

Flowerpots: Objects of Misuse

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This paper will examine the radical behavior of discrete and contentious objects of urbanism in Detroit that perform as deviations of everyday objects. Through a series of examples analyzed through a discussion of object-thing theory, including art work and contemporary architecture, the paper argues that the intentional misuse of objects in Detroit may offer a framework to consider discrete, site specific, and architectural-scale propositions that interface between urbanism and infrastructure.

OBJECTS OF MISUSE

The flower pot, an innocuous object, fitting comfortably both in the domestic and public realm, made national headlines in 2015, labeled as “controversial, divisive, and even racist.”¹ The offending flowerpots resemble their typical brethren albeit for one substantial difference: their scale. Standing five feet tall, they are affiliated less so with flowers than with trees. They trade in their horticultural aspirations for those that are more nefarious, serving as a wall-like infrastructural assemblage sited along the contentious border between Detroit and the wealthy City of Grosse Pointe Park; a border which has been described as one where “race and class collide...like nowhere else in the region, perhaps the nation.”²

That the flowerpots have emerged as mechanisms of division between these two conditions speaks to the power of everyday objects, that their quotidian nature might be leveraged to disguise otherwise overt divisive tactics. Simultaneously, the flowerpots also engage the architect’s fascination with everyday objects; that the manipulation of their traits and form register new meaning and provide the grounds for opportunistic appropriation. The Grosse Pointe flowerpots in fact do just this, and, here, are posited as the latest in the evolution of an alarming history of Detroit’s racist border control strategies. Hidden beneath the surface of the pot-figure is a systemic and overt history of border control in the city. The contemporary manifestation employs a duplicity that feigns domesticity, even congeniality, to accomplish its goals.

SYSTEMIC HISTORICAL BORDER CONTROL

In *Driving Detroit*, George Galster remarks that “Intense competition over turf has been Detroit’s hallmark from its inception.” It is in the

pursuit and protection of land that Detroiters have been walling themselves off, literally and figuratively, from the feared “other” since Fort Detroit three centuries ago. Reinforced by institutional racism, the value (or lack of value) of property shaped the grim turf battles that plagued 20th Century Detroit. Two infamous strategies found in Detroit and other major northern cities—redlining and blockbusting—provided the framework for racial divisions that remain present in areas today. Redlining instituted by banks and insurance companies refused mortgages and limited other financial services based on the racial composition of the neighborhood.³

Redlining produced overcrowded enclaves and real estate agencies took advantage, applying scare tactics to strategically buy adjacent properties from white owners at low prices and resell to black buyers at inflated prices. This process of blockbusting became one of the pressures that caused white homeowners to defend and fortify, or retreat; to intensify their efforts to protect their turf, or abandon their neighborhoods and move further outside of the city. It was immensely influential in producing the makeup today where the city of Detroit is predominantly black while its suburban ring is predominantly white. With the introduction of barriers such as the 8-Mile Wall—constructed to prevent the integration of races in neighborhoods and sanctioned by the Federal Housing Association⁴—the systemic policies of division were transformed from red lines on maps into physical boundaries within communities.

In other areas, less visible tactics were more duplicitous. In an effort to screen potential residents and control municipal occupancy, private detectives working with Grosse Pointe Real Estate Agents infamously enacted a point system to investigate interested buyers using a series of crude questions framed to determine one’s ethnicity.⁵

Out of 100 points, the “preferred group” (native-born whites) needed 50 points to qualify, Polish 55, Greek 65, Italian 75, Jewish 86, while Black and Asian were immediately disqualified. When these systems failed to maintain the divisions between races, often violent scare tactics were deployed within the communities. These strategies, including redlining, blockbusting, physical barriers, point systems and violence, were complicit in forming the stark racial and socioeconomic divisions, edges, and borders that we still see and feel today. In 2017, this divide can be clearly read at the infamous Grosse Pointe-Detroit border: known arguably as the starkest juxtaposition of economic scenarios in the country.



