

Building Space Not Building: A Case Study

As practicing architects, the trajectory of this project has tested our thoughts on public space. We questioned our goals - would there be a normative construction somewhere in the timeline of the project, a community center, a deployable canopy, a storage shed?

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2008 our practice has been engaged in reanimating a public space on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City. We teamed up with residents of East 1st Street to create First Street Green, a non-profit collaboration with the goal of converting a seemingly derelict lot of land located at 33 East 1st Street from an inaccessible, garbage-strewn, rat-infested piece of “vacant” land into an active public space. Our involvement with the residents of 1st Street began as a pro bono advisory position but quickly evolved into a partnership that led to the establishment of FSG as the driving force behind revitalizing the lot.

The purpose of this paper is to share with you our experiences creating a public space - and our thoughts on a contemporary architectural practice engaged in such a project - and to bring our perspective to bear on the question of local vs. global permeating today’s critical discourse.

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE SPACE

Throughout this paper, one of the tools we will use to explore our idea of public space will be the presentation of a series of conceptual oppositions. The first such opposition, public vs. private space, may be considered by some as the primordial opposition in any study of public space. However, it will be instructive to digress into more strictly philological considerations to trace a few interesting preconditions in the definitions of the words public and private, as a way to bring into question from the outset any received notions cleaving to the concepts of public and private.

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the etymology of public to an adaptation of the Latin publicus, with its roots in early Latin poplicus, from populus (later populus) meaning People. However, the OED relates the following as a further clarification of this history:

The change to publicus appears to have taken place under the influence of pubes, in the sense “adult men”, “male population.”¹

The OED traces its etymology of the word private to Latin privatus, the past participle of privare, to bereave, to deprive, to rob, perhaps originally to isolate, to make solitary.²

We are confronted, in our discussion of public vs. private, on the one hand, with a latent gender bias associated with the not so subtle shift in meaning from “people” to “adult men” in the history of the English word “public”, and on the other hand, with its opposite word “private” that carries with it the ignominious notion of depriving one of a public presence. In the case of private, we are left with the impression that the definition of privacy conceals an inherent nihilism, the imposed absence of, or the rejection of, a public life as the crucial determinant in the concept of the private. This leads to the radical and ideologically fraught construction that privacy might be a condition forced upon us by the planned eradication of a public life that was only ever made available to a select group (adult men) anyway. In other words, the notion of privacy, held in such esteem by our contemporary standards, is revealed as the remainder condition imposed by our being (twice) removed from the only club that seems to matter, the public. In that direction, seemingly, lies much of our contemporary discourse on neoliberalism and its controlling impact on the urban condition. Going further, nothing can be closer to Eric Wolf’s analysis of history as written by the victor to appear virtuous than this etymological redirection of so fundamental a concept.³ Perhaps these considerations are somewhat beyond the scope of our current study. However, they drive home the point that the most elemental concepts available to us to ground our understanding of public space vs. private space are already compromised, negotiated and fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence.

