Urban Surfaces Definition

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USRN

Urban Surfaces Research Network vol.3

a discussion about the role of urban surfaces in developing public cultures and equitable cities

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Editorial

We established the Urban Surfaces Research Network (USRN) in April 2023 as a conversation between an urban scholar in Australia, an architect in Cyprus, and a geographer in Sweden. We have been researching surfaces for many years, and decided to formalise our networks and create a setup where we could workshop some *Surface Conversations*. The result of this setup is a series of publications, of which this is Vol. 3.

The USRN brings together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, to examine the roles and uses of urban surfaces, and their contribution to the formation of urban cultures, politics, and atmospheres. It is a multidisciplinary group held together by a shared empirical interest and a passion to untangle the affordances of surfaces for citizenship, belonging, media, economy, law, and justice - the list continues.

Participants in these *Surface Conversations* were asked to address three prompts, which you will find in the following pages:

1. Share a definition of urban surfaces pertinent to their discipline and field of research or practice.
2. Propose three concepts for advancing urban surfaces knowledge.
3. Introduce an example or case study of their surface-related work.

This publication is intended to inform research, practice, and public discussions on the role of surfaces in urban environments. We hope you enjoy your journey through these incredibly wide-ranging responses and share our enthusiasm for the traction of surface knowledges in the series.

Sabina Andron, University of Melbourne
Konstantinos Avramidis, University of Cyprus
Tom Ward, Uppsala University

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities

3. Present a recent case study or provocation

Surface Conversations vol. 3

Editors: Sabina Andron, Konstantions Avramidis, Tom Ward

01

Cecilia
Brazioli

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Within my framework, I deal with Urban Surfaces both as canvases for the expression of conflicting instances, and as penetrable boundaries that allow for the visibilisation of ongoing negotiations on the aesthetic and visual order of contemporary cities.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

Aesthetic capitalism: highlights the relevance of the visual and the aesthetic, the sensory aspects of our experience as users of a specific space, for value extraction. This concept helps address urban surfaces as both material and symbolic sites exploited by local administrations and economic actors for the display of an aesthetic able to attract capital and investment, often silencing different claims and aims.

Urban creativity: since (contemporary Western) cities have become an integral part of the process of production, the semantic field of creativity is now strictly connected with a capitalist aspect of creation. Urban surfaces became a vantage point to look at the ways in which creativity is capitalised upon and used for urban management purposes.

Urban order: as any category, also the one of (dis)order is contingent and situated, as well as negotiated according to the categorisation system at work. From the relation with, and the study of, urban surfaces, it is possible to gather information about the conventional idea of order, as well as the contrasting forces that oppose it, with a constant negotiation and re-negotiation of meanings and values.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

In an increasingly digitalised world, I deem it of primary relevance to dig deeper into the relation between new technology, advertisement and urban surfaces. I consider it crucial for an overall understanding of the experience individuals make of the urban context, in contemporary (Western) cities. In particular, I refer to the emergence of companies[1] that combine creativity and technology for the innovation and transformation of urban environments. The emergence of such corporations stimulates reflections and potential research in multiple directions. Within my framework, it could be interesting to dig deeper into the development of the concept of urban creativity towards more digitalised practices, how this impacts on the affective and sensorial ex-perience of urban spaces, and the consequences of an increase of value extraction from the visual aesthetics of surfaces.

The feeling is that we are moving more and more towards a neoliberal capitalisation of urban aesthetics, with surfaces being the primary sites for the visibilisation of the "proper" (hip, vibrant, creative, progressive, clean, petty) look of the city, and the invisibilisation of opposing instances. Nonetheless, since social phenomena are never unidirectional, and complexity is always at play, an interesting development could be to look at the potential emergence of antagonist practices. These might undermine the effects of this new direction undertaken by neoliberal urban management strategies, combined with the expansion of new technologies, like subvertising did with advertisement billboards.

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02

Lucy Finchett Maddock

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Urban surfaces are legal etchings upon which the cityscape writes. They are rich tapestries of spatial code. They are the edge of law. And they are law.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

<u>Nomosphere</u>: This is the direct connection between law and land, whereby all surfaces, depths, hiddens, revealeds, are imbibed within the materiality of law. This is following from the Schmittean understanding of law and land connected within his *The Nomos of the Earth*: "Every ontomomous and ontological judgment derives from the land. For this reason, we will begin with land appropriation as the primeval act in founding law." (Carl Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth 1950)

<u>Juriscut</u>: Very much inspired by the notion of surfaces this is the coming together moment of law, whereby an edge is reached and an aesthetic bifurcation ensued. This is familiar in the work of Karen Barad and her coming together of ontology and epistemology of 'onto-epistemic ethics'. Also prescient within a beautiful quote from Berardi: "[Law] is like a switch that breaks the natural link between sensorial experience and conscious elaboration." (Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, The Phenomenology of the End (Semiotext(e), 2015)

