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# reflect

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Gideon Boie

# The Activist City

Essays on Political,  
Urban and Archi-  
tectural Activism

Gideon Boie  
Lieven De Cauter



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# Overview

8

The Activist City

Reflect #14

The activist city is the city of activists. It is the city activated through spontaneous initiatives and grassroots organisations. It is bottom-up democracy. Just as the night, according to Patti Smith, belongs to lovers, the streets and squares of the city are the terrain par excellence of activists. It is almost too obvious for words: the city plays a central role in most activism by providing a stage for protest. Protesting in the fields is like shouting in the desert.

But activism also turns the city into the target, the goal, the aim of the protest, especially when citizen movements arise to change how things are arranged in their neighbourhood. It is the moment when resident committees oppose the powers that be, the moment when citizen movements spontaneously gather around common concerns, the moment when action groups turn indignation into direct acts on the street. The result is urban activism. Political activism mostly takes place in the city; urban activism has the city as its topic.

As the architectural discipline often shares the same ambitions – albeit from a professional perspective – we dreamed of integrating architecture and activism. But, at first sight, architectural activism confronted us with an oxymoron: architecture is usually on the side of money and power while activism opposes these. In recent years, however, we have seen architects engaging with the skills of their discipline within urban activism and even forms arising of what could be called ‘activist architecture’. It is the holy grail of our research: the use of architecture as a different means to engage with the many political and urban struggles of today.

The *Activist City* thus highlights three different forms of civic action: political, urban and architectural activism (including activist architecture). The tripartition reappears throughout the book, although the three forms often make up a continuum with blurred borders.

The first part of this book, *The Horizon of Activism Today*, evokes, in several essays written by Lieven, the broad context of activism today. It is a mosaic of fragments evoking a large panorama. Each essay highlights a different aspect of today’s context. First comes a general introduction of protest, a lecture for secondary-school students. Then come two essays on the commons: one that seeks to clarify the conceptual confusion when we use the word commons, and one that attempts to unravel the mysteries of the ‘urban commons’. Besides this, there are two short essays. One is about language and power, the other about art and politics.

Together, they orient the reader in these forever hot topics. Then comes a concrete case on the decolonisation of architecture, more precisely Art Nouveau as ‘Congo Style’ and how to deal with colonial monuments in general. The essay on storytelling in the Anthropocene is a synthesis of three years of research with script-writers from a film school. A longer essay looking back on the so-called ‘Anthropocene debate’ closes this mosaic of the situation and challenges of activism today. It stresses that ecological urgencies are high on the agenda.

The second part, *Forms and Constellations of Activism*, written by both of us, constitutes the true core of this book. The first text, *Forms of Activism as Democracy in the City*, is an introduction to activism for young architects that focuses on the three different shapes it can take. Political activism deals with street marches, occupations, strikes and actions of civil disobedience. Urban activism discusses the reclaiming of streets, squatting, the temporary use of vacant spaces, joyful street blockades, citizen movements and ‘guerrilla’ actions. Finally, architectural activism contributes to the transformation of the city through paper proposals, critical mapping, temporary installations and other oppositional practices. But as the architectural discipline remains part of the building practice, the text ends with a discussion of what we call activist architecture. Twisting the terms allows us to identify activism in the heart of regular building practice – it is in fact a genuine challenge for the architectural discipline.

The second text of the second part, *Three Space-Time Constellations of Urban and Architectural Activism in Brussels*, also written together, focuses on specific topographical locations in Brussels. It shows how activism might be about spontaneous initiatives, popping up momentarily and depending on specific persons, but most often following on from earlier moments, even building upon each other. The three constellations we reconstruct are an attempt to sketch the long waves of activism and highlight unconscious or simply forgotten links. The constellations also show how urban activism is often intertwined with architectural interventions, the latter either igniting popular protest or correcting historical mistakes. The postscript on activist institutions would have deserved a text on its own, perhaps even a book – maybe later or in the next life – but we are happy to have the concept on board for further discussion. The prolegomena for a ‘metabletics of activism’ are more a tongue-in-cheek farewell to the dream of an impossible theory.

Finally, the third part, *The Struggle for Road Safety: The Case of Brussels*, written by Gideon, reconstructs what could be termed ‘traffic activism’ in Brussels as a situated commitment spanning years. The fight of action groups for a single issue like road safety is shown as key in urban change; although seemingly a

technical problem, road safety serves as a driver – no pun intended – for a more liveable city. Technical interventions aimed at improving road safety became part of a discussion on air quality, especially in school environments, and later also with measures to protect public health during the Covid-19 pandemic. Even more, road safety provides direct access to the fundamental right to the city for inhabitants, pedestrians, cyclists, children, the true users of the city, as opposed to the many commuters driving through. Still, the text sketches, by means of highly concrete debates, how the redistribution of public space remains a hot political issue and contestation lurks around every corner. The sabotage of small-scale improvements in the streets of Brussels heralded the revanchist politics that ultimately sabotaged the Good Move regional mobility plan. As the text covers a period of almost a decade, activism appears as a continuing struggle around the layout of specific streets, dealing with specific government agencies and representatives in a changing political landscape.

Brussels forms a constant reference point in this book. In fact, many of the cases discussed are actions in which we were directly involved or of which we were fellow travellers. In that respect, this book is more existential than might seem at first sight. It is definitely a form of ‘action research’, a reflection on activism by doing, theory based on experience and practice. The practical element is not just about finding the right illustration of theory, but lies for us rather in the opposite meaning: the practical situation makes it possible to shed a different light on a theory. Many of the texts have already been published in earlier versions since we consider engagement with the professional and public debate essential to the labour of criticism. The same holds for activism: we are happy that some texts played a part in or interfered with specific moments of activism in Brussels.

The book takes the form of a collection of essays on political, urban and architectural activism, dealing with a variety of issues, topics and cases, written over a longer period of time. It is the cherry on the cake and the keystone of years of teaching together, most notably the course ‘Architecture and Activism’, from the academic year 2015–16 till 2024–25. (Gideon invented the course as a logical follow-up to the books on art and activism we each published more than a decade ago.) The legendary ‘Sofa Talks’, with urban and architectural activists as guests, later also with urban walks, constituted the public part of the course. Several texts were either written in preparation for the course or were the outcome of it. In any case, the texts are all inspired by the weekly discussions we had in class with countless enthusiastic students. And it is to them that we dedicate this book.