

Urban Imaginaries of Co-creating the City: Local Activism Meets Citizen Peer-Production

Carlos Estrada-Grajales*

Urban Informatics Research Lab
Queensland University of Technology

Marcus Foth

QUT Design Lab
Queensland University of Technology

Peta Mitchell

Digital Media Research Centre
Queensland University of Technology

ABSTRACT

Urban activist groups challenge the status quo in city governance and demand their 'right to the city' as city co-producers. The specific forms in which such movements engage, plan and activate different participation mechanisms to contest local dominant power structures and governance practices are not well understood yet. Scholarship on the topic has mostly gravitated around the structural influence of private corporations and governments, as well as their role in the global urban crisis as the rationale for socio-economic interventions in urban governance. Yet, the dominant belief remains for local governments to remain in sole control of city futures. The aim of this study is to examine citizen demands for new dynamics of engagement and participation in decision-making mechanisms that co-produce the city. We present Right to the City – Brisbane as a case study of an activist organisation aligned to these citizen-led demands for more agency in local governance. An ethnographic approach involving participant observations, in-depth interviews and analysis of social media and printed media identified the urban imaginaries produced by Right to the City – Brisbane. The objective was to understand how group members construct a narrative of their struggles against exclusion practiced by government agencies and private developers, as well as of their visions and desires for shaping the future of Brisbane. We found that this activist group engages with the city and residents through playful practices, envisions a fair and sustainable city, and crafts a future of Brisbane privileging a DIY activist approach. This study concludes that a citizen-led peer-produced urbanism, based on methodologies that relate directly to citizen needs and desires, constitutes a valuable contribution for expanding and reshaping urban governance policies and practices in modern cities.

Keywords

Urban imaginaries, Right to the city, Activism, Peer-production, City co-production, Civic engagement, Political participation

* Correspondent author details

INTRODUCTION

2016 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Henri Lefebvre's (1996) concept of *le droit à la ville*, or the 'Right to the City.' Lefebvre coined the phrase in 1967, but the book that bore the concept as its title was not published until the following year—a year that, in France, saw massive social upheaval and widespread protests, strikes, and occupations of public and private spaces and institutions. Half a century later, Lefebvre's call for a shift in the ways citizens engage in urban governance is experiencing a resurgence all over the globe. In the last decade, critical urban theorists (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2012; Harvey, 2012), and a spate of citizen movements challenging the status quo in city governance, have demonstrated the renewed relevance of the concept. Social movements such as the Tunisian Revolution (Zemni, 2017), the Movimento dos Sem Teto da Bahia – MSTB – (Belda-Miquel, Peris Blanes, & Frediani, 2016), and Indignados in Spain (Postill, 2014), are based on the right of citizens to reshape the city according to their need and desires.

Despite the significance of 'Right to the City,' both as a concept and as a social movement, scholarly literature on urban studies and social movements has focussed mostly on understanding both the roles of private corporations and governments as regulators of social and economic activities in the city, and the justifications for their interventions (Fujita, 2013; James, Thompson-Fawcett, & Hansen, 2015; Weaver, 2016). Approaches from critical urban theorists (Marcuse, 2012; Mayer, 2012) have emphasised the urgency of investigating the specificity of citizen-based endeavours, such as 'Right to the City' and others claiming citizen co-ownership, for understanding how these organisations contest top-down urban power structures and governance-beyond-the-state practices (Swyngedouw, 2005), and generate 'participatory urbanism' (Foth, Brynskov, & Ojala, 2015) and 'urban policies of the inhabitant' (Purcell, 2002).

The underlying significance of understanding citizen responses to the contemporary urban crisis relies on the shifting role of citizens from passive residents to city co-creators. To investigate this shifting role in the context of Right-to-the-City-inspired urban activism, this paper focuses on a local organisation, namely Right to the City – Brisbane, that actively practises different forms of peer-production of the city by activating strategies for spatial appropriation, innovative protest, political participation, and citizen empowerment. Since its formation in 2015, Right to the City – Brisbane has consolidated an agenda against gentrification, the shortage of affordable housing, private development and marginalisation of citizens from decision-making mechanisms in Brisbane, Australia ("[Right to the City Brisbane.](#)" n.d.). In this paper, we present an ethnographic account of the organisation's principles, actions and agendas. We use Harvey's ("[David Harvey: The Right to the City,](#)" September-October 2008, p. 1) questions about "what kind of city [...] what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire" in order to examine how Right to the City – Brisbane conducts local activism and engages citizens in the peer-production of Brisbane.

The paper first outlines a threefold literature discussion about how citizens shift their roles from passive residents to peer-producers of the city in the context of urban crises, the Right to the City concept, and

the production of imaginaries ([Cinar & Bender, 2007](#); [Silva, 2012](#); [Westwood, 1997](#)) as narrative mechanisms in citizen-centred urbanism. Second, we outline our methodological approach describing our epistemological approach and expanding on the research method we use for collecting and analysing the data. Third, we present and discuss our findings focusing in three sections related with how Right to the City – Brisbane engages, and crafts the city. Finally, we present our research conclusions.

Our ethnographic approach to the Right to the City – Brisbane community included attending tactical interventions, community forums, and rallies in public space, as well as an analysis of Right to the City – Brisbane interactions in social media channels. Expanding the scope of online and offline ethnographic studies in the field of citizen-based urbanism, our contribution aims at mapping local responses to neoliberal policies in this particular city. Our analysis of Right to the City – Brisbane urban imaginaries produced evidence hinting at more innovative, strategic and inclusive governance models for citizen peer-production of the city.

NEW MEANS FOR CITIZEN PEER PRODUCTION OF CITIES

Cities are more than built spaces: they are historical, social and political products. When applying Lefebvre's trialectic lens ([Soja, 1998](#)) to understand how cities are produced, one can argue that specific cities are the result of how certain individuals, organisations and authorities conceive the urban space, how the urban space becomes a system of signs conditioning residents perceptions, and how such conceived and perceived space is experienced and practised every day by citizens in general ([Lefebvre, 1991](#); [Stewart, 1995](#)).

The processes that socially produce cities are embedded in a constant power struggle among a number of agents with different levels of leverage ([Harvey, 2012](#)). The ongoing influence of capitalism in political decision-making ([Harvey, 2003a](#); [Weaver, 2016](#)) is being expressed by globalised neoliberal practices in urban governance under the umbrella of what has been named by urban theorists as urban crisis ([Weaver, 2016](#)). An array of social and political effects, including the rise the levels of inequality and unequal wealth distribution ([Forum, n.d.](#); "[Global Economic Inequality](#)," n.d.), the increasing of disenfranchisement in lay citizens ([Purcell, 2002](#)), and the emerging of authoritarian regimes ([Swyngedouw, 2000](#)), have been utilised by local governments to justify political and economic interventions in cities ([Weaver, 2016](#)). Neoliberal governance practices decrease democratic mechanisms for citizen participation in the process of shaping cities ([Aarsæther, Nyseth, & Bjørnå, 2011](#); [Castells, 1986](#); [Falk, 2000](#); [James et al., 2015](#)). Swyngedouw for instance, labels the direct influence of 'private economic actors' as an example of governance-beyond-the-state - i.e., "horizontally organised and polycentric ensembles in which power is dispersed" ([2005, p. 1992](#)), to interrogate neoliberal governance practices and how they limit both democratic principles and citizen empowerment. This is the context in which citizen-led movements, particularly Right to the City, have emerged in recent years as genuine reactions to the marginalisation of citizen agency in the process of co-producing the city ("[Right to the City](#)," n.d., "[Right to the City Brisbane](#)," n.d.).