BMW GUGGENHEIM LAB

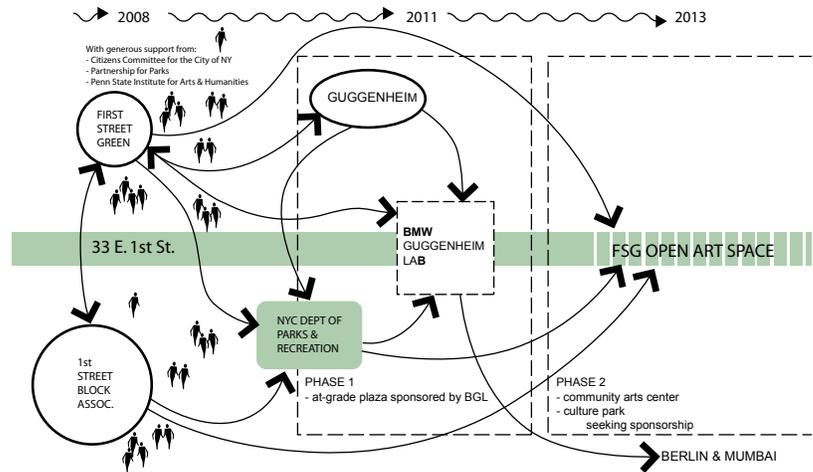
In 2010, the Guggenheim Museum asked New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to recommend a tract of Parks-owned public land that might host the BMW Guggenheim Lab, a proposed urban laboratory scheduled to travel the world studying the local/global dialectic. It was to begin in New York City with a three month residency in the summer of 2011. Largely the result of First Street Green’s ongoing efforts on behalf of the East 1st Street lot, NYC Parks recommended that the Lab work with FSG to host it at the lot. The Lab’s residency proved pivotal to the lot’s development. They remediated the site to allow for public access and invited FSG to hold a series of workshops to explore future uses of the lot beyond the Lab’s residency. As of the Fall of 2013, we have completed our 2nd full season of programming at the lot, now officially named, and incorporated as part of, First Park (Figure 1a).

As you might guess from the fact that we are moving into the project’s sixth year, this process has been fraught with complex challenges, heartbreaking setbacks, community, institutional and political confrontations, invaluable alliances and a growing respect for the uncertainties and ambiguities of the creation of public space in the contemporary city.

HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT

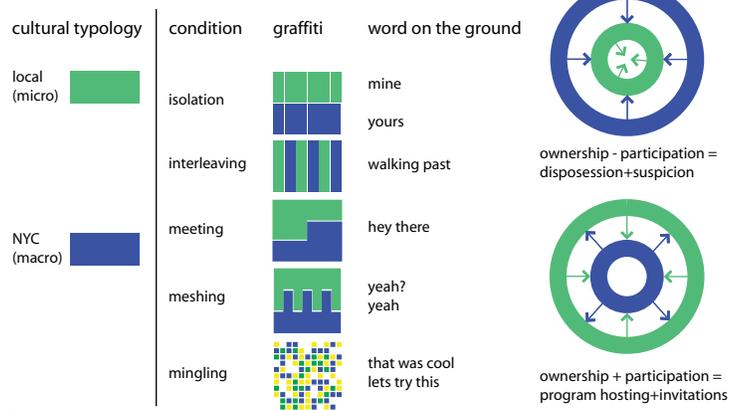
The push to revitalize the lot came indirectly from the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Over the decades, while the lot remained closed behind chain-linked fencing, the Health Department somehow had identified the

FIRST STREET GREEN CULTURE PARK -- PROJECT TIMELINE



1a Figure 1a

LOCAL MICRO CULTURE (1st Street) + LOCAL MACRO CULTURE (NYC): AN INTERACTIVE MODEL



1b Figure 1b

neighboring building at 35 East 1st Street as the source of the street’s rat infestation. Violations were issued against the building, levying fines and calling for them to address the issue under penalty of law. The building hired a lawyer and, at great expense, repeatedly went to court to have these violations overturned and to point out, with the support of the residents of East 1st Street, that the infestation and health hazard was without question the result of the garbage strewn vacant lot next door. The building proved that the owner of the lot was, improbably, NYC Parks. They presented Community Board 3 with the idea of establishing a sculpture park there. CB3 asked the building to come up with a more coherent plan that focused less on the rats and more on the plan to revitalize the lot.

Our friends had already reached out to NYC Parks who tried to solve the problem with gravel and traps, but the infestation and violations persisted. All of us realized that without a big idea, we were finding it hard to gain traction with NYC Parks and CB3.

First Street Green met with NYC Parks and established a working relationship with various department heads. We wrote for grants and held fund-raisers. We agitated on behalf of our initial vision of a park as a passive sculpture park, similar to the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City in the NYC borough of Queens but more on the scale of the Toronto Sculpture Garden in Toronto, Canada. The Toronto Sculpture Garden appealed to our artist partners in FSG, who have lived next to the lot for over twenty years and saw the vacant lot as an empty

Figure 1a: FSG - Project Timeline.

