



# PREFIGURATIVE PRACTICES

an exploration into Prefigurative Architectures  
through five case studies

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## PREFACE

*Prefiguration*, usually discussed in political discourses, is a method whereby an aspect of the 'normal' political framework is disrupted, in order to test and re-plan how we can live. In a temporal frame, the actualisation of a subversive reality allows us to discuss practically, rather than hypothetically. Progress, and change, instantly becomes easier to visualise.

*Architecture*, in simple terms, is the built form and the process of its manifestation. It can also be the organisation of 'things', and processes which play out in and around this built form, whether cultural, or social, economic, or political. Through manipulation and invention, Architecture can transform the environment, and thus the way we live. The moment of construction, and the scale of the constructed differentiate Architecture from other art forms, which, relatively speaking, remain in

the background of our lives.

*Prefigurative Architectures*, therefore, are moments where a new way of living is tested, in a temporary or artificial framework, and through the moment of construction, actualised. This method of working differs from producing a 'utopian' idea, which is laid out on paper, then immediately bound to inexistence. When an idea becomes a physical prototype, its strengths and weaknesses in the real world can be questioned. Then, through improvement, development and growth, it can become an exemplar to manifest actual change.

*This booklet* looks at the work of five prefigurative practices or processes in order to unpack the notion of prefiguration, whilst referencing and discussing relevant ideas from other architects and theorists.

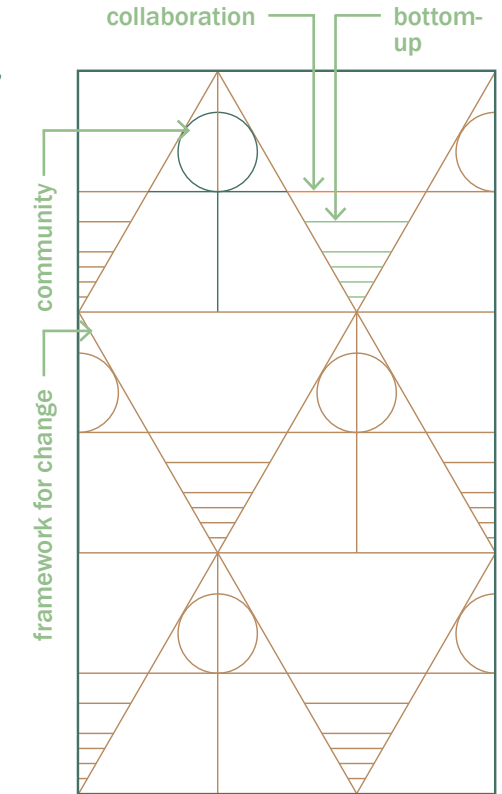
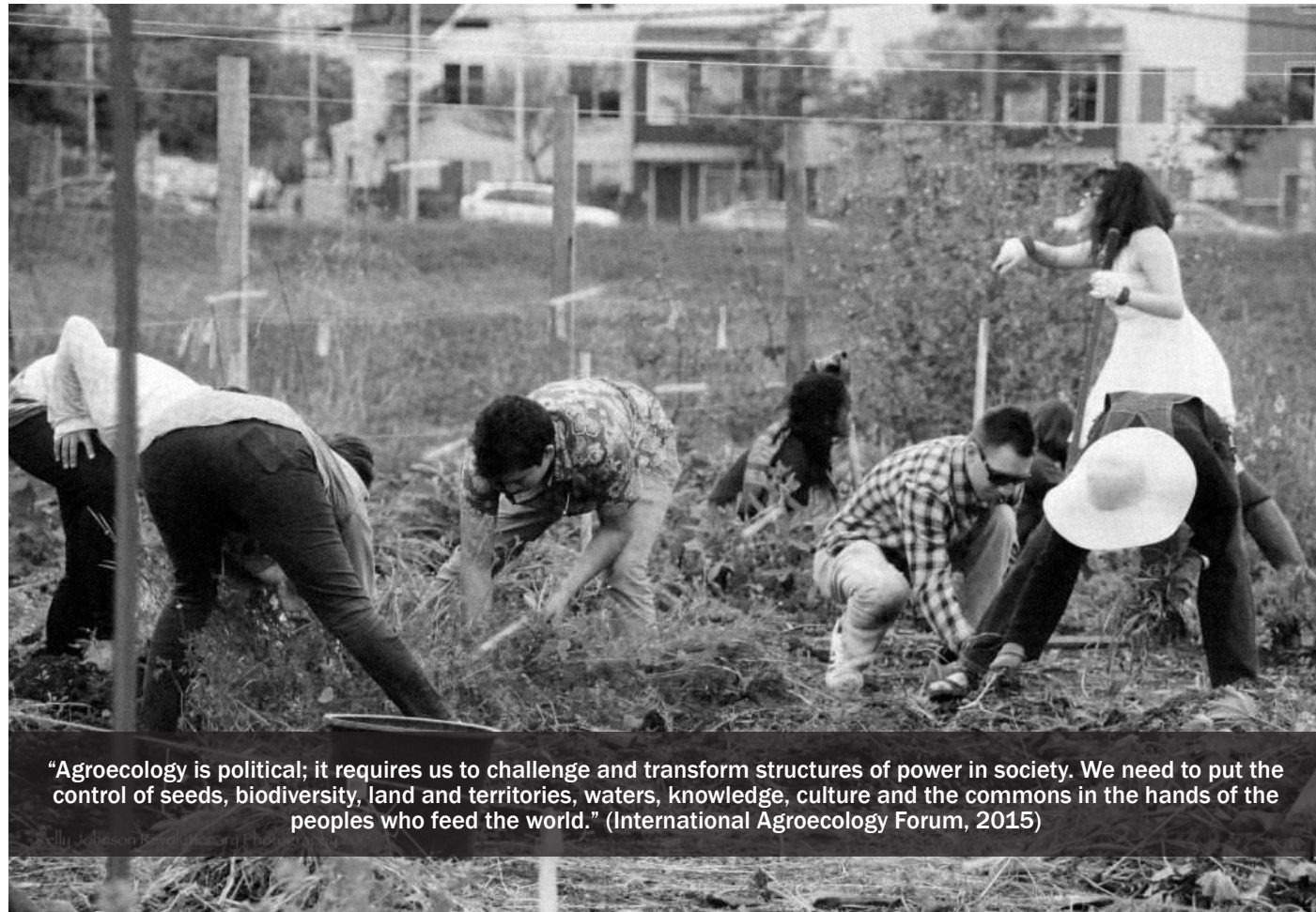


