

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/0208-6107.30.10>

Katarzyna Breska

East Street Arts
St Mary's Lane
Leeds LS9 7EH
kasiabreska@yahoo.com

**PERCEPTION OF URBAN HABITAT AND THE STRUCTURE
OF HUMAN INTERACTION. DIALOGUES WITH THE ARTIST
AS PART OF CREATIVE INTERVENTION**

Abstract

In this paper I bring closer some of the aspects of my work, I show the approach to the space when working in public locations. The components of this approach are a careful observation of the environment, spending time with the locals, talking to them, taking into account the symbolic nature of the contents brought by the people. So I quote and comment some of the dialogues that happened between me and the passers by during a four week creative intervention in the city's oldest street.

Keywords:

Mural, public space, urban habitat

That's because I haven't put my point very clearly. I must try to make it clearer. By 'beauty of shape' I don't in this instance mean what most people would understand by it – I am not thinking of animals or certain pictures, but, so the thesis goes – a straight line or a circle and resultant planes and solids produced on a lathe or with ruler and square. Do you see the sort of thing I mean? On my view these things are not, as other things are, beautiful in a relative way, but are always beautiful in themselves, and yield their own special pleasures quite unlike those of scratching. I include colours, too, that have the same characteristic. Have you got my point, or not?¹

When executing a mural, I find it absolutely necessary, to make an insightful approach to its location. My art practice is focused on the concept of space, how we impact the space and how the space influences the architecture of our mind.

¹ Plato, *Philebus*, translated with notes and commentary by Justin C. B. Gosling (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 51 (section 51c).

By space I mean any given environment, be it a wild landscape, room in my house or a street in a city. All of them will have different set of dynamics that can alter our perception of where we are.

In November 2016 I started the mural commission which aims to bring creative interventions to Leeds city centre and to link art, architecture and a citizen. The project is part of a bigger undertaking developed by East Street Arts, named “City Less Grey.” It brings artists and their work to the city’s spaces, allow for an open access to an image and through colour and form transforms urban space into a space of inspiration and stimulation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN INTERACTION IN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

What is crucial and what needs to be mentioned at the beginning, is that the process of painting the mural has many levels and the execution of an image is just one of them; it is a creative intervention that over certain stretch of time, allows to provide an element necessary for creating lively cities – experience of the contact with one another. So what exactly constitutes for a contact? Referring to an architect and thinker – Jan Gehl, living cities are the ones in which people can interact with one another, are always stimulating because they are rich in experiences, in contract to lifeless cities, which can scarcely avoid being poor in experiences and thus dull. He says that the most widespread social activity is passive contacts, that is, simply seeing and hearing other people. The presence of others, activities, events, inspiration, and stimulation comprise one of the most important qualities of public spaces altogether. Moreover, he urges to understand the subtle qualities, which throughout the history of human settlements, had been related to the meetings of people in the public spaces. He points out to the life between buildings as a dimension of architecture.²

During few weeks of the mural project I spent significant amount of time in one specific location of the Leeds city centre. The presence of the artist and new creative intervention brought new dynamics to the place. The 37m hoarding which was the “canvas” for the painting became a “focal point” for the possibility of interaction. When talking about the interaction, I mean all diverse levels of it: simply observing the action of painting the mural, giving a quick comment to the artist (like “you missed a bit”), passers by talking to each other and commenting on the artwork and finally a longer conversation with the artist where questions were asked.

² Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings. Using Public Space* (Washington: Island Press, 2011), 7, 12, 13, 21.

“CITY LESS GREY” MURAL – DESIGN AND DETAILS

The mural on Kirkgate in Leeds is site specific, responding to the physical, historical and cultural characteristics of the location. Its design is based on the elements of the city plan across centuries (1200's – now) and eighteen different written scripts that reflect on the multicultural richness of the city. Among the scripts I used was Latin, Old Norse, Yiddish, Greek, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Arabic, Nepali, Nsibidi and more. All those scripts describe one word: “art.” I then used the elements of the street plan and scripts as shapes, where colour and curve would come across first, “hiding” the original meaning of the elements, and thus building new associations.



