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Proposal for IAMCR 2023

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Title: Cultural third places and commons in a world of transformations: evidence from France

Climate change, economic crisis, digital transformation, the revolution in our working practices, the needs of the learning society and a malaise within liberal democracies are challenging global economies, as well as communication research agendas. In this context, the commons, as a mode of collective action, solidarity and governance of shared resources have emerged as an alternative paradigm in a variety of sectors (Alix et al, 2018; Bollier & Helfirch, 2019; Zimmerman, 2020) including the creative economy (Bertacchini et al, 2012; Comunian et al, 2022; Péliissier, 2021).

Third places (*tiers lieux* in French) is a term used in the French context to describe places that put an emphasis on doing together (*faire ensemble*) for better living together (*vivre ensemble*) (Levy-Waitz, 2018) and provide opportunities to meet, to exchange, to co-create and to experiment. In response to the challenges posed by contemporary transitions, some of those *tiers lieux* with a strong cultural component- that we call *cultural third places*- inscribe their projects in a new form of pragmatic 'utopia' by embodying new forms of commons (Idelon, 2022; Desgouttes, 2021; Péliissier et al, 2023) aspiring to the construction of a new society in opposition to the one based on the increasing commodification of all forms of cultural expression.

In this presentation, we will focus on the preliminary results of a research project on cultural third places and commons partially funded by the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Paris. Our methodology lies on a combination of fieldwork and documentary analysis of websites, communication material and other sources shared by the interviewees (statutes, work plans, project descriptions, etc). Our fieldwork includes site visits, observation of activities and interviews with representatives of cultural third places mainly located in the Sud Region in France (including Marseille, Avignon and Nice), but also others in Paris, Grenoble and Lyon. The fieldwork is currently underway and will be finalised with a focus group and public event gathering the representatives of the spaces we interviewed and inviting them to provide feedback on the preliminary research findings in a participatory manner. A public event to present the final results is foreseen in autumn 2023 in Paris.

Our aim is to explore in a more systematic way how these cultural third places mobilize the commons logic as an alternative organisational and narrative paradigm to respond to the challenges of the contemporary transitions. We do so by exploring how a narrative identity for cultural third places takes shape around the conceptual grid of the commons (Ostrom, 1990; Coriat, 2015) and how it translates into actions, activities and new forms of governance.

Keywords: creative economy, cultural third places, commons, transitions

Introduction

Climate change, economic crisis, digital transformation, the revolution in our working practices, the needs of the learning society and a malaise within liberal democracies are challenging global economies, as well as communication research agendas. In this context, the commons, as a mode of collective action, solidarity and governance of shared resources have emerged as an alternative paradigm in a variety of sectors (Alix et al, 2018; Zimmerman, 2020) including the cultural sector (Bertacchini et al, 2012; Comunian et al, 2022; Pélissier, 2021). From this perspective, it is interesting to note the interest generated by the revival of the idea of the commons (Coriat, 2015; Dardot Laval, 2014), especially in the cultural sector (Bertacchini et al, 2012).

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Besides the fact that there are few studies around commons and the cultural sector, very few of them explicitly discuss practitioners’ understanding of commons as a value and as practice (Borchi, 2018; Gilmore, 2017). As the concept of commons has evolved into a buzzword characterised by a ‘conflation of designations’ and ‘conceptual blurriness’ (Vaccaro & Beltran, 2019), there is a need to re-examine commons and their unfolding in cultural narratives and practices. This requires revisiting the language and practices described as commons and engaging practitioners themselves to co-produce common understandings on how such spaces perform as ecosystems of the commons.

Our research questions can be articulated as follows: How do cultural third places' practitioners come to understand a resource or a practice as commons? What is the place of the notion of commons in the narration of their identity? How are commons negotiated and communicated with their community?

The commons as a conceptual framework

Commons have been theorised as sites of emergent value systems outside of traditional market mechanisms and alternative to capitalist production and the subsequent social relations in which new ways of working can with time be reproduced through 'commoning' activities (Coriat, 2015; Bauwens et al, 2019). Commons theory has its origins in Elinor Ostrom's (1990) work, which highlighted the ways in which communities were able to manage common pool resources outside the binary of state provision or free markets. Advancing on her work, De Angelis (2017) contends that the horizontal and democratic governance of the commons, reflected also in the organisation of labour as well as in their interrelation with broader socio-political processes, offer an entry point for exploring how commons social arrangements interact with the surrounding environment.

