Can planners design disorder?

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Urban design and planning theory struggle to address this question: is it possible to design urban spaces that encourage informality and unplanned activities? One of the main issues with this question is its contradictory nature: urban designers have the ambition of shaping human behaviour through their designs, which results in introducing order and control in urban places.

The 20th century and the beginning of the 21st have witnessed urban renewal schemes that attempt to remove disorder from cities. From London's slum clearances and construction of modernist housing estates in the post-war period, to the most recent regeneration schemes in social housing, which build on Oscar Newman's 'defensible space' principles to provide safer—and more controlled—urban environments, removing any space that could lead to anti-social behaviour.

Removing disorder from urban environments can result in overly-planned places with no vitality, which do not encourage social interaction or spontaneous activities. The sociologist Richard Sennett, in his first book *The uses of disorder* (1970), affirmed that 'certain kinds of disorder need to be increased in city life', so people become more tolerant towards difference and are better prepared to face unexpected situations. He criticised modern planning for eliminating disorder from cities and creating overly-rigid environments. 46 years after this book was published, regeneration schemes still aim to remove disorder from neighbourhoods and introduce more order.

My piece of research recently published in the *Journal of Urban Design* proposes taking Sennett's notion of positive disorder into urban design. Rather than trying to plan those places where informality is already happening, my research focuses on introducing disorder in overly-rigid environments such as modernist social housing neighbourhoods. For doing so, it proposes designing 'infrastructures for disorder': urban design interventions in the public space of social housing neighbourhoods that *create conditions* for the unplanned use of the public realm and encourage social interaction.

The infrastructures for disorder aim to encourage actions from the bottom-up. Certain urban areas such as some housing estates may not have an appropriate context where this kind of bottom-up urban actions take place and initial interventions might be necessary to motivate them. The role of urban design should be to encourage stronger relationships between people and their surrounding environment so they can have a more active role in its transformation. For proposing the strategies, the paper uses common terms from architectural and urban design practice: surface, section and process. While the strategies on the surface and section look at how people interact with the materiality and the spatiality of the public space, strategies on the

process explore how to build a public realm where the final output is not predetermined, but is the result of people's actions and experiences.