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Urban Commons and Ordinary Places

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Abstract:

In the era of globalization, ordinary places are increasingly contested and urban experiences fragmented, resulting in ordinary places that facilitate everyday life becoming marginalized and turned into places that are left behind yet rediscovered, excluded yet revived, forgotten yet remembered. It is important to consider ordinary places' changing roles and functions as this allows us to understand how different places in the city are used over a period of time. This is done by studying the changing roles, meanings, and functions of urban commons, as this allows us to understand how processes of globalization are affecting the formation of different kinds of public and ordinary places that are used for different purposes, including isolation, resistance, consumption, and creativity.

Key Words: ordinary places, urban commons, creativity, sustainability

Urban Commons, Urban Poetics and Urban Politics

Urban commons are spheres, spaces and places of human interaction, cooperation, and negotiation. Making urban commons is a process and should rather be understood as a verb as everything public is becoming a part in the productivity of the city being negotiated between activists, the state and capital (Harvey 2013). Many of such movements, whether it is the international Occupy Movement or Occupy Gezi in Istanbul, try to express their rights to the city and initiate commons, which can be groups of small pioneers or entrepreneurs, producers of subcultures or social activities providing networks and services to the poor and marginalized, whether native, newcomer or temporary urban dwellers.

Urban commons are often understood as initiatives focusing mainly on urban gardening but the versatility of such activities, groups and movements is much more varied. Governments started to recognize their potential and encourage if not support such movements to upgrade derelict urban spaces and provide more places, at best for all (Stavrides 2016). Yet, the creative and productive capacity of urban commons is also weakened by the increasing control, institutionalization, and decreasing autonomy of social movements crucial for the formation and productivity of commons. Others go even so far to argue that once local grass root movements lose their spontaneity and momentum and turn into global streams of protests and justice (often supported by the internet), it is the mistrust and rejection of political/ economical control coming from the movements' participants which hinders the creativity, horizontal character and togetherness of movements and commons to develop (Castells 2012, Tonucci Filho 2015).

Despite urban commons not just being about collective gardening and the resistance of urban hipsters (Bowers 2006), the question remains how the city can implement the concept of the commons on a larger scale making the city and its alternative spaces available to all types of users and uses (Borch and Kornberger 2015). Furthermore, urban commons are not just common resources but need a fundamental set of regulations and strategies for how to be managed to keep a balance between individuality/creativity and direction/supervision (Ostrom, Burger et al. 1999). Martina Löw (Löw 2015) states in her recent work *Managing the Urban Commons: Public Interest and the Representation of Interconnectedness* that the urban commons do not exist as a shared resource but are negotiated by different (social) media which offer constantly new images of urban commons, without actually addressing (and critically discussing) for example the gap between rich and poor and the rising inequality in the city (Löw 2015, p.112).

Whether we talk about knowledge commons (Strathern 2004, Frischmann, Madison et al. 2014), cultural commons (Bowers 2006, Bertacchini 2012, Rowan 2012) or urban commons (Harvey 2013, Borch and Kornberger 2015, Dellenbaugh, Kip et al. 2015), it is the political dimension of commons which make the concept so interesting as they seem to offer alternatives in times of crisis, stress and conflict. Furthermore, it will largely depend on the way commons are performed - e.g. in form of radical activities, peaceful

resistance or harmonious, open-to-all initiatives - if commons can continue to exist. The existence, conservation and preservation of commons also depend on the urgent need for such a resource as the commons, the resource itself and the presence of a community with a manageable, secured population and dense social networks (Ostrom, Burger et al. 1999)

Many recent examples such as the urban commons called Agrocité Project developed by the Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée in Colombes, Paris show that initiatives can go beyond urban gardening, including urban farming, modern recycling systems and eco-housing, reaching a complexity and size which asks for the participation of all users (Blundell Jones, Petrescu et al. 2005, Jenkins and Forsyth 2010).

Urban Commons, become more common, everyday features with an alternative economy, society and space (Stavrides 2016). Yet, the big question remains, who do they actually include, and are urban commons really open to all? What if they become new urban enclaves, hip places for one group (causing new cycles of gentrification) and excluding other users. Stavros Stavrides writes in his recent book *Common Space: City as Commons* (2016) that urban commons should always stay open to newcomers, new ideas supported by new political initiatives and ideas which yet have to be tested as it is crucial to find the right balance between creativity, political support and continuation (Stavrides 2016).

In comparison to urban commons, this chapter will refer to the diversity of public spaces as ordinary places as not everybody takes part in such active collaborations or movements. Many people fight a lonely battle and still have the right to claim their space in the city (Harvey 2013). Additionally, we can question whether in times of increasing consumption and commodification of public places the direct relationship between public place, the formation of civic society and expression of public voice is still existing (Spierings 2006, Cronin and Hetherington 2008, Smas 2008). Ordinary places facilitating everyday urban life are increasingly contested and fragmented affecting the formation of place identities, place attachment and sense of place which determine how we can navigate and orientate ourselves in a rapidly transforming urban landscape (Giddens 1990). To discuss the changing meaning of the creativity and sustainability of the city, I will make use of this concept to help to improve the understanding, recognition and commitment to

ordinary places which are situated between urban politics and poetics and are the backdrop of the real stories of everyday life. All in all, we are talking about a diversity of concepts, scales, meaning and uses of urban places, which facilitate different uses and inviting different users. The concept of the urban commons can be used to show that ordinary places are situated between different areas of conflict and the case/ actors are facing these challenges every day.

