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(COUNTER)POWERS AND PUBLIC SPACE IMAGINARY.

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Abstract

Based on a research on urban transformations of the North-Eastern metropolitan area of Paris, this article aims to question the role of public space imaginary in urban planning participatory processes. The presented research consist in an ethnography on interaction situations between different groups of actors: neighbourhood associations, groups occupying empty urban spaces, artists and architects collectives promoting urban art and participation, policy-makers and technicians of major urban projects. In the context of the recent valorisation of citizens' participation in French urban planning policies, the observed interactions rise a series of questions about the results of the dialogue between institutions and organised civil society. While showing an attention to contestation instances in urban planning processes, the institutional apparatus issued by participatory policies seem in fact to produce new categories of action that flatten collective urban identities and reduce the possible alternatives to neoliberal planning processes. Through this text, we wish to enquire the relation between public space, collective imaginaries and urban transformations. If the definition of what is public and common is a moving concept in urban societies, what seems interesting is precisely to focus on the process of this definition production. In order to be interpreted, this process has to be read through the analysis of collective imaginaries. By affirming the importance of a relational understanding of collective imaginaries as one of the main issues permitting to analyse the disputes about city's future, we wish to enquire the capacity of participatory policies to stimulate these disputes in urban projects. After highlighting some general questions on participatory policies and their development in the French context, we will present two examples of negotiations on public space transformations in the Chapelle district (18th arrondissement of Paris) in the form of two narrative scenes. Those scenes will permit to point out some questions on the sense and effectiveness of participatory devices through an analysis of spatial and political issues. We will focus especially on the justifications and representations that lie beyond the action of citizens engaged in participatory situations and on the result of their negotiations with institutions. Our aim will be to show how participatory planning devices avoid the possibility of disagreement between actors and, in consequence, suppress (instead of questioning) the debate on the social meaning of public space imaginary. Our main thesis is that participation, as an institutionalised practice, frames the social imaginary and, consequently, reduces its political potential supporting a neoliberal vision of public space, but also of urban citizens. Participation is in fact working as a political apparatus that implies a voluntary subjection of citizens to the logics of neoliberal development. In the background, this essay wishes to affirm the importance of urban ethnography not only as a tool of analysis, but also as a necessary step for building participation.

1 | Participatory policies

Public space in contemporary cities needs to be understood as a complex object composed by the interaction between both the physical and psychological accessible spatial urban entities (Joseph, 1998) and the sphere of political dialogue (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). The heterogeneity and illegibility of urban public space in the recent history let emerge its role as a recipient of conflict between actors because of its capacity for gathering all the different representations of a fairer and more liveable city (cf. Daconto, 2014). If the definition of what is public and common is a moving concept in urban societies, what seems interesting is precisely to focus on the process of this definition production. In this essay we would like to consider the fact that, in order to be interpreted, this process has to be read through the analysis of collective imaginaries, in the sense of as an ensemble of mental and material productions (Wunenburger, 2003). As said by Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), imaginary can be understood as a creative social practice that guides transformations and shapes power relations. It is in fact the social imaginary that builds the institution of collective meanings in the social life. For Castoriadis imaginary is a relational process issued by power disputes whose result is the affirmation of norms and institutions. Following this dynamic vision, we can consider the collective imaginary that lies beyond disputes on city's transformations as the fundamental element for the collective definition and shaping of what is considered as public both in socially and spatially. In this sense, we could say that the disagreements linked to the public space imaginary constitute an interesting point of view for assessing power relations in the contemporary city.

This key role of the public imaginary is nowadays widely recognised by urban policies, not only through the development of territorial marketing techniques, but also by a wider attention to the building of participatory planning policies. It is in fact the better understanding of the 'common citizen' imaginary through participatory devices that is assumed as a goal for depicting a more effective synergy between institutional action and citizens' needs in space building. Participatory policies seem, in this sense, to open the debate on urban transformation by letting emerge a potential dispute on collective imaginaries. Nevertheless the institutionalisation of this participatory imaginary seems to produce ambiguous effects both in democratic and spatial sphere.

Participatory policies in France are developing since the 1980s. The first actions have concerned the introduction of various forms of public consultations on urban projects: from the creation of enquiries for public projects[1], to the establishment of a National Public Debate Commission for exceptional territorial projects[2], to the obligation of public consultations for urban projects implying a modification of planning documents[3]. Since 2000, these instruments are more and more accompanied by a holistic «system of cooperation between public and private actors including civil society» (Zatlaoui-Léger, 2013). This system of governance, more or less regulated by official norms, promotes the inclusion in planning processes of 'non-institutional actions' produced by civil society: *i.e.* community gardening, squatting, self-building, district-based mobilisations. Those actions imply the production of various forms of collective social practices. The adjective 'non-institutional' is used here to underpin the difference from informal practices that can take place in complete opposition or exteriority to an institutional planning process. As participatory processes are more and more institutionalised, the non-institutional action has how-

