



# Reclaiming the commons for urban transformation



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how public space can leverage disruptive changes in urban environments which compel sustainable urban transformation. We draw on three recent cases in New York City (Times Square in Manhattan, Jackson Heights in Queens and 596 Acres in Brooklyn), where activation of public space radically changed the function and identity of apparently stable urban systems by giving rise to nascent 'urban commons'. As healthy commons are indicative of cultural and institutional practices aligned with sustainability, we examine how innovative social and institutional practices can form in urban environments, and compel more sustainable ways of living. Drawing on resilience theory as a framework, our analysis focuses on the contextual conditions and mechanisms that enabled new public spaces to form; the processes by which 'commons practices' developed; and the way these urban commons influence urban systems more widely. We find that rigid urban systems can be 'loosened' by iteratively prototyping urban interventions (such as temporary street closures). These actions create fertile, low-risk, experimental conditions in which stakeholders can cultivate and consolidate shared resources and custodial commons practices. The formation of these 'communities of practice' is essential for the advocacy and protection of new commons as they begin to scale and challenge dominant urban system configurations. We conclude by describing how urban commons must scale vertically and horizontally within wider urban systems to support transformation towards sustainability. Upon identifying a range of challenges to this process, we suggest that the distributed replication of small public space interventions may offer the most pragmatic path towards promoting and normalising commons practices, as it can seed a groundswell of grassroots social innovation. In turn, these activities may lay the cultural foundations for traditional institutional stakeholders and urban authorities to play a more progressive and enabling role in urban transformation.

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## 1. Introduction

On September 17, 2011, a small, windblown concrete plaza, nestled at the base of Wall Street's skyscrapers, became home to hundreds of new residents and spawned a global change movement. Zucotti Park, one of New York City's many 'POPS' – privately-owned public spaces, became occupied and reclaimed as a public space. This collective action symbolically highlighted the contestation of public space as a symptom of a much greater cause: the unjust appropriation of common resources by a corporate few – 'the 1%'. Within weeks this publicly re-appropriated private space had matured into a pop-up, self-sustaining 'urban commons'. It defined itself through consensus-based, collective activities providing 'mutual aid': food, books and clothing distribution, first aid,

an information centre, a grey water and recycling sanitation system and even bike-powered generators (Frank and Huang, 2012). A communal spirit drove and was nourished by these activities, as the park became a thriving social and civic space with teach-in workshops, General Assembly meetings, music groups, exercise classes and long discussions into the night. As Daniel Latorre, an Occupy activist, recalls "I've never felt anything like it, because there was a sense of openness, that's why you went there... There's something that goes on when people are next to each other. It felt very alive. Very present" (Latorre, 2012).

Clearly, while public space is a physical domain, it continues to be valued as "the 'where' of democracy and civic engagement" (Neal, 2010). Indeed, besides New York City (NYC), in 2011 tens of thousands demonstrated against systemic marginalisation across the globe through the reclamation of public space – from Pearl Square in Bahrain to the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona and Tahrir Square in Cairo (El-Sadek, 2011). These actions highlighted the role of public space as an inclusive 'leveler' (Oldenburg, 2010) and both

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conduit and crucible for social change (Hobsbawm, 1973). The speed at which Occupy Wall Street's (OWS) actions (themselves inspired by the Tahrir Square protests and Spanish Indignados) gained a contagious momentum is a timely reminder how rapidly contemporary radical change can be transmitted and scaled. The Occupy 'meme' (Writers for the 99%, 2012), aided and engineered through social media, grew the movement spatially, ideologically and politically as Occupy affinity groups multiplied around the world, diversifying and self-organising in concurrent, decentralised waves. However, the Occupiers' eviction highlights the fragility and transience of these newly formed 'urban commons' within urban environments shaped by more powerful and rigid social, commercial and institutional interests. The legal occupation ended after two months when new regulations (introduced for the purpose) were upheld in a court decision - forcing the park's evacuation.

In this paper, we take inspiration from the nascent commons fostered in Zucotti Park to investigate how urban public spaces can act as critical leverage points for sustainable urban transformation. Public spaces and urban commons, while related, do differ. While public spaces can be defined as publicly-owned land, open (in principle) to all members of the public (Neal, 2010) as Jay Walljasper describes, "a commons arises whenever a given community decides it wishes to manage a resource in a collective manner, with special regard for equitable access, use and sustainability" (Walljasper, 2010). Urban commons might therefore require the physical form of a public space, and are defined by the social and institutional 'scaffolding' and practices developed for managing that space as a sustainable common-pool resource (Bollier, 2012). Commons can therefore be regarded as fundamentally complex, socio-ecological systems (Armitage, 2008; Berkes, 2006).