Figure 1b: Local Micro/Macro Culture.

exhibition space ready to host installations on a rotating basis. We expressed our concern that this idea might not capture many imaginations in the surrounding communities where public art is displayed on every green patch of public land.

FSG organized a meeting with James Wines of Site to get his opinion on what we were considering. He agreed with CB3's assessment that the sculpture park plan was too timid. We presented NYC Parks with our alternate vision of an arts exhibition and community center that became pivotal when the Guggenheim came calling.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE PROJECT

Central to our idea of public space is our idea of an open art space, its definition, purpose and constituencies, its formal qualities as well as its theoretical underpinnings. Somehow our idea had to convey to our constituency, collaborators and potential partners a conceptual framework that would, on the one hand, address aspirations and concerns of East 1st Street and neighborhood residents, while on the other, formulate a clear vision for the space that could be sufficiently broad to attract public and private institutional groups whose support we would need to move forward. In short, we needed to articulate First Street Green's theory of public space for First Park.

SITE ANALYSIS

The southern half of the block, comprising the buildings that once faced Houston Street, was demolished during the installation of the Independent Subway lines and the expansion of Houston Street circa 1930. The rear yards of the remaining East 1st Street buildings were exposed to Houston Street. The remaining lot areas pertaining to the removed buildings became a strip of parkland that ran the length of the new triangular block between the newly exposed rear yards and Houston Street.

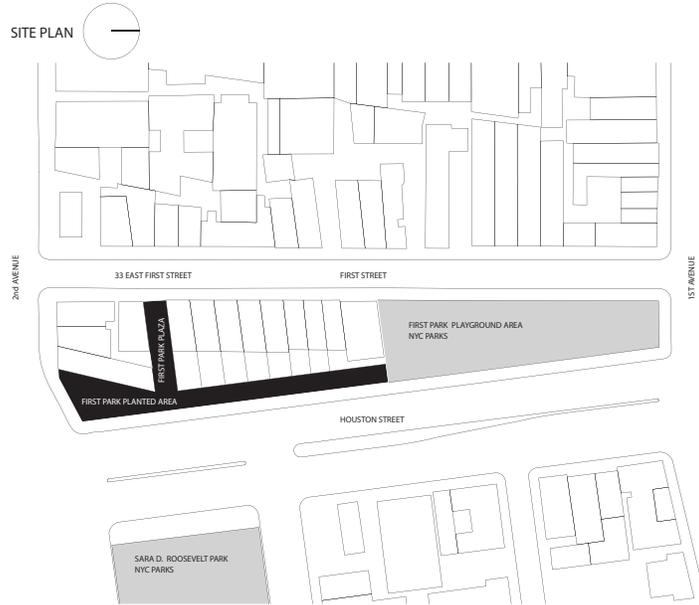
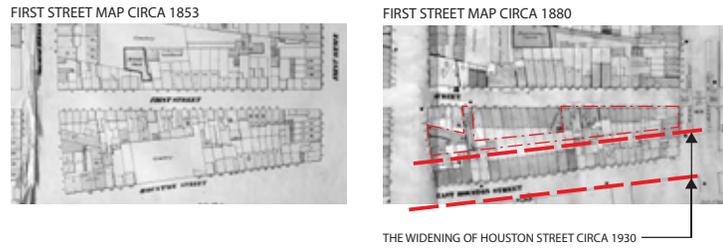
Buildings on the eastern tip of the remaining triangular block were also demolished and became the triangular First Park playground.

33 East 1st Street was an empty building lot between two buildings just east of 2nd Avenue and between East 1st Street to the north and East Houston Street to the south. The lot had a building that burned and was demolished in the 1930's and never replaced (Figure 2).

