Shifting Ground: Protest Occupations as Worldmaking Practices

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In late summer of 2016, activists erected a loose collection of tents on an empty lot in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago and dubbed it ‘Freedom Square.’ Some tents were for sleeping, others for distributing goods like books or food, and others provided shelter from rain and sun. People from the neighborhood trickled in and out of the occupation, children stopped by to participate in artmaking classes, some folks picked up fresh produce free of charge, and others dropped off donations. The activists advocated prison abolition, and the imposing Chicago Police’s Homan Detention Center across the street posed a notable contrast with the protesters’ tents. The Freedom Square protest presents a puzzling question about what this occupation was *for*. When we think about what protests do, we often think they do one or several of the following: raise awareness, express a position, or prevent implementation of a law or policy. However, this protest did not seem well-suited to any of these goals. If the activists sought to simply express their position in favor of prison abolition, they could do so more effectively by releasing a statement of principles or by organizing a speech expressing their critique of the Chicago prison system. While there were speeches made at Freedom Square, they were not a central activity; in fact, the clarity of their political program seemed to suffer from the wide range of activities unfolding at Freedom Square—few explicitly related to prison abolition. If the activists sought to raise awareness or garner broad public attention, then we might expect the occupation to be in a more central location, such as downtown Chicago, rather than in a disadvantaged neighborhood like North Lawndale. A different form of protest, such as a march, would be more likely to draw in a crowd of supporters whose numbers would be more likely to draw media attention. As the protest was held on an empty lot, the neighborhood experienced little interruption, and the activists were not preventing any policies from being enacted and did not disrupt the functioning of the detention center across the street. Instead, the protest space focused on creating space and facilitating a range of activities not clearly connected with prison abolition. So how do we make sense of this protest, which is not seeking mass attention, not acting as a form of speech, and not seeking to prevent or disrupt any specific activities?

This article argues that protest occupations like Freedom Square are doing another, less recognized, political thing: spacemaking. Protest occupations often rely on spacemaking as a political tactic, and it is a recurrent element of political contestation, used particularly often in the last several decades—most famously with the Occupy movement, and more recently with pro-Palestine campus occupations. This piece focuses on two underappreciated roles that these protest spaces play in the tactical repertoire of contentious politics: refiguration and prefiguration. Spacemaking refigures the built environment by offering contrasting spatial arrangements, conducting habits and behaviors, and (re)framing experiences. Spacemaking can also be prefigurative by serving as immersive utopian experiments. Far from inert models, these protest spaces stretch our understanding of political possibility by serving as a live archive of alternative spatial arrangements, bearing the material authority of the already-built, and allowing participants to perform and enhabit political aspirations. In these ways, space-making reframes the present, and challenges our understanding of the horizons of political possibility. I argue that these refigurative and prefigurative practices should be considered worldmaking activities, drawing on Amia Srinivasan’s theory of worldmaking as the transformation of our representational practices, and an important tactic of political change. I examine two modest protest occupations on the South Side of Chicago in the last decade in order to show how activists use the material, symbolic, and kinesthetic elements of space to shift participants’ figuration of the present and stretch their imagination about the future. These immersive worlds, though relatively minute and ephemeral, do important political work in political experimentation and critically engaging with the built environment. This analysis moves beyond the well-recognized adversarial role of protest occupation and encampment in order to better understand its constructive character.

The article begins with a taxonomy for the roles of space in political contestation. I describe six roles that are established in the existing literature, followed by two roles that I argue are underappreciated: prefiguration and refiguration. These two roles involve imagining, performing, and building alternative social environments. In the following section, I develop my argument for why prefiguration and refiguration are both practices of what I call ‘worldmaking.’ In this section I discuss how agents make use of the built environment’s ability to shape behavior which unfolds within it in order to pursue structural change—a conclusion which stands in contrast to other work which tends to view environmental influence as a source of domination or resistance to political transformation.

The rest of the article is dedicated to case studies of protest occupations showcasing prefiguration and refiguration in action. I examine two examples of protest and activist projects on the South Side of Chicago in the last decade: the Healing Village protest in Woodlawn, in 2018; and the Freedom Square occupations, in 2016. Through these protests, I show how activists use the material, symbolic, and kinesthetic elements of space to shift participants’ understanding of the present and stretch their imagination about the future. Space-making aims to make epistemic shifts, specifically in how we interpret our political landscape and its openness to political change. In these worldmaking protest occupations, protests use the characteristics of social space—including materiality’s proof-bearing character, its denaturalization of the built environment, its naturalization of the new social relations facilitated by these spaces, and its staging of habits and attitudes—to challenge and reframe participants’ understanding of the present and the possible. These embodied political experiments denaturalize our understanding of the possibilities available within the present and stretch our imagination of what future political arrangements are feasible. Through—not despite—their ephemerality, these prefigurative spaces anticipate radical futures.

This work allows us to go beyond the adversarial role of protest occupation and encampment in contemporary politics (including on university campuses), and better understand its constructive role. Methodologically, this work is aligned with a burgeoning literature which takes contemporary activism as an important and underappreciated arena of political theorizing.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Taxonomy of Protest Space**

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Despite the rise in interest during and following what Edward Soja has called ‘the spatial turn’ in theory, there have been surprisingly few attempts to categorize the various ways in which space appears and intervenes in politics.[[3]](#footnote-3) This taxonomy of protest space provides a starting point for disaggregating the diverse range of literature on spatial politics specifically as it pertains to social movements. The above taxonomy outlines the way space interacts with politics. Space is generally understood to serve an antecedent role in political contestation (as a stage which shapes protest), or passive roles (as the object or product of protest). Although I will explore other roles of protest space below, examining space in each of these guises has offered us valuable insights into power in urban environments and in social movements. As a stage for protest, space serves a similar role as the theater does for a play: it facilitates some actions and interactions, while circumscribing others. A favorite example among spatial theorists of how space stages protest is Baron von Haussmann’s nineteenth century transformations of Paris. Haussmann punched large boulevards through the jumble of tight streets of central Paris; the boulevards were supposedly designed in part to make guerilla uprisings easier to control, by eliminating many of the city’s small, winding streets which had been favorable to civilian-built barricades. Like theater stages, space also frames the action which unfolds within it, lending symbolic heft (as in protests held on the Washington Mall, for example). Examining space as a stage for protest allows us to understand how extant geographies of constriction, openness, and the configuration of resources can shape protest tactics and protest success.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Other literature (in geography and cultural studies in particular) has explored how space can be a product of contentious politics. [[5]](#footnote-5) Places can take on symbolic significance when protests which occur there are memorialized in collective memory (e.g. Tiananmen Square, Washington Monument). Although some politics scholarship does examine the cultural artifacts produced by social movements—including music, visual art, and film—few specifically examine the production of new spaces. Understanding space as a product of protest offers insight into the process of memorialization as a political act.