Despite the threat that neoliberal governance agendas pose for citizen-led engagement and participation avenues, urban residents are finding innovative ways to co-produce cities. Regardless of the risks of perpetuating the conditions of capitalism as the dominant socio-economic system – i.e., the use of media architecture and social media channels as apparatuses of consumerism and neoliberal ideological spreading ([Estrada-Grajales, Mitchell, Caldwell, Yang, & Johnstone, 2015](#)); the negative impacts in the construction of community sense and social interaction in physical spaces ([Carr, 2011](#); [Lanier, 2010](#); [Putnam, 2001](#)); the exacerbation of power imbalances generated by uneven conditions of citizens' digital access and literacy ([Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011](#); [Leszczynski, 2014](#)) – there are examples of how urban residents use different technologies to engage in civic matters ([Foth, Schroeter, & Anastasiu, 2011](#); [H. Klaebe & Foth, 2007](#); [H. G. Klaebe, Foth, Burgess, & Bilandzic, 2007](#)). Citizen appropriation of digital tools, as well as the reorientation of strategic organisation schemes in response to the effect of global urban crises, have fuelled the emergence of citizen attempts to claim their rights to the city and being more informed agents in the process of co-producing it..

Digital technologies and new forms of civic organisation reshape the forms in which urban residents understand and interact with their cities ([Brynskov et al., 2014](#); [Schroeter, 2012](#)), and by extension redefine the power struggles that underlie urban governance ([Houghton, 2014](#)). By using tech-based tools ([Foth et al., 2011](#)) and *vis-a-vis* mechanisms ([Mayer, 2012](#)), citizens, both individually ([Cranshaw, Schwartz, Hong, & Sadeh, 2012](#)) or as part of activist movements ([Postill, 2014](#); [Rekow, 2015](#)) transform their role from passive residents to city co-producers ([Foth et al., 2015](#)). The shift in the way urban governance is challenged by bottom-up approaches ([Iveson, 2013](#)), enables citizens to pursue common goals in a decentralised form, to aggregate a multitude of civic motivations, and to transform the purposes of the common good and public service. Citizens, then, appropriate, reimagine and execute forms of civic intelligence ([Schuler, De Cindio, & De Liddo, 2015](#)) and city peer-production ([Benkler, 2013](#); [Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006](#); [Benkler, Shaw, & Hill, 2013](#)) responding to the limitations brought by the social and political effects of urban crises, and most importantly, to co-create their cities.

RIGHT TO THE CITY : CITIZEN RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

Among the world-wide spate of citizen-led movements responding to the diminishing of political engagement and participation opportunities brought by the so-called urban crisis, the Right to the City has called the attention of critical urban theorists as it challenges the status quo in city governance. For instance, Harvey ([2012](#)), Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer ([2012](#)), and Purcell ([2003](#)) have emphasised the relevance of these movements as they contest top-down urban power structures, and generate participatory urbanism ([Foth et al., 2015](#)), and urban policies of the city inhabitant ([Purcell, 2002](#)). Although Lefebvre ([1996](#)) coined the concept of Right to the City, both as a political motto and as an academic concept contextualised in the student movements in the decade of 1960 in Paris, the relevance for framing citizen-led socio-spatial demands on the city still pertinent today. By unpacking the concept of Right to the City and understanding its appropriations in activist movements in different

localities, one can examine how citizens challenge contemporary manifestations of the urban crisis, shifting their role from docile residents to engaged co-creators of the city.

The concept of Right to the City implies four principles ([Purcell, 2002](#)). First, the concept *redefines* the city, transforming it from a collection of physical features in space ([Mattern, 2017](#)), to a scenario for social and political encounters and interactions ([Schmid, 2012](#)). This redefinition hints at a decentralisation of the expert knowledge (e.g., city planners and developers) that shapes cities under the neoliberal agenda, contesting in this way traditional schemes of urban planning and governance ([Arnold, Gibbs, & Wright, 2003](#); [Irvin & Stansbury, 2004](#)). Such decentralisation of the expert knowledge redefines and questions who are the legitimate authorities entitled to define the city. Second, Right to the City refers to the principle of *appropriation*, which implies the opening of spatial use of the city, as well of the access to its facilities and services currently privileging a small number of urban actors. Appropriation also refers to a restructuration of the neoliberal governmentality, in other words, the rationality and the mechanisms of power in urban governance, which exclude and disenfranchise certain urban populations. Lastly, and recalling its connection with spatial production, the principle of appropriation also refers to the capacity of citizens to control the means for producing a city that meets their needs and dreams ([Purcell, 2003](#)). Third, Right to the city means a new conception of the principle of citizen *participation*, implying a deep change in current forms of decision-making in cities. This principle reformulates the representational democracy pillars, as it aims to empower citizens as direct authorities of political and spatial decisions of their cities. Right to the City stands for a collective emphasis of citizenship in urban governance, which demarcates the principle of *co-production*. Under this principle, the right to shape the city shifts from the liberal definition of citizenship – i.e., passport holders of any given nation – to a collective affiliation of residence earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city” ([Purcell, 2002, p. 102](#)). Co-producing the city, then, celebrates and encourages diversity and the ‘wealthy knowledges’ ([Foth et al., 2015](#)) that multiculturalism bring together in the city.

Activist movements embrace, challenge and adapt their position and views as city-makers under the principles of Right to the city, despite the uncertainty created as result of the implementation of neoliberal and shrinking democracy agendas in cities. Citizens reinvent the city, because the city is able to being imagined. However, the DIY mechanisms ([Iveson, 2013](#)) used by citizens to redefine, appropriate, participate, co-produce , and ultimately imagine the city are far from being dominant in the urban governance arena. In the context of urban crises, but also in moments where urban residents claim and use different resources for co-producing the city, becomes imperative to explore how such efforts engage, envision and crafts legitimate narratives ([Foth, Odendaal, & Hearn, 2007](#)) of their local struggles for obtaining more decisive leverage in the decision-making arena.

IMAGINING A CITIZEN-LED URBANISM: CITY-PRODUCTION IN FUTURE TENSE

Urban imaginaries, in the shape of oral stories, storytelling, poetry ([Odendaal, 2006](#)) and shared experiences, constitute a still unperceived, but enormously powerful material to be used in strategic community engagement and urban planning ([Collie, 2011](#)). As mechanisms to co-produce versions of the city based on citizen experiences, points of view and envisions of the future, urban imaginaries are the base of *DIY urbanism* ([Iveson, 2013](#)) and *civic urbanism* ([Silva, 2012](#)). They are then, citizen strategies to co-produce the city as lived urban space ([Westwood, 1997](#)).

Cities are the ever-fluctuating product of a complex array of forces, including social, political, and imaginative ones, that operate both from the top down and the bottom-up. In this sense, cities are collective intentions and plans. For instance, the Right to the City alliance narrates how they were “born out of desire and need by organizers and allies around the country to have a stronger movement for urban justice. But it was also born out of the power of an idea of a new kind of urban politics that asserts that everyone, particularly the disenfranchised, not only has a right to the city, but as inhabitants, have a right to shape it, design it, and operationalize an urban human rights agenda” (“[Right to the City](#),” n.d., [sec. Mission](#)). In this example, the activist organisation proposes an alternative vision for the city based on shared values and principles. The city that these activist have in mind is then, shaped by their imagination. Cinar & Bender argue that the correlation between the material dimension of the city and the imaginary is expressed by “interactions, negotiations, and contestations yielding several competing narratives and images of the city that seek to give it a particular presence and identity” ([2007, p. xxi](#)).

