the visual materials produced in the context of previous political uprisings – after all, many of the participants, at least in New York City (for which there is extensive survey evidence), were well educated and had “access to the entire history of radical thought.”<sup>9</sup> Such knowledge would have included the visual methods of previous groups that deliberately used simple techniques as a means of address.<sup>10</sup>

Many of Occupy’s visual materials failed to exhibit the high production values associated with some earlier movements, most strikingly ACT UP of the late ‘eighties and early ‘nineties, whose protests typically employed posters and other materials produced by professional designers—signs that spread information about AIDS and fomented resistance to the lax government response to the crisis. In contrast, Occupy often relied on discarded or mundane materials (such as cardboard or duct tape, used also on homeless people’s signs), freehand lettering, and seemingly hasty execution. This homespun approach appears paradoxical, even self-defeating, in light of the extremely sophisticated electronic devices used by the participants to communicate with one another, the assured worldwide distribution of images of the protests, and the participation of many design professionals in the movement. In fact,

handmade signs indicated the authentic and deeply felt engagement of people in the movement and embodied its larger critique of capitalism. As participant Arun Gupta said, “[OWS] was not the same old tired rallies, preprinted protest signs, and canned chants. It was unpredictable and that’s what made it so powerful.”<sup>11</sup> Handmade, even crude, visual materials obtained their force by contrast with the dominant aesthetic of downtown Manhattan, where slick commercial graphics and polished steel-and-glass postwar architecture convey the power of global capitalism. By way of contrast, the handmade aesthetic of the visual/textual signage announced resistance to commodified culture. Ephemera jarringly disturbed the glossy imagery of Wall Street’s visual culture and had the potential to intervene in the dominant aesthetic character of the neighborhood. How could architects and urbanists have launched a parallel intervention in Wall Street, had they wanted to?

The “handmadeness of the signs, their artisanal crudity,”<sup>12</sup> pointed to an equally important political tenet of the Occupy movement: participatory use of space to serve the needs of the people who were there, rather than the needs of a financial system that seems obscure and impenetrable to many, with its arcane language (“toxic assets”). The organization of space at Liberty Square insisted on participation rather than commodity – for example, the silk-screen station that reproduced graphics at the encampment. The silk-screeners made it clear that they were not producing souvenirs to be purchased by tourists: those who wished to have something silkscreened had to help in the production itself, either by producing graphics of their own, aiding in the process, or finding materials to print on. People who came into the space, whether dedicated Occupiers or passersby, had to use the space in the way it had been designated – they could not walk by and window shop, exchanging money without interaction: instead, they had to participate and engage. Artists brought a vast array of stickers, patches, and other objects that they had made, and handed them out rather than sold them: the aesthetics of Occupy were deliberately de-commodified.

#### NUIT DEBOUT: BORROWING FROM OCCUPY

The Nuit Debout movement began in Paris in March 2016, in the Place de la République, as a protest against a proposed new labor law, and more generally against the François Hollande government. The movement occupied a prominent public space in Paris, and the way it did that strikingly resembled the Occupy encampment at Liberty Square. The aesthetics, the use of space, the enactment of educational programming and survival tactics demonstrate a reclamation of urban space and the desire for a utopian transformation.

The very repetition of the mode of reclaiming space links Nuit Debout to the Occupy movement. The Nuit Debout encampment occupied a public square in the center of Paris (and spread to other major French cities), and used the space to create a vision of how cities could be used differently: like Occupy, the protestors created a library; spaces for political discussion and teaching; and spaces for consensus-driven decision making, food, and places to sleep – again, all regardless of one’s ability to pay. The space of the Place de La République enabled people to come and learn to live differently: to articulate political positions, to treat each other as they wish to be treated, to enact camaraderie in the most public



