An unReal Estate Guide to Finding Your Own Gallery

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> *Anyone who changes a spatial experience within a museum or gallery context, in a way, still is part of that structure. And when you choose to work on abandoned and wasted sites, you make yourself part of a real estate, economic structure rather than part of the art structure. Don't you think?*
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> Gordon Matta-Clark, March 1976 [1]

During the 2000 Olympics, when squatters were facing eviction from their row of disused terraces on Sydney's Broadway, a website called *unReal Estate* was launched by the Sydney Housing Action Collective (SHAC).[2] Using the graphics and descriptive language of commercial real-estate listings, the site advertised several empty local properties as potential squats. Commercial TV stations were outraged and did their best to make the 'bludger' label stick to the squatting activists. SHAC, of course, felt differently. For them, the website was a direct action, linking DIY-inclined homeless people to unused empty buildings: a database for real-estate recycling. Often, in Sydney, perfectly inhabitable buildings are purchased by a development company with a view to future demolition, and left empty for years. SHAC urged people to use these empty buildings for shelter in the meantime, instead of joining the 90,000 people already waiting for public housing in NSW.[3]

Fast forward to Newcastle's *This Is Not Art* festival, October 2002,[4] where Sydney artist group SquatSpace has just set up a professional-looking *unReal Estate* shop in the Newcastle Mall, advertising potential squats. Astonished passers-by are stopped in their tracks by what appears to be a genuine real-estate office. Featured in the window are more than 40 abandoned, empty or disused local buildings, ranging from the city's classically styled former GPO and concrete-bunker World War II defence architecture to dozens of boarded-up shops and office buildings. Newcastle

suffered a severe earthquake in 1989, and hundreds of jobs were lost when BHP closed down its steelwork operations in the late 1990s. These events drove people from the city, leaving a hole in the local economy and surplus urban real estate.

For the time being at least, inner Newcastle and Sydney have waste architecture to spare. It seems obvious that the empty spaces in the two cities have been generated by quite different economies. Newcastle continues to suffer from a lack of demand, Sydney from an over-abundance of supply. Recently, however, the geographical distance between the two urban centres has been shrinking, as Sydney investors snap up their northern neighbour's cheaper land.

One extreme eventuality of this land grab could be that, with rising rents, all the struggling industrial warehouses and run-down shops will be 'converted', and both cities will house only big business, luxury apartments and shopping malls. Primary industries, moving offshore, will find cheaper labour markets, leaving their factory spaces empty. Subdividing and 'apartmentalising' these former manufacturing sites will yield vast profits. In this way, the transformation of our urban fabric is inextricably linked to the globalisation of production and trade. Convincing first-world governments to intervene in this process is extremely difficult, since (at least on paper) they are all the richer for it. In the meantime, spaces are left boarded up, awaiting demolition. Inspired by SHAC, SquatSpace proposed to temporarily occupy capitalism's leftovers.

Squatting, of course, throws up all sorts of practical problems. Getting into a heavily boarded-up property is the first. Then comes changing the locks and gaining access to electricity and water. Finally (and most tricky of all), squatters must negotiate with unsympathetic landlords and aggressive police. The Newcastle *unReal Estate* project attempted to close this information loop with the free supply of a photocopied pamphlet, *The Squatter's Handbook*. Combine the handbook and the location listings, and

you're working your way to a no-budget home.[5] The texts describing each 'un-property' were deliberately witty, mimicking the euphemistic lingo of real-estate-ese – an abandoned jewelry store, for instance, became a "diamond in the rough". *Newcastle Herald* journalist Michael Gadd wrote: "[*unReal Estate*] hammers home clichés in a manner worthy of the most seasoned property mogul. [An] unused railway signal box ... is promoted as a 'two-level kit home that boasts its own city views and a surveillance camera on top'."

