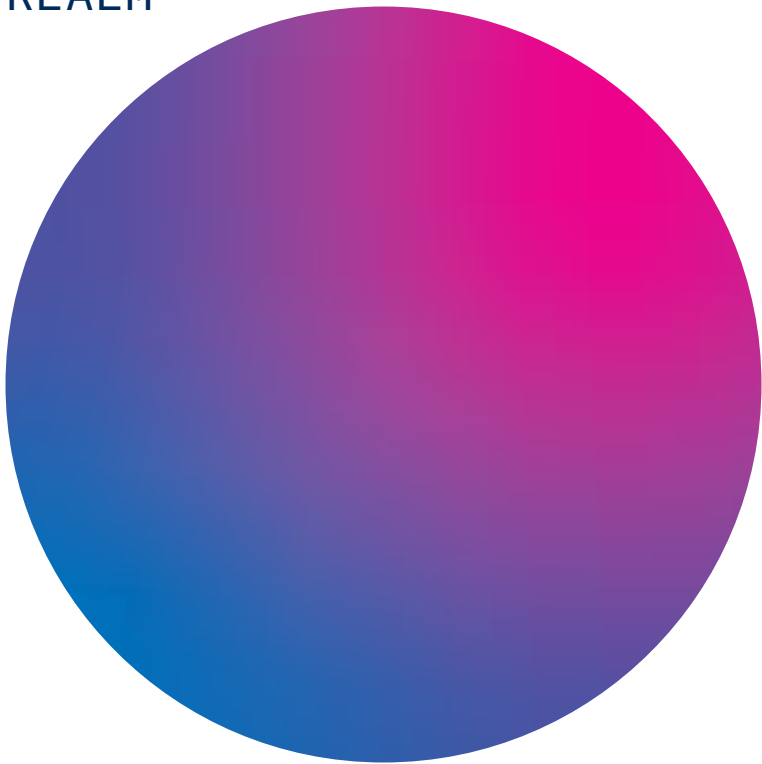


LAGOS: PERFORMANCE
AND NEGOTIATIONS
WITH THE PUBLIC
REALM



PAPA
OMOTAYO
Lagos

Lagos: Performance and Negotiations with the Public Realm

Text by Papa Omotayo

At around 6.30pm, I stare up from the bright screen of my laptop and through the burglar-barred window down the street that is home to our one-storey corner office building, a former electrical warehouse on a zoned residential road. On the same corner is a large fruit tree, whose branches and leaves hang like albatross wings, ominous, like gatemen to the sun. A man and a wheelbarrow appear. The man finds a bench and table from the shrubs and lines them along the pavement. An old ritual, but the pavement is new, completed during the last rainy season, as are the amber streetlights, which have started their slow reveal as the sun begins to set.

Our man takes out a radio from the bag slung across his shoulder, places it at the edge of the table and finds a channel playing music. He then places a grey pot, filled with water, on a kerosene cooker and starts to create rows of Indomie noodle packets on the table.

In another bowl are boiled unshelled eggs. He places an assortment of small cling film bags, filled with a variety of spices and flavours, into two small jars. He begins to work. By the time I look up again, the corner has filled with men seated on benches, or on the kerb, some with bowls of already half-eaten Indomie and the now peeled eggs, others waiting for their turn. The men spill out into the street, they talk, there is laughter, the radio is turned up and there is exuberance amidst the eating.

I look up again, this time jarred by the commotion of noise and the sound of agitation, I see an official state environmental enforcement truck and its officials trying to move the newly formed crowd away. People begrudgingly, but unfazed, eat up or transfer their food order into plastic

takeaway containers. As the cook begins his process of closing shop, an officer makes a request. Our man serves his final dish, then puts the bench and table back behind the shrubs and with the wheelbarrow in which he has placed his ingredients and utensils, begins to make his way down the street, out of my vision and into the darkness. The truck stays parked on the same corner, the three officers each with a plastic plate of Indomie and egg. They talk, there is laughter, a radio is turned up and the food is eaten.

Such a scene, with its many variants, occurs daily throughout the city of Lagos. Despite huge improvements in infrastructure, security and the economy, a contradictory unfinished city still remains. The city continues to operate within large pockets of localised self-regulation, and many of its inhabitants still view the state as absent and the city as theirs to repurpose at will.