1 French law n°83-630 of 1983.
2 French law n° 95-101 of 1995.
3 French law n° 2000-1208 of 2000.

ever to be understood in this context as a specific kind of practice that is included in transformation processes in order to represent a disagreement to the institutional process itself. Participation in this sense is indeed conceived as the permission to give voice to a potential contradiction within institutional urban planning.
Since the economic crisis of 2007-2008, non-institutional actions linked to urban transformation stimulates a growing interest in planning processes and take a central role in participatory policies. This interest is based on the valorisation of the capacity of self-management practices to give a response to urban crisis. As a consequence, the recent inclusion of these initiatives in urban planning reinforces an institutionalization process already started in the 1980s. In fact, many of the urban movements linked to urban space transformation have been through a process of institutionalisation since the crisis of the modernist urban model and the birth of the European contemporary city policies of urban renovation. Many authors identify three steps in this process: a first phase of radical activism in the 1970s, a second of institutionalisation in the 1980s and a third of integration in the technical field of urban development in the 1990s (Neveu, 2011; Blatrix, 2012; Bacqué, Biewener, 2013). At the same time this institutionalisation process is often represented as «incomplete» (cf. Bacqué, Sintomer, 2010) and the non-institutional actions are still reported as spontaneous. This ambiguous representation arises a question on the complexity of the non-institutional position of urban actors as potential counter powers in the dispute on urban transformations.

As already shown by Manuel Castells (1972; 1983), the physical and institutional proximities between non-institutional actions and official urban renovation projects reveal a number of political contradictions. For their historical background urban citizens' mobilisations and self-management experiments are rooted in a strong critique to capitalist system. However, in the actual context this critique seems to have the capacity to support the neoliberal system itself. As Boltanski and Chiappello (1999: 617) argue, this contradiction about critique is typical of the new capitalism: «The dangers that menace capitalism when it can develop itself without resistances, destroying the social substrate on which it prospers, find a palliative in the capacity of capitalism to extent its critique, that is with no doubt the principal factor of toughness that it holds since the XIX century. The critical function (voice), that hasn't any place inside the capitalist business where deregulation is meant to operate uniquely through competition (exit), can be practiced only outside of it. Critical movements inform therefore capitalism on the dangers that threaten it. […] This kind of regulation made by the conflict has a high price, paid mainly by those that take the risk of the critique and give their voice to it» (translation by the author).
Following this analysis, non-institutional actions could exacerbate the problems of public spaces in the neoliberal context, i.e. the omnipresence of economic reproduction strategies in cultural urban activities (de Certeau, 1990 [1980]; Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]) and the privatization and commodification of urban public spaces (Debord, 1992 [1967]; Zukin, 1991; Florida, 2002; de Biase, 2007). Likewise Evelina Dagnino (2007) observes the effects of participatory policies can lead to a «perverse confluence» between the promotion of participation and the neoliberal development. This confluence is based on the construction of a «proactive civil society» structure in which the solutions to rights accessibility issues are based more on individual moral duties than on collective emancipation processes (*Ibidem*).

These observations constitute the base for the main hypothesis that we are going to discuss. Assuming that a collective imaginary can express a potential contentious position, we will observe how the idea of public space that emerges in non-institutional

actions is discussed and framed in participatory devices. Are participatory practices letting emerge a new imaginary of what is public in the contemporary city? Do citizens' actions constitute a counter imaginary capable of questioning power relations in neoliberal urban transformations?

1.1 | Methodology and fieldwork

In order to be analysed, those issues need to be observed through an insight vision on micro-situation of negotiation between citizens and institutions. For their informality, the sense and extent of non-institutional actions is in fact to be found in the contextualised interplay of social actors. As already shown by the history of urban anthropology and sociology, ethnographic methods such as participant observation are one of the most effective tools to describe and interpret the complexity of cultural and relational based facts behind the apparent formal structure of urban transformation (cf. de Biase, 2014; Agier, 2015). Furthermore ethnographic approach permits to highlight the complexity of symbolic and social implications of power relations through the revelation of the sense that actors give to social situations and spaces. As said by Michel Agier (2009), anthropological analysis allows reading the city through a «decentred» point of view. This decentred approach consist in observing the city «in the making» before undertaking a global appraisal of social structures. In fact concrete social situations permit to observe the setting of social structural constraints and power relations «from the bottom» (Agier, 2015). According to Michel Foucault (1990 [1978] : 93-94), power relations need to be understood not only in term of explicit domination, but also as internalised behaviours: «Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibrium which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations; relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play».
It is precisely this form of productive role of power that we will need to inquire in order to understand if the institutional inclusion of non-institutional actions through participation is a vehicle of emancipation for actors and a producer of more just public spaces, or an instrument of conformation to neoliberal development.

The North-Eastern metropolitan area of Paris can be considered as emblematic in the European context for the richness of the interaction between collective social practices and official urban transformation. It is actually a context that has many favourable characteristics for the rise of non-institutional actions: 1) a structure of popular districts marked by a long industrial past; 2) the massive presence of post-industrial empty spaces; 3) a twenty-year long process of urban renewal at different spatial scales; 4) the persistence of left wing local governments since the 1970s with a rather explicit opposition to neoliberal development. This context is moreover characterised by a set of contradictions between intentions and results of policies due principally to the emergence of the 'Greater Paris' metropolitan urban project. This project has been launched in 2007 by the former president of the French Republic Nicolas Sarkozy. Its goal is the improvement of international competitiveness of the city through the creation of new economic clusters[4]. Among these clusters,

