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Chapter 5

Metropolitan streets as contested spaces

The modernist dream of rationalized traffic

It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that the city streets became a tool for transforming big cities, a tool for interventions with political targets, hidden or not behind the rhetoric of decongestion and unobstructed circulation of goods and people. The word 'circulation' evokes a metaphor which was going to have serious consequences for the legitimization of such interventions as well as for the manipulated collective imaginary which supported them. In the same way that blood circulation is considered as the most important condition for the sustaining of life, circulation in cities appears to be the grounding precondition for the sustaining of urban life. And exactly as the circulation of blood is characterized by a hierarchy of vessels which distribute blood throughout the human body, so it is with the city streets, which should be categorized into main and secondary arteries which develop in a capillary-like fashion in order to sustain and 'feed' the city (Sennett 1994: 324–38).

This organic metaphor, which considers street movement as a precondition for city life, matched absolutely with the growing feeling that industrial cities had been sick and in urgent need of 'therapeutic' interventions. It was this approach that became predominant in both the discourses and the ideas which have been developed in interventions decisively connected with the

birth of modern urban design. However, urban therapeutic logic (Donald 1999) did not borrow from an imaginary attached to the empirical understanding of illness which is an important part of everyday medicine. Everyday medical practices contain important instances of regulated improvisation as doctors often get involved in tentative searches for symptoms, in trial-and-error experiments when treatments fail, and in idiosyncratic approaches to each patient's individuality. Although these practices are often considered to be outside the prevailing canon of medical protocols, they are always there because medical knowledge is far from being absolutely certain, fixed and context-free. On the contrary, the medical imaginary that was evoked in and transposed to urban therapeutic interventions was that of a confident doctor with unlimited faith in medical knowledge who already knows what to do: planning interventions based on this imaginary rarely questioned diagnoses and assigned treatments, even though urban bodies were at least as complex and as unpredictable in their reactions to treatments as human bodies are. Planning in both its meanings (design and programming), considered as a project of curing city life through rationalized control of urban 'functions', did not profit from the inventive wisdom of everyday medical practice which always puts into doubt the possibility of an absolutely certain and conclusive knowledge of any disease. It was this ignorant confidence that guided urban design and planning in its search for a universally valid language which would be able to express the main characteristics of urban 'health'. And this language was indeed discovered (or, rather, rediscovered in a different historical context) in the supposedly universal language of geometry.

Baron Haussmann, in his famous urban interventions in Paris, actually concretized both the predominant urban therapeutic

imaginary and the employment of geometrical rationalization of city layout as a form of urban cure. A revealing detail of his overall project was that '[t]o make the actual streets of the plan, Haussmann constructed tall wooden towers up which his assistants – whom he called “urban geometers” – ascended, measuring out straight streets with compass and ruler to the old walls of the city’ (Sennett 1994: 330). Geometry was present both in the discursive practices and in the working methods of the urban interventions.

According to Benjamin, Haussmann was nicknamed by his contemporaries an ‘artist-demolitionist’ (Benjamin 1999: 128, E3,6) and his projects were dubbed ‘strategic embellishment’ (ibid.: 12). Both terms capture a legitimized contrast between means and ends in Haussmann’s project: a decisive and accurate hand of a strong and determined man who nevertheless works for a universally recognized goal, namely beauty and a well-calculated blow against proletarian neighbourhoods in the city centre in the name of a longed-for urban unity, possibly nuanced with Saint-Simonian utopianism overtones (Donald 1999: 46). Haussmannian city-order utopia was formed as a project of redesigning public space and had a role in the reproduction of bourgeois hegemony.

Everybody was supposed to be able to walk on the wide boulevard pavements. And anybody could supposedly use the pavement cafés. However, social inequalities were directing people’s expressive acts on this new public stage. The poor were the dazzled spectators in performances of wealth and elegance given by the rich. As in Baudelaire’s poem ‘The Eyes of the Poor’, this mutual act of seeing and being seen is charged with the asymmetries of social status. What Marshall Berman describes as a

modern 'primal scene' already contains a major contradiction: 'The setting that makes all urban humanity a great extended "family of eyes" also brings forth the discarded stepchildren of that family' (Berman 1983: 153). Behind the illusion of a new, inclusive space that is open to all, behind the new setting of a democracy based on a generalized visibility and exposure, lies a hegemonic project that excludes those who cannot hide their misery. In a democracy of anonymity the poor were offered an alternative to fantasized social ascent: the chance to hide their true social and economic condition, the chance to deceive through the manipulation of their appearance. If the boulevards created a new kind of public space this was the ceremonial space par excellence: displays of wealth and power were socially effective because they were projected onto a spatial arrangement that was meant to be the culmination of a bourgeois recuperation of the city centre. More than the aristocrats who could reproduce their dominance by organizing only occasionally their presence in public, the bourgeoisie needed to expose in public its economic power and thus to legitimize its rule. But this legitimization was dependent on the staging of a certain democracy of equal chances.

