

Addressing and Observing the City From Within

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The Vancouver Art Gallery's summer event flier boldly announced that **SPACEAGENCY**, the Vancouver-based Architecture and Design Collective would "imagine and design a new public space" within the gallery on July 28, 2006. Well-grounded in neo-Marxist critical spatial theory we, the SpaceAgents, were mortified that people might think that we intended to make an installation within a private institution and call it a new "public" space. Somehow there must have been a communication breakdown between the gallery's programming directors and public relations department; we had made no such claim. To associate public activities and public space with controlled and institutionalized environments – while not a limited to local conditions – is a typical assumption in Vancouver that figures into public life in the city.

The resulting confusion/crisis over public space in Vancouver is so strong it is almost tangible. In 2004, a group of architects, designers, critics, and educators formed **SPACEAGENCY** to address this exact issue and explore just what forms a vibrant, active and engaged public sphere could take in the city. Through speculative and built projects, writing and general public instigation, **SPACEAGENCY** who works with the mandate "making space for knowledge and discussion of architecture in the public realm" highlights both the latent possibilities and limitations of public life in the city.

This paper will discuss ways to explore the potential of existing urban conditions with a focus on two projects, 'FRONTIERSPACE' and 'FLUXSPACE, or What Does Vancouver X* Like?' by **SPACEAGENCY**. The projects encourage a discourse on the contemporary

city by finding other 'other' spaces (in the city): interventions that bring out ways to reveal and engage in the city and public events that promote participation and stimulate the collective imagination.

Vancouver as Site

The condition of a living city is that of constant flux. Driven by a complex interplay of forces, flux is experienced through the passing of thresholds that mark successive chapters in the life of the city. Vancouver, a young city, is currently experiencing its burgeoning density. The downtown peninsula alone has been the site of considerable residential development, increasing the population 50% in the past 10 years with a density approaching 50 people per acre. The conversion of industrial areas along the waterfront into sites for residential development, overlapping with the predilection for public space oriented towards the ocean and mountains beyond has brought about an imbalanced emphasis on the city's edge. As the city reconciles its recent growth spurt and introspects, we propose interventions that engage the familiar typology of existing inner city spaces, plazas and alleyways through instigation and provocation.

The young city requires participation, speculation and invention. Locating sites of potential requires a careful reading of the emerging city that anticipates latent and new possibilities. Marginal, avoided, fleeting, these sites all compose the leading edge; they make up the border that separate the known and accepted from the unknown. By activating and intervening on seemingly banal, overlooked sites with multiple forms of occupation, 24-

