

THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Liza Fior

There is a confidence in projecting futures for others, in those lush but noncommittal images produced by masterplanners. A projection forward which skips the messy realities of the present. Visioning in masterplanning is predicated on the equivalent of the elevator pitch—it requires something snappy.

But there is another type of future visioning which is associated with less bravado and carries less prestige, namely the labor—emotional labor¹—of preparing for the afterlife of projects. These preparations are necessary but often not welcomed by clients, as they require knowing what's what in a site and a situation, sometimes before making the first design move. Each muf project as it comes into the studio thus requires its own quarantine—sufficient time to understand what's what, to expose the relevant fault lines and possibilities—which is an act of returning a brief to the realities of the site and of those who will use it.

◀ **The local fishermen's club boatyard in Birżebbuġa now parks an oversized toolbox and mobile kitchen, designed and built on site**

¹ The use of “emotional labor” to describe the imagining of consequences is an appropriation of a term coined by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in 1983 to reflect the work that predominantly female employees do to suppress their emotions in order to do their jobs.

After ten years of austerity, the UK has begun to lose its muscle memory of the making of public spaces. The shift to outsourcing many of the services (and knowledge) of a local authority—from street cleaning to lighting—is an act of distancing, which replaces a named person at the council with a company chatbox. A “pay more in the future” for the immediate relief of the now—like high street payday loans, instant cash for excruciating interest payments later. Outsourcing also makes it much harder to be responsive to the specific localized needs of a street or constituency, whereas broad-brush visions or strategies protect the author from the low blood sugar of meetings, being challenged by the anger of those who live in a place or the complications of ownership and use.

The broad brush which does not get caught by the friction of the situation can extend to the “sweet gestures” of tactical urbanism—such as the street library round the corner from where the public library has closed down. Such a thing will need the campaign against closure with the email address of the relevant politician painted across the top, if it is not to be read as a statement against the public funding of necessities.

The preparations for an afterlife of usefulness—and, with it, care—must begin before a project comes into being. This is also a form of visioning but one where the difficult bits are not smudged out in Photoshop or obscured by well-placed trees but played out in sharp detail, like an insomniac imagining the logistics of the following day. This “worrying ahead” or, if you prefer, a projected care and repair, is essential, especially when working in other people’s neighborhoods.

RECOGNIZING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The neighborhoods we work in are often contested, involving mitigation from an adjacent development or the public realm the planners insisted on. We have to explain ourselves—what we are doing there in the first place (and often we shouldn’t be). The anger of those you meet is a form of commitment in itself—and sometimes a way to identify the community organizer or future guardian of a project. Plans for change, the everyday work of the urbanist—completely separate from the lives of residents—are too distant to allow appreciation of the detail and priorities of what goes on. For example, the

legacy masterplan for the Olympic Park in London included (thanks to land costs) placing a school next to a motorway. At the same time as the drawings were being drawn, the mother of a child had started her campaign against air pollution, one she has since won.

Living for the moment (and in the case of “visioners,” a future where they won’t be present) is a luxury. A luxury which is not an option in a landscape of austerity where you do not know when there will be money spent again on the site in question.

The dangers of living for the moment can also apply to DIY urbanism, the cheering up with pots of paint, the anecdotal in 2 by 1 timbers. It is important to recognize that the enthusiasm with which you might find yourselves being invited in to do your thing can also be the attempt to work in a time zone which avoids the effort and responsibility of accuracy. It won’t be there long, so it doesn’t matter, doesn’t need to go through processes of accountability, and is therefore in danger of sitting with those breezy visuals associated with planning applications as a process to increase land values without breaking ground.

Like successful planning applications for large-scale changes to the city fabric, use can change the meaning and values of a place. A play street for one day a month begins to change the norms of expectation, but does a hipster food truck parked for three weeks destroy the livelihood of the café next door, which has to pay business rates?

This is not to deny the pleasures and serious impact of being able to play in the public realm. And not to recognize the role that tactical urbanism, incremental urbanism, grassroots local change, student-led action research, or site-based youth engagement play in informing larger-scale projects and policy.

It is at times like these—when land values are high, space is limited, cheap empty buildings are not free for appropriation, where there are no public spaces, and no publicly funded briefs for would-be practitioners in the public realm—that the market exploits uses to increase land values and attract tenants without the commitment that comes with, say, creating permanent space for a market and security for the stall holders. Good intentions can have unintended consequences. It is important to understand where you are operating and the role you may end up playing by operating there.

