

# Animating the interstice Protest as a creative act on the fringe of the 'creative city'

For fourteen days in early 2018, [UCU](#) members at many UK universities went on strike. As part of the industrial action at UCL, proactive union members and supportive students organised an extensive programme of social, educational and political teach-outs on picket lines, as an alternative to the disrupted teaching timetable. The creativity on display inspired me to consider how such actions can re-frame our current understandings of the 'creative city'.

A particularly interesting aspect of the teach-outs were the temporary occupation of micro-spaces immediately in front of UCL buildings. These surplus spaces became the sites of temporary acts of creative production and dissemination. Three in particular caught my eye, and the juxtapositions below display how the protest transformed them from passive to active sites:

- **15m<sup>2</sup> outside the Bartlett School of Architecture at 22 Gordon Street**
- **Steps leading to the entrance of UCL Art History outside 20 Gordon Square**
- **Ramp outside 14 Taviton Street, home to UCL Anthropology**

Bottom-up forms of creativity animated these interstices between the everyday street and one of the anchor tenants of the creative city inside – part of the 'wellspring of the creative economy', as Richard Florida puts it (2005: 144).

Decorated by self-made banners, placards and an endless amount of [punning](#), the teach-outs covered subjects from [mental health in academia](#), the [art histories of protest](#), [gentrification](#) and even the [creative city itself](#), whilst self-published [zines were distributed](#) and ['making' sessions](#) organised. As scholar-activist Paul Chatterton writes, protests derive their energy 'from the creativity and inventiveness of participants' (2000: 395), and those in attendance at the teach-outs were encouraged to be active contributors, which leant the pickets a bustling atmosphere.

For urban planners and policymakers, spaces of urban void – albeit here on a micro scale – are economically unviable and thus ignored (Colomb, 2012). But my takeaway from the occupations is that, no matter how small, place itself can be a creative asset. The frontline of these protests had the effect of activating spaces which would otherwise remain excess

and not be understood as creative. Re-framing them through the strike allows us to expand our concept of what *can* constitute part of the creative city.

If we understand 'collectivity [...] boundary spanning and risk taking' to be notions of creativity (Pratt, 2000, cited in Chatterton, 2000: 391), then these protests displayed the radical end of creative practice, and might be considered part of a revised democratic, sustainable and healthy creative city.

The suppression of protest in the increasingly privatised and regulated urban sphere (Minton, 2012), makes it appear unlikely policymakers will change tact and allow for more freedoms on where these activities can take place. The use of the micro-spaces being due to the limited rights strikers have to be elsewhere. Yet, considering how other originally subversive acts have been co-opted into the existing creative city framework – from support for LGBTQ+ Pride marches to the (semi-)promotion of street art – there is a precedent that exists for protest to be situated - or appropriated - within the current toolkit.

### **Bibliography**

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