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WALL STREET BOUNDED AND UNBINDING

The spatial as a multifocal lens in design studies

Jilly Traganou

Introduction

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the visitor to New York had no doubt about which was the ideal spot to view the city from above. The World Trade Center (WTC), the iconic twin towers in the heart of Wall Street, the most dense and tense locale of the city, were that place, physically and symbolically:

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center . . . The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles . . . The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. In it are inscribed the architectural figures of the coincidatio oppositorum formerly drawn in miniatures and mystical textures. On this stage of concrete, glass and steel . . . the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess.

(de Certeau 1984)

Thirty-five years after de Certeau’s view of New York from above, the coincidatio oppositorum (coincidence of opposites) that he encountered from the top of the WTC, “the immobilized” and “gigantic mass” on the one hand, and a “universe that is constantly exploding,” on the other, remains the reality of the Wall Street area, with its totality and its cracks.

Taking its name from the palisade that separated the colonized from the indigenous territory in the seventeenth century, Wall Street, the center of New York’s financial district, is a locale of global importance and, hence, a highly bordered area. From the 2001 9/11 terrorist attack to the encampment of the Occupy Wall Street movement in Zuccotti Park in 2011, the Wall Street area has been the site of significant events in recent US history. In 2012, part of the area was severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy due to its location on reclaimed coastal land. Perceived as a symbolic target of attack, but also a topographically vulnerable area, Wall Street is subject to constant monitoring acts of security preparedness and control.
Assuming a (spatial) design studies approach, some caveats have to be made. It may appear awkward to choose a financial district in order to speak about design, particularly to speak about the district “as design.” Upon exiting any of the subway stations in the financial district of Lower Manhattan you are confronted with a disconcerting soundscape of building constructions, temporary and permanent barriers that hinder your circulation, police watch-towers, and a sense of contingency that hardly matches the mental image of a financial district’s entryway. The few examples of iconic design in the WTC reconstruction complex are surrounded by a bundle of everydayness (see Figure 2.1); the jumbled designscape of the Wall Street area as both a site of spatial production (new constructions and land turned into commodity of high value), and a site of consumption (of space, objects, capital).

Even though talking about the district “as design” might be a risky proposition, I see the Wall Street area as a case study par excellence of what “Design Studies” with a “spatial” attributive can offer. Its binding function and its unbinding potential helps us illuminate the coexistence of two fundamental aspects of design—control and agency. It also helps us to be mindful of what Clive Dilnot has alerted us to, quoting designer Jan van Toorn: the “complex factors of institutional power” which contribute to the production of design and which “have mostly been ignored . . . despite the enormous dissemination of information.” By not losing “sight of context . . . of the real ‘spaces and places’ . . . in regard to which design works,” we will be reminded of the “real capabilities design deploys” (Dilnot 2008: 182).

The border condition

Wall Street, an unfinished socio-spatial assemblage, will be seen as an example of the fundamental functions of space, and the interplay of scales, ontologies, and forces that create its magnetic field-like function. I discuss the Wall Street area by paying attention to its borders, attempting to show a dialectic between space and counter-space that emerges in conditions of bordering. I see bordering as an inherent function of abstract space, or the political, institutional space, constituted originally by the state. According to Henri Lefebvre, at first sight this space appears homogeneous. The forces of abstract space “seem
to grind down and crush everything before them . . . performing the function of a plane, a bulldozer or a tank” (Lefebvre 1991: 285). It originates in a tabula rasa mode of production that eliminates difference, only to reintroduce it later in the shape of commodity.

I define bordering as the act of drawing lines, or establishing checkpoints, in a territory to delineate spatial differences in terms of sovereignty, ownership status, or spatial rights. Border need not always be material. From being based on linear fortifications, such as the palisade, material lines of separation between social, political, and economic spaces, bordering has given way to new articulations—matrixes of outposts, or dromological borders, that are based on the perception of space as an elastic entity (Weizman 2007). Surveillance technologies are part of the act of bordering, functioning as tools for classifying and ordering people, deciding who has access to a given territory and who lacks it. The condition of bordering transforms space into a magnetic field. The border is both attracting and repelling. It evokes both disavowal and a desire for transgression.

