

Call for papers

Whose space is it? Interstices and urban commons: the city from an inter-disciplinary perspective

Tours, France, 10-11 December 2020

As part of the research cluster “Cities and urban studies” at the *Maison des sciences de l’Homme Val-de-Loire*, a group of scholars from different fields and various centers of research, we are organizing an international conference entitled “Whose space is it? Interstices and urban commons”¹. The conference, alternating plenary meetings with thematic presentations, will offer the opportunity to exchange methods and theoretical frameworks throughout the various human and social sciences dealing specifically with these spaces.

From their very beginnings, cities have included ambiguous spaces void of any particular function or status, spaces which confuse and defy previously established limits, alternating between public and private, and between the city center and its peripheries. The study of urban “fabric” has mainly focused upon the processes of its formal realization, and as determined by public authorities. It hardly takes notice of interstitial spaces or peripheries, those places which have been abandoned and lack a specific identity, and which are waiting to be identified and appropriated. These spaces in fact deserve greater attention. Whether empty or occupied, vacant or built upon, these spaces are coveted, menaced, occupied, etc. They may well become public spaces again, but also may not. Just as they may be occupied physically, they may also be appropriated intellectually. As these spaces are constantly involved in the transformational processes of the city, we should benefit from an examination of the informal forces at work, taking into consideration the regulations bearing upon them which were established prior to their use, as well as looking into the process of institutionalization which remains beyond the reach of public agencies. These spaces may in fact help us to understand academic positions regarding the city, whether they be historical, sociological, geographical, legal, literary, or philosophical, etc.

Focus on urban interstices: “in-between” spaces of the city

Taken literally, the word interstice refers to that which is located between two or more places, as demonstrated in the German “Zwischenraum” and the English “in-between”. In some languages, such as Turkish, the word has no direct equivalent. Historically, the word was first used in France to describe the space between two vertebrae, and later on, it came to mean a period of time. Only with increasing urbanization in the West during the nineteenth century did the word take on a more general spatial meaning, namely that which is situated between one thing and another, to be associated with words such as “niche, vacant lot, recess, wasteland, zone, interface, etc.

¹ Call for papers translated by Liam Fennelly.

Formalized by the legal status given to it, the interstice, without any a priori judgement concerning its nature, could in fact be considered as an exception within normality, to be understood only by way of the social activities performed within it, these last more often than not outside of rules and regulations.

Taken in this sense the word interstice has no fixed or formal meaning, being more of a blanket term with potential use in many contexts. Within the area of urban studies, it is widely used in history, archeology, art history, geography, sociology, urbanism and urban planning, all depending on the specific areas and time periods studied. The aim of this conference has less to do with finding a precise definition of the word as with bringing together various fields of research to contemplate their respective approaches, their objectives and their methodologies centering upon the following three areas:

Concepts of space and of time

Considered spatially, the interstice is first and foremost distinguishable by its uncertain nature: this uncertainty rising from how it is put to use, a use which may prove to be permanent but can as well remain ephemeral or sporadic.

In its spatial sense, the word also refers to otherwise forgotten and abandoned places, void of interest, seen as insignificant and even disregarded, hardly visible, more or less out of the way, more or less laid-out, well-defined spaces or passageways, all of which are unstable. An interstice not only has a history but has temporalities as well, all of which are respectively related to their changing functions and to their processes of (non-)integration within the urban environment. Certain spaces enter into the category of interstice, others not, all of which requires an understanding of its development over time and according to particular social, historical, and cultural contexts. In this sense, the concept of the interstice covers a heterotopic dimension which may also imply a heterochronic temporality.

Uses, functions, and appropriations

Existing outside of the urban order, the interstice as a concept can easily be adapted and modified (squats, camps, places of resistance and refuge, etc.), appropriated for common uses ("donkey paths"), and used for discrete, secret or illegal activities (drug-dealing, lovemaking, a place for political or religious refugees, etc.). If urban planning is capable of creating interstices, the improvised uses of these locations may well interfere with urban flow, security, and surveillance, etc. On the other hand, in spatial arrangements conceived a priori without interstices (such as housing complexes), micro-interstices may be spontaneously created. In the same way, doorways and spaces adjacent to buildings can be considered as buffer-zones likely to be used and transformed for other purposes. Interstitial spaces may be borrowed or appropriated, or otherwise adapted for some other function of a social or artistic nature; they also represent spatial resources for city dwellers, resources which are in their turn subject to power relations (of social orders and gender, etc.), and which have the potential to create conflicts. Silent, almost invisible, and often discontinuous in nature, these interstices and what happens within them may be menaced and coveted, but are all part of the urban construct. Whether located in the center or on the outskirts of the city, the interstice remains inextricably linked to the problematic of spatial and social margins. While the interstice is defined by its uses, functions and appropriations, the periphery on the other hand in its various historical configurations occupies a place related at the same time to several areas, some located in the center, some reaching far beyond.

