

THE URBAN COMMONS AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

An Exploration of the Institutional Embeddedness of Architectural Design in the Netherlands

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The urban can never be simply conflated with a system of private property and competitive markets – indicative and normative ways – for diverse institutional arrangements both to deal with the technical market failures and to manage the common pool resources of the city as a whole.

(Scott, 2012, p. 25)

The market alone cannot meet our needs; nor can the state. Both, by rooting out attachment, help fuel the alienation, rage and anomie that breed extremism. One element has been conspicuously absent from the dominant ideologies, something that is neither market nor state: the commons.

(Monbiot, 2016)

The Quest for New Forms of Urban Governance

The urban environment has now become *the* typical milieu for Homo sapiens on a global scale. Accordingly, understanding how cities cope with social, economic and environmental issues is becoming ever more important. What, then, are the key conditions for liveable, sustainable and prosperous cities? And, more practically, which forms of governance can contribute to reaching these goals? The limits of allocation through markets, which was promoted as part of the neoliberal drive after 1980, have become much more manifest in the wake of the credit crisis of 2008 notably in the realm of social equity and climate change (Klein, 2014; Mason, 2015, Milanovic, 2016). A return to more statist approaches as in post-war Western Europe (Judt, 2005), it seems, is also not very feasible due the fundamental Hayekian problem of lack of knowledge which, arguably, has become even more serious with the increasing complexity and

fragmentation of post-Fordist urban societies, and also because of the more mundane problem of lack of financial resources which many public actors face. There is, consequently, a quest for governance options which may counteract the obvious shortcomings of market allocation while avoiding some of the problems inherent in more statist approaches. There are many ways to look at urban governance – from the highly abstract to the detailed concrete and from the explicit normative to the descriptive and analytical empirical.

Below, I will use a rather modest window to analyse a specific case of the functioning of the so-called urban commons, the pool of resources in cities for which property rights are hard or even impossible to establish and therefore require forms of collective action. I will look briefly at how forms of collective action underpin a successful Dutch cultural industry, namely architectural design. The focus is on architectural design as an economic activity which can be seen as emblematic of advanced urban economies. Looking at architectural design may thus give us an understanding of how the urban commons function in relation to a wider set of economic activities. An outline of cities and the urban commons is given in the first part of this chapter. This is followed by an empirical illustration of a concrete example of a common pool of resources, based on earlier empirical research (Kloosterman, 2008, 2010a; see also Brandellero & Kloosterman, 2010; Heebels & Kloosterman, 2016; Stegmeijer et al., 2012). In the conclusion, some of the wider implications will be sketched.

Cities and the Urban Commons

Cities come in many shapes and sizes and quite a few attempts have been made to grasp what they have in common. Wilfully ignoring all kinds of finer distinctions and observations, cities can be seen, following Louis Wirth (1938), to boil down to a localised, sizeable human settlement with a relatively large population, which is densely populated. These complex interlocking man-made ecosystems comprise both durable physical parts, such as roads, buildings, sewage systems, internet infrastructure, and less tangible, but no less important and often also very durable, parts, such as governance systems, norms, values, financial transactions and cultural life. Myriad linkages between different parts exist in these relatively compact environments with a high population density, a refined division of labour and, related to this, an intricate social stratification. These parts interact thereby initiating a series of emergent effects, among them agglomeration economies, along path-dependent trajectories (Scott, 2012). From a spatial perspective, we can observe an elaborate mosaic of specialised land-uses containing social spaces where people live, production spaces, and circulation spaces (Scott, 1988, 2012; Scott & Storper, 2015). All cities, in principle, can be described in these rather abstract and general terms, but variations on this fundamental theme are both manifold and highly significant for the living standards, the quality of (everyday) life, the resilience and the spatial lay-out of cities (Fainstein, 2010; Kloosterman, 2010b; Kloosterman & Lambregts, 2007; Konvitz, 2016).