From a geographical viewpoint, New York’s financial district, one of the fastest-growing neighborhoods in the city, roughly overlaps the boundaries of the New Amsterdam settlement of the late seventeenth century. It expands from Chambers Street in the north to the southern tip of Manhattan, and from the East River to Broadway. A construction boom emerged in the area after the major destruction brought about by the 9/11 terrorist attack. After this tragic moment, the city elites seemed determined to rebuild the area from its ashes. Building was seen as an expression of patriotic confidence to which architects, politicians, and developers naturally subscribed. Today the area is guarded by an army of public and private security enforcement personnel: police with uniforms, undercover officers, informants, police videographers, photographers, users of manned and unmanned aircraft, and analysts in data centers that keep watchful eyes on real-time events (Gillham 2011).

**Socio-spatial duality**

Space, being both the envelope of human action and the outcome of it, has a unique position within the ontology of design. It is both a dominating framework that shapes design action, and a product of the design acts it envelops. It is also “simultaneously a medium of social actions, because it structures them, and a product of those actions” (Gottdiener 1985: 128). Within design studies space can be both the object of an inquiry, seen as a designed artifact, and an irreducible nexus within which multiple distinct design actions occur. This dual aspect may appear to differentiate space from other typical products of design (a chair, a poster, a tool) that seem to lack this binding nature, giving the user the choice to ignore or abandon them. Nevertheless, this distinction is not necessarily something that design theorists would agree with. The dictum that “what we design ‘designs’ us” is an established understanding of design as a formative realm that redefines the condition of humanity (Fry 2012). This view resonates with Langdon Winner’s syllogism that artifacts, or “technical arrangements,” are “ways of building order in our world” that deliberately, or inadvertently, structure our daily routines of communication and circulation (Winner 1980: 127). At the same time, design is used as a means of social exclusion and control; it structures social divides.

Wall Street’s primary spatial function has been that of harboring the institutions of financial capitalism. It comprises the offices and headquarters of several of the city’s major
financial institutions, including the New York Stock Exchange and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Such institutions impose a network of systemic arrangements that start from physical in-situ fortifications, which are expressed by spatial choices and materials, to invisible technological networks of surveillance and control, which regulate vehicular and pedestrian access. At the same time real estate and zoning changes have caused the construction of new office buildings, condominiums, chain hotels, boutique hotels, and rentals, each of which applies its own system of security. The construction of the 9/11 memorial and museum have brought an influx of tourists, and new regulatory maps of vehicular circulation (encircling the site with a fortified palisade of guard booths, vehicle barricades, and sidewalk barriers, restricting access to through traffic). These are being resisted by members of the WTC Neighborhood Alliance which sees them as regimes that obstruct and colonize their everyday life.

Numerous actors have been involved in the area’s rebuilding: from the 9/11 victims’ families and grassroot community planning coalitions (Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, Rebuild Downtown Our Town), who envisioned a new Lower Manhattan; to high-profile global architects, such as Santiago Calatrava, Daniel Libeskind, and Fumihiko Maki who were commissioned to design important buildings in the area. New York City mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg (each with a different agenda), Homeland Security, the New York Police Department, the Port Authority, and Silverstein properties, have been constant key players whose will is reflected in both the blueprints and current built environment of the area. The result is the parcelization of land into zones of distinct ownership and legal status ranging from private to public–private partnerships (such as privately owned public spaces), to spaces that belong to the city, the state, or the federation. Within this system of abstraction, enclosures are being established to defend and protect the assets of those constituencies that have the capacity to hold a spatial stronghold.

The spatial ensemble of Wall Street does not end with the area’s physical boundaries. Like all designed artifacts, space too is not tied to singular locational binding. Not only do designed objects flow as commodities, diasporic entities, or perishable things, but spaces are also multi-sited. The physicality of a spatial agglomeration carries with it relations with trans-local networks: the location of foreign labor that brought a building into being; the harvesting of material for a construction from distant territories; the flow of capital through transnational channels; and interactions within trans-continental networks that were part of its making or its destruction. The origin of Wall Street is already a product of multi-sitedness: a strategic seventeenth-century post of the Dutch Republic in the new continent; the flooding of the district is triggered by planetary pressure systems; the 9/11 attacks were interconnected with the geopolitics of the Middle East. At the same time, the Wall Street area is elevated from its specific geographical location, to being part of a network of sites of national and transnational significance, at once bordered (protected, fortified) and bordering (prohibiting and controlling).