It is interesting to note that First Park was not a designed park but a residual space adopted by residents as a park and later defaulting to NYC Parks.

As we read the site and the historical record, East 1st Street exists as a fine grained, single lane, residential street where many residents still carry a multi-generational perspective of street history and culture. In addition, many artists still remain from the earlier wave of gentrification that occurred throughout the area in the 1970s. Along with newer residential groups who have moved in during the last decades, the street has a strong family flavor.

In stark contrast to this is the distinctly Haussmann-like boulevard scale of Houston Street, a major, divided, four lane, east west artery. The Houston Street corridor contains new luxury high-rise towers as well as historic retail establishments such as Katz's Delicatessen, the Sunshine Landmark Theater and many clubs, bars and restaurants that act as destinations for visiting groups. This area has also become home to a burgeoning arts district anchored by the New Museum on the Bowery and myriad galleries to the south.



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THEORY OF CONSTITUENCY

It is the apparent incongruity of these two worlds meeting in the breach of First Park plaza that makes the plaza such a special place. We explored the interactions that might take place between 1st Street residents and Houston Street denizens and examined the various typologies of space overlaying and coexisting within this compressed zone.

LOCAL VS. GLOBAL

“By turning names into things, we create false models of reality.”⁴ In this quote, Eric Wolf summarizes our tendency to draw hard edged boundaries around our concepts, creating myths that distort our ability to see the more holistic picture.

When the BMW Guggenheim Lab came to the space with their theme of “confronting comfort”, they immediately began to frame the Lab’s discourse within the local vs. global opposition. However, the local in the Lab’s use of the pairing meant a small coterie of well-connected NYC groups and Lab specialists flown in from cities around the globe. Though an effort was made to identify local conditions, the Lab’s focus on well-organized and connected groups espousing ostensibly avant garde, often technological solutions to finding “responsible comfort” in the contemporary urban environment condemned their work to being an exercise in professional networking. Wolf might call this process “descriptive integration,” by which he means that “Limitations of time and energy in the field dictate limitations in the number and location of possible observations and interviews, demanding concentration of effort on an observable place and on a corps of specifiable ‘informants.’”⁵ These results exist as “hypothetical isolates,” by which

Figure 2: First Street Maps and Site Plan.

he means “A methodological unit of inquiry ... turned into a theoretical construct by assertion, a priori.”⁶ The Lab’s work was heavily weighted to issues that only in the most general sense of taking place on the block had any relevancy to the residents of 1st Street, Houston Street or even the Lower East Side.

We had a hard time correlating this process with our experiences on the ground during our years of work at the park prior to the arrival of the Lab. We questioned the Lab’s conceptual framework to encompass such enormity that the particular qualities that had drawn them to First Park seemed to get left behind.

MICRO LOCAL VS. MACRO LOCAL

In wrestling with the meaning of the Lab’s shortcomings on the ground, we proposed a micro and macro understanding of the local. In our minds, New York City certainly framed the local both geographically and culturally. However, labeling this capital of congestion as local blinds us to the immediacy of experience of street and neighborhood culture, stoop by stoop and all of the cultures that lend themselves to conversations on street corners and eventually to Jane Jacobs.

By macro local we refer to the forces surrounding us that have a tendency towards the ambitions of Haussmann’s Paris. The big get bigger, and even our local town of New York has aspirations to unlimited potential on the 302 square miles of land mass within its borders. Houston Street began as an ordinary east west street with residents and store fronts, very similar to 1st Street. However, by the completion of its expansion, it had already evolved into a boulevard of the greater New York future. It had graduated onto a more expansive stage of city life.

By micro local we refer to individual residents, to the inherited and shared culture of individual streets often spanning multiple generations, ethnicities, nationalities, professions and habits. Micro local allows us to consider the peculiar irregularity of a Parks Department employee’s variable understanding of when a park gate needs to be locked and when it doesn’t, or a neighbor’s statement that he preferred the rats to any open public space, arts programming or events.