The boulevards were undoubtedly expressing a new public culture. And they could emphatically present this culture as democratic and inclusive. They could even present this culture as natural, obvious and indisputable. The boulevards naturalized a presentation of society as an agglomeration of individuals who, as in the experience of the crowd, could be different and anonymous. This process 'depoliticizes' the street experience. Instead of becoming the public space in which social antagonism is expressed and demands are collectively made, the boulevard is meant to become a phantasmagoria of a brand-new world of

promises and peaceful progress. Sharing space in boulevards would mean participating in a fantasy of well-being oriented towards an always-better future.

Publicness and the art of being in public were shaped in the boulevards through the hegemonic project of presenting an explosively divided society as a united whole in pursuit of the modernist dream of eternal progress. It is in this ideological context that a model of urban order was effectively shaped in the form of an effectively regulated mobility in the city. The dream of the pacified city is from these times onwards connected to the rational and never-broken control of traffic. Social chaos is still being depicted nowadays as a city circulation system out of order.

The fantasy of urban order expressed in the form of a geometrical street layout that would 'allow the most efficient circulation of goods, people, money, and troops' (Donald 1999: 46) was the fantasy of Haussmann but also the dream of modernist urban planning. After all, 'Le Corbusier admired Haussmann as a surgeon who had tried to decongest the arteries of Paris' (ibid.: 57). What seems to be very persistent in this fantasy or ideal (meant to change urban reality) is the idea of complete separation of movement flows. The pedestrians were to be completely separated from the vehicles.

During the years between the First and Second World Wars, Le Corbusier (1970 and 1987) contributed decisively to the clarification of modernist architecture's vision of the future of cities. In a formulation that would have important consequences in reconceptualizing the role of the streets, he maintained that the modern street is 'a sort of stretched-out workshop' (Le Corbusier 1987: 167). In direct correspondence with his view that architecture and urban planning should learn from the way engineers

formulate and solve problems of machine functioning, Le Corbusier insisted that the street is essentially a machine for the effective, fast and precise regulation of circulation (ibid.: 131).

In Le Corbusier's vision, vehicle circulation arteries are very wide and are arranged in an orthogonal grid. The most important of them are to be suspended above ground level and thus become absolutely separated from pedestrian movement (ibid.: 168). Emphatically favoured is the straight-line design of streets as opposed to the site-specific irregular street pattern that is characteristic of historical cities (ibid.: 207–11). His dream was to build the future cities from scratch, in flat places devoid of geographical and historical particularities (ibid.: 220).

It is interesting to note that an important debate between prominent German-speaking architects and planners on the character of city streets which unfolded in the 1890s already prefigured modernist hymns to the rationality and efficiency of straight streets. Defenders of 'crooked streets' were arguing in favour of a 'harmonious cityscape' that created feelings of 'cosiness' and 'intimacy'. Their counterparts were accused of defending 'boring' streets in which 'anonymity', 'indifference' and 'uniformity' were bound to prevail. Straight streets would correspond to a 'geometric man' belonging to an 'abstract mass' (Frisby 2003: 76). In this debate the connection of street form to distinct modes of social interaction is more than apparent. What was at stake then and continued to be at stake in twentieth-century modernism is the forms of appropriation of the street by individuals, masses or communities in the process of contesting their character as public, communal (connected to the closed neighbourhood communities which Haussmannian projects attacked) or common spaces.

The modernist programmatic separation of the world of pedestrians from the world of vehicles appeared to be promising a city that was to be offered to pedestrians. Functional solutions of this separation were supported not simply by a rationalizing approach that would optimize the work of the city-machine but also by an ideology of freedom expressed as a freedom of unobstructed movement both for cars and for walkers. In a later chapter we will see how deeply this ideology has affected the imaginary of emancipation. In the context of this chapter it is important to note that the modernist street layout offered images of a completely tamed streetscape, devoid of conflict and clashing uses. It was these converging and different, even clashing, flows, however, which made the streets lively public spaces. Intersections, apart from being areas of possible traffic congestion and of circulation flow discontinuity, were places of great social value by becoming nodes of commerce and social interaction. Informal and formally organized practices converge in places in which movements intersect and various forms of encounter are bound to flourish.

Pavements and pedestrian areas in direct connection with flows of vehicles and goods, are spaces in which various activities that might introduce conflicting interpretations and uses of the city unfold. Thus, 'as shared spaces that people transverse by necessity, sidewalks have provided arenas for negotiating exclusion and inequality' (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009: 85).

Le Corbusier's city-park with its high-rise buildings which were supposedly providing more open-air ground space for a community of pedestrian users created what we could describe as 'cities without qualities' (compare Musil's 'man without qualities'). There would be no contested areas in such cities, no unpredictable

intersections and no unregulated encounters. Circulation defined as one of the four basic functions of the city according to the modernist epitome of urban ordering, the Charter of Athens (Conrads 1971), is considered as a discrete, localizable and repairable part of the city-machine (Mumford 2000: 90).

