

Re-energizing the City! A comparative analysis of urban commons initiatives

International Workshop and City Expedition

Side-event to Working Conference on 'Participation Fatigue'
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Dept. of Urban Management
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1. Introducing the context: Toward a futureproof equilibrium in Amsterdam

We started with a welcome by **Julie Ferguson**, project leader of the research project [Futureproof Equilibrium](#). The aim of the workshop (part 2 and 4 below) was to understand how three local initiatives have avoided or overcome stagnation in their efforts to re-energize urban consumption spaces and find a new balance in their usage. In the afternoon, we tried to apply this understanding to the Hoogstraaten case, a supposedly overheated urban consumption space that forms the backdrop to our next case study in the research project. In between we had an inspiring city expedition (part 3 below).

Next, our professor Coordination of Urban Issues **Stan Majoer** introduces this research project as related to three key themes that we distilled after our first year of the project, namely vitality of consumption spaces; polarisation; and governance and commoning. These themes are illustrative of the concerns that motivated the project.



Amsterdam increasingly struggles with a changing use of urban public spaces, where life, work, recreation simultaneously take place. This mixed character is an important urban quality, but sometimes is out of balance. In certain 'overheated' places, this unbalance is caused by a one-sided use, e.g. tourist shops and bars, which results in a local decline in its diversity and its liveability. In certain 'undercooled' places, this unbalance is caused by hardly any use at all, leading to people only passing through, vacant buildings and deprived neighbourhoods.

We draw on an urban commoning perspective as an approach to re-energize the collaborative governance of such spaces. It is about the collective care of a shared urban resource by the community of stakeholders, through the practices and written and unwritten rules that are

developed, operated and maintained by that same community. In these contexts depending on market and/ or government solutions has proven not to be sufficient. In our multi-stakeholder project 'Futureproof Equilibrium', we conduct action research to explore the question: Which processes and interventions promote or hinder a commoning process in the attempt to achieve a more stable development of overheated or undercooled urban spaces?



The *Hoogstraaten* streets comprise a wide variety of shops and restaurants in a highly overheated space between the Dam and the Jodenbreestraat, and is an intriguing case where more balance is urged for by various stakeholders. The international nature of this event proves already that it is an international problem, and provides an opportunity to share fresh perspectives on this case.

2. International cases

In the first part of the workshop, three international cases were shared, namely 1) the *Hospitalet* neighbourhood, Barcelona, 2) research conducted in *São Paulo*, Brazil, and 3) *The Broederij* (Hatchery), Gent, Belgium. We asked each presenter to pay attention to 1) (the risk/cause of) imbalance, 2) (re-)energizing interventions and 3) key lessons.

Culture as a commons: Hospitalet neighborhood, Barcelona

We started with the *Hospitalet* neighbourhood in Barcelona, presented by **Nina Suriñach Carandell** from University Ramon Llull. Barcelona is located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, between the mouths of the rivers Llobregat and Besòs, and bounded to the west by the Serra de Collserola. These geographical features restrict Barcelona's further expansion possibilities. Elements such as the limitation of space, the fact that the city is becoming a more populated place, the inaccessible rental rates etc., have contributed to peripheral cities like Hospitalet "turning into new centers", or what in recent years has been called "the Brooklyn of Barcelona".

In February 2013 the debate started about the direction the transformation of the city. More than 1.200 citizens participated actively and another 6000 through social networks. After a participatory process, the project began: l'Hospitalet on, el futur per endavant – "the Future ahead!"

In Hospitalet City culture plays a central role in this future growth of the city, facilitating the 'Cultural District'. Factories were turned into places for artistic work, educational experiences, sport events, festivals and gastronomic exchange.

The purpose was to place the city on the map for its artistic, ancient and modern heritage, to gain recognition as a place of creators and companies of different disciplines, and to enhance cultural tourism. This development is becoming a success by empowering the citizens from the local level by giving them access to artistic production as a means of improving the city. However, there is also a shadow-side to this success, namely a gentrification process which makes the prices of housing go up, and property being taken over by real estate investors seeking economic profit only, without contributing to neighborhood development.



