

Claiming the city: public art exhibitions, spatial politics and everyday resistance in the UK

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This article reconceptualises public art exhibitions in the UK as spatial-aesthetic and institutional devices that organise urban relations. By developing a unified Lefebvrian spatial grammar, it reads cases at two scales: a micro triad (representations of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation) and a macro diagnosis (abstract, contradictory, and differential space). Archival, curatorial, and media sources — news-reels, press, letters pages, and institutional records — ground analyses across: the Festival of Britain and the exhibition, ‘This Is Tomorrow’; Rachel Whiteread’s *House* and Antony Gormley’s *Sculpture for Derry Walls*; Black Arts Movement-aligned murals in Brixton and the Bogside; the ‘Fourth Plinth’; Assemble’s Granby Four Streets; and the festival ‘Lumiere Derry~Londonderry’. The study specifies four tests for assessing when exhibitionary projects tend towards spatial justice from redistributed authorship/decision rights, changes in ownership/tenure, recognised and resourced care, to persistence of public voice. Findings challenge linear narratives from spectacle to participation, showing instead patterned continuities, frictions, and conditions under which differential practices can be made durable.

Introduction

Public art exhibitions and exhibitionary projects in the UK have long organised how urban public space is seen, moved through, and argued over. From post-war festivals, curated outdoor commissions, to community-led projects, they repeatedly raise the same questions: who sets the terms of appearance in public, how bodies are choreographed through sites, what kinds of memory and value become legible, and under which institutional arrangements dissent is absorbed or sustained. A frame is needed that keeps curatorial apparatus, governance, and audience practice in view at once.

Since 1945, three influential lines have structured debate yet often pull analysis towards aesthetic or discursive horizons. First, a participation-centred line — Claire

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Bishop on participatory aesthetics and spectatorship (*Artificial Hells*), and Grant Kester on dialogical and collaborative authorship (*The One and the Many*), with field-defining handbooks by Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera — asks whether collaboration redistributes authorship or merely restructures spectatorship.¹ Second, a line attentive to antagonism and the public sphere — Rosalyn Deutsche's *Evictions* and Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model — reads urban interventions through conflicts of access, visibility, and policing.² Third, a site-specificity or post-site line — Miwon Kwon's *One Place after Another* with James Meyer's 'functional site' and Rosalind Krauss's 'expanded field' — tracks the shift from fixed sites to social, discursive, and institutional networks.³ These accounts clarify participation, antagonism, and site; nevertheless, spatial production — how space is conceived, practised, and symbolically lived — often appears only implicitly or episodically, leaving case-based historiography fragmented and difficult to compare across periods.

Henri Lefebvre's spatial thought offers a way to re-assemble these fragments without erasing heterogeneity. Drawing on Marxian, dialectical materialism, Lefebvre treats space not as a neutral container, but as a historical product — socially produced, politically organised, and contested in practice. His well-known triad distinguishes spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces — respectively, the routines and pathways through which space is reproduced, the conceptual and regulatory orders through which it is planned and administered, and the symbolic, affective, and lived dimensions through which it is inhabited, imagined, and contested.⁴ As Lefebvre cautions, this triad is not to be used as a static template:

The perceived-conceived-lived triad [...] loses all force if it is treated as an abstract 'model'.⁵

That warning is important here. The triad is used not as a classificatory grid imposed on cases from above, but as a relational way of reading how particular practices bind together conceived arrangements, embodied routines, and symbolic meanings. In the present study, representations of space are approached through projective and regulatory mappings, from planning frameworks, commissioning briefs, cultural-policy protocols, insurance and security requirements, to circulation design; spatial practices through embodied routines and detours such as lingering, queuing, bypasses, maintenance, repair, and vandalism; and representational spaces through the symbolic and affective registers activated by works and sites, including counter-narratives staged by artists, organisers, and audiences.⁶ At a different scale, the article also draws on Lefebvre's broader historical diagnosis of the production of space.⁷ This second register tracks the consolidation of abstract space (homogenising, measurable, exchangeable, and brandable), its eruption into contradiction (ownership frictions, policing, and governance conflicts), and moments that prefigure differential space (co-authorship, commoning, care, and limited redistributions of decision-making). Used together, the triad and this historical register provide a comparative vocabulary through

which exhibitions can be read not only as images or discourses, but as devices that organise spatial relations over time.

Prominent applications adjacent to art-and-city debates have tended to emphasise different aspects. Cecilie Sachs Olsen's *Socially Engaged Art and the Neoliberal City* develops a practice-led account of artistic tactics under neoliberal urbanism, with global cases and an emphasis on situated knowledge. Łukasz Stanek reconstructs Lefebvre's exchanges with architects and planners, clarifying the genealogy of concepts such as abstract space and situating them in professional cultures. Malcolm Miles synthesises public art's urban roles in *Art, Space and the City*, while Sarah Bennett and John Butler's *Advances in Art & Urban Futures, Vol. 1* gathers seminar papers on locality, regeneration and diversities around 2000.⁸ The present article diverges by systematising a UK historical arc explicitly through Lefebvre as a system-builder: aligning exhibitionary apparatus (selection, security, circulation, and authorisation) with the production of space, and specifying institutional conditions under which tactics are absorbed or endure. In short, it turns concepts often cited descriptively into diagnostic operators for cross-period comparison. At the same time, the account acknowledges the historical limits of a Lefebvrian system — its Eurocentric inheritance and the under-specification of racialised and migratory urban experience, and Lefebvre's distance from design and building practice — and therefore calibrates its claims through selective dialogue with feminist and Black geographies, Black British cultural studies and post-colonial urbanism, and through the juxtaposition of diverse UK cases.⁹ It is offered as a necessarily provisional reconstruction that may err at points, yet is valuable in reopening a historical-materialist conversation about how exhibitionary forms produce urban space.