<u>Legal Storytelling</u>: A way that the street and the urban environment can narrate the law and the law narrate the street through surfaces, curves, edges, moving around, inside and out, onto the next pavemented step, transforming the history of law as it goes.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

30 years on and A Series of Repetitive Beats: Nomadism, Sound and Property - On 3 November 2024, it will be 30 years since the notorious Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (hereinafter 'CJA 1994) was given Royal Assent, illegalising raves, banning music that "includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" (section 63 (1)(B)). Under section 63 (1), a rave was originally defined as a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers), until its amendment by Section 58 of the Anti Social Behaviour Act 2003 to a gathering of 20 or more persons, and on land which is not in the open air (i.e. within a building) as well as outside. As a reminder and awareness raiser, it is a project moving in and out of urban and rural space, concerning itself with the impact of legislation on nomadic communities, and on forms of sound and music, and their visual and surface communities. The project is curated and organised by Instrumenting(s), Art/Law Network, LORE (Legal Origins Rights Education & Art), as part of the wider investigation on law, sound and nomadism and the impact of the CJA 1994 on the rave scene and traveller community, *A Series of Repetitive Beats*. The wider project seeks to temper these questions, recreate the legal frameworks of banned music, in a series of events, interventions and research opportunities.

GRAFFITO

⚠ Pictorial

OK
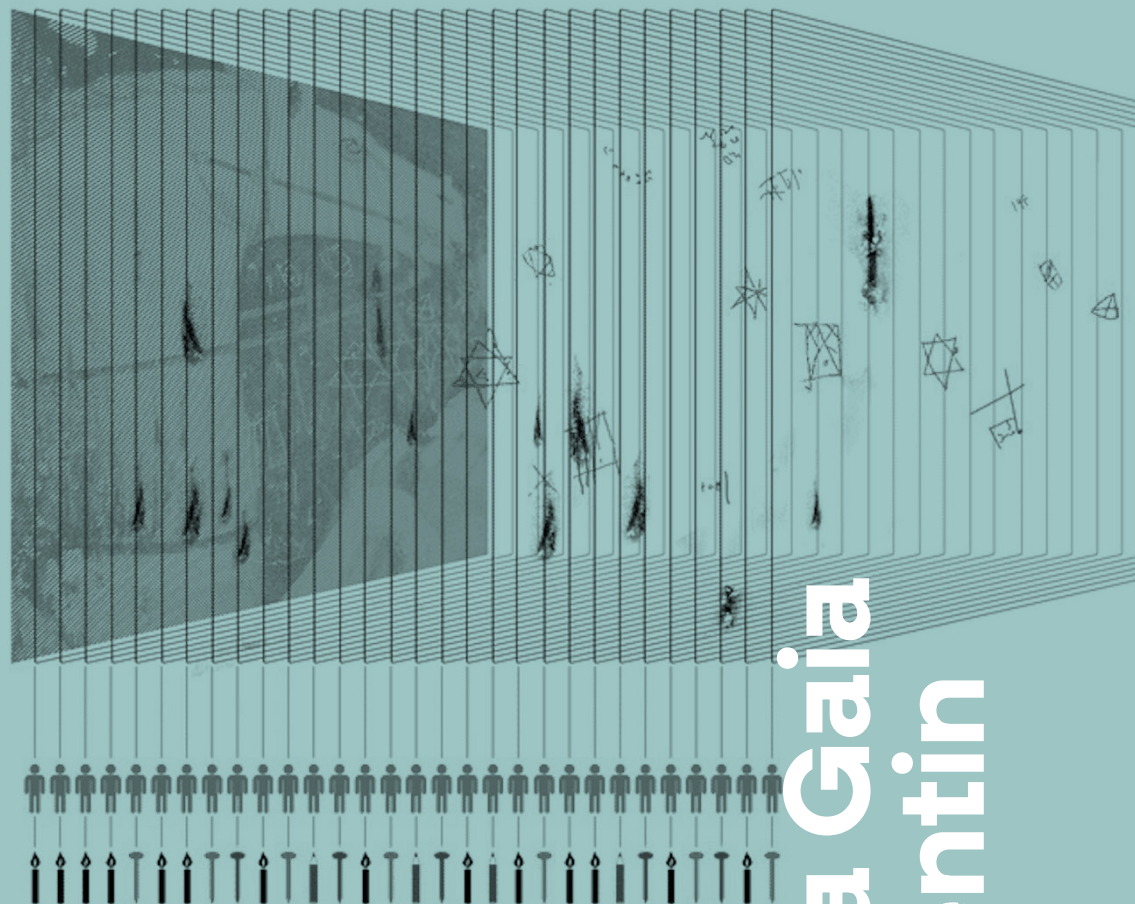
03

Mia Gaia
Trentin

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

The surface is an interactive space that collects a wide variety of anthropic marks of interaction, performed with different intentions for different reasons through different media. In this sense, the surface becomes a repository of collective memory, meanings, and values for the communities experiencing the place.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

My three concepts for the study of historic graffiti and marks of interaction are as follows.

