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THE DOMAIN, SYDNEY

FRONTIER TOURING, TADIE M & MAX PERK

MIDNIGHT OIL

THE GREAT CIRCLE 2017
WITH JOHN BUTLER TRO & A.O ORIGINAL

We play calm or shine. Minors
must be accompanied by an adult

Fri 17 Nov 2017 4:30pm

TICKET NO.: 968 PAX: 2382
GEN. ADMISSION ADMIT
\$99.90
in GST

MR DOUGLAS ORR

TRANS N1: 156568
PURCHASED: 13 NOV 2017
SENDER: W12061
TICKET NO.: 968
PAY.: 2382



DOMAINS

Sydney
X
London

It's
only
temporary...

The
Sydney
Shuffle

The monetisation of public spaces through their temporary enclosure for commercial events is becoming naturalised in Sydney. Is this privatisation of public space ok because it's only temporary? We think not! The push back against privately-owned public spaces in London shows what's possible for those of us concerned with enclosures in Sydney...

Walking to campus from Redfern station a few months ago, a couple of us were stopped in our tracks by a swarm of workers in high-vis vests toting a Citibank sign into a gate that restricted access to a greenspace where we read on sunny days. Most of the benches in the park, it would seem, were being cordoned into a corporate 'outdoor cinema' for the summer. As a concession, a few benches remained just outside the fence, giving the punter a clear view of the space lost... if only temporarily. In the context of public space being sold off to private developers in London, we began to wonder if the temporary closure of public space wasn't just another kind of privatisation of public space, since the closure of this space, for profit, inevitably excludes some citizens. Both the assertion of power to cordon the space and the decision to exclude (non-paying) citizens seems to us fundamentally undemocratic, in much the same way selling off the space permanently to private forces is. Both decisions harbour serious consequences. And both stem not from malicious intent on the part of councils but a desperation to make up for shortfalls due to budget cuts. Which raises, for us, two crucial questions. First, how can we, as urban scholars, research and raise awareness about these issues and second, what might be done to turn back the tide?

All over Sydney, and especially when the weather warms up, we lose access to public spaces for temporary events. In November 2017, a controversy erupted when former prime minister Paul Keating confronted the Australian band *Midnight Oil* over their concert in the Domain, which left a large part of the space fenced off for 16 days with two-metre high spike-topped fencing. Given that tickets were going for \$82-160, Keating suggested that the band was, "squatting and profiting from Sydney's central piece of public land".

Between them, Midnight Oil singer Peter Garrett and the Botanic Gardens Trust offered three responses to Keating's concerns: that the money is going to a good cause; that they didn't fence the whole Domain; and the closure was only temporary. Garrett went on to quip that Keating's complaint was the product of musical snobbery, rather than politics.

We like us some Midnight Oil. But we share some of Keating's concerns that such responses are pretty flimsy justifications. Looked at in isolation, perhaps an individual instance of temporary enclosure doesn't seem all that significant. But when such enclosures are happening more often in more places, and when the length of 'temporary' enclosures is getting longer, something significant is happening to our public spaces.

Large chunks of iconic public spaces like the Botanic Gardens, the Domain, and Centennial Park are increasingly fenced off for temporary commercial events of varying durations - sometimes for just a single day or a weekend, sometimes for several weeks. The Botanic Gardens has become home to Moonlight Cinema and Moonlight Opera at different times of the year, with prime foreshore fenced off and access restricted to ticketed customers for weeks at a time.



Fig.8.1
Enclosure
Image: Authors own



Fig.8.2
Found in the park
Image: Authors own

Centennial Park hosts similar commercial events that involve the temporary fencing of significant areas, and has also started to rent out space for exclusive corporate events. In February 2017, a 2.4ha area was fenced off and reserved for a private function held by tech giant Atlassian. Every time a concern is raised, the same three justifications re-appear - the enclosure is lucrative, partial, and temporary, so there's nothing to worry about.

This trend is also beginning to take hold in less iconic, more suburban parks. A 2017 application to fence off a significant area of Camperdown Memorial Park for a commercial burger festival (yep!!) met with concerted opposition from Newtown residents. The organisers eventually retreated, but only as far as another park in nearby Marrickville where their event was eventually staged.

Often the first we see or hear of these enclosures is when the fences are going up. Just as often, they then evaporate before we have time to lodge a protest. This is guerilla privatisation, firing sniper shots and dispersing, but in the process making ~~us subcon-~~sciously register the fact that our public space is no longer wholly public. As a result, we stop ourselves from going to public space, or doing certain things in it, because we feel, subconsciously or otherwise, that on some level corporations have more of a 'right' to the space than we do as public taxpayers. The psychological effects of this sort of self-policing were written about by Michel Foucault when he suggested that we ourselves assume responsibility for the constraints of power and become the principle of our own subjection. In other words, being disempowered, even if only temporarily, encourages us to reproduce our own disempowerment.



Fig.8.3
Book your tickets
now
or lose your green.
Image: Authors own

We are left to assume that the councils, the companies, the bands and performers, are doing this 'for the public good'. But given 'we' as a people didn't decide to invite this on our space, we must ask 'public good for whom?' Because as much as we might enjoy, and can afford, a *Midnight Oil* concert, what of our neighbors who cannot and who also now cannot play in the park with their kids for free? And if this was really all about the public good, wouldn't we have a right to know a little more about how decisions to grant these temporary enclosures are made, or how much revenue is raised? Asked about the above-mentioned Atlassian private function, a spokesperson for the Centennial Parklands Trust refused to tell the *Sydney Morning Herald* how much they charged, citing 'commercial in confidence'.

