

**“Whose Streets?”:**  
Notes on Urban Social Movements, and the  
Politicization of Urban (Public?) Space

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**Introduction**

“The task is now to defend the vanishing public realm, or rather to refurnish and repopulate the public space fast emptying”  
(Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 2000, 39)

“The growing dissatisfaction that grips all of humanity will reach a point where we will all be driven to carry out projects for which we possess the means, and that will contribute to the realization of a richer and more rewarding life”  
(Constant, *A Different City for a Different Life*, 1959, 101)

“*Whose streets?* Our streets!”  
(*Reclaim the Streets* action, Toronto, September 26, 2003)

When we stop to carefully examine the countless different urban redevelopment projects recently taking place in ‘world cities’ such as Toronto, Ontario, it becomes acutely apparent that what Zygmunt Bauman has called the “notoriously mobile boundary between the private and the public” is currently undergoing new, violent and dramatic processes of re-negotiation and re-conceptualization (Bauman 2000 70). Directly corresponding, the politicization of urban space has become a prominent feature in the socio-political agendas of many Urban Social Movements (USMs), including most notably *Reclaim the Streets* (RTS), an international movement that originated in London, England during the early 1990s, as a reaction to car culture and highway expansion projects. In recent years, RTS has become highly conscious of the importance of situating their critique of car culture within the larger framework of global capitalism. As the

London *Reclaim the Streets* website clearly explains: “The struggle for car-free space must not be separated from the struggle against global capitalism- for in truth the former is encapsulated in the latter ... [t]he streets are as full of capitalism as they are of cars and the pollution of capitalism is much more insidious” (<http://rts.gn.apc.org/prop07.htm>)

Since its inception, the political agendas of RTS chapters throughout the world have expanded and evolved to include almost all aspects of the politicization of urban (public) space. Regardless of the specific local conditions that each RTS group has reacted against, however, the primary means of protest is ‘*reclaiming*’ urban (public) space- transforming a given site into “a place where people can gather together without cars, without shopping malls, [and] without permission from the state, in order to ‘develop the seeds of the future in the present society’”

(<http://reclaimthestreetsnyc.tao.ca/info.html>).

It is acutely obvious that contemporary urban social movements such as *Reclaim the Streets* have developed as a direct response to the increasingly violent *politicization* of urban space by the multiple factors and forces of hyper-capitalist globalization in the postmodern cityscape. Taking this basic premise as my point of departure, in this presentation I will attempt to critically examine *how* RTS has responded to the pattern of hyper-capitalist redevelopment that has resulted in the politicization of urban space.

According to David Harvey, “political interpretations of grassroots [urban] activism have ebbed, flowed and diverged without any clear or obvious relationship to the actual activities [of the activists] themselves” (Harvey 2001 189). By conducting a close, critical examination of the specific activities of the grassroots Toronto *Reclaim the*

*Streets* movement, I will directly attempt to reconcile what Harvey sees as being an absent or *under*-theorized aspect of research into urban social movements.

In order to go about accomplishing this task, I will attempt to critically analyze three specific practices that have been associated with— and directly employed by— *Reclaim the Streets*, tracing these practices back to their origins in the *Situationist International* (SI) movement, and illustrating the specific ways that they have been changed and modified by RTS to account for and adapt to contemporary conditions. Briefly, these three areas include: (one) the notion of ‘*reclaiming*’; (two) the ‘*playful*’, ‘*carnavalesque*’ nature of urban protest practiced by RTS; and (three) the active attempts to blur and collapse the distinctions between *art*, *politics* and *everyday life*.

By critically analyzing the most recent Toronto RTS action, and interrogating the practices through which this movement has attempted to engage with the contemporary politicization of city space, I intend to draw larger theoretical conclusions regarding the complex interrelationships existing between urban social movements, globalization, and the politics of urban space in the contemporary, urban context.

**(1) ‘Reclaiming’:**

**Spatial (re-)appropriation and/as the autonomous assertion of (public) right to (public) space**

“The *right to the city* cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*” (Lefebvre 158)

Although the original practice of ‘reclaiming’ is a characteristic that is common to all RTS chapters throughout the world, both the selection of the specific space to be reclaimed, and the particular justification behind each act of reclaiming varies

considerably according to local conditions and circumstances. In this sense, as a *global* urban social movement, RTS clearly reflects the tension between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ that is generally posited as being a fundamental aspect of the contemporary process of globalization (i.e. ‘*glocalization*’).