An example of what kind of extreme outcomes may result from this logic of attributing to streets the role of regulators of urban order is the urban interventions of Mussolini's fascist regime during the pre-war years in Italy. The construction of huge monumental avenues in major cities was meant not only to ensure unobstructed and separated movement of vehicles and pedestrians but also to create the setting for the parades, ceremonies and public spectacles organized by the regime (Atkinson 1998: 24). The effort to regulate pedestrian movement reached almost absurd levels of suppression as 'jaywalking was outlawed and the police enforced a one-way system upon the narrow pavements of central Rome' (ibid.: 19).

Haussmann's ideal of the city as a 'cleaned' and ordered urban environment, Le Corbusier's fantasies of a flawless city-machine, and Mussolini's paroxysmic urban autarchy share the same genealogy. In all of them, city streets represent a world of social disorder that needs to be controlled through planning policies and authoritarian interventions in a direct clash with practices that appropriate the street as a possible common space.

Gentrification rhetoric and the 'shared space' approach

Contemporary city and traffic circulation problems have considerably changed in consequence of important structural transformations in capitalist societies. What is being described as globalization and the advance of global cities is a complex

set of economic and cultural phenomena which were and are being conceptualized either through terms that indicate a crisis of modernity and modernism ('postmodernity', 'supermodernity', etc.) or through terms that name a society different from industry-based ones ('post-industrial', 'post-Fordist', etc.). A critical appraisal of the relevant debates is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter. What is helpful, however, in trying to understand an important shift in the ideals and practices of urban planning interventions is to keep in mind that those structural and cultural transformations put the modernist imaginary into severe crisis. The city itself could no longer be presented as a world-out-of-order which might be fixed; rather it was seen as a multilayered and conflictual reality which would have to be treated as a challenge requiring the devising of context-specific tactics of intervention. From this perspective, public space, and specifically streets, became the focus of important interventions in city centres which were supported by widespread diagnoses of urban degradation. Such interventions depart from the modernist imaginary of a new city designed from scratch and the corresponding rhetoric of a rationalization of city functions. Whereas modernist planners took for granted that what they described as urban chaos needed important organizational and regulatory interventions (and in their most extreme statements they said that this was not possible in maze-like historical cities), after-modernist planners emphasized diversity and surprise as important characteristics of a new kind of urban environment. In place of rationalization, zoning and clear legibility of urban functions, it was organized contingency, mixed uses and a rich communication-focused urban landscape that were praised.

As we will see, this change of approach helped to shape at least two different sets of urban policies in terms of redefining the meaning and role of public space and streets. The first is by far more dominant than the second and has already left its mark on important big cities all over the world. It is characterized by interventions that attempt to regain control of degraded city areas and redefine a kind of publicly used space that generates private profit in conditions of protected consumption. Local authorities or states have an important role in shaping the targets and the processes through which these areas are to be planned in direct connection to the logic of urban enclavism, as we have already seen. Gentrification interventions are predominantly policies of redefining the character of urban public space and extending its implicit or explicit privatization.

Less ambitious in its goals and a lot less able to influence, so far, the shape of urban centres is an emerging set of policies and ideas that attempt to create what is termed 'shared space'. This kind of public space programmatically departs from the dominant model of 'traffic segregation' which was initially proclaimed as the quintessence of modern road design. Putting emphasis on inclusive public space and the mixing of uses, the 'shared space approach' shares with gentrification planners the will to redefine public space by favouring difference and diversity and also a keen awareness that mass communication strategies fundamentally shape today's cityscapes. Both approaches criticize and construct urban images as a means to establish or corroborate identities of urban places which may directly or indirectly support market economic activities. But these approaches differ greatly in the forms of space sharing they create. Whereas gentrification often

creates a simulacrum of 'common space' by carefully planning the collective consumption of space (and not only consumption through space), the shared space approach creates certain kinds of space-commoning, although such commoning is based more on individual responsibility than on collective inventiveness and collaboration.

Let us first examine, then, the gentrification logic. What Neil Smith has proposed to term the 'revanchist city' (Smith 1996) captures a dominant approach towards the city developed by the ruling elites which is characterized by an effort to regain control of the city's crucial public spaces and especially the city centre. According to Smith, such policies directly aim at replacing liberal capitalist politics of public control – which were more tolerant of deviant behaviours and minorities – with neoliberal zero tolerance. This shift may indeed constitute a form of revenge against all those who acquired rights during the liberal period characterized by important mass movement struggles. But it also crucially includes a redefinition of public space by neoliberal governments in an effort to reclaim the city for middle-class interests, including renewed opportunities for profit and secure urban consumption.

Gentrification may be publicized through rhetorics of diversity and plurality but it is essentially a highly selective set of interventions that establish strict rules of public space uses. Gentrification is explicitly connected to displacement acts directed against all those who are stigmatized for their misery or their 'unruly' behaviours and especially against those who inhabit areas that may become 'developed' in the interest of real estate investors. Gentrification, thus, is a specific set of policies that

shapes the revanchist city as both an aggressively homogenized urban order and a rhetorically shaped world of individual opportunities and safe consumption of differing lifestyles.

