Urban Negotiations – Nomadic Kitchen and Strategies of Practice

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Urban Negotiations are art strategies that find possibilities for art to engage in real life issues. Nomadic Kitchen is an interstitial art initiative that occupies a place between art and urban space. This work engages with issues of self-organisation, in the process negotiating the urban environment with the residents of Vila Nova, a *favela* community in Sao Miguel, Brazil. Nomadic Kitchen is one urban practice among many in a collaborative and participatory action in the production of public and private space. The emergent strategies for this artwork evolved through a series of workshops with residents of Vila Nova. The working strategy created a place of agency between participants. The project embraces 'informality' as another kind of intelligence whose tactics bring a collective visibility to the project and other kinds of urban negotiations. The structure will function as a locus where residents self govern and develop flexible and creative ways of building a context for living. The structure of Nomadic Kitchen is flexible, fluid, nomadic and adaptable to different occasions and contexts of informal urban practices.

Urban decisions around producing public and social space are made while cooking, eating and meeting in the Nomadic Kitchen. This interstitial sculptural structure becomes a place of dialogue while defining the conditions that determine its situated conditions and public space. The consequences of Nomadic Kitchen explore the potential limits of art production as an urgent action in creating an aesthetic-ethical-spatial-politics.

Spatial Phenomenon as Places for Action

> Social space is produced and structured by conflict. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins.[1]

This paper explores the limits of aesthetic practice within the wider dimensions of urban actions and cultural complexity. Rather than being preoccupied with the aesthetic object as the final designation, the work emerges as a process of negotiations whose dynamics bring a visibility to spatial encounter occupying ethical and political relations. The work explores art and non-art actions as spatial encounters made legible by men, women and children in how they negotiate the contingency of their local environment within wider global complexity. Space is not a natural phenomenon but rather is socially produced and negotiated. This work engages with aesthetic-spatial-politics as an ethical encounter. Ethical encounters are created in how we engage with each other in making a commitment to a situation. These relationships are experienced in urban practices and the built environment on a local and global scale. How might ethics impinge on a situation? Is the ethical moment identifiable in a specific situation? Is the ethical context determined or indifferent to specific circumstances and guided by an absolute condition? When ethics impinges upon an art situation that is a spatial encounter, how might this be welcomed and revealed? Ideas of spatiality can be perceived as a static entity, a void we fill with objects such as sculpture, architecture and mundane artefacts. There is a tendency to perceive space as occupying physical qualities, it can be mapped and measured, a material concrete mass that is real and fixed.

New thinking around spatial organisation experienced a radical re-conceptualisation after the Second World War. Urban expansion and the increase in population accelerated into all forms of space on a global scale. Space was no longer regarded as an ontological natural phenomenon, occupying only its physical mass, seen in historical time/space geographical configurations.[2] New discursive spatial configurations proposed space as non-physical, fluid, flexible and conceptual. These notions embodied space as a social production. That is, we produce and construct the spaces we inhabit. This new lexicon imagined expanded and complex ideas of spatiality as 'smooth', 'nomadic', 'rhizomic' and 'multiple'.[3] This radical re-conceptualisation of spatial production shifted the focus from urbanism as a design question envisaged by orthodox urban planning practices, to more axiomatic complex configurations of how we inhabit spatial geographies on a local and global scale. This proposition strives for thinking spatiality that is not representational but constitutive and indeterminate in the pursuit of new boundaries, for reinventing subjectivity, for a new urban imagination. Within these situated conditions, the site of this discourse is placed between the formal city as a predetermined object/artifact that renders public and private space prescriptive, fixed and rational, and the informal city, regarded as illegitimate space, non-space, in some instances not even registering on local maps. Informal settlements and marginal communities are signified as zones of exclusion. These are spaces of proximity, interstitial spaces of `territorial assemblages`[4] whose structures are in an indeterminate state of impermanence and incompleteness.

Globalisation and Mobilising Forces of Resistance

The background for this project is embedded within the forces of globalisation amidst cultural fragmentation, economic deregulation and failed political systems. This offers an operational field for action between

[1] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p.xxiv.

[2] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 2003).

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Deleuze and Guattari create a new lexicon of thinking spatially, reorganising and re-conceptualising subjectivity and space beyond physical bodies and spaces to a new organisation of thought that is `nomadic` and `rhizomic`, and which pursue `lines of flight`. This way of thinking challenges conventional forms of representation (of the body) as being constitutive rather than non-representational.

[4] 'The territory is the first assemblage, the first thing to constitute an assemblage is fundamentally territorial'. Ibid., p.323.

people, places and situations. In the most part these operational fields of action are dysfunctional and bring to the surface tensions of discontinuity. Such tensions offer opportunities for artists and other practitioners to build new forms of support and solidarity, to generate agency and enablement as alternatives to strategies of globalisation. Nomadic Kitchen and non-art urban negotiations are tactical responses to global phenomenon, but operate within spheres of influence that may be parallel but disconnect. While many urban negotiations operate as discrete barely desirable self-organised interventions, occasions such as the World Social Forum create a platform of connectivity and forum for exchange that is trans-national.

