In Gen. McPherson’s park, the Occupy D.C. encampment improves a vibrant urbanism

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Hands-on public space.

The National Park Service has posted signs creating a buffer in the park, requiring generators be turned off so no one can use them. But the space remains a communal hub.

The Occupy movement, which has taken

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From Occupy D.C. to Washington square, early days.

park in cities across the country, 800 or more, whether it has resonance and can translate its message into concrete change, are political questions. But looked at as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon, it has roots in ideas with established pedigrees in the worlds of art and architecture. Its anti-consumerist ethos, its impatience with the media and its love of theatrical intervention in city life make it a direct heir of the Situationists, a radical European avant-garde collective begun in the late 1950s with ideas that remain influential today.

It might also be considered a living exercise in do-it-yourself (or DIY) urbanism, a trendy movement that strives to engage ordinary people in a hands-on approach to shaping and claiming public space.

And it seems a perfect fit with an exhibition, “The Art of Activism,” which provided signage and maps and — with a video that provided even better — the public lives inside.

To passersby, it is a jumble of tents and blue tarps, the iconic symbol of the displaced, the temporary, the makeshift. Set against the orderly but dull architectural backdrop of McPherson Square, the Occupy D.C. encampment is a low-slung and seemingly haphazard arrangement. But it has made this slow public space, used mostly by office workers and a few residents of nearby luxury condominiums, one of the busiest public squares in Washington. To use the argot of urbanism, the protesters who installed themselves at McPherson Square on Oct. 1 (and another group that has occupied Freedom Plaza a few blocks away) have done what so many planners, designers and architects strive for but fail to achieve: They have “activated” the urban core.

Whether the occupiers, which has thrived over

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