



## Public Space Activism and the Space for New Commons: Directions for Socially Engaged Design, Planning, and Placemaking

Jeff Hou\*

### Abstract

This article was prepared based on a talk given at the Department of Landscape Architecture at SUNY ESF (College of Environment, Science and Forestry, State University of New York) in April 2017. The original title was Public Space Activism and Reclaiming the Commons. It was changed to the current title as I realized later that the focus was not about reclaiming or restoring commons that once existed but instead about new commons – new social relationships, new model of interactions in the society that can be facilitated

through design, planning, and placemaking practices that build on what we know and do already in community engagement but in a more nimble, networked, and open-ended manner, a manner that is exemplified in aspects of recent public space activism. Additionally, part of the writing has been previously published in *Perspecta 50* (HOU 2017a).

**Keywords:** Participatory design; Seattle; Taipei; multiethnic communities; landscape design.

## Introduction: Public Space Activism

**P**ublic space activism as a social and political phenomenon has been a distinct form of urban social movement for some time, arguably long before the recent manifestations such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, and 15M in Spain. In 1971, citizens in Stockholm gathered to protect a beloved grove of Elm trees at Kungstragarden from being chopped down to make way for a subway station. One can consider it as an early precedent of Occupy through the use of bodily occupation as a means of protest and a leverage for results. In Stockholm, the gathering led the city to re-examine ways to better engage the public in the planning process. In the early 1990s, Reclaim the Streets emerged as a movement in London as a way to take back the streets from automobiles and claim the streets as belonging to the people. One can consider this as an early example of Temporary Autonomous Zone, in which citizens temporarily occupied the street to stage events and to make a public statement. It was also around this time that Critical Mass movement began in San Francisco

– a monthly gathering of cyclists that has since become a tradition and has continued to this day in cities around the world.

In my observation, these movements share at least two things in common. First, public space, whether it's streets or urban open space, can be something intrinsic to a society's culture and sense of identity. It is both a place and a concept that defines one's relationship to the larger society. Secondly, public space itself can be an effective vehicle for mobilization and for the display of citizen power. It is something that can be transformed through the participation of individuals and collectives. As a space where small-group or mass mobilization can happen, this is a place in which ideas and opinions can be expressed and visualized. The gathering and public attention can in turn translate into political strength, and as such holds the authority accountable. In this context, public space activism is a form of social actions that build on both the cultural meanings



Figure 1. Occupy Wall Street turned parks and sidewalks into a space for political exchange between strangers and passerby. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)

and emancipatory potential of public space.

In recent years, we have seen public space activism taking on a more urgent and decidedly political tone, but one that continues to embody a similar duality – first that public space as a concept, something shared by the society, and is intrinsic to democracy; and secondly, public space as a space and a vehicle for mobilization, protest, and visibility. During the Occupy Wall Street protests, for example, public space serves as a stage in which strangers can gather, participate in collective decision-making, and begin to have political conversations that would not have occurred otherwise. Even the standoff between the police and the protesters has led to debates concerning the governance, meanings, and purpose of public space. In the protest at Gezi Park in Istanbul, to protect it from the encroachment of the proposed development, the park space is both something to be protected and a stage for actions. Even the Google bus blockade in San Francisco functioned very much the same way as the protestors tried to defend not only livelihood of locals from corporate interests and forces of gentrification, but the streets as a public space which in turn serves as a stage for the protest<sup>1</sup>.

Through these cases, one may begin to see how public space can function both as a focus and instrument for mobilization (public space as an entity to be defended can also bring people together). At the same time, it can also function

effectively as a stage for political and social actions. This is particularly important for socially and politically marginalized groups who often do not have access to other forms of resources to voice their opinions and defend their rights. Furthermore, because public space, including the defense of public space, can bring a variety of people together, it provides a space for us to rethinking how individuals and society as well as different social groups can relate to each other. With that in mind, public space along with the activism associated with it has potential to provide opportunities for new social groups and networks to emerge. In other words, public space can serve as a space of new assemblages – a concept of social formation focusing on fluidity, flexibility and multiple functionalities that was first introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and has been gaining currency in recent years as new forms of social movements emerged. Finally, because so much of the focus is on bringing people together and sharing of knowledge, skills, networks, and resources, one can argue that public space activism can contribute to the making of new commons – a commons that dwells on social relationships and social production, rather on materials resources alone.

