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'Saving' the city: Collective low-budget organising and urban practice

Paula Bialski, Heike Derwanz, Birke Otto and Hans Vollmer

Introduction

In recent discussions and popular accounts of social practices such as urban gardening, car sharing, coworking, food cooperatives, ticket sharing, and waste recycling, there seems to be an underlying assumption that such trends tend to organise the city differently. Often descriptions of these accounts are discursively linked to the economic reality of austerity politics, an impending threat of resource scarcity and demographic change in large cities of contemporary welfare societies, which seem to prompt many people to develop innovative, alternative or entrepreneurial ways of coping with the challenges of the 'the order of the day'. These practices of urban dwellers show a re-evaluation of the notion of scarcity, waste and consumption, a collective way of organising on a low budget and an appreciation of slower, simpler, self-organised and local ways of producing and consuming. They contrast starkly to those more top-down, centralised, market- or state-based, resource-intensive and costly infrastructures, production patterns and consumption practices that have characterised urban life in these cities for a long time (Harvey, 2013; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Venkatesh, 2006).

This raises various questions, such as: to what extent does for example a possibility of flexible car sharing through online services change attitudes towards car ownership? Is travelling using online hospitality networks (e.g. 'Couchsurfing') more sustainable than relying on large chains of resource intensive hotel accommodation (e.g. Bialski, 2012; Rosen et. al., 2011)? Does DIY-building constitute cheaper alternatives to ready-made (Brodersen, 2003; Drotschmann, 2010; Grubbauer, this issue)? Or, will second-hand shopping,

clothes swapping and 'dumpster diving' curtail mass consumption and a throwaway culture (Gregson and Crewe, 2003)?[1] To what extent do these practices contribute to a 'powered down' civil society (Urry, 2013) or cultures of frugality, cooperation and sharing, and what are their long-term effects on urban space? The increasing attention to such practices enunciate their political relevance while posing new questions regarding the relation of these practices to capital, the state, sustainability and citizen responsibilities (e.g. Hoedemækers et al., 2012; Beverungen et al., 2013). As the city is made up of multiple methods of organising, forming such 'heterotopias' (Foucault, 1970) of collectively organised low budget solutions often means to conceive of 'liminal social spaces of possibility' (Harvey, 2013: xvii). These practices tend to organise differently, apparently striving to create an urban environment that relies on more self-organised, local, autonomous, and resource efficient forms of organisation, which in turn somehow changes the political, economic, and social setting in cities. 'This "something different"', so Harvey 'does not necessarily arise out of a conscious plan, but more simply out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their city lives' (*ibid.*).

Low-budget urbanity: Saving and the city

This special issue of *ephemera* is focused on recent research that aims to map, describe, and track these social practices of collective organising on a low budget in cities today. Focusing particularly on an empirical interest in saving practices of urban everyday life, such saving practices can be considered as both 'expressions of a self-imposed frugality, as well as a need to save costs' (Färber, 2014: 123), thereby constituting a field of tension between saving as an ethical practice and/or imposed order.[2] Often these low budget ways of organising entail a complex meaning of economising, also expressed in the double meaning of the English term 'saving'. Stemming from the latin, 'salvus', the term derives its roots form 'intact and healthy'. 'Saving' as a verb can also take on the notion of

1 Other examples include urban farming and cooperative gardening (Schmelzkopf, 1995), local currency systems (Hughes, 2005), transport ticket sharing (Färber, Otto, Derwanz, forthcoming), house squatting (Neuwirth, 2005), up-cycling of sewage and trash, and other forms of re-using and re-valuing urban resources.