The forces of Globalisation dominate space; in their wake great distances are collapsed, urbanism is deterritorialised as micro and macro sites of encounter. The future of Urbanism beyond Modernism no longer holds a universally applicable image, neither for a cultural vision nor as a method of intervention for artists, architects or town planners. The global-cities or megalopoleis are not only challenged and influenced by their own expanding suburbs but by their secondary cities and beyond. The reach of these influences is considerable, not only addressing centre and periphery but also intersecting with formal and informal economies on a global scale. Informal urbanism offers non-analytical alternative ways to negotiate and articulate particular urban practices in finding new urban imaginings. Urban Negotiations are art strategies that find possibilities for art to engage beyond systems of representation and the symbolic aesthetic,

Fig. 1. World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2005.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2005.

discovering other forms of legibility within the indeterminate and contingent conditions that residents inhabit in Vila Nova. The impulse for this project evolved out of a series of conversations between Mudanca de Cena, an NGO organisation working with communities who live in social zones of exclusion in São Paulo, and myself while attending the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2005[5] (see Fig 1). Following these exchanges I was invited by Mudanca de Cena (MDCN) and Nova União da Arte (NUA) to find possibilities for art to collaborate on an urban intervention in Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil. Vila Nova is an informal settlement about 24km north east of São Paulo. It sits between the river

5   The World Social Forum is a networked programme for the mobilisation of citizens around the world. The ambition of the Forum is to create an International Platform of Solidarity as set out in Porto Alegre Charter of Principles: 'an open meeting place where groups and movements of civil society opposed to neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital or any form of imperialism, but engage in building a planetary centered on the human person, come together to pursue their thinking, to debate ideas democratically, formulate proposals, share their experiences freely and network for effective action.' The architecture of the Forum was a compact infrastructure of tents. This temporary nomadic city of tents consisted of make shift lecture theatres, conference halls, restaurants, coffee kiosks, camping areas, cinemas, Internet and cybernetic centres of communication, public toilets and showers. Like informal urbanism, favelas, barrios and shanties, the Forum's architectural assemblage resembles a 'dock-onto, plug-into and clip-onto' mechanism that connects with the infrastructural grid of Porto Alegre. The ease and casualness of negotiating the scheduled events and conversing with other delegates created a fluid or liquid space of encounter. Mobility is the condition for the production of thought that is nomadic and flexible, open to non-hierarchical systems of politics and governance. The Forum created a place to examine new models and other kinds of imaginings for democracy that began as a grass roots structure. This was achieved through the horizontal network of exchange between NGO's and others involved in creating collaborative desire and agency.

Tietê and a railway track on reclaimed land that is prone to seasonal flooding during the rainy season (see Fig. 2). It has a population of 45,000 inhabitants, more than half of which are approximately 18 years of age and under. Vila Nova is robust and resolute in its determination to exist and modernise as a regenerative urban community. At the same time it is environmentally fragile, difficult to urbanise and susceptible to clandestine developers and planning authorities. Up until the 1970s, informal settlements were mostly ignored by formal urban planners and frequently not regarded as part of the formal city register. Their existence was illegitimate and provisional.
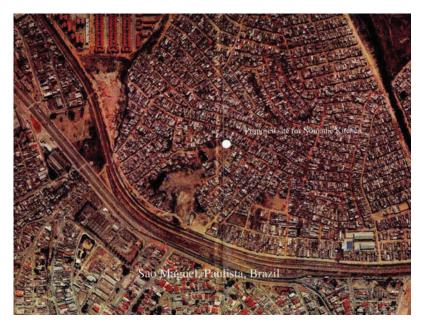

Fig. 2. Aerial Photograph of Sâo Miguel, Paulista, Brazil. Photo: Mudanca de Cena, 2006.

As communities organised and formed subaltern groups, they found their own voice and mechanisms to agitate State Authorities to provide infrastructure, to supply water, electricity, sanitation, roads, footpaths, refuse collection and public space. Government investment in urban regeneration is always a project in progress and always seems to be in a state of catching up. Informal settlements through self-regulation and self-organisation struggle to avoid eviction and to secure land tenure. New tools of negotiation evolved to help create a public vision around the realities and diversity of urban habitation at local government level. These were known as 'special social interest zones' (ZEIS) or 'areas of special social interest' (AEIS), the concept of ZEIS was to identify specific needs and alternative strategies for living by informal communities. Participatory Budgeting is such a strategy where citizens are resourced to affect the planning and management of their localities (OP).[6] To recognise the diversity of informal settlements new categories in spatial planning legitimately started to look at and address the relationship between formal and informal urbanism. Recife, a city in the North East of Brazil was the first city to adapt ZEIS strategies in the 1980's and Porto Alegre adopted participatory budgeting in 1989.

