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## Perspectives

How to cite:

Krueger, Rob. “Art, Social Change, and the Green City: A Rebuke of Green Metropolitanization.” In: “Green City: Explorations and Visions of Urban Sustainability,” edited by Simone M. Müller and Annika Mattissek, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2018, no. 1, 81–88. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8470.

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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088  
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Rob Krueger

## Art, Social Change, and the Green City: A Rebuke of Green Metropolitanization<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: The Green City and the Lost Mandate for Change

In his wonderful essay, *My Lost City* (2005), F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the character Bunny, an old schoolmate of the narrator, to lament the process of metropolitanization. In the story's opening sequence, Fitzgerald reflects on Bunny's transition as his narrator observes the protagonist from his taxi:

He was no longer the shy little scholar of Holder Court—he walked with confidence, wrapped in his thoughts and looking straight ahead, and it was obvious that his new background was entirely sufficient to him. (106)

For Fitzgerald, Bunny's disposition exemplifies the process of metropolitanization, whereby our perceptions of the city are desensitized and become regularized, naturalized, and even hyper rationalized, so that our bandwidth of observation is narrowed to perceive and respond only to those stimuli that are out of the realm of the new ordinary. We become accustomed to the smells, sounds, and goings-on around us, nefarious or otherwise. Like Bunny's experience, the rise and fall of the green city vision resulted from a naturalization of a certain concept of greenness, one that can now be indicated by technology, measured quantitatively, and promoted by the private sector.

With its conceptual roots in sustainable development, the green city once posed an alternative vision for society that required human-environment interactions to consider concerns of ecological integrity, social equity, *and* economic prosperity. In the late 1990s, however, the green city movement emerged from a fringe imaginary and entered popular and policy lexicons. Compact urban development, smart growth, and transit-oriented development are all monikers of this new regime. Cities were now able to become “eco-friendly,” “human-scaled,” and host green buildings and other new infrastructures. The “city” was also discursively transformed into a bourgeois utopia. It is precisely this

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Simone Müller, Sabine Dörry, and Tim Freytag for their editorial comments. All remaining mistakes are owned by me.

marriage of the green city to the bourgeois imagination that has stripped it of its emancipatory potential; metropolitanization has been draped over the green city and softened the edginess that established it as an alternative, transformative development project. Indeed, the green city is so enmeshed with neoliberal capitalism it has become its own regime of capitalist growth.

This essay seeks an antidote for metropolitanization in the context of the green city—green metropolitanization, if you will. In an attempt to drive a wedge into this condition, I bring in art, or, more precisely, the process of creating art, as a way to recapture the emancipatory potential of green cities. I first examine the role that art can play in green metropolitanization. Here, I examine how the process of creating art provides a lens into seeing those invisible aspects of life, in this case, green city life. I then offer a very brief look at an unlikely artist, Adam Smith, extending the argument from the previous section to show how the process works in the context of social theory. In the penultimate section, I quickly explore the work of three artists, Banksy, Marina Abramovich, and JR, as exemplars of the type of thinking we need if we are to see past the bourgeois green city. Finally, I bring the discussion back to green metropolitanization.

### **Leveraging Art for Social Change**

In contrast to metropolitanization, the role of art, any medium of art—and by “art” I particularly mean the process of imagining and creating art—in social change has been vanquished to the realm of the dreamer who, in business terms, doesn’t understand how to “efficiently” “incent” the “value proposition” to the “customer.” Perhaps, we have been able to overlook art as a possible entry point to social change because of the organizing successes of various radical discourses to reveal—and many have with microscopic clarity—the injustices that presently endanger our planet and the people who live on it. I think particularly of the Occupy movement, the anti-austerity demonstrations in the UK and Europe, the Climate March, and the Arab Spring. These discourses and the movements that emerged from them attracted followers because they offered an alternative to those who suffered under the status quo. Despite their popularity, where did many of these movements go? Who remembers Syria’s ongoing revolution as something other than a war against ISIL or a side war between Russia and the US, for example?