Form: This refers to the visible evidence of human interaction with space, as recorded by surfaces.

Content: This represents the meaning or the reason why a mark was made on a surface.

Space: This is crucial for understanding the marking process and its meaning. It refers to both the specific location and the functional/symbolic aspects of the space. Space encompasses the material and symbolic dimensions of space.

Form, content, and space have been shaped based on the three constitutive communication elements defined in semiot-ics by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards – symbol, meaning, and referent. By understanding the various combinations and variations of these elements and their relationships, we can decipher the mechanisms of interaction and expression and understand the meanings behind surface interactions.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

Studying the religious buildings of Cyprus from the Medieval and Early Modern periods has provided insights into how people in the past lived and experienced religious spaces. By gathering and analysing the graffiti, taper burn marks, and acts of vandalism (i.e., damnatio memoriae) left on the walls, we can see that these surfaces were highly interactive spaces. Past communities leave their marks, highlighting a process of space appropriation and communication while supporting practices and rites usually not attested by other sources. The walls serve as a repository of collective memory, with inscriptions of prayers, acts of devotion, and records of community events. These markings also offer insights into socio-cultural aspects, contributing to our understanding of everyday life and how people perceived space. Additionally, they raise questions about the modern concept of Cultural Heritage. In the past, scratching a name or a prayer on a wall was an accepted and widespread practice that enhanced the meaning and value of a building for its community. Each mark on the wall represents the action and presence of a person, creating a visual and dynamic archive. Understanding these markings is essential for rediscovering the historical significance and the diachronic sense of place of buildings. Moreover, it represents a key element in engaging present communities with their local heritage in the process of sustainable valorisation and understanding the historical and sociocultural landscape.

55 870056
−9306956

04

Alex
Hale

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Contemporary urban surfaces are archaeological sites to be considered as feral things. They are rural landscapes tamed by concrete, bricks and mortar. The graffiti are artefacts, previously associated with writing, but now wild; a feraling of sorts. Held within these artefacts are performances of tentacular knowledge networks. Their extent reaches beyond the urban and into a landscape's stratigraphy. As archives they perform a role that disrupts our philosophies, institutions and systems of knowledge-making. As such they are active combinations of archaeological, archival and artefacts.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

Archaeological: Urban and rural surfaces can be considered archaeological sites, not in the traditional sense, awaiting excavation, but as assemblages of surfaces, performances, emotions and politics. They are organic archaeology, in process of creation and ruin at the same time. As such our practices consider what is a site always in the making, without an end point, with its own sensibilities and responses. This concept enables us to think beyond capitalist, extractive tropes, especially when it comes to knowledge creation through archaeology.

Archival: By focussing on urban, peri-urban and rural surfaces through an archival lens, not with a view to sustaining the archive as a power system (after Derrida 1995), but with a view to exploring new forms of archiving. Henck Slager's idea of the 'para-archive' is useful here, 'the methodological trajectory of artistic archiving seems to be characterized by another type of will; not a will colored by thinking in terms of hegemonic power and a meticulous control, but a frivolous will, the will of a 'gaya scienza' concentrated on artistic probing, establishing connections, associating, creating rhizomatic mutations, producing assemblages, and bringing together; including that which cannot be joined' (Slager 2015, 82). This enables us to consider the urban as an extension of the rural in both space and time, as a 'graffitiscape'. This approach aims to critique reductive classifications and engage surfaces, marks and meanings as creative practices of archive in-process.

Artefacts: I suggest that urban surfaces, once rural, have become feral again with graffiti (after Monbiot 2014, iiiv). Through practising para-archiving the surfaces themselves, as well as the patina of time, the materials used to mark the surfaces and the unfolding performative politics, are all in conversation and have the potential to form assemblages of artefacts that are not constrained in either time or space. As Gavin Lucas describes, these artefacts are time in themselves, rather than existing in time (Lucas 2021). As their feral nature emerges, their representation of time(s) becomes infused into the surfaces. This requires a critical reading of previous structures such as archaeology, archives, museums, art galleries and other spaces that commodify material culture into time, typology and geo-locational systems. I would rather we consider urban and rural graffiti as feral artefacts, that create their own archives and timescales, and unfold beyond our control (Hale 2022).

