

# **HOT IN HELSINKI: EXPLORING LEGAL GEOGRAPHIES IN A DIY SAUNA**

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This paper will question the boundaries of the law through an analysis of alternative spatial practices in the urban environment. Examinations of counter-cultural uses of public space can employ legal geographies to unsettle law's closure. By exploring urban regulation, the objectivity of both law and space can be called into question. This paper will discuss these ideas through a reinterpretation of the traditional Finnish practice of the sauna. This research took the authors to a do it yourself (DIY) sauna under a bridge in Helsinki. The DIY sauna utilises a gap in the regulatory net and creates its own system of rules operating outside of the laws of the State. The sauna community provides a template for alternative ways of using and managing space in urban environments.

## **I INTRODUCTION**

This paper was inspired by the Finnish Youth Research Network Summer School, which took place in June 2015. The authors, two Finnish and one Australian, first came together through a project that invited people studying youth cultures to work intensively at a week-long, live-in camp on the outskirts of Helsinki. The authors were drawn together by their shared interest in DIY, squatting and alternative spatial practices. The paper evolved from our research and explores the innovative use of abandoned spaces, or 'liminal zones' in large urban centres, through the building of a DIY sauna. The authors argue that alternative spatial practices, such as the ones described in this article, reflect a new approach to activism and

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resistance by young people, who have largely become disenchanted with the existing political system.

The paper will focus on Helsinki's newest DIY sauna, built in the summer of 2015, hereinafter referred to as 'the DIY sauna'. This sauna drew together not only its builders and users, but the authors of this paper, who shared in the warmth of the sauna and the community that surrounds it. In exploring the sauna as a traditional practice and also as resistance to the closure of urban space, the authors will highlight the tensions of the sauna as a representation of both past and future Helsinki.

## II COMING IN FROM THE COLD: THE OUTSIDER ON THE INSIDE

Sauna culture in Finland is an iconic cultural practice that can represent an idealised vision of traditional Finnish life. However, where the sauna is unauthorised, and appears in public spaces it also represents a disruption to prevailing economic and political structures. Our research employs a critical ethnographic methodology. Critical ethnography involves semi or unstructured interviews with participants, as well as reflection from the authors, who are themselves participants in the activities being discussed. The voices of the authors and participants are often indistinct, and form part of a 'multivocal text' that gives the same authority to the word of the participant as to those of the researchers, who are also present within the text. As Kay Cook writes, '[c]ritical ethnography [is] in a unique position to examine power-laden social and cultural processes within particular social sites'.<sup>1</sup> Critical ethnographic research engages in an analysis of observations by the researchers which does not deny the part they play in the research. In this way, it 'repopulates the text', allowing the voices and actions of participants and researchers to be present and active in the text. 'Repopulating

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<sup>1</sup> Kay Cook, 'Critical Ethnography' in Lisa M Given (ed), *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Sage, 2008) 148, 149.

the text' does not reduce human experience to facts and figures. This shows a movement away from a positivist approach, following the work of Foucault and other critical theorists.<sup>2</sup>

A critical ethnographic account 'should attempt to subvert a dominant discourse' by undermining meta or master narratives. It can do this by giving voice to marginalised groups. Tessa Muncey explains that ethnographic research can 'shed light on the silent majority of people whose individual voices are unheard'.<sup>3</sup> Although urban activism has become a visible phenomenon in Helsinki, the stories of the DIY sauna builders and those who use the space are those that usually go unheard. This article will give them expression. The ethnographic research involved two interviews: One with "K", the main builder of the sauna,<sup>4</sup> and the other with "E", a user of the sauna.<sup>5</sup> While their voices are present in the text, their names will not appear, to maintain anonymity.<sup>6</sup> "E" is a young, tertiary educated Finnish woman with an adventurous spirit.

"K" is a white, young Finnish man, in his late twenties. He had the idea for the sauna when his family were replacing the sauna "base"<sup>7</sup> in their home. While Finland is often praised with having one of the best education systems in the world, the current economic conditions have meant that youth unemployment is very high.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> D C Philips, 'Telling it Straight: Issues in Assessing Narrative Psychology' (1994) 29(1) *Educational Psychology* 13, 14, cited in Tessa Muncey *Creating Autoethnographies* (Sage, 2010) 43.

<sup>3</sup> Tessa Muncey *Creating Autoethnographies* (Sage, 2010) 8.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with "K" October 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with "E" conducted June 2016.