Undoubtedly, city-centre renovations potentially create a field of unpredictable public behaviours. These behaviours may even create ad hoc common spaces through the appropriation of certain parts of public street spaces, no matter how temporary this can be. However, it is not the creation of pedestrian zones that characterizes mainly gentrification projects. Gentrification policies are predominantly devoted to ensuring an urban environment as secure as it may be and as deeply immersed as it can be in consumption culture. Constant surveillance is a necessary part of the gentrification setting; it can be accomplished not only through mechanisms of control but also through the very form of spatial arrangements. Le Corbusier's anathema of the old 'donkey street' (Le Corbusier 1987: 6–12) with its labyrinthine layout is just one of the modernist contributions to the design of streets that are exposed to total visibility (and therefore control). Gentrification architecture did not only use the straight line which Le Corbusier considered 'the proper thing for the heart of a city' (ibid.: 10). Scenic layouts and picturesque winding roads also became tools for organizing and disciplining urban uses in gentrified areas. Spatial form becomes a means to fix those uses and to eliminate surprises in the organized consumption of space. A planning view which favours an overlay of differences (Sennett 1993: 166 and 202) or gives 'narrative properties to space' (ibid.: 190) may very well create staged spectacles of tamed and predictable public life, contrary to Sennett's suggestions that such approaches are necessarily connected to a 'humane city' (ibid.: 202).

Too much is at stake in a gentrification venture to allow space to be used or be appropriated by 'deviant' users. Unauthorized street merchants, beggars, 'illegal' immigrants or skaters and graffiti 'villains' are chased out of the gentrified neighbourhoods either by police controls or by ingenious uses of public furniture and lighting. Curved benches which do not allow somebody to sleep on them, random grass watering to discourage temporary appropriations by homeless people and lighting that exposes to cameras every bit of allegedly dangerous or deviant action: these are just some of the means used to establish a safe setting for encouraged behaviours and to avert those that upset spatial and social order. M. Davis goes as far as to describe such environments as 'sadistic street environments' (Davis 1992: 232–6).

Gentrification projects vary greatly, of course, but dominant classes support these projects everywhere in the world in order to reclaim city centres or, generally, to regain control over parts of the city in which the 'dangerous classes' predominate and threaten public security as well as prevent rich profit investments. At the far end of this logic is, of course, the 'zero tolerance' policies epitomized in mayor Giuliani's administration in New York, which have since become the dream of many big city mayors, for example A.M. Lopez Obrador of Mexico City, who completely changed the rules of public street uses in the city centre. During Obrador's administration, street vendors, who used to play a crucial role in the life survival strategies of the poor, were expelled from their centuries-long selling spots and their practices were criminalized.

Collective and individual identities are performed in gentrified public or quasi-public spaces in ways that tend to reproduce and corroborate stereotypical behaviour. As many researchers

show (Zukin 1995, Sorkin 1992, Smith and Williams 1986), gentrification is promoted and established in city space through policies heavily dependent upon the manipulation of images. Public space is designed to be used, recognized and appreciated through images that are connected to marketable urban identities. The resulting visualization of public culture dominates over the construction of city inhabitants' identities. Trapped in taxonomies of image types, identities are thus performed without really been affected by the contingencies and challenges of encounters. Gentrification projects mould not only space but also the collective identities of 'gentrified' users. People are encouraged to enter an exclusionary urban scenery that redefines the city as the locus of a collectively referred-to proper identity. Cleaned from the impurities constantly generated by social antagonism, this identity condenses widely publicized images and forces people to act in and through those images which stage a form of carefully manipulated publicness. Obviously these projects are very far from providing opportunities for common space to emerge. Nevertheless, gentrification projects often employ a peculiar common-space rhetoric that actually tries to present public space as being reclaimed by decent, law-abiding, at times successfully creative but always-insatiable users-consumers.

No matter how often diversity, freedom of movement and individuality of use are called upon, gentrification manufactures enclosed identities and defines enclosed urban settings of collective consumption. Even in cases in which gentrification interventions are meant to transform a city through extensive city branding projects, and the new collective identities appear as inclusive and plural, an overarching manufactured 'city patriotism'

reduces differences to harmless variations of the dominant models. The 1992 Barcelona Olympics provides a valuable example. The construction and redesign of many public spaces as well as large-scale urban renewal interventions were combined with an equally large-scale public rhetoric on the part of the local authorities which presented the city as the symbolic and inhabited locus of a collective identity of which citizens should be proud. As the campaign slogans condensed it: 'Barcelona, everybody's goal' and 'Barcelona, more than ever' (Albet i Mas and Garcia Ramon 2005: 236). The so-called Barcelona success story carefully hides from view some really alive public spaces which were replaced by sophisticated design gestures, the displacement of Roma camps near the seaside, the radical transformation of the popular housing area of Barcelonetta, also near the sea (part of which remains as a sightseeing island with small enclaves of a different public culture), and of course the replacement of the rich harbour life (with all its contradictory characteristics) by a zone of leisure activities. Admittedly the seaside interventions have offered to the city an access to the sea enjoyed by many inhabitants and tourists (Busquets 2005: 392–5). City patriotism, however, prevailed as an imposed collective fantasy which continues effectively to subordinate cultural and social differences to an always-expanding touristic phantasmagoria.

