

Culture + critical thinking + activism = MOVEMENT MAKING

By Shelagh Wright and Peter Jenkinson

Across Europe and across the world cities, where most people now live, are not only expanding but are also displacing existing communities and historic civic structures as the inevitable 'price of progress'. The movements of new municipalism have grown from civic and collective activism to resist and reclaim. The fire of this activism has been fuelled by playful and provocative creative and cultural work that has sparked people's imaginations and critical thought. It has been the confluence of social movements, civil society organisations, citizens platforms and cultural groups together that has forged the potential for lasting political change.

Cultural acts and processes have been a core part of political expression, protest and resistance from the year dot with artists acting as dissenters and dissidents. Physical and visual symbolism in civic and political protest has power, it engages and motivates the crowd and attracts media attention, often globally. From the raised fist to taking a knee, graffiti from ancient times through street art and on to Banksy and JR, Rosa Parks standing up by sitting down on a Montgomery bus, the fall of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad, the Gay Pride flag, umbrellas in Hong Kong, sunflowers in Taiwan, pink knitted pussy hats in Washington....

New democracies depend on a vibrant civil society which engages citizens to challenge and change their community. It is therefore necessary to know the tactics and strategies groups, campaigners, activists and organisers can work with to raise awareness, move people, change their views, and get them engaged. The past decade has witnessed a surge in cultural and artistic activism. But is this tactic useful in movement building, or are there better ways to work?

The Nordic Experiment (Fritt Ord) is an evidence-based, empirical study of the variable impact of creative forms of activism on a public audience in terms of ideas, ideals and actions. Working with partners: ActionAid, RAPolitics and Roskilde University in Denmark, and the Center for Artistic Activism in New York, researchers staged the first ever public experiment of the comparative efficacy and of cultural activism versus more conventional forms of activist interventions.

And guess what - in every quantitative measure the creative approach is more successful than a conventional activist one. And it has a qualitative impact on how people think and feel. People find conventional activists predictable and annoying but creative forms of activism make people curious and more affected; and can - productively - disturb and unsettle. The full report by the Fritt Ord Nordic Experiment can be found [here](#).

So the work of creative and cultural activists in movement making has a real impact. Not only in inspiration and active participation but also in reflection, critical thinking and changing mindsets for longer-term shifts towards new realities. Cultural forms, acts, images and processes have been a core element of political expression, protest and resistance from the outset in municipalism. They have been a powerful tool in movement making and shaping the expression of municipalism, but these cultural processes also have power in maintaining the spirit of the movements.

Yellow Duck Protests, Belgrade

Ne da(vi)mo Beograd - We won't let Belgrade d(r)own



"A lot of people liked the duck as a symbol as 'duck' has a multi-layered meaning. Sometimes it is ridiculous how they [the police] are bothered by the duck. It looks like they are afraid they will get a direct order to arrest it" Radomir Lazovic, Yellow Duck protester, 2015

The Serbian initiative 'Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own' was formed in 2014 and changed the way citizens think about transparency and their role in relation to urban development projects. It was triggered by a controversial development project that would transform Belgrade's waterfront into skyscraper

luxury apartments and five star hotels. The plan was the biggest development in Serbia's history. It was a

familiar tale of top-down regeneration 'revitalising' a 'run down' area of the city with gentrification, demolition, displacement and social cleansing.

The €3.5 billion development would be funded by Emirati petrodollars. It also emerged that the project would be 68% owned by the developer as a private actor capitalising on public resources. Details of the multi-billion-dollar project were not made public, there was no consultation and the demolition took place at night. The project had been classified as 'of national significance' so that it could bypass bureaucratic hurdles, it was taking place behind closed doors.

Opposition and dissent began to grow. It started with the conventional steps: filing official complaints about changes to the urban development plans and requesting public hearings. More than 2,000 complaints were filed but all of them were rejected. The activists then got creative, they organised small performances, such as singing at the public hearing of the plan. Then came the first protest with the big Yellow Duck. A yellow duck the size of a car became the symbol and rallying call for action - funny, friendly and absurd, it sent powerful, compelling and sustained political messages. It was subversive and concealed subtle messages, codes and metaphors and counter-narratives to the status quo. Yellow duck is a symbol of civil resistance and of ongoing fraud and corruption and in Serbian 'duck' also means 'dick'.

