

Military Urbanism, Surveillance and the Privatisation of Public Space

ISAAC MARRERO-GUILLAMÓN

On Sunday 2 October 2011, at See Studio in Hackney Wick, writer Anna Minton, artists Stephen Cornford, Laura Oldfield Ford and Jim Woodall, photographer Giles Price and researchers James Field and myself got together to discuss some of the critical issues around the transformation of east London for the 2012 Olympics. Anna Minton chaired the session. Around 25 people, sitting on benches and the floor, constituted the public.

Minton introduced the session discussing her book *Ground Control*, which investigates the politics of urban regeneration.¹ The transformation of east London brought about by the Olympics (and Westfield Shopping Centre) should be understood in relation to a regeneration model that started in the late 1980s with the London Docklands Development Corporation and Canary Wharf, and which took off during the New Labour period. It is a property- and debt-fuelled model, based on the privatisation of the public realm, which brings with it an atmosphere of high security and surveillance, as well as a climate and culture of fear.

James Field, PhD student at King's College London, doing research on urban public space, discussed "the relentless commodification of space" in global capitalism – a hyper-commodification stage of urban development where land as well as social services, housing, transportation and so on are privatised and commodified. The idea of public space as the place where communities are built, subject to contestation between different groups but mostly self-regulated, is being replaced by top-down strategies of management and control, that "push people out and undermine our right to the city". In the specific case of Stratford, the impact of the globalisation of capital was clearly visible, materialised in the production of a generic non-place, the Westfield Shopping Centre, replacing a very diverse community.

Laura Oldfield Ford, artist and writer, introduced her psycho-geographic zine *Savage Messiah*, started in 2005 and later compiled into a book.² At the height of the property boom, she set out to capture a sense of "prescience and unease" and attend to the "hidden narratives and repressed voices beneath the regeneration schemes". She described what has happened in the last decade as "Restoration London" – a massive operation of social cleansing that manifested itself through a grossly inflated property market coupled with evictions and

displacements:

It's kind of like the slum clearances: hiding the undeserving, making them disappear. What's been lost in the Lower Lee Valley... is an unpoliced space. Somewhere where you could step outside of the city and the normal modes of consumption. Along the canal and on the marshes there was no traffic, very few advertising hoardings, no shopfronts, no surveillance cameras at all. It was a place where odd encounters could happen, where free parties and raves took place, where a black economy could exist.

Her work has engaged with these silenced events and memories, chronicling (her experience of) the changes in the city, and trying to locate them within the wider political context. Remembering, not as a sentimental activity but as a form of revenge: "It's not a safe retreat to the past; it's about not allowing things to be forgotten."

Stephen Cornford followed. He started the presentation of his project *Trespassing the Olympics* by going back to Laura's mention of rave culture and a black economy. His first two encounters with the area in the late 1990s, he said, were precisely "to go to a squat party on Waterden Road and to go to the old black market by the dog stadium. You can think of those two things as community strategies for reclaiming space, and they were very informative in my decision to trespass the site." Cornford said he had also been inspired by the "occupy mentality" of reclaim the streets and the student fees protests:

I guess I was being intentionally naïve, to behave as if it would just be fine to walk across that bit of publicly purchased land. Why can't I explore like I used to when it was an untidy hinterland? Taxpayers have paid for it; I can take care of myself, I know the dangers of rubble... I didn't want to leave traces or vandalise equipment, I just wanted to be there. It was much more about me experiencing what happens to a space which is being taken over; what actually happens when the fence goes up and the blinds are closed and you can't see.

