For the sly city yet to come: self-organisation and common(ing)
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Q: On what idea of city and cohabitation are self organized process founded? Which values do they embody?

A: Portrayals of the contemporary city, seem to place practices of re-appropriation of space and self-organization at the center of attention. If in the past decades these practices were depicting a global landscape of alternative initiatives, today they seem to be a necessary ingredient of metropolis. They participate in branding and labelling capital cities: how could Paris, Rome, New York or Brussels not have networks of urban gardeners appropriating wastelands; public spaces re-shaped through practices of commoning; alternative creative or working spaces bringing life back into abandoned buildings?

And yet, the phenomenon of self-organization in cities seems to be a possibility for some forgotten urban context to take their revenge. In the sidelines of international global cities (Sassen, 1991) and away from the exciting and cosmopolitan urbanity of European capitals, a fringe of drifting towns and forgotten rural territories is emerging. The phenomenon of shrinking cities and territories concerns areas affected simultaneously by deindustrialisation, peri-urbanisation, demographic transition and austerity policies. Images of abandoned factories in Detroit (Michigan, United States), vacant houses in Halle (Germany), empty shop windows in Saint-Étienne (France) are now widely renowned. They raise questions such as: what does it mean to live in a shrinking cities? What daily landscapes do their inhabitants go through? How does this progressive decadence determine transformations in lifestyles, in everyday life? And ultimately what forms of collective organization emerge in the face of such decline? And if such a question arises, it is because the same cities that consolidated an image of a city in decline went onto be the place from which new more positive images of an alternative urban life emerged: community gardens (Paddeu, 2017), open air graffiti galleries (Gribat, 2017), corner shops and empty plots (Béal, Journel, Pala, 2017)[1] reinvested by

1 For an analysis of self-organized practices in recuperating urban voids in Saint-Etienne see «La Cartonnerie - Expérimenter l'espace public, Saint-Etienne 2010-2016» Coll. Recherche PUCA, Vol. 229a, a collective work edited

groups of neighbors or local non-profit organisations are some of the process participating in transforming decline into an alternative form of making the city (Béal, Rousseau, 2014). Far from the flow of money and in the shadows of rich landscapes of world capitals, these cities have become places of experimentation, laboratories of possible redefinitions of the same values of urbanity which seem to lack in these very same cities due to economic decline. Architects, urban planners, activists, social humanists, scholars "rediscover" and invest these cities as places where a different "smart city" can be invented, mostly based on bottom up process, collaboration, self-organisation, reinventing ways of living together, of defending the commons, and in some cases experimenting new urban policies… From cities in crisis they become models for a decreasing city, in other words examples of possible redefinitions of progress, ways out from a consumeristic society, capable of asserting that, even without large economic capital and without an obligation to grow, a city can still be a city …

Taking this thought one step further, and consider the relation between Global North and Global South, we see that they share more than it might seem and definitely belong to the same planet. In fact, the absence of an efficient welfare system and the consequent self-organized life in the margins of the formal city are common situations in the so called Global South (Agier, 1999; Davis, 2006). Within this perspective African, Asian, American as well as Mediterranean megacities can be considered as theaters of tactical daily urbanism[2], places for the emergence of inventive modes of co-existence, alternative housing and service provision, pushing us not to look at southern cities as relics of a past in a breakdown of development but rather as examples of the city yet to come (Simon, 2004; Myers, 2011)[3].

by architecte and urban planners of the NGO Carton plein. http://www.carton-plein.org.

2 On this subject see the Moma exhibition catalogues « Uneven Growth : Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities », Paperback 2014, edited by Pedro Gadanho and with texts by Richard Burdett, Teddy Cruz, David Harvey, Saskia Sassen and Nader Tehrani.

3 In 1997 Rem Koolhaas and Kunlé Adeyemi explored the African megacity of Lagos, functioning on a self-organized mode after being largely abandoned by the State. They aimed to find solutions for this apparent dysfunctional system and despite the apparent chaos, they discovered patterns of organisation and at the end they talk about a collection of initiatives that made the city looks almost utopian to their eyes. This project was never published because of the political situation of Nigeria.

A global landscape of self-organized urban situations emerges. This landscape that crosscuts north and south, legal and illegal, rich and poor, formal and informal city making should help us, researchers and planners, to better adjust our lens to look at this phenomenon. Anthropology, in particular, invites us to erase latent asymmetries and hierarchies that are often attributed to these different contexts in order to better define what are we talking about and understand why we talk so much about it.