4 This project is mainly based on the creation of a new circular metro - the Greater Paris Express - that will link the peripheral territories. In this context, the president François Hollande launched in 2014 the creation of the "Greater Paris Metropolitan Area", a new institutional entity that merges the department of Paris with those of the first urban ring in order to manage urban and environmental planning.

the North-Eastern area represents the 'Creation pole'[5]. In this context, the need for a requalification of post-industrial districts is in opposition with the objective of international competitiveness whose expected result is to substitute the industrial and popular identity of this urban area with a new identity based on 'creative' economy. Furthermore, this emphasis on economy of creativity leads to an agreement on the importance of giving space in the new projects to citizens' initiatives based on art and culture.
In this context, our ethnography has concerned the forms of negotiations between urban transformation and its resistance, meant to integrate a critical discourse to urban planning. The delimitation of the physical fieldwork is not based on normative limits. It results from the meeting of different networks: the on-going urban renewal projects linked to the Greater Paris and the network of associations implied in these transformations. The research site is consequently included in a moving perimeter between the 18th arrondissement of Paris and the neighbouring municipalities of Aubervilliers and Saint-Denis (see Image 1). Our ethnography is grounded on a three years long participant observation that took place in the daily life of associations with a particular attention to their interaction with the institutions through negotiations and meetings.

To 'give voice' to this complex fieldwork and illustrate the relation between projects and non-institutional actions, we will present two ethnographic scenes chosen for their significance in the analysis of disputes applied to public space in participatory contexts. Our aim is not to make a comparison, but to take two very different examples in terms of public spaces inside the same context: the Chapelle district in the 18th arrondissement of Paris (see Image 2). This district, as the whole North-East, is characterised by a deep process of transformation and by a strong network of actors involved in non-institutional actions and participatory processes. Inside the diversity of those actors, ethnography showed the solidarity of their network and the homogeneity of discourses and actions regarding their relation with institutions. By taking two different situations we will be able to show the possible configurations of institutional and non-institutional networks. Coming back to the two main theoretical aspects of public spaces mentioned above, we will enquire on one hand the physical value of public spaces and on the other the political and discursive one. The scenes will represent two forms of negotiation on the creation of future public spaces: one concerning a small scale negotiation on the physical value of a public space trough the issue of its aesthetic form, and the other concerning a larger scale negotiation on the political value of the public space through the issue of consensus building on its transformation. Each case will present two forms of imaginary linked to non-institutional actions and their confrontation with the official transformation projects. Despite the different size of urban projects and number of actors involved, the scenes will show us what lies beyond the discourses on aesthetic and political value of public space highlighting how those discourses constitute themselves a limit to actors' imaginary.

2 | Aesthetic value of public space

When a public space that has been invested by collective actions is transformed by an urban project, the general reaction of actors engaged in those initiatives is a disappointment for the loss of a certain urban quality: «They [the municipality, NT] build by erasing the existent, as it happened at the Eole's gardens with that big vacant

5 «A territory that embodies French creativity, artistic creation, art expertise, fashion, design, 3D animation, video games, imaging and digital sound» (http://www.plainecommune.fr/plaine-commune/territoire-de-la-culture-et-de-la-creation/territoire-de-la-creation/#.Vr5MnhH5LNU, translation by the author).

space. […] When I saw this park come out, it gave me the impression of a highway! […] I think that our initiatives, alternatively, bring some soul, something human that the city [government, NT] is simply unable to do.» (Member of a community garden of the 18th arrondissement of Paris, January 2013)

The person speaking refers to the example of the Eole's gardens (see Image 2), one of the most important projects of the Parisian North-East renovation process, realised by the socialist municipality in 2007. The field of the garden was initially planned to become a parking lot. After the raise of strong protest by the inhabitants of the district, the municipality started a long process of negotiation that led to the creation of a park though a collaborative design monitored by a «social project management' (cf. Renaud and Tonnelat, 2008). In this context, the person interviewed understands the «existent» as the informal collective initiatives of the district, in particular for those who occupied the area of the Eole's garden during the protests (a theatre-circus and a community garden), and who had to move when the project started. Even if this park has been created through a virtuous participatory process, the reported interview shows a disapproval of the loss of a certain aesthetic quality and of the sense of emptiness and coldness of the brand new space. On the contrary, what is valued is the fragile and precarious circus-like atmosphere of the non-institutional actions. This aesthetic imaginary is seen as the characteristic of a 'human' space that is not «clean-clean as a public garden», as said by a landscape designer interviewed about community gardens in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. This imaginary is apparently linked to a sort of natural disorder created by the DIY amenities (indeed very homogeneous) that characterise these spaces and that are designed to produce a shabby air: hydroponics vegetable gardens, recycled objects (mainly wooden pallets), minimalist lodges in raw wood, etc. The lexicon used to describe such devices is composed by words like 'sharing', 'participating' and 'making' that suggest direct action and self-management as expressions of space 'appropriation'.

2.1 | Alice's rose bushes

To better understand how this imaginary of 'human' public space can be translated in the negotiation on a public space design, we propose here the example of a small renovation project in the Chapelle district.