2 The special issue emerged from the research background of the editorial team – most of whom were affiliated at one point or another with a research initiative at the urban-development-oriented HafenCity University in Hamburg, Germany. The interdisciplinary research project *Low-budget urbanity: On the transformation of the urban in times of austerity* explored how saving and economising practices change the city and/or notions of urbanity. The research initiative's case studies ranged from ticket sharing in intercity train travel to online hospitality networks (e.g. 'airbnb'), eco communities focused on saving natural resources and DYI-homebuilding in a number of German cities.

rescuing. Furthermore, it means to keep something, sometimes in order to use it later, at other times just to maintain and not spend it.[3] Unpacking the meaning of saving therefore calls for an approach beyond merely an economical or sociological perspective. The complexity of 'saving' calls into question the interplay between organisations, resources, lifestyles and moral economies (Thompson 1991; Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013) in various fields of practice and therefore demands more interdisciplinary ways of study. In doing so, not only notions of time and money, but also sustainability and sociality, can become normative entities of saving. Thus, 'saving the city' includes the imperative to economise (save money, resources, time, etc.) while at the same time harbouring the desire to 'rescue' – recollecting an urban civil society via mobilising the public, helping neighbourhoods, creating public spaces, and heterogeneous possibilities of living to cope with today's and future challenges. Such 'challenges' include growing inequalities, avoiding the waste of money and resources with their voluntary work while redistributing, reusing or preserving the metabolism of cities in manifold ways – via art (Beyes, this issue; Henke, this issue), architecture (Petcou and Petrescu, this issue; Herman, this issue), sharing (Psarikidou, this issue; Foden, this issue) or co-operation and co-production (CiT-Collective et al.; Podkanstka and Podkalicka; Merkel; all this issue). Thus, the title of '"Saving" the city' alludes to a multitude of what is considered resourceful – money, nature, the built environment, social relations, time, aesthetics, or the just city.

Besides saving, the second pillar of this issue is the importance of the urban setting as a place where specific saving practices are enacted or represented. Urban space or specific urban qualities are usually characterised with notions of density, population size and heterogeneity (Wirth, 1938), as the place of surplus value production (Harvey, 2013), and as complex networks of relations that link various sites across the globe, both virtual and 'real' (Brantz et al. 2012). At the same time, cities today are 'spaces and places where most of the world's populations now live; they are the centers of economic power and wealth, but they also are where the most vulnerable in society, particularly the young, the old and the poor are concentrated' (Donald et al. 2014: 3). Moreover, cities are spaces in which 'heterogeneous values flourish and where social wealth is produced in common and shared, not merely through the market and mediated by capital' (Frenzel and Beverungen, 2014: 6). The self-organised, collective saving practices

3 In regard to the city, the widely used adjective 'safe', however describes 'secure' spaces implying free and fearless behaviour. Here, the safe neighbourhood or safe city are discourses framing a social balancing act between a growing surveillance and police armament on the one hand, and a gender-sensitive design of the public space on the other hand (Laimer and Rauth, 2014).

presented in this issue can be considered as enabled by and shaping these 'complex encounters, connections and mixtures of diverse hybrid networks of humans and animals, objects and information, commodities and waste' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 2).

Appearances of collective urban saving practices

The call for papers for this special issue had the intention to collect case studies and thought pieces from various situations and localities in order to contribute to a discussion on collectively organised low budget urban practices and to unfold commonalities and potentialities. We collected contributions from an interdisciplinary set of researchers as well as urban 'practitioners' such as planners, activists and artists. We particularly invited contributions with a perspective on the everyday that aim to describe the perceived reality of the people who save. This goes beyond a perspective of everyday economics, or unreflectively and strategically-practiced patterns of formal or informal economic behaviour (Arnstberg and Boren, 2003: 7). It inquires into different scales and values of economising and the various global to local links and the discursive emblems entangled in urban saving practices, thereby showing the tension between a normative judgement of what is voluntary simplicity (Huneke, 2005, Doherty and Etzioni, 2003) or what is bare need (e.g. Barr, 2012, Daly, 2009). Such a perspective should avoid the danger of polarising or simplifying motivations for saving as either out of necessity or out of lifestyle.

