Collective cultural infrastructures: Ownership, architecture, governance

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Keywords

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Introduction

Bringing together researchers, artists, architects and organizers from across Europe, the *Building Beyond: Collective Strategies for Just Cities* summer school took place from 9 to 11 September 2021 in Brussels.[i] Neither a traditional academic occasion nor a policy event, the summer school aimed to stay close to the experiences and reflections of the diverse actors 'on the ground', in order to critically examine and think through the ownership models, spatial conditions and grassroots processes of collective infrastructures, focusing in particular on the role the arts can play. The standard narrative of the arts and urban development is well-documented (e.g., Zukin 1982, Ley 2003, Pratt 2011): in cities dominated by the logic of entrepreneurial governance, artists and the cultural and creative industries have been—and continue to be—both drivers and victims of these urban development dynamics; playing an instrumental role in projects for temporary use and urban regeneration, but also being among the first to relocate following a development phase. The *Building Beyond* summer school moved beyond this seeming fait accompli by asking more future-oriented questions about collective and anti-speculative infrastructures that counter mainstream urban development by providing tangible access to essential needs, such as affordable homes, artists' studios and community facilities.

To an extent, the original motivation for this summer school was a very local one. Confronted with insufficient availability of artists' spaces, the instrumentalization of temporary use by real estate developers, and with Brussels lacking a developed cultural industries policy, the artist cooperative and studio provider Level Five initiated the practice-based research project 'Permanent' to investigate the cooperative economy and commons as potential models for the cultural sector. In emphasizing this local dimension, the summer school built on

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established academic and policy observations concerning the importance of the 'local': ranging from literature that criticizes the 'flagship building' bias in creative city policies and that directs attention to the role of locally situated arts and community spaces (Bell and Orozco 2020), to work on cultural ecosystems emphasizing the role of place and the importance of physical sites (Gross and Wilson 2019). The local concern also ties in with a much older debate about cultural democracy, its interest in local and community-oriented scales of cultural value, and the ways in which claims for cultural democracy are intertwined with demands for economic democracy (Hadley and Belfiore 2018). In addition, by directing attention towards questions of infrastructure and ownership, the summer school engaged with emergent debates about the cultural commons (Borchi 2018), research into cultural cooperatives and the social economy (Sandoval 2016), and policy reports on funding cultural spaces (Patti and Polyák 2017).

In this article, and in line with the setup of the summer school, we discuss three core concerns: developing diverse and flexible understandings and models of ownership, designing architectural typologies that contribute to more accessible and inclusive cultural spaces, and realizing modes of grassroots urban governance that allow for collective action beyond token participation. Following this discussion, we offer a brief conclusion, in which we point to the next steps for research and policy concerning what in this paper we propose to label collective cultural infrastructures (CCI)—a tongue-in-cheek reference to the cultural and creative industries for which the same acronym is used.

Ownership

The first day of the three-day summer school tackled the question of how a critical and experimental engagement with property can contribute to the realization of collective cultural infrastructures that are non-speculative and relatively immune from state or market pressures. Levente Polyák, director of the urban advocacy and policy support organization Eutropian, gave a keynote lecture on 'The Multiple Degrees of Ownership: Organizing, Governing and Funding the Cooperative City'. He warned against approaching property ownership in dichotomous terms ('bad' private actors vs 'good' public actors) and argued that the politics of strategically engaging both the public and private sector can contribute to collective goals. Polyák pointed to legal and financial instruments that can be utilized to protect the collective use of cultural infrastructures and that can ensure, to a greater or lesser extent, that the value created by the involved communities remains with these communities. This includes heritable building rights that allow organizations to acquire long-term (e.g., 99 years) usage rights of a property. Even though the land remains in the ownership of a municipality or other actor, this withdraws the land from speculation and ensures its collective use over extended periods of time. Heritable building rights are mostly utilized for social housing projects, but mixed-use infrastructures with the strong involvement of cultural actors have gained ground in recent years. One well-known example is the ExRotaprint project in

Berlin that brings together cultural workers, community outreach organizations and manufacturing businesses, and has a legal configuration that separates the buildings (owned by the ExRotaprint association) from the land (owned by two foundations that are against property speculation). Other legal and financial instruments are less permanent, but still allow for a longer-term presence than is usually possible within increasingly short-term temporary use projects. These instruments include rent-to-invest schemes (with tenants paying a symbolic rental fee to the owner and receiving tenure security for multiple years on the condition that the tenants invest in the building's renovation), crowd investment initiatives (with many small investors receiving some financial returns on their investment) or the issuing of shares to sympathizing cultural consumers or local citizens in order to acquire and pay back a long-term bank loan.

