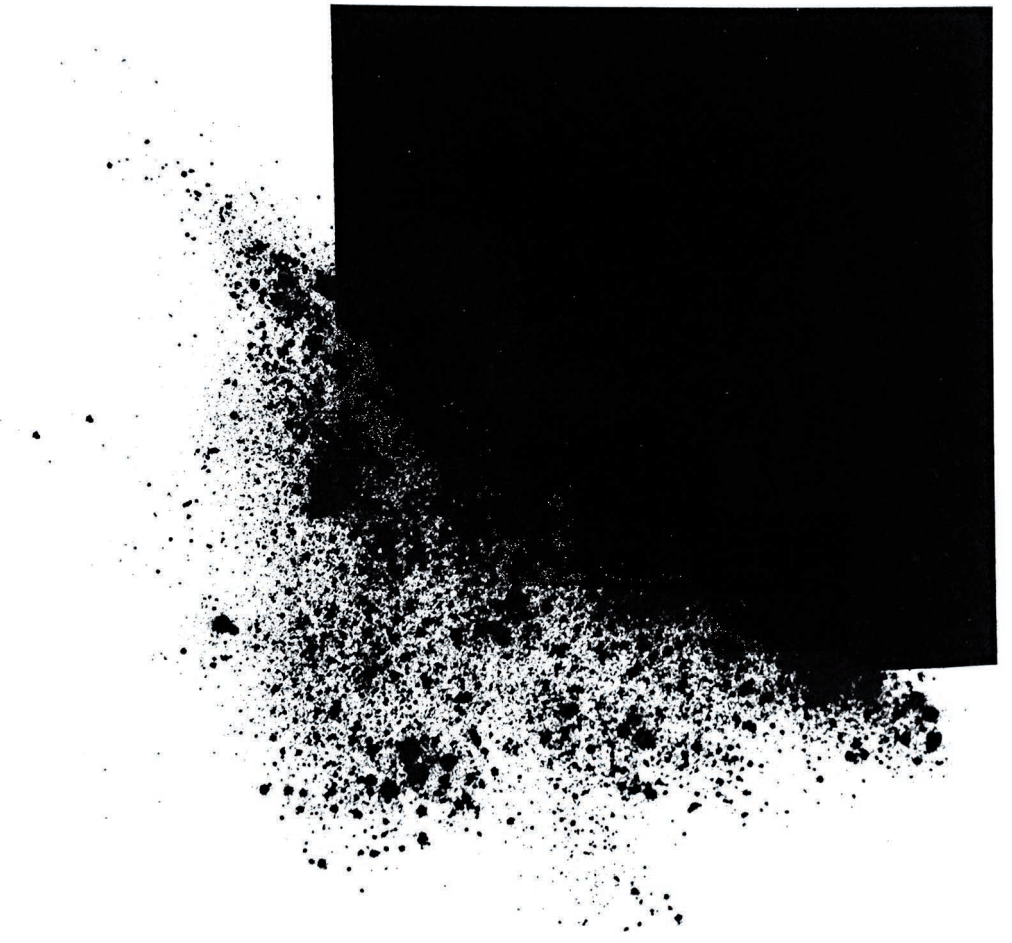
LONG LIVE EQUIVOCAL SPACES

PAUL CITRON



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They are not immediately easy to see or understand. They embody various uses and come in different forms. Their unclear purpose makes them ambivalent, ambiguous, controversial.
They can appear anywhere, often for several years, sometimes for longer. They always respond to a need for sweeping, radical change. They propose globally viable and locally desirable solutions to the classic modes of production and management of inhabited space. They are equivocal spaces.

Self-made or shared living spaces; cultural centres opened up in their neighbourhood; third spaces combining creativity and solidarity; citizen-run commons; radical occupied spaces or friendly community cafes; these spaces incorporate a variety of diverse geographical and urban realities. They are levers to possible unknown or unexplored social, urban, ecological and democratic change. Despite their differences, and even their contradictions, equivocal spaces still have common characteristics. These commonalities allow them to recognise each other, to link up and to propagate by analogy.

OPEN PROGRAMMING

It all starts with the occupation of a place. This initial start-up reveals the potential uses of the site and integrates them into the programme, which remains open to change. Each act and each occupier or user contributes to the transformation of this space. The programming begins to take shape as types of activities expand and the place evolves. Even small actions gradually prepare the future.