While editing this issue, we became immersed in various descriptions of such practices, and witnessed an ever-increasing mass-media hype (e.g. The Economist, 2013; Geron, 2013) with new examples of 'city-saving' projects, and other institutionally-funded programs arising, often linked to the emergence of the so-called 'sharing economy' (Botsman and Rogers, 2010).[4] Still, some analytical questions remain: 'why' exactly people save is not easily answered. To find answers to this question, and even before discussing the political potential of such practices, it is also helpful to go back to why such practices emerge and where they come from. What do these practices mean today (and what did they mean in the past) to the people involved? In other words: where and how are they socially and historically rooted? In order to overcome established, purely economic perspectives on saving, our aim was to explore the economic motivations, the social dimensions and the cultural spheres that are created by urban saving practices. The interdisciplinary range of submissions addressed the

4 Like the 'We traders. Swapping crisis for city' project organised by the German Goethe-Institut that aims to internationally distribute the knowledge produced in various 'collaborative city' projects in Madrid, Turin, Berlin, Lisbon and Toulouse.

awareness, knowledge, how-to methods, motivations and critiques of engaging in these practices.

One of the things that has become apparent in these descriptions is that instead of being reliant on professional expert systems, which were so prevalent in the pre-digital, pre-networked world, these practices are also growing because of an increasing access to do-it-yourself knowledge (Friebe and Lobo, 2006). The underlying mentality behind these grassroots movements seems that the actors cannot only 'do-it-themselves', but can also 'do-it-themselves-better'. It shows that the lack of trust in large socio-economic systems is also a large motivator to engage in such practices. The examples, such as coworking (Merkel, this issue), alternative agro-food networks (Psarikidou, this issue), online exchange platforms (Foden, this issue), green-space projects (Herman, this issue) and of course neighbourhood initiatives (CiT-Collective et al., this issue) – to name a few – lay out ways to overcome economic or resource scarcity by drawing on self-organised structures rooted in co-operation and co-production.

What these practices seem to underline is a post-individualistic ethic, which comes out of a mere realization that space in cities has to be shared. With that realization, it seems more and more en-vogue to be responsible for a city, to take a bike rather than a car to work. Reputation, status, and respect in many urban subcultures are constituted in the engagement in such city-saving, frugal practices. Indeed, in media representation and self-descriptions, the more one saves, the 'cooler' one seems to be perceived because of how much one is doing for others (see Podkalicka and Potkańska, this issue). In other words, frugality and the sharing of resources often becomes a status symbol. As a new stage of capitalism, this frugality is celebrated as 'sharing economy' (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Agyeman et al., 2013), in which the sociality of sharing becomes monitised. We also observe the revival of old and traditional practices put into new usages. These traditional practices are often supplemented and revived with new forms of technologies, such as internet sharing platforms or specifically developed apps. The internet provides an unprecedented kind of infrastructure to foster social and material organisation, and quickly gathers a critical mass to spread various modes of knowledge and participation.

Collecting the critiques

These practices as well as research on them have been criticised from many angles and perspectives. The main (and perhaps most obvious) ongoing critique is that such 'movements' are not forming any sort of alternative, but are just entangled in a neoliberal, consumer model (Heath and Potter, 2005). Critics argue that the described practices remain small-scale local experiments which are

nothing more than little and temporal islands reserved for a concerned but exclusive middle class, and a selective urban creative milieu in a number of welfare societies (Friebe and Lobo, 2006, Auerbach, 2012). What also must be questioned is the limited potential of such practice for upscaling, redistribution and broader structural change by creating strategic alliances (Harvey, 2013) as they are more threatened to be crushed by an ever-encroaching welfare state retrenchment (see e.g. Peck, 2014). Moreover, Marvin and Hodson have pointed out that if sustainable city development is scaled up, it often produces powerful exclusionary mechanisms between a rich elite living in protected 'premium ecological enclaves' and the rest of the urban population (e.g. Marvin and Hodson, 2010). In other words, such practices often are appropriated to foster the redevelopment of urban areas through financial investors who make it attractive for a rich urban class, and who contribute to the negative consequences of gentrification (Henke, this issue; Frenzel and Beverungen, 2014). The critical questions are whether such experiments really address larger structural issues such as poverty and uneven distribution (Hilbrand and Richter, this issue); to what extent they engage critically with the 'seductive powers of the notions of urban flexibility, temporariness, resourcefulness and "creativity"' (Ferreri, this issue: pp. 189); and how sustainable they really are (Ziehl and Oßwald, this issue)? It is also obvious that outside the global north, low-budget practices, frugality, and improvisation in cities are permanently present (McFarlane, 2012). However, as this issue is limited to cases from the global north and welfare societies (Munck, 2008; Rosa and Weiland, 2013), the question remains to what extent and at what moment are citizens possibly forming a critical mass? In order to address some of these critiques, we would like to end this section with a quote from our interview with John Urry in this issue:

> I'm slightly less bothered by the issue of whether or not these practices are limited to a certain class or gender. Things have to start somewhere. So it's actually the starting that is pretty significant, and it has to come from a specific social group. The car came from a specific social group too – young men driving and developing cars as speed machines, and subsequent use changed. So the question is: does it spread? Does it move? So I think it is worth to talk about this more – these many efforts, which push these various phenomena out, to move them out beyond the young, male model. (Urry et al., this issue: 224)

Three discourses framing '"Saving" the city'

The issue has gathered submissions from sociology (Foden, Psarikidou, Tellmann, Urry), urban studies (Hilbrandt and Richter, Merkel), cultural studies (Gandini, Podkalicka and Potkańska), architecture and urban planning (Grubbauer, Petcou and Petrescu, Herman, Ziehl and Oßwald), geography (Ferreri), organisation studies (Beyes) as well as from a range of activist urban

practitioners. Given this diversity, we would like to position the contributions in three discourses that link to various discussions to frame the debate: a) austerity urbanism, b) degrowth/postgrowth, and c) urban intervention/right to the city.

Austerity urbanism

One line of inquiry proliferating in urban studies and urban geography concerns the effects of, and relationship between, the recent economic and financial crises and urban centers (see e.g. Peck, 2014; Donald et al., 2014). Jamie Peck is perhaps the most prominent representative of this debate, and one who coined the term *austerity urbanism* to problematise the impact of neoliberal urban policies on cities. He argues that austerity measures are the defining principle characterising market-based urban reforms, even though they are not a stable or fixed condition with clearly defined measures, policies and practices. While austerity urbanism is in no way a generalisable process, but rather changes over time with distinctive local productions according to its institutional, geographical and cultural contexts (Peck, 2012; see also Peck et al., 2009: 50), the smallest common denominator is the imposition of market-based policies based on the *principle of austerity*. This principle appears in the guise of various practices: e.g. structural adjustment and good governance, privatisation and public-private partnerships, welfare retrenchment and active social policy. Acting under the legitimacy of permanent fiscal constraint has perpetuated the rule of market selectivity, and austerity seems to become the political economy *zeitgeist* of our time, defining the common sense to constantly see a need 'to cut back and safe' as a permanent condition.

While austerity urbanism describes the rescaling of austerity measures from the state to the urban and the economic, political and social implications of such politics of decentralisation, privatisation, etc. (Peck, 2013); it also shows how 'democratic processes are being undermined' by relying on technocrats and urban administrators in charge of austerity measures acting 'in the name of financial expediency' (Donald et al., 2014: 4). It draws out the uneven effects of such politics hitting mainly the poor, young, elderly and racialised city dwellers (*ibid*.). Mayer describes how the effects of austerity programmes are made visible most clearly by those who bring their protests to the streets. While the industrial city and the Fordist city model still provided institutionalised arenas for protests and discontent through unions, Mayer argues that neoliberal urbanism offers fewer sites and openings for such collective struggle (2012). Already 15 years ago, Graham and Marvin's seminal work *Splintering urbanism: Networked infrastructures, technological mobilities and the urban condition* (2001) drew out how privatisation processes, legitimised by saving imperatives, started to erode the unifying character of technical urban infrastructures in cities, which were based

on a Keynesian welfare state notion of a common good. The process created 'premium network spaces' that are limited to certain urban elites, while leaving the rest of the urban population to decay or disconnected networks (Graham and Marvin, 2001, see also Marvin and Hodson, 2010). Yet, while existing institutional arrangements, political compromises and collectivist, social-state policies and redistributive systems seem to be systematically destroyed, they also create new infrastructures for market-oriented economic growth, commodification, and capital-centric rule (Peck et al., 2009: 55). It is here, where these policies and systems are often linked to creative and entrepreneurial tendencies with a positive value for transforming cityscapes, exploiting cultural creativity and entrepreneurial activation (Mayer, 2012). In sum, austerity urbanism produces uneven urban development amongst and within cities, and limits municipalities' capacity to act. Much of the above-cited literature focuses its understanding of urban development primarily on the context of strategies of capital and the hopelessness of structural inequalities.