Therefore, the city, as spatial phenomenon under constant process of redefinition, depends of the fluctuations of the collective imaginary, i.e., shared “individual perceptions and experiences of urban space” ([Kelley, 2013, p. 184](#)). However, although they refer simultaneously to physical urban features and “the space we experience in novels, films, poetry, architectural design, political government, and ideology.” ([Prakash & Kruse, 2008, p. 7](#)), cities are far from being spaces of consensus. As previously argued by Sassen ([1996](#)), cities comprise deep-rooted struggles for positioning cultural identity referents, governance models and political representation systems.

Although the concept of urban imaginaries has been explored as an alternative way to gain insights about urban cultures and their relation with city-planning ([Silva, 2003, 2012](#)), there are dominant perspectives in the field of planning inclined to hesitate the cost-benefit balance of participatory city-making and the type of datasets those produce. For instance, Irvin & Stansbury argue that “citizen participation may be ineffective and wasteful compared to traditional, top-down decision making under certain conditions” ([Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 62](#)). This is due to such dominant planning paradigms, mostly dominated by quantitative datasets, leave aside a rich universe of sources and opportunities for interchanging knowledge, co-producing urban space, and empowering citizens to be on top of transparent redistribution of power in local governance.

The concept of urban imaginaries aligns with Odendaal claims, as “an understanding of local conditions and sensitivity to local knowledge is, therefore, required. The access to this information is not necessarily through reports and documents, but may have to be gained through oral stories, storytelling, and poetry, for example” ([2006, p. 566](#)). Consequently, the emergence and establishment of urban imaginaries as

engine of city shaping and representation of the collective desire, reveals a complex imbalance of power among different urban stakeholders. Cultural geographers like Bailly ([1993](#)) and Schrank ([2008](#)) locate the problem of the production of urban imaginaries in the context of citizen political representation in relation with the symbolic relevance of places within the city. The practice of power in urban planning and governance, for example, illustrates how those who control the means of ideological production (e.g., government, private developers and media outlets), tend to impose not only particular forms of shaping the cityscape, but also, as argued by Wilson ([1998](#)), the narratives to socially legitimise them. In this paper, we propose understanding the concept of urban imaginaries as those verbal and visual narratives conveyed by Right to the City - Brisbane members in order to legitimise their cultural worldviews and political practices.

METHODOLOGY

We are interested in the production of citizen imaginaries as narrative schemes of interpretation of the urban life transformed into symbolic representations by the use of imagination ([Cinar & Bender, 2007](#)). As cities are collective productions ([Lefebvre, 1991](#)), citizen imaginaries are also a result of collectively generated visual and textual narratives that work as socio-spatial meaning generators ([Silva, 2003](#); [Westwood, 1997](#)). To study how local activist organisations claiming their right to the city are co-producing specific imaginaries, and therefore, engaging and participating in the process of shaping the city according to their needs and desires, we chose an ethnographic approach to examine this phenomenon. This decision, implies an understanding of ethnography not only as a research method or writing style, but also as a platform for knowledge production that enables “the understanding and representation of [human] experience; presenting and explaining the culture in which this experience is located, but acknowledging that experience is entrained in the flow of history” ([O’Reilly, 2012, p. 3](#)).

Considering an ethnographic approach for this study also entitles an understanding of citizen realities as result of the tension between global phenomena (e.g., globalisation and urban crisis) and its local manifestations (e.g., lack of civic engagement and political participation in decision-making in specific cities). As theoretical approaches in urban studies related to city production tend to be immensely broad and often fail in grasping local nuances of power struggles in urban governance ([Lopes de Souza, 2009](#)), embracing ethnographic approaches contributes to produce systematic empirical explorations of the tension between global trends in city governance, and the ways in which such trends are contested by citizens in local settings ([Brenner et al., 2012](#)).

We use the digital ethnography principles ([Pink et al., 2015](#)) to frame our ethnographic approach, as the everyday practices of Right to the City - Brisbane occur both in *vis-a-vis* and in digital domains. This means that:

- a. our research considers different forms of engaging with the digital and physical interactions that define the practice of Right to the City - Brisbane;

- b. although our research explores digitally mediated interactions of this activist organisation in social media channels, it is not necessarily considering those interactions as the centre of our enquiry;
- c. our study embraces openness as it considers a transparent interchange of knowledge between Right to the City – Brisbane and ourselves;
- d. our study involves a reflexive practice, as it recognises our own position as knowledge producers within a specific context of research; and,
- e. our ethnographic exploration relies on complementary data sources, including Facebook data scraping and a collection of printed media, in addition to traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observations and semi-structured interviews, aligning in this way with the multi-sited ethnographic paradigm ([Hannerz, 2003](#); [Marcus, 1995](#)).

As Right to the City – Brisbane exists and performs both in digital and *vis-a-vis* domains, and the production of their specific imaginaries of co-creation of the city revealed diverse communication channels and organised activities, we decided to conduct a non-local ethnographic exploration ([Feldman, 2011](#)) in order to illustrate how this group of activists appropriate, challenge and redefine through their practice the role of citizens in producing the city.

Research Methods & Techniques

Ethnographic participant observations

Since Right to the City – Brisbane schedules weekly meetings to organise group activities, work agendas and interventions in public space, we engaged in regular participant observations conducted over a period of six months, starting in October 2016. The average attendance in these ranged between 6-25 individuals, with equal presence of both male and female young people. Observations, which took place in different locations around the inner-southwestern suburbs of West End and Annerley, served the purpose of blending in and understanding the cultural context in which Right to the City – Brisbane imagines and co-produces the city. In specific, participant observations facilitated the identification of collective practices, routines and rituals, as well as remarkable social patterns and outstanding events within the group ([Wolfinger, 2002](#)). Fieldnotes were taken by hand during and right after weekly meetings, planning gatherings and interventions in public space organised by the activist group, and digitally converted. Although these observations enabled a systematic collection of descriptive fieldnotes ([Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011](#)) and printed media ([Hannerz, 2003](#)) produced by the activist organisation, participant observations did not constitute the only, nor the most relevant method for data collection.

Interviews

During participant observations, we identified Right to the City – Brisbane key members to approach them as potential interviewees, following a maximum variation sampling criteria i.e., considering their age, cultural background and the level of engagement within the activist organisation, their meetings, working sessions and other public events ([Teddlie & Yu, 2007](#)). We conducted 5 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 2 males and 3 females, ranging between 45-90 minutes long. The interviews were conducted strategically by the end of our fieldwork (March 2017). Interviews aimed to deepen research insights obtained from participant observations, and grasping different individual perceptions and experiences of group members in relation to their involvement in Right to the City – Brisbane engagement practices, visioning mechanisms and peer-production strategies ([DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006](#)). We chose to conduct the interviews after 6 months of engaging in participant observations within Right to the City – Brisbane, as the rapport and trust between participants and ourselves proved solid, and we could create the most comfortable conditions to open up a conversation with participants, rather than operating a strict interviewing protocol. In this sense, we followed an ethnographic interviewing technique, directing the conversation with the activist group members towards an interchange of knowledge between pairs and exploring “purposefully the meanings [participants] place on events in their worlds” ([Sherman Heyl, 2001, p. 369](#)).

Printed media

Right to the City – Brisbane produces an important amount of printed media in the shape of posters, flyers and zines. The activist group uses this tangible media to produce and reproduce their vision on specific issues occurring in the city, as well as disseminating information about the political principles they stand for, and the activities and interventions they organise in public space (Figure 1). Since “Media, personal or impersonal, seem to leave their mark on most multi-site studies” ([Hannerz, 2003, p. 212](#)), we considered that collecting and exploring printed material may provide us an opportunity to explore both a unique perspective of this group’s experience on peer-producing the city, and the verbal and visual narrative forms used to convey such experience. This approach to printed media as a vehicle to explore citizen imaginaries through verbal and visual sources, has been explored by Silva ([2003, 2012](#)) in his attempt for decoding the production of urban cultures in Latin American capital cities. By including a printed media in our dataset, we align to a definition of ethnographic work as a matter of ‘polymorphous engagements,’ that is “collecting data eclectically in many different ways from a disparate array of sources, attending carefully to popular culture, and reading newspapers and official documents” ([Gusterson, 1997](#)).