FIG. 1 (right): Cover pattern & diagram.  
*The Principles of Prefiguration*.  
Authors Own (2016)

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“Agroecology is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society. We need to put the control of seeds, biodiversity, land and territories, waters, knowledge, culture and the commons in the hands of the peoples who feed the world.” (International Agroecology Forum, 2015)

# 1. THE LIBERATION OF THE LAND

GILL TRACT FARM. ALBANY, CALIFORNIA, USA, 1997-PRESENT

Occupy the Farm is an ongoing 20 year struggle, in which students, professors, and local residents have fought to save the 20 remaining acres of land at Gill Tract from development, and use it for sustainable agriculture.

The movement uses a broad spectrum of tactics to reclaim and expand the commons for sustainable farming and education. A main tactic is direct action - the cornerstone of prefiguration.

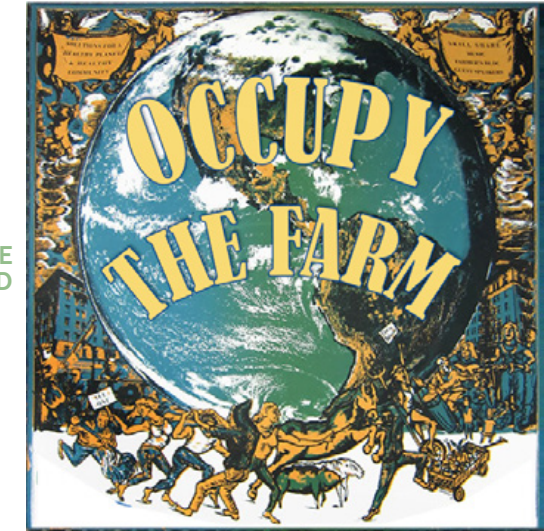
“Our goal is to heal our ecosystems, expand biodiversity, and embrace the wisdom of indigenous & traditional practices of stewardship and knowledge of the land, as we work to dismantle the systemic injustices which have separated people from these central relationships.” (Occupy the Farm, no date)

FIG. 2 (left): Photograph.  
Autogestion on Gill Tract farm.  
Johnson (2015)

FIG. 3 (right)  
Occupy the Farm.  
Occupy the Farm (no date)

RESIST MONOCULTURE

LIBERATE THE  
LAND



RECLAIM THE  
COMMONS

CULTIVATE THE COMMUNITY



“We’re not trying to change what the University does on the land; we’re trying to change who governs the land. And there’s a very big difference between a campaign to change practice, and a campaign to change power dynamics.”  
(Gopal, 2012)

Since the late 1990s, the Real Estate division of the University of California has planned to privatise the whole piece of public land, in what is effectively a corporate land grab from the people. Plans include a supermarket, senior housing, and other commercial development. (Occupy the Farm, no date) This warns of the effects of the increasingly close relationship between universities and corporate funding.