Community center as a commons: De Broederij, Ghent

Barbara Janssens shared the development of *De Broederij* (The Hatchery) in Ghent, Belgium. After the bankruptcy of a do-it-yourself store 'De Standaert' in the upcoming neighbourhood of Ledeberg late 2012, a DIY action group organized a citizen's assembly early 2013. They wanted



1) an open, green interiorised space, free of traffic, 2) an area for Ledeberg's organisations and 3) public participation on the development of the Standaert-site, and co-management of the final result. After this first phase the city decided to acquire the site in 2013.

In the second phase, the initiators sought further community participation in site management. Many activities were organized in an experimental period, whereby all kinds of relations were explored, including with the government in an attempt to strengthen the initiative's sustainability. In phase three,

the users and site managers created the 'Standaert Group' which made a design of the site's infrastructure, and a collectively shaped vision and management. After renovating and rebuilding the site, phase four started in which *De Broederij* (Hatchery) was realized and managed by a non-profit association consisting of neighbours and organisations with volunteers.

A sense of approachability and accessibility – 'low profile' – is important for local groups and new initiatives to become active with their own program, but complicates financial sustainability and long term strategy. The group continuously has to reinvent themselves to prevent becoming a homogeneous, inward looking group which is hard to connect with for new volunteers. Another challenge is to somehow measure impact and show that to the city of Ghent, as a way to strengthen and continue their commitment and financial support to the site, which strongly contributes to the social cohesion of the developing neighborhood. Indeed: long-term political support to this important goal is a key challenge for the sustainability of the program.

Squatting as a commons: My Life, My House São Paolo

Next, **Juliana do Amaral Costa Lima** from the University of São Paulo presented her action research on housing developments in the *My Life, My House* program. São Paulo is a global city with more than 12 million inhabitants and a major housing shortage. From 1940s the upper classes moved out from the central area to the southwestern part of the city, taking with them market and government investments. The southwest sector has concentrated urban innovations, higher quality public transport, cultural facilities and the best parks, as well as the city's economic hub, which concentrates large multinationals companies. In other words, some neighbourhoods of this part of the city became "hot-spots".

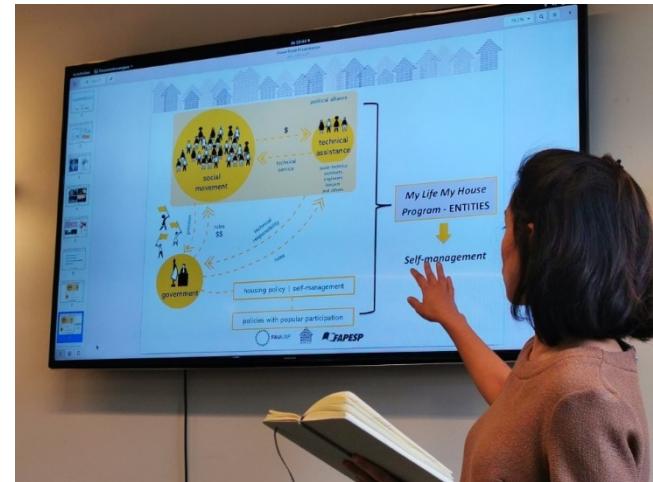
Because of this displacement, the old centre was slowly abandoned, turning the once-vibrant center into "cold spots", with many empty, unmaintained buildings, and a lack of public or private investments. Many lands and buildings, public or private, do not fulfil the social function of

property, which means, they are in urbanized land, provided with urban infrastructure, but with no role of public utility for the society at all.

It was in this context that the organized housing movements began to emerge in the 80s. They occupied abandoned land and buildings to live and to protest, as a way of pressuring the government. The idea was transforming these buildings into decent and regularized dwellings, whereby squatting acted as a commoning process. To keep the squat alive, the squatters promoted cultural events such as cinema, art exhibitions, meals and meetings. Everything worked in an organized and democratic way.

Housing movements fight for the constitutional right to housing, but unfortunately access to adequate housing has not been recognized as a basic necessity. Brazil is a country with huge social inequality, in which the lack of housing compromises access to other citizens' rights. Indeed, São Paulo now hosts approximately 206 squats, most of them in the city centre, but also has a further 1400 empty buildings that could be converted into housing. The social movement pressure convinced the federal government to create the largest housing program in Brazil. The *My Life My House* Entities represent less than 1.5% of the entire program.