The street level becomes the terrain where the contingency of these forces obtains a physical definition. A complex and diffuse system of bordering strategies has been applied in the area, employing infrastructures that originate in prisons, warfare, and military bases. Modular concrete or plastic barriers (also known as Jersey barriers), fencing, wedge barriers, heavy tree planters, controlled entryways such as sally ports, canine inspection
teams, checkpoints, watchtowers, armed police personnel and security guards, controlled passage points (such as those in airports) comprise the variety of defensive strategies used today in the district.

Besides the visible borders, a more pervasive counterterrorism and policing system has an intangible presence. The Lower Manhattan Security Initiative comprises a network of private and public cameras in close collaboration with financial institutions in the area. In conjunction with this, the NYPD and Microsoft worked to develop the Domain Awareness System, modeled after London’s Ring of Steel. The program aggregates and analyzes real time “public safety” data streams, in combination with pre-existing databases, to alert NYPD investigators and analysts about potential threats and criminal activity in the area (NYC Gov 2012). The Domain Awareness System is a real-time mapping system that provides a comprehensive pan-spectric view of the area. Nevertheless, its effect in crime prevention, and its ability to eliminate prejudicial surveillance and racial profiling, are questionable.

Who is the designer of this spatial condition of bordering that transcends physicality? It is obvious that no single mentality has produced or controls this aggregation of synergetic, or at times even conflicting, bordering systems. Spatial authorship is distributed, elusive, often secretive and undisclosed. Within this polyphony the synergetic agency of the State, its financial and policing institutions, major IT players, and the interests of New York City elite developers, prevail. The collective will of this actors’ network not only materializes their power through the “gigantic rhetoric of excess” (de Certeau 1984: 91) expressed in their edifices, but also determines the movements and physical experiences of citizens, residents, and newcomers. Disparities between these two poles of action should not be disregarded. While some feel protected or entitled to the protection that this bordering offers, others feel threatened or offended. These others (who numerically might comprise the silent majority) do not necessarily comprise a fixed group, a community, or a social class. They might include mid- and low-level employees in the district, long-term residents, people of a certain geographical origin, civil rights activists, or individuals who simply defend their right to privacy. For instance, the NY Civil Liberties Union has raised concerns about the erosion of privacy rights, blanket policing, the lack of legal accountability, and judicial review that are the results of these practices.

By taking this into account, the choice of abstractions like us, social actions, our world that were used in the early paragraphs of this section acquire an uncomfortable resonance, as if trying to mask the unevenness that lurks behind them. While there might be no disagreement about the fact that space “designs” or controls “us,” its users, one should be cautious of the identification of designers with those who are subjected to a design’s controlling power. Indeed, has the bordering condition of space been the decision of those who opposed the rebuilding of the financial district in the business-as-usual mode? Have the actions of these actors led to the particular bordering designs that were described above? If not, to what kind of designs have they led? Where do they belong in the spectrum of design action? It seems that the understanding of the words design, society, or space in the singular, elides the plurality of social action, and the power dynamics (inequality, asymmetry, suppression, resistance) between different social actors. If this proposition of the reciprocity of space and society is correct, it should only be conceived as a constantly unsettling condition.
Spatial trialectics

An understanding of space as a design outcome of diffuse authorship, constantly under construction, urges us to consider it in its trajectorial form from the stage of production to the moments of use, appropriation, or transformation. Henri Lefebvre provides a comprehensive framework for understanding space as both the condition and the product of social action in a dynamic manner. Lefebvre sees space as a triadic entity: perceived, conceived, and lived. Perceived space is found in the physicality of space, the establishment of spatial practices that colonize everyday life and reproduce the dominant socio-spatial order. Conceived space is found in the realm of ideas that are mentally invested in space, in the ideologies and representations of space by expert knowledge and vision. Lived space is the realm of desire and mythification; it escapes prescription, utility and discipline (Lefebvre 1991). This trialectical understanding of space addresses both the realm of spatial (and designerly) production—at once physical, ideological, and strategic—and the interconnected realms of use, appropriation, and agency. With this, we can perform an epistemological shift from conceiving “things in space” to that of the “actual production of space” (Merrifield 2006: 106). Neither things nor spaces should be studied in isolation. Rather, the consideration of space allows for the social relationships that are latent in design to come to the surface, relations that introduce “the contradictions, for instance, between the private ownership of the means of production and the social character of the productive forces” (Lefebvre 1991: 90).