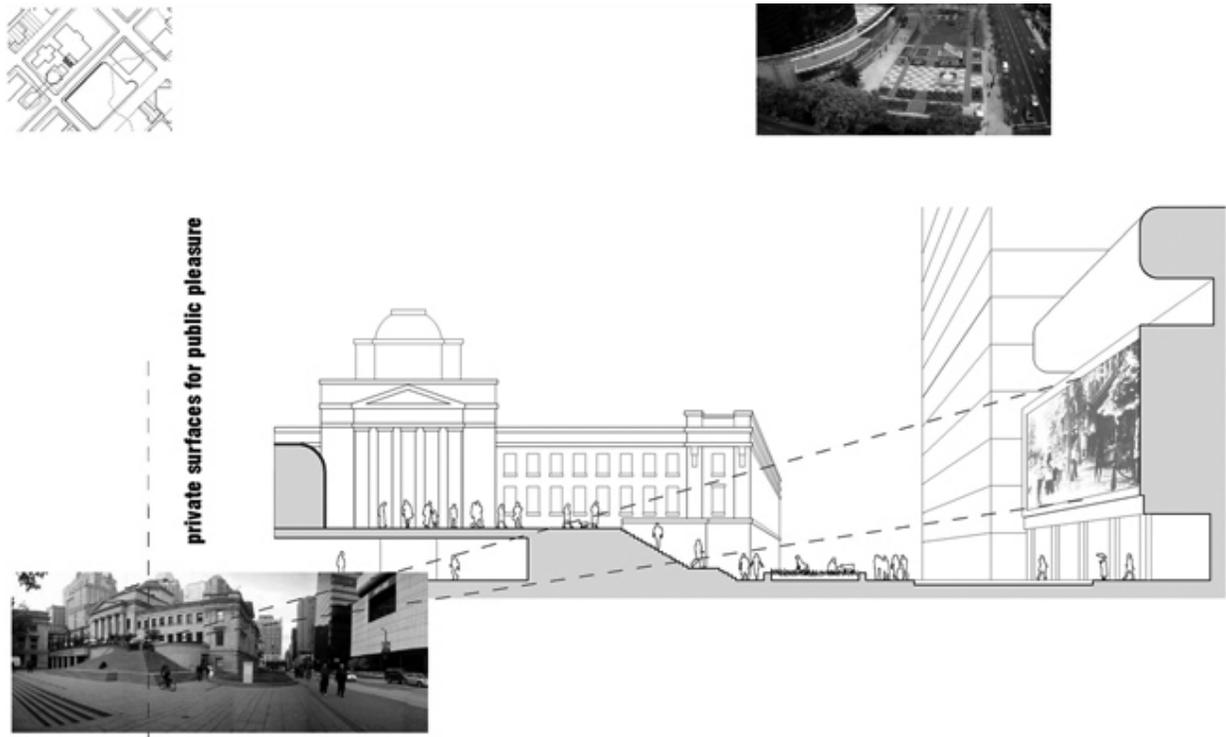


Figure 1_Private Surfaces for Public Pleasure_MFujita, ONeumann, AVaughan

hour activity is generated, drawing and engaging multiple publics. By examining and occupying these sites within the city, a dissonance is created, stimulating the collective imagination and leaving behind traces. By engaging and learning from conditions of the city in transformation, the prospect of ephemera and expedient occupation is encouraged, heightening the anticipation of turning street corners.

Policy shifts such as a more aggressive use of the City of Vancouver Amenity Bonus Program have exposed a more calibrated and nuanced model of the traditional public / private divide. The opportunities to test a version of civic engagement that is manifest in a symbiotic relationship between public and private space are manifold. Through a series of public actions that are temporary in nature, the territory of the city can be reconceived.

ADDRESSING THE CITY

Street addresses, an integral part of a city's system for identifying the location of lots and buildings, generally designate places and

spaces. This regulatory system of names and numbers associates residents with their whereabouts and indicates where a person, business or institution can be found. The alleys in Vancouver, however, while technically defined as streets of a certain (limited) width, are not included in the designation system given to streets. "The city doesn't normally name alleys because the practice would double the number of street names in the city, present delivery problems for mail carriers and interfere with emergency vehicles, which often use alleys," says Larry Cantrell, the city's clerk on the street-naming committee. Because buildings cannot front onto alleys, and because the entire alleyway system was created to accommodate city services such as electrical lines and garbage disposal, the status of alleys is always that of something secondary, often of something "other". As the backside or out-of-sight space that hides the messy reality of a working city, the space of the alleys is often forgotten or avoided. As the domain of dumpsters and clutter, they are nonetheless host to informal economies and systems of exchange.



Figure 2_Dumpsters- an Exploration of Alleyway Life_GMackenzie

FRONTIERSPACE

In January 2005, **SPACEAGENCY** announced an open international design competition to reconceive of Vancouver's alleys as **FRONTIERSPACES**, new frontiers within the city. Considering these frontiers as the border that separates the known and accepted from the unknown, the competition sought innovative ideas that transformed the public's consideration of the urban fabric. The

objective of the design competition was to explore the potential of alleys through the development of a design intervention that considered multiple forms of occupation across the span of a 24-hour day. The interventions were to be conceived of as a vital urban public space in which different activities, planned and spontaneous, could take place.