One of Julia's case studies is the Maria Domitila building. It was an occupation on idle ground for 17 years, when it began to be built through the MCMV- Entities. Since the beginning of the construction process, the 245 families living there have been self-managing the work, receiving public funds monthly. Future dwellers were divided into thematic groups dealing with different parts of the process in an effort to build relationships between future neighbours and the building, seeking to alleviate possible future management problems. During the building process, they used a space in the ground-floor to promote their meetings, events and activities. Now the building is almost done, and their projects are more focused on solutions for selective waste collection and making a compost system and organic garden on the roof. Also, they are pressuring the local power to provide more educational and health services there.



Key take-aways

We drew on these cases in order to understand how local initiatives have avoided or overcome stagnation in their efforts to re-energize urban consumption spaces and find a new balance in their usage. Guided by responses from Joachim Meerkerk (AUAS), Rogier van der Groep (Amsterdam Municipality), and Karoline Wiegerink (Hotelschool The Hague), we identified the following key take-aways from the presentations:

1. The gentrification process from a creative area to an expensive area was recognized.
2. The importance of mobilizing 'the right people' is crucial everywhere.
3. Once a collective challenge is overcome, new challenges arrive, but the stakeholders improve their resilience.
4. 'Real' or complete ownership is a crucial factor in each case in various forms.

5. It is always a challenge but also unavoidable and necessary to cooperate with city councils.
6. there is a temptation on the one side to complain about the government, but on the other side to wait and expect the government to do something.
7. The collaboration between government, community and market can be an opportunity.
8. Each three have their flaws and each coalition of these three has to deal with these flaws.
9. In some cases non-financial rewards given for social engagement that could later influence ones opportunities.
10. We could talk about measuring impact or value impact, but what kind of impact, what measures?
11. What makes collaboration strong, with whom and when is it sustainable?
12. Meaningful encounters between stakeholders are important.
13. If we could sum up and celebrate all the contributions small initiatives have in terms of liveability, this would be very inspiring.

3. City Expedition: Future commons in an overheated consumption space?

Following the morning discussions, we take the ferry to the city center, seeking out commoning opportunities in the overheated consumption space of *The Hoogstraaten*.

Elena Simons welcomes us in the Iamsterdam Store, explaining the development of The Untourist Movement and her book, *The Untourist Guide*. "The Untourist Movement Amsterdam is a growing community of 200+ social entrepreneurs, non-profits, alternative city guides, hotels, hostels and other pioneers bound to change tourism in Amsterdam for the better." (<https://www.untouristguide.com/>)

We continue the expedition, walking through a very busy central station and the Zeedijk, entering the Red Light District to catch our breath at brewery the Prael: "Thirteen years ago, we hatched a plan to combine working with people facing obstacles in the job market, with brewing beer. And De Prael is about so much more than just beer. One person might work seven days, another might work seven minutes, but everyone is part of the same big family. Working with people and with beer has turned out to be a brilliant combination." (<https://www.deprael.nl>)



Next, we paid a visit to The Upcycle Store, where Tim Spekkens summarized their work as: "Local – together. Always aiming for social impact in the process. Some call us artists, dreamers or creators. We prefer to be seen as makers. Optimistic. Cheeky. Colourful. And in love with the endless opportunity that resides in creativity. (...) By transforming used materials into functional design products, we help and stimulate

people to look different at the resources around us, while contributing to a circular society together." (<https://theupcycle.nl/>)



At the Oost-Indisch Huis, Thomas Vernooy shared the plans of the University of Amsterdam for the University Quarter, between the red-light district and the shopping streets: "The University of Amsterdam is building the University Quarter at and around the Binnengasthuis premises. In the future, this campus will serve as the home base for students, employees and researchers of the Faculty of Humanities. The UvA-wide University Library will also occupy a prominent location on the campus." (<https://campus.uva.nl/en/university-quarter/>).

Local entrepreneur and (former) resident Sander Kok stops by to explain how his business has changed over the years. Moreover, he explains that he chooses to maintain his store in the *Hoogstaaten* because the social value of his store, in maintaining a particular profile for the street, outweighs the enormous profits he would be able to reap in selling his property.