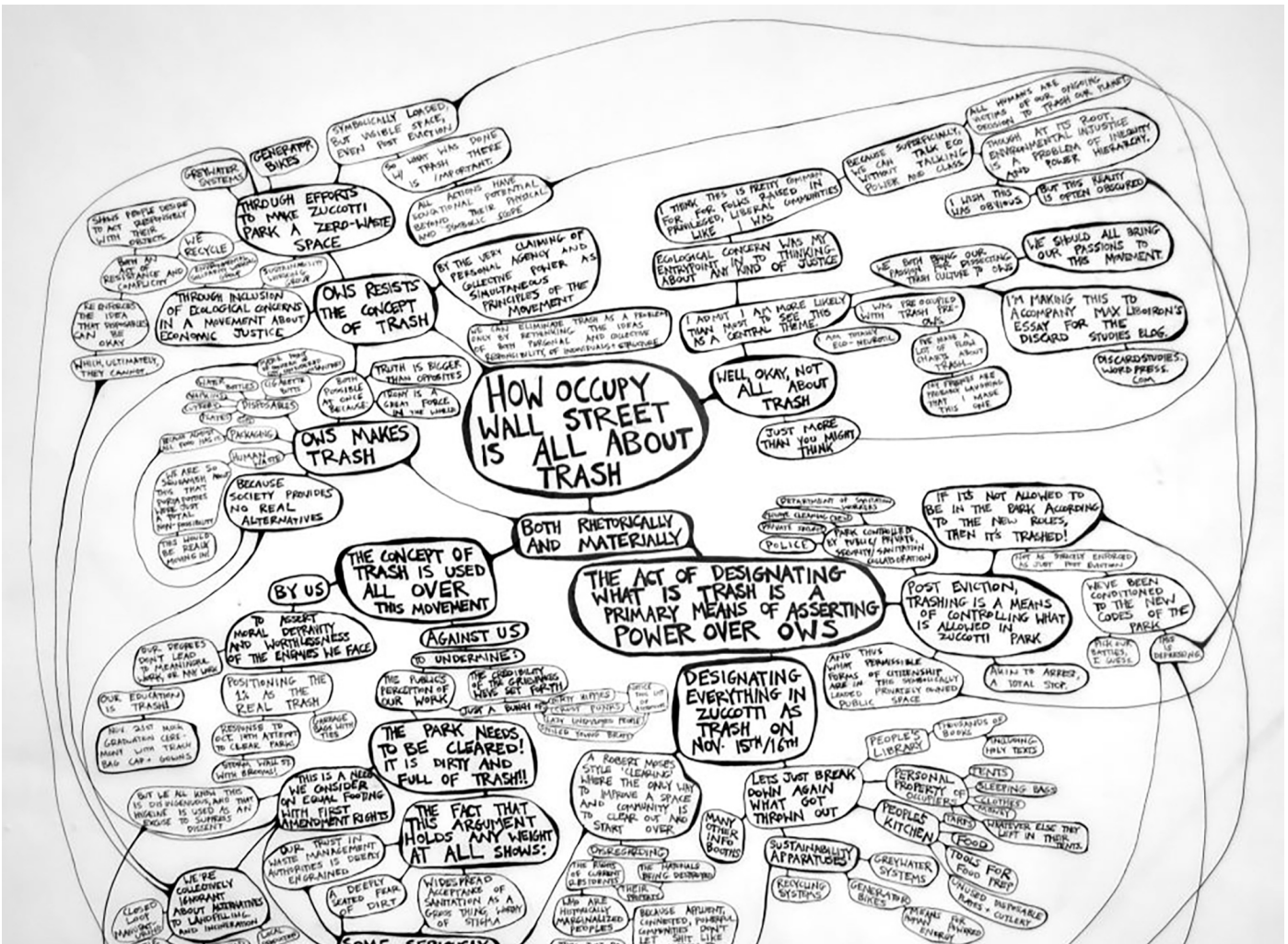


Figure 3: Occupy Wall Street: teaching through signs. Diagram art by Rachel Schragis in collaboration with Max Liboiron, Discard Studies.

possible way. Just as at Occupy, passersby could take part in any of the activities, and thus the space modeled a specific political vision even for skeptics.

That occupying public space should be seen as an effective political strategy in France is no surprise. Indeed, the nation's major political upheavals—going back to the Revolutionary barricades of the late eighteenth century—were all characterized by the very public seizing of urban space, through the “Occupation” by the Germans during World War II and of course during the “Événements” of 1968. In each case, the new, sometimes violent, use of urban space was politically strategic but also a necessary expression of the crowd’s desire for change.

**AFFECT: THE EFFECT OF OCCUPYING PHYSICAL SPACE**

The impact of ephemeral interventions, according to reports of those who participate in them and those who witness them, can be positive or negative, but in any case, it is intense. The key to transformation through physical participation is affect, which neurologists and environmental psychologists have begun to explore through the limbic system. Deborah Gould translates their insights into political terms when she

defines affect as “nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body” (26).<sup>13</sup> Affect, says Gould, is “unfixed, unstructured, and nonlinguistic,” but has the potential to be translated into an emotion that can then become communicable, hence political (27). The stimulus elements of the intervention—music, images, the press of the crowd or the rhythm of the drums, fear of police violence—work directly on the body, and then are translated into emotions, which in turn are fitted into preexisting categories of recognizable signification. The process explains how transformative many participants have found the experience of ephemeral interventions to be.