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

Pollphail village lies 100km west of Glasgow. It was built in 1977, to house over 500 workers to construct oil rigs. But the village was never occupied, because the construction yard never got any orders. It became a ruin; an archaeological site of the 1970s oil rush. In 2009, artists Derm, Juice One Two Six, Remi/Rough, Stormie Mills, Timid and Jason System, aka Agents of Change painted the village. Their intervention provides us with opportunities to undertake archaeological research into contemporary ruin and the para-archiving of feral artefacts (Hale and Anderson 2019).

One piece by Jason System comprised a profile of Juice 126. A speech bubble emerges from Juice 126's mouth: '55.870056 −5.306956', putting Pollphail on the map, through digital geo-location technology. Agents of Change deliberately bypassed the art gallery and created a graffitiscape of feral artefacts. These digital artefacts have outlived the physical lifespan of the village, which was demolished in 2016.

When considering the urban, Pollphail highlights the interrelated nature of graffiti from Prehistoric origins to city streets, returning to rural ruins and back again. Pollphail's architecture could be found in any Scottish new town or suburban scheme. However, it is notable why Agents of Change chose Pollphail as their first ever major collaboration in 2009. Some of them are from Scotland and recognise the duality of the 'rurban' realm, where there is no clear division and one space passes into another. Their intervention initiated a series of ongoing graffiti conversations, showcased a range of street art styles and enables us to reframe our notions of both urban and rural space.

Whilst I was working at Pollphail, I collected a couple of fragments of spray-painted render that had fallen off the walls: a small part from the image of Juice 126, and a part of one of Stormie Mill's characters. So, I' m now thinking what to do next with these feral artefacts? Should I break them up even more send them around the world, as Doug Bailey has done in his Ineligible art/archaeology project? (Bailey 2020). Or do you have other ideas to activate this feral matter, and explore their para-archival potential?

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Cemonite is a prototype urban surface currently being developed in Norway. It is a low-carbon geopolymer concrete (GPC) based on mining waste from the mine Titania AS in Jøssingfjord, Norway.

05

Ingrid
Halland

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Urban surfaces serve as aesthetic contact zones between man-made materials, individual experiences, and global meaning-making, including politics, ethics, and cultural values.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

The surface-process paradox: Most urban surfaces are created through processes that transcend human-scale limitations, involving mass automation, chemical processing of material constituents, and managerial standardisation. As a result, urban surfaces become hyper-abstracted entities. A key feature of urban surfaces is that the conditioning processes underpinning them are never displayed as aesthetic properties.

Deep surface: Surfaces are fundamental sites for critical analysis within the humanities and have the capacity to reveal profound aesthetic, technological, ideological, and ontological changes. A deeper understanding of surfaces—across times, forms, and scales—can bring attention to the global entanglements that today's surfaces are weaved into, onto, and with.

Displaying Deep Surfaces: A method of studying surfaces that reverses the habitual search for depth beneath the surface and instead focuses on the aesthetic properties of the surface itself as a way to display ontological conditions. Engaging closely with surfaces, such as walls, coatings, façades, glass, paint, asphalt, laminate, and screens can reveal profound meanings, encompassing both individual phenomenological experiences and global forces—ethics and ideology—that all beings are subjected to.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

Given that the built environment consumes approximately half of the earth's raw materials (European Commission 2018), a significant transformation in the production and perception of urban surfaces is imperative. Yet, often, the most impactful transformation arises not from producing anew, but from regenerating what already exists.

Cemonite is a prototype urban surface currently being developed in Norway. It is a low-carbon geopolymer concrete (GPC) based on circular principles. Cemonite addresses the demand for a circular economy in the building industry by upcycling mining waste. The first pilot factory opened in the summer of 2024, and during the coming year, Cemonite prototypes will be made from mining residues from the Titania AS mine in Norway. This new concrete reduces carbon emissions by over 80% compared to the industry standard (Portland cement).

In my upcoming research project Deep Surface, Cemonite is used as a case study for exploring three critical questions: What can architecture do with modernism's waste products? How can we combine critical design with real-life solutions? How can we make systemic change desirable?

Importantly, the site-specificity of the waste becomes an aesthetic quality in Cemonite; different waste products from different mines produce varying textures and colors.

The term "spolia" originates from the Latin "spolium," meaning the act of stripping away, whether it be an animal's skin or armour, essentially to disarm. Historically, the use of spolia was both functional and deeply symbolic; it entailed repurposing waste materials as an aesthetic strategy to metaphorically rewrite the past by disregarding, violating, and cannibalising the achievements of predecessors. Site-specific traces of mass extraction (the mining waste) will become aesthetically manifest on Cemonite surfaces, serving as a form of contemporary spolia.

