

# Table of Contents

Undoing the City, and Ourselves . . . . . 1



# Undoing the City, and Ourselves

By Anthony Iles

A recent festival in Copenhagen dedicated to the cultural politics of the city escalated into a Dionysian street party-cum-riot. With the stakes raised by this sudden, if fleeting, show of force, conceptual discussions around urban activism took on new perspectives â report by Anthony Iles

In April 2007 Stewart Home wrote a report from Copenhagen for *Mute* on a self-organised conference about the legacy of the situationist movement in Scandinavia.<sup>i</sup> The conference coincided with large scale rioting sparked by the eviction and destruction of the Ungdomshuset (The Youth House) social centre. During the subsequent two years, activists in Copenhagen have continued to build upon the energies catalysed by the defence of a popular social space. Finally, after numerous actions and demos, activists were granted a new social centre by the city council on 11 June 2008.

[IMAGE]

Image: A street party in the central shopping district of Copenhagen that became a riot, Friday 8 May, 2009

These energies also entail marked attempts by Copenhagen's activist scene to educate itself and draw in discourses from elsewhere. To this end, I had participated in a two-day workshop on political readings of the financial crisis, *Finanskrisen Socialkrisen* this February. At the time, the Danish press and political elite were confidently issuing statements that the crisis was something happening elsewhere, while at the same time Danish firms were widely using the crisis as an excuse to carry out wage cuts and workforce rationalisation. The crisis is unfolding differently across the specific temporal frameworks of national boundaries â Denmark's housing bubble peaked in 2006 and its economy went into recession in early 2008 following the collapse of the Roskilde bank.<sup>ii</sup> It remains to be seen whether the crisis will be used to extend neoliberal reform (ongoing since the 1990s) of Denmark's almost unique combination of low unemployment, high-level of unionised labour (80 percent) and comparatively strong welfare state.

Such neoliberal reforms extend, of course, to the lock-down of Copenhagen's 'slack space' essential for the self-organisation and survival of people existing at the economic and cultural margins. Undoing the City was a festival dedicated to tracking and strategising the struggles to defend such spaces. Its accompanying conference covered gentrification, squatting, urban gardens, mapping, policing the police, anti-racist organising, actions against detention centres, housing speculation, water and land rights. The festival took the form of a two day seminar accompanied by film screenings, walking tours, distributed actions and workshops across the city over four days. In the end the festival drew a huge amount of press and created a national scandal after a street party in the city centre culminated in riots and property destruction. This event forced a mainstream debate in Denmark around the term 'gentrification' for the first time. The action has also been interpreted (as it probably should be) by

right wingers in the Parliament and mediasphere as a deliberate provocation by the activists around the Youth House, bringing their struggles and culture to the centre of the city. The Friday night riot was one of several reasons to see this young movement as deliberately breaking the Danish State's monopoly on violence by mounting asymmetrical attacks against its very power to define violence.

Whilst intended to be one of the smaller and more playful events in the busy Danish activist calendar, Undoing the City has achieved a significance through the press attention it received and what seemed like a meaningful balance of actions, international participation and theoretical debates. Each of these delved into the specific history of a neighbourhood (Nørrebro) and radicalised understandings of the city based on the potential for change inherent in existing conditions.

That property destruction radicalised what was on the surface a 'fluffy' event tailored to fit the activist niche and fashioned to annex small streams of arts funding seems to be a dynamic peculiar to Copenhagen at the moment. What would seem absolutely impossible and perhaps outmoded elsewhere 'Reclaim the Streets'-style tactics of multiform antagonistic occupation of public space ' seems to have legs in Copenhagen. I attribute this, at least partly, to the fact that actions take place within a context of dialogue, self-critique and reflection missing from the use of similar tactics elsewhere. Throughout the four days there was a welcome questioning of the usual affirmations of activist gatherings I have encountered elsewhere.

Jaya Klara Brekke's talk on the 'post-capitalist city' reflected on different engagements with activism around migrant struggles and squatting. It culminated in the strong proposition that work on urbanism be imaginative and affirmative in its construction of post-enlightenment and post-capitalist forms of living in the city. The presentation by the Hamburg based group Es Regnet Kaviar (It's Raining Caviar), though full of humour, was less inspiring. The group's anti-gentrification actions amounted to little more than symbolic subversion and the production of a spectacle of antagonism around spatial privatisation in the city. The group's actions were often defensive, if playful, and fell short of a meaningful theorisation of what they actually wanted from their city other than to be left alone to enjoy it.