Nova União Da Arte (NUA) in Vila Nova is an NGO organisation that negotiates these volatile urban conditions in creating a context for living. They appropriate art activities to build confidence around individual character and creativity in the social process of daily life. These strategies

[6]   Participatory Budgeting translates as 'Orcamento Participativo'. It fosters citizen involvement in the planning and management of their locality. Belo Horizonte, a peripheral city to the north east of Brazil was the first to establish a participatory housing budget. Participatory budgeting is now common in other Latin American countries, including Venezuela, Uruguay, and Argentina.

are carried out through workshops in theatre, dance, music, and arts and crafts. NUA and MDCN have been active agents in creating community and campaigning for social inclusion as part of the urban regeneration project in Vila Nova. Until 2005 these urban negotiations where performed in an informal self-build community workshop space in Vila Nova.

The São Miguel city authorities demolished the NUA community workshop space in Vila Nova, denying NUA a public arena for deliberation around their needs and desires. The workshop structure was an informal self-build initiative, a temporary 'make-do'[7] structure that was basic in its ability to function as a workshop space for residents and the wider community. The facility comprised two buildings divided by an open area. The dimensions were 12m x 5m and 8 x 5m. This included spaces for a workshop, office, classroom and toilets. When I visited in January 2005 it was a very bright and cheerful place with a welcoming atmosphere. The workshop space was demolished on the grounds that it was an illegal structure and also because it did not comply with legitimate building and health and safety regulations, specifically inadequate toilets for child use (see Fig. 3).

[7]   Michel de Certeau , *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California,1984), pp.29-30.

Fig. 3. Nova União Da Arte Workshop Space and its demolition in Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil. Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2005.

In advance of finding a position for art intervention I was invited to attend a number of meetings that addressed the hegemony of NUA and their future strategies for survival in Vila Nova. This, for me, was a place for listening, a geo-sounding and mapping of parallel desires and energies, in advance of action that would in time have a collective pulse. To remain sensitive to the volatile and uncertain conditions of informal settlements requires solidarity in exploring potentialities for new urban spatial narratives. The recognition of these volatile conditions of survival requires its own logic of spatial organisation. In informal urbanism this logic is non-hierarchical in its forms of improvisation and has a self-knowledge that impinges upon the regulatory codes of formal planned space. All of these meetings took place in the kitchen/dining room of Hermes Cabruera, the NGO and team leader of NUA. Responding to the enthusiasm and desire of these meetings through a series of dialogues and consultation meetings, I proposed an art initiative titled 'Nomadic Kitchen'.

Nomadic Kitchen an Aesthetic-Spatial-Politics

While NUA are in a moment of rupture and transition without a place for deliberation to construct a sustainable action plan for residents and community, Nomadic Kitchen operates as an interstitial artwork that engages in the process of creating urban narratives with the residents of Vila Nova.

The challenges of this art intervention were:

1. To address the transient nature of spatial organisation in informal settlements.
2. To build a communal space and develop a sustained programme for NUA and Vila Nova regeneration.
3. To develop a collective assemblage of fidelity and desire for a public image of what Nomadic Kitchen might become. How will we invite and recognise ethics as agency in the process of the artwork?
4. How to inscribe an ethical aesthetic into the organisation of space that permeates the different scales and dimensions of the work. Thus an ethical aesthetic becomes one undifferentiated action in producing urban space.
5. To find the limits and dimensions of an artwork to engage in urban regeneration.
6. To find a form where art becomes an event for change in spatial organisation.

Like `an event as a political occurrence` artwork has the potential to alter the space of a situation or context.[8] How one constructs a house, a street, or maps a journey with their body, ruptures the flow of how inhabitants navigate and produce a place, not as a passive traveller/spectator but as producer. This is not the same as the psycho-geographic mapping of the Situationist International. Their interest in the ephemeral was a subversion of the aesthetisation of place as a surplus action.

The consequence of this action is that the production of space is not motivated by cultural consumption but as an aesthetic-political production. The social production of desire is an action to create change. This can be on a monumental scale i.e. the construction of a motorway or a shopping mall, or it can be an interstitial and temporal event, outside the gaze of the multitude, but having significant consequences for an individual, small group or community i.e. Nomadic Kitchen in Vila Nova. What is the ethical-aesthetic in desire and how does it work in an art situation? Desire is motivated by the principle of fidelity to a specific situation. Desire is constructed and produced in articulating passions, actions, enunciation and outcomes.[9] Consequently desire is an application in an event; it calls into question the event in a situation, it is an action, it is not representational but is constituted and finds meaning only when it is put into action. It encourages and responds to collective action. These actions are given urban forms through the motivation and method of how we might live. We might also ask, what are the dimensions of desire in an art situation? When an individual / citizen uses desire as a tactical strategy to negotiate a way of life, they assemble agency for an individual or a group. These actions generate agency and create territorial assemblages. To encounter a territorial assemblage is not an historical or linear negotiation but rather it is lateral and spatial, geographical and geo-political, it is also an ethical encounter. Informal settlements offer alternatives to existing spatial arrangements of human endeavour. Urban negotiations operate on many fronts and in many directions, these are 'lines of flight'[10] to use Deleuze and Guattari's phrase, they are schizoanalytic lines that transgress the social field creating ruptures in