In addition to its utilitarian function, *unReal Estate* could be read in purely symbolic terms, as it played Newcastle's urban fabric back onto itself. Some locals were dumbfounded to see the 'eyesores' of their town described in such glowing terms. Many were outraged that public policy had sunk so low as to suggest *squatting* as a legitimate answer to homelessness. Others lingered, smiling as they perused the listings, getting the joke. The Newcastle City Council, astoundingly, offered to buy the artwork – presumably as it represented a collective snapshot portrait of the city, at a particular moment in time. The piece was a homage to the resplendent (yet economically unproductive) architectural surface of Newcastle. It was a socio-architectural study, an independent contribution to local heritage.

unReal Estate was also, partly, a challenge for the organisers of *This Is Not Art*. The festival had been promoting itself as a "conference for trouble-makers". In recent years, there had been numerous forums about 'trouble-making' occurring elsewhere, yet few mischievous projects took place during the festival itself. The police made some enquiries about *unReal Estate,* suspecting the distribution of the *Squatter's Handbook* to be a case of inciting an illegal act. It wasn't, of course. The project did not 'incite' – strictly speaking, it merely 'provided information'. The *Handbook*, an essential part of the project, stayed.

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After the mid 2001 eviction of the Broadway Squats, SquatSpace had embarked on an ad-hoc series of site-specific projects and urban interventions. This was partly a response to having lost its gallery space, located in an old locksmith's shop on the corner of Broadway and Howard Lane. The group objected to the notion that when an artist collective is 'spaceless', it becomes automatically 'defunct'. Obviously, the physical incarnation of SquatSpace on Broadway was temporary, fortuitous and gone forever (the site became a demolition zone within a few months, cleared for over 300 luxury apartments). But the energy and politics generated in those buildings grew and broadened to involve new initiatives.

Individuals from SquatSpace reclaimed a huge abandoned theatre in Homebush, which became the Grand Midnight Star Squatted Social Centre, from February to November 2002. The Midnight Star was managed by the Social Centres Autonomous Network (SCAN), a network of anarchist-autonomist groups inspired by similar models developed in Italy and Spain.

There was a sense that an ever-increasing number of people in Sydney were becoming disillusioned with the kinds of architecture, commerce and lifestyle options available locally. The centre "existed to demonstrate the capacity of people to organise themselves outside the systems of state and market which increasingly control our lives".[6] It hosted countless political meetings, independent film screenings, art shows, performances and parties.

In November 2002, SCAN groups were forcibly evicted from the Midnight Star by police. SCAN had attracted negative publicity for its role in organising protest demonstrations at the World Trade Organisation meeting (which took place in nearby Olympic Park). In a climate of increasing government paranoia (in which criticising the methods of the state is tantamount to terrorism) innovative social projects like the Midnight Star are unlikely to find friends in high places.

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In 1976, Gordon Matta-Clark, the New York artist most famous for chainsawing a suburban house in two, visited a squatted abandoned factory complex in Milan. The squatters, he said, were "radical communist youths … [who aimed to] resist the intervention of 'laissez-faire' real estate developers from exploiting the property". [7] They wanted the building to be used as a neighbourhood social services centre – or *Centro Sociale*, as they are known in Italy. The exposure to this nascent Social Centre had a profound effect on Matta-Clark. In a radio interview at the time, he declared:

> *My goal is to extend the Milan experience to the US, especially to neglected areas of New York such as the South Bronx, where the city is just waiting for the social and physical conditions to deteriorate to such a point that the borough can redevelop the whole area into the industrial park they [the city] really want.* [8]

Matta-Clark, suffering from pancreatic cancer, did not live to achieve his vision for New York. However, his statements pinpointed the tactics played by local governments in the cycle of urban decay and renewal – a cycle no less evident in Sydney in 2003. Projects like the South Sydney City Council's shiny new Green Square 'renewal' appear only after long periods of neglect, by which time anything would seem to be an improvement. [9]

Predictably, though, the major changes will be to the demographic profile, as expensive "studio-apartments" replace actual artists' studios. It comes as no surprise that dormant city-council-owned spaces are often boarded up rather than turned over, even temporarily, to more creative uses. Allowing empty buildings to be occupied by artists as studios or galleries would only draw attention to their fascinating, time-encrusted surfaces – and delay their inevitable lucrative sale and demolition.