Between 2009 and 2014 a collective of artists, coming from the Parisian circle of artists' squatting movement[6], occupied the number forty of Chapelle street. At that time the area was just bought by the municipal social landlord 'Paris Habitat' after the death of the precedent owner, Madame Alice, whose name inspired the squat appellation 'Jardin d'Alice' (Alice's garden, see Image 2 and 3). The lot was composed of a two level house, a 19th century barn and a 650 m^2 garden. A temporary agreement allowed the artists to legally stay on site on the condition that the place would be cleared when the construction of seventeen new social apartments would begin.

While 'Paris Habitat' was finalising the project, a local Green Party politician proposed to make the garden around the house (classified as a protected green space for its qualities) accessible to the public even if there was not a direct access from the street. He argued also that the Jardin d'Alice association could keep managing the garden. The association of artists, on its side, didn't accept the proposition and confirmed its intention to quit the place. The president of the association motivated this position saying: 'we have no legitimacy in this district. We have been here only

6 In France squatting practices are defined by a quite strong division between 'squat of poverty', less visible and dedicated mainly to housing, and 'squat of artists', frequently located in post-industrial buildings and dedicated to artistic production and diffusion. The latter is more and more integrated as a legal practice and valorised in urban renewal projects.

for three years and now we're obliged to leave. Now it is up to inhabitants to claim those spaces' (Jardin d'Alice's president, July 2012). This ostentation of a distance between the artists and the inhabitants can be explained by the interest of the association to preserve its institutional link with the municipality giving them the possibility to find another building to occupy with a temporary agreement[7]. The only commitment of the association consisted in a letter to the municipality in which the group underlined the importance of reminding the artists' presence that had permitted the opening of the site to the public. In response to this choice, the local Green Party politician recommended to Paris Habitat another association running a community garden in the district, Ecobox, as a potential garden manager. Then the social landlord accepted to organise a series of meetings between the architects and landscape designers of the project and the representatives of Ecobox (composed of four members among which an artist, an urban planner and an architect).

The two meetings took place in July 2012 on the site. During those meetings the actors' interactions have been quite paradoxical. Designers were opened to the idea of redesigning the project and highlighted their political engagement justified by their knowledge and personal experiences of the benefits of artists' and community gardens actions in 'popular districts'. Conversely, Ecobox members did not want to be seen as political actors, but as landscape and building experts. They focused particularly on the preservation of the garden existent vegetation and spatial organization and on their intention to grow edible plants: «We should keep the garden in its existing form and provide additionally some beneficial vegetation» (Ecobox member, July 2012). Most of the discussion was afterward dedicated to the importance of preserving Madame Alice's rose bushes and on the possibility of planting kiwis and red fruits. While showing a big enthusiasm for the «subversive» idea of the edible plants[8] and the preservation of the existing vegetation, the landscape designer specified a condition: to comply with the regulations, they would have to remove all the vegetation during the construction works and to choose new plants that «do not seem edible». Furthermore the designers underlined the difficulty of maintaining the present aesthetic and spatial organisation of the garden because its characteristics (irregular paths made of recycled wood, difficult access to some areas) were incompatible with a public garden.

Faced with the insistence of the association for the preservation of the 'wild' aesthetic atmosphere of the garden and forced to discuss on a technical level, the designers confirmed their engagement but started to reject some of the association's requests by listing the normative limits of a protected green space, i.e. accessibility to disabled people, restriction for the use of some materials and plants. Then the association members decided to concentrate their effort on the conditions of access to the garden, in particular talking of the self-management of the space and of the possible conflicts with the inhabitant of the social housing building. At this point designers admit their impotence: «We cannot say too much to the municipality […], there can be some flexibility on uses […] but this depends on your agreement, we will be gone since long time at that point' (Architect of the Chapelle street project, July 2011).

After this meeting no more negotiations or public debates have been organised and the social landlord have never met the association or the district's inhabitants.

7 In April 2014 the collective of the Jardin d'Alice has been rehoused in a former military compound in the 12th arrondissement that will be renewed by 'Paris Habitat' in the following years.

8 Fruit trees are usually avoided in public spaces because of the maintenance and cleaning they need, and because of the legal responsibility that the municipality has towards possible accidents (*e.g.* caused by fruit drop).

This case permits to show that, when reduced to aesthetic treatment and architectural scale, participation avoids the crucial question of the space management. The urban dimension of public space is indeed central to discuss which are the limits and extents of the imaginary of a 'human' space. If the spatial technical issues seem to be the field in which all actors have a first common understanding, it is also what makes impossible the debate on social value of the space. The artificial re-production of the garden precarious aesthetic substitutes the central issue of the space sharing and accessibility.

3 | Political value of public space

This avoidance of social issues can be observed, even if with other characteristics, also in situations of political debates concerning the creation of new public spaces. Public debates are usually frequented by district-based associations promoting direct democracy and defending the place of inhabitants in urban transformations. In the context of popular districts, these non-institutional actors link the imaginary of future public spaces to the idea of a mixed place (in terms of functions and population) that needs to be created to erase an urban life perceived as brutal and associated with illegal traffics. The transformation of public space is seen as the solution that could discard troubles associated with violence and criminality. What is important is to avoid repeating past mistakes, e.g. the 'tabula rasa' of modernism, the 'ghettoization', the 'anonymization' of the spaces. To produce an 'enjoyable' city, the most sought-after aspect is a certain kind of intelligibility of space. As said by a citizens' association leader in Saint-Denis municipality in the north of Paris: «Our desire is to have a non-anonymous city. Because here […] there are lots of really anonymous buildings, like cubes with glass facades […]. Sometimes you don't even know if it is dwelling or offices, they're all the same. As a result it is true that those who want to enjoy the city by foot don't know where to go.» (Plaine Commune citizens' association leader, June 2012)

Diversity and clarity seem therefore to define the imaginary of the quality of a 'non-anonymous' space able to solve cohabitation problems. The possibility of 'living together' in a 'user-friendly city' depends on a public space appearance that can invite 're-appropriation' and pacific coexistence.