8   Alan Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham, (London: Continuum, 2007). Badiou develops the concept of the eruption of an event, splitting the situation in two. As a political act the event and its situated conditions are always changed.

9   'Desire is never separable from complex assemblages that necessarily tie into molecular levels, from microformations already shaping postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations... Desire is never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions'. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.215.

10   'Lines of flight' are different from horizontal and historical lines in that they are schizoanalytic lines that operate in bundles and multiple pathways. The notion of the Body without Organs is such a conceptualisation of the new ideas of subjectivity composed of complex lines that resist analogue perception. See, Ibid., p.203.

sites of political, aesthetic and spatial encounter. Urban negotiations (Nomadic Kitchen) adapt the notion of the *schizoanalytic lines of flight* as tactical manoeuvres of survival and aesthetic practices, in how humans produce public and private space. The alignment of this concept is not singularly invested in formal aesthetic qualities and theory but rather at the level of political economy. Nomadic Kitchen is a tactical manoeuvre, an everyday urban practice that operates between consumption, desire and production, and the inherent contradictions of formal spatial organisation and state governance. Informal urban practices are precarious and unpredictable; *schizoanalytic lines* capture the most creative energies to rethink the situation and negotiate the limits of action.

Urban Desire and Ownership

Producing desire requires a collaborative process that will in turn bring together a collective sense of ownership and imagining that strengthens resourcefulness beyond the immediate situation. What kinds of knowledge, methods and tools empower non-analytical approaches to urban desire? In July 2005 I ran a series of workshops with residents and participants living in Vila Nova. Participants in the workshops included parents, children, teenagers and the NGO team who organise NUA. From these workshops emerged an individual and collective visual aesthetic for what Nomadic Kitchen would become, and an aggregate of desire for a new imagined urbanism. Through drawings and maquettes a bricolage[11] of collective imagination made visible this aggregate of collective desiring. The workshops developed and revealed an imaginative vision between the participant groups and the artist. This explorative strategy found an aesthetic creative process that looks to multiple possibilities for a nomadic urban structure (see Fig.4).

Building a sense of collective imagination and possibilities for what the project might become was grounded in terms of the dimensions of the site and the capacity to dream. Hermes Cabruera offered his family house to the project as he was relocating his family to a new dwelling (see Fig 6). The dimensions and boundaries of land was a place to dream and imagine a new confluence of positions for thinking and acting differently. The emphasis on visualising nomadism is to keep 'thought' nomadic and adaptable to the changing conditions of the informal *milieu*. Life in informal settlements is temporal and contingent to the situations at hand, this does not aestheticise the concept of nomadism but acknowledges the need to hold thought as flexible to the urgency of the situation. Using bits of drawings, masking tape, glue and cardboard, the project Nomadic Kitchen would in time take on life, scale to urban dimensions, and spill out of the workshops into the street and alleyways in unpredictable and diverse ways. A desire to celebrate nature was a recurring motif in many drawings and maquettes despite the reality of Vila Nova being mostly on a floodplain, barren wasteland and a scatology of open sewers.

This process explored and interrogated the real life complexity of *favela* informality but with a lyrical sensibility revealing imaginative drawings and models of plants, flowers, trees, vegetables, a kitchen and gardens, all aligning with ideas of nature. To respond to nature and explore the imagination of this desiring process, it was initially proposed to build a temporary / nomadic garden on the workshop roof. This hiatus was initially motivated by the limitation on space but just as significantly, it disrupted the conception of the garden as implicitly a natural phenomenon. This garden would be above ground on the roof, an interstice between the earth and the sky. With recycled plastic tubs, pots and bottles this modest roof garden would intersect and disrupt the nature/culture dilemma of informality, of spatial organisation that is

[11] 'It could be said that the engineer is always trying to make his way out and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within'. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp.18-20.

Ernesto Laclau suggests that the bricolage is an ethico-political encounter within an incomplete system and that the system itself is ethical. See, Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), p.79.

Fig. 4. Nomadic Kitchen Workshops in Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

peripheral to the normative city. The initial impulse was to consider the
garden as a retinal experience and not as a gardening action.