<sup>6</sup> As the builder of an illegal structure in public space, "K" insisted that his identity remain hidden, or he would not consent to the interview.

<sup>7</sup> A sauna 'base' is a wood fired stove, like a wood heater, with stones onto which water is splashed to produce steam.

<sup>8</sup> Current statistic suggest 22 per cent or around one in five Finnish people 15-24 cannot find work. Details can be found at: Statistics Finland, *Labour Force Survey* (May 2016) <[http://stat.fi/til/tyti/2016/04/tyti\\_2016\\_04\\_2016-05-24\\_kuv\\_002\\_en.html](http://stat.fi/til/tyti/2016/04/tyti_2016_04_2016-05-24_kuv_002_en.html)> and EU YCharts: *Finland Youth Unemployment Rate* (June 2016) <[https://ycharts.com/indicators/finland\\_youth\\_unemployment\\_rate\\_lfs](https://ycharts.com/indicators/finland_youth_unemployment_rate_lfs)>.

means that there are many intelligent and well educated young people unable to find a job, losing trust in the political system, and looking for their own projects. “K”, along with both male and female friends, have donated their time and energy to the community by building the renegade sauna.

### III RESISTING ENCLOSURE

The law is at odds with the free movement of people. Public spaces are moving progressively toward higher levels of regulation, being ‘reconfigured as a series of closures, boundaries and obstacles’.<sup>9</sup> Urban centres are defined by shopping districts, historic areas are repackaged and commodified for tourist consumption. Surveillance cameras pop up like mushrooms. Public space is constantly being analysed as a space of risk, where statistics reveal predictions of which crimes might occur at what times and locations.<sup>10</sup> In this environment, where people are constantly being corralled into patterns of predictable behaviour in public, there are groups who are resisting. For them, citizenship is not defined by the lucky dip of birthplace, but by loosely (dis)organised groups who gravitate together because of shared beliefs and common goals. Some of these groups are spontaneous and temporary, others last for years. These groups ‘employ DIY (Do-it-Yourself) activism, “direct action”, and other anarchist strategies both to liberate ... space and reanimate it with ... democratic activity’.<sup>11</sup> They create their own systems of governance which exist within yet beyond state law. Their governing systems breach not only the codified black letter of the law, but also often the norms of acceptable behaviour.

Property is the cornerstone of capitalism. Anarchist and Marxist philosophers alike have long rallied against the enclosure of lands

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<sup>9</sup> Jeff Ferrell ‘Anarchy, Geography and Drift’ (2012) 44(5) *Antipode* 1687, 1691.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 1689.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 1690.

for private profit.<sup>12</sup> Henri Lefebvre takes this argument to a logical Marxist conclusion in the *Production of Space* and ‘The Right to the City’, arguing that the city is produced by its inhabitants, and therefore should be collectively ‘owned’ by them. Lefebvre famously wrote that a new society needs its own space.<sup>13</sup> This cannot be a structure imposed by capitalism, but must be a space socially produced by its inhabitants. The challenge for those seeking to live in new ways is often finding a location in which to do so, in particular within cities, where property is highly commodified. In this era of increasing enclosure and control of public urban spaces, the writings of philosophers such as Lefebvre and Marx become if anything more pertinent.

Helsinki is a cosmopolitan city which has made numerous concessions for a variety of users of public space, including those that exist on the margins. There are many DIY skate parks, for example, which are now state sanctioned. There is a legal graffiti wall in Suvilahti, showing that if subversive activities happen at the right place and time, they can become predictable and therefore acceptable. They no longer pose a threat to certainty, and are not a ‘risk’ to the ordered city. Indeed, creative activities such as skating and graffiti can become urban attractions in themselves, and Helsinki is a city which is ready to embrace such activities in controlled ways. An example of this is the response to an earlier DIY sauna — the Sompasauna — which began as an illegal construction at the end of a peninsula. While this sauna shares its beginnings with the sauna discussed in this article — as an illegal structure created by a group of friends — it has now become a permanent part of Helsinki’s cityscape. As we will discuss below, when it became apparent that Sompasauna was a tourist attraction, local councils passed laws which allowed it to continue to exist, as long as certain restrictions are adhered to. Once the authorities had wrestled back some control over this once temporary and anarchic display of

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* (Cosimo, 2007); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *Communist Manifesto* (Diversion Classics, 2016); Lefebvre *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Lefebvre, above n 12.

resistance, it was allowed to stay.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV LEGAL GEOGRAPHIES AND THE REGULATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