It is important to understand the impact of this self-regulating attitude when we attempt to formalise any intentions, interventions, or expressions of art within the public realm. To note that this self-regulation is also a form of resilience. This singular self-preservation, exists because there continues to be no ideological agreement between the state and its citizenry about the nature of the 'new model megacity' being proposed, or what its cultural aesthetic would or should be. So the public realm continues to exist, largely for sustenance and survival, reflecting a disconnected state and a dissociated citizenry. "Man must chop!" (a man must eat by any means) continues to be the colloquial Lagos motto of the hustling everyman, whose principal aim is survival.

In this case, we must therefore acknowledge that for many it's not the city one identifies with, but one's resilience to it. As stickers and bus iconography state, "e go better" (things will be better). Many in the city exist in a state of patient permanent compromise, somehow reassured in the communal agreement of unspecified hope. That individual ingenuity holds the key to the city's absolution. So the challenge is to transform the resolve of the individual self-imagination to a communal agreed dream for a city.

A vibrant art scene is part of the growing dream of the city. Since 2007, the art scene in Lagos has grown at an extraordinary rate, and the number of independent galleries, art exhibitions and fairs continue to have a multiplying effect. But museums and galleries are capital-intensive and the city does not appear to have the resources to maintain them long-term. Also, most of these independent spaces are privately funded, or privately supported by corporations whose primary incentive is consumer engagement.

However, it is clear from the growing attendance of public art events and interventions, such as Art X Lagos, Lagos Photo (a public pan-African photography showcase, using outdoor spaces and public walls) and the A Whitespace Creative Agency Block Party (a free, community street-art initiative that takes place on Broad Street, Lagos Island), that Lagosians, when given the opportunity, openly engage with artistic expression. Perhaps this is because such expression feels familiar – from the physical openness and individualist expression often visible and occurring naturally within the existing public realm. In this regard, within these spaces in the city, things often occur as natural collaborations, coming out of informal gatherings or sometimes through the sheer numbers of people – not begging or being disruptive, but simply idle, waiting, resting in the shade under bridges. It is from these moments that people like artist and performer Wura-Natasha Ogunji create public performances that open up opportunities for new types of public engagement within the available co-opted unregulated public spaces.

The poet Maya Angelou saw imagination as a ‘solitary fantasy’ able to ‘transform one million realities’.

Interventions by a new generation of creatives hint at the possibility of the city’s new ‘shared spaces’ allowing for individual reimagining, whilst creating a sense of the commons through outdoor community cultural art programmes – programmes that capture the constant search for adaptation, creation and reinvention that has come to define the character of the city and formulate its unique identity. The result, we have seen in brief pockets around Yaba, the hotspot of



© Isi Etomi of The Meme Studios



© Isi Etomi of The Meme Studios

Makoko and Lagos Island, is providing new opportunities for employment and socio-economic development through the arts.

Art, if allowed to engage in conversations and collaborate on the modalities of the city's shared spaces, offers an opportunity to enrich and reframe the public realm. Perhaps the intervention of art in the city's shared spaces simulates the diverse, unstated, constant reinvention and appropriation that currently frames the city. Then, through a process of formal localised community-based art projects, we can find ways to reconnect and identify new modes of informal communal participation, which bring about shared meaningful places of convergence. This may allow us to move beyond individual ingenuity, to a more self-structured communal connectivity and shared ideology beyond the commodification of space – in the same way that 70,000 copies of the largest daily newspaper passing through 400,000 hands ensures that shared participation is customary even if simply as an economic necessity. The effects of this is that everyone on the streets seems to have a view on the news of the day, political conversations and the visual narrative expressed through print media. I often wonder if Lagosians would be even more willing to share if sharing were framed as aspirational.

A young generation of artists are using public infrastructure, sidewalks, walls, parks, roundabouts, buses and so on to showcase their work, using performance, installations, street art and murals to create opportunities for more inclusive dialogue. The artists I have talked with describe an initial cautious curiosity on the part of local communities when they are approached to allow work within their spaces. However, easier access and partnerships have developed when returning to specific locations, with some intrigued members of the public wanting to participate, help clean the areas where a performance will be held, or protect the walls where new murals have been created. The seeds of civic ownership and trust start to be formulated and cultural value identified. The legacy of these interventions also provides important physical and visual reference points for the discourse about how public space can be used, what it can be for, and who it can represent.