At the dawn of the 21st century, having long symbolised the inefficiency of shared ownership, the commons is re-emerging in force as an effective principle of social and cultural struggle against the current dynamics of capitalism. Today, the attraction exerted by the thought of the commons in the movement of cultural third places constitutes an opportunity to reaffirm the role of culture in favour of a certain model of society. In a previous paper (Pélissier, Dechamp, Magkou, 2023) we showed that a twofold reading of the commons approach can be applied to cultural third places, both constituting alternatives in terms of political economy to the growing commodification of knowledge, on the one hand, and of urban space, on the other. In the first sense, they refer to spaces for the social production of knowledge digital commons, i.e. digital cultural resources created by volunteer contributors for reuse by the community and protected by open licences. It is this approach that was originally found in many Fablabs and is at the heart of the free culture movement (Pélissier, 2018; Dechamp, Pélissier, 2019) and has subsequently been adopted by certain third places¹.

¹ See for example: https://movilab.org/wiki/Tiers_Lieux_Libres_et_Open_Source

On the other hand, cultural third places are inspired by the concept of specific forms of urban or territorial commons (Brossaud et al, 2019 ; Zimmerman, 2020 ; Dellenbaugh et al., 2022, De Tulio, 2020) in the sense that they propose novel territorial experiments based on new ways of working together, affirming the desire to renew the foundations of citizen participation. In many occasions this means that they set up their activities based on a mix of economic and non- economic services, those later ones grounded on the contributive actions of the community. This second dimension is part of a wider movement of social criticism of the commodification of urban space that has taken place in different European countries over the last decade. This approach has developed particularly in Italy (Festa, 2016; Borchi, 2018). In France as well, this reading of the commons has been at the heart of debates at recent forums organised by the Coordination nationale des lieux culturels intermédiaires et indépendants (Cnlii) (2019 and 2022) who define themselves as "spatial and cultural common(s)" according to the perspective of sociologist Pascal Nicolas LeStrat (2017: 22), for whom the common is defined as a principle of political action, a new ideal of emancipation, where working together must contribute to a new grammar of the political, which opens onto a new universe of meaning and practices.

Methodology

To shed light on our research question, an empirical survey was carried out, based on a multi-case study approach. As a relevant selection criterion, we chose six third places among those that had been awarded either the "fabrique du territoire" or the "fabrique numérique du territoire" label by the French Agency of Territorial Cohesion, because their label constitutes a priori recognition of their commitment to ecological and digital transitions. The case studies that constitute our corpus are: the Friche Belle de Mai and La Fabulerie in Marseille, Shakirail in Paris, Akwaba in the periphery of Avignon, Le Hublot in Nice and TETRIS in Grasse.

From a methodological point of view, we combined several data collection methods. Firstly, part of our corpus is based on a textual analysis of the websites of the third places studied of our sample, as well as on documents provided by the third places themselves (in particular, their response to different call for proposals). In addition,

we conducted semi-structured interviews with various players of the cultural third place studied. Our interview grid was organized around three themes: from the collective to the commoners (or commoning); the nature of the venue's governance and funding model; and the singularities of artistic production. Most of our interviews took place at the venue itself, and we took part in several collective events organised by the spaces concerned. The interviews were preceded by a visit to the site to gain a better understanding of the space, its actors, and its territory before the interviews. In addition, interviews with representatives of public authorities (representative of the DRAC, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, local government representatives) or stakeholders linked to the third place concerned (member of the Board, artist or citizen involved in the third place) complete our fieldwork. Finally, our findings are also based on non-participant observation of different activities organized by the third places.

Results and discussion

In response to these contemporary challenges, some of these artistic and cultural spaces see themselves as experimental laboratories whose projects are part of a new form of pragmatic utopia. Through their actions, they aim to contribute to the social transformation of the world as it is today, by participating in the construction of a new project for society in opposition to the growing commercialisation of all forms of cultural expression.