We suggest 'urban commons' are important vehicles for fostering sustainability within cities as they require behaviours, cultures and institutions consistent with equitable and transparent sharing of resources (Cash et al., 2006; Marshall, 2008). When connected to public space, they also have the unique position of fitting structurally within the everyday cultural and spatial fabric of cities, while being partly buffered (by public ownership) from dominant market forces. Understanding how urban commons develop through the appropriation of public space may therefore reveal social and institutional innovations from which sustainable urban practices and ways of living emerge. Therefore, in exploring the contribution of public space and the commons to sustainable urban transformation, we are interested in firstly, identifying the processes enabling the creation of new urban commons in public space; secondly, the processes by which custodial practices develop; and thirdly, the capacity for urban commons to influence the urban environment from local to city levels.

Our investigation of urban commons as a vehicle for urban transformation is framed by an understanding of cities as complex adaptive 'systems-within-systems' (Alberti, 2009; Marzluff et al., 2008) and draws on resilience theory and its 'adaptive cycle' (Holling, 1973; Walker and Salt, 2006; Du Plessis, 2012). Consistent with this framework, we refer to urban transformation as a process where the dominant structures, functions and identity of urban systems change fundamentally – leading to new cultural, structural and institutional configurations (Gunderson et al., 2002). At a 'meta-level', this perspective is useful in explaining how the current failure of urban sustainability initiatives to drive significant change is partly due to the resilience of cities (at least in environmental policy) (Westley et al., 2011; Harich, 2010). In turn, this understanding also highlights the need for urban transformation strategies to undermine the resilience of unsustainable urban configurations such as by disrupting the current flows and accumulation of resources (such as cultural, physical and economic).

A complex systems framing is also useful for understanding how small innovations in public space may influence large-scale transformations at whole of city scales, for it frames the configuration of urban systems as the result of emergent processes. In other words, the structure, function and identity of a city arises largely from myriad interactions between elements, including people, business, institutions, culture and physical conditions (Alberti, 2009; Alberti and Marzluff, 2004; Marzluff et al., 2008; Roggema, 2009). This radically de-values the influence of traditional top-down 'sustainable design' and policy mechanisms in achieving sustainable urban transformation. Conversely, it elevates the transformative impact of mechanisms that cultivate new norms, practices and other social innovations aligned with sustainability (Christensen et al., 2006; Westley et al., 2011). These socially-constructed 'rules of interaction' should be seen as the more important 'building blocks' that redefine a city's emergent pattern of structures and institutions. Clearly, however, cultivating small novel building blocks alone can't drive transformative change within the nested and mutually reinforcing 'system within system' macro-architecture of cities (Alberti, 2009; Marzluff et al., 2008). Transformative social innovations must scale horizontally (via spatial replication) and vertically (via interaction with systems at larger scales) to affect broader systems change (Westley et al., 2011). Therefore, our focus on the emergence of new commons within public space is conscious of the role public areas play in facilitating communication between urban stakeholders at many levels.

We present three case studies in Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn, and evaluate how new urban commons have developed from disruptions in apparently stable urban configurations. NYC is a fitting urban laboratory for this investigation, as it has recently seen significant urban change at multiple scales. These range from Mayor Bloomberg's current PlaNYC strategy for coping with the one million extra residents projected to settle in New York City by 2030, to the rash of 'grassroots' activities overtly challenging traditional property ownership and land access. The investigation is informed by site visits, participant observations and interviews with municipal urban planners, urban activists and designers, held from January–September 2012. We begin with the transformation of Times Square into a pedestrian plaza and evaluate the viability of a commons created by 'top-down', tactical urban interventions. Our second case study, a 'Play Street' in Jackson Heights, Queens, also examines how the same tactical practices operate at a grassroots level. We evaluate the compromises associated with this nascent commons engaging vertically with formal institutions in order to harness wider bureaucratic support. Our final case study investigates grassroots practices with 596 Acres, a Brooklyn-based organisation that supports local communities to appropriate vacant lots for activities such as gardening. Here we examine how linking urban and digital commons can support the replication, consolidation and wider legitimacy of novel community practices. We conclude by asking how these public spaces (see Fig. 1) and the various 'communities of practice' associated with them support wider urban transformation to sustainability.

## 2. Times Square

In late May 2009 the New York City borough of Manhattan was gripped by small-scale hysteria (Ouroussoff, 2009). The reaction was not the consequence of a terrorist attack or sudden stock-market disaster, but the first steps to pedestrianize Times Square. The Department of Transport's (DOT) 'Green Light for Midtown' initiative shut traffic to one of the most dense and iconic intersections in the world, converting five blocks of Broadway into a series of pedestrian plazas. This initiative was launched in 2008 as a part of the DOT's Sustainable Streets strategy; a progressive agenda

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