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Sublime or subversive: Activist culture in reclaiming public space

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Abstract

The rise of civil society movements to defend public space represents one of the most powerful mechanisms for changing walking culture. Activist groups such as Critical Mass, Reclaim the Streets, Space Hijackers, and Mobile Clubbing have utilised a combination of humour, guile, and creativity to challenge the orthodoxy of the public relationship with city space. The research utilises surveys and interviews to understand the motivations behind these organisations and to highlight the techniques utilised to change public perspectives on street culture, such as unannounced sporting and musical events on city streets.

Traditionally, there have been a range of measures available to community-based groups to raise awareness of public space issues. The advent of information and communications technologies such as email and text messaging have given activist organisations powerful new tools in realising citizen mobilisation. Their activities are fomenting the creation of an urban fraternity of like-minded citizens who can readily organise significant numbers into the streets.

Despite the energy and creativity of such groups, local authorities have sought to curb their activities through legal restrictions. However, the research shows that these types of campaigns may in fact be quite effective mechanisms for instilling public life back into city streets. The research concludes by suggesting how public officials can utilise similar mechanisms for achieving the policy goals of increased use of public space and greater citizen participation.

Biography

Lloyd Wright is currently a Gakushin Fellow at Osaka University. He was formerly the Latin American Director for the Institute of Transportation & Development Policy. Mr. Wright has also held positions with the US Agency for International Development, US Environmental Protection Agency, and the United Nations.

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Introduction

Creating a social street culture where it does not currently exist is never an easy proposition. Such a transformation requires both the "hardware" of an improved physical environment as well as the "software" of behavioural change within the citizenry. Local officials are often relatively adept at the hardware side. Designing a street environment conducive to human interaction is not a trivial matter, but the knowledge base for doing so is well developed (for example: Gehl, 1987; Gehl and Gimzoe, 1996; and Alexander, 2002).

However, municipalities are typically ill-equiped to engender the behavioral changes that must accompany the physical transformation. Behavioural change is related to a complex web of social and cultural norms. A difficult process of awareness-building, acceptance, and assimilation must take place before behaviour is likely to be influenced. Negotiating this process requires innovativeness, creativity, empathy, and highly localised insights. Local citizens and citizens-based groups may be well-positioned to play a central role in this process.

Community- and grassroots-inspired efforts to reclaim and promote the use of public space have shown remarkable inventiveness over recent years. The activities of activist organisations have brought a refreshing perspective to public space. The efforts of organisations such as Critical Mass, Reclaim the Streets, and Space Hijackers may hold important lessons for public officials seeking to re-engage the public with the street environment.

This research summarises the range of activities to date by activist organisations in attempting to reclaim public space. The research also examines how municipalities can better adopt some of the techniques from activist organisations to further the objective of promoting the use of public space. This paper is part of a broader effort supported by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) to encourage car-free development in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Wright, 2005).

Community-based actions

Communities overwhelmed by traffic, noise, and pollution do not always have the luxury of waiting for an inspired political leader to come along. The urgency of local conditions may inspire citizens to develop their own means for reclaiming their streets. Thus, conventionally there has long been an assortment of measures available for citizen-based actions. Table 1 illustrates some of the common techniques for promoting the use of public space.

Table 1 Examples of promotional events

Activity type	Event
Commerce	Food markets
	Goods markets
Leisure activities	Game boards in pedestrian area
	Game tables in pedestrian area
	Aerobics classes
	Street sports (table tennis, tennis, football, basketball, golf, cricket, etc.)
	Street games
Events / Performance	Street parties
	Concerts
	Theatre
	Opera
	Film screenings
	Art exhibits
	Showing of films and sporting events on large screens
	Street musicians
	Street performers
	Fashion shows
Informational	Bicycle maintenance clinics
	Bicycle riding lessons and demonstrations
	Health and nutrition workshops

Source: Wright (2005)

Even when the legal authority to utilise street space is not given, there are other subtle mechanisms that permit community-based actions. "Psychological reclaiming" is a term given to techniques that help to change the perception of a street's usage (Engwicht, 1999). Psychological measures may include hanging banners and other artwork above a street, placing chairs on pedestrian areas (Figure 1), or writing poetry on pavement stones. As noted by Engwicht (1999):

"Psychological reclaiming reinstates the lost social, cultural, and economic functions of the street. This can be done without taking one square inch of roadway away from cars. Physical reclaiming takes back some of the physical roadspace and converts this to exchange space" (Engwicht, 1999, p. 87).