... space is key to enforcing inequality, oppression and the exercise of power in all of its many forms.<sup>15</sup>

Legal geography is a critical approach which seeks to problematize the neutrality of law through interdisciplinary and/or post-disciplinary techniques. This involves engaging with the interplay between disciplines, for example the differences in the way the law operates in different locations, and also a consideration of how the law is implicated in the creation of spatial boundaries and tools such as maps, which create a very particular view of the world. Division of land defines who owns and controls it, and determines how it is to be used. As Pavel Bykov asserts, the '[m]ain target of dividing land into a categories is in defining of legal regime of the territory, that belongs to one of the categories, and allowed usage of this territory according to territorial zoning'.<sup>16</sup>

In *History, Geography and the Politics of Law*, Nicolas Blomley writes: 'Central to Western law and legal practice is the assertion of legal 'closure', this being the characterisation of law as an autonomous, self-sufficient field that can be marked off, in several

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<sup>14</sup> However, some of the Sompassauna's anarchist roots continue. The sauna still has no opening hours or rules with regards to gendered entry. It is also still run and maintained by a loose collective, rather than by paid council workers. If one were to be cynical about this, the city has gained a tourist attraction without the usual financial expense.

<sup>15</sup> Myrna Breitbart 'Looking Backward, Acting Forward' (2012) 44(5) *Antipode* 1579, 1586.

<sup>16</sup> Pavel Bykov, *Comparison of Russian and Finnish Planning Systems and Land Use Laws* (Thesis for Applied Sciences Double Degree Programme Civil and Construction Engineering, Saimaa University, 2012).

important ways, from the vagaries of social and political life'.<sup>17</sup> Here he writes that the mainstream of legal thought attempts to separate law from other disciplines which are deeply implicated in its construction. Allowing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of law allows it to become open, and to disrupt conceptions of its 'insides' and 'outsides'.<sup>18</sup> Further, Blomley asserts that many critiques of law to date have focussed on the historical, ignoring the geographic, or spatial, as way of calling into question its objectivity. '... I do not think that the critical legal project can be fully realised without paying attention to the spatiality ... of social life'.<sup>19</sup>

If we scratch beneath the surface, it becomes clear that understandings of space are constructed via 'abstract' discourses such as law.<sup>20</sup> One example of a legal or political representation of space is the map. Boundaries that do not exist in the physical world are visible on this abstract representation of space. Law and space are integrated in other ways as well. On the scale of the city or the neighbourhood, legal documents produce boundaries between public and private, and regulate where behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable.

We assert that a DIY sauna has the potential to challenge the boundaries of law and geography by reinterpreting and redefining where the legal and spatial lines should be drawn between what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in public urban spaces. It disrupts the closure of space by ignoring boundaries defined by legal instruments, such as the Finnish *Public Order Act*, *Land Use and Building Act*, and laws that protect private property more generally.

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Blomley *Law, Space and the Geographies of Power* (Guilford Press, 1994) 7. This is the theme of the LSAANZ Conference 2015, where this paper was presented. Margaret Davies also discusses the insides and outsides of law, and how a postmodern approach disrupts this in her ground breaking legal theory text *Asking the Law Question* (Thomson, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Davies above n 17, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Blomley, above n 17.

<sup>20</sup> The term 'abstract' is used in the Lefebvrian sense.

## V CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SAUNA

Sauna culture is an important aspect of Finnish society, including at the Summer School. The Summer School Conference Centre, Sofia, had its own sauna, and all attendees were invited to take part in this traditional activity at the end of a long academic day. While the Sofia sauna was wood-fired and in a separate log hut, much like a traditional sauna, it had strict rules with regards to use. Only one gender was allowed to enter the sauna at a time, and there were defined hours for use.

Traditionally, the special nature of the sauna means it is unique in bringing people together.<sup>21</sup> Finland has a long sauna tradition that goes back at least two thousand years, and in many respects it has remained unchanged.<sup>22</sup> The sauna has been part of life for people of all ages, both as a means of washing and to get warm during the cold, dark months. It was often the custom for the entire family to go to the sauna together. This included all generations, and led in turn to the habit of everybody being in the sauna together regardless of gender in the early industrial communities.<sup>23</sup>

The meaning of the sauna in Finland has developed through its long history. For many, the sauna is a mythical space and can be seen as having quasi-religious significance according to some commentators: ‘Many superstitions are connected with the sauna. The ancient Finns believed that fire came from heaven and was therefore sacred. For this reason they looked upon the sauna as a holy place’.<sup>24</sup>

The steam rising from the stones further develops the sacred

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa-Marlene Edelsward *Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland* (Peter Lang, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Matti Karjanoja & Jarno Peltonen *Sauna Made in Finland* (Kustannusosakeyhtiö Tammi, 1996) 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* 32.