A clear example of this tension between the global and the local can be seen in the most recent RTS action that took place in Toronto on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003. The specific site/space that was chosen to be ‘reclaimed’ at this particular action was ‘*Yonge-Dundas Square*’, the City of Toronto’s largest and most ambitious urban ‘public space’ initiative, located in the heart of the City’s downtown core business and tourist districts. Although advertised as being a so-called ‘public’ space, *Yonge-Dundas Square* is in fact the product of a ‘public-private partnership’ between the City of Toronto, and downtown private sector interests, largely represented by the *Yonge Street Business Improvement Association* (BIA).

As indicated in a short tract that was printed by the Toronto RTS organizers and distributed to participants at the action, “[c]ontrary to the idealized, sanitized vision of Dundas Square that has been aggressively marketed by the City and private sector interests ... [the space] is nothing but a marketing showplace, intended to facilitate little more than the act of consumption and the adoption of consumer identities”.

Similar to the very first RTS actions which took place in London, England during the early 1990s, once arriving at Dundas Square, the primary intention was to simply hold a spontaneous party within the rigidly controlled confines of the Square, engaging in what the New York RTS site describes as “celebration as direct action; dance as resistance” (<http://reclaimthestreetsnyc.tao.ca/info.html>).

In an article concerning the 2003 Toronto RTS action that appeared in *Now Magazine* (October 2-8 2003 13), the author teased out the implications of this playful form of political action. As he stated, “the threat of unlicensed dancing should not be underestimated ... [because] studies have shown that dancing can lead to a marked decrease in mindless consumption. Most worrisome is the joy of motion, allowing us to shimmy around the insecurities needed for the smooth operation of any illusory and compartmentalized landscape” (13)

Elsewhere in the article, the author quotes Toronto police chief Julian Fantino as saying: “a problem is now arising where portions of the public believe that Dundas Square is a public space” (13). This passage dramatically reinforces the sheer hypocrisy inherent in the marketing of Dundas Square, which has consistently been advertised as being an explicitly ‘public’ space; nowhere in the ‘public’ discourse surrounding the project is the term ‘*public-private partnership*’ employed.

It is most certainly not a coincidence that *Yonge-Dundas Square* was specifically selected as the site of ‘reclaiming’ for the most recent RTS action in Toronto. Since its completion in the Fall of 2002, almost every aspect of this particular initiative has been criticized and condemned by public space advocates. As a perfect example of a formerly ‘public’ space that was subjected to the *privatizing, militarizing, sanitizing* forces of (hyper-)capitalist urban redevelopment, several different aspects of the Square’s design were responsible for the site being targeted for ‘reclaiming’ by RTS. These design features were directly addressed in the literature that was produced by the RTS organizers for the day of the action:

With the presence of Closed Circuit Television Surveillance (CCTV) covering the Square’s empty, concrete expanse, and the addition of 24/7 private security, the

Square has been designed for the explicit purpose of consumption, and anyone caught engaging in any other activities (such as riding a bike or skateboard, releasing balloons, lighting candles or climbing trees- all of which activities have been criminalized and declared forbidden in the City by-laws applicable to the site) are quickly detected by the surveillance cameras, accosted by private security, and removed from the site, forcefully if necessary.

Later in the same document, the authors go on to provide a series of playful suggestions as to how individual RTS activists might go about independently addressing and engaging with these specific aspects regarding the design, management and intended use of *Dundas Square* in a explicitly critical manner:

If the Board of Management declares that riding a bike on the Square is prohibited, we need to begin arriving on our bicycles *en mass*, in a *critical mass*; if they continue to restrict economically marginalized people such as panhandlers and the homeless from accessing the square, we need to invite our friends to begin physically occupying the site with tents and sleeping bags; if they want to turn Dundas Square into a venue for corporations to showcase their products, we have to set up our own socially-organic marketplace of competing ideas and alternative lifestyles ...

Through this discourse we can clearly see how one specific ‘reclaiming’ initiative, organized by a small, localized (Toronto) contingent of *Reclaim The Streets* activists, inclusively attempted to inspire and generate action from an entire spectrum of (marginal/ized) urban social groups, clearly indicative of how the RTS movement world-wide constitutes in John Jordan’s words, “more of a cultural idea than a material organization” (Jordan 347).