Methodologically, the study proceeds as a literature-based critical interpretive synthesis, drawing together curatorial and planning archives, commissioning texts, artists' and curators' statements, press and broadcast coverage, and secondary scholarship across art history, urban studies, and cultural geography. Coding organises cases around recurrent spatial issues — ownership, participation, surveillance, resistance, and gentrification — and sequences them across three socio-political moments (post-war welfare state, late-twentieth-century neoliberal redevelopment, and post-2000 global city). Audience evidence is gathered from contemporaneous sources where possible and from institutional documentation where available. For mid- and late-twentieth-century instances, direct observation is unavailable and continuous first-hand observation cannot be reconstructed; accordingly, newsreels, contemporary criticism, letters pages, and institutional records are treated as historicised documentary proxies for reception, complemented, where appropriate, by later oral testimony and by the documentary record of film and newsreel practice.¹⁰ The theoretical lenses named above are not sequestered in a separate section but work as integrative tools to interpret spatial effects alongside curatorial agency and the institutional settings that condition it.

For clarity, 'public art exhibitions' is used capaciously to denote exhibitions and exhibitionary projects staged in public space. In this expanded usage, 'public' is not treated as a neutral descriptor of people or of spaces, since the category spans forms that organise access, visibility, and audience participation in markedly differ-

ent ways. It is therefore used critically to name a contested arrangement of access, visibility, legitimacy, policing, and decision-making rather than an already unified people or an intrinsically open realm. The operative criterion is the presence of a curatorial apparatus — arrangements of display, timing, audience pathways, authorisation, and the management of who may appear and under what terms — rather than a strict boundary between ‘exhibition’ and ‘artwork’.

Three recurring threads structure the analysis and anchor cross-period comparison: (1) state–corporate apparatus and abstract space — homogenisation, measurability, exchangeability, and the choreography of security and circulation; (2) memory, identity and dispute — contestation around ownership, policing, removal, and mediated public debate; and (3) co-production and care — co-authorship, commoning, ongoing maintenance, and governance devices such as community land trusts. Each thread is tested in the cases through the micro triad of representations of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation, and read, at the macro scale, for the consolidation of abstract space, the surfacing of contradiction, or the prefiguration of differential space. Taken together, however, these threads do more than organise comparison — they identify the main dimensions along which exhibitionary arrangements distribute, withhold, or condition spatial rights. It is in this sense that the article speaks of spatial justice. Here, spatial justice does not denote fairness in the abstract, but the uneven distribution of rights over visibility and appearance, access and movement, decision-making, tenure, maintenance, and the capacity to alter or contest the terms under which space is organised. For analytical purposes, these issues are assessed through four recurring tests: redistributed authorship, changes in ownership and tenure, recognised and resourced care, and the persistence of public voice after the moment of display.

Two contributions follow from this design. First, an analytical grammar is offered that binds exhibitionary form, governance, and audience practice to the production of space, enabling comparison across periods without erasing heterogeneity. Second, the article develops a comparative diagnostic for assessing when exhibitionary arrangements redistribute spatial rights and when they reproduce existing asymmetries of decision-making, access, tenure, and care.

The discussion proceeds in three parts. The first revisits the post-war apparatus through the Festival of Britain (1951) and the exhibition, ‘This Is Tomorrow’ (1956). The second analyses redevelopment controversies via Antony Gormley’s *Sculpture for Derry Walls* (1987), Rachel Whiteread’s *House* (1993), and Black Arts Movement-aligned community mural practices in Brixton (1981–90s, including *Nuclear Dawn*), read alongside the Bogside Artists’ *People’s Gallery* (Derry, 1994–2006). The third considers contemporary configurations through Trafalgar Square’s ‘Fourth Plinth’ programme (with attention to commissions such as Yinka Shonibare’s *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle* and Samson Kambalu’s *Antelope*), Assemble’s *Granby Four Streets* (Liverpool, 2010s), and the light festival *Lumiere Derry~Londonderry* (2013). A concluding section considers the reach and limits of a Lefebvrian frame in contexts shaped by colonial legacies and racialised urban politics, and reflects on the methodological implications of reading audience practice through documentary traces.

1945–1960s: state exhibitionary apparatus and the infiltration of the everyday

As set out in the introduction, post-war public art exhibitions can be read as devices that organise spatial relations, binding curatorial apparatus, governance, and audience practice under specific historical conditions. The Festival of Britain (1951) and 'This Is Tomorrow' exhibition (Whitechapel, 1956) anchor claim at two distinct scales. The Festival fabricated a metropolitan parcours on the South Bank in which route-planning, vantage, and queue-management translated national recovery into a pedagogy of looking and moving (Fig. 1); 'This Is Tomorrow' miniaturised the city as sensorial environment, reassembling rubble, fencing, posters, and sound so that the 'everyday' itself became curatorial medium. In Lefebvre's terms, the Festival consolidated representations of space—site plan, pavilion taxonomy, guidebook script, security, and insurance protocols—through which spatial practices (promenade, queue, pause, and photograph) were choreographed at scale while the spaces of representation it animated were those of technocratic optimism and national self-fashioning keyed to icons such as the Skylon.¹¹ At the macro register, this amounts to the consolidation of abstract space—standardised and measurable, and designed for exchange and display—whose contradic-

Figure 1.
Aerial illustration of the South Bank Exhibition, Festival of Britain, 1951, showing the Skylon, Dome of Discovery, and other structures along the South Bank, in the public domain, Wikimedia Commons



tions appeared quickly in budgetary rows, hasty demolition, and an asymmetry between spectacle and durable provision.¹²

