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Ways of Knowing the Landscape of the New Town: A Lefebvrian Analysis

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Abstract

This chapter explores how knowledge of landscape has been produced by different groups of interests in the Mark 3 partnership new town of Warrington, UK, referring specifically to a neighbourhood called Birchwood. I introduce my on- going research project *Days of the New Town* and present findings as a point of encounter between knowledge of landscape as professional expertise and as socially lived experience. I place this encounter within the theoretical context of Lefebvre's writings on social space. Specifically, I use his spatial triad, three overlapping concepts on how space is produced as lived, conceived and perceived(see *The Production of Space* 1973 translated into English in 1991). Having grown up in Birchwood, I carry with me a knowledge of this space in terms of lived experience. Whilst I do not call upon personal experience in this paper, the aim of bringing about a

greater awareness of the new town as a space of lived experience has been a motivational factor in researching and writing about the ways we formulate our knowledge of new towns: knowledge which can co-exist with the official archives of New Town Development Corporations.

Key words: Landscape; Planning; sense of place; Lefebvre;

Introduction

In *Notes on the New Town* (1962/1995), Sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901 - 1991) writes about the new town of Mourenx in the department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, built in the late 1950s to house workers of a nearby gas processing plant. The neighbouring town of Navarrenx happened to be Lefebvre's home town and it has a history dating back to medieval times. He suggests it bears the traces of a "1000-year-old community", and goes on to refer to the town as an 'expiring seashell', one that has kept its form but is vegetating and emptied of, for example, its craftsmen, its market traders, and other aspects of the historical activity that gave the town its characterful social life. Still, Navarrenx is a town that over the centuries, has forged its own 'spatial practices' (to use Lefebvre's own terminology); it has appropriated spaces for its own requirements. For Lefebvre, Navarrenx gains its legibility through its lived experience. This is the natural growth and natural character Marx refers to when discussing the pre-industrial town or village, lost to us since the Industrial Revolution. The new town of Mourenx on the other hand, embodies the terrifying prospect at the heart of the planner's representations of space in modern capitalist society, a place devoid of spontaneity, 'surprise, possibilities', and the potential of people to take control of their lives and create a lived space for themselves, in a future (socialist) world. Instead, the planner, acting discretely, has created spaces that are only *too* legible, spaces which have already

conceived of all the human activity that will ever take place in them, creating bored compliant citizens.

Here every object has its use and declares it. [...] everything is clear and intelligible. Everything is trivial. Everything is closure and materialised system [...] despite the architects' efforts to vary the lines. Surprise? Possibilities? From this place, which should have been the home to all that is possible, they have vanished without trace. (Lefebvre 1962/ 1995, p. 119)

In this short essay, Lefebvre articulates a concern about new towns that persists in the popular imagination to this day. The idea that an entirely planned residential space will always, inevitably sit at a disjointed angle with the lived experience of those who will inhabit it. That somehow it is impossible for planners to conceive of a whole, self-contained area for housing, industrial employment and amenities in a way that is flexible enough to allow for culture, character and interest to thrive as it does in towns or cities - places with a history. Around a decade on from writing *Notes on the New Town*, Lefebvre published *The Production of Space*, a hugely influential text, which when it appeared in English in 1991 went on to inspire the 'spatial turn' in the Anglo-American Social Sciences. It is a text which demands space (not just time) to be duly considered part of Marxist criticism of Capitalist society. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre pursues the idea that space is deeply fragmented in both theoretical and material terms by the functional urbanism produced by modern Capitalism, and he therefore seeks to unify our idea of how social space is produced. Our thought and social experience are fragmented, and a radical re-thinking of how we have come to produce space historically is required as a first step in realising what is possible beyond Capitalism.

