

Towards Creative Urban Spaces: Empowering Citizens through Self-Production in Urban Public Spaces. The WIP Community Lab Experience.

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Abstract

This paper is about the "Intermittent City" project, which explores the transformative potential of temporary and shared uses in Lisbon's public spaces. It presents the project's three-phases approach: recognition and mapping of Intermittent Practices (IPs), analysis and discussion, and development of tools for urban transformation. The research highlights the importance of collaborative and multidisciplinary methods and stakeholder engagement, involving citizens, universities and municipalities to ensure effective urban interventions. The project outputs offer valuable insights and replicable models for adapting the city to the intermittent rhythm that citizens' lives are assuming.

Key features are interdisciplinarity and collaborative design which are practices that can lead to unexpected and creative projectual solutions, capable of generating dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments.

The project includes a series of practical actions in the fields addressed by the research, which reimagine urban policies through temporary transformations of urban spaces.

Central to this paper is the conception of Community Labs, consisting in the temporary occupation of a public space with a mobile station for self-production, through participatory design methods.

Drawing from the ideas of conviviality and degrowth, the project aims to foster non-commercial relationships and enhance social and environmental sustainability in urban spaces. The integration of digital tools supports community engagement and the long-term relevance of these interventions.

This last initiative addresses urgent urban challenges while contributing to broader goals of social equity and environmental stewardship. The aim is to open a path for

navigating the complexities of urban transformation in the 21st century, fostering social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and community resilience. Through these efforts, the project sets a precedent for how urban spaces can adapt to the evolving needs of society.

Introduction

Introductory note. The Intermittent City Project

In parallel with the political, socio-economic, and technological transformations that have emerged in the new millennium, cities have undergone significant changes. Values of transience and sharing emerge in various dimensions of public life, driving urban transformations and causing disruptions in the conventional relationships between space, time, and use.

New and unconventional dynamics, with various articulations and variants, take shape: living arrangements (co-living, temporary housing); new forms of work (co-working, teleworking); shared mobility (bike-sharing, car-sharing, pedestrian-bus); sharing of goods (creative commerce, collaborative consumption, community food) and services (Netflix, Spotify), either physically or via digital platforms; spontaneous cultural events; improvised uses in anonymous spaces (parties in abandoned structures, rooftop parking spaces, urban agriculture in vacant lots), and so on.

We refer to the set of urban dynamics that simultaneously express values of transience and sharing as Intermittent Practices (IP). Interfering in both public and private realms, IPs emerge through temporary actions and define spaces, goods, and services to be shared.

The city, therefore, faces new functional mechanisms, with the potential to generate new architectures and ways of living, designing and managing urban space.

In response to this complex reality, the project "Intermittent City. Temporary Uses and Sharing Practices for an Adaptive Urban Space" aims to create a bridge between research and action. Based on case studies and operational initiatives, tools and design methods will be proposed, using IPs as catalysts for urban changes, fostering a more adaptable city.

The project considers IPs in the municipality of Lisbon as a research object to: (phase 1: SWITCH ON: Recognition and Mapping:) identify and systematize the characteristics of IP; (phase 2: CONNECT Analysis and Discussion) analyze and evaluate their structural components and impacts, and (phase 3: LIGHT UP: Future Scenarios and Forward-looking Tools) contribute with a design-oriented perspective for future urban transformations. The choice of Lisbon as a study laboratory is justified by its complexity, functional diversity, and occurrence of IPs in various sectors of urban life.

Currently, the first two objectives are almost completed, with the online publication of the IPs archive ([Intermittent City website](#)) and the presentation of the project's outputs both with the academic community and civil society. This does not preclude the addition of new case studies when they manifest. For this reason, the website asks visitors to "become informer" of the project; the same invitation is extended during

public and colleague meetings, building a network that extends hybridly between the physical and digital.

Thanks to the work carried out so far, it has been possible to activate phase 3 of the project, which this article will focus on. The last of the activities promoted within this phase, Community Labs, is still under development and this paper will offer a panoramic of the process.

From theory to practice: design-oriented exercises in the scope of Intermittent City project

International PARK(ing) Day (EIT Urban Mobility)

As explained, after a mapping phase and a first approach to the IPs impacts, the project began its last phase with the Park(ing) Day activity, on 15th September 2023. It was related to one of the cardinal themes of the Intermittent City project: the “Sharing” as a tool for rethinking urban policies and the consequent design of space. Many IPs are centred on sharing, which depending on the case, happens in workspaces, living and convivial spaces¹.