Amongst peaceful sit-down protests (Fig. 4), there have been multiple active occupations, where occupiers cleared the tall grass (Fig.2) and

planted vegetable gardens, with huge support from over 100 members of the community.

Since the occupations were raided by police, the focus switched to establishing a partnership with the University’s College of Natural Resources.

Autogestion is at the core of “Occupy the Farm”: that we should be more capable of altering our own surroundings. Through reducing the spread of the market through decommodification, we can experiment more freely in time and space.



FIG. 4 (across): Photograph.  
Silent meditators halt construction.  
Occupy the Farm (2016)

“The intention behind the use of horizontalidad is not to determine “the” path that should be taken but to create the space for a conversation in which all can participate and in which all can determine together what the future should look like, while at the same time attempting to prefigure that future society in present social relationships.”  
(Sitrin, 2014: 249)

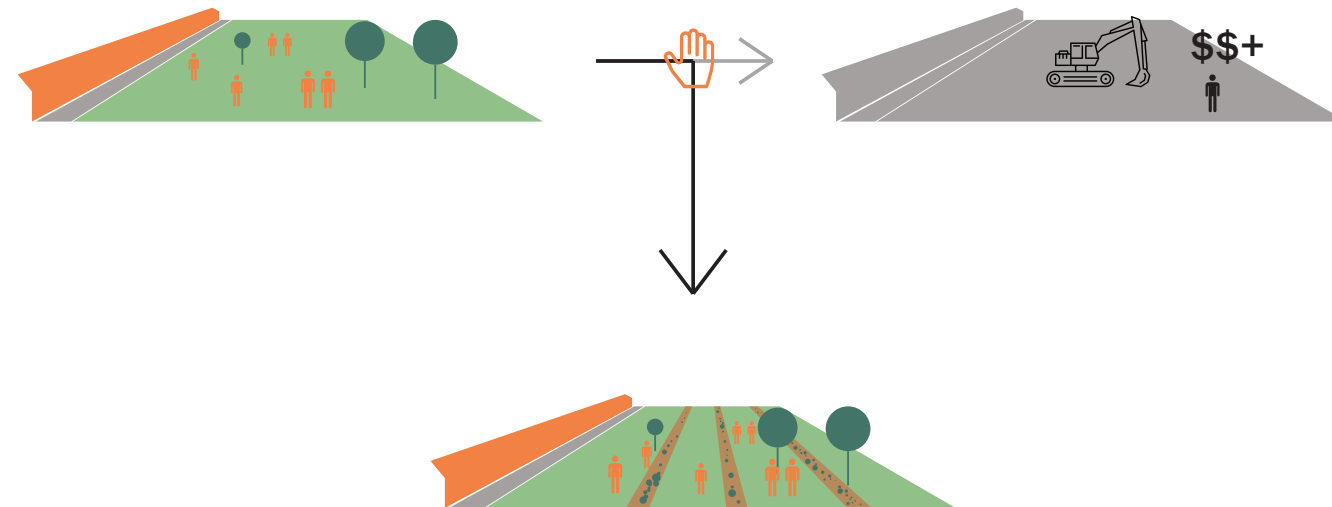


FIG. 5: Diagram.  
Land and Autogestion.  
Authors Own (2016)



“As a “fire-break” stops or redirects the spread of fire, this act does not erase history, but perhaps redirects its future.”  
(Detroit Collaborative Design Center, no date)

## 2. THE LIBERATION OF TIME

### FIRE BREAK. DCDC, DETROIT, MICHIGAN, USA, 2001-PRESENT

Detroit has struggled with arson for decades. Currently, with the city on the verge of bankruptcy, the scale of the problem is an insistent reminder of the depths of its decline. (Neavling, 2013)

Burnt out shells of timber houses can lie vacant for years before the government takes an action. This is having a detrimental effect on neighbourhoods and their communities.

