Contributory Economies, Design Activism and the DIY Urbanism of Renew Newcastle

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ABSTRACT

This paper will deploy French philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s neo-Marxist notion of the contributory economy to explore conceptions and practices of ‘DIY (Do It Yourself) urbanism’, with a specific focus on disused interior spaces. Reference will be made to contemporary design and architectural discourses on DIY urbanism and design activism, particularly in relation to the Renew Newcastle scheme in Newcastle, Australia. Although Renew is now a recognised model for urban regeneration, it began in 2008 as a socially-oriented experiment within the unoccupied shopfronts and tenancies of this rapidly transforming post-industrial city. Its DIY urbanism occurs alongside established institutional and commercial entities and as such, it could be superficially understood as an extension of, rather than an alternative to, mainstream project procurement models. Here, Stiegler’s invocations of contributory economies, driven by an ethic of care or cura, suggest a way of understanding Renew Newcastle’s urbanism as a participatory economy coexistent with the same capitalistic economy that prompted the urban decline it addresses.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2013 interview titled ‘We are entering an era of contributory work’,1 Stiegler argues that the twenty-first century heralds the emergence of the contributory economy as an alternative to that of both nineteenth century ‘productivism’2 and the subsequent twentieth century consumerism. According to Stiegler, the contributory model differs from its predecessor through its focus on sociality, participation and heterarchic production methodologies. For Stiegler, the contributory model replaces mainstream consumerism, leading him to declare that ‘consumerism has had its day’.3 It is the contention of the present paper that the DIY urbanism of Renew Newcastle can be understood as an example of Stiegler’s contributory economy and attendant ethic of care that coexists with, rather than supersedes, mainstream consumerism. Based in Newcastle, Australia, Renew contributes significantly to its host city’s complex and unique urban condition, accommodating an expanding artisanal ‘maker’ culture alongside the world’s largest coal export port, 200kms from Australia’s largest city (Sydney). In 1997, the departure of the BHP steel works from Newcastle undermined the economic cycles upon which the city was formerly based as well as the traditional proletarian identity of the region. Like the earthquake event a decade before, this dramatic change placed the city in a state of flux. By the turn of the millennium, and despite the growth of newly developed regions around the city, Newcastle’s central business district remained in decline due to speculative investment patterns and movements of capital away from its traditional centres of economic and cultural stability. Many retail tenancies shifted from their former CBD locations to new peripheral suburban developments, effectuating an evacuation of Newcastle’s inner city generally and the main street (Hunter Street) specifically.4 Even so, the dereliction and abandonment that ensued spurned new modes of occupation and participatory models of economic activity. The temporary reoccupation of empty retail and commercial spaces in the CBD facilitated by the Renew Newcastle scheme during the last five years is an example of design activism transforming the failures of the spaces of capitalism into alternative modes of architectural and spatial practice: modes not unique to Newcastle, but certainly endemic to it. With this in mind, and in response to this journal’s theme of ‘Design Activism’, the present paper concerns itself with a particular problematisation of capitalism and a subsequent theorisation of...
The concept of consumerism has been historically conceptualised by contemporary Marxist discourse and philosophical writings of Stiegler. Stiegler’s writings are influenced by the writings of post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze and by contemporary Marxist discourse, and are self-initiated as part of a deliberate attempt to circumvent traditional boundaries of capitalism but simultaneously outside its abandoned commercial interiors, buildings and urban landscapes.

DIY urbanism has been positioned as a post-Marxist, post-industrialisation production methodology and is (similar to the contributory model) closely associated with the figure of the ‘amateur’ and the technologies of open-source software and online social networks. As a notion and term, DIY urbanism is used in contemporary design and architectural discourses to encompass a range of different ‘bottom-up’, ‘citizen-led’ and ‘grassroots’ activities occurring in existing city spaces. The projects of DIY urbanism could be understood as a form of ‘community activism’ and ‘collaborative urbanism’, and ‘place making’ and ‘tactical urbanism’. The label of DIY urbanism is associated with a wide spectrum of projects, particularly those experimental ‘tactical interventions’ occurring in the interstitial spaces between and within buildings, public spaces and short-term art projects, community gardens made by local residents, guerrilla knitting and seed banking, to name a few.