Reffen 'constructor'

Image: One of Reffen's constructors at work

Rikke Luther's presentation on water rights and the transformation of cultures of water use and ownership in and around Copenhagen Harbour drew upon extensive research into the harbour's history and land reclamation. She also drew on her own experience of living on a self-built, floating platform in the harbour. The history of the production and development of this new land has been determined by changing patterns of sovereignty (from the absolute right of the king, to parliamentary sovereignty, to its privatisation), the shifting needs of military defence and expansion, and the demand

for labour. Initially dredgers were powered by convicts and later horses. Now water ownership in Copenhagen Harbour is distributed across three agencies – the military, a private-public consortia which manages Malmo-Copenhagen Harbour and Copenhagen’s municipality. This multi-agency management of the waterway has allowed rampant privatisation of the land around the harbour, giving rise to a swathe of flats and offices, financed by global consortia, that effectively block pedestrian access to the waterfront.

Joel P. Vedel presented ‘Reffen’, a utopian building project on reclaimed/polluted land in the midst of Copenhagen’s harbour. This took the form of a temporary occupation of a public street and surrounding land. The occupiers, or ‘constructors’ as they became known in the press built structures with found and donated materials over a period of three months. These physically and experientially risky buildings briefly found their place between the city’s fortifications, the Queen’s palace, military-owned harbours, PoMo yuppie stables, a container port, an opera house sponsored by the shipping giant Maersk and reclaimed polluted land. Vedel saw this experiment as very much in the original spirit of Christiania. This comparison was made more pertinent because Christiania, now largely overwhelmed by tourists drinking marijuana-flavoured beer, has just lost a major case against the city and is under the impending threat of eviction. The ongoing demise of this once thriving experiment in alternative living was a timely reminder of the need for free space and the human capability to make first one’s own environment and, perhaps secondly, if at all, laws to govern it by. Reffen could be dismissed as a bunch of hippies playing out their survival fantasies, but in the context of Copenhagen’s heritage culture and in the slipstream of the real estate boom and crash, this messy settlement posed the basic question again of who can build and how, on playful and inventive terms.

Artist Lasse Lau’s talk posited male homosexual cruising as spatial contestation. Initially opening a discussion on gay militancy by giving a history of queer and trans activism in New York, Lau then showed video footage of Gay Pride events in different cities that now include floats advertising major corporations, in particular banks and investment funds. This juxtaposition was not developed, but it seemed to be intended as some sort of ominous address to Copenhagen’s militant queer scene and a corrective to its present exuberance. Lau’s own artistic practice, however, did not live up to the militant culture he was surveying. His interventions into heavily policed and controlled cruising spaces were gestural and ineffectual rather than pragmatic and constructive. They failed to negotiate the subversion of public space constituted by acts of ‘improper’ sexual intimacy, and appeared completely compromised by their need to publicise clandestine sexual practices. Yet, if anything was recovered in Lau’s presentation that could be applied to the field of activity engaged by Undoing it was, for me at least, the residue of surreal animality present in a certain anecdote he told about 19<sup>th</sup> Century Paris. According to Lau, men seeking temporary partners would meet in the Tuileries before a statue of a wild boar. If anything, this anecdote and the events of the four days suggest to me that the investment of the city with myth, the savage topography drawn daily across ordered and policed space, should be intensified rather than rationalised.

One practical contribution to this project was the ‘surveillance of the Police’ which took place over 24 hours from Thursday morning to Friday night. Imitating the Black Panther tactic of ‘policing the police’, albeit unarmed, groups of observers walked the district of Nørrebro monitoring police activities and stop and search operations. Against a background of intensifying violence in this district – where the sight of gun battles between Hells Angels gangs and local migrant youth is not uncommon

â police stop and search operations targeting migrants are rising. The street violence stems largely from a struggle over control of the soft drugs market which has moved in recent years from Christianna to NÃ,rebro. The sharpening struggle over this economy seems to relate directly to the migrantsâ increasing marginalisation in the job market and exclusion from social provision. The mainstream media reported this surveillance action in a surprisingly positive light, showing âconcerned citizensâ following police activity in their area, ensuring that the law was carried out correctly and without intimidation. This positive media coverage would later prove an anomaly in light of Friday nightâs events, further complexifying âpublic outcryâ over the festival.