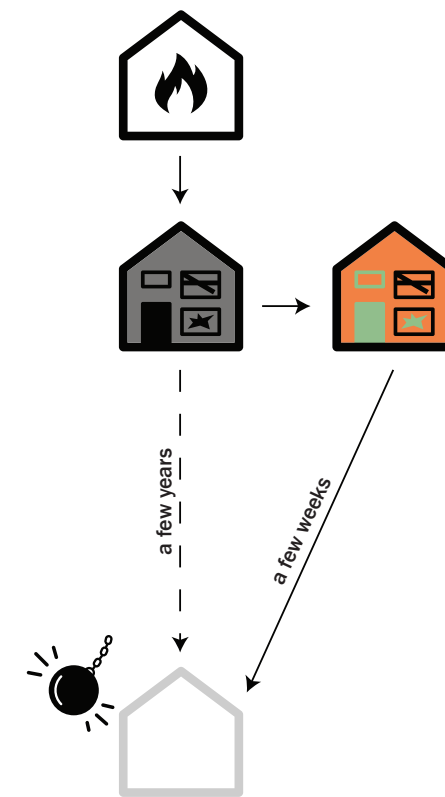
The Detroit Collaborative Design Center, a facet of the Detroit School of Architecture, deals primarily with Neighbourhood-based projects. “Fire Break” was a catalyst in the neighbourhood, intended to inspire action in the community.

Instead of waiting to delegate the authority to transform the space,

FIG. 6 (left): Photograph.  
*Skinned House*, 2004.  
Bonnemaïson. Eisenbach (no date)

FIG. 7 (right): Diagram.  
*We will not wait*.  
Authors Own (2016)

students worked with local residents to create a number of varying installations on burnt derelict houses (Fig.8). A surprising, yet positive outcome occurred: following the installations, the houses were demolished in weeks. (Fig. 7)



With utopian designs, there is a temporal gap. They respond to a current issue, but in the future. This suspends the chance of action. We don't need to wait.

An architecture of change comes through tiny empowerments, systematic change, harvesting power from collectivity. It is important to insert at the scale in which you can engage.

“For a few hours during the course of the installation, Cajun music joined the wind blowing through the empty structure to reanimate Sound House. Motown's citizens gathered to listen to the music. The billowing orange drapes hung in the openings, shielding the interior from view, restored in a small way a sense of decorum and privacy” (Bonnemaïson and Eisenbach, 2009:121)

#### SOUND HOUSE



Completed: 2001

The inside of the house was filled with local musicians. Visitors could listen from the outside, but not see fully into the interior.

#### HAY HOUSE



Completed: 2001

Drawing on the notion of urban farming, participants covered the house with 5,000 small bundles of hay.

#### HOUSE WRAP



Completed: 2004

The exterior of the house was wrapped in a clear plastic bodybag.

Whilst 6 houses may seem invisible in the scale of the city, DCDC have created a moment of disruption that can be repeated, on multiple scales, and applied to varying situations. The houses are not isolated fragments. They are present examples showing how we can change urban policy, ending the cycle of waiting by bypassing the protest and response gap. Intervention does not end in physical manifestation; it is borne out of that example.

#### SKINNED HOUSE



Completed: 2004

Covering the house in thick paint preserved its haptic memory, when peeled off, like a rubbing.

#### HOUSE WARE



Completed: 2008

Specimens from the house were catalogued and put into vials, which were then placed in a box made from the burned wood of the house. A new house is now being built on the site; this box will be given to its owner.

#### PUBLISHING HOUSE



Completed: 2008

Linking back to the idea of the building as a canvas for activism, what motivated this project was the desire to bring together the community.



### 3. THE LIBERATION OF INFRASTRUCTURE

#### INTELIGENCIAS COLECTIVAS. INTERNATIONAL, 2009-PRESENT

We are increasingly defined by material supports, and reliant on physical infrastructures, such as housing and transport. As urban subjects, we are increasingly dependant on networks, at both ends of the social scale.

In his text “The right to infrastructure”, Corsin Jiménez (2014) deliberately echoes Henri Lefebvre’s famous phrase “The right to the city”, and puts a modern twist on the theory. He speaks of an open source urbanism, with the city as an educational frontier. Running along his main idea of an open source infrastructure is that of the prototype. Of course, this is at the heart of prefigurative architecture.



