Open Source Urbanism
A First Step

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Forty years after the revolt of May '68, the prevailing opinion seems to be one of aggrieved jealousy, disguised as the wisdom of experience. A series of retrospective newspaper articles seeks to finish once and for all with a troubled legacy. Writers stubbornly struggle to distance themselves from the idea that idealism and engagement could mean anything other than the charitable causes espoused by pop stars and society figures. The soixante-huitards are dismissed as sandbox idealists, weak-minded and aimless sympathizers of terrorism, who in their unbridled naivety thought the world could be changed; we know better by now. It's the gist of several months of disappointing newspaper reading.

What all this disparagement of the '68 activists is meant to cloak – without succeeding particularly well – is the bottomless vacuity of today's politics and the loss of any horizon along which social development might take place. Where are the utopian visions today? Where are the visions of the future, for that matter? With the exception of the development scenarios of consultancy firms, planning bureaus and policy advisers, no one is willing to offer any sort of vision about a collectively desirable future. The world cannot be remade, we are told, when it is in fact being irreversibly reproduced day after day.

Urban space is where the spirit of '68 – in essence a struggle against any form of authority – particularly manifested itself, not just in Paris, but also in the inner cities of the USA, where the violent repression of the civil-rights movement degenerated into full-scale riots, in the streets of Prague, where the rebellion turned against the Soviet occupation, or in bullet-riddled Saigon, target of the Vietnamese Tet Offensive. In Amsterdam the spirit of '68 was embodied by the Provo and Kabouter movements, the Nieuwmarkt protests, and the general resistance of residents against the form of autocratic modernist urban development in force at the time. A small revolution took place, one that still defines the structure of Dutch cities to this day.

It is therefore in the area of urban development – in Dutch history one of the most fertile grounds for the development of radical politics – that an impressive system of procedures was created to prevent conflict and not so much parry criticism as render it toothless. 'Interactive policy making', 'open plan processes' with 'sounding-board groups', 'consultation procedures', 'co-production': the quantity of terms used to describe the participation of residents in contemporary urban development gives the impression that we are living in a veritable Mecca of democracy. Ultimately, however, the marvellous participation models result in a disappointing reality of notification and information, with a few therapeutic public-comment meetings to calm tempers a little. For it's too late for any real decisions. The political establishment now hides behind a hedge of semantic impenetrability: urban development plans are deliberately drawn up in a jargon that no resident can comprehend. We live in a so-called post-political age, where the framework of politics is set and remains unquestioned by any political party, and within which tiny alterations are the subject of intense negotiations.

The post-political framework of contemporary urban policy is that of the entrepreneurial city. An entrepreneurial mindset has taken over city government, where the drive towards

competition among cities has supplanted every other policy consideration. As much care as is being devoted to the strategic positioning of cities in global flows of human and financial capital, so little interest does there seem to be in adopting the existing population of the city as the premise for any integral vision of city politics. We have arrived at a clearly atopian juncture, [1] safely removed from any utopian philosophy and at the same time from the dystopian darkness.

The only fertile domain of utopian politics today seems to exist in the digital world, in the open-source software movement FLOSS, [2] where an all too real battle is being fought for the public, open nature of the Internet. Although there have been attempts to pull these politics out of the computer domain and transpose them to analogue everyday life, this has aroused surprisingly little interest in the social mainstream. The first step in the Netherlands to translate the cybernetic to the urban domain, strangely enough, is coming from the real-estate sector, which describes its projects using terms like urban hardware (urban infrastructure) and urban software (urban programming). It is no longer just about the bricks. Project developers have discovered that genuine added value lies in linking the physical hardware (the built environment) to sociocultural software (practices, identities, and so forth). This is why project developers now almost routinely invite artists and other cultural actors, on a permanent or temporary basis, to 'add some flavour' to as yet unfinished real estate, in order to jack up the prices. Almost every large-scale project in Amsterdam is now associated with a new cultural institution; the Zuidas has a design museum, the South Banks of the IJ have the Muziekgebouw, and the Overhoeks project the new Filmmuseum. Even in the restructuring of social housing, cultural branding has been turned into a new trend.