The 'shared space' approach was initially formulated through focused research on the problems connected to traffic and especially on the ways traffic has destroyed the city streets' character as spaces of multiform public uses. According to this approach the solution to these problems depends heavily on 'the integration of traffic into the social and cultural fabric of the built environment'

(Hamilton-Baillie 2008a: 169; see also Hamilton-Baillie 2008b). Although such a perspective arose from a technical, empiricist search in pursuit of efficient and quality road planning, it has a straightforward view on what are the social implications of different models of traffic management. Directly opposing the 'segregation principle' (ibid.: 164) according to which it is imperative to separate cars completely from pedestrians, this view experiments in creating urban traffic landscapes of mixed use and planning tools that encourage the active entanglement of drivers and pedestrians in shaping the use of reclaimed street and square spaces. Instead of dividing, this view integrates worlds of movement which can differ in form, speed, means, et cetera (Methorst et al. 2007, Moody and Melia 2013).

The very logic behind the shared space idea is that people have learned to negotiate their place and their trajectories in urban settings and that when they are allowed to interact freely they know how to avoid accidents and find ways to coexist as street users. Eliminating signs or spatial arrangements that separate and control, this approach develops planning proposals that aim at resolving 'potential conflict through informal protocols and human interaction prompted by clues from the built environment' (Hamilton-Baillie 2008: 171).

Probably these ideas have a kind of genealogical connection with attempts to invent 'traffic calming devices' (ibid.: 167 and Vahl and Giskes 1990) but they reach well beyond that. They take shape through an undertheorized but specific approach to human interaction that privileges negotiations and the employment of 'informal social protocols' (Hamilton-Baillie 2008: 166). 'The rationale of shared space is that no one has priority of access or usage; it is an egalitarian space' (Jensen 2013: 15). According

to this approach, when people are left to negotiate freely with others they will find their way of dealing with different priorities and stakes especially because they themselves will assume responsibility for the negotiations rather than ignore each other by being obliged to obey signs.

What kind of space is the shared space shaped through these practices of negotiation? One is tempted to see in these practices a kind of 'traffic commoning'. Aren't performed negotiated crossings, after all, instances of shaping traffic in common? Indeed, but we should not forget that space as well as vehicle and pedestrian flows are shaped by planners and not the people themselves. What people are allowed to do is to move in these spaces (either as drivers or as pedestrians) by learning to use a less movement-defining spatial form that is less restrictive than the usual segregation-and-control paradigm. People cannot intervene in the materiality of space, and people are not asked to participate (as a local community) in the site-specific definition of the stakes connected to the social and cultural integration of traffic. The community evoked in shared space is a rather vague abstraction of real communities, as is the abstraction of informal protocols. Real existing communities develop shared priorities and shared skills as well as, of course, conflicting approaches to the uses of urban space – a polemic over the common, to recall Rancière.

The shared space approach considers users as responsible individuals who out of an almost inherent courtesy or ability to calculate risk and optimize personal trajectories are able to negotiate their way effectively and harmlessly. All those attributes and potential abilities are developed in specific sociocultural contexts. Maybe it is a paradigm fit for Northwestern types of society (and sociality), although it remains to be proved that it not only works

but also contributes to the reproduction of informal protocols. After all, informal protocols exist only in and through practice.

Furthermore, assuming that people negotiate 'freely' is also assuming that they can equally make risk assessments and that they are in equal positions. However, pedestrians, cyclists and car drivers neither have to face the same dangers nor do they enter negotiations as in an ideal democratic deliberation in which views are considered as equal. In a metropolitan context, the shared space approach may very well run the risk of unwittingly supporting a street law of the jungle (Methorst et al. 2007: 12).

It is interesting to compare the shared space examples with examples of ad hoc management in places and societies in which a very inventive spirit of constant negotiation is developed in everyday urban settings of what Westerners call traffic chaos. How do people negotiate their way in Cairo, Nairobi or Mumbai for example – not because traffic lights or zebra crossings or road signs do not exist but exactly in spite of them?

The experience and practice of matatu driving and using is highly indicative in this context. Matatu cars are small private vans that are a popular and cheap means of transport in Nairobi (Kenya). There is a distinct matatu culture there, especially influenced by youth subculture trends (Wa-Mungai 2010: 376), which makes the matatu presence in the streets more than a circulation symptom. Mostly poor people use matatu regularly, and lots of them identify with the drivers' inventive abilities to almost heroically find a way in the dense and always-unpredictable traffic of downtown Nairobi. Matatu crews (comprising the driver and a highly active co-driver who collects tickets and shouts or whistles to attract the attention of potential customers) even used to be fashion trendsetters for the Nairobi youth (ibid.)

