

WALABAB N°4

SLIDING FRICTION

THE HARMONIOUS JUNGLE OF CONTEMPORARY CITIES

NICOLAS NOVA & FABIEN GIRARDIN

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As a great Surrealist poet once said, there are indeed other worlds, but they are to be found within this one.

Dr. Nicolas Nova and Fabien Girardin are not Surrealists. They are designers methodically searching for processes and interaction within the urban environment. Like many designers and all good ones, they are generally looking for darkly hidden human problems, rather than showcasing glamorous design successes.

This makes Dr. Nova and Fabien Girardin persistent stalkers of the be-draggled, the busted, and the buried – when it’s exposed to view. What interests them is not the formal qualities of the image on the lens, but the processes, the affordances, and the patterns of interaction.

There are those who find their behavior “quirky,” as, for instance, when Nicolas stops dead in the streets of Seoul to immortalize a weird pattern of cracks in a Korean sidewalk. Or the tattered remnants of a wheat-glued poster in Brazil. Or a delirious surge of colorful Berlin graffiti. Yet they consistently shows us things we would never see otherwise.

This small collection is a treasure of Nova and Girardin’s peculiar thematics of broken bicycles, writhing electrical plumbing, and the obsolete cybernetic hardware that litters 21st century streets. These are original documents of urban space, and also urban time.

Nicolas is a user experience researcher, uncovering people’s behavior when using technologies (nicolas.nova@gmail.com).

Fabien is an engineer and researcher, investigating the integration of technologies in our everyday urban environments (fabien@girardin.org).

They are members of the The Near Future Laboratory, a thinking, making, design, development and research practice speculating on the near future possibilities for digital worlds.



The physical space is the primary place to design, convert, and customize artifacts in a playful way. The creation of environmental assemblage to use as spaces in which one can skateboard, run, jump and play is a practice that kids engage in all over the world.

Paint, cardboard or pieces of wood are the material that can be recomposed and converted into devices that suggest rules of place. Circular hopscotch and weird stairs have a clear affordance: they want to be employed in physical activities.

The pleasure lies in both the creation of the device and the performance of various tricks using the device as an object to be literally acted upon.

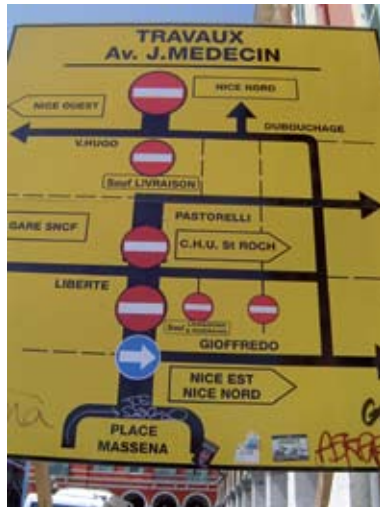
These examples show how environmental design is expected to control delinquency and loitering, thus projecting an image of security, a concept known as "defensible space". The presence of pointed fences and barbed wires can be seen as marker of territoriality.

An obvious target of defensible space are skateboarders. The addition of metal plates on benches or covering city structures such as handrails has been meant to prevent skateboards from rolling on them or grinding angles. Empty spaces are also "augmented" with pointed clips so that people could not sit or lay on them, eventually targeting vagabonds and bums.

Defensible space is a common feature of our cities of the 21st century, projecting new norms about what is acceptable or not down the streets.



