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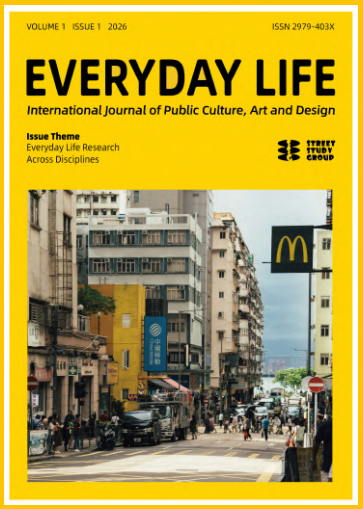
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The City as a Method: Queering Educational Urbanism in Authoritarian Times

Maxim Bulanov[a*]

[a] School of Liberal Arts, Indiana University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
[*] Corresponding author: mbulanov@iu.edu



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[a] School of Liberal Arts, Indiana University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

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ABSTRACT

This practice review follows three narrative lines. The first traces the emergence of Educational Urbanism in Russia as an approach that recognises the educational potential of city spaces, objects, and everyday activities. The second reconstructs a master's programme at a Moscow-based public university and examines three practices from its curriculum: designing learning experiences in urban space, mapping informal educational resources, and sustained observation of ordinary places. The third offers a retrospective interpretation of my contribution to this collective educational experiment. As a closeted queer educator, I participated in designing, developing, and teaching the programme without describing my work as queer pedagogy. I now recognise connections between my queer experience and the pedagogical decisions that challenged established distinctions between legitimate and informal knowledge, proper educational spaces, and supposedly neutral observers. I explore these connections, drawing on instructional materials, assignments, student reflections, and autoethnographic reflection. I provisionally describe this relationship between queer perspective, pedagogical method, and constrained professional visibility as *closeted pedagogy*.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Maxim Bulanov: Maxim Bulanov is a doctoral researcher in the American Studies PhD Program at Indiana University Indianapolis, with a minor in Philanthropic Studies. His research examines Pride organisations and LGBTQ+ nonprofit activity in Indiana, drawing on ethnographic, organisational and critical GIS methods. Before moving to the United States, he designed and taught interdisciplinary educational programmes in Moscow, focusing on urban learning, instructional design and educational environments. His scholarship connects everyday spatial experience, pedagogy, nonprofit organisations and institutional change. He was a Fulbright scholar at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis in 2019.

Introduction: An Educational Experiment in a Closing Country

Educational Urbanism developed in Russia during a contradictory historical period. The 2010s were marked by increasing political repression and an expanding state discourse of 'traditional values'. The 2013 legislation restricting so-called 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' among minors (Russian Federation, 2013) changed the professional conditions in which queer educators worked. Yet universities also developed experimental programmes, Moscow invested in urban spaces and cultural infrastructure, and educational discourse emphasised individual trajectories, project-based learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and new learning environments.

Much of this experimentation was supported by public institutions. A centralised system could accommodate pedagogical plurality when innovation served educational and urban modernisation. I describe this condition as *authorised experimentation*: not broad political freedom, but institutional permission to test educational approaches and relationships whose outcomes were not fully predetermined. Educational Urbanism (Banerjee, 2010) was one expression of this moment. Around 2015, the School of Educational Urbanism began taking shape as a network connecting research, professional development, and methodological experimentation. From 2020 to 2025, a Moscow-based public university hosted a master's programme in this field. Its subsequent disappearance invites reflection on the fragility of such institutional permission.

This practice review has three related lines. First, I introduce Educational Urbanism and the programme's curriculum. Second, I reconstruct three urban educational practices and explain the instructional decisions through which city environments became indispensable to learning. Third, I reread my own participation as a queer educator who was not publicly out in that professional setting. I ask how my queer perspective may have found expression through decisions about educational space, knowledge, embodiment, and belonging. In this article, to queer means to question the naturalised classifications that make particular spaces, uses, experiences, and knowers appear proper or legitimate (Britzman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998; Blackburn and Smith, 2010; Rumens, De Souza and Brewis, 2019; McDonald and Rumens, 2020). The analysis proceeds to a provisional account of *closeted pedagogy*, before returning to the programme's changing political context.