The lecture by Polyák was followed by a roundtable discussion with actors representing key cultural initiatives across Europe that are experimenting with property: Daniela Bershan from the Performing Arts Centre (PAF) in rural northern France, Christoph Pennig from L'Asilo in Naples, Andrea Verdecchia from De Nieuwe Meent in Amsterdam and Verena Lenna from Community Land Trust Brussels. Bershan highlighted the intimate connections between ownership models and shared governance dynamics, with PAF having recently moved from individual to collective ownership of a building by 50 partners through the legal entity of a property investment company (Société Civile Immobilière). This is a type of ownership structure that allows for joint or multiple ownership of property. Pennig talked the audience through the organizational setup of L'Asilo, an independent centre for artistic production in Naples that relies on an open governance approach centred around public assemblies and with the local government recognizing L'Asilo as an urban commons. With the De Nieuwe Meent project, Verdecchia offered an example of a housing cooperation organized around the principles of commoning that creates space for social and community-oriented activities, suggesting that engagement with housing policy and activism can provide one important route towards achieving collective cultural infrastructures. Lenna affirmed this possibility, as well as noting the role of non-housing elements in social housing projects, but also pointed to the challenge of funding often being tied to specific uses, making mixed-use infrastructures more difficult to realize.

Architecture
The second part of the summer school laid important groundwork for thinking through the role of architecture in the design of collective cultural infrastructures. Structured around an evening lecture by Nishat Awan (UCL) on architectures of displacement, a keynote by Khensani de Klerk (Matri-Archi(tecture) and ETH Zurich) on 'We are the city: towards a spatial lexicon', a roundtable event with input from both as well as Ola Hassanain (Sandberg Institute and HKU), Luce Beeckmans (Ghent University), and Ken De Cooman (BC Architects), and with two design workshops in the afternoon, this setup examined the challenge of designing spaces for

belonging and hospitality. Within research and policy, perhaps apart from studies on museum architecture (Jones and MacLeod 2016, Lindsay 2020), there has been little research into the ways in which the design of cultural infrastructures can contribute to the realization of a hospitable environment accessible and open to all, and the complexities this entails.

In her lecture, De Klerk tackled this challenge head-on by examining the role of building 'types' - a key structuring device in architectural education and practice. In questioning the ideal aspiration of a 'smooth' city that leaves little or no room for alternative practices, she proposed paying more attention to informal 'types' by looking at the ways in which inhabitants of the city act as co-authors of building types. These range from community-led self-build initiatives and squatting as a practice that allows for the grassroots appropriation and redevelopment of specific buildings (which has also drawn some attention outside of architecture: e.g., Moore and Smart 2015) to barbershops as safe spaces for black men in London, while also creating a particular architecture and fluid public-private space. These largely unrecognized building types, de Klerk argued, act both as a vessel and a conduit: as a vessel by archiving social life, past, present and future; and as a conduit by communicating modes of human survival, enjoyment and evolution. These important observations create awareness of how specific designs have differential social effects, and thus offer suggestions for designing spaces that are open to wider communities and the many informal cultural networks shaping the city. Responding to the keynote lecture, various participants emphasized the role of this kind of 'social' architecture as places of belonging (Awan), dwelling and hospitality (Beeckman), criticizing unidirectional understandings of infrastructures as places of inclusion (similar to the debate in cultural policy on the distinction between cultural democracy and cultural democratization). De Cooman underlined the value of architectural practice as a community-centred process that creates infrastructures, carried and supported by hundreds of people. Hassanain offered a critical reminder that the formalization of informal practices—be it through the identification of types or the creation of organizational forms such as cooperatives—also creates opportunities for governments to regulate and control these practices. This note of caution also returned during the design workshop of Globe Aroma, an artistic workplace and meeting place in Brussels for newcomer artists. Operating as a place of arrival for artists often in precarious economic, social and legal positions, it was emphasized that collective cultural infrastructures architecturally and organizationally need to find a balance between being open and closed spaces: open to allow for encounters between different individuals and communities and the sharing of infrastructures, but closed to be safe from police raids or other forms of state repression.

Governance

Architectural form, when understood from a processual perspective, is closely intertwined with questions concerning governance, the topic of the third and last day of the summer school. The debate primarily looked at the challenges of organizing grassroots infrastructural

governance and setting up meaningful collaborations across social differences and inequalities. In her opening keynote, Darinka Czischke (TU Delft) walked us through the different dimensions of collaborative housing; an umbrella term for co-housing projects, community land trusts, resident-led cooperatives and other initiatives involving high levels of end-user involvement and collective decision-making. As already addressed during the first day of the summer school, experiences from the housing sector can be inspirational for the cultural sector and projects around collective cultural infrastructures. Not only because these housing projects can include non-housing 'cultural' elements, but also because the experiences gained with governance in these collaborative housing projects raise challenging questions for governing collective cultural infrastructures. Czischke highlighted the demanding and time-consuming nature of collective decision-making, leading to many projects not moving beyond the idea phase. She also recognized the social biases in many projects, often being led by those with high levels of cultural capital and sufficient economic capital, though she did argue that recent years have seen an increasing diversification in terms of who participates.

