

Participatory Design: Commonmaking

Designed by and for the Community



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1 Introduction

How do we plan the unplannable? The term the *commons*, introduced by ecologist Gerrett Hardin in 1968, is defined as “...a general term for shared resources in which each stakeholder has an equal interest.” (Indiana University, 2006). It speaks about cultural and natural resources we, as humans, are in need of to sustain ourselves, such as air, water and liveable ground. Architecturally speaking, the commons is the most public of shared urban spaces, shaped by cooperating people for everyone, consequently used and maintained by them as a unit. Everyone is welcome on equal terms, even the most socially depressed, even the wealthiest.

As an example of participatory design, the commons is a space that utilizes time and use as factors for its existence. It is constantly changing, depending on the user and local policies, politics and built environment. It is a permeable, yet impermeable space. It is in a constant movement, adaptable to changes, yet fragile to power.

Placemaking is another approach, making use of the resources on site with help of the stakeholders. Placemaking treats the sense of place, made by the immediate surrounding community, and for the pedestrian rather than motor vehicles.

This paper discusses the power of participatory design of public spaces in the economically weaker section with focus on the Philippines and India. It analyses

how participatory design practices, methods and outcomes can help a community gain power of their own space, capitalizing the potentials with small effort.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Commons and ownership

Even the Romans divided their spaces into three categories: ‘res privatae’, ‘res publicae’ and ‘res communes’, where ‘res communes’ are the natural things around us, including wild animals (Berry, cited in Dimitriou, 2020, p. 36).

Dimitriou describes a space in the centre of Athens that had been neglected by the municipality, meant to be transformed from a parking lot to a public space but the contract expired and the owner, the Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE), expressed their intention to build on the plot (Dimitriou, 2020). The plot was then occupied by various groups of people, transformed into a space detached from the state and therefore, consequently, detached from the public as by definition. The fact that it is regularly invaded by the police support the statement that it is not a part of the public. What we can learn from her text is the example of how people can unite and take control of a space, activate it, run it, maintain it, and keep it (de facto) free from ownership.

Instead of ownership, the commons rather exclude authorities, becoming an authority on its own. Politically, the commons are therefore an enemy to the state. Places like the Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen has, since its proclamation in 1971, experienced an uncountable number of governmental approved raids by the police. Christiania, today synonymous with cannabis and alternative lifestyles, has gone from being a hippie community without rules in the 70’s, to become an open, functional, sustainable collective of approximately 1000 people. The inhabitants have a liberal view towards cannabis, one can only rent and not own their dwelling, and illegal, self-built structures are common (Rosell, 2018). The current Danish government proclaimed in 2004 that a normalization of the freetown was inevitable. This involved a construction stop and an enforcement of Danish law, i.e. no more cannabis (Rothenborg, 2004). In 2011, the supreme court of Denmark confirmed that it is the state that has the rights of disposal of the occupied land. Just a few months later, the Christianites purchased parts of the land through the Foundation Freetown Christiania. (TT-Ritzau, 2012).

Commons are utopias. A commons is, in practice, squatting in an organised matter, occupying owned land with the power of a community. It is comparable to squatting since, in our world, there will always be a landowner, unto whom the land belongs, who opposes the occupier. A commons is not meant, constitutionally, to last. They are headaches for the owner of the land if the land is occupied by another. The owners' freedom of exploitation is severely restricted! By letting the occupants obtain the land, preferably through a foundation or similar, to avoid conflicts, the commons can live on.



1 Mural on the infamous Pusher Street in Christiania, Copenhagen, Denmark

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/Mural_in_Christiania_against_hard_drugs.jpg.

2.2 Placemaking as a method

Placemaking was, despite its contemporary rise, already de facto practiced in the 60's by, among others, Jane Jacobs (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). The ideas of placemaking involved designing for people rather than cars, a controversial approach considering that car-centric designs were widespread at that time. Placemaking has since then emerged into a strategy of transforming existing urban shared spaces by strongly involving the direct users or the surrounding community. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) listed 11 principles to achieve a great public space:

1. The community is the expert.
2. Create a place, not a design.
3. Look for partners.
4. You can see a lot just by observing.
5. Have a vision.
6. Lighter, quicker, cheaper.
7. Triangulate.
8. They always say: “it can’t be done”.
9. Form supports function.
10. Money is not the issue.
11. You are never finished.