“social and material components retrofit each other as being in mutual suspension”  
(Corsin Jiménez, 2014)

FIG. 10 (left): Photograph.  
*The Offficina.*  
Zuloark (2012)

Initially, Inteligencias Colectivas (The IC Project) was an educational experiment for architectural students across America. The real challenge was not in finding or inventing your intelligence (Fig. 11), but in charting the technical specifications, assembly instructions and so forth (Fig. 12), for your intelligence to be uploaded on the platform and be universally shared, protected by a Creative Commons license.

Everything is accessible and open source, kept open to scrutiny and readaptation, almost having been designed to be structurally unstable. As Corsin Jiménez notes, black boxing blocks curious tinkering.

Disseminating architectural technologies prevents the commodification of the expert. The resulting autoconstructive creativity can turn dead space into a platform for communal engagement.

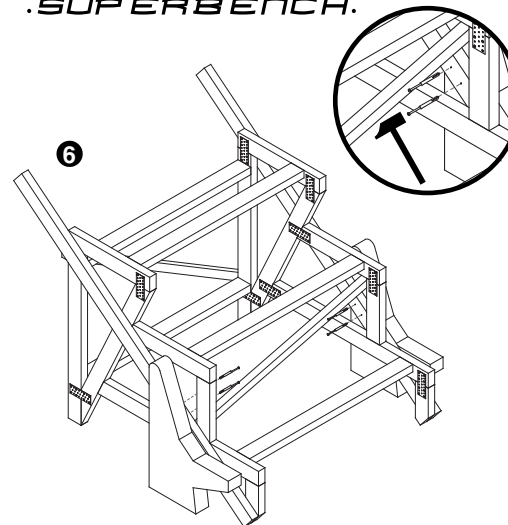
“These projects have made visible novel systems of urban intelligences. They have quite literally equipped the city with novel conceptual hardware, including technical designs, medial systems, and actual material interventions.” (Corsin Jiménez, 2014)



FIG. 11 (across): Photograph.  
Superbench, 2011.  
Zoohaus (2011)

**ic** **inteligencia  
colectiva**  
[budapest]

.SUPERBENCH.



#### Instalación en el lugar

- 6 Anclaje de la estructura al banco preexistente  
4x. Tornillo de percusión 10cm
- 7 Colocación de tablas de asiento  
24x2m. Madera de pino, sección 2x12.  
Caja de 200 Clavos 2 1/2 x 11

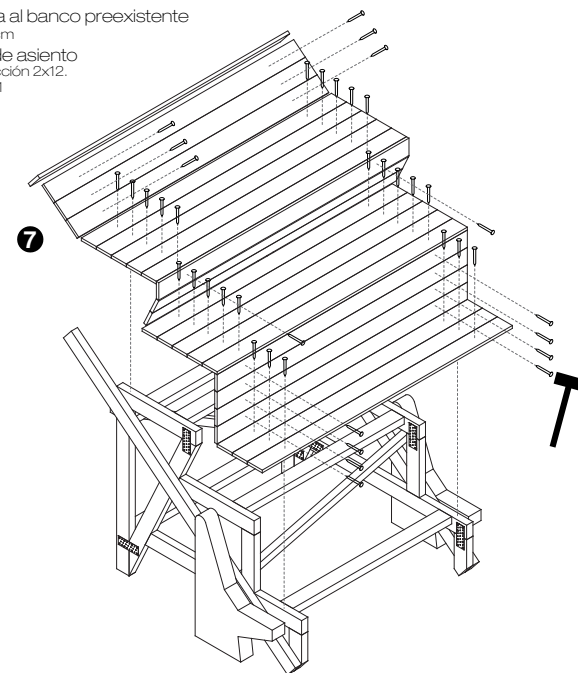


FIG. 12: Construction manual.  
Superbench, 2011.  
Zoohaus (2011)



## 4. THE LIBERATION OF CONSTRUCTION

### INFLATABLES. ANT FARM, USA, 1970s

The catalyst for Ant Farm's inflatable architecture is said to be the heaviness of the Brutalist movement. (Spatial Agency, no date)

Practicing in the countercultural movement immediately post-1968, there were new ideas of nomadicism, temporary dwelling, and autonomy. Dwelling means to be able to do something else, and to be a citizen means to be of a space. The latter is flipped on its head with the nomadic lifestyle.

New technology gives way to old assumptions. Ant Farm, amongst others, employed radical materials and techniques in the search of something new, something better than before.