The theatre group Illuminate, founded by Taiwo Jacob, is a street ensemble. The group performs in mumblings and howls exclusively on the streets of Lagos, moving from place to place, bodies twisting, curling and contorting to an amalgamated analogue soundscape of the city. They often appear without introduction, in market squares, on street corners or in slum communities, drawing on the energy of the public spaces they occupy as they '*bata*' to exchange a moment of trust and connection with a surprised, curious and cautious audience. On their return, months later, they often find that not only have the crowds grown, but also that the spaces have miraculously been identified as 'performance space', and they have seen children doing their own imitations of their play, highlighting the possibility of more sustainable engagement.

Tunde Alara is an artist unfazed by the lack of suitable platforms for self-expression. He has turned to the street as a canvas and gallery, using technology and social media to document and to engage. His work, he says, acknowledges the challenges and perception of street art, amidst the 'THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE' and 419 (Nigerian code for fraud) signs that are written across private walls throughout the city. He acknowledges that, though much of his street art is classified as illegal, even the state enforcers are curious and intrigued about its iconography, or maybe just superstitious as to whether the narrative carries a 'religious fetish' undertone.

The performance artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji invites female participation for her performances in Obalende Market, on the streets of Yaba, along the beaches and in institutions around the city. In her recent works *Strut, Beauty, and Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?*, Ogunji's performances explore the presence of women in public space. The women perform, walking dressed for attention, having their hair braided, or doing laborious tasks such as carrying gallons of water. Ogunji questions the notion of value in the world, the power of space, liberty and the body, searching for endurance through the mundane physicality of the everyday life within the city.



Strut, Natasha Ogunji, 2016



Strut, Natasha Ogunji, 2016

Ogunji says: “I like this thing of causing people to be curious. There’s a lot of watching of tragic things in this place so it’s nice when people can watch things that are inventive and different and strange and maybe a little foreign but familiar. This pushes their own visual sensibility and experience and touches on tradition or history, but also is something completely outside of what they’ve seen before.”

It is interesting how all these young contemporary artists integrate both physical and digital space in their work. Digital space seems to act as an extension of dialogue, as documentation to be shared, and as inspiration to a wider audience uncertain of how to navigate the creation of these experiences.

In Lagos, the easy argument is often that there is very limited public interest in such art, that survival is the only discourse. But young artists are finding that there is curiosity and conversation when the work is engaged within non-formal spaces, and also when it is shared on social media, often allowing for exchanges between the performers and their curious audience. These conversations seem particular to participatory and disruptive visual works that evoke a sense of local experience and outward vulnerability in their reference to the everyday, whether it’s the water kegs in Ogunji’s *Will I still...* or the iconography of abstract forms and lettering in Alara’s work. A new space called hFactor has been set up within the Lagos Island community by graphic artist Osione Iteboje and 16x16 founder Tushar Hathiramani, along with a series of open public programmes. The collective also takes its creations and ideas directly into the public realm, from creating packaging for local vendors’ produce, to finding new ways of showcasing the creations of children from the local community in various public formats.

The 2015 Venice Biennale artist Karo Akpokiere, whose work often focuses on themes of the city, created a series of images that were digitised and printed on the BRT public bus system in 2012 to celebrate Nigeria’s 50th birthday. Though an advocate for art engaged in the public realm, he fears the current scramble for art in public space may be co-opted as another tool to reinforce a new form of cultural colonialism.

He fears the commodification of cultural space as another one-dimensional tourist attraction. The danger lies when we begin to remove the focus of art as a cultural tool for empathy, inspiration, searching for meaning, regeneration, localised expression and community-building within the 'shared spaces' of Lagos.