In my research, I argue that aesthetics plays a significant role in rethinking surfaces. To effectively challenge modernism's outdated perspectives on resource extraction, I argue that the approach must be tactile, site-specific, aesthetically appealing, and most importantly displayed on the surface, as such.

Cemonite surfaces regenerate modernism's waste as spolia. Systemic change will thereby be aesthetically displayed on the surface, rendering the necessary transformation more appealing, and thus, hopefully more desirable.

MOSS

CYANOBACTERIA

LICHEN

MICROFUNGI

06

Adam Hudec

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Epidermitecture is concerned with the naturally occurring stains on urban surfaces and is exploring the aesthetic, ecological and functional potential of Urban surfaces within the context of Epidermitecture are defined as living, breathing entities that interact with their environments.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

Aesthetics of urban surfaces: The concept of aesthetics in urban surfaces is intrinsically linked to notions of cleanliness, whiteness, and the ongoing maintenance of these surfaces. Contemporary urban design and architectural practices prioritise the removal of any nonhuman life, reflecting a desire to preserve surfaces free of stains and biological material. In this context, the value of a surface is frequently assessed by its capacity to remain unblemished, leading to the systematic eradication of nonhuman life forms that appear on these surfaces, despite their significant ecological benefits.

The ecological aspects of urban surfaces: The ecological aspect of biopatinas and the significance of supporting rather than suppressing their growth is an intrinsic part of the project. Biopatinas function as natural filters, absorbing CO_2 and other airborne toxins. By maintaining biopatinas on urban surfaces, they help to mitigate the urban heat-island effect through their water vapour and structural properties, effectively cooling these surfaces. Additionally, biopatinas form protective films that shield surface materials from weathering. These phenomena are under-researched and are currently being investigated through the collection, cultivation, and analysis of biopatinas as part of this research project.

Functional concept: Project Epidermitecture seeks to redefine the function of urban surfaces overgrown by microorganisms, particularly exploring their potential as educational sites for urban environments. Within the discipline of architecture, there is sufficient expertise to design surfaces that support the growth of biopatinas. However, in contemporary discourse, such surfaces are typically perceived as abandoned, unmaintained, dirty, devalued, and in need of renovation or refreshment.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

The project "Blind Spot" (Weißer Fleck) addresses the ecological and functional significance of biopatinated urban surfaces through an intervention on the facade of a social housing estate in Vienna. A 10-meter diameter circle will be cleaned to create a stark contrast between the cleaned and naturally aged biopatinated surfaces, reflecting current maintenance practices that prioritise cleanliness over ecological benefits. This circle will serve as a long-term case study where researchers will monitor biopatina regrowth, heat absorption, and the uptake of CO_2, NO_2, and airborne dust. A carefully planned public program will educate the community on the benefits of biopatina-covered surfaces, fostering greater appreciation for these natural phenomena. The project challenges prevailing attitudes toward urban surface maintenance, demonstrating that biopatinas can provide significant ecological advantages.

Tim
Ingold

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

By the urban surface, I refer to the ground of what is commonly called the 'built environment'. It is distinguished by being paved.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

Earth-sky world, or weather-world: This is a concept that I have used in contrast to landscape. Where landscape focuses on the surface features of terrain upon which the perceiver moves around, with the earth-sky world, the perceiver is placed in the midst of earth and air, with the ground as a permeable membrane between them. Whereas the landscape might be imagined as the object of perception, the weather world is its milieu, underwriting our capacities to see, to hear and to touch.

Atmosphere: For science, atmosphere belongs to the world of insentient nature. It is defined as a gaseous envelope surrounding the earth. For aestheticians, by contrast, it is on the side of human sensations and perceptions, a space of feeling and affect. The two atmospheres, of meteorology and aesthetics, straddle the familiar divide between nature and humanity, materiality and sensoriality, cosmos and affect. To find a way beyond this division, I approach atmosphere in a way that is both aesthetic and meteorological. It is where the affective and the cosmic collide.

Hard surfacing: Hard surfacing, or paving, is the distinctive property of the built environment. It seals the soil below from the air above, setting up an interface between the two that can be penetrated only through vents, drains or cracks. While nothing can grow there, hard surfacing provides a solid platform for human activities, giving material support to the modernist illusion that life is lived on the ground, rather than in it.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

What if the city were an ocean, and its buildings ships?