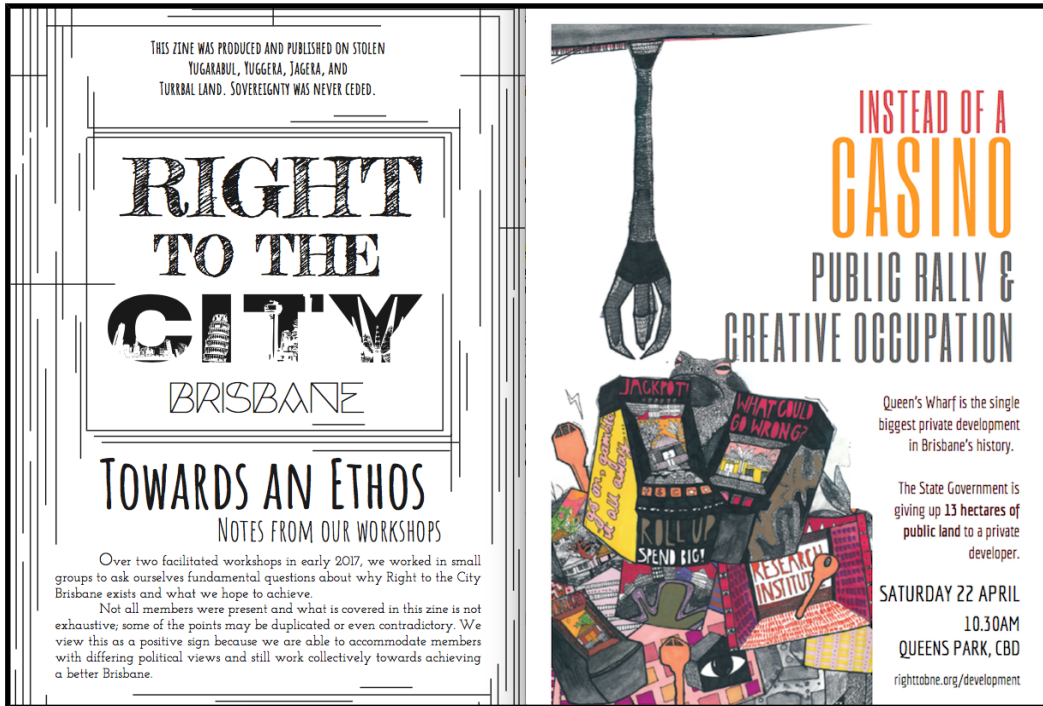


Figure 1. Examples of posters, flyers and zines printed and distributed by Right to the City – Brisbane

Digital traces

Throughout our engagement and participation in the social and political dynamics of Right to the City – Brisbane, we examined the affordances, uses and limitations of digital outlets ([Hine, 2000](#)) such as the group Facebook public site (facebook.com/righttothecitybrisbane). Rather than centring our ethnographic enquiry in the use of social media to accelerate activist communication ([Poell, 2014](#)), or exploring how social media has transformed the activist group as a form of digital collective intelligence ([Bastos & Mercea, 2015](#); [Schuler, 2009](#)), we took Right to the City – Brisbane facebook site as an extension of our participant observation and as a space for searching traces of how this activist group engages with broader audiences, envisions the future city, and activates mechanisms of co-creating of their urban space. The collection of this digital traces implied a manual scraping of Right to the City public Facebook posts, in which not only the activist group spreaded information about local events, but also engaged in discussions with Facebook users from other affiliations – although discussions with other users occurred less often during the time we scraped Facebook data.

Data analysis

Due to the diverse nature of our dataset, we based the analysis in ethnographic grounded theory criteria ([Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001](#)). The coding of the data, directly related to the research questions that

motivate this study, combined data pieces from all the described sources (i.e., participant observation fieldnotes, in-depth semistructured interviews, printed media collection, and Facebook scraping), and were given equal weight as significant traces of the narrative peer production of activist imaginaries. A grounded theory inspired approach to analyse our dataset enabled us to outline a more complete image of the study settings. It also provided us the opportunity to establish connections across the events, discourses, actors perceptions and our own take of the studied phenomenon. Likewise, we argue that conducting a grounded theory inspired analysis helped to compare and create emerging analytical categories from early stages of our research endeavour, which served the purpose of identifying emergent categories, refine these early ones and create new and unexpected connections across the dataset.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following, we present the major findings and discussions as a result of our data analysis with the aim of revealing the specific forms in which Right to the City – Brisbane engages, plans and activates different participation mechanisms to contest local dominant power structures and governance practices in the city. This section presents and discusses, first, how Right to the City – Brisbane engages with Brisbane citizens. Second, we explore how Right to the City – Brisbane envisions the city. Finally, we examine how Right to the City-Brisbane crafts the city.

How Right to the City – Brisbane engages with citizens?

Feeding on citizen frustrations

Right to the City – Brisbane is publicly presented as a collective in which “we [can] exercise our rights to shape our city. From communal gardens to public housing – residents, not capital, shape our city” ([“Right to the City - Brisbane - About,” n.d.](#)). The group feeds from some Brisbane residents discontent and frustration caused by the perceived low impact of their decisions and opinions in the processes of urban planning and local governance. As pointed out by Osborne (2016), “A key driver of this new urban politics in Brisbane is an entrenched cynicism towards mainstream urban governance, which is seen as corruptible, profit-centric to the exclusion and harm of all other interests, and inhibiting our ability to attend to our responsibilities to the environment and to each other.” The group, then, stands as a unique activist scenario for citizen-led urbanism. The reflections and practices around citizens rights and agency in the process of decision-making in the city represent a major motivator for the group members to voluntarily joining in. One of the participants explained his motivations to join the group:

P1: There was a missing gap in Brisbane’s activist landscape. Of course there were people addressing environmental issues, and Unions defending workers rights. There were also [activist] organisations

working around [urban] planning, [all of them] playing by the rules of the state power but not challenging it in terms of citizens rights and control over urban planning.

Right to the City – Brisbane is an activist grassroots organisation that presents itself as politically independent and citizen-oriented, albeit in its origins was tied to Jonathan Sri’s successful campaign for a seat in Brisbane City Council in March 2016 ([Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016](#)). The closeness and influence of Councillor Sri, although perceived as a potential risk in terms of the group independence – even with accusations of Right to the City – Brisbane to be an ‘astroturf’ group (Figure 2), is defended by its members as a positive feature, because it represents an innovative form of doing politics standing *vis-a-vis* with the electorate and including lay citizens in simple decision-making processes, such as local participatory budgeting (Figure 3).

