

Talk on the Wild Side: moving beyond storytelling in cities

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We are developing a method of collective movement and congregation to meaningfully involve people in writing the city's future and form new urban narratives. This is in part a response to existing opportunistic practices of city-branding that have co-opted the notion of narrative for place making, its marketing and investment. But what lies beyond these and what might we do differently? When we arrive in urban situations they often have an existing narrative through the palimpsest of their development. What we are exploring here is how to write a different story for a place and co-author it in a new way that affords people in a neighbourhood the opportunity to rewrite the future of their city on the eve of large-scale transformation projects. We employ narrative in two ways. Firstly, through mining archives and oral histories, locals collect and recount stories and shape the collective walks we take through lost parts of the city. Secondly, as an action-based method of walking the city collectively, communities and urbanists begin to co-write a new story of the city. We have been experimenting with this approach in the city of Glasgow, Scotland. To further emphasise the reciprocity of narrative and place, we present fieldnotes from our ongoing action-research alongside the analysis of each theme as a means of illustrating how and why such narratives are vital to our method. These follow as a pairing of observations and reflections from a series of nightwalks through lost parts of Glasgow between 5 December 2017 and 22 February 2018.



Fieldnote #1 – Congregation

“Because they are thought of as sort of dead spaces or passing places at the moment, it’s the kind of place we’d get lost in and think of that in a negative light, so to deliberately be brought here is quite interesting.”(1)

In the underbelly and residual spaces of an elevated motorway dividing the centre of the city of Glasgow, strangers gather for a nightwalk. A congregation drawn by invitations to professionals, people we have met who hang out in these sites, and an open invitation on social media. Novel pairings form: between a skateboarder and a policy maker; a planner and a tango dancer; an arts student and a city road traffic engineer; and create open ended, informal, fluid discussions. The stories and observations shared are of deep interest to citizens and professionals alike. This congregation on the move through the city forms a critical mass with a strong presence in time and place. The collective walking initiated the process of people becoming active participants for change.



Beyond storytelling

Our practice is concerned with how the future of places can be meaningfully rewritten through collaborative engagement with different communities and stakeholders. The crux of who the narrative is for and how it empowers them is essential. Here, we are actively exploring novel ways in which narratives can go beyond existing practices of city-branding or simple interpretations, by using creativity to bring places to life in a way that encourages community ownership and empowerment. One way of developing the story of a place is to write a position paper, impact study or design a masterplan. These methods may shape the narrative of an urban situation, but we are interested in finding a way that directly connects to the site in a more active and inclusive manner. We therefore propose an approach that augments how we generate and develop narrative urbanism through an orientating and choreographing mechanism that anchors participants to the site. This provides a method in which we can go beyond conventional storytelling and incorporate the parallel world of the city, outside of its blueprints and theories, by embodying the lived experience and temporal qualities of it. This is vital if we are going to challenge the existing processes of city making and find better ways to unlock the narrative of place, as Brück and Million (2018: 143) usefully remind us, “The future is always in the making, and so are cities. Constant re-imagining and re-making by citizens and the continuous reconfiguration of the built environment make the urban spaces we inhabit a palimpsest of multiple re-imaginings and alternatives.”(2)



Fieldnote #2: Unknown territory

“Tango is all about your connection with what is underneath you, whether that’s wood or stone or, tonight with it being concrete it completely changed the experience of dancing.”

Noisy, smelly, dirty and difficult to arrive at and move through. A part of the city few participants had previously thought of as attractive, safe or having potential. A place out of mind and out of time with the everyday city. But once there, it has a reciprocal relationship with the body, immersing people in a new pattern of light, colour, sound and material experiences. Those who arrived early witnessed the skateboarders sweeping this apparent no-man’s land before stashing their own broom in a cavity under the motorway. Skateboarders peeled off from the 120 participants, inscribing new routes through the site. The walk brought collective experience with a sense of occasion to a place that was not part of their city. There is revelation in people seeing their city anew. After time we tend not to notice parts of the city in decline and assume they are a blind spot for all. But through performative actions of care and movement these neglected spaces become activated places.



Parallel worlds

How do we capture the fleeting, seemingly ineffable, lost elements of the city and bring them into a narrative that communities can work with? Our collaborative practice has emerged from the approach to narrative urbanism we have each developed in our own practices. Drawing from our urban narrative and inscriptive practices of nightwalking (Dunn, 2016) and wastelanding (Dubowitz, 2010) has enabled us to develop a different way of writing the city with its people.(3) By the term inscriptive practice, we are referring to the action of a spatial practice to provide a temporary occupation of space that affords an appreciation of the site and an exploration of its potential uses. Nightwalking is an inscriptive practice, providing new experiences of place that support a different perspective since it presents us with a new tempo-spatial relationship that can bring change to even the most familiar or seemingly ordinary places. Wastelanding, by contrast, offers a way to examine what is left behind or discarded in the city by focusing on abandoned or neglected places. These practices are valuable in this context for three reasons. Firstly, both these approaches enable new perspectives on existing places to be gleaned by emphasising the ephemeral and often overlooked aspects of a living city changing over time. Secondly, these practices can be combined so that we can explore the city, and in doing so inscribe them with new narratives for the future. Thirdly, both practices are open for collective movement, allowing groups of people to gain a sense of ownership of such sites in a communal manner. Using these inscriptive practices of nightwalking and wastelanding together, we are drawing professionals and experts who see the city anew together with citizens through areas of the city that are lost and about to be transformed.