What is at stake in examining Warrington, (and in particular the New Town expansion area of Birchwood) using Lefebvre's conceptual framework of the spatial triad, (which Lefebvre introduces in *The Production of Space*) is the potential that 50 years on from Warrington's designation as a partnership new town, (meaning the Development Corporation worked with the existing Local Authority to expand the existing town) the resident is key to the way space becomes meaningful. This allows for a move beyond the tendency to circulate around the planner/ architect's agenda for social space in the New Town. This tendency criticises the new towns of Britain as over-planned and inflexible to the dynamism of the social life of successive generations as well as to the broad political changes occurring in Britain from the 1980s onward. This is a view which has gained ground since the 1980s in the public imagination, indeed it forms the basis of a 2018 documentary film *New Town Utopia* about Basildon (Smith 2018). Whilst there is little doubt that the planner's vision of new towns in the post war years have often failed to withstand the changes referred to, I want to acknowledge an effect of focusing on the planner's agenda is to construct the resident as powerless subject of the planning profession, a criticism I found myself pondering upon first reading *Notes on the New Town*. I am seeking to augment the critical landscape by illustrating that Birchwood gains its legibility through a combination of the Development Corporation's vision, *and* how residents made it a lived space. Through the project Days of the New Town, I seek to acknowledge the intimate emotional and historical markers of personal biography of residents, rather than reproducing the image of the resident as disgruntled and powerless consumers of the planners blueprint. Working with a definition of space as political and socially produced by successive groups and generations, it is important to think beyond the confines of how space has been produced by planning and administrative institutions alone, and to consider the value of how residents have constructed meaning of space through lived experience.

Contextualising Birchwood, Warrington in a Lefebvrian analysis

Warrington in England's north-west sits equidistant between Manchester and Liverpool. Due to its convenient location and the availability of land, the British government identified it as an ideal growth point for job creation and new housing (WNTDC 1972a p.2). It was designated a partnership New Town in April 1968. One expansion area was named Birchwood, situated around 8 km to the north east of the centre of the 'old' town' and covering approximately 4 km from east to west and 2 km north to south. The original aim was to house 21,000 people (WNTDCb, 1972) in a combination of Development Corporation built houses for rent, and privately built homes for sale. This was scaled down and the current population of Birchwood is between 11 and 12,000 people. The Development Corporation was wound up in 1989 and the expansion areas were incorporated into the Warrington Borough Council's administrative responsibilities. This chapter considers the role of landscape design in constructing the idea of social space. It is in Birchwood, that the Development Corporation staff have commented on how their 'ecological planning approach' found its fullest expression:

Birchwood, if not the whole of Warrington as an expanded new town does not figure prominently in recent published literature on British New Towns, yet the story of the landscape in Birchwood suggests it was a unique and radical experiment in landscaping for residential areas. The singular concept for Birchwood was to take an "Ecological Approach" in creating a 'natural' woodland setting for the houses and amenities. The Development Corporation used a detailed understanding of the existing vegetation found on site, and based planting on these findings as well as knowledge of the site's natural history. There was a

philosophical underpinning of this ecological approach (which is considered later in the chapter) part of which posited landscape to be an integral part of the way residents develop feelings of belonging to and ownership of the place. When the Warrington New Town Development Corporation was wound up in 1989, the coppicing required to maintain the landscape as originally conceived was not continued. The look and overall feel of the green spaces changed to something less managed. A question for this research then has been how the evolution of the landscape design over the past 40 years has affected resident's sense of place and sense of belonging.

At the beginning of 2016, I began to explore the official archive of the Warrington New Town Development Corporation. Held by the Local Archive at Chester it provides a chronology of the New Towns development. This archive reflects a particular understanding where space becomes a set of administrative concerns, of technocratic rationalisation, of compartmentalisation of human activity. It is a world which resonates very strongly with Henri Lefebvre's idea of 'representations of space', or 'conceived space'. This forms one part of his 'spatial triad' consisting of closely bonded, inter-related concepts of how different spaces are produced as lived, conceived and perceived.

One element of the spatial triad is representations of space (also referred to as conceived space) which Lefebvre describes as "conceptualised space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub-dividers and social engineers – all of whom identify what is lived...with what is conceived...this is the dominant space in any society" (1974/1991, p. 38). Representations of space are "shot through with knowledge (*savoir*) – i.e a mixture of understanding (*connaissance*) and ideology...they play a part in social and political practice" (ibid, p.41) and are thus capable of intervening in and modifying spatial textures.

Another concept in the triad is spatial practice or ‘perceived space’, how we decipher space through both our “daily reality” (routines such as a commute to work) and through “urban reality” that is “the routes and networks which link up places set aside for work, private life and leisure” (1974/1991, p. 38). Our reality is structured by these often repetitious uses of space. Here, Lefebvre proposes a dialectical interaction between spatial practice and society: “The spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space...it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it” (1974/1991, p.38).