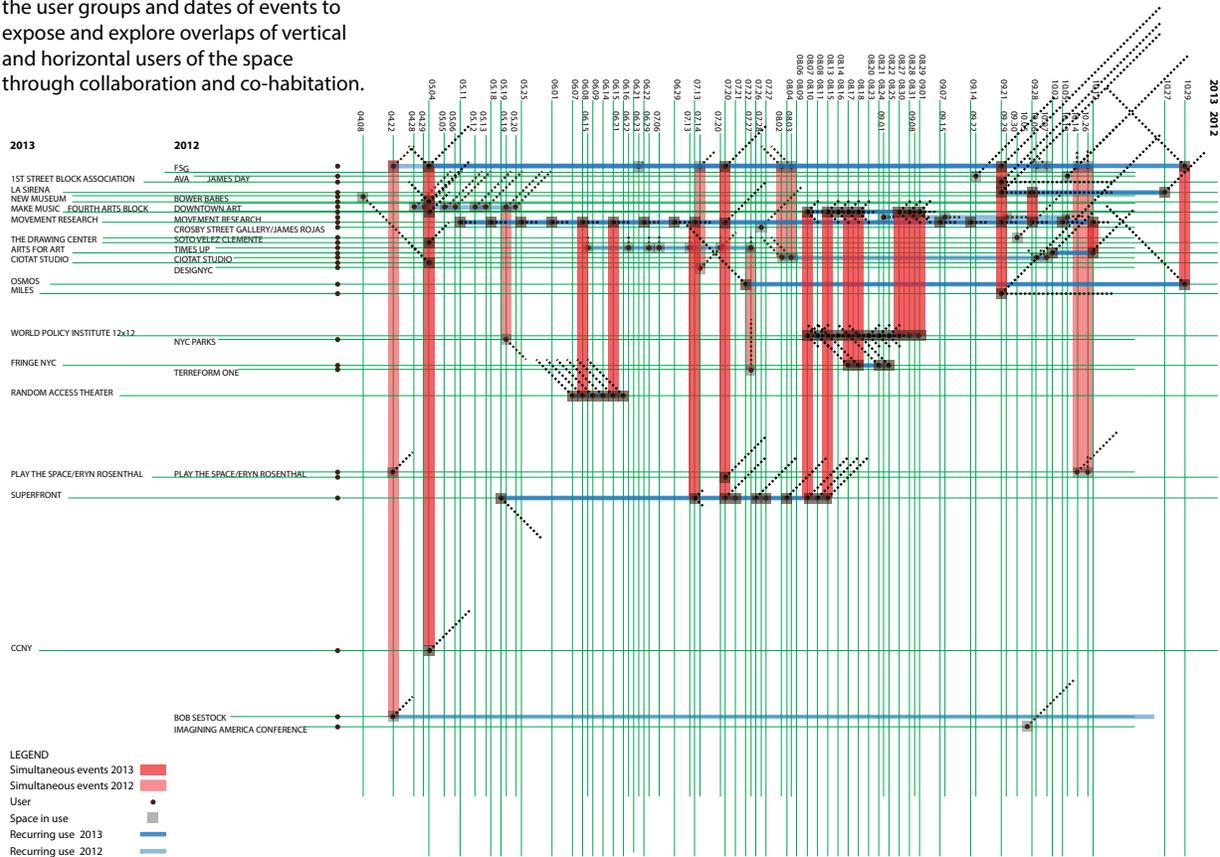
This micro local vs. macro local formulation informed a series of diagrammatic propositions that attempted to understand the interactions between 1st Street residents and visitors at large, whether from the greater city or beyond. We established 5 abstract conditions – isolation, interleaving, meeting, meshing, mingling – and their analogous “word on the ground” translations. (See figure 1b.) We speculated on how 1st Street residents’ perceived ownership of the park and their level of participation in the future of the park would influence their acceptance or rejection of visitors to their park. By pairing ownership and participation in an arithmetic logic statement we came up with the following statements: 1) ownership – participation = dispossession + suspicion, and 2) ownership + participation = program hosting + invitations. We used these formulations to design events that could be hosted by local residents as a means of empowering them. James Day was such an event for a cancer stricken boy on the block.