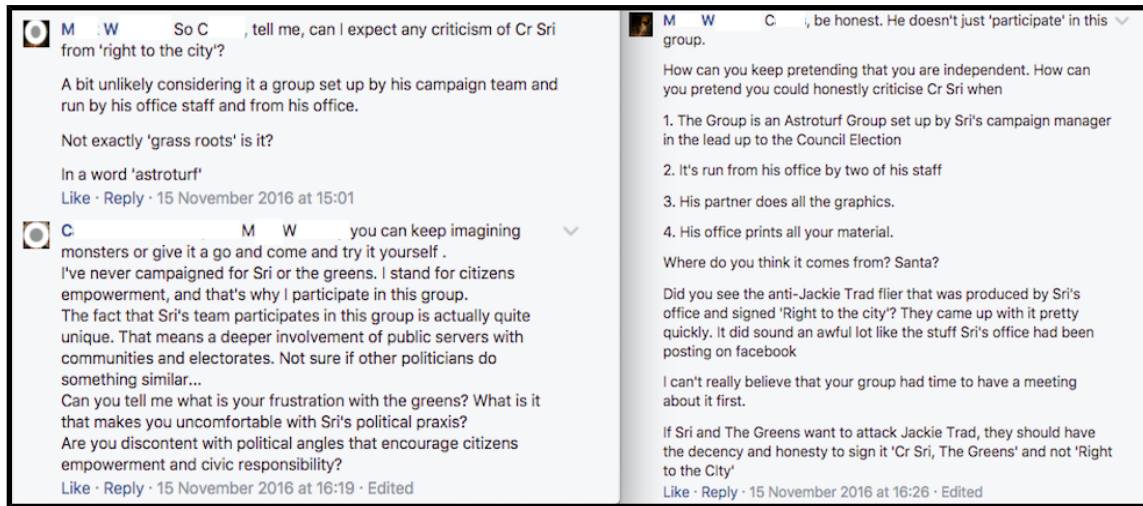


Figure 2. Conversation between MW, a frequent Right to the City – Brisbane Facebook troll, and C, member of the group. MW accuses the group of being an astroturf organisation, blindly favouring Councillor Sri’s political agenda.

Part of the discontent that drove many Right to the City – Brisbane members to get together under the movement pointed at the lack of democratic opportunities for citizens to engage, participate and decide about how to build the future city. The democratic reduction experienced by the group members, refers ultimately to a drastic concentration of decision-making power by city authorities, their incapability to redistribute such power in realistic ways, and the ‘tokenistic’ and opportunistic political practices that make the electorate feel manipulated. When asked about their impression on how Brisbane authorities performed in terms of governance practices, one participant commented:

P4: Brisbane City Council has a very thin veneer of democracy. Most decision-making is very hierarchical and centralised. In terms of consulting directly with citizens, [BCC councillors] are very tokenistic and shallow, and most important, [consultation] only appears around election times. That’s when you see [councillors] conduct consultation meetings, deploying surveys that are all predetermined.



Figure 3. A facebook invitation for urban residents to engage in participatory budgeting workshops organised by Councillor Jonathan Sri.

Politics doesn't have to be boring

Being playful and having fun and making friends describe three of the Right to the City – Brisbane engagement mechanisms. Through play, Right to the City – Brisbane members represent, criticise and challenge the values of current political practices. An example is illustrated by the staging of a satirical wedding between a corrupted politician and a greedy developer (Figures 4 & 5). The wedding was a playful way to denounce the alarming influence of private corporations in local development decisions. Using satire, Right to the City – Brisbane conducts a strong criticism of the current state of power relations in Brisbane governance without necessarily being obligated to point out any particular names

or starting legal allegations against public servers. Choi (2010) Seoul, Korea – argues that play is a ‘liminal’ activity situated between imagination and reality, and also between the margins of social pressure and individual freedom. Given this, the group uses play as a powerful alternative to execute reciprocal, ethical control over the local authorities who hold the power of shaping Brisbane.



Figure 4. Satiric wedding between a corrupted politician and a greedy developer.

Right to the City – Brisbane members are guided by ‘having fun’ as one of the most important outcomes of their engagement with the serious topic of local politics. When describing what makes Right to the City different to other activist groups in Brisbane, one participant referred to the happy group atmosphere as a determinant factor for new members to remain:

P3: When T and his boyfriend joined Right to the City – Brisbane, was because we co-organised one of the Free University sessions at the Bearded Lady, you know, that dancing bar in Boundary [Street]. When they saw that we were talking about serious shit in a non conventional site, when they saw that everyone could participate, and specially when they saw us having fun and laughing, they couldn't resist and have been with us since then.



Figure 5. Politics doesn't have to be boring.

Having fun goes beyond being just a recruitment practice. As described by another participant, having fun involves a distinct way to understand social interactions as part of the social transformation that the city requires to become a place of encounters (Lefebvre, 1996). This explains why Right to the City – Brisbane conduct their activities and interventions around creating social atmospheres that inspire happiness and social interactions. As argued by one participant when asked by the nature of Break the Boundary, an *impromptu* carnival organised by the group which occupied Russell Street, West End, on September 2016:

P2: With a normal protest you have around hundred people united under one idea. That's great, but nobody knows each other. We wanted [with Break the boundary] to create the conditions for people to encounter, to experience each other, to socialise.

Camaraderie is also one of the defining mechanisms Right to the City – Brisbane employs for engagement. In our first encounter with the group, we registered in our field notes: “Sitting around a table on the ground level, there were a bunch of young people mostly in their late twenties. In a matter of 10 minutes after my arrival, the group got bigger in numbers (around 20 people in total). It captured my attention that there were only two people, a couple, in their fifties. Before the ‘serious’ conversation got started, people had time to talk to each other. Most of the attendees ordered beer from the bar. I engaged in a couple of placid chit chats with strangers” (Field Note 29/09/2016). There are two elements to highlight in this note. First, Right to the City – Brisbane is an organisation that attracts and gets defined mostly by young people from a particular age-segment. Second, members encourage socialisation as a relaxed mechanism to start serious conversations about their political practice. These two characteristics revealed a unique feature of the group engagement practices, i.e., the use of friendship as a cohesive and meaningful form of structuring the organisation. By relying on friendship, the group not only increases local solidarities – what has been described by [\(Landau, 2017\)](#) in the context of African cities as ‘communities of convenience’. As a community of friends, Right to the City – Brisbane materialises and increases effective functional relationships within the group members and the community in which they act upon [\(Bunnell, Yea, Peake, Skelton, & Smith, 2011\)](#). One participant commented:

P1: I'm aware that groups like RttC are highly relational. There are no designated conflict resolution officers, and there are no formal complaint mechanisms. So we rely pretty much on our capability of mediating conflict and disagreements by getting people talking about it.

(Un)structured hierarchies: the nature of internal organisation

We registered these words in our field notes: “When I got there, I saw how nearly everyone putting their belongings on the side and rushing up to collect chairs and set up the room. Nobody suggested how to locate the chairs, but in an ‘instinctive’ way, we all organise the chairs forming a big circle” (29/09/2016). Later on, we annotated how “The meeting started with an established ritual. We sat in a circle and provided a brief update on who we were and how we felt. I have undervalued this greeting practice, but I started noticing how important and welcoming it is, particularly for those who turn up for the first time” (20/10/2016). Sitting in a circle (Figure 6), rather than in a magisterial lecturing pose, is the first indication of how Right to the City – Brisbane members contest hierarchical organisation structures. However, the group praises and nurtures the generation of new leaders among the group members.

Although it seems paradoxical, the anti-hierarchical organisation form does not contrast with the formation of internal leadership, as pointed out by one of the participants:

P5: It is foolish to think Right to the City – Brisbane as a completely anti-hierarchical group just because there are no elected positions. Inherently, people who can spend more time in organising and having their voices heard will acquire more power. Those who have more time and put more effort end up calling the shots.

How do you, then, control the accumulation of decision-making power within the group in the hands of those who participate the most? Another participants recognised that:

P3: The challenge [for Right to the City – Brisbane] is how to create mechanisms to decentralise power. A strategy that seems to work relatively well is to rotate roles. Facilitators, for instance, can set up agendas, sort out contents and shape conversations. They end up having some power. That’s why it’s important to share those roles around and give all people the skills and practice of facilitating. Another strategy [that Right to the City – Brisbane have tried] is having good feedback mechanisms where people feel happy with the decision being made.