Urban Commons, Creativity and Sustainability

Creativity can be understood as a phenomenon in which existing ideas and information are used to produce something new and valuable. According to Mel Rhodes, the dominant factors of creativity are process, product, person and place (Rhodes 1961). In a similar way, researcher such as Meusburger and Funke (Meusburger, Funke et al. 2009) are asking questions like: why are highly creative individuals not evenly distributed over time and space? Why are certain cities and historical periods characterized by great creativity in the visual arts, music, and science, whereas others are not? As a result, the development of creativity is not just the achievement of a single person but a complex and dynamic set of social and spatial factors.

In comparison, Charles Landry argued that cities' crucial resource is its people and that aspects like human intelligence, emotions, creativity and innovative ideas are becoming more important than location, natural resources and the access to markets (Landry 2008). Combining both approaches, we can argue that it is the complex, dynamic interaction between creative people and their environments which allows us to understand creativity as a dynamic and interactional concept. The relevance of situational, cultural and contextual principles in this setting is as important as the consideration of time, existing conditions and chances to gain experiences and solve problems. All these aspects together allow us to recognize creativity as a valuable concept when it comes to understanding current urban conditions and the state of socio-economical development of diverse urban settings.

R.L. Florida (2008) argued that a good quality of urban life helps cities to attract talent and as a consequence grow economically. Furthermore, the growth of a creative class includes outcomes and benefits including new ideas, the high-tech industry and regional growth (Florida 2008). However, if there are no incentives offered by governors

or other bodies to support the good quality of urban life, which helps to attract creative people and new talent, it is very unlikely for creative talent alone to be able to cope with problems like economic decline and to be the engine that turns a struggling community into an innovation cluster (Moretti 2012). Thus, the existence of an creative class does not automatically mean economical revitalization or development as Florida argued. For example, the case of Berlin shows that a city which generates amenities to attract a growing creative class as a result offers a rich cultural and urban life but not enough job chances for the growing group of intellectuals. In contrast, others scholars ask for new alternatives to creative capitalism and economical driven creative practices, focusing on new ways to understand and utilize the concept of creativity and creative commons which includes flexibility, mobility, but also precarity, recovery and accumulation. Cocco and Szaniecki (2015) argued in their work that out of every success and failure of capitalist processes new creative practices and identities emerge which are not just aiming to stimulate economical growth but also anti-capitalist movements and protests (Cocco, Szaniecki et al. 2015). This shows that creativity and creative capitalism work in different ways in different cultures, cities and economies in the world.

Sustainability is a term which we hear almost every day but what does it really mean? The words 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' are about us, our culture, environment but also our economies, cities, countries worldwide and more. Sustainability can be defined as the ability and capacity to do something, maintain something and sustain oneself using the resources we have know without damages the resources and potential resources of the future and the people who will need them. In short, in means that an act, activity or process can continue forever without damaging others (Rodwell 2007). Living sustainable also means to live within our natural environments and cities without harming other people, society and culture. In the 21st century sustainability is a big idea and catchphrase as it is an everyday question whether we should consume food, clothes, energy and other products whose origin and final destination we cannot retrace anymore? Our lifestyles and life in the cities are changing in a high pace, as we are asked to be more flexible, mobile and competitive in times of rapid globalization.

In such globalized times, sustainability occurs almost in every context and situation as a great idea, concept and solution to be applied to every and anything but as a

result sustainability is frequently misunderstood as we do not ask for its original meaning, and what we can really achieve with it (Khan and Islam 2007). Others even further and claim that sustainability became a concept to justify and sustain first world lifestyles at a comfort level which we think is ethical appropriate and acceptable when actually knowing that we ignore the most crucial fact that we base our life on the resources, abilities and potential of all people who are not belonging to the global rich (Kingsnorth 2004). Instead of just relying on others and their resources, life in cities has to be about the limited resources, existing heritage and creative potentials to secure a sustainable future for life in cities.

Taken together, both terms - creativity and sustainability - are contemporary buzzwords, whereas we miss the opportunity to explore their real potential and impact once applied. In this context, Hagport, Thomassen et al (2012) stated that creativity can contribute to the sustainable transition of the city from one stage to the other if we recognize that transition appears in cycles. Each phase - whether growth, decline or recovery - has its own dynamism and appears in many forms, shapes and networks (Hagoort, Thomassen et al. 2012) 89).

Alternative lifestyles and creative urban practices mirror these dynamism as they reflect the fluidity and flexibility of contemporary urban life and identities. As a result a growing number of creative common or communities evolve out of these alternative lifestyles. People are not just forced to migrate but voluntary move from one country, one city and community to the other to commit themselves, searching for the real meaning of life and/ or work as volunteers, artists and in other flexible positions to discover simplicity, forgotten potentials and use their own creativity (Geenhuizen and Nijkamp 2012). What if more and more people practice such lifestyles and create such communities in economies and cities which have seen economic boom but also decline? Can we see the search for a meaningful everyday life in the city as a chance to recover hidden abilities, potentials and chances for the future, at best a sustainable future?

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