Out of these 11 steps, one can get a deeper understanding what placemaking is all about. The principles of triangulation and keeping it simple could seem fundamental for any public space design but are often overlooked. By triangulation, spaces cooperate and strengthen each other, emphasizing their importance in the space which they are a part of.



2 A mural, café, and street vendor in Bogotá, Colombia
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/La_Candelaria%2C_Bogota.jpg).

A successful city or region has, according to PPS, at least 10 destinations of public character that attract people. These destinations should in turn also offer at

least 10 places and, in these places, there should be at least 10 things to do. The destination spaces should therefore be rather complex with a larger number of places scattered randomly for dynamic displacements to occur among people visiting these certain areas. The destination cannot neither be too vast nor open, hence the places requires distinguished uses in order for the operator to recognize them as independent places within the single destination.

3 Argument, Critique or Discussion

3.1 A new method?

Commons and placemaking are working with ownership and/or objects within a place. One can say that they are political and architectural at the same time.

However, commons is a result while placemaking is a method, and they are not necessarily a result of one another.

Placemaking is the method of dealing with public spaces by involving the public, placing objects around, turning a space into a place. The method is used to create ownership of a space where mostly necessary activities takes place, transforming it into a place where also many optional and social activities can occur. When placemaking deals with existing spaces, I argue for another method for shaping spaces from scratch, with placemaking in mind and the status of commons as goal. How can we reach there?

3.2 Learning from the Philippines

When the interviews of former informal settlement families (ISFs) took place in the Philippines during February/March 2020, the results showed us that one of the major missing spaces within their new neighbourhood was a proper public space. If they already had a public space, which was usually a basketball court, they wanted a playground for the kids. Any type of public space is wanted, even among the urban poor. Most communities had a basketball court in favor of any other public space, with the argument that it is used during daytime while being open enough for celebrations, meeting and other social gatherings. It is, with other words, resilient.

However, the public space-to-inhabitants ratio is often not enough. Some of the communities do not even possess a single public space nor a multi-purpose building. Focus is often set to density, inhabitants/squaremeter land, and therefore

the quality of life, and sometimes even livelihood has been sacrificed. Density and urban shared spaces will benefit from one another, a symbiosis.



3 Ernest Ville, Quezon City, Philippines. Well-functioning community, impressive apartments, but no defined public space.

3.3 Learning from India

Studying Indian Pritzker price laureate Balkrishna Doshi, one will sooner or later come across his fascinating Aranya low cost housing, designed for the economically weaker section (EWS) of India's population. Subventioned by various authorities, including the World Bank, one of the challenges was to invent a new model of economic growth and empowerment (Hoof, 2019). Following studies of existing urban slum dwellings, he proposed incorporated public spaces to bind the new community together.

Nevertheless, the Aranya low cost housing strategy inclined towards urban planning and public participation contra architecture in its traditional sense. Doshi's contribution is modest, yet of essential importance to the project. The units for the EWS were placed on an extremely small plot of 30 m², provided only a plinth, toilet and electrical power. This simple provision was supposed to encourage the community to help themselves to build their own home, bearing in mind that providing a house, does not necessarily make a home. Doshi presented designs for a parts kit, including railings, balconies, and other attachable elements

which were thought to be manufactured by the community, employing the electricians, carpenters, plumbers etc. occupying the housing units.

Evaluating the housing scheme 20 years later, the residents have expanded their houses to a maximum. They now belong to the middle-class, generating income from their housing units as well as from their individual profession.