Fig. 1. “City Less Grey.” Mural on 37m hoarding, executed by Katarzyna Breska, Leeds 11/2016. The work depicting the elements taken from the city plan and elements of various language scripts. Source: Katarzyna Breska’s archive.



Fig. 2. Engaging the public into contributing towards the mural on Kirkgate, Leeds, 11/2016. Source: Katarzyna Breska’s archive.



Fig. 3. Detail of the mural showing the elements of the composition, with precise in between spaces, creating a balanced and “lively” two dimensional space. Source: Katarzyna Breska’s archive.

The aim of this approach to the design was to put an accent on the fact that we only see each other as citizens from an angle of a passer by, a stranger that notices a bare and superficial minimum about the other, often “tinted” by the nature of current politics and messages accumulated in media. We hardly make an attempt to appreciate a simple fact of richness in not being the same, in the fact that all of our urban habitat is in continuous change and elements constituting for the city do not belong exclusively to solid objects like streets and buildings, but also to the elements of human existence like language, visual contact with each other, the experience of meeting together in the realm of architecture and culture. The more diverse these elements are, the more diverse experience we get.

My design was then carefully composed together into a new “map” depicting spaces and what I consider the most important cultural element – the possibility of communication, the language.

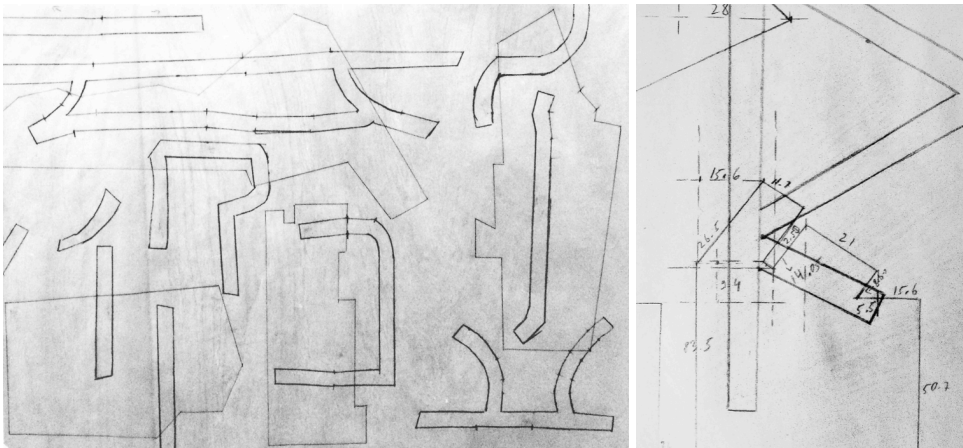


Fig. 4–5. Scaled details of plan for the mural with precise measurements. Source: Katarzyna Breska’s archive.

The famous passage from “Philebus,” proposed as the motto, is interpreted very differently. Even – as Alfred H. Barr Jr. reminds – to reflect on whether Plato was thinking about the beauty of machines.³ My concept refers to the classical interpretation of Plato’s thought. First rather we should I think remember that the objects which produce the pure pleasures were made in the same way as

³ Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art: Painting, Sculpture, Constructions, Photography, Architecture, Industrial Art, Theatre, Films, Posters, Typography* (New York: Museum of Modern, 1974), 14.

utilities.⁴ Second “no art can be completely free of this element [mathematics]; if arithmetic, measuring and weighing were taken from any art, it would be about useless.”⁵

My abstract art is about the simplicity of the message, about the language that is understandable to everyone, about something that can be counted or measured and compared to something else and then to think it more deeply. It is a visual representation of us, existing and moving in a space with historical dimensions, where our means of communication meet together. It is the process of interwoven exchange of the experience, in the urban space that makes the geography of a given location its uniqueness and ever developing specificity.

SPECIFICITY OF THE LOCATION: HISTORICAL, ARCHITECTURAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

My approach to the design consists of three elements: historical, architectural (or spatial) and social. As an artist, I see the importance of all those elements crucial to a commitment of “visualising” the space’s unique “image.”