The long-term liveability and resilience of cities depends on meeting five basic requirements (see Hall, 1998):

- (a) cities need a strong public authority which can guarantee the rule of law and public safety as well as being able to provide, directly or indirectly, basic services such as education, health care, garbage collection and physical network infrastructures;
- (b) cities should have some kind of a democratic political system which allows for responsive, transparent and controllable governance in which the voice of citizens is heard and taken seriously;

- (c) cities should be home to a set of competitive economic activities that provide jobs and generate incomes;
- (d) cities have to be organised in an environmentally sustainable way with, among other things, clean water and air;
- (e) cities must display at least some minimum degree of socio-economic equality both in terms of incomes and opportunity to achieve a certain level of social stability.

These very general requirements are sometimes conflicting in the short-term, and thus often demand a fine balancing act on behalf of the various relevant actors. Moreover, at least some of these essential requirements cannot be met through market allocation as property rights are hard if not impossible to establish, as in the case of much of the physical infrastructure, public safety, the environment, the underpinnings of competitiveness and social equality. They are, then, non-excludable and therefore prone to chronic undersupply. Some of these non-excludable resources are also non-rivalrous, which means that consumption does not affect the availability to others: using these resources is *non-subtractive* as in the case of street lanterns (Ostrom, 1990/2011, p. 32). There are, however, also man-made resources and assets for which property rights are hard or even impossible to establish and, hence, difficult to exclude other users, but which are *rivalrous* in the sense that there is a limited stock which can be threatened by overuse as in the case of cities like Barcelona and Amsterdam where the large number of tourists tend to undermine the very quality of place which made them attractive in the first place.¹

Although the distinction between ‘pure public goods’ which are non-rivalrous and common pool resources which are rivalrous makes analytically good sense, in practice they are not always easy to disentangle. What, for instance, may at first be seen as a pure public good, might turn into a rivalrous common pool resource if a certain threshold is reached as in the case of mass tourism where overuse is manifestly affecting other uses. It makes sense, therefore, to start an empirical analysis of the *urban commons* with the fundamental common characteristic of non-excludability and then proceed to define if and under which conditions these resources are rivalrous.

Given high costs or the impossibility to exclude users, these urban commons are liable to chronic undersupply if left alone to market forces thereby threatening the functioning of the city as a place to live, work and reside thus creating an inherent need for forms of collective action within the urban realm. In Allen Scott’s view (2012, pp. 162–163), the very reproduction of capitalist society depends on these urban commons because:

1. markets cannot exist in the absence of legal and political structures;
2. unfettered markets are apt to give rise to many different kinds of corrosive outcomes (e.g. harsh labour conditions, pollution, recurrent crises);
3. markets are unable to deal in the long run with endemic political collusion between capital and labour over the distribution of the surplus into profits and wages.

(Scott, 2012, p. 163)

Seen this way, the presence and the reproduction of the effective urban commons are imperative for the survival of capitalist urban economies and not just based on a particular normative point of departure.

With respect to cities, Scott argues that the whole notion of markets and equilibria is not relevant for cities, because key elements – land-use and labour – tend to be inelastic and clustering “makes industries geographically lumpy and relatively hard to move” (Storper et al., 2015,

p. 22). Responses to external changes are often slow and cities develop along path-dependent (positive feedback) trajectories, contingent on particular points of departure and driven by increasing returns and positive feedbacks. Instead of viewing cities as a huge interlocking system of fluid and frictionless market transactions, they should be conceived as sets of gigantic urban commons of which agglomeration economies, the glue that holds cities together, constitute an essential part. What Scott proposes, then, is an ambitious urban research agenda in which forms of collective action may sustain and reproduce common pool resources straddling the field of urban studies with that of political economy and notably the path-breaking work by Elinor Ostrom, who has analysed the variegated landscape of institutional set-ups for providing these resources (1990/ 2011).²

The issue of common pool resources in urban contexts covers a wide range of aspects, which go far beyond the scope of this chapter.³ I will seek to step down from the lofty heights of more abstract views and descend into the much less neat world of social reality and provide an empirically informed scan of the relationship between common pool resources and a specific economic activity. To be able to put this case in perspective, the next section goes into the role of knowledge in contemporary urban economies.