The other dimension of the spatial triad is ‘representational space’, or directly lived space, Lefebvre describes such spaces as “directly lived through its associated images and symbols... which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects”. This is described as dynamic and fluid by Lefebvre and is aligned with our everyday, embodied experience of space; “it embraces the loci of passion, of action, of lived situations (ibid, p.42).

Lefebvre suggests that these three “conceived-perceived-lived” elements have the potential to interconnect in a person’s apprehension and experience of space. For example, constructing the meaning of a given space is coloured by one’s inner self, one’s imagination and memory. To physically enter that space and move around it is to have the planner’s will, the architect’s vision, the state’s by-law coexist, concord or interfere with that experience. Key to the potential uses of the spatial triad as a way of understanding and articulating the production process, is how the elements interact. Lefebvre suggests that the three elements “contribute in different ways to the production of space according to their qualities and attributes, according to the society or mode of production in question, and according to the historical period” (Lefebvre 1974/1991, p. 46). I propose to reflect on how these dimensions of producing space can contribute to contemporary understandings of being in a New Town. I argue that the initial findings from my research project Days of the New Town, permit more

of a reflection of the New Town as a representational space than conventional histories and reviews of new town development have permitted.

Ways of knowing the New Town

Alexander (2006) suggests that up to, and arguably after the early 1970s, the New Towns building programme in Britain avoided the kind of scrutiny that would question the programme's fundamental assumptions that planned environments would improve lives (See Alridge, 1979; Alexander, 2006). The literature reviewing post-war New Town development from the 1970s (as the programme was building the last phase of New Towns in the UK) tend to frame the New Town foremostly as a 'representation of space'. Rather than reflecting on articulations of space as directly lived by residents, accounts tended to offer a perspective on the agenda and actions of government at national and local level, and the Development Corporation managers (Schaeffer, 1970; Evans, 1972; Osborn and Whittick, 1977; Cullingworth, 1977). The anonymous resident in these accounts appears within the order created by the administrative complex of the government and development corporation. For example, the residents experience is referred to in terms of whether their social and recreational needs are being adequately *provided for*, is the size and scope of the social development department in the New Town effective etc. (Schaeffer, 1970; Evans, 1972). A notable and worthy exception here is the television documentary from 1980 *New Town, Home Town* written and presented by Colin Ward where he interviews residents of some of the first wave of New Towns. There was also a book of the same name (Ward, 1993) where he foregrounds residents' perspective (in-comers and those who lived in areas prior to New Town designation) in producing a social history of the New Town in Britain.

The enduring legacy of the new town project, and the literature generated by the Town and Country Planning Association, one of the foremost lobbying organisations in favour of the New Town building programme in the UK was the assumption that lives could be improved through planning. Consider one of the objectives of the original outline plan for Warrington: “[to] make Warrington a pleasant place in which to live, work and grow up” (WNTDC b, 1972). In more recent times, a concern has been articulated through the work of academic researchers and film makers as to where in that kind of assumption, the resident was able to intervene as an autonomous, speaking, feeling subject. The years 2017 and 2018 marked 50 years of the Mark 3 new towns in Britain and over that time there has been a more prominent conversation about the new town project. In TV and on film there have been personal accounts which either situate the resident’s knowledge of space (through their lived experience) as the fulcrum of the narrative (see *New Town Utopia* directed by Christopher Ian Smith 2018) or assumes the perspective of the former resident looking back at the assumptions of the planners and managers (see *Milton Keynes and Me* Directed by Richard Macer, 2017). My own contribution to these critical resident-driven perspectives is a research project I initiated in 2016 called *Days of the New Town*. I will provide a brief outline of the project before then expanding on its findings in terms of thinking about Birchwood as a conceived space and as a representational space.