Interestingly, these computer terms of software and hardware were translated to urban space in the 1970s by the Pop Art architecture group Archigram, [3] to promote the use of soft and flexible materials such as the inflatable bubble instead of the modernist hardware of steel and cement. Along with contemporaries such as the Italian architecture group Archizoom and texts such as Jonathan Raban's Soft City, Archigram aimed its critique at the monotonous and rational functionalism of modernism, presenting a more organic conception of the city as a living organism (comparable views made Aldo van Eyck the quintessential architectural spokesman of the Nieuwmarkt battle against urban modernization). The term urban software thus dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, with software as the social programming of a city and hardware as its infrastructure. Just as the Situationists experimented with bottom-up software through psychogeography and the dérive, so did subjective, organic and bottom-up approaches develop into a spearhead of the utopian urbanism of the time. French urbanist Henri Lefebvre, an important source of inspiration for the urban social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, formulated 'the right to the city' in the 1960s: '. . . the right to the city means the right of citizens and city residents . . . to take part in all the networks and circuits of communication, information and exchange. [4]

In light of current notions of cities as centres for trade in and exploitation of knowledge (the 'creative knowledge economy'), this formulation of the right to the city seems more imperative than ever, as well as being intrinsically connected to open-source politics. For, in the neoliberal city, this libertarian approach to software is being replaced by an increasingly tightly regulated and coded version, in which urban programming often comes to serve narrow economic functionalism. Through the introduction of codes of behaviour, local ordinances and an increased police presence, streets are kept free of unsanctioned street scenes and undesirable use. By means of the creative city policy, the neoliberal city encourages and promotes the influx of highly educated residents, even as cutbacks are imposed on the creative public domain such as education and the cultural sector and lower education levels have been in crisis for years. Notions of cultural and creative entrepreneurship are becoming dominant in the cultural sector, formerly grounded in political and aesthetic considerations. Culture as a consumer product is developing into a

crucial resource in the branding battle among cities. In the process, cultural branding becomes an attempt to construct competitive urban software products that serve to 'programme' the urban space in the most economically favourable fashion possible. The neoliberal city is becoming the Microsoft of the spatial knowledge economy: it chooses branding over substance and refuses to makes its source code – its political agenda – public. With the 'kernel' [5] of the city increasingly focused on intercity competition, policy no longer needs legitimization – the need to be a 'top city' is reason enough. It seems an almost inevitable necessity, as a response to this trend, to create a programme that translates the demands of the FLOSS movement to the urban space. The realization of a public domain dedicated to the bottom-up production of knowledge and power, and an open urban source code that encourages, rather than complicates, participation; these, at any event, are two essential ingredients of a yet to be determined method for open-source urbanism.

Flexmens, text Merijn Oudenampsen; illustrations: Thijs Vissia

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Footnotes

1. I use atopia here in the sense of the non-place, the dominance of the generic. See the essay 'On Atopia' by Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti, in: *Vittorio Gregotti, Inside Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996).
2. See the article by McKenzie Wark, 'Copyright, Copyleft, Copygift', *Open*, no. 12 (NAi Publishers in collaboration with SKOR, 2007).
3. F.M. Ribeiro and R. Spitz, 'Archigram's Analogical Approach to Digitality', *International Journal of Architectural Computing*, vol. 4, no. 3, September 2006, 20–32.
4. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 194–195.
5. In computer science, the 'kernel' is the central component of most computer operating systems. The most important function of the kernel is to manage the system's resources, which comes down to the communication between the software and the hardware of the computer. In its urban metaphor, this makes the kernel the central locus of power in the city: the governance structure that has developed around the city government. For more on kernels, see W. Wulf, 'HYDRA: the Kernel of a Multiprocessor Operating System', *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 17, no. 6, 1974.

Tags

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