Perhaps space’s most familiar role in protest is as an object of contestation.[[6]](#footnote-6) Protesters seek to change how a space is used, how it is organized, and how access to the space is controlled. Examples include protests which aim to stop a building’s demolition or to demand the construction of a new one. The sit-ins at lunch counters during the civil rights movement are also paradigmatic examples, in which protesters challenged the management of space—specifically racial segregation. Analyzing space as an object of contentious politics allows us to understand how specific spaces symbolize larger political power arrangements (such as segregated lunch counters and the Jim Crow South), as well as how architecture and the built environment are important features of the political world (seen in protests against affordable housing developments or for the construction of a medical trauma center on the South Side of Chicago).[[7]](#footnote-7)

In addition to these antecedent or passive roles of space in protest, space is often used as an active tool for achieving specific political goals. As a political tactic, space can take on several roles: expressive, functional, constitutive, prefigurative, and refigurative. The first three roles mirror more familiar roles of protest writ large. Perhaps the most readily apparent use of space in protest is its expressive function. Through the construction of purpose-built structures and aesthetic symbolism, the architecture is part of how activists communicate their political commitments. The protesters in Freedom Square, for example, located across from Homan Square Detention Facility, leaned on the spatial contrast in order to express rejection of the carceral system. The ad hoc architecture of the encampment contrasted aesthetically with the imposing detention complex across the street, but also expressed rejection of the carceral system’s social role through its strikingly different approach to community health and safety: structures which house goods provision, from food and water to books. A more familiar example of spatial occupation wielded for expressive ends can be found in the Occupy Movement, during which tents in front of skyscrapers of London’s financial district used ad hoc architecture to materialize economic inequality.[[8]](#footnote-8) Architecture may be used to express political commitments, activists have a wide range of other, more readily available symbolic mediums, such as placards, speeches, and even their dress.

Protest spaces can also be functional—producing a specific outcome through the occupation itself. The functional role of protest depends on the specific goals of the protests, and thus may range from the productive (e.g. providing an access point for food or services), to the destructive (e.g. damaging infrastructure or private property), to the preventative (e.g. tree-sitters in Berkeley California to prevent logging coastal live oak trees). The functional role of the Healing Village protest was to provide local services and activities to care for community mental health. Protest occupation with functional goals can often extend into the prefigurative, by modeling an aspirational spatial status quo. Take for example Oakland’s Moms for Public Housing occupation (during which homeless mothers squatted in unoccupied houses to critique inaccessible housing), which provided protesters with shelter, and performed prefiguration of a more just housing system in which greater regulation on housing and/or expanded public housing would make low-income housing more accessible.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Protests spaces also serve a socially constitutive role by creating spaces where people can gather to pursue further action. The spaces provide the necessary conditions for development of networks of activists and also help produce a ‘public’ which can make claims in the broader public sphere. John Parkinson offers a thorough examination of these constitutive roles of space-making, drawing on theater analogies to emphasize the importance of a public stage for constituting groups and performing narratives of political injustice.[[10]](#footnote-10) Margaret Kohn’s work is also notable here. ‘Radical spaces,’ as she refers to them, facilitate behaviors, symbols, encounters which cultivate assembly and foster solidarity. [[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, space can be an important part of routine democratic public formation as well as the constitution of alternative publics and resistance groups.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Prefiguration, Refiguration, Worldmaking**

While space takes on a range of the above-described roles in the case studies I examine below, the focus of this article is on the final two roles, as they have received insufficient attention: prefiguration and refiguration. In addition to these familiar roles of protest space (expressive, functional, and constitutive), space-making also targets participants’ framing of the present and the future. I refer to these as refigurative and prefigurative roles of protest space, respectively. I argue that space-making refigures the political present (targeting how participants experience the built environment) as well their understanding of the political landscape’s possibilities and horizons (targeting their political imagination). Space is an important arena in which representational frames are produced, and thus space-making is one arena where political possibility is contested. Thus, I refer to prefiguration and refiguration as ‘worldmaking’ activities, which I explain in greater detail below.

*Refiguration*

Refiguration entails using material and symbolic resource to reformulate the atmosphere, activities and interactions within a space. Refiguration involves cultivating relations, conducting kinesthetic experiences, and orchestrating behaviors. Through contrast with the surrounding built environment, refigured spaces emphasize the contingency of seemingly natural or immovable spatial arrangements. The refigured spaces act on the participants, including those activists who built them. By creating new political situations on a micro-scale, they offer immersive knowledge of alterative political arrangements. This matters not just because the spaces become a loose model for liberated social and political institutions, but because they target participants’ sense of accessible and appropriate action, their dispositions toward others, and their critical appraisal of the environments they inhabit. In each of these ways, the protest spaces seek to refigure the political landscape.

Refigurative spaces rely on space’s ability to frame action, conduct behavior, and shape dispositions in the first place. Like other social institutions, space functions as a constraining structure which guides the performances of participants as well as their representational practices. In order to understand the relationship between the two, it is useful to turn to ritual theory. Like space, rituals conduct behavior, cultivate atmosphere, and organize relations between participants. Ritual practices provide a framework to negotiate social boundaries, meanings, and normative commitments.[[13]](#footnote-13) For example, Saba Mahmood describes in *Politics of Piety* how prayer (re)aligns worshipers to each other and to the world. As a ritual, prayer consists of structured behavior, symbolism, and a cultivated atmosphere. By engaging in this ritual, worshipers perform the relationships and dispositions that prayer entails: alignment of activity toward God, emotional sensitivity to the divine, and management of unholy emotions. But performance is also formative. Mahmood explains that “ritual performances are understood to be disciplinary practices through which pious dispositions are formed…Thus, ritual worship, for the women I worked with, was both enacted *through*, and *productive of*, intentionality, volitional behavior, and sentiments.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Rituals aim to transform our habits, dispositions, and orientations.

While space is certainly less formulaic than ritual, it structures practice, cultivates atmosphere, and organizes relations among participants (and between participants and institutions) in similar ways. Michel Foucault’s account of the panopticon is perhaps the most famous articulation of this argument.[[15]](#footnote-15) Foucault analyzes a form of prison described by Jeremy Bentham in which prisoners are detained in cells arrayed around a central watchtower. Whether a warden is actually present in the watchtower ceases to matter, as the architecture functions as a ‘disciplinary mechanism’ which transforms the prisoner into an isolated individual—an ideal subject for state discipline. “The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities,” Foucault writes. “He is seen but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Foucault’s panopticon is most famous as a metonym for his historical account of the internalization of state power through surveillance in the modern era, but on a more straight-forward level he is also arguing for architecture’s ability to structure practice and social relations, and thus to shape the dispositions of subjects within it.

