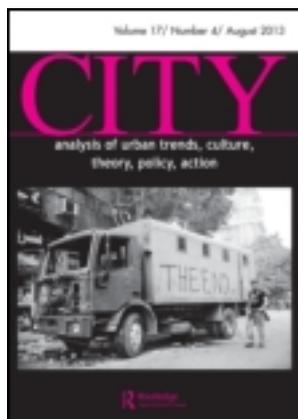


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# Cultural activism and the politics of place-making

Michael Buser, Carlo Bonura, Maria Fannin and  
Kate Boyer

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*In this paper, we explore the relationship between creative practice, activism and urban place-making by considering the role they play in the construction of meaning in urban spaces. Through an analysis of two activist groups based in Stokes Croft, Bristol (UK), we argue that cultural activism provides new political prospects within the wider context of global capitalism through the cultivation of a shared aesthetics of protest. By cultivating aspects of shared history and a mutual enthusiasm for creative practice as a form of resistance, Stokes Croft has emerged as a 'space of nurturance' for creative sensibilities. However, we note how Stokes Croft as an autonomous space remains open-ended and multiple for activists interested in promoting different visions of social justice.*

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**Key words:** place identity, cultural activism, Stokes Croft, collectivity, resistance

## Introduction

Defined as a type of organising 'where art, activism, performance and politics meet, mingle and interact' (Verson 2007, 172), cultural activism has received a growing amount of attention in the field of urban studies in recent years. Scholarship has focused on the role of creative practices such as culture jamming, subversion, public art, performance and rebel clowning as means of motivating social and political change within anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements. This work has argued for the power of humour and parody as tactics for the diffusion and dispersal of authority (Routledge 2012; see also Klepto 2004 for an insider's account of the non-violent direct action of the Clandestine Rebel Clown Army). In addition to its role in anti-capitalist activism (Lechaux 2010), cultural activism has also been used as a

mechanism of resistance to oppressive state rule (Notes from Nowhere 2003; Pietrzyk 2011) and to challenge the legacies of colonialism (Ginsburg 1997; Duncombe 2002; Ryan 2008).

In this paper we consider the relationship between creative practice, activism and processes of urban place-making. We argue that cultural activism is not merely capable of constructing meanings about urban space, it also provides the 'prospects for a new progressive political opening' (Scott 2011, 316; see also Long 2013) within the wider context of global capitalism through the cultivation of a shared aesthetics of protest. By a 'shared aesthetics of protest' we are referring to two distinct though related meanings. First, in Stokes Croft there is a shared artistic style of protest grounded in a DIY sensibility and a highly varied spirit of artistic experimentation. Second, by shared aesthetics we are also referencing a shared

perception by activists of the ways in which Stokes Croft has been excluded from civic or developmental narratives of Bristol or traditionally regarded as a problem for the city council, urban planners and the police. Aesthetics of protest here borrows from the work of Jacques Rancière: it is a form of protest specifically designed to challenge perceptions (*aisthesis*) of urban life and capital in which certain ways of living and visions of community are deemed unacceptable. The 'new political opening' of cultural activism in Stokes Croft, therefore, is found both in the *style* of protest and in the way that protest 'reworks the frame of our perceptions' of urban life (Rancière 2009, 82).

Through an analysis of two activist groups based in Stokes Croft, Bristol (UK) we suggest that cultural activism has an important role to play in constituting particular urban neighbourhoods as centres of social activism. Our use of the phrase 'cultural activism' follows Steven Duncombe (2007) who positions these practices within a wider critique of hegemonic or dominant constructions of the world. It is an activism that calls upon art and creative practices to disrupt commonly held assumptions and expectations often by forging alternative spatial imaginaries or meanings. For example, the Reclaim the Streets (RTS) movement famously merged protests with parties, 'taking over streets and turning them into pulsing, dancing, temporary carnivals in their demand for public space' (Duncombe 2007, 68). In retelling the movement's origins, John Jordon (2002, 350) noted the emergence of 'a new breed of artist activist' who called upon Situationist-inspired tactics of *détournement*—for example, closing roads to traffic and holding parties in the streets. This reversal of hierarchy and order—the transformation of a so-called dead motorway into a living human space—was celebrated by RTS and their carnival-esque construction of 'a world inside out' (Bakhtin 1968).

Our thesis is that cultural activism allows for the transformation of urban spaces

through an aesthetic politics that resists urban developmentalism. As James DeFilippis, Robert Fisher, and Eric Shragge (2010, 32) assert: 'it is the great political potential of communities to take the objective qualities that come from shared territory ... and combine them with the subjective processes of identity formation that happen through the everyday interactions of daily life in the community'. By cultivating aspects of shared history and a mutual enthusiasm for creative practice as a form of resistance, Stokes Croft has emerged as a 'space of nurturance' for creative sensibilities. As a space constituted through cultural activism, Stokes Croft remains open-ended and multiple for activists within and beyond the neighbourhood interested in promoting different visions of social justice.

At the same time we also recognise that processes of neo-liberalisation (including privatisation of service-provision and a broader shift from government to governance) can undermine the relationships that make up activist communities. As such, there is a need to consider these activities within the wider political economy and identify ways in which specific practices might form part of wider movements of social change. Our claim—that cultural activism can serve as a form of urban place-making—is a critical addition to current scholarship of cultural activism in that it moves away from an insistence on the fragmented and temporary nature of these practices and moves toward an analysis of the genuine re-configuring of socio-spatial relations in the city. This involves attempts to redefine value in a neighbourhood considered to be without value, but also fostering new relations to property (squatting and reappropriation of public spaces) as well as recognition of the lives of people at the margins of society (within this area, see Unsworth et al. 2011 who argue for a renewed attitude within regeneration strategies and efforts which recognises and values the potential and creative capacity of local people in areas of deprivation and neglect).

