

## HACKING PUBLIC SPACE

People use public space for intimate purposes, establishing relationships and associations. Human interactions and participation are bases for everyday life. Public domain areas are for the free use of individuals despite the territorial claims of some influential users. Open space, parks and streets need to be designed to encourage people to interact. A network of good transitional spaces is needed to establish solid relationships between the private and the public realms.

Old meeting points related to the geography or history of cities have been replaced by more commercial ones. There always have been places within the city which provide adequate space for interaction and intimacy; but most are now unusable through neglect. Actual designs are abandoning such concepts of privacy and some users are being forced to take or reinvent spaces for the purpose.

Colonia Bausili and Cases Barates, a joint housing estate in the Zona Franca of Barcelona dating from around the 20's, form an example of housing microworlds created by industrialisation. The model housing estate of the period would include a bar, a shop, different services, venues and relational spaces vital to neighbourhood life such as a public square, a playground etc which were extensions of the personal space.

Most of this old housing is now disappearing from Barcelona's districts, not without resistance from citizen groups which see in this disappearance a social displacement for the purpose of creating the compartmented city to the benefit of special interests such as commerce, lucrative research and the professional classes and to the detriment of existing residents whose needs are ignored. Instead of being recycled as public space or a public venue, industrial land is fast disappearing and its heritage lost.\*1

Urban developments based on land clearance sites make little or no attempt to include spontaneous public "usability" among the architectural criteria. No shaded seats, except outside commercial premises reserved only for paying customers, individual seats, no seats at all; no green verges, inadequate trees, no fountains...and uncomfortably tilted benches (apparently conceived as a measure to avoid homeless people resting overnight) – The modern city is no more welcoming or convivial a social centre than the interior of a fast food restaurant whose furnishings are conceived to encourage transitory eating --



Colonia Bausili/Cases Barates Barcelona



Plaça del Fossar de les Moreres barcelona

In times like these some thoughts come to mind: the rapid spread of global surveillance, the obsession with security, oppression, social compliance with the fact of being monitored. How we become statistics, consumers, how we are guided towards consumerism from birth to death, what happens to our personal information, and where it is going.

There's nowhere to hide. But in this panopticon city we are all watchers as well as prisoners, and identities are lost, dissolved in a multiplicity of observation points. So, reduced to effective solitude,

watched and watching, we hide in the hive.

The City Hive, the shopping mall of all desires, rejects the classical conception of the “active citizen”, a free user of meaningful public space, entitled to act in solidarity with other free users. Instead, consumer society encourages and cultivates individualism, reducing this former “active citizen” to one more interest group competing among the city’s other interest groups, e.g. city development, the tourist industry...

These “new citizens” of the hive, born individualists, will have little interest in preserving quaint gathering places or to build sociability into new urban planning; they may even seek to turn all human outdoor interaction into a variety of social pollution, an anomaly against livability and an illegal practice.

In spite of recent associations with computer crime, the term “hacker” originally meant a technically skilled, inquisitive individual who dismantles everyday electronic devices to gain a better understanding of their workings. By extension anyone who takes an interest in the secret workings of any closed system has come to be known as a “hacker”. In the context of city exploration “urban hackers” map the city's prohibited sections; forgotten tunnels, abandoned buildings, derelict factories, etc.

City planners close to politicians but far from citizens and their needs may also consider as urban hackers, those who retain a conception of the city's open spaces as being entirely public.

These hackers of the new hive anonymously create social locations or reclaim old ones, rebelling against an urban landscape that tilts the balance of empowerment from the private citizen to private enterprise. Space hacked and appropriated becomes an extension of the private and intimate, a playground...a place for sharing, transcending the individual, challenging monitoring and recovering the celebration of the collective.



Living room at Sabadell suburb street



Living room at Terrassa suburb street



Private message in the street



Private message in the street

This city hive, with its mercantile heart and new exurban districts build with a uniformity of construction, still retains areas that, in reality are areas where the most creative urban hacking takes place, developing and maintaining a social quality of life in spite of their marginal position, inadequate housing and lack of support or public structures.

These expressions of determined social coherence include such activities as neighbourhood gatherings, the creation of allotments, user-planned construction and the appropriation or customising of public space for relational purposes.

In the time of chats, emails, and sms the street is still an open book to share messages; and so old and young alike may also share in the subversion of hacking the hive.



Skate-boarders in the Macba square Barcelona



Second home at Monbau Mirador Barcelona

These hackers make their statements without reference to the law and policies which attempt to hide them or label them as a problem. Barcelona's Macba's square has been appropriated by the skate-boarding culture which is seen as an example of "uncivic" behaviour; it could also be argued that the skate-boarders' use of the unwelcoming civic furniture of ramps and high stone benches as an obstacle course recreates the lost playground where youth networks were established.

In the second example illustrated above a family creates a Sunday dining room "al fresco" at one of the official viewing points of the city with their backs to the main road. The view ahead is ideal while they studiously ignore the evidence of urban transit behind the self placed screens, subverting the use of a transit space. \*2

Considering the existing urban fabric and its current condition we all need to reclaim meeting points to provoke a response that grows, opening up and leaving a positive trace of a human presence, returning more personal landmarks to the city.

\*1 More information at [www.laescocesa.org](http://www.laescocesa.org) and <http://salvemcanricart.org>

\*2 Examples and illustrations included in my research for the project Occasional Cities [www.ciutatsocasionals.net](http://www.ciutatsocasionals.net) and in other personal works which can be seen at [www.interraincognita.org](http://www.interraincognita.org) and [www.myfirstkiss.net](http://www.myfirstkiss.net)