Cultural Industries, Architectural Design and Agglomeration Economies

Advanced urban economies thrive on the input of highly specialised knowledge. In an interesting approach Cesar Hidalgo (2015, p. 68), a statistical physicist, has conceptualised the economy as “a knowledge and know-how amplifier” where ‘knowledge’ involves the capacity to imagine and map more abstract relationships (as, for instance, in physics); and ‘know-how’ refers to the mostly tacit capacity to perform actions (ibid, pp. 6–7). In addition, he has coined the notions of ‘person byte’ and ‘firm byte’ which denote respectively the “maximum knowledge and know-how carrying capacity of a human” (Hidalgo, 2015, p. 82) and, *mutatis mutandis*, the maximum knowledge and know-how within one firm. Both are hard to quantify, but conceptualising these constraints sheds light on why networks of persons and firms are necessary to make complex products. Knowledge and know-how are sticky: they stick to persons, firms and networks. To be able to make complex products, many person bytes are needed and often they also transcend one firm byte and, hence, involve networks of firms. To reduce the transaction costs of the exchange of knowledge and know-how, persons and firms collaborating on a frequent basis tend to form spatial clusters of related economic activities.

This format also holds for cultural industries – economic activities concerned with producing and selling goods and services for which the main selling point is their aesthetic quality. Instead of competing just on price, many cultural industries markets display horizontal differentiation where products may differ along more dimensions within one price segment (Caves, 2000, p. 6). They are very much part and parcel of the economic profile of advanced cities, as nowadays a whole array of performing arts, consumer-oriented craft and artisanal industries, media and related industries as well specialised design industries, among which architectural design, generate a significant share of urban employment and income (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2016; Scott, 2004). Their main production input is specialised knowledge to generate the aesthetic qualities and come up with stylistic and other innovations.

Cultural industries typically display a specific spatio-organisational format. Due to the volatility and unpredictability of demand, economies of scale are typically hard to reap and they tend to be vertically disintegrated forming spatially clustered networks of mainly small- to medium-sized firms often with one dominant large firm, a systems house (Scott, 2000), such as the Disney Corporation or LVMH which comprises among others, Dior, Marc Jacobs, Kenzo and Givenchy

fashion brands (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2016). Spatial concentration in specific urban areas, initiates recurrent processes of increasing agglomeration economies and increases both in size and in the social division of labour within these clusters along path-dependent trajectories. These agglomeration economies, “the principal force that makes activities geographically sticky” (Storper et al., 2015, p. 22), consist of the classic Marshallian triad of agglomeration economies: a localised pool of specialised labour, frequent exchange of knowledge and know-how and dedicated institutions dealing with, for instance, certification, product development and marketing.

Agglomeration economies are, by definition, spatially bounded *external* economies of scale. Many definitions of external economies abound, but they share the basic ideas that they cover gains or benefits of transactions accruing to third parties, that is, firms or persons which did not participate directly in those market exchanges, and these benefits are, hence, not reflected in the price (see Clark, 2003; www.businessdictionary.com/definition/externalities.html). They are, to use Alfred Marshall’s (1919) dictum, “in the air”. This famous observation does not just refer to their ubiquity in a certain place, but also to their elusiveness in terms of property rights: it is hard if not impossible to exclude users. Leaving the provision and reproduction of agglomeration economies just to market allocation would inevitably lead to undersupply. In some cases, the benefits of agglomeration economies can be qualified as non-rivalrous. This holds, for instance, in the case of the symbolic capital that a location may endow to specific products, such as fashion from Paris or Milan, music from Manchester or Nashville or architectural design from Rotterdam. They can, however, also refer to a subtractable pool of resources where use is rivalrous and overuse and even depletion of that particular stock is possible, such as in the case of a system of apprenticeships where there is a limited number of openings. This theoretical distinction between non-rivalrous ‘pure’ public goods and rivalrous common pool resources is anything but set in stone. In practice, there are all kinds of more blurred and rather dynamic situations requiring different institutional set-ups for provision and maintenance of these non-excludable resources. I will illustrate this by looking at the case of architectural design in the Netherlands.