This is what Edward W. Soja describes as “trialectics of being.” According to him, trialectic or spatiality-sociality-historicity is a three-sided way of conceptualising and understanding the world. Human spatiality is becoming as fundamental to understanding our lives and our life worlds as the social production of our histories and societies.⁶

From my perspective, this approach gives a full picture of where we are, and what dynamics appear within the certain location. When travelling and working in various spots, for me, the primary action is an insightful research with all three aspects I mentioned above in mind. During my mural project in Leeds, the very first element that appears “crucial,” has strong impact onto the space, is the “emptiness” behind the hoarding on which I was painting. It was a central point of the conversations I had during the painting period and it became apparent very quickly, how much people care about the place they live and work in. The area behind the hoarding is considered “neglected” and there is certainly a necessity of bringing the balance back to the street through restoration and careful planning. As an artist, I felt it is a huge privilege to paint on the oldest street in Leeds but also a huge responsibility. The mural itself became not only a new artwork in the open space of the city, but also, and most importantly,

⁴ Donald Davidson, *Plato's 'Philebus'*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 384.

⁵ Ibidem. Compare Plato, *Philebus*, section 55 e.

⁶ Edward W. Soja, “Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination,” in *Architecturally Speaking. Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, ed. Alan Read (London: Routledge, 2011), 14.

a possibility of communication between local residents, passers by, bus drivers, families, other artists, city's officials, visitors and tourists. The amount of dialogues I had with people that were triggered by the mural is staggering. During the four weeks of the intervention I had more chances to speak to "strangers" than in the space of a whole year. If we all had an opportunity like this more often, engaging into conversation with one another, we would be very quickly heading towards designing not only a city full of art accessible for everyone, but also, as a result of it, a lively city.

DIALOGUES WITH THE ARTIST

Over the span of few weeks during the painting period I had a chance to engage in conversations with the public, below I present some examples.

(1) Two elderly ladies coming back from shopping at the Kirkgate market (Leeds 09/2016):

"You are doing great job! You know, this empty space behind your painting has been like this since we were little girls. I wish there would be something done with it. Do you know if something is going to happen to that space? It is great you are taking care of the hoarding, it is already an improvement."

I asked if they are coming back from the market and if they like shopping there, as I do, I know it is an important place for people to go and shop but also to talk or sit and eat.

"The market used to be much bigger and much busier, now all the chain shops and shopping centre are taking over and you see less and less people buying there, which is a real shame as it is such an important place for Leeds."

(2) Two gentlemen with a pork pie (Leeds 09/2016):

"You know, you can be done for this!"

For what, I answered.

"For your graffiti business, the council will come and call the police."

I explained it is actually in a cooperation with the council and the aim is to use art as the means of restoration and communication.

"Oh, I see....well, what are you painting then?"

I explained the design and they answered:

"I suppose it will look better. So are you like Banksy or something?"

(3) A gentlemen with a briefcase (Leeds 11/11/2016):

“Are they paying you for this?”

When I answered yes, he said entirely shocked:

“But any child could do it, any child!”

(4) Alain from Burundi (Leeds 12/11/2016):

“Hi, could I please join you, I love to paint. I do not have anything to do today, so if I could help you that would make me feel like I did something useful. I can stay for some time but then I need to make a phone call.”

We talked while we painted and I got to know a lot about his life in Leeds and his background. When he finished his part of the painting he was very proud of it and I said he now officially made his “mark” in the city and every time he passes the painting he can remember that.

(5) Jenna from Australia (Leeds 12/11/2016):

Jenna moved into a flat on Kirkgate in June 2016 and she said she enjoys the location a lot:

“Hi. Can I please join you? I saw you painting in the last few days out of my window. I noticed someone just joined you to help, and I thought I could do the same? I was hoping for something to happen in the “empty area” of the street and around the hoarding.”

Jenna said she came from Brisbane and she is in Leeds to study. We worked together for a bit, chatting about Leeds and life in general.

(6) Steve and Dennis at the bus stop (Leeds 12/11/2016):

Waiting for the bus, two of them kept watching me working and they finally said:

“Your painting is really good, what is it about?”