## **(2) ‘Playfulness’ and the ‘Carnavalesque’:**

### **The creative nature of urban protest practiced by RTS**

“Reclaim the Streets introduces a particularly playful politics into ... [the] climate of anarchy [that they work to create] ... For Reclaim the Streets, then: the playful, anarchic absurdity of a city street painted in the colors of direct action” (Ferrel 139-140)

The notion of ‘*playfulness*’ permeated almost all aspects of the methods and means of political protest practiced by the Situationist International, the European avant-garde movement that is widely acknowledged to have had the single most important influence upon RTS. Although almost every element of the Situationist agenda was directly informed by the underlying theme of *playfulness*, this fact is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the case of the Dutch architect Constant, whose lifelong project “*New Babylon*” involved articulating a radical vision for a utopian, situationist-inspired city.

Constant repeatedly emphasized throughout his writings on the *New Babylon* project that without public space, no culture is possible, because of the fact that “the forum in classical times, the market square of the middle ages, and, more recently, the boulevard ... were the [public] places where cultural life developed” (Heynen 159). In *New Babylon*, therefore, Constant gave “primacy to open, public space ... argu[ing] repeatedly that 80 percent of New Babylon [would] consist of collective” (Heynen 159).

In an article entitled ‘New Urbanism’ that begins by articulating the growing discrepancy between “the standards applied in allocating urban space” and “the real needs of the community”, Constant expresses his utopian belief that, in the future, “man’s way of life will be determined not by profit but by play” (169). Here, Constant explains that “the revolt against the fossilized standards and conditions of the past is aimed chiefly at the recovery of social space—the street—so that the contacts essential for play can be established” (169). Positing a direct correlation between *the street* and *social space*, this passage clearly emphasizes the central role and symbolic importance of the street in facilitating communal, collective endeavors— or, in Constant’s words, “encounters with others in a social environment”, which, in his view, can take place “only in the city”—

beginning with the *Situationist International*, and continuing with the present-day actions of the global *Reclaim the Streets* movement (168-169).

In Constant's view, these 'contacts essential for play' cannot be established through "prescribed patterns of behavior", but can only be brought about through "spontaneous initiatives" (169). The 'idealists' who believe that 'prescribed patterns of behavior' can, in fact, facilitate the notion of play are, according to Constant, "opposed to the most important characteristic of the new generation, creativity—the desire to create a behavior pattern of their own, and ultimately to create a new way of life" (169).

Closely related to the notions of *creativity*, *imagination* and *playfulness* with regard to different forms of urban protest is the age-old concept of the 'carnival'—another feature that is of central importance to the methods and means through which RTS has attempted to respond to the politicization of urban space. As Jordan states, "Reclaim the Streets pioneered a new, or rather resurrected a very old, style of protest: the street carnival" (Jordan 354).

One of the primary theorists of the notion of 'carnival' is the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who analyzed the historical role of carnival in his book *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. According to Bakhtin, up until the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, "[t]he source of carnivalization was carnival itself" (131). In this sense, "people were *direct participants* in carnivalistic acts and in a carnival sense of the world; they still *lived* in carnival ... as something unmediated" (Bakhtin 131).

Throughout Bakhtin's writings, the notion of *carnival* is closely associated with the 'public square', which is described as being the primary stage for the collective, *performative* nature of all carnivalesque goings-on. In Bakhtin's view, since the mid

seventeenth century, the role and importance of carnival has steadily decreased. Despite the fact that, at the time of his writing, “there continued and still continues to exist a public square carnival in the proper sense”, Bakhtin explains that these celebratory activities “lost their former significance and their former wealth of forms and symbols” (131). “As a consequence”, Bakhtin argued, “there occurred a deterioration and dissipation of carnival and the carnival sense of the world”, where the very notion of *carnival* “lost that authentic sense of a communal performance on the public square” (131).

This direct correlation between the ‘*carnival*’ and the ‘*public square*’ is screamingly relevant to the local manifestation of RTS in Toronto, because of the fact that the primary objective of the most recent RTS action was to ‘reclaim’ *Dundas Square*- the City of Toronto’s hyper-regulated, controlled and surveilled ‘*carnival square*’. In spite (or, perhaps, because) of the many different aspects of the *Dundas Square* site that have been criticized by the media and local residents, it is interesting to note the carnivalesque potential of this site, contrasting the autonomous, unsanctioned ‘carnival’ activities orchestrated by RTS, with the rigidly ordered, regulated and controlled sense of carnival that have been hesitantly endorsed and promoted by the *Dundas Square* Board of Management.