Regardless of their location (inside or outside buildings) and type, these DIY projects temporarily transform the surrounding urban condition. Urban theorist and writer Joni Taylor notes that DIY urbanism usually operates outside of sanctioned financial, legal and institutional frameworks: ‘It looks beyond the Masterplan and reimagines the idea of the urban utopia, not as the functionalist failed city of the past, but as a better place to live.’ Regardless of their professional training, designers and architects may also be the initiates of DIY projects through their involvement in the design, production and project occupation phases; deploying temporary and unusual materials and interventionist processes normally considered to be outside the remit of professional practice. According to Australian architect Rory Hyde, these alternative practices are a form of design activism enabling artists, designers and architects to address their civic and social responsibilities through the creation of public space.

Alternative DIY practices exist in a complex interrelation with mainstream DIY and consumerism. As argued elsewhere, this interrelation was particularly evident in the co-option of DIY techniques and practices by the North American counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Architectural and urban theorist Miri Zieger also distinguishes DIY urbanism from other commercially driven forms of DIY. Even so, she notes that the outcomes and products of DIY urbanism may superficially resemble those of mainstream DIY practice, retail and commerce. Thus do-it-yourself urbanists are somewhat paradoxically bound to, yet differentiated from, the mainstream DIY community and its attendant consumerism.

[DIY urbanists] are motivated more by grassroots activism than by the kind of home-ec craft projects (think pickling, IKEA-hacking and knitting) sponsored by mainstream shelter media, usually under the Do-It-Yourself rubric. (Although they do slot nicely into the imperative pages of Good and Make magazines.) They are often produced by emerging architects, artists and urbanists working outside professional boundaries but nonetheless engaging questions of the built environment and architecture culture.

A REMEDY AND ALTERNATIVE TO CONSUMERISM: DIY PRODUCTION AND THE FIGURE OF THE AMATEUR

The aforementioned themes of urbanisation, creativity and consumerism inflect much of Stiegler’s discourse, including The Decadence of Industrial Democracies: Debtfuel and Discrédit, Volume 2 (2004); Pour une nouvelle critique de l’Economie politique ou Pour un New Critique of Political Economy (2009); a lecture and presentation entitled ‘Bernard Stiegler: Economic prosperity relies on creativity’ (2010); and the aforementioned interview. We are entering an era of contributory work (2013). Stiegler posits ‘contributory economies’ as an alternative emerging economic model to the orthodoxies and inflexible practices of the capitalist system and its attendant ‘culture’ industries. The latter are seen by Stiegler as an extension of capitalism through a central focus on profit rather than social and cultural transformation. He, like Marx himself, accepts not only the inevitability of capitalism but its capacity to invade every aspect of contemporary life. For Stiegler, however, capitalism has an inimitable and unavoidable obsolescence extending from its displacement of the issues of humanity, interconnectedness and sociality from technological production systems. This displacement is evident in the segregations of labour and economic markets, which obfuscate socially beneficial and direct participation in production. In his 2004 text The Decadence of Industrial Democracies, Stiegler argues that consumerism, initially developed by harnessing the forces and capacities of human desire andcourts the Latin term for private leisurely human comportment, is human desire alone is nonetheless insufficient for sustaining consumerist economic activity. For consumerism to self-perpetuate there must also be a perceived and insatiable need to purchase and consume an ever-expanding range of new products, goods and services. Accordingly, consumerism must transform itself into business need or negomet — the calculable, necessity-driven aspects of existence. This transformation of desire into need produces a scenario in which the natural balance between utopia and negomet is overturned in favour of an artificially elevated sense of necessity inflecting all aspects of life. To encourage consumerist activity, Stiegler also argues that there must be an
accompanying transformation in the relations and connections between humans and the material world. Promoting the ‘chronic and structural obsolescence’ of objects encourages consumers and individuals to replace seemingly redundant items with new products. Consumers therefore develop superficial, empty and ‘disposable’ relations with objects and the material world, resulting in an attitude and ethic of ‘carelessness’.