4 Street seller in the Aranya neighbourhood, Indore, India

https://www.sangath.org/uploads/images/1535113596_2-ARANYA-VSF.jpg

3.4 Resources, common denominators, application

The use of local resources looks different across the globe. The local resources in India differs from the ones in the Philippines, and the resources in the mountainous regions of Luzon differs from the ones in Metro Manila. Were resources being sparse, people tend to cooperate in a farther extent, bringing out more creativity of what could possibly be done otherwise. In the Philippines, single-use products and vehicles are seemingly the most common waste products. Since there is no general recycling strategy, many of the low-income households refine the waste products for a living; one man's trash is another man's come up. This method of up-cycling has reached higher ground, being used for villages and communities to beautify their place, bringing the people together and clean the place for rubbish in the process. It is an easy way to use the local resources and implement participatory design.

Another technique to create a community from scratch with people from other backgrounds is to find a common cause. Relating back to the Philippines and a community called Ernest Ville, it could be a fairly small common denominator such as a drug-free community that bring people together. By building their own neighbourhood, they separate themselves from parts of the society they do not support. However, when these communities are created, many are and remain gated to stay safe, becoming an enclave in the process. How could we avoid isolation while remain safe in a highly dense, urban environment?

Extracting the foundational ideas of placemaking such as the triangulation and form supports function, they could be applied in a design process instead of an intervention. Let us call it *commonmaking*. By identifying the common assets, material resources, goals, and future scenarios, the commonmaking will aim to make a resilient, non-constant public space. An adaptable commons. The commons would however be dependent of the landowner in terms of survival until, if and when the community is based on trust, long term-planning, sharing and continuity, the community manages to collect enough capital to purchase the plot from the landowner, not unlike in Christiania. However, a reason why the Christiania community proceed to purchase the land was that it had public acclaim for all these years; 58% of the Danes felt that Christiania community should remain (Rothenborg, 2004).



5 Participatory contribution and local resources forms a school yard in Batad, Philippines.

4 Urban Shelter Design

Implementing these findings into the individual design of the Urban Shelter design project, one could understand their importance in the context of Metro Manila.

When applied to the urban shelter design project, an architectural project aiming to design a neighbourhood of social housing in Metro Manila, the ideas of the participatory design procedures used in placemaking combined with the aim of creating a commons (commonmaking) are of high importance. As Jan Gehl, a prominent urban designer of our time, has said "First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works" (Gehl, 2011), which I interpret as first activity, then urban shared spaces, and last architecture. However, I argue that in order for life to start in our design, you need to build. At start, perhaps, the buildings are not of immense importance, but rather street furniture to promote play, education, and livelihood. When the activation is achieved, the buildings are erected. However, while the buildings are being built, the spaces have already been framed by the construction. Hopefully, the activities could continue to occur while constructing, and that is an opportunity worth investigating.

