# *Adaptive Actions*

Jean-François Prost

Architects often prefer photographing/showing buildings at the height of their glory: when the presence of time is imperceptible and user-trace absent. Some architectural agencies even control representation, allowing circulation and posting of approved images only. '*Now*' is the *modus operandi* – priority goes to the image of the building in the present and very little concern to its progression, to the future. Much emphasis is given to what must be photographed, honoured, recorded and published in magazines rather than to users' adaptation of space and appropriation in various forms. Very little importance is given to post-production, to a building's post-construction life cycle, structure or landscape.

Adaptive actions operate on a shift in focus from representation and aesthetics to programming and built environments' possible uses. By observing, revealing and sharing citizen adaptive actions, this project aims to encourage others to act and to engage with their environment, as well as to inform designers of possible programme extensions.

Can perceptions be altered and change pioneered through simple actions, images and ideas? Can the identification and representation of realities, which have to date been perceived as improbable or absurd, lead to new urban concepts and construction processes? The ongoing Adaptive Actions (initiated in 2007 in London[i]) throws light on these questions. It explores alterations in the workplace, the home and public spaces in general. The project lends creative voice to marginal causes and alternative urban lifestyles whose up-growth is otherwise precarious. Imagination and personal creativity's potential for impact on daily life is emphasized, particularly within public spaces.

Thus, it indexes and reports existing actions in the city and encourages renewed activity, such as adaptation of architecture, landscape and objects unfolding in several stages.

**Singularities**
In order to document and create an inventory of existing urban alterations, an ongoing survey, an open call for collaboration is conducted through the Web and printed documents. It should be noted, however, that these undertakings occur on a small scale and are often only known to a limited number of locals. The request for postings accelerates the



Fig.1 *Snow Shovelling*, submitted by AA, created by Hannah Jickling and Valerie Salez, Viger Square, Montreal: http://adaptiveactions.net/action/112/



Fig.2 *Temporary Shelter*, submitted by François, Miami Beach: http://adaptiveactions.net/action/38/

process. Collaborators register and log in as actors on the website and submit actions directly and instantly online, adding images, text and comments if desired. By offering a space in which to share experiences, ideas, types of actions and specific accomplishments, Adaptive Actions creates an inventory of alterations rarely available to the general public.

The website's objective is to collate a variety of actions of a popular, theoretical or scientific nature expressing a series of possibilities – from conflict to cooperation, opposition to composition. The presentation of projects will create a vocabulary through which the collective imagination may express itself through the use of existing structures and will encourage the growth of similar actions.

Fig.3 *Little Fisherman Fountain*, submitted and created by Martin Dufrasne, Saint Félicien, Lac Saint-Jean, Quebec: http://adaptiveactions.net/action/131/

*AA: Through this action, a fountain-sculpture popular with the village becomes a soft monument: living and mobile, participatory, an element of desire, sociability and negotiation.*



Fig.4&5 *Dots versus Demolition D*, submitted by FNJFP, create by Tyree Guyton, Detroit: http://adaptiveactions.net/action/65/

**Assemblage and Cooperation**

A programme of events, workshops and round tables in various localities on specific topics creates links, associations between actors and actions. The aim, as Maurizio Lazzarato would say, is not to neutralise differences but, conversely, to enrich the concept of commonality through these differences[ii]. As he argues, the challenge is to find ways to retain this multiplicity, to embrace heterogeneity while maintaining disparity.

Some proposed actions are conceptualised and carried out collectively. Our shared knowledge and expertise is applied towards accomplishing a creative project whose aim is to modify the intended use of architectural and urban elements[iii]. This communal project could, for instance, emphasise one existing and documented action to give it more resonance, a stronger impact. Some actors might wish to pursue, reinterpret, extend or carry out variations to existing adaptive actions[iv].

**Relational Shift**

Adaptive Actions initiates a relational shift. Resident collaboration is an essential part of the process, which involves the hybridisation of conventional and unusual urban realities, disseminating such novel notions as deghettoisation, as well as the use and assertion of public spaces through site-specific interventions. This relationship with residents in itself constitutes the first element of this action-research project and is critical to its success. While the instigator still intervenes in public spaces, he rather act as catalysts. Relationally, the focus is on the concepts brought forth by the instigator rather than on strictly on the end result. It is no longer a question of infiltrating public space, but of penetrating the collective imagination. Consequently, the actors themselves become encompassed within the infiltration and act as agents of it. For the relational shift to occur, it must be an expression of the people as an integral part of the context.

