# ACTOR/AUDIENCE INTERFACE IN THE CITY/STAGE SPACE

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## Abstract

In the evolution of urban conditions, defensive sociological structures fequently construct their own spatial boundaries, resulting in the creation of unintentional voids in the form of neglected public spaces. Current landscape urbanism projects address this stigma by changing people's perception and engaging the public through direct programmatic masterplanning. The concept for this submission instead focuses on the idea of the 'stage' on a human scale by seeking to subvert the public as 'audiences' into participants in the space as 'stage actors'. The experiment was to conduct direct action interventions in unsanctioned tipping grounds in East London. By the simple act of staging and rearranging the existing rubbish heap to resemble the familiar interior of a domestic space, it challenges the local community to notice these spaces and to react to these installations. Four different sites yielded different responses. The level of interface was informed by the existing site geography (convex spaces and axial lines); the local community (society and beliefs); sense of civic consciousness (human behaviour and government policies); and the notion of speed. Allowing for a more organic and sensitive negation of such 'undesirable' spaces will invoke a more proactive involvement from the city's inhabitants. The audience will derive a truer measure to describe the reality of the city by means of immediate experience of the 'performance'.

## Prologue

In the evolution of urban conditions, the city environment becomes the product of complex inter-relationships encompassing social, economic, cultural and political factors. In order to preserve their existence, defensive sociological structures inherently construct their own spatial boundaries. The resultant clusters of insular community formations create unintentional voids in the form of neglected public spaces which bear a negative association to the neighbourhood within their catchments and statistically carry the high likelihood of becoming criminal hotspots.

Throughout the early 1990s, central public piazzas in European cities such as Barcelona, Lyon and Rotterdam, have been rejuvenated by a wave of urban-based landscape projects that addressed this stigma

by changing people's perception and engaging the public with direct programmatic masterplanning. Schouwburgplein (1991-1996) in Rotterdam by Dutch landscape architects West 8 is a fine example of how an elevated square in the middle of the city operates as an interactive and flexible public 'stage' for both organised and ad-hoc activities.

The formal approach of viewing space is parallel to how the audience is directed to dwell in Giorgio de Chirico's theatrical paintings, particularly his work of the 'Enigmas' between the periods of 1909 to 1919. The decisive framing of the dynamic blue sky forms the backdrop whilst allowing for his subject matters to form imaginative social compositions. Jewell (2004, p.57) best describes his paintings as at once the familiar 'terrain of Italy and Europe and (the) ground of identity and collectivity…whilst also (a) strange, mysterious world of metaphysical pictures, as if seen for the first time by foreigners'.

**Pre-Production**

*Venue*

The A13 highway is the main thoroughfare from London to the South-east of England and cuts across the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in the east-west direction. Besides being listed as the most deprived borough in the United Kingdom that amounts to 2.4% of London's population since 2000, Tower Hamlets also suffers social repercussions from bordering on the City of London and manufacturing-based east London industrial areas.

Although London generates on average 3 million tonnes of MSW (Municipal Solid Wastes) of which 70% is recyclable, only 12% were in fact recycled in 2000 (London Waste Action 2000, p.3). Tower Hamlets suffers from a serious rubbish tipping problem in empty lots by local residents and businesses (from locally and the City of London) due in part to the lack of civic awareness regarding the need for recycling in order to maintain environmental sustainability. The UK recycling framework places all the responsibility of national household waste collection to the Local Authorities who are already strained in resources. The resultant delay in moving MSW to limited but designated large plants in isolated areas that are far from the curtilage of London as well as the inefficiency of monitoring local conditions have further exacerbated the problem of tipping in deprived London boroughs such as Tower Hamlets.

*Plot*

In order to highlight this current pandemic, it has been proposed for simple reconfiguration of such undefined spaces in the same manner as Chirico's treatment of his painting to influence the public to view their routine landscape afresh. Instead of allowing the public to perform roles merely as spectators of the urban space, these newly defined public spaces then become a catalyst for a different kind of experience – or better still – a more intimate means of direct interaction. Benjamin (Reflections 1978, p.83) articulates this new sense of experience aptly by '(w)hat makes the very first glimpse…in the landscape so incomparable and irretrievable is the vigorous connection between foreground and distance. Habit has not yet done its work. As soon as we begin to find our bearings and to find our way about, that earliest picture can never be restored'.

The experiment was to conduct provocative 'direct action' interventions in unsanctioned tipping grounds that the public have become accustomed to seeing on a daily basis. These installations aim to take the public out of their perceived comfort zone to psychologically force a physical reaction from them. It focuses on the

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idea of the 'stage' on a human scale by seeking to subvert the public as 'audiences' into participants in the space as 'stage actors'.

## In-Production

A thorough search employing conventional legwork around Tower Hamlets identified four suitable test sites to the north and south of the A13 motorway that were very different from one another in the geographical sense: location, size and socio-economic conditions. The distinctive similarity they all share is that all four sites are leftover voids that were straddling public and private properties in East London.