3.1 | Good faith and the financial balance

To better understand how this imaginary of 'non-anonymous' space can be discussed in a participatory situation, we propose to observe an example of a public meeting in which institutional and non-institutional actors are involved in an apparent common search for a consensus on project programme and form. The example concerns a meeting organised in 2011 by the municipality of the 18th arrondissement of Paris for the *Chapelle International* project for which formal public consultations started in 2002. This project, located in the north side of Chapelle district, is part of a larger renovation plan called 'Paris North-East'[9] (see Image 2 and 5) that is considered as the starting point of the Greater Paris renovations. *Chapelle International* consists in a new highly dense mixed sector of four hectares to be built on a site belonging to the French railway company[10] where train sheds were formerly disposed. The project is a public-private partnership operation led by this company and controlled only partially by the municipality through the creation of a minimum standard of public equipment.

9 The Paris North-East plan is a 200 hectares project that is part of eleven renovation sites on the Parisian peripheral ring road launched in 2002 with the objective of restructuring the spatial relation between Paris and the bordering municipalities.

10 Even if the railway company is a semi-public actor, in this context it acts as a private actor that uses the real state operation to finance its transport activities.

The meeting took place the evening, in the 18th arrondissement Paris city hall room of honour. Following the habitual protocol of Parisian public consultations, the meeting started with a long presentation of the project by the mayor and the town-planning councillor of the 18th arrondissement, the City of Paris town-planning councillor, the architect and the technical division of the municipality. Each of these actors presented the project from a different perspective (political, technical, strategic, etc.). Then the discussion has been opened to the audience composed of about 50 people.

A shopkeeper of the district introduced himself and started the debate: «I've heard that you want to build a lot of new offices, but there are already a lot of empty offices in the nearby district, so I wanted to suggest to build a library instead, this is my suggestion.» The audience applauded. Then a lady wished to respond: «To answer to the issue of the square meters of offices, when I asked [in other public meetings, NT] if it was possible to make less offices and more green spaces, they always answered "no" to me. I appreciate the proposition of a library. It is what I already said to the participatory meetings: that we are already in a very populated district and now they build 900 new dwellings. At the beginning they said 600! […] It is a lot for a district that already has some big difficulties and where people are tired. And you make it worse. It's a shame, because we already suffer and you don't want to see it» (Local association member, November 2011).

Afterward it has been the turn of a young landscape designer living in the district, member of a community garden built in a vacant space next to the railway line and intended to be destroyed by the new project: «I'm quite surprised by the fact that in the discourse you always talk of a new innovative district […]. But the park [of the project, NT] is a park like everywhere in Paris, the grassland is a green boulevard like everywhere in Paris, public place is a square like everywhere in Paris. You put innovation everywhere but in the public space. I just ask to think about it» (Community garden member, November 2011).

The audience reacted again applauding warmly and the mayor introduced a new speaker that everybody seem to know very well. He presented himself as the president of an association of districts' inhabitants that works for the 'monitoring of the Paris Nord-East planning programme'[11]. With a notebook in his hands, he raised the question of public spaces in the project again: «A very pragmatic question: what about the 3 000 square meters [of green spaces, NT] that were planned in the last version of the project? I ask this question because at the very beginning we spoke about 12 000 square meters [of public spaces, NT] and now your proposal concerns less of the half. This is something that we could examine seriously» (Local association president, November 2011).

Afterwards the debate came again to institutions. The town-planning councillor, coming himself from the local associations circle, started facing the dissenting opinions from the audience. He answered with irritation remembering the 'principles' of the participation: «About the square meters and the numbers, this is what has been decided by the municipal Town-planning Direction […]. The public consultation implies something really important: that the person speaking is in good faith. Then I consider that when you have these data, even if they are not completely correct, you know that it is the only information that I can give you. We don't hide anything because we have fear. I mean, be faithful because there is good faith on both sides» (Town councillor, November 2011).

11 This association has been founded in 2008 as the result of a citizens' mobilisation against a renovation project in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. The objective of the association is «to gather inhabitants and residents of the arrondissement that wish to reflect, analyse and make propositions on urban projects» (http://asa-pne.over-blog.com/page-8435731.html, translation by the author).

Feeling also attacked, the architect of the project answered by defending his formal choices, even admitting the lack of public spaces due to the density of the project: «About the issue on public spaces, I think that our work is really innovative. We propose to recycle the materials of the industrial site for example. […] I understand the question coming from the audience, but, for example, a garden on the roof of a building is not really common. […] Honestly we do our best in order to well design even with this kind of high density that is the principal of the sustainable development. So I'm available to discuss on public spaces, we will do it. […] I think that we will have time to discuss and we can do a specific workshop on it» (Architect of the *Chapelle International* project, November 2011).