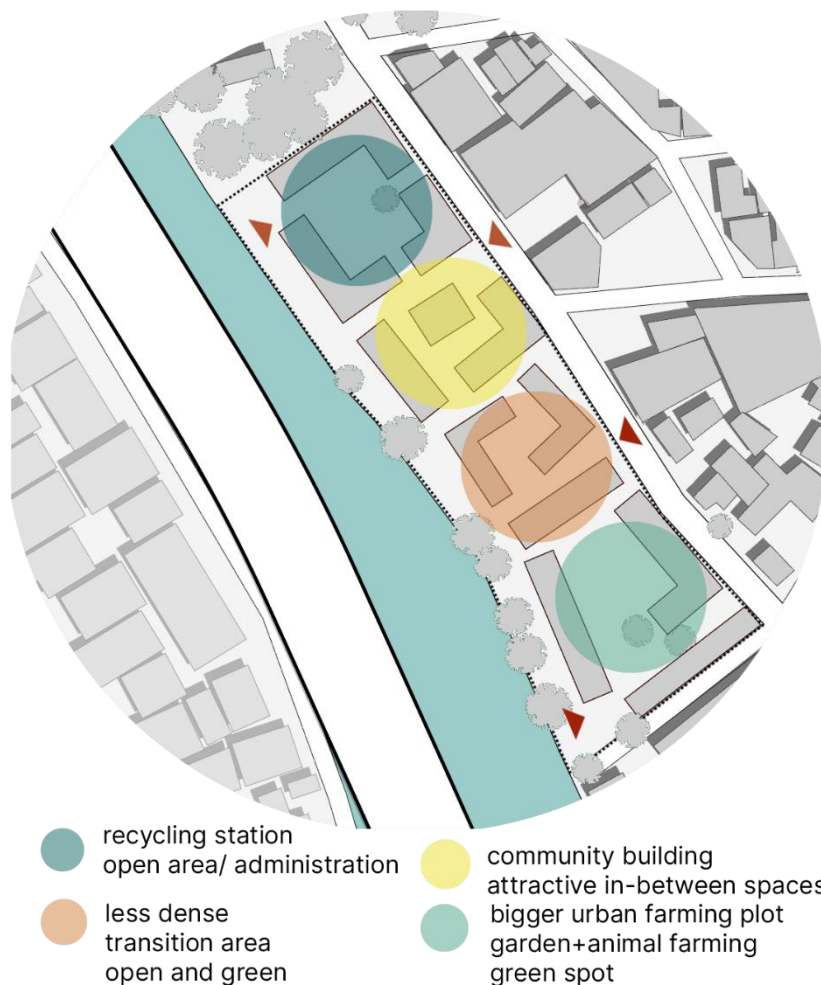


6 Site plan of proposed neighbourhood design, Barangay Batis, San Juan, Philippines.

In the Urban Shelter studio in the spring of 2020, my group proposed a neighbourhood plan which features urban gardening, public ground floors and movable street furniture. An opinion includes variations in seating possibilities, an often forgotten and underestimated function. Shading is also mostly welcome in the Philippines and might therefore be provided before constructing any other movable furniture.

To cite the placemaking framework, in order to find a common cause, the inhabitants needs to be identified. The housing is proposed for ISF's, where among half of them live on site, and with that information we can conclude that these people sit upon the most relevant information that we can relate to the location. Here, I will have to trust our interviews, field notes and memories as a replacement for that information.

As previously mentioned, I believe that one of the most important principles in the placemaking method is the triangulation. A straightforward design tool that, simply as it is, can define a place and an identity for its immediate inhabitants.



7 Cluster plan, defining each area's proposed purpose.

As an example, the peach cluster in figure 7 could form a workshop for scrap materials, a park with street furniture from the workshop and a sari-sari store to supply visitors of the park. The triangulation principle does not have to stop there, but should stretch within the area, preferably even across the road, further through the city.

One should neither underestimate the power of a mural. A mural can represent the community in other occasions than just standard of living, occupation and location. It represents what they are about, what they like, how they live, their history. The power of the mural lies also in how it is done: by the community. Even the elders and the children can participate, all convey their ideas with help of colours. The mural can also express direction, location and sense of arrival, depending by its position. It also has the ability to cooperate with the activities in a place, citing figure 2 on page 4.



8 Mural outside the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila.

5 The Role of Architect

The role of the architect is an always changeable role dependent on circumstances such as stakeholders, site, and time. One can discuss which is the most important, but I will argue that it is time. No matter the who the stakeholders are, how the site is located, shaped, or used; time will always affect a space. Therefore, resilience and permeable designs are of most importance. How long can a space survive for the intended use? What other uses could take place, and when? History is a fantastic tool to try to predict how a space could be used without considering user groups, activities, technologies, and habits. Everything is already invented, we rather rediscover, and therefore history is important.

Without time as a factor, there are no commons, no placemaking and informal settlements. Everything would be constant, and these places are dependent on time to exist, existing by the fact that they are never “done”. Yet, with the time as a factor, the commons might end up privatized, state ground or other types of ownerships. It is the architects’ task to plan accordingly.

Related to participatory design, it is debatable if the architect is needed for the actual design phase. Evidently, architects are rather tools, ready to assist in the process, while they are essential in providing a framework for the design were the required activities can take place. Like Balkrishna Doshi, our work has the power to help people, raising them from the dirt:

By choosing to design for the urban poor, Doshi created a successful example of how society’s weaker members can be uplifted – and in doing so he expanded our understanding of the architect’s role (Hoof, 2019, p. 241).

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Images

Where not indicated, the images are taken by the author.