Foucault’s picture of space characterizes it as a tool for translating institutional power into subject-formation, seeming leaving little room for space’s role as a tool of resistance.[[17]](#footnote-17) We get a better account (which considers how social institutions can be wielded as a tool for contestation from below) by once again turning to ritual. Like space, ritual has often been associated with conservation of norms and reaffirmation of powerful institutions (such as the Church, through daily worship; or the State, through the pledge of allegiance). However, recent theorists of ritual including Mahmood and Molly Farneth have shown that rituals can also be used as a tool of agency and resistance (and in Mahmood’s case, challenged the tension between domination and submission to norms). As Farneth argues, practice is both prefigurative and formative.[[18]](#footnote-18) Farneth offers the example of American football player Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling during the national anthem as ritual innovation which is both expressive and formative. Transforming ritual, as Kaepernick did in kneeling during the national anthem, allows practitioners to communicate (that police violence against Black Americans is a national failure) as well as orient themselves (in mourning toward Black death and public commitment to social justice as such). Through ritual’s structure, its embodiment, and repetition, practice does formative work on the practitioners themselves.[[19]](#footnote-19) Similarly, radical space-making, as in protest occupations, uses space’s ability to structure practice, cultivate atmosphere, and organize participant relations to immerse participants in situations which cultivate new habits and dispositions. These social institutions are part of subject formation by directing practice and immersing subject in structured situations. Spacemaking—architecture in particular—has often been understood as a tool of constraint and thus the enforcement of extant power arrangements.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, it is precisely the ability to impose order, constrain action, and mold atmospheres that allows space-making to be a radical tool of resistance.[[21]](#footnote-21)

*Prefiguration*

Carl Boggs describes prefiguration as “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.” [[22]](#footnote-22) To be prefigurative is to bring a political goal into being by performing its micropolitics and building toward its macropolitics.[[23]](#footnote-23) Space-making is prefigurative in protest occupations in the way that these spaces become inhabitable models to embody principles of social organization which activists understand as necessary to accompany their political ends. In other words, these are spaces not constructed to achieve short-term strategic goals, but to model the type of society in which political emancipation is realized. Describing the Occupy Movement, David Graeber described this as the project to “create the institutions of the new society in the shell of the old.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Experimentation is a persistent characteristic of prefiguration. In this guise, prefiguration is “the continuous exercise of testing the imaginary landscapes against the necessities and the subterranean flows of daily life”—a sort of stress-testing models of political life.[[25]](#footnote-25) As explored in the case studies below, protest occupations use space as a tool for these various goals of prefiguration: enacting ethical commitments of broader political goals, modeling desired institutions, and experimentation.

In addition to modeling and experimenting with alternatives, prefigurative spaces also target the horizons of possibility in the political landscape. Making new environments and new practices, we also stretch our sense of political possibility. Pierre Bourdieu helps us understand how our sense of possibility is rooted in our practices. Bourdieu, though more well known for his theory of how practices are structured, also offers a useful account of how practice in turn structures our understanding of the world around us, from its contours to its limits.[[26]](#footnote-26) His work is fundamentally interested in showing that the ways we move through the world reflect and reproduce conceptual categories and our sense of self. Movement of the body is key in this. “Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking.”[[27]](#footnote-27) As Bourdieu explains more pithily: “adapting a phrase of Proust’s, one might say that arms and legs are full of numb imperatives.”[[28]](#footnote-28) For Bourdieu, this tends to be a self-affirming process. Our dispositions tend to be compatible with the conditions which generate them.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, we tend to act in accordance with the possibilities presented to us by our environment (and our schemes of interpretation of that environment provided by our habitus). As Bourdieu explains, “the most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Possibility is a molded thing, pushed into shape by our interpretations of our conditions—and their limits. “Only in imaginary experience (in the folk tale, for example),” Bourdieu explains, “…does the social world take the form of a universe of possible equally possible for any possible subject. Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not ‘for us’.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Bourdieu shows the entwined relationship between practice, environment, and our sense of the practical and possible. Thus, through changes in practices (like those in protest spaces), we can enforce changes in possibility. Prefigurative spaces, like those often created in protest occupations, conduct participants’ practices and attitudes through new material, symbolic, and relational situations. Practice within these spaces produces new kinesthetic experiences, which offer embodied knowledge and in turn shapes our sense of what practices and social arrangements are possible.

*Worldmaking*

Prefiguration and refiguration are what I call ‘worldmaking’ activities. The concept of worldmaking has gained prominence through work by Adom Getachew and Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò’s; however, Getachew and Táíwò use worldmaking to describe the project of building and transforming world systems, such as imperial regimes and global capitalism.[[32]](#footnote-32) I do not use worldmaking in this expansive register, instead following Amia Srinivasan’s use of the term to describe shifts in the frames we use to understand the world. Amia Srinivasan defines worldmaking as “the transformation of the world through a transformation of our representational practices.”[[33]](#footnote-33) In other words, the concepts and categories we use to represent the world compose the world as we engage with it; when we change the frames we use to understand and engage with the world, the world itself changes. Srinivasan uses this definition of worldmaking to describe how critical genealogy functions as a radical worldmaking practice when it “diagnoses our representations in terms of the oppressive function they serve, but moreover shows us the role that agential powers—individuals, groups and institutions—have played in the emergence and continued dominance of those representations.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Worldmaking, for Srinivasan, involves denaturalizing the frames we use to interpret the world, and demystifying the motivated choices which produce and maintain dominant frames. She goes on to argue that worldmaking also involves putting forward alternative representations—different models for viewing the world, and thus making room for structural change.

Deva Woodly’s work on public discourse similarly emphasizes the role which discursive frames play in informing our understanding of the political world. While Srinivasan focuses on critical genealogy and critical theory more broadly as a source of transformations of representational practices, Woodly considers public discourse more broadly as the arena in which shifting representational practices shape the political landscape. “This power of public speech to create political understandings is critical because what we think of as political is both contingent and constrained by common-sense notions that develop out of the interactions among our background conceptions of the way the world is—what Aristotle called *endoxa*—with new ideas, practices, and laws,” Woodly explains. “These interactions play out through public discursive processes that shape individuals’ interpretation of new political problems and solutions.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Woodly’s work emphasizes that our interpretation of the present also shapes our sense of political possibility.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This frame shift—changing how people interpret and evaluate their political world—does not only rely on the mechanism of disruption. Immersion in these radical spaces does not have to persuade participants to be successful (and indeed, most participants are already convinced of the protest’s position and the priority of the issue at hand). Instead, the protest spaces aim to shift our interpretation of the political landscape without explicit political persuasion. While traditionally protests have been understood to effect political change through public persuasion, recent work has shown how social movements reframe issues and shift discourse to effect change—even if they fail to explicitly persuade people. Recent developments in political theory literature have further expanded our understanding of how protests can make political change by altering how we frame issues and whether we see them as morally demanding. Clarissa Hayward has argued that disruption created through protest does not need to result in increased public support for a cause to be effective; instead, protests often disrupt motivated ignorance of privileged parties, and can thereby shift the political agenda.[[37]](#footnote-37) Ongoing work on framing processes shows how social movement organizations can use protests as a tactic of reframing conflict (leading to shifts in public opinion).[[38]](#footnote-38) Deva Woodly’s work also counters the usual persuasion narrative (which assumes public opinion shifts in response to successful appeals which lead people to change their values) and instead argues that public support for an issue can be shaped by changing the terms of the debate used to evaluate the issue.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Both Srinivasan and Woodly attend to how discourse, constituted through theoretical writing and public speech, is one crucial way through which our understanding of ‘the world as it is’ is constructed: through the language we use to describe it. However, ‘the world as it is’ is also material. While the existing work tends to focus on public discourse, media, and individual confrontation as the arenas in which political frames are disrupted, we should also understand experience in urban space as a further arena in which political frames are molded and shifted.[[40]](#footnote-40) For example, the Healing Village’s integration of ad hoc community services (under canopies and a wood hut) within an open atmosphere of celebration and community gathering (under string lights and around garden plots) guided participants to move easily between accessing services and chatting with neighbors. This enactment showed that essential services *could* be integrated within communities—a huge political claim on Chicago’s resource-starved South Side. When we move through spaces in new ways, our ways of being in the world shift; when our ways of being in the world shifts, so do our frames for understanding the present and the possible. Imagination of alternative political arrangements is made more visceral and immediate when we make and inhabit spaces; space-making allows us to *make* believe.[[41]](#footnote-41) Radical progress can only occur by breaking through the limitations to imagination imposed by the present. As Mark Fisher argues, “emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.”[[42]](#footnote-42) If we understand political imagination as not something that is concocted ex ante in our minds or produced through political speech alone, but is also educated in experience, we understand the importance of immersive, transgressive occupations which challenge the limitations of the political world and the built environment that serves and composes it.