Figure 1: Left, 8 Mile Wall. Right, Grosse Pointe Park Flowerpots scale comparison, 2016

GROSSE POINTE BORDER

If in the 1950's Grosse Pointe established covert tactics of division at a *policy* level, since then we have seen an accumulation of *physical* artifacts of this division. These demarcations recall the strategies put forth by Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space* in the 1970's, put into practice in the Five Oaks neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio. Through a series of edits to the street grid system, Newman articulated strategies of cutting streets, forming cul-de-sacs, and thereby parceling neighborhoods into smaller chunks that renewed ownership values among its inhabitants, dramatically cutting crime and illicit activity. Effectively, by editing the infrastructure of the city, it became controllable.

In the case of Five Oaks the intent was to foster inclusionary practices within the neighborhood, namely that the techniques focused on generating self-preservation initiatives within the city (neighbors looking out for one another and the neighborhood).⁶ But in Grosse Pointe, similar tactics have been introduced and spliced into the border between Detroit and Grosse Pointe with an opposite intended effect: employed instead as exclusionary practices.

In fact, we might recall Fort Detroit to contextualize the physical boundary as a contemporary colonial procedure in which the wall is used to secure oneself from a vast territory surrounding it. Instead of an unknown wilderness, the territory surrounding an enclave consists of a perceived out-group or feral city: of perceived or actual threat defined by economic poverty and crime.

In *Cities Under Siege*, Stephen Graham catalogs the numerous ways in which "aggressive physical restructuring," as well as "violent reorganization of the city," is used, and has been used throughout history, as a means of securing and/or controlling a city's population. The architectural redesign of cities can thus be used as a set of military policing tactics as much as it can be discussed as a topic in academic planning debates.

He extends the argument to the introduction of military tactics into everyday spaces of cities, blurring "homeland" from its "colonies" and suggesting via Michel Foucault: "A whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could



Figure 2: Detroit-Grosse Pointe Border at Alter Road and Brooks Avenue.

practice something resembling colonization, or an internal colonialism, on itself." Geoff Manaugh continues this argument: "If it works in Baghdad, the assumption goes, then let's try it out in Detroit."

Graham goes on to suggest the "boomerang effects" of military tactics emerging in everyday urban environments where "hard, military-style borders, fences and checkpoints around defended enclaves and 'security zones,' [are] superimposed on the wider and more open city..."⁷

Fortified enclaves such as Belfast's peace walls/lines reinforce the social order that arises out of these methods of spatial governance. Constructed as blunt physical objects meant to divide Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods, these elements also engender more subtle clues of division. No longer strictly infrastructural, they acquire signification in being painted as memorials to fallen comrades. The wall, while a divisive infrastructure, itself is unbiased: the image is not.

To be clear, the tactics employed by Oscar Newman also demonstrate this potential but suggest that a spectrum exists where by the physical manipulation of street networks range from those that empower its inhabitants to those that exclude and exert political will. How do and how can we read these gestures for what they are?

In Grosse Pointe we see a series of border tactics that emulate Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space* and Stephen Graham's urban military design practices (at a domestic scale). In the late 60's the top down, systematic nature of division in communities begins to transform into smaller scale tactics of defense exhibited along the Grosse Pointe border.

If we look back to a street map of the 1940's and at the Grosse Pointe Detroit divide, the fabric reads relatively even on both sides. Streets that were once connected are today disconnected: out of the twelve streets that run perpendicular to Alter Road, only two remain to stitch the sides together.

Four strategies of physical division emerge: roads are blocked, cut, jogged and reoriented. Sometimes brutal cuts, in the case of the bridge removal and blockade at Alter Road and Korte Avenue and sometimes forming perceptual blockades, as in the case of the parking lot placed at Mack Avenue and Beaconsfield Avenue. Subtle as some of the divisions