The compelling experience of being part of the occupation is what kept the participants there for months. The mobilization of prints, music, performance and more has been a strategy to change participants in public debates—in particular spatial contexts—throughout the modern period. As Judith Butler noted, bodies in space make a difference:

[...] bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action.<sup>14</sup>





Figure 4: Nuit Debout, making signs, courtesy Sally O'Driscoll



The meaning of any ephemeral intervention is not simply to create a spectacle for others, but also to transform participants politically through the complex workings of affect. Images, sounds, activities—all are part of the environment that produces the feeling of political engagement. It is the bodily experience of the ephemeral intervention that matters.

The aspects of the Occupy Wall Street encampment that deeply moved participants on the ground were re-created at Nuit Debout because they continue to represent a political vision. Coverage of such protest occupations could not fail to note how they profoundly challenge the former character of the space. Henri Lefebvre's widely influential *Production of Space* is germane here as he describes "Spaces of representation [that] embody complex symbolisms linked to the 'clandestine or underground' side of social life[...] It is the lived space; the space of inhabitants and users as well as of some artists and writers, the space they incessantly seek to create through appropriation of the environment." These appropriations can be part of comprehensive artistic projects, as well as "more modest everyday appropriations of space."<sup>15</sup> The appropriations of space brought about by the Occupy movement and Nuit Debout were crucial to achieving their political objectives.

### THE DESIRE FOR URBAN COMMUNITY

Ephemeral interventions help to define communities and public space. The myriad responses to an ephemeral intervention tell us how various people perceive public space and thus open up an important and contentious question: who owns public space, and who has the right to use it? How spectators at an event respond tells us whether the space is envisioned as a closed community that is "attacked" by such productions. If so, who is in the community, and who is excluded? What is the relationship of such community to state power and authority? Finally, what provisions can and should architects and planners make for such kinds of communities?

The term "community" is often used as shorthand to indicate unity of purpose and intent, the choice that people have made to work and live together, to be bound together with a vision of life and future. As Raymond Williams notes, "What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it [community] seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term."<sup>16</sup> Ephemeral interventions are rarely solitary endeavors: usually, they are group efforts and frequently they serve to solidify the participants as a community.

The familiar aspects of ephemeral interventions help to produce a community in political occupations of urban space. Posters and print saturated both the Occupy and Nuit Debout encampments: cardboard signs were duct-taped to tents and tarps, and messages were scrawled on them. Signage not only directed people to what they might need (library, kitchen, info booth, etc.), but also commented on why such things were important to the encampment: the signs served as a linguistic construction of the encampment's significance, publicly indicating Occupy's priorities. The encampment grew to meet people's human needs: food, shelter, reading material, information, art, and access to the outside world through laptops powered by bicycles. In every one of these aspects, Occupy stood in stark opposition to the professionally



Figure 5: Nuit Debout, teaching and discussion, courtesy Sally O'Driscoll

produced capitalist environments that surrounded it. Nuit Debout contrasted sharply with the government-sanctioned and ordered streetscape around the Place de la République.

### CONCLUSION: OCCUPYING URBAN COMMUNITY

The Occupy Wall Street movement marks a new step in the articulation of political vision for urban community – and the very replicability of its enactments and self-representations (the elements of its work as an ephemeral intervention) indicate how powerful that vision is. As later protestors, for example in the Nuit Debout movement in Paris, demonstrate, both the aesthetic articulation and the way space could be used survive the destruction of one occupation and endure as the vision is recreated in different cities. The encampments grew out of strongly felt opposition to the hegemonic control of urban space that has been a hallmark of modern cities, and especially of the global capitals in the west, such as New York and Paris. In both places, the tendency over the past decades has been to squeeze groups and practices perceived as counter-normative to the periphery, thereby "protecting" the pristine core. Occupy New York and Nuit Debout have asserted, in the hearts of their respective cities, an alternative and transgressive vision of how an urban settlement can be used and to whom it belongs. These were not interventions designed by planners or architects, but they can serve as powerful provocations to professionals to consider the desires of their often voiceless constituents to occupy the city, and to have a powerful public forum for expressing their needs and perspectives.

The radical gesture of both Occupy and Nuit Debout was for participants to "live" in public, and that necessarily required the accommodation of bodily functions. As Massey and Snyder describe, Occupiers contended with a lack of public toilets in Liberty Square and the unwillingness of the City to allow portable toilets to be installed, by using the restrooms of neighboring businesses and the nearby United Federation of Teachers headquarters.<sup>17</sup> Still, there was no escaping the buckets of human waste that proliferated in the camp and that was perhaps one of its most disturbing aspects for its critics: infrastructure, and especially the provision of clean water and facilities for dealing with waste, is one of the central aspects of urban modernization in the west and was, for

example, a major component of the “Hausmannization” of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. Conversely, the lack of sanitary facilities and the inescapability of human waste present themselves as the sharpest challenges to the modern, urbanized state.<sup>18</sup>