As an alternative to the all-pervasive capitalist economic model, Stiegler outlines the more socially-orientated economy of contribution which is (like DIY urbanism) bound to the figure of the ‘amateur’, the self-producer and the do-it-yourselfer, rather than the passive consumer. For Stiegler, the inevitable obsolescence of capitalism has enabled the current ‘reign of amateur’ to emerge. Amateurs or ‘do-it-yourselfers’ are essential to Stiegler’s contributory economy because of their direct investment in the products that they both produce and consume. It is the complex intertwining and blurring of production and consumption processes that differentiates the contributory economy from mainstream consumerism: the ‘contribution’ is not just a producer or simply a consumer. Of note is Stiegler’s differentiation between two types of do-it-yourselfer: the ‘traditional amateur’ aligned with participatory economies; and the goal-focused do-it-yourselfer – otherwise known as ‘un bricoleur du dimanche’ or ‘Sunday handyman’, aligned with traditional consumerism. The traditional or artisanal amateur is, for Stiegler: ‘primarily motivated by their interests rather than by economic reasons. They can also develop greater expertise than those motivated by economic reasons’.

Incidentally, this distinction between committed and occasional do-it-yourselfer recalls Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s philosophical distinctions between the occasional hobbyist and the traditional artisan: their artisan, like Stiegler’s ‘traditional amateur’, is immersed within the material world and the flows and capacities of matter. Through vested interests in production systems rather than fiscal gain alone, Stiegler’s contributory economy potentially reinstates a sense of care and interconnectedness between people, their objects and technologies; the ethic of carelessness characterising consumerism is thus replaced by an ethic of care or cura. Stiegler’s arguments for the contributory economy and the amateur contributor do not delimit this model to any particular project or production type. Indeed, in a 2010 presentation, Stiegler suggested that the emerging economic model is directly tied to creative practices, urbanity and regional identity: ‘Artists and creators help regions, cities and regions create a sense of social inclusion and authenticity. Economic prosperity relies on cultural, entrepreneurial, civic, scientific, and artistic creativity’.

Stiegler’s understandings of the do-it-yourselfer, sociality and consumerism appear to resonate with those of an earlier North American academic theorist of DIY, Albert Roland of the now-defunct United States Information Agency. In a 1958 essay, Roland also identified different types of do-it-yourselfer based on focus and motivation. His invocations of the ‘craftsmen-hobbyists’ and ‘oldtime craftsman’ are similar to Stiegler’s ‘traditional amateur’, motivated by an interest in the work itself. Whilst noting the difficulty of pinpointing precise inner motivations for engaging in DIY pursuit, Roland argued that many of the post-war do-it-yourselfers relied unnecessarily on DIY kit assembly as a shortcut to a more engaged and meaningful investment in productive acts. Although Roland and Stiegler’s respective invocations of the amateur were developed in very different historical, cultural and technological contexts (1958 and 2013 respectively), both associate DIY with an economics founded upon sociality. Whilst Roland suggests that DIY is an extension of mainstream North American ‘consumerism’ and its dispersal of DIY goods and services, he also sees that it engenders skill and productive capacities amongst unskilled labour. Roland’s do-it-
youselfers of the 1950s often participate in groups organized to bring together fellow craftsmen.14 Accordingly, DIY can be understood as a social phenomenon focusing on relationships among people.15 Stiegler’s equivalent contributor-amateurs of 2013 operate through online social networks16 united by specific investments in DIY pursuits. New digital technologies, free and open-source software and tools such as web-based platforms17 promote knowledge sharing amongst online communities; shared digital production workplaces such as the Fab Lab[...]

CARE, INTERVENTIONIST PRACTICE AND THE DIY URBANISM OF RENEW NEWCASTLE

Through its emphasis on sociality, cultural and urban transformation, the discourse on DIY urbanism appears to closely resonate with the tenets of Stiegler’s notion of contributory economies. However, closer analysis of a particular example of DIY urbanism – Renew Newcastle – also indicates an inextricable bind between DIY modes of operation and mainstream commerce: a bind also evident in the aforementioned discourses on DIY urbanism. Described by its founder, festival director and Australian media presenter Marcus Westbury, as a ‘self-initiated’ example of ‘DIY urban renewal’,18 Renew organises inexpensive, temporary rolling-lease arrangements with the property owners of unoccupied commercial spaces until (and if) a long-term tenant is installed. Accordingly, flats are constructed by their artisan-tenants with little or no alteration to the existing building shell, often using affordable or recycled materials. The temporality of Renew Newcastle interiors is particularly evident in the self-built office workplace of the architectural firm Antheros, designed for quick disassembly and removal; the workspace includes a suspended ceiling made of inexpensive netting and timber laundry pegs (Figure 2).