Dutch design and notably Dutch architectural design – ‘Superdutch’ – are internationally renowned cultural industries (Kloosterman, 2008, 2010a, 2014; Lootsma, 2000; Rasterhoff & Kloosterman, 2014). From Marcel Wanders to Rem Koolhaas and from Piet Hein Eek’s furniture to Ben van Berkel’s UNStudio, Dutch design has made its name with daring stylistic innovations. High-end, innovative (*strong-idea*) and internationally oriented architectural design is concentrated in the two largest Dutch cities, Amsterdam and particularly in Rotterdam (Kloosterman, 2008; Kloosterman & Stegmeijer, 2004). Dutch architectural design was hard hit by the economic downturn after 2008 which led to a dramatic drop in domestic construction and, hence, demand for architectural design, but here we will briefly investigate the systems, the nature and the systems of provision of agglomeration economies. I specifically look at the localisation economies – those agglomeration economies which are more specifically related to one particular set of economic activities and leave out the more general urbanisation economies which, in principle, hold for all economic activities (see Jacobs, 2016). I follow the threefold division of a shared labour pool, exchange of knowledge, and dedicated institutions (see Storper et al., 2015).

A Shared Labour Pool

The presence of a sufficiently large labour pool of specialised workers constitutes a crucial agglomeration economy for many cultural industries. To be able to compete, innovative cultural industries are dependent on the input of highly qualified, specialised workers. In addition, they

typically have to cope with rapid changes in demand and accordingly have to be able adjust their labour force. Being located in a place where it is relatively easy to attract extra, competent, workers at short notice is, therefore, of vital importance. In the case of strong-idea architectural design, (most) workers need to have formal qualifications from official schools of architecture to get a job. It turns out, however, that having an official diploma in architectural design is not sufficient. Part of the necessary skills in architectural design – as in many other cultural industries – are acquired through on-the-job training in intensive face-to-face settings: “Workers need to have not just the ‘hard skills’ (e.g. the ability to use complex 3D systems), but also the ‘feeling’ for particular styles and fashions ... These soft skills are not very well codified and involve a lot of tacit knowledge” (Kloosterman, 2010a, p. 7). Transfer of this tacit know-how and knowledge and acquiring the *habitus* of an architect requires settings in which some kind of trust relationships exist (Fukuyama, 1995; Hidalgo, 2015; Kloosterman, 2008).

The creation and reproduction of the necessary skills is contingent on a local system of apprenticeships in which costs and benefits are not necessarily directly linked: one firm may invest in the soft skills of an apprentice, while another firm may reap the benefits while, later on, the first firm may benefit without having invested in that particular worker. Apprentices may, of course, also contribute right from the start to the firm – especially as they are usually paid only very meagre wages – but this is not a given. The overall benefits of the apprenticeship system are generated at the level of the cluster, and the irregular distribution of costs and benefits among individual firms make market allocation rather difficult. However, to be able to become officially certified as an architect in the Netherlands, an apprenticeship is mandatory (Heebels & Kloosterman, 2016). What has emerged is a bottom-up, organically grown system of apprenticeships resembling the pre-industrial guild system with its master-apprentice relationship (Banks, 2010; Epstein & Prak, 2008) and contributing to the reproduction of the localised pool of specialised labour – a crucial localisation economy (Kloosterman, 2008, 2010a). The stock of potential openings for apprenticeships is limited as became very clear during the downturn after 2008. The apprenticeship system in architectural design, therefore, displays the characteristics of a common pool resource: users (those who employ an architect after he or she has completed an apprenticeship) cannot be excluded while the use is rivalrous as the stock is subtractable.

The institutional set-up of this particular urban commons involves a hybrid of state-led regulation, informal arrangements among firms and a widely spread understanding of the long-term benefits of the apprenticeship system, probably partly based on the established architects own early career experiences.

Exchange of Knowledge

Innovative activities do not just thrive on the presence of talented workers, but they are also dependent on a more or less continuous exchange of all kinds of knowledge pertaining to stylistic and technological developments, to market and job opportunities, and, very prominently in cultural industries, to who is hot and who not. Clusters of related economic activities thus need conduits along which this embodied knowledge can be transferred. Much of this exchange in the architectural design cluster happens through workers moving from one architectural practice to another or setting up their own firm (Kloosterman, 2008). However, there are also other ways to exchange complex, context-dependent and topical knowledge. To put it somewhat more concretely: a cluster needs places or micro-spaces where workers can get together on a frequent basis and engage in conversations and identify the voice in the noise of the gossip (Kloosterman & Brandellero, 2016).