Collective Action and Structural Transformation

To advance the process from a space of desiring and imaginary aesthetic
to a physical structural reality, involved appropriating different regimes
of knowledge and know-how in making legible collective action. The
process acknowledges that Nomadic Kitchen as an art initiative is one
urban practice among many in this collaborative action, bringing together
different players in the regeneration process and in the production of
public and private space in Vila Nova. To this extent the residents are
embedded and integrated into the origination of the work; this makes
their position that of co-producers in the urban negotiations of Nomadic
Kitchen. The parameters of this urban action bind together the context
and different language narratives of a migrant community engaged in
the process of creating new structural transformations. At this juncture
the project occupies conflictual positions between legality and illegality.
To establish the project as a legitimate enterprise, the artwork (Nomadic
Kitchen) must comply with mandatory building, planning, and health and
safety regulations. Being a legitimate enterprise would secure government
funding for NUA to carry out its work. As with many forms of unofficial
urban intervention which occur between state authored approval and the
micro tactics of a community trying to survive urban transgressions, the
state frequently turns a blind eye. In such situations urban negotiations
are tactical strategies of silent encroachment. For NGOs to work with
children they must be licensed by the state. To acquire a licence the project
Nomadic Kitchen must provide separate toilets for boys and girls, adults
and a disabled toilet.

What are the forces where the formal and informal engage with each
other and what are the tools of communication to legitimise that process?
The assemblage of crayon drawings, bits of masking tape and cardboard
maquettes would not do it for the rational analytic planning methods
employed by formal urban planning. There was the need to utilise the
language and internal logic of architecture, to establish the concept, to

detail the building methods and communicate the project to the City Planners. This shift in territoriality invests the project with protean qualities in-between the legitimate and illegitimacy. Through established networks of support contact was made with an emerging architectural practice Group 5 / Obra who were invited to collaborate. Obra reviewed all material documentation and research carried out in the workshops, enabling them to frame the concept and context of the project. The drawings and maquettes from the workshops were an inspirational influence in developing and making design decisions. This approach to design moves beyond formal concerns of design and decision making, to privilege the end users as priority and to value informal non-hierarchical kinds of intelligence. Fig. 5 shows a digital design model based on the workshop material and maquettes. Acknowledging the limitation of space, it was proposed that the kitchen and temporary garden would be located on the roof of the one storey two-bedroom house. This would utilise the limited space and symbolically bring a new visibility to the project and to the public image of NUA and the surrounding community. Situating the Nomadic Kitchen on the roof created a public visibility that ruptured and registered a break with the ordinary function of people and place

Fig. 5. Digital drawing of Nomadic Kitchen by Group 5/Obra, 2005.

Mutuãrio and Collective Desiring

The *Mutuãrio* is collective assemblage of urban building where the community synchronises their desires, energies, passions and expenditure towards a collective action. This collective action is central to the idea of community where the collective good is served by individual need. The Nomadic Kitchen was constructed with *Mutuãrio* collaboration and support, by the NGO team and local residents. This process of building and extending onto existing informal urban structures is common practice for families in need of additional space. This is an art/architecture of urgency whose interstitial aesthetic is based on improvisation and appropriation. It is a labour of reciprocal economy between neighbours (see Fig. 6). The structure of Nomadic Kitchen will function as a locus where residents self govern and develop flexible and creative ways of building a context for living in Vila Nova. The structure of Nomadic Kitchen is flexible, fluid,

Fig. 6. Mutuãrio, collective building action Nomadic Kitchen, Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil.   Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

nomadic and adaptable to different occasions and contexts. This aesthetic is sympathetic to the self-build, 'making-do' strategy of the informal architecture of *favela* communities. As urban negotiations these strategies function as tactical responses to the ever changing conditions of informal settlements. As urban actions their tactical potential is determined by the ability to respond to the limitations of the situation that is always outside individuals' autonomy. Urban decisions around producing public and social space are made while cooking, eating and meeting in the Nomadic Kitchen. This interstitial structure becomes a place of dialogue while also defining the conditions that determine public space.

Urban Negotiations seek out the fluidity of spatial entanglement, where creative urban practices adapt to the changing condition of the local terrain. The Nomadic Kitchen is structured and built on contingency, indeterminacy and aesthetic-political complexity; its structure is an assemblage and not a predetermined constellation of parts, a process of absorption into the formal networks of the normative city grid. These transient assemblages while occupying a local situated-ness plug into the global networks of São Paulo, the libidinal flows, flows of utility and capital. This tactical interstice between local and global almost never comes without contradiction. Nomadic Kitchen's status as a temporary interstitial artwork is integrated into an informal and unofficial house built on appropriated land. The site is clearly materially and discursively disputed as it straddles simultaneously, multiple conflictual positions i.e. the land and existing house is illegally appropriated yet the Nomadic Kitchen has legitimate approval by the formal regulatory instruments of the city. There are similar and dissimilar interests at play distinguishing the relationship of formal (state control) and informal (self-organisation) in working out human narratives of what De Certeau calls 'daily life'. Nomadic Kitchen would best be considered, not as kitchen object but as 'kitchen process', in a continuing state of negotiation where the aesthetic always leaves enough room for residents to inscribe and interpret its future. The aesthetic of mobility and flexibility of the Nomadic Kitchen is not exclusively about the physical structure but about the mobility and flexibility of thought of its occupants. The materialisation of Nomadic Kitchen is a manifestation of its affects and of how it becomes a useful tool in negotiating the public domain (see Fig 7).