The passage from one area to the other can be formally marked off (determined by certain criteria—a border in urban architecture), or can be more subtle, such as in the gradual increase of indicators, such as is the case passing from the countryside to the city in Western societies. In this way, the periphery might be regarded as a spatial interstice between the city and the country, at least if considering the possibility of polymorph interstices which resist any spatial designation.

Political recuperation of interstices

The interstice thus seems to defy any rational spatial organization and normative standards. It would even be possible to consider the absence of interstices as having a totalizing or even totalitarian effect. Coveted by different and opposing parties, interstices may be subject to intervention by governmental agencies seeking to re-establish control over them, to redefine their functions, or even to remove them. The appropriation of the interstice by urban planners, whose motives and purposes change with time and according to local contexts, is made possible through means specially designed to control it, by reassigning it normal functions, and by depriving it of its interstitial status. Those responsible for creating the interstices may either resist or conform to these adjustments through forms of engagement which it would be interesting to examine.

If we were to imagine urban interstices as “empty”, we could likewise consider urban commons as “filled in”.

Focus on the commons: the urban collective

The notion of « commons » has been recognized since Antiquity and has long been a subject of study for historians of ancient societies – particularly in its legal and economic aspects. It is currently the object of debate as much within the various disciplines who have treated it (principally economics, law, environmental sciences, and philosophy) as well as outside the academic world. The boundary between these two areas is in fact porous, as the scholars involved in the study of the subject often have personal interests. Benjamin Coriat’s definition of the term “commons” comes quite close to defining the objectives of the conference: “a shared-access resource, governed by rules largely established by the community of its own users, aiming to guarantee over time the integrity and the quality of the resource” (Coriat, in Cornu et al., 2018). Commons are as much of an ideal as a daily reality in civil societies. Efforts to define the word often refer to specific social events (e.g. the Rotonda commission, which sought to establish a third category of goods - neither private nor public)

Applied to an urban context, the idea of commons is difficult to separate from the criticism of the neoliberal city. It has particularly been taken up by social movements and by critical geography, and in particular in the United States. Far from ignoring these debates, this conference would like to broaden them by crossing over the different disciplines treating the notion of urban commons. By opening up unexplored areas of the question, it aims to spread out this theme in order to create as many openings as possible: new approaches, new fields, new questions, etc. The interdisciplinary approach adopted by the conference also seeks to enrich dialogue and stimulate thought on these issues.

The objective is also to find common conclusions around the following lines of study, without excluding other proposals:

Commons space: Which urban places can be considered as commons or characterized as such? How long have they been so? When and why did they cease to be?

User groups: Urban commons are always created by and associated with groups or collectives. How do these collectives come into being, over how much time? How can they be identified and characterized? How do they evolve?

The rules behind the commons: Commons exist through “practical rules determined collectively” according to Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval. What sort of rules are likely to organize urban commons? How are these rules conceived and put into practice? Could co-ownership or collective ownership based on a “community of interest” (Chaigneau, in Cornu et al., 2017), a very widespread phenomenon in Europe where 40% of housing is covered by it (Bright and Weatherall, 2017), be the basis for the commons? Beyond this example, the question is whether the rules which allow for the existence of commons proceed from “the social activation of the law”, according to Jacques Commaille’s formula (2015), or arise from the inclusion of shared practices in the space.

Resources shared by the commons: What are the precise elements or resources which urban commons share? If these are places or objects, how can we describe them (lands, buildings, facilities), what are their uses, their purposes (municipal agencies, cultural locations, etc.)? Are they in the process of changing?

Art and the commons: How are commons portrayed through art, how are they appropriated? We think immediately of the occupation of abandoned buildings by artist collectives (the Berlin Art Bang project, the artist squat Tacheles in Berlin, Les Frigos or 59 Rivoli in Paris) or the collectives of event managers (Soukmachines, Collectif MU, etc.). The appropriation of these spaces by graffiti artists is also worthy of consideration, as these are for the most part unregulated, but nevertheless informed by certain social codes. In the same way, graffiti is a dissident graphic act which represents the appropriation of urban commons by the individual, an appropriation of urban property on the city walls.

Proposals for presentations or posters may be based on empirical research or on theoretical studies. They may take the form of a case-study or cover one or more areas of study.

As the aim of the conference is to encourage a collective reflection on the possibilities and issues of interdisciplinary approaches in urban studies, the authors are asked to explain their research clearly and precisely: their methodologies, their sources, their theoretical framework.

Proposals may not exceed more than 3000 characters, with spaces included (1500 spaces for posters), accompanied by a short bibliography, written in French or in English.

The proceedings of the conference will be published.

Deadline for proposals: 17 April 2020.

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