Fig.6 *P L A: Public Loitering Area*, submitted by Acronymia, Liverpool: http://adaptiveactions.net/action/131/

The role of the instigator in this particular situation is to encourage a different attitude, initiate a new practice, exchange ideas, share knowledge and skills. This project explores, promotes and encourages daily actions, ways to stimulate active and committed participation and to challenge organized space as well as imposed movement patterns, by creating positive tensions, measuring and testing the limits of tolerated appropriation. A multiplicity of actions – such as displacing and leaving a chair in an unforeseen place[v] – can have an impact on our urban lives.

### Interstitial Experiments

In Liverpool, one is struck by the quantity of urban plots zoned as *public land* but designed to remain in disuse, fenced off. A project with benches undertaken there, entitled *Public Loitering Area[vi]*, and aimed at adding an additional element to the fenced-off property is a good example of a one-off / sporadic space-activating micro-action. The project offered local residents the opportunity to participate

alternate location. After launching this urban action with several benches, others joined in and installed many other benches on yet more sites, an initiative that continued for several months[vii].

This project and other adaptive actions are most commonly micro-actions and constitute one form of resident participation complementary to conventional or non-conventional ways of building or to various-scale interventions. Micro, interstitial actions complete and activate large structures incapable of, and not conceived for, adaptation to constantly changing local and global realities. They give flexibility to large structures subject to increasingly complicated regulations, legal obligations, etc.

### Places and Non-places

In Montreal, Canada, in the late '80s, a Portuguese Plaza was designed to commemorate and mirror the character of a local neighbourhood. Today, virtually all Portuguese residents have relocated and this very specific cultural space is left as a strange relic that in no way answers the contextual uses of current residents.

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Fig.7 *Residual spaces*, submitted by Surplus:
http://www.adaptiveactions.net/action/86/



Fig.8 *Dirt Biking*, submitted by AA, on the periphery of the London 2012 Olympic Site

Contrary to the movement and circulation of people that characterise these inner-city neighbourhoods where identity and specificity are in continual change, the architecture of the Portuguese Plaza in Montreal is permanent. In the 80's, this post-modern return to context was welcomed and brought a much-needed debate following decades of *tabula rasa*, although resident, user, and context specificities were expressed in a traditional way and through permanent architectural elements and conventional means. This Plaza brings up the question: should good architecture or city design of today still express local cultural specificity? Could it not be explored through other forms of actions, additions and events, be them temporary?

In this case and many others, citizen appropriation or actions represent an interesting alternative to adapting buildings to the flow of changes and enable activation and meaning to many different public spaces. Increased mobility and population movements, as well as acceleration phenomena, displace people in places which have no personal memories or personal connections to desires... Current and frequent displacements entail the need for personal appropriation in order to bring character and singularity to spaces which may be too generic or, conversely, too specific to foster a sense of belonging.

Why do some people love vacant lots or abandoned buildings so much? Perhaps because their undetermined and non-controlled nature offers a sense of freedom; these spaces are less restrictive when it comes to expressing different feelings of anger, ecstasy or despair. Undefined places offer real or imaginary space for adaptive forms of uses and personal expression. Specificity is constructed, negotiated and brought forth by users and uses.

In fact, some people might feel less at ease on the streets of beautiful and historical Florence versus a generic shopping mall. Paradoxically we could say that today, overly protected and site-specific places are in fact non-places[viii] – and that hyper-functional non-places, always undergoing repairs or constantly mutating are actual places. Photo documents, artist work, and testimonies show, contrary to general belief, that non-places, generic spaces such as airports or malls, create relational and historical constructions[ix]. In North America, seniors object to the demolition of local malls – perhaps the only, and their most important, public space for gathering[x]. These unplanned and temporary group or individual uses, these singular forms of appropriations are often invisible but they leave signs and traces revealed through what Frank Nobert calls narrative breaks[xi]. Pascal Nicolas-Le-Strat explains it more thoroughly in his recent text for the Adaptive Actions publication.

*'Unlike buildings or spaces, use often eludes the work of mapping; so it becomes vital to chronicle, to tell the tale of these uses – to construct a story from them, with them, without these stories becoming bound up within a single interpretative frame. Use takes form imperfectly; it cannot be reduced to a single way of being used. The 'constitution' of a use is inseparable from the multiplicity of accounts that it gives room to (of sociologists, photographers, fictions, conversations), it is indivisible from this insistent murmuring that bears witness to the presence of use[xii]. '*

Fig.10 *Atwater*, submitted by Maxpro, Montreal:
http://adaptiveactions.net/action/65/