For this activity, a partnership between Intermittent City/UrbanLab² and BGI Building Global Innovators, a private sector stakeholder, and thanks to the collaboration of the local administration, a first Portuguese edition of Park(ing) Day was organised³. It took place in Rua Luís de Camões, Lisbon, where two street parking places in a row were transformed for a day into a public space. Various associations and institutions were invited to propose activities, such as talks, or workshops. The team of Intermittent City proposed the workshop “Urban Talks, Generations in Motion: What to do in a Parking Place?” in which the participants were invited to reimagine and redesign the configuration of the area according to possible shared uses of the space.

¹ Collected under the category [coexisting](#) in the Intermittent City website.

² URBinLAB CIAUD.FA.Ulisboa: <https://urbinalab.fa.ulisboa.pt/index.php/about>; BGI: <https://www.bgi.pt/>

³ [Park\(ing\) Day](#) history is described in the relative case study in IC Website.



Fig. 1_Workshop “Urban Talks, Generations in Motion: What to do in a Parking Place?” (Author: Matteo Cappello)

Focus Group on Urban Mobility

The second initiative carried out by the project consisted of creating a focus group on urban mobility, with the aim of exploring the impacts of intermittent mobility practices, both at local and at city scale. It happened on the 16th February and the team of Intermittent City acted as facilitators in the conversation. The issue of mobility is central in many bottom-up initiatives from which IPs originate, such as Comboio de Bicicletas⁴ or the various sharing mobility services (Bolt, Gira, etc.) that populated Lisbon in recent years.

An architecture studio was temporarily transformed into the headquarters of the Focus Group, following the principles of temporariness and coexistence that this project studies. Additionally, the experience demonstrates that it is possible to bring together stakeholders, both public and private, flexibly and economically thanks to the facilitation and mediation work that academia can perform outside the university walls.

⁴ Students that, following a defined route and timetable, go to school by bicycle accompanied by adult monitors.



Fig. 2_The Focus Group reunited at CCA Atelier in Lisbon. (Author: Matteo Cappello)

Workshop: Re-use of a Quarry for a New Life

The latest activity conducted was a workshop within the Second International Symposium New Construction with Stones, held for the students of the master in architecture of Beira Interior University, Covilhã. It happened in Pinhel, Guarda, in a territory characterised by extensive granite outcrops, which have given rise to an important extraction industry.

In this case, too, a temporary architecture atelier has been created *in situ*. The students were divided into groups and guided in the design and activation of temporary and successive uses over time, for a quarry that is still active, following the principles and dynamics investigated by the Intermittent City project.

The drawings produced were then publicly shown at the conference and debated. The activity had a pedagogical nature, aiming to test the impact of the dynamics investigated by the project on teaching methods. The results were encouraging; the students showed high interest in the proposed themes and were strongly involved in the design exercise, proposing different ideas in line with the work proposal.



Fig. 3_Students exploring the abandoned mine during the workshop. (Author: Matteo Cappello)

Community Labs: Empowering citizens through self-production

The activity, named Community Lab, involves the temporary occupation of a public space within the city of Lisbon and consists in the co-creation, through participatory design methods, of a mobile station for the self-construction of everyday objects.

The debate on the contemporary western city addresses two major spheres: the social, which brings with it themes of inclusion and democracy (two “promises” often unmet by the city) and the environmental, which crosses the urban agenda in all societies and it’s rooted in the need of reducing the impact of urban metabolism⁵. Aiming to combine research on public space with the topics of social and environmental sustainability, Community Lab draws inspiration from the idea of conviviality, as understood by Ivan Illich, and the Degrowth proposed by Serge Latouche.

Context and Key Concepts

The debate regarding the role of urban public space is highly topical. This discussion intends to explore new possibilities for urban public space, which is often a too passive element in the life of residents. The aim is to add a dimension of creativity to space by introducing a device that expands its functionalities, turning it interactive and thus an active element in daily life. Goal of the action is to promote non-commercial relationships between individuals and investigate the impact of intervention on public space on the relational and social sphere.

The conceptual reflection on an cooperative city⁶ has roots in the second half of the last century. From the 1950s, Hungarian architect Yona Friedman, for example, shaped the concepts of Mobile Architecture and Mobile Urbanism to introduce a construction system that would offer people the possibility of deciding the shape, orientation, and style of their home and/or neighbourhood. The city had to become human-scaled through the use of "open" technologies, conceptually very similar to

⁵ Wolman, A. (1965). The Metabolism of Cities. *Scientific American*, 213(3), 179-190.

Wolman, A. (2000). The Metabolism of Cities Revisited. *Water Science and Technology*, 43(10), 45-50.