The equivocal space is never completed. It remains transitory, in a state of constant construction and development, like life itself. Acting before thinking is the way to remove any barriers between the project and its actual use. Thought helps to clarify the action rather than to contain it. Prioritising the use of a space instead of its form brings the project into the present and separates it from its planning function. In concrete terms, this means refusing to define in advance all the purposes of a cultural hub, a market, a house or even a school – and thus recognising the legitimacy of all the different possible users, whoever they may be.
In a site that is to be redesigned, this means leaving time to test temporary and spontaneous options adapted to the uses of the inhabitants rather than to the assumption of the experts.
Open programming involves everyone creating their own environment. It is a way of legitimising the urbanist – that is, the citizen.

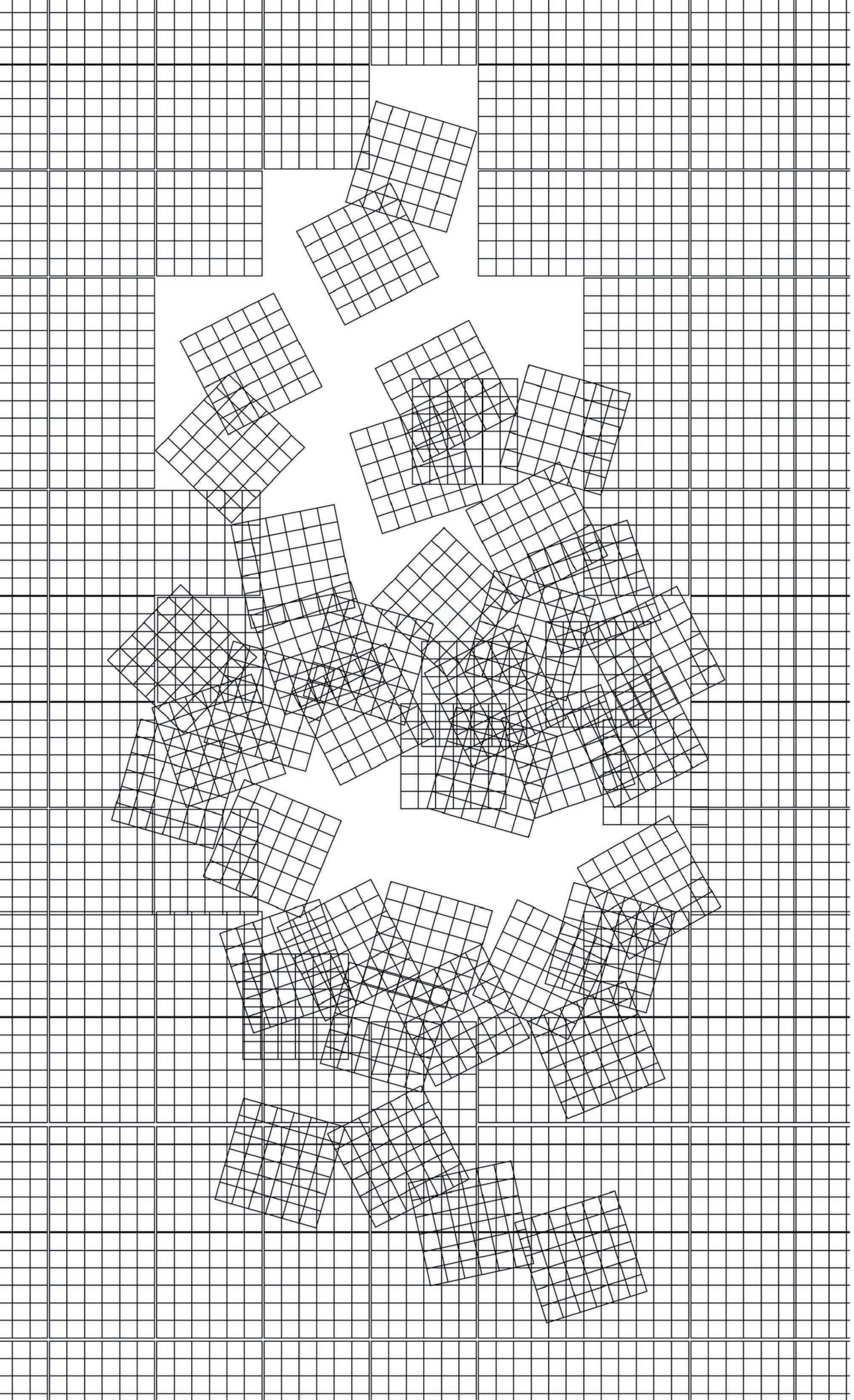
ALREADY THERE

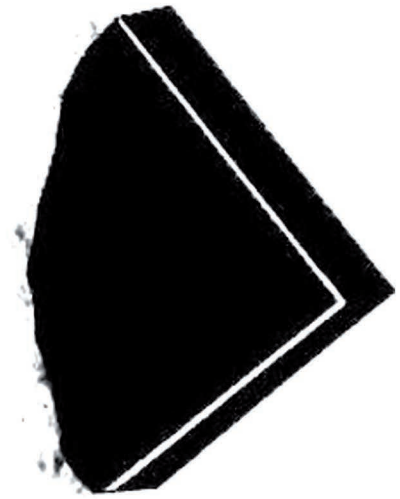
On the project site, there is a permanent meeting place that is always open. It soon becomes a lived-in space. It is not the closed architect's office. It is opened daily by people who become identifiable in the area. Thanks to them, everyone concerned with the project can find their role and think and act together. This meeting place becomes a catalyst for a community of people with their own ideas and desires, which take shape and enrich the programming through these people's presence and actions.

Equivocal spaces can accommodate the different rhythms of each person involved and allow for the unexpected to happen. The present is called upon to play a role in the future.
The wasteland, the vacant space, the place to come is surrounded by neighbours who already interact with and shape this space.
To let them have their place, to let oneself be transformed by them, to live and build with them: this is the ecology of the 'already there'. This is what happens, for example, if we allow residents of social housing to renovate their houses using the money that was designated to demolish the same houses.
It implies a confidence in individual action, in the action of an amateur under a watchful eye rather than in actions ordered by some distant expert.
In equivocal spaces, transformation is chosen over demolition, the vernacular over the formal gesture, the invented use over a predetermined function.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH INSTITUTIONS

Equivocal spaces are run by citizens who, on a daily basis, take up issues usually reserved





for experts. Collectives of inhabitants or users, co-ops, organisations bringing together public and private investors, groups of associations and smaller structures without a clearly defined scope – all these players are legitimate and accountable because of their active and cooperative nature. As an example, when residents propose their urban projects to the municipality based on tried-and-tested practices, these practices override planning and become the source of shared urbanism.