**Case Studies**

While protesters use space in a variety of ways, this paper focuses specifically on occupation-based protest. I use the term ‘occupation-based protest’ to refer to forms of contentious politics that use occupation of a physical space to make a political point. These spaces can be private or public, well-used or abandoned. The distinctive feature of these protests is inhabiting spaces which are not designed to accommodate occupation. In other words, the protests that I am referring to do not involve a regularized uses of space (such as an organizations’ headquarters or a permitted protest in public space). A second feature is that the (re)organization of space itself is an active part of protester goals. Although the features of protest occupations I discuss below are seen, to some extent, in many other forms of in-person protest, I have focused my analysis on occupations for which (re)making space is an explicit and primary objective of the protest.

In selecting the protests, I focus on those which received limited media attention and did not mobilize large parts of the public. They did not shift the opinions of a broad democratic public and had limited impact beyond their immediate neighborhood. Indeed, organizers made surprisingly few references to broader public opinion. Although they clearly articulated policies and systems that they sought to change, they are also all focused on a more amorphous, ambitious goal: alternative world-making. Each specifically engages the built environment as a source of injustice as well as a mechanism for change. I also selected protests which were held on empty lots.[[43]](#footnote-43) This allows me to focus on the constructive part of these protests, rather than the disruptive elements. I have relied on analysis of social media and news coverage of these protests, supplemented by interviews. I have most heavily relied on the materials created and speeches given by organizers and participants themselves, but I have complemented this with critical analysis of the occupation spaces and activities.

More familiar examples of occupation-based protest include the eponymous Occupy movement of 2011-2012, and the autonomous community which called itself the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) that took place in Seattle in summer 2020. For both of these protests, sustained occupation of space enabled experimental arrangements of people and resources. Although the protesters had demands about wealth redistribution and defunding the police, respectively, they sought to create these changes not only through disruption, but also through alternative community infrastructures that they built in New York’s Zuccotti Park and in Seattle’s Capitol Hill. Occupy experimented with anti-capitalist ways of living, and CHOP experimented with public safety provision without policing. These prefigurative spaces were porous and temporary (both CHOP and Zuccotti Park encampments were ultimately dispersed by the police).[[44]](#footnote-44) Indeed, protest occupations often end with the tents dismantled and streets cleared, and the urban spaces returned to their previous appearance. However, as explored in the cases below, the occupation’s ephemerality makes them well-suited to utopian experimentation, as it provides intensive immersive experiences for activists and casual participants alike without demanding the full development of an independent and permanent community.

In the first case study of West Chicago’s Freedom Square protest, I pay particular attention to spacemaking’s refiguration of the built environment—and in turn what activities, interactions, and material arrangements it can accommodate. In the second case study of South Chicago’s Healing Village protest, I emphasize how spacemaking is prefigurative and how it stretches participants’ understanding of political possibility.

*Freedom Square*

In the summer of 2016, the Freedom Square occupation sought to “imagine a world without police.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Activists converged on an empty lot near the Homan Square police precinct on the West Side of Chicago. The Homan Square facility, though well-known in the neighborhood for its hostile policing practices, had recently become notorious as an emblem of exploitative policing in Chicago following an investigative piece in *The Guardian*.[[46]](#footnote-46) The investigation accused Homan Square of giving those arrested extremely limited access to lawyers in the early stages of their arrest, and lawyers’ difficulty accessing or locating clients held in the police facility—describing a ‘black-box’ facility in which confusion and opacity were used to punish those arrested, and to facilitate confessions.[[47]](#footnote-47) Following a proposed city ordinance that would classify certain actions against police officers a hate crime, renewed attention on police misconduct put the practices of Homan Square back in focus for organizers in the surrounding North Lawndale community. Homan Square came to represent the violence and racial injustice of Chicago policing.

The occupation was spearheaded by the #LetUsBreathe Collective, a group of young Black organizers in Chicago inspired by Movement for Black Lives activism following the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in 2014.[[48]](#footnote-48) After holding a ‘block party’ blocking the entrance to the Homan Square police facility, organizers set up an occupation of the empty lot across from it. For roughly six weeks in the summer of 2016, protesters remained in that lot, providing food and water to community members, hosting games, and sharing art supplies. These activities embodied the organizers’ political commitment that public safety was ensured not by the police, but by the health and nourishment of the community through education, nutrition, and material security.

At Freedom Square, the main features of the occupation were camping and canopy tents. In order to expand and partially enclose the interior space, some of the canopy tents had tarps hanging between other tents. Each canopy offered a different service. There was a food tent, first aid tent, a hospitality tent, and a free store. The free store offered clothing and books “for us, by us, and about us.”[[49]](#footnote-49) When the weather allowed, folding tables clustered around the site, covered with free art supplies for neighborhood children. Barbecues were often seen at the site, and free hot meals and fresh produce were shared with community members.[[50]](#footnote-50) There were impromptu dance recitals and community discussions, as well as scheduled events for arts and crafts and political speeches. By creating spaces where these various activities could flourish, Freedom Square allowed participants to embody the ideals they saw as core to an anti-carceral future. “Part of being out here is having the autonomy to construct a village where we live our values every day and have the courage to resolve conflict without calling police,” Colón explained.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Space-making was core to how activists understood their protest. Activists often spoke about their political projects in the language of construction. Ideas, they suggested, must be built. “It’s important for activists to take their ideologies out of the meeting room and into the block,” organizer Kristiana Colón explained from within the Freedom Square hospitality tent.[[52]](#footnote-52) Describing how they convince community members to join the effort, activist Ericka Dickerson explained, “There have been passersby who will come up and say ‘what are y’all doing? What we doing?’ And we tell them why we’re here, and what we’re offering, and how we would like to build with them.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The protest was itself a practice of experimentation and creation, in which ‘building’ was at once a material project and a process of community-making in space.