From its inception in late 2008 as a not-for-profit entity, Renew Newcastle’s agenda was to recuperate the city’s urbanity through the temporary occupation of abandoned shopfronts and other unused spaces by local emerging artists, designers and other ‘low-budget19’ producers financially precluded from accessing standard commercial properties. In the late 1990s, the failure of homogenous commercial strategies for Newcastle’s urban spaces – many in place since early colonisation – prompted the effective ‘evacuation’ of CBD commercial space that continued unabated for the next decade.20 These vacated interiors were the same spaces targeted by Renew Newcastle for a range of modes of design activism and temporary occupation. In its earliest stages, Renew projects took the form of artistic installations, temporary stalls and non-standard studio spaces. As the profile of Renew expanded, the tenancy type shifted accordingly and included creative office-based practices and commercial, albeit artistic, retail: a recently created area of Renew interiors is particularly evident in the self-when youselfed Renew Newcastle.21 Although Renew Newcastle is a self-initiated, ‘bottom-up’22 response to the failures of mainstream consumerism and urbanism, it is also now supported by public and private investment in recognition of its contribution to the city’s rebirth as a global tourist and cultural destination.23 Renew currently receives funding and in-kind support from both state institutions and private developers, including the New South Wales State Government and its Premier’s Rural & Regional Grants Fund.24 Its most prominent tenancy, The Emporium, is located in a heritage building (currently) jointly owned by a private investor and developer – the GPT Group – and UrbanGrowth NSW, the land acquisition and development section of the NSW State Government and its Premier’s Rural & Regional Grants Fund.

Above

Figure 3: Conditions and Speculations: future urban living and density in Newcastle. An exhibition of work by the first year students of the University of Newcastle Master of Architecture program, located in The Project Space, Renew Newcastle, August 25-30, 2014.
Photograph: Cathy Smith, August 2014.

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Government. Renew’s relationships with both private and state development entities have been publicly recognised as an exemplary business and economic model through a number of awards. This unique bind between Renew’s DIY urbanism, mainstream commerce and the entity of the state precludes certain tenants who are seen to be competitive with existing city businesses and/or who do not fit the definition of an arts or cultural provider.

As a form of urbanism and interior spatial practice, Renew Newcastle appears to invoke the twin conditions of otium and negotium that Steigler argues are a necessary component of human comportment. Grounded in genuine concerns for Newcastle’s social and urban vitality and otium, Renew’s projects are enabled through negotium and ‘brokerage’ with the city’s property owners and the local council, and their associated legal and fiscal structures. Renew explicitly differentiates itself from mainstream or established retail and consumerism through its primary conceptual focus on place-specificity, localised production and emerging creativity: concerns also invoked in Stiegler’s arguments for the contributory economic model. The blurring of the processes of production and consumption characterising Renew’s self-initiated projects allows for a new urbanity to emerge that is site-specific and bound to ambitions of ‘social inclusion and authenticity’, to borrow from Steigler’s terminology.

One project example involving a deliberate interplay between the conditions of otium and negotium, pleasure and business, is the 2009 Hunting Grounds temporary installation by Kim Bridgland, Ksenia Totoeva and other collaborating architectural students from the University of Newcastle. Contributing design skills and labour, the students initiated the project in response to an early call for projects by Renew Newcastle. The installation was located in ‘The Room Project’ space (a former shop), and was comprised of upcycled and individually calibrated pieces of timber forming an undulating floor surface with a new and alternative materiality to the generic commercial space in which it was sited (Figures 4 and 5).

Hunting Grounds deliberately challenged the functional use of dormant retail spaces because its sole purpose was to provide a sensory and auditory experience, and to invite atypical modes of occupation in a retail space void of commodities. The timber pieces registered the movement of the audience (the architecture students themselves alongside the general public) who travelled freely in and through the space, accompanied by an ambient soundscape. The students adjusted and nuanced the placement of the timber pieces in the space without altering the building shell per se; as such, the work was effectively produced in the same location as it was consumed. The ‘consumer’ (here, the audience of students and the participating public) was invited to consider the careful reprocessing of the objects of everyday life within a former commercial space that is particular to the Newcastle milieu. Like many other
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