Our study is based on an analysis of recent cultural activism in Stokes Croft, Bristol. In the spring of 2011 Stokes Croft entered the national imaginary through media coverage of resistance to the opening of a branch of a Tesco grocery store in the neighbourhood. The proposal to open a Tesco Express attracted intense opposition from local residents and activists, many of whom spent months both protesting and engaging in the city council's planning review process in an effort to prevent the store from opening. When these efforts failed and the store went ahead as planned, an attempt to evict nearby squatters led to violence that came to be interpreted as anti-Tesco 'riots'. These protests were represented in the local and national press through images of disorder and violence, including a newspaper headline proclaiming that '*Bristol Burns ...*' (*The Independent*, April 30, 2011). However, while stories of the riots drew the national gaze, they failed to grasp the everyday political work of place-making in which these protests are situated. More importantly, they obscure the wide range of highly creative forms of social and political activism taking place in the area. Our work reveals how an urban landscape that has long been viewed by many as derelict has been radically revised with whimsy and artistry, purposefully eschewing mainstream pathways of urban renewal. This effort to revision Stokes Croft often calls upon tactics associated with cultural activism (e.g. political murals, parodist protests) and insurgent planning (Miraftab 2009; Hou 2010) including the production of a place identity viewed by activists as generative of creative and political practice.

Indeed, much of the existing work on cultural activism discusses its emergence and effects within (mostly) urban contexts: as a reclaiming of public space, accomplishing a transformation of public streets into sites for public performance or art. Approaches to cultural activism that fail to consider the spatial effects of activism miss the relation of collective practices to space, both in how practices become tactically situated in space

(as in the forms that collective practice can take) and in the way that certain spaces can become referents for collective visions. This is where our work advances existing scholarship.

Of course, 'place' has long been recognised as a critical factor in the construction of individual and collective identities (Tuan 1977; Keith and Pile 1993). Likewise, the ways in which place identities are shaped to achieve different ends now constitute a rich body of scholarship (Hoelscher 1998; Lowenthal 1998; Till 2005). Of particular relevance for this project, Deborah Martin (2003) has argued that place provides an important means of mobilising identity and collective action in the context of neighbourhood activism. Similarly, Sara González and Geoff Vigar (2008, 64) suggest that 'a sense of place, memory and heritage can be crucial ingredients in mobilising citizens to engage in governance processes and that this can enable a challenge to be mounted to a dominant urban regime'. Within the arena of cultural activism, Faye Ginsburg (1997) develops critical connections between place, activism and creativity in her study of indigenous groups in Australia. Cultural activism was deployed not only as a means of sustaining aboriginal culture, but also as a way to make particular claims to self-representation, governance, cultural autonomy and land; claims which take on 'vital significance in the construction of indigenous identity' (Ginsburg 1997, 121). While Ginsburg's work focuses on the role of place and identity in shaping cultural autonomy, our study analyses cultural activism as a form of urban place-making in which the sense of place provides the context for a variety of new forms of political protest and social activism (see also Long 2013 for the role of sense of place in local activism).

Reflecting on the role of place in the study of social movements and activism, we are cognisant of efforts within the field of geography to connect the study of local sites to the networked and transnational relationships that make up social activism

(Cumbers, Routledge, and Nativel 2008; Featherstone 2008). These perspectives have expanded understandings of the spatiality of contentious politics (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008). They have led to efforts to theorise new geographies of politics that capture the complexity and imaginative reach of social movements while avoiding the reification or privileging of any one scalar concept (Osterweil 2005), or indeed, the concept of scale more generally (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005). At the same time, geographers are re-introducing and re-incorporating place into the lexicon of networked geographies (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy 2011; Cummins-Russell and Rantisi 2012), arguing that the daily practice of activists—in place—remains a critical concern in the study of social activism (Amin 2005; Nicholls 2008; Bader and Scharenberg 2009). The push for permanence and a desire to control space locally can outweigh considerations for ‘extra-local politics’ (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 484).

Informed by these debates over the relationship and importance of place to activism our research considers two grassroots activist movements based in Stokes Croft, Bristol: the *People’s Republic of Stokes Croft* and the *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* campaign. These initiatives have each sought to make claims to space, alter the physical landscape of the city, challenge state authority and critique prevailing modes of urban development. Moreover, the use of creative practice has been a *leitmotif* and organising framework through which both groups have, in various ways, sought to express alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. Some indicative examples include: transformations of public space through murals and graffiti; carnivalesque protests; urban knitting; guerilla signage (e.g. fake National Trust markers); mock town twinning; and the creation of a ‘people’s republic’ within the jurisdiction of a British city. However, while these activities are commonly understood as being in opposition to city development schemes, the cases also demonstrate a

somewhat uncomfortable relationship between ‘socially responsible forms of creativity’ (Catterall 2011, 286) and processes of gentrification. Moreover, following Paul Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill (2010, 479), we recognise that the process of ‘activist-becoming-activist’ can be fraught with the struggle between an ideology of resistance on the one hand, and the daily practice of pragmatism and the need to ‘do *something*’ on the other. Nevertheless, if ‘social movements need communities’ (DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2010, 22) our research indicates important openings for cultural activism to serve as a means for building place-based identities through the articulation of (multiple) shared visions of social change.

This paper first describes our methods and Stokes Croft’s status within the wider political context of the city of Bristol. Then we present our findings in two sections. The first is focused on the *People’s Republic of Stokes Croft* and the second is focused on the *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* campaign. We examine how these cases demonstrate how a politics of collectivity and autonomy is mobilised through cultural activism. We argue that the forms of collectivity that appear in Stokes Croft are grounded in transformative practices of place-making; the creation of ‘Stokes Croft’ as a ‘place’ has helped form and sustain diverse practices of cultural activism. Our paper concludes by identifying the wider relevance of these findings and discussing prospects for future work on cultural activism and place.

### The politics of place-making in Stokes Croft, Bristol

This paper draws on research conducted between January 2011 and March 2012 including analysis of newspapers, policy documents and web-casts of public meetings and other relevant events. Fifteen interviews were carried out with activists, artists and designers working and living in the area as

well as planning staff and political representatives from the city council. Interviewees were asked to speak about their role and nature of involvement in local activism and to reflect on a series of themes such as relations between culture and activism; activism, participation and democracy; interpretations of the boundaries of Stokes Croft as a neighbourhood and a community; and how their work related to ongoing economic and social change in the area. Regarding the composition of our interview sample, all but one of the activists with whom we spoke were white, and many (though not all) identified educational or travel experiences congruent with a middle-class background. In addition to these data, each of the four authors also undertook participant observation at three to six community events in Stokes Croft during the study period as part of this project. These included attendance at protest events, a community 'visioning' event, a field tour with activists and city council representatives, attending activist organisational meetings and informal discussions.