Figure 1 *Placing chairs and tables on or near streets can be an effective psychological measure to regain public space. Photo courtesy of Photo by Five Roads Forum (Broughton Road, West Ealing, London).*

Critical Mass

On a September day in 1992 in San Francisco, a new movement was born through the actions of a few concerned cyclists. The development of the "Critical Mass" movement resulted in an unleashing of citizen-based activism that strives to improve the rights of cyclists in utilising public space. A Critical Mass ride consists of bicyclists riding through a city, often during the busiest times of the daily commute. The ensuing gridlock created is intended as a reminder that cyclists and pedestrians are part of the transportation mix as well and that municipal leaders need to also cater to the needs of these groups. A Critical Mass maxim asserts that "We do not cause traffic, we ARE traffic".

Critical Mass is not actually a formal organisation. Rather it is a permeable meeting point for like-minded citizens. The organisation does not have any formal secretariat or legal registration. This unique informal structuring also prevents officials from directly curtailing its existence and from persecuting any "official" members.

The concept of Critical Mass has spread to cities in virtually all parts of the world with large events having been held in over 300 cities world-wide including London (UK), New York (USA), Paris (France), Johannesburg (South Africa) (Figure 2), Manila (Philippines), Melbourne (Australia), Mexico City (Mexico), and Santiago (Chile) (Critical Mass, 2003).

Figure 2 *Critical Mass in action on the streets of Johannesburg. Photo by Lloyd Wright.*

Reclaim the Streets

The "Reclaim the Streets" movement emanates from a similar philosophical belief as the Critical Mass rides. In the case of Reclaim the Streets, a loose-knit group of activists and citizens descend simultaneously upon a street, converting it into a large street party (Figure 3 and 4). The idea is to raise awareness that the streets are a public asset and not just the private domain of motor vehicles.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 *Reclaim the Street events have demonstrated that there exists a groundswell of citizens who are ready to take action on public space. Photos courtesy of Reclaim the Streets (www.reclaimthestreets.net).*

The first Reclaim the Streets event took place in London's Camden Town in May 1995. In rather dramatic fashion, two vehicles feigned an accident in the central intersection of Camden. The two motorists subsequently staged a heated argument that culminated in each taking a sledgehammer to the other's vehicle. At this moment, hundreds of participants streamed forward from side-streets and the nearby underground station. The ensuing street party lasted an entire afternoon. Other events have included the dumping of sand on a London motorway which then acted as a pseudo beach and sandbox for family fun and play. Subsequently,

Reclaim the Streets events have taken place in other UK cities as well as Berlin (Germany), Brussels (Belgium), Sydney (Australia), and Wellington (New Zealand) (Reclaim the Streets, 2003).

Space Hijackers

More recently, "Space Hijackers" has proven that there is no limit to the creativity that can be applied to the cause of public space. Space Hijackers is a grassroots movement spawned in London in 1999. The group's young roots include art students, architects, and even skateboarders. With this eclectic background, the group's out-of-the-box thinking has produced some extraordinary events that have frequently captured the attention of the news media. The group is perhaps best known for its "Circle Line Parties" in which groups of people simultaneously converge on London subway cars to hold a party replete with music, beverages, and dancing (Figure 5).