The matatu is a private minibus, there is no doubt about it. But at the same time it constitutes a potential catalyst in the creation of common space, both inside it and outside it as it moves in a traffic-congested urban environment. Rules of use exist but are not imposed by a certain authority – they result from the accumulated negotiations between drivers, co-drivers, passengers and pedestrians who all belong to a community in which these roles may be interchangeable or, at least, easily recognizable and acceptable. Micro-communities may take shape inside this loosely defined community, like, for example, a community of those who regularly use a specific matatu line, or the community of those drivers who share the same service and parking station.

What makes matatu a commoned space and a commoning catalyst is the very process through which people collectively create rules of sharing. There is even a distinct set of matatu culture terms which define practices and actors involved in urban everydayness (Wa-Mungai 2009: 273). In the shared space approach, common space seems to be *offered* to people from above. What is more, people do not act as a collectivity even if this collectivity sometimes is assumed by planners as an abstract socially meaningful and binding context. Shared space is nearer to a liberal utopia of negotiations between free individuals, who due to the ethical superiority of freedom will necessarily take the best decisions and thus avoid any mischief.

However, the shared space approach is a valuable testing ground for evaluating practices of shared use of space by comparing the differences created not only by the rules but also by the forms of rule production and implementation. Common space, precarious and precious as it is, cannot be given to people by a certain authority nor can it be planned. Common space

is actually a process of space creation that unfolds through practices of commoning. And if these practices are to be sustained well beyond the boundaries of capitalist society, they will have to be collectively inventive and always welcoming to newcomers.

Streets as potential sites of commoning

In direct contrast to the politics of urban regeneration, which almost as a rule aims at reclaiming the city centre for the middle and upper classes, important urban practices develop which struggle to use the streets as subsistence terrain for the poor. Throughout the world, these practices shape behaviours and habits which produce 'unauthorized' meanings and uses for the streets, the pavements, the junctions, the residual spaces around and below highways, and the leftover spaces of urban peripheries.

As AbdouMalik Simone describes it, in contemporary Africa urban control is based on a management of urban populations which looks a lot like the management of refugees. Policies tend to ensure a 'right to place – that is, the sheer ability to live in the city and survive ... but not the right to the city – that is, the right to use the city as an arena to actualize and/or transform specific aspirations' (Simone 2008: 114). In this context, 'the apparent provisionality of African urban life' (ibid.: 104) is expressed in practices that take advantage of urban points of intersection, of urban flows of trade and exchanges, by 'maneuvering the relation between social spaces, visual fields, symbolic resources, concrete objects and linguistic materials' (ibid.: 105).

Are these practices of the weak and the dispossessed being developed in common? Do everyday improvising skills create individual trajectories or confluent tactics? These questions are

important in order to understand the possible ways through which street practices create ad hoc common spaces.

Streets may become common spaces especially when street trade or neighbourhood markets create conditions of living together in which individual survival practices interweave to create formal or informal support networks. Neighbourhoods may become, in this context, important collective reference nodes (*ibid.*: 109) in which the exchange of services and goods is recognizably spatialized.

Urban communities obviously differ from traditional communities (this, as we have seen, is true for urban Aymara communities in Bolivia too). However, in Africa, as in many cities of the global south, urban neighbourhood streets develop into crucial commoning spaces by providing not simply the ground but also the emblematic images that represent, support and reproduce ways of action, habits and forms of communication. In this context, the street is more than a spatial support of the circulation of people and goods. The street becomes a means to shape shared habits, everyday rhythms and forms of regulation which, nevertheless, remain open to everyday negotiations and individual tactics. This subtle creation of commoning rules and institutions 'from below' and through constant renegotiations unfolds in many market streets in which various levels of informality mix and interweave. Formal rules and planning policies are in many cases simply direct attacks on the potentiality of such emerging common spaces. They usually seek to establish 'the tidy, modernist city-image of politicians' dreams' (Brown et al. 2010: 677) which amounts to a controllable public space.

'Associational life in Africa is built around overlapping obligations, responsibilities, customs and traditions that determine

reciprocity' (ibid.: 678). Street trading, which many governments attempt to exorcise (either by criminalizing it or by directly and brutally suppressing it), is actually a set of practices that explicitly treats the street as a livelihood asset. However, street traders also weave, in and through the streets they use, important networks of solidarity and collective culture which may support and give ground to common needs, aspirations, values and habits.

The social context of course differs but in many places throughout the world, family ties and relations of kin become crucial 'mechanisms for securing access to space and other resources', as in the case of African street trade (Brown 2006: 52). Thus, 'In Ghana it was common for women to "inherit" a trading space from another family member' (ibid.: 185). Street trading appears today in all metropolitan areas of big cities, whether these cities belong to the so-called First, Second or Third world. Actually, this distinction between 'worlds' seems today to describe different layers of urban life coexisting or clashing in every such city. And street trading does not have to do only with practices of temporarily appropriating public space. Often, hidden networks of communication and exchanges interconnect the private realm of poor households with appropriated public space so that communities of vendors and neighbourhood communities overlap or even coincide.

