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# WELTSTADT

THE PROJECT WELTSTADT - WHO CREATES  
THE CITY? IS A JOINT INITIATIVE OF THE  
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WER MACHT DIE STADT? WHO CREATES THE CITY? KUY DÉFAR DÉK BIZ QUI CRÉE LA VILLE? 누가 도시를 만드니까 CHI CREA LA CITTÀ? QUIEN HACE LA CIUDAD? ನಗರವನ್ನು ಯಾರು ಶೈಕ್ಷ್ಮಿ ಮೂಡುವರು QUEM CRIA A CIDADE? KURS VEIDO PILSĒTU? ŠTA SE DEŠAVA U GRADU?

# NOTES FROM THE CONFERENCE

Carly A. Krakow, Peder Anker, Louise Harpman, Mitchell Joachim

What is the relationship between nature and the city? How are the bounds between a democratic, open-access approach to city development and an urban planning methodology that emphasizes expertise and extensive training negotiated? Is it possible to design spaces as realms of free speech and activism, or is the idea of “designed democracy” antithetical to spontaneous and genuine demonstrations of citizenship?

These are just a few of the questions addressed at March 14th's Cities and Citizenship conference, co-organized by Global Design NYU and Parsons the New School for Design as part of the Goethe-Institut's Weltstadt project. The conference featured a series of panels that engaged with the ways in which the construction of the city is inextricably related to the role of the citizen. Drawing on historical understandings of how urban centers have been both geographically and socially delimited, the conference sought to inspire an expanded understanding of the citizen's role in shaping the 21st century “green city”.

In an era of globalization and mega-urbanism, natural disasters caused by global warming pose unprecedented challenges to the architecture and design communities. Climate change is forcing an urgent examination of outdated infrastructure, particularly in New York City. This sense of immediacy about the interactions between urbanism and environmentalism has led to heated discussion amongst academics, scientists, urban planners, and policy-makers about the ways in which the “natural” or pre-existing environment has interacted and ought to interact with infrastructural planning and creation.

As NYU biologist and Professor of Environmental Studies Tyler Volk pointed out, nature plays an integral role in defining urban citizenship, and a deeper appreciation of the role that nature plays in shaping our urban centers can perhaps lead to a heightened level of engaged citizenry. Volk noted the potential for the loss of individual identity in our era of increased technological advancement, and suggested “involvement with ecological networks and other species [can] help prevent us from becoming automatons in a large urban machine”.

Volk's warnings against the “age of zombification” were in sync with an emphasis on an appreciation of the micro-community – an emphasis that pervaded the tone of the entire conference. Not surprisingly, this focus on an appreciation of the micro-community led to many nods to activist and urban theorist Jane Jacobs, including NYU sociologist Eric Klinenberg's remark that we are in the “age of Jacobs, not [Robert] Moses” and assertion that when it comes to dealing with pressing issues such as climate security, it is essential to emphasize citizen involvement. This line of thought raised issues about how we define the bounds

of the city, and to what extent regional forces define urban epicenters, as well as the ways in which community preservation is affected by urban expansion and globalization.

NYU Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies Colin Jerolmack also noted the ways in which Jacobs' discussion of the “intricate ballet of sidewalk life” has shaped contemporary thinking about urban community membership and participation. The Weltstadt Project begs the question, “Who creates the city?”, but as Jerolmack demonstrated, this question is problematized when we consider participants of the community that play huge roles in “creating” the city, but are at best not given credit for the roles they play, and as is unfortunately too often the case, are deemed “undesirable” urban inhabitants. Jerolmack discussed the example of the pigeon from his book *The Global Pigeon*, but the ensuing conversation opened up larger questions about exclusion and marginalization in the creation of the modern city. As Jerolmack stated, “Modernization of the city is the expulsion of nature, and then we invite it back in ways that are compartmentalized and controlled...Animals that are 'out of control' are [deemed] trespassers”. Jerolmack then postulated that perhaps the status of “pedestrian” is a step en route to the status of “citizen”, connecting back to the conference's larger theme about who creates the city, and how city-creation is influenced by the agency of its inhabitants.