***IT IS NOT THAT
TEMPORARY
ACTIONS MUST
REMAIN PERMANENT,
RATHER THAT
WE NEED TO
RECOGNIZE THAT
THERE IS ALWAYS
A PRE-HISTORY
BEFORE YOU
ARRIVE ON THE
SCENE, AND ALSO
AN AFTERLIFE.***

RISK-AVERSE DESIGN—WORRYING AHEAD ABOUT FUTURE USE

Risk-averse design looks into a future where any bad things that do happen are not the responsibility of those who built them. Avoiding risk in a time of austerity tends towards designing in neglect as a condition that can be counted on, with any care and maintenance being tied to “footfall” or rental income of privately owned public spaces.

The work of thinking ahead when making the first move requires knowing all there is to know about a situation in order to design to a brief so precise that it holds the possibility of appropriation for another use. Reminding your client that design has to come from the situation rather than a carefree future unencumbered by what you know can find you being treated as a downer—the destroyer of fun, the messenger who deserves to be shot.

But this work is the worrying as to how a space will take care of itself when you are no longer there. It is the knowledge that public space cannot be left to itself. Delivery vehicles, when the description is ascribed to financial structures, are designed not to root themselves in place, and local authorities operating during times of austerity must aim for a cost-neutral maintenance regime. Therefore projects for the public realm require the designer to design in governance. This is a kind of looking forward that is not just about the robustness of materials but about designing for possible guardians, so a space can take care of itself.

In muf’s work, projects begin with mapping. This surveying of the ground, a refinement of site and brief, is also the establishing of who might make it their own, an imagining of possible caretakers that requires the architect to provide the infrastructure to allow that to happen.

These are two very different modes of imagining futures, one where through the prism of risk you imagine the worst for those responsible for paying for it and another where you attempt to design in the possibility of multiple use and ownership, by expanding the possible care which follows use and making those paying for it accountable for its future, because there will be more people remembering it coming into being. This is not about seeking volunteers to run the library you closed yesterday, but rather about

ensuring that the thing which is built has an accuracy of brief and design response.

The future of a site lies in understanding what already exists, filling in the detail of what makes a place what it is, establishing the work that has been done previously and who did it. The more you know about the situation the more there is to address. Giving precision by finding a public to design for, in the here and now, brings accuracy to a brief, and this first accuracy can allow for appropriation by other uses in the future.

At the same time, there is always a certain degree of complicity involved in attempting to redirect private interests and ownership.

FROM ARTIST INSTALLATION TO EXPANSIVE PUBLIC GARDEN: DALSTON EASTERN CURVE 2008–2020 (MUF AND J&L GIBBONS)

In 2008 we were sitting round a table where an art commission linked to a new development—flattening a 19th-century building which had housed the historic Four Aces Club—was being discussed. The discussion asked what the public art requirement might look like, what material might a sculpture be. muf and J&L Gibbons were sitting at that table and we argued for a very small commission to map existing cultural production in the neighborhood, with the widest definition for cultural production assigned to allow the inclusion of community spaces, while at the same describing the public adjacent to them, mirroring this commission for new art in a new space with the act of recording existing cultural production.

We mapped the area through interviews and visits. We overlaid this map with the open spaces in Dalston. In a neighborhood without parks, the mapping identified a number of spaces that could be invested in to make them host existing activities and/or to mitigate the absence of open spaces. From this propositional mapping, we then won the commission to take this mapping to a costed list of projects, again developed with those who lived and worked in Dalston.

These were listed as possible sites for investment in the here and now rather than as future developments, from planting the perimeter of a school playground, to a community-run square which needed play equipment, or a disused over-

Site of the *Toy Parking* mission in Stuttgart before ►
intervention. Residents set up a fence with
mailboxes to block the street to vehicular traffic



grown railway line—the Eastern Curve. We named the Eastern Curve a wildlife garden and hoped for funding; naming can be propositional.

Coincident with this exercise we were approached by the Barbican Arts Centre, who was looking for a site to host a commission by Exyzt and a reenactment of a living cornfield installation by the artist Agnes Denes. We successfully proposed the Eastern Curve as the location.

We were commissioned to support the project with logistics. Exyzt planned a windmill and pizza oven on site. We introduced some of the organizations which we had mapped, such as the Hackney Young Carers, as participants in the project, so as to embed this temporary installation on site and in the neighborhood.

