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Viewpoint

The broken middle: The space of the London riots

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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint looks at the 2011 London riots, and in particular interprets them against a discussion of their urban location. In contrast to previous riots, which generally have happened either in urban centres or urban margins, the London riots happened in the everyday areas of the city, along borderlines between areas of different social inequality. The article centres on riots being seen as a magnification of the ordinary rather than an outburst of the extraordinary, and then discusses the spatial and social implications of this interpretation.

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One of my favourite maps is the one published in *City of Quartz* by Mike Davis. It shows the gang territories in South Central Los Angeles in 1972 (Davis, 1990). Particularly fascinating is the way that the areas designated to each gang overlap, so that small areas appear contested by two, or in one case, three gangs. One can but wonder what these spaces are like by night, by day, over time. Although diagrammatic, the map throbs with incipient violence and a sense that these hard black lines are in a state of continual flux, as the control of streets and back alleys pass from one gang to another. But it is not only the overlaps that make this map so compelling: it is also the way that in some places the gang territories are clearly separated, as if a truce has been made not to fight for that particular stretch; in other places there are zones claimed by no one, probably the most dangerous places of all in the turbulence of rival occupations.

Maps hold within them the intersection of space and potential action, which is why it is so easy to get lost in them, as one's imagination rushes in to project lively scenarios out of dead lines. Maps can only ever be suggestive of the connection of space and action, since they only ever present a partial reading of a given territory. They are best read as diagrams of contingent stories than they are as authoritative statements of spatial and social actuality. It is in this provisional sense that I enter into the mapping of the recent London riots, in order to speculate on the way they might describe the relationship of space to the action within. As Wouter Vanstiphout noted in a talk soon after the events,

“riots reveal things about our city that we have hesitated to look at before.”¹ Following this line of argument, studying the space of riots becomes a means of understanding the underlying city since they bring to the surface what is usually suppressed. The mapping of riots can thus be seen as a mapping of the latent socio-spatial conditions of our cities, but only if one remains open in one's interpretations of those maps.

My speculative approach to maps is very different to that of the Space Syntax group, who have used maps in a manner that is almost entirely determinist. In the case of the London riots this leads to a very unfortunate analysis (*Space Syntax Network, 2011*). Their headline finding is that “84% of verified incidents in north London and 96% in south London took place within a five minute walk of both (a) an established town centre and (b) a large post-war housing estate.” Well, that might be true, but the underlying explanation is less palatable. There are vague mentions of Bill Hillier's work on housing estates and his “conjectures” that “the overly complex spatial layout of these housing estates has an effect on social patterns, often leading to social malaise and anti-social behaviour.” It looks as if we are meant to surmise that the spatial experience of living on these estates somehow programmes the residents to venture forth and take it out on their local high streets.

Not only is this research flawed (in so much as other maps clearly indicate that the rioters did not necessarily come from the immediate neighbourhood, but in many cases travelled some distance, alerted by messages sent through the BlackBerry Mes-

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¹ In a talk at the Building Centre organized by NLA (New London Architecture) on 9th September 2011.

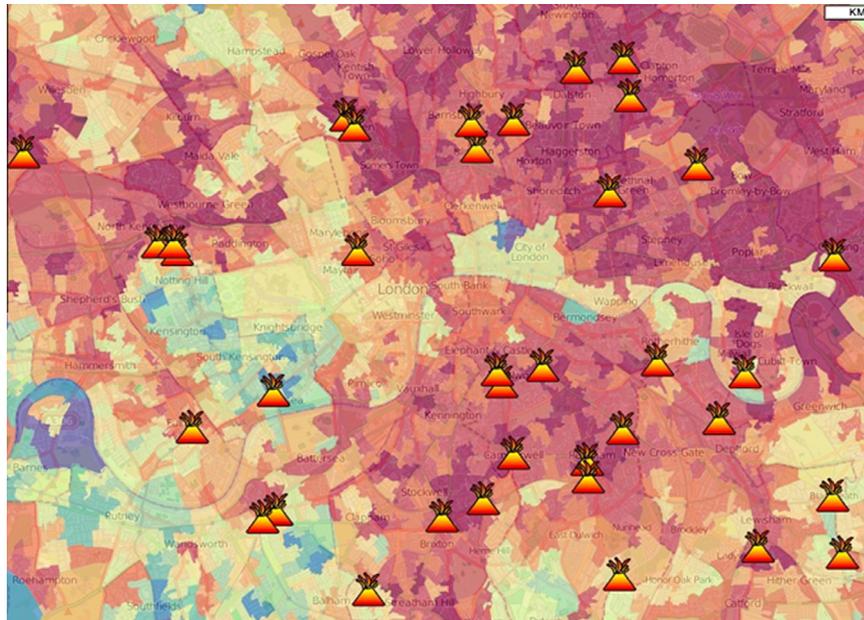


Fig. 1. Map of location of 2011 London riots.