Fig.9 *Use Traces*, walking as affirmation and spatial inflexions, submitted by FNJFP, created by Detroit resident.
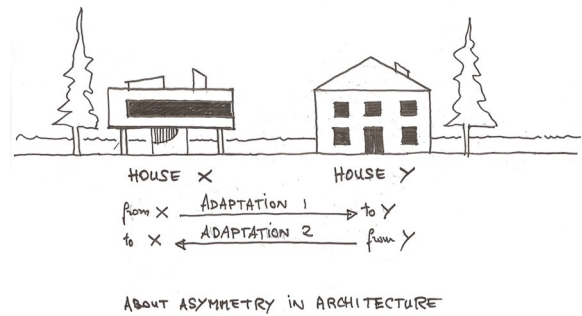
Fig.11 *Pessac, France* (Le Corbusier)
drawing submitted by Bobby:
http://adaptiveactions.net/action/75/

**Open Process and Architectural Appropriations Integrated to Future Building:**

The submitted action *Atwater*[xiii] – bird feeders installed on the balcony of a large repetitive concrete tower – reveals an interesting addition, a (possibly) missing element in the conception of this important twenty-five-floor, 150-metre-long residential project. Environmental studies have proven that similar towers in urban centres have a negative impact on bird life: they create barriers, disrupt flight patterns and reduce sources of food. This revealed action, the initiator of which is unknown, could serve as an indicator, a sign of an unfulfilled need, and be integrated into a new architectural project and programme.

Through similar documented actions, Adaptive Actions explores and gives value to non-linear, continuous construction processes with phases (conception, production, post-production,

management…) where distinctions are attenuated and transitions less brutal or even non-existent. As Stephen Wright states about art in a broad sense, it's about thinking "in terms of its specific means (its tools) rather than its specific ends (artwork)."[xiv]

This new scenario generates non-existent transversal links, accelerated cycles, changed attitudes and roles. Buildings, like cities, are living entities, change constantly in unpredictable ways and need to be constantly rethought through all these cycles rather than simply built and demolished[xv]. All buildings are initially biased and adhere to a programme. Buildings would thus be constantly observed, monitored, rethought and reworked. Residents, through intuition and observation, may suggest actions that, with more means and further discussion, could progressively materialise.

Fig.12 *Resilient City*, submitted by FNJFP, Detroit:
http://adaptiveactions.net/action/83/

## Transformable and Automated Architecture

To facilitate appropriations and allow adaptations, many flexible and mobile attributes are presently being explored and integrated into structures. The conceptualisation of such devices raises many issues and challenges. To what extent should or can objects or devices be contextualised to changing situations, users and new parameters? Moreover, to what extent can they answer the distinctive needs of users, of a programme or specific event? To that effect, various strategies for context-adaptation of devices can be introduced: positioning and setting modes, designs with component-modification or collapsible functions, dimensional variations... However, many transformable devices or construction elements have never been tested or instigated by users and many mutative possibilities are vastly deemed symbolic. Many difficulties arise in using units conceived with transformable and adjustable devices. Changing elements are often not instigated for various reasons: overly complicated or non-functional, too time-consuming or unnecessary, or simply not corresponding to the real need for change. Most mutative attributes are utopian and offer little individual innovation

There are effective risks related to transformation-based aesthetics, to device concepts with no real potential for use; for instance, pillar-shaped billboards (Morris) are unusable due to the impossibility of modification, inoperable mobility and great complexity, rendering permanent that which was supposed to be temporary.

In the research project *Adaptive House*[xvi], adaptation is, conversely, effortless. Hundreds of sensors survey movement and behaviour, and a central computer hub analyses and stores the data and then creates patterns of uses. Programming is done and adjusted by computers. Temperatures are adapted to body activity: higher temperatures if inactive, lower if very active… To counter current building inefficiencies, architects are presently inventing and exploring a new self-referential and self-mutating digital and automated architecture that could maintain constant dialogue with its environment and the human body; it would necessitate little human participation, input or activation. These buildings pre-programmed for change, which constantly

Fig.13 *Sea Oats vs Humans*, submitted by François, Miami Beach: http://www.adaptiveactions.net/action/70/

survey and analyse users and context (in relation to the body rather than the intellect), will report and implement adjustments accordingly. But how will this new environment be implemented, and to what degree will it be ethical and respect privacy rights or, most importantly, forecast desired changes?

