

# Appropriating urban corridors: a networked transgression in hiding

Janice Astbury

Department of Anthropology, Durham University, UK [janice.astbury@durham.ac.uk](mailto:janice.astbury@durham.ac.uk)

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Urban spaces in transition offer particular opportunities for creative citizen action. They are by definition 'loosened' space (Franck and Stevens, 2007). As investment in maintaining infrastructure ceases and formal control is reduced, new opportunities open up for people and nature to newly appropriate these spaces. Urban corridors are a particular type of urban space, which is often in transition as a result of changes in forms of transport or in the importance and/or distribution of certain resources. This paper will explore examples of citizen interaction with urban corridors and potential ways to theorise this interaction and its effects.

Corridors offer particular opportunities because they are material networks through which things have been and can be transported, and through which people have moved and may continue to move, albeit in different ways such as on foot or bicycle through disused railway corridors or along canal towpaths where trains and boats once passed. Users and neighbours of these corridors in various parts of the world are helping brown infrastructure to become green infrastructure, thus opening up a much broader range of opportunities for other people to both make and benefit from infrastructure in more equitable ways. Such transformative action is a means of overcoming the obduracy (Hommels, 2005) of the large scale and imposing infrastructure built for the modern city, which is to say it reduces the perception that the existing systems and edifices will be there forever and we mere humans have no capacity to change anything or deviate from the path dependency that is built into them and transferred to us.

Urban corridors can become the means through which innovations are developed, disseminated and taken up and built upon within a social-ecological system of urban changemakers. Movement of humans and non-humans bringing materials, histories, capacities, landscape elements and more, generate potential to disseminate possibilities and to initiate experiments in different parts of this largely hidden (for now) network. Concealed behind the trees or buildings, or ideas about nice places to go or good routes to travel, these corridors represent something of a protected niche where things can be tried out; where unconventional assemblages, which are possibly more inclusive and equitable, may flourish. Loftus (2012, p. xxi) speaks of how "by using the environment of the city as a laboratory for artistic experimentation, we see how urban interventions open up new conditions of possibility for alternative urban futures." He argues that "we need to conceive such practices as being inherently socio-natural. They are reducible neither to the social nor the natural but rather are part of a continually changing urban assemblage." (Ibid.)

Urban corridors are sometimes viewed as ecological corridors, which may have supported a local ecosystem by bringing water and biodiversity and cooler cleaner air, along with other ecosystem services, but which have been marginalised and undermined--as is the case of the barrancas (ravines) of the Mexican city of Cuernavaca--but are now being re-appropriated and resuscitated by citizens. Or it may be a case of the emergence of richer ecological corridors as vegetation sprouts through the cracks in the unmaintained pavement, opening up space for former ecosystems to reclaim the space or new ecosystems to emerge. This allows corridors to be viewed from a landscape ecology perspective where they connect the system of matrix and patches (Forman, 1995) with the patches representing diversity at the margins, some of which may become the new matrix as a new ecological regime becomes dominant. Of course as implied above, urban landscapes are never purely ecological. They are products of social-ecological systems or social-ecological-technical systems and the patches can be sources of innovation and disruption that can spread

through the corridors (which can themselves be patches) to inspire other patches and thus gradually shift the overall system.

Urban landscapes are also cultural landscapes. They send strong messages about what the city is and what role its citizens might play in shaping it. Moving around the city through alternative corridors gives an entirely different sense of the city and its possibilities. It is possible to traverse areas of Montreal almost entirely through alleyways, one can travel across Manchester through systems of canals and former railway lines, and (with a certain amount of agility) walk through sections of Cuernavaca's barrancas. There behind the houses is quite a different world from that seen from the road in front, and which is still only glimpsed by a small proportion of the city's inhabitants. This offers an opportunity for citizens to transform these spaces while no one is looking, and many are doing so using creativity and collaboration with nature, and in the process inviting others to join them in the corridors.

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