Q: About self-organization and institutions: are these processes responding to social needs or are they supporting the commodification of them?
A: The city has always been partly produces by self-organized processes and community based initiatives. More precisely, form a heuristic perspective, the attention focused on micro-practices « inventing » the city (de Certeau, 1980 and 1994; Agier, 1996), seems to be almost banal as it is considered the base of social production and reproduction of urban life, especially by anthropologist favoring an apprehension of the city from a dweller perspective[4] instead of studying the institutional framework of city-making. A constellation of actions and practices, uses and ruses that every single citizen exercises to go along with its everyday life composes the «infra-ordinary» (Perec, 1989) city, object of the anthropologist observation and analysis.

If today we are so intrigued by the capacity and production of self-organisation is partly because of a changing trend in the urban production of spaces and services. Within the context of modern cities (here considered as production of a contingent historical moment) we have been used to services being provided by the state, as the role of institutions was precisely, in the modern state, to supply services that has been centralized under its competence. In the contemporary context of a neoliberal globalized urban setting, socio-economic dynamics are impacting on the welfare state capacity, or willingness, to keep doing the job. To put it in a simple, and maybe banal, way: when (in time), and where (in space)

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4 Michel Agier uses the expression "city-bis" to signify the product of an anthropological observation of city life: «It's not from the city itself that the knowledge of urban anthropology emerges, but from a montage of urban life sequences taken from a tiny part of the real world. All of this information represents a kind of city-bis, as a result of procedures for collecting and arranging urban data» (Agier, 1996: 35).

centralized state or market organizing forces are weakening, here they come: organized, volunteering, resisting or constrained citizens ready to come together and find solutions. The terrain of ambiguity lies precisely at the place (and questions about the form) of the interplay, or the luck of it, between state organisation and self-organisation.

On the ground, we can observe a double effect of welfare state constraints in the provision of urban services: on one hand citizens are demonstrating their ability in finding solutions for important social issues. In the other hand we can witness some local institutions changing their governance habits confronted with community based initiatives and the central state resignation. For instance, municipal institutions can be motor of choices aiming at facilitating citizens self-organization by regulating it. As Chiara Belingardi demonstrates in her paper, the city of Rome, Naples and Bologna have promoted lows respectively addressing the use of municipal buildings for social use, the inscription of some spaces as «Commons», the definition of some guidelines for the cooperation among citizens and administration for the care and regenerations of commons.

Q: Are they producing new and innovative institutions or just making bad institutions more accountable? Can we witness a learning process both at institutional level and at community based level?

A: Institutions are not the only actors of this sort of support by legitimation or «normalisation» process of grassroots initiatives. The cases of Metropoliz in Rome and Cavallerizza Reale in Turin presented by Francesca Bragaglia and Karl Krähmer are very interesting case to address how and to which extent art and culture take a central role in the politics of legitimation, with which effects, benefits and downsides. The first, an old industrial building at the outskirts of Rome, have been occupied by a multiethnic and poor community needing a place to live; the second, a historical complex in the city center of Turin, have been occupied by actors, academics and urban activists in order to prevent its privatization. In both cases the illegality of occupations is combined with its official use by the arts and museum network of both cities. If we can be sure that this inclusion within the art and cultural market is a way to some-how promote the importance of these spaces of autonomy at an urban scale and therefor prevent their premature erasure from

the city-map, we can also observe a reduction of the political and social scope of the squatting original act.

This is why the real independence of these initiatives and their production of spaces of autonomy is so hard to define. Often what we are facing is more a redefinition of roles between bottom/local/self-organized initiatives, institutional actors and the Market. The case of the Escocesa Cultural Center in Barcelona presented by Iolanda Bianchi rises precisely this question. This former industrial complex located in the district of Poblenou, worked from 1999 to 2006 as a space and meeting point for artists and craftspeople when the real estate company Renta Corporación purchased the buildings with the aim of building offices and homes. Artists were evicted from the factory which was left completely empty by the end of 2007. The same year the Barcelona City Council approved a plan for the renewal of La Escocesa, which was catalogued as Industrial Heritage. Two of the buildings in the complex were established as devoted to public use and included in the Strategic Cultural Plan of Barcelona. In 2008, the City Council gave provisional management of La Escocesa to the artists NGO La Associació d'Idees. With this analysis focused on the process and evolution of this cultural center, Bianchi sustain that, in order to emancipate from the capitalist system, Urban Commons need the support of institutions and can only survive through a combination of the logic of self-organization and the logic of universalization and social protection, which is the one defying management of public spaces and goods.

