An Office for Civic Imagination

Conversations about community engagement and local action to 'reclaim the city' as a collaborative (http://www.collaborative.city) or sharing city have long surpassed the binary of top-down or bottom-up process. Indeed, they have become dominated by ideas of networked-thinking, devolution and polycentric structures: process orientated approaches. One such approach is captured in the notion of establishing an Office for Civic Imagination.

What is it?

It is a mechanism designed to bridge the gap between local government and citizens with a view to transforming the governance of our city region.
It is a device used to co-create new ideas for co-managing publicly owned assets.
It is a forum to incubate social and economic innovation.
It is an urban laboratory that provides a space for experimenting with new ways of running public services, assets or developing the local economy.
It is an instrument to tap the knowledge and energy that exists in our communities and use it as a resource for the common good.
It is a way of re-framing the role of local government and citizen for mutual benefit.
It is a toolkit for designing city region wide collaborative governance.
It is a shift in power and social relations.

Who participates?

Citizens and social innovators, not for profit organisations, businesses and universities.

What is the role of local government?

The job of local government, and every government layer, is changing. Their function is less about commanding or providing. They are increasingly acting as a platform that enables collaboration between citizens and social innovators, not for profit organisations, businesses and universities. Their role here is to:
- formally establish office(s) for civic imagination through co-creating and agreeing protocols
- to scout and enable active citizens, social innovators etc,
- to oversee the process and give technical support to citizens, the proper techniques to collaborate – and ensure they are collaborative, not competitive, processes
- and to resolve conflict.

What is the academic role?

To contribute knowledge but also expertise in the continuous evaluation of the process and its rightful place in the overall governance structure of the city region.

Why do we need it?

Our city region is chronically underfunded and we need as a matter of urgency to find new ways to support not only our public infrastructure but also our social infrastructure.

But don't we have many civic organisations doing something similar?

Yes, community rights, such as those outlined in the UK's Localism Act (2011), have led to neighbourhood forums. There are also community land trusts, co-operatives, tenant management organisations, an array of lighter touch 'friends of groups', tenants and residents mixes between community and business, traders associations, business improvement districts.

This Office for Civic Imagination (OCI) will not replace or replicate these initiatives but build upon their strengths and overcome their limitations. The latter primarily being that they are nestled within an existing governance structure that restricts their capacity for scaling-up or scaling out. The OCI will not only source innovation across the existing eco-system of civic organisations but critically look at developing, agreeing and implementing a city region wide governance structure that can enable good ideas and practice to be scaled up or out.

It sounds good but what's the thinking behind it?

Theoretically speaking, it is Elinor Ostrom's work 'Governing the Commons' (1990) - she won the famous Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons. Ostrom examined successful examples of self-organised governance systems and defined the context in which they can work: where there are clear boundaries of the resources and the parties involved, internal rules and sanctioning processes, monitoring systems to ensure accountability, mechanisms of conflict resolution, and ensuring stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. Beyond this: effective communication, internal trust and reciprocity.

Ostrom famously disproved American ecologist and philosopher Garrett Hardin's notion of the 'tragedy of the commons', which was the idea that without centralised monitoring people would abuse the commons and take more than their fair share. Ostrom pointed to examples whereby communities have successfully managed common resources – through internal processes of self-sanctioning and exclusion and other successful self-organising principles.

This work has now been taken forward by a number of scholars most recently by Sheila Foster and Christian Iaione in the 'City as a commons' (2016 Yale Law and Policy Review). Their interest is in using Ostrom's work to empirically and theoretically explore the potential for the commons to provide a framework and set of tools to open up the possibility of a different, more inclusive and equitable form of city governance. The problem for exponents of Ostrom's work is that it has only been proven to work with a relatively small number of people (50- 15,000) and resources. Foster and Iaione's contribution is to conceptualise the commons and present a set of democratic design principles that, they argue, can guide the scaling-up of cooperative forms of commons governance to the city level.

They found that existing commons institutions share a number of characteristics that set them apart from merely sub-local forms of urban governance. They describe these characteristics as: horizontal subsidiarity (or sharing), collaboration, and polycentricism. It is these they offer as a set of design principles for an urban collaborative model of governance.

Horizontal subsidiarity is the idea that power should be shared with "the lowest practicable tier of social organisation, public or private". The principle of horizontal subsidiarity conceptualises the citizen as an active citizen and encourages local officials to put in place appropriate public policies that foster the activation and empowerment of citizens in managing and caring for shared resources. Active citizenship means that urban inhabitants are able to participate not only in the public life of the city, but also in creating the city and in maintaining it for the collective welfare.

Collaboration is another core aspect of commons institutions, more generally, and of urban commons institutions, more particularly. Collaboration has strong political and democratic

ramifications. Collaboration, as a general matter, has emerged as a form of governance to replace adversarial and managerial modes of policy making and implementation. In this model, several stake-holders interact in order to implement public policies, or manage crucial assets for the community. At the level of a common pool resource, active citizens become problem solvers and resource managers, able to cooperate and make strategic decisions about common assets and to implement them with other citizens and other urban stakeholders. It deeply engages citizens in public-public and public-private partnerships with the goal of implementing an arrangement in which citizens are governing and not simply being governed. Similarly, a commons-based approach to governance at the level of the city can utilise collaboration as a methodological tool through which heterogeneous individuals and institutions co-create or co-govern the city, or parts of the city, as a common resource.

A *polycentric* approach to local governance locates commons institutions in between the market and the state. To understand the polycentric approach is to understand the distinction between government and governance: in this model the state becomes a facilitator state or relational state. As such it is part of the move from a "command and control" system of governance to what they call "urban collaborative governance," a system which at its core redistributes decision making power and influence away from the centre and towards an engaged public. The facilitator state creates the conditions under which citizens can develop collaborative relationships with each other, and cooperate both together and with public authorities, to take care of common resources, including the city itself as a resource.