The South Bank's choreographic clarity is legible on the page and on film. The HMSO official guide does not merely list attractions; it scripts a traversal — 'the Exhibition [...] tells a continuous story' — and aligns exhibits to that sequence, while the site plan and pavilion taxonomy materialise the narrative as a map of decks, ramps, and sightlines.¹³ Historic England reproduces the plan with 22 pavilions and 13 restaurants, and even prints a recommended route so that the continuous story 'will make the most sense if the Pavilions are visited in the order shown': a textbook instance of conceived order rendered projectively and operationally.¹⁴ Contemporary tallies make scale visible: 8,455,863 visits to the South Bank and 7,355,213 to the Battersea Gardens were recorded at closing; museum syntheses later summarised '8.5 million' to the main site and framed the event as a national 'tonic'.¹⁵ These counts matter not as boosterism, but as proxies for practice — densities at bottlenecks, desire-paths round queues, the pacing of entrance, linger, and exit that the script anticipates.¹⁶ Contemporary reportage describes the closing-night ritual — flag-lowering, lights out — as a staged termination of the exhibitionary city; newsreels amplify the same score visually and sonically, their pans and commentary specifying how bodies were expected to look and dwell, turning spectatorship into a recorded spatial practice.¹⁷ Within months, parliamentary exchanges over the disposal of the Skylon crystallised the fragility of festivalised publicness. As the Minister of Works told the Commons:

I cannot decide the future of the Skylon [...] If [L.C.C.] do not want it I shall have it dismantled without delay.¹⁸

British Pathé's footage of the demolition of the Skylon and the Dome of Discovery literalised the volatility of the spectacle, while the Royal Festival Hall alone was retained and institutionalised as the anchor for a later cultural quarter.¹⁹ The Festival's spatial scripting, then, was not only technical but ideological. Read through Lefebvre's macro vocabulary, it condensed abstract space — standardisation, calculability, and exchangeability — while exposing contradictory tendencies of budget discipline, symbolic iconoclasm, and administrative dismantling. Within this abstract order, only narrow corridors remained for differential experiments: improvised vantage-points, fleeting commons at bottlenecks, and momentary deviations from the prescribed route. Yet, the Festival's narrative unity also rested on exclusions. As Jo Littler notes, the post-war rebranding of empire as the 'Commonwealth' supplied a language of national renewal that muted the politics of decolonisation and post-war migration, even as imperial hierarchies were rearticulated in softened form.²⁰ Similarly, in her reading of the South Bank displays, Moya Jones observes that 'the aim was to present a cohesive, single "story" about Britain [...] there was not really any place for representing the multiple national traditions and differences.'²¹ In this sense, the Fes-

Figure 2.
Installation of Group 2's exhibit for
'This Is Tomorrow', Whitechapel
Art Gallery, London, 1956,
showing the group's collaborative
construction blurred the
boundaries between architectural
design, artistic production, and
exhibition-making, exemplifying
post-war efforts to reimagine
spatial authorship through display
as an urban and social medium,
photographed by Sam Lambert,
courtesy of Architectural Press
Archive / RIBA Collections (RIBA ref.
RIBA28312)



tival's abstract space did not only measure, brand, and discipline; it also manufactured a selective unity, smoothing colonial entanglements and migrant labour out of sight, and thereby narrowing the spectrum of publics that could be imagined.

'This Is Tomorrow' reverses the optical distance and normalises the everyday as curatorial material (Fig. 2). Whitechapel's records confirm the organisational wager — 12 teams, autonomous briefs, low-cost materials, environments rather than object-salons — and detail practicalities that index representation of space at the gallery scale (programme notes, sketches, layouts, and timed entries).²² Group 6 (Alison and Peter Smithson, Nigel Henderson, and Eduardo Paolozzi) assembled *Patio and Pavilion* from corrugated sheet, sand, and street salvage, staging a threshold between bombsite and domestic patio; Group 2 (Richard Hamilton, John McHale, and John Voelcker) saturated perception with billboard imagery, jukebox sound, and perfumed carpet — the banal media of the post-war street recoded as exhibition device.²³ A contemporaneous British Pathé newsreel of the show preserves a compact verdict and shows spectators adjusting their gait as they negotiate thresholds and make-shift structures:

Strange, yes, but exciting and provocative.²⁴

In print, a 1956 *ArtReview* critique by John McEwen caught the same blend of assurance and abrasion, pitching the show's audacity against its impatience:

It is all done with compelling good faith, youthful assurance and provocative intolerance.²⁵

Triadically parsed, representation of space lies in the teams' diagrammed scripts and the gallery's cueing of entry and flow; the spaces of representation activated are symbolic and affective — rubble, fencing, and advertising keyed to memory and desire; and the spatial practices solicited — stooping at thresholds, brushing corrugation, following sound into dim corners — are intimate and slow, re-training perception rather than scaling to millions.²⁶ A small but telling instance grounds this — the newsreel lingers on hands grazing textures and bodies edging sideways through a tight gap, a choreography only obliquely anticipated in the printed plans.²⁷ In macro terms, Whitechapel prefigures differential impulses — co-authorship, multiplicity, low-cost making, and the dignifying of maintenance and repair — yet remains contradictory in ways that would haunt later debates: the curators are architects associated with the conceived order; the media are those of commerce and publicity; and the street, ostensibly brought inside, remains a designed street.²⁸ The wager that everyday infiltration can unsettle gallery discipline is therefore double-edged, suspended between tactic and absorption.²⁹

Taken together, the cases clarify how analytic grammar travels. First, representations of space: the Festival presents a full-spectrum apparatus — state brief, plan, sequence, and policeable flows — whose urban imaginary is a continuous national story; Whitechapel decentralises authorship into 12 micro-apparatuses, each with its own diagram and script. Second, spatial practices as contrasting measures — mass promenade versus intimate detour; queue and overlook versus crouch and brush; and ticketed thresholds and turnstiles versus flimsy, porous partitions. Third, spaces of representation — technocratic optimism and a nation made new versus estranged advertising and the dignity of rubble as a material of memory. In the macro register, the Festival concentrates abstract space and exhibits contradictions (political iconoclasm, budget cuts, demolition, and selective permanence) while Whitechapel prefigures differential logics (co-authorship, multiplicity, and care), yet cannot shed contradiction because it rehearses the media grammars — poster, diagram, and planned route — by which abstraction circulates.³⁰ A historical hook signals the carry-over: the Fun Palace imaginary (Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price, 1961–75) reframed participation as an infrastructural question — 'a laboratory of fun, a university of the streets' — conceived as mobile, demountable, sited on wasteland, and programmed rather than merely displayed.³¹ The lesson 'everyday life is a curatorial medium' thereby migrates from the micro-environment into a proposal for programmable public infrastructure, the horizon on which later participatory and community commissioning would stand or falter.³²