### **Making of New Commons**

As a scholar of urbanism, I have been writing about public space for almost a decade. Beginning with *Growing Cities, Growing Communi-*

1. Apparently, Google and other tech companies pay the city very little to have their buses park on the streets while the bus services allow the workers to commute from the city and gentrify vast tracts of neighborhoods in which they live (Maharawal, 2017).

ties: Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens (Hou, Johnson, Lawson, 2009), I was inspired by community gardens as a form of hybrid public space – neither completely public nor private in a conventional sense, a form of public space that embodies more the agency of individuals and collectives. In the book *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism* (2010), building on the previous work on community gardening, I was interested in public space as created by ordinary citizens (and “non-citizens”) vis-à-vis state institutions. I was intrigued by how such bottom-up making of space occurs often outside or at the border of the regulatory domain, and how such places and placemaking efforts enable communities to thrive and for new communities and networks to emerge. Examples of such efforts include the case of Beijing residents, especially rural migrants, occupying the residual spaces in the city for social and recreational activities (Chen, 2010), and Park(ing) Day starting in San Francisco (Merker, 2010; Bela, 2015) – at least in its early form as temporary, guerrilla act that has since become a worldwide phenomenon, adopted increasingly by local governments.

In another book *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking* (2013), I became interested in how places and placemaking transforms social relationships – particularly relationships between different ethnic and cultural groups – in other words, how urban spaces can perform as a vehicle for engendering cross-cultural unders-

tanding. For example, how community gardens in Oakland enable refugees and local residents to work side by side and how they allow people from different ethnic and cultural background to share a meal and a conversation, and how places and placemaking initiatives engender these everyday interactions (Prince, 2013). I was also interested in how specific actors – in one particular case, social work students and faculty working at the Hartland Partners Center at the University of Utah, facilitate such process, one that requires working through discomfort and misunderstanding – but also a process that creates opportunities for face-to-face interactions, and for overcoming and respecting differences (Mai and Schmit, 2013). Distinct from institutionalized forms of public space, the production of these spaces often through self-organized as well as collective actions can be considered as the making of new commons or acts of commoning.

Commons and commoning have emerged as an influential intellectual framework behind the recent, anti-enclosure social movements around the world. On one hand, some argue that they represent distrust against the state institutions that are no longer the sole provider of social good and services in a neoliberal era (Sohn, Kousoula and Bruyns, 2015). At the same time, the concept of commoning also suggests forms of participatory self-governance that set them apart from state institutions (Kip, et al., 2015: 9). According to Hess (2008: 3), the rise of new commons repre-

sents reactions to “increasing commodification, privatization, corporatization, untamed globalization, and unresponsive government.” She further describes the recent movements as developing “new forms of self-governance, collaboration, and collective action” (Hess, 2008: 3-4).

With the renewed interest in the notions of commons and commoning, there have been efforts to articulate their contemporary meanings. For instance, political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009: viii) suggest that the commons can be understood as both the commonwealth of the material world (air, water, place, etc.) and the results of “social production that are necessary for social interactions and further production” (knowledges, languages, code, information, affects, etc.). Specifically, they argue for a notion of commons that focuses on “the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting detrimental forms of the common” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). Similarly, Hess defines commons as “communities working together in self-governing ways in order to protect resources from enclosure or to build new openly-shared resources” (Hess, 2008: 40). In examining the process of space commoning in the recent movements manifested in occupied squares around the world, including the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados, and the worldwide Occupy Movement, Stavros Starvides (2013) notes that in these movements, space served both as a good to be shared and as a form of organizing shared practices.

In the book *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*, it is further noted that most contemporary definitions of commons comprise of three parts: commons as resource, institutions, and communities “who are involved in the production and reproduction of commons” (Kip, et al., 2015: 15). Also using a three-part framework, philosopher Adrian Parr (2015: 87) suggests that urban commoning refers to three processes working in tandem: first, “a political project that seeks to construct coalitions between individual, local, regional, national, and even international struggles”; second, “an urbanization process that constructs alternatives to the production and realization of surplus value”; and third, “collaborative activities involved in concretely transforming the system of exclusive ownership that renders the common non-common.” In short, urban commoning suggests a vision of society distinct from the predominant, neoliberal paradigm that has dictated the transformation of cities and privatization of urban spaces in the recent decades.

