



Introduction

It is not easy to reconfigure an undemocratic, polluted, gentrifying city into a more just and livable place. It takes considerable effort to recognize the immensity of the problems, no less see clearly where the work begins. Cities around the world increasingly lack decent affordable housing, public spaces not controlled by private interests, and cultural spaces free from corporate influence. Replacing bureaucracy and top-down urban planning with inclusive neighborhood-led design is imperative. This cannot be entrusted to architects and planning professionals trained in various economies of space.

Projects that change the urban landscape without deferring to precedent or city mandates were the inspiration for this book. The work presented here is by no means exhaustive, yet there is much to learn from these groups and organizations. They are immersed in struggles to creatively reshape their neighborhoods and cities. We asked them to write about their experiences. The contributors are City Repair, Portland; The Resource Center, Chicago; Park Fiction, Hamburg; Can Masdeu, Barcelona. Each offers distinct strategies for self-organizing and creatively impacting a neighborhood. Their initiatives teach us about the cities and cultures they are from while offering ways to overcome seemingly insurmountable bureaucracy and social stagnation. Each deals with the city in a different way. They all use creativity, compassion, and action to realize different realities and challenge the status quo. This is necessary if we are to create more open and participatory societies for future generations to further transform.

Beyond the limited scope of trickle-down urban planning and its pseudo-participatory processes are living neighborhoods where democracy thrives and people have a say in how their environment is shaped. We cannot trust experts to design cities for us. We can learn a lot about how cities work from the people who live in and use them, but it is all too rare that inhabitants are asked how they would like their cities to be. The contributors to this book do not wait to be asked to act on their desires. They organize themselves, and implement the changes they want to see.

far left:
City Repair's
Share-It Square

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In the summer of 2003, we met with Mark Lakeman, part of Portland-based City Repair. He eloquently explained a major component of the group's activities: getting people to "unplug from the grid." Anyone familiar with the terminology used by advocates of "green" technology, such as making houses out of natural materials or using solar energy, knows this as a cliché that means taking oneself out of the loop of un-renewable, wasteful building and energy consumption. This is not, however, how Lakeman was using the phrase. He was talking about a much older grid, the Roman Empire's system for mapping out entire nations, articulating a massive political and social structure from the ultimate position of power and detachment. This same approach was used by early planners in the United States to map out vast tracts of land that would not be populated for decades, if not centuries. This centralized and reductive system, Lakeman explained, still pre-determines the way neighborhoods in the U.S. look and feel, and the kinds of community spaces they have, and do not have, before anyone actually moves in.

Such a restrictive design is maintained for easy governance and control. Inherited structures like this are not only obsolete they are socially corrosive. Yet, when we collectively assert our desire to build a park or tend a garden, when we work with others to make something larger than personal economic interests or private property, we challenge such unimaginative and oppressive structures. We create new social configurations and local places tuned to our needs. We show what human beings are capable of when we work together. Building community in any landscape is difficult; divergent visions, disagreements, and other pressures can greatly interfere with collective efforts, but working through them can be a source of democratic strength.

Our meeting with Mark Lakeman was at Sunnyside Piazza, one of City Repair's most developed neighborhood sites that has transformed an intersection of two streets into a public square. It is no longer a place just for cars; it has become too visually disorienting to drive through quickly. Everything has been brought

back to relate to the human body, its speed, and sense of time. This was immediately tangible. It is difficult to convey this experience to anyone who has not visited this particular place. We felt so comfortable in this intersection that we lay down in the middle of the giant painted sunflower that filled it. We felt safe to soak up the sun's rays and enjoy what has to be one of the most incredible experiences of public space we have ever had.

We had similarly intense, yet vastly different, experiences with the work of the other contributors to this book. It is extremely important to see their work together, and share it widely. We would like to thank them all for their ideas, actions, and generosity.

—Brett Bloom and Ava Bromberg