Commons as a non-explicit narrative apparatus

Firstly, we found that the notion of commons does not serve as a narrative apparatus for all cultural third places. For those that the notion of the commons is in the construction of their narrative identity (Friche Belle de Mai, Shakirail, TETRIS), this use of the concept accompanies a discourse aimed at legitimising experiments in favour of a space of shared resources, a democratic governance and a broader, participatory conception of culture (often associated with the register of cultural rights) aimed at rooting their projects in new forms of “pragmatic utopias”, at odds with the growing commodification of all forms of cultural expression and urban space. The notion of transition is also present in the vocabulary of these TLCs to

varying degrees, demonstrating a willingness to commit to this path. To add to this, we have also observed that the use of the notion of commons by the third places is also related to either punctual or regular proximity to the wider commons movement. For example in 2019 the assembly of the commons took place in France and some of the interviewees of the third places that form part of our corpus were part of it. Also another important element is the connection of the founder of each place with the notion of commons. A very vivid example is the case of the co-founder of TETRIS who has defended in 2019 a commons of capabilities based on Ostrom's and Sen's (2013) approaches. The person interviewed from Le Hublot also mentioned that they have been influenced by their interaction with researchers on exploring the notion of commons, although they do not adopt it in the language they use in their communication or practice- even if they recognise that a lot of the work they are doing (from reclaiming spaces for artistic work to providing digital skills to disadvantaged populations) enters in the framework of a commons-based vision of life.

Therefore, even some of the cultural third places that are part of our corpus are far from claiming to be part of the commons, what we might call an *atmosphere of the commons* can be found both from the angle of an economy of solidarity and a seek for more plural economy, as well as from the angle of acting in common (Cervera, 2019).

Commons as a cultural participation and collaboration apparatus

Our research has shown that the strong capacity of cultural third places to activate relational proximities (Deschamp and Pélissier, 2018) makes it easier for them to establish a climate of shared knowledge and desire for experimentation and thus embody "a cultural action" where citizens participate in the organization of cultural life (Idelon, 2023).

Take for example the case of the Salle de Machines de la Friche, which is open to participatory programming that connects producers with inhabitants. As described on the Friche's website, "It is not only about opening and welcoming but also about learning how to do things together: creating citizen artistic projects and associating

the inhabitants, the social and cultural structures of the territory, the young users of the site, starting from the desire, even the necessity, to go towards, *to do with* instead of *doing for*" (translation and emphasis of the authors). This example brings us to consider this space as a shared resource: from its material aspect that includes the spaces and its equipment, but also in regards to competencies and knowledge). But also for those third places that place the digital in the heart of their identity and have been label digital territorial factories, their use of digital technologies is closely related with inclusion and seeing digital technologies as forms of citizen empowerment (Magkou and Pelissier, 2023), which is more in line with a vision of "digital democracy" (Durand Folco, 2016). Finally, if we consider the governance of those places, an exemple worth mentioning is Akwaba, which although they do not use the notion of commons, they have been the first cooperative that has introduced a collective governance structure (based on the one voice, one vote principle) that also brings together other associations who become partners of the cultural project.

Conclusion

Our aim has been to identify, through stories and discourse, traces of a commitment by these spaces to thinking about the commons as a **narrative and operational apparatus** to meeting the challenges of contemporary transitions. A framework for reading and analysing cultural third places, conceptualised around the notion of the commons, seemed to be an approach that corresponds to the spirit of our times, when we are seeking to make social, economic and environmental development sustainable. However, further research is still needed to delineate the ways in which commons arrangements can facilitate cultural production, as well as to map out how commons practices can find their place within cultural third places and contribute to their sustainability.

Studying cultural third places as a shared resource and as a commons ecosystem allows us to identify the main factors and social dilemmas impacting the production and evolution of cultural expressions. In this way, one can begin to understand cultural activity not as a matter of individual transformation and competition but as a practice of co-operation and social change (Sandoval, 2017). Cultural third places

and the commons are movements of different origins, but their union seems self-evident, with a strong symbolic impact. They are two concepts that are undeniably reflecting the current societal challenges affecting the issue of living together, in all its social, political, legal and economic aspects (Pélissier, Dechamp, Magkou, 2022). In this way, some of these artistic and cultural venues will not only build their narrative identity around this notion of the common good, but will also experiment with new ways of 'doing things together' (Desgouttes, 2021; Idelon, 2022) on the scale of their territory, with the implementation of forms of democratic governance based on the principles of self-management, through access to shared resources (physical spaces, production tools) and singular forms of work combining the individual and the collective, voluntary contribution and traditional remuneration.

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