

Urban Spaces of Creation, Convergence and Collaboration

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Abstract: This presentation explores two different case studies which, from different angles, investigate the importance of created space in cities. It suggests giving more consideration to space within the context of adult learning and calls for approaches in contemporary urban environments that seek out all actors involved in the complex process of place and space in the city. Comparing two wildly different case studies, this paper discusses a needed emphasis on place, through context and processes of collaboration, creation and convergence, and some emerging lessons that still need to be learnt.

Berlin, a Community Garden

Within the literature community gardens have been looked at for different purposes, in most cases for their addition to urban sustainability, to general health and wellness, to beautification, to environmental education and to the building of social capital (Rosol, 2010, Mueller, 2001, Draper & Freedman, 2010, Kingley & Townsend, 2006). They have lightly been referred to in the literature around reclaiming commons and rights to the city (Chatterson, 2010) and as extensions of active citizenship (Rosol, 2010). In part they have been constituted as both urban social movement and as forms of neoliberal service provision (Rosol, 2010). Through collective fighting for place, such as through gardens (as Paddison & Sharp, 2007 point out), community can become stronger as converging points emerge for collective struggle.

Urban gardens mark an entry point for furthering discussions on urban community spaces which, in this case, looks at one multicultural garden in Berlin. As a background, German multicultural gardens were started in the city of Goettingen in 1995 by a group of Bosnian women who wanted to do something more than drink tea together at a refugee centre (Mueller, 2001). Since then multicultural gardens have spread across the country. Overall the gardens encourage community creating processes, rather than interventions aimed at immigrants and where self-determination emerges and engages in, for example, alternative economies, in new forms of communication through sharing, and through creating (Mueller, 2001).

“Ton, Steine, Gaerten” is an intercultural garden located in Mariannenplatz in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, made up predominantly of ethnic Germans and Turks. The garden members squatted the land after trying to legally acquire the use of it, were thrown out by police, only to squat it again. Through negotiations with the city they were granted half the land they had asked for.

Kreuzberg is a unique quarter in Berlin. Activists moved into Kreuzberg in various phases due to, in part, housing speculation, and urban economic crisis. Activist history can be seen in the built environment, as well in creating a strong relationship between subculture and place, between social movement and urban planning in Berlin (Vasudeven, 2011, Sheridan, 2007)

helping to give Kreuzberg its general identity as a sub-culture quarter, supported, as well, by a strong Turkish population, who initially emigrated as factory workers during Germany's guest worker scheme originating from the 1970s (Saunders, 2010, Sheridan, 2007). There are on-going struggles to stop recent financial speculation of real estate and gentrification in the quarter (Scharenberg & Bader, 2009), in some social movement flyers and posters, planting gardens and trees in speculated areas have been encouraged. People are feeling pushed out of Kreuzberg and into large high rises on the outskirts of Berlin. Local discourse is concerned with the creation of periphery slums and a war on the poor. Working class people and especially those with an immigration background are the ones most impacted as middle-classes seek 'hip' inner city areas, a general trend in cities throughout Europe (Rérat, 2012).

The garden itself is located next to Berlin's first squat. The garden is colourful with sunflowers growing, a variety of vegetables and flowers on small individual plots. Small gates mark the entrance and the interior is a short labyrinth of pathways. There is a table in the middle with benches, street art, and a recipe covering the surrounding walls. A sign reads "Eine andere Welt ist pflanzbar" – meaning Another world is plantable, a play on the WSF-slogan "another world is possible". Nearby stands a sign renaming the park as Carlo Giuliani Park, an unofficial title and act of resistance. Carlo Giuliani was killed by Police in 2001 during an anti G8 protest in Genoa.

When restoring the area where the garden is located, the city wanted public parks and were against supporting a community garden on the site. An excerpt from journal notes:

A member explained: "the city is making parks for wealthy people. And they have the idea that parks should all look the same, all with turf, all the same, no diversity. The idea seems to be wherever you go in the world it should look the same. We disagree." He points to an area across a wide street at what look like new buildings. "They want the park for them, not for us. They don't want us in the park. They built those benches, and that was one reason they gave for not giving us land, but the benches are never used." Metal tables with connecting metal stools dot the sidewalk. I had noticed them the last two times I had been to the garden, and no one was using them then or now. I turned towards the garden and noticed a group of people around the main table within the garden, painting banners. I asked if they were part of the garden. "No, many people come and use the garden. That is what it is here for, a place for everyone."

Kreuzberg is sometimes lamented in local discourse as representing a disconnect between the Turkish and the German population. Too often discourse within Germany points to the failure of integration, without being particularly critical of city and state policies aiding segregation. Within a "Ton, Steine, Gaerten" newsletter is a story written by one garden member of how neighbours came together to get involved in the garden. They referred to the space as becoming a place to have coffee together, to eat and live together. In the garden, for members, it was the first time, even though Turkish and Germans had lived alongside each other for a long time, to speak and get to know each other in an open public space. A few Turkish members said that in over 30 years they had not spoken to a German outside of their apartment building complex. The author asks what is needed for community and answers "Gemeinsamkeit ist das Schlüsselswort!" - Commonality is the key ("Ton, Steine, Gaerten" newsletter, 2011).