Methodologically, this is a retrospective practice review with an autoethnographic component. I draw on syllabi, assignments, instructional materials, pedagogical notes, available student reflections, and my memory as a member of the programme's design and teaching team. The student materials help me reconstruct how assignments were taken up and inform my retrospective interpretation; they are not systematic evidence of learning outcomes. Consequently, I distinguish what students were asked to do from what I can claim they learned, and I distinguish my retrospective perspective from the intentions of colleagues and participants.

I do not name the institution or non-public participants, nor do I use images to illustrate the methods. The account connects identifiable educational work to queer pedagogy,

anti-LGBT legislation, and political restriction. Some former colleagues and students continue to work in Russia; associating them publicly with an interpretation they neither offered nor consented to could create professional risk. Published authors and named public works are cited where relevant.

Designing Educational Urbanism

From Educational Environment to Educational Urbanism

Educational Urbanism was a relatively new term in Russian education, but it entered a field already concerned with the relationship between learning, activity, and environment. Cultural-historical psychology, activity theory, developmental education, tutoring, and anthropopractical approaches offered related ways of thinking about mediated development, educational environments, and individual trajectories (Zuckerman, 2011; Smirnov, 2020; Troitsky, Maksimova and Albul, 2023). These traditions made the idea of organising education through relationships among people, activity, and place intellectually recognisable.

In international scholarship, Banerjee (2010) described Educational Urbanism as an alliance among pedagogy, educational planning, and urban planning. Dvir (2006) approached the knowledge city through dispersed 'knowledge moments', while Gruenewald (2003) argued that place is pedagogically and politically consequential. These perspectives treated the city not merely as the subject of education but as part of its possible infrastructure. Our design question followed from this: how could graduate students learn Educational Urbanism *through* urban experience rather than only learn *about* it (Bulanov, Rossinskaya and Asonova, 2021; Asonova, Bulanov and Rossinskaya, 2022)?

The Programme as a Designed Ecology

The master's programme sat between education for people working with cities and urban studies for people working with education. Participants included educators, tutors, architects, urban and cultural practitioners, municipal employees, theatre practitioners, and people working with informal education. This range was intentional, since the programme did not aim to produce one standardised professional identity. A recurring design question for our students was: What kind of practice are you trying to construct, and what do you need to make it work?

The curriculum combined an academic track of reading, seminars, and methodological vocabulary; a practice track that moved work into urban locations; and a research track organised around observation, mapping, and interpretation. Graduate projects invited participants to bring these strands into a self-directed inquiry or intervention. A community dimension—collective visits, conversations, informal gatherings, and continued

discussion outside class—helped participants compare professional languages before turning experiences into formal arguments. Study, practice, research, and community were therefore designed to overlap (Rossinskaya and Asonova, 2026).

Anthropopractice and self-skills gave this curriculum a further orientation. In the anthropopractical approach, education concerns how people work on themselves and configure relationships with others and their environments (Smirnov, 2020). Self-skills directed attention to noticing and interpreting one's own curiosity, fear, discomfort, position, and relation to place (Bulanov and Rokal, 2020; Kovaleva and Khachatryan, 2021; Bulanov, 2021). These approaches belonged to established educational conversations; they were not codes for queer theory. Nevertheless, they became important to the personal interpretation I offer below.

The City as a Method: Three Practices and a Queer Retrospective Reading

The three practices discussed here were developed within Educational Urbanism and were applied to the master's programme. At the time, I understood them primarily as instructional-design decisions: how to create situations in which students would notice the city differently, discover resources outside formal institutions, and examine their own relationship to place. My subsequent engagement with queer pedagogy and queer urban scholarship offers another way of reading these choices.

Queer theory is relevant because it questions the apparent naturalness of established relations. Britzman (1995) connects queer pedagogy to habits of knowing and ignorance; Shlasko (2005) uses queer as a verb describing what pedagogical practices can do; and Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha (2017) emphasise situated bodies, affects, and the interrogation of taken-for-granted research categories. I distinguish this reading from experimentation, which opens alternative possibilities, and anti-authoritarian pedagogy, which redistributes authority. Queering asks additionally how a particular arrangement becomes understood as proper in the first place. The distinction is analytical, not a claim that only queer educators question norms. The examples below show both the assignments and the connections I recognise retrospectively with my own queer experience.

Queering Educational Space: Movement, Access, and Interpretation

The pedagogical sequence began with *Yasenevo.Refugium*, an immersive audio-walk created by director Anton Sytin in Moscow's peripheral district of Yasenevo. Residents' oral histories and an ambient soundscape made an ordinary suburban landscape available for a slower, more attentive encounter. Movement, sound, atmosphere, and unexpected details structured the experience rather than merely illustrating information delivered by an instructor. The activity helped establish a shared starting point for designing learning in urban space.