Contrast with the Homan Square police facility across the street was central to the protest’s tactical repertoire. The aesthetic contrast was clear. The detention center was notorious in the community, and the architectural history of the facility represented the tight connection between disinvestment and state violence on Chicago’s Southside. The building had originally been a Sears Roebucks warehouse, part of a massive merchandise and administration complex that dominated the West Side neighborhood, before Sears (along with all the jobs it had provided) moved downtown—and the police moved in.[[54]](#footnote-54) A Chicago Tribune article described how Freedom Square’s collection of a few dozen scrappy tents turned attention to the imposing building across the street, lined with fencing and a glut of blue-blazoned police cars: “as ephemeral as Freedom Square seems, it's a counterpoint of a place, constructed in such a way to draw your gaze across the street, to a different nearby building, the Chicago Police Department's Homan Square facility, a lightning rod of police misconduct allegations for many years.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The contrast between the occupied lot’s bustling open atmosphere and the police facility’s opacity and monumental scale served as a discursive argument against the impersonality and violence of Chicago public safety. However, its spatial character also challenged the architecture of the carceral system, denaturalizing the monumental presence of police, the size of the facility, its detention capacity, its opacity, and its inaccessibility. Freedom Square in contrast was open, human-scaled, and modest—and yet explicitly claimed to serve the same function: public safety.

Freedom Square activities aimed to create an experiential contrast as well. The spatial features of the protest accomplished this through not only a discursive rejection of carcerality, but experience in an alternative. “We aim to be the opposite of what that shit is,” explained an activist at the site, pointing to the Homan Square facility.[[56]](#footnote-56) The architecture was more than a reflection of the collective’s principles; it produced an environment which allowed activists to embody them.

Once Freedom Square’s free store had been erected, its presence did not simply reflect the group’s anti-carceral and anti-capitalist values; it also organized the activities of the occupation such that it was not solely dissent and disruption that characterized the protest, but also provision of basic goods to the broader North Lawndale community. The presence of the free store facilitated the activities of donating items and distributing them in turn. Though it was simply a tent, the tent organized as a store encouraged participants to take on either the role of giver or receiver. The structure of this temporary community figured goods provision through mutual aid as practical and feasible—if on a small scale. The structures and symbols embedded in the space narrate and facilitate the proper relationships between community members. Although the store could be misused, neglected, or destroyed, each of these are activities that require protesters to choose how to engage (or refuse to) with the structure and function of the free store. The flimsiness of the structure did not much matter, as it served its purpose of acting as an organizer of behavior, and a carrier of social relations.

By creating the conditions of alternative relations, attitudes, and practices, organizers create situations in which participants inhabit these alternative relations, making them familiar, and thus stretching the range of practices that are available in the future. As Pierre Bourdieu describes it, our understanding of the future (and thus the possible) is a dynamic between the set of practices and dispositions inculcated through our social experiences in the past—our habitus—and our negotiation of the conditions offered by the present. “In fact, a given agent's practical relation to the future, which his present practice, is defined in the relationship between, on the one hand, his *habitus* with its temporal structures and dispositions towards the future, constituted in course of a particular relationship to a particular universe of probabilities, and on the other hand a certain state of the chances objectively offered to him by the social world.” [[57]](#footnote-57) The resources of the present, interpreted through our cultural concepts, compose the range of possible actions and feasible projects we pursue. In other words, the possibilities that the environment presents to us help us interpret the social world.

These protest spaces shape the dispositions of activists toward each other and toward their political goals by creating environments in which they must act out new activities and new modes of relating. Experimental world-making within these protest occupations is a way of expanding the diversity of practices that are possible—those which seem plausible—for the participants within them. Although living in a society in which the police have been abolished is difficult to imagine, the Freedom Square guided participants through living around mutual aid kinesthetically, turning those activities into habits, and making this approach to public safety seem a little more familiar. Michael Billig calls the process enhabitation: when patterns of activity become habits, and the structures which shaped the activity in the first place becomes naturalized as part of the social world.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Freedom Square used space-making to denaturalize the extant built environment, and constructed ad hoc architecture and atmosphere to cultivate new forms of behavior and relationship between participants. By crafting the spatial conditions, the activists orchestrated prefigurative performances of what alternative relationship to public safety. Denaturalizing and embodied performance both target the participants’ experience of the present, attempting to shift their understanding of political possibility. Experimentation and political imagination are enmeshed. “People have to push to create a space where we imagine a world without police,” said Trina Reynolds-Tyler, describing Freedom Square. “What mechanism, what kinds of structures exist so that we can keep people safe without thinking that we need to put them in a cage?”[[59]](#footnote-59)

*Healing Village*

The Healing Village occupation offers an example of the specific role that space-making plays in modeling and experimenting with political commitments. In other words, activists created a prefigurative space. The Healing Village did this specifically by orchestrating embodied experience in political alternatives, building a live archive of political experimentation, and through the built environment’s evidentiary power.

In the summer of 2018, mental health activists erected a cluster of tents and structures into an empty lot in Woodlawn, on Chicago’s South Side. They were there to protest the city’s failure to invest in mental health resources for the surrounding community. The protesters built what they called the Healing Village. For the activists, community healing itself was considered “a radical act of resistance.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The previous years had seen sweeping disinvestment in South and West Chicago communities. Mayor Rahm Emanuel had closed half of Chicago’s twelve mental health clinics, including the single one serving the Woodlawn neighborhood. In response to these closures and ongoing disinvestment, community members and several activist organizations—including Southside Together Organizing for Power (STOP) and Black Lives Matter (BLM) Chicago—organized an occupation of the empty lot that faced Woodlawn’s shuttered mental health clinic. The Healing Village occupation was not designed to only occupy space in order to demand policy change—although policy change around mental health provision and alternatives to policing were certainly central goals. Beyond demanding action from elected officials, the Healing Village stood as a living model of mental health care that stood in contrast to city services lost or long absent.

The protest spaces offered a concrete vision of alternative political arrangements. The Healing Village styled itself as a protest against Chicago’s failure to fund mental health in Southside communities; but it also saw itself as building a space of healing where mental health resources and service provision were radically reorganized. Volunteers erected tents, installed flower and vegetable beds, and built a small wooden building to provide private space for mental health consultations. Over several weeks, the occupations served as a hub for a range of volunteer service providers, including a tenant’s rights organization, legal aid volunteers, and mental health service providers.[[61]](#footnote-61) The space between the service tents was a gathering place for impromptu conversations from neighbors who would tend the garden or participate in activities like yoga sessions, artmaking, and dancing.

These structures, although modest, served as a live archive of the holistic, community-based care that protesters argued was necessary for serving mental health needs: flexible spaces that accommodate a range of service providers; private spaces easily accessible by the community; gathering spaces which allow for neighbors to process trauma collectively; and beautiful spaces which provide comfort and reflect the value of the neighborhood. Nortasha Stingley, a community member who had lost her daughter to gun violence and had begun to use the space, explained, “We need a space where we can come, we can meditate, we can be creative and we can have peace . . . throughout the city, with so much violence going on, we need some type of comfort.”[[62]](#footnote-62) The Healing Village provided this space, serving as a living archive of the community’s understanding of the intersecting challenges which communities experiencing gun violence face—beyond the crime itself.

Rather than being simply expressive of political principles, this live archive differs from other ways an organization might articulate their principles because of its spatial form. Documenting movement goals in a manifesto or speech can concretize organizing principles and serve as a medium for resolving internal ideological differences (or at least legitimizing the perspective of the document’s writers). However, by representing principles in material structures and concrete resources, these movement goals no longer function as simple representations. Instead of simply demanding spaces of comfort, the Healing Village built a model of it. The occupation makes a tangible, inhabitable political demand for mental health provision, and an argument that mental health depends on enmeshment of leisure spaces, accessible legal services, in addition to counseling services.

