

The Unfinished City: Approaches for Embracing an Open Urbanism

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To design cities which are equitable and sustainable we need to make cities differently: an open urbanism that is intentionally incomplete. The deluded dreams of urban planners and architects to conceive and deliver the ultimate city vision in one go are now all but dead. Cities are in a perpetual state of becoming and are never finished. New concepts and methods are urgently required to respond to this ongoing state of change.

We are devising another way of going about things, resetting the approach to urban regeneration to be an open journey rather than a predetermined pathway. This is no utopian dream that evades delivery nor the discounted desires of a value-engineered tomorrow. Rather, we are creating the blueprints for the urban afterlife by deliberately designing urban areas and the processes that shape them to be in a state of change. We are doing this by developing a structured, pragmatic, and economically viable approach that – crucially – is able to respond to what is discovered along the way.

This is challenging when prevailing attitudes demand a finished product. Yet urbanism is a process not a product. It is the lifeblood of cities when done well. But as a superorganism, the city needs to be able to adapt in order to thrive and being unfinished is essential to this process. If too confined, then it stagnates and excludes. Worse, it can further sharpen existing inequalities while simultaneously using up precious resources which is ludicrous in an era of climate emergency.

We are developing an approach where things are in a different sequence and we work with people in a different way. It keeps the notion of who the city is for as an open dialogue that can, in turn, shape how it is made. This is a two-fold process through which:

- 1) We reimagine the role of city making professions as the practice of constructing places that are in a state of change.
- 2) We establish a state of change for places that acknowledges their patterns across time and space.

Both of these aspects of our approach celebrate the existing city as unfinished. They enable an ecosystem of principles and practices for asking new questions for how and why the city can be transformed. This ecosystem is situated, relational, and plural. It can take account of the specificities of place and be adapted as appropriate to other sites. It is able to operate across a range of scales, from the microcosms of growth and decay on surfaces, through the human scale of multisensory experience, to the macro urban district. It adopts a vitalist understanding of the city as consisting of heterogeneous and self-contradictory spaces that recognises that the potential future of places informs their past and present (Deleuze 1966; Grosz 2004). (1) This complexity and the uncanny qualities of place can be easily lost when urban areas are redeveloped. Yet it is working with these aspects and even retaining them, when and where appropriate, that enables patina and traces of the past to influence the future in a productive way. They are the tenebrous threads that connect across the material, spatial, and temporal aspects of place.

To achieve this, we are working with urban regeneration property developers, built environment professionals, creative practitioners, and local communities to develop trajectories for an area's transformation that are inclusive, sustainable, and transitory for the co-creation of the future city. The context for this work is Manchester, UK. No stranger to radical movements, Manchester was the world's first shock city due to industrialisation. It is now going through its second shock city state as we uncover ambiances and elements, some of which have been dormant since 1780.

Our practice-based research focuses on the area of Mayfield, currently a major urban regeneration programme in Manchester city centre, that has been out of sight and out of mind for many decades. It is a forgotten island yet adjacent to the city's largest railway station. In the interim, it has evolved its own patinas and ambiances that are integral to the area's identity: grout in masonry slowly flowers; trees emerge from walls; and lost gardens and a culverted river are revealed. Its century as a wasteland in the blind spot of the city's progressive vision have meant it has had the perfect conditions to evolve into an exemplar of the unfinished city.

This is not simply a retroactive manifesto in the way that Koolhaas eloquently analysed New York (1978). (2) Instead, this approach requires us to work with places in a manner where not all the cards have been dealt (in fact, we might be playing a different game than the one we thought we were playing) as we move towards an open urbanism that can enable multiple futures to coexist. Cities rarely conform to the planned power and comprehensive renewal that visions for place often promote. Where they do, the results are typically sterile, expensive, and make negligible contribution to social sustainability since they frequently involve the dislocation of an area during its development from the surrounding city. Too often this process involves the dispossession of existing residents in anticipation of a new community that is more affluent.