What options, then, exist for exhibiting art in the city? The task is daunting. Renting space in an artist-run gallery can set you back more than $400 a

week. State-funded spaces sometimes facilitate (but more often compromise and modify) challenging political projects. One tactic used by SquatSpace is to occupy empty buildings for short periods, launching one-night-only events and then quickly moving on. This has been a successful model for *SquatFest*, which occurs each year on exactly the same day and at the same time as *TropFest*. *SquatFest* is both a critique of the corporate-sponsored nature of *TropFest* (while lampooning its selection of twee narrative films), and a celebration of the experimental films and activist documentaries being produced locally.

Other artist-activist groups have had similar ideas. Spectacular in scale was the Perth project *Hotel 6151* (6151 indicates the location's postcode). In late 2002, the run-down suburban Rhodes Hotel, on demolition death-row, was generously turned over to artists Ben Riding, Heather Webb and Christian de Vietri. More than 50 individuals and groups were invited to occupy a labyrinth of rooms with installations and performances. Bec Dean, who attended the 1 November launch event along with 2,500 other punters, wrote:

> *Throughout [the hotel's] spaces artists had created works which drew on structural features, furniture and objects that still remained in the building prior to its imminent demolition ... [it was] one of the most inspirational installation and multimedia events in the history of Western Australian contemporary art practice.*[10]

Many of the works in *Hotel 6151* were carefully devised to create a dialogue with the building's site and history, as a popular, but increasingly disheveled temporary residence. In one room, former cleaning staff of the hotel were re-employed, by Ben Riding and Christian de Vietri, to obsessively scrub and polish, simultaneously recounting tales of their past experiences on the premises. Gary Wiseman filled the hotel's swimming pool with black ink, creating a super-reflective, sump-like pond (which one visitor fell into on the night). On the hotel grounds, Kate McMillan dug a deep, elongated

trench, suggesting the architecture of battlegrounds, but also recalling Perth's despised 'Trench', a cross-town traffic tunnel the construction of which resulted in the razing of entire blocks of much-loved buildings.

Christian de Vietri described Perth as:

> *A city of continuous redevelopment. Buildings are knocked up and knocked down everywhere ... it creates a strange feeling here, that history seems to be forgotten and constantly recreated to suit the latest real-estate trends. This project gave us an opportunity to consider this process, to linger on our waste ... to give the space one last breath before it dies.*[11]

These descriptions suggest that *Hotel 6151* was conceived as an exchange. The building offered a rare opportunity for artists to flex themselves within 'real space' (as opposed to the pseudo-neutrality of a 'white cube'). In return, the artists posed some very pertinent questions about the faddish nature of local attitudes to aesthetics. As Andrew Nichols wrote, *Hotel 6151* displayed an "ability to locate previously unrecognized value in what is commonly perceived to be worthless."[12]

Perth's patchy architectural surface results from periodic waves of demolition, in which the architectural masterpieces from previous generations are demonised. Particularly unpopular in the mid 1990s was the very fine 1950s pavilion Council House on St Georges Terrace. The state government scorned it as an eyesore, and threatened to tear it down, until strenuous agitation from an outraged architectural community forced a re-evaluation of the building's merit. Council House was saved, but many such modernist 'eyesores' are demolished before being given a chance to come back into style.