*Stokes Croft: dereliction, gentrification and reinvention*

Stokes Croft as an area is marked by dynamics of dereliction, uneven forces of gentrification and creative practices of reinvention. Although its boundaries have been the object of recent activism, Stokes Croft is commonly thought of as the 300-metre section of the A38 that connects Gloucester Road, a vibrant high street to the north with a significant concentration of independent shops, with Broadmead, a large commercial retail redevelopment to the south in the city centre. It is flanked by a large post-war housing estate to the west and a historically Afro-Caribbean neighbourhood (St Pauls) to the east. Activists have countered the city council's designated Conservation Area boundaries for Stokes Croft with a 'cultural' definition that includes adjacent council

flats, the subterranean open space in the centre of a roundabout, and bars and shops on the northern end of the high street corridor that runs through Stokes Croft. Pamela Karantonis (2008, 6) suggests that in the context of the complex interaction of these discursive, economic and creative forces, 'Stokes Croft occupies a liminal place being both a public gallery and a site of real social dereliction'. During the 19th and early 20th centuries Stokes Croft was a vibrant commercial area with a diverse mix of residences, shopping and factories. In the wake of post-war urban redevelopment, the growth of suburbs and deindustrialisation, however, the area became associated with the effects of urban decline.

In 1977, for instance, Bristol City Council planners described Stokes Croft as part of a 'ring of dereliction' that encircled the commercial centre of the city (Punter 1991, 345). Such official characterisations of dereliction have continued to appear in planning documents, as, for example, in a recent Bristol City Council summary of the 'Reinforcing Eastside Regeneration' which described Stokes Croft and neighbouring St Pauls as an 'inward looking and isolated area with a degraded public environment' (Bristol Objective 2, 2007). Similarly, the *Stokes Croft Gateway Enhancement Project, Action Plan* noted the particularly high levels of deprivation in Stokes Croft and explained its depressed property market in terms of the area's negative reputation, visual appearance, the poor state of available properties and threat of theft, among other reasons (Buchanan and Partners 2006, 7). These negative representations of the area are echoed in the popular press, as exemplified by comments noting that Stokes Croft 'had become a cluster of massage parlours and abandoned beautiful buildings, home to Bristol's cider drinkers and heroin addicts' (*Prospect Magazine*, 2010).

In the face of such persistent narratives of dereliction and deprivation, the emergence of a highly organised and successful cultural scene in Stokes Croft has not yet resulted in

comprehensive gentrification. Stokes Croft has not been affected by the development-led ‘urban renaissance’ present in other parts of Bristol over the last decade. Henry Shaftoe and Andrew Tallon (2009, 123), in their account of patterns of renaissance and gentrification in the city, express what could be considered popular frustration in suggesting that ‘if anywhere in central Bristol needed a “renaissance” it would be Stokes Croft given that thousands of people pass along it every day, yet the city council has singularly failed to achieve any substantial improvements’. The high street corridor running through the centre of Stokes Croft, which connects two urban residential neighbourhoods (St Pauls and Cotham) and links the suburban areas of northern Bristol to Bristol City Centre, has never been considered as a prospective site for the massive ‘property-development partnerships’ recently pursued by the Bristol City Council (Clement 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Although there has been no large-scale development of the neighbourhood there is evidence of uneven gentrification, in which gentrification is as much bound to highly localised dynamics of capital and politics as it is motivated by far-reaching, even global, sources of speculative investment. In instances of uneven gentrification changes in property development across a neighbourhood may result in mixed or uncertain transformations to both property values and the lived-experience of a neighbourhood (including the possibility for broad resistance to certain forms of development). Evidence of potential gentrification in the neighbourhood includes the development of a large residential block on the northern edge of Stokes Croft,<sup>2</sup> a wave of new café and restaurant openings since 2005, the opening of the Jamaica Street Art Studios and residential redevelopment taking place on the western edge of St Pauls, which also includes yoga and art studios.

The role of art or cultural practices in these property-based transformations does not neatly follow recent examples of art-led

urban regeneration in the UK. These changes in Stokes Croft are neither formally directed by a local authority as in the regeneration of Hoxton<sup>3</sup> (Hamnett and Whitelegg 2007; Pratt 2009), which involved the development of a cultural quarter complete with Use Class Orders (which enables a change in the use of a property without planning permission)<sup>4</sup> to facilitate changes in market demand, nor have artists been formally solicited by a local authority to complement a large-scale redevelopment project with ‘public art’ as in the case of Glasgow’s Gorbals redevelopment (Warwick 2006). Rather, the coalescence of artists, activists, entrepreneurs and those who support Stokes Croft’s street life in all its forms is mostly the consequence of a locally directed and contingent vision of Stokes Croft’s many futures.

While we recognise the long-established relationship between ‘cultural creatives’ and processes of gentrification, stretching all the way back to Sharon Zukin’s seminal work on New York in the late 1970s (Zukin 1982; Lees 2000; Harvey 2002; Novy and Colomb 2012), our objective is not to present Stokes Croft as an example of gentrification or counter-gentrification. Instead, we maintain the tension between urban place-making, identity formation and the cultivation of an aesthetic politics that resists urban developmentalism and the ways that the infusion of artistic energy into a place can increase its desirability to capital. In this case, the unevenness of gentrification results in contradictory effects (of resistance and recuperation) through which cultural activism must be understood.

For Karantonis (2008, 3) it is the ‘microcosm of urban decline, environmental and ecological degradation’ found in Stokes Croft that serves as ‘the predicate for radical reinvention’. Some of the effects of this reinvention appear in the pubs, cafés, restaurants, as well as the vibrant film and music culture that are all important elements of Stokes Croft’s contemporary scene. However, a critical mass also exists in the individuals

and organisations in Stokes Croft that have demonstrated a concerted and enthusiastic bottom-up interest in regeneration around themes of culture, public art and community resources. These community resources include public, non-profit or charitable sector organisations providing emergency and long-term accommodation for homeless people, free legal aid and specialist medical care for drug and alcohol users. In promoting an alternative ‘cultural’ identity for the area, cultural activists in Stokes Croft have countered representations of the area’s ‘dereliction’ with celebrations of the area’s history and extensive murals, which ‘bring colour and lightness’—as one interviewee put it—to residents who may be ‘in a dark place’.