I want to bring attention to how art, in its various forms, can be brought to bear on social change; the kind of social change that we need to discharge “the green city” in favor of something more progressive. Art has long been a power in social life, having been used as a tool of discipline for the church (e.g., medieval arts) and to reify the “power” of empires (e.g., the cathedral in Cologne, Germany). Art has also captured the beauty of human labor (e.g., in *The Reaper* by Van Gogh). And, art has captured nature as sublime (e.g., Albert Bierstadt) and transcendent (e.g., Ansel Adams). Art has been used to amplify tensions between Western and non-Western ideologies (e.g., Shostakovich and Stravinsky). Artists have also sought to make pointed political statements, such as Picasso’s *Guernica*. Finally, art has captured what slain environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa called the “omnicide.” Omnicide is something we carry out daily on people and the planet in the name of “progress” and our “quality of life.” Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, in his current project on the Anthropocene, suggests that his photographs and films must capture phenomena that are “either invisible or marked by an absence” (Khatchadourian 2016). Art and the artists who create it, then, present to us, if we choose to take it, the opportunity to “see” what has not been seen before and to reimagine what we have seen. Certainly, art can reify power, and while it does not constitute social movements, it can inspire them.

### **Adam Smith: An Unlikely “Artist”?**

To examine more closely the process of art and social change I will now turn to an unlikely artist, Adam Smith (1723–1790). In this brief discussion I want to highlight the process he went through to create his ideas about economy and society. Smith’s process is important here because he wrests from economic chaos a way forward that, he felt, would provide a better quality of life for everyone.

Many historians of economics and biographers of Adam Smith have commented that the prodigious moral philosopher reconciled his views on a moral economy by observing the detritus of human exploitation, ecological degradation, and willy-nilly systems of exchange that blanketed the urban and rural landscapes of the United Kingdom in the eighteenth century. Against all odds, Smith deduced from his observations that an individual, acting in self-interest, can provide a broad social benefit.

My point here is to draw attention to Smith's method of building a beautiful theory: through the observation of the mundane, tired, daily activities of being human. For Smith, society cannot be conceived of as a static achievement—unchanged, unchanging, from one generation to the next. Rather, it is an organism with its own life history. Like a painter with a canvas, a photographer with a Kodak Brownie, or a sculptor with stone or casting metal, Smith imagined and used his words to sketch out a social system vastly different from the one he observed. Smith took his own artistic license to the conditions of his time to create what he thought would be a utopia for all human beings.

For Smith, the subject of his art was visible and in front of him, yet no one could “see” it until he wrote about it. Like Burtynsky's effort to capture images of the Anthropocene, Smith sought to capture organization where it wasn't perceived to exist. The opportunity to produce art is everywhere: some people synthesize disparate elements of life to reveal new insights, give voice to those who have been silenced, and make us bear witness to what we cannot see or choose to ignore. Artistic vision, as in the case of Smith, can be brought to new social imaginaries that provide a basis for social change.

### **Art and the Search for Big Ideas Today**

Art, whether it be sculpture, avant-garde building design, or even the written word, embodies a method for how we see or perceive; this brings new imaginaries and radical approaches for creating a more dignified human-environment relationship with people and the ecosystems that we inhabit. We could explore the work of many different artists—important social commentators who have gained notoriety because they were at the fringe of their disciplines and beyond some people's imagination.

In this section, I reflect on the work of three artists: Banksy, Marina Abramović, and JR. Each artist's method of seeing provides an argument for my critique of the green city.

Consider the first form of open-source “code”: graffiti. Graffiti has been behind a number of social imaginaries. The London street artist Banksy has moved people with his stencils of cops kissing, rats impersonating politicians, and panhandlers rejecting coins and asking for “change,” jarring amalgamations of societal modes of discipline and explicit calls for change. Banksy forces us to process, through visualization, what many

people merely utter in daily political discourse. Further, Banksy's project is grounded in anarchism. For him, art should be free and readily available to the public, not stored in the staid institution of the museum or bourgeois gallery in SoHo.

While Banksy plies his trade in the dead of night out of the sight of onlookers, he understands the importance of people in his art. As I mentioned above, this is open-source communication 2.0. Consider the Code of Hammurabi depicted on the basalt obelisk, Mayan temples, or the Ville Nouvelle in Casablanca, Morocco, all of which reify normal behavior and power. Banksy, too, uses objects and architecture to deploy his own code: walls, the sides of buildings, billboards, anywhere he finds an open canvas. In contrast to open-source 1.0, Banksy seeks to disrupt our impression of the normal and the natural(ized). Having people see his images is therefore important to his art. It's open source because in contrast to Italian Renaissance painters whose canvases were only on view in churches and the stately homes of merchants and friends of the church, he puts his out there for everyone. His provocative images demand we pay attention and consider the messages they portend. Art should be free. Art is democratic.