This question was inspired by a recent exhibition of work by artist David Lemm, on the theme of wayfinding and mark-making in the city. Lemm had superimposed schematic icons pointing to details of buildings that could be seen from different locations, on old nautical charts. The exhibition led me to reflect upon how we think of buildings in relation to the ground of the city, as superstructure on infrastructure, placed upon the ground rather that sunk in its depths. On Lemm's charts, the parts of buildings not only appeared dis-

connected from one another, but seemed also to float like bric-a-brac upon the surface of the ocean. What if the ground of the city were like the ocean? Is it at ground level, rather than above or below, that the city has to contend with the forces of disintegration? For the mariner, the ship is a point of stillness in a turbulent world of sea and sky, and his attention is directed not to the surface but to currents below and winds above. How might we think of buildings and of the city differently, if we were to imagine the ground, likewise, to heave with the swell of the elements, and of buildings to converse with the earth and with the sky? What if our city maps were more like nautical charts, indicating depths and cardinal directions rather than surface features and their layout? With rising sea-levels, does this offer a glimpse into the future?

Simon
Marvin

PAL ACE CIN MA

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Urban surfaces - building walls and roofs, ground space including hard landscaping, water features and green nature - are being actively reconfigured as climate technologies to strategically modulate energy, thermal, liquid and chemical flows at the interface of atmospheric and terrestrial milieus.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

<u>Obduracy</u>: understanding the interweaving of surfaces with the uneven social and political processes of their production, construction, distribution and maintenance that 'locks-in' material performance that exacerbates climate insecurity.

<u>Infrastructure</u>: reconfiguring existing surfaces to develop new ecological capacities – reflecting heat, providing shade/cooling, extracting water, energy and carbon - that provide a 'fix' to the climate emergency.

<u>Experimenting</u>: contested socio-technical processes through which existing surfaces are made malleable as they are reimagined, reconfigured and re-materialized with novel ecological capacities.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

Urban studies have sought to 'look' the surface to provide an in-depth excavation of the less visible social, economic and political processes shaping urban life. Yet urban surfaces themselves are becoming a new focus for action primarily for engineering research, environmental NGOs and commercial innovators in a dual process of 'problematisation' and 'techno-solutionism'.

New experimental urban landscapes are revealing the complex and contested processes of making systemic change to urban surfaces in Sydney. Proposals to increase the thermally reflective qualities of urban roofs in overheating Western Sydney were abandoned following resistance from the construction sector. An award-winning green wall at One Central Park Sydney was served with an emergency building rectification order following the failure of the structural supports on the planting boxes and the potential threat to human life. A huge increase in the use of artificial grass in New South Wales sport fields has caused major controversy about the microplastic, urban heat and chemical compounds in the grass resulting in calls for the surface to be banned. Furthermore, university researchers are experimenting with even more complex surfaces that incorporate novel nanotechnologies in 'eco-active' building envelopes that can extract water, collect carbon and produce energy from the atmospheric milieu.

Urban surface start to become proto infrastructures that it is claimed can help modulate relations with planetary climate change. Even though urban surfaces are extremely 'thin', appear to be simple and uncomplicated these vignettes reveal that their existing performance and future reconfigurations are not socially or technically straightforward transitions. There is a need to examine the reconfiguration of urban surfaces as a socio-technical process that is political and contested and producing of uneven social-spatial capacities to modulate life-supporting milieu.

09

Liz Oakley
Brown

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

In 2017, Rebecca Coleman and I argued that 'The surface is ...potentially manifold and politically contingent' (2017: 6). By taking up and developing our earlier point, I define urban surfaces as parts of the physical environment dependent on scale, semiotics and social justice i.e. what's visible, what's communicable, and who matters? I extend this definition in the three concepts below.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

<u>Surficial scale, or what's visible?</u> If quotidian perspectives consider surfaces as straightforward planes of separation between various kinds of spaces, microscopical technologies reveal flat-seeming materials to be rough, ragged, interrelated things. The advances in and the availability of the scientific gear that enables some humans to view their surroundings in augmented conditions unsettle clear-cut representations of planetary conditions.

<u>Semiotic relationality, or what's communicable?</u> In its everyday use, the term 'urban surfaces' suggests a break between the semiotics of town/city and countryside. Yet post-Saussurean thinking shows how signs, signifiers and signifieds are connected by infinite loops of meaning. Like the apparatus that discerns the intricate textures of the physical environment, theories of textuality complicate coherent communication. The coinage of the word 'rurban' in early twentieth-century America to describe 'an area sharing both rural and urban characteristics' (OED) is an attempt to capture non-binary outlooks.

<u>Non-Privileged agencies, or who matters?</u> In the two concepts above, a predominantly Eurocentric human agency is privileged. The messy material and metaphorical notions unleashed by a deep dive into ideas of urban surfaces eventually leads to scrutinising the ideological tools that keep semiotic chaos in check. An ethical approach to urban surfaces aims to recognise the politics of privilege and to ensure that other views, other voices — and otherness in general — are key components of its praxis.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

Often advertised as structures that 'bring more nature to cities and make the world healthier and greener' (Fojtíčková 2021: para 6), contemporary architectural designs based on Stanley Hart White's living wall systems and/or Patrick Blanc's vertical gardens are becoming increasingly commonplace in Western cityscapes. Scrutinising living walls via the concepts 'surficial scale', 'semiotic relationality' and 'non-privileged agencies' helps to unpack the range of ecological and economic inequalities generally and specifically in play.