"It's simple to look at an inflatable plastic wonder and accuse the creator of wide-eyed optimism and impractical daydreaming. But isn't that sentiment at the core of what we consider larger architecture's mission?" (Sisson, 2016)

FIG. 13 (left): Photograph.  
50 x 50' pillow (1970), installation at Saline Valley, California for Whole Earth Catalogue Supplement.  
Spatial Agency (no date)

is important here to raise the issue of the utopia: the antithesis of the prefigurative method. Whilst to look at, the inflatables may seem utopian, the fundamental reason I would consider them to be a prefigurative intervention is the “Inflatocookbook” (Fig.14). This was a comprehensive document published with the idea that people could then build their own inflatable structures. Perhaps not many people carried on the work, but, like the manuals of the IC project, they were liberated with the knowledge of construction.

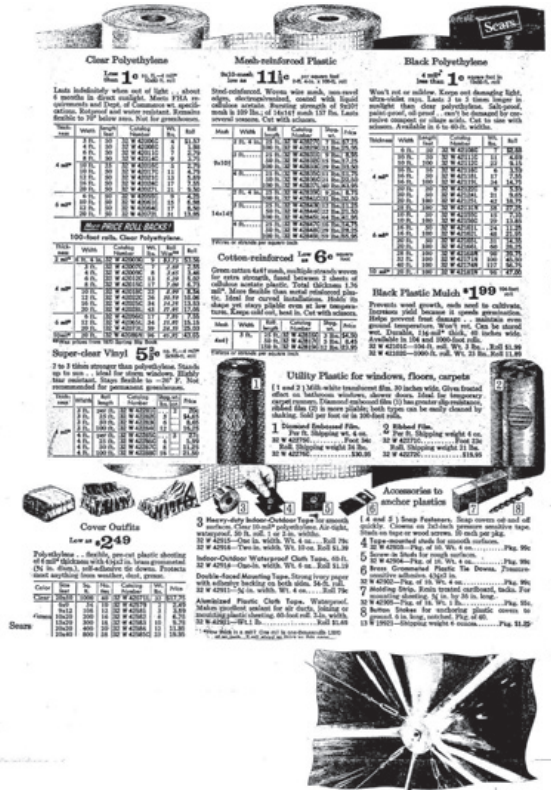
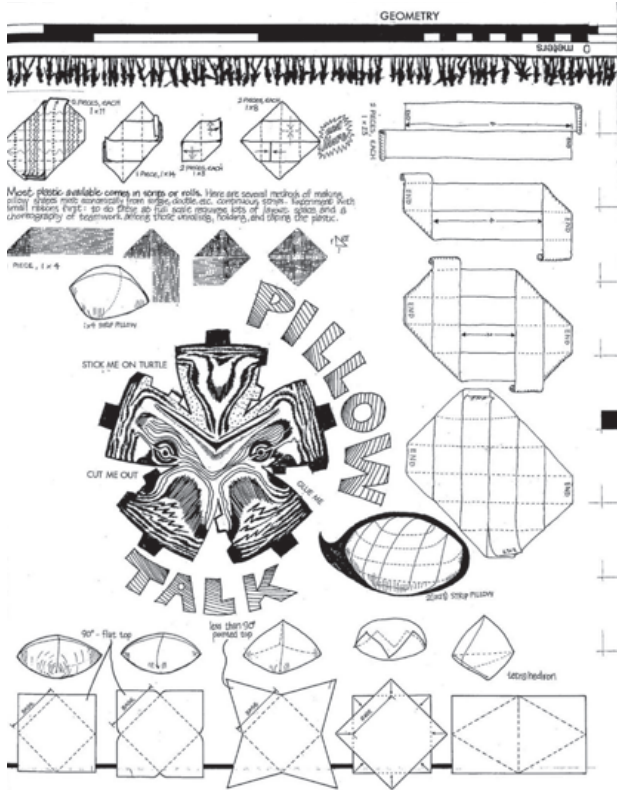


FIG.14 (right): Publication.  
*Pages from Inflatocookbook.*  
Ant Farm (1973)



## 5. THE LIBERATION OF SHELTER

### SQUATTERS. DUCIE BRIDGE PUB, MANCHESTER, ENGLAND, 2016

Squatting takes a redundant space (in this case, a vacant pub), and gives it use value. This disruption of space and the notion of ownership is certainly subversive, but is it prefigurative? Certainly, the act is immediate; it takes control, and shows the potential of a different use for the space. However, it is also isolated and often extremely temporary, usually with little permanent message or solution. Therefore, even though it is subversive, instant, and suggesting of decommodification, it cannot really be considered a prefigurative action.