saging System²) but also it is unacceptably reductive in its conclusions. The Space Syntax researchers first state that “most post-war housing estates have been designed in such a way that they create over-complex, and as a result, under-used spaces.” These spaces are populated by large groups “of unsupervised children and teenagers, where peer socialization can occur between them without the influence of adults.” And then, within the same paragraph, they assert: “our analysis of court records shows that almost three quarters of convicted rioters in the study areas live on large post-war housing estates.” We are meant to imply from this a causal link between space and behaviour, in this particular case the spatiality of post-war housing estates and the act of rioting; this is a causality that apparently overrides the social and political backdrop.

This form of spatial determinism has been encountered before in the analysis of riots, most famously in the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, where a whole series of commentators weighed in to make the association between decaying estates and the ‘resulting’ riots. Thus the book *Community Architecture* by Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt opens with an apocalyptic description of the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, when “violence erupted” on a North London housing estate.

As families and the elderly covered in their homes, gangs of youth – armed with bricks, knives, bottles and petrol bombs – confronted hundreds of police armed with riot shields and batons. What had been thought of as a model housing estate on its completion only twelve years previously became, for several hours, a battleground (Wates & Knevitt, 1987, p. 15).

By setting their analysis against an architectural backdrop, the authors suggest that there was “a possible link between social unrest and the degree of control that people have over their environment” (Wates & Knevitt, 1987, p. 16). The book then proceeds with a benign introduction to community architecture. The argument is never explicitly made, but the implication of this hysterical opening of social unrest is clear: modernist architecture, because of its

remote and irresponsible genesis, is the cause of social breakdown; community architecture, with its engaged and democratic genesis, will overcome these ills. Space Syntax and this version of community architecture are unlikely bedfellows, but are joined here in their architectural determinism, which all too conveniently overlooks the political and social, and in this plays into the hands of politicians who are all too glad to have other factors as an explanation of social disturbance. Architectural arrogance, spatial complexity, blind alleys – all these and more shift the responsibility out of political hands and onto other more instrumental factors.

Let’s use Georg Simmel to reverse out of this cul-de-sac of architectural determinism: “the city is not a spatial entity with sociological consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially” (Simmel, 1997, p. 143). Space arises out of – or in Lefebvre’s term is produced by – the social, rather than the determinist reverse in which the social arises out of the spatial. In this light one approaches maps or architectural plans not as instruments of potential behaviour, but in the spirit of an archaeologist who attempts to summon up lost lives from splinters of material and spatial evidence. Space Syntax’s UCL colleagues in the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis are particularly useful here with their generous open source maps, Maptube, one of which overlays the location of the riots onto a map of social inequality in London (CASA, 2011). This particular map (Fig. 1), which smudges computer game graphics of the instant onto the apparently precise statistical evidence of the given, challenges previous assumptions about the constitution of riots.

Spatially, riots may be placed into two broad categories. First the riots that take place within the most socially deprived areas and are defined by their boundaries. Second riots that take place in city centres, bringing the excluded directly into confrontation with the spaces they are normally excluded from. The first group includes the Broadwater Farm riot of 1985, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 (which were centred on the South Central area of Mike Davis’ map), and the Parisian banlieue riots of 2005. The second group includes the Manchester riots of 2011, the London Poll Tax riots of 1989 and the Detroit riots of 1967, (which started with a local altercation but rapidly, spread out to the neighboring University district). The first group of riots are the most easily for the establishment to manage, both practically (because they can be

² “An analysis of one day’s court hearings by BBC Newsnight last week found 70% of those accused of riot-related crimes had travelled from outside their area.” As quoted in *Guardian* (2011).

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