<sup>24</sup> Craig Nagel *A Place Called Home: Moments from an Ordinary Life* (Authorhouse, 2007) 78.



imagery associated with the sauna:

Some people believe the practice of throwing water over the heated stones evolved as a form of sacrificial ceremony. The Finnish word *loyly* (the steam which rises from the stones) originally signified “spirit” or even “life”, and a corresponding word in languages related to Finnish is *lil*, which means “soul”.<sup>25</sup>

The majority of saunas in Finland are private saunas, which are in almost every house or apartment block. Many Finns also have holiday cottages with saunas which they travel to during the summer break. ‘Finnish cultural roots are in the countryside, living in harmony with nature’<sup>26</sup> write Jack Tillotson and Diane Martin in a paper which includes interviews with Finnish people about their connections to the environment. The sauna was discussed as a link between nature and culture: ‘For many people, sauna is a purification ritual that bridges humanity and nature’<sup>27</sup> they write. Saunas are traditionally built and run on wood, and are ‘elemental’:

We Finns experience bathing in the sauna as holistic purification and relaxation. It is possible to experience the cosmic connectedness with elements in the sauna: the fire in the sauna stove, the air and the water, even the earth itself as the floor of the old kind of smoke saunas. Nakedness in the sauna is natural and tells about the positive value of bodiliness ... The holistic cosmology that our sauna culture manifests can become a bridge between everyday bodily experience and a more holistic way of thinking and knowing.<sup>28</sup>

In the interview with “E”, she speaks about the relaxing aspects of the sauna, and how she enjoys watching the water, trees and birds through the sauna’s window whilst inside. In Finland, saunas almost

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Jack S Tillotson and Diane M. Martin ‘Mythological Dairy Connections to Nature and Rural Life’ in Kristen Diehl and Carolyn Yoon (eds), *Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 43)* (Association for Consumer Research, 2015) 810.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Pauliina Kainulainen ‘Wisdom Theology and Symbols Powerful Enough’ in Sigurd Bergmann and Heather Eaton (eds), *Ecological Awareness: Exploring Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics* (Transaction Publishers, 2011) 169.

always have a window, so that the bathers can connect with nature. ‘The sauna has a specific smell and atmosphere. It is really calming, especially in the countryside. There is no noise, just birds and a lake with no waves, like a mirror. When you are naked, and in the forest, it is ... primitive’.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the building of saunas developing along with other construction techniques, the simple construction of the sauna has remained largely the same.<sup>30</sup> The sauna usually consists of a free-standing room which is heated to a high temperature by means of a wood stove covered with stones. The sauna’s special character lies in the correct balance between heat, humidity and ventilation.<sup>31</sup> Although during 1980s and 1990s the number of public saunas in Finland declined, there are still public saunas in Helsinki. These saunas are advertised to tourists as a traditional, and family oriented activity. They are displayed as must see attractions - a distinctive part of Finnish culture. A visitor website for Helsinki explains a tip for the sauna visitor is to ‘bring your own sauna beer or cider and snacks with you’.<sup>32</sup> This instruction from locals shows that while the sauna is displayed as a family activity, it is also a social place, where food and alcoholic drinks can be consumed.

Public saunas in Helsinki, however, are highly regulated environments. There are strict sets of rules about use, including rules relating to gender segregation, hours of opening and hygienic practices. The renewal of the sauna tradition has been growing within the younger generation. However, this renewal has been accompanied with a reinterpretation of its use. With the advent of the DIY public sauna comes a space which is deliberately rule-free. Young people in Helsinki are looking to transform this iconic tradition into an activity that suits their forward looking attitudes while maintaining a link to the past. As Davina Cooper writes of a queer feminist bathhouse in Toronto, this reinvention of space is not

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with “E”, above n 5.

<sup>30</sup> Kainulainen above n 26, 169.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid 32.