Moreover, the definition and assertion of community through place-making plays a critical role in this reinvention. In addition to the campaigns to reclaim Stokes Croft discussed below, the neighbourhood is the site of numerous efforts to reclaim or repurpose unused buildings and public spaces. Highly active and well-organised networks of squatters continuously repurpose buildings in the neighbourhood. To provide just two examples, in 2011 a group of squatters opened a ‘free shop’ out of a squat in a building owned by developers headquartered in Hong Kong, and the now infamous initial attempt to arrest a member of the Telepathic Heights squat located across from the newly opened Tesco Express provided the catalyst for the spring 2011 confrontations. Clement (2012, 84) has emphasised the importance of such squats ‘adding to the mood of autonomy and anti-authoritarianism’ to the neighbourhood’s reinvention from ‘a semi-derelict area to a thriving “alternative” zone’.

Strategies of place-making can also be seen in the development-led repurposing of commercial offices in the Hamilton House office building, a multi-storey office block located on Stokes Croft’s high street, into activist/community group office space by Coexist (a charity which runs the facility as a community hub) in conjunction with property developers Connolly and Callaghan

(Larner and Moreton 2012). Similarly, the artists’ group ArtSpace LifeSpace, through negotiation with the city council, transforms unused sites often unsuitable for regeneration into temporary studio spaces for artists and performance groups, as well as organising large-scale street art (Shaftoe and Tallon 2009). There are also the formal efforts by Stokes Croft-based design firm Eudaimon through a city council public art initiative to design a sustainable community street corner, entitled ‘Reimagining 50 Stokes Croft’. In each of these cases, the cultural and conceptual work being done to reinvent Stokes Croft involved developing new techniques of place-making.

Such place-based practices require as much organisation as ingenuity and care for previous artistic/activist traditions. It may also be said that they require a certain level of professionalisation. One interviewee recounted a squat in a former Volkswagen garage in Stokes Croft in the 1980s. The squat ran a bar and café that held benefit gigs for squatters and the homeless, all outside formal planning or city regulatory processes. The activist, now involved in national level community work, contrasted these early efforts with the ‘professionalism’ characteristic of the current activism in Stokes Croft. This recognition is consistent with Chatterton and Pickerill (2010, 487) who have noted a ‘creeping professionalisation’ within activist practice which, while enabling more effective navigation of complex governance landscapes, raises concerns of co-optation by both the state and media and threatens to steer activist agendas towards entrepreneurial, neo-liberal modes of operation. This characteristic of urban activism, however, can also be considered as one sign of uneven gentrification. Within a gentrifying neighbourhood, pockets of professionalism among anti-development residents or activists can emerge culminating in resistance capable of engaging with the legal and economic logics of local authorities (and the business interests they often serve). In the case of

Stokes Croft such professionalism informs much of the cultural activism that defines the neighbourhood's vibrancy.

In the next section we investigate the place-making potential of recent cultural activism in Stokes Croft. Towards this objective, we present two grassroots activist movements: the *People's Republic of Stokes Croft* and the *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* campaign. While these initiatives represent only a sample of the activism and creative practice in the area, they are arguably the most visible and are useful here as they provide critical insights into the ways activists have used creative practice to develop a shared place identity and create space for activism in Stokes Croft.

### *A new republic*

Of the wide variety of activism and varied types of cultural production that exist in Stokes Croft, perhaps the group with the largest investment in the cultivation of a place identity is the People's Republic of Stokes Croft (PRSC). A community interest company established as a social enterprise in 2007, the group thrives mostly, though not exclusively, from the effort of a single individual who coordinates artists, volunteers and PRSC members to engage in various types of work and activism within Stokes Croft. At the heart of these efforts is dissatisfaction with council-led mechanisms of public engagement, planning and regeneration and an expression of Stokes Croft as a forgotten, neglected space of the city—a representation that has been reframed as a local cultural advantage:

*'It is precisely because Stokes Croft has been neglected, that people of all backgrounds and circumstance have learned to co-exist in an enclave of tolerance that few from outside this magical area can begin to understand.'* (PRSC 2009)

What is remarkable about the PRSC's influence on the recent transformations to Stokes

Croft is the aesthetic form of its activism. As described above, the aesthetic form of the PRSC's activism includes its recognisable use of large-scale murals, graffiti and public art. It also involves a highly stylised campaign designed to generate a place identity for Stokes Croft, challenging the broader perception of the neighbourhood. The PRSC website includes a list of 124 sites to be painted dating back to 2007 ranging from a *strange metal box* and a *canine faeces bin* to the Grade II\* listed Perry's Carriage Works building and neighbouring Westmoreland House, which towers over the neighbourhood, both of which are described as 'massive canvases'. Across this outdoor gallery, murals are often, but not always, painted with the approval of owners and generally contribute to distinct visual narratives that develop through the corridor. The most visible narrative that emerges from these murals reflects an engagement with the theme of injustice, broadly conceived. This includes anti-consumption messages (one conspicuously located at a pedestrian entrance to the city centre shopping mall, see Figure 1), a two-storey quote attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr. ('Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'), Banksy's famous 'Mild, Mild, West' mural, depicting a teddy bear throwing a Molotov cocktail at three police in riot gear, and a call to boycott the Tesco supermarket chain (representing Stokes Croft's own locally experienced injustice).

Another recognisable theme is framed by the PRSC's particular claim to local history. In part, this is expressed by efforts to rejuvenate the public memory of Edward William Godwin, who serves as the area's historical figure of design and innovation. Godwin was a Bristol-born architect-designer who built a number of important structures across England in the mid-late 1800s, including the Carriage Works, a large, listed building that dominates the frontage along Stokes Croft's high street corridor. Echoes of Godwin's designs (e.g. a fabric lattice) can be found painted on various structures



**Figure 1** Anti-consumption mural at a pedestrian entrance to the Broadmead shopping mall, Bristol (Photo: Michael Buser)

and his likeness makes up the centrepiece of a thematic mural on the Carriage Works building (see Figure 2).