The Days of the New Town project

The archive of Warrington New Town Development Corporation includes an extensive photographic collection, primarily of the Development Corporation’s housing and landscaping. I approached Warrington Museum and Art Gallery with the idea of exhibiting these photographs for the 50 year anniversary of Warrington New Town’s designation. Staff were supportive and during discussions, acknowledged that the New Town expansion of

Warrington was somewhat marginal in the ways the Museum tells the story of the town's history. I was able to select about 20 photographs from the Development Corporation archive to appear in the exhibition which we called *Days of the New Town: Birchwood at 50*. It ran for six months between July 2018 to January 2019. It also featured 'The People's Archive' which was a collection of resident's own photographs. As photographer Andy Lock has suggested, 'other' photographic material which sits alongside 'official' archive collections has the power to legitimately contribute to ways of knowing our built environment heritage. The re-framed 'official' archive allows it to be "read creatively in ways unanticipated by the archive's formal remit" (Lock, 2016, p. 68). The exhibition and the blog present the different archives of Birchwood as different ways of constructing meanings of space. The People's Archive records Birchwood as a social space, notable for images of people, whereas the official archive tends towards space laid out and landscaped with saplings, but yet to be occupied by human activity. The project now has a digital presence in the form of the blog www.daysofthenewtown.wordpress.com which has become a publicly accessible platform for all the photographs digitised for the project. The blog also contains edited extracts from interviews and focus groups with residents, and I hope readers of this chapter will read those extracts to gain a sense of Birchwood as a lived space. The variety of the reflections in these interviews inevitably exceed the planners vision, and create a multi dimensional picture coloured by reflections on for example, how social class difference is experienced; how residents experience and resist the way-finding designed into the pedestrian infrastructure; the ambivalence of the early settlers in being able to feel a sense of belonging in Birchwood; the enjoyment in finding traces of the massive Royal Ordnance Factory which occupied the site during the second world war and which lay derelict until the early 1970's; the consequences of having few cultural amenities in the area; the lack of cohesion between the three neighbourhoods which make up Birchwood.

Ways of knowing Birchwood

To embark upon a search through the Warrington New Town Development Corporation's archive is to be thoroughly immersed in Birchwood as a conceived space (Lefebvre's term – as a 'representation of space'). The documents left behind after the project of creating a New Town speak almost entirely of achieving targets. Whilst the familiar rationale for many of the earlier New Towns was to relieve overcrowding of nearby cities, by the time the New Town at Warrington was taking shape, the sense of arresting the flight of city dwellers has started to dawn at local government level in Liverpool and Manchester. Warrington's expansion was therefore referred to more in terms of establishing a growth point to capitalise on its position at the intersection of three new motorways. In this sense, Warrington as a partnership New Town was driven by a desire to efficiently organise labour and technology in order to enable economic growth. This is the abiding logic referred to by Chief Architect and Planner of Warrington New Town Hugh Cannings. Below he reflects on the rationale of his work in terms of *successfully* conceiving space:

SF: Where does the pressure come from to develop a place [a New Town] in the way you have talked about?

HC: we had a program, targets, and we always felt strongly in the Development Corporation that we were sitting on a great opportunity from the point of view of employment.

[...] SF: What did it allow you to express as an architect?

HC: Urban design is limited because it really was suburban. We produced some very good district planning frameworks for the infrastructure, for centres,

locations of schools and so on, very comprehensively done but at the end of the day the thing that really has had the big effect has been the landscape development framework.

Viewing Birchwood through the prism of the Development Corporation archive, Lefebvre's concern that the New Town constructs a compliant citizen amid "all too legible" spaces resonates. This is largely down to the manner in which the resident/citizen is imagined by the professionals working within the Development Corporation. The Social Development officers particularly focus on imagining how residents might spend their non-working lives. A report making the case for a multi-use leisure centre in Birchwood, propounds the task of the planner thus: "to make a good habitat for man as an individual, but also man as a social being. His [i.e the Town Planner] starting point must be an analysis of the individual needs and the social life" (Mackey, 1979, p. 15). Spaces and subjects are conceived of as stable, complete and knowable which reinforces the coherence of the rational worldview created in the process of planning. In the case of Birchwood, its landscaping became bound up with the dual concerns of establishing a sense of place, and establishing a citizenry who comply with the imagined outcomes of the landscape planning i.e. that they enjoy, explore and learn from the urban woodland.