The Rhodes Hotel "now lies in rubble".[13] *Hotel 6151* is, however, generously represented online, with excellent photographs and texts about the temporary occupation.[14]

While the *Hotel*'s website serves as a historical document after the fact, other groups' websites are used to develop *new* projects. These include London's Space Highjackers[15] and the pseudo-corporate ®™**ark**,[16] which utilise a bulletin board interface to propose and collaboratively develop ideas for events. On the Space Hijackers' inspirational site, an idea is put forward and gradually built and refined by subsequent contributions. When the collective's scheme reaches an acceptable degree of refinement, the virtual contributors meet in real-space to carry it out. Typically, the projects developed exhibit a situationist-style desire to intervene in the everyday activities of urban life. One hilarious example is the *Circle Line Party* project. Hundreds of participants converge on a London Underground train that follows an endless loop through the inner city. A spontaneous party erupts around London's famously dour peak-hour Tube commuters. Sound systems and lighting displays are ingeniously supplied by battery-operated equipment contained in individual briefcases. The *Circle Line Party* dissipates as quickly and mysteriously as it begins. The website, naturally, serves as a receptacle of photographic documents, as well as a place for debriefing.

Closer to home, abandoned buildings have temporarily hosted art rapidly produced and launched within a single weekend. For *The Empty Show*, in February 2003, an anonymous group of stencillers, graffitists and poster artists covertly occupied the boarded-up Brittania Hotel in Melbourne's bayside suburb of Williamstown, and engaged in what they ironically described as "a bit of interior decoration".[17]

A fair chunk of this kind of work has always seeped into the 'legitimate' art worlds, via glossy design mags, street-smart museum shows and, recently in Sydney, high-rent artist-run galleries. It seems there is some caché to be

gained by combining underground graphics with white-cube venues. The gallery gets street-cred (and fills up with groovy young things for the opening) and the artists get pats-on-the-back (as opposed to the usual kicks-up-the-bum). But apart from this mutual prestige swapping, is there any meaningful communication going on between art and site?

The artworks in *The Empty Show*, like those in *Hotel 6151*, spoke to the specific, history-rich, architecture in which they were housed. The Brittania Hotel is located in a shipbuilding zone owned by a company called Tenix Defence. Under contract to the federal government, Tenix builds guided missile frigates and the coast guard vessels, which are used to keep out asylum seekers. The hotel was purchased and boarded up over ten years ago in a huge land-grab by Tenix, which effectively pushed out all other tenants from the surrounding blocks.

For the artists, *The Empty Show* was a chance to infiltrate and creatively utilise a site that had been forcibly evicted in order to manufacture Australian war technologies. Many of the works bluntly (and somewhat crudely) stated their opposition to Australian military deployment in Iraq. A common approach was to juxtapose war imagery with relics that had been found onsite. In one piece, phalanxes of plastic soldiers were frozen in battle on a long-dead electric blanket draped over a decrepit mattress. The scene, located on the withered carpet of the abandoned hotel room, was by turns poignant and depressing. In a nearby room, a skull on a five-pointed star was spray-stencilled onto pillows. The place looked like it had been hastily evacuated – papers and bedding were left in disarray, presumably as they had been found by the artist.

Offering the possibility of audience interaction, one cheeky artist had spray-painted John Howard's face onto the stainless steel surface of the urinal in the men's toilets. In an upstairs bedroom, cheerfully shaped blood-red clouds emerged from a mysterious hole in the floor, floating up and away onto the adjacent walls. Given that few members of *The Empty Show*'s

audience would have needed convincing of the futility of war, these works were, indeed, 'interior decorations' rather than functional political petitions. Indeed, what *The Empty Show* exhibits is not so much artwork as an 'empty', (slang for an abandoned building), whose price of admission is a thrilling, if minor, act of civil disobedience.

Scattered within the Brittania Hotel were a more subtle series of sprayed images: in some of these, small silhouetted human figures carried to safety the unconscious victims of an unknown calamity; in others, the figures, sporting delicate angel-like wings, experimented with primitive fire-making techniques. The practical-yet-poetic activities of these survival-savvy characters mirrored the DIY approach to art making in evidence throughout *The Empty Show.*

The project's launch was rudely interrupted by police, who arrived 90 minutes into the opening for an impromptu, interactive performance of their own. Since then, the Britannia Hotel (hastily re-secured, but otherwise untouched) has remained as a hermetically sealed museum of the art created within it on that one weekend.