In contrast to the usual mistrust that occurs between different players in urban projects, equivocal spaces become a source of trust. This includes finding allies in the institutional decision-making bodies. In equivocal spaces, people work facing institutions, face-to-face with institutions. People work with the power structures to overcome the blockages they create themselves. Rule-breaking becomes legitimate, because the rules are discussed, appropriated and overcome. Collaborating with institutions implies assuming the risk of exploitation as a risk to be run in order to act and disseminate these methods of action.

INTERMEDIATE TEMPORALITY

Equivocal spaces are never definitive. They respond to principles of scalability, adaption over time, even reversibility. They are defined by their relationship with time, which is always relative, dependent on the players. Equivocal spaces are intended to be temporary, regardless of their planned duration. Their time is the present: a viable and immediately enviable present. Aware of their transitory nature, they respect their environment. They make temporal hesitation an asset for greater agility, ecology and possible adaptation to an uncertain and therefore always open future.

Rather than wait years for a school to be built, for example, why not experiment with new ways of sharing knowledge in temporary buildings and thus produce in situ the programme of the future school? Equivocal spaces are a reinsertion of time into the construction of urban space. The series of gestures and situations count more than the final object and its physical deployment. The spontaneous new uses of buildings at the end of their life are the first steps in long-term projects that will perhaps never see the light of day for the architect or the urban planner, but which already exist in the imagination of residents.

Equivocal spaces remove the gap between the temporary and the permanent. They take on intermediate temporalities, inevitably undefined, always ephemeral: six months, three years, 10 years, 45 years...

GENEROUS SPACES

Whenever new equivocal spaces are born, the same questions come up about their longevity, their means of subsistence, their economic models. The obligation to fit into a traditional economic model is powerful and often fatal. Access to real estate at cost price sometimes protects them from traditional financial mechanisms and profitability constraints, but it is still an ongoing struggle.

Equivocal spaces' shared goal is not to generate rent, but to create positive social, cultural, urban or environmental externalities. This generous disposition challenges the absolute right to property. The creation of financial value is not the touchstone of equivocal spaces, which also create extra-market values, either directly or indirectly, immediately or subsequently. These values can sometimes benefit those who use the space – sometimes local residents, sometimes visitors and sometimes non-humans in the surrounding area: an animal species, a river or a forest. Equivocal spaces produce and share experiences that can inspire other projects in a completely unexpected way.