The social capital that street traders accumulate and share supports common livelihood strategies but also creates common worlds and common claims and struggles. Family, kinship, religious, ethnic or professional networks may be expressed in associational ties, both informal and 'formalized'. What all those associational practices have in common is their direct adherence to specific spaces and spatial trajectories. Space, and the street in

particular, is the locus, the means of expression and the stake of such practices.

Street-commoning, thus, may be produced by various kinds of associational communities. Some of them may be a lot more closed and impenetrable than others. The street economy in inner-city Johannesburg, for example, is based on the predominance of Nigerians organized as a hierarchically structured support network which can exhibit its presence in the street and participate in various forms of 'pirate economy' (Simone 2008). Creating a common sociality in the city, Nigerians can both reinforce their presence as an ethnic group and, more important, navigate their common course as a multi-levelled community between informality and formal trade, between legal and illegal practices (*ibid.*: 362). In the same city, another kind of regulated street-commoning based on hierarchically organized street traders' communities is organized by the so-called Johannesburg's 'block captains', who 'informally control the pavements of the inner city' (Brown 2006: 51).

Street-commoning supports forms of subjectivation that may possibly corroborate dominant social role taxonomies but also deviate from their normalizing grids. By learning to negotiate in the streets, either as traders or as street users and neighbourhood members, many people throughout the world learn not only how to survive but also how to be, how to express themselves and how to assume or lose socially meaningful identities. Excluding the affluent urban elites who have no contact with the mixed world of metropolitan streets and who either fly above the city (in helicopters as in São Paulo) or travel barricaded in armoured cars, all other people have to deal in differing ways with street practices.

What makes street traders and hawkers so inventive is the fact that their lives depend on their ability to seize opportunities, to attract attention where and when this will become favourable and to optimize their assets and their knowledge of urban life. Street traders develop, thus, ways of negotiating their presence in the streets but also their relations to potential buyers as well as to potential competitors. In the gentrified streets of world metropolises, dominant policies succeed in organizing street life in role taxonomies that stage diversity only to extinguish or mask social antagonism. However, outside the heavily controlled enclaves of urban normalization, streets become areas of contestation. Only focused research on specific cities may reveal the complexities of the relation between rules imposed on spaces of urban renovation and practices which transform, bend or defy those rules throughout periods of intense political or social struggles. Christina Jimenez offers us an exemplary study of the Mexican city of Morelia by following the way street vendors organized both their claims and their associations in the nineteenth century in order to negotiate their right to be in public space. Their negotiations with state and local authorities, as she shows, employed in different periods the rhetoric of street and city modernization as well as the hegemonic discourse of early post-revolution governments (Jimenez 2008).

Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht have carefully studied the history and life of sidewalks in five major US cities to document and support their theoretical arguments about the need to retain 'conflict and negotiation over public space' (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009). Carefully focusing on collective and individual rights which are being curtailed by policies of security and 'homogenization', they conclude: '[A]s residents and urban

designers and planners, we need to be more vigilant to ensure that sidewalks remain accessible and open, even if this means some potential danger and conflict' (ibid.: 272).

To know how and where to be is already an art that exceeds the mere observation of rules and etiquettes. People in the street have to perform not simply themselves but those selves that may profit from the street's opportunities. An informal theatre of the weak (Stavrides 2002a), an inventive manipulation of buyers' expectations or of the attention of passers-by, is using the streets as ephemeral stages in which shared meanings and stakes are created or are being lost and found again. Performances of approach, of aggression, of seduction or of probing negotiation unfold on the street stages. This is how people may reconfigure possible common worlds but also themselves.

Just observe a Nigerian street vendor in Athens. Selling cheap electronic gadgets, he will present himself as a modern young man. He will learn to address young people by using recognizable catchwords, preferably English ones, and by displaying a shared technological enthusiasm. See him selling 'traditional' craft items from his country. He will reinforce his 'exotic' look, he will talk about luck, good health or legendary African beauty and even evoke a bit of African 'mysticism'. Just a person who knows to change masks? No, this is, rather, a complex set of practices and expressions through which an immigrant moulds himself or herself in the process of finding ways to be in another country. Identities become themselves both the locus and the stake of negotiating encounters.

Talking about life in Naples during the inter-war period, Walter Benjamin (in a work he himself says he wrote with Asja Lacis) observed a 'passion for improvisation, which demands

that space and opportunity be at any price preserved' (Benjamin 1985: 170). Edensor uses the same word, 'improvisation', to describe ways of behaviour which unfold in the Indian bazaar (Edensor 2000: 136). As he suggests, the contemporary city offers a series of stages on which different roles may be performed but variety is not unlimited: 'most performances are "regulated" improvisations' (ibid.: 124).

In the city streets of contemporary metropolises, practices of individual improvisation are an integral part of everyday role performances. When those practices become, however, the means to construct collectively arranged street common spaces, then we can talk about forms of commoning which shape common identities. We need to understand the construction of common worlds and the unfolding of commoning practices as processes which directly influence the stability of pre-existing identities and possibly contribute to the creation of new ones. Theatricality in public performances may describe these inventive (either adaptive or dissident) acts which create spaces of negotiating encounter between different people. If theatricality is the socially learned skill to become other and not simply an art of deception or disguising imitation, then through theatricality people can create bridges to otherness (Stavrides 2010b: 81–91).