HORIZONTAL VS. VERTICAL

“Each [specialized field of study] ... proceeds to set up a model, seemingly a means to explain ‘hard’ observable facts, yet actually an ideologically loaded scheme geared to a narrow definition of subject matter. Such schemes provide self-fulfilling answers, since phenomena other than those covered by the model are ruled out of the court of specialized discourse.”⁷

PROGRAMMED HORIZONTAL / VERTICAL TEMPORAL SPATIAL DIAGRAM

The diagram collapses the activities at First Park in 2012 and 2013 juxtaposing the user groups and dates of events to expose and explore overlaps of vertical and horizontal users of the space through collaboration and co-habitation.



UNPROGRAMMED MICRO / HORIZONTAL TEMPORAL SPATIAL DIAGRAM

The inverse diagram of the above maps reveals the horizontal, unprogrammed space and use of First Park.



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Figure 3: Horizontal/Vertical Temporal Spatial Diagrams.

The micro/macro dialectic gave us insight into how our approach differed from the Lab's, however it fell short in describing the spatial relationships between our constituencies and First Park. What is missed by the micro/macro formulation is the verticality of an event/sponsor, such as the Lab for example, whose institutional connections soar through the upper strata of New York City life. The vertical axis of the Lab intersects the horizontal axis of the park. Along these lines, we began to read First Street Green's activities on the site as a combination of micro/macro and horizontal/vertical. Micro/horizontal groups and structures include 1st Street residents, visitors, Parks Department personnel, volunteers, First Street Green, community groups, etc. Macro/vertical groups and structures include Parks Department, sponsors, arts organizations, event organizers, universities, policing authorities, First Street Green, etc. In short, the vertical group intersects with the park during discrete events on a determined schedule and, importantly, has an agenda of which its presence in the park is an expression. The horizontal group tends to see, visit or pass through the site on a regular basis, has a more longitudinal memory of the park and has no discernible agenda with respect to the park other than the satisfaction of its desire to visit the park (Figure 3). According to this definition, Parks Department is both horizontal and vertical in as much as it has a mandate to maintain a local presence to keep park land free and available to residents and visitors, while satisfying its political mandate to be responsive to institutional and corporate sponsors who provide valuable support in the form of fundraising, donations, etc.

As a public park, a formal type of public space, First Park is a heavily administered space. No events can be closed, exclusive or charge admission. All events and installations must be permitted by NYC Parks' Department of Operations. All art installations must be approved by NYC Parks' Department of Arts and Antiquities. All structures of a certain duration must be permitted by Department of Buildings. All events with proposed amplified sound must be permitted by NYPD. Everything brought into the park for events must be removed by organizers, etc.

The impact of this administration on FSG's use of park space is interesting. As First Park must remain open and accessible at all times, our programmed events always have a strong horizontal component, as passersby, dog-walkers and moms with strollers walk through dance recitals or Shakespeare in full performance. The park's public space is inviolable. We wouldn't have it any other way.