Figure 5 T*he Circle Line parties of Space Hijackers have become renowned as a creative way of making public transport a socialising affair. Photo courtesy of Space Hijackers.*

Like Critical Mass and Reclaim the Streets, Space Hijackers is an informal association of like-minded activists rather than a formally registered organisation. Its permeable and non-hierarchical structure gives Space Hijackers the flexibility to grow and adapt to a variety of circumstances and opportunities. Also, as is the case with other such organisations, the lack of a formal structure avoids any unwanted legal attention from the authorities. Members of Space Hijackers are known as "agents" and strive to keep a fairly underground persona in order to retain their edge as an activist organisation.

A few examples of Space Hijacker actions to date include:

- Cricket challenge matches in London's financial district and in front of Parliament
- "Mobile discos" in which organisers bring music to a street or square and encourage people to dance (Figure 6)
- "Raaaa!" event in which people dress up as wild animals and growl at people in sports utility vehicles (SUVs) (Figure 7)
- Using car parking spaces as offices (Figures 8 and 9)
- Placement of home-made artwork in the restrooms of shops and fast-food outlets

Figure 6 and Figure 7 *During "Mobile Disco" events (left photo), Space Hijackers bring music to the street and encourage everyone to join in dancing. SUVs are not the most practical vehicle in a city centre (right photo). Assuming that SUV owners must be looking for a safari, Space Hijackers hold a "Raaaa!" event in London's Chelsea district by dressing up as wild animals and roaring at passing SUVs. Photos courtesy of Space Hijackers.*

In virtually every case, Space Hijackers have shown exceptional creativity in challenging the conventional thinking with regard to public space. Participation in the events is not limited to simply the core membership of the organisation. Through the power of the internet and mobile texting, hundreds of individuals unrelated to the organisation often participate. The impromptu parties on the London subway system have grown to the point where multiple train sets are being besieged by party-goers. In many cases, the events attract accidental participants who just happen to be in the vicinity of the action. For the cricket matches, Space Hijacker agents entered a pub in London's financial district and issued a challenge to those present to take up a game. Many professionals in suits and ties happily obliged and subsequently played until the late hours of the evening.

Figure 8 and Figure 9 *Space Hijackers turn a parking space in the financial district of London into a makeshift office. A simple mechanism to raise awareness of how we use and perceive public space. Photos courtesy of Space Hijackers.*

Through their artistic approach and use of information technology, Space Hijackers are re-defining how collective-action organisations operate (Space Hijackers, 2005a):

"The way our organisation is now growing is aiming to provide a space where likeminded troublemakers can meet and develop projects together. Rather than the Space Hijackers being a specific group of people, it is hoping to become a space for the production of ideas and events initiated by a range of people. In this way hopefully we can grow and spread whilst still maintaining a fairly permeable and non-heirarchical structure. Hopefully this will enable us to remain big and small at the same time."

Flash Mob

In the summer of 2003, a rather unusual public gathering in New York launched a phenomenon that rather quickly was being replicated around the world. A Flash Mob "is when a crowd converges at a specific time and place, usually organised through the internet, to participate in apparent random acts and then dissipate once complete" (Wikipedia, 2005).

The initial mob actions have tended to be oriented towards a sort of performance art. The first successful Flash Mob took place on 19 June 2003 in Macy's department store (New York). Approximately 150 people were drawn together by emails and word of mouth to gather at precisely 7:27 pm in the rug section of the store. Once there, the crowd gathered around a large Persian rug and began to deliberate on whether to make the purchase. When asked by store personnel of their interest, persons replied that they all lived together in a communal warehouse and that they were in the market for a "Love Rug". In fact, until that moment, virtually none of these participants had ever met. A few minutes later, the crowd dispersed (without the rug). Since this initial event, some of the subsequent Flash Mob activities have included:

- At Times Square in New York, 400 people gather in front of a dinosaur display in a "Toys R Us" store; as a giant mechanical dinosaur roars, the crowd falls to their knees moaning and waving their arms in worship
- In Central Park, a mob gathered to tweet like birds and crow like roosters
- At a sofa store on Tottenham Court Road in London, a Flash Mob gathered by way of mobile text messaging and proceeded to all simultaneously fawn over one particular sofa model
- In Berlin, in front of the US Embassy, people gathered to make a champagne toast to a fictional person called "Natasha"
- In San Francisco (US), hundreds of people gathered on a street to simultaneously spin around like children
- In Birmingham (UK), a flash mob gathered at an Oxfam charity shop where they proceeded to remove articles of clothing and donate them to the shop, while at the same time singing the Red Hot Chili Pepper song "Give it Away"
- In Rome (Italy), hundreds assembled at a bookstore to ask for a non-existent title

The phenomenon has spread to developing nations as well through events in such cities as Mumbai (India) and São Paulo (Brazil). In Mumbai, police officials have since warned that any such public gathering of five persons or more would require prior official approval.

Opinions are somewhat divided as to whether Flash Mobs contribute to street life and the cause of improved public space. For the most part, flash mob activities have had little to no policy motivation. The events are somewhat more akin to pranks rather than actions anchored in any

sort of political consciousness. One of the Space Hijacker spokespersons has commented that (Space Hijackers, 2005a):

"The Flash Mob phenomenon is rather like Space Hijacking or Critical Mass but with the politics taken out to make it easily consumable and mass appealing. It seems a real waste to gather everyone together just because you can cause a load of trouble or fun, then all disperse."

However, Flash Mobs at a very basic level may help people make social connections, and thus can be seen to play some role in the socialisation of streets. As a form of entertainment, Flash Mobs may be useful in adding to a society's overall sense of playfulness. Further, some Flash Mob events do show promise as a possible conduit for a more substantive expression. The mob donations at the Oxfam charity shop in Birmingham is one such example.

The founder of Flash Mobs is a somewhat anonymous figure only known by the name of "Bill". In a news article interview, "Bill" acknowledged that the initial emphasis of Flash Mobs was primarily on mindless fun (Bemis, 2003). However, he also notes that such events have an important social dimension in terms of people undertaking a shared experience. Further, "Bill" has grown to recognise the potential of Flash Mobs to change how public space is perceived (Bemis, 2003):

"And the more I did them, the more I realized the mobs actually did have a deeply political value. The nature of public space in America today has changed. It's shopping malls, large chain stores, that kind of thing. The presumption is that you're going to purchase something, but once you try to express yourself in any other way, suddenly you're trespassing. New York City is blessed with a bunch of real public spaces, but at this point, if you're young in America, chances are you have grown up without authentic public space."

Flash Mob's success may also say something about how the internet and telecommunications technology can be used to the benefit of the car-free movement. Through the power of the internet, Flash Mob's founder notes that the future of these interventions can indeed have a useful political agenda (Bemis, 2003):

"The way I've come to think of the flash mobs is that it was an experiment in using e-mail to bring strangers together in a collective action directed toward simple politics. In these specific cases, people choosing fun. My hope is that someone will take the premises that made flash mobs so popular, and they will become tools in the tool kits of people who want to do art projects, or want to do political projects."

Mobile clubbing and pillow fight clubs

While the Flash Mob concept has waned somewhat since its publicised debut in 2003, the concept lives on through related events, such as Mobile Clubbing and Pillow Fight Clubs.

Mobile Clubbing involves a group of individuals arriving simultaenously at a public place such as a train station. Each person carries their own personal music device with a earpiece. As a group these persons then begin to simultaneously dance to the different music playing in their ears. People dance individually or together or even in the form of a conga line.

The concept was developed by musical artist Ben Cummings and his friend Emma Davis of London. The events provide a healthy outlet for citizens to express themselves in public space.

Surprisingly, while Mobile Clubbing has been popular with teens, it has attracted a wide-range of participants. Emma Davis notes that (West, 2004):

"We have had families turning up at events. We have had older people and we have had suits but everyone has fun and there is no trouble."

Figure 10 and Figure 11 *Pillow Fight Club takes to the streets of London. Photos by Adam Giles.*

Events such as Mobile Clubbing are effective in creating a sort of urban fraternity of persons who would otherwise only be strangers. Such bottom-up mobilisation may represent a powerful new tool in achieving greater street sociability.

