

An Introduction to

New Public Sites

and the NPS-T/MBX thesis exhibition and events

Published on the occasion of Maryland Institute College of Art's
M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition III
April 23 - May 2, 2010

*New Public Sites - Middle Branch Crossing +
The Typology of New Public Sites*

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April 2010

Somewhere between a suburban strip mall and its urban surroundings lies a poetic amalgam of space both epic and discrete. Situated within disparate zones of overlap, contradiction, ambiguity and interstice, the ongoing *New Public Sites* project investigates the ways in which invisible sites and overlooked features exist within our everyday environment. Based on a critical approach to understanding public space, this project proposes alternatives for signifying and activating sites through urban analysis, mapping, installations, video, tours and print media. Through this process of city resignification, the *New Public Sites* (NPS) project invites a practice of "radical pedestrianism". If a pedestrian is simply a person traveling by foot, a radical pedestrian is one who travels by foot through infinite sites of freedom, both concrete and dispersed. The radical pedestrian tests the limits of and redefines public space through drifting direct action and insightful discourse.

The Typology of New Public Sites (NPS-T) and *New Public Sites - Middle Branch Crossing* (NPS-MBX) are two interrelated, complimentary projects

presented in conjunction with Maryland Institute College of Art's Thesis III graduate exhibition. Serving as both field guide and manifesto, *NPS-T* organizes liminal public spaces and pedestrian experiences of the everyday environment into a system of sites, components and qualities, indexed and described through architectural and poetic terms and definitions. Putting this typological language into action, *NPS-MBX* explores Baltimore's spectacular southern gateway - the Middle Branch, a majestic amalgam of voids, lost spaces, paths, pauses and vistas. These two projects (*NPS-T/MBX*) are made accessible inside the gallery through a multi-media installation, and outside the gallery through the project website, the *New Public Sites - Kiosk* and interactive, urban tours.

The NPS investigation is predicated by an expansive definition of public space. For this ongoing project, *public space* is any open area accessible to most people in a given community. In this case, *accessibility* describes the ability for individuals to physically enter and actively engage with their surroundings. Given that no public space is entirely accessible to all, this radical approach qualifies a space's "publicness" by asking the degree to which anyone off the street is able and permitted to enter and engage. This perspective on public space disregards typical assumptions about private property, and opens the frame of research to a wide range of places and terrains. Public space can then encompass a variety of areas, including but not limited to: vacant properties, parking lots, streets, highways, squares, parks, campuses, shopping centers, waterfronts, transportation hubs, and civic buildings. Within these differing public spaces there exists a multitude of overlooked and under-signified places that can

collectively be understood as "new public sites".

While there is no explicit set of conditions defining new public sites, they generally consist of everyday public spaces existing in one or more of three states: rendered mute by their physical and discursive emptiness, ambiguous due to contextual contradictions of urban design, and/or invisible from a lack of formal architectural framing and practical readability. A NPS analysis of these public spaces requires a range of representational modes:

- 1) Free maps that locate and describe sites for interested participants.
- 2) On-location installations of tape, posters and plaques identify the sites and or draw attention to specific details.
- 3) Performative, guided walking tours invite group participation and enable direct feedback from individuals.
- 4) Video uploads and interactive digital maps decentralize the distribution of information by sharing the project with networked audiences.
- 5) Publications such as books and pamphlets provide supplementary information in support of project sites and operations.

As the most significant project publication to date, *The Typology of New Public Sites* serves as both conceptual framework for NPS maps, videos, and tours, as well as field guide for intrepid participants.

The Typology of New Public Sites consists of sites, components and qualities indexed and described through terms and definitions both invented and appropriated. The typology not only represents a system of classification, but also a linguistic intervention. Drawing from the fields of architecture and urban

planning, the appropriated terms and definitions are repurposed with complete sincerity. In some instances the definitions for these lifted terms remain unchanged, while in others they are altered, recombined or entirely rewritten. Through invented and appropriated language, this reference book/manifesto challenges the authority of how public space is typically represented. While declarative and technical, these definitions also hew towards the poetic and absurd. The linguistically playful moments of this otherwise serious endeavor are derived from the latent beauty and humor within many of the spaces, features and experiences addressed.

