

# 1968: Cities in Protest

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**This paper chronicles the development of research into the built urban environment and how it guides/empowers/stifles social interactions during intense moments of political upheaval. Beginning with a graduate seminar focused on documenting and representing the spatial progression of protest events in 1968, the research has now grown into a multi-dimensional collaborative investigation with a robust set of discoveries, connections, and lessons. The paper summarizes the goals, methodologies, outcomes, dissemination and future possibilities of the research and speculates on its far-reaching implications and parallels with current events.**

## OVERVIEW

Cities are centers of political power and concentrations of authority and culture. As condensers of social interaction, how does the city figure into the way political change unfolds? Protests, for instance, are primarily an urban phenomena; crowds come together, events happen, sometimes in control, sometimes not. Levels of protest vary, going from the most peaceful and ordered to the most violent and chaotic. When and how does a protest transition into a riot? It is not easy to say. Just consider definitions for the following terms: gathering, protest, incident, violence, riot.

In order to study this issue, a recent seminar at the University of Illinois at Chicago traced the social unrest and protests of 1968 within the public spaces of five case-study European and American cities. In these cities (and others) during this time period, political structures came under immense threat after widespread rebuilding post-WWII. The newly formed and motivated populace took to the streets and vehemently demanded changes to existing authority. Whole swathes of cities were taken over with demonstrations, riots, and even occupations by groups that were heretofore unrecognizable in traditional terms. While many of these events are the stuff of popular folklore, the goal of the research was to separate fact from fiction and map the spatiality of these events within their urban contexts. Considered now, some fifty years later, these events are “stress-tests” to conventional urban theory about socialization and public gathering. On the contrary, existing organizations, operations, and the status quo were

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deeply threatened by these events. As such, examination of what happened at the physical level can provide further insight into how political concerns and built fabric affect one another. While these events have been well documented, determining what happened where and when is often less than clear. In each, power took on a unique spatial expression, one which has largely gone unrepresented in existing literature.

## METHOD

Tracing crowd behavior during historical events is a distinct challenge. For the sake of this research, existing photographs, news reports, and histories were assembled to document the motivations for the events, the extent of the conflagrations, as well as the movement and paths of the crowds. In order to understand the role of the physical attributes of the city, the relationship between crowd dynamics, their motivations, and their space were considered in the following ways:

*Cultural Backdrop.* The 1960s were a time of major cultural change, which was widespread but varied wildly by location. This was a period of major new ideas that rippled for decades, with breakthroughs in philosophy, music, and architectural theory. Such new thinking was an essential part to the character of the events taking place in each country. These cultural shifts were examined through representational or “mood” studies, looking at the graphics of mass media and the themes of the day. Cultural investigations were done in a particular disciplined format as collages of nine-squares, combined with a written excerpt from both France and the US, as two major cultural centers of the time. Posters from the May occupation of Paris, record albums, book covers, and cartoons from the Sixties served as source material. These revealed stark contrasts, as the French protests contrasted rebellion against the European older rule, Americans engaged in a mixed affair challenging the power and imagery of consumerism.<sup>1</sup>

*Event Specific Data Gathering.* This included outlining the sequence of the events, their movement, and their evolution. Although there is a great deal of literature on these events, there is very little from a design or urban geography viewpoint. Determining what happened and when was much more challenging than expected. Extensive use of historical photographs in conjunction with accumulated



Figure 1. A student hurling rocks at the police in Paris during the May 1968 student uprising. Gamma-Keystone, via Getty Images in May 1968: A Month of Revolution Pushed France Into the Modern World, by Alissa J. Rubin, New York Times, May 5, 2018

information from varied publications, both mainstream and alternative, were all used to recreate event timelines.

*Crowd Behavior Comparison.* Singular events or particular moments were mapped orthographically over time, categorized and compared between the different case-study cities. While the crowd is understood to be locationally specific, they were also framed independently to establish an inventory of performances informed by the descriptions and definitions of Canetti's in *Crowds and Power*.<sup>2</sup> The study of the physicality of crowd performance with regard to particular physical artifacts, was also briefly explored. Ultimately there were not enough examples or detail to draw conclusions, but it is a direction worthy of additional exploration.

