

Reyhaneh Mirjahani and Azadeh Zaghi

A monument of the city to build

Lesson plan

A Monument of the City to Build

A Monument of the City to Build is a toolkit that explores some of the concepts associated with the ‘right to the city’. These are ideas such as public space, residentship, and responsibility.

The toolkit is derived from A Monument of the City to Build, a project that aims to present these concepts to children and young adults through a series of pedagogical workshops and exhibitions.

Placing an emphasis on intercultural encounters, the project aims to engage culturally diverse groups of children and young adults in a discussion surrounding the “right to the city”. This is done in order to empower them in imagining and demanding a better environment to live in. To do this, participants engage in a critical discussion in which they are encouraged to share stories about what living in a city means to them. By reflecting on their city and neighbourhood as it is *now*, the participants are then invited to create their own proposals of what they want their city to *become*.

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Keywords

- The right to the city
- The right to public space
- Residentship
- Responsibility
- Urban space
- The politics of space
- Democracy
- Critical thinking

Main subjects

- Social science, social geography, civil (citizenship) education
- Informal education and workshops

Age group

- 9–15 years old

Number of participants

- 12–30 participants

Timeframe

Two or three sessions:

- Lesson 0 / Homework
- Lesson 1: Activity
- Lesson 2: Discussion

Materials needed

Lesson 0 / Homework: A computer, projector and printer

Lesson 1: Colourful pens and markers

Topic introduction

The right to the city: In recent years, the “right to the city” has become an increasingly fascinating slogan when talking about urban spaces and their inhabitants. As an alternative to the liberal idea of urban space, the “right to the city” (conceived by Henri Lefebvre) puts forward a “radical restructuring of social, political and economic relations” in the city (Purcell, 2002) and has become a focal point for social thinkers, academics, and cultural organisations to foster an open-ended vision of urban politics.

The “right to the city” aims to reorient decision-making away from the state and towards anyone living in urban spaces. The “right to the city” thinks about the way urban spaces are created, empowering anyone who lives in the city and contributes to the body of urban lived experience to lead this empowering movement.

To challenge the entrenched ideas created by urban neoliberalism we should approach urban space as a place of communal living rather than individual liberty. As writer David Harvey says, “The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.” (Harvey, 2008)

1. Mark Purcell, “Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant”, *GeoJournal*, no. 58 (October 2002): 99–108.
2. David Harvey, “The Right to the City”, *New Left Review*, no. 53 (September–October 2008): 23–40.

About “A Monument of the City to Build”

A Monument of the City to Build is an ongoing socially engaged collaboration between two artists: Reyhaneh Mirjahani and Azadeh Zaghi. The purpose of the project is to present the concepts of the “right to the city”, the right to public space, residentship, and responsibility to children and young adults through a series of pedagogical workshops and exhibitions.

Placing an emphasis on intercultural meetings, the project aims to engage culturally diverse groups of children and young adults in a discussion surrounding the “right to the city” in order to empower them in envisaging and demanding a better environment to live in. To do this, participants engage in a critical discussion in which they are encouraged to share stories and reflect on what living in a city means to them.. By reflecting on their city and neighbourhood as it is, the participants are then invited to create their own proposals of what they want their city to become.

The “right to the city” is a topic of increasing popularity in public discourse and has become a core democratic issue among activists, academics and politicians around the world.

Young adults and children, particularly those who come from marginalised groups, are often left out of these conversations. In opening up the discussion to the young, Zaghi and Mirjahani attempt to reorient decision-making power away from large institutions, and into the hands of the city's younger inhabitants. Through their conversations about the "right to the city", they create a space in which children and young adults can train in participation, responsibility, and critical thinking: the fundamental skills of active democratic citizens.

As an action-based social art project, we want to create a space for children to talk about the spaces we live in. Our aim is that these conversations about rights and responsibility will help to foster critical thinking in the young actors of society. This will be achieved by creating a space to introduce both the discourse around the "right to the city" alongside the tools of critical thinking and discussion required to create their own idea of a city that is suitable for everyone.

Introduction to the artists

Reyhaneh Mirjahani is an artist and artistic researcher based in Gothenburg, Sweden. She holds an MFA in Fine Art from HDK-Valand at the University of Gothenburg and a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Sculpture from the University of Tehran in Iran. In addition, she completed the Commissioning and Curating Contemporary Public Art course at the University of Gothenburg and is currently participating in a Curatorlab programme at Konstfack University.