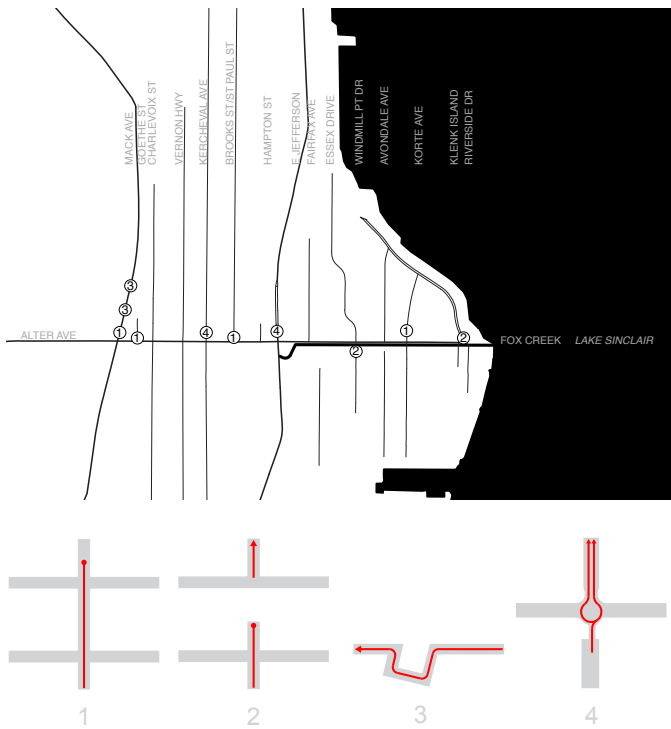


Figure 3: Detroit-Grosse Pointe Border. Disconnection tactics. along Alter Road and Mack Avenue.

may seem, it is important to realize them as a collection of strategies intended to defend and deflect.

OBJECTS AND THINGS

As mentioned previously, Detroit’s legacy of policy-sanctioned divisions still have a material presence in the city. For instance, today the 8-Mile wall remains, but has taken on an entirely different meaning wherein it no longer divides two neighborhoods from one another but, instead, is now immersed within a single community. In its contemporary situation, the 8 Mile Wall’s agency as a divider has been stripped away, not by manipulation or destruction but by reinterpretation within a transformed context that has muted the binary condition upon which walls thrive. And yet in its place, at the Detroit-Grosse Pointe border just ten miles to its east, the oversized flowerpots absorb the history of a divided city—acting today more wall-like than the wall itself.

In Bill Brown’s essay, *Thing Theory*, he explains that “things” are objects that in some way have lost their accepted or intended use. In transitioning from objects to things, they alter the subject-object relation, allowing the subject to rethink an object’s predetermined meaning. As Brown says:

“We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how

the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation”⁸

In other words, what do we do with the broken drill? How do we reinterpret the dirty window? What uses do they have for us?

Just as everyday items do, objects found in the public realm take on the characteristics of thinghood once they no longer perform their sanctioned function. For example, a road that no longer serves to connect, a wall that no longer divides, or a flowerpot that no longer serves as a vessel, alters the subject’s perception and relationship to the object, and the narrative that it projects. This may begin to explain why citizens of Detroit and Grosse Pointe so drastically disagree on the intention of the Grosse Pointe Flowerpots:

*The purpose of the supersized flowerpots is to beautify the border, borrowing the design of friendly, giant flowerpots from European plazas.*⁹

*The flowerpots, along with a series of other strategies tested at the border, as “discriminatory and act as a physical and symbolic barrier between two cities.”*¹⁰

This conceptual fissure is a reason we are able to project alternative narratives: the perception of these objects is precisely what the thinghood/ness of the flowerpots imply: that while Grosse Pointe suggests they are merely routine objects improving the environment of the street, Detroit notes the duplicity and disingenuous political control they exert. Aside from the perceived aesthetic value as recognizable domestic objects, the flowerpots once scaled up, function as disguised blockades and redirect traffic away from the main point of intersection and serve to block views of Detroit’s dilapidated buildings.

For Detroit’s residents the over-scaled flowerpots become a divisive wall to racially divide, while for the inhabitants of Grosse Pointe the flowerpots serve as bollards and barriers that protect children from traffic. In other words, for one group they are a device for keeping subjects out (and alienated), for the other they are a device for keeping subjects in (and protected). What both can agree upon is that the flowerpots no longer achieve their supposedly primary function: to house plant life. Both physical and conceptual, this gap is a territory where architectural-scale objects operate as discrete urban artifacts that reveal challenges and tensions. It is a space where architects, artists, and thinkers, can re-think things.