Two consequences follow for the central argument. First, the festivalisation of planning clearly predates neoliberal redevelopment: managed routes, paced dwell, emblematic icons, and countable audiences recur in mid-century cultural urbanism and find afterlives in the South Bank's institutionalisation and the policy language that would frame culture-led regeneration.³³ Put in Lefebvre's terms — abstract space takes an exhibitionary form — produced not only by plans and deeds but by scripts that choreograph bodies and promises that attach value to circulation and visibility.³⁴ Second, the infiltration of the everyday is not a straightforward antidote to abstraction; it yields ambivalence that is analytically generative. The collaged patio and the jukebox do not romanticise the street against planning; they are appropriations that teach bodies to move and feel otherwise while remaining legible to institutions (insurable, budgetable, documentable, and re-stageable).³⁵ Hence, the need to read the micro triad with the macro diagnosis: it is inadequate to cast the Festival as purely 'strategic' and Whitechapel as purely 'tactical'. Both combine conceived orders with situated practices and affective symbols; the comparative question is how those combinations stabilise or unravel. The Festival's contradictions were made visible by demolition and debt, and Whitechapel's by authorial ambiguity in architects curating 'everyday' environments with the media of commerce. The pattern prepares the next phase — removal, policing, and property; co-authorship and care as governance; and devolved thresholds of 'allowable dispute' — by establishing exhibitionary form as a medium of urban governance whose effects are not exhausted by images or texts.³⁶ Here, 'the public' appears less as a unified collectivity than as a counted, choreographed, and selectively imagined audience, which is precisely why the post-war cases already turn on uneven visibility, access, and voice.

1970s–1990s: redevelopment and the politics of property, memory, and identity

From the late 1970s onwards, public art in Britain was increasingly shaped by instruments designed to tackle inner-city decline. The Inner Urban Areas Act (1978) inaugurated targeted programmes for deprived districts and normalised inter-departmental bidding for funds.³⁷ The Thatcher years recast this terrain into entrepreneurial urbanism: Urban Development Corporations and Enterprise Zones (from 1980) moved key regeneration powers to arm's-length bodies and tied investment to measurable outputs, risk management, and brandable image-making.³⁸ By the early 1990s, schemes such as City Challenge formalised 'partnership' across local authorities, quangos, and private developers, embedding briefs, audits, and security protocols as the routine representations of space through which public art was commissioned.³⁹ At decade's end, New Labour consolidated culture-led approaches — creative-industries mapping and urban-design agendas — so that visitor counts, media value, and 'cultural quarter' branding became standard benchmarks.⁴⁰

Against this arc, the cases that follow mark different contact points between redevelopment and public art: Antony Gormley's *Sculpture for Derry Walls*

(1987) stages a securitised heritage landscape where 'neutral culture' meets conflict, Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993) condenses London's clearance politics into a single monument of loss, and community muralism (Brixton) together with the Bogside Artists (Derry) turns identity and memory into neighbourhood authorship under shifting regimes of permission and care. These are not simply aesthetic episodes but tests of how policy scripts choreograph bodies, how audiences re-write those scripts, and how the resulting frictions disclose abstract, contradictory, and occasionally differential spatial orders across the period.

Antony Gormley's *Sculpture for Derry Walls* (1987) shows this clearly (Fig. 3). Commissioned through the TSWA 3D programme for a city still structured by the Troubles, three back-to-back cast-iron figures were set at overlooks on the seventeenth-century ramparts, each pair facing different quarters of the city.⁴¹ As a conceived order (representation of space), the project translated heritage oversight and policeable movement into a map of sanctioned pauses and sightlines—the wall as instrument and looking as a permitted posture. Yet, practice on the ground did not stay within those lines.

In a later recollection published in *BBC News* (2011) and cited in the *PublicArt.ie* directory, Gormley described how, shortly after installation, one of the figures was subjected to an overnight 'necklacing':

The final act was throwing a tyre around its neck and then pouring petrol on it [...] Red melted plastic was running like blood over the totally black charred head. This was excellent. This was the work as poultice throwing violence and evil onto itself that would otherwise be experienced in other ways.⁴²

Here Gormley's own words—recorded nearly 25 years after the event—reframe the act as cathartic rather than vandalic, yet the episode itself remains evident that audiences re-purposed the piece beyond its commissioning grammar, forcing its contradictory status into view. Analytically, the triad is legible without strain: representations of space (the TSWA brief, siting, insurance, and policing) met spatial practices of defacement, re-signification, and tour-taking; spaces of representation—witness, surveillance, and martyrdom—were activated by the posture of the bodies and the charged topography. At the macro register, the work sits in contradictory space—a conciliatory civic icon read by some as target, with reception periodically re-written by unauthorised acts that the commissioning grammar cannot fully absorb.⁴³

Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993) condensed London's redevelopment politics to the scale of a single terrace (Fig. 4). Cast in concrete from the negative interior of 193 Grove Road (Bow) and commissioned by Artangel with Tower Hamlets, it appeared exactly where planning, culture, and housing policy met—a clearance site becoming parkland, and a temporary permission bounded by fencing, insurance, and safety zones.⁴⁴ The conceived order consisted of commissioning protocols, traffic and crowd plans, and the statutory