Equally creative are the various urban “Pillow Fight Clubs” that have emerged since the advent of the Flash Mob concept. The Pillow Fights involve people arriving at a square or street with a pillow hidden amongst their clothes or belongings. At an agreed upon time, the pillows are removed and the participants begin good-natured combat (Figures 10 and 11).

Both Mobile Clubbing and urban Pillow Fights may be a healthy indication of individuals choosing to challenge how public space can be used (Space Hijackers, 2005a). Like the original Flash Mob, Mobile Clubbing and Pillow Fight Clubs have successfully translated itself to many other cities, especially in North America and Europe.

Democratising public space

Direct action in public space is not just unique to Critical Mass, Reclaim the Streets, and Space Hijackers. A variety of other organisations with different political objectives have made use of similar techniques. Groups such as Greenpeace and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have likewise used the public forum to creatively articulate their points of view (Figure 12). Whether one agrees with the objectives of such organisations is perhaps not as important as the principle of a democratised public space.

Figure 12 "*Vegetarians make better lovers!" is the message from PETA's street action in Rome. Such eye-catching advocacy can be help make public space more interesting for all. Photo by Alessandro Bianchi, courtesy of Reuters News Service.*

Private sector uses of public space

The inventiveness of Flash Mobs has not been lost amongst the corporate world. Firms are making use of a concept known as "guerrilla marketing" in which actors play out scenes in public space to draw attention to a particular product (Figure 13). A health club in New York sent out models in scant clothing onto the street in order to demonstrate the benefits of exercise.

Such commercial use of public space is a controversial practice. The expropriation of the public realm for commercial purposes can discourage public use of the areas as well as be visually damaging. In 2001, the company IBM spray painted the words "Peace, Love and Linux" on San Francisco streets. The firm was subsequently levied a fine of US$ 120,000 for defacing public property. Likewise, Microsoft was fined for blanketing Manhattan with promotional stickers, which could not be easily removed (Crawford, 2004).

Figure 13 *Advertisers use a bit of creativity during the Sunday car-free event in Bogotá. Such private use of public space can be a controversial issue. Photo by Lloyd Wright.*

Some corporate uses of public space, though, may provide some public benefit in terms of entertainment. The singer Avril Lavigne has utilised Flash Mob techniques in giving unscheduled performances in public space in order to promote her newest releases. In 2004, the music group "U2" gave an unannounced concert beside the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. The BBC has sponsored several "Flash Operas" in train stations and shopping areas in the UK. The operas even employ the services of passer-bys into their performances. The idea is to hopefully bring opera and other art forms to audiences who would otherwise never see such an event. These types of events also hold the promise of making the street compete with other solitary forms of entertainment, such as television.

Nevertheless, any private expropriation of public space is a controversial matter that cities should scrutinise closely before awarding event approval.

Responses to activist actions

In many cases, local authorities and police agencies have sought to counter the actions of groups such as Critical Mass, Reclaim the Streets, and Space Hijackers through arrests and aggression. For the most part, the activists involved in these activities stress a strictly peaceful approach to their projects.

Nevertheless, the Critical Mass rides have suffered from a surge in violence and aggression between participants, motorists, and local officials. During the 2004 convention of the Republican Party in New York, the police used the opportunity to clamp down on Critical Mass activities. During the convention, the police arrested and seized the bicycles of 264 participants (Colwell, 2005). Subsequently, for the one-year period beginning in August 2004, the police have arrested and seized bicycles of another 518 persons (Figure 14). The legal basis for these arrests is still unclear given that riding a bicycle on New York streets is technically not illegal. However, the police actions are having an impact. The potentially intentional slow handling of these cases has meant that many individuals have lost access to their bicycles for over a year.

The arrests of Critical Mass participants have led to legal and human rights challenges over police actions. An international campaign is underway to convince New York city officials to

change their approach to Critical Mass (World Carfree Network, 2005). The campaign is also seeking to have the impounded bicycles released back to their owners. Initial court cases have upheld the basic rights of Critical Mass participants, but the harsh actions of the police have continued.