Graduate students were then asked to design and conduct their own educational activity at a chosen urban site: the location had to be indispensable to the instructional logic. If the same activity could be transferred unchanged into a classroom, the city had become decorative scenery rather than an educational resource. Students therefore had to identify what could be noticed, questioned, or enacted *because they were there*: in a courtyard, on a transit route, in a market, park, or cultural institution. Weather, users of the place, traffic, sounds, access, and unplanned encounters could modify the activity. The educator could prepare conditions and questions but could not fully predetermine how the encounter unfolded (Asonova, Bulanov and Rossinskaya, 2022).

A conventional field trip (Portnova, 2023; Kuzmina, 2025) can preserve the distinction between a knowledgeable guide and an audience visiting objects to be explained. Our design made that expertise-based relationship less fixed. Students had to consider the expertise of residents and everyday users, the unexpected properties of the environment, and the limits of their own plans. The city became a participant in the educational situation, not just an illustration of the syllabus.

Only later did I begin to connect these choices with queer questions about access and legitimacy. Formal education assigns appropriate locations and recognised roles: classroom and street, instructor and participant, sanctioned lesson and contingent encounter. Queer urban scholarship interrogates the similarly universalised figure of the person who is free to move, linger, look, and interpret. Munt's (1995) account of the lesbian flâneur asks who can occupy the position of urban observer, while Pelurson (2019) considers how routes, pacing, and deviations from prescribed movement may challenge normative spatial expectations.

Neither author provided a blueprint for our assignment. Their work made me recognise a connection between my own interest in less prescriptive educational spaces and an experience of inhabiting social environments where the right to be visible, to remain, or to interpret could not be taken for granted. I now read the exercise as questioning the presumption that educational authority belongs naturally to designated people and places. Its queer possibility lies in making the relationship among learner, educator, and urban environment open to reconsideration.

Queering the Map: What Counts as an Educational Resource?

The second practice reversed the conventional order of mapping educational provision. Institutional maps normally begin with established types of facility: schools, libraries, museums, cultural centres, and sports institutions. We asked students to begin instead with routes, uses, encounters, and relationships. Where do people stop or gather? Where is information exchanged? Where do young people rehearse, care for others, avoid adults, or learn how a neighbourhood works? Only after observing such practices did students organise them into formal, non-formal, informal, and accidental educational resources, sometimes using distinct colours and symbols to show these categories.

This sequence produced maps reflecting the reality outside of conventional maps. A

neighbourhood dog-training park mattered because pet owners met and exchanged practical knowledge. A mural could provoke unplanned cultural discussion, and a closed Soviet Palace of Culture could remain a site of learning through its exterior reliefs and architectural history. These were examples of how educational relations could become visible once the map ceased to start with a list of authorised institutions. The activity drew on the broader conception of dispersed urban learning described by Dvir (2006) and on our programme's work with assessing city objects as educational resources (Rossinskaya, Asonova and Bulanov, 2022).

In instructional terms, students had to justify an observed educational relation rather than rely solely on an institution's official designation. The task redistributed some authority to the inhabitants and users of places. It also required students to distinguish the *declared* function of an object from what people actually learned there.

My retrospective queer reading begins with that apparently technical decision. What makes some places legible as educational while others remain outside the inventory? Who determines what is a proper use of space, and whose practices disappear when a category is treated as natural? Britzman's (1995) attention to habits of knowing and Shlasko's (2005) account of queering pedagogy help me understand the exercise as more than the addition of overlooked resources: it opened the authority of classification itself to questioning.

I recognise a personal connection here with living in social categories that could not adequately recognise my own identity. This is not to equate a park used for informal learning with a queer space, or to turn a collective curriculum into my autobiography. It is to say that the difference between official recognition and lived experience was an issue to which I was attentive, even before I had the language of queer pedagogy for describing that attention. The map offered students a practical way to ask why one account of a neighbourhood becomes authoritative while another remains marginal.

Queering Observation: Bodies, Time, and Belonging

A third cluster of assignments drew on urban anthropology (Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Lofland, 2006). Students were asked to choose an ordinary place, return to it, observe and document its changing uses, and resist the pressure to identify a problem immediately. Their questions were concrete: Who uses this place at different times? What was it designed for, and what do people do there? Who passes quickly through, who remains, and whose behaviour attracts attention? What does repeated observation reveal that a first visit missed? Rather than producing an instant diagnosis, the task required students to revise their observations over time.