Does common space possibly acquire the characteristics of a stage? Yes, if people try to create it not out of an already-existing feeling of community or communality but in the process of discovering possibilities of sharing between different groups and individuals too. As we will see in the next chapter, this was the case in the square occupations of 2011. To be able even to approach others and to possibly establish common ground, people or individuals need to be inventive in their ways of expressing

themselves and understanding the expressions of others. A visit to otherness through the construction of an intermediary self, a self that is not simply an impersonation but an extension and transformation of an identity-in-the-making, is valuable from the point of view of exploring and expanding commoning. We definitely need to distance ourselves from the view that presents commoning as a necessarily homogenizing process. Commoning, if it is to remain a dynamic set of practices that overflows all kinds of enclosures, should remain open to otherness. Common spaces may become stages on which negotiations and bridges to otherness develop as people learn to become others without losing themselves to otherness. A visit to otherness, as in the intricate and inventive styles of street negotiations, becomes, thus, not a mere tactic of deception but an active contribution to identity formation. To share means, from this perspective, to be able to create bridges and thresholds to otherness rather than to enclose in and through space already-established common identities.

We can possibly think that such an everyday inventive theatricality contributes to the emergence of common spaces by creating 'the virtual space of the other' (Féral 2002: 98). This space concretizes a spatiality of in-betweenness. And such a threshold space, in which differences are offered a stage to exchange approaching gestures (Stavrides 2010b: 90–1), is a space-in-the-making, a potentiality of space. Virtuality expresses the most important quality of this process. Encounters *may* happen and differences *may* meet. But, what is more important is that space should remain in this dynamic condition of virtuality if it is to support such possibilities of exchange and encounters. Virtuality actually corresponds to the dynamic character of space-commoning which is oriented towards expanding beyond

the boundaries of any established communities of commoners. In order to be open to newcomers, commoning has always to test its boundaries and transcend them by creating, activating or taking advantage of such 'virtual spaces of the other'.

One can focus on the individual tactics and skills that become visible in performances of theatricality in everyday encounters. But one can also focus on the conditions under which everyday actors collectively construct the ephemeral or more permanent stages on which they perform. It is not necessary to assume that such acts of stage construction or stage definition are conscious or deliberate acts. A collective frame of reference is formed through myriads of individual micro-acts which tend to develop collectively recognizable modes of behaviours. We can even assume that this process leads to the formation of practice codes. For example, Anderson studies the characteristics of the 'code of the street' in the black neighbourhoods of inner-city Philadelphia in an effort to trace everyday tactics of gaining respect and protection employed by young marginalized people (Anderson 2000). Well beyond the formative explicit rules that we usually attribute to a code of behaviour are the expressive and inventive individual and collective practices which shape such a code. Codes of this kind may thus be considered as common worlds that support common spaces and are supported by them. And these codes may be as strict as the rules and institutions developed in a closed community of commoners (more or less hierarchical or not) or as open as the rules and institutions of an expanding community of commoning which needs to readjust and reconfigure the very process of its self-management.

The more the construction of common spaces as minuscule stages is regulated by a non-admissive community, the more this

process tends to evolve to an enclosure of practices and habits. On the other hand, acts that expand commoning are neither totally unexpected nor absolutely innovative. They rather have the characteristics of a musician's improvisation within a music ensemble, as Sennett suggests (2009: 237).

There is a hidden order behind the appearance of the visual (and functional) 'mess' of the stoops of the tenement buildings of New York's Lower East Side. People use the steps in ways that are based on improvised acts and gestures which develop according to this collectively recognized hidden order. 'Improvisation is a user's craft' (ibid.: 236). This craft is shared and keeps on producing spaces to be shared. But if we choose to focus on the community of users rather than on the individual user-craftsman, then we can observe how such a community emerges as the sometimes contingent, sometimes habitual confluence of various micro-communities. Only if we abandon the idea that comes from the musical improvisation metaphor according to which there should be some kind of formal rules and consistency underlying improvised acts can we possibly capture the inherently negotiable character of an expanding commoning process. Micro-communities, as we will see in the next chapter, which examines the squares movement, may coordinate practices that unfold in them too but they may also explore the boundaries and opportunities created by practices that retain their relative independence. The idea of an overall synthesis will sometimes look like an order introduced from outside to a process which evolves either through political experimentation (in the case of squares) or through everyday micro-tactics. Maybe we can learn from the hawkers' choreographies (ibid.: 237), but also from the matatu drivers' improvisation acts, that

common space is not necessarily an ordered space but rather an always-emerging patchwork of fragments of order reconfigured by inventive actors. An expanding community of commoners need not be envisaged as a well-organized machine that can integrate new parts into its always-improving functioning; rather, it can be understood as an artifice of collective *bricolage* which people always mend, and even enjoy in doing so, and which is being shaped and used according to their needs and dreams.