The strategies tested at the border, from traffic cones to snow piles to market stalls to flowerpots become increasingly benevolent on one hand in their appearance, yet are increasingly permanent and divisive.

BLACKBOXED

We might consider the flowerpots in the way that we consider infrastructure: as blackboxed. Or as historian Paul Edwards describes, via architect and urbanist Deane Simpson, as “merging with the background of the habitual everyday” where systems and objects such as cars, roads, sewers, telephones “reside in a naturalized background, ordinary and unremarkable to us as trees, daylight, and dirt.” We depend on them, but mainly notice them when they fail. ¹¹ Just as elevators and stair cores are the infrastructure of buildings, the flowerpot can be read as

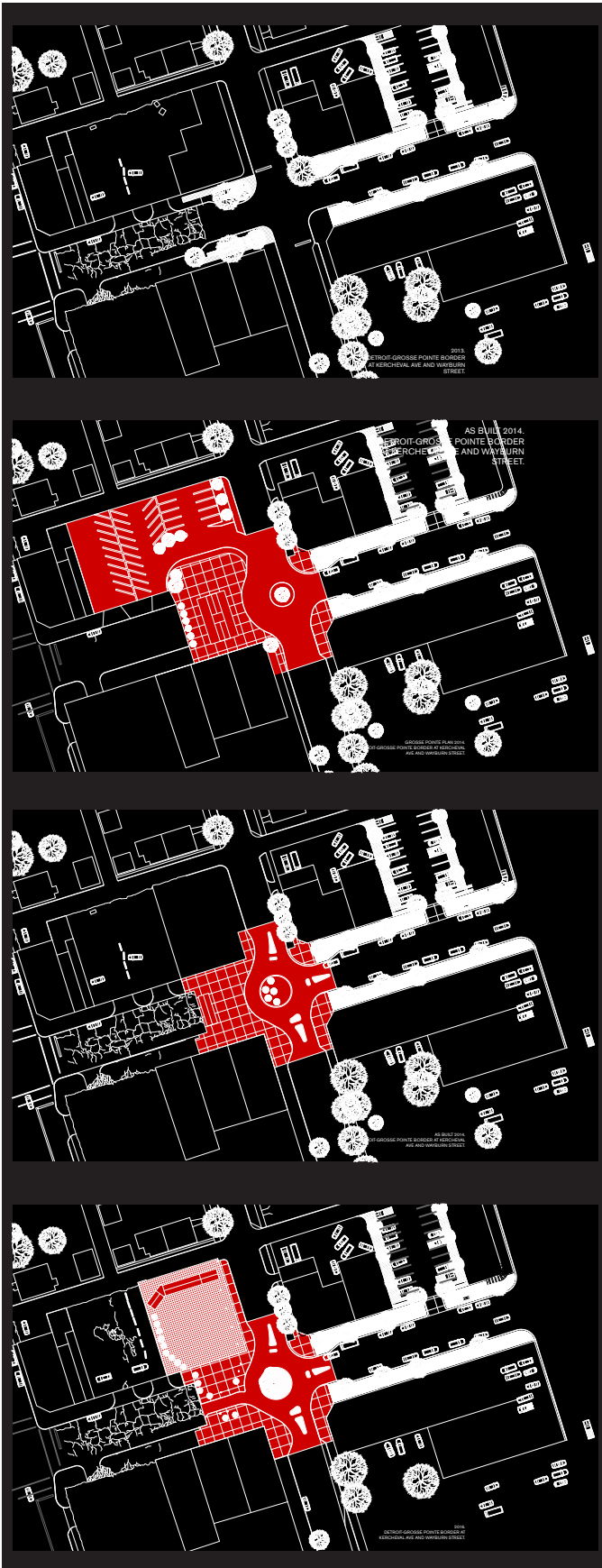


Figure 4: Detroit-Grosse Pointe Border at Kercheval Ave And Wayburn Street. Plan depict the recent transformations and addition of flowerpots. 2013-2016.

an infrastructure for domestic gardening and horticulture, defining the basic physical structure that allows plants to grow, and absorb and retain water.