The grand ceremonies celebrating the formal opening of the *Dundas Square* site, for example, are clearly demonstrative of the continuing carnivalistic potential of the ‘public’ square, despite the fact that the carnivalesque nature of the celebration was very carefully planned, regulated and controlled by the cooperative partnership between urban governance (i.e. the City of Toronto) and the private sector (i.e. largely represented by the

*Yonge Street business Improvement Association*). The literature that was produced for the grand opening celebration of Dundas Square, for instance, clearly attempts to set a tone of (ordered) intensity and (closely monitored) excitement, describing the event as “360 degrees of SPECTACULAR, BREATHTAKING entertainment in the HEART OF THE CITY”, involving the “thunderous rhythm of more than 75 drummers and dancers weaving their way through the square showcasing Toronto’s diversity through music” and “thrilling aerial acrobatics featuring the breathtaking and daring artistry of Cirque Sublime”. Perhaps a more balanced and succinct, less biased description of the event might have read: “360 degrees of PANOPTICAL SURVEILLANCE designed to ensure the smooth and efficient functioning of the CONSUMER SPECTACLE that constitutes Dundas Square!”

Despite Bakhtin’s warnings concerning the deteriorating importance of ‘carnival’ in the contemporary city, however, it can be argued that in recent years the notion of *carnival* has been dramatically revived by a whole spectrum of different groups, in a wide variety of social and political contexts. This fact is most blatantly illustrated in the ‘carnavalesque’ strategies employed by the emergent *anti-capitalist* and *anti-globalization* movements. Perhaps the best example of the conscious, intentional invocation of the notion of carnival can be seen in the FTAA ‘*Summit of the Americas*’ demonstration that took place in Quebec City (April 2001)- an event which was dubbed as the ‘*Carnival Against Capitalism*’ by demonstrators and the media alike.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the *Reclaim the Streets* movement has consistently employed ‘carnavalesque’ strategies in its agenda of ‘reclaiming’ urban (public) spaces that have been *militarized, sanitized, privatized*— and in some cases

blatantly *colonized*— by the increasingly violent forces of hyper-capitalist globalization. Contrasting the idea of institutionalized, state-endorsed ‘festivals’ with the ‘carnavalesque’ nature of spontaneous street parties that are typical of most RTS ‘reclaiming’ actions, Jordan states that while “official festivals ... are arranged in neat rectangles and straight lines”, the RTS street party “is vortexed, whirling ... [involving] an uncontrollable state of creative chaos ... [that] breaks a cultural obsession with linearity, order and tidiness, epitomized by roads and cars” (Jordan 355).

Emphasizing the communal aspect of the carnivalesque street party pioneered by RTS, Jordan goes on to say that when “thousands of people have reclaimed a major road and declared it a ‘street now open’”, replacing “the roar of [automobile] engines” with “music, laughter and song”, and transforming “road rage” into “road rave”, then “Lautreamont’s desire that ‘Poetry must be made by all ... [n]ot by one’” has been fulfilled (Jordan 354). This reference to Lautreamont’s *Maldoror* again indicates the conscious attempts by RTS to situate the movement in the lineage of the twentieth-century European avant-garde, from Dada to Surrealism to the Situationist International.

### **(3) Art, Politics and Everyday Life: Blurred Distinctions**

“The new artist protests: he no longer paints (symbolic and illusionistic reproductions) but creates directly” (Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto 1918*, 121)

“to undercut capitalism’s power ... the situationists argued that the key step was to begin living a richer, less alienated, more participatory culture ... [t]hrough a fusion of art into everyday life, people should rediscover their ability to control their own lives” (McCreery 239)

Closely related to the *playful, carnivalesque* nature of urban protest practiced by *Reclaim the Streets* is the tendency to blur, collapse and erase the distinctions between

art, politics and everyday life- another strategy that can be traced back to the twentieth-century European avant-garde. Before undertaking a closer examination of how the functional blurring of distinctions between art, politics and everyday life has been incorporated by RTS in its attempt to critically address and engage with the politicization of urban (public) space, however, it will first prove useful to interrogate one instance of the historical application of this phenomenon, revisiting the early work of the Situationists in order to provide a sense of background and context to the contemporary activities of RTS.

In the case of the *Situationist International (SI)*, the active questioning of distinctions between art, politics and everyday life was significantly informed by the hybrid character of the movement itself, where art and politics, creativity and activism, were merged into a single, indistinguishable entity. Coupled with the more artistically-oriented activities of the group, the overt theoretical content of the SI is seen as being one of the most important defining features of this movement, where, as Heynen states, “an active exchange developed between situationist theory and the discussions of Marxist groups” (150). Here, Marxist intellectuals such as Henri Lefebvre exercised “an unquestionable influence on the theoreticians of this movement”, resulting in the fact that the *Situationist International (SI)* constituted one of the only political/poetic, revolutionary/artistic movements of the twentieth-century where “the trajectory of the artistic avant-garde merged with a theoretically informed political activism” (Heynen 150). According to Heynen, the intention behind the SI’s conscious attempt to blur these once clear distinctions was to catalyze and hasten “an immediate revolution which would be performed on all levels of society and which would permeate the whole experience of life” (Heynen 151).

