



Environmental governance, experimentation and the material politics of the urban commons

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Urban commons emerge from within specific and historically situated urban trajectories: they are the product of the co-evolution of ecological transformations, technological transitions and cultural change. As cultural practices are embedded in material environments, such environments are also redesigned to fit urban practices. Urbanists and science and technology scholars such as Hommels have characterised the obduracy of the urban fabric: how the mutual embeddedness of actions and materials limits future change possibilities. Sustainable urban environments will thus emerge from actions that target those interactions. The urban commons cannot be easily delimited. Instead, they integrate socio-technical and socio-ecological systems that include institutions, political ideas, design, and day-to-day ways of interacting with material environments (green or otherwise).

Research on experimentation has looked into the varied ways in which the governance of urban environments and its commons has shifted in the wake of climate change. As Grin and Van der Kamp intimate in the introduction of this *Digest* issue, a multitude of bottom-up initiatives have sought to reconfigure urban environments in more sustainable ways, often putting notions of justice at the core of such transformations. These are of

course, community groups, users, NGOs and citizen networks, but also SMEs, social enterprises, and local governments, most often operating within multi-level governance arrangements that attempt to orchestrate the ensemble of institutions and material concerns to intervene in the transformation of urban environments. A predictable critique has followed to the experimentation enthusiasm: if all we can deliver is a series of punctual, disconnected, actions, how can we ensure that the addition of all those actions will lead to a true global transition to sustainability?

This question is particularly relevant in urban environments where the complexity of entanglements and the speed of change make it difficult to identify the manner and form of such transition. Governance arrangements around urban commons are ambiguous, because what those commons are is ambiguous as well. For example, in an electricity network where electricity theft is common, what is the common? A single public-owned utility, or a group of utilities may own the network, but when the thefts lead to blackouts and a general decline of service, the electricity users are the ones who suffer most from it. When utilities lack maintenance capacity in poor and deprived urban areas, communities may attempt to control theft as a means to maintain an infrastructure system that works. Thus, the question about the step



A woman cooking street food in Mong Kok, Hong Kong

Photo: Vanesa Castán Broto

from experiments to transitions is meaningless in urban sustainability transitions. It assumes that a clear diagnostic of change is possible in a context where there is considerable ambiguity about both the actual governance arrangements and their material impacts.

In the paper for the 2017 biennial conference in Utrecht, I propose to step back and look instead at transitions in the making: at the integration of the materiality of urban commons in everyday practices of governance. Everyday practices of governance are not practices of use of commons, but rather, routine tasks that citizens carry on around commons, with commons, and transforming commons which ultimately determine the pace and direction of change towards sustainability. This requires an understanding of urban transformations anchored in the materiality of such transformations: using material reconfigurations as a means to diagnose forms of urban governance, rather than assuming that the material consequences of urban governance are known- as it is common in most urban transitions scholarship.

This requires to reimagine the materiality of the urban commons and how it shapes

social relations and the possibilities of change. I propose a theoretical perspective that brings together debates around the urban commons with new insights from a neo-materialist philosophy. In particular, this paper brings together two key neo-materialist insights: The first one emerges from a heterodox reading of Heidegger's tool-being, about the integration of material objects in everyday processes of repair and maintenance. The second one emerges from feminist neo-materialism, especially Karen Barad's definition of intra-agency as emerging within specific relationships, as a means to redefine the nature of urban experimentation. Reading the principles of this neo-materialist approach to urban governance with reference to empirical cases or energy landscapes in Hong Kong, Bangalore (India), Maputo (Mozambique) and the metropolitan area of Great Concepción (Chile), the paper shows how urban sustainability transitions are always unfinished, in the making and open to redefinition.

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