In a context of economic crisis and/or in the need for redevelopment strategies, municipal institutions seem to be particularly open to accompany and empower citizen initiatives by recognizing their role in the dynamic of urban social fabric. They can even decide to be the promoter of such dynamics by providing spaces or organizing conditions for self-managed initiatives when they already proved to be socially and politically successful and respectful of a certain aesthetics and practice of participation. As Juan Arana paper presents, the Local administrations in Madrid and Barcelona have kick-started processes of citizen appropriation of spaces such as urban gardens or empty plots through self-managed initiatives. The 2012 program Pla de Buits Urbans in Barcelona pioneers in the country the promotion from local administration of site-specific citizen-led strategies. The program launches a competition for 19 unused urban voids. In Madrid the administration impulses the participative program

«Imagina Madrid» that approaches the production of collective spaces from artistic and cultural intervention. These two policies are not particularly Spanish one. At the contrary, they are very well known other european municipalities: this fashion of regulating forms of self-organisation by reframing them into formula of pubic actions that can be exported, replicated, not to say «sold off» from one european capital to the others, should definitely push us to question the aim and sense of these actions when they happen in such a transformed context. We cannot miss the chance to question this shift from ephemeral to institutionalized, from alternative to regulate, from radical to negotiated practices all tough these processes seem to shear a similar aesthetic and produce, undoubtedly, some communing situations standing as an alternative to exclusive urban development.

But if we zoom out, if we take some distance from the particularity of each case, as well as from the specific relation between the state and the (self)organized citizens that each of them embody, something seems to emerge: what appears to be new is that these actions aim not only to transform a disadvantage status quo in a better one (as it can be the case of the so called «informal», or un-planned neighborhood such as the self organisation in favelas), or to claim a different use and roles of spaces considered to be spatially unjustly organized or unevenly attributed (as it is for squatting movements); today some of these actions are aiming *at* maintaining[5] things from falling apart. It is less the self organisation itself to be a new phenomenon to me, but more the «direction» and the aim of self organized initiatives to be considered as a new practice. We do not need to go into the extreme situation of an overall State resignation to see that public services are more and more demanding the «participation» and collaboration of dwellers if not in making, at least in maintaining the city... For instance, smart-city labels are flourishing demonstrating how technology is a tool for enabling participation (an individual more than a collective one) pushing us to question the role of the state and its institutions in guaranteeing the common good and the maintenance of the

5 On this topic architects B. Robles Hidalgo and K. Berghmans are currently working on the link between architecture and maintenance. Among other aspects, they are developing this topic by fieldwork on municipal participatory tools like MobiliSÉ Saint-Étienne and Fix My Street in Bruxelles. To know more about their ongoing work, see K. Berghmans and B. Robles Hidalgo, «L'entretien e(s)t l'architecture. BIENNALE 2017 SAINT-ETIENNE, *Fig. n°4 - Pléonasme*, 2018.

status quo.

Q: What is the very meaning of research in these processes? Are self-organized process occasions to bridge the gap between research and urban policies/practices?

A: Rather than trying to find a general, not to say generic, answer to this question, I'll summarize some thoughts in the form of a list of «risks» in approaching the field of self-organisation, communing and the city. This should, by no means, be taken as an exhaustive check list. It is just a way to contribute to unpack some of the complexity, and ambiguity, on the topic of the self organized processes and the relation to institutions and power, an attempt to participate into building a common critical approach to our vocabulary.

The first risk we should be aware of, is the risk of de-politisation that I will address by the question of vocabulary. The rather dark horizon of the post-political city has colonized not only our actions, but also our language; symptomatic of that is the kind of categories we mobilise to talk about actors involved in self-organized initiatives: the words we are using are more and more disconnected with a political vocabulary, leaving the *plateau* to categories such as «dwellers», «inhabitants», «neighbors» and «riverains», terms that seem to legitimate the actions of people involved not because they are supporting a cause or envisioning a future they want to fight for, but because of their proximity and belonging to the local scale... If indeed we are facing a period of political crisis, particularly in the lack of political figure entitled to function as mediating figures between social needs and decision making process, this radical (even though progressive) «spatial» turn in our vocabulary has to be questioned.