Our establishment of open urbanism practices and new urban regeneration processes recognises the value of atmospheres and transitional situations. Rather than cleaning these up, they become the basis for supporting a provisional city that becomes the stimulus for further transformation. This is important since much of what constitutes a city is not necessarily immediately obvious to the eye. Presences may be detectable but they are not always visible. The complex dynamics of cities means that there are different forms of representation beyond the visual, such as sound. The nature of some activities and movements may give expression to temporary, even fleeting, occupancies of place. New methods are thus required to document and engage communities in these aspects of an area prior to its development so that alternative knowledges and understandings of place that are temporal, material, and spatial can be discovered and inform the trajectory of its transformation.

To illustrate our approach to open urbanism practices, we share two strands of our thematic practice: Ephemeral Archaeology and Dark Design. Both are active and experimental methods that enable new and essential species of space to be explored, embracing the city in flux. We then present a manifesto for The Unfinished City, that is the intentional design for an open urbanism as a means to investigate the future, where the ongoing accretions and disappearances are adopted as urban design values. By this term we are referring to the importance and worth of the details and ambiances that we want to bring further attention to and need to retain in an area's transformation. This is because such elements shape the relationship of how a place is experienced and strengthen its connection between past and future. Our work acknowledges that the city is unfinished and to truly embrace this requires an open urbanism that is: incremental, serendipitous, plural, partial, and dissonant.

Ephemeral Archaeology

The practice of Ephemeral Archaeology is one that bears witness to what a site reveals about itself when it is being transformed. In the first instance it is the practice of seeing and hearing what a place discloses through a state of change and recording testimonies through photography, field notes, and reflexive writing. These site readings then become the basis for engaging local people and built environment professionals in the findings and stories that emerge as an early stage in shaping the urban design of an area. (3) Archaeologists are often the first to break ground on a regeneration project. The Ephemeral Archaeology work runs parallel to the traditional 'static'

archaeology package. It values the phenomena and ephemera that can't readily be retained or preserved in the way objects can.

Ephemeral Archaeology contends that the temporal discoveries of patinas, atmospheres, traces, smells are as important to understanding a place as historically significant objects and, critically, this approach to archaeology practice also contributes to writing an area's future. The phenomena witnessed in the first months of the transformation of Mayfield, from flowering grout and moss gardens to wild gardens and dyeing tanks with colourful histories, formed the basis for a follow-on project, the 'Grit Walks'. In its second stage Ephemeral Archaeology becomes a programme that offers people in Manchester, through walking and talking, an opportunity to start to write the area's future identity.

Dark Design

The practice of Dark Design is one that listens, feels, and (re)activates the urban night by emphasising the quiet, contemplative, and sublime as an essential counterpoint to the brightly-lit city centre. (4) It reveals nocturnal ambiances that are all-too-easily obliterated by the profusion of LEDs which over-illuminate newly developed areas and have become synonymous with regenerated urban sites at night. Rather than accepting the character of place after dark to become (literally) overpowered as a result of poorly conceived and implemented public lighting, it explores ways we can design *with* darkness rather than against it. It utilises a mixed methods approach consisting of photography, nightwalks (collective and individual), reflexive writing, sound and light measurements, and urban design to provide thick descriptions of place after dark.

Dark Design practice contends that the shadowlands of the city's past could and should be re-examined for their potential to contribute toward a more sustainable inner-urban experience rather than whitewashing it with harsh and unnecessary light. By building upon the insights into Mayfield at night, this approach seeks to foster an area full of differentiated drama and ambiance, reflecting the diversity of its population and architectural legacy. The nocturnal ambiances discovered during the initial phase of Mayfield's transformation include those darker parts of the site that enable biodiversity at night to flourish and older artificial illumination technologies that give certain spaces specific night-time character. Design preservation and consideration should not just be limited to the daytime city.

Manifesto for The Unfinished City

Principles and practices for working in and for a state of change:

Open urbanism is flux (things are in flow)

Open urbanism is plural (different things happen at the same time and in different ways)

Open urbanism is dissonant (it does not seek harmony and enjoys the incongruousness of place)

Open urbanism is situated (it has context, not everything can happen anywhere)

Open urbanism is serendipitous (it embraces chance encounter and discovery)

Open urbanism is relational (people and elements of place are connected in many ways)

Open urbanism is incremental (it can involve small changes to see what they do)

Open urbanism is intentional (it is not leaving a site alone but is a process that activates it)

Open urbanism is provisional (it asks questions that we don't yet know the answer to)

Open urbanism is ...