On Sunday, Saul Albert and Jakob Jakobsen staged a workshop, NÃ,rebro Open City, during which the courtyard parks of NÃ,rebro were mapped using a free editable map of the world called Openstreetmap. The courtyards have an interesting history bound up with local housing activism, and were renewed and turned green during a period of urban renewal lead by housing and community activists. Originally they remained open as thoroughfares and play spaces accessible to all. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s however, and in the context of rising property values, these have become enclosed, private spaces enhancing the property values of the flats which surround them.

During the workshop Jakobsen and Albert used Openstreetmap to locate and mark the courtyards and pose the question of access. There is no equivalent to the UKâs âpublic right of wayâ, or legally enshrined common ownership under Danish law, making access to such spaces a question of social contestation. Making them accessible to all would significantly improve the quality of life for the many rather than just a select few. There is very little other green space in this area, so opening up the courtyards makes it possible to navigate the area without crossing roads, encountering traffic or police. Shortly after the project was announced many residents approached the organisers with keys and, by the end of the afternoon, nearly all the courtyards in NÃ,rebro were mapped and their accessibility (open, gated, key available etc.) recorded. The NÃ,rebro Open City project is continuing and there will soon be a map and a set of keys to the courtyards in the Folkets Hus. A link to the map here shows the green courtyards plotted by those attending the workshop.

The problem of access and marginality in the city was addressed in the project Trampoline House which was a temporary centre for discussion, social activities and self-education for migrants. This initially took the form of a series of workshops in the Danish asylum centres Kongelunden and Sandholm this January and February. The Trampoline House and Asylum Dialog Tank are currently attempting to establish a permanent space in which to continue the activities begun earlier in the year. But by Sunday the exaggerated media and police presence at the festival meant that the planned speakersâ corner was called off. Many of the users of the Trampoline House, however, attended the discussions at the Folkets Hus over the two days, and made some of the more interesting contributions to the ongoing exchange over anti-racist organising and techniques of exclusion in the neoliberal city.

Berlin based group Kanak Attackâs rigorously theorised presentation on the problems of anti-racist/anti-fascist organising, whilst rejecting rights and notions of identity, was central to this exchange. Kanak Attack understand âintegrationâ as the stateâs counter-claim to âunreasonableâ basic demands. Under the rubric of multiculturalism the stateâs injunction to migrants is to âassimilate but remain differentâ. Against this, Kanak Attack theorise political goals in terms of the good life and

struggles over access to it, taking a position of 'no integration' and promoting the notion of 'escape routes' as a replacement for the fetishisation of 'roots'. This amounts to a refusal of the division of labour and a refusal of the paternalism that lingers in much anti-racist organising. Migration is thus understood as the escape from unbearable conditions and the fixity of identity. This critique of paternalism had a powerful resonance with the question of organisation being thought through by many activists around the Folkets Hus, and spilled out of the seminars and into conversations running across the whole four days.

Action Diritti's presentation covered similar issues to Kanak Attack's, albeit with a less theoretical but more concrete relation to similar issues. The group has a strong tradition of organising with migrants in Rome. This has involved establishing squats to provide housing for new migrants as well as setting up shop-front advice centres providing legal advice and a point of contact. In Rome, intense speculation, a lack of coordinated housing policy, high rent and instability all contribute to what the group terms *Caravita* - a life which is ever more expensive. Action Diritti's response is to wage campaigns of auto-reduction, self-organisation and 'real' political representation. Their somewhat schematic plan for 'new social rights, new welfare and new citizenship' was of course troubled by Kanak Attack's prior questioning of these terms.

As is fairly common, there was a palpable disconnect between those from Northern Europe and Action Diritti's enthusiasm for welfare and rights. In many ways this, and the strength of Italian and Spanish movements around precarity, can be attributed to the relative absence of social housing, healthcare or unemployment benefits in each country. This struggle passes by those of us who have had the dubious privilege of a strong welfare state, and see the need for social struggles to move beyond the compromise it compacts. This raises the question of how to bridge these two discussions and find ways to deal with the local and national characteristics of capitalism. The question is particularly relevant in Denmark, and several of those who participated in the discussion following Kanak Attack's presentation made the point that existing struggles in Denmark need to go beyond asking the State for equal rights for migrants. Something that, in any case, seems highly unlikely. But also because, as one Kurdish/Iraqi activist saw it, the important thing is to 'question the state's very authority to dispense rights'.