⁶ Patti, D., Poliák, L. (eds.) (2017) Funding the cooperative city. Community finance and the economy of civic spaces. Vienna: Cooperative City Books. <https://cooperativecity.org/product/funding-the-cooperative-city/>

those understood by Ivan Illich⁷, capable of encouraging individual participation in the construction of living spaces. Friedman's goals and methods – citizen empowerment, the conviviality of tools, the role of the expert, and his idea of social organisation – were in full harmony with the purposes of the Austrian intellectual⁸. Both opposed the theory of developmentalism, they supported the centrality of the individual and the necessity of using accessible technologies to encourage community self-assertion and build autonomous and equitable societies.

"Conviviality" appears as a multidimensional concept, referring to the private as well as the collective sphere, to socio-economic relations (reintroducing the spirit of gift), but also to man's relationship with the environment and technology. It means being able to act autonomously, using personal gifts and living creatively: "I see conviviality as individual freedom realised in personal interdependence and as such an intrinsic ethical value,"⁹.

The degrowth project launched by Latouche embraces Illichian conviviality to restore social bonds and build democratic, sober and ecological realities. This is a global challenge that is being tackled at the local level, mostly through small-scale concrete actions based on the strategy of the so-called '8 Rs' - Revalue, Reconceptualise, Renovate, Redistribute, Relocate, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle¹⁰. It requires the involvement of the individual, and implies direct individual responsibility, but is aimed at the common good. This perspective privileges the small, the local and the independent. Three of the eight principles identified by Latouche are particularly relevant to the Community Labs: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. The promotion of projects with an interdisciplinary character outlines a practice open to other sectors for social and environmental purposes, to stimulate or trigger good practices (conviviality, livability, integration, coexistence) and to influence the mentality for a real rethink.

Convivial technologies and public space

The use of convivial technologies could provide people a way to transition from being consumers to citizens, helping the shift from a competition to cooperation society. In this regard, in 1982 Ingmar Granstedt – another reference from Degrowth debate – published a study in the journal *Autogestion* titled "du chômage à l'autonomie conviviale", proposing the establishment of *neighbourhood vernacular laboratories* equipped with small-scale machinery available to citizens, applicable in sectors like textiles and paper recycling.

It is no surprise that in his book *Pour sortir de la société de consommation* (2010), Latouche cites Friedman and Granstedt on the same page, referring to urban villages and neighbourhood laboratories as concrete acts of a necessary paradigm shift to be experimented from the bottom up.

⁷ For Illich, technology can be an essential factor in the development of human faculties and the realisation of desires, provided that it does not become an end in itself. He distinguishes between two types of tools: those he defines as manageable or simple, capable of meeting needs and increasing human autonomy; and complex ones, which create needs that only the device itself can satisfy.

⁸ The two knew and respected each other so much that Illich tried, though unsuccessfully, to intercede with Le Seuil to have Friedman's essay *Utopies réalisables* published, which eventually appeared in 1975 under Union General d'Éditions.

⁹ Ivan Illich, *Tools for conviviality*, Harper&Row, 1973, p. 18.

¹⁰ Serge Latouche, *Pour sortir de la société de consommation. Voix et voies de la décroissance*, 2010.

This theoretical framework is aligned with the urban dynamics investigated by the Intermittent City project. Indeed, the aforementioned principles are reflected and found in many Intermittent Practices.

Community Labs are conceived under this framework for two main reasons. The action aims to provide concrete tools to residents to get independent in the satisfaction of certain material needs. This underlines the social inclusivity purposes that public space should embed. Nevertheless, it aims to contribute to the construction of a new collective memory, where the urgent topic of environmental sustainability is framed in the perspective of abandoning capitalist market logic and thus rethinking the production-consumption system.

This perspective particularly arose from a meeting with Serge Latouche, during a public conference, where he was interviewed by the authors of this article. Below is a brief excerpt:

IC - "From the perspective of transforming a work-based society into one founded on activities without economic ends, could an initiative like community laboratories, conceived as a tool for the self-production and repair of everyday goods available to citizens, making them autonomous and avoiding the purchase of new items, play a role?"

SL - "Yes, because they are the practical implementation of a theoretical alternative and are also useful for building an alternative memory for the future. Small initiatives are not sufficient for change but are important for nurturing a new imagination and creating a different collective memory."

Furthermore, Latouche sets the goal of de-commodifying labour and productive activity, bringing it within the logic of gift (in the sense of Mauss: give - receive - return): neighbourhood laboratories also fall within this framework. The activity is thought on a local scale but is embedded in a systemic vision, capable of resonating at an urban and thus global scale if spread extensively across the territory.

Two movements related to architecture and design complement the operational framework for Community Labs: participatory design and the Makers movement.

The first emerged around the 1960s as a critique of top-down policies and is part of the broader trend of civic participation in public policies. Authors like Sherry Arnstein and Henry Sanoff contributed to defining a methodological framework for activating participatory processes in urban and architectural design¹¹.