Issues of visibility and invisibility are equally fundamental in artist Jim Woodhall's *Olympic State*. Jim had been living in Hackney Wick since 2003, and had undertaken work on the changes happening in the area in relation to the Olympics as part of the Cut Up Collective. *Olympic State* was how-

ever conceived in Malta, he explained, after spending a night reading Anna Minton's *Ground Control* in a bird hunting hut in the countryside, and then finding similar huts, this time CCTV control rooms, in the city centre under redevelopment: "It struck me the similarity between being a hunter waiting to shoot and being a security guard waiting for something to happen. That made me think about us as a society waiting for the arrival of the event, from one spectacle to the next." *Olympic State* pieces together all those aspects: Woodall built a hut resembling the Maltese hunting huts on the rooftop of a warehouse building in Hackney Wick, filled it with surveillance monitors, installed CCTV cameras all around the rooftop (some aiming at the Olympic site's own security cameras), and lived there for two weeks, waiting for the event, documenting it – only at the "wrong" time: "Not a lot happened, but it was about being there, depriving myself of anything other than the *waiting*."

Giles Price explained that his work as a photographer is structured around his attempt to portray the Olympics and the restrictions around it:

When the blue fence was up I had a notion of wanting to see what was behind it but didn't think about it any further. Then, when the new security fence came up and you could sort of see through it a glimpse of what was happening behind it, I started documenting it. I must admit in my previous life I was in the military, and this is more heavily securitised than a lot of military installations.

Amber Alert, the resulting series of pictures, exposes the magnitude of the security operation around the 15-km-long fence. The pictures were taken late into the night in the winter of 2010, when the snow and the reflections of the artificial lights produced a yellowy atmosphere, which chromatically echoed the military code, "amber alert" or "imminent danger". A heightened state of anticipation, which was ratified by the presence of anti-terrorist police that stopped him while taking those very pictures...

I added that the military-grade security deployed in the Olympic site had indeed to be connected with the restrictions on all kinds of public activities that the legislation specifically passed for the Olympics had introduced.³ The Games required the production of a space of *reinforced consensus*, a smooth environment, without criticism or disagreements – which was precisely what all these artworks were challenging.

"It's great that there are artistic responses to the displacements, but where are the voices of these people in their own words?" asked a member of the

audience. Laura Oldfield Ford responded that her work had originated from a network of people actively involved in campaigning against the bid, doing confrontational flyposting (the We are Bad collective). Her work was about “plotting those lines of antagonism”, which did not exclude anybody from expressing themselves in other ways: “I can really only speak for myself – but I think the antagonism is there, and we’ve seen it flared up in the August riots. That’s a howl of protest, of anger.” Anna Minton immediately followed: “I think the point here is that there are no networks for those people themselves to make their voices heard. That’s why you don’t hear from them. You don’t hear what people have to say unless they form themselves into campaign groups.”

A member of the audience said that the August 2011 riots could represent the total fissure of the urban fabric. And when juxtaposed with the Olympics as a space of absolute control, it raised the question of the ratcheting up of the hyper-security strategy around the Olympics. Someone else related the riots to the development of a state of exception, saying how the riots had triggered exceptional forms of penalty, and asking whether we thought that was a trend. A student who had been involved in the UCL occupation quickly answered that that was indeed the case. He mentioned pre-emptive arrests of activists during the 2011 Royal Wedding and Notting Hill Carnival or the routine use of anti-terrorist powers to deter political protest:

More and more legislation has been introduced on the premise that it’s only temporary for some events but then not actually repealed afterwards – rather extended... There’s essentially two ways a state can control a dissenting population: you give them concessions or you repress them. And we’ve seen a clear answer to that question.

Anna Minton followed up on this issue, arguing, “It is a well-known fact that every Olympics brings with it a legacy of far greater security. Once all this security’s been introduced it doesn’t go away; rather the security of the domestic environment is ratcheted up.” And yet, unlike in Vancouver, where a group of academics signed “the Vancouver Statement”⁴ publicly expressing their concern with the securitisation of their city, and managed to galvanise the country, “over here we have no discussion about it at all. To even raise the issue turns you into a subversive.” Price said that he thought that apathy came back to the issue of homeland terrorism and the Northern Ireland conflict, which had allowed extreme security measures to “encroach in”: “We’ve lived under this umbrella and this perception that everything can be a threat for a long time.”