The City of Paris town-planning councillor, guest of honour of the meeting, gave the last speech: «I would like to answer to some of the questions. […] Regarding the issue of offices and public equipment you say: "we make fewer offices and we build more equipment". I would love it, really! But we are in a world in which economy and project financing have to make sense. Moreover, [the municipality of, NT] Paris keeps investing a lot on urban projects, on urban quality, on social housing, in Parisian public space renewal… all this has a cost. […]

On the Parisian public space: yes, in Paris we have parks and it is part of the Parisian identity; yes, in Paris we have some trees alignment in the streets… There are things that are typical of Paris, it is Paris identity and those who designed Paris, I think notably to Haussmann[12], created something magnificent that makes Paris a unique city. […] But I think that the project here is a nice project, honestly, I cannot let you say: "we are in a district about which nobody cares and you make it worst." No! I'm sorry. I cannot let you say that. The investment we're making is aimed at bringing some quality of life, of uses, in a place where there is nothing at present. Leaving things as they are does not help. I'm sorry, we don't want to leave things as they are. I'm not scared of the fact that new people, children, researchers, workers are coming to live here. On the contrary, the vitality that this will bring to the district will compensate and reduce the difficulties that you mentioned. It is better that the whole space is filled with activities and café terraces because when there is nothing illegal traffics take place, really screwing up the life of those districts. […] Everything can be discussed, it is democracy, but there are things that you can't say. Because we wouldn't have passed all this time and spent all that money to make things worse as you say. On the contrary, we do all this to break the unacceptable situation of abandonment in the Nord-East of Paris.

Then to go on, I think that this meeting is important because it permitted to clarify a few points, to present some documents, but now we have to work in workshops. We have to do workshops with the kids […]. We have to organise some participatory groups to see things in detail, to decide where we will put the plants. […] We have to go to the subtlety of the work with a scale model and we have to do it fast. So I am quite enthusiastic, I think that these discussions are important» (Town councillor, November 2011).

The final intervention closed the debate and showed how prevalent is the institutional speech in such meetings, in terms of time and authority. The role of inhabitants has been made clear on what can be said or not, and confined to the forthcoming (but never realised) workshops with the kids on plants location. The economic imperative and institutions' 'good faith' are placed before every other argument but cannot be discussed.

12 Georges-Eugène Haussmann, prefect of the Seine region between 1852 and 1870. His project of renovation reconfigured completely the Parisian urban forms under the principle of *hygienism*.

This situation shows how, when focused on procedural public sphere rituals, participation avoids the discussion on the political and social sense of urban projects. If the representatives of institution impose their decisions with a moral attitude, reducing participation to a sort of indoctrination, non-institutional actors, even affronting technical issues with ease, voluntary restrain their critique to the margins of decisions. The weakness of non-institutional actors' critique is due to the impossibility of a discussion on the economic principles of urban project programme linked to the assumption of the necessity of an investment on dwelling for solving social problems.

4 | Impossible disagreements

The main observation that arises from these two examples concerns the poverty of the debate on public space and the impossibility of letting emerge a disagreement on collective imaginaries.

As said by Jacques Rancière (1995: x-xii), «the structures proper to disagreement are those in which discussion of an argument comes down to a dispute over those who are making an object of it». Following this definition, public space negotiations could lead to a political disagreement by letting emerge a dispute over the power relations between actors. In the observed situations disagreement appears instead to be only superficial and its power is shaded by the debate conditions of translation. According to Callon and Latour (2006: 12-13), translation in political debates can be defined as «a set of negotiations, intrigues, acts of persuasion, calculations, violence through which an actor or a force allows himself or entitles himself to speak or act in the name of another actor or of another force: "your interests are ours", "I do what I want", "you cannot succeed without me" » (translation by the author).

This kind of translation is linked here to a context in which the dialogue and planning techniques impose a standardization of the public debate (cf. Blatrix, 2012) and become more important than the result related to space and society. In this context, the potential of imaginary seems to lose its political potential. As shown in the first case, the aesthetical dimension of the new public space is deprived of its social value, which is a potential element of conflict. An ostensible agreement between the actors is possible in this case thanks to the lack of power that both sides have on decision-making. In the second case, we saw even more explicitly how the possible disagreements on the quality and economic value of public spaces are cancelled by the impossibility, accepted by both sides, of questioning the objectives and the process of the renovation project. The ideas of 'human' and 'non-anonymous' spaces appear to be the centre of actors' imaginary and the focus of their collective strategies, but they lose their social and political potential when included in participatory situations.

These situations, if considered as social structures framing the political debate, constitute what Michel Foucault (1971) called apparatus. That is a heterogeneous ensemble of practices and discourses that «has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings» (Agamben, 2009: 14). In this case, we can refer more precisely to an apparatus that would potentially permit the institutional inclusion of non-institutional actors on the basis of a voluntary subjection to a procedure of formal negotiation. The result of this apparatus is in fact to force non-institutional actors to reduce the political potential of their imaginary by assuming an empathic role in the debate with the institution. This role is shaped by the formality of negotiation and the normativity of its contents and constitutes both the element of non-institutional actors submission and the element of distraction from the social and