Figure 3.
Sculpture for Derry Walls, Antony Gormley, 1987, Derry, Northern Ireland, installed as part of the TSWA 3D programme, and the work reconfigured the fortified city's edge as a site of embodied encounter, questioning how visibility, exposure, and protection are spatially organised in a divided landscape, photographed by and courtesy of Antony Gormley Studio



regeneration frame. The practice organised itself around the object — queuing along railings to peer at blocked window recesses, circling the plinth, touching the concrete, and later, at demolition, collecting fragments. The symbolic register was overdetermined by grief and memory — home as imprint and loss rendered monumental. At the moment of its unveiling, critical reception in the national press captured this tension between bureaucratic order and affective response. Writing in *The Independent* on 2 November 1993, art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon described the work as:

This is the house that Rachel built [...] one of the most extraordinary and imaginative public sculptures created by an English artist this century.⁴⁵

Yet, in the political sphere, local officials voiced hostility in equally public form. Eric Flounders, then Chair of the Parks Sub-Committee of Bow Neighbourhood Council, wrote to the letters page of *The Independent* on 5 November 1993 to insist that the work's removal was imminent:

Those poor, unsophisticated readers who share my view that Rachel Whiteread's concoction *House* is utter rubbish can rest assured that, despite the pleas of the *Independent*, the monstrosity will not remain in place beyond the end of November.⁴⁶

On the day Whiteread received the Turner Prize, the council voted to remove the work; petitions circulated. An Early Day Motion was tabled, and thousands visited before demolition.⁴⁷ Read macroscopically, *House* staged a contradiction between redevelopment's abstract logics — valuation, land assembly, and risk — and embodied attachments made public through queues, vigils,



Figure 4.
House, Rachel Whiteread, 1993, showing the concrete, full-scale cast of a Victorian terrace house interior in East London, transforming absence into monumental presence, and confronting the politics of housing, demolition, and memory at the end of the twentieth century, photographed by Sue Omerod and courtesy of Rachel Whiteread and Gagosian

Figure 5.
Nuclear Dawn, Brian Barnes and the Brixton community, 1981, Coldharbour Lane, Brixton, London, created in collaboration with local residents, the mural visualises anti-nuclear activism and collective memory amid Cold War urban politics, and its continued restoration and local stewardship exemplify how grassroots public art can sustain political agency and shared spatial identity across generations, photographed by Matt Brown and courtesy of Londonist

Figure 6.
The Petrol Bomber, The Bogside Artists, 1994, Rossville Street, Derry, Northern Ireland, painted in response to the events of Bloody Sunday and the Troubles, the mural forms part of the 'People's Gallery' and commemorates youth resistance and local memory within a conflict-scarred urban landscape, photographed by The Bogside Artists and courtesy of CAIN Archive, University of Ulster

and petitions, briefly prefiguring differential space in these collective practices. Yet, because neither ownership, land-use designation, nor the temporary consent changed, the same apparatus that authorised the work also authorised its end: demolition folded the site back into the pre-existing regeneration script, reaffirming the primacy of abstract space while leaving the contestation on record in broadsheets and Hansard.⁴⁸

A parallel, explicitly political strand unfolded through London's muralism community. In Brixton, works such as *Nuclear Dawn* (1981) emerged from alliances of artists, tenants, and local campaigns, supported by small grants and voluntary labour (Fig. 5).⁴⁹ Here, the conceived order was modest — wall permissions, borough funds, and informal agreements — but it bound projects to the long work of maintenance. Everyday practice included using murals for



orientation and meeting, school visits, and periodic repainting when ‘appropriateness’ was renegotiated under changing governance. The symbolic register — Black British pride, anti-racist solidarity, and Cold War anxiety — was the content, not a supplement. A later controversy surrounding the Stockwell memorial murals (2005) — when the face of Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian man shot by police, became the site of contested memorialisation — reveals how governance and media reshape public commemoration. In a *Guardian* article published 28 November 2005, Archie Bland framed the dispute in dramatic terms:

It’s war on the memorial to De Menezes.⁵⁰

The phrase stood in for a broader argument about who may appear, who decides, and how grief is pictured. Seen macroscopically, Brixton’s mural field sometimes stabilises differential space — not as utopia but through repeated acts of joint decision-making, fundraising, and cleaning — while remaining vulnerable to absorption into branding or to erasure under new security and property regimes.⁵¹

A devolved counterpoint in Derry sharpens the comparison. The Bogside Artists’ *People’s Gallery* (1994–2006) — fifteen large-scale images across gable ends — curates a community chronicle of the Troubles and organises routes, pauses and scripts for residents and visitors alike (Fig. 6).⁵² As rep-

resentation of space, the series sits within a dense ecology of permissions and self-authorisations: community sanction, tacit municipal tolerance, and periodic negotiation over images that spills into policing and tourism management. Spatial practice includes wayfinding, rendezvous, guided walks marketed as 'Troubles tourism', and constant photographic documentation. The symbolic register remains vivid and contested—for some, the murals offer testimony and dignity; for others, they risk reinforcing division or commodifying trauma. Early analyses of Northern Irish murals noted this duality. In *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (1992), Bill Rolston described how militant and memorial imagery coexisted, functioning both as 'sites of testimony and as symbols of continuing conflict'.⁵³ The Bogside Artists themselves later articulated a similar stance, arguing in their 2001 publication that their works sought 'to represent the experiences of ordinary people' and 'to resist the erasure of local history'.⁵⁴

Together these records reveal how the *People's Gallery* has been sustained less by official heritage management than by recurring community labour—cleaning, repainting, narrating, and refusing revision. Macro-analytically, the series oscillates between contradictory and differential valences—contradictory, where memory and security collide, and visibility becomes a site of policing; differential, where community control over imagery and maintenance constitutes a workable, if fragile, commons. The growth of guided tours and municipal promotion extends audience and risk at once, tending towards absorption even as local vetoes and care practices persist.