**No End in Sight**
Not all future transformations can and should be anticipated and integrated in building production and design. Rather than being planned, they should be given a space, a structure to grow, to expand, to take shape. By leaving undetermined and un-programmed spaces in buildings, architects could contribute to their development. Funds could be allocated to future programming of events and possible transformations that could be coordinated by a group of citizens. However, the possibility of buildings changing progressively, more organically, without resorting to traditional grand schemes and gestures, necessitates an ideological shift. As long as representational space continues to dominate innovation and exploration, little change can occur. The predominant emphasis on aesthetics, forms and signs over experience, ideas or uses is certainly one of the biggest obstacles to creating a new and alternative architecture. This architecture is less oriented on the final product and more on the "use value"[xvii] and what Anne Querrien calls the building "enunciation"[xviii]. The interest and desire are there, but academic, professional and media pressure limit and control explorations, and stifle inspiration and creative possibilities. How can we get beyond mere curiosity and amusement and actually begin to

implement these changes? Adaptive actions are often seen as individualistic, personal, fragmentary and spontaneous. Since these actions are unplanned, rarely thought through globally – i.e., in relation to the building as a whole and the city – they are often considered undesirable, of little value and unconstructive.

Uncoordinated resident adaptive actions can negatively alter the overall visual force of expression of a building by creating unplanned additions. However, many user adaptations are positive, a normal evolution to construction as a nuance or critique of a building, and should therefore in many cases be encouraged and reviewed before they are removed[xix]. Of course, input from a mediator or coordinator can balance the needs and requirements of all parties, recognizing the value of aesthetics, materials, urban and building design, as well as taking into account a crucial element of all such aspects: usage, which is undoubtedly more efficient upon consideration of the users' perspective. Very little thought and time are given, and budgets allocated, to post-production, in order to pursue, improve, implement and adapt constructions for various and changing users. Resident adaptive actions prolong the life of buildings by progressively adapting their environments in a number of small, sustainable stages, thus avoiding accelerated or premature dilapidation as well as the need to resort to large-scale urban-renewal projects.

Jean-François Prost, 2009

[i]Part of the Canada Council for the Arts International Residency program, hosted by SPACE in Hackney, London East End.

[ii]Yves Citton, *Puissance de la variation, Maurizio Lazzarato*, Multitudes 20, pp.187-200 and book : *Puissances de l'invention. La psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde contre économie politique*, also published at Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2002.

[iii]A series of 'open houses' and workshops were organised at SPACE (London) to discuss several proposed actions or context of intervention - see Olympic walks and suppers following the All Aboard action (www.adaptiveactions.net/action/46/)

[iv]Such as Gesche Wuerfel's action *Building the Future?* which reused the All Aboard action paint to erase pictures taken by this urban photographer of the past and lost Lower Lea Valley in London (www.adaptiveactions.net/action/59/)

[v]Also such as the All Aboard action (www.adaptiveactions.net/action/41/)

[vi]Adaptive Actions is the continuation of prior research initiated at the Liverpool Biennial 2006 - Public Loitering Area: www.adaptiveactions.net/action/21/

[vii]A new phase of this project is being initiated as we speak by a Liverpool resident on new proposed sites – for news and further detail, visit the Adaptive Actions website.

[viii]For more information on the concept see Marc Augé's book: Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity. Verso, London & New York, 1995.

[ix]See article by Jean-François Prost on project Inflexions in the Generic City recently translated in English at: www.adaptiveactions.net/information/

[x]For accounts and testimonies, see website: www.deadmalls.com

[xi]Nobert, Frank, *Narrative Breaks*. in Adaptive Actions (UK Edition). Adaptive Actions & SPACE, London, pp. 70-71

[xii]Nicolas-Le Strat, Pascal (2009) *Micropolitics of Uses*. in Adaptive Actions (UK Edition). Adaptive Actions & SPACE, London, pp. 57-62

[xiii]For further detail:  www.adaptiveactions.net/action/71/

[xiv]Wright, Stephen, *The future of the reciprocal readymade: an essay on use value and art related practice*, Parachute 117, p.123

[xv]Corboz, André (2001) Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais. Éditions L'imprimeur, Paris

[xvi] www.adaptiveactions.net/action/67/

[xvii]idem, Wright, Stephen p.123

[xviii]Querrien, Anne, *Fabriquer des seuils à une troisième nature*, Multitudes no.20, Spring 2005

[xix]Such as the housing project by Le Corbusier in  Pessac, France, transformed by residents and currently being restored to its original state. Series of modifications described and addressed in Philippe Boudon's book: Pessac de Le Corbusier. Dunod, Paris (1967 &1983).

IMAGE CREDITS
Fig. 1: Hannah Jickling and Valerie Salez
Fig. 2, Fig. 6, Fig. 7, Fig. 8, Fig.13:
Jean-François Prost
Fig. 3 : Martin Dufrasne
Fig. 10 : Jean-Maxime Dufresne &
Jean-François Prost
Fig. 4, Fig.5, Fig. 9, fig. 12 : Frank Nobert &
Jean-François Prost
Fig. 6 : Federico Figa Talamanca
Fig. 11 : Robert Prost