Fig. 7. Nomadic Kitchen, Front View, Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

Fig. 8. Nomadic Kitchen, Rear View, Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

Spaces of Appropriation Legitimacy and Agency

Informality as a way of life contributes and expands the conditions for
the future of an urban vision. While informal urbanism is perceived as
peripheral to the dominant practices of the normative city, its influences
are experienced in all forms of production of urban spaces. During the
course of the project I set up a number of round-table meetings with
affiliated participants and residents in Vila Nova. These were informal
conversations held in the Nomadic Kitchen to discuss ideas of public and
private space. To identify in more universal terms the ephemerality and
concreteness of its existence, and in particular the places in Vila Nova

Fig. 9. Appropriation of Space, Vila Nova, São Miguel, Brazil.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

Fig. 10. Roundtable meetings in Nomadic Kitchen, Vila Nova, São Miguel,
Brazil. Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

where citizens have access to public space. It was widely agreed that the
only public urban forms identified in Vila Nova were the schools. Beyond
this there are no public places to meet, i.e. public parks, gardens or play
areas for children. Many adults specifically mothers expressed: 'There is no
public space in Vila Nova, and we can't bring the children to public parks
as they are too far away, and we can't afford the bus fare'.[12]

These perspectives confirm the legitimation of formal constituted public
spaces. For informal communities the conditions that constitute public
space are authorised and administered by the state but their public
vision is always somewhere else. The theory of public space as a universal

[12]   Views expressed by parents attending
round table meeting in Nomadic Kitchen
about what is public space and who
has access to public in Vila Nova.

concept suggests that it must be valid for everyone. It is a gift from the State: it belongs to no one and everyone at the same time. This would be its universal claim.[13] But in informal settlements, *favelas* and barrios, public / private space does not so much pre-exist a priori for urban negotiations to takes place in. Public space in informal settlements are spaces of occupation and appropriation and are created through the process of repeatedly reinventing themselves over and over.

Appropriation of space is a provocative act created and constructed by human intervention and intrusion into the space of urbanism. Such actions emerge out of discourse but it must be acknowledged that discourse is not external to the process of appropriation, it is a spatial construction within the conditions of appropriation itself. Spaces of appropriation are places of action that create the very possibility of discourse to emerge. How this is actualised creates a dislocation between regimes of practice. Regimes of practice are multiple and operate across discursive levels that are semiotic, linguistic, aesthetic and political. Such dislocations are actualised through the forces of social dislocation and power relations i.e. determination (power of governance) and autonomy (self-organisation). This implies that the authority of power is determinate and centred and that autonomy is seen as peripheral, resistant and divergent. Centres of power impose a structure; social dislocation frustrates the centrality of the structure. The following examples will explore the appropriation of spaces and spaces of appropriation, legitimacy and agency. Some forms of intervention are collaborative and peripheral to the formal city model while others are individual, motivated within the legitimate planned space of São Paulo.

Aligning political practice, public action and art practices offers temporal moments of intrusion and transgression into the public domain. This locates an interweaving of a complex configuration of positions where the boundaries are constantly in a state of flux. Appropriation of space is a creative response to such configurations. Creative responses to the absence of public space, to its negation are produced in informal appropriation as urban actions. These are commonly referred to as vacant spaces, empty or open spaces where a person or group occupy and inscribe a new use. Appropriation of empty spaces opens new trajectories of use, like De

Fig. 11. Public Private negotiation of Urban Space, Ave Cons Rodrigues Alves, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

13   Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. M. Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p.61.

88

Fig. 12. Public Private appropriation of Urban Space, Rua Paulo Avelar, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

Certeau's tactics of walking.