THEORY OF PUBLIC SPACE

As one approach to understanding the potential of FSG's involvement at First Park, we used our workshops in the BMW Guggenheim Lab to solicit from local residents and Lab participants ideas of how the park could be used after the Lab moved on. We designed a system of foam tiles on which participants could write, draw and assemble their ideas. The tiles were cut in such a way that they could be fitted together to build a visioning wall. Roughly 2000 people attended the events and 400 tiles (all we had!) were illustrated and assembled into a wall 2 ft wide x 16 ft long x 8 ft high (Figure 5). The tiles were later photographed and their contents inventoried into a database. While not a statistically accurate survey, the visioning wall provided interesting results. Data mining the contents showed that art and arts related programming was the favorite programming idea appearing on roughly 60% of the tiles. The 2nd most desired event was nature-related programming such as gardening, flowers, etc., appearing on 16% of the tiles. When we added nature with references to animals (from aquariums to giraffes!) the number rose to 23%. In addition to programming options, our mining revealed a 2 to 1 ratio of the occurrence of first

person pronouns to combined second and third person pronouns and a 6 to 1 ratio for participatory rather than passive or received programming.

CURATED VS. CONTROLLED

In the context of the problematic conceptual framework on which the terms public and private are constructed, we turn our attention to curated vs. controlled space. If the fundamental concepts on which our discussions of public space are so radically in play, why are we constantly surprised by the contentiousness of public space? It's a battleground, as it invariably should be. Without the struggle for meaning inherent in our desire to configure space to suit our mind's eye, public space would lose its efficacy. And perhaps it has. Digging heels in the ground and knee jerk responses are the inevitable outcome of an imbalance between the controlling impulse and the curatorial call that we all seem to heed in our attitudes towards open, public space. The far right calls for more regulations, more patrolling, more arrests, less toilets, less benches. The far left calls for unfettered access, less regulation, more unmediated space, more toilets, more benches. The irony here lies with the intractability of the discourse.

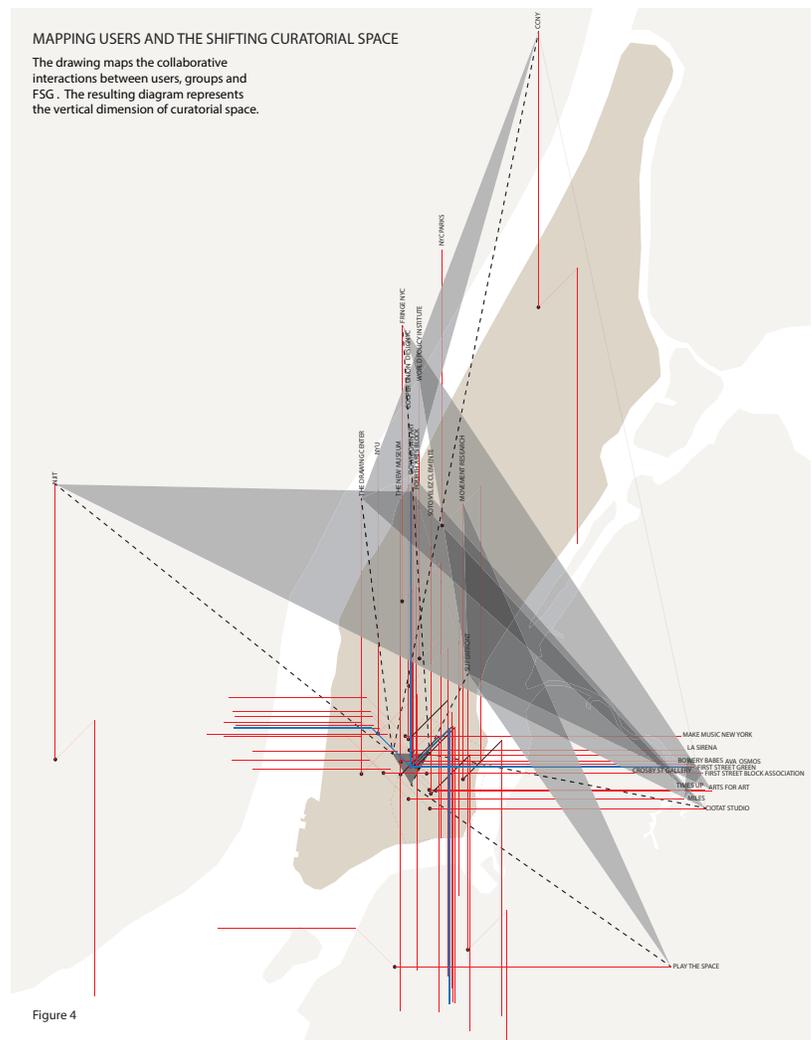


Figure 4: *Users and Shifting Curatorial Space Diagram.*

When the BMW Guggenheim Lab was closing down, they held a final community gathering in which First Street Green was portrayed as one possible successor