The challenge of networked governance may be that its structure resembles a loosely coupled system, subject to fraying at the margins and not glued together enough to be organisationally coherent. What stabilises the kind of collaborative institutional ecosystem that they envision is the role of the public authority, which becomes that of coordinator and mediator in co-design processes. In this sense, the networks, actions and reactions of others in the ecosystem are independent and free but nested within the local government, consistent with a polycentric system. Elected officials behave no longer as "citizens' representatives" but rather as "collaborative institutional ecosystem managers." City officials and staff are tasked to assist, collaborate, and provide technical guidance (data, legal advice, communication strategy, de-sign strategies, sustainability models, etc.) to enable themselves to manage, mediate, and coordinate the ecosystem. The role of a public official is therefore that of manager, enabling and supporting (and perhaps coordinating) parts of the ecosystem to allow it to "nest" within the larger policy of the city.

That's all very well in theory but where is it working?

Foster and Iaione's work comes at a point where, alongside a well-established neo-liberal critique, there is a growing intellectual and social movement to reclaim control over decisions about how our cities develop, grow and regenerate. This has arisen as public officials in cities around the world have been selling off and commodifying public resources to the highest bidder. Leading Saskia Sassen to pose the question of who owns our cities (GUARDIAN (Nov. 24, 2015), http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/ 24/who-owns-our-cities-and-why-this-urban-takeover-should-concern-us-all.)

In response many cities worldwide are experimenting with ideas that are based on notions of the 'commons' or 'sharing. Whilst many of them do not use the language of the commons they nonetheless share many of the pillars of Foster and Iaione's urban collaborative model.

The Seoul Sharing City project would be one such example. Seoul is the world's first sharing city. In Seoul, citizens are the "mayor," according to the formal mayor of Seoul. The city government decided to empower "collective governance" of the city, a governance strategy based on communication and collaboration with citizens. The Sharing City Project is made possible thanks to the approval of the "Seoul Metropolitan Government Ordinance for the Promotion of Sharing."

Article 8 of the Ordinance provides a number of core defining terms. The term “sharing” means activities that create social, economic and environmental values by jointly using resources, such as space, goods, information, talent and experience. A “sharing enterprise” is an enterprise intending to contribute to the solution of social problems—such as economy, welfare, culture, environment, and traffic—through sharing practices. A “sharing organisation” is an organisation or corporation designated pursuant to Article 8, i.e., a nonprofit, nongovernmental organisation or nonprofit corporation, which intends to con-tribute to the solution of social problems, such as economy, welfare, culture, environment, and traffic, through sharing.

However their preferred model is described as a ‘collaborative city model’. This is distinguished from the ‘sharing city’ by a methodological approach to development captured in a co-city protocol. The protocol, developed and experimented in five cities in Italy so far, is articulated in three main phases: mapping, experimenting and prototyping.

The aim of the mapping phase is to understand the socio-economic and legal characteristics of the specific urban context. The second phase, the experimenting process, is a “collaboration camp” where synergies are created between emerging commons projects and the city, filtering the collaborative actors from the predatory ones, on one side, and the participative one, on the other side. In this phase co-working sessions organise tests for possible synergies and alignment between projects and relevant actors. These culminate in a “collaboration day,” which might take the form of placemaking events—e.g., an urban commons civic maintenance festival, temporary utilisation of abandoned building or spaces, micro-regeneration intervention—to test, experiment and coordinate the ideas that arise out of the co-working sessions. The third phase, the governance prototyping phase, leads to a different governance outcome on the basis of the guidelines extracted during the experimentation phase and on the needs of the specific community or city. A crucial characteristic for urban commons-based governance experimentalism is adaptiveness. This phase results in the design of governance tools best suited or tailored to local conditions.

The protocol is the necessary step to create the most favourable environment for innovation through urban commoning, by adopting the design principles of sharing, collaboration, and polycentrism. The key is to transform the entire city or some parts of it into a laboratory by creating the proper legal and political ecosystem for the installation of shared, collaborative, polycentric urban governance schemes. This process of democratic experimentalism re-conceptualises urban governance along the same lines as the right to the city, creating a juridical framework for city rights

The most successful application of the “co-city” protocol is the CO-Bologna project (http://co-bologna.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2015/11/CO-BOLOGNA.pdf) run in the City of Bologna to design a policy and regulatory framework re-shaping the relationship between inhabitants and the local ad-ministration with regard to urban resources and services.262 The main pillar of the CO-Bologna process is the recently enacted regulation on civic collaboration for the urban commons, empowering residents, and others, to collaborate with the city to undertake the “care and regeneration” of the “urban commons” across the city. The “urban commons” covered by the regulation includes mainly public spaces, urban green spaces, and abandoned buildings and other infrastructure. However, its definition of the commons is quite expansive, directly relating the concept to the quality of life in the city and the concept of human flourishing.

At a sub city level there are pilot (LabGOV) projects running in New York (http://www.labgov.it/tag/new-york/) and Amsterdam (https://citiesintransition.eu/cityreport/labgov-amsterdam/)

So, what do we do now?

Conversations about community engagement and local action have long surpassed the idea of top-down, bottom-up process. Indeed, they have become dominated by ideas of networked-thinking, devolution and polycentric structures: process orientated approaches. We will use the concept of Participatory Action Research which reflects the toxic binary social relationship between those who are legitimate holders of knowledge and those who are not. This binary relationship is a barrier to the implementation of evidence. Participatory action research, with its emphasis on co-production and the value of different types of knowledge, offers a way to challenge this barrier. This will be the method employed by Engage and the Heseltine Institute in the work we are to undertake.

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