> If it is true that a spatial order organises an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualises some of these possibilities. In a way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements.[14]

These are tactical incursions where creative urban practices adapt and challenge the changing condition of informal urbanism. Nomadic Kitchen is one such incursion into an appropriation of space. Adjacent to the site of the project there is an empty space; an abandoned piece of land that once had a tight network of informal houses. Residents have erected make shift goal posts and transformed this open/empty space into a football pitch (see Fig. 9). This is a creative act of antagonism,[15] operating on the limits of legality between formal and informal urbanism as legitimate or illegitimate enterprises. Where one feels hopeless and overpowered in not having a choice of where to live, informality as another kind of intelligence subverts the situation at hand, turning disadvantage to advantage in how one works in between the situated conditions and reveals unexpected improvisation. Informal appropriation of empty spaces offers another understanding on what is public about space. This illegitimate occupation, 'making-do' tactic is about isolated actions, a response to the outside space of the formal city. Public spaces of appropriation operate as spaces of exclusion, beyond civilization and society whose actions change the organisation and operation of urban forms. The appropriation of space to become public space is about making a new lexicon for its future users. De Certeau's tactics of appropriation delineate space as contingent and relational. 'Dancing on a tightrope requires that one maintain an equilibrium from one moment to the next by recreating it at every step by means of adjustments; it requires one to maintain a balance that is never permanently acquired'.[16]

[14]   de Certeau , p.98.

[15]   Chantal Mouffe, On the Political, (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.20-21.

[16]   de Certeau, p.73.

Fig. 13. Camelô, Street Trader, São Paulo, Brazil.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

Fig. 14. Street Market, Rio Branco, Motorway São Paulo, Brazil.
Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

Appropriation of public space is equally not only a condition of the
expanding informal periphery but is also a phenomenon of the formal
normative city. Fig. 11 shows the improvisation of car gates customised to
wrap around the car parked in the porch. Fig. 12 shows how residents have
built a terrace of ramps to accommodate the difference in levels between
the car porch, the footpath and the road. In each case residents have
appropriated what is regarded as public space for their private use. In each
occurrence the boundary between public and private becomes unclear.
These are grey areas, liminal spaces of appropriation that harness new
modalities of public and private spaces of human encounter.

Geo-Spatial and Geo-Economies of Survival

Ideas of periphery are not always situated on the margin and marginality can be embedded within the *milieu* and flux of the normative city. The marginal can operate as a form of silent encroachment within. The distinction between the formal and informal extends beyond the boundaries of the geo-spatial to geo-economic. As seen from fig. 9 and 10 their relationship is more malleable than one would imagine. Street traders known as *vendor ambulante* or *camelô* operate in the pedestrian streets, parks and on the downtown motorways of São Paulo. This offers new networks of migratory trading practices that are interstitial economies of survival. There are thousands of such *vendor ambulante* or *camelôs* operating across São Paulo. Their strategies of survival draw attention to formal economies and their tactical counter-response of black market trading and shadow economies; in the process their spatial tactics revitalise the street and the future dynamic of the city. These urban trading practices highlight the tensions between the regulated and un-regulated flows of people, consummerables and capital. In conditions of indeterminacy such practices operate on a larger scale across geo-political economies worldwide.

Fig. 15. Prestes Maia, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo: Mick O'Kelly, 2006.

The term '*Camelô*' means to blend into the immediate surroundings and become invisible. This urban negotiation is a tactical application whose actions create multiple connections, possibilities, and situations. It exploits the collapsed infrastructure of city planning and the gridlock of the motorway network. It exploits a failure in the system that constructs desiring assemblages in an interstitial informal economy that subverts the balance of power. These mobile trading practices are spatial manoeuvres where the traders claim and re-appropriate space, collaging their desire onto those of the car drivers stuck in traffic. These tactical manoeuvres of the *camelôs* do not go unnoticed by multi-nationals and big corporate business. Companies realising the opportunity and potential of marketing their wares sub-contract the *camelôs* as distribution points to push their slogans and logos, peddling anything from chocolate bars to cars, mobile phones and the sex industry (see Fig 11).

Similarly, Rio Branco is a motorway in the centre of the city where

residents have successfully campaigned and succeeded in creating a moratorium on traffic flow each weekend. From 10.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. each Sunday the motorway is a traffic free zone. In part this moratorium initiative was motivated by the desire to dull the noise of the endless flow of traffic. The motorway was an emergency response from the city planners to reduce the gridlocked traffic and get more cars through the city. It did not accommodate for the noise pollution that residents living parallel to the moving traffic would have to endure. Each Sunday it becomes an informal market, creating openings for trading material goods and services. These include mobile cafés, bicycle repair outfits, barbeque stations, a place for deliberation and a five kilometre running, pedestrian space. These spatial incursions are micro-revolutionary sites of encounter that reveal the cultural complexity, between formal and informal, centre and periphery. (see Fig 14).
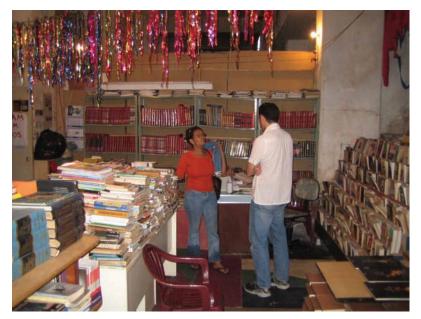

Fig. 16. Library and literacy classroom in Prestes Maia Favela, São Paulo. Photo: Mick O'Kelly 2007.