The Carriage Works and neighbouring Westmoreland House have been empty for several years. Yet, they are commonly recognised as key sites in the future development of the neighbourhood. Through the Godwin mural, the PRSC has made a historically based claim to the structure as a part of the community's heritage and, hence, essential to its future.

Finally here, much of the public art in Stokes Croft also calls upon the whimsical and playful tactics often associated with cultural activism and notions of *détournement* (Debord 1995; see also Ford 2005). For instance, the PRSC has painted a series of *trompe l'œil* shop fronts in empty structures including Mrs Lovett's Meat Pies (in a sly reference to the murderously entrepreneurial

baker immortalised in the dark, urban musical *Sweeney Todd*) and a mock apothecary specialising in a range of illegal substances. In another example, a local artist and PRSC member established the Stokes Croft Museum, billeted as a 'fake memory arcade' where the artwork is simultaneously a celebration of the local and an expression of value and meaning. She explained:

*'... really the threat for this place [Stokes Croft] is development ... we're going to make it beautiful, then they're going to want it ... So I thought what we need is the council to start coming here and taking us seriously as a place worthy of protection as a cultural quarter ... taken seriously as a place of value and interest.... They have things of value in a museum and they understand that word as having significance and creating a sense of significance about whatever the fuck's in there.'* (Interview with activist)



**Figure 2** E. W. Godwin mural (Photo: Michael Buser)

Within this celebration of the intimate experiences of daily life in Stokes Croft, one can find the work of local artists as well as an exhibit that featured the poetry (and ashes) of a street poet who lived in a nearby homeless shelter and died of a drug overdose. Here, what is valuable speaks directly to the creation of a place identity of creativity where local memory includes those excluded from conventional historical accounts of the area as well as more commonly recognised forms of urban memory-making. At the same time, the claim that ‘we’re going to make it beautiful, then they’re going to want it’ also suggests the awareness (and distress) on the part of artists themselves about their role in changes to local space they might not foresee or choose.

In much of their work, the PRSC’s subversion of mainstream cultural production connects to a range of practices that could loosely be described as insurgent planning. The PRSC has created a mundane aesthetics

of local governance, appropriating many of the modern techniques of crafting local authority. It has done so in a manner that demonstrates the ubiquity of these techniques in the everyday construction of the abstract identity of local authorities. For example, at a prominent junction at the southern edge of the neighbourhood, in 2010 the PRSC arranged signs identical to Bristol City Council signage (including the council logo), declaring Stokes Croft ‘Britain in Bloom Winner 2012, 2013 and 2015’ and stating that Stokes Croft was ‘twinned with St Ives in Cornwall, Montmartre in France and Wan Chai in Hong Kong’ (see Figure 3). While this guerrilla signage is consistent with the playful and at times illegal or unsanctioned nature of the PRSC’s activities, it is also representative of a more ambitious effort to characterise Stokes Croft as a globally significant cultural destination, to create ‘a Stokes Croftian artistic tradition—a Bristolian St. Ives’ (*The Guardian*, May 26, 2011). The effect is to



**Figure 3** Guerrilla signage (Photo: Michael Buser)

entirely invert the perception of local authority. Whereas, Stokes Croft previously was entirely lacking in any kind of 'pride of place' council signage, the PRSC's guerrilla sign-making creates the perception of a neighbourhood thoroughly integrated into Bristol's official identity.

Taking on other aspects of insurgent planning, the PRSC has regularly carried out what it refers to as 'public works' (including painting neighbourhood refuse bins, street and sidewalk sweeping, clean-ups after the two disturbances and providing 'public services' to the homeless). David Goldblatt (2011) has termed these projects 'random acts of beautification'. The PRSC further supported an archaeological dig on 'Turbo Island', a tiny patch of grass in the middle of the intersection at the centre of Stokes Croft decorated with miniature Easter Island *moai* statues. The dig was carried out by local archaeologists and included participation by homeless members of the community

(Kiddey and Schofield 2011; Schofield, Kiddey, and Lashua 2012). The PRSC has also been involved in recent public outreach efforts surrounding proposed redevelopment of the Carriage Works and Westmoreland House and developed a display of local views and concerns in their exhibition space.

These various techniques of signage, graffiti, public art, mapping, regeneration, curation, archaeology and memory-making create a sense of the collectivity of Stokes Croft through an aesthetic of local governance. Drawing on well-known modes of urban iconography (e.g. rewards for competitive urban improvement schemes, the announcement of town-twinning programmes) but subverting them to suggest an alternative, neighbourhood-level understanding, the PRSC has developed a playful aesthetics of 'seeing like a city'.<sup>5</sup>

The PRSC's *trompe l'œil* claims to local authority, however, raise questions of how and by whom this area is represented. In

other words, if Stokes Croft is an urban, outdoor gallery, who curates it? To Bristol designer Tristan Manco (2004) the term 'street logos' refers to the branding quality of street art, but we can also rework his phrase to include its meaning in Greek as well: *logos* as 'an account', as elaborated by Rancière. Developing this notion of an account, Rancière (1999) argues that a politics of a polity is always really about those who count (who can provide an account of the polity) and those whose voices do not count. Graffiti produces an artistic style (a brand or logos) but it also produces an account of the street that is constantly being covered over, crossed out, ignored or complained about. In the case of Stokes Croft, these graffiti-based accounts are taken quite seriously.

Who speaks—and does not speak—for Stokes Croft? The PRSC's critique of the city council's abandonment of Stokes Croft frames their account of the area through vibrant murals; whimsical, insurgent signage and other forms of (sometimes politically motivated) artistic expression, as discussed above. Yet it is important to note that this vision for Stokes Croft is both itself an amalgam of multiple views (as an arts *collective*), as well as being but one possible vision of the area, which may not be shared by all members of the community. While being home to a vibrant arts scene, activism in Stokes Croft appears detached from the political dynamics in the Afro-Caribbean community of neighbouring St Pauls. In addition, it is not apparent that the Somali businesses on the southern edge of Stokes Croft are actively involved with cultural activists in the neighbourhood. Stokes Croft's council estates are home to asylum seekers and other residents who may be experiencing some degree of social or economic exclusion, and it is not clear how this group relates to local projects of cultural activism. Like the 'No Tesco in Stokes Croft' campaign (discussed below), the PRSC and its members have been successful in expressing a particular vision of the area and in having their voices heard. Moreover, while the group is

representative of a diversity of interests, many members also draw on a range of social privileges. As such, in the formation of its 'people's republic', the PRSC faces the ongoing challenge of representing the area's more socially disenfranchised residents.

