Mind the Gap is a thought-provoking show at the Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn, attempting to make visible the spaces that are often overlooked. Curators Eva Diaz and Beth Stryker gathered videos, performances, and installations by artists and activists who use leftover urban spaces as the departure point for their work. The show does not lack contradictions: How does one mount a show of work that, as the catalogue says, are “unexpected, clandestine, and unauthorized” interventions into the fabric of a city? How do you avoid the risk of romanticizing and aestheticizing these very spaces?

Mind the Gap features the work of 15 artists of different nationalities, many of them based in New York. Together, their works serve as an international typology of overlooked urban spaces, including, for example, Kyong Park’s Making It Better For You (2000), a “fiction” on Detroit’s urban plight; Ines Schaber’s just! (2001), a slide installation on Berlin’s vacant lots; and itan Aksanić’s Arizona Road (2002) a proposal scenario for the development of a market in Sarajevo, and thus the easiest one to experience, and potentially the most radical. The piece—a temporary booth built with plywood, 2-by-4s, and orange safety netting—is in the street, curbside, just outside the Farragut Houses, a housing project on York Street.

Using a map distributed by the gallery, I walked through the park that overlooks the East River and faces the city, passing hordes of people sunbathing, kite-flying, and picnicking. Rest Area Open House reads not as a work of art but as a makeshift shelter for the construction site. When I arrived, the installation was occupied, and my first impulse was not to enter. A police patrol was passing by, and observing the structure’s occupants, who at that moment were three young African-American men. I started talking to them. They told me that they live in the projects, and in the last few days had used the piece for socializing. It seemed that, other than these guys and the two artists who monitor the installation, the people who have shown the most interest in this installation were the police. Indeed, as soon as I left, the police approached the guys and told them to leave. When I came back, the guys called out to me, and the Center for Urban Pedagogy’s Values & Varieties (2005), a project that looks at the cultural history of the Fulton Street Mall in downtown Brooklyn.

Alex Villar takes a literal and even comical approach to highlighting the empty small slivers of residual urban spaces. Temporary Occupations (2001) is a double-screen projection in which Villar jumps from decks, over fences, on terraces, through alleys, and into holes. Another gap, a banal and ordinary parking lot, takes on another quality when occupied by Michael Rakowitz’s Pilot (2004), a tent structure that simulates a covered car and playfully promises some temporary urban privacy.

Marjetica Potrč’s Drawing Cities: The Struggle for Spatial Justice (2004), a wake-up call on urban and civic tensions, is a series of colorful, cartoonish sketches that walk us through Amsterdam, Pristina, and Tirana, and speak of scenarios of good cities and good citizens.

One of the works, John Hawke’s and Sancho Silva’s Rest Area Open House (2006), is an outdoor installation a few blocks away from the gallery. Of all the pieces in the show, this is the only to actually occupy an urban void.