Related exercises focused on the observer's position. Participants attended to their own routes, avoidance, curiosity, comfort, anxiety, and sense of belonging. In discussion, a commute could become a way to analyse experiences of safety and risk; a visit to a municipal institution could expose practical lessons about bureaucracy and authority. These activities enacted what we meant by *self-skills* (Bandura, 2001; Kovaleva, 2016;

Gulevataya, 2024): using one's experience as a resource for observation without assuming that it is universal. A route that looks neutral on a map may be lived differently according to age, gender, class, disability, professional position, familiarity, or perceived safety.

The method had two deliberately linked mechanics. Embodied attention asked students to register their own responses as potentially relevant information rather than noise surrounding an objective description. Repeated, unhurried observation delayed the demand for a rapid, useful conclusion, making routines, absence, waiting, and variations in occupation easier to notice. Neither mechanic was invented as a queer technique; both had established meanings in urban observation and educational research.

Looking back, however, I recognise why these choices mattered to me as a closeted queer educator. Questions of comfort, safety, visibility, and belonging were not only abstract categories within a course. They were also present in my experience of moving through professional and social environments in which some aspects of myself could not be named openly. Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha (2017) help me articulate how bodies, affects, and positionality enter the production of apparently neutral knowledge. Pelurson's (2019) discussion of queer temporalities adds a way of considering what becomes visible when an activity departs from a prescribed, productive timetable.

I am not claiming that slowness or embodied observation is inherently queer, or that students encountered the exercises as queer. My retrospective reading concerns the arrangements they were invited to examine: which bodies appear at ease, whose presence seems out of place, who may remain without explanation, and why particular routines are treated as ordinary. The practice allowed unfamiliar or uncomfortable experience to become a source of inquiry. For me, that possibility connects the pedagogy of everyday urban attention to questions of normality and belonging that later became central to my own queer interpretation.

Looking Back: Closeted Pedagogy

The three practices had educational purposes and intellectual histories independent of my identity. They were designed collaboratively, and their immediate aim was to teach Educational Urbanism (Banerjee, 2010; Bulanov, Rossinskaya and Asonova, 2021). Nevertheless, looking back at my involvement in their design and delivery, I recognise that some pedagogical values I helped enact—questioning established categories, attending to embodied experience, and allowing unofficial uses of space to count as knowledge—were also expressions of how I understood the world as a queer person (Ahmed, 2012; Jobst and Stead, 2023; Kletchka, 2021). This is a situated claim about my work, not an assertion that the programme had a concealed queer curriculum.

This interpretation requires a distinction between queer content and a queer reading of pedagogical method. Explicit engagement with LGBTQ lives and identities can take place through curricula and departmental pedagogies (Kletchka et al., 2020), student

organisations (Coley and Das, 2020), and activist or transformative leadership (Pryor, 2021; Zook, 2017). My retrospective interpretation instead examines the instructional decisions that could render settled categories open to question: why a classroom is the proper educational setting, why an officially designated institution is the proper learning resource, or why one type of observer is presumed neutral. These decisions need not always be queer. In my account, they acquire a queer significance through their connection with my experience and through the questions queer scholarship makes it possible to ask of them.

A useful but imperfect vocabulary comes from Meyer, Dale and Willis (2022), who distinguish ancillary from central attention to LGBTQ issues in nonprofit research and passive from active roles for LGBTQ research subjects. Their categories were not devised for curriculum analysis. I borrow them cautiously as a heuristic: ancillary describes the non-central position of explicit queer material in our curriculum; active, in my adaptation rather than in their original measure, refers to the active questioning of normalised relations through instructional decisions. I would place my own retrospective account provisionally in this ancillary/active position, without presenting it as an established model of queer pedagogy.

I call this relationship closeted pedagogy. By closeted I mean a condition of professional legibility in which an educator's queer perspective may inform pedagogical choices even when that perspective cannot safely become an explicit professional claim. Educational Urbanism offered a public and intellectually legitimate language for work with non-standard learning environments, informal practices, situated experience, and self-skills. These concepts did not disguise queer theory; they belonged to Russian educational traditions and to the programme's collective project. Yet they also made room for questions I can now recognise as personally connected to my queerness.

