

# To Occupy, to Inscribe, to Thicken Spatial Politics and the Right to the Surface

**Sabina Andron**

This essay sits in the warm, multiple and frictional space of the urban surface.

The surface is a space: not a boundary but an extension, a thickness, an object.

The surface object is cumulative and layered: it results from the gradual addition of individual inscriptions, materials, coatings, paint, markings and erasures.

Urban spatial production makes surface. It doesn't just occupy the surface, it produces it: it generates a new space, a new location, a new object.

The surface is therefore qualitatively different from private and public spaces. It blurs these urban ownership regimes and embodies collective spatial production and use: a surface commons.

Urban ownership regimes and the politics of spatial production are closely related to the question of the right to the city. In thinking about what, and where, the right to the city is, I will suggest in this essay that the right to the city might be (in) the surface.

## **The right to the city**

Henri Lefebvre introduced the right to the city as the possibility of actively participating in shaping and producing cities, their image and function, and argued that this right was fundamental to urban inhabitation (Lefebvre 1996). Since then, the right to the city has been variously interpreted as a right to the democratic management of capitalist surplus (Harvey 2013), an urban politics of inhabitation (Purcell 2002), a right to difference and centrality (Butler 2012, Dikeç 2001), a right of production and not only of choice (Marcuse 2012) and a moral claim to property (Layard 2012). The city, like the surface, should not only be a space for consumption, but an everchanging reality that results directly from individual acts of production, participation and appropriation created by its inhabitants.

How might the right to the city apply to surface spatial production, and what can the surfaces of the city tell us about access, exclusion and urban entitlement? While the notion of the right to the city includes and connects such rights as housing, rights against police abuse, rights to public participation in urban design, and rights against established property laws (Attoh 2011), I dedicate these pages to explore the right to the surface as a form of right to the city. (see also Andron *forthcoming*) My own understanding of the right to the city is that of a right to self-determination in the production and occupation of space, and a prerogative to use the city in defiance of exclusionary and suppressive properties and regulations.

Two strategies of spatial production, appropriation and participation, are particularly relevant to understanding the right to the city as a right to the surface. Appropriation is the right to creatively define and produce urban space as property, while participation was understood by Lefebvre as the right to

Sabina Andron is an architectural historian, interviewer of walls and researcher of surfaces. She curates up-and-coming art and is about to obtain a PhD from the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. She teaches architectural history across London and runs workshops and outreach programmes on urban creativity and the right to the city.

[sabinaandron@gmail.com](mailto:sabinaandron@gmail.com)

<http://sabinaandron.com/>

the *oeuvre* – the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy and use urban space. Radical sites of publicness can be produced at surface level, immediately next to private property, opening up the use value of cities and fighting against their valuation and management as a series of private assets. This type of publicness is a form of spatial production rather than a type of property certificate, so what is communally used effectively becomes public, despite it being privately owned. Use, rather than ownership, determines publicness, and produces an urban commons, the not-public-nor-private, the *oeuvre*, the right to the city.

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This is a project of writing from below, of becoming minor and complicating the interstitial space of the surface as a form of commons. The spatial typology of the surface commons challenges normative conceptions of property in the

neoliberal city, through a form of democracy as civic empowerment and co-production. The action of surface inscription is such a process, through which urban spatial politics are re-written in practice (re-practiced). Inscribing surfaces re-politicises property, participation, public and private spaces, and brings to the fore the importance of self-determination in the production and occupation of urban space. The right to appropriate the city is not something that is requested or even demanded of the existing order. Rather, this right is something that is declared and verified in practice (Iveson 2013: 945).

The cultural force of the property ownership model is its clarity, certainty and order: “the visible geographies of property (the maps, fences, signs and so on) give a reassuring legibility of property” (Blomley 2004: 14). What happens on surfaces, however, is a complexification of this certainty, whereby property and its marks become ambiguous, uncertain and challengeable. In fact, this lack of stability is the clearest strength that surfaces possess, as they *can* and *will* keep transforming. This makes them more resilient and ultimately impossible to control by any single discourse, be that of private property or urban order. Surfaces enable a heterogeneous experience of property, which becomes malleable, subversive and politically productive in its support of alternatives (Keenan 2015).

Surfaces become locations for a specific way of claiming a right to the city, and counter urban governance regimes based on crime prevention through environmental design, hostile architecture, broken windows, urban decay, defensible space, disorder prevention, privatisation, securitisation, cleanliness, exclusion, sanitisation and propriety.