I answered the question and they both seemed to be even more impressed and happy about the artwork. I asked them where they are going as they spent a long time waiting for the bus. We then all together figured out the time and carried on the conversation. They introduced themselves to me as Steve and Dennis. Steve then asked me where about I live in Leeds and then told me that he used to live in the area nearby and he enjoyed it. When the bus came they said goodbye and wished me good luck with my artwork.

(7) Lady waiting for a bus (Leeds 12/11/2016):

“You know, I used to work there, at the old Amusement Centre you are standing by. It was shot down around 15 years ago and it is a shame as it was a great little place to gamble. I loved working there.”

(8) Andy, the metal artist and street cleaner (Leeds 13/11/2016):

Andy was working picking the rubbish on the street when he came to me and said he really likes my art. He was very interested in the project in general:

“This looks really good you know, I like it. My son is a graffiti artist and he paints on the streets a lot as well. He is quite known.”

I asked what sort of work his son does and where about. We then spoke about art in general, Andy said he likes three dimensional artwork very much and he himself works a lot in metal, cutting and reassembling. I told him he should show his work somewhere as it would be great to have a local artist exhibiting in town.

(9) Linda – a member of the Leeds Civic Trust (Leeds 15/11/2016):

“I like your work, you make the street look so much brighter.”

We then talked about the “balance” in a public space, how much it matters to the people living, working and visiting Leeds, to experience it as a place where architecture and spaces reflect the city's history and culture.

(10) Stewart the Welsh man:

Stewart stopped by to ask few questions about the mural. After my brief explanation he got interested in the concept, especially about the part where I talk about language and its various scripts. He said:

“I am researching the Welsh language and how the language shapes the community and the place. I come from a small town up in the northern part of Wales and everyone speaks Welsh only up there.”

I got interested in his research and asked if he can tell me a bit more about the language itself. We talked for over 10 minutes and it was great to find a connection between his work and the mural. He then said:

“Now you need to know how is “art” in Welsh. It is CLEF and it reads like CLEV.”

He took out a page out of his diary and wrote on the blank side: CLEF. Later on I looked on the other side of the page, it said: *Language, economy and society*. Aitchison + Carter 2000. As linguists Sapir and Wharf suspected as early as the 1940's – and postmodern theory has confirmed – language is not merely the mirror of society, it is the major force in constructing what we perceive as “reality” (London 1992). It was a great surprise to discover and read this note as the quotation felt accurate and compatible with the mural's language elements but yet it was not planned and happened by a chance, of that one person passing by and being curious.

(11) Rebecca (Leeds 26/11/2016):

Rebecca was interested in the relation between developing the Kirkgate and the creative intervention happening through the “City Less Grey” project and the

massive commercial development with John Lewis shopping centre open to the public.

“Do you think people of Leeds would prefer more murals and creative events and investments in restoration of “neglected” areas or new shopping centres? What is your opinion?”

I answered I can not possibly talk for the whole community of Leeds but I can express my own opinion, and share the observations after conducting various discussions when working on Kirkgate. Considering the amount of shopping centres in Leeds and the budget put forward for them, there should be at least an equivalent of effort to present the city as a creative hub that engages with the citizens and promotes innovation, communication and education. These are the qualities that in the long term will create communities inspired by utilising one’s passions and courage for integrated progress. Consumerism and a habit of buying, rather than making, translates into lack of personal inventiveness and kills the opportunity for discovery and learning.

There are number of people in Leeds working hard and tirelessly to make art come through first when looking at Leeds. East Street Arts are just one of them. What also matters, is the cumulative effect of every single small step of every single person in the city that contributes towards creative living.

From the information I gathered during the conversations I had with people on Kirkgate, there is a felt seriousness about the expectations they have, about the necessity in putting attention towards the restorative and creative way of developing the city.

