In The City Series Part 3: Working In The City: A Lexicon of Labour Movements – The Parlour Showrooms, Bristol

Tea Break Talk, Sunday 1 September 2013 – Tools and the City – James Dixon

Transcribed from a recording by Cara Davies, see also
https://jamesdixonarchaeology.com/2013/11/

Some thoughts about tools from archaeology. Archaeology has a fundamental relationship with tools. Modern archaeology owes a lot of its existence and thought structures to tools and how we understand tools. The fact that it was worked out that stone tools came before bronze tools which came before iron tools is one of the basic structures that comes into existence in the middle of the nineteenth century and is really the start of how we do archaeology now. Also central to how we think in archaeology is the concept of typology, which is how things become into other things over time, and if you Google 'Pitt-Rivers' and 'typology' you'll see this wonderful diagram - that looks a little bit like what's on the wall over there – of a stick with things radiating out from it. It shows how the stick turns into a shield and a spear and a bow and arrow.

So, tools and how people use tools and what tools are is really fundamental to what archaeology is. I'm not going to talk about any of that. I'm going to leave that as relatively obvious and a point to move on from because most of my work isn't really based on the past. I do a lot of contemporary archaeology, trying to look at ongoing time and 'history-being-made' and how you can think archaeologically about that. What I want to talk about is the ways that archaeologists can look at contemporary tools in a way that goes beyond just identifying them and describing their uses, which would usually be the first thing an archaeologist would do. I'm going to talk about how tools control – on my notes here I've put tools in inverted commas because I'm taking a very open definition of what tools are as you'll see – and how tools are controlled and how important tools and control are to our understanding of city living for individuals in the present day.

To start I'm going to present four images which I'm only going to describe and you can make up the pictures yourselves. These will give you an overview of how archaeologists and anthropologists might approach tools in a way that goes beyond looking at them and measuring them. I'm going to present four different 'tool scenarios' that we will then come back to later.

The first scenario – I want you to picture a Japanese macaque washing a potato in a river. Or picture anyone anywhere washing anything you like if you can't picture a macaque. This is an extremely basic act, it's not necessarily learned behaviour, it could be largely instinctive, whether some of these behaviours are transmitted or instinctive is up for debate. But it's a very good example of using a natural thing, the water, in a tool-like way. It's using something to accomplish a task that makes eating a potato easier and more pleasant, maybe healthier, or less unhealthy depending on your views of dirt. You may be aware of other examples of natural things being used in tool-like ways, like finches using sticks to get mites out of wood, that sort of thing. So that's the first scenario.

The second scenario or the second tool I want to briefly talk about is a native sailing chart from the Marshall Islands in the Pitt-Rivers Museum. This is a series of sticks tied together with twine. It has shells tied to it and what this sailing chart does is map water currents in relation to islands. In some ways that's extremely functional, it operates as a map as we would know maps, or so you might

assume until you think that something like that is used at sea. It's used in motion. It doesn't speak for itself; it requires a human body to learn to use it. You have to have prior knowledge of how to begin to learn to use it. Here we see tools imparting cultural knowledge and learning, and this tool only really becomes active of the intersection of itself, the knowledge, the human body and the environment-in-motion.

For the next scenario I'm going to take you to 18th century Virginia, specifically Colonial Williamsburg. There was a site excavated over the last few years called the James Wray Carpenters Yard, this was a big carpenters yard run by one man employing largely enslaved, but highly skilled, African-American workmen. The business ended and the site ceased to be used with the death of James Wray and all the workmen went elsewhere. When the site was excavated there was a very clear layer that marks the destruction of the carpenters yard, you see it in things like ditches filling up with silt and not being maintained anymore. The destruction layer, this archaeologically-visible end time, contains a lot of broken tools and they were intentionally broken. We know they were intentionally broken because a lot of that breaking is very hard to do, it's very hard to accidentally snap a saw blade for instance or to accidentally split the handle of a hammer, not breaking the handle away from the head, but actually splitting the handle itself. What this shows us is that with tools there is a certain kind of symbolism in misusing tools, or deliberately breaking tools, using these tools in a way that is not intended, including rendering them unusable.

The final scenario before I come to the contemporary city, I'm going to jump forward about 80 years to Paris in 1830. I read some really interesting workers news-sheets published on the eve of revolution in which various workmen write about their own situations and interestingly they often depict themselves in terms of their tools. They depict their political struggles as industrial processes and talk about themselves as hammers and as forging new kinds of society. What we see there is a symbolic self-identification with specific tools and processes, but also that people writing about and talking about tools is of as much interest to archaeologists as the things themselves.

