Learning to Live Together: Humans, Cars, and Kerbs in Solidarity

Guillermo Fernández-Abascal
Urtzi Grau

Uncommoning the City

Tomás Sánchez Criado

Portrayed as ideal for the optimisation and further articulation of urban needs and demands, the "smart city" has gathered as many advocates as it has inspired furious critiques. Its detractors see it as a vehicle for the expansion of free market capitalism and the advent of totalitarianism in city management. Indeed, many fear that the deployment of devices like sensors and algorithmic modes of government such as the ones administering late capitalist corporations might result in a certain "black mirror"-ification of city processes.[1]

I would like to go beyond this criticism and focus on the sometimes-under-theorised aspect of smart cities. Amidst a renewal of planning visions searching to upgrade the urban fabric, the different projects presented under this 'smart' rubric have reinvigorated a cybernetic functionalist ontology by treating complex and heterogeneous processes of urban assembling[2] as a single "urban text." That is, the idea that what we are dealing with is "a" city whose constitutive diversity and practices can be rendered into a single phenomenon that 'we can decode or interpret'.[3]

Many of these urban visions, in which cities are brought together by atmospheric sensors and responsive technologies, might be read as a retro perpetuation of what has been called "networked urbanism"[4]: an urban planning dream as much as a techno-political ideal where infrastructure—traffic lights, roads, public transportation, sidewalks, policies, etc.—would bring the city together as a "common ground." A unified whole whose actors and procedures are rendered legible and coordinated by a vast array of standards and gadgets.

What if, then, rather than trying to contribute to urban unity, contemporary urban planners and designers relearnt, through different techniques and procedures (algorithmic, sensor-based, DIY or otherwise), to be affected by what anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena refers to as "the Complex We"?[5] In other

words, the processes whereby cities are treated not as places of homogeneity but of divergence. Across the globe, people have repeatedly taken to the streets in different urban revolts: Hong Kong, Minneapolis, Santiago de Chile or Barcelona, Quito, Portland and Paris. Although there are sometimes interconnected discourses or common circumstances, the motives and causes of these revolts are manifold and nuanced, making it difficult, perhaps, to find a common thread.

Some of these protests articulate demands—be they for alternative ways of living or fraught struggles for relevance— whilst others are gatherings of outbursts, attempts at finding meaning in the face of oblivion or desperate cries of rage against indifference, perhaps even staging a fragment of the violence they might have suffered. More often than not the only commonality they share could be summarised by the felicitous slogan originally projected by a Chilean on a building in late 2019, which has since gone global: 'We cannot go back to normal, because normal was the problem.'

It might be too easy to dismiss the very simple element that many of these protests display: the urban condition in which they operate. During these protests, the streets' urban elements are either turned into supports of these revolts—as a barricade, shelter, or throw-away cobblestone—or canvases and stages. Also smart urban devices—given their connection to contemporary modes of urban government—have, indeed, been the object of several contentious discussions. For instance, Hong Kong's and Chile's riots protesters took down intelligent lampposts—carrying CCTV and infrared cameras and a wide variety of other sensors—and attempted to block drones to defend their "right to opacity,"[6] refusing to be captured on screen by the cybernetic government.

What if these recent uprisings were no less than a recurrent mode of revolting against the lasting principle of networked urbanism, which takes on a new form in data-driven algorithmic urban governance, or the so-called 'smart cities', and casts a unifying gaze over urbanites and their gestures, movements, and behaviors? Rather than just attempting to improve infrastructure and network the city so as to build a common citizenship project—struggling for recognition, for a better concertation of already-known differences or to make visible the invisible—these protests are also mobilising DIY "sensors" to show alternative versions of what matters, hence highlighting a wide range of alternative urban sensitivities,[7] pointing towards a project that I would like to call here "uncommoning the (smart) city".

Uncommoning the city is an explicit attempt to undo the supposed commonalities of inhabitants that are taken as the foundations of city-making practice. Most of the discourse around public spaces is exclusionary, projecting a hegemonic civility and polite urbanity of an undiversified "we". As philosopher Josep Rafanell i Orra states, what many of these revolts signal is that 'rather than learning to live in the ruins ... the point is ruining the project of the world's unification.'[8] At a time of many social democratic pleas to reinstate public infrastructure as the foundation for social cohesion and social rights after their decades-long neoliberal decay, this statement is very much in line with The Invisible Committee's view of infrastructures of connectivity as a new type of logistical power,[9] or what Keller Easterling calls *extrastatecraft*.[10]

What is at stake here—rather than whether or not we will have automated cars driving us around or drones serving us food—is being able to make our milieus accommodate many forms of urban divergence. Remaining open to the many unknowns these forms of urban divergence entail might allow us to witness a different city, what I wish to call *an*

uncommon city. "Uncommon" here refers to the divided and fragmented effects of modernist urbanism, which, when not violently crushing divergence as a form of "otherness", dismisses it, but also, and more importantly, refers to the unexpected and inspiring possible cities looming in the background. The city of rejected and inappropriate humans and other-than-humans that come back with a vengeance, not just in spectacular violent revolts, but also in ambient forms of volatile violence:[11] a specter, a phantom, an alteration or, better, an act of urban divergence.

This is a city that is as much a hologrammatic projection and figure of the imagination as it is the lived and practised city of those actors who tend to remain invisible, uncounted and living on the margins, at the gates of urbanity. Their main project is to open the city up to alternative ontologies of what is and what matters, and to hide from its totalizing gaze by crafting forms of opacity to protect themselves in dimmed light. In an uncommon city there lies a project of communisation or making common that doesn't depart from clear-cut "common grounds"—urban, bodily or otherwise—but from the iridescent wealth of possibilities that the unknown (what has been left out, the opaque, and what cannot be known for sure) has to bring us together.