Michel de Certeau’s terms “strategy/tactic,” “maps/itineraries,” “space from above/below,” help us further qualify Lefebvre’s three realms, and especially the “lived space.” Lefebvre’s first two aspects of space are akin to de Certeau’s notion of panoramic space, a “texturology” of space seen from above by those in power, while Lefebvre’s third spatiality is analogous to de Certeau’s realm of tactical space that unfolds on the street level, and exceeds the typical scripted understanding of spatial use (de Certeau 1984). And if the specialized tool of mapping, both in its projective and descriptive dimensions, is a method for developing and controlling the first two (perceived and conceived space), attention to the elusive nature of the “itineraries” (another de Certeau term) of the anonymous walkers would give us a lens for understanding the way space operates from below (lived space). Space (as well as design) is indeed the product of calculation, ideology, and imposition. But, at the same time, there are a myriad hidden, incoherent, subversive “designerly” (Cross 1982) or proto-design actions taking place in space that escape the panoramic gaze and will of the spatial producers, border makers, spatial planners, and cartographers.

Attention to all three realms comprises what I call “Spatial Design Studies,” an understanding of space as both a controlling apparatus, applied by those with productive capacities (the state and its bureaucracies, the markets, multinational institutions), and as carrying the possibility of agency (by community, social movements, non-professional designers). Replacing the terms “used” or “consumed” space with the term “lived space” brings our attention to a much broader realm of social action and imagination. “Lived space,” nested with all the designerly, creative, and libidinal opportunities, can be agentic rather than simply productive. This understanding transcends the perceived/conceived, or producing/consuming, dialectics. The agentic is based on the belief that engagement with space provides the capacity for resistance to the encompassing coercive function of the very space that was meant to shape its subjects. Agentic design thus describes the capacity of those who operate within space, whose voices might be marginalized or excluded.
from the realm of public deliberation, and whose productive capacities—physical, political, or financial—might be limited. Advocates of community planning, neighborhood organizations, political activists—subjectivities that wish to change their lifeworld or the political world beyond them—might belong to this category. Led by imaginaries that are being brewed within the “lived space,” their “designs” might be material or intangible, tactical or strategic, radical or insurgent, antagonistic to an overpowering condition, or prefiguring a future society.

As a physical space Wall Street is dominated by a dehumanizing regime of spatial practices that converts the walker, the worker, the visitor into a part of an ominous socio-technical mechanism that secures and safeguards the dominant form of space. As a conceptual space, Wall Street is the temple of financial capitalism, while it is also shaped by numerous other mental fabrications, such as the Domain Awareness System, an Orwellian invention of totalized spatial mapping, or the Wall Street memorial, a site that commemorates national trauma and reinstates the national unity. These two layers of space stand in a dialectical relationship: the first implies the system’s machinery, its hardware, the banality of daily operation; the second points to the lofty and the utopian of total control and national healing. These two spatial layers are bound together, establishing the realm of coerciveness and control, fixing both meaning and action into mental and physical constructions and enclosures. These ideas and realities that derive from the synergetic acts of power/finance/knowledge-holders are indeed the designs that “design” society, but it would be a sweeping generalization to claim that they are being produced by “us,” as the will of society as a whole.

