

Seminar Current Issues (LVA 272 .046) summer term 2013

### **Peer-to-Peer Architecture**

*Making the Commons Mode of Production Work in Urban Design*

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Characteristically, the architectural quality of urban public space is the collective product of the individual architectures enclosing the place. It is not just the quality of the architectures looked at distinctly on which the rank of the common product depends, but the interplay they are performing in both competition and cooperation. Architecture differs from mere building in its claim of being of aesthetic value. Hence, architecture is always involved in a beauty contest with its neighbours. On the other hand, the collective product can be better than the individual contributions summed up if the individual architectures understand to cooperate with each other. Even an average quality player can contribute to an excellent team performance by supporting neighbours in the formation of an aesthetically consistent wall of the public outer space.

The accords, overtones and resonances resulting from the synergetic teamwork are attributable neither to the individual object architectures nor to central planning. They are the product of something in-between single building architecture and town planning. This something in-between is public urban space made productive as a *commons*. The product is architectural quality in the urban scale. The particular quality of the finest places in Venice and Siena, the superb street views in Amsterdam and Brügge, the finest Corsi in Florence and Rome, the magnificent

Boulevards in Paris and Barcelona is brought forth in this 'commonal' mode of production.

In pre-modern times, public urban space seems to have worked remarkably well as a commons even though it was not organised explicitly as a commons. Instead of rules negotiated explicitly there were conventions ruling implicitly. First, it went without saying that architecture has a two-fold task: It has (1) to envelop inner space and to give its use appropriate outward expression, and it has (2) to define outer space in collaboration. Second, it was understood without mentioning that adopting task (2) implies to select a vista façade. The floor plans, accordingly, have to be oriented towards the street side irrespective of the compass. The outer walls of the more representative internal rooms thus turn into the inner walls of public outer space. Third, it went without saying that architectural expression makes use of a conventional stylistic vocabulary. The use of a conventional language could grant that the architectural expression within an ensemble was compatible and capable of corresponding.

Modern architecture denounced this tacit consensus. Avant-garde vies for distinction only. Modern urbanism declared that floor plans of residential buildings have to be exclusively oriented towards the sun. Modernity fought conventional styles. Even in traditional contexts, modern architecture preferred striking collision to collaborative alignment. Rem Koolhaas got it on the nail: "Fuck the context!" Koolhaas is right in terms of textbook economics. Dealing with urban contexts, in particular with high quality contexts, invites to free riding, shirking and the like. Wherever it is the context that makes an address good, you can exploit it without contributing to its quality. While you can harvest the bonus of the good address individually, the costs that your detrimental insertion causes will be born collectively. In a context where you cannot be excluded from harvesting the collective product, defecting is the 'dominant strategy' (put game-theoretically). In terms of economic rationality it only

seems logical that the urban commons was overtaken by the proverbial 'tragedy of the commons'.

Today, there is much complaint about the misery of modern urbanism. In fact, if you want to experience high quality urban architecture you have to visit – or live in – old towns. It makes no sense, however, to think of re-animating those deceased conventions. Nevertheless it could make sense to mull over a re-invention of the team play that was unlearnt in modernity. It makes sense to consider the design of a set of rules that groups of neighbours interested in synergetic teamwork could agree upon deliberately. Such a design would not have to start completely from scratch. It could make use of the design principles distilled by Elinor Ostrom from her studies of working commons. By brushing Garrett Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' against the grain, Ostrom could show both empirically and analytically that the tragedy is far from inevitable. There are commons still working that have worked since centuries, she even reports of the newly negotiated commons for the use of the groundwater basins of Los Angeles. Regrettably, Ostrom did not consider examples of communal production of aesthetic quality.

This however is what the present paper embarks on. Inspired by Ostrom's report of the newly negotiated commons solution of the use of the LA groundwater basins, the paper sets out to translate Ostrom's design principles (listed in 'Governing the Commons', p. 90) into the design of a legal form that groups of neighbours interested in a commons mode of urban design can make use of. Its purpose is to act as a catalyst in the second-order dilemma of the initial phase where the prospective participants have to meet an agreement. In this initial phase the same perverse structure of incentives is imminent that also threatens the operative working of a commons. Each participant has a veto right that invites to being played off. In order to overcome the initial problems, a scheme is of help that (1) provides an overview over the chances and benefits as well as over the risks and costs of project and (2) instructs a stepwise introduction of the communal mode of architectural or

conservational production. Stepwise introduction allows to keep low the risks and costs of the commitments received in a round. In order to facilitate higher levels of commitment, one can think about transferring certain competences of the planning authority to those commons that have proved to work operationally and to be productive architecturally.

Since it is among the first principles of Ostrom's list that the persons who produce the good and the persons who harvest it should be the same, the form of agreement addresses owners and architects in the first place. For reasons of practicability, the participation of residents should be structured in a side letter. Among the core parts however are the policies for the peer-to-peer mode of 'open source' architectural production. Open source software, such as the Linux operating system is of technologically highest standard, but produced not by a firm paying high bonuses for high performance, but by peers working without hierarchical organisation in a kind of commons mode of production. The peers are motivated not by money wages, but by their interest in solving demanding problems and being acknowledged in a community of expert co-workers. David Pink, among others, has pointed out that heart and soul dedication to one's work can much more depend on the sense it makes for oneself than on money gratification. The sense that p2p production makes for its devotees is unalienated work. Hence, might this not a model for re-activating urban design as a team sport?

*Lectures /14ct – 16h*

*11.03.2013*

*18.03.2013*

*08.04.2013*

*Paper Presentations – Mandatory Class Attendance!*

13.05.2013

27.05.2013

03.06.2013

10.06.2013

17.06.2013

### *References*

Hardin, Garrett (1968), The Tragedy of the Commons, in: Science **162**, 1243-8

Ostrom, Elinor (1990), Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions of Collective Action, Cambridge: Cambridge UP

Pink, Daniel H. (20??), Drive. The Surprising Truth about what Motivates Us, 2010

### *Further References (not yet validated regarding worth)*

Baden, John A. & Douglas S. Noonan (eds.): Managing the Commons. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Barnes, Peter (2006): Capitalism 3.0. A guide to reclaiming the commons. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Mc Shane, Ian (2010): Trojan Horse or Adaptive Institutions? Some Reflections on Urban Commons in Australia. In: *Urban Policy and Research*, **28**, 101-116

Sen, Jai (2010): On Open Space: Explorations Towards a Vocabulary of a More Open Politics. In: *Antipode*, **24**, 994-1018