So, to summarise those four scenarios that I'm now going to use in the contemporary city, you've got natural things being used like tools; intersections of bodies, things, knowledge and environments; we have the use of tools in unintended ways including breaking them; and we have tools as symbols and personal identification. Onto the city…

I've been studying contemporary Bristol for quite a long time now and could talk about it for days – I was going to say hours but that would be selling myself short. What I want to focus on today is a clash I have observed happening, at least in the last 50 years in Bristol, but which I have no doubt has happened through the whole history of Bristol as a city. That is the clash between 'mega-tools', those things put in place to control city life, and micro-tools, the tools and tool actions that people use to oppose that control, whether that's through acting in direct opposition to control or otherwise tweaking that controlled life to make it either more bearable or more personal.

What are mega-tools? The obvious one is the city itself. Cities do come into existence organically in part, but they are also to a large part designed and they are actively operated, they don't necessarily just happen. But that might be a bit too meta – meta-mega-tools, there are too many parts to that - so we can actually break that mega-tool down into smaller things that I think can still usefully be considered mega-tools in the context of what I want to say. Roads are a really good example. Some roads come into being out of need, but some are created because people want to tell you where to

go. If you follow, in the 1960s, the ongoing debacle of the Bristol ring road, you'll see exactly what that means. Traffic lights and traffic control systems are a good example of mega-tools. They're all inter-connected and they create a certain kind of relationship between vehicles and pedestrians that's centrally controlled. You can change the order of lights to change traffic flows at different times. The last mega-tool I'll mention here is Cabot Circus. Cabot Circus was built to make people do a certain thing – that's obviously shopping – but it's also very specifically built to make you shop in a certain way. All of those mega-tools are relatively benign. Whatever you think of roads, you can't really deny that if you want to drive somewhere a road is a really good thing to have to help you. And if you really need Swarovski crystals, Cabot Circus is a really good thing to have, or if you want to pay £15 for a cinema ticket. There are also, of course, bad mega-tools and they're the ones I want to focus on. Here, I'll mention Keep Out signs. Keep Out signs are a bad mega-tool. What they do is they relate to someone else's idea of where you can and can't go. Sometimes it's for good reasons like not falling off cliffs, things like that. Sometimes it's just because people don't want you in 'their bit'. Another bad mega-tool is the armchair style benches in the Bear Pit. They represent a particular iteration of benches in the Bear Pit that are intended to – or were intended to, because the Bear Pit has changed a lot recently – but they were intended to stop people being there, to try to control behaviour in a very unhelpful way that made the space an unpleasant thing within the town. Bad mega-tools can include those spikes you get on stone blocks to stop people skateboarding. Anti-climb paint would be another one. All of these are things that people want to act against or need to act against for various reasons and they can be acted against by using other tools, these micro-tools. Daily life in the city involves a constant interplay between those mega-tools that use us and the ways that we use other tools, or use our own bodies in tool-like ways.

To wrap up, I'm going to give you some examples of what these micro-tools might be, or what these tool-actions might involve. To go back to using natural things in tool-like ways, we might think about desire lines and not using footpaths, using open space in a way that somebody has told you not to, but accomplishing something that makes your life easier. Gorilla gardening or wildflower planting, both use natural things in a tool-like way to oppose someone else's attempt to control you. For intersections between tools, knowledge, bodies and environments, things like shortcuts are really important, and muscle memory, the fact that even though I haven't been in Bristol for a year I don't need signs, my body knows my Bristol and I don't need to think about where to go. A quite good way to oppose that city control is if you have a regular journey you make, try going by a different route every day. The city wants you to go the same way to work every day so it can measure you and control you and see you on CCTV cameras. Then we have breaking tools and using tools in what some might say is the wrong way. At one end, there are things like graffiti, spray cans. Plenty of spray cans are now marketed now for art-painting, but historically spray paint on a wall is a misuse of that tool, and it's an extremely important part of claiming space on behalf of individuals or communities who feel unrecognised in the way that their spaces are being controlled. At the extreme end we can think about vandalism or smashing shop windows, that's partly using your body as a tool, but also breaking a tool, Tesco is a tool as well. Finally, for self-identification, what I'll say here is that we shouldn't be afraid to self-identify with objects, to connect with physical objects in the city, to see and feel how things are used, to recognise when they are misused, and really to take it personally when we perceive people to be using our tools in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons. A simple exercise that you can do today to start acting against the city is to cross the road before the green man comes on.