This document is the outcome of a series of discussions and collaborations with a number of people, involved directly or indirectly in a project within a European network. It shows a collective desire to create connections between different practices and research on the city. Some of those involved in the initial stages of the network have, in turn, invited new contributors from their own networks. The algorithm which made the body of the book grow was that of affinity and friendship. From an initial small handbook we have arrived at quite a fat book. But we kept the smallness, as an important detail. Twenty-three groups from France, Belgium, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Germany, Sweden, Holland, Spain, Croatia, Slovenia and Canada are now included in the book. Their assemblage allows parallels and the possibility of identifying similarities and differences across comparable contexts.

URBAN ACT condenses the idea of a certain type of activism, of a way of acting and organising actions, which is probably a common thread for all the contributors. This ACT-ing can take different forms: from radical opposition and criticism to a more constructive and propositional acting, embedded in everyday life. It challenges both academic, professional, artistic, and political practice; it addresses the creativity and criticality of a new approach to the city. This approach is necessarily differentiated and reflects a multiplicity of viewpoints and ways of doing.

The practices presented here include artist groups, media activists, cultural workers, software designers, architects, students, researchers, neighbourhood organisations, city dwellers. Most of these groups are usually catalogued as ‘local’ and their position is minimised as such, but in fact they are highly specific and have the quality of reinventing uses and practices in ways that traditional professional structures cannot afford (due to their generic functioning). Their ways of being local are complex and multilayered, involving participation and ‘local expertise’ as well as extra-local collaborations. They reinvent contemporary urban practice as ‘tactical’, ‘situational’ and ‘active’, based on soft professional and artistic skills and civic informal structures, which can adapt themselves to changing urban situations that are critical, reactive and creative enough to produce real change.

A series of texts accompany the groups’ self-presentation. They add a few more questions to those of the groups: What is the relationship between urban struggles and urban actions? / What is the political role of counter-culture in urban transformation? And that of youth and women, of the unemployed, retired, immigrants…? / What role could be given to urban interstices? / How can urban tactics reconstruct spaces of proximity and collective desire? / How can one use media as an urban tactic? / What is changed when the ‘artist’ replaces the ‘planner’? / What are the dangers of alternative practice? / How to not essentialise positive notions such as ‘participation’ and how to deal with the ambivalence of situational urbanism?
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A handbook for alternative practice
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