Space-making also affects our framing of the present through architecture’s evidentiary power. Material evidence of these experimental models plays an important role in legitimizing them and making them seem feasible. By making this type of mental health space, the occupation made this form of political demand tangible. These inhabited models provide embodied experience in political alternatives. Even temporary structures carry relative permanence; once constructed, tomorrow the ad hoc structures will be there, until they are actively deconstructed or fall apart (which was, admittedly, a problem when high winds whipped through Freedom Square in the summer of 2016). These small-scale experimental spaces claim through their physical presence that once they have been made, they can be made again. They make visible and visceral what seemed outside the realm of possibility. In strong terms, experimental worldmaking in small spaces attempt to drag utopia into the present, shaking it out, showing it off, trying it on. This experimentation shifts existing conditions, such that our vision of *what can be* changes as well. Being within and moving through new political situations expands participants’ understanding of the horizons of possibility.

From an empty lot, the Healing Village built and embodied a community whose needs were met through mutual aid and in which mental health was central. But world-making enterprises like this one are soon packed up, closed out, swept away. We might be tempted to see these protest spaces as scrappy schemes that ultimately fail to achieve mobilization or shift city policy. Or as offering only “an overly idealistic image of togetherness, a retro '60s pie-in-the-sky portrait of communal living,” as one Chicago Tribune journalist described them. However, these utopian commitments matter precisely because they are materialized in inhabitable, if fleeting, experiments. Their flexible character and reliance on ad hoc architecture allows them to crop up quickly and with limited resources. To make up for their more limited architectural resources, activists relied more on visual symbolism and programming activities—such as dance events and community gardening sessions—to transform space.

One might consider the ephemerality of these occupations and wonder whether they can really fuel meaningful political change. However, their specific functions do not rely on permanence. Our evaluation of their ephemerality depends on the first place on whether we compare them to more traditional forms of protest like marches and gatherings, or to permanent spaces where political groups organize (like the houses of the people described by Kohn).[[63]](#footnote-63) Protest occupations often last several days or weeks and are often iterative. In any case, these protest occupations’ ephemerality offers several advantages: they allow experimentation to unfold in symbolically loaded locales, building new forms of political interaction in public or publicly-positioned spaces. The temporary nature of the occupation contributes to the goal of experimental prefiguration, allowing space-making to be an ongoing process. Concrete experimentation of different mental health provision spaces (including atmosphere, structures, and the activities facilitated by them) is made possible by the local and impermanent nature of the project. Shortly after the activists had set up their occupation, a Black barber from South Shore named Harith Augustus was shot and killed by Chicago police officers not far from the occupation. Community members rallied in response to the shooting, where upwards of a hundred officers confronted as many protesters, violence broke out and a number of protesters were beaten by the Chicago police.[[64]](#footnote-64) The Healing Village became a place of mourning and processing for those affected by police violence.[[65]](#footnote-65) While it would have been possible for those other protesters to gather in an empty lot—or indeed other gathering places in the community—the Healing Village had created this space that could easily accommodate the types of care these protesters needed: an atmosphere dedicated to processing and reflecting on trauma in public, private mental health counseling, and legal advice organizations. Their spacemaking made it easy and reasonable for mourning community members to gather here, when they would have been very unlikely to if it had remained an empty lot. The flexible nature of the space makes it suitable to responding to changing community demands and allows for greater experimentation.

By creating the spatial conditions for alternative paradigms of mental health care, the Healing Village protest space allowed participants to model their political visions and to glimpse seemingly impossible futures, which came into focus and appeared closer than they had been before. In these bounded spaces, structured by ad hoc architecture designed for mutual aid provision and community activities, immersed in a symbolic environment of experimentation and interdependence, participants briefly inhabit new political worlds. The activities and attitudes that define everyday life shift and are naturalized through our inhabitation of them; and as our idea of what is real and natural in the social world shifts, so does our understanding of the horizons of possibility for the future. By understanding the role that space plays in orchestrating experience, and the relationship between experience and our framing of possibility, we are then able to see the entwined nature of practical tactics and imaginative work in the repertoires of social movements.

After occupying their site for more than a month, the Healing Village was forced to evacuate the Woodlawn lot after a bitter battle with the local alderman (who was later convicted of unrelated federal charges of embezzlement, in the grand tradition of Chicago politicians).[[66]](#footnote-66) In the face of eviction, organizers declared that “even if the city takes the group’s tents away, the sense of community that has been built there will remain.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Activist Amika Tendaji declared that “certainly the structures can be taken away [but] the community has really embraced this space and we feel as organizers — people whose job is to respond to the demands and requests of the community — we’re going to have to figure out something to keep this active.”[[68]](#footnote-68) In subsequent years, the Healing Village model was adopted by the Collaborative for Community Wellness (CCW), another local group dedicated to bringing more mental health resources to the underserved communities of the South and West Sides of Chicago. In their current iteration, the CCW runs a series of Healing Villages which consist of temporary installations at a rotating series of community locations, from parking lots to libraries and senior centers. In addition to information about accessing mental health resources, volunteers provide services and activities that depend on location and availability but have included mental health screenings, acupuncture, and free food. CCW executive director Arturo Carrillo explained that community-based care that responds to the root causes of poor mental health is necessary, even when at times it seems impossible to achieve that change through city government. “Reopening clinics is a vital part of creating a safe healing city. And until you do so, we have to create these visionary spaces of healing.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

# **Conclusion**

Spatial occupations offer embodied experience in political alternatives. By denaturalizing the built environment, conducting experience, carrying the authority of materiality, and facilitating political experimentation these protest occupations shift the figuration of the present and the future. In other words, these spaces *make* believe, indicating the entwined character of spatial frames of experience and our interpretation of political possibility. Understanding protest spaces within this worldmaking framework help us make sense of activists’ ambitious claims about protest occupations. It may at first seem strange to view protests prioritizing cultivating community and hosting a diverse program of activities over disruption or articulating policy demands. However, these occupations make more sense if we understand spacemaking as a tactic dedicated to fostering critical analysis of the surrounding built environment and cultivating an expanded political imagination. Activists involved in organizing these occupations were clear about their goals. Commenting on the Freedom Square occupation, activist Bella BAHHS hoped that the protest would “[urge] the country to critically examine the world we exist in and to radically re/imagine the world we want to create.”

In this article, I have emphasized the promise of these protest occupations in order to show that hope is educated in environmental experience, and environments can be built by activists as well as urban planners. Despite my focus on progressive protest occupations, these lessons about the way spatial transformation is used to denaturalize the built environment and bring ambitious visions of political change into view do not apply only to socially progressive movements, but can also be wielded across the political spectrum.[[70]](#footnote-70) Further, the growing prominence of protest occupations as utopian experiments should also be understood as a reflection of the fundamental failures of the broader political institutions to accommodate a range of political imaginations and a general sense of pessimism about the limitations of institutionalized political action.