An uncommon city of the unknown "us," always in the making: fragile and volatile, and always on the verge of disappearing amidst the infrastructural violence of expert and identity-driven modes of articulating our togetherness. Resting on such unsteady grounds, an uncommon city, hence, is a concern many actors—not just classic experts—might seek to elicit, enact and make viable. An uncommon city, thus, always appears whenever some seek to materialise alternative forms of the urban beyond those of unified infrastructures. The uncommon city of those who realise that, although infrastructures have the power to separate and divide, they

do so often without enacting powerlessness and defeat. The uncommon city, hence, of those who feel entitled to activate their diverse knowledge and practices to invent and experiment with fraught modes of togetherness.[12]

As I see it, in these particularly fraught times of ours—with new totalitarian divides and unprecedented more-than-human challenges for urban life, in the midst of a pandemic that is taking a toll on many exposed urban inhabitants—perhaps rather than dreaming of smart city arrangements that could manage this mess, it is now more important than ever to try and materialise uncommon cities everywhere: By generating ecologies of support,[13] we can offer the possibility of not only thriving in cities of undeniable violence but also of envisioning urban forms where we could attempt to relate to one another, even at the edges of unrelatability.

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6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. A. Lingis* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 214.

7. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 190, 208, 260. See also Gilles Deleuze, and Claire Parnet, "A Conversation: What Is It? What Is It For?," *Dialogues II,* (New York: Continuum, 2002): 33.

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4. Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities, and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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1. *How I Started Hanging out with Home.* Space Popular. MAGAZIN Gallery, Vienna. 2018.

2. Space Popular - Lara Lesmes y Fredrik Hellberg, "Hoovers, not Hoomans," *DUE*, http://due.aaschool.ac.uk/spacepopular/

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5. Authors note: the dimensional approach to audio that mimics the way we hear in real life.

6. High Fidelity, https://www.highfidelity.com/

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Bios

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Hamish McIntosh is an emerging photographer living and working in Sydney, Australia. His practice explores urbanism, the built environment and the relationship between photography and architecture. His works include *Quality, Control* and collaborations with practices such as Supercontext and Common Office. Hamish completed his Bachelor of Photography (Honours) at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Marina Otero Verzier is an architect based in Rotterdam. The director of research at Het Nieuwe Instituut, she leads research initiatives such as "Automated Landscapes" and "BURN-OUT: Exhaustion on a planetary scale." Since September 2020, Marina also holds the position of Head of the Social Design Masters at Design Academy Eindhoven. She has co-edited *Unmanned: Architecture and Security Series* (2016), *After Belonging: The Objects, Spaces, and Territories of the Ways We Stay In Transit* (2016), and *Work, Body, Leisure* (2018), *Architecture of Appropriation* (2019), *More-than-Human* (2021). Her PhD thesis "Evanescent Institutions," examined the emergence of a new paradigm for cultural institutions.

Tomás Sánchez Criado is Senior Researcher at the Chair of Urban Anthropology and Director of the Stadtlabor of Multimodal Anthropology, Humboldt-University of Berlin. Working at the crossroads of Anthropology and STS, he has developed a particular concern around how bodily diversity comes to matter in the knowledge, material and care politics of participatory city-making. He is currently working on a book project, *An Uncommon City: Bodily Diversity and the Activation of Possible Urbanisms*, drawing from ethnographic and archival materials from the city of Barcelona as well as his experiments in architectural design studio projects in Germany. He has also been experimenting with different forms of public engagement, ethnography and pedagogy in other projects pivoting around technoscientific activisms and the democratization of urban knowledges. He recently co-edited *Experimental Collabora-tions: Ethnography through Fieldwork Devices* (Berghahn, 2018) and *Re-learning design. Pedagogic experiments with STS in design studio courses* (DISEÑA, 2018).

Simone C Niquille is a designer and researcher based in Amsterdam NL. Her practice **Technoflesh** investigates the representation of identity & the digitisation of biomass in the networked space of appearance. She holds a BFA in Graphic Design from Rhode Island School of Design and an MA in Visual Strategies from the Sandberg Instituut Amsterdam. She teaches Design Research at ArtEZ University of the Arts Arnhem and is Chief Information Officer at Design Academy Eindhoven. She is a 2016 Fellow of Het Nieuwe Instituut Rotterdam and is recipient of the talent development grant by The Creative Industries NL 2016/2017. SCN is commissioned contributor to the Dutch Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale. Currently she is researching the use of digital capture technology for evidence production with the long term project Parametric Truth.

Brenton Alexander Smith is an Australian artist whose practice focuses on the intimate relationships between humans and technology, creating works that aim to elicit an affective response: his works are unnerving, yet sentimental. In his projects, Smith works across mediums both digital and tangible, often combining both sculptural and video elements into immersive installations. One of his key concerns is addressing cultural anxieties around technology: his works reflect this by turning attention towards machinic detritus, lending it human-like qualities and expressions.

Space Popular is directed by **Lara Lesmes** and **Fredrik Hellberg**, both graduates from the Architectural Association in London (2011). They founded the practice in Bangkok (2013) and have been based in London since 2016. The studio has completed buildings, exhibitions, public artworks, furniture collections, and interiors across Asia and Europe, as well as virtual architecture in the Immersive Internet. Lesmes and Hellberg have taught architectural design studio since 2011, first at INDA, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and since 2016 at the Architectural Association in London. Their current MArch course investigates visions for civic architecture in the virtual realm.