Figure 14 *A Critical Mass participant being placed under arrest in New York. Photo by Dani Simons.*

In the case of Space Hijackers, official responses have varied from amusement and general perplexity to obstruction (Box 1). The variety of responses perhaps stems from each individual police officer making his or her own judgement decision as to how to react. There is clearly a sense of uncertainty from local officials on how best to respond to these creative projects. Space Hijacker representatives see this process as being healthy for both official organisations and the public (Space Hijackers, 2005a):

"I do find it amusing that the authorities clamp down on a lot of our projects, but it is certainly not unexpected. I think a lot of what we do is pushing the laws of acceptable behaviour until we discover where the line of the law actually lays. Then attempting to push this line back, or highlight the overbearing presence of it. In some ways the police and authorities do us a service by representing the government and giving us a body to ridicule and question. I think we hope that eventually a lot of the questions we raise will filter through to mainstream thinking and affect the way that these bodies work."

Box 1: A dialogue with the London police

The following is an excerpt from the web site of Space Hijackers, relating their experience with the London police during a Mobile Disco event. In this case, Space Hijackers had taken their music box to Old Compton Street, a part of London's Soho district. Being one of the more liberal parts of the city and having a semi-pedestrianised space, Space Hijackers thought their street dancing would find favour there, and they were correct:

"Almost as soon as the sound system was switched on, we had people joining in to dance with us. Shop keepers came out of their shops, girls and boys put down their bags and a street party was started! One girl pulled a football out of her bag and a game of keepie-up was started with shop keepers, dancers, bin men and passers-by all joining in. Everyone was happy, people had stopped in the street to dance or just watch, and for a long time there was no Police presence! Then they came, one car, one van, and about fifteen Policemen and women (over reaction?) came to close down our party" (Space Hijackers, 2005b).

Police official: "You are disrupting the local businesses."

Space Hijacker: "Erm, they are dancing with us."

Police official: "We don't mind, you just have to stay on the pavement."

Space Hijacker: "Okay then."

Police official: "You have to leave."

Space Hijacker: "But we are on the pavement."

Police official: "It doesn't matter. It's not the dancing, it's the football."

Space Hijacker: "She has left."

Police official: "I know but you can't play football here."

Space Hijacker: "We don't have a football."

Police official: "You have to leave anyway."

Space Hijacker: "Why?"

Police official: "Because, footballs are dangerous."

Space Hijacker: "We don't have a football."

Police official: "I realise that, but you have to leave."

And so ended the Mobile Disco (Space Hijackers, 2005b).

Conclusions

The development of unconventional events by activist groups brings with it a potential to catalyse new interest in promoting public space. A question for many public officials is whether these activities represent an opportunity or some type of threat to public order.

There are clearly lessons that local officials can learn from these creative interventions. First, the sort of out-of-the-box thinking unleashed by activist organisations should help city officials devise their own strategies for socialising public space. Second, these events are a reminder to public officials of the enormous resource that exists from the efforts of an involved citizenry. Third, activist groups are showing that the introduction of playfulness and humour into the urban realm is a surprisingly powerful tool to engage the public and catalyse change. Ultimately, the size and popularity of these events may represent the tipping point at which change in public space is realised.

The appropriate responses from police and other officials depend on the situation and the local context. The novelty of the approaches and events make it difficult for officials to devise a precise policy. The immediate reaction is often to prohibit or obstruct such unusual behaviour.

Upon reflection, though, many of the same authorities may find that such groups are actually serving a highly useful purpose for the betterment of the city. By challenging ingrained biases into how public space is used, these groups are doing much to open new possibilities for cities. While there are appropriately legal limitations to what groups or individuals may do in public space, by showing some flexibility, public officials may find that these events can have a positive side. These groups perhaps represent less a subversive threat to public order than a healthy democratisation of public space decision-making.

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