Small-scale actions were followed by mass protests in 2015 and at the beginning of 2016 the watershed moment followed the demolition, when citizens showed up in great numbers to protest, demanding resignations and laying criminal responsibility at the door of officials. In the following months, ten major protests took place, each one bigger than the last. At the height of the protests, there were 20,000 people on the streets of Belgrade – the biggest civic protests since those that toppled Slobodan Milošević in 2000.

From the beginning, the initiative included direct actions and mass protests, using legal challenges to the development, as well as iconic symbolism and intense media campaigns. The development which contravenes Serbian legislation is still underway, but the protest has nevertheless injected a new sense of hope onto the streets of Belgrade. It has showed the strength of its citizens willing and ready to take back control of their city, their lives and their future. It has changed mindsets and stirred critical thought and action. Ever since, a growing number of Belgradians have been demanding that citizens be consulted and heard on major urban development projects. Crowds have taken to the street with the famous duck logo to challenge the process of how citizens are left out in major investment and development schemes.

Gradually the Yellow Duck movement has become an example to others, of how local communities lose their grip on their neighborhoods to institutions that hold financial power over them, and how they can creatively reclaim power. Yellow Duck has subsequently been taken up in many other places around the world, most prominently in Brazil, China and Russia.

PAH - Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) and the Movimientos de Liberación Gráfica (Movement for Graphic Liberation)

"If we are able to imagine another Barcelona, we are capable of transforming it // If we are able to imagine a Barcelona city, we are capable of transforming ourselves"
Movimientos de Liberación Gráfica Barcelona Facebook



The 2008 global financial crisis quickly turned into a housing crisis in Spain because of the preceding growth in home ownership. Franco had created opportunities for people to own a home as a strategy to avoid revolution. Since the transition, parties on both sides had further encouraged home ownership. The financial and housing crisis hit, and rising unemployment left many families facing eviction being unable to pay their mortgages. Previously, if you were unable to pay your mortgage you sold your house, but now no-one wanted to buy. The little-known Spanish foreclosure law allowed banks to evict if an owner defaulted on just one mortgage payment. Ten years after the financial crash, half-a-million people have been evicted from their homes.

In 2009 a small group of housing activists and progressive academics came together to contemplate what could be done. They set up an organisation to enable people to deal with this situation collectively - the PAH, *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (platform for people affected by mortgages). The PAH knew the problem was big and that it was impossible to fix people's housing issues one by one. Instead, they needed to create spaces where people could teach each other how to solve their own problems with others. They held Monday-night assemblies where people who were more experienced with housing issues helped those who were newly subject to evictions. Through working together, people came to realise the source of their problems was public policy. And to solve their own problem, and the broader policy problem, they had to work together.

Dozens of people took direct action to stop evictions, standing in front of threatened premises, risking arrest. The movement had come a long way once people lost their sense of shame and fear. Everyday people were prepared to take part in high-risk non-violent civil disobedience, and every time they won they became emboldened changemakers. These were not just the immediately dispossessed but also others from the young urban, precarious, creative social sector.

People brought professional skills linked to the production and dissemination of knowledge, language, visual arts, media and journalism. They helped to shape the movement language, ethos, and aesthetics. A group of local artists and designers dubbed themselves the Movimientos de Liberación Gráfica (Movements for Graphic Liberation). This network of graphic artists, designers, animators and sketch artists, extended the visual imagination of the campaigns beyond the official design elements. Using social media platforms such as Facebook groups, Instagram, and Tumblr to discuss ideas and then to share and distribute images. This use of social media alongside multiple informal, often word-of-mouth, and more formal channels, like the workplace, amplified and multiplied the campaign to become viral.

Started in Barcelona and Madrid, the Movimientos de Liberación Gráfica have been replicated in other neighbourhoods and cities with many more artists, designers and cultural producers putting their creative skills in service of the movements. With their explosion of campaign creativity these local platforms have created viral dissemination of imagery more effectively and cheaply than any central campaign. Their imagination and humour has worked to completely transform the sense of what is politically possible and change realities.