### CASE-STUDY CITIES

The five case-study cities feature events which are sufficiently sympathetic to build a focused understanding of urban protest but vary in underlying motivations and levels of disruption. Paris was primarily occupied by student occupations and worker strikes. In Prague, a momentary outburst of political freedom was quickly quashed by a military response, with tanks confronting citizenry. London's protests were more granular, even calm by nature. Chicago had both political protests and, along with Detroit, race riots of a totally different character.<sup>3</sup>

*London. Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park, Grosvenor Square. (March, October)* Major protests occurred both in the Spring and Fall: first on March 17th at Trafalgar Square, with a march to Grosvenor Square; events of October 27 were more widespread in Grosvenor Square, Hyde Park, Trafalgar Square, and included the seizure of the London School of Economics. In general, these protests were more peaceful than in the other case-study cities, although confrontations with police did occur. In addition, a major march down Whitehall Street was



Figure 2. The aftermath of a night of riots in Paris. Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos in May 1968: A Month of Revolution Pushed France Into the Modern World, by Alissa J. Rubin, New York Times, May 5, 2018

also reviewed as an example of a crowd within a large but confined street area.

*Paris. Student Occupation, and Counter Protests. (May)* The events in Paris during May 1968 were more complex than initially considered. It began with significant labor protests outside of the city in many industrial plants surrounding Paris. It then became a student rebellion in the Latin Quarter based in the Sorbonne. The takeover was violent and extreme with streets barricaded in direct conflict with the needs of the greater public. A massive art campaign of posters and other publications highlighted the uprising. De Gaulle left France for several days in response and upon his return, a major counter-protest on the Champs-Élysée rallied against the students. Seminar analysis focused on the Latin Quarter and the relationship of the events to the small streets typical in that area of Paris.

*Prague. End of Prague Spring, and the Russian Occupation. (August)* The events in Prague were an extreme, ending to a month's long liberalization of the country's political control called the Prague Spring. Czechoslovakia was behind the Iron Curtain, and Russia was uncomfortable with these changes. An agreement was reached with Russia on August 3, but the arrival of Russian troops and tanks a few weeks later put an end to the new ways, as the Kremlin enforced its will on Prague and the country. The Russian tanks arrived as a total surprise; they forced their way through the city center, encountering large groups of people in a variety of circumstances. Analysis focused on the interface between people protesting in the face of these overwhelming forces. The protests varied from direct confrontations to more modest interactions.

*Chicago. Protests and Riots at Democratic National Convention (August)* The protests of the Democratic Convention took place throughout the week of August 25th. They began with uncertainty as to whether the protestors could stay overnight