In the case of the Ducie Bridge pub, the occupants employed a clever combination of squatting and protest, resulting in a longer occupation than would normally occur. By using the building as a canvas for activism (Fig. 15), they revealed the untapped

potential of the structure whilst it lay dormant, and highlighted key issues, possible solutions, and villainous actors, such as the surprisingly corporate Co-operative. The squatters' lead spokesperson Chris also voiced frustration at the limitations of his ability to modify the building for its temporary use (Fig.16).

This level of direction, planning, and advertisement leads this particular case of squatting into becoming an example of a prefigurative action from the most deprived section of society.

"It is just frustrating because we could have used the building for so much more. We could have created a soup kitchen, and we could have got the showers working to help people keep clean."



"The housing question may not be resolvable under capitalism. But the shape of the housing system can be acted upon, modified, and changed." (Madden and Marcuse, 2016:6)

FIG. 15 (left): Photograph.  
The Squatted Pub.  
Vice (2016)

FIG. 16 (right): Photograph.  
Chris Blaine protesting on the roof of the pub.  
Allen (2016)

Speech bubble text: Quote from Christopher Blaine, the group's main spokesperson.  
(Bardsley, 2016)

**“Housing crisis is not a result of the system breaking down but of the system working as intended.”**  
(Madden and Marcuse, 2016:10)

It is estimated by the UN that the planet's homeless population lies between 100 million and 1 billion people. This figure changes depending on how homelessness is defined.

Whilst we are all too aware of the problem, we do not fully understand it, and even less how to prevent it. Furthermore, it would be naive to presume that this lack of prevention stems purely from a lack of knowledge.

In their recently published work “In Defense of Housing”, Madden and Marcuse (2016) highlight the ideological distortion of the “housing crisis”. The phrase is politically loaded, suggesting a temporary state of affairs that will get better. In fact, the housing

crisis is perhaps a vital component that is required for the capitalist system to work.

Like Madden and Marcuse, the Ducie Bridge Squatters exposed the nature of the system, but in a more publicly accessible way. By using the building as a means of exposure, the “writing on the wall” was there for all passers-by to see, for the duration of two months.

Although this action ultimately failed, in terms of finding anybody a permanent home or solution, the case drew a large amount of publicity in Manchester and arguably may have accelerated the discussion on the urgent housing problem, locally.

FIG. 17 (across): Timeline of Events.  
From Occupation to Eviction.  
Authors Own (2016)

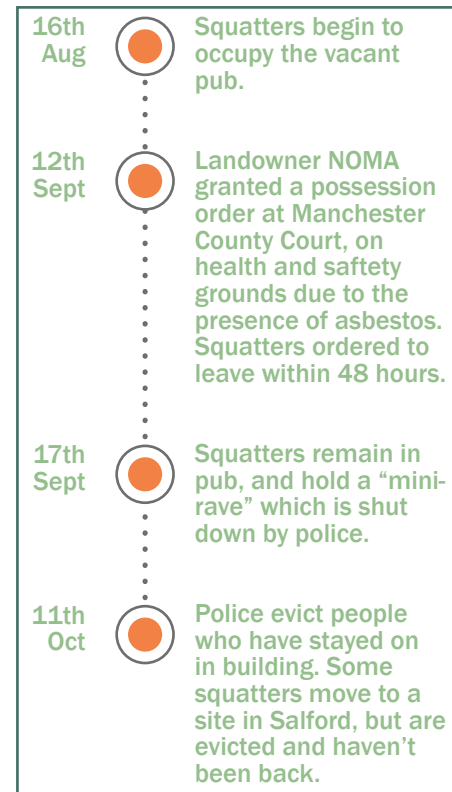


FIG. 18 (above): Photograph.  
The Building as a Canvas for Activism.  
Salford Star (2016)

FIG. 19 (top right): Photograph.  
Slogans written by squatters at Ducie Bridge.  
Bardsley (2016)



FIG. 20 (centre): Photograph.  
Christopher Blaine, 41, and Liam McLoughlin, 18, among the squatters at the Ducie Bridge pub.  
Manchester Evening News (2016)



FIG. 21 (bottom right): Photograph.  
Former Ducie Bridge pub landlord, Dave Foran, comes down to show support, with Danny from the squat.  
Salford Star (2016)



“Commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, and social factors.”  
(Appadurai, 1986:15)

An actor heavily lambasted in the squatters' slogans was the buildings landowner: NOMA/The Co-operative. It was this organisation who pushed for the swift eviction of the squatters, despite having no immediate plans for the demolition or reuse of the vacant building. Looking at the Co-operative values (Fig. 22), there is certainly a great irony in the situation.