Our research has shown that architects of strong-idea firms in Amsterdam and Rotterdam do indeed frequently meet each other: “They often live within the same (cheap) apartment block in either Rotterdam or Amsterdam; go to the same lectures and also to parties of other architectural workers, and in many cases even have partners with the same background (mostly working for other practices)” (Kloosterman, 2008, p. 10). There is even a football competition for teams of Amsterdam- and Rotterdam-based architectural firms (www.archicup.nl/). These cluster-specific amenities fostering exchange of knowledge among workers in architectural design are then first and foremost bottom-up initiatives which then develop along path-dependent trajectories which are deeply intertwined with what Allen Scott (2000) calls “place-based communities”. These communities comprise both the institutionalised places to meet and talk and the social networks based on trust to exchange this knowledge. Again, the knowledge is “in the air” but touches down selectively in concrete places where concrete people meet in trustful settings. The resource of knowledge itself is part of the urban commons and, in principle both non-excludable and non-rivalrous, but access to it is dependent on some kind of membership to relevant social networks, making it in practice more excludable and rivalrous, but, without the establishment of property rights. As with the maintenance of some fishing stocks, the presence of a small community with a strong social network and shared social norms is conducive to the reproduction of the combination of amenities and trust that enables the sharing of knowledge (Ostrom, 1990/2011).

Dedicated Institutions

These informal institutions enabling the exchange of knowledge form an important part of the “dedicated local institutional infrastructure” which also comprises public-sector instigated and publicly funded, local educational institutions (e.g. the Berlage Institute, the Department of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University, etc.) which reproduce, transfer and create knowledge. There are also other, not necessarily local, institutions which underpin the functioning of architectural design in the Netherlands, and in Amsterdam and Rotterdam in particular, by fostering competitiveness (along path-dependent lines) through the stimulation of R&D, quality control and the promotion of trust and exports. The national, publicly funded grant system selects innovative projects from architects and gives travel and project grants. This way, an institutional infrastructure is established which creates the conditions for innovation in a sector dominated by small firms where slack time is usually hard to come by (Brandellero & Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman, 2008). The highly diversified system of architectural prizes and competitions is not just a sector-specific system of quality control, but also establishes linkages promoting social networks and trust involving architects, critics, juries, customers and media.

More generally, what we observe in the case of Dutch architectural design is that the agglomeration economies are deeply intertwined and embedded in a rich, diversified sectoral institutional framework which weaves together excludable and non-excludable, as well as rivalrous and non-rivalrous resources. It is also an intricate combination of bottom-up, grass-roots initiatives; top-down state intervention; and formal and informal institutions. This lattice of relationships (Ostrom, 1990/2011) or, to use Bourdieu’s terminology (Bourdieu, 2000), this *field* links producers and customers through intermediaries and enables the dissemination and reproduction of a specific habitus regarding quality and aesthetics comprising many institutional arrangements and actors. Much of these relationships are higher order emergent effects and help the cluster to generate increasing returns and move the cluster along a path-dependent trajectory.

The high level of organisation and institutionalisation of the field of Dutch architectural design, it can be argued, is also related to the *certification* of architects (Heebels & Kloosterman,

2016). The primary aim of professional certification is to set a minimum level of skill and knowledge for a certain profession: “with certification, any person can perform the relevant tasks, but the government or generally another non-profit agency administers an examination and certifies those who have passed, as well as identifies the level of skill and knowledge for certification” (Kleiner, 2006). Clients and the wider society are then up to some extent protected against incompetent practitioners and this should encourage demand for the services of certified professionals. From a more neoliberal perspective, certification is a form of protection which reduces competition and hence drives up prices. One could also take a broader view and look at how certification through the requirement of a minimum level of skills and knowledge contributes to the formation of a dense, multifaceted field which can also act as a forum for strategic choice and action (Scott, 2000) with permanent deliberation on different levels. Such an institutional setting allows for nuanced, interactive processes of “voice reaction”, to quote Albert Hirschman (1992, p. 77), between practitioners, customers, educational institutions and others. In his view, success “of channelling individual voices requires members to join together, so that voice formation depends on the potential for collective action” (Hirschman, 1992, p. 79). These processes of collective deliberation may strengthen the lattice or field even further. Without these conduits for “the articulation and channelling of opinion”, actors face only two choices which are characteristic of the economic realm and arm’s length market relations: go ahead with the deal or exit.