As a community-engaged educator teaching in a professional design and planning school, I have been thinking about how our education and professional practices could better engage with these phenomena and processes. Particularly, those of us with a foot in community engagement don’t often have the luxury to just research and write. Working on the ground together with our collaborators and community partners, we must be concerned with delivering tangible social and mate-

rial outcomes, including capacity building, or we would begin to lose credibility. In the following, I would like to use two examples to demonstrate how we can respond to these challenges and opportunities in practice – the challenge and opportunities of creating new social assemblages and new commons through community-engaged design and planning. The two cases are respectively my own community-engaged work in Seattle and the work of my colleagues in Taipei.

### **Seattle's Chinatown-International District**

For the past 16 years, my community-engaged work in Seattle has focused on the neighborhood of Chinatown-International District located in Seattle's South Downtown. The district, as the name implies, is a multi-ethnic community, with a fascinating history of multicultural immigration and settlement. It's also a neighborhood that is faced with many challenges – influx of new immigrants in need of social services, encroachment of new developments – not unlike many ethnic neighborhoods in North America. One of the constant challenges in the neighborhood has to do with the overlapping territorial claims between different ethnic groups that result in constant tensions and conflicts over identity and other interests. Another major challenge resides in the kind of community engagement process that previously existed in the neighborhood which has failed to support interactions between the different ethnic, social, and even age groups.

The key questions for us as community planners and designers working in the district thus include: how to make sure that residents and community-stakeholders are engaged in the process in a meaningful and effective way, especially those who may have limited English ability and understanding of public process in the US, and how to build foster social interactions and dialogues to overcome persistent tensions and conflicts. In other words, how can we make the planning and design process more engaged and participatory, and how can we create a space that is welcoming and inclusive to different members in the community?

Since 2002, together with my students and colleagues, we have worked with different community organizations to experiment with different ways of engaging the residents and community stakeholders in the district through various neighborhood planning projects—with the purpose of not only improving the neighborhood's environment but also to build community capacity to address issues that are important to the community by working together and becoming more engaged. Over the years, we have produced projects that are now in different stages of completion and development. In addition to projects we have engaged with through design studios, there are also those that different community organizations have initiated on their own, often building on discussion during the studio process and sometimes with our involvement as well.



Figure 2. Photographs taken by local residents revealed the significance of everyday environments in the life of immigrant residents. (Source: Jeffrey Hou)



Figure 3. Design games and design workshops provide residents with opportunities for collaboration, learning, and hands-on participation in the design and placemaking process. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)

Many techniques have been experimented to better engage the community members and to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. For example, to engage in more substantive conversation with community members, particularly older citizens, we used the “photovoice” technique by providing them with cameras to shoot photographs of what they like and dislike in the neighborhood. We then used the photographs to have conversation and learn about their everyday experience of the built environment in the neighborhood. The photographs and conversation have yielded more in-depth understanding of the life of individuals in the neighborhood. In one particular case, an older gentleman had his friends in each of his pictures from a nearby community garden. He explained that his friends were the most important elements of the garden. As a recent immigrant, the garden enabled him to develop his social networks and adapt to the new environment (Hou, 2005).

Instead of public meetings that tend to be alienating and ineffective, we have emphasized the importance of hands-on and interactive activities through “design games” (Sanoff, 1979). One of the games we developed was called “design as second language,” a game that was built into an ESL (English as Second Language) class. With cut-outs of pictures representing different park design elements that are labeled in both Chinese and English, participants enjoyed taking an ESL lesson while also designing a park together with their peers. The game injected engagement into

the everyday activities, in this case an ESL class that the older residents have been taking already. In addition to the games themselves, one thing we try to do in many workshops is to have youths facilitate the group activities themselves, in part because their bilingual ability is highly useful in this context, but also because it is a great opportunity for leadership development and capacity building among the immigrant youths. Furthermore, by engaging the youths, we also create intergenerational opportunities – as such we avoid treating the different age groups in isolation in the participatory process.