These neglected pockets of spaces are simply the by-product of the formation of 'defensible spaces' by the public and private societies' respective attempts 'to bring (their) environment under control for residents' (Newman 1972, p.3). Figure 1 demarcates the sites from their surrounding public and private properties, exposing the open areas outside the limits of these properties to potential tipping. Because these sites display a lack of ownership and monitoring, it becomes easier for guilty tipping parties to subversively nominate such spaces as unauthorised dump sites.
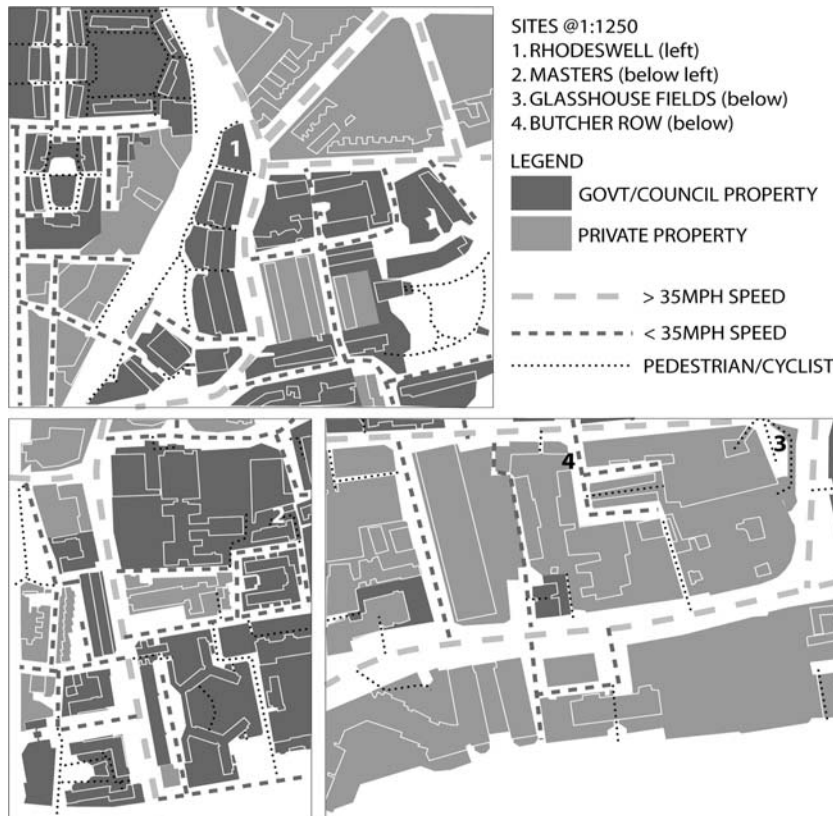


SITES @1:1250
1. RHODESWELL (left)
2. MASTERS (below left)
3. GLASSHOUSE FIELDS (below)
4. BUTCHER ROW (below)

LEGEND

GOVT/COUNCIL PROPERTY

PRIVATE PROPERTY

\- \- \- \- > 35MPH SPEED

\- \- \- < 35MPH SPEED

........... PEDESTRIAN/CYCLIST

**Figure 1:**

*Maps of installation sites showing buildings within government and public curtilage; and traffic routes classified under various travel speeds*

The parameters of the sites can be further distinguished through the notion of speed which Liebniz most compellingly elucidates through his philosophy of 'monads'. The reality pertaining to Liebniz' philosophy differs from that of how we perceive the reality of our own environment: 'The familiar world around us appears ordered in space and time; it contains extended and durable things, which interact and obey causal laws. Yet monads are not extended – perhaps they are not 'in time' in the way that physical objects are.' (Scruton 2006, p.78)

If we assume a travelling vehicle carrying its driver and passengers as a singular monad, this element can only gain coherence in the perception that the landscape it is travelling in exists on a perceived plane different from itself – one that moves in a certain range of speed whilst that monad remains 'static'. A set of monads travelling on a

main road (i.e. above 35mph) would hence perceive their surroundings on a velocity plane differently to those of monads travelling on a reduced speed (i.e. 35mph and below), which would also differ to monads travelling on foot (i.e. pedestrians or cyclists).

Routes around the sites classified under these three speed ranges are illustrated in Figure 1. Again, Sites 1 and 3 appear further isolated by the traffic activity to the extent they effectively become rarely accessed 'traffic islands'. The faster the monad travels, the more detached its relationship is to its surroundings as the landscape simply blurs into passing scenery. The more high speed routes that encircle a neglected 'island', the more segregated it becomes from its surroundings, allowing it to be more susceptible to tipping activities. The remaining two sites appear equally ideal as illegal dump sites because they are isolated and rarely visited. Both are located on the small back streets of residential blocks, are not as easily reached from the main roads and barely visible to the regular passers-by.