occupying engineering land

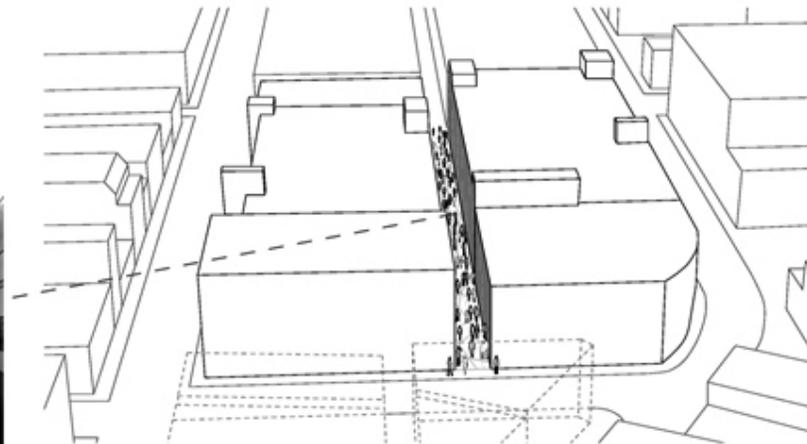


Figure 3_Occupying Engineering Land_ MFujita, ONeumann, AVaughan

BALLOON CAUGHT

For three days in August, the winning entry, *Balloon Caught*, designed by Tokyo architects Satoshi Matsuoka and Yuki Tamura and commissioned by **SPACEAGENCY**, was installed in a Vancouver alley. The urban installation, designed to be mounted and dismantled in less than a day, featured light air-filled glowing nylon orbs measuring fifteen to thirty feet in diameter that were wedged between buildings. *Balloon Caught* drew local residents, planners, tourists, school classes, families and designers to explore the public space through an array of programmed and spontaneous activities. As described by Michael Gordon, Senior Planner at the City of Vancouver, the "Asian-infused surreal experience of cylindrical forms in a rectilinear environment" promoted a shift in perception of the alley by introducing a sense of destination and place. Spatially, the presence of the soft white forms overhead brought enclosure and continuity to the alley, encouraging the public to reconsider the forgotten or avoided space commonly associated with infrastructure, garbage and illicit activity. What is significant about *Balloon Caught* is that while it reconceptualized the space of the alley, it maintained all existing functions. The alley was not reprogrammed or masked, but was re-presented as an occupiable public space.

The provocation in *Balloon Caught* is that within our cities, spaces exist that offer unique potentials for public gathering. That alleys don't have addresses and are therefore outside of the system of naming and designation can be considered their greatest asset. If a street address locates place in the spatial and cultural context, then being without an address is to resist stabilization and singularity, social expectation and compartmentalization. Undesignated, undefined, informal, the space of the alley provides the opportunity for open-ended, playful activities and thus for a vibrant civic life to unfold. As Herbert Marcuse points out, "The play impulse does not aim at playing 'with' something; rather it is the play of life itself, beyond want and external compulsion ... and thus the manifestation of freedom itself." Rather than to project the familiar experience of the streets onto the alley, *Balloon Caught*

made space for spatially and socially discrete activities in a city of delineated, regulated and over-programmed public space. From an opening night party to an exhibition of selected competition entries to a family event featuring stilt performers to curious pedestrians following the evening glow, the installation drew over 3000 people into the otherwise sparsely occupied alley. Given the city's predilection towards the surrounding topography, the majority of Vancouver's civic life and active public spaces are oriented towards the water and landscape. **FRONTIERSPACE** and *Balloon Caught* highlight the potential of existing inner-city spaces to redirect public activity to the center of the city.

OBSERVING THE CITY, Starting with Walking

The act of walking has always been a means of conceiving, comprehending and defining territory. Traversing, tracing, navigating, measuring, tracking, interacting with, getting lost... Consider nomadic roaming, Dadaist visit-excursions, Surrealist deambulations, the Situationist International's *derive*, Stalker's *transurbances*¹. It is through the full-sensorial experience of walking that one is able to reposition oneself in the city, to discover aspects that are not immediately apparent, to engage in a potentially critical act.

In contrast to Corbusier's *Promenade Architecturale* in which architecture is known through temporal experience and narrative sequence, the notion of the subject has shifted from a humanist to a post-humanist conception. The subject is no longer the originating agent of meaning, as K. Michael Hays has pointed out, but is instead a variable and dispersed entity whose very identity and place are constituted in social practice. The modernist, humanist subject-object distinction shifts to a model in which the subject is placed within the object. The blurred line between subject-object, observer-observed results in a complex situation in which **OBSERVATION** constitutes critical interpretation. Observing, following this concept then, is to act upon and actively change a site.



Figure 4_FRONTIERSPACE Balloon Caught Installation_ GMackenzie

The shifted subject-object relationship affects our relationship to the urban context. Conditioned by the degree of openness to a range of cultural influences, context is now understood as a network of interrelated forces that are manifest in superimposed fields rather than as a static built environment. Considering the context's dynamic nature, architecture as well as the individual then has to be conceived as both embedded in and acting upon its surroundings.