Within *The Typology of New Public Sites*, sites are characterized by one or more "platzgeists", and organized into three main categories. Capturing the psychic spirit or experiential essence of public space, the NPS platzgeists include *The Urban Sublime*, *Sub/urban Ambiguity*, *Terrain Violence* and *Playscape*. In material and conceptual terms, the subject(s) of investigation fall into three categories: overlooked *sites*, their contributing *components* and the experiential *qualities* therein. Sites are classified as *Voids*, *Lost Spaces*, *Paths*, *Pauses* and *Vistas*. Components are described as *Horizontal*, *Vertical*, *Discrete*, *Symbolic*, *Masses* and *Anti-masses*. Qualities are split into *Ethereal* and *Psychic*. Supporting the three main categories and providing a theoretical foundation for the overall NPS project is an appendix consisting of archetypes, positions and concepts. Complementing the project maps, videos and tours, the field guide aims to expand interest in these invisible public spaces while also serving as a reference for participants in-situ.

Within MICA's Thesis III graduate exhibition, *The Typology of New Public Sites* is visually presented as a flat, 9' x 12' wall installation of medium scaled color photographs arranged along map-like, rectilinear lines of red, blue and grey adhesive tape. The unlabeled photographs are grouped into the book's three main categories: sites, components and qualities. At the center of the network hangs a short text introducing the book. On the floor in front of this installation lay two grey diagonal lines that position the viewer while framing a "vista" of the wall. Also on the floor sits a set of exhibition copies of *The Typology of New Public Sites* that allows curious viewers to identify the names and definitions of the wall-photos. A notice on the floor reminds viewers that while they may not take the exhibition copies, they can get their own, free copy of the book by simply downloading it online or participating in one of the scheduled *Middle Branch Crossing* tours.

The Typology of New Public Sites and other NPS strategies for interstitial site signification and the participatory production of space are employed through the *Middle Branch Crossing* project:

Beyond a raven stadium and above the Westport light rail station lies a majestic collection of public spaces around the northwestern tip of the Patapsco River's Middle Branch. Here a transit network spans a waterfront amalgam of voids, lost spaces, paths, pauses and vistas. Traversed by floating zones and directional flow, this spectacular gateway to Baltimore reveals a shimmering parallax of invisible sites.

- *NPS-MBX Project Introduction*

In an effort to both draw attention to and activate these sites, the NPS-MBX project exists both inside and outside the gallery.

Inside the gallery, the project consists of a photo/map installation, free maps

and tour schedules, and a looping video featuring twelve exemplary sites. The 9' x 16' NPS-MBX wall installation includes medium and large scaled photographs in color and black and white, a 62" x 40" map of the overall area, the central introductory text, and poster advertising the schedule of tours. Corresponding to the NPS-T wall installation, all elements are arranged along the map-like red/blue/grey tapelines. On the floor in front of this installation lay two grey diagonal "vista" lines. The installation photographs consist of labeled, color elevation shots of twelve salient sites as well as five black and white birds-eye view aerial perspectives. The large, vertically oriented map is highlighted by an assortment of color and pattern-coded zones signifying the various sites, components and qualities of the Middle Branch. Next to the wall map hangs a 17" x 11" reference key explaining the color and pattern coding. On the floor below sits a pile of 17" x 11" color reproductions of the map annotated with titles for all of the various sites. Nearby lays a similar pile of free 8.5" x 5.5" cards promoting the NPS-MBX tour schedule. In addition, a series of short videos are projected on the wall opposite the photo/map installation. Corresponding with the map installation photographs, the videos each consist of one to two minute long still shots of the twelve highlighted sites. At the beginning of each video, my voiceover introduces the name of each site then states the corresponding definition from *The Typology of New Public Sites*. The installation videos, maps and photographs can also be found embedded within the New Public Sites website.