If living in public space, with the bodily functions that entails, is arguably the most powerful way of creating a new community capable of focusing attention on contemporary issues, then to what extent should architects and urbanists make that possible as they build and rebuild cities? More fundamentally, to be truly democratic, should a society provide spaces not just for recreational camping and for temporary public gatherings, but actually for public living? The challenge raised by Occupy and Nuit Debout for democratic cities is to make spaces where the kind of protest that they showed to be most powerful—encampment in plain sight—is not just tolerated but facilitated. What if, for instance, at the center of a modern city, a democratic government opted to locate an open space—functionally inspired by the ancient model of the Agora—where citizens could safely and comfortably agree to dwell together for a time in order to draw attention to their shared concerns? In such a semi-permanent encampment, ephemeral means—performances, posters, signs, music, and more—could be used to bring new meanings to the space. The very debates that making such spaces would produce—about the limits of democracy in the city—would entail powerful contributions to our political lives.

## ENDNOTES

1. Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: An Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964), np.
2. Agustín Láo-Montes, “Niuyor: Urban Regime, Latino Social Movements, Ideologies of Latinidad,” in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Láo-Montes and Arlene M. Davila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 145.
3. Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder, “Occupying Wall Street: Places and Spaces of Political Action: Surveying a hypercity built of granite and asphalt, algorithms and information,” *Places Journal* (Sept., 2012); <https://placesjournal.org/article/occupying-wall-street-places-and-spaces-of-political-action/>.
4. See our “The Art/History of Resistance: Visual Ephemera in Public Space,” an Introduction to a special issue of *Space and Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 328-357. Passages from that text are adapted here, but in the larger consideration of Occupy’s impact on Nuit Debout and other protests.
5. Karen Wells, “The Material and Visual Culture of Cities,” *Space and Culture* 10 (2007): 136-144.
6. Láo-Montes, “Niuyor: Urban Regime, Latino Social Movements, Ideologies of Latinidad,” 144.
7. Massey and Snyder, “Occupying Wall Street.”
8. Michael Ellick, quoted in in Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, “Changing the Subject: A Bottom-Up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New
9. David Graeber, “On Playing by the Rules: The Strange Success of #OccupyWallStreet,” [www.nakedcapitalism.com](http://www.nakedcapitalism.com), Oct. 19, 2011; quoted in Milkman, Luce, and Lewis, “Changing the Subject.”
10. Some participants in Occupy may have known of earlier campaigns on behalf of gay and lesbian rights that employed self-consciously flawed production as a strategy. For example, the queer women’s collective fierce pussy, founded in 1991, drew on conceptual art to make posters that proclaimed lesbian identity in a variety of ways but often using deliberately grainy photocopies or text obviously produced on an ancient typewriter—the primitive quality of the means separated such oppositional works from the slick commercial advertising of the period and conveyed authenticity and a rejection of professionalized production in ways that anticipated Occupy’s visual strategies. Tara Burk, “Let the Record Show: Mapping Queer Art Activism in New York City, 1987-1995” (Ph.D. Diss., City University of New York, 2015).

11. Arun Gupta, quoted in Milkman, Luce, and Lewis, “Changing the Subject,” 26. Another participant, Jimmy Higgins, asked rhetorically online in November, 2011: “How many demonstrations have you been at where preprinted signs with a boring slogan are pushed on everyone by a union or a group like MoveOn.org or perhaps something with a name like the Proletarian League for the Reconstitution of the Fourth International (Bolshevik Faction) and people took the damn things? If anybody tried something that blatant now, it would be painfully obvious to everyone how bogus it was.” Jimmy Higgins, “A Thought on the Aesthetics of OWS,” Nov. 17, 2011, <http://firemtn.blogspot.com/2011/11/thought-on-aesthetics-of-ows.html>.
12. M. Taussig, “I’m So Angry I Made a Sign,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (Autumn, 2012): 76.
13. Deborah Gould, “On Affect and Protest.” In Janet Staiger, ed., *Political Emotions* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2010).
14. Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” *Transversal Texts* (9.2011); <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>.
15. Kirsten Simonsen, “Bodies, Sensations, Space and Time: The Contribution from Henri Lefebvre,” *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 87, no. 1 (2005): 6-7. Here she is discussing Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1991), especially 33, 38-9.
16. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Rev. ed., 1983), 76.
17. Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder, “Mapping Liberty Plaza: How Occupy Wall Street Spatially Transformed Zuccotti Park,” *Places Journal* (Sept. 2012) <https://placesjournal.org/article/mapping-liberty-plaza/>.
18. See Max Liboiron, “Tactics of Waste, Dirt and Discard in the Occupy Movement,” *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest* 11, no. 3-4 (2012): 393-401.