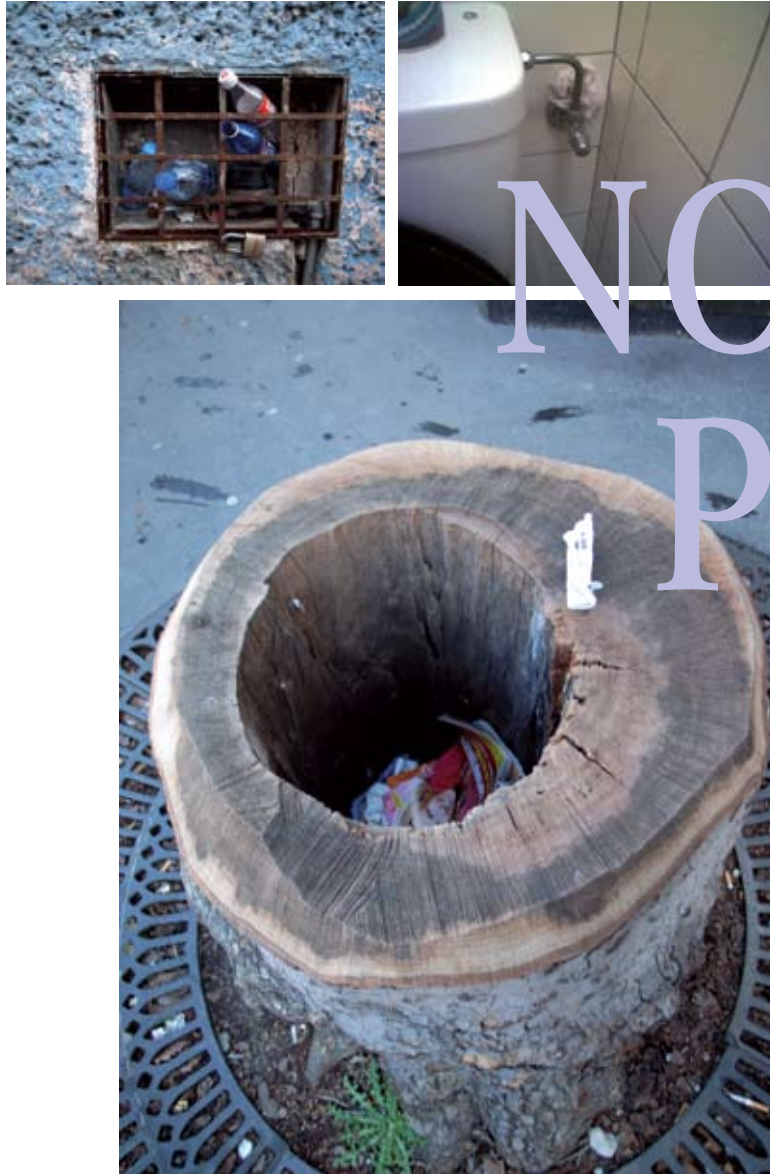




TRANSIENT TRAFFIC SIGNS

Traffic signs impart information to road and sidewalk users to support the navigation in the urban space. However, the orderly and timely flow of traffic is often challenged by the dynamics of a city. The recurrent road works and transient traffic obstruction force the deployment of temporary signs to redirect the stream and keep the pulse of the city intact.

The rush in setting up this temporary type of infrastructure in conjunction with the over-complexity of the urban space can create more confusion than order. Photos on the left reveal the antagonisms, deadlocks, and ambiguous states resulting from the deployment of these transient signs.



NO NORMS AND PRACTICES

Topic 4 INTERSTITIAL PRACTICES

A peculiar urban rule says “when there’s a hole, it’s gonna be filled with junk”. Indeed holes, often caused by the removal or break in an infrastructure, are used as disposal sites for various forms of waste. It seems holes really have good affordances for “interstitial practices” that is filling gaps with any sort of artifact. People like to trash stuff in certain ways: either to hide the junk or to make it as small as possible (compressing it into a small pipe as seen on the photos).

There seem to exist multiple factors that encourage this practice. Undoubtedly, the anonymity of the space promotes carelessness. It is augmented by the fact that in a public place, it is expected that somebody who is paid for it will erase any negligence.

Nevertheless, should this practice be considered as lack of respect to the place and to the community that uses it?



Topic 5



Topic 6

Topic 5
FACE ON TECHNOLOGY

Mistaking an interface or a device for a face corresponds to a psychological phenomenon called “pareidolia”: a type of illusion or misperception involving a vague or obscure stimulus perceived as something clear and distinct. The pictures here show how the perceived anthropomorphy of certain technological features or the addition of eyes/eyebrows/mouth on artifacts can facilitate pareidolia. It takes remarkably little effort to see a face! What about people’s comfort with such artifacts? Can there be a role for pareidolia in design? Are such faces more intrusive than CCTV cameras?

In any case, these pareidolia phenomena are a feature of our streets. They may reveal how we humans project agency and anthropomorphy on objects.

Topic 6
HOLY TRACES

In many occidental countries religion has been relegated to the background of people’s lives. In consequence, public spaces, removed from many devout signs became secular spaces. In reaction to this mystical emptiness, new forms of explicit reference to holy spirits surface in unexpected places. For example, places where reference to God are unexpected or incongruous, but yet the invisible presence needs to be reminded. A few believers intervene by leaving being them “holy traces” that appear in forms of signs or handwritten message.





Topic 7 REINFORCEMENT SIGNS

In public places anyone has a right to occupy the space regardless of economic status or socio-cultural profiles, although this may not always be the case in practice. The context of a space and its affordances frame the opportunities and restrict the area of use. For instance elderly people might not invest the proximity of a skate park or a poorly illuminated street at night will be avoided.

However, in some cases, the affordances do not suffice to guide the use of the public space and project the norms about what is acceptable or not. Consequentially, signs are deployed to explicitly prevent access to a certain population (e.g. children) or reinforce the norms of proper conduct (e.g. no short pants allowed, do not run).



REVEALING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

Cities rely on kilometers of wires and tubes to conduct the communications (phone lines, fiber optical cables) and resources (water, electricity, gas) in and out of their terminal. These complex infrastructures are often removed from human eye and relegated to the underground layers of the landscape either for aesthetic reasons or to protect them from damage. This invisibility impairs their accessibility and thus the management and maintenance work they often require.

In reaction, temporary annotations and signs revealing the presence of the invisible infrastructure appear at the surface, on walls, roads and sidewalks. They are often signs of imminent incision of the skin of the city to fix or upgrade its wires and tubes.