### *The Battle of Stokes Croft—The No Tesco Campaign*

In the spring of 2011 Stokes Croft became known nationally for activism relating to a development application for a supermarket along Cheltenham Road. The application, approved in November 2009, did not draw much attention until it became known that the shop would be a Tesco Express. Many residents found this objectionable due to Tesco's dominance within the British grocery market and the widespread perception that supermarkets of this kind price out independent shops (there were already 14 Tesco stores within a two-mile radius of the proposed site). The campaign was also concerned about the market-led development that the Tesco store represented and the potential gentrifying effects of the store on the area.

Resistance to the supermarket brought together a diverse set of groups and individuals who found unity in an expression of Stokes Croft as a coherent, quasi-autonomous, alternative community. In arguments against the Tesco Express, activists cited the 'independent local businesses' and Stokes Croft's 'alternative culture' as defining features that stood in opposition to the 'ubiquitous supermarket chain' (Chalkley 2010). Another activist echoed these thoughts:

*'... Stokes Croft kind of epitomises the antithesis of supermarkets and the whole chain store homogenisation kind of model, it has built its identity on being nonconformist, being all about independence, all about creativity, all about the richness of life ...'*  
(Interview with activist)

The group initiated a campaign to resist the development, putting up posters, calling

community meetings and creating a wide network of support within (and beyond) Stokes Croft. The early campaign focused on mobilising the community to demonstrate local opinion:

‘... [we had] a naïve belief that ... if we can prove that the majority of the community don’t want it then they can’t let us have it ...’  
(Interview with activist)

The group engaged in the local development review processes, wrote letters to the city council, attended council meetings, and held rallies and protests debating and decrying the merit of the supermarket and the application. The activism involved a number of demonstrations including a ‘human delivery lorry’ and protester occupation (i.e. squatting) of the site, including one individual cementing himself to the structure. However, there was a widespread opinion amongst the activists that the council was broadly unsympathetic to neighbourhood concerns and efforts to reverse the decision to grant planning permission to Tesco were ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>6</sup>

In the days before the store was set to open, two events took place that transformed the public profile of the *No Tesco* movement. The first, on 21 April, occurred after a small midday peaceful protest in front of the Tesco Express. Later that evening, police efforts to arrest a member of the Telepathic Heights squat across from the Tesco site, suspected by police of building petrol bombs, drew a crowd of roughly 300 onlookers. This gathering developed into an impromptu protest against the heavy police presence, consisting of 160 officers and a fleet of police vans from neighbouring areas, including Welsh forces, and was fuelled by rumours that the police were there to evict the squatters. However, over the course of four hours, tensions between the crowd and the police escalated to a full-blown confrontation, resulting in damage to property (including damage to the Tesco store) and injuries sustained by both protesters and

police. A second gathering on 28 April, a ‘party’ organised to protest the police actions of the week before, also resulted in a confrontation with the police and a night of violence (*Bristol Evening Post*, April 29, 2011). The following morning, after a long standoff with the remaining squatters in Telepathic Heights, the police arrested and evicted all the squatters. However, it bears emphasising that the *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* group has consistently petitioned for peaceful protests only, and media portrayals uniformly represent the violence (both that perpetrated by protesters and that perpetrated by police) as being the result of a few individuals.<sup>7</sup>

A cynical observer might cast this campaign as an example of something akin to ‘bohemian NIMBYism’ (in other words, it is fine to have Tesco in other neighbourhoods, but not in Stokes Croft). This interpretation could further be said, somewhat incongruously, to evoke a desire for preservation and maintenance of a localised status quo that is more commonly associated with a conservative political orientation. As Begüm Özden Firat and Aylin Kuryel (2010, 19) argue, ‘activist practices are situated at the juncture of power, desire, identity, political practice, political agency, and the dialectic of subversion and recuperation’. This dialectic describes how activists might aim for a certain political end or ethos, but in fact such activism might be complicit with practices contrary to such aims. In many ways the dialectic of subversion and recuperation poses the fundamental problem of whether such activism is truly political; in other words, does it provide the grounds for radical action? Attempts to resolve this problem (either in the affirmation of cultural practices as political practices or in efforts to trace the complicity of current activism with gentrification or neo-liberal forms of governance) tend to look for a definition of radical politics from which to assess cultural activism. Yet cultural activism does not necessarily guarantee radical political practice. Rather, it is caught within the

contradictions that complicate all urban politics: dynamics of neo-liberal governance (Newman 2010), forces of gentrification and the question of (anti-)capitalism.

We want to underscore that our understanding of cultural activism acknowledges the political indeterminacy of cultural practice itself. This is the case because cultural activism involves forms of social critique grounded in artistic and organisational sensibilities that challenge *and* are challenged by old definitions of radical politics. These activist forms are novel, and yet they are also part of established traditions of political art and debates over the political potential of art itself (Noyes Platt 2010). These debates over art and its relation to politics and the political are ongoing and perpetually unsettled. What is important for us is how conditions for radical activism and social movements are framed in terms of their relation to the places activist practices inhabit. In Stokes Croft, this includes the dynamics of how resistance against Tesco, the city council planning process, police use of force and gentrification, reinforce prevailing conceptions of Stoke Croft's place identity as a 'space outside' city development aims and planning processes. The passion with which activists and others sought to 'defend' a (special, beloved) space against 'outside forces' can be read as a testament to the power of understandings of 'Stokes Croft' as a space of alterity, unity and cohesion.

Alongside this, a pervasive narrative found throughout our informal discussions and interviews with *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* activists was that their motivations were always tied to larger goals. In seeking to build place identity in Stokes Croft there is a recognisable desire to link the local campaign to environmental concerns over peak oil, industrial agri-business and global capitalism/consumerism that, it is argued, disconnects people from nature. As such, the *No Tesco* campaign resonates with what Michal Osterweil (2005, 26) describes as the 'place-based' politics of global justice movements, in which activists invent

'new political forms and objectives that are based on a fundamental critique of representative democracy and include a greater attention to many aspects—such as culture, subjectivity, process—that might be considered micro-political and that can quite literally only be addressed in-place'.