Figure 6. Sitting in a circle as a ritualised expression of equality and power distribution.

Certainly, we notice the formation of new leaders in the group during the time we observed participants. Likewise, we witnessed how those new leaders happened to be members with a major level of commitment. However, subtle management of decision-making power in hands of the leaders was not perceived by others as a menace to the power distribution among the members, but as natural consequence. In addition, not for being an expected effect, leadership was seen as tantamount of

tyrannism. Instead, rotating leadership appears to be desired as a skill to be learnt, and as it can 'get things done.' In this regards, one participant claims that:

P4: Honestly, without [leaders] we all will be wasting hours of discussion. We do things here. We want things, and we do them. We value our capability of doing a lot of stuff and not only talking about it.

The loose internal organisation of Right to the City – Brisbane seems to overwrite what Bennett (2003) predicted in terms of digital activism. The group, which prefers to engage and interact through *vis-a-vis* practices, shows low vulnerability levels to control failures in decision-making situations. However, their scarce digital engagement have represented a slow growth of their political alliances and partnerships, contrary to the tendency on networked activist groups around the world (Juris, 2005). The success of Right to the City – Brisbane unstructured internal organisation depends on the relevance of their solidarity ties, which at the time relies on the creation of conditions for camaraderie and the premise of playfulness and happiness. Only in this way, the group can engage effectively with their members. Right to the City – Brisbane members know they are achieving their goals by contrasting what they do with the feeling of the majority. They embrace a particular vision of the world and any proposed and developed activity is unspokenly contrasted against such vision. Right to the City – Brisbane does not have a formal, rigid and centralised code of conduct, system of values or written constitution. Instead, a social sanction system acts 'instinctively' if ideas or decisions tend to go against their shared values.

Right to the City – Brisbane engagement practices, then, echo “countercultural movements of the past – the Beats of the 1940s, Hippies of the 1960s, and Punks of the 1980s – all of whom critiqued capitalism and social climates of oppression” (2013, p. 58). As an example of an alternative movement, the group engages in political practices that challenge and reveal exclusionary patterns in current local government behaviour, fitting this way with Jeppesen’s (2012) definition of anarchist principles and values, i.e., “a critique of relations of domination, so anarchist values and practices are against domination, be it in the form of hierarchies, unequal power relations, structural inequities, or authoritarian behaviours” (2012, p. 264).

Audience outreach and civic disobedience: the nature of external engagement

Right to the City – Brisbane recognises a major challenge in terms of their mechanisms for expanding their community base. Despite every event, meeting, and even every zine published by the group acknowledge and remember that we are on 'stolen land,' the engagement, participation and scope of the group shows a low number of members identifies as traditional owners. Equally, involvement of diverse cultural background populations is not as high as expected, particularly when the group concentrate the majority of their actions in West End, a socio-culturally and ethnically diverse area. After a conversation with one member of the group, we registered this in a field note: “the organisation struggles in diversifying and expanding its community base. ‘C’ claimed that in lesser interesting events, such as participatory budgeting, there were only 5 mid-aged, financially stable, white Australians

attending to such working session” (20/09/2016). This situation raises a concern in terms of political representation and legitimacy, as it is unclear whose values does the group stand for, and more critically, under what criteria they claim the right to represent their community. However, we will explore this discussion in section 4.3, as it relates to the group’s crafts mechanisms to challenge current representational democratic values and practices.

One of the strategies followed by Right to the City – Brisbane for expanding their base and outreach wider audiences, is to engage in civic disobedience practices. As pointed out by one participant,

P2: If government decides that, for instance, young people don't wanna [sic] get involved in any consultation just because they wouldn't attend a meeting, Right to the City – Brisbane will continue to organise big public events to demonstrate how young people actually do care about this, that young people mobilise with the right range of tools and mechanisms. We will also be appealing to do direct actions and encouraging pacific civic disobedience that directly makes demands to the government. Disruptive actions are useful to set up a guiding north as our dreams are so far from the current ways in which the city is made that we can alert everyone that there is an alternative even though is not necessarily plausible right now.

The use of disruptive actions in public spaces redirects the discussion in two different considerations. First, civic disobedience actions are, most of the time, the group modus operandi. The formula is well-practiced by media outlets, e.g., rating in TV shows or likes in Facebook. The more you appear notorious, the wider the audience you may speak to. Right to the City – Brisbane has exploited this principle for connecting with other population segments that may agree with the group ideological standings and practices. One participant commented:

P2: About the strategies we have put in place, I think we have done a good job in terms of remaining open and accessible to newcomers, so new people can come along and quickly get involved and participate in shaping key strategies and decisions.

Second, civic disobedience practices relate directly with one of the funding principles of Right to the City as a political concept, i.e., city appropriation. This means that Right to the City promulgates the right of urbanites to make use of the city, access its facilities and services, and occupy its existing spaces currently privileging a small number of urban actors ([Osborne, 2016](#)). The group’s principle of appropriation highlights that urban space is socially produced ([Lefebvre, 1991, 1996](#)), but the unbalanced power socio-spatial struggles framed under the umbrella of neoliberal policies in urban governance, often enable a reduced segment of city populations to execute their own and exclusionary right to the city. In Marcuse’s words: “Some already have the right to the city, are running it right now, have it well in hand. They are the financial powers, the real estate owners and speculators, the key political hierarchy of state power, the owners of the media” ([2012, p. 32](#)). By appropriation, Right to the City – Brisbane implies a restructuration of the neoliberal governmentality ([Foucault, 1991](#)), in other words, the rationality and the mechanisms of power in Brisbane governance, which exclude and disenfranchise populations in the city. Lastly, the principle of appropriation also refers to the capacity of

controlling the mediums for producing a city that meets the needs and dreams of its residents ([Purcell, 2003](#)).

How Right to the City – Brisbane envisions the city?

A fair city

In Right to the City – Brisbane narratives, the city is envisioned as a fair one. The principle of social justice is the first and guiding reference to build up the city to the future. By envisioning a fair Brisbane, Right to the City – Brisbane members state a reality that is desired, and hence, a reality that mismatch the current conditions. As one participant stated:

P2: I would love to live in a city in which I could have the right to be myself without being judged. I would like a city that respects my views and specially a city that never commands me or tells me what to do.

As part of the fair city imaginary, group members dream of a Brisbane that provides equal economic, environmental, spatial liberties, contrasting with the inequalities derived from the implementation of neoliberal agendas in urban governance – i.e., governance-beyond-the-state ([Swyngedouw, 2005](#)). Similarly, a notion of a fair Brisbane reveals a desire of challenging capitalism as the structural source of disparities. The group members desire, for instance a reconsideration of private property, the establishment of a Brisbane Treaty, and the implementation of a Universal Basic Income (Figure 7). In this sense, the imagined fair Brisbane encompasses the definition of a city that solves the historical disadvantages of certain vulnerable populations, vindicating this way those who have been marginalised from basic schemes of representation. Right to the City – Brisbane, therefore, proposes a city that no longer comprises spaces for exclusion of any kind, but places for celebrating cultural, ethical and system-values difference as the formula for cohesion ([Schmid, 2012](#)).