Yet at the border at Kercheval and Wayburn, we are presented with a series of everyday objects that disguise the barrier or wall that they collectively form. Their friendly demeanor is marked by their materiality and shape, and exhibits wishful thinking that they might disappear into the background and out of our collective perception. However, its scale shift functions in the way that a broken infrastructural system does. When it no longer serves its function (to house plants) it becomes something *other* that no longer performs horticulturally but instead behaves urbanistically.

Alexander D’Hooge has argued that infrastructure, like architecture or sculpture should be understood as objects of cultural production, something to be experienced, which should avoid a strict systemized and functionalist approach and rather embrace a cultural and material presence. D’Hooge goes on to describe the experience of roads as one pertaining to scale. If the car breaks down, from Brown’s reading we understand that this transforms the car from a performing object to a thing of a potentially different kind of use, but it also transforms the road on which you were driving into a thing.¹² Its mutation from a conduit to something unrecognizable in normative terms introduces the experience of scale both physically and temporally: the pedestrian’s relationship does not reach into an infinite expanse without the instrument of the car, thus, the road is now experienced at both a corporeal scale and slower time-scale. Our experience, which is altered by many more intangible elements (speed, culture, politics, history), affects how we interpret things, and becomes an important element in which to critique and understand the qualities of thinghood.

In challenging everyday objecthood by studying the flowerpots’ traits—material, scale, and shape—and the potential of their manipulation, we might critically and physically engage with the subversive Grosse Pointe border strategy by subverting it itself through calibrated readjustments of known objects.

SCALE

It would be helpful to examine strategies of object manipulation, then, to uncover techniques used historically and in contemporary art and architecture.

The act of altering the object, in order to alter one’s perception of the object, was spearheaded by Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades in 1918 which featured everyday objects that were dismantled and recombined. This resonates today in the flowerpots placed in Grosse Pointe, which by enlarging the object act as Pop Art offspring that cause the scalar relationship between the subject and object to be reversed. In contrast to artwork placed in galleries or vacant landscapes such as Surrealist paintings in which dreamlike attributes were ascribed to everyday objects or Pop Art sculptures of supersized everyday objects, objects that appear in the public realm, whether they are at the scale of infrastructure that asserts boundaries and directs flows or at the scale



Fig. 5 Timm Ulrich, Hornbeam with Concrete Flower Pot Französischen Garten
 Photo Credit: Bernd Schwabe in Hannover https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Der_übergroße_Blumentopf_des_Totalkünstlers_Timm_Ulrich

of furniture in urban “beautification” efforts, have gone predominantly unnoticed in the discipline. Yet these objects have, as exemplified by the Grosse Pointe Flowerpot dispute, the ability to alter the subject-object relationship and absorb narratives that are outside of their normative purview.

Scale as a device to challenge our relationship to everyday objects has been extensively studied by Pop artists such as Claes Oldenburg. At face value for Oldenburg, scale is read as a playful tactic to engage the viewer, where his sculptures are often situated in galleries and open landscapes, removed from the external pressures of a more loaded context. When the sculptures do appear in an urban context they begin to absorb the characteristics that are found in urban infrastructural objects such as vertical hardscape surfaces of buildings, sewers, highways and underpasses in which serve as alluring canvases for graffiti. By happenstance, the extra, extra-large flower pot which possesses similar traits, is treated similarly as a target for vandalism. While this observation may seem all too obvious, when considered in juxtaposition with the traditional 8” diameter everyday flowerpot, the absurdity of the flowerpot as a target for tagging emerges as well as its transformed agency as an urban instrument.

MAKING

Shifting in scale subsequently impacts processes of making. The enlarged flowerpot is unlikely constructed by traditional wheel throwing techniques and is more likely cast, negating the necessity of its cylindrical form. The typical material of the flowerpot is terracotta, so widely accepted that even plastic mass produced versions are dyed to a similar

color. For artist, Jean Pierre Raynaud the flowerpot’s form and materiality has become a symbol of the generic, an object mass produced and further cheapened by plastic alternatives, mimicking the form and color to look like clay. Yet, it is these generic qualities that register it as a provocative canvas. Most notably, Jean Pierre Raynaud has used the flowerpot as a base instrument to deploy a series of charged issues that manifest as containers for rubble, surfaces for national flags, and a tremendous gold-leafed surface. The generic nature of the flowerpot is precisely why the placement along the Detroit, Grosse Pointe border is so contentious. As opposed to chasing after an ideal of the proto-typical flowerpot and its image, how might working with alternative methods afford opportunities for new expression and performance?