Once the *No Tesco* efforts moved to the formal political spaces of city council meetings, protesters expressed frustration about being 'forced to fight this campaign on narrow grounds' of the planning system (referring to debates about noise levels, architectural design, deliveries, refrigeration units and the like). They further articulated their desire to claim a right to remake the city in a way that is suggestive of Lefebvre's (1991) notion of lived space.

Creative practice was woven through the *No Tesco* campaign (and its place-making aspects) at every stage. As part of their endeavours activists took a 500-person survey of neighbourhood residents, from which they found that 93% did not want a Tesco in Stokes Croft. The power of the survey lies not in its strength as method of social scientific research, but rather as the basis for a provocative, political piece of public art intended both to shape local action and mark local space. Its message—the notion of consensus based on a particular place identity—was then prominently displayed on a massive anti-Tesco mural along Cheltenham Road in a style consistent with other murals in the area (see Figure 4). The mural's initial intent was to serve as an appeal to participate in an upcoming planning meeting. It has remained as a stunning visual marker of place identity, reinforcing an understanding of Stokes Croft as a space of resistance. This mural can be described as an example of what Dickens (2010) refers to as 'post-graffiti'. The use of 'post-graffiti' further reinforces a number of critical messages regarding social justice, protest, community participation and the right to engage in the production of local space. In this case, the visual 'reading' of the murals along Stokes Croft effectively connects



**Figure 4** No Tesco mural (Photo: Michael Buser)

a number of different artistic and activist impulses as being part of a whole. More specifically, it materially connects the anti-Tesco campaign to Stokes Croft as a space of resistance to market-led urban development.

In addition to featuring elements of occupation (cementing oneself to a structure), other protests in the *No Tesco* campaign throughout 2010 demonstrated the links between creative practice and place-based activism through homemade placards and costuming (see Figure 5).<sup>8</sup> Examples included calling upon elements of performance and the theatrical—such as protesters masquerading as vampires holding signs with slogans such as ‘Tesco sucks the life out of the community’. Moreover, at least two of the 2010 protests (the year before the Tesco opened) included the participation of Bristol-based ‘Ambling Band’, whose performers all dress in hot pink, feather boas and/or pirate attire (see Figure 6). As with protesters dressed as vampires, the Ambling Band invokes a visual

repertoire of easily recognised symbols of transgression (e.g. men in hot pink tights).

In fact, much of the protest and activism related to the *No Tesco* campaign was marked by a spirit of the carnivalesque. For example, Bristol East Labour Member of Parliament Kerry McCarthy, who witnessed the 21 April riots, described the scene before it ‘got nasty’ thus: ‘In many ways there was a typical Stokes Croft atmosphere. There was someone playing a saxophone on a bus shelter, someone playing the bongos and people walking around with lampshades on their heads’ (*Bristol Evening Post*, April 23, 2011). While these activities are not, in point of fact, representative of the daily life in Stokes Croft, the ‘hyper-performative’ atmosphere of the protests resonate with broader understandings of the neighbourhood within the local imaginary.

In a final attempt to underscore the gentler, more light-hearted tone that most of the movement had taken over the last two



Figure 5 No Tesco protest group. The building at the centre would later become a Tesco Express (Photo: Mark Simmons)



Figure 6 The Ambling Band supporting a No Tesco in Stokes Croft protest (Photo: Mark Simmons)

years, *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* hosted an orderly but characteristically playful ‘tea party’—a time-honoured symbol of British civility—in front of the (now open for business) Tesco Express. Finally, (and doubtless uncomfortable for some) artistry, creative practice and place-based activism were even woven into how the violent aspect of the protest came to be represented, as a Banksy image of a petrol bomb with the word and logo for ‘Tesco’ on its side found its way to the cover of the *Guardian Magazine* in the weeks following the riots, in a direct reference to events in Stokes Croft. We suggest that this campaign proceeded as it did, drawing so centrally on whimsy, artistry and the carnivalesque, because it occurred in Stokes Croft, immersed in the creative energy of an inter-connected network of activists for whom creative practice has come to serve as a lingua franca. And in turn we suggest that this kind of activity recursively shapes the place identity of Stokes Croft as a space of (creatively infused) social resistance. We now turn to the broader theoretical significance of these cases before concluding.

### Cultural activism and place identities

As an area of critical inquiry, cultural activism presents interesting challenges to existing understandings of place-making and place identities. On the one hand, these efforts often display quite complex and disperse (at times ‘virtual’) networked relationships between groups interested in global resistance movements. On the other hand, activism can be intimately place-focused, occurring almost at the micro-scale of social life. The situated nature of activism ensures that the definitions of collectivity, autonomy and cultural practice at work in activist practices will involve some relation to place, whether in the conceptualisation of the public nature of performance, the place of the event of solidarity (particularly in the periodic protests of the anti-globalisation movement), a particular site (such as a

centre, squat, bookshop, farm or commune) that serves as one basis for defining an autonomous collective, or (as in the case of Stokes Croft) as a spatial referent/place in which a wide variety of political visions are invested.

Much of the literature on cultural activism engages with place and place-making within the confines of temporary incursions or moments. This includes the itinerant character of summit protests (Noyes Platt 2010), as well as the varied disruptive, temporary breaks such as the liberation of roads into utopian street parties through the RTS movement (Scholl 2010) or the transformation of civic sites into theatre spaces (Changfoot 2006). However, cultural activism need not be ephemeral. As our research suggests, activities can also be mobilised toward the ends of place-making and the formation of place identities in potentially more durable ways. While the efforts we have highlighted are relatively recent, there is evidence that activists’ efforts have helped galvanise more formal political support. We argue that this is an important, yet often overlooked aspect of scholarly work on cultural activism.