There are further limitations of this paper’s argument, in particular the limits of space-making from below. The most entrenched political issues are those that concretize and naturalize their ideological principles in the built environment. For example, racial segregation—which has long defined Chicago’s South Side—has been shaped by decades of discriminatory policies and laws.[[71]](#footnote-71) Inequality has not simply resulted in segregation, but has been inscribed in the landscape, and now undergirds the practices of people’s daily lives.[[72]](#footnote-72) On the other hand, protest against this form of political wrong cannot be effective if it only targets agenda, policy, or even succeeds in changing people’s values. It must do something more challenging: it must propose alternative spatial arrangements—and make believe that they are possible.

We often associate architecture with stability and permanence, making it seem ill-suited to serving contestatory politics. Fredric Jameson, for example, describes the political valence of the built environment thus: “the logical contradiction lies…in the difficulty of producing difference out of the same. It is a difficulty compounded by our conviction as to the increasing systematicity of this system, of its closure as a totality from which, as Foucault taught us again and again, we can scarcely hope to escape.”[[73]](#footnote-73) This paper offers a view of ad hoc architecture as an arena and agent in contestation, rather than a source of political conservatism. Further, the radical potential of space-making specifically relies on architecture’s disciplinary power and ability to naturalize the social relations it hosts—characteristics usually associated with conservative politics. This conclusion bears on the debates between reformism and radicalism in social movements. Organizers often worry about the appropriate balance between faithful pursuit of radical goals, and clearheaded negotiation within the limitations of the environments they inhabit. Put another way, they ask how we can remain honest about the entrenched nature of the very structures we wish to overcome. Responses to this question often focus on goal creation, such as: what goals should activists craft so that they are sufficiently radical while remaining sufficiently achievable? But we should also consider how protest methods can themselves help bridge pragmatic considerations and utopian ideals. Activists in these protests used modest materials and abandoned spaces within constraining landscapes to model imaginative alternatives. David Pinder calls this 'everyday utopianism' as it finds the possibility of radical futures buried within the terms of the conservative present.[[74]](#footnote-74) This suggests that grappling with the limitations of the present political landscape in the name of radical politics is not limited to reformist capitulation nor rupture, but also includes targeting our imagination of what is possible in our political landscape in the first place. Though the occupations, protesters are producing ‘the spatiality which permits them to speak.’[[75]](#footnote-75) While architecture has long been associated with conservatism, these protests show how architecture’s rigidity and authority can be used for radical ends, while contributing experiential data to the ongoing debate about what kinds of changes activists want to achieve.