The second risk is the one of *reification*: as the paper of Romano Alessandro demonstrates, the definition of commons is rather bleary if we go from practices to theory, and, I would add, back from theories to practices. In fact, when we talk about «commons» there is a light tendency to conceive it as «good». Although they are goods in terms of resources (to protect, to shear, to claim) they should not be reduced to «things». The accent should be put at the process transforming, in the opposite direction, goods into commons by a «commoning» movement, that is to say a set of social relations and actions by which a group of people share

responsibility for something that can be an empty plot, a section of a street, the governance of a neighborhood or even drinking water supply.

The third risk is connected with time. Ephemeral and temporary urban practices are often classified as forms of alternative way of making the city. But the temporality of the opportunity where this alternative urbanism can take place is not neutral, and should not be seen as such: empty buildings or vacant plots are often waiting for a new urban project to come; informal management of spaces or services often happens in between formal organisation of it; In fact, as some scholars attempt to demonstrate nowadays, if temporary urban practices are framed as alternative forms of collective collaboration, political activism, self-organization and resistance against neoliberal logics of city production, they also can be seen as a product of the same neoliberal system of flexible economic models aligned with the logic of consumption and privatization (Madanipour 2017; 2018). This contradiction seems to be the one risen by the case of the city of Santiago and the ambivalent nature of its temporary use practices as Marisol García explained in her paper, in line with the emerging critics addressed to «temporal urbanism».

The fourth risk is the one of an anonymous and disembodied conception of actors involved in process of self-organisation and re-appropriation. Often actors involved in such actions are seen as a homogenous entity: for instance, the opposition of citizens, inhabitants, dwellers on one side and institutions in the other side, is quite abstract, not to say often untrue... We should look deeper and closer at biographies and trajectories of actors involved to discover that these categories are far from being watertight. Far from that: in most of the cases we are facing situations where these categories are very porous one. A good exercise could be, for example, to follow the path of a researcher working of this kind of topic. We will easily discover that not only he/she is a researcher, but he/she is also a dweller, an activist, and, why not, could become at one point a municipal worker... Moreover, self-organized urban process and spaces are by definition ambiguous situations where different social actors, with different aims and interests, interact and conflict among them are not exceptions. In the multicultural and ethnically diverse neighborhood of Ballaro, in Palermo (Italy), studied by Giancarlo Gallitano, for instance, «commoning» becomes a way of distinction from the different

network of dwellers living in the same area: Sos Ballarò's activities are therefore a way for certain dwellers to construct a network of relationship and identification that is not at all including the whole neighborhood population. In this case, as it is frequent in multicultural neighborhood, re-appropriation of space, although it is framed as a neutral and positive action of dwellers engagement and of commoning in urban production, is at the same time a very powerful why of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) and therefore division among dwellers as Giancarlo Gallitano pointed out defying these actions "differential commoning" (Noterman, 2015). Re-appropriation and commoning are not homogenous or exclusively inclusive process!

That leads us to the fifth risk, that I would call the danger of a moral(-istic) approach. Self-organisation and re-appropriation, two terms that are not quite synonymous but are here often used as if they were, are most of the time depicting a positive process of use: independent, autonomous, emancipatory for the first; borrowing, recycling, upgrading for the second. Following a movement of emancipation and re-semantisation, these actions claim an independent way to act and give a new role to what has been rejected and outcast. But these terms are actually describing double-sided phenomena: aside from this positive approach connected with the act of commoning and re-claiming, they could also describe «negative» process, as a means of grabbing goods, fencing territories, privatizing services at the expense of others. In other words, self-reoganisation can also be a crime, as it has very well illustrated Francesco Chiodelli in its work on housing informality and criminality in northern Italy. For the sake of research we have to take in account that informality is not only commoning in a «good» and «civic» sense. Or, to say it in another way, communing can also be linked with mafia privilege of a «we few we happy few» attitude and therefore be, at the list, a form of selfishness.

Success, is the six risk, in the sense of self-organisation as reproduction of a «model», of a «best practice» forgetting the local emergency of a process; it could therefore become a recipe to be learned and replicated, with less and less taste each time we cook it; a buzzword losing its significance. This is also when self-organisation loses its power of innovation and become just an already tested way to do, or to analyse, things.

The seventh risk is (un)scaling processes we are looking at. We

often celebrate self-organisation as a local/grassroots action to uneven top down decisions. But is the «local» scale always the most «democratic» and inclusive one? This ambiguity is well depicted in Andrew Wallace work about austerity policies and collaborative planning in some English cities where the neighborhood scale have been promoted as a decisional scale instead of regional planning authorities that have been abolished in 2010 by the Conservative-led Coalition government. Following Wallace's conclusion this situation has produced an uneven geography of localized planning activity reflecting wider spatialized inequalities in resources and capitals. This is an opportunity to remember that the scale at which self-management of commons occurs, changes its relationship to forms of social organisation: rising the question of scale, means to question if and how the idea of self-organisation and the commons challenges our traditional conceptions of neighborhood, town, city, regional and national administrative bureaucracy.