Notes

- (1) See respectively: Deleuze, Gilles. 1988 [1966]. *Bergsonism*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Zone Books; Grosz, Elizabeth. 2004. *The Nick of Time: Evolution and the Untimely*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- (2) Koolhaas, Rem. 1978. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- (3) For examples of ephemeral archaeology practices in urban regeneration projects see: Dubowitz, Dan. 2011. *The Peeps*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, and Dubowitz, Dan. 2014. *Citizen Manchester*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- (4) For an understanding of the wider framework of the approach, see: Dunn, Nick. 2020. "Dark Design: A New Framework for Advocacy and Creativity for the Nocturnal Commons." *International Journal of Design in Society* 14(4): 9-23.

Image Captions (in order of corresponding and numbered images also in folder)

Ephemeral Archaeology Field Note #13: Moss Jungle. © Dan Dubowitz. Rainwater percolates slowly through the gargantuan railway viaducts in Mayfield, and here under a bridge there is water cascading down a wall all year round. Under its own weight from time to time the moss peels off to reveal white ceramic faces bricks of the viaduct from the 1800s.

Ephemeral Archaeology Field Note #29: Colour Dye Tank. © Dan Dubowitz. This iron tank, possibly left over from the fabric dyeing rooms for the calico print works in Mayfield, is one of the only industrial objects of scale to survive the decline and building demolitions in the area. It was not retained for its historic value but because the police asked for it to be retained until they had finished their forensic investigations, it having been discovered on the site operated by Manchester's infamous Quality Street Gang.

Ephemeral Archaeology Field Note #42: Sounding Post. © Dan Dubowitz. A junction box is severed from what it communicated to or from. For a moment it appears as a sounding vessel, full of possibilities as its tendrils await re-connection. The next day it is gone.

Dark Design Field Note #75: Mancunian Way Arch. © Nick Dunn. A railway arch runs alongside the motorway circling the Mayfield site, walking through it the change in atmosphere is profound, more so at night when sodium light washed the walls, and the sound space is more distinct. The sodium lights were recently replaced with all-illuminating LED lights, and something has been lost.

Ephemeral Archaeology Field Note #110: Flowering Grout. © Dan Dubowitz. The glazed bricks under viaduct bridges have produced new species of patina across Mayfield. Some excretions are

such a delicate flowering that they are turned to dust in the wind, others are as hard and brittle as stalagmites. Cracks in the glaze and the surfaces are habitats for a range of animal and mycelium species.

Dark Design Field Note #148: Hidden Garden. © Dan Dubowitz. Much of the River Medlock was built over since the 1880s through Mayfield, but this short stretch between two roads has been left to grow wild and evolve into its own species of urban space. Night-time renders it a world apart from the city and the atmosphere is akin to being deep in the countryside.

Author Biographies

Nick Dunn is Executive Director of ImaginationLancaster, an open and exploratory design and architecture research lab at Lancaster University in the UK, where he is also Professor of Urban Design. He is the founding Director of the Dark Design Lab, exploring the impacts of nocturnal activity on humans and non-humans. His research into urban futures has been funded by the AHRC, EPSRC, the UK's Government Office for Science and the Ministry of Defence. Nick has worked with the Alliance for Healthy Cities, European Commission, International Dark-Sky Association, World Health Organization, and sits on various scientific committees and advisory boards. He has authored numerous books, curated exhibitions, and given talks at public festivals and conferences around the world.

Dan Dubowitz is Reader in Architecture and International Lead at Manchester School of Architecture. He is Director of the cross-school teaching atelier: FLUX investigating how architecture can be on the move and activate a state of change. Dan is founder and director of Civic Works Ltd, a multi-disciplinary design practice for city-making. Between 1997 and 2015, he delivered nine city-scale Cultural Masterplans for post-industrial areas in decline in five city-regions across the UK. He is author of a number of monographs including: 'Citizen Manchester' (2014) and 'The Peeps' (2011) on the transformation of Manchester; 'Wastelands' (2009) on post-industrial cities around the world; and 'Fascismo Abbandonato' (2010) on the children's colonies of Mussolini's Italy.

Short Biographies

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