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custodial group, among more populist choices, who would take control of First Park. Present were members of the corporate sponsors (BMW), East Village activists, members of Occupy Wall Street, and the Lab collaborators who had not yet jetted off, among others. The scene was instructive in the wiles of public discourse. Calls were made for the immediate surrender of all Lab resources, including most importantly, the toilets and washrooms, followed by impassioned pleas for funding of social programs, including housing, as well as demands that we prove our organizational stature to control the park, and more.

The notion of curatorial vs controlled space would not have been received well that night. Most assuredly, both terms would have been understood as a hegemonic move against the accessibility of the park. However, in the more measured moments since we began our work in the park, we have come to understand the importance of the idea of public space as a curatorial imperative. In other words, curatorial space as we define it suggests a spatial structure that allows us to work closely with individuals and groups to display their work in the park while managing the Park's relationship to the administrative structure under which we operate, NYC Parks, the expectations of 1st Street residents and neighborhood visitors. The curatorial concept of public space allows us to keep the administrative control of the space at a seemingly remote distance allowing users

Figure 5: Photographs.

to experience the space through their desires, while bringing together horizontal/micro and vertical/macro constituencies (Figure 4).

OPEN SPACE ART INCUBATOR

Finally, our concept of a curatorial space can best be described as an open space art incubator. Our definition of open, on the one hand, is secured by the administrative imperative that park land be accessible to all (leaving the definition of this “all” for a future discussion) and, on the other, meets four criteria that work within our conceptual framework of micro/horizontal vs. macro/vertical: 1) all work should benefit the community, 2) emerging local artists and arts organizations will take precedence, 3) unfinished or work-in-progress will take precedence over completed work and 4) FSG will act as the conduit to get this done. One collaborator, Movement Research, based on Avenue C just north of the park, uses First Park as open rehearsal space for their artists in residency, as well as offering interpretive movement workshops for the public. Another, Ciotat Studio produced the Urban Exquis video series. Cinematic collages, similar to the surrealists’ corps exquis drawings, engaged viewers by alternately blending with the city’s sounds and visual field, then proposing an alternate experience within the park.

As practicing architects, the trajectory of this project has tested our thoughts on public space. We questioned our goals - would there be a normative construction somewhere in the timeline of the project, a community center, a deployable canopy, a storage shed? The last two years have suggested to us that building the space rather than building a building has achieved most of our aspirations for the park and for First Street Green. The events are not designed to leave behind a physical trace. They are designed to enrich the horizontal of the park, creating memories for residents, participants and visitors. They are designed to climb the vertical, to share this richness with the greater city. We remain engaged with the work of the park because it satisfies us as architects. Andres Lepik calls for “a New Architect, a revised role whereby the architect acts as a social catalyst, community organizer, and facilitator for organizing space and brokering urban relationships.”⁸ Finally, we agree with the Lab on something.

ENDNOTES

1. “Public,” Etymology, The Compact Edition Of The Oxford English Dictionary (New York: Oxford University Press 1971) 2349.
2. “Private,” Etymology, OED, 2306.
3. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2010) 5.
4. Wolf, 6.
5. Wolf, 13.
6. Wolf, 14.
7. Wolf, 10.
8. Andres Lepik, “83,” in “100 Urban Trends: A Glossary of Ideas from the BMW Guggenheim Lab Berlin,” ed. Maria Nicanor, Curator, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation 2012) list item 83.