The relevance of architectural design for cities transcends that of merely providing employment and generating income. Using the communication channels that the field provides and by shifting the set of skills and knowledge that the certification of the profession stipulates, wider societal issues such as sustainability and liveability of cities which are related to the quality of the built environment and, therefore, to the quality of architectural design, may also be furthered (Heathcote, 2017; Heebels & Kloosterman, 2016).

Conclusions

We are, it could be argued, entering a new, though not necessarily brave, uncharted world regarding governance and public policies. The shortcomings of the relentless drive towards commodification and enlargement of the realm of market allocation excluding poorer segments of society from key services and even leading to debasing the very meaning and function of certain institutions essential for capitalism (e.g. rating agencies, reproduction of labour) have become very manifest. Social polarisation (Milanovic, 2016), growing uncertainty, environmental degradation and climate change, and, more generally, an erosion of trust in institutions and society at large are undermining the political stability of many societies. Populist revolts may threaten the rule of law and the very foundations of society. Notwithstanding the nostalgic views that some may have regarding the role of the state in Western countries during the “trente glorieuse” (the glorious 30 years from 1945 to 1975), there is no way back to post-war *dirigiste* statist policies. On the one hand, societies have become too fragmented, individualised and inserted in a myriad of global linkages to be governed in the way of the post-war reconstruction years. States, on the other hand, have seen their powers decline due to years of austerity and to their shrinking tax base as firms and rich people are transferring their money to offshore tax havens. Still, it is imperative that we find ways to protect and maintain common pool resources which underpin the social, economic and ecological sustainability of cities. To safeguard and enhance the quality of cities – “...simultaneously the most fragile of political achievements and the most necessary” (Mazower, 2017) – new forms of collective action and governance are needed. “How the commons can bring about a more ecologically sustainable, humane society”

in order “to build human spaces in which the local, the distinctive, and the historical matter” is a concern David Bollier (2015, p. 2, p. 15) tries to address in his critique.

Above, an attempt was made to probe into how a competitive, knowledge-intensive activity is embedded in a wider framework which allows the generation of a whole array of resources which are out there, beyond the establishment of property rights. The window of entry, accordingly, has not been place- but sector-oriented. On the one hand, this has allowed a more focused identification of how the institutional framework may contribute to the emergence of agglomeration economies. On the other, this is inevitably a rather narrow approach and cities are, of course, much more than sets of economic activities and are confronted with issues which are much broader and more daunting than the competitiveness of one particular cultural industry. However, there are more general lessons to be drawn from this particular case study.

A first lesson is that the generation of localisation economies – a pool of resources specifically for one set of economic activities – depends on a complex interplay of public and private actors with the former creating a broader framework in which the latter with bottom-up initiatives are able to thrive in an organic, interactive way. Secondly, the long-term development of such a shared political space is crucial in creating an effective field or lattice of relationships that is finely tuned and capable of enabling the creation of resources which are not provided through market allocation. Thirdly, it seems that it is not just that the provision falls outside the scope of market allocation, it also appears that crucial actors are motivated not just or primarily by profit maximisation but are intrinsically motivated to contribute to the field. Fourthly, the complexity and the significance of unintended emergent effects (second/third and higher order) and inevitable lack of knowledge of each individual actor makes targeted (instrumentalist) interventions difficult. This ties in with Willem Salet’s view on institutional thinking: provide condition, focus on general norms rather than goals and solutions (see Salet, 2018 and Chapter 1 in this volume).

According to Allen Scott (2012, pp. 162–163) “... the continuation of capitalist society depends not only on individual action coordinated by markets, but also on wider institutions with the capacity and legitimacy to deal with the multiple breakdowns, failures, and lost opportunities that would inevitably undermine the viability of capitalism if individual decision-making and action alone were to prevail”. What we now urgently need is a research agenda focusing on forms of collective action which are suitable for advanced urban economies thriving on knowledge and global linkages.

Notes

- 1 I owe this example to Jochem de Vries.
- 2 I am referring here not just to Allen Scott’s book, *A World in Emergence*, but also to the lecture he gave on urban commons in Vienna, 26 August 2016, and I am much indebted to his insights.
- 3 This contribution is part of *The Urban Commons and Culture*, a larger research programme.

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