Fieldnote #3: On collaboration

“Personally I think it’s great that we can make things happen...we could possibly do this here, all these different people, I feel now that we can easily make things happen in the future.”

By bringing professionals away from their routine activities they mingled and co-created new perspectives on the meaning of these otherwise lost places. In doing so professionals develop a new understanding of the significance of alternatives through shared discovery and exchange as they learn that citizens, in a different way, are also experts on how the city can be remade.

Collaboration occurs differently here because of the level playing field for all participants set up through the act of congregating in unknown territory. This dynamic collaboration has reciprocity. For the non-professionals they are engaged and motivated by the new sense that they can meaningfully contribute to the future of their city. For the professionals they develop a new comprehension of what the brief should be and who the transformation of the city is for.



Collaborative Urbanism

Collective walking in abandoned and lost parts of the city at night, outside of everyday routines, creates a new narrative that can help us profoundly reconnect with our surroundings and experience in a powerful and visceral way. We have chosen to refer to this approach using the term ‘Collaborative Urbanism.’ We define Collaborative Urbanism as a method that combines thinking and action across three-stages. Firstly, for people in a neighbourhood to develop engagement for themselves; secondly, by having participated directly they develop a collective sense of place through time; and thirdly the process contributes toward empowerment of these citizens to become activists about it collectively.(4) The key shift which this method promotes is a move from a professional and client-centred narrative for city making toward one that is more inclusive, collective and public. The socio-political context for this approach is that as architects we find ourselves in the UK with a culture and society that by and large is not actively engaged with transforming their cities. In addition, the instruments we currently have available to us as architects, urbanists, planners, developers, local government; from writing briefs and developing designs to planning permissions and how construction is delivered on a city scale are not working for people in the city. People living in a neighbourhood all too frequently have the sense that city scale regeneration projects are being done to them or in spite of them, rather than for and with them. Therefore, parallel to Glasgow City Council’s *Avenues* project to remake key streets as people-centred – rather than car-focused – in the city between 2018-2024, we have involved people from all walks of life in collective nightwalks through supposedly hostile spaces. Inherent to this process is a sense of belonging and ownership as the conversations created during the nightwalks enabled the sharing of ideas for the future of the place.