Last but not least Ramez Ramzy introduced us to the Dutch Association of Coptic Entrepreneurs (DACE) and his experiences in the area. "The members of this association consist of mainly hospitality entrepreneurs as well as real estate owners located in the center of Amsterdam. The DACE was founded in collaboration with the Royal Hospitality Netherlands (KHN) to serve the local political interests as well as the financial interests of the Coptic entrepreneurs."

(<https://www.linkedin.com/company/nvko-nederlandse-vereniging-van-koptische-ondernemers/about/>)

After the expedition, we regroup at the offices of our partner N.V. Zeedijk, where we discussed the main challenges around the area of 'De Hoogstraten', and explore what the day's findings mean for the research project's further development.



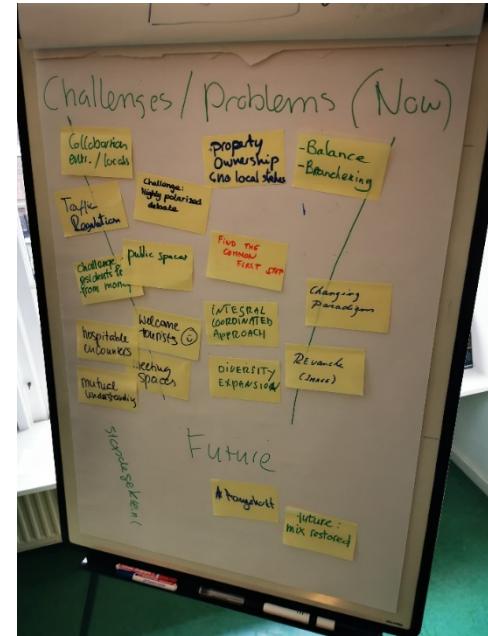
4. Looking ahead

Our final deliberations, aimed at identifying how we as a research team should move forward in shaping the next phase of our case study, comprised a wide range of stakeholders: residents, entrepreneurs, a university representative, municipal professionals, and researchers with various backgrounds. We talked about the history of the area which used to be unsafe in terms of drug dealers and junkies. The entrepreneurs explained how they thought they contributed to the development into a lot safer and more liveable area by opening shops and restaurants. However, a resident stated that the liveability has significantly decreased, through the large numbers of

tourists that shops and restaurants draw. Interestingly enough, both groups talked about liveability, but maybe meaning different aspects of the same idea.

In an attempt to channel discussions, we invited participants to write one or two current challenges, as well as vision for the future on a post-it, gathering these as a ‘funnel’ as to what the future should comprise. Most of the post-its contained challenges and some solutions, which also gave a first idea about things that participants would like to overcome in the near future. Contributions (in random order) included:

- Property ownership increases local engagement.
- Highly polarized debate.
- Traffic regulation: experiments.
- Collaboration between entrepreneurs and locals.
- Balance in parties
- Branching – diversity
- Internet shopping
- Public spaces adjustments
- Changing paradigms
- Find a common first step
- Residents lose through the focus on economic gain
- Integral coordinated approach (civil service)
- Welcome tourists
- Hospitable encounters
- Meeting spaces
- Image
- Mutual understanding
- Restore the mix
- Diversity expansion



In an effort to prioritize these contributions, we seek advice from our international guests. First, we should seek a small, first common step among the various stakeholders. Further, we are advised to look further into the future as some big problems – at a macro level – call for greater joint efforts than the local perspective allows for. Finally, we should seek to learn from residents in places without commercial activities, to understand what kind of mix they aspire.

After a long day Julie thanks all the guests for their valuable input and we all go our separate ways: into the city, to get a well-deserved drink at the Tolhuistuin, or to catch the train back home abroad. Now it is up to the project team to analyze the varied perspectives shared throughout the day, carving out the *Hoogstraaten* case study with our partners, and encouraged by the urgency of the project’s themes.

The project Futureproof Equilibrium continues until the beginning of 2022, comprising a total of six case studies around the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region, with numerous research and practice-related activities and regular meetups. If you would like to stay informed, attend meetups, or contribute to the project in another manner, please don’t hesitate to let us know!

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