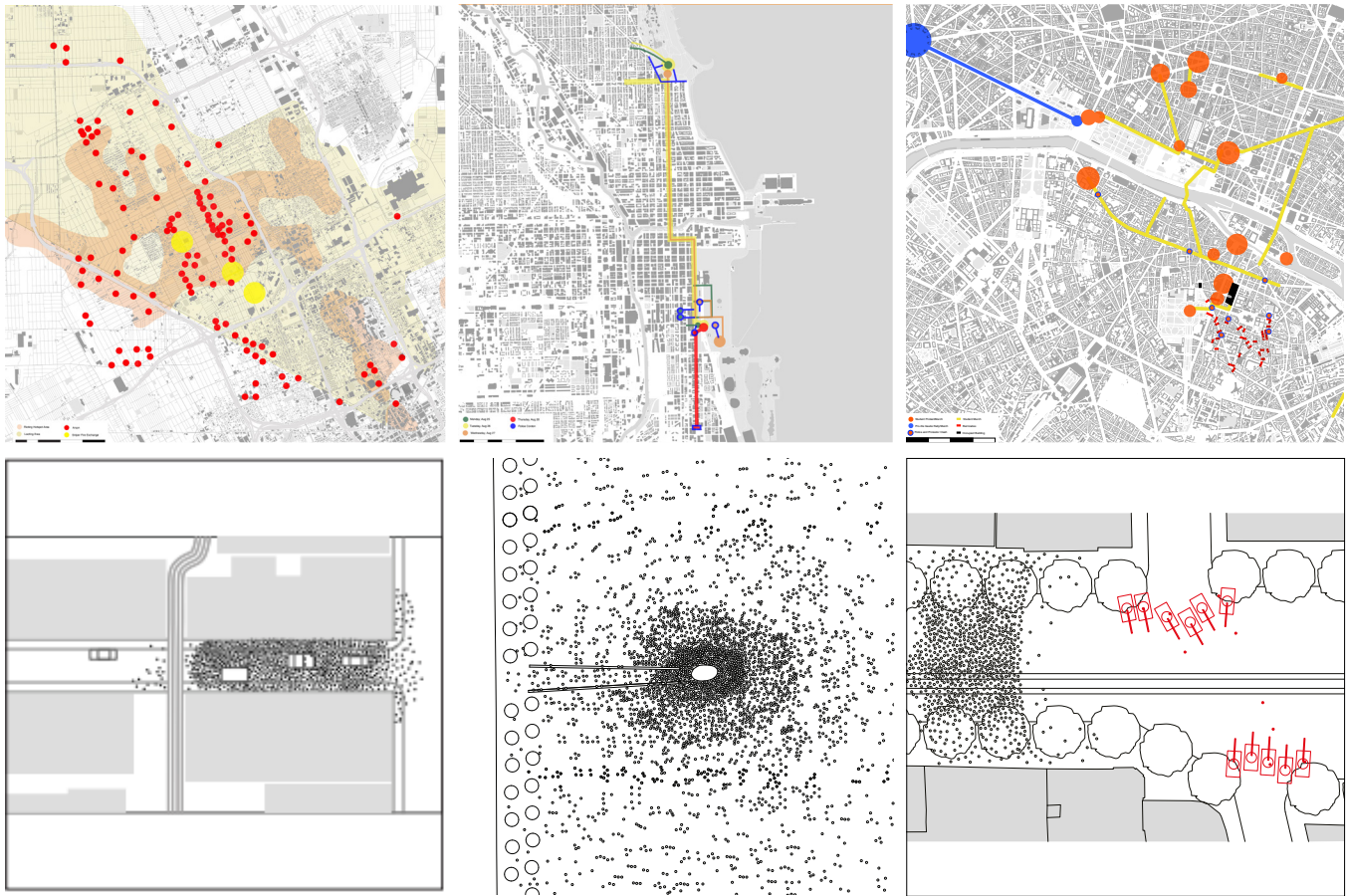


Figure 3. Top row (left-right): Maps of Detroit incidents and riots, 1967; Chicago protests paths and incidents, Democratic Convention, 1968; Paris marches, incidents, and counter-march, 1968. Bottom row (left-right): Diagrams of Chicago, to hear Martin Luther King speak, 1964; Chicago, at park monument near Balbo, 1968; Prague, at street crowd with tanks, 1968. Results from graduate seminar “Cities, Power, and Space”, Spring 2019 at University of Illinois in Chicago.

in the public park, with mixed signals given from the City. There were several marches during that week from Lincoln Park to Grant Park and the nearby Conrad Hilton Hotel, where the conventioners were staying. These ultimately resulted in the famous police riots in front of the hotel.

*Riots on the death of Martin Luther King. (April)* The assassination of Martin Luther King brought on significant public protest in the black communities of Chicago, largely on the south and west sides of the city. Its beginning was simple: a series of marches that began in public schools on the far south side. This was quickly joined by outbursts in other parts of the city, the most notably on west Madison Street where the protests started at two high schools before heading downtown, and evolving into an eruption of violence. Analysis focused on the particular interface between the protestors/rioters and the police /National Guard. In one case there was the conflict with a sniper atop a building at Cabrini Green.

A separate study considered Martin Luther King’s visits to Chicago a few years earlier. These revealed a healthy and deeply personal interaction between a leading figure and the

community in a variety of spatial conditions, from the intimacy of a pool hall, to talks in the park or the streets.

*Detroit. Race Riots. (July 1967, April 1968)* The riots in Detroit were violent and largely racially defined. Race riots (as they were called) happened in many cities in the United States in 1967 and 1968, including Los Angeles and Chicago among other cities. There were riots in Detroit in 1968, but the more significant and extensive one was in the hot summer of 1967. It started with a series of individual confrontations with police, and then exploded to a number of incidents throughout a large part of the city. Analysis focused on the evolution of the violence, and its seemingly many separate incidents that developed into large scale looting and destruction. Police intervention was militaristic in an effort to re-establish control over the city streets.

**REPRESENTATION AND DISSEMINATION**

The work of the seminar is based on the assumption that viewing and representing the events of 1968 from the perspective of an architect can yield new understandings of the otherwise well-documented protests. As a discipline inherently biased



