

Margaux Vigne

Landscape architect (ENSPV, Higher National School of Landscape Architecture of Versailles)

Sociologist (EHESS, Higher Studies School of Social Sciences, Paris)

Phd student in urban planning

Under the supervision of Laurent Devisme and Élisabeth Pasquier

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ENSAN (Higher National School of Architecture of Nantes)

Ed DEGEST, Université de Nantes, France

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« Alternative urban practices and policies in neoliberal contexts : a critical approach »

Key words

Public space development / institutionalization / experimentation / temporary occupations / citizens involvement

Title

Between alternatives and models. Observing the impacts of institutional experiments implemented in inhabitants involvement devices in public space development projects in Nantes and Brussels : *experimentation and institutionalization, seizing and manipulation, overflow and instrumentation, ensauvagement and domestication.*

Abstract

This abstract harness a current Phd research studying alternative experiments within public spaces development projects, in three european cities, Nantes, Lille (Roubaix-Tourcoing-Wattrelos) and Brussels (Molenbeek-St Jean). These upstream actions take place directly on sites which are going to be renewed. They combine spatial and social prefigurations, inhabitants involvement devices and temporary occupations. We observe what we call institutional experiments, as the purpose was to focus on institutionalization of generally speaking alternative approaches, previously mainly initiated by civil society, and turning into real public policies (Pradel 2012, Paquot 2012). The research deals with the tensions between institutionalized participation and informal practices, and we assume that it is judicious to observe public policies and civil society mobilizations altogether (Neveu 2011, Rui & Villechaise-Dupont 2006, Bacqué 2006, Carlier 2011, Goirand 2013, Hatzfeld 2011). What is interesting is what it reveals of the roles played by these alternative practices when seized by public stakeholders and if they produces a transformative impact on urban fabric or not.

The notion of institutionalization is here linked to the transformative potential of alternatives turning into routine (Cefai 2007), and not so much seen as an obvious neutralisation of critical aspects. The notion of experimentation is used in its political sense (Dewey 2003), but also as a mode of action and knowledge (Barthe 2009), and in the more commonly speaking sense in public policies, that means leading a small scale and time framed experiment conducted in order to test its reproductibility potential at a larger scale and in different settings.

We decided : to observe institutionalization and experimentation dynamics simultaneously amongst institutional actors and non-institutional actors ; to observe institutionalization dynamics as well as misappropriation and hijacking dynamics of these institutional devices by non-institutional actors ; and also to carefully observe the impacts of these experiments, included the failed ones, whether they are related to the main issues of public space development or to other fields.

The challenge is to combine a critical and a pragmatist approach, working mainly from empirical case studies and ethnographic surveys, and to always wonder about the observation scale (for the researcher : which balance between observing and describing small stories and local resistances and revealing large societal trends ?) and about the action scale (which possibilities for local action in the globalized context ?) (Devisme, Dumont & Roy 2006).

For this paper we'll cross two case studies, an inhabitant involvement device in the Île-de-Nantes and a temporary occupation of a future public space in Brussels, along the canal in Molenbeek. We'll give priority to description, contextualisation and analysis of these practical cases, in order to debate two research questions, which are only mentioned here and will be deepened along the paper writing through the field work still going on.

First, we want to analyse in detail institutionalization and experimentation dynamics which really differ between the two fields :

- in Brussels : from a first draft not clearly framed, we yet observe how the alternative model of temporary occupation is spread amongst public policies through its reappropriation by numerous institutional actors, and even how it is about to become a specific tool and entering the routine action of public space development.
- in Nantes : we followed the internal preparation of a program thought as an experimentation and which is now going to be tested out on the field.

Secondly the aim is to benefit from the session topic to redefine these alternatives ways of refitting public spaces, examine how they interact with urban neoliberalism, and question their critical and transformative capacities (Harvey 2011, Béal & Rousseau 2014, Rousseau & Béal 2015, Kęblowski & Van Criegingen 2014). Some researches show convergences between forms of citizen self-management of public spaces and urban neoliberalism, more specifically through the multiplication of « established counter-powers » (Gatta 2014). Some researches show how alternatives spread as fast as neoliberal models and how rapidly dominant trends embedded them, in case of tactical urbanism (Lydon 2011, Douay & Prévôt 2016) or squat movements (Pattaroni 2011) for instance. But some researches also show that some other and yet fruitful alternatives exist (Paquot 2012, GRAC 2010), which can be « oppositional » and « instituting » at the same time (Nicolas le Strat 2016), and our field work confirms this critical and transformative potential through several aspects :

- in Brussels, the institutional devices have been seized by civil society to gain more negotiating strength in the power balance in front of private actors, through physical use and sites occupation (Ripoll 2008) and through collective organisation as a third party besides public actors ; moreover, institutional actors tend to adopt, facing the civil society, a role of support and « following » (giving spaces, let the possibility of...) more than a role of framing and supervising.
- in Nantes, the experiment is an institutional attempt to transform public action from the inside, more specifically an attempt to rectify, to compensate, and balance the importance and domination of large urban marketing policies that tend to turn the city into a public policies « showroom » (Matthey 2014); it is interesting to observe this attempt, led by individuals within the institutions, trying to give more space and value to small stories and projects, to the inhabited city and local level.

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