Placed against the period's policy frame, the through-line is clearer. First, redevelopment-era commissioning binds authorship to formal structures of partnership, bidding and risk, producing an abstract exhibitionary space calibrated to outputs (visitors, media value, and brand).⁵⁵ Second, contradictions surface where memory and ownership rub: Derry's tyre-burning re-inscribes violence into a conciliation apparatus; *House* turns clearance into a civic argument and is then removed; Brixton and the Bogside show how co-authorship institutionalises care while exposing it to renewed policing through maintenance. The triad travels without overreach—conceived orders (briefs, permissions, and security), embodied practices (detours, gatherings, defacement, and repair), symbolic registers (mourning, witness, and antagonism)—and the macro diagnosis provides a comparative grammar. Abstract space persists in the calculability of risk and exchange, contradictory space appears in removal votes, 'misuse' and policing, and differential space flickers in collective authorship, local vetoes and the labour of care.⁵⁶ What distinguishes the period is not a clean shift from spectacle to participation, but a re-wiring of exhibitionary form through which governance and audience practice co-produce publicness—property, policing, and memory being the decisive tests. Across these redevelopment conflicts, spatial injustice is legible in the uneven distribution of rights over memory, access, decision-making, and durable control of site—publics emerge as claimants, but rarely as holders of stable spatial rights.

2000s–present: institutional strategies and community co-production — brand, security, and care

Since the early 2000s, public art in Britain has been commissioned and judged through procedures that make works countable, securable, and brandable: open calls and shortlists, risk and insurance files, event plans, evaluation dashboards, and education packs.⁵⁷ These are the representations of space that frame what can appear and how it should be managed. The lived responses they elicit — loitering, posing, petitioning, and repairing — are spatial practices. The meanings and affects that attach to sites and objects — imperial memory recoded, neighbourhood pride, and post-conflict testimony — form spaces of representation. Read together (micro triad) and alongside Lefebvre's macro vocabulary — abstract (standardised and measurable), contradictory (where order and attachment clash), and differential (where co-authorship and care are sustained) — the following cases show how contemporary exhibitionary projects organise publicness by selectively assembling, addressing, and disciplining different publics.

At Trafalgar Square, the Fourth Plinth programme makes the apparatus unusually visible. The Greater London Authority (GLA) sets out a two-stage process: public consultation on shortlisted maquettes; a decision by an independent commissioning group; and final approval by the mayor.⁵⁸ The programme is also tasked with reach — bringing 'contemporary art and debate to millions' — and with pedagogy through a Schools Awards strand for 5-to-15-year-olds.⁵⁹ This is the conceived order rendered explicit: selection rules, security perimeters, crowd flows, and audit trails. Public consultation registers the preferences of selected publics and generates visibility, but decision-making remains with the commissioning group and the Mayor; being heard is not the same as sharing control. Within that frame, practice is legible on the ground — pausing, photographing, and assembling for unveilings — and representation is intensely symbolic because the plinth speaks to the square's imperial grammar rather than a neutral plaza.

Two commissions clarify how the macro categories operate in practice. Yinka Shonibare's *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (2010) miniaturised HMS *Victory* beneath sails cut from Dutch-wax cloth, a textile whose trading history folds African diaspora, European industry, and colonial circulation into a single surface (Fig. 7).⁶⁰ When the temporary display ended, the work did not vanish into storage. In April 2012, thanks to a public fundraising appeal coordinated by the Art Fund (with a grant of £50,000) and matched contributions by the National Maritime Museum and the artist's gallery, over £362,500 was raised, allowing *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* to be permanently relocated to Greenwich.⁶¹ Shonibare remarked in *The Guardian*:

The piece was wholeheartedly embraced by the public while at Trafalgar Square and I am glad that the same affection for the work will continue at Greenwich.⁶²

Analytically, the plinth concentrates abstract space (countable audiences, securable site, and evaluable education), yet it also enables a differential

extension when ownership and permanence shift through collective finance and a museum partnership.

Samson Kambalu's *Antelope* (2022) puts contradiction at the centre. The sculpture restages a 1914 photograph of the Pan-Africanist preacher John Chilembwe beside John Chorley. Chilembwe's figure is slightly enlarged and — critically — wears a hat, defying colonial etiquette that denied Africans the right to remain hatted before Europeans (Fig. 8).⁶³ Coverage in *The Guardian* framed the work as a litmus test for how an imperial square might be re-read through a post-colonial lens,⁶⁴ while reviews in *Artnet News* stressed the subversion achieved within canonical bronze — a redefinition of commemoration rather than its rejection.⁶⁵ Triadically, the representation of space is the programme's brief, security, and circulation plan; practice appears in the bodies that point, pose, and argue; and the representational space is a recoded national stage where the hat functions as a counter-rule of appearance, publicly reversing a colonial etiquette of visual hierarchy. At the macro register, *Antelope* occupies contradictory space by design — a municipal brand platform that simultaneously troubles the history that platform once naturalised.

If the plinth shows a state–city apparatus staging dispute, Granby Four Streets (Liverpool) turns to the infrastructures of co-production. From the 1990s, residents opposed clearance; in the 2010s, they consolidated assets and decision-making through a Community Land Trust (CLT), coupling property instruments (leases, covenants) to an ecology of making and care — market, winter garden, workshops, and self-help renovation. Policy case studies now document not only units delivered and affordable tenancies, but the governance devices that keep them running — from volunteer labour braided with paid roles to municipal and philanthropic partnerships alongside earned income.⁶⁶ CLT membership and board composition embed resident voice; long leases and resale covenants keep value in place; and routine budgets allocate time and money to cleaning, planting, and repair. On 7 December 2015, Mark Brown's article on *The Guardian* framed the Turner Prize (2015) not as a vote against art but as recognition that design, maintenance, and commoning can be exhibitionary when they redistribute authorship:

The Turner prize judges rightly praised Assemble's 'ground-up approach to regeneration, city planning and development in opposition to corporate gentrification' [...] it was local residents, including those running Granby Four Streets community land trust, who opposed the demolition of the area.⁶⁷

Here the macro reading differs from the plinth. Prize circuits and media attention can certainly re-absorb a project into brand economies; yet the CLT matters because it alters the conditions of space. Ownership and decision-making move, making *care* — planting, cleaning, repairing, and stewarding — structural rather than episodic. In Lefebvre's terms, differential space is institutionalised: not a frictionless utopia, but a rule-bound capacity to keep work on the neighbourhood going.⁶⁸ The 'exhibition' here is a routine: the weekly market as choreography, the winter garden as stage, and the repair as script — prac-

Figure 7.

Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, Yinka Shonibare CBE, RA, 2010, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, originally commissioned for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, the work reimagines Admiral Nelson's HMS Victory within a giant glass bottle, its sails patterned with African batik textiles, and by relocating a symbol of imperial conquest into a vessel of containment and hybridity, the sculpture reframes national identity and post-colonial narratives within the public realm, photographed by Matt Brown and courtesy of Londonist

Figure 8.

Antelope, Samson Kambalu, 2022, Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, London, restaging the 1914 photograph of Malawian preacher John Chilembwe and British missionary John Chorley, reversing the colonial hierarchy of visibility through scale and posture, and, as a contemporary public commission, reconfiguring the politics of commemoration and racialised memory at the symbolic heart of imperial London, photographed by Matt Brown and courtesy of Londonist





Figure 9.
Granby Four Streets Community
Land Trust market on Granby
Street, Liverpool, as a community-
led regeneration of the Granby
Four Streets area, initiated through
local repair practices and sustained
by Assemble in collaboration with
residents, that exemplifies how
cooperative forms of authorship
and care can reconstitute urban
commons through everyday
participation, photographed and
courtesy of Assemble

tices that keep publics returning and translate into altered tenure and governance. Residents describe the market and workshops not as art events, but as ‘ways of keeping going’; their maintenance labour itself becomes the aesthetic and political form (Fig. 9).⁶⁹

A devolved perspective shows how the thresholds of allowable dispute vary with policy and place. *Lumiere Derry~Londonderry* (2013) — a multi-night light festival at the close of the UK City of Culture year — made participation and visibility into core metrics. Monitoring reports enumerate crowd counts, mapped routes, peak loads, and media reach; risk and traffic plans are integral to the project file.⁷⁰ Representation of space is thus unambiguous: for four nights, the city was programmed and choreographed — its crowd flows, lighting grids, and viewing routes planned in advance, its cultural narrative folded into a bid-winning brand. Practice followed accordingly: an estimated 180,000 people walking, waiting, and looking; volunteers staffing thresholds; and families following printed maps through newly lit streets.

Contemporary commentary captured the event’s double register. Writing in *The Guardian*, Rachel Cooke described *Lumiere Derry~Londonderry* as ‘creatively edgy, subversive, joyful and new’, while Charlotte Higgins, reflecting on the wider City of Culture year, saw in it ‘a reawakening of idealism’ within a still divided city seeking to reimagine its future.⁷¹ Both recognised the civic optimism and the image-work expected of a post-conflict city. The representational space thus oscillated between civic self-portrait and municipal advertising. In macro terms, the festival’s abstract logic — programmability, measurability, and security — remained strong. If differential sparks were visible (community co-makes and local stories), their durability sat outside the festival’s timeframe, depending on what infrastructures remained once the counters were put away. Security checkpoints, crowd barriers, and timed flows made the city feel momentarily safe yet curiously supervised — an

affective residue of post-conflict urban management that outlasted the lights themselves.

A brief historiographic clarification helps to tie these strands. A common simplification is the 'neat shift' thesis — public art moves cleanly from post-war, top-down spectacle to contemporary, participatory practice. The evidence here suggests a more entangled picture. First, the periods overlap; strong institutional scripting persists long after 2000 (the plinth's commissioning and security) while grass-roots authorship predates it and continues (Granby's CLT builds on 1990s mobilisation). Second, participation is ambivalent; it may be meaningful co-production (Granby) or a managed modality inside branded urbanism (Lumiere's choreographed routes and metrics). Third, 'top-down' forms are not monolithic; some state-city programmes actively stage dispute and historical re-reading (the plinth's commissions by Shonibare and Kambalu) while some community projects are re-absorbed into promotional narratives (prizes and media value). Thus, the contemporary exhibitionary city extends post-war logics under new metrics of brand, security, and care.

Set against the analytic grammar, the comparative points are precise. Representations of space are found in the plinth's commissioning and schools' programme, the CLT's constitutions and leases, and the festival's event manuals and monitoring dashboards. Spatial practices are found in posing, pausing, protesting, and photographing at Trafalgar Square, the weekly market and the planting and repair at Granby, and supervised walking and waiting at Lumiere. Spaces of representation are found in imperial memory recoded at the plinth, home-and-neighbourhood care at Granby, and post-conflict self-portraiture at Derry. In the macro register, abstract logic is strongest where brand, security, and measurement dominate (plinth and festival), contradiction surfaces when colonial histories are staged at the centre or when image-work rubs against local priorities (plinth and festival), and differential space is most durable where ownership and governance shift (Granby), and can occasionally be extended from a temporary commission through public acquisition (Shonibare). None of these zones is pure. The plinth can sponsor differential extensions (Shonibare's public acquisition and relocation). A CLT can be pulled towards brand economies. A festival can host moments of commoning even as its metrics remain those of abstract space. Measured against the four tests introduced above, the practical question is not whether a project is 'top-down' or 'participatory' in name, but whether authorship is redistributed, whether ownership and tenure change, whether care is recognised and resourced, and whether pathways for voice persist after the unveiling. On that measure, the contrast between the cases is clear. At the plinth and at Lumiere, participation can be real at the level of encounter, debate, and symbolic re-reading, yet decision-making, security, and evaluation remain tightly organised within institutional apparatuses. In Granby, by contrast, co-production is tied to altered tenure, resident governance, and funded maintenance, so that care becomes a durable condition of space rather than an episodic supplement to visibility. Exhibitionary form therefore operates as a medium of urban governance not only through images or texts, but through

the rules, assets, and routines that structure what publics can do, sustain, and change. In this sense, the exhibitionary city of the 2000s–present is not a departure from post-war modernity but its mutation under neoliberal rationalities. The earlier choreography of movement and attention persists, but it is now more often mediated through metrics, participation procedures, brand management, and selective forms of institutionalised care. What changes is not that governance disappears, but that visibility, evaluation, and care are more closely braided together as techniques for organising publicness — sometimes reproducing abstract space, sometimes opening limited but material differential extensions.