If urban life is fully colonized in a web of blockages and controls is there any mental or physical territory left for lived space? For Lefebvre, it is space that “holds the promise of liberation: from the tyranny of time, from social repression and exploitation, from self-imprisoning categories—liberation into desire” (Smith 2003: xiii). Differential spaces (or counter-spaces) operate “against the Eye and the Gaze” (Lefebvre 1991: 382), trying to “restore unity to what abstract space breaks up . . . put an end to those localizations which shatter the integrity of the individual body, the social body, the corpus of human needs, and the corpus of knowledge” (ibid.: 52). Counter-spaces and new unpredictable capabilities emerge even in the highly controlled spatiality of Wall Street, in the fissures of the systems that fail to cover the full terrain, or at the opportunities afforded when things fall apart, and when quantities are turned into qualities, for example, the ninety-nine percent becoming a political subjectivity. Such attempts lead to the emergence of differential space, where design, in the form of the agentic and the imaginary, in contrast to the productive/conceptual, can play a role.

**Unbinding Wall Street: the Occupy Wall Street encampment as differential space**

In the fall of 2011, a differential space emerged that aimed to question the society of financialization as incarnated by Wall Street (Occupy Wall Street 2011) (see Figure 2.2). It materialized as the occupation of Zuccotti Park, a privately owned public space in the heart of the financial district, and it comprised an encampment in which processes of direct democracy could be exercised in-situ. The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement that brought it into being revitalized a “revulsion against the large-scale centralized and inhuman institutions” (Breines 1980: 422) of the financial district that shaped politics in the US and beyond, and sought to prefigure a future society. For this, it strived to practice
horizontality, transparency and participation, the opposite of what those institutions stood for. The OWS protesters joined a series of global activists from Cairo’s Tahrir Square to the Syntagma Square in Athens. Between September 17 and November 15, 2011, Zuccotti Park was transformed from “an utterly obscure . . . downtown plaza” to “a miniature polis” of “global consequences” (Kimmelman 2011).

The conversion of Zuccotti Park into Liberty Plaza, despite the heightened surveillance and constant policing of the financial district, is illustrative of the possibility of differentiated space and spatial agency, even in a fortified location of extreme control. Here, as in the case of other protest camps, we notice the development of strong collective identities, which shape and are shaped by the creation of internal democratic processes (Feigenbaum et al. 2013). Thus, like space at large, protest camps are both being formed and formative of their subjects, while at the same time, due to their participatory nature, they strive to defy the disjunction between the subjects that produce these formations and those who are subjected to them. The spatial practices of the OWS protesters included the installation of an elaborated network of interlinked do-it-yourself infrastructures. The site was domesticated and gradually filled with tents and other ephemeral structures for supporting shelter, food and energy supply, self-governance, learning, and sanitation. Governing infrastructures were set up in designated spaces for general assembly meetings and for other decision-making processes characterized by horizontality. The site also included a comfort center, a prototype of a sharing economy, where food and supplies were circulated.

Design played a major role in the lived space of the camp, ranging from the realm of “metis, a tacit type of practical knowledge” (Scott 1999) and “proto-design,” to more mature configurative processes. This is the realm of agentic design that was integrated with every level of the camp’s realization, from the overall spatial arrangement and the creation of alternative socio-technical propositions, to the distinctive bodily preferences of many of the protesters manifested in a sense of group subculture. The creation of most of these forms does not depend on expert knowledge, but is based on the development of agency-focused capabilities,
peer-to-peer dissemination, and alternative pedagogies. These capabilities expanded from securing the protesters’ well-being and prototyping conditions of self-management to emancipation from power structures for the broader society, such as the development of alternative energy production stations or a gray water system. Most importantly, these practices emerged from “the realm of imagination as a social practice . . . and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996: 31).