The boundaries of private property stop right at the edge of built space, before the first inscription hits the surface. The politics of these subsequent surface strata are imbedded in their materials, and the best way to understand these is to conceptually thicken surfaces, to expand their liminality and explore their layered depth. Material depth, of course, matters very little. Surfaces begin their conceptual thickening with the first inscriptive layer that sticks to their private body. This layer sits parasitically close to private property yet negates its postulates and proposes a communal use instead. I therefore propose to reassess surface space as a radically political locus where a collectively inscribed, communally debated urban model can be pursued.

## **The right to the surface**

Urban surfaces are social spaces and repositories of political activity. They are the stage on which urban stories unfold, or become hidden, and they mediate between the cultural forces and the physical objects that make up the city. They are fascinating because they are specific physical loci, yet they afford readings and interpretations that expand far beyond their material existence.

Surfaces are archives of the city, which are produced, curated and recruited to serve specific political agendas. Cities can reveal themselves in depth through their surfaces, and the study of surfaces could become a uniquely political and richly detailed field of urban spatial exploration. Such surface studies could investigate visual, material, legal and semiotic dimensions of surface productions and use them as insights into issues of urban entitlement and claims to the right to the city. An interest in urban surfaces has already been explored by scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, including sociology (Brighenti 2009, 2010), anthropology (Noland 2005), architecture (Unwin 2000, Lavin 2011), linguistics (Pennycook 2009, Harris 1995, Henkin 1998), geography (Mould 2015), literary theory (Nandrea 1999), urbanism (Tripodi 2008, 2009), visual culture (Bruno 2014), photography (O'Neil 2008) and communication (Irvine 2012); and collections such as *Urban Walls* (Brighenti and Kärholm forthcoming) and this special issue are instrumental in establishing this field of urban studies and setting its agenda.

Every surface is a locus of minor victories enabled by transition and becoming, a recurrent celebration of trivial metamorphoses and opinions. Each inscription is an assertion, an involvement, a temporary victory of visibility over silence, of activity over idleness and of memory over oblivion. Fame here is rarely individual and it almost never lasts, but it produces a collective recognition instead, a force that comes from being simultaneously together, rather than distinctively apart.

I understand the right to the surface as a right of ownership, production and positionality, which can be claimed in different ways. It is a right to alter the surface through erasure and inscription, a right to touch, read, lean against, write about and photograph the surface. This right is of all urban inhabitants to engage in discursive and material production around surfaces, and to develop surfaces as politicised spaces.

### **The right to the city is the right to the surface: a manifesto**

The right to the surface is unique but manifold, its energy is singular yet its traction comes from multiplication. The right to the surface is a right to visibility, inclusion and participation: the right to be clear and to be here. The right to the surface is a right to appropriation and use, irrespective of ownership entitlements and property certificates: its authority lies in shared urban experience and sociability. A right to spatial production and enactment of dissent, and an enfranchisement for the urban inhabitant in front of corporate and institutional interests.

The right to the surface is a contestation of private property and a production of spaces for collective use. It is a moral and political claim to access and participation, hijacking and appropriation. It is a right to break the law. The right to the surface is additive and productive, not selective and exclusive: it is the right of more, of all, to write, show and be seen – instead of none or a selected few.

The right to the surface should not be institutionalised: it is claimed, not granted. It is direct and not representative. The right to the surface does not depend on aesthetics or harmony. It is processual and formative, it seeks change and movement, not stability and permanence. It is a right to risk, not to safety. The right to refuse and confuse ideas about beauty and value; and to produce an active surface politics. The right to surface territories as political achievements.

The right to the surface is a right to write, to create, to produce *oeuvre*. It is a right to non-reconciliation and disagreement. It is a right of power and not of immunity: it grants the authority to inscribe and it does not offer protection against inscription. It is a liberty right and it entitles confrontation between subjectivities: the sticker, the crack, the writer, the scrawl, the message and the hybrid alongside the title to govern, the owner, the fence, the law and the capital. It is a right against spatial enclosure and privatisation, a right of action and not of suppression.

The right to the surface is a right to discourse and sociability, it is a right to stay name-less and

uncategorisable. The right to the surface is a right to sign and a right to the sign. It is an expression of possibility, potential, alternative, heterogeneity and future. A right to struggle and belonging, to simultaneity and encounter. A right to incoherence.

The right to the surface is the right to produce urban art, to decide the image of the city and to contest its regimes of regulation. It is the right to become and to remain minor, mundane, category-less and an-aesthetic. The right to the surface stacks, delights, annoys, undermines and empowers. The right to the surface is a right to unpoliced displays and to value surfaces as archives of urban cultures. The right to the surface is the right to the city.

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