While these studies focus on the characteristics and impacts of 'austerity urbanism', they rarely describe the reactions and practices that people develop in such circumstances. How are their daily living conditions affected by these measures? How is daily life organised in the austere city?

For example, the note from Michael Ziehl and Sarah Oßwald in this issue emphasises the potentials that arise out of certain need-and-austerity-induced creative practices. Their contribution 'Second hand spaces: User practices in times of austerity and urban transformation' (this issue) describes their collaboration with the municipality of Bremen, a German city known for verging on bankruptcy. Here, their project was to make space available for creative and entrepreneurial activities that would otherwise be inaccessible for certain people because of rising rents. The ambition of the project was to conceptualise it from the outset in a more 'sustainable way' and urge the city to 'do justice to the importance of *second hand spaces* for sustainable urban transformation (...) allowing users to share the values they create, and remedy their precariousness' (Ziehl and Oßwald, this issue: 275). Urban activists like Ziehl and Oßwald aim to engage creatively with situations of scarcity while also recognising the many pitfalls that are implied in these practices, such as their own precarious employment. Mara Ferreri's note in this issue discusses this paradox theoretically, showing how 'the currency in common parlance of terms such as pop-up shops, guerrilla and interim uses bears witness to the existence of a shared imaginary of marginal and alternative temporary practices' and how temporary use has been celebrated uncritically as a 'new form of urbanism with the "temporary city" as its paradigm' (Ferreri, this issue: 182). Drawing on Doreen Massey's time-space relationship, Ferreri's note acts as a 'sympathetic

provocation' that attempts to question the tension between short-term projects and longer term power relations (*ibid*.). In a similar manner, Hanna Hilbrandt and Anna Richter's article in this issue points toward the risks of uncritically 'celebrating' such practices, as they believe is done in much of the literature. Following but also interrogating Jamie Peck's critique of austerity urbanism, they state that collectively organised low budget practices provide a response to austerity that 'neatly fits into the neoliberal repertoire of shifting responsibilities downwards, devolving the costs of austerity to lower scales' (Hilbrandt and Richter, this issue: 167). It is much more important, they state, to focus on neglected aspects of poverty and people who have to deal with 'no budget' situations such as bottle collecting, temp-work, street vending or unpaid academic work.

Between these two opposite ends of the debate of low-budget urban practices (positive engagement or critical dismissal), Ute Tellmann's article in this issue lays out the theoretical foundations of scarcity, providing a solid groundwork for discussion. She revises two different ways of how the notion of scarcity has been perceived historically: the intention to save as an important step for civilization as presented by Thomas Robert Malthus, or on the contrary, as a barrier for economic growth as in the macroeconomic perspective of John Maynard Keynes. The articles philosophical perspective helps us to think of scarcity as a historically developed and western concept that acts 'as a social device for inculcating modes of futurity,' stating that:

> Issues of scarcity and austerity mobilise antagonistic assumptions about what it means to face economic reality. They entail specific notions about what the bounds of the economy are or should be. They are tied to polemics about who abides in the realm of imagination and fiction and who is clear-headed enough to see the order of the day. (Tellmann, this issue: 22)

This shows that the notion of scarcity contributes to a construction of demands, which make certain resources appear limited. Its critical interrogation, however, can also reveal the links and connections between valuation, scaling and perhaps a more positive notion of a culture of frugality.