REORIENTATION

Contemporary architects, as well, have developed techniques that investigate everyday objects through the denial of their performative use, such that other qualities emerge. CODA’s Urchin pavilion is one such project. The project tactically deploys the technique of reorientation as a strategy that converts an object to a thing. In this case flipping the generic lawn chair upside down. From the architect, Caroline O’Donnell: by reorienting the chair “it loses its meaning as an object that affords sitting and becomes instead an architectural surface whose formal and material qualities are allowed to come to the fore: it is white, porous, spikey, etc. before it is a chair.”¹³ In losing its function, the chair-object gains new value as an architectural component with material qualities that replace its use-value.

EXPERIENTIAL APPROPRIATION

Alternatively in the example of SMAQ’s BATH, an object’s use is leveraged to entertain a new performance. When choreographed, objects’ functional and formal qualities might be drawn upon as a strategy of enhancing and inventing new qualities. In SMAQ’s case, the garden hose’s purpose to distribute water is appropriated to create a space of leisure by unfolding, multiplying, and orienting it toward the sun, and creating a surface as a result. The surface form is then celebrated through the performance of a shared bath. That the used water is reclaimed for irrigation at the end of the leisure event cycle reasserts its original functional qualities. Thus, the misuse of the hose assembly as a leisurely appropriation is a spatial yet temporary deflection. The bath is a thing that interrupts and appropriates both the object and its function. Doing so challenges the role of a strictly utilitarian and everyday infrastructure by superimposing it with leisurely qualities that instead expose and celebrate domestic infrastructure.

In both CODA’s *Urchin* and SMAQ’s *BATH*, the architects ask more of everyday mundane objects that populate our world in suggesting that they are ripe for experimentation that might sponsor alternative performance and qualities. In Detroit’s case, we might ask how can the flowerpots offer a similar condition—one concerned with an empathetic reading of the object rather than an acceptance of typical use and therefore a disregard for its potential?

While divisive tactics attempt to limit tangible connections, there are simultaneously less visible flows of resources and capital moving across the borders between Detroit and its suburban neighbors. Regional scale

efforts, such as water distribution networks, proposed rapid transit plans, and state and national funds to restore parks and historic sites continue to maintain connections. But the flower pots invoke a history of tension that remains unresolved and demonstrates a new breed of subversive tactics through the misuse of seemingly harmless objects.

It is precisely the generic appearance of the flowerpot coupled with its contextual placement that renders it contentious. Yet as misused objects, they also make a promising argument for increased attention to seemingly innocent things. In denying the functional attributes of objects, they acquire, even demand, new readings, interpretations and performance. As evidenced in the border condition of Grosse Pointe and Detroit, these imaginative projections have the potential to serve as contentious, even flagrant, discrete urban forms. However, the methods of misuse employed by contemporary architects also outline strategies—via a set of operation manipulations that are both formal: scale and reorientation, and experiential: appropriation—that imbue infrastructural objects with empathy and instead allow us to locate productive new uses and interpretations as urban constructs.

In summary an alternative reading of everyday objects in Detroit might be proposed. Through the strategic manipulation of typical *objects* and their conventional attributes a set of discrete *things* might be generated that provoke a series of questions:

-How do we read quotidian objects once their typical use and form is frustrated?

-How might material processes of making translate and leverage flows of capital that blur boundaries?

-How might new formal techniques and appropriations of objects engage to become infrastructure of the city and provoke performative effects?

-In short, in what ways can misreading and appropriating everyday objects suggest alternative use?

This essay marks the initiation of a two year design and research Michigan-Mellon Fellowship in Egalitarianism and the Metropolis at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. The questions put forth outline an agenda for continued research and exploration to be tested through the design of new objects for the city of Detroit.

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