In this process, different subjectivities appeared, such as new agents, following Amartya Sen’s definition of the agent not only “as someone who acts and brings about change, whose achievement can be evaluated in terms of his or her own values and goals,” but also “as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions” (Sen 1999: 18–19). Participation in the encampment of OWS was a pivotal experience for its members. But a collective new agent was also formed; the ninety-nine percent, or the majority of the United States population that is subjected to decisions made by the one percent that holds the wealth. It is not that the ninety-nine percent did not exist prior to the fall of 2011, but that through the OWS intervention it acquired an image in the collective imaginary and became a potential political acting subject that united individuals and dispersed groups. In this sense, the differential space of OWS constituted a new body politic. In political terms, it created a counter spatio-temporal arrangement that prefigured a political model, using Breines’s definition of prefigurative politics as a means to “create and sustain . . . relationships and political forms that . . . embody the desired society” (Breines 1980: 421). Occupying Zuccotti Park was an anti-bordering, anti-surveillance action par excellence, what I call an unbinding act. Zuccotti Park formed an area of different status from its surrounding territory. Unlike other public spaces of the city, the park, being a privately owned public space, had no curfew restrictions, and thus complicated the protesters’ evacuation by the police. Nevertheless, Occupy activists became slowly bordered in, confined in a private space of special status. The occupiers’ actions unfolded as a counter-bordering game of chess. Their containment was established by the police’s action to create hard and soft zones of control, the first being permanently barricaded spaces, and the second temporal spaces with restrictions on speech and activity. The occupiers were constantly under the gaze of the police from a thirty-foot high portable surveillance tower and, on the ground, through patrol officers. Protesters performed a range of counter- and anti-bordering resistance moves against the police’s efforts to incapacitate their behavior. During their street march along the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1, 2011, kettling, a typical bordering police practice, was used as a method of crowd control that aimed to confine demonstrators to a limited area, leading to arrests. OWS protesters frequently breached the barricaded perimeters, physically or through the projection of protest images. Protesters also managed to mobilize counter-surveillance methods by using scouts, live streaming, and cameras (Edwards and Gillham 2013). It is important to note the adversarial nature of these moves:

The interactions between OWS protesters and the NYPD resembled an adversarial dance . . . as each side performed a series of overt moves intended to counter the other and prevail in the struggle to shape the location, substance and interpretation of protest.

(Edwards and Gillham 2013: 16)

With the above it becomes clear that overarching notions, such as those of space, technology, and design do not reside on just one side of the spectrum; rather they are resources that can
be used for the creation of both abstraction and differentiation. But the ways these are used differ greatly, and the extreme power asymmetry between the two groups could not make their adversarial dance possible for much longer. Indeed, on November 15, 2011, in a manner reminiscent of Urban Renewal's slum clearance, police in riot gear removed the encampment from the park on the grounds of unsanitary and hazardous conditions.

Numerous people supportive of the OWS were outraged, while many others expressed their relief at the dismantling of the encampment at Zuccotti Park. Reporters had already started talking of “an insidious hierarchy” (Shapiro 2011) and social cracks emerging in the micro-neighborhoods of Zuccotti Park. Several OWS committees continued to hold meetings, decentralizing, and trying to connect with local communities. They hoped to move the protest from the realm of the extraordinary to that of the everyday, in order to give rise to insurgent spaces that would empower populations beyond those that had already joined OWS (Traganou 2013). Occupy The Pipeline (an anti-fracking campaign), Occupy Sandy, and Occupy Foreclosure emerged in the following years. The lesson from this transposition is that differentiated space is fugitive and nomadic, and that it has to be transformed or it will fall into the same pitfalls that it tried to resist.

Conclusions

By introducing the “spatial” into the field of design studies (Traganou 2009) we are presented with a context that sheds light on some of the field’s blind spots. An extreme spatial condition, a coincidatio oppositorum, Wall Street district is helpful in this inquiry because of several of its characteristics. First, as a bounded territory it incarnates the ultimate wish of the producers of space and design for achieving absolute control over the finitude of their forms. Second, being a district that has repeatedly attracted deviance, disobedience, and destruction, Wall Street reveals the futility of bordering and the inability of full control. Third, having been the locale of one of the most important resistance movements in recent US political life, it indicates the possibility of differentiated space and agentic design emerging through the spatial ruptures in even the most fortified of locations. These point to the fact that a fugitive process is at work—that of bordering/splintering/differentiating, rather than simply producing/consuming/appropriating—to which object-based inquiries often adhere. Design studies is called upon to trace this process in the expansive and imploding geographics of space, from Wall Street, to other parts of New York City, to other urban areas. Thus attention to the spatial provides us with a multifocal lens for understanding the spectrum, the trajectory, and the metamorphoses of designing beyond the myopic view of the market/non-market dichotomy as the main site of design’s biography. It also allows us to overcome the static categories of design (print, object, architecture), and to be always on the watch for the interconnected (synergetic, adversarial, antagonistic) actions of the different political subjects of space and design, of space as a field of constantly evolving designs and imaginaries.

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