Forms of commoning, frugality and DIY as degrowth practices

In our interview on 'low-carbon societies' in this issue, the sociologist John Urry answers questions about a precarious future, stating that the bigger environmental picture makes clear that scaling down in one way or another is inevitable. One of the ways to speed up this scaling-down, says Urry, is to somehow make modest life more fashionable. The question is, how? Perhaps some answers can be found in the degrowth or post-growth context challenging

the economic growth paradigm of modern societies. This social movement (that was originally termed *Décroissance,* as it usually refers to French, Italian and Spanish social movements questioning the growth paradigm) became a European-wide movement in the last decade.[5] With its geographically and philosophically heterogeneous sources, it not only introduces an ethical-political dimension but also criticises the basic understanding and structures of society from the perspectives of ecological economics, social economy, economic anthropology and activist groups (Martinez-Alier et al., 2010). As Barbara Muraca points out, the movement has two roots: economical and environmental (Muraca, 2013). With key insights from André Gorz, Ivan Illich, Serge Latouche or Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen to name just a few, it differs from other perspectives:

> Generally degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well being. (Demaria et al., 2013: 209)

When Demaria et al. describe degrowth as aiming at environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being, they emphasise certain values that stand behind practices described in this issue. Thus, it is important to re-introduce these other categories beside economics and structural injustices underlined in the austerity research within critical urban studies. In this line, the article by Psarikidou in this issue focuses on alternative food networks in Manchester and Birmingham that promise to provide their own local remedies to urban effects of austerity and resource scarcity. Their actors develop strategies that draw on personal networks, barter systems, voluntary labour and fair-trade ethics – practices that directly shape a local community and therefore the urban setting. It takes a critical approach to question the perspective of innovation based on the economic growth paradigm and argues that it could be valuable to understand such collaborative projects as innovative forms of reorganising the economy.

Another discourse underlying many of the practices described in this issue is the notion of commoning – as originally described by Elinor Ostrom (2005), and brought up more recently by authors such as Peter Linebaugh (2008, 2014) or Massimo de Angelis (initiator of the online journal 'the commoner'). The most outspoken example is the Londoner New Cross Commoners project portrayed in a roundtable discussion about organisation in grassroots initiatives (CiT-Collective et al., this issue). Following Ostrom's question of how commons are successfully managed, the activists discuss and reflect upon their own forms of

5 See e.g. http://leipzig.degrowth.org/en/what-does-degrowth-mean-to-us/.

self-organisation. In this case of an activist group in one of London's deprived neighbourhoods, it applied to their aim to act differently against market competition and state regulations and therefore, creating commons. In their words:

> A commons is a resource whose use is negotiated, decided and regulated by its users on a direct and non hierarchical basis. A commons is not a resource that everybody can use, it is a resource that can be used by people who take part in the processes of negotiating and re-negotiating its regulations – people who take part in commoning. Such a commons is something that has to be taken care of against the control of the state and the privatisation of the market. (CiT-Collective et al., this issue: 240)

Urban collectives like the New Cross Commoners in London exemplify that in an urban setting which is being put under an 'austerity regime' and/or being gentrified, practices are at play that are different from capitalistic production – questioning private ownership and other fundamental concepts like working for a wage, competition and the market (Exner and Kratzwald, 2012: 24). However Harvey, in regard to Ostrom, reminds us that horizontal organisation finds its limits when solidarity groups leave the small scale (Harvey, 2012: 70).

Mike Foden's article in this issue analyses online gift-based exchange networks and reuse in online social networks. While interviewing Freecycle and Freegle users, he exemplifies the sometimes unintended exclusion of certain groups from these processes of gifting and exchange. Social inclusion and exclusion related to digital labour are also explored in an article and note about coworking spaces in this issue. In 'Coworking the city', Janet Merkel studies the rising phenomena of coworking spaces as shared and flexible workplaces for precarious but ambitious freelancers and start-up entrepreneurs, often described as members of an urban creative class. They seem to find each other in a collective, community-based organisation that is free, open and non-committal. Merkel states that coworking spaces can therefore be regarded as a new form of urban social infrastructure – possibly replacing those that were established by a more fordist organisation. Similarly to Merkel, Alessandro Gandini's literature review in this issue addresses the rising popularity of coworking spaces in many cities of the rich north. By reviewing the emergent literature on coworking spaces, he asks: to what extent do these spaces really allow knowledge workers to find ways to accommodate their nomadic work life and alleviate their precarious working conditions? He highlights the contradictory nature of such places as they oscillate between the organising potential on the one hand, and the danger of creating another 'creative class bubble' on the other hand, which only reinforces neoliberal mechanisms of individual survival.