With experimentation in mind, we make a point of developing a different design game each time that allows us to build on the skills and knowledge that residents and participants may already have. In one case, since one of the most familiar activities in the community is eating a buffet meal, we developed a game called “Design Buffett” (Hou, 2017b). Similar to a buffet meal, participants would select park activity and design elements (food) from the buffet table, and return to their table to design a park. By mixing individuals of different ages at each table, we also created opportunities for interactions between the different age groups in the intergenerational design workshop. At the end of the session, participants would take turns to share and explain their designs to each other as to foster understanding and appreciation of different perspectives. The particular workshop was probably the most successful one we ever



Figure 4. The design of the expanded Hing Hay Park was developed based on outcomes of participatory design workshop, facilitated in part by local youths. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)



Figure 5. Community events provide an empowering means for activating neighborhood spaces and opportunities for community capacity-building. (Source: IDEA Space)

did. Almost as soon as we announced that the game was like a buffet, everyone started to get in line. There was no need to explain what a design or workshop process was. The participants intuitively understood the process.

To avoid the fallacy of public meetings and presentations that seem overly formal and uncomfortable and with little meaningful interaction, we use community open house events where residents can talk directly to the designers instead of sitting passively in the audience. This also allows the stakeholders to participate at their convenience and preference during a typically 2-3-hour window. Furthermore, it's a format that enables younger kids to participate easily as well, by speaking directly to staff or students standing next to the design projects just like the adults. Together, based on inputs from these activities, a series of projects have been completed since 2010, including the Maynard Avenue Green Street, renovation of the Donnie Chin International Children's Park, activation of the Historic Canton Alley, 10th Avenue Hill Climb, and Hing Hay Park Expansion.

As mentioned before, a primary goal of community engagement is to build community capacity – in terms of their ability to engage more effectively in the public process, and even to take on the role of coordinating a project. In the case of the International Children's park, we supported the establishment of a Friends group that has been instrumental in the development process of the

new park, as well as its continued stewardship through programming and holding regular events in the park. We also participated in the establishment of a community design and resource center – the IDEA Space that has been instrument in engaging the community in a day-to-day basis, applying for grants, and manage projects – projects that help support local businesses, real estate development, public safety, and design of neighborhood spaces. IDEA Space just celebrated its 10th anniversary this year (2018).

### Taipei's Open Green Program

The second case is the Open Green Matching Fund Program in Taipei, a placemaking program that supports local communities to activate vacant spaces (either public or private) in the city as a way to inject new energy particularly in old neighborhood and to build community networks. Since its inception in 2014, the program has been run by a local planning and design firm commissioned by the City. The funding program supports 10 to 20 projects each year throughout the city on the condition that the activated spaces are open to the public and therefore contributing to the overall improvement of the neighborhood. To apply, communities come up with the proposals and obtain the permission to use the space. The City then provides the funding for implementation following recommendations by a committee of leading practitioners and scholars. The Open Green program is a follow-up to an initiative to create temporary green spaces in the city





Figure 6. Success from temporary placemaking experiments such as this urban garden led to the development of the Open Green Matching Fund Program in Taipei. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)

on vacant sites. But rather than just planting and greening the city, the firm – a group of landscape architects and planners saw this as an opportunity to create community commons – places that support building of communities

Examples of Open Green projects included community gardens and conversion of residual spaces in the neighborhood into community gathering places where events such as outdoor movie nights can be organized. They also include projects such as is the White Hut – a vacant two-story building owned by the Ministry of Defense. With support from the Open Green Matching Fund, the community organizers converted the building into a tool library for neighbors. In a short period of time, the tool library evolved into a community repair station and makerspace – where people can come and learn about repairing small household appliances, furniture, etc. The facility is open to everyone including neighbors and non-neighbors; and volunteers have come from different parts of the city. Instead of repairing for the visitors, the volunteers would teach them how to fix the appliances themselves. The White Hut was envisioned as a space for sharing – sharing of skills, knowledge, time and resources. In addition to a repair space, the space is also used for all kinds of events such as a training workshop for community designers. What began as a repair hour has spiraled into other uses – that are strategically scheduled at different times to engage different constituents in the communities including

people with different work hours.