Marina Abramović is a performance artist who often self-mutilates, and her work tests the limits and blurs the boundaries between the artist and audience. She reveals the agency of the ordinary by having her audience bear witness to how the ordinary can be transformed to the extraordinary. In 2014, at the Serpentine Gallery in London's Hyde Park, I participated in the creation of a Marina Abramović "512 hours" installation just by showing up and following instructions from strangers. Art has the power to catalyze transformation.

For Abramović, the message is that the *barrier* between performer and observer is a false dichotomy. There is a tension there, for sure. Where the layperson takes the perceived message is open ended, overdetermined, and colored by ideology. By explicitly turning over control of her message, Abramović accepts the contingency of the outcome and rather views the process of engagement and creation as the beauty of her contribution. Abramović thus reminds us that no matter how elegant our design, how pure our assumptions about people and/or nature, change occurs within change and it's the process of the evolving idea that is of critical importance.

Another example is JR, the French photographer who captured the imagination of people in 127 countries with his massive collages of photographs pasted in the slums of



“Time is Now, Yalla!”  
A photobooth set up by  
JR in Israel/Palestine.  
Photo by Camlacaze  
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Wikimedia Commons.

Nairobi, a favela in Rio, and in Tunisia around the time of the Arab Spring. JR received a large grant that enabled him to invite people from around the world to send him photos that he would print and send back so they could paste their own images and messages. This project has bridged divides caused by race and religious alienation in the Paris suburbs, fostered public discussions on freedom of speech in Tunisia, and on violence against the youth in Brazil. Following JR, art can emerge out of the lived experiences of the world’s invisible people. He exposes the implications for those who are victims, direct and indirect, of chronic violent crime. He captures the concerns and fears of the majority who don’t show up to the public demonstration. Finally, he reveals the invisible and inspiring humanity that exists in post-natural disaster communities.

The work of these artists provides a way of framing the disconnect between green metropolitanization and its emancipatory potential. The juxtaposition of Banksy’s work, the cringe factor of self-mutilation and the participatory nature of Abramovich’s work, and the valorization of the mundane, the hidden, and the lost in JR’s work—each of these artists forces us to question our assumptions about social relations, the relationship between subject and object, and the winners and losers. For example,

Banksy's juxtapositions can act as a metaphor for who greening the city is actually for. All too often, greening amounts to a set of amenities for those who can afford them, not a democratic distribution of sustainability principles. Abramovich reminds us that the green city does NOT fall under the sole discretion of experts. Everyone has a stake in the green city; there are no professional or lay barriers. Finally, JR reminds us of forgotten urban dwellers, those who remain outside the green city mandate. His images should serve as a reminder that despite often good intentions, there are winners and losers in the sustainable city.

### **Art and a Rebuke of the Green City**

*People think that the most appropriate building is a rectangle, because that's typically the best way of using space. But is that to say that landscape is a waste of space? The world is not a rectangle. (Hadid 2013)*

A generation ago, the green city was somewhat of a science fiction, an urban utopia when cities were derelict and unfashionable. Urban designers, like Zaha Hadid, reimagined places that maintained ecological solvency, were accessible to everyone, and, of course, beautiful. Today, the green city is marred by techno-fixes and self-aggrandizing marketing. The heating, ventilation, and cooling system (HVAC) has become more important than the progressive aesthetic green cities used to stand for. Instead of architects designing buildings, we now have architectural engineers privileging building physics over aesthetics that embody a structure's social purpose. Green buildings, and their composites, green cities, are efficient and rectangular. We accept them because they are green and forget to ask what the larger social purpose was meant to be.

The three examples from above, Banksy, Abramović, and JR, both provide reproach and offer insight into the green city failure. Banksy's egalitarian approach. Abramović's defiance of the "expert" versus "lay" person. And JR, who visualizes the subaltern and forgotten urban dweller. The green city has increased our confidence in the urban; it has also made us comfortable with what was once derelict, industrial, and dirty. Like Bunny, we are confident in our urban surroundings. Yet, in the process, it has distorted the reality of the city. The artists above remind us that cities are not rectangular mosa-



ics designed by experts. They are communal affairs; they are transformative; they are for everyone. They are not only for those who can afford them. And, change that is not mindful and deliberately progressive only serves to hide or displace suffering.

Taking inspiration from the creative method of artists, it's time to take a walk in the green city and cast our gaze on what isn't there.

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