One of the prevalent empowering processes at play is that of re-skilling, which in turn reactivates certain practices. As knowledge is being redistributed, it has widespread social potential. Older everyday practices like knitting, gardening and preserving food for example are choice-based practices that are taken on by certain societal groups some could easily call 'hipsters' (Podkalicka and Potkańska, this issue). Aneta Podkalicka and Dominika Potkańska explore the question of representation of these increasingly en-vogue western practices, specifically as they appear in a post-communist Polish setting. In their article about Polish saving practices as portrayed in the Polish media, they unfold transcultural movements of trends in a specific national and generational context.

While it is often argued that processes of re-skilling places the knowledge and power to act and change ones immediate surroundings in the hands of the citizen, such everyday practices are rarely studied or explored systematically as Monika Grubbauer states in her piece about DIY home-remodeling. She explores amateur-led architecture as one such form of DIY urbanism and questions the relationship of 'high architecture' versus the skills acquired by laymen through everyday spatial practices, called vernacular architecture. This example as a form of DIY urbanism elucidates laypersons' understanding of architecture in the context of their daily routines and everyday ways of thinking, by focusing on practices and practical skills rather than on value judgments.

Urban interventions and the right to the city

The third discourse that relates to many of the contributions in this city regards the more practical ambitions of creating public spaces through urban interventions. When considering work on re-imagining the city, Harvey reminds us that academics all too often forget the role played by 'the sensibility that arises out of the street around us', which triggers us to conceive and practice other urban lifestyles: the feelings and imaginations provoked, for example, by building large scale development projects, by the helplessness felt when walking past homeless people, the enjoyment of large crowds on a summer day in a public park, the despair of the marginalised, the boredom felt by unemployed youth, the fears provoked by rising rents, the frustration of traffic chaos or the unease caused by smog or noise, the creativity sparked by vacant spaces lying idle, or the exhilaration or annoyance of street demonstrations. In other words, thinking about cities starts on the streets more than at academic desks (Harvey, 2013: xi). In addition to the empirical case studies and theoretical reflections, this issue includes a section called 'study in practice' collecting contributions from urban planners, (landscape) architects, urban activists and urban artists/curators. These authors provide their own accounts of their projects of urban interventions

and thereby differ in style and format from the more 'academic' papers found in the other sections of this special issue. Their format provides some insights into the relationship between theory and practice on a different level as the authors reflect on their practices, describe the organising issues they face and their challenges and ambitions.

The collection of the texts in this section touches upon issues of political activism, the production of urban space, participatory planning processes, urban interventions and tactical appropriation of space in a field, which in the last 10 years often finds itself under the umbrella term of the right-to-the-city-movement (World charter for the right to the city, July 2004). In its core, the movement and most of its sub-groups relate to French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who in 1967 wrote the seminal essay *The right to the city,* and which today has become a slogan and empty signifier that has been picked up by academics and activists alike. That right was a 'cry and a demand' to reinvigorate everyday life in the city, which to Lefevbre seemed alienated, without meaning or playfulness (Lefebvre, 1996: 158). The 'cry' is directed against the dominance of capital-centric urban planning, meaning mainly the creation of high-rise buildings, highways and consumption-orientated, privatised spaces. The 'demand' calls for access to the resources that the city provides and for a city, which is created by the people who inhabit it, fostering an open space of democratic politics that harbours the possibility of constant reinvention. In other words, urban life is a constant and collective struggle (Harvey, 2013: 4). The first note in this section, the 'Activist roundtable', is a virtual conversation of political actors – four urban grassroots initiatives from Los Angeles (U.S.), Vienna (Austria), London (U.K.) and Hamburg (Germany) – who discuss the practical organisation of their work: their methods, skills, motivations and material resources. While a growing number of participants and bigger projects are a sign of success for these initiatives, they are also faced with financial challenges and the difficult quest for autonomy and non-precarious labour conditions. All of these cases have the explicit aim to radically shift city politics towards the integration of under-represented, marginalised groups.