Lagos can be partially understood as described in Rahul Mehrotra's *Kinetic City* as: "an indigenous urbanism that has its particular 'local' logic. It is not necessarily the city of the poor, as most images might suggest; rather, it is a temporal articulation and occupation of space that not only creates a richer sensibility of spatial occupation, but also suggests how spatial limits are expanded to include formally unimagined uses in dense urban conditions."¹

It can be argued that Lagosian self-regulation or resilience – evident in the daily striving for social mobility by constant creation of ever-new opportunities for generating entrepreneurial wealth – is in fact an artistic performance which animates the city's inventive and narcissistic desire for self-expression. The negotiation of many aspects of formal and informal uses of the city is illustrated by what occurs when parking a vehicle at Muri Okunlola Park – a public park that showcases formal music, art and theatre, mostly for the middle classes, in Victoria Island, one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in the city. During weekend events, the street parking bays are lined with rocks, car tyres and 'no parking' signs written by individuals. The local community gatekeepers, the *omo nils* (owners of land), inform attendees of the negotiations required to park. Though at times intimidating and aggressive, they are mostly harmless unemployed male youths, looking to make ends meet. In most cases, when confronted with these negotiations, we tend to acknowledge, agree with irritation and mumble on with a sigh. This dissociation is further amplified by the fact that many of the state's newly created public spaces and artistic interventions are isolated, fenced off and difficult to access.

The state thus needs innovative ways to manage the negotiation of public spaces. Its current approach feels reactionary and simplified.

Lagos wants to be a global city. However, the adoption of unsustainable global trends often ignores the fundamental infrastructure or importance of community participation, as it desires to straighten the frayed edges by turning borderless markets into empty malls and empty plots into unaffordable theatres. In turn, it feels that regardless of the state's desire for a global city with aggressive boundaries defining formalised public spaces, the city is still most recognisable and comfortable when impromptu wedding marquees turn up on streets within communities, when markets and road commerce continue at every corner, where public interactions can naturally occur, and where unfenced spaces under bridges, intersections and side roads become football pitches, food stalls and rest stops – all taking advantage of the opportunities presented by shared ownership to reaffirm personal independence. This random and sudden co-opting of space meant for all by individuals is problematic in the desire for an inclusive city, but may also present an opportunity for a new idea of public 'shared spaces'. These events, which cause conflict and often drive the urban to the limits of breaking point, also simultaneously expand the possibilities of uses and create new opportunities for engagement within what constitutes cultural public space in the city.

Therefore, as with other cities in the so-called Global South, the people using the public realm rightly desire but also refuse to adopt the traditional codes and logic of Western cities. In Lagos, the public realm has existed for extended periods of conflict, conflicts that reflect the contentious issue of land throughout the state, exacerbated by the 1978 Land Act. This act gave ownership of all land to the state in the hope it would provide equality for all. The act, however, continues to be fraught with contention, often appearing as a tool for civic appropriation and socio-economic segregation.

The city has always struggled to consolidate or extend beyond its colonial creation, unable to fully grasp or properly discard the model of a city that most of the population had no participation in creating. Successive administrations continue to tread a thin line along this same path, which has led to the current tendency towards extreme rejection of the physical colonial heritage – which in turn has led to the woeful

destruction of historic buildings, and whitewashing murals and political public art, thus discarding the very fundamentals of the city's historical narratives and building blocks.

There is an historical precedent for regional public murals, slogans and text on public transport in Lagos. Since the 1970s, slogans on *molues*, the old large public buses of the city, have reflected public mood and opinion. Writer Tolu Ogunlesi cites the bus artist Olaitan Theophilus Iwalokun, declaring that, “this is no art for art’s sake, the vans and trucks and buses that come to me for branding want to send a message to the world”.² The 1970s saw the last large-scaled artistic expressions in public space, epitomised by Festac 77, the government-funded, internationally lauded Black African Cultural Festival, which ensured a ‘good time’ but did little to connect with the realities of the time nor establish a sustainable legacy for arts in the decades that followed. Arts buildings such as the National Theatre, built for the festival, have all had a difficult past and need to reconnect with the changing landscape to ensure relevance.

The first formal public spaces – such as Tinubu Square, The Racecourse (which would later be renamed Tafawa Balewa Square), and Ikoyi Park (which would be rezoned, partitioned and sold as a residential district for the new wealthy Nigerian military elite post-independence) – still form the core formal public spaces on Lagos Island. These spaces were created as part of the urban design of British civic rule, administration and leisure.