The Development Corporation's chief Architect and Planner supported his design team in delivering pioneering ideas for the landscape for Birchwood, of houses in woodland, inspired by the Dutch 'Heempark' (Homes in Parks), there would be play areas made from natural materials, forest parks, wooded glens linking residential areas to amenities, green

corridors, and the world's first Urban Ranger service (Grimshaw, 2017) which was based at Risley Moss Nature Reserve and a neighbouring 'Forest Park'. The Development Corporation perceived the ecological approach to landscaping as an opportunity to educate residents about both the specific properties of the natural landscape in the area, but there was also a sense of encouraging an appreciation of countryside management more generally. Part of the role of the Urban Ranger service was to liaise with the new community of Birchwood and act as a kind of mediator between resident and landscape, guided by the philosophical context created by the Landscape Architect team. Below, Urban Ranger Gaynor Kerry describes her work when the Development Corporation was still active:

The philosophy of the New Town was to get the people into the parks because a lot of people had come from Salford, and Manchester and Liverpool into a totally new place so it was to try and get people to connect with their parkland, to try and get them to see it as their own [...] in the hope that they would look after it in the future.

The Development Corporation staff set about constructing a particular mode of apprehending the landscape to new residents. In this extract from an interview with Ian Grimshaw former Urban Ranger, he describes working with new residents of Birchwood:

I very vividly remember meeting up with some mums and toddlers class, [...] and we said, we're going for a walk, [...] and some of the mums saying, 'are we really going in the bushes?', well we're going in Birchwood Brook park [mums saying]" I don't know where that is" [...] Brook Park would be a few hundred metres away [from where they lived], and they'd never gone 'into the bushes', because they thought it'd be unsafe, [...] they weren't sufficiently - their curiosity didn't override their fear of 'the bushes' and what might be in 'the bushes'.

It becomes possible to argue that the ecological planning of Birchwood is an example of a conceived space, instead of the modernist built environment which Lefebvre rails against in *Notes on the New Town*. In Birchwood, it is the landscaping that becomes the instrument of the architects/ planners vision of creating a legible space. In the above quotations there is a sense that there were particular ways that people should apprehend the space that had been designed for them and indeed, there is evidence above of how residents were expected to act in that space – with curiosity about the flora and animal life in the vicinity - and a willingness to explore. In the interviews with residents there is evidence of an overlap with this notion of conceived space, where the woodland landscape is clearly an abiding factor in people’s connection to Birchwood. Equally, residents referred to the subtle absence of a sense of belonging that arises when they considered how much of their family and personal history abide in other geographical locations, outside of Warrington. I mention this as a way of illustrating how the agenda of those contributing to this project diverge.

Robert Tregay who would become Deputy to the chief Landscape Architect sought to create a ‘British version’ of the ‘homes in parkland’ idea in Birchwood. Tregay suggested in the interview that: “The ideal was the creation of a more natural living environment, which also provides some of the elements of a traditional suburban landscape”.

Tregay’s philosophical approach to landscape design was referred to in a paper entitled “Oakwood’s New Landscape” (1983); in it, he outlines the benefits of creating a landscape which mirrors the growth of woodland which is often referred to by him as ‘natural’, here summarised by Jorgensen (2005 p.83/4):

Nature as a usable space for everyday outdoor life and recreation; Nature as a usable space for children’s play; Nature as man’s spiritual retreat; Nature as a dynamic outdoor art-form; Landscape as a social catalyst; Environmental education, urban

wildlife and wildlife conservation in urban areas and finally, as an example of Sound Landscape Practice.

Below, Tregay expands on his belief in the centrality of landscape to the resident's sense of place:

I'll tell you what the possibly naive and the rather limited way of looking at it from a landscape perspective [...]. For us, at a very conceptual sort of level, but it played out practically - what difference it made I have no idea. We started out with the idea that people are rooted in their landscape. And that the connection with the land, and landscape is a very important part of being human - rightly or wrongly - and that therefore, the landscape, then, would help root people to place and a landscape with a strong sense of identity, through its ecology, through relating it to soil types and so on, having Risley Moss Nature Reserve on the doorstep, having wildlife and birdlife on your doorstep would help people root themselves to that place, through nature. Now, whether that's true or not, I don't know.

