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Urban Interstices between Appropriations and Resistances

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This special issue grew out of a two day conference entitled *Whose space is it? Interstices and urban commons: the city from an interdisciplinary perspective*, which was held at the University of Tours in December 2020. Despite of difficult conditions et unpredictability of situation due to Covid-19 pandemic, the conference was a real success and brought together researchers from various disciplines of social science and more than ten countries. This conference provided an excellent venue within which to begin the discussions on the signification, the use and the ways of appropriation of what is called *urban interstices* covered in this issue. Urban interstices were one of the two main research themes of this conference whose scientific purpose has been collectively prepared by myself, Bénédicte Florin and Ulrike Krampfl, all of us from University of Tours. The interesting point was to see how our different scientific disciplines, respectively sociology, geography and history provided a large scope to understand the interstices and their perception.

If we take literally, the word interstice refers to something and/or somewhere located between two or more places, as demonstrated in the German “Zwischenraum” and the English “in-between”. In some languages, such as Turkish, the word has no direct equivalence. With the increasing urbanization in the Western world during the nineteenth century, the word take on a more general spatial meaning, namely that which is situated between one thing and another, to be associated with words such as "niche, vacant lot, recess, wasteland, zone, interface, etc.

If we have a look on the origin of the word, we find the following definition in *Dictionnaire de la langue française* : “the time that the Church observes between the reception of two sacred orders”¹. Which means that the interstice initially had a temporal rather than a spatial sense. The interstice therefore has a spatial but also a temporal connotation, and the two are sometimes inseparable when it comes to urban interstice (Farazdag 2019).

In its spatial sense, the word also refers to otherwise forgotten and abandoned places, void of interest, seen as insignificant and even disregarded, hardly visible, more or less out of the way, more or less laid-out, well-defined spaces or passageways, all of which are unstable. An interstice not only has a history but has temporalities as well, all of which are respectively related to their changing functions and to their processes of (non-)integration within the urban environment. Certain spaces enter into the category of interstice, others not, all of which requires an understanding of its development over time and according to particular social, historical, and cultural contexts. In this sense, the concept of the interstice covers a heterotopic dimension which may also imply a heterochronic temporality. In this sense, Rouba Kaedbey’s article constitutes a good example presenting a former abandoned beach as an evolutive interstice with changing functions, escaping to the control of various actors. Its changing functions make it progressively exit of its interstitial status and a commercial object

¹ Definition « Interstice », Littré Emile, Dictionnaire de la langue française, Paris, Hachette, 1863.

as hip-hop artists and young adults transform it in a clean, frequented area. In the same way, Félix Lefebvre presents a case of heterotopic interstice around the tea grins in Ougadougou, places where people –especially men – drink tea and discuss about political affairs and where a ‘subaltern cityness’ is constructed. Therefore they propose a protective area for their participants concerning the power relations specific to the public space, while offering a space for discussion and enunciating a collective speech. From the article of Lefebvre, we see clearly that tea grins as interstice have a spatial and temporal status making possible to offer the qualities of an open space, in communication with the existing public space such as roads, parks, etc. It is a flexible and temporary space, “creating possibilities for the freedom of appropriation of the city by its citizens: It becomes a space allowing a spatial and usual breathing, contrasting by its informal character with the structure of the city in which it figures”. (ibid., p.22)

An interstice has not forcibly a negative meaning. It is not always something useless which does not require attention. It has sometimes many potential if some actors, groupes (political, social, cultural, artistique even même religious) decide to appropriate it for their alternative and sometimes subversive practices. The article of Hugo Rochard et.al provides this kind of experience around the example of *Collective Interfriches* composed of architects, geographers, urban planners, ecologists, sociologists, politicians, artists, seeks to think the role of wastelands in the making of the city in different contexts. Based on a workshop on a third place named *Vive les Groues* managed by an association (Yes We Camp) in the suburban Paris, their paper leaning on the experience of involved persons puts collective methodological questioning into a reflexive dialogue. What does an interdisciplinary workshop allow to capture about an occupied urban interstice ?

An interstice could be also considered as an exception within normality and understood only by social activities performed within it but outside of rules and regulations. These rules and regulations could be cultural, social and traditional and not only legal or written. We argue therefore that interstice has no fixed or formal meaning, being more of a blanket term with potential use in many contexts, by different disciplines like art history, geography, sociology etc., all depending on the specific areas and time periods studied. The aim of this issue has less to do with finding a precise definition of interstices as with bringing together various fields of research to contemplate their respective approaches, their objectives and their methodologies.

Existing outside of the urban order, the interstice as a concept can easily be adapted and modified (squats, camps, places of resistance and refuge, etc.), appropriated for common uses (“donkey paths”), and used for discrete, secret or illegal activities (drug-dealing, lovemaking, a place for political or religious refugees, etc.). If urban planning is capable of creating interstices, the improvised uses of these locations may well interfere with urban flow, security, and surveillance, etc. On the other hand, in spatial arrangements conceived a priori without interstices (such as housing complexes), micro-interstices may be spontaneously created. Laura Monfleur presents in her article this kind of interstice. The doorways and spaces adjacent to buildings or sometimes walls can be considered as buffer-zones likely to be used and transformed for other purposes. In Egypt, because of uprisings during 2011 in Cairo, the government installed walls and checkpoints in cement in different areas of the city in order to control the access towards Tahrir Square and large avenues. L. Monfleur shows in her article how these walls have been diverted from their formal uses and transformed by inhabitants in micro-interstices for expressing a counter-power against political control or hegemonic urban planning. The Street Art performances played a role as creative power for the (re)appropriation of urban spaces by people fighting for their political and human rights.

Interstitial spaces may be borrowed or appropriated, or otherwise adapted for some other function of a social or artistic nature; they also represent spatial resources for city dwellers, resources which are in their turn subject to power relations (of social orders and gender, etc.), and which have the potential to create conflicts. Silent, almost invisible, and often discontinuous in nature, these interstices and what happens within them may be menaced and coveted, but are all part of the urban construct. Engin Sustam questions this conflictual nature of interstices by studying how interstitial practices related to art performance in urban space especially in cities with Kurdish majority reveals forms of emancipation and resistance against domination of authoritarian regimes. At the same time, these subaltern and subversive practices are a form of creation against hegemony of space production by Turkish government. For example, The 'Bahçeya Hewsel' mobilisation deployed a form of ecological squat against a gentrification project and the urban transformation considered as an authoritarian intervention by Kurds in their life space.

Whether located in the center or on the outskirts of the city, the interstice remains inextricably linked to the problematic of spatial and social margins. While the interstice is defined by its uses, functions and appropriations, the periphery on the other hand in its various historical configurations occupies a place related at the same time to several areas, some located in the center, some reaching far beyond. The interstice thus seems to defy any rational spatial organization and normative standards. In Kosova for example, X's article shows how places built with Ottoman architectural style became a kind of interstices as they were excluded from the ideological objectives and wills in Yugoslavia in different periods of history and especially in 1990s, they were marginalised, damaged and destroyed in order to be replaced by the modern during the Serbian occupation of the city. This example demonstrates that interstices may be subject to intervention by governmental agencies seeking to re-establish control over them, to redefine their functions, or even to remove them. The appropriation of the interstice by urban planners, whose motives and purposes change with time and according to local contexts, is made possible through means specially designed to control or to reshape it.

The articles in this issue provides insightful analyses and perceptions about interstices towards various empirical studies. They show variety of interstices and of ways of their use and appropriation. This will contribute, we believe, to understand the interstices as social and sometimes political constructions, their transitory and changing character and their malleable use that could be propitious for creation, advocacy, transformation and emancipation.