Minton replied that she thought it went beyond that, and talked about the way “secure by design” schemes had penetrated all aspects of urban design, including schools and hospitals. The security culture in Britain, she concluded, goes beyond anything one can see in the rest of Europe.

Continuing with the discussion around modes of artistic involvement, another member of the public said that one of the things that had struck him most about the Olympics was the aestheticisation of the official images:

On the tube there is a poster with a cyclist, the Stadium, Primrose Hill and Canary Wharf! And what’s interesting about the picture is that there are no people. These places are not intended for people to inhabit them, only to pass through – which is a very passive form of being in the space.

He thought photography, for example via Photoshop, had been complicit with this tendency to produce sanitised images of the kind now used to promote new developments, and he asked the panellists how they related their aesthetic choices to those official image-making strategies.

Giles Price acknowledged the issue, and responded that he didn’t think a retreat to classic documentary modes was the solution. The problem he had with a lot of documentary photography is that it had been rendered non-operative by the sheer bombardment of images – what he called the “I have seen it already” syndrome. So his strategy was to work in response to that, trying to generate an aesthetic which will produce an impact, “because you’re fighting in that image space”. He dismissed notions of documentary photography as being unmediated, as “whichever way you’re taking an image you’re effecting your view of the world... The act of taking the image influences that image, however pure you want it to be.”

Laura Oldfield Ford said that her decision to work in a zine format was to deliberately

locate the project aesthetically in the late seventies and early eighties. Partly because I wanted to restore a radical critique to an aesthetic that I felt had been rendered anodyne by Shoreditch nightclubs and Top Shop and that kind of thing. But also because the late seventies and early eighties was a very important time politically and socially. A time of socio-political unravelling and ruptures like we’re seeing now with the riots. So I used this black and white, photocopied aesthetic to sort

of say you can locate yourself back in other historical epochs, to plot different trajectories out of that.

As we approached 5pm and the end of the discussion, the question of the impact of Westfield and the Olympics on the local economy was raised from the floor. After all, the redevelopment had always been presented as a strategy to “regenerate” the deprived economic fabric of this part of east London. Minton responded that nobody expected the mega-event to have an impact on the local economy, as it is a private “global Leviathan” that benefits its owners. Westfield, on the other hand, was seen as a huge opportunity by people like the Mayor of Newham. A quarter of the 5000 jobs created are likely to go to local people, “but you’ve got to weigh that against everything else, and I think 1200 low-paid retail jobs is not that much when doing the balance”.

In the course of the debate, the “legacy” of the Games had indeed been described in terms of increased surveillance, the privatisation and militarisation of urban space, and the erosion of civil liberties and the right to the city. “Who, then, stands to benefit the most out of this?”, somebody asked. Minton answered right away:

There’s a few layers and a few key property companies, but to keep it simple, Westfield will be a huge beneficiary, and also a company called Lend Lease. Lend Lease was the developer that was supposed to be raising the money for the Olympic Village, but then the financial crash happened and they couldn’t. So basically the Government said, “OK, you don’t have money, we’ll pay for it and we’ll appoint you to be the project manager.” And what’s particularly interesting about Lend Lease (that also built the Bluewater Shopping Centre) is that its former CEO, David Higgins, went to be the CEO of the ODA. So all these people are mutually intertwined. They all know each other and go back a long way. It’s the same people and the same companies. So in terms of who are the main winners, Westfield and Lend Lease – two Australian companies, actually.

Endnotes

1 Anna Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-first-Century City* (London: Penguin, 2012).

2 Laura Olfield Ford, *Savage Messiah* (London: Verso, 2011).

3 See “Olympic State of Exception”, in this volume.

4 “The Vancouver Statement of Surveillance, Security and Privacy Researchers about the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games”, http://www.sscqueens.org/Vancouver_Statement (accessed 17 March 2012).