



# EXCHANGE RADICAL MOMENTS!

Live Art Festival

**30.8.2011 – Scott Burnham - THE URBAN GUIDE FOR ALTERNATE USE**

<http://11moments.org/scott-burnham/>

## **Exchange Radical Moments! Live Art Festival**

INTERVIEW #7: We would like to introduce you to Scott Burnham. He is an independent creative director, strategist and writer specialising in innovation at the edges of urban culture, design and street-level activity. He is living and working in London. His work „The Urban Guide for Alternate Use“ was launched in October 2010 and is constantly growing since then.

Hi Scott, where are you at the moment?

## **Scott Burnham**

In London, enjoying a rare moment of calm between travels. I returned from Madrid yesterday, will be off to Amsterdam tomorrow and will be in Boston next week.

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That sounds like a busy life. Can you explain to our audience what your project is about in one sentence?

## **Scott Burnham**

"The Urban Guide for Alternate Use" is a celebration of and a catalyst for creative re-use and resourcefulness in the city, documenting alternate uses for urban objects and areas.

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What was your intention with this project? And how did you get the idea for it?

## **Scott Burnham**

I created "The Guide" as a platform for documenting the changing relationship between people and the urban landscape. I wanted to show examples of individual resourcefulness through design interventions and re-use in situations where the existing functionality of the city's objects and areas fall short. I travel a lot and am always taking photos in various cities around the world of the ways in which people alter the physical city to address different desires. Whether altering the public aesthetic with street art or creating physical alterations through design interventions, the city has become a malleable landscape. I wanted to create a way to explore this happening publicly.

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Would you call yourself a collector or do you intervene into your environment also personally?



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### **Scott Burnham**

I've directed a number of large projects which use new forms of design and creativity in the city, from Urban Play to Ill Communication (more details on <http://www.scottburnham.com/>), so I work at a much more active capacity than as a collector and intervene personally through these projects. When I travel around cities, I become something of a researcher and design operative, and if I see a need or opportunity for something in the city to be put to better use, I see what can be done.

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Can you give us an example for a successful Alternate Use?

### **Scott Burnham**

In Hong Kong, I came across a man selling picture frames and offering a "quick stop" framing service on the street. He had set up a shop using an existing fence as a display area for his frames, and as a working area to hang customers' pictures next to each frame to make a selection, with a flat surface attached to the fence on which to assemble the chosen frame. The re-invention of this two meter stretch of fence into a business brought a humanity to the infrastructure of the city that I found beautiful.

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Can a street-level activity become a radical moment? How do you define a radical moment for yourself?

### **Scott Burnham**

For me, a radical moment is when someone decides they are going to take it upon themselves to take an existing object, area, or system and move it towards a better reality. Contemplation and complaint is energy that can be used more effectively by doing something yourself to create change. The radical moment is in the action of the individual making something better. The street has always been the platform for radical moments – creating change through the design and aesthetics of our shared spaces seems a natural progression.

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And personally, when did you experience a moment when time stood still?

### **Scott Burnham**

In terms of discovering great surprises in the city, it happens all the time, in the smallest of ways. The Hong Kong frame seller I mentioned previously was wonderful to discover. Or



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finding a Paris café whose menus are tucked in the branches of trees next to your table, or an Amsterdam bar that has decorated the lamp post outside at Christmas. There are too many of these discoveries to name any one as a defining moment for me – they all combine to make exploring a city itself to be a wonderful mosaic of experience.

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The work we see on your website is sometimes at the edge of legality or even over it. Is it still art or design, even though it's illegal?

#### **Scott Burnham**

My first response is that "art" categorizes the work on "The Urban Guide for Alternate Use" in a way that isn't entirely accurate. I consider the majority of the work on "The Guide" to be a dialogue between people and the city – part design, part creative expression, but mostly a message back to the city of ideas for improving its physical self.

Regarding the question of legality and art, the majority of street art is, by legal definition, illegal, but anyone who has seen the work of Blu, Vhils, Swoon, Os Gemeos, or Mark Jenkins wouldn't question its validity as art due to its questionable legality. But in the larger picture, contemporary culture is filled with advances enabled by people who at some point stretched the boundaries of legality. A great deal of early sampling and remixing music technically broke laws, but without those law breakers we wouldn't have Hip Hop or DJ culture. "The Urban Guide for Alternate Use" is documenting a new urban remix – a physical version.

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Do you think art or design should meet the audience outside of a secure space like a gallery, a museum etc.? What is the difference between an activity on street-level and a painting p.e. in a museum? How does the position of the audience change here?

#### **Scott Burnham**

I often find much more relevancy in the art and design found outside of institutions. That word – relevancy – is the defining term one needs to keep in mind when considering the difference between work inside an institution versus work outside the institution. In the street, relevancy is paramount, particularly in "The Urban Guide for Alternate Use". Institutions have a habit of trying to attribute relevance to the work they show. The street is the universal context we all share as urban citizens. Work that appears in the street becomes part of that context – part of the shared narrative of our urban experience. The audience is part of the work, not viewers of it behind glass.



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## **Exchange Radical Moments! Live Art Festival**

Until the 5th September a competition is still running on your website. 500 Euro for the Best Re-Purposed Urban Object or Area. Did you receive interesting submissions already?

### **Scott Burnham**

A tremendous number. The submissions I've received are amazing. Just an hour ago I received one from the Netherlands in which someone transformed an old cement staircase that remained after its building had been torn down into an attractive bench. Yesterday, I received one from Sofia, Bulgaria, in which someone transformed some tiles in a public square into a game board. Every day there are new submissions from cities around the world. The range and breadth of the submissions has been inspiring. I couldn't ask for more – well, apart from a plane ticket to go see each one in person...

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Take me with you :) ... But there are still some days left. Would you like to recommend something to your contributors?

### **Scott Burnham**

Keep them coming! The winner receives the prize, but all the good ones will be posted on the website, and the runners up will be available for view in Berlin on 11.11.11. And remember – the competition is about the reuse of any object or aspect of the city, so let your imagination run wild. Just remember to bring a camera.

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Where can we find your project online?

### **Scott Burnham**

<http://www.altuseguide.com/>

## **Exchange Radical Moments! Live Art Festival**

What are your plans with "The Urban Guide for Alternate Use"?

### **Scott Burnham**

I'm working on "The Urban Guide for Alternate Use" book now. The book will be, true to the name, an urban "field guide" to help people discover new uses for the existing infrastructure of the city. "The Urban Guide for Alternate Use" book will be a new type of user manual for the city.



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When will it be published?

**Scott Burnham**

I'm still in discussions with publishers regarding the date and format, but Exchange Radical Moments! Live Art Festival and this page will be the first to know.

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Thank you for the interview and have a good evening!

**Scott Burnham**

Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

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Me too.