political issues of urban transformation. If the interest of imaginary, as stated in the introduction, is in its capacity of revealing a debate on what is public and common in the city, it is precisely this lack of debate on the imaginary that opens the way to a closure of the possible alternatives in the project.
What lies beyond this apparatus and its translation capacity is an ambiguous discourse on the empowerment of the actors. As soon as non-institutional actors accept to participate, they have to renounce to a radical vision of their imaginary. That is to take the 'responsibility' of their participation to political decisions and to integrate technical limits imposed by the authority. If the non-institutional actions seem to be based on the idea of a 'human' and 'non-anonymous' space in contrast with the metropolitan strategies that support the image of a global competitive city, at the same time this idea is belittled to an «aesthetic treatment of social tie» (Jeudi, 2003). The only way in which non-institutional actors can imagine their contribution to the imaginary of the future public spaces is by denying the possible conflicts issued by urban transformations. The global result is a reinforcement of the institutional discourse on the inevitability of a neoliberal management of the urban project carrying a lack of democratic transparency in favour of an endless land speculation (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, Rodriguez 2002).

If these issues pose some interesting questions on the institutionalisation of contemporary urban social movements, it seems for us even more interesting to reflect on the results in terms of spatial planning. What means to build a 'human' and 'non-anonymous' public space in contemporary cities? We argue that participatory devices, in their actual form, are still incapable to answer to this question. Since participating means to accept to be included in the circle of planning technical discourses, no discussion is possible on the physical and political value of public space. At any moment the observed participatory devices open a debate on the sense and extent of the imaginary mobilised by non-institutional actors, supposing a consensus on the objectives of urban transformation.
In conclusion, we would like to point out the importance of renewing the critical perspectives of urbanism through qualitative comprehension of the city structure and uses. Public space has to be the centre of this reflection for its capacity to reveal the complexity of the urban issues. Participatory policies highlight the need to better understand the value of collective practices. Nevertheless it is only analysing these practices from an ethnographic point of view as controversial elements of social imaginary that it will be possible to strengthen the effectiveness of participatory policies. Increasing people participation through more and more sophisticated devices (*e.g.* with use of ICT) still doesn't seem to contribute to the understanding of peoples' words and actions meaning. This understanding is possible only by direct observation that permits to analyse the real sense of collective imaginary. The issue of the contemporary public spaces does not need a set of ready-made solutions, as alternative or efficient as they may appear, but the development of methodologies of qualitative analysis that can integrate in the project a structured, not bowdlerised, vision of the society and contribute to build real process of emancipation of the urban actors. Within an interdisciplinary and qualitative approach, urban ethnography allows not only to highlight the complexity of the power relations within the urban transformation, but also to inspire imagination on a renewed visions of public spaces.

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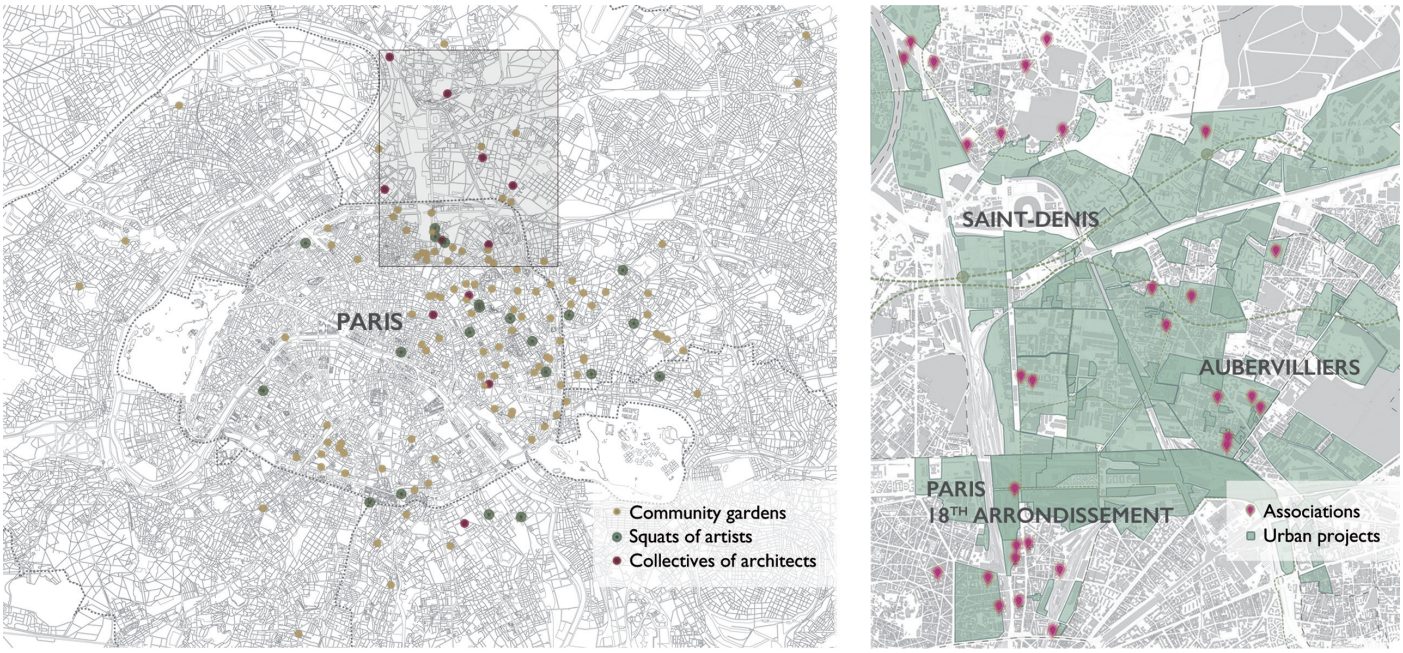

Image 1 | Left: Plan of the distribution of non-institutional actions in the metropolitan area of Paris (the framed area indicates the perimeter of the plan on the left). Right: Plan of urban projects and associations observed in the North-Eastern metropolitan area of Paris.
Source: Author, 2014.