Eight, the Risk of « fashion » of re-appropriation and commoning: this *effect de mode* has the tendency to fuzzy our capacity of understanding a phenomenon. Some difficult questions have to help us to go further, such as: If the state is not any more granting on collective and common interest, shell we go for that? Is self-organisation the good answer? Shel we calibrate it for that? Or should we be claiming institutions to take back their job?

To conclude, as a suggestion let's make a lexical exercise: what if we take off from our talks and texts the term «self-organisation» and/or «commons»: which word would we use?

Q: How the role of the planners and planning itself is changing confronting with community based initiatives?

A: I would like to frame my answer by the effort of semantisation done by one of the biggest international event on architecture and urban planning: the Biennale of Venice.

We are in 2012 and the U.S. Pavilion at the 13th International Architecture Exhibition of Venice[6] curated by Cathy Lang Ho (Commissioner and Curator), David van der Leer, and Ned Cramer (co-curators) — was devoted to the theme «Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good». The exhibit features 124 urban interventions initiated by architects, designers,

6 The Director of the 13th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale was David Chipperfield and the general topic of this biennale was «Common ground».

planners, artists, and everyday citizens that bring positive change to their neighborhoods and cities. Spontaneous Interventions was a reflection of country's attitudes towards civic participation, social justice, and the built environment. That year, the overall theme of the Biennale conceived by director David Chipperfield was «Common Ground». The projects exposed in the US pavilion were characterized by their interest in collaboration, in serving the collective needs of a community, and in improving public space. The exhibition also examined how urban actions that originated as radical ideas have evolved from subversive tactic to increasingly accepted urban strategy.

Two editions and 4 years after, in 2016, Curator Alejandro Aravena form Chile, propose to reflect on architecture and practice from the margins: *Reporting from the Front* is the title of its Biennale that focuses on architecture as an instrument of *self-government*, of humanist civilisation, and as a demonstration of the ability of humans to become masters of their own destiny. Participation of communities was, if not the central topic, at list a very frequent trend in exposed process and works in the global exhibition as in national pavilions.

This year[7], the moment has come for the French pavilion to put light on the phenomenon of collective and experimental spaces: «Infinite places» is the title that curators Nicola Delon, Julien Choppin, Sébastien Eymard (Encore Heureux) gave to their exhibition celebrating ten pioneering places that explore and experiment with collective processes for dwelling in the world and for building community. Here some words of explanation by the curators:

«These are open places, possible places, un-finished ones that establish spaces of freedom and the search for alternatives — places that are difficult to define because their principal characteristic is to be open to the unexpected, to endlessly build for future possibilities. In the face of the enormous challenges of our time — in which ecological changes conflict with the dominance of commercial economy, at a time of withdrawal into nationalist identities and authoritarianism, it is all the more urgent to maintain hope…to find inspiration in experiments that are sometimes ephemeral, but that are nonetheless concrete and based in solidarity. (…) Almost all of them started with an abandoned building, or a neglected site. Here architecture finds its means of expression through the confrontation of pre-existing spatial qualities with an organic process of transformation, whose

7 Directors of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale were Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara. They decided to entitled this edition «Freespace».

meanings depend on common needs and the aspirations of those who commit themselves to it with courage and determination. In this spatial and temporal combination, the generalist architect serves as an invaluable guide, at the outer margins of the role that she is normally assigned. The architect does not stay within the bounds of building construction but seeks to make places just as well»[8].

Looking at all this exposed and therefore celebrated experiences, it seems first of all clear that the design itself (of a house, of a garden, of a public square) is not the final product nor the central job of architecture and planning, but rather the medium through which architects and planners can participate in building community relationships and innovative group dynamics. Second, we can conclude that what these situations of self-organisation are doing to design, is challenging the capacity of architects and urban planners to open up their creative process, to make space for co-production, putting, some time, in crises authorship and ownership by destabilizing common definition of what design is and where and when design happens. Ultimately, it seems that for architect and urban planners what is progressively changing is their potential client and therefore their future role. «Making space» to self-organisation and re-appropriation by civil society means not only to explore the role that designers and design have in enabling communities to work together but also to prove that they themselves can work with and be part of larger communities.

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