For the sake of clarity in subsequent analyses, the sites have been christened according to the streets they are located: Rhodeswell, Masters, Glasshouse Fields and Butcher Row. Under the aegis of 'Urbanroom', these 'works of art' are created from rearranging the existing rubbish piles and painstakingly staged to resemble familiar interiors of domestic space – a bedroom, living room, lounge and a clinic ward respectively. These seemingly misplaced settings challenge the local community and passers-by to finally take notice of these neglected spaces and to react to the installations.

Over the course of ten days in November 2001, daily recordings by means of photography were taken to gauge the level of physical interactions from the public. Should any of the installations be disturbed, the displays would be reset as accurately as possible depending on the level of damage incurred from the public's demonstrations.

**Post-Production**

*Figure 2:*

*Photographic evidence of the sites as existing; the installations and the results*



1. RHODESWELL

Existing Condition:
Traffic junction public space

Result of Experiment:
Considered & deliberate additions by public to the installation

2. MASTERS

Existing Condition:
Decanted secluded garages in council estate

Result of Experiment:
Repeated daily thrashing by local gang youths

3. BUTCHER ROW

Existing Condition:
Industrial area cul-de-sac by main road

Result of Experiment:
Installation on driveway has allowed tipping boundary to be extended

4. GLASSHOUSE FIELDS

Existing Condition:
Corner pavement to private social housing entrance

Result of Experiment:
Instigated clearance of installation items within 3 days

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The outcome of the experiment was disparate and varied independently from one site to the next. Although the initial parameters for selection of the test sites did not employ space syntax methods, the application of overlaying axial lines as 'linearly extended space' to identify convex spaces (where the maximum 'axial extension of the point in a straight line' occurs) helped define the syntactic quality of the sites (Hillier & Hanson 1986, p.91). By synchronising these results in conjunction with existing socio-economic conditions as consequence of current government policies, we can begin to dissect the data collectively and individually.



AXIAL LINES & CONVEX SPACES ANALYSIS
1. RHODESWELL (left)
2. MASTERS (below left)
3. GLASSHOUSE FIELDS (below)
4. BUTCHER ROW (below)

LEGEND

LARGEST CONVEX SPACE

SEGREGATED SPACE

AXIAL LINE
MAIN AXIAL LINE

*Figure 3:*

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*Mapping of axial lines and convex spaces on and around the sites*

With the exception of Glasshouse Fields, all the installations registered strong public reactions and are located directly adjacent to main convex spaces. It is highly possible that Rhodeswell and Butcher Row, being more 'open' had what could be described as considered interactions, demonstrated by deliberate additions to the settings or by exploiting the installation as an opportunity to extend the previous tipping boundary.

Speaking to residents from Lockesley Estate around Rhodeswell Road (Site 1), the sense of community was so strong it was confided that although they knew who amongst themselves were littering the grounds, and despite the worsening pestilence epidemic, no one would dare consider reporting the culprits to the council caretakers for fear of being ostracised by the local community.

Illegal dumping of unwanted items that require specialist removal is very common in commercial areas such as Butcher Row for two main reasons. Once a request has been made to the local council for removal, unless they prove to be offensive or pose as an immediate hazard to the public, scheduled removal will typically require a fortnight as the Local Authority in Tower Hamlets are seriously under-resourced. Self-removal by the owners are rarely considered as dump sites are not conveniently accessible (there are currently three for the

entire borough and are privately owned) and require a £10 entrance fee per visit.

The installation in Masters received expected adverse reactions due to the nature of the very closed off Bangladeshi council estate community within its equally architecturally segregated compound. The local youth gang guard their territory aggressively and any external and unfamiliar additions within their turf will not be tolerated, as testified by the repeated devastation the installation in the enclosure of decanted garages had to endure. The isolated location of the site and the presence of gang territoriality also define the site as a 'hotspot' under the London Metropolitan Police guidelines in their efforts to identify potential areas for negative social behaviour.

The fact that Glasshouse Fields is not located beside a convex space may reflect a more private ownership characteristic to the site. The installation may have simply instigated the relevant party to clear up the rubbish before it begins to draw more attention from passers-by or to invite further tipping from others.

## Epilogue

It is accepted that the results from this one-off urban guerrilla experiment is too premature to allow for a full set of data to be developed, but it nevertheless extrapolated the potential for one to propose solutions for human scale interventions in public spaces all over the city. Allowing for a more organic and sensitive negation of such 'undesirable' spaces on a one-to-one scale will invoke a more proactive involvement from the city's inhabitants and introduces the potential to alter or create more appropriate axial lines for these convex spaces.

The solution in addressing the existing voids in our cities can be approached in two manners. The first is by recognising existing locations that fulfil the criteria of what constitutes neglected sites for applying direct intervention. The latter approach, being more precognitive, will rely on the right level of knowledge on existing local socio-economic conditions and by employing space syntax techniques to predict where potential problem sites will emerge in the near future.

The double-edged sword of once having identified or predicting problem sites will be to use a more developed methodology to control the nuance of public provocation and reaction to achieve the desired level of interaction. It becomes a means for the public audience to derive a truer measure to describe the reality of the city by means of immediate experience of the 'performance'.

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