<sup>32</sup> Katariina ‘Relax, Finnish Way’ on *Like a Local Guide (Helsinki)* (June 2016) <<https://www.likealocalguide.com/helsinki/kotiharjun-sauna>>.

a total transformation of a traditional form, but a more complex meld of old and new:

The [queer] bathhouse, like many sites of social invention, did not simply reverse dominant social relations. It was not a mirror held up to the mainstream, showing its practices in a counter-normative light. Rather, what becomes very apparent is the more complex interplay and entanglement between the site and wider social relations.<sup>33</sup>

## VI SOMPASAUNA

The DIY sauna is not an isolated occurrence in Finland. An interview with “E” reveals that there have been a number of quasi-legal, pop-up, ‘secret saunas’ built in Helsinki.<sup>34</sup> The most notable of these is Sompasauna. The Sompasauna is easy to get to and close to the sea. It started out in 2011, when a group of friends found a sauna base and wondered what to do with it. The sauna was an illegal structure built out of second hand materials at the end of a peninsula.<sup>35</sup> The response from locals to the sauna varied. Young people held parties there, and painted colourful graffiti on the outside.<sup>36</sup> “E” revealed more about the culture of the users of the Sompasauna: ‘In summer there were big parties, and they built another sauna next to the [original] sauna because there were so many people coming to have a sauna that they needed to build another one’.<sup>37</sup>

“E” explained that the new sauna was not authorised, but was another sauna built by the users. She explained that the Sompasauna and the DIY sauna (which is the focus of our research) are most

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<sup>33</sup> Davina Cooper ‘Caring for Sex and the Power of Attentive Action: Governance, Drama, and Conflict in Building a Queer Feminist Bathhouse’ (2009) 35 *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 126.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with “E”, above n 5.

<sup>35</sup> Terho Marttila *Sompasauna, Stadlilaisten Oma Underground-Sauna* (Masters Thesis, Turku University, 2014). The thesis was translated from Finnish to English with assistance from “E”.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with “E”, above n 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

similar to the summer cottage saunas, because there was also a ‘home-made’ aspect to the saunas at summer cottages.

In an interview, “E” explained how conservative locals had frequently come to the Sompasauna to remove the ‘base’ and throw it into the sea so it could no longer be used. ‘At the Sompasauna, they were having lots of problems. Some people did not like that the sauna exists, and they went inside the sauna and took the sauna base and throw it into the sea. It happened many times, almost every summer ...’<sup>38</sup>

The government also made some moves to shut the sauna down, saying that it should be treated in a similar way to a Roma gypsy camp.<sup>39</sup> However, there was community protest following this and it has now become a permanent fixture and tourist attraction. This has led to some official governance: ‘The sauna area has been leased from the City this summer and a sauna now has to meet certain government requirements — accessibility and management of waste’.<sup>40</sup> The Sompasauna is maintained by volunteers, via an organisation known as ‘Sompasaunaseura Association’.<sup>41</sup> On its website, it states: ‘The sauna is open around the clock in summertime and free for everyone to use ... You may but are not required to use a swimming suit’.<sup>42</sup>

While the Sompasauna has become somewhat accepted by the authorities, the open spirit of the sauna remains. Terho Marttila describes the sauna as ‘wild and free, a little revolutionary and anarchist’. He explains that it ‘will surely attract people who think of things in the same way; unbiased, transparent, without hassles and with tolerance’.<sup>43</sup> Marttila says this drawing together of like-minded

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Marttila, above n 35.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Sompasauna Renovation Saunakultturi* (July 2014) <<http://www.saunakulttuuri.com/helsinki/sompasauna-renovation/>>.

<sup>42</sup> Sompasauna <<http://www.sompasauna.fi/>>.

<sup>43</sup> Marttila, above n 35.

people creates an ‘area of community, of which there is little in big cities ...’.<sup>44</sup>

## VII DIY SAUNA SPACE

The DIY sauna, where the primary research for this article was conducted, remains secret and to some extent hidden by its location under a railway bridge. While its builders are happy for ‘outsiders’ to use the sauna, they feel that part of its magic lies in its clandestine nature.

The DIY sauna sits at the bottom of a rocky embankment, next to the sea. The journey to the sauna involves engaging with the physicality of the environment — climbing over a fence near a busy road, and half walking, half sliding down a steep, rocky slope. Reaching the bottom, the ground evens out, and the sauna is found, surrounded by trees, including the silver birch.<sup>45</sup> The sauna is constructed out of discarded materials found in dumpsters at building sites, and completed with a ‘base’ — the wood fired stove which produces heat for the sauna. The fire is lit using wood left over from its construction and dead branches gathered from near the sauna. The ethic of reuse and recycle is evident in both the construction of the sauna, and in the openness of the builders to share the sauna with like-minded people.