Following in the footsteps of the SI, *Reclaim the Streets* is a perfect contemporary example of an urban social movement that consciously attempts to defamiliarize and call into question the conventional distinctions between art and politics in everyday life. Similar to Henynen's comments concerning the SI, when we look at the various different (artistic/political) practices employed by RTS in an effort to engage with the politicization of urban (public) space by the forces of hyper-capitalist globalization, it becomes acutely apparent that this movement has consistently, explicitly sought to "overthrow the status quo by dissolving the boundaries between art, social praxis and theoretical reflection" (Heynen 151).

In the case of RTS, we can clearly see how this collapse of distinctions is embodied in the practice of 'reclaiming' itself, which can be considered as "a model of political action wherein the protest itself is a living, breathing, and in this case, dancing, political message" (Jordan 347).

*Reclaim the Streets* has from its very inception attempted to "abolish the divisions between art and life", thereby introducing "creativity, imagination, play and pleasure into the revolutionary project" (Jordan 347). As a DIY (i.e. *Do It Yourself*) social movement with autonomous chapters throughout the world, RTS has "finally broken down the barriers between art and protest" (Jordan 347). In this sense, through the various different political/poetic strategies that have been developed and employed in response to the increasingly militant politicization of urban (public) space, the *Reclaim the Streets* movement has emphatically proven that at the dawn of a new century, "new forms of creative and poetic resistance have finally found their time" (Jordan 347).

## **Conclusion**

“the pulverization of space by private property and its segmentation into controlled social spaces are antagonistic to the ability to appropriate space freely ... violently defended private and social spaces often render the structure of urban space relatively static and processes of spatial transformation highly conflictual ... [g]iven the intricate complexity and sheer scale of urbanization under capitalism and the peculiar mix of alienations and opportunities that arises out of the urban experience, the objectives of radical and revolutionary movements are bound to become confused ... [t]he history of urban social movements must be read in exactly such a light” (Harvey 1989 198-199)

After having closely examined the specific methods and means through which the global *Reclaim the Streets* movement has attempted to respond to the politicization of urban (public) space by the processes and practices associated with hyper-capitalist globalization, it has become obvious that RTS has developed and evolved as a direct challenge to what David Harvey refers to as “[r]estriction of the freedom to appropriate space ... and other social forms of domination and control” (Harvey 1989 182), including those that are exercised and imposed by the cooperative relationship between the State, and the private sector, as evidenced in the case of Toronto’s *Dundas Square*. From this perspective, the practice of ‘reclaiming’, which lies at the heart of the global RTS agenda, must be seen and understood as, in Harvey’s words “[t]he demand to liberate space from ... [different social, political and economic] form[s] of domination and reconstitute it in a new image” (Harvey 1989 182). In this sense, from the very beginning RTS has consistently “sought to liberate and appropriate their own space for their own purposes” (Harvey 1989 182) through the practice of ‘reclaiming’.

Throughout the aggressive, violent attempts by the Metropolitan Toronto Police to keep the demonstrators off the streets, a spontaneous cry intermittently rose up out of the gathered crowd, a cry that has become increasingly common— in fact, almost ubiquitous— in the context of contemporary anti-globalization and anti-capitalist protests: “*Whose streets?*” asked the collective voices of the many different artists and activists all assembled in the heart of downtown Toronto on the evening of September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003, “*Whose streets?*” As the police presence quickly grew less patient and more violent, the officers mounted on bicycles and on horseback attempting to disrupt the unity and cohesion of the crowd, a response could be heard, muffled and distorted at first, but becoming louder and stronger as the scattered groups and individuals emerged intact on the other side of the police barricades and re-joined the collective whole despite the spectacle of a few random arrests: “*Our streets!*”

Over the course of this paper I hope to have clearly demonstrated the fact that urban public space has become perhaps one of the most contested, symbolic sites in, over, and through which the opposing factions of globalization struggle. As urban (public) space becomes increasingly politicized by the forces of privatization, sanitization and militarization, the question ‘*whose streets?*’ will become more and more relevant, leaving contemporary urban social movements such as *Reclaim the Streets* to provide the playful, creative, collective response: “*our streets!*”

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