Broad Street Prison, also built during this era to hold the locals, ironically currently exists as the only significant permanent public art space in the city. It feels like a local space, very much created through the reconciliation between its setting, history, urban regeneration, appropriation and art. Conceived independently by the architect Theo Lawson during the desire to regenerate the then-deteriorating urban fabric of Lagos Island, the formal creation of a park within the old prison walls grew out of LIMGE's (Lagos Island Millennium Group on the Environment) community outreach programme to find new ways to reconnect the urban environment with the people through arts and culture. It was hoped this was the start of a new civic era for the arts.

Then on 25th May 2017, Lagos turned 50. In the lead-up, and as part of creating a legacy for this milestone, the Lagos State Government embarked on the commission of public art projects to be sited at numerous identified public locations and intersections throughout the city. There was an open call for artists to submit works that were site specific. Naturally, excitement about the possibilities within the art world was tangible. These works, we were told, would vary in scope from sculpture to murals and would give voice to a diverse group of young contemporary artists who would tell their own stories of the city. What we got were contracted commissions, by old and established artists, that told the same story of sculptures and murals as monuments for state validation. Only a very few attempted to approach the art through participatory dialogue in their sited locations.

Whatever the intention, the things that we are told to look at don't necessarily create opportunities for the conversations or transformations we desire. In this essay I have no intention of going into a critique of the final installed artworks, or an interrogation of the past and current strategy the state has chosen to implement in regards to its policy on public space, 'beautification' and public art initiatives. But one thing is certain: with a few exceptions, most of the works will remain viewed as top-down, badly sited, inaccessible and unconnected. It will go down as one of the greatest missed opportunities in the city's cultural history. They are ultimately monuments that reinforce the separation of the state and the public, and they failed to use the opportunity to engage a new way of integrating art within the public realm that is already thriving.

The monuments seem to follow a trend that has occurred in recent years, in which the city's roundabouts are adopted from the state, for a fee by private banks, to become branded isolated gardens and green spaces as part of their corporate social responsibility. They become competitively decorated spaces in festive seasons, as each corporation aims to outdo the other, while the city's wider infrastructure has been co-opted by those edged out of these areas, who in turn searching for more equitable spaces – under bridges, by disused canals, on street edges and intersections – which are ultimately adopted as new places to gather, exercise, rest or enjoy idleness.

The fenced parks at Muri Okunlola, in Victoria Island, and Ndubuisi Kanu Park, in Alausa Ikeja, have been host to internationally regarded public art interventions, such as the annual Lagos Photo, and Yinka Shonibare CBE's *Wind Sculpture VI*, aimed at extending engagement beyond just a physical installation of the art and offering opportunities for conversation, critique and reflection by the public. These brief flickers of light are beautiful sparks, but we must ask whom these interventions really speak to and for. We must ask whether they meet our current intention for art as a catalyst for a sense of commons. Is the aim to build social engagement and meaningful encounters amongst strangers in the public realm, or just to create an extension of the private art gallery?

Falomo is a major public intersection in central Lagos, connecting Ikoyi to Victoria Island. Part of the site, now rented by a corporate bank, was once the first public location for Lagos Photo Festival. The rest of the site was left neglected, unlit and desolate. At night it was widely regarded as no-go area for pedestrians. In recent years the space and roundabout has been adorned with images of the Chibok girls (the 276 female students kidnapped from the Government Secondary School in the northern Nigerian town of Chibok, by the fundamentalist jihadist group Boko Haram) as well as being a weekly meeting point for the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. Along with weekend football matches, a daily newspaper and food vendor, the bridge also serves as a resting and meeting point and acts as shelter from the sun and the rain.

The recently completed public space and art intervention entitled *Under Falomo* – the result of a collaboration between my architectural firm MOE+ Art Architecture and the artist Polly Alakija, and funded by Lagos State – aimed simply to give formality to existing activities that have become synonymous with the location, with locals and passers-by incorporated in both the making of the physical landscape and the mural artwork on the columns.



Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman, Natasha Ogunji, 2013 © Ema Edosio

The politics was frustrating from start to finish, from the state's desire to censor and control artistic direction to its preference to fence the site and limit access to the completed public space – none of which, I am glad to say, it succeeded in doing. Ironically, the openness of the space has become essential to its success, and this has been acknowledged by the state's current governor. However, it was a process that left me questioning this formal mode of state intervention.