The concept is necessarily limited. An author's later reflection and interpretation is not evidence of what every colleague intended or of what students understood. Nor does the closet give rise to a special body of knowledge unavailable to openly queer pedagogy. Its particular feature is the uneven relation between what could be enacted educationally and what could be named professionally. This relation can offer partial protection but can also reproduce silence, conceal queer intellectual genealogies, and encourage retrospective attribution that others would not share. I therefore neither idealise closeted pedagogy as a response to repression nor generalise it beyond my experience. I offer it as a provisional way to examine the intersection of pedagogy, personal identity, and institutional constraint (Thomas-Brown and Shaffer, 2016).

When the Window Closed: From Authorised Experimentation to Educational Unity

The Educational Urbanism programme was possible within a period when public authorities supported educational and urban modernisation. In Moscow during the 2010s, programmes that linked universities, professional education, new urban environments, and project-based learning could align with official ambitions for innovation. Educational Urbanism fitted this configuration: it brought together city and education professions, formal and distributed infrastructures, and individual learning trajectories. The state system did not have to become politically open for such experiments to be institutionally useful.

This coexistence was personally contradictory. The same decade saw restrictions on public expressions of queer life, including the 2013 prohibition concerning so-called 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' among minors. I left my work in a secondary school because I did not want to continue teaching minors under that legislation. Yet within higher education I could help develop an interdisciplinary programme centred on plurality, informal knowledge, and attention to different lived experiences. Some forms of pedagogical difference could be welcomed while queer professional visibility remained risky. This is the specific tension that authorised experimentation helps me name.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the political environment for educational experimentation became increasingly restrictive. Presidential Decree No. 809 of 9 November 2022 established the preservation of 'traditional Russian spiritual and moral values' as a state policy priority (President of the Russian Federation, 2022). In September 2023, Russian universities introduced Foundations of Russian Statehood, a centrally developed course for first-year undergraduate and specialist students (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, 2023). While these developments do not establish a direct connection to the discontinuation of our master's programme, they illustrate a broader shift towards ideological conformity and centralised control over higher education. Restrictions on LGBTQ visibility intensified further in November 2023, when the Russian Supreme Court designated the so-called 'international LGBT movement' as an extremist organisation, exposing LGBTQ individuals and organisations to increased risks of prosecution and further constraining the professional visibility of queer educators (Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, 2023).

The same administrative concentration that had made experiments possible when innovation served modernisation could transmit new priorities when ideological conformity gained importance. The contradiction was therefore not simply between a liberal programme and an authoritarian state: institutional innovation and political restriction had coexisted from the beginning. What changed was the range of activities and vocabularies likely to receive continued institutional support.

In the case described here, the master's programme did not reopen enrolment after its

final period of operation. Looking back, that meant the loss of a concrete space where we could experiment with how people learn from urban materiality, everyday relationships, and their own experience. The case illustrates how contingent a publicly authorised educational experiment can remain when permission to innovate is not the same as secure autonomy.

Conclusion

This review has traced the emergence of Educational Urbanism, three practices within a Moscow master's programme, and the changing institutional conditions of that work. The activities made the city part of instructional design rather than a backdrop: students had to construct learning around specific places, map educational relations beyond official institutions, and return to ordinary locations while attending to their own embodied positions. Anthropopractice and self-skills supported this attention to the learner's experience as a source of inquiry.

Returning to the programme as a queer educator, I recognise connections between my own experience and decisions I once described only in the language of educational innovation. Closeted pedagogy is my provisional name for this situated relationship between constrained professional visibility and pedagogical work that could question established definitions of proper spaces, recognised knowledge, and legitimate ways of belonging. The term does not redefine the whole programme as queer, attribute my interpretation to colleagues or students, or establish specifically queer learning outcomes.

The institutional history is part of this reflection. A centralised system could encourage experimental educational plurality while restricting queer visibility; later shifts in state priorities narrowed the conditions in which our programme operated. For everyday life and practice-based educational research, the case shows how ordinary spaces become educational through design, and how a practitioner's retrospective interpretation can reveal relationships among identity, pedagogy, urban experience, and political constraint without claiming that those relationships were shared or openly articulated at the time.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

I used Google Gemini to assist with processing reference materials on queer theory across disciplines, analysing students' reflective essays to identify illustrative quotations for the hidden queer pedagogy checklist, and refining the manuscript's academic style. I take full responsibility for the content, citation accuracy, data integrity, and originality of this article.