London Land Grabs

In London, we see a different, more blatant kind of privatisation in action – but we can also take inspiration from recent interventions that are contesting such trends. Like many other cities, London's public domain is being reshaped by the creation of privately owned public spaces ('POPS'). These legal niceties transform open-air squares, gardens and parks into spaces that look public but are not: they are owned and/or managed by private entities. And as a result, the rights of the citizens using them – our rights to the city itself – are curtailed, since private whims rather than the law of the land may then shape the rules of engagement.

Although this issue might be academic while we're eating our lunch on a private park bench, the consequences of multiplying and expanding POPS affects everything from our personal psyche to our ability to protest.

All of this is important because public space is more than the empty space between buildings. It's also the space where we slow down and relax, the space where we meet friends and family, and the space where we can be sure - whoever we might be -- that we have a place. Cities are filled with buildings that will deny you entry, but public space is where we should all feel welcome, regardless of our differences. Public spaces are crucial sanctuaries of equality. In short, public spaces are material monuments to our right to the city.



Fig.8.4
The largest POPS
in London,
patrolled by police
impersonators.
Image: Authors own

And so, to defend those rights, in 2015 a group of people (including Brad) formed the London Space Academy which went after pseudo-public spaces via three prongs. We collected information about ownership and finances, we undertook direct action to gain media exposure, and then ramped up political pressure. We contacted the landowners of more than 50 major pseudo-public spaces in London, ranging from financial giant JP Morgan (owner of Bishops Square in Spitalfields) to the Tokyo-based Mitsubishi Estate (owner of Paternoster Square in the City of London) and the Abu Dhabi National Exhibitions Company (owner of the open space around the ExCeL centre). We asked them what regulations people passing through their land were subject to, and where members of the public could view those regulations. All but two of the landowners declined to answer. We also asked all local authorities in London for details of privately owned public spaces in their borough, via the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act; most councils rejected the request, saying they either didn't have the resources to respond or didn't have the data at all! So, we just got the information ourselves by crowdsourcing data and testing the limits of various spaces around the city as part of what we called 'space probes'.

With that in hand, we needed direct action to raise awareness. And so, on a drippy winter morning last year, in Potters Fields Park next to City Hall, a hundred-strong group amassed to undertake 'Space Probe Alpha' – a mass trespass onto the property of *More London*.

A few yards from us, thousands of methodically interlaced Irish blue limestone paving stones marked the socio-political boundary where the public space of the council-owned park transformed into privately owned pseudo-public space.



Fig.8.5
Sián Berry, 2016 Green Party Candidate for Mayor of London and Trespasser.
Image: TBC

We converged on The Scoop, a private outdoor arena in view of Tower Bridge, proclaimed it a public agora, and held an unsanctioned two-hour event featuring speeches about the importance of public space. It was, by all measures, a resounding success and we learned that the private security of *More London* had very little leverage to enforce their extralegal rules.

Regardless of recent political shifts, we have learned over the past 20 years that we cannot and should not expect a ramping-down of the privatisation and securitisation of public space in our city. More research and journalism can highlight what is being lost, and where, and more on-the-ground action similar to Space Probe Alpha raises awareness on the issue and renders transparent the fallacy of this 'security theatre.'

Sydney
←—→
London

With the information in hand, we needed media exposure with solid infographics. While that may sound petty, people respond to stories that are clearly articulated. If we want to be scholars that change the world in addition to studying it, we need to use more-than-textual methods. In partnership with Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL), the city's environmental records centre, we produced a comprehensive map of pseudo-public spaces in the capital and made the underlying dataset publicly available.

In response to our informations raising campaigns and direct action, the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, vowed to publish new guidelines on how these spaces – some of the city's most prominent squares and plazas – are governed. So despite all of the despair in the UK and more broadly, things are never hopeless. As Donna Haraway writes, it is ever so crucial, that we do not give up in despair but instead 'stay with the trouble'.

Turning back to our 'trouble' in Sydney's parks, we propose that a three-pronged approach is **needed to tackle temporary enclosure in before** it becomes more serious than it already is. We need to gather data about how much temporary space is being closed off, where, when and for how long. Next, we need to undertake direct action in those spaces to raise awareness of the issue. Finally, we need to make clear data and images, and press from the direct action, to create more press, until the pressure on politicians becomes unbearable, and they respond. If this can be done in London, the belly of the neoliberal beast, it can be done in Sydney, where sensibilities still veer toward the social.

We want to make clear that monetization is the problem, not the use of this space. Using space is sharing space, and the programming of temporary events can actually help to boost their use and accessibility. Free events in the Domain and Hyde Park over summer are a case in point, and have become Sydney institutions for that reason. In Newtown, the same people who opposed the commercial burger festival were happy for the park to be fenced off for the Newtown Festival once a year - an event whose gold coin donation for entry goes to the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre.

But when temporary enclosures are commercial in nature, then we start to see the calculatory logic of profit and loss enter the management of public spaces. This has the obvious immediate effect of restricting access to those spaces to those with the means to pay for entry. But more broadly, and more perniciously, it reflects the increasing dependence of public park authorities on commercial revenue for their survival. Here, temporary enclosures are a manifestation of a deeper threat to the democratic ownership and control of public space -- the re-casting of non-profit-making public spaces as financial liabilities rather than communal assets.

It's our job not only to seek further information that might allow us to document the extent of temporary enclosures, but to make the case for a public realm that does not have to justify its existence in purely financial terms.