The subsequent website, containing photographic evidence of the 'art-crime', generated so much interest that three copycat *Empty Shows* followed, spontaneously organised by *different* groups of artists, in *different* empty buildings. The second *Empty Show* was staged in an abandoned function centre in Melbourne's upper middle-class suburb of Canterbury. The third took place in ex-migrant housing units adjacent to Canberra's Australian National University. The fourth occurred in Sydney in mid August 2003 to launch SCAN's new Balloon-Shop Social Centre in Newtown. SCAN was evicted from the Balloon Shop after three weeks.

The Empty Show has, in effect, become an open-source 'brand name', an adaptable formula for embedding art within capitalism's fallow zones. And the movement is growing – in October 2003, a convergence of *Empty Shows*

was held in Newcastle. Dubbed *Public Liability*, this inter-city meeting of *Empty Show* artists was an unauthorised plug-in to the *This is Not Art* festival. The title *Public Liability* was an ironic jab at the way Australian insurance laws have crippled many festivals and outdoor events, requiring the payment of astronomical premiums in the name of 'public safety'.[18] The anonymous participants developed a bulletin-board website of their own to plan in advance and trade location secrets.[19] Naturally, many of the Newcastle locations for the *Public Liability* were sourced from SquatSpace's *unReal Estate* archives. A by-product of the Newcastle convergence was the artists' network itself, and the potential for further, increasingly well coordinated urban actions.

Public Liability, as a collection of *Empty Shows* in various abandoned (and sometimes unsafe) buildings, would not have been possible as an official component of *This is Not Art.* In fact, official permission could actually be a limiting factor, restricting the content of the work and public access to the sites. Temporary squatting actions enable artworks to situate themselves in local hotspots, rather than being politely spirited away to 'legitimate' galleries or museums. As such, they are a potent reminder of the absurdity of private property ownership.[20]

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<Notes>

[1]   Liza Bear 'Gordon Matta-Clark: Dilemmas' [radio interview] WBAI FM, New York, March 1976 reprinted in Corinne Diserens (ed) op. cit. p176

[2]   http://squat.net/shac (The terraces were owned by South Sydney City Council, which was in the process of selling them to developers for a sum of $5 million).

[3]   *Direction for Housing Assistance Beyond 2000 Background Paper* NSW Department of Housing 1999 See also www.sydney.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=27606&group=webcast

[4]   "*This Is Not Art* is Australia's largest annual gathering of young media makers, musicians, artists, writers, and troublemakers" from www.thisisnotart.org

[5]   *The Squatters Handbook* is available online at the SHAC website listed above

[6]   From a photocopied pamphlet produced by SCAN, 2002

[7]   Judith Russi Kirshner 'The Idea of Community in the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark' in Corinne Diserens (ed) op. cit. p159

[8]   ibid.

[9]   See www.greensquare.com.au and Elizabeth Farrelly 'A Seemless Journey to Sanitown' *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 July 2003, reprinted at www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/07/21/1058639723616.html

[10]   Bec Dean 'Last Rites: Inspirational Installation' *Realtime* 52, Dec 02–Jan 03

[11]   Christian de Vietri 'One Night Stand' [interview with Chris Hatherill] *Sleazenation* January 2003

[12]   Andrew Nicholls 'Hotel 6151' at www.hotel6151.com

[13]   Bec Dean, op. cit.

[14]   www.hotel6151.com

[15] www.spacehijackers.co.uk

[16] www.rtmark.com

[17]   Interview by the author with anonymous *Empty Show* participant, 26 August 2003

[18] For example, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras estimates that its public liability costs have increased fivefold since 2000, and now are as expensive as the rest of the festival put together. See Glen Brennan, "The Madness of Mardi Gras", in *Pink + Blue*, July 2002, www.pinkandblue.com.au/display.asp?articleId=562

[19]   *Public Liability'*s online bulletin board is at www.anonart.org

[20] Private property ownership has become so absurd that now even the Moon is being sold off, acre by acre. See www.lunarrealty.co.nz

Readers may also find www.cleansurface.org and http://scan.cat.org.au of interest in relation to this article