Supporting the overall exhibition and events, the grahamprojects.com/nps

website includes introductions to both *The Typology of New Public Sites* and *New Public Sites - Middle Branch Crossing*. From this website, users can download a free copy of *The Typology of New Public Sites* book in pdf format and consult an interactive project map. The custom designed Google map features color-coded routes for the car, bicycle and light rail tours alongside the images and videos of the twelve highlighted Middle Branch sites. The website serves to both introduce the project and promote the NPS-MBX tours that meet at the outdoor kiosk.

Outside the gallery, in MICA's Cohen Plaza, stands the "New Public Sites Kiosk" that features information on the project and accompanying tours. The triangular kiosk is a lightweight, portable informational structure and meeting point that stands 10.5' tall with three sides for promotion and display. Participants are invited to explore the Middle Branch Crossing through three modes of transit: car, bicycle and light rail. Sweeping back and forth across the I-95/I-395 interchange, the car tour provides breathtaking zoomscapes of the water below and city beyond. At a slower pace, the bicycle tour navigates sites of pause south of the stadium, before joining the Gwynns Falls Trail as it skirts the vistas of the Middle Branch's western shore. Heading farther south, the light rail tour will glide over fluid dynamics and unseen fields before culminating in an excursion of radical pedestrianism.

As a tour guide I wear an authoritative white uniform adorned with buttons and patches displaying my name, the project logo and the American and Maryland state flags. Paralleling the linguistic intervention of *The Typology of*

New Public Sites, the uniform exists as an appropriation of the iconographic emblems that typically represent institutional power and individual expertise and/or authority. By making my own patches and pins, I am attempting to both convince people of my sincerity and expertise while also calling into question the power of bodily-signified authority. Both playful and serious, the DIY uniform supports my role as a self-appointed tour guide and expert on *New Public Sites*.

The goal of the tours is to activate new public sites through participant exploration and social discourse. As social events, the tours are an opportunity for me to point out particular invisible sites and overlooked features while soliciting responses from participants. Some of my language comes from memory, some is improvised, and some is read directly from the field guide. Throughout the tour, participants can reference *The Typology of New Public Sites* as they engage their surroundings and listen to my analyses. As a self-appointed tour guide, I do not expect people to necessarily agree with everything I have to say. Indeed, I am more interested in offering a conversational starting point by simply giving the invisible sites names and drawing attention to particular characteristics. By setting up a framework for discourse, I hope to ask the primary questions of why these sites exist, how they are used and what they represent. From this critically engaged position, the tours are a way to get participants thinking about how their everyday experiences in public space are shaped by the political economy of place, as represented through architectural and urban design. Through such discourse, the *New Public Sites* tours create the opportunity for new publics to form around newly signified sites.

The NPS project intensifies the publicness of its given spaces while simultaneously cultivating new "publics" among interested participants. The mere act of identifying the sites and representing them through physical installations, dispersed media and promoted events raises awareness of the spaces while also making them more physically and digitally accessible. Drawing attention to the sites and inviting group participation creates opportunities for new and different publics to coalesce. Here, a public is defined as the people constituting a community of participants who produce accessible urban spaces through their physical behavior and discursive practices. Additionally, as participants responsively engage particular sites through media and in situ, they then also become contributing social producers of the given public space. Together, NPS and its rejoining participants increase the degree to which many invisible sites and overlooked urban features function as public space.

Between the maps, videos, tours and this book, the *New Public Sites* project offers participants new ways to interpret and activate otherwise under-represented types of public space. Together, these various aesthetic and social strategies not only describe the spaces and resignify their possible meanings, but also call into question how the sites came to be and what they represent. These representations and actions make the invisible sites available to a wide range of participants through multiple points of access and interaction. Whether participating in situ, in a gallery or over the Internet, the radical pedestrian reifies new public sites while redefining the meaning of public space.