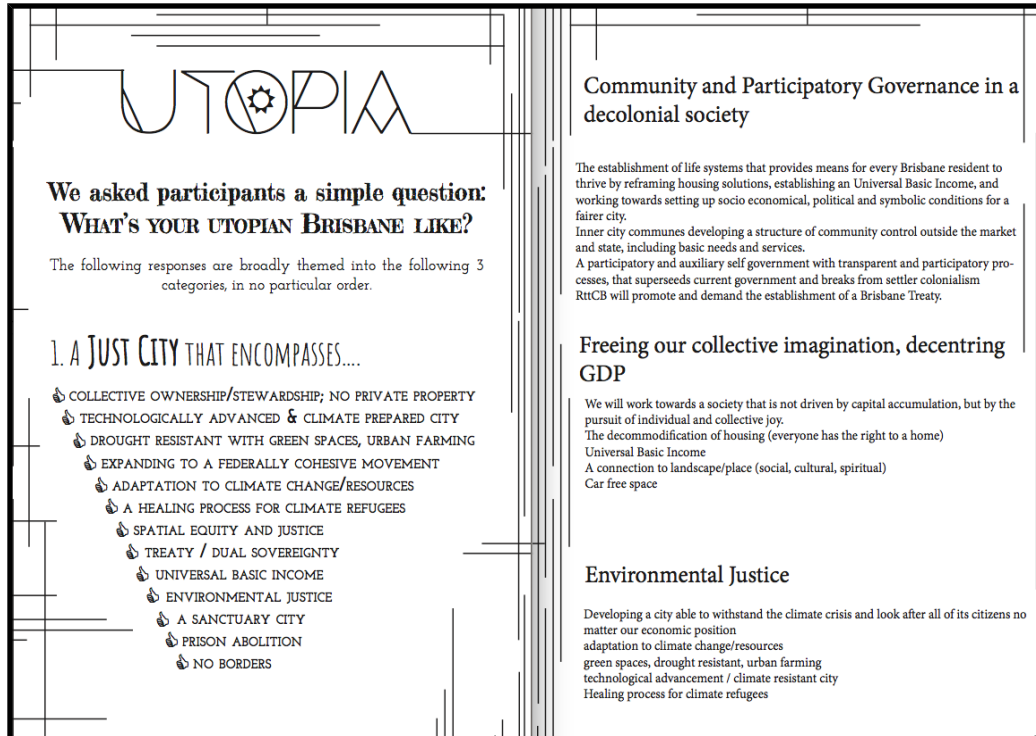


Figure 7. A zine condensing group members ideas about Brisbane envisioned as a just city.

A sustainable city

Right to the City – Brisbane members envision a sustainable Brisbane. The definition of sustainability, although, is more comprehensive than its environmental or economic meanings. In our field notes we recorded that “the mention of the concept of sustainability during the meetings has gradually increased and transformed with the days. At first I thought it was a sort of conceptual bias, since there are many supporters of The Greens party. I guess I overlooked this concept and how dynamically it is used by the group. It seems that they use it to refer to a sort of ecosystemic balance” (02/02/2017). Figure 8 illustrates how Right to the City – Brisbane members carefully addressed an alternative vision of the West Village development project, integrating not only people who may be ideally benefited by the construction project – e.g., Aboriginal residents, low income workers, and less privileged residents, but also representative institutions and elements of the cultural life of the community – e.g., community centres, art and music venues. Such holistic attention to the relations between actors and groups, has been used to describe the communicative ecology that guides the interactions of different actors involved in the food industry in Australia ([Hearn, Collie, Lyle, Choi, & Foth, 2014](#)). The implications for the case of Right to the City – Brisbane are related to the capability of their members to include a more comprehensive set of human and institutional actors within the spectrum of stakeholders involved in effective envisioning and planning, contesting how developers and city authorities conduct their profit-oriented development projects.

Far from being a feasible blueprint, the relevance of this vision of Brisbane as a sustainable city is the implied demand for residents to play a more informed and decisive role in planning their lived space. By designing an alternative view of the West Village development project, Right to the City – Brisbane members acted not as residents who were passively delegating responsibilities to city authorities, but as engaged city co-producers who were able to step up the participation ladder (Arnstein, 1969) catching a glimpse of citizen control.



Figure 8. Alternative proposal for West Village development project.

A decentralised city

Brisbane is desired as a decentralised city. Similarly to the sustainable city described above, the decentralised Brisbane refers to a comprehensive meaning of the concept. As explained by one participant,

P5: I foresee a sustainable, more decentralised city, not just in decision-making but also in terms of physical development. Rather than a city with wild densification, I'd like to see a shift towards urban villages and development nodes. So reclaiming that idea of walkable neighbourhood where people can

live and work and encounter with others and create community. For me an utopian city refers to more small businesses and food coops rather than a few large corporations.

A redistribution of decision-making power that may enable a change in how citizens shape their urban space, is critical to consolidate the Right to the City – Brisbane project. However, a part of the decentralisation of decision-making and how it applies to the physicality of the city, the group member also pursue decentring capitalism as the framework in which commodification and gentrification of urban space is defined, naturalised, and taken for granted.

How Right to the City – Brisbane crafts the city?

Legitimising citizen experience as organic knowledge

Our data suggests that Right to the City – Brisbane challenges and attempts to redefine conventional and dominant assumptions of representative democracy. The group takes literally the Lefebvrian premise that the right to the city may be universally claimed by any city resident, no matter their affiliation to any 'liberal democracies' forms of citizenship ([Purcell, 2002](#)). Thus, as argued by Lefebvre ([1996](#)), the right to the city "is conferred by inhabitation – which is not a fixed or singular identity, but one that may reflect intersectionality and multiplicity" ([Osborne, 2016](#)). Undoubtedly, legitimating urban residents experience as an acceptable form of knowledge that may grant them the right to shape the cities, is a complex statement to assimilate. In our field notes we recorded our hesitation: "I threw up a question about how representative were [the activities Right to the City – Brisbane got engaged] in terms of matching community needs and desires. I was interested in starting to interrogate the ways in which they reckon, they listen, prioritise, model and represent their local communities expectations. My intervention generated a bit of disruption in the quite harmonic atmosphere. Interestingly, the man sitting next to me, just after he offered me fries that M ordered minutes before, clarified to me that Right to the City – Brisbane effectively is an open initiative born from the community itself, and for that reason they all felt they represent the community needs and desires. Although they never mentioned any formal consultation mechanism for guaranteeing a transparent representation, they argued that appropriating or activating that 'right to the city' is beneficial for the entire community in a broad sense as they are leading by example and showing that we all have the power in our hands to make the city to our fit" (29/09/2016).

In their aim of legitimising urban residents' experience as a major – and certainly overlooked – asset for the process of city co-production, Right to the City – Brisbane resembles Gramsci's definition of *organic intellectuals* ([Forgacs, 1988](#)), since the activists articulate and represent citizens' political desires and needs. An example to illustrate how Right to the City – Brisbane vindicates citizen experience as a major asset for city-coproduction is annotated in our field notes: "The group gets enthusiastic when any [meeting] participant points out how inept city authorities are. 'M', for instance, just claimed that by participating [in the participatory budgeting sessions] we all show [city authorities] that we know what's

best for our suburb” (22/09/2016). Hemphill and Leskowitz (2013) labeled as *DIY activism* the type of political practices that describe Right to the City – Brisbane approach and interventions as “their everyday practice of crafting radical alternatives to mainstream models of governance, consumption, and learning. DIY activists [such as Right to the City – Brisbane] offer a revealing portrait of an evolving community of practice and radical new forms of knowledge sharing” (2013, p. 58).

Leading by example

In addition to legitimating city residents as rightful urban reshapers, Right to the City – Brisbane promotes a hands-on strategy to craft the city. Leading by example “overwrites the necessity of imposing any sort of moral, social or ethical sanctions proper of hierarchical organisations. At the same time, [the group] saves significant amount of efforts and resources by employing [leading by example] technique as they subtly privilege one way to do things, and expect everyone else to copy and incorporate the expected behaviour, no matter if it is about sitting in circles, mocking the Liberals [party members] or even establishing friendly and respectful conversation with the others” (13/10/2016). In the words of one participant:

P1: the way we run our meetings, that kind of example to say, hey look this is another way to make community decisions. I guess practicing these decision-making processes internally is how we convey the kind of processes we'd like to see in the society. Also, what we are doing here [at Right to the City – Brisbane] when we organise those big events and public forums is to show BCC that there is appetite for opening discussion about citizen engagement and participation in decision-making, because there is still a dominant belief within our political representatives that residents don't wanna be consulted, that people don't have time to discuss anything and that's why they have elected representatives.