The differences to other public and semi-public saunas in

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> A significant part of Finnish sauna culture. See Michael Nordskog, Aaron W Hautala, and David Salmela, *Opposite of Cold: The Northwoods Finnish Sauna Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010): ‘Vihta and Vasta are regional Finnish words for bath whisks, most commonly made from birch twigs’ at 20. Finnish people traditionally hit themselves and each other with these birch bath whisks to increase circulation in the sauna. The use of these sticks, which are sometimes kept in the freezer to maintain freshness for use in the winter months, also increases the woody smell inside the sauna, and enhances the connection to nature (Interview with “E”).

Helsinki are immediately apparent. The DIY sauna transgresses the usual uses of public space, and its unauthorised existence might be seen as representing a kind of ‘lawless’ zone. However, upon visiting the site, the researchers found that the space was well-kept — Rubbish was collected and removed from the site (including rubbish discarded by non-sauna users), towels were washed, and there was a general respect for the natural environment. At the DIY sauna, unlike other public saunas in Helsinki, there is no gender segregation, no hours of opening, and no entry fee. The lack of control allows for experimentation and alternative uses. As “K”, the DIY sauna builder, explained: ‘This is an undefined ... area, where you can just be like you want to be, and with the people you want to be with ...’<sup>46</sup>

The governance of the sauna is formed through self-regulation, and taking responsibility for your own actions — rules that operate from the bottom-up. While the sauna builder stated that ‘there are no rules here’, he also said ‘it is all up to you’. The way the sauna is to be used is devised by the users, not authorities. The rules are not written, but arise from the shared ethic of the users: ‘[I]t would be really like fake if at a place like this there were some rules written down there like ... “ladies first” ... Or whatever’.<sup>47</sup>

An alternative ethic has arisen around the sauna. It involves repair of the sauna, and taking care of it so that it can be enjoyed by others. Users of the sauna were encouraged to take part. “E” described the users of the sauna as being a ‘community’ which takes care of the space.<sup>48</sup>

While the space is aesthetically pleasing, and in an area both close to the city where wealthy people chose to live, the small sliver of land is steep and falls beneath noisy infrastructure, making it unattractive for commercial uses. While central, the space is

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with “K”, above n 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with “E”, above n 5.

surprisingly secluded and hidden, being under the cover of trees and two bridges. From the main road or train bridge, it is almost undetectable, unless you know what you are looking for. In one conversation with the sauna builders and users, the builders were concerned that when the winter came, and the trees lost their leaves, the sauna would become visible. This visibility might end the life of the sauna, as rich inhabitants of a nearby marina might report the 'eyesore' to authorities, who could order it removed. "E" stated that the area was a 'construction area', which used to contain some squats, but as new houses were beginning to appear in the suburb, she wondered how long the sauna would last.<sup>49</sup>

On initially finding the location of the sauna, "K" remarked:

This was the perfect place in the city to build it, and it was the hardest part, finding this kind of place. And now it ... works very well in the sense that everyone wants to hang around in this peculiar place because there's this sauna (laughter). Yeah, I don't think anyone would've come otherwise.<sup>50</sup>

This kind of reappropriation of space is described by Henri Lefebvre as having a revolutionary potential. Lefebvre suggests we seek out spaces that have outlived their capitalist uses, or are not seen as 'valuable' in monetary terms, and examine ways in which they may be reinterpreted. It is through this technique that the creation of a new space can be imagined:

An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one ... The diversion and reappropriation of space are of great significance, for they teach us much about the production of new spaces.<sup>51</sup>

According to Lefebvre's classic definition, the city is produced by

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with "K", above n 4.

<sup>51</sup> Lefebvre above n 12, 167.

its residents' shared space (oeuvre). Urban space is something that they construct and use together. The city is not just built top-down by its planners, but also from the bottom up. A citizen's participation is just as significant in renewing the city as those of its planners, because the city is not just a physical, abstract idea — but a social and cultural product of the people. The reappropriation of space for the sauna could be seen as an example of Lefebvre's diversionary tactics. However, the authors argue that the sauna goes one step further than reappropriation. The DIY sauna is a socially produced space, and the community that utilises it is creating the world they want to live in, in the here and now.