This act of immersion in particularity², in Adorno's terms, in which the subject is giving itself over to the object, leads not to the subject's self-discovery but to the uncovering of the intricate social structure of a particular historical moment and configuration. Parallels can be drawn between the act of walking and

an understanding of complexity in architecture where the concurrence of spaces and events is always plural and dynamic. Walking-perception while in motion or through motion-becomes a way of insisting on a dynamic condition that reveals multiple aspects of the city. The city is then a heterogeneous urban context, an amalgamation of physical space and dynamic conditions that include but are not limited to people's activity and movement. Walking corresponds to the fragmented and dissociated character of today's culture as an effective means to experience the city from many viewpoints, foregrounding visual and cultural disjunctions of program, form and values. By moving beyond the obvious, regular and familiar, the transgressive act of walking then is a way to reconnect with the conditions of the urban surroundings.

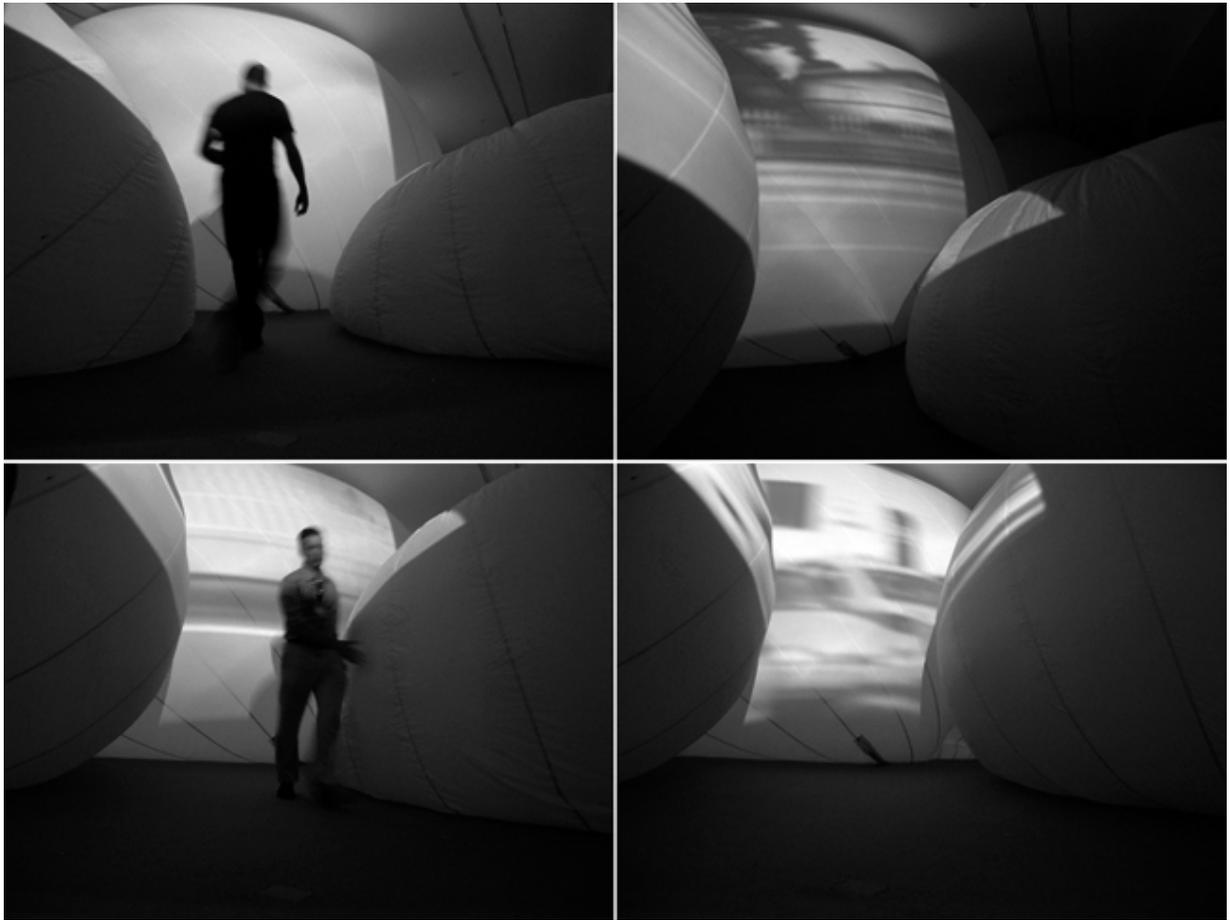


Figure 5_FLUXSPACE Installation_KDavis

Walking in Walter Benjamin's mind turns us into historical detectives and forces us to get actively involved in reconstructing the culture of the city and its particular evolution. From the historical project of modernity to unlock the city's socio-historical reality walking today is a means of active and direct engagement with the contemporary urban context. While walking previously was conceptualized as a conscious act to buffer the urban reality of the individual in the modern metropolis walking now becomes an act of revealing and engaging. In the multi-layered contemporary city where spatial and formal diversity can be seen as expressions of broader underlying cultural, economic and social forces walking is a form of critical participation.

*FLUXSPACE, or What Does Vancouver X*Like?*

For an installation in the Vancouver Art Gallery, SPACEAGENCY collected observations on the city to form the basis of the work. The key elements of the installation were video and audio tracks set within an animated pneumatic [breathing] space. The video was collected through a series of walks, bike drives, and car rides. Variations in speed and depth of field shifted the focus of the video from material details to fast-paced sweeps through streetscapes. The tracks were only lightly layered in the editing process. The overall intention was to present the material in its raw state so viewer/participants could feel the immediacy of the visual observations.