Conclusion

This article has argued that public art exhibitions and exhibitionary projects are not merely aesthetic events or occasions for discourse but devices that organise spatial relations. Read through Lefebvre's triad — representations of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation — and his macro vocabulary of abstract, contradictory, and differential space, such projects can be compared across periods without flattening their heterogeneity. What comes into view is how visibility, value, and risk are distributed in the city, and how those distributions are stabilised, tested, or re-made.

Taken together, the three periods traced here reveal both continuity and friction. In the post-war moment, the festivalisation of planning consolidated a full-spectrum apparatus of routes, vantage, and countable publics — an exhibitionary rendering of abstract space whose unity rested on choreography as much as on exclusion. In the redevelopment era, conflicts around property, policing, and removal made contradiction visible and turned audience practice — letters, protests, acts of watching, and defacement — into evidence for how space was lived. In the 2000s–present, two trajectories have been particularly clear. One is an institutional strategy that renders art brandable, securable, and measurable, yet sometimes stages dispute at the centre, as in commissions that publicly rehearse imperial memory. The other is community co-production, in which authorship, tenure, and maintenance are reorganised around collective care, allowing responsibility to become institutionalised rather than episodic. These tendencies overlap; the linear story of a shift from spectacle to participation does not match the evidence.

A key contribution has been to specify the conditions under which public art tends towards spatial justice and those under which it reproduces existing asymmetries in institutional decision-making, proprietary control, representational authority, and policing power. Four tests clarify this distinction. First, authorship — whether decision-making moves beyond consultation to shared control. The contrast between the Fourth Plinth and more sustained forms of co-production is instructive here; consultation may register preference and generate visibility, yet control can remain firmly with commissioning bodies. Second, ownership and tenure — whether assets or rights change hands so that publics gain material stakes. Granby Four Streets is

the clearest case in the article, since co-production is coupled to the institutional form of the community land trust, giving collective labour a durable territorial basis. Third, care—whether maintenance is recognised and resourced as cultural labour rather than displaced onto volunteerism or absorbed into short-lived event management. This is where the distinction between episodic activation and ongoing stewardship becomes decisive, whether in the upkeep of community-led projects or in the afterlives of politically charged murals. Fourth, the persistence of voice—whether publics retain durable channels to alter what is shown, maintained, or governed after the unveiling. House, for example, generated intense public argument, but the case also shows how voice can be vivid without becoming institutionally durable. Projects meeting none of these conditions reproduce abstract logics of visibility, securitisation, and managed participation. Projects meeting several may prefigure differential space. Many occupy contradictory space, staging dispute while leaving underlying allocations of control intact. The comparative question is which arrangements a project institutes, which rights and obligations they redistribute, and whether those changes endure beyond the event-form itself.

Methodologically, the study has been documentary and historical. For mid- and late-twentieth-century cases, sustained first-hand observation is unavailable; hence, newsreels, press coverage, letters pages, and institutional records are treated as historicised documentary proxies for audience practice and triangulated with curatorial and policy archives to avoid single-source bias. The press record—especially *The Guardian's* digital archive—offered longitudinal evidence of reception across decades, balanced where possible by municipal reports and evaluation documents. These sources remain partial, privileging official and expert voices, yet that partiality does not invalidate the analysis, which focuses less on subjective states than on how exhibitions organise movement, access, and encounter—the frictions documented by the archive—and cross-checks multiple source types for reliability.

The theoretical wager has been to operationalise Lefebvre's concepts as diagnostic operators rather than ornamental citations. The triad and macro schema allow cross-period comparison while requiring calibration through feminist, Black, and post-colonial urban thought. The framework's Eurocentric limits are acknowledged, but dialogue with these literatures—together with cases addressing race, empire, and migration—helps reveal how contradictions persist within institutional apparatuses and how differential practices can be made durable through community governance. The aim is not to displace intersectional accounts but to provide a vocabulary for analysing the exhibitionary form of governance that they contest and reformulate.

For commissioners and municipalities, several implications follow. Briefs can translate consultation into shared governance, with decision rights and review mechanisms that endure beyond the unveiling. Commissioning can be coupled with tenure instruments—community land trusts, covenants, or acquisitions—that anchor temporary visibility in material arrangements. Budgets can

recognise care as a form of cultural labour rather than outsourcing it to goodwill. And evaluation can move beyond footfall to assess shifts in authorship, ownership, and voice. For curators and communities, one lesson is that the exhibition need not remain event-bound; it can become a recurring routine—a market, garden, repair practice, or collectively maintained platform—when decision-making arrangements, tenure, maintenance resources, and everyday participation remain aligned across conceived order, lived practice, and symbolic attachment.

Finally, the discussion opens a research agenda. Oral histories and archival micro-histories could recover the lived reception of 1970s–1990s exhibitions; comparative work across devolved nations could illuminate divergent thresholds of allowable dispute and supports for co-production; and digital afterlives—social-media archives, petitions, and forums—should be recognised as part of the public record of maintenance and reception. If there is a single lesson, it is that exhibitions matter not only as images but as rules, assets, and routines. They claim the city when authorship shifts, when tenure changes, when care is resourced, and when pathways for voice endure; they reinscribe it when visibility is detached from such arrangements. The task is therefore neither to celebrate participation in the abstract nor to lament institutional persistence, but to specify—and build—the institutional and material conditions under which public art redistributes spatial rights and produces more durable forms of spatial justice.

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