Conservation ecologist Eric Sanderson directly and gladly exclaimed “nature creates the city!” in response to this set of questions, drawing on his *Manahatta2409.org* project that allows the public to develop and share climate-resilient designs for Manhattan based on rapid model estimates of the water cycle, carbon cycle, biodiversity, and population – showing the ways in which designed-by-citizens approaches to city-planning interact with considerations of science and the natural environment. Miodrag Mitrasinovic of Parsons the New School for Design suggested that the question of how we define “designers” is more complex than is commonly thought, and that architects as well as social scientists and political organizers are “designers” of the city in different ways. NYU Gallatin sociologist Gianpaolo Baiocchi argued that there is a distinction between citizenship and democracy, and that we can “live in a citizenship without democracy”. These comments suggest that membership within a state does not automatically imply the presence of a democratic process, an idea touched upon by New School political theorist Andreas Kalyvas. Perhaps democracy is what shapes the role of the citizen and enables the citizen to literally and figuratively “design” egalitarian urban centers.

Stephen Duncombe, a sociologist and NYU Gallatin Professor of Media and Cultural Studies, discussed the Designing for Free

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Speech project, raising questions about whether or not places can be specifically designed and set aside for free speech and acts of protest in New York City. One possibility is that mechanizing the creation of protest-spaces actually risks a boomerang effect that leads to a confinement of free speech and a stunting of First Amendment rights. The hope and expectation, however, is that the process of design in and of itself creates citizenship and sustains a sense of community, fostering stronger connections between citizens and the built environment.

The conference teased out important tensions between emphases on democratic open-access and a focus on expertise and comprehensive training – traditionally integral aspects of high-quality, reliable design. In seeking to define the role of the citizen in a sustainable city, it is important to strike a balance between visions of an urban environmental utopia and the ecological reality. In the era of globalization, the stakes have been raised for the environmentally conscious citizen, and it has become challenging now more than ever to recognize the vital role of nature in the city, and to consider nature in all urbanist and activist endeavors. Perhaps one way to define “citizenship” in an environmental context is to include a responsible consideration of nature as a requisite aspect of urban citizenry.

This line of thought, however, opens up a host of questions regarding who is entitled to define “citizenship” in a dynamic and rapidly evolving environment such as New York City. One issue raised is that the building codes and legal policies of New York do not evolve as rapidly as the city itself, creating numerous hurdles for designers and the public. Architect Susanne Schindler noted that for design to be truly emancipative, it must be affordable as well as feasible as dictated by building codes. This opened up a larger discussion about the fine line between codes ensuring safe living conditions and controlling living conditions in outdated or unrealistic ways, with Schindler remarking that it is perhaps time to “legalize...living” and advocate for codes that catch up to ways in which people are already living in New York City, as long as these ways of living are safe.

On the topic of infrastructural policy-making, the landscape architect Susannah Drake noted that the lessons learned from Hurricane Sandy and the looming threat of additional global warming-induced natural disasters should lead to the creation of codes that promote increased infrastructural strength. She added that the reality of climate change has led to an increased flow of stormwater, but that belief in this reality is not necessary on the part of policy-makers – increased infrastructural strength should be encouraged regardless – emphasizing the ways in which partisan divides should not prevent architects and designers from

building fundamentally stronger, longer-lasting, more durable cities.

The Cities and Citizenship conference addressed key questions regarding the relationship between design theory and application, and the ways in which citizenship is defined in a true “global city”. In her opening remarks, Andrea Zell of the Goethe-Institut commented on the untranslatability of “Weltstadt” – explaining that after considering translated English counterparts such as “world city”, it was felt that the term was best retained in its native linguistic form. It is interesting to consider how this notion of untranslatability impacts our conception of the “global citizen” in a dynamic urban center. Is citizenry locally and regionally defined, or does citizenship in its true sense transcend geographic borders to facilitate cross-cultural expressions of democracy?

The ideas communicated at the Cities and Citizenship conference suggest that while unique and vibrant cities such as New York each have an individual and perhaps “untranslatable” essence that define the identity of that particular city, it is the ways in which the city's inhabitants interact with one another and with other global actors that truly define a city as a “world city”. Nature must be a key consideration in this conversation, since the natural environment is in large part what defines the potential and possibilities of the “global city”, and it is environmental concerns that must inform urban planning and policy-making in the age of global warming. Citizenship and the city are mutually defined, and only when citizenry is examined in an environmental context does the emergence of a truly “green”, ecologically conscious, and democratic urban center become possible.

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