With too many volunteers for a small amount of space, the volunteers at the White Hut started to support building makerspaces in other communities, such as the Timber Hut, located in the different part of the city, but also by turning a vacant, unused space into a community workshop and makerspace. Another interesting project is located at the South Airport Apartments, a resettlement housing complex built with American foreign aid. When the building was completed in 1968, it was the most advanced modern building in the city. However, it has since fallen into disrepair. As part of the original building design, there was market in the basement open to the central courtyard. The market was no longer in operation, and the space has been sitting there vacant for many years, until a young graduate from an architecture school came along. He saw the potential of this space and applied for an Open Green grant to fix it up. Less than a year later, the basement space now hosts multiple social service organizations, including CityDreamer, an organization that provides job training for homeless individuals and uses the space as a carpentry workshop. Another organization is Nanji Rice, a project of Do You a Flavor in collaboration with other NGOs. The project centers around a community kitchen in which residents and volunteers both eat and cook together, as well as sharing food materials and providing services to those in need. They also deliver bento boxes to elderly residents who are not able



Figure 7. The White Hut serves a place for repairs, sharing, and social connections. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)



Figure 8. Seed funding from the Open Green program allowed activists and organizers to turn a vacant basement space into a hub for community activities and social experimentations. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)



Figure 9. Taipei Umbrella Project also turned a vacant site into a ground for experimentations. (Photograph by Jeffrey Hou)

to come to the community kitchen. The new basement space also hosts other events, including movie nights, a pay-as-you-wish restaurant, and repair hours with volunteers from the White Hut.

Another notable Open Green project involved the Hun Commune, which was started as the city's very first co-working space. To reach out and engage their neighbors, staff at Hun Commune applied for the Open Green fund to convert a nearby vacant space into a temporary open space. The entire project was completed in a day – with pallets, artificial turf, and many young volunteers, after which new elements were then added one after another, including large photo banners featuring photographs of neighbors who were invited to have their photo taken. As they were waiting in line to have the photos taken, conversation started to happen among neighbors including newcomers and old-timers who don't often have a chance to speak with each other (Hou, 2017a). With the successful transformation of the space, the folks at Hun Commune has since transformed itself into a design firm with a specialization on transforming and activating vacant lands in the city. In addition to the individual projects, with its continued success, the Open Green program has since been replicated in other cities in Taiwan, including Keelung, Taoyuan, and Hsinchu.

### **Making Space and Practice for New Commons**

In conclusion, to create spaces and practices for the new commons, we need to think of planning

and design as a form of social practice, in the sense that planning and design practice needs to contribute to the building of social networks and relationships as much as making structures and spaces. Much the same way we make space, create habitats, and restore ecosystems, we need to consider ways of building and developing networks and relationships through design and community engagement process. In addition, we need to make the design process not only participatory but also contributing to the capacity building in the community so that participants and stakeholders are empowered to act and create networks and interventions on their own. In the case of Seattle's Chinatown-International District, this has been done through hands-on and interactive activities in which participants can build on their existing skills and acquire new ones. This has also been done through partnerships with local organizations including youth groups that get to develop leadership skills and experience through the process.

Secondly, we need to facilitate and promote a culture of sharing and social learning – processes that are fundamental to the space of new commons. In the case of the Open Green program, projects such as the White Hut are exemplary in this respect, by fostering a culture of sharing in terms of not only material resources but also skills, knowledge, and social networks. It's important to note that such culture of sharing has contributed to a growing number of similar projects. This

leads to my next and final point, that we need to create networks and relationships not only within the existing neighborhoods and communities but also between communities and social networks with different sociocultural backgrounds and economic circumstances. In other words, we need to consider places and placemaking as networked – which is arguably the essence of the new commons – a commons that is built on formation of new relationships and assemblages.

Particularly in this day and age of growing social and political divisions, these new commons are increasingly important for breaking down social barriers and reconnecting communities to place and one another. Such making of new commons can empower individuals and communities with a sense of agency and ability to transform the built environments and their relationship with each other. Our ability to engage in such process will determine the relevance and significance of our profession and practice in the face of today's profound social and political challenges.

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