

DIRT & DANGER #downtownlethbridge #lethbridgebrz #lethbridgerealestate

DIRT & DANGER is a material and performative response to the various, conflicting and political interests shaping urban development and civic discourse in Lethbridge, Alberta.

It mimics the uniform of a police sanctioned, citizen patrol group called The Watch to take a rhetorical counterposition against the obfuscating language of cleanliness and safety used in the City's Downtown Clean and Safe Strategy¹ documents.

Although simple in form, the hat is not a statement of naive contrarianism against efforts to engender social and economic vitality. It does not make an indiscriminate critique of the programs and social services contained within the strategy framework, nor is it an argument against cleanliness and safety, as such. The former being a concern for the quality of the built environment and the latter a sincere desire to live free from violence and discrimination. What I am suggesting is that "clean" and "safe" are not neutral objectives. They are targeted: exclusive categories aimed at social conformity by establishing narrow standards of conduct while vilifying all those who cannot--or will not--accept such strict parameters of being. Once washed, clean and safe describe idealized and depoliticized spatial conditions where structures of domination are maintained and their operations proceed unencumbered. On the other hand, a coarse and gritty space is not easily ordered. It is an ever shifting aggregate consisting of intimate circumstances, distributed forces, and concrete political effects. These are open, necessary and generous commons.

Dirt and danger are negative conditions that form a complex threat to power. They expose its prejudice and coordinated ambitions by showing what it sweeps away. But, they also make people acutely aware of their own contingent vulnerabilities within the fluctuating dynamics of social relations. Danger is immediate and corporeal as much as it is imaginary.

The point here is not to exchange one set of rhetorical terms for another, but to acknowledge that they are both, in fact, language used with intent. A power motivated by cleanliness and safety always involves discrimination and, at some point, will use force to achieve its ends. More than likely, it will even rely on historical forms of violence being misidentified as benevolent innovation or excused as natural. The difference between clean and dirty is a matter of recognition and direction: what currents of power are being mobilized and on whose behalf are they working? To ask questions like these is to care about who is being hurt; who is being blamed; who, if anyone, is held accountable; and who is lauded the architect of prosperity or champion of community. It is not as simple as distinguishing between victim and perpetrator. It is necessary to understand the instrumental ambiguity of language, find comfort in the muck and to slog through difficult political processes in the long run.

Dirt and danger are intentionally agonistic: opposed to vacant administrative routine; critical of the ideological bias inherent to vague terminology claiming status as a universal value (an incontestable good); an indictment of discriminatory development strategies founded on surveillance and displacement; yet interested, attentive and open to the concerns people have about their place in the world.

At its core, this project is a quiet gesture advocating for spaces with a profound capacity to receive and support the fullness of lives lived. It implies that, when couched in the economic logic of an urban revitalization strategy, "clean and safe" designate a closure founded on an imaginary ideal--an unreal estate of absolute normativity and capitalist productivity--impossible to obtain in spite of strict enforcement. Dirt and danger move in another way, they are situated, contextual, and open categories meant to prompt a careful consideration of what constitutes violence and how it is enacted in the city.

¹ Details of the strategy can be found on the City of Lethbridge's [website](#).