Reyhaneh's artistic practice and research focuses on the notion of individual and collective agency in dilemmatic socio-political situations and the disposition of ethics in this discourse. Moreover, she is interested in understanding and challenging the role of art and artists in communicating the issues we face in contemporary life, as well as finding intersectional methods within sociology, politics and art to facilitate or mediate a space in which the complexity of contemporary politics can be discussed. She has collaborated with various institutions in Iran, Italy, Poland, the UK, and Sweden, and has been published in a number of critical journals in Iran, Sweden, and the UK.

Azadeh Zaghi is a Gothenburg-based artist. She holds an MFA in Fine Arts from HDK-Valand at the University of Gothenburg and a BA in Fine Art from Azad University in Tehran. She is educated in Critical Pedagogy, Project Management and Fine Arts, as well as working as a teacher for the course Art, Pedagogy and Social Action for HDK-Valand at the University of Gothenburg. Moreover, she is the founder and head of the *East in West* Fine Art Organisation.

In her prolific career, she has participated in a large variety of artistic and educational projects across Sweden. With a strong focus on issues of representation, democracy, accessibility, inclusion, pedagogy, and institutional critique, Zaghi's career extends past the boundaries of what is typically considered the artist's role and includes her work as project curator, art consultant, and educator. She often works with the topics of international relations, anti-racism, political economy, exceptionalism, and historical representations of trauma. Her projects take the form of performances, videos, installations, and documentary films, as well as artistic educational projects in the public space.

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Learning outcomes

- To explore and understand the notion of the “right to the city”.
- To empower the participating students to exercise democratic discourse and critical thinking.
- To develop the students' drawing skills without performance anxiety.

Lesson plan: Instructions and advice

- Lesson 0 / Homework

If “Browse Street View images” on Google Maps is available:

Exploration on Google Maps: In small groups, ask the students to open Google Maps and explore the school neighbourhood, in both satellite view and street view. (5–10 minutes)

The city: In each group, start a discussion about what they find on the map of their city and the neighbourhood surrounding their school, a well-known public space, or their home. Here each student in the group can show the others where they live, what exists around them, and how they spend time in that space. (10–15 minutes)

Gathering images: Ask each group to choose and save seven places on the map of their city or neighbourhood. It is important that the selection happens in a discussion: “Why do we choose this place?” The “Google Maps Street View Instructions” document can be used to guide the students. (15–20 minutes)

Next, print the first page of PDF files the students have saved for the next session’s activity (the Street View images). Print each image on a separate A3 page.

If “Browse Street View images” is not available:

Prior to the session, ask the students to take photos of their city and neighbourhood and send them to you. Each student should send a few images. Print each image on separate A3 pages.

It is important to mention to the students that it is preferable not to have human faces or bodies in their images so that the focus can be on the urban space and nature landscape in their surroundings.

- Lesson 1

Choosing photos: Place all of the printed images on the floor next to each other so that they are clear and visible to everyone. Divide the students into groups of five and ask each group to pick an image for themselves. Ideally, they shouldn't choose their own image. (1–2 minutes for each group: 5–10 minutes total)

Topic introduction: Here, the teacher can start talking about their own neighbourhood, the public spaces there, and the general conversation about their rights, responsibilities and demands as residents. Pay special focus to the inclusivity and accessibility of the place you choose to talk about. (5–7 minutes)

Individual activity: The teacher should shift the conversation on to the images the students have chosen and ask them to think about the following questions:

- What is functioning well in this space? What isn't?
- What would you like to change?
- What would you like to keep? Why?

Then, the students should add their thoughts and opinions about the space directly on the images using brightly coloured pens and markers. Their additions can be fictional or based in reality. It is important to mention that this is not a drawing lesson but instead a way to express their thoughts and opinions freely, and with respect. (20 minutes)

Writing phase: The students should then turn the images over and write a paragraph about their reflections. (10 minutes)

- **Lesson 2**

Presentation: Each student should present their images and reflections.

Open discussion: After all of the presentations, the teacher can start an open discussion about residentship, the “right to the city”, the politics of public space, individual responsibility, and the students’ rights and demands for public space.

Tip: If the places in the images are close by, the presentations could take place on site.

Additional resources

- A tutorial on how to download images from Google Maps Street View:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Z8Q4NqX4wE&ab_channel=ArtLearnTech
- David Harvey, “The Right to the City”, *New Left Review*, no. 53 (September–October 2008): 23–40.

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