It was rewarding to see this discussion of 'rights' significantly testing and extending the discourse invoked by the festival's promotional literature which had deployed the phrase 'Right to the City' popularised by Harvey and derived from the work of Robert Park.

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

â Robert Park, *On Social Control and Collective Behavior*, Chicago 1967, p.3.

Taking collective power to reshape the 'process of urbanisation' sounds very good, but both Park and Harvey are not always explicit about whose class interests the city is being shaped in. Like many theorists of neoliberal urbanism, Harvey runs the risk of putting his tools of critical analysis in the

hands of those uncritically shaping cities through gentrification. A friend once told me how he had overheard a group of young people plotting about their neighbourhood in a pub in Limehouse. Initially excited that this might be some group addressing local problems in the area he quickly recoiled in horror when he realised they were home owners plotting to raise their house prices by engineering the eviction of unruly neighbouring council tenants. There are many actors reshaping the processes of urbanization of cities, but by what criteria are we to judge, ethically or otherwise, the truth of their right to do so? Since rights are almost always dispensed in an exclusive manner, a privilege of the stakeholder society, what becomes of those excluded from full admission into the citizenry so much in evidence amongst the population of districts like Nørrebro?

I would question whether it is possible to square the truth of this aspiration to change ourselves by changing the city with the rejection of a discourse which requests rights. Democracy in its neoliberal phase is full of so many forms of false dueness; from the ready made forms of identification used to sell yuppies homes, to the forms of governance exercised on populations around regeneration projects, consultations, local democracy etc. By recognising ourselves as the subjects addressed we confirm the power that addresses us and, in the neoliberal city in which no-one belongs, belonging or its simulacrum is endlessly promoted and solicited. When, after a week of media hysteria, three communiques by the organisers of Friday night's party appeared signed *Os der ikke findes* (We who do not exist), what was held up as a response was not only a mask of secrecy, the rejection of a stable identity, but also a refusal to be called to account or to reveal that which the public sphere expects and demands.

[IMAGE]

Image: After the street party, Saturday 8 May, 2009

The programme for Undoing the City had promised street dancing and that they would set up an overthrowing ass-shaking to the smell of canny untidiness in the market place. Cheap bars mad DJs open street stylee! *Somewhere in the inner city...check your cell phone*. The street party took over a narrow street off Copenhagen's main shopping thoroughfare blocking it with a van parked sideways and carrying the sound system. Ladders were raised to allow graffiti artists access to two stories of chain storefront as canvas, sofas, fires and bars were placed on the street. After a few hours of diplomatic negotiation with police the sound system was switched off at 4am (apparently this had more to do with the driver needing to get home to start his day job later that morning). As the sound system wound down the back streets dancers began to pull up their hoods and the sound of imploding shop windows replaced the beats, while choreographed looting was exchanged for the shapes previously being thrown on the dance floor. Practically everybody seemed to know what they were doing except the Danish police and myself, each of us equally unsure whether to get involved and in what capacity. Amidst tumbling glass, bricks and bicycles soaring through the air, the mood felt safe and festive, several people took a break from fighting the police to check I was ok, and make sure I got out of the action and to the nearest good pub safely. The perpetrators of the events of Friday night were most definitely not a minority of troublemakers. The organisers stress that they remain invisible in the public life of Denmark and shunned by it and this is clearly a common feeling across whole sections of Copenhagen's youth. They wish to remain outside of the public gaze, but refuse to

be prevented from actively reshaping the material and symbolic fabric of their city. Moreover, what they claim, with a cheeky grasp of political rhetoric that does not preclude seriousness, is a very real politics at odds with the democracy of the market:

Politics is opposition. Politics is to refuse to obey. Dissensus is politics. Consensus is anti-politics. This is why parliamentarism is not politics â but an illegal street party is!