1. I thank Arturo Carrillo for his time, and the participants in a Western Political Science Association panel and the Chicago political theory group—especially Linda Zerilli—for the helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to Bernardo Zacka, Katrina Forrester, Eric Beerbohm, Nace Zavrl, Chris Chambers, Soren Dudley, and Alexander Hartley for their generative feedback. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example: Erin Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Mie Inouye, “Starting with People Where They Are: Ella Baker’s Theory of Political Organizing,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 2 (May 2022): 533–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yang Zhang and Dingxin Zhao, “The Ecological and Spatial Contexts of Social Movements,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Wiley Blackwell, 2019); See for example Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Mark R Beissinger, *The Revolutionary City* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for example Juan Herrera, *Cartographic Memory: Social Movement Activism and the Production of Space* (Duke University Press, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Javier Auyero, “Spaces and Places as Sites and Objects of Politics,” *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, March 16, 2006, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270439.003.0030. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Deepti Sailappan and Jason Lalljee, “Rallies, Sit-Ins, and Padlocks: The History of Trauma Center Activism,” *Chicago Maroon*, April 26, 2018, sec. News, https://chicagomaroon.com/25853/news/rallies-sit-ins-padlocks-history-trauma-activism/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Benjamin Taylor, “‘The Winter of Discount Tents’: Occupy London and the Improvised Dwelling as Protest,” in *Consuming Architecture: On the Occupation, Appropriation, and Interpretation of Buildings*, ed. Daniel Maudlin and Marcel Vellinga (London: Routledge, 2014). Also, expressive uses of space in protest occupations tend to rely on implicit claims as to what a just use of public space or the surplus of capital production is. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Aja Seldon, “How Moms 4 Housing Challenged Oakland’s Housing Crisis and Won,” *KTVU FOX 2*, March 31, 2023, https://www.ktvu.com/news/how-moms-4-housing-challenged-oaklands-housing-crisis-and-won. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Martin extends this by showing how neighborhood identity formation can also be used for social movement mobilization. Deborah G. Martin, “‘Place-Framing’ as Place-Making: Constituting a Neighborhood for Organizing and Activism,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 3 (September 2003): 730–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Molly Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 8–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2004), 128,130. Mahmood makes this claim about the specific attitude toward prayer understood by a group of young women in Cairo. However, she notes that despite differences in desired subjecthoods, that this understanding of prayer as transformation of the self and alignment to the world is shared by other, more liberal, Muslims (132). Mahmood cautions that this “Self-reflexivity is not a universal human attribute here but, as Foucault suggested, a particular kind of relation to oneself whose form fundamentally depends on the practices of subjectivation through which the individual is produced” (32). Despite her attempts to relativize it, the self-reflexivity embodied in ritual appears remarkably consistent across very different cultures. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Much has been made of Foucault’s (exceedingly brief) piece on heterotopias in order to recover an account of Foucauldian radical space. However, Foucault’s focus is consistently on institutions of dominant social power and this theoretically ambiguous text offers few promises resources for an architecture of resistance. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October 1984, https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Farneth concedes “whether or not participation in the protest was enough to cultivate new habits and dispositions is debatable—probably not on its own—but for many protesters, this ritual innovation and protest made the national anthem and the dispositions expressed, enacted, and cultivated in it matters of self-conscious reflection.” Ibid., 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Must prominently with Foucault and Scott. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Farneth makes a similar point about ritual, also often understood as a tool of the status quo, as a useful tool for political resistance. Farneth, *The Politics of Ritual*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. However, I depart from Boggs’ description of a distinct programme of prefigurative politics which emphasizes decentralization, democratic participation, and ideological pluralism; in his work, prefigurative politics is a communist tactic which stands in direct contrast to statist communism. Although these programmatic commitments often overlap with the cases I describe here, I use ‘prefigurative’ simply to describe practices which attempt to translate general political principles into concrete practices in the present. Carl Boggs, “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, And the Problem Of Workers’ Control,” *Radical America*, no. 11 (November 1977): 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As Luke Yates points out, ‘prefigurative politics’ often refers to two different phenomena: embodying one’s idealistic principles in the present, even if the present conditions are averse to them; and, enacting broader goals for an ideal future’s structure on a small scale in the present. Thus, we might call these ethical prefiguration and concrete prefiguration. Here I am focusing on concrete prefiguration, as protest occupations function primarily as models for future structures. However, as I hope to explore in the future, modeling ideal future political configurations in these protest occupations also involves an ethical commitment to collaboration. Luke Yates, “Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.870883. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. David Graeber, “Occupy Wall Street’s Anarchist Roots,” *Al Jazeera*, November 30, 2011, sec. Opinion, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/11/30/occupy-wall-streets-anarchist-roots. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio, quoted in Kinna. Ruth Kinna, “Utopianism and Prefiguration,” in *Political Uses of Utopia*, ed. S. D. Chrostowska and James D. Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 202, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7312/chro17958-011/html; Yates, “Rethinking Prefiguration.” Experimentation figures as one of several diverse processes that Yates identifies with prefiguration as well, in a study of free spaces that captures well the overlapping political goals of spatial occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Analytic philosophers have recognized the role of spatial immersion in shifting political attitudes. Elizabeth Anderson argues that ‘experiments in living’ allow us to identify contradictions within our ethical commitments. Habitual exposure to bias-challenging and opportunities to “change habits underwritten by conduct underwritten by shared expectations and attitudes” allows for broader social changes in attitudes. While her work elevates the importance of embodiment and practice in shaping how we engage with the political world, she focuses on how it shapes our practical reasoning. Turning to theories of practice, Bourdieu in particular, we get a better sense of the way that practice shapes our sense of the political present. This allows us to better understand how space-making—as an arena in which practice is shaped and constrained—can be a tool for stretching our understanding of the political present. Elizabeth Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery” (Lecture, The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lecture Series, University of Kansas, February 11, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, 1990, 69–70. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, first paperback printing (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020); Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations: Worldmaking in the Case of Climate Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Amia Srinivasan, “VII — Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119, no. 2 (July 1, 2019): 145, https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoz009. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Deva R. Woodly, *The Politics of Common Sense: How Social Movements Use Public Discourse to Change Politics and Win Acceptance* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This is particularly apparent in her work on the gay rights movement. Woodly, *The Politics of Common Sense*. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Clarissa Rile Hayward, “Disruption: What Is It Good For?,” *The Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2 (April 2020): 448–59, https://doi.org/10.1086/706766; Clarissa Rile Hayward, “Responsibility and Ignorance: On Dismantling Structural Injustice,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (April 2017): 396–408, https://doi.org/10.1086/688355. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Reny and Newman warn however that we need to be attentive to how other entrenched narratives (such as racial prejudice) can make some people be resistant to protest reframing. Their work builds on a long literature about protest as a source of reframing, of which McAdams is an important contributor. Tyler T. Reny and Benjamin J. Newman, “The Opinion-Mobilizing Effect of Social Protest against Police Violence: Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd Protests,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (November 2021): 1499–1507, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000460; Doug McAdam, “The Framing Function of Movement Tactics: Strategic Dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 338–56, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803987.017. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Deva Woodly, “The Importance of Public Meaning for Political Persuasion,” *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 1 (March 2018): 22–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717003127. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. This in fact is indicated by Hayward’s other work on racial identity and housing segregation. Clarissa Rile Hayward, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. I borrow the term ‘make-believe’ used in reference to space which shifts political imaginaries from Navaro-Yashin. Yael Navaro-Yashin, “Introduction: The Make-Believe Space,” in *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* (Duke University Press, 2012), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. While not the subject of my analysis, occupations of buildings often involve these constructive elements as well, thought they are often overshadowed by space’s contentious expressive role when it engages material property rather than simply land. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hallie Golden, “‘We’re Not Going Anywhere’: Seattle’s Chop Zone Dismantled but Cause Lives On,” *The Guardian*, July 2, 2020, sec. US news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/02/chop-zone-seattle-police-protest-legacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Pascal Sabino, “Freedom Square Activists Imagine Public Safety Without Police Near Homan Square ‘Black Site,’” *Block Club Chicago*, July 25, 2020, https://blockclubchicago.org/2020/07/25/freedom-square-activists-imagine-public-safety-without-police-near-homan-square-black-site/. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Spencer Ackerman, “Homan Square Revealed: How Chicago Police ‘disappeared’ 7,000 People,” *The Guardian*, October 19, 2015, sec. US news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/19/homan-square-chicago-police-disappeared-thousands. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Some lawyers and researchers have argued that these conditions were not unique to the Homan Square facility, but were generally standard practice across the CPD. David Heinzmann and Jeremy Gorner, “Lawyers Wary of Claim about Chicago Police ‘black Site,’ Say Abuse Citywide,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 28, 2015, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-homan-square-chicago-police-met-20150227-story.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
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49. *Welcome to Freedom Square* (The Chicago Reporter, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct-yzh07dAM. Produced by Lauren Harris, *Chicago Reporter*, August 28, 2016, Video. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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52. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Welcome to Freedom Square*. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Erica Westly, “Former Sears Complex Returns as a Beacon in a Chicago Neighborhood,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2019, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/business/sears-chicago-homan-square.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Borrelli, “A Tent City Grows in Homan Square.” [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Welcome to Freedom Square*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Sabino, “Freedom Square Activists Imagine Public Safety Without Police Near Homan Square ‘Black Site.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
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62. Maya Dukmasova, “Mental Health Advocates Are Battling Self-Proclaimed ‘Gangster’ Alderman Willie Cochran over an Empty Lot,” *Chicago Reader*, August 18, 2018, https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2018/08/03/mental-health-advocates-battle-gangster-ald-willie-cochran-for-empty-lot. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Kohn, *Radical Space*. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Lee Edwards, “‘Traumatized’ Protesters Recount Clashes with Cops Following Shooting Of Harith Augustus,” Block Club Chicago, July 16, 2018, https://blockclubchicago.org/2018/07/16/traumatized-protesters-recount-clashes-with-cops-following-shooting-of-harith-augustus/. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid.; Dukmasova, “Mental Health Advocates Are Battling Self-Proclaimed ‘Gangster’ Alderman Willie Cochran over an Empty Lot.” [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Heather Cherone, “Ald. Willie Cochran Pleads Guilty, Becomes 30th Alderman Convicted Of Corruption Since 1973,” Block Club Chicago, March 21, 2019, https://blockclubchicago.org/2019/03/21/ald-willie-cochran-scheduled-again-to-plead-guilty-set-to-become-30th-alderman-convicted-of-corruption-since-1973/. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Lee Edwards, “Woodlawn’s ‘Healing Village’ Faces Eviction After Ald. Cochran Changes His Tune, Organizers Say,” *Block Club Chicago*, August 2, 2018, https://blockclubchicago.org/2018/08/02/woodlawns-healing-village-faces-eviction-after-ald-cochran-changes-his-tune-organizers-say/. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Arturo Carrillo and Lisa Salazar, Interview with Collaborative for Community Wellness, interview by Celia Eckert, Zoom, September 1, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. The assault on the Capitol on January 6th could be considered an example. However, it’s worth noting that the transient nature of temporary occupations better suits political agendas of decentralization and flexibility than those of hierarchy and rigidity. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Hayward, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces*. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Fredric Jameson, “Is Space Political?,” in *Rethinking Architecture*, 2005, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Pinder also writes convincingly about the reappropriation of streets as utopian experiments through creative reengagement with them such as the Situationists experimented with, using what they called psychogeography. David Pinder, “The Breath of the Possible: Everyday Utopianism and the Street in Modernist Urbanism,” in *Utopia/Dystopia*, ed. Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash (Princeton University Press, 2010), 206, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781400834952.203/html. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Dovey? Cite page. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)