This only goes to show that space has become commodified to an extreme degree. We cannot wait for policies, or delegate the ability to transform our surroundings. Social needs need not be subordinated to economic necessity. The reproduction of the housing system can be a catalyst for social change. Housing is a resource that should be available to all.

FIG. 22 (across): Photograph.  
Co-op Ethical Policy.  
Salford Star (2016)

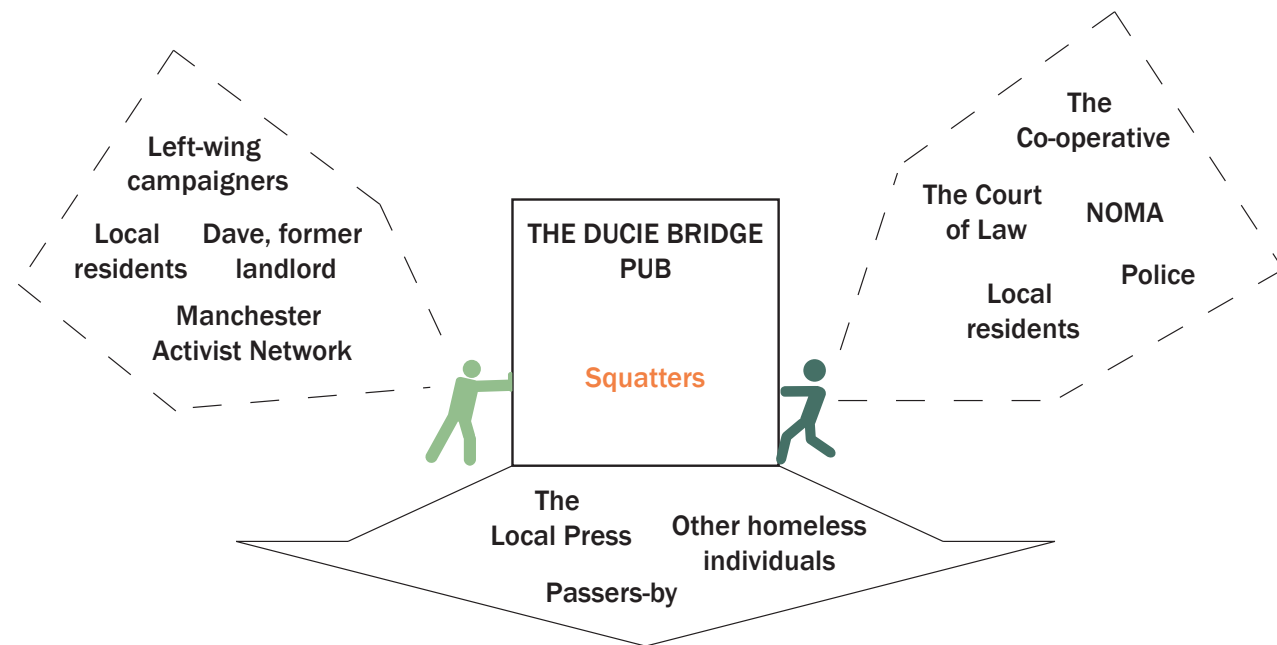


FIG. 23 (right): Diagram.  
Actors, Ducie Bridge Squatting.  
Authors Own (2016)

## REFLECTION

A common theme running through the instances of prefiguration that I have just discussed is that they all happened in times and conditions of austerity, uncertainty, or depravity. Of course, this makes sense; prefiguration is one answer to a problem, that is, the systems by which we must live are never perfect, and often they drastically fail us.

In order to improve our future through the employment and development of previous tactics (prefigurative or otherwise), we might first seek to understand the present. There lies a great importance in defining and being aware of the personality of 2016 (Fig.24), in order to decide whether prefigurative action is the strongest means of achieving a better outcome.

FIG. 24 (across): Photomontage.  
*Started this. Regretted it about halfway through.  
 Bit like 2016 really.*  
 Barker (2016)





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