15,000 people visited in three weeks, a magic number which assisted in securing funding to create a temporary wildlife garden for 18 months. While sitting by the cornfield in a deck chair, the person from the “regeneration” department said, “now I get it,” referring to our proposal for the public garden on the site, a snapshot of the possible that could be inhabited. “I even wonder if we should have made the development so high,” he said referring to the development in search of a public art commission, as he sunbathed looking into the as yet uninterrupted sky.

The three-week installation assisted in getting funding for six of the 76 projects we had mapped, including the garden. We designed a framework for appropriation.

This year the garden celebrated its tenth year in existence, thriving, growing—a center for the neighborhood. Even now it operates on a yearly lease but the masterplan, which proposed that this garden should be a “shopping loop” connecting two ends of a nearby shopping mall, has been shelved and the garden is assuming its place at the center of the neighborhood (acknowledged formally by the local authority), a foil to that new square.

The school got its perimeter of planting, the square its play equipment, Hackney Young Carers used the garden, Exyzt (who were visiting from France) evolved but Nik Henninger stayed in London (check out the Office for Crafted Architecture). Dalston has changed, but the battles against displacement led by development continue. Two of the original residents who challenged us as agents of the local authority have been running the garden on a mixed economy of

selling drinks at the weekend (plus pizzas made on site) and hosting children, older people, and the vulnerable. Since COVID-19, a fundraiser has allowed it to continue to be a place of escape.

A year after the build, we sat down with Marie and Brian, who run the garden, listing outputs and outcomes. Seven years after the build when the future was unknown, the garden gathered testimonials which responded to the question, “What is it good for?” Thousands of people lent their support and answered what it meant to them. And ten years after the build, Aranza Fernandez, one of the original team, sat down and captured everything that had been added to the garden, from planting to a volunteer program, hosted workshops for the vulnerable, and a stage.

DESIGN AS A SNAPSHOT OF THE POSSIBLE: SISTERS UNCUT AND MARIAN COURT (MUF ARCHITECTURE/ART WITH ADAM KHAN ARCHITECTS)

The East End branch of feminist group Sisters Uncut staged a political occupation in Marian Court in Hackney, to highlight cuts to domestic violence services in the borough and housing for women made homeless due to domestic abuse in inadequate and threatening situations. Marian Court is a housing estate, which, thanks to a lack of government funding for social housing and a stalled attempt to invest in it, had been left empty, awaiting demolition.

Sisters Uncut squatted a ground-floor flat, opening it as a breakfast club for children and their families. This can be said to meet the idea of a snapshot of the possible—where protest embeds within it an alternative future. Combined with large-scale posters and banners supported by social media, their efforts played their part in persuading the local authority to do necessary repairs and to house families on site for two years before rehousing them in permanent accommodation.

muf, working with Adam Khan, were the architecture practices working on the design of the new housing scheme on the site. When you work in London, stating that you work in the public realm cannot be just left as a simple statement. Public spaces are seldom funded solely from the public purse. Designing public spaces often requires a recalibration—by pushing briefs, building envelopes,

definition of scope, self-deceit—to make it so.

The occupation by Sisters Uncut further emboldened us to ask why the existing housing was not being retained through drawn proposals. We learned why not: a sorry tale of early millennial limitations placed on local authorities, compounded by the 2008 crash.

The families housed on the site stood in for clients. While we were designing the development of the site, the estate was no longer empty—it was full of children and their mothers. We lobbied for play equipment and toys. The children and their mothers, temporarily housed on site, were generous with their thoughts, even though only very few would be housed on the same site after construction.

The drawn scheme includes play routes for both the housing and the neighborhood, places for communality, including—on the actual site of the occupation—community rooms perfect for a breakfast club.

Sisters Uncut East End continue to go from strength to strength, oscillating between policy and grassroots support. Their temporary occupation was successful: all the families were re-housed. Their action made the urgent housing need visible and reminded us all how complicit those involved in building housing in London will be until the funding situation changes.

BALANCING COMMUNAL AND CLIENT VISIONS: RUSKIN SQUARE

We were commissioned to develop the public realm for a 24-hectare site in East Croydon, equidistant from London and Gatwick airport, a suburb which has been determined as a focus for development.