Different events take place at the garden. Events are open to the public, and through community garden networks there are invitations to numerous events across the city. In terms of motivations some members said they wanted to know what home-grown food tasted and looked like and to share that together with their children and with friends and to reclaim knowledge. I was told it was experimenting, and that knowledge about gardening came from trial and error, sharing tips with other gardeners, and that sometimes passersby would stop and talk, sharing knowledge and advice. For some, the garden is a place to reconnect with nature and food, and as a non-consumer space. Some link their activities with food networks. Multiple learning is taking place in multiple ways.

The garden is not free of its problems, gardeners lament the occasional vandalism that takes place, suggesting that different people in the surrounding area have different ideas about how to use the place - including the possibility that the garden is seen as aiding in the gentrification that is being fought. The desire to have more space to use and to build something bigger was repeated by a number of members, expansion prevented only by the city. Comparisons were made to a very successful community garden in Berlin that hosts workshops, sells trees and plants, and has a café, offering fresh organic food at affordable prices, as the prime example of what could be a community garden, linking alternative economies, local food and jobs with garden work and place, creating economies of scale. Some gardeners told me that the idea first came from New York, and that it had captured their imagination.

The garden is connected with several other groups which are local, regional, national and global in scope. They are linked to a school, to a social centre, to the local government where there are links to voice concerns and participate to an extent in urban sustainability planning through the network of urban gardens, as well as being part of a network of intercultural gardens. They are linked to networks and social movements centred around food and to land rights with a global scope. Critical links are made between their small plots and to peasants fighting agri-business. Some of their involvements in actions have included a day of solidarity with Via Campesina International Peasant Movement, links to reclaim the fields, which saw 23,000 protesters in Berlin in January to protest against industrial farms and EU farming policy.

Toronto, Participatory Budgeting in Social Housing

Within a vastly different urban place setting is a different approach to articulating spatial struggles and impacting people's engagement. The following case study represents a form of space, where engagement is initiated from above, where significant research has already been undertaken on people's learning, highlighting some of the ongoing struggles within a particular created space connected to housing.

Toronto housing is the second largest housing provider in North America and the largest in Canada, providing housing for six percent of Toronto's population. It includes 58,000 units, which house 164,000 tenants. Participatory Budgeting (PB) within the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is a state-sponsored practice of participatory social housing governance in Toronto. Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a process of collaborative management of the allocation of public funds for local needs as prioritized by citizens. This process brings citizens and local communities closer to the decision-making processes around

the public budget allocation that impact their daily lives.

The PB works in the following way: Within each Community Housing Unit (CHU), the manager develops local plans and allocates resources in partnership with the CHU tenant council. Each CHU council develops an accountability framework so that tenants can keep the TCHC accountable on decisions made. Within the Tenant Participation System (TPS), tenant representatives are also involved in budget allocation at both the CHU and city-wide levels. At the CHU level, through their input into the CHU business plans, tenant representatives have the opportunity to influence funding priorities, and at an annual city-wide participatory budgeting exercise, tenant representatives, through extensive deliberations and negotiations, allocate scarce capital dollars in areas with the highest impact on tenants' lives.

Participation is assumed to benefit participants by providing them the opportunity to gain representation, exercise political rights and influence local decision making. It is also suggested that participation when guided by communicative action can support social consciousness and political community. Meanwhile it is also believed that participants develop a body of tacit knowledge helping them to become more informed and more engaged citizens (Abers, 2000).

In the context of PB, informal learning occurs both intentionally, as a result of conscious planning through informal paths; or tacitly, acknowledged through self-reflections on one's experiences. Tenant representatives heavily rely on informal learning to enhance their effectiveness as advocates for their communities. Tenant's informal learning can be classified in four categories: The first is knowledge about the political and organizational structure of social housing management and municipal governance. Second is learning that augments social, political, and civic skills of tenant representatives that help them to engage with and affect the community at large. Third is learning that enhances self-esteem and self-confidence encouraging tenants to pursue community change through political action. Fourth is learning that improves the practice of the TPS.

In a research on tenants' motivation to participate in PB, respondents' main reference to volunteering was as an opportunity to exercise authority in order to tackle issues in their community, as well as to educate themselves and the community on governance of social housing in their own housing unit and beyond. They view the PB as a domain where their desire to participate in decision-making over their housing welfare and their desire to develop valuable skills are mutually satisfied. Through the PB they see themselves engaged in developing competencies while exercising community management, both taking place in one (and only one) space provided.