SETTING A PRECEDENT

In equivocal spaces, people act before regulating. By preceding the rules, they can change, adapt or even create them. They carry out the work of reimagining laws. Codes, rules and laws contain subtleties, unknown fragments, margins of interpretation that open up previously unknown possibilities. Legal solutions often

exist but we don't know about them yet. When the appropriate set-up doesn't exist, why not create it ourselves? Equivocal spaces invite us to think about a law that allows users to transform and build with unexpected means, without prior authorisation, provided that the ultimate goal – environmental, social or cultural – is respected.

While any intervention that takes place on urban space is usually pre-validated by the public administration, direct action is the cornerstone of regulation in equivocal spaces.

A law can be a living thing, generated in situ by observing what has been produced and implemented as a jurisprudence for future cases. Setting a precedent is what makes it possible to transpose acts, ideas, extraordinary places into contexts and situations that are different from those where they were originally conceived. Lawyers then take on a role in the project comparable to that of architects, engineers or urban planners – translating the desire of acting differently. Through their experiences, equivocal spaces often set a precedent.

IN EQUIVOCAL SPACES...

EVERY ACTION IS CHANGEABLE AND REVERSIBLE

ON-SITE WORK MEANS YOU CAN KEEP ASKING QUESTIONS

THE 'PROJECT' IS NOT A PREDICTION BUT AN 'ALREADY THERE' THAT IS BOTH TRANSITORY AND STILL TO COME

CITIZENS ARE ALWAYS COMPETENT AND LEGITIMATE

TRUST IS THE DOMINANT RELATIONSHIP MODEL

ANY MOMENT IS A GOOD ONE TO SHARE MANUAL OR INTELLECTUAL KNOWLEDGE

WHOEVER SOWS EXPERIENCES CULTIVATES PRECEDENTS

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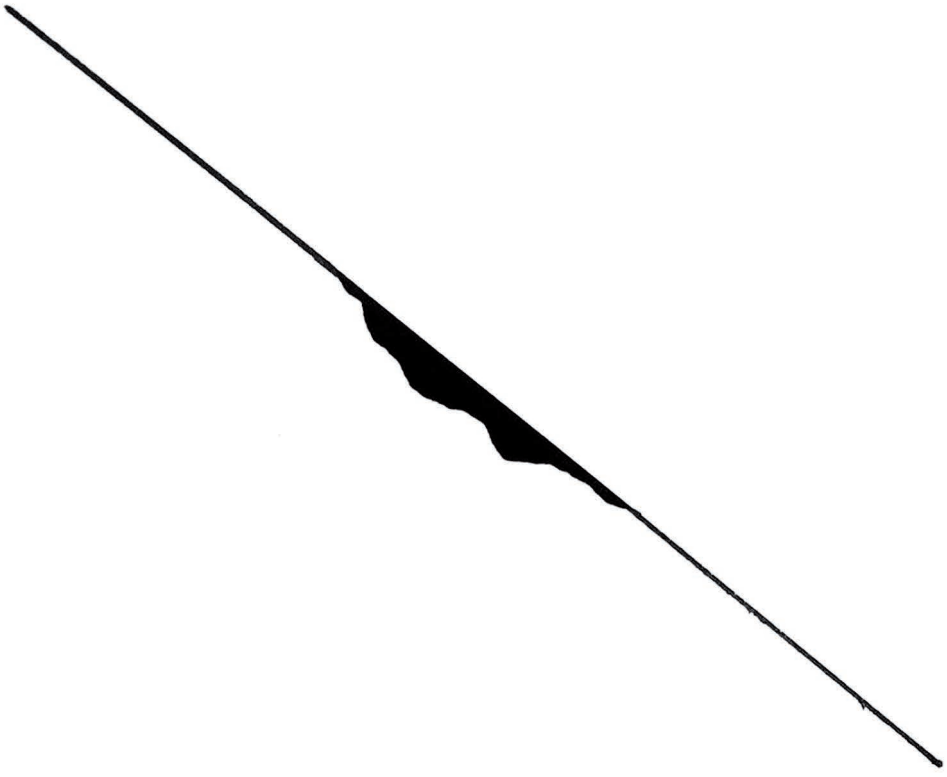

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