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10

Chris
Parkinson

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Urban surfaces are a portal into sinewy networks of rhythmic, relational and nonrepresentational concepts of urban space.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

Rhythm: Rhythm coordinates the relationship between space and time as an impressionistic analysis of social practices that perform everyday life. In studying surfaces through rhythm, the interconnectedness of the social, cultural and economic rhythms that shape cities deepen surface tension.

Intertextuality: Surfaces are an intertextual urban proposal presenting dialogue between the voice of the author of a text and other voices, creating a "cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and remediate one another."[1]

Passing through Walls: The wall is a surface of transfiguration and circulation, enabling the wall to transcend its materiality.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

The mischievous eyes of my friend, Roly, otherwise known as LoveHateLove, light up the still searingly humid Jogja, Indonesia evening.

"I CAN'T BE A SINGULAR EXPRESSION OF MYSELF. THERE'S TOO MANY PARTS. TOO MANY SPACES."[2]

Roly's black and white wheat-pasted posters zigzag through the city's jumble exclaiming his contingent relationship to Jogja's urban surface spatial, a spatial democratised in that way that passes through the walls of historically recent "democracies," connecting all that is post: colonialism, structuralism, modernism, conflict...

In *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*, Karen Strassler suggests that "the unprecedented access to the street as a surface for inscription in the post-Suharto period has been celebrated as a material embodiment of a democratic era of openness and popular participation."[3]

Through a lineage of activism[4], youth culture and transition[5], art collectivism[6] and intermediality[7], urban practices inscribe themselves onto the skin of Jogja, a palimpsest visualising democracy, post-Reformasi; participatory public practices constituted through art collectivism, belonging and everyday life.

If Dale Southerton's proposal of practice as a "configuration of activities that together form meaningful ways of doing and understanding everyday life," rings true, then it is through Roly's performance of his practice that rhythmic threads of contemporary urban life are reproduced."[8]

"I look at the assembly of everything," Roly says.

"The assembly of the intersection. The assembly of the T-Junction. The assembly of the traffic lights. If I like the assembly, I will put up the poster."

His material intervention upon the surface a refraction of regulatory rhythm.

"During COVID I was wanting to support a photocopy shop that had lost income, so I started wheat-pasting, so I could give the photocopy shop some business. I put these wheat pastes on the streets for the people who were homeless. I got small money for my business. I feel I need to give a share of my money. It's a support system. So I give my art to the street, via the printing business, and put the art into where the street people are to connect art and audiences to their life."

His pasted, paper proclamation integrates socio-economic networks along a particular rhythm of urban habitation.

"Yeah, LoveHateLove is balance, that's why in the pandemic era, people just had a lot about hate. Not love. Not care. So I just tried to give my voice – of LoveHateLove - to the street to remind everyone to think about the balance between the love and the hate during this difficult time. I put my pastes around to make people happy. To see the love amongst the hate, a visual provocation in every corner of the city to escape the city's restrictive politics and work independently, for collective good."

And with the thickened paste and brushes bagged and hooked back onto the scooter's carrier, the early morning's cool respite congealing with the pasty evening's diminished thickening, I learn how the surface is simultaneously a process involving social relations between people, between bodies, between economies, between late night and early light, a movement through, to borrow from Henri Lefebvre through Tim Ingold, a meshwork of rhythm.

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Untitled (10Foot et al), London, 2024. Image by author.

What is the position, relation, and location of the artefacts on this urban surface?

11

Rafael Schacter

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Urban seems easy enough define - something of or related to the city - whilst surfaces presents us with both a physical and conceptual idea of a boundary point (often between inside and out, above and below). In this context, however, and in today's increasingly surveilled, securitised, and privatised megalopolises, "urban surfaces" are critical spaces of conflict and contestation revealing the messy complexity of the city today.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

When thinking about urban surfaces, I often use three binary pairs to comprehend the images or artefacts that exist within them:

Position / Adjunctive vs Autonomous: Are these material forms attached to the city or always and already primary? Do they upset the distinction between primary (wall) and secondary (image/object) or are they self-sufficient and produced solely for themselves?

Relation / Interruptive vs Assimilative: Do these artefacts work to transgress the architectural borders of the city or to highlight and reinforce them? Do they contravene formal norms or affirm the urban order in which they reside?

Location, or Marginality vs Centrality: Are these objects situated within the periphery or core? Are they in-and-of the centre or at the liminal edge? Are they inside or outside state control? Are they set in mundane, commonplace locations or touristic and hegemonic ones?

