

# This City Does Not Exist

## *How to practise the culture-led re-commoning of cities*

Partisan Social Club  
Gary Hall

We have been attempting the awkward job of reconsidering the city. We work in Coventry, so the transformation of the city through culture in the form of the UK City of Culture designation is all around us. The aim of the UK City of Culture scheme is to utilise 'culture as the catalyst for investment in places to drive economic growth and regeneration, promoting social cohesion and instilling pride in places and making them more attractive to live and work in and visit.'

We agree with the importance the government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) attaches to arts and culture. Operating in terms of those social movements dedicated to radical open access, peer production and the anti-privatised knowledge commons, we see culture as a site for the invention and testing of new knowledges, new practices, even new subjectivities, not least for the artist and author.

We are now working on the following question: can the collaborative, performative approaches to art and knowledge we have developed with initiatives such as the Partisan Social Club and Open Humanities Press be translated to cities?

We want to create a space for all of us to think differently about the city from the way in which most UK urban planners and policy makers do at the moment. We have a feeling they are missing something. So we have come up with a 15 point 'plan' for how we think the city should be transformed [in our case in a more socially just direction]. It's just a start. No doubt we have got lots of things wrong.

So we would like to invite you to **add to, edit, cut up, strike through**, attack or otherwise engage, with these initial ideas. You can use a **keyboard, pen, pencil, brush, whatever comes to hand**, really. The hope is that, by working together, we might develop a plan for transforming the city and the way 'we' are as bodies in public spaces.

1) View the disruption created by deindustrialisation, the financial crisis, austerity, Trump, Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic and war in Ukraine, as an opportunity to challenge both the public and private paradigms as they currently exist.

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2) Focus on rethinking cities and their infrastructure beyond the public and private – conceptually, but also practically and concretely.

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3) Begin to reformat cities by offering a diverse range of more horizontal, collaborative and commons-oriented alternatives to those galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) that are provided by the state and corporate realms.

[.....]

4) Create and maintain these bespoke cultural institutions by selecting from the hardware, software, resources and collections made available by proponents of open access, open GLAM, free and open-source software, p2p filesharing, copyfarleft, 'piracy' and the anti-privatised knowledge commons.

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5) Remember there is no need to mimic those cultural institutions that have traditionally gone to make up a city – municipal libraries, museums, galleries and the like. New and very different kinds of institutions that function online or off (as well as hybrid combinations thereof) can also be designed.

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6) Remember, too, that not every detail of a city needs to be planned and designed. Some things can be left to chance.

[.....]

7) Accept that there is no blueprint for the cities we are looking to create. They do not already exist – not even in our imaginations. Nor are they a conspiracy theory or illusion. They are missing cities; cities that need to be called forth in different ways, times and places. Artistically, practically, theoretically. As such, they require a certain openness, both to that which can be named and identified in advance and that which cannot.

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8) Recognise that we are not trying to produce an equivalent to the Smart City. Without the 'stupid' – including the marginalized, the disadvantaged, the disempowered and the disaffected – cities are boring and antiseptic. It is important cities remain hospitable to the useless and unproductive, as well as to the strange, the surprising, the weird and the monstrous. This includes the notion that nonhuman species (animals, insects, plants) and other actors and elements (buildings, technologies) may actively participate in the creation of both culture and cities.  
[.....]

9) Strive to make it possible for multiplicities of actors (beyond the usual suspects of professional politicians, councilors and retired middle-class professionals with experience in local or third sector politics), to be able to participate in the (re) making of cities according to the specific needs and requirements of the situation.

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10) Appreciate such multiplicities do not already exist: say, as civic populations or publics. Rather a new context needs to be invented in which they too can be called forth. These missing communities can then participate in the re-commoning of cities by copying the above-mentioned tools and resources as they are; or by developing, modifying and repurposing some elements and discarding the rest.

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11) Concede that cities are messy. It is to be expected that the appropriate combination and mixture of principles and protocols, tools and infrastructure, tactics and strategies, priorities and resources will differ from location to location, and will be highly situated and site sensitive: temporally, materially, ecologically, culturally, politically.

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12) Acknowledge that each city contains a pluriverse of cities. Within any 'one' city there are a plurality of actors and groups, organisations and institutions, resources and priorities.

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13) Ensure that the building of such bespoke cultural counter-institutions is carried out in a non-rivalrous, non-competitive – although not necessarily non-antagonistic – fashion, to collaboratively proliferate experiments with reimagining the city.

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14) Be aware that the practice of re-commoning cities is not concerned with growth or expansion. Nor is it be organised hierarchically in terms of an centre/periphery, inside/outside model, be the latter the suburbs or the countryside. Instead, it proceeds through the establishment of relations of co-creation and custodianship with a variety of widely distributed initiatives. It can thus add to the repertoire of alternative ideas for transforming existing cultural, economic and social relations that are already being explored in places such as Preston and Birmingham in the UK, New York and San Francisco in the US, Barcelona and Madrid in Spain and Amsterdam in the Netherlands (platform cooperativism, municipal socialism, 'sanctuary' and 'solidarity' cities, mutual care networks, credit unions, people's banks, community land trusts and so on).

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15) Make sure to feed the results back into either an informal, flexible, latent commons or a more formal distributed union or federation of open city infrastructure. In this way they can be made available to be critically and creatively reused, misused and abused by others in turn.

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This version of 'How to practise the culture-led re-commoning of cities' has been adjusted and rendered unique by (feel free to add your name here... or not)

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