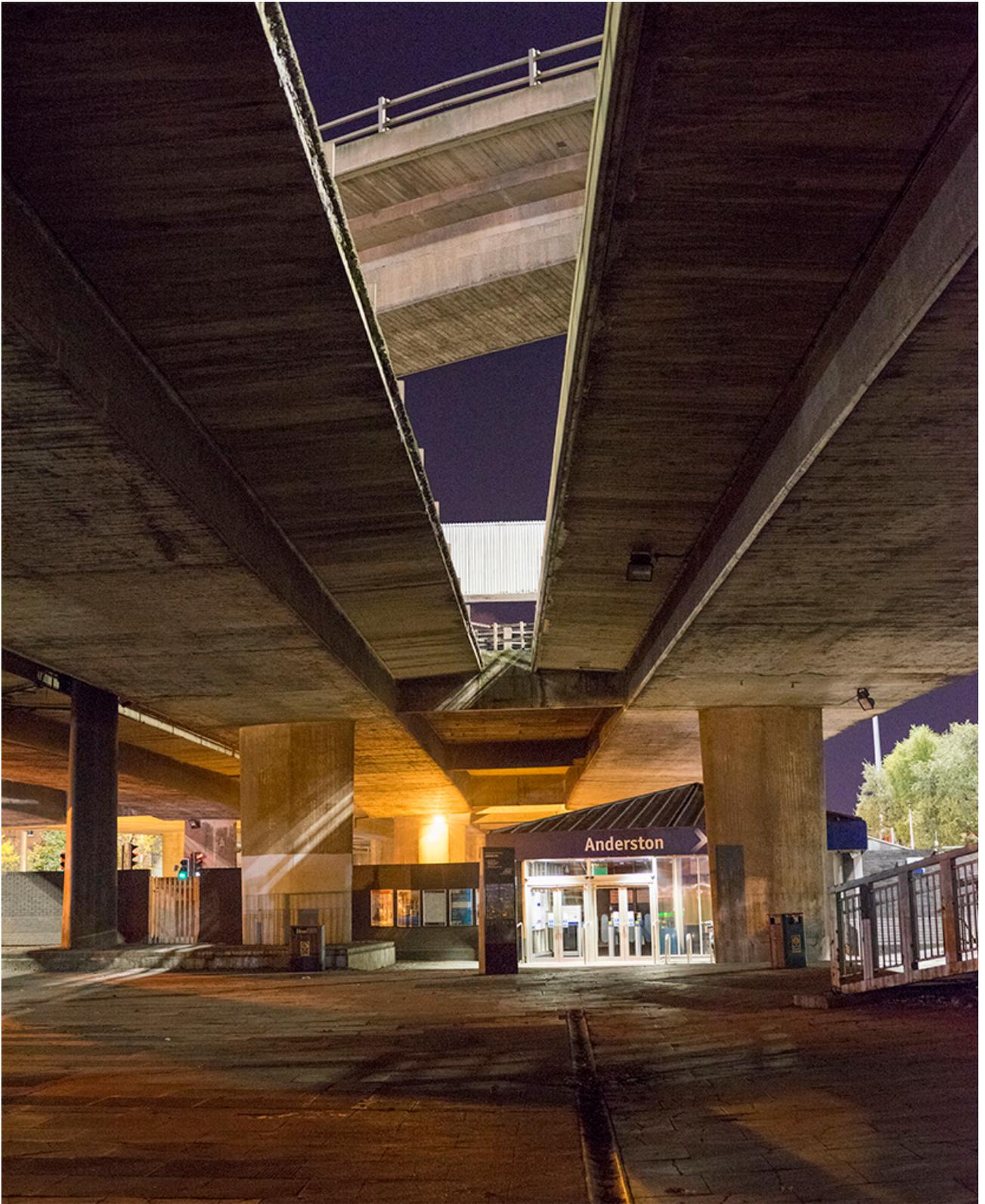
Fieldnote #4: Shared trajectory

“People are occupying space at different speeds at different moments, at different periods of time, and that’s the thing we tend to forget about space, we tend to talk about it like it’s a neutral container, like its frozen and its waiting for things to fill it, and actually that isn’t true so I think it’s really good for activating how we think about our space.”

Collective walking and congregation creates a loose choreography and emergent narratives concerning the city are shared. The temporary occupation and movement through space by participants shaped the characteristics and definition of the place. These inscriptive practices reframed how the place was seen and understood. The approach enables lingering, discovery and the celebration of what has been lost or hidden. By encountering the lived experience of place as it could be, and how it changes over time participants rediscover their city. The shared experiences of participants combined with their conversations results in a new, collectively authored narrative for place. Alternative futures are exchanged as a result of people rediscovering the city.

Future Narratives

The way we approach city making in the 21st century remains dominated by existing practices that typically exclude the very people the development is intended for. By moving and congregating in the city, we can collectively discuss, reflect and speculate on what the narrative for the future of a place could be, in an active and inclusive manner. Collaborative Urbanism is one way this can be achieved. By bringing forth latent stories and revelations of place, it contributes to the poetics of future city making through its ability to account for narratives that are often overlooked or excluded. The story does not end here, however. This work creates situations that are generous and open up the potential for something more. Our intention is to both inspire and provoke people to question the received narrative of their city and embark on new ones that they can own and develop collectively.



Notes

- (1) All direct quotes taken from *Underline*, a short film made in collaboration with participants on a collective nightwalk involving professionals developing proposals for, and Glaswegians living near to, the underbelly of Glasgow's M8, 22 February 2018. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opkTh9DhJcl>
- (2) Brück, Andreas and Million, Angela (2018) 'Editorial: Visions for future cities' *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers - Urban Design and Planning*, 171:4, pp.143-145.
- (3) See respectively: Dunn, Nick (2016) *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City*, New York: Zero Books; Dubowitz, Dan (2010) *Wastelands*, Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing.
- (4) In Britain the level of activism and awareness of urbanism and engagement with processes of objection etc., is extremely low compared to many of our European counterparts.

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Author Biographies

Nick Dunn is Executive Director of ImaginationLancaster, an open and exploratory design research lab at Lancaster University in the UK where he is Professor of Urban Design. He is Associate Director of the Institute for Social Futures, leading research on the Future of Cities. Nick's work responds to the contemporary city and is explored through experimentation and writing on the nature of urban space: its design, regulation and appropriation. He has written numerous publications related to architecture, art practices and urbanism, and had work exhibited across the UK, China and the Ukraine. His latest book, *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City* (Zero, 2016), is an exploration of walking as cultural practice, the politics of space and the right to the city.

Dan Dubowitz is an architect who, for 20 years, has pioneered a new approach to embedding cultural transformation into city-scale developments which has become known as cultural masterplanning. His work challenges the way things are normally done by devising cultural interventions from the bottom up whilst the bigger picture emerges. This is all part of a choreography of civic projects that engage people in the transformation of their city. Dan's practice centres on post-industrial city-making. Projects have ranged from collaborating with the World Monument Fund and UNESCO on international cultural sites at risk, delivery of transformation programmes for city-scale regeneration projects across the UK to a trilogy of long term speculative urbanism projects: *Wastelands*, *Fascismo Abbandonato*, and *Megalomania*. These have been published and exhibited widely across Europe and the USA 1999-2018.