This methodology seems particularly appropriate to set up Community Labs. The activity has a strong social and political connotation, as it aims at strengthening the role of public space so a bottom-up approach will help to understand the needs of the community and face eventual crises.

The Maker Movement emerged in the early 2000s, as a natural evolution of DIY towards a social dimension facilitated by the Internet. The movement brings together people from different backgrounds, who are interested in learning technical skills and using them creatively to *make* things and find innovative solutions. Makers see technology as a tool for individual empowerment and promote its democratisation,

¹¹ R. Arnstein, S. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>; Sanoff, H. (1999). Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning. Wiley.

especially through *open source* and the creation of learning spaces such as FabLabs. Douglas Dougherty, considered the founder of the movement, writes: "The Maker Movement has come about in part because of people's need to engage passionately with objects in a way that makes them more than just consumers".

These words resonate with the concepts expressed by the degrowth movement, thus, the methodologies and techniques adopted by the Makers are identified as allies for the activation of Community Labs. As noted by Granstedt, "neighbourhood vernacular laboratories" are equipped with "small-scale machinery" available to citizens. Who better than a Maker to share this vision?

The following section analyses the framework for the implementation of the Community Labs activity. It introduces the actors identified in Lisbon within the various movements mentioned and describes how each of them is expected to enter the process and what contribution they can make.

Community Labs Activity

Community Labs will rely on a network of stakeholders, including citizens, university, municipality and collectives of makers, architects and designers. Each actor has specific and complementary roles to ensure the success of the initiative. Academia plays a central role in the conceptualization of the process and facilitating and co-designing the artefact. It will study the impact of the activity and guide the participatory design process as well as promoting the dissemination of the results. The municipality will take care of the legal, bureaucratic and security aspects, the concessions for the use of public spaces and will contribute to the dissemination of the project. Associations and collectives will provide technical support during the co-design phase of the artefact and technical introduction to users.

Citizens will be involved from the very beginning in the co-design of the artefact and will be responsible for the management of the space after its implementation, with the support of the other promoters of the activity.

As the activity will involve local communities, the first step is to identify a site in which the device will be installed. The design of the artefact will be location-aware, to meet the needs of the community. A criteria for the identification of the location is to find a place that had no relevant social life¹², with the aim of not impacting pre-existing patterns of spatial appropriation by the citizens. To identify such spots, Intermittent City will set up a dialog between the partners involved in the project and the citizens associations addressed by this research. Municipality represents a strategic stakeholder in this phase and will help to identify a site in the targeted neighbourhood. The co-design process is structured in several operational phases, starting with the initiation phase, currently underway. Collaboration with the MILL Makers Lisbon¹³ is currently being explored to publicise the idea and identify new partners. The design phase includes preliminary meetings and workshops to define the functions and uses and develop a concept based on the citizens' needs and technical possibilities. To assess needs, resources and constraints, a first scan will be made

¹² Németh, Jeremy, and Joern Langhorst. "Rethinking urban transformation: Temporary uses for vacant land." *Cities* 40 (2014): 143-150.

¹³ <https://mill.pt/>

through questionnaires, from which a discussion will follow.

Working groups will be created to implement the necessary technological equipment and build the final artefact.

Finally, the device will be introduced to users, with an initial accompaniment phase that includes demonstrations of the device's use.

In its maturity, the device is expected to be equipped with a QR code linking to a recorded guide, accessible via smartphone and publicly available on the Intermittent City website. This aims to provide long-term operational tools to the citizens, even after the university's involvement ends. Monitoring the interaction with the device and collecting ethnographic data will allow for studying and analysing the impact of the activity, ensuring that it continues to serve the community, according to the principles described in this article.

Final Remarks

The rhythm of urban life is increasingly intermittent, necessitating adaptations in the city, especially in public spaces, which serve as its core.

Intermittent City analyses the dynamics contributing to the emergence of Intermittent Practices and proposes adaptation strategies for urban spaces, starting from the spontaneous practices of citizens.

Passive public spaces, designed according to economic logics and thus disconnected from collective identity, must transform into "emerging spaces" capable of hosting mutable and intermittent practices.

Temporary interventions offer opportunities to educate citizens about the need of a more sustainable urban environment¹⁴. From this, the idea of making an activity which has strong social and environmental connotations.

The university can act as facilitator in these processes, collaborating with other actors involved in urban planning. A participatory design approach is envisioned as the most effective strategy for testing new urban practices that focus on public space, where the practices of space-appropriation by citizens occur.

This article aims to open a path and promote a collective debate, which is essential for any urban program to positively impact the lives of citizens.

¹⁴ Martinez Almoyna Gual, Carlos (2021). Appropriation, interaction and conflict in temporary public space. Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington. Conference contribution. <https://doi.org/10.25455/wgtn.15185865.v2>