â We do not exist, âAn explosive force of freedomâ<sup>iii</sup>

Thus the politics of dissensus much discussed at the two day seminars found its clearest expression in the joyous cacophony of a noisy party â it was the catalysing event which forced everyone to shift and reassess their positions. It embodied the struggle over the stateâs prerogative to dispense violence and to a small degree briefly broke it. As Alberto Toscano, explaining Badiouâs conception of violence, concurs:

Without the âviolentâ inscription into the situation of a subjective tendency or force of transformation, which is itself the product of internal divisions and separations, we are left only with the dumb brutality of a structural violence.<sup>iv</sup>

This indicates the work that must be done. But, it must also be made clear, random manifestations of constitutive âviolenceâ will not be sufficient to reverse the malign movement which squeezes profits and life out of our cities. Those for whom such âradical expressivityâ is merely the icing on the cake of spectacular commodity society will want to shuffle off to the nearest peaceful study lined with Adornoâs books. Those who approve, but contest that street parties, property destruction and proletarian shopping are fun for the few but not for all may be heartened to hear the organisers caveat:

...this vandalism is also an authoritarian expression that is undemocratic and excludes. It is often male dominated. Women and gays also smash windows. But not all can participate in the destruction. Many are excluded from vandalising, but destruction should be for everyone, not only white heterosexual Danish men!

Nonetheless, the party and aftermath was a temporary breach, with the damaged shops claiming record sales the following day. In fact a sofa dragged outside during the party and graffitied was sold, though not, despite the rumour circulating, for more than its original price tag. It is clear that some longer term strategic thinking is required for those wishing to chase the spectre of gentrification from their cities.

Therefore, just as things are a little more complicated than simply declaring opposition to capital â likewise with gentrification we cannot simply extract ourselves from this relationship.

Attacking gentrification might also involve, in a certain sense, attacking ourselves as constituted by present conditions.

This statement, given as part of my own presentation, was generated by thinking through the consequences of the crash on the built environment in London, yet it became pertinent in Copenhagen. On the final day of the festival I was interviewed by a feminist collective who were filming the festival for the website Modkraft [modkraft.dk/]. At one point my interviewer asked:

But look what happened, we did an anti-gentrification action, we smashed shops in the centre of town, but this has been recuperated immediately [attracting tourists and shoppers to the scene of the crime]. We gained a new youth house, but this is in a poor area and contributes to the gentrification of the area. How can we really attack gentrification?

Gentrification is a process born out of the present organisation of capital. In capitalism violence is structural, the destruction and displacement enacted by gentrification is part of a social relation a part and parcel of the contemporary relation between capital and labour. That struggles around gentrification appear to focus on the reproductive sphere and capitalistsa efforts to extract profits from workersa consumption does not mean these struggles are disconnected from capitala imperative to reproduce us as ready for work. There is a tendency towards a purely cultural response to gentrification as if gentrification is only a culture rather than a network of relations that derive from vested interests in property, ownership, law-making and the reorganisation of work. Underpinning those relations is a mode of production.

After a decade of project-oriented activism characterised by media stunts and voluntarism, it is clear that longer term approaches are required. There has been little examination on the left of the actual preconditions for involvement in struggles. To understand how struggle against the iniquities of the existing social and economic system that governs our lives starts from real lives, from peoplesa lived circumstances and extends outwards from them is to walk away from activism as practised by specialists. With the current resurgence of struggles in the workplace, factory occupations and strikes across the world, there is the opportunity to link struggles at the point of production to contestation at the point of reproduction a struggles over housing, food, environment, welfare and so on. To make room for these connections might mean giving up aactivisma and giving up arecuperationa. Giving up on belonging, as theorised by both Kanak Attack and *Os der ikke findes*, could mean becoming more self-aware about the group identifications that are in circulation and which sediment around class, religion and culture. Recuperation might mean change a actual change that could destabilise the radical identity of an oppositional group. After all, any movement working to make radical change must not fear its *ends* unintended or otherwise.

**Anthony Iles <anthony AT metamute.org> is a contributing editor to *Mute***

## **Info**

Undoing the City took place at the Folkets Hus and at many other locations across the city of Copenhagen, 7-10 May 2009

## **Footnotes**

iStewart Home, aThe End of Copenhagen?a, *Mute*, April 2007, <http://www.metamute.org/en/End-of-Copenhagen>

iiMikael Hjorth, aDanish banking crisis the worst in Europea, *Berlingske Tidene*, see <http://www.creditwritedowns.com/2008/09/danish-banking-crisis-worst-in-europe.html>

iii [http://www.metamute.org/en/an\\_explosive\\_force\\_of\\_freedom](http://www.metamute.org/en/an_explosive_force_of_freedom)

ivAlberto Toscano, aCan Violence Be Thought? Notes on Badiou and the Possibility of (Marxist) Politics\*a *Journal for Politics, Gender, and Culture*, Vol. 5/No. 1/Winter 2006.p.21.