Becoming Library and Infinite Expansion

Until recently Prestes Maia was an illegal settlement in the heart of São Paulo. It is twenty storeys high, the tallest vertical *favela* in Latin America. Two and a half thousand people, approximately six hundred families, occupied this building which was formerly a textile factory. The residents were under constant pressure of eviction from the city and police wanting to repossess the building in order to redevelop it in accordance with the image of a modernist urban planned city (see Fig. 15). The library in the basement of Prestes Maia is another example of a micro-revolutionary site of encounter.

This project began when Lamartine Braziliano, a resident of Prestes Maia found a bunch of discarded magazines, which he made available to the rest of the occupants of the tower block. This public act was responded to with reciprocity, visitors donated books and magazines, building an archive whilst creating lines of connectivity with other members of the *favela*. The library functioned as a place of exchange and encounter. The architecture of the archive is indexed and coherent but with an eclectic assemblage of surprising juxtaposition and fusion of parts. Encyclopaedias sit comfortably along side popular novellas, philosophy alongside children's

storybooks, magazines alongside academic journals, all arranged not by intellectual proximity but according to shape and size. The aggregate of its dimensions are always in negotiation, continually changing shape, it is an open-ended proposition, in a sense a library always becoming. The action of constructing the library creates `lines of drift`, lines of inter-connecting travelers who pass through the system of lending and borrowing. Two evenings per week there were literacy classes for children and adults. This was an informal initiative to learn the linguistic tools of signification that give access to the formal public sphere. There is no natural available light in the basement so what little there is comes from a vine like network of raw electric wiring borrowed from the street above. The concept of lines here serves to reveal the urgency and complexity of this urban intervention to the formal city that engulfs it outside. The impulse of the library is not containment but infinite expansion and spreading, always reaching out. The library functions as a way of mapping human interconnectedness and relations.

Modes of Practice and Interstitial Blind Spots

It might be argued that informality, as an assemblage of hybrid practices of spatial organisation, will continue to play a significant role as antagonistic and destabilising to the future of formal urbanism. These are relational and incomplete systems of transference and transaction where disparate worlds collide and intertwine and their boundaries create a malady of trajectories yet to be imagined.

Urban Negotiations as tactical strategies of practice, and more specifically Nomadic Kitchen as an interstitial structure and urban negotiation, tests the coextensive potential of an aesthetic-spatial-politics to engage in finding the potential limits of an art situation and the social production of space. The project offers a discourse through its affects, instruments and method, creating different kinds of actions as an agency for exchange. What is critical, is determining the value of that exchange. Implicit in generating value regarding the art enterprise is the role of audience in relation to the artwork. It is more than muted that the audience or spectator brings the artwork into existence. The space and convention in which one experiences an art situation is mostly an isolated encounter were the image draws the spectator into a ritual or theatre of illusion and mimesis; where the artwork operates within an enclosed system of appearances, what the philosophers call 'the thing in its self'.[17] In this scenario the materiality of artwork holds syntagmatic relations, meaning and representation is determined within the narrative itself and not some external reality in the world. Institutional art spaces are autonomous spaces of withdrawal from the *milieu* of the public. Collaborative or participatory practice generates a multiplicity of energies and passions that emancipate collective desiring in a common social production. The art event acts not as an aesthetic object but as an alibi to do something else.

This process visualises independent thought and validates equality of intelligence and distribution of roles towards a reciprocity of exchange, all the while being alert to recognising the newness in a social situation and the action to transform it. Nomadic Kitchen's location in an informal settlement where residents generate their own narratives through urban practices, supports the thesis of this project. The residents are insiders, their position is one of occupancy and use and not the gaze of the spectator, the voyeur or outsider. This artwork proposes that there is no audience that creates meaning, completes or legitimises the artwork. The residents of Vila Nova are citizen producers of Nomadic Kitchen and the wider spatial politics that produces subjectivity, community and a common space for action. The function of desiring production within this urban

[17]   Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett Company, 1987), p.29.

action is to locate the labour of desire not as surplus expenditure but as an urgent action in self-organisation. The potential for (Nomadic Kitchen) as an aesthetic-spatial-politics to engage in the production of space in urbanism, creates a new dialectic and project paradigm. In part this asserts that new models of art practice engage a *public* but not audience or spectator. In the process of producing space, the *public* is constituted in multiple trajectories creating a plurality of subjectivity. Perhaps one needs to approach this mode of practice as a penumbra of effects that are caught in its interstitial blind spots. This practice tries to find legibility for an urban imagination and to locate the protean dimensions of an art practice that occupies the discursive fields of an aesthetic-ethical-spatial-politics, which are in a continued state of indeterminacy and contingency.

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