Many of the identified challenges were picked up in the subsequent roundtable event, with writer and curator Olivier Marboeuf, Selçuk Balamir as co-initiator of the commons initiatives NieuwLand and De Nieuwe Meent in Amsterdam, Paul Citron from Plateau Urbain in Paris and Natassa Dourida from Communitism in Athens. Marboeuf emphasized the impact of an epistemology of whiteness on how we imagine participatory processes and communities. Criticizing superficial understandings of relationality in the art world, he dismissed thinking about relations without saying anything about their quality and conflictual nature. This links back to Czischke's reflections on the demanding and socially-biased nature of many collaborative housing projects, but also sensitizes us to the often-fraught relations between projects and public administrations—projects with 'dirty faces', in the words of Marboeuf, having more difficulty in gaining the trust and cooperation of institutions compared with those that appear similar to these institutions. In his discussion about NieuwLand, a mixed-use project combining housing, workplaces and a neighbourhood centre, Balamir pointed to similar governance challenges: with the centre, despite its own ambitions, being foreign to its neighbours due to 'squatter aesthetics' that attract some but dissuades others (something also addressed in research on cultural policy and neighbourhood arts spaces, e.g., Bell and Orozco 2020). Citron presented the case of Les Grands Voisins in Paris, a large-scale project involving a five-year temporary occupation of a former hospital site and hosting a mix of housing for people in precarious conditions, spaces for associations, start-ups, artisans and artists, a restaurant, a cultural centre, and more. According to Citron, the occupation allowed the building of relationships of trust between public administrations and local associations, showing to the former that the latter can successfully run an entire area. It also changed the final urban development project by creating an infrastructure for emergency housing and the social economy, showing that temporary use does not automatically equal gentrification and

that it can raise critical questions about the legitimacy of property rights. Dourida drew on her work with Communitism in Athens to discuss how the economic crisis in Greece, and the relative absence of the state in supporting those in need, led to coalitions between owners of cultural heritage buildings and creative and cultural workers. Owners provided buildings for free in exchange for restoration: in the first instance for one year and involving basic maintenance only, but followed by another three years leading to more substantial restorations. Even though temporary, and with future use not yet decided, Dourida argued that those four years allowed for an enormous amount of cultural activity to take place, with buildings being shared as a common good with several communities and acting as a training ground for collective action.

Concluding comments

With participants coming from different countries, disciplinary and sectoral backgrounds, and operating in varying institutional and organizational settings, the summer school showed the relevance of focusing attention on the built environment, and the ways in which urban mobilization around the dimensions of ownership, architecture and governance can create collective cultural infrastructures (CCI). These are community-centred, affordable, accessible and anti-speculative, tackling issues that have been identified by many as problematic in the case of the creative and cultural industries (CCI) at large.

For future research, policy and action, we see at least three directions worth investigating in more detail. First, engaging more substantially with housing research and policies can be beneficial to the cultural sector and cultural policy. Building on experiences in housing projects of integrating non-housing elements and realizing mixed-use infrastructures opens up a field of activity for cultural actors, both regarding potential funding opportunities and the actual spaces to use for cultural production and presentation. Second, context and process matter. This became especially clear when discussing grassroots governance, co-production, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of temporary use versus more permanent ownership-centred constellations. Realizing permanent collective infrastructures is work for the long haul, whereas different social groups have different time availabilities and are subject to different temporalities. This means that structures of permanence are often more accessible to those with stable socio-spatial trajectories in one city, whereas, for example, refugees or migrants for whom the city can be a transitional space, often find it easier to access, benefit from and contribute to temporary use projects. Third, a difficult balance needs to be struck between collective cultural infrastructures being socially, architecturally and aesthetically 'open' and 'closed' spaces. Whereas the discourse on the sharing city, the cultural commons and community-centred arts often suggests a practice of openness, publicness and visibility, in actual practice, this is more ambivalent. On the one hand, these infrastructures indeed thrive on being open and accessible to a wide range of cultural networks and communities. Any closure of these spaces is looked at critically, for example when certain spaces privilege

particular aesthetics and urban lifestyles, leading to a disconnect with most inhabitants in the surrounding neighbourhood. At the same time, it is precisely this closure that is supportive of 'counter publics' (Nicholls and Uitermark 2018), and that creates a safe space and relative autonomy in the face of state and market pressures.

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[i] The full programme can be found online at: http://permanentbrussels.org/buildingbeyond. All the lectures and roundtable discussions were also recorded and are accessible via: https://vimeo.com/showcase/buildingbeyond. The authors of this piece are members of Permanent and the core organizers of the *Building Beyond* summer school.