Adjacent to a heavily used train station, Foster + Partners had created a masterplan for a mix of uses, mainly offices but also residential. We were given the spaces between. It had been named Ruskin Square, a tangential identity developed by branding consultants for the clients, a pension fund and a developer. The public realm was the setting for the new buildings and amenity for the neighborhood.

We practiced obedience towards this identity by drawing on John Ruskin's writings which are numerous and sometimes radical. "There is no wealth but life" was the first sentence which we

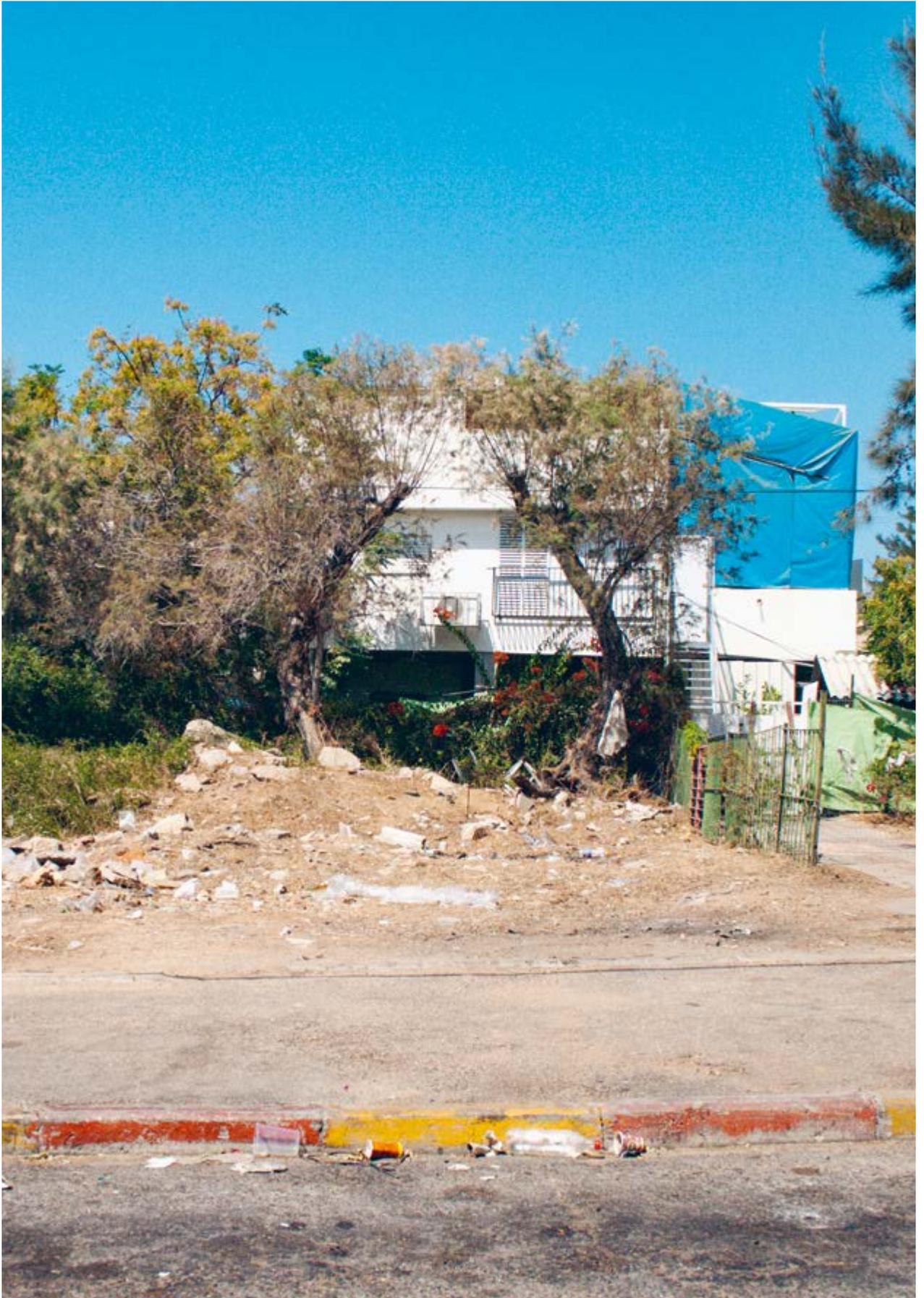
used as a prompt to testing with the client what they could stomach for the site. We proposed that we should make it possible for the site to be occupied for the first time since it was amassed as a plot and buildings on it were demolished. The site was not a complete tabula rasa: when you looked closely, the rubble was a patchwork of slabs left by the former buildings, fragments of terrazzo from the floors of former entrance lobbies, wild plants.