For example, Bristol’s first directly elected mayor, George Ferguson, is an architect-philanthropist and developer with ties to Stokes Croft and other arts endeavours in the city. Prior to his election as mayor, Ferguson was a vocal critic of plans to combine the construction of a city football ground with a large supermarket development in South Bristol. As mayor, he has echoed the core arguments of the *No Tesco in Stokes Croft* campaign and is seeking stronger powers for local government to limit the development of major supermarket outlets in the city. Quoted in a national newspaper, he decried the loss of independent retailers on the high street and suggested that supermarket chains ‘are more responsible for the blanding of our cities than any other single business’ (*The Guardian*, January 21, 2013). In this sense, one could argue that through the temporary appropriation and politicisation of the Tesco Express, activists created a type of ‘freezone’ (Corjin and Groth 2011) where,

while they failed to stop the development, they successfully challenged dominant perspectives on urban meaning and regulation.

In our research in Stokes Croft, we have found that diverse forms of cultural activism can generate a politics or vision of place-based collectivity. However, while this collectivity takes the form of a single collective referent (in the place of Stokes Croft), it should not be interpreted as a singularly defined notion of place. More precisely, there are heterogeneous visions of Stokes Croft, all of which invest it with a politics of collectivity. The place-making that has recently emerged in Stokes Croft, whether in the form of a 'people's republic' or in the depictions of the nature of Stokes Croft in the *No Tesco* campaign, represents attempts to invest the space of the neighbourhood with a sense of collectivity that can be represented, defended and valorised. In this paper, rather than focus on the identity of activists who draw on cultural resources or media in political practice, or who self-identify as a collective, we are interested instead in how different practices of cultural activism come together and are generated out of spaces that nurture creative practice. Our interest, therefore, is specifically in *place*, and in theorising the geographic elements of different practices of cultural activism as they are situated in specific urban spaces.

Our research also suggests that the focus on cultural activism as 'the dominant tendency of the global justice movement' (Grindon 2010, 21) can be fruitfully expanded by attending to the dynamics of other settings in which cultural activism takes place. We further propose that it is also critical to understand the practical relations between the global justice movement and urban re-configurations of social-spatial relations. Our work on Stokes Croft suggests that cultural activism is not limited to the periodic timing of the global justice movement but may in fact be linked to the novelty of activist aesthetics that enable the global justice movement to develop its opposition to global capital. In other words, it is

the radical and experimental nature of protest aesthetics that potentially links activists in global and local protests.

It might be said that the emphasis on place in this approach runs the risk of being read as a fetishisation of space and place. Yet we suggest that our analysis of the generative aspects of space is not an attempt to fix the identity of a place, or to suggest that one particular scale of political practice is more or less creative, or more or less important, for understanding forms of cultural activism at work in Stokes Croft. In this analysis, place-based activism is not a retreat to the local, in which the local delimits the imagination of political possibilities or action (Amin 2008). Instead such activism involves a nexus of varied commitments to place and activism. The way a place is claimed to represent a particular vision of politics may actually entail a complex relationship between place and politics: a commitment to a neighbourhood as an experiment in sustainability, a nurturing environment for cultural activism, or a place with a popular, radical history. Place as a collective political referent is relational, rather than essential, in nature.

Finally, different understandings of collectivity or different modes of collective political practice may have a politics of their own around place that defies easy categorisation into 'scales' such as local/global, for example. The politics of place-making in Stokes Croft does not indicate a single cause or social movement, but rather implies how co-location and the development of a shared referent and place identity have benefits and generate further transformations. Most markedly for the purposes of this paper, these transformations have been successful in extending the ability of activists in the area to articulate and generate visions of Stokes Croft as an autonomous space.

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of the activities of two activist groups based in Stokes Croft,

Bristol, we have argued that the blending of creative practice with social/political activism can serve as an important means of creating enthusiasm for particular urban sites as spaces of resistance. Thus, we add to the existing literature by highlighting the ways in which cultural activism can infuse place and urban space with meaning. We further suggest that a shared interest in this mode of protest can serve as a heretofore unacknowledged link between forms of protest directed at achieving different ends.

Our discussion of cultural activism and place-making in Stokes Croft further demonstrates the necessity of understanding the way place can play a critical role in the fostering of political collectivity. To take place and place-making seriously in the practices of cultural activists requires an analysis of how neighbourhoods, streets, sites, structures (and so on) may serve as flexible referents for radical politics, cultural sensibilities or the potentials of cultural activism more generally. As such, it is just as important to understand the role place can play in the constitution of collectivity as it is to explore the subjective and political dynamics of collectivity.

Finally, we suggest that at the same time as this study has revealed important findings it has also uncovered areas that deserve further inquiry. These themes include the potential of cultural activism as a means of creating certain kinds of 'affective atmospheres' in particular places (Anderson 2009; Buser 2013). Though beyond the scope of this paper, we hope that these and other themes aimed at increasing our understanding of cultural activism as a form of social practice are taken up by interested scholars.

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### Notes

- 1 For a detailed description of recent development projects in Bristol, see also Tallon 2007, 79–83. An account of the political economy of such partnerships in Bristol also appears in Bassett 1996.
- 2 Clement (2012) argues that this building was partially responsible for the increased local demand for a grocery store of the kind that Tesco opened in Stokes Croft in 2011.
- 3 Hoxton was often cited in our interviews as a comparison to understand how Stokes Croft is currently developing, even in light of the fact that Bristol City Council has had very little involvement in supporting artistic initiatives in the area.
- 4 Use Class Orders are groupings of land use types (e.g. shops, restaurants and cafés, business, assembly and leisure, and so on) as set out in the Town and Country Planning Order 1987. Planning permission is typically not required for changes of use of land or buildings within each category.
- 5 To borrow from James C. Scott's (1998) explanation of the techniques of modern statecraft that he described as 'seeing like a state'.
- 6 Activists were particularly frustrated with formal participation and engagement opportunities, and many ultimately found themselves in an adversarial relationship with city council planners.
- 7 See, for example: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/bristol-burns-once-more-as-tesco-riots-return-to-streets-of-stokes-croft-2276837.html>;

<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/laurie-penny/2011/04/stokes-croft-police-tesco>; <http://www.bristolregeneration.org.uk/fundingapproved2.html><http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/apr/22/bristol-riot-police-injured>; <http://www.thisisbristol.co.uk/Tesco-frustrated-fierce-opposition-say-raw-deal-Bristol/story-11264608-detail/story.htm>

- 8 For a more complete gallery of images from these events, see: <http://stokescroft.wordpress.com/2010/02/14/no-tesco-in-stokes-croft-protest-the-community-finds-its-voice/>

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