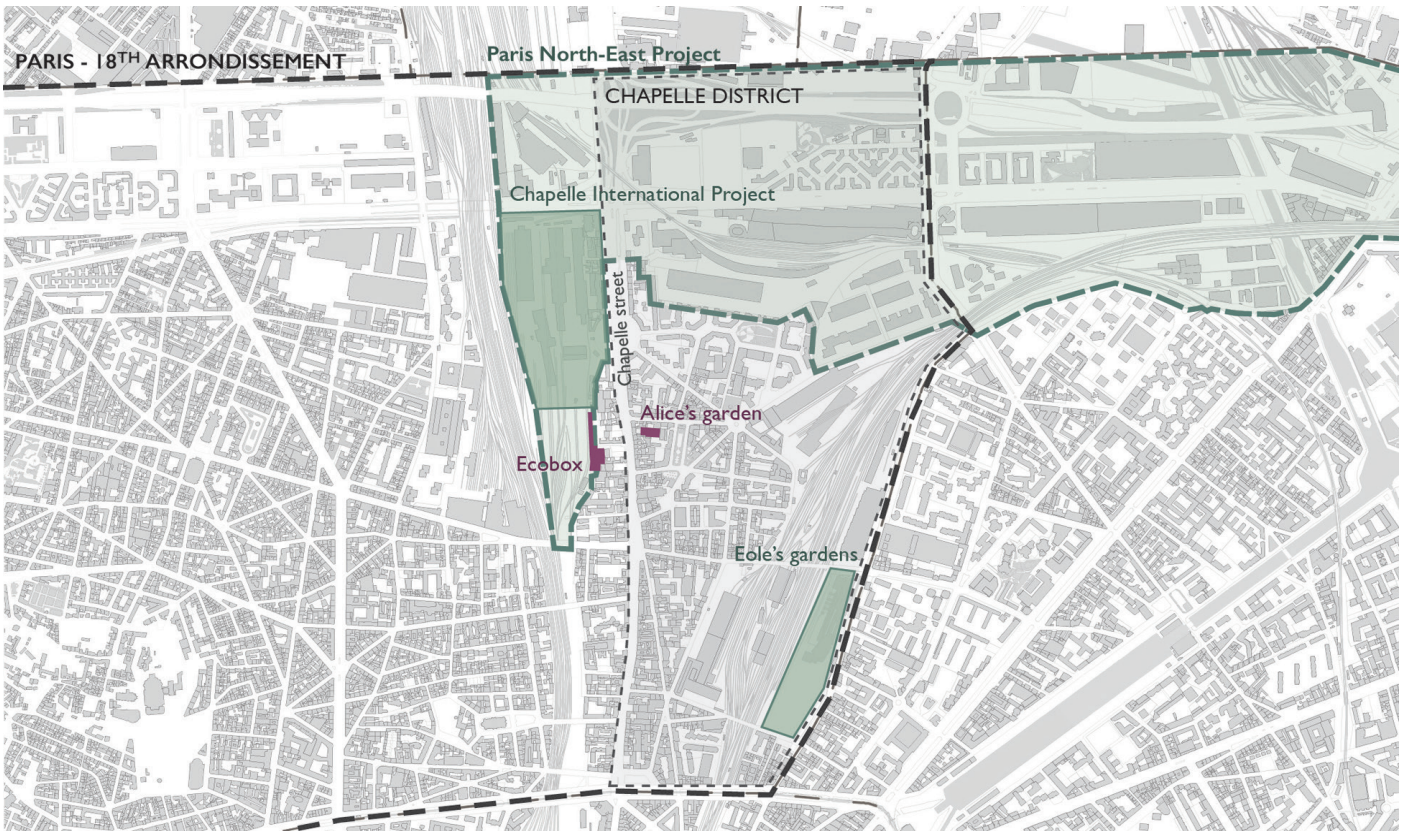

Image 2 | Detail of the Chapelle district and case studies location. Source: Author, 2016.

Image 3 | Photomontage of the typologies of non-institutional actions observed in the North-Eastern metropolitan area of Paris. Source: Author, 2014.

Image 4 |Left: Jardin d'Alice. Source: Author, 2014. Right: 40 rue de la Chapelle project. Source: Frédéric El-Bekkay architect, Après la pluie landscape designers, http://www.alp-paysagistes.fr/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/LA-CHAPELLE-OPH.jpg, 2011.

Image 5 |Left: Chapelle International project. Source: AUC office, https://paris-nord-est.imaginons.paris/les-secteurs-en-detail/chapelle-international-condorcet-innovation-et-developpement-durable, 2011. Right: Public meeting at 18th arrondissement city hall. Source: Author, 2013.

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