We made a garden with a defined route passing between wild plants, stopping off at a smooth concrete slab big enough for 20 people to sit on, defined by yellow netting and concluded with a use which could bridge those paying for it and those who lived there. We proposed cricket nets—the sport of lords and young Afghan men.

Lunar House is based in Croydon, the outpost of the Home Office where anyone seeking asylum or leave to remain must present themselves. The Refugee Council supports young people with English lessons and cricket.

The garden was only there for two summers: we were, as is often the case, caught by our own advocacy. Where it stood is now a box park, a food court constructed from containers, the ad hoc aesthetic rolled out as a shorthand, but offering shelter and informality. We also proposed that the small theater, the only building on the site, should be given a back door onto the garden, thereby expanding vastly its footprint and possible income. That was a step too far for our developers but also for the local authority, who took the funding for a theater from the site to fund another theater more closely aligned to their vision. muf's deep imperfectness is illustrated by this example—we did not make the opening in the wall connecting theater bar to garden, we whipped out. The theater, already deeply financially challenged, folded. We will never know if access to the garden could have helped.

The two-summer garden did warm the client to the idea that public space is for inhabiting, that investing in public space in advance of construction is a good idea. As we build out the rest of the site, the permanent public realm echoes the lessons of the two-summer garden with its places of gathering, of understory planting, of places to lounge, places to play, and places to make your own. No cricket, but we are still working with young refugees.



DESIGNING FOR THE PUBLIC— RESPONSIBILITY AND REWARD

Enactment is a safe way to model possible outcomes, the “pretend play” of children being a worthy case in point. To enact a change of use to communal space, however modest, is to share a possible future in public and to allow it to be refined through use. To quote artist Siw Thomas, things can be taken away but experiences cannot.

To have walked in bare feet over the same ground, which the day before was driven over by lorry tires, could transform that stretch of road forever—its use and meaning is no longer fixed. To then move that into policy requires a range of people who are both invested in that stretch of road and have access to power to remove their socks.

It is important to make the most of this snapshot of the possible.

All (design) moves require the emotional labor both of imagining possible consequences and of taking thought for who is being invited in and how.

This is not an argument for not trying. It is not even an argument for working it all out before you begin. Rather it is an argument for surveying the ground, understanding the players, the needs, and the underlying brief, and for being honest about your own position in this. What is

the deal? Are you building your own portfolio in return for free labor for a community? That’s OK(-ish), just let them know. As Gilly Karjevsky, co-director of 72 Hour Urban Action, says, “we plan for a future where we do not helm the ship, we search for the captains on site.”

Properly understanding a site requires deep hanging out, building trust, and ideally—if you are paid—sharing that money with locally based knowledge.

Stick around to sort things out the day after or find who will. It is not that temporary actions must remain permanent, rather that we need to recognize that there is always a pre-history before you arrive on the scene, and also an afterlife.

The afterlife can be as minimal as visiting, just sitting there, checking that you did tidy up after you, talking through with those involved, understanding if your intervention left any trace in good ways and bad, and learning from this for next time.

Emotional labor can be as sweet as honey. Relationships where power relations have been understood and tested, where value remains with those who need it, where others’ sweat equity is recognized and paid for (in kind, in space, or in cash), and where mutual respect has been earned—these are precious.

Liza Fior is a founding partner of muf architecture/art. muf’s interdisciplinary work encompasses masterplanning, urban design, landscape design, buildings, temporary and permanent public art, and participative research—a continual dialogue between detail and strategy. muf advocates the value of the existing in order to define parameters for the new. muf is the recipient of the European Prize for Public Space (for Barking Town Square), and authored the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2010, where it continues to collaborate with We are Here Venice. It is also the recipient of the Landscape Institute President’s Medal 2011 (for Making Space in Dalston). In July 2017, Fior was made a Mayor’s Design Advocate to Sadiq Khan. Fior is Professor of Architecture and Spatial Practice at CSM London, has taught at the AA, Yale, and RCA. In her view, theory, practice, and teaching feed each other.

- ◀ Site of the *Space Invaders* mission in Bat Yam before intervention—nestled between private occupations of public space and illegally dumped construction waste