The urban public sphere is constituted differently depending on the time and condition of a day. After dark, boundaries between what is public and private slip away; weather patterns, seasons and a city’s morphology have much to do with the conditions from which public spaces emerge. The publicness of urban space reminds us of Rosalyn Deutsche and her examination of the public nature of subjectivity, where social relationships are critical to the meanings given to the public sphere: ‘What does it mean for space to be public – the space of the city, a building, exhibition, institution, or work of art?’ I consider how the concept of publics, and publicness, may not always be a product of the designed built environment and ask: under what urban conditions are spaces being re-imagined as public?

In September 2009, the City of Montréal announced preliminary plans for a regional bus corridor expected to move approximately 1400 buses and 42,000 commuters daily between Montréal’s south shore and the city centre. This bus corridor coincided with the city’s plan to revitalise its harbour front and to reorganise the Bonaventure corridor. Equally, those temporarily using the site were determining another kind of space that reorients the discourse away from the tropes of historical preservation and resistance, and towards a re-conceptualisation of what constitutes public space.

Spatially, Le Dalhousie is a wedge that defies those spatial boundaries typically associated with what constitutes a public space, such as the public square. Le Dalhousie is shadowed by two historically modern structures that frame this recess in the city. From a performative point of view, the surfaces of Le Dalhousie’s edges provide a number of scenographic possibilities. The mouth of the cul-de-sac increases its volume. Its texture is characterised by a bruised and cracking surface on the remains of the New City Gas building and rust etching itself into the skin of the Canadian National Railway viaduct. Le Dalhousie has an evolving ecological life: a tree grows out of the viaduct façade and peeling asphalt reveals weeds pushing through the street’s original nineteenth-century cobblestones. From an architectural perspective, Griffintown, and likewise interstitial urban spaces like Le Dalhousie, while perceived to be indeterminate, are in fact determined by more than the residue of the site’s urban morphology.

The transformation of the Dalhousie cul-de-sac was just one of many debates over the city’s contentious plan to revitalise Griffintown. Local stakeholders — business proprietors, residents and members of the ad hoc Community for the Sustainable Redevelopment of Griffintown (CSRG) opposed the Dalhousie Corridor project and circulated a petition to stop its development. Key issues were increased air and noise pollution, high density traffic, the projected and prohibitive cost of the project (originally estimated at $119 million) and how the change would compromise the integrity of existing historic buildings in the neighbourhood. These concerns were presented to city officials through a series of public consultations.

In June 2010, the community initiative Corridor culturel de Griffintown named this cul-de-sac ‘Le Dalhousie’, and launched a number of community events on the site. Between July 2010 and August 2011, Le Dalhousie became a site that invited creative responses, rehearsing its own publicness. The site’s reclamation for public and social activities appeared as an act of resistance to municipal plans for the bus corridor. Equally, those temporarily using the site were determining another kind of space that reorients the discourse away from the tropes of historical preservation and resistance, and towards a re-conceptualisation of what constitutes public space.

Le Dalhousie appeared as a short street running four blocks along a north-south axis. It was transformed from a street into a cul-de-sac with the construction of a Canadian National Railway viaduct in the 1940s. The Dalhousie cul-de-sac now sits between the massive concrete wall of the railway viaduct to the east and to the west, the façade of the iconic, historic, nineteenth century New City Gas buildings.
In September 2010, I invited Théâtre Nulle Part, a site-specific theatre company, to create a performance at Le Dalhousie. Théâtre Nulle Part used Le Dalhousie as a site to examine, over three weeks, the memory of a site to examine, over three weeks, the memory of a site and boarded up windows, that crunched under foot, the brrrring and restless city sounds ricocheted in whispers, loose rubble of marginal and interstitial urban sites such as the Dalhousie cul-de-sac.

Théâtre Nulle Part's spectators collaborated with the site’s public identity was cultivated by the imagination of its users. Despite the initial controversy regarding the reuse of the cul-de-sac as a bus corral, the economy of public exchange that occupied the site of Le Dalhousie in 2011 showed what dialogical processes hold for the production of publics. Participation and dissent, social processes, contingency and contestation re/write relations between multiple subjects. They also outline a wide ethical concerns for the future of marginal and interstitial urban sites such as the Dalhousie cul-de-sac.

The urban stage, or the city as a theatre of social action, calls to citizens to drop their dependence on cultural institutions to revolt and reflect on the performative qualities of public spaces.

Le Dalhousie is not ‘public’ by definition. Its reputation as a public site is as a site of public interest for artists, the community and spectators which evolved with its temporary and tenuous occupation. Cynthia Hammond says that “the publicness of space is not a given; rather, it is something to be continually rehearsed and negotiated, exercised, and sometimes lost”.

The temporary use of Le Dalhousie shows that although there are spatial practices that feed dominant divisions of power and space, there are also dialogical processes that contest and negotiate these divisions.

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On November 8, 2011, protesters with Occupy Cal attempted to establish an encampment next to Sproul Plaza, the Berkeley campus’s symbolic heart. A handful of tents were hauled up before police in riot gear clubbed their way through a line of protesters to pull up the stakes. The police broke several students’ ribs and arrested. Videos went viral; international media covered the ensuing outrage.

The following day all students received a message from Robert J Birgeneau, the university chancellor. He called the protesters’ actions ‘not non-violent civil disobedience’, and urged them ‘to consider the interests of the broader community — the tens of thousands who elected not to participate in yesterday’s events’. What he meant by ‘the broader community’ remains a mystery. Student and faculty councils condemned the police violence and the student senate passed a resolution supporting the goals of the movement — but by invoking the ‘interests of the broader community’, the chancellor implied the protesters were a minority at odds with their peers and the common good. At best misguided, at worst, selfish, radical and exclusive.

On November 9, 2011, protesters with Occupy Cal attempted to establish an encampment next to Sproul Plaza, the Berkeley campus’s symbolic heart. A handful of tents were hauled up before police in riot gear clubbed their way through a line of protesters to pull up the stakes. The police broke several students’ ribs and arrested. Videos went viral; international media covered the ensuing outrage.

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This was not the first time Occupy was accused of failing the public good. Though the movement was ostensibly inclusive, epitomised by ‘We are the 99%’, the encampments themselves were seen as an unlawful, exclusive appropriation of public space. Critics upheld the protesters’ right to freedom of speech and assembly, but argued that the way the protesters exercised those rights, through continuous occupation, impinged on other people’s ability to do the same — the many groups that participated in the Occupy movement did so to the detriment of the greater public. The rights of a few usurped the rights of the many, so the criticism went. This argument has an intuitive, almost unobjectionable appeal. But it is a dangerous one, both for rights generally, and specifically for the exercising of those rights in public space. By privileging the minority preference over majority protest, democratic participation can be squelched. And by barring this protest in public space, voices that have no other public forum, no presence in the media or political lobby, can be silenced.

The idea that individual or group rights should be subordinate to collective or societal rights stems in part from the notion of a singular public. ‘The public’ is a broad term, encompassing all people of a place and time. In contrast, the term ‘publics’ better captures the ever shifting group identities we each either subscribe