At the level of urban planning, we witness an increased interest in participatory planning processes. For example, after a series of failed large construction projects in Germany (Hamburg Opera House, Stuttgart Train Station, Berlin Airport etc.), many city residents have become increasingly critical and engage in the development of more participatory urban planning processes. Those citizens who have sufficient capacities (e.g. urban planners, students, activists, architects, pensioners etc.) can in fact influence design processes. The note from Krzysztof Herman – an activist, urban planner and landscape architect – is about initiating, supervising and implementing urban interventions. He states that a low-budget

and intervention-based approach allows the landscape architect to step down from the 'imagined "designer" (or "demiurge"), and to come out from behind his desk to advise and act in a citizen or NGO-led project' (Herman, this issue: 280). The concept of ZwischenZeitZentrale described in the note 'Second hand practices' is another example, where urban planning aims to become more participatory, but here with the cooperation between the municipality and urban activists (Ziehl and Oswald, this issue). Whereas these contributions mainly focus on the physical space, other additions in this section approach the negotiation of urban space in a more holistic way, noting how these practices are also attempts at the social reproduction of common life (cf. Frenzel and Beverungen, 2014: 2). The architects Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou introduce a bottom–up framework for resilient urban regeneration – a collaborative, citizen-led network of facilities, which can serve as a model for sustainable city life. Their current project, created in a small city near Paris and titled 'R-urban' is a grassroots intervention that aims to meet social, economic and environmental needs of their participants through the collective creation of a common space. In sum, the 'study in practice' notes in this section range from small practical interventions to new models of living in the city. What is common to all of these examples is their active participation in co-designing and co-producing the urban environment. Yet, the approaches and tactics of these groups are specific to the respective politico-economic and cultural regimes as well as spatial circumstances. Similar to Lefevbre's cry and demand, the last note in this section can be read either as resignation or as a 'wake-up call to the city and its dwellers, a reminder of the necessity to preserve the affordable and lively spaces of possibility, instead of producing un-dead taxidermies of art' (Henke, this issue). Here, the curator/artist Lutz Henke elaborates on his recent urban intervention, which he calls an 'act of auto-iconoclasm'. In 2008, he and the graffiti artist Blu painted a larger-than-life caricature of a businessman chained by his golden watches on the fire protection wall at one of Berlin-Kreuzberg's few remaining waste lands. The mural became one of the most famous graffitis in the scene, and appropriated as an iconic symbol of Berlin's 'poor, but sexy' tourist image. Six years later, the group decided to make the artwork disappear by painting it black. This act was interpreted as one against gentrification, rising rents and the role of creative urbanites in contributing to this process. To Henke, this act, as well as many of the other collective low-budget urban practices described in this issue, hopefully 'prompts a dialogue with the city's reality, stressing the capability and social function of (...) interventions where others fail to advance' (Henke, this issue: 295).

A similar, albeit theoretical point, is made by organisational scholar Timon Beyes, in his note in which he discusses the various ways in which art is summoned to save the city. Lining up the different modes how artists as urban

entrepreneurs engage with the city, he points to the spectacle, grassroots development and social work. Following Rancière, however, Beyes adds a fourth mode of observation, namely in understanding urban interventions in their capacity to arouse dissensus. On the example of the *Dorchester Project* and *Huguenot House* by the artist Theaster Gates, he shows how contemporary art creates an 'urban laboratory for repurposing and recycling resources of all type, and for establishing new forms of collectivity and cultural life in forgotten, neglected pockets of the city' (Beyes, this issue: 209). Just as Blu's black mural and many other practices introduced in this issue, they have a 'singular potential of questioning, irritating and intervening in the habitual forms of organising urban life' (*ibid*. 217) through an act that shakes up conventional perceptions and provokes urban imaginations of different collective practices of organising.

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