It should be noted that it is wrong to assume that it can be objectively or technically practiced based on the TCHC's blueprint. Staff and management have diverse perspectives and multiple experiences with regard to the concept of participation. Coupled with these various perspectives is the lack of deliberation on the meaning of the participatory process, which creates a host of challenges that we refer to as the communicative problematique. It has been the staff's perception of the concept of participation that has helped to shape the characteristics of the participatory spaces and practices. Consequently, the PB was moulded

into a rather confusing format for the tenant representatives. Next is the formal system of participation, a format chosen to institutionalize the practice of participation in the TCHC communities, a designated structure that hosts another set of challenges in sustaining progressive community engagement. The PB tends to bureaucratize participation and thus renders it prone to such faults as slowing the pace of innovation, stratifying the communities into hierarchical structures and reinforcing existing power imbalances within the social fabric of the communities.

Discussing Spaces

The difference between the two spaces can be described as created/claimed vs. invited forms of space. The community garden is a created/claimed space, denoting that the space was created from below, by grassroots activities whereas participatory budgeting in social housing is an invited space, initiated from above. While they represent significantly different formations, the garden with stronger links to social movements and radical democracy, the latter, participatory budgeting, makes more connections with institutionalized participation, civil society partnerships and deliberate democracy, there are a number of commonalities amongst them.

First and foremost the spaces have been produced, they are co-created and intended to be spaces that continue to develop, both base involvement on acting rather than being served. They are both focussed on a mutual relationship of learning and active engagement of participants to impact place. Both are based on social justice, and reflect Soja's, (1989, 2009) notions of spatial justice which include struggles for participation, for improved housing, urban land use, anti-gentrification all representing struggles to reduce spatial inequalities. There is a strong correlation between both cases linked to learning as a motivation and acting on place, on contributing to place and participating in place. The significance of place is magnified when we think of it through other critical lenses, including Sassen's (2006) assertion that place is where the global is played out, that in place society is socially produced (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). An example of social reproduction is played out in the participatory budgeting example, whereby public administrators maintain unequal relationships with tenants, which help to formulate hierarchies. The social production of space can also create alternatives and be counter-hegemonic, which both cases demonstrate as a goal of their efforts. Struggles and conflict exist within both cases, participatory budgeting conflicts include the conflict within this social reproduction of inequality and the impacts of bureaucracy on maintaining unequal relationships (Soja, 1989). The garden conflict is more external, struggling for place against a backdrop of hegemonic urban renewal that links to Neil Smith's, 1996, reformation of the Revanchist City, where neoliberal policies have as a goal to displace and get rid of leftists, immigrants, and socially marginalized groups in the city. In common, both cases place significant conflict and obstacles within the context of relationships with bureaucracy, with public administration, with urban planning. (Adhering to Massey's, 1994, call for a need for place consciousness, and reflecting Castell's 1989 position that people must stake out place to preserve meaning and to restore control over work and residence).

Within the garden the ideas of multiplicity and of convergence are formulated as strategies to come together, in otherwise divided places, between Germans and Turkish residents, but also

for all garden members and the community at large, providing a place to converge. The garden draws on weak links and loose networks to draw people together, and this activity is furthered by linking their garden to alter-globalisation movements or what is also called the movement of movements, a convergence of movements, and clearly makes links to the world social forum, the gathering place of movements and seem to answer Whitaker, 2004, call for creation of spaces for convergence, for alternatives. Participatory budgeting, promotes other kinds of convergences that are significant as well, to shifting power. In this case convergence happens between public administrators and tenants to collaborate on just distribution of funds and to increase accountability. Strong collaboration and strong links feature more predominantly in this case and are important to the success of the endeavor, and within a much larger scale than the garden, relationships and how they are formulated are significant contributors to the depth of success, and to the depth of power shifts, which elude to collaborative learning.

Learning is a significant outcome within both places. Within the garden multiple learning is eluded to which includes social learning, place based learning with links to critical pedagogy, and possible links to citizenship learning, to learning in social action, more conclusiveness will come through the research proper. More pronounced and from concluded research tenants involved in participatory budgeting have undergone significant learning, which can be described as transformative, citizenship learning, and social learning increasing knowledge, skills and attitudes for continued action continually impacting and shaping the spaces of participatory budgeting they are involved in. There is a strong relationship between learning and continuing to create in place.

However, learning is largely focused on the participants, on the tenants, which brings up important questions. If we take place more seriously in community development learning, and include everyone in place as contributing to place, then a program of learning and engagement needs also to include public administrators. What becomes highly evident is that facilitating a tenant-driven community planning process requires a shift in the values, roles and responsibilities of conventional public servants. Rather than control by property managers and bureaucrats this calls for housing authorities to lead by stepping back and complementing managerial efficiency and formal accountability by instilling political sensitivity, responsiveness to community values, and social equity into the practice of social housing governance. It calls for new learning. Understanding the dynamism between the staff and tenants' agency, for example, and how learning (in both cases), relationships and interactions constitute and characterize the spaces of participation is extremely beneficial to community planners and adult educators interested in exploring how such created spaces, convergences and collaborations are forged and how possibilities for participation and participatory processes contribute to active learning (in a continual process of creating for self-determination, dependent upon continual learning).

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