## VIII THE REGULATION OF HELSINKI'S PUBLIC SPACES, AND REACTION FROM AUTHORITY

The DIY sauna appears to have baffled the authorities who have come upon it. As explored above, this can be linked to the way it combines an image of idealised historic Finnish life, coupled with an anti-authoritarian edge that rejects the law of the state. The law which governs the use of public spaces in Finland is the *Public Order Act 2003*.<sup>52</sup> Chapter Two of the Act regulates behaviour which could be seen as '[e]ndangering public order and security and causing disturbance'.<sup>53</sup> The section specifies creating a disturbance through a performance or making loud noise. However, it does not refer to the building of a sauna, or taking part in traditional Finnish activities. The definition of public spaces under the Act includes places such as a 'road, street, pavement, market square, park, beach, sports field, water area, cemetery or similar area that can be used by the public'.<sup>54</sup> While this provision is fairly broad, it does not appear to specifically cover abandoned spaces, and seems to be more concerned with areas which are 'built up' or densely populated.

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<sup>52</sup> An English translation of the *Public Order Act 2003 (Finland)* was used by the authors. The translation includes a disclaimer that the document is legally binding in Finnish or Swedish only.

<sup>53</sup> *Public Order Act 2003 (Finland)* ch 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* s 2 'Definitions'.



Police have visited the DIY sauna three times. Each time, the police did not know that their colleagues had already visited the sauna. It could be deduced from this that no report had been made from the earlier visits, and that the police had given a silent acceptance to the activity. The first time the police came, the builders told them that it was ‘a temporary art project’.<sup>55</sup> The police reaction to the site suggested that they were looking for Roma<sup>56</sup> or people camping illegally. When they discovered it was ‘just a sauna’, they were happy to not pursue any further action. The sauna is painted with images of trees, which adds to its appearance as a public art piece. “E” explained that the builders did not want there to be graffiti on the sauna, because this might lead to it being less acceptable to authority. ‘The people who built the sauna painted the trees on it, because they did not want there to be a [bad] reaction [from the authorities]’.<sup>57</sup>

The reaction from police suggested that they associated the activity of building and hanging out in the sauna as attached to their concept of traditional masculinity. They told the users that they thought saunas are ‘a good thing for guys’, and that they were happy for the young Finnish men present to continue using the sauna. The interview with “K” describes the police reaction:

[When the police came] it was quite surprising that they were so positive ... [They said] “it’s a sauna and it’s ok”... When they opened [the sauna] ... when they first checked [it out, they said], “it’s built ok, like what kind of construction is this?” But when they saw the [sauna] stove ... it changed their reaction a lot and it was like “oh, a sauna?” and that this was a cool thing in their opinion and they weren’t concerned about fire safety or anything, which is kind of amazing,

<sup>55</sup> Interview with “K”, above n 4.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Roma’ are gypsies, and possibly the most discriminated against group in Finland, and much of Europe. Ferrell argues that tight control of land has led to communities who drift — either through homelessness, or to find work in low paid jobs. This is in stark contrast to those who own property and are able to establish permanence in employment and habitation. He links these unintentional drifters to those who deliberately create disruptions in urban spaces. These groups are tied together in the ways that they cooperate and form communities. Where they differ is in how they are responded to by authorities.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with “E”, above n 5.

really.<sup>58</sup>

Police were not the only authority figures visiting the sauna. Guards from a security company, operating at a Helsinki Metro station also came to the sauna. This happened at night time, after the last train. They checked out who was hanging out at the sauna and asked what they were doing there. The area is known to be used by graffiti writers, and there is street art under the bridge. It may have been a concern of the subway guards that graffiti was being written there. They also asked if anyone had been running on the subway tracks. The guards left after declaring that the future of the sauna was not a matter that should be decided by them. They left, politely wishing the participants a pleasant evening.<sup>59</sup>

Another evening, firefighters investigated the sauna. They said they had come because train drivers had seen smoke drifting across the tracks. After the participants let the fire fighters know that the smoke was coming from a sauna, they did not come any further, but left straight away. The fire fighters possibly trusted the participants' professionalism in sauna building, since every "true Finn" would know how to build a sauna.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, while the sauna challenges many mainstream stereotypes about the use of urban spaces, and even traditional understandings of the sauna, field observation showed that the sauna remains a mostly white, masculine, heterosexual space.<sup>61</sup> The majority of users were male, and conventional ideas of Finnish masculinity were bolstered through their behaviour at the sauna. For example, the throwing of water on the base to see who is 'the last man standing' inside the sauna before jumping into sea, beer being consumed in the sauna and men sitting around the fire to tell stories about life, fishing or how drunk they were last time they came. A smaller number of sauna users were women, and while they also

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with "K", above n 4.

<sup>59</sup> Field note, 21 August 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Field note, 11 August 2015.