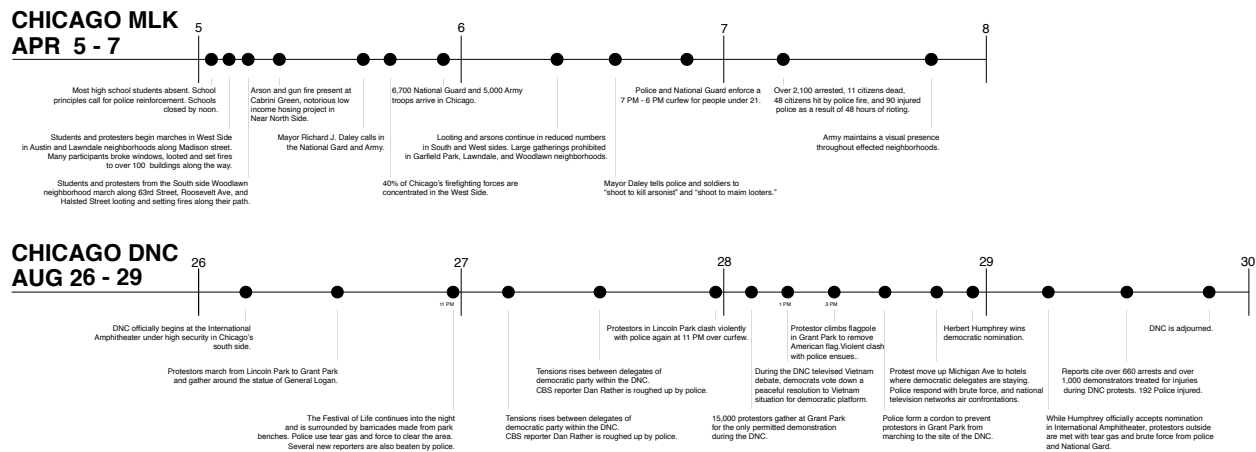


Figure 4. timelines of incidents, reconstructed from articles and photos, diagrammed by day. Results from graduate seminar "Cities, Power, and Space", Spring 2019 at University of Illinois in Chicago.

toward spatio-temporal impressions of the world, the outcomes of this shift in perspective should render visible some of the urban, material, spatial, and kinetic forces at play that the journalist, historian, or autobiographically driven narrative could not. However, the problem of presenting this data quickly bumps up against the limitations of architectural training in representing space, time, and events. In a typical architectural scenario, representations communicate authorial intent while the object, or building, being represented has the capacity to allow a motivated subject to formulate their own interpretations and personal occupation tactics. However, here we have the reverse—motivated spaces and the need for the subject viewing the representation, not the buildings itself, to explore and to formulate their own interpretations. Giving people access and tools is infinitely more powerful than telling an audience what or how to think.

In this case, the typical tools of the architect are too limiting. Maps, models, drawings, timelines, and image essays, while informative, stilt the viewers' exploration and require authorial determination in their fixity, scale, and linearity to present the content to an audience. Whereas the problem at hand is to present information in a way the audience can form their own narratives. To accomplish this, the format requires reconfigurability by the user and space for exploration. While this sounds infinitely architectural, the technical tools to produce this kind of presentation are typically outside the average architect's toolset.

Even common mapping criteria of public versus private space are ill-suited for visualizing these events. The protests suggest the crowd was "taking control of the street", even if only for a short time and in limited areas. During these events, part of the city was ceded in these times to a different kind of possession and set of uses and possession. This change of ownership, even if temporary, is challenging, and raises issues of portrayal, not just in documentation and, also in perception.

In its simplest version, the city (for these moments of crisis) is changed from traditional understandings of public and private ownership to something else - that allows for a third type of possession. In representation, urban documentation may need to add to the Nolli figure-ground to allow other aspects of urban ownership and use.

The seminar studied a number of precedents to develop familiarity with dynamic representations of the city. These included Debord's Situationist City4 and Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals subjective urban representations5, and the work of Bernard Tschumi in Manhattan Chronicles as well as the lesser known Violence of Architecture6. In particular, Tschumi represented an interesting rethinking of the relationship of the crowd, cities and violence, with attention to the combination of the image, the event and urban spatiality. Studies Combined ing an images of his own from his work with one from the event study in preparation of s supplemented with a diagrams to explore the merging of ed the complex visual, spatial, and political aspects of protests. Subsequently, Then, contemporarily Liam Young's videos, and Forensic Architecture's reconstructions served as inspiration while we scoured the fields of video game design, database management, corporate information visualization, computer science, etc for ways of presenting the research.

After the conclusion of the seminar, it was determined the potential impact of the research would be limited if only presented in a predetermined static arrangement. Rather their spirit are better served by presenting them as data on a platform that provides depth through exploration, arrangement, and alternative ways of visualization. One solution lies in library and museum science in platforms like Omeka. These operate as database collection and curation tools with flexible and extensible plugins for mapping, categorization, visualization, etc. They allow inputs of each entry from the research: images, events, locations, dates, people, and objects and cross-reference their data in infinitely configurable ways.

They can construct a multi-dimensional web-based platform that allows users to input the parameters for presenting the information for how they wish to view it. Is the map the primary tool for exploration, or the timeline? Does someone just want to see all the images from all cities together? Database platforms accommodate these possibilities and many more.

