

Riots

IDEA, ACTION AND FORM



Words by Fani Kostourou

“Action causes more trouble than thought.”
Jenny Holzer

If Victor Hugo came back to give a TED talk,” says Keller Easterling, an architect and professor at Yale University, “he might assert that architecture, which he once claimed had been killed by the book, is reincarnated as something more powerful still—as information itself.” If architecture is information, then human actions are the carriers of this information and those that shape architecture. In a world where broadband communications lead

into a global urbanism, media are changing the city, infrastructural models generate forms of polity and spatial formulas are created to model activities and relationships, architecture and information are inextricably intertwined. It's naïve to disregard information when making architecture; it's naïve to overlook actions when making form. The information of these actions is what matters the most. The purpose of any kind of spatial model is to capture these actions that take place in the built environment, translate their patterns into information and attempt to understand the idea behind them so as to inform the design of the built environment, meaning the form. However, when space turns out to perform poorly, the question is, what causes more trouble: the idea, the action or the form?

In summer 2011, in light of riots breaking out in London and other UK cities, a research group at UCL's Centre of Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA) teamed up with the department of Crime Science and the Metropolitan Police to study the *action* of rioting in an effort to understand the *why* of the riots, as well as the spatial patterns that can emerge from a group of rioters. By simulating rioting with mathematical formulas and drawing analogies with other well-studied behavioural models, the researchers tried to predict how riots spread to inform policy makers and police strategies to prevent rioting from happening again. As a matter of fact, the team led by Sir Alan Wilson found that there's an analogy between the act of rioting and the everyday act of shopping. For instance, according to Hannah Fry's film, *Can Maths Predict a Riot*, more than 30% of rioters travel less than 1 km from where they live—as in the case of London—but are willing to go further if there was a large sized riot—as in the case of Manchester—or little chance of getting caught. The action of rioting had not only distinct spatial patterns but also these patterns were shared with the action of shopping—which space makers know much about. The patterns correlate to findings indicating that people usually prefer to go shopping close to their home but are willing to travel further away for a big department store or an outlet centre.

UCL research also observed that where police were absent, rioting thrived—making certain locations more attractive than others for rioters to get involved, much like the case of a contagion. Not only was the action contagious but so was the decision to riot which goes way before rioters actually get out on the street. According to the data, the way the idea was spread was similar to that of a disease. The way a virus contaminates a foreign organism has certain similarities with the London riots, acting as a sort of infection. Both need causative agents and usually—if not always—both produce noticeable signs of disorder, which in turn stimulates more agents. However, in both cases the spread can be avoided or proven powerless in front of an immunised system. So which rioters can be immunised against the idea of rioting?

This is where the problem shifts from the action to the idea—and to form as well. We can argue that the idea of any kind of action is potentially carried by all of us. It pre-exists within us but only acquires visibility by those that decide to act. In this sense, the idea of rioting constitutes a disposition carried by all of us of a *know/how* to act. One doesn't need to act to know how to act. Yet, in the case of rioting, as the research argued, certain people are more likely to riot than others, and these tend to come from some of the most deprived areas of the city. A resident of a council estate is seven times more likely to be

involved in the riots than any of his affluent neighbours, says Hannah Fry, based on data from the police records of all offenders' arrests. According to other research conducted in 2011 by the London-based consulting company Space Syntax Limited, the majority of convicted rioters lived on large post-war housing estates.

But the idea of rioting is related to form. In his early work Bill Hillier, founder of Space Syntax, has suggested that the relationship between rioting and large housing estates may not be result of deprivation but of design. A complicated, unintelligible and segregated form discourages use, and as a result encourages the idea of an anti-social action. Moreover, where CASA research argues for a strong correlation between rioting, retail attractors and poverty, Kinda Al Sayed and Sean Hanna's research on 'How city spaces afford opportunities for riots' as part of a PROXIES project on data, crime and the city, suggests that riots were determined rather by the form of the street network and the natural through-movement, making certain locations more likely to be chosen than others. They think space best forecasts where rioters live and act. In fact, they argue that both actions of rioting and shopping are similarly susceptible to form and this is why analogies were found in the first place.

One way or another the conclusion is the same: form affected the idea of rioting as well as the action itself, even before riots actually occurred. So knowing how the idea and action are prone to the form is essential to understand the action. Information on the action is not enough. We need information on the form that has predisposed it. Hence, the research on UK rioting can help architects understand, firstly, the susceptibility of an *idea*, an *action* and a *form* individually and together, and, second, how architecture as a form-shaping-science has the opportunity to create enormous spatial and social consequences only by privileging or impeding actions. Maybe the riots weren't the real problem all along; maybe the real trouble arises from the probable failure of architects, policy makers and planners to establish a link between ideas, actions and forms. ◇