<sup>61</sup> For example, out of the regular users of about ten, there were two women.

took part in these activities, they were not present when the police visited. The reactions from the police showed that they were mostly unconcerned about the activities taking place there, as long as they were being conducted by (mostly) young, Finnish men. “E” commented that maybe sauna was ‘so in the roots of Finnish culture’ that it was somewhat acceptable, even if in an illegal place.<sup>62</sup> Had the same people been found painting graffiti, or if a Roma camp were in the same place, the reaction from authorities would not likely be so friendly. As explored by Cooper above, the recasting of the sauna as a site of resistance, while a disruption to mainstream gender stereotypes on one level, served to reinforce them on another.<sup>63</sup>

## IX SAUNA’S INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

One of the researchers in this project is Australian, while the other two are Finnish. This precipitated some conversations about the meaning of the sauna in Australia. Saunas in Australian culture, as well as many other countries outside of Finland, have different sets of connotations attached. The sauna in Australia is most often found at a swimming pool, gym or health club. They are seen as contributing to health and wellness, and are a generally a silent space where people meditate after a long work out, the heat soothing their aching muscles.

The other interpretation of the sauna is as a sexualised space, linked largely to the gay male scene. For example, in *Sydney Gay Saunas 1967–2000: Fight for Civic Acceptance and Experiences Beyond the Threshold*, Jason Prior writes that the ‘sauna played a central role in the battle for gay liberation in Sydney during the latter part of the twentieth century’.<sup>64</sup> Originally seen as a space that could

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with “E”, above n 5.

<sup>63</sup> Cooper above n 33.

<sup>64</sup> Jason Prior, *Sydney Gay Saunas 1967–2000: Fight for Civic Acceptance and Experiences Beyond the Threshold* (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2004).

‘threaten the city’s order’, the sauna has become, in major Australian cities such as Sydney, ‘a crucial institution to ... gay culture’.<sup>65</sup> The meaning of sauna as an iconic challenge to heteronormative space in Australia is worth noting, but is outside the scope of this article.

## X CONCLUSION

Traditional democratic processes or methods of political action have failed to halt worldwide corruption and inequality.<sup>66</sup> Political parties move increasingly toward an ‘extreme centre’<sup>67</sup> or represent a dangerous far right element. Urban activists therefore are reshaping direct action to define and exemplify alternative ways of living. These inspirations are not intended to produce systems which would replace the existing order, or prescribe a structure of governance for others. Rather, they represent a kind of operating outside of existing power structures, taking governance into ones’ own hands, and living as if these new forms of habitation are already a reality. As Jeff Ferrell explains:

[t]o the extent that these [activist] groups found their spatial activism in anarchic traditions, their goal is not so much to retake control of urban space, as it is to obliterate spatial domination and control itself ... To recall the old anarchist cry, the goal is not to seize power, but to destroy it.<sup>68</sup>

In this article, the authors have discussed their experiences of a DIY sauna in Helsinki as an alternative use of space. We have argued that the use of abandoned space for the DIY sauna displays new possibilities for a society that relies on fewer rules, developing a form of collective self-governance. This is just one example of many alternative practices currently operating worldwide, in exploring new ways of resisting the closure of public spaces by capitalism. As

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid 11.

<sup>66</sup> As recently revealed through global financial crises and documents leaks ‘Wikileaks’, or ‘Panama Papers’, are two prominent examples.

<sup>67</sup> Tariq Ali *The Extreme Centre: A Warning* (Verso Press, 2015)

<sup>68</sup> Ferrell, above n 9, 1691.

Myrna Breitbart writes:

... there is a lot of work to be done and more that can be documented ... to bring attention to grassroots mobilizations that successfully subvert planning agendas promoted by private developers or the state, and that create new space for resistance and experimentation with alternative social, economic and cultural formations.<sup>69</sup>

While the community surrounding the DIY sauna is just beginning, it exemplifies a shared use of a space that is not *owned* by



the users, but is *produced* by them. This is a small example of a global trend in activism, away from protesting against political parties and chanting slogans. Rather than engaging with a broken political system, today's activists are looking to direct action to find new ways of living and governing. These new philosophies often reject rights discourse, which is seen as individualistic and neoliberal, in favour of community and anarchy. Spatially, this movement is a backlash against privatisation of public spaces, overuse of surveillance, hyper-consumption and socially hostile architecture. It is a movement toward imagining

cities as something to which all can contribute and enjoy.

At the time of writing, the sauna was still fully operational, over a year from its construction.

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<sup>69</sup> Breitbart, above n 15.