There are a number of challenges that come with shifting our thinking about artifacts and data exploration from mere information presentation. These include simultaneously visualizing events that have precise times and locations with other extensive events that build gradually and behave more like shifting forces and intensities with intensively gradated data. Naturally, there are varying levels of precision in the recording of the events and this causes an uneven presentation that may or may not coincide with other forms of value. Another challenge is the vast scale differences between individual interactions with territorial scale observations. While certain software platforms like Omeka allows the author to choose what data is presented at particular scales of view, there are still decisions that need to be made consciously beforehand, possibly coloring it with bias. So, while the intent is to create a more objective presentation of explorable data, there are just as many (if not more) decisions that introduce unintended consequences and influence that require further navigation.

### PROJECTION

This work directly builds on two models of urban documentation that form the foundation of our understanding of the contemporary city, both from the 1950s-60s: Kevin Lynch's mapping of the perceptual aspects of urban design have been widely appreciated.<sup>7</sup> Guy Debord's Situationist mappings of Paris have also been well regarded as a radical rethinking of city - being more perceptually based. Yet in both cases, migration of these ideas has been limited: perhaps Debord's work migrated (via Constant) to Holland, where it was reconsidered and used generously, but Lynch's work rarely reappears in the US.<sup>8</sup> Considerations of perception in the work of Debord and Lynch can be supplemented by concepts of changing ownership and temporal shifts in the use of the city.

In addition to plugging back into theoretical models of urban geography, presenting the research through database platforms ensures it can live on for new audiences and expand with new data and/or functionalities. Future seminars are already in the works to include more cities impacted by the events in 1968. The first study was limited to 6 events in 5 cities and even within such a narrow focus, a broad range of event types were found. The range of events was adequate, from peaceful protests to full scale urban riots, but an additional study would help fill out the picture and allow for closer inspection for similarities, and perhaps expand widen the range of event types.

Further, other, perhaps a set of increased scales can be considered, revising the of inputs, values, and consequences can also

be imagined of the study. One could compare current protests with those For instance, information about current protest events might accompany that of 1968, and . We could compare and contrast how the city figures into how cellular technology and social media impact the dynamics of the crowd with and without cellular technology and social media. Certainly these technologies affect the speed of gathering, assembling, flash point, and dispersal, but are the time frames for events simply accelerated, or does the nature of these events change entirely? Is the analog historical version useful in understanding the contemporary model? There is also value in expanding the data to include different, but related, urban phenomena like sporting events and parades. How does a protest or riot occupy streets differently from a parade, or a music festival? How are props like such as cars, barriers, streets, etc. used similarly or differently? Finally, can existing database platforms, like Omeka and other and this data driven approaches to space, objects, and events be leveraged, together or separately, as tools in the design of cities and buildings?

All these speculations fall beyond the scope of this particular paper, but the future of this type of spatio-temporal view of urban events has both a deep history and expansive future and we believe this research offers a critical contribution to this ongoing, urgent, and fertile agenda. It is time to expand our models and our techniques to adjust to the newer ways in which the city is both used and documented.

### CONCLUSION

Protests occupy the city in a way that challenges and disrupts the distinctions between public and private space. The crowd as a force takes over, public space is inverted as occupiers displace other populations. During these events, public spaces become 'occupied' rather than strictly public, suggesting a third category of ownership. Perhaps cities require more distinctions and different definitions than previously thought, challenging older public/private separations. Such recalibration could be done by rethinking how cities work in time, changing ownership, or revised and different perceptions of distance, among other ways, as our urban models need updating. In a time of mass isolation with COVID-19 lockdowns, there is yet another shift rendering public space voided, and private spaces fully inhabited and displayed in platforms of public presentation like zoom. From this vantage point, the study of crowd behavior is ever yet more poignant, representative of a social dynamic from long ago. Surely, in these peculiar times of isolation, distance and emptiness in our own cities, one can find sympathy for the city afresh, with its multiple characteristics and capabilities, adapting with resilience that had been merely lurking in the background.

The unusual situations of 1968 encourage different readings of public space, forcing re-examination of the interface between physical and dynamic realities. These were telling moments, a hinge in the fabric, where old norms and new currents clashed,

requiring a major rethink and reorder in society. This research represents a different version of how that conflict both emerged and unfolded, offering a range of alternatives, with yet more to be considered. In these current times of struggle, this study suggest a different view of how cities accommodate and respond to change. Traumatic then, the gift left by these events is the opportunity to rethink priorities and hierarchies unexamined in daily experiences.

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#### ENDNOTES

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