Thinking about urban surfaces and the objects that exist upon / within them through these three situational elements (and others beside), can then help us to unpack the different affordances of urban spaces. Do they offer or prohibit possibilities? Do they ask questions or give answers? Do they direct us through or open up the city?

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

My provocation comes directly from my new book, *Monumental Graffiti*, in which I re-position graffiti as a monument (in literal, not simply metaphorical terms) in order to question the state of the city today. Rather than understanding monument in its most contemporaneously predominant sense, as that which is permanent and large-scale, as that which is set into stone and set upon a pedestal, I take the term "monument" back to its etymological roots to signify a material reminder, advice, or warning (from the Latin *monere*). Here monument emerges not via a specific style or material but through its status as a publicly positioned artifact reaching out to us on a social scale. And why is this important for thinking through urban surfaces? Well, not only are both institutional monuments and graffiti omnipresent in nearly every city in the world, but they are both subject to forms of iconoclasm (whether top-down or bottom-up), and both critical to understanding the desires of the city and its citizens (whether top-down or bottom-up).

Unpacking both graffiti and monument in this way will, as outlined in *Monumental Graffiti*, help us to clarify the resonances and capacities, affordances and vulnerabilities of these material forms while simultaneously coming to address the "crisis" over monuments and public art today. It defetishises and vernacularises our monuments — both our institutional and graffiti variants — in order to reexamine what they do and how they work, as much as to reassess the strange power they have over us and our contemporary urban surfaces.

12

1. Present a definition of urban surfaces that is pertinent to your discipline and research.

Urban surfaces act as display boards where the needs of the governed and the interests of government intersect, offering insights into societal structures and issues. The surfaces not only reflect the society they also sustain the society.

2. List some concepts that best capture your approach to researching the surfaces of cities.

Urban Governance: There is a constant tension between maintaining clean, aesthetically pleasing public wall surfaces and addressing the practical needs of a densely populated city with inadequate infrastructure, which are reflected on these surfaces. This also includes the government's contradictory role in combatting defacement while using walls for political and policy advertisements.

Socioeconomic Surface Dynamics: The things that appear—or don't appear—on urban walls reveal a lot about society, reflecting underlying socioeconomic and political conditions. Despite government efforts to keep walls clean for a well-organised reflection of the community, certain features persist. Visual elements like pasted flyers, paan stains, and evidence of public urination high-light issues such as the lack of public facilities, high unemployment rates, and the reliance of small businesses on wall surfaces for informal employment opportunities for the poor. These markings tell a deeper story about the challenges and resilience within urban environments and how surfaces sustain society.

Power dynamics on surfaces: Surfaces reveal the unseen power that exists there. Certain elements on a surface negotiate their presence, coexisting without overpowering others, while some exert dominance, covering everything else. Additionally, what power is inherent in the walls, absorbed by their surfaces? A surface can tell us a lot about the power dynamics of those who reside within the walls, those who pass by them, and those who leave their marks on them.

3. Present a recent case study or provocation.

Patna is a highly populated city in India with a very low per capita income. Its streets are filled with a diverse array of visual elements, including commissioned artworks, hand-painted advertisements, large hoardings, rows of pasted flyers, religious imagery, and warnings against defacement. Additionally, the walls often bear red paan stains and evidence of people urinating on them. While some features, like hoardings and artworks, are widely accepted, others, such as pasted flyers, urine, and paan stains on the walls, are perceived as nuisances. Efforts are made to mitigate their presence on public walls by using commissioned paintings, prohibitive messaging, and religious imagery in an attempt to control the visibility of the city, as clean and orderly surroundings are taken to signify a well-organised community.

However, in a densely populated city where public facilities are inadequate and there is a lack of public toilets and spittoons, such defacement reflects underlying societal needs and the necessity for improved infrastructure. The flyers on the walls also double as advertisements and employment opportunities for the poor. Small businesses, unable to afford large advertisements, hire people in this high-unemployment city to paste them on public walls, where the unemployed find menial jobs to earn their daily bread. Thus, these features persist on the streets with some spatial changes, sustaining the society and highlighting the ongoing negotiations between combating defacement and its perpetuation.

The government also relies on the wall surfaces for promoting some policies, especially during election time when political parties use them for visibility. Political advertisements and publicity of government policies often overpower and cover any available space except the houses of politically important people, highlighting the power dynamics and contradicting governmental attempts to keep surfaces clean and aesthetically pleasing. This results in two conflicting forms of governance on public surfaces, creating a new canvas.

The USRN brings together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, to examine the roles and uses of urban surfaces, and their contribution to the formation of urban cultures, politics, and atmospheres. It is a multidisciplinary group with contributions from sociology, geography, architecture, communication, media, and visual and material studies.

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