Topic 9



Topic 10

Topic 9
FIXING INFRASTRUCTURES

Infrastructures, although invisible most of the time, become apparent when they break. Thus, the presence of people as well temporary signs around infrastructure “entry points” is a mark of their existence. The most intriguing moment is definitely when these entry points are opened, revealing huge stacks of wires, connections and electrical pieces.

Fixing them requires the use of various tools. Depending on the system at hands and the level of importance material such as strings, duct tape, wires, laptops are needed. As we see on the picture here, it is interesting to notice the move from mechanical fixing (duct tape, screwdrivers) to the necessity to employ digital artifacts like computers or cell phones.

Interestingly enough, the repair technician acts as “man on a mission”, sure of himself, handling the problem surrounded by novices who do not even know what tools and knowledge he/she mobilizes in order to save the area from further breakdown. The technician is basically a life guard for a neighborhood craving to get their electricity/tv-network/water back.

Topic 10
REMNANTS FROM LANDLINE PHONES

Given the surge of mobile devices and wireless technologies, landline phones are used much less often. Public phones have become victims of this phenomenon and are often removed. But often booth remains, like ghosts.

These remnants show us former infrastructures we are not using anymore, the equivalent of abandoned train rails in fields... still present, still connected with cables but not employed. As a matter of fact, they are only perceivable as an age in which things ought not be wired to work together.

Besides, what does leaving the booth but not the phone itself means? Should we expect other affordances for these places?



Topic 11



Topic 12

Topic 11
ODD MACHINES

The infrastructure of public spaces is often difficult to maintain and nearly impossible to sustain in its original, freshly constructed state. Design of these spaces must take into account their peculiar and unique features, and their obscure architectures with hard to reach areas, corners and interstices. Consequentially, very unique and oddly shaped machines must be deployed according to the constraints of the space to maintain all its aspects. Many of these apparatus serve very specific and unique environments and contexts. They are customized to solve a specific issue, almost limiting their use to one task (e.g. reaching the lights of a ceiling in a large corridor, handling trash in pedestrian areas).

Topic 12
CLOUD OF CONNECTIVITY

The widespread deployment of mobile devices and wireless technologies has a significant influence on urban life and people's habits and communication practices. They rely on a "cloud of connectivity" offered by wireless networks to get access to the information superhighways. Often advertised as seamless and pervasive, this cloud is, practically speaking, very many clouds, misbehaving as the weather metaphor suggests. It is almost always patchy, swirling, unstable, and unpredictable in their qualities of services. These weather-like vagaries often force people to change their location or postures to get connectivity, much the way people will do in reaction to inclement or favorable weather. Instead of providing them mobile access, the clouds compel them to assume awkward positions, as if huddling for shelter from the rain, as represented on these pictures. Furthermore, these clouds of connectivity reveals itself physically through all the hanging cables over the streets and crossroads. The so-called wireless revolution indeed relies on the very noticeable installation of wiring and power supplies. Eventually, this presence of cables highlights how the "virtual" is actually strongly (not metaphorically) material and physical.





The presence of broken bikes with distorted wheels and missing parts is now a common feature of occidental cities. A sort of unbelievable aggression is expressed toward bicycles, often attached to street furniture or parked in bike lots.

Each city has its share of vandalized bikes. Their owners often abandon them because it is not worth replacing the missing pieces such as tires, breaks, handlebars or wheels. An artifact losing an element of its functionality can easily lose its full utility and become a waste object.

This situation eventually leads to the presence of bike parts with their locks in place; a quiet image that contrasts with the representation one has of a thief in the process of “molesting” such devices.

“Street computing”: The ever-growing presence of computers (dismantled or not) in the street of our cities naturally led to this notion of “street computing” as it reminds us how digital environments have physical counterparts.

The sort of artifacts represented here on street pavement and ash tray is a remarkable new feature of our societies that cannot manage all its wastes. Cities of the 21st century filled with technological artifacts spill their residues over the environment. The increasingly quick cycle of products reinforce this trend as well as the crux need to take care of disposal issues as sustainable as they could be.

Street computing also refers to new practices that began to emerge in our cities: the collection of technological garbage, waste and second-hand material currently sold to various industries and soon to be tweaked, hacked and modified by grassroots communities.



The continuous flow of people along the trails of the city creates enormous amounts of wastes. Removing these residues and cleaning the space has always been part of the public spaces life cycle. Moreover, facilitating the cleaning process became an integral part of the design of the space. Nowadays, multiple special-purpose cleaning machines invade the space in a perpetual ballet of cleaners repeating their gestures to scrub the cityscape and remove the littering. Their shape and type of steering embrace the topology of the surface and space. For instance, customized tri-cycles are deployed in pedestrian quiet environments with smooth surfaces. On the other hand, motorized 3-wheels machines thrive in the chaotic sidewalk of a busy city center.

Cities featured on these pictures:
Amsterdam, Barcelona, Boston, Frankfurt,
Geneva, Heraklion, Hong Kong, Lausanne, Lyon,
Madrid, Marseille, Montreux, Mexico,
Nice, Oaxaca, Oviedo, Paris, Rio de Janeiro,
Saint Gallen, San Francisco, San Jose,
San Juan de Chamula, Seoul.

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