Tregay here lays out Birchwood as a conceived space. Residents concord with this view when thinking about Birchwood as a lived space. Landscape remains an important and at times profound point of connection between people and place. Below, two residents reflect on the green space:

The Moss used to be open as well [...] you could follow the old railway track that used to go [...] I used to play chase the dragonflies and all sorts round there [...] and then I got a job there [...] I suppose that helped on my career path. I preferred it when it was like that, but obviously it was unsafe.

It was a much more agreeable place to look at. I thought it would be nice for the children [...] each time now you turn into our close its so leafy and green and you think, this is really lovely. It looks quite settled.

However, the multifarious nature of the reflections on Birchwood as a lived space form a crucial part of the picture. There are a multitude of other considerations that arose in research interviews with those who have lived in Birchwood since its earliest days, concerned for example with an abiding lack of social cohesiveness amongst residents; a feeling that as in-comers there is a fainter social bond to Birchwood, and to Warrington as a whole; the design of the New Town was too rigid in the lack of pavements next to roads for example, forcing the resident to enter the warrens of path ways of the housing estates. There is also an great sense from multiple interviewees that the lack of cultural amenities in Birchwood has been an abiding problem since the closure of the large multi-use arena, built to serve not only the residents of Birchwood, but the greater region around Warrington. It closed as a venue in 1986 and the building is now used as a call centre for an online bookmaker. There was also the consideration that arose in interviews about what the shift in the governance of the area meant for the landscaping of Birchwood. In 1989 the Development Corporation was wound up and to quite a large extent, so was the philosophical underpinning of the ecological approach. Playgrounds fell into disrepair and were removed, Risley Moss Nature Reserve was threatened with closure in 1990, but was saved by a spirited resident-led campaign. Cut-throughs became overgrown, street lamps were not maintained and by the 1990s fear of what was “in the bushes” became a legitimate concern as a succession of mostly female students of the local High School reported being chased, or attacked by men in a section of densely planted walkway between housing and the school which gained the unfortunate nickname “flashers alley”.

Jorgenson (2005) interviewed residents of Birchwood about the urban woodland landscape in the context of feelings of personal safety. She concluded that “skilled design and proactive management” is needed to ensure “vegetation remains within acceptable parameters” (Jorgenson 2005: 307). Since the end of the Development Corporation, the skills and management have not been adequately provided in Birchwood, and since the swingeing cuts to public spending which started in 2010, resident volunteer groups are now taking the place of the Local Authority to undertake a fraction of the woodland maintenance which Birchwood’s now maturing woodland requires. However, the process of sharing the photographs of the Development Corporation’s archive with the public has resulted in residents sharing their reflections of their early years in Birchwood, and this inevitably does not connect necessarily to the landscape at all, and focuses much more on the social experience. The comments left on the facebook page are testament to this www.facebook.com/daysofthenewtown

The Days of the New Town blog contains a section featuring edited extracts of interviews with residents and Development Corporation staff and can be read as an appendix to this chapter. These conversations are partly an oral history, partly a snapshot of how Birchwood is understood now, 50 years on from designation. By sharing them publicly my aim is to encourage a wider conversation amongst residents, the Local Authority in Warrington, the academic community of researchers who are interested in notions of New Town heritage to consider for themselves how conceived space and lived space relate to each other. A grander motivation for the research is for it to be part of a wider consideration of residents voices, lived experience and knowledge production of space by those designing the next generation of large planned residential settlements in the UK and Europe.

Conclusions

At the time of writing the Days of the New Town project is on-going and there are plans to expand the geographical scope of the project by sharing more of the Development Corporation photographic archive featuring other expansion areas in an exhibition planned for Summer 2020 in a neighbouring area to Birchwood. This chapter has been an initial exploration of the possibilities of applying Lefebvre's spatial triad to a planned space, and to consider how this theoretical framework might open up a more expansive and nuanced conversation amongst residents and the planning profession about how residents situate meaning of social space as the new town ages. To return to Lefebvre's contention that key to an understanding of how we produce space is to understand how the elements of the spatial triad interact, I have attempted to reflect on how the intentions of the planner's rational worldview of providing the landscape, and imagining the interested citizen overlaps with a dimension of residents experience of living in an urban woodland, and I have pointed to data collected from interviews with residents reflecting lived experience of and in Birchwood as a dynamic and constantly unfolding process where the resident is appropriating the meaning of space in a way that exceeds the planners intentions.

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