The audio component to the installation was produced through interviews taken during a series of walks through different neighborhoods in the city. The intention was to acquire a sampling of Vancouverites responses to create a sensorial map of the city. Residents were asked to identify a characteristic of the city via their respective senses with questions such as, "what does Vancouver smell like, on a good day?", "if you could run your hand over Vancouver - what would it feel like?", "what does Vancouver sound like?", "if you could fit the whole city in your mouth, what would it taste like?" and "if you had to make a gum that was Vancouver flavored, what would it taste like?" The answers ranged from witty, to bizarre, to insightful - but taken together began to point out common associations of the city.

TASTE:

"Kind of bitter and green, not like apple pie"

"Exotic. Like mangosteen"

"It's very mild, yet there's some spice to it- think of it as an aftertaste."

"It would not taste very good because there would be so many flavors battling it for supremacy."

SMELL:

"Like burning blood and sawdust"

"It smells of coffee, more than any city I know"

"If you're downtown, garbage"

"Like when you're walking through a rainforest when it's raining"

SOUND:

"Like a dinner party of transformers"

"Motorcycles! Get them off the road"

"Maybe birds"

"A bustling noise, a constant movement"

FEEL:

"It's like a cozy sofa, not a fancy sofa, just a nice worked in cozy sofa"

"Everything is nice here, it's just like a baby's skin- that's a nice texture"

"Fibrous. Solid"

"You know like on the side of a building when they've taken the plaster and messed it all up? It's kind of like that."

The medium to capture and hold the collected audio and video observations was a series of air-filled balloons set to inflate and deflate on a 20-minute cycle. When fully inflated, the balloons offered only a very tight passage to viewer/participants. When limp, the ballistic nylon surface appeared like crumpled silk and brought a dampened hush feeling to the space. Through the arc of inflated and taut to deflated and limp and back again, the manner in which viewers engaged the space was revealing. Initial attempts to navigate the oscillating environment without coming into physical contact with the balloons soon gave way to tentative patting and prodding, and later more confident pushing and poking. While clearly not a public space given its setting in an art gallery, the installation challenged and provoked the viewer/participant to take action.

SPACEAGENCY's FLUXSPACE, like **FRONTIERSPACE** suggest *tactics of participation* for engaging the intellectual and physical public realm of the city. Through the act of observation in **FLUXSPACE**, and the focus on overlooked spaces in the **FRONTIERSPACE** Balloon Caught, these projects insist on existing untapped potential in the public realm and seek to explore the underlying diversity of urban life. In a young city such as Vancouver, participation is key; passivity is not an option.

Endnotes

¹ Careri, Francesco, *Walkscapes. Walking as an Aesthetic practice*, (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2002)

² Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 29.