How does a new generation deal with the political landscape of space whilst simultaneously trying to interrogate innovative ideas? How can artists use their specific skills and tools within the available negotiated spaces and create new conversations and relationships between the city, the people and the places that define it?

In the cities of the Global North, art has had a longer and more formal use for social development and been a catalyst for urban regeneration. In recent times, however, this has led to problematic issues of gentrification and economic exclusion. Around the globe, it must be acknowledged that the privatisation of public space is on the rise and of great concern, commodifying communities' and artists' cultural assets for an appropriating elite.

Whatever the case in future, we must first agree that our platforms and forms of expression start with the local – how we use newspaper vendors, kiosks, food stalls, post bill stickers – and the numerous ways we already use, see and create in the city. The formats of these new modes of engagement don't have to be complicated, neither does the scale need to be monumental. They only need to serve as a point of view, a sense of self-reflection in a 'shared space' with 'shared imaginations'. Then perhaps their value becomes intangible and our connection to the space resonates. It is therefore imperative that the forms of cultural expression precede the establishment of formal spaces in which those expressions are stored and auctioned. We must be allowed to create first before we are sold.

We cannot, however, ignore the common feeling amongst most Lagosians that many of the new public spaces, even those integrated with artistic and cultural expressions, like the old colonial spaces, are generally not for the masses, but are rather for private or political stock. At Freedom Park there is a 500-naira charge for entry, which makes it unavailable to much of the population. Yet it appears many locals in and around the area seem to desire innovative ways of engaging with the public realm. They also question the tangible value these 'formal spaces' add to their daily lives. When public space is created formally, it tends to disassociate the public's informal needs. Why would artistic participation within these spaces be any different? Perhaps we should approach art-working within the informal public realm simply as a cultural currency, another part of the city hustle. It would be interesting to investigate whether this creates a problem or a new opportunity for civic participation and becoming, the results of which could be a city in which community becomes central to its urban development.

Early on Christmas morning in 2013, a close friend and I spent the day cutting out a text stencil. I drove with blackened painted fingers through the empty streets, parking and walking with exaggerated patrol eyes scanning 360 degrees, as we approached our chosen locations: the intersection of a wall under a bridge, the whitened entrance of a petrol station, a gleaming generator, the concrete barricade at the traffic light junction of the Ozumba-Falomo ramp-bridge interface. Two people

connected by love and searching for strangers in the city. Even yesterday, as I drove up the ramp from Ozumba to join Falomo Bridge, feeling a fragment of the exhilaration from that day, I saw the faint, faded outlines of our words, which have become a part of the city: “This time last year, everything was so different”.

Footnotes

¹ Rahul Mehrotra, *KINETIC CITY: Emerging Urbanism in India*, accessed at www.rmaarchitects.com

² Tolu Ogunlesi, “What the Truck”, *Glide*, 2008, p.54



Papa Omotayo

Papa Omotayo is the CEO/Creative Director of MOE+ artARCHITECTURE and founder of A Whitespace Creative Agency (AWCA).

An award-winning architect, artist and film maker, Papa seeks to define a pragmatic African modernity with contemporary artists. His work focuses strongly on context, culture and nature. Through collaboration and participation, he strives to find new possibilities for architecture and visual narratives in Nigeria (Africa's) urban centres and beyond.

www.aw-ca.com
www.moeaa.com



Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer. Previously, she was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations, an international arts producing company. For full details on the 15-year period of projects and for access to publications and resources, visit www.situations.org.uk.

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society.

Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications.

Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.



© British Council 2018
The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.

Where Strangers Meet

An international collection of essays on arts in the public realm.

The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that ‘the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet’. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

For 80 years the British Council has worked in cities in over 100 countries worldwide. The British Council is now responding through research and programmes to the changing urban dynamics affecting citizens and institutions globally, including the impact of globalisation and technological and political change. Work in cities also forms part of our response to some of the world’s current challenges including migration and security. This collection is intended to strengthen our global offer to collaborators and audiences by demonstrating how the power of the arts and creative exchange can be harnessed to make cities more open, dynamic, inclusive and fit for the future.

www.britishcouncil.org