There were dozens more of this type of dialogues I conducted with the public. The vast majority of them was positive, expressing excitement and pleasure of having a large scale artwork that “brightens up the street.” Because of the nature of this paper I chose these of them that constitute for a good example of the diversity of interactions between the artist and a viewer. However, they show some general phenomenon, namely that aesthetics has a direct impact on life in daily life.⁷

LIVELY CITY VERSUS LIFELESS CITY

More of contacts and exchanges like this in urban environment would mean people continuously exchanging their knowledge and passion and creating a flow of information. Mural is just one example of a “trigger point” of such

⁷ This aspect is widely discussed in the discourse called aesthetics of everyday life. See e.g. Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 17–30, 103–112.

social opportunity. What is important is that it brings something which is essential in every day life – a message of bold creativity, sharing, invitation to openness, taking the new as an opportunity to learn. Those qualities, once seen and experienced, come a long way, transferring into our daily life. Each small act of creative intervention has an impact on the space and people in that space, it is a fact and it has been stated by many artists, thinkers, architects and scholars. It is in a human nature to be creative and to leave a mark, to create a link.⁸

So what happened to the creation of those links? Why do we feel so disconnected to some parts of the city and not in the other areas? Why are we trying so hard to bring back creativeness to the streets and to our lives?

Franco La Cecla gives us a brutal answer: street life in the last two centuries has been forbidden, prosecuted, and deleted. Place names given by people to their own environment have been replaced with numbers on every door and labels on the streets. The only place the dwellers are allowed to handle has become the interior of the apartment. Building codes, inspectors, bureaucracies and professional corporations have criminalised every creative intervention of citizens outside, and greatly reduced those inside their domiciles. We can walk through the streets of the city, cross its sidewalks, enter its buildings, stay in the rooms of various apartments yet leave no trace of our presence, no individual or collective mark. The activity of the modern citizen is not an activity of inhabiting, of creation of localities. He is only a consumer of space.⁹

Clearly, the “City Less Grey” project and projects happening across the cities around the world are challenging this statement and bringing a proof of a shift in a way we think about our cities. It is quite clear, in my believe, that creative planning and creative urban strategies are the answer for the future of our urban habitat.

As Doreen Massey stated, social space is not an empty arena within which we conduct our lives; rather it is something we construct and which others construct about us. It is this incredible complexity of social interactions and meanings which we constantly build, tear down, and negotiate.¹⁰

⁸ This idea is well known primarily thanks to Joseph Beuys. His first statement on “social sculpture” is dated 1973, first published in English in: Caroline Tisdall, *Art into Society, Society into Art* (London: ICA, 1974), 48. Compare: Clara Bodenmann-Ritter, “Talks at Documenta V by Joseph Beuys,” in *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*, ed. Claudia Mesch, Viola Michely (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), 189–197.

⁹ Franco La Cecla, “Getting lost and the localised mind,” in *Architecturally Speaking. Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, ed. Alan Read (London: Routledge, 2011), 45.

¹⁰ Doreen Massey, “Space-time and the Politics of Location,” in *Architecturally Speaking. Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, ed. Alan Read (London: Routledge, 2011), 39.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barr, Alfred Hamilton Jr. *Cubism and abstract art: Painting, sculpture, constructions, photography, architecture, industrial art, theatre, films, posters, typography*. New York: Museum of Modern, 1974.
- Berleant, Arnold. *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.
- Bodenmann-Ritter, Clara. "Talks at Documenta V by Joseph Beuys." In *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*, edited by Claudia Mesch, Viola Michely. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007: 189–197.
- Cecla La, Franco. "Getting lost and the localised mind." In *Architecturally Speaking. Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, edited by Alan Read. London: Routledge, 2011: 31–48.
- Davidson, Donald. *Plato's 'Philebus.'* London; New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Gehl, Jan. *Life Between Buildings. Using Public Space*. Washington: Island Press, 2011.
- Massey, Doreen. "Space-time and the politics of location." In *Architecturally Speaking. Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, edited by Alan Read. London: Routledge, 2011: 49–62.
- Plato. *Philebus*. Translated with notes and commentary by Justin C.B. Gosling. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Soja, Edward W. "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination." In *Architecturally Speaking. Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, edited by Alan Read. London: Routledge, 2011: 13–30.