With a combination of playfulness, humour and pride for the local emblematic natural features that define Brisbane as a locality, the activist group decided to adopt a nickname that expresses a series of values aligned with their hands-on crafting approach to city production: They identify as “Wagun of Right to the City – Brisbane” (Figure 9), which is the Yugara name for brush turkeys. The selection of this nickname provokes, at least, two comments. First, the imperative need of adopting an aboriginal name for the group — even when the great majority of the group members are from different cultural backgrounds — as a sign of respect and justice for the traditional owner of this land. Second, the selection of turkeys as the emblematic representation of resourcefulness and the ability of living on others' waste, which evokes an interest for austerity and disconnection of the capitalist regime.

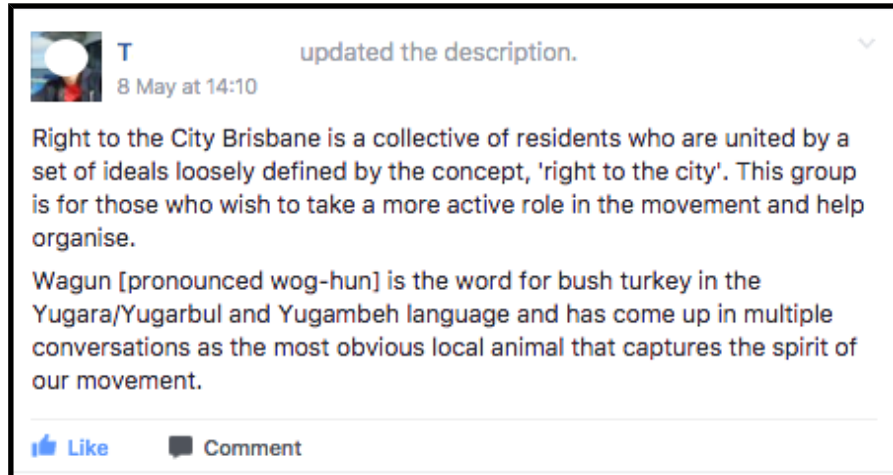


Figure 9. Brush Turkey or Wagun in Yugara language is the group's emblematic animal.

The fact that they have chosen a bush turkey as the group emblematic animal connects with the strategy Right to the City – Brisbane uses for quick interventions and appropriations of urban space. Tactical urbanism interventions — e.g., unauthorised landscaping, rubbish collection ‘working bees’ in empty lots or building urban furniture after recyclable materials — refer to the right to the city principle of appropriation, which as it turns highlights that urban space is produced by unbalanced power socio-spatial struggles framed under the umbrella of neoliberal policies (Schmid, 2012), but also susceptible of being claimed back by those in dispossession of such right. Likewise, such interventions convey the message that activism goes beyond protesting by embodying the active and transformative principle of action (“Rethink Activism,” n.d.)

Digital resistance, zines and mediums ownership

Right to the City – Brisbane follows an unstructured strategy to disseminate information in regards to their principles and action plans, as well as to engage in political debates with stakeholders and other communication-related activities. As specified before, the activist group takes advantage of “the wealth of knowledge, wisdom, and experiences collectively and privately held by each urbanite” (Foth et al., 2015, p. vi) such as the group members, and translate it into their avenues to connect with the general public. The group makes use of its members skills and capabilities. For instance, local artists such as ‘Mama.see,’ who is a member of the collective, creates the majority of the artwork published in zines and pamphlets and a Facebook site (facebook.com/righttothecitybrisbane). Printed anarchist media (Jeppesen, 2012) appears as a resource for ideological reaffirmation widely accepted by the members of Right to the City – Brisbane. The content portrayed in zines and pamphlets produced by the group (Figure 10) reinforces contracultural values – e.g., anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, pro-equality, pro-minorities – and convey an imaginary in which the city is seen as a ground for “direct democracy, participation, cooperation, collective self-determination, taking action to create change, mutual respect, long-term accountability, and lived social equality, among others” (Jeppesen, 2012, p. 265). In addition,

the production of zines as part of the signature communication strategies of Right to the City – Brisbane members also relates to the idea of hand-made crafting. Zines contents are designed as original pieces and provide glimpses of the narratives used by the group to configure their own political identity and political agenda. In them, the activist group members explore, create and communicate “chaotic, disturbing, uncomfortable, sensual, complex, loud, confrontive, humorous, and often a pointed and acerbic critique of mainstream culture and contemporary life,” which is labeled by Chidgey as DIY media ([2014, p. 101](#)).

Right to the City – Brisbane also communicates through a Facebook site. However, the use of digital platforms reveals an important variant with respect to the use of DIY anarchist printed media. One participant described her thoughts about Right to the City – Brisbane Facebook site as:

P2: [Facebook interactions] are necessary. It's a necessary pain. I get that. You can spread info wider and quicker. I feel we only use it for that reason. But, honestly, I feel we are different because I don't like the whole day looking at the screen. I rather talk with you and invite you to a beer or something. I think we do more when we can see each other.

The group members understand social media channels from a utilitarian angle. The Facebook site, for instance, provides just a means for getting in contact with a wider audience, a scheduling assistant for the group meeting and interventions, and a tool for attracting new members. Although digital platforms such as Facebook are seen by the group as useful, a sense of distrust and resistance to them becomes evident. The ‘necessary pain’ of using Facebook is only justified as the platform appears as a dominant scenario for networking well-spread throughout the world, but, as noted by the same participant, the digital platform is perceived as limited, suspicious and alien to the imaginary of city that the group desires:

P2: [Facebook] helps with the invitations to our events. But, you know? You call me paranoid or whatever, but Facebook is just about selling you stuff. It's not just a simple [scheduling] tool. I think it's evil. I think also that there's a hidden agenda that serves equally evil purposes. I don't like it, but I guess we kind of need it.

The resistance to embrace digital platforms such as Facebook relates to a number of factors. First, Right to the City – Brisbane members perceive Facebook as a dually powerful tool, which enable both visibility and invisibility of certain populations and socio-political practices. This dual property has been highlighted by Shaw and Graham in their examination of Google, as “it is by virtue of this control [over digital information] that Google has the power to control the reproduction of urban space” ([2017, p. 4](#)). Facebook generates scepticism as it is perceived by the group as a space for the reproduction of exclusionary practices ([Leszczynski, 2014](#)) and reproduction of neoliberal and tokenistic political practices and agendas in local governance ([Greenfield, 2013; Žižek, 2009](#)). Third, the reluctance to fully embrace Facebook or any other digital media platform relates to the sense of ownership. As pointed by participant #2, the ‘hidden agenda’ of these digital channels is also the lack of control over the means of co-production of the city. Facebook is seen as a rigid and rigged platform – as much as Google is to Shaw

and Graham (2017) – controlled by others who do not share the libertarian and contracultural expectations of the group.

In this context, Right to the City – Brisbane refreshes the categorisations of contemporary social movements focused on networked and digital activism (Juris, 2005; Postill, 2014), decentralised real-time coordinating groups (Rekow, 2015), and online non-participation movements (Andersson, 2016) by practicing a resistance of media, instead of a resistance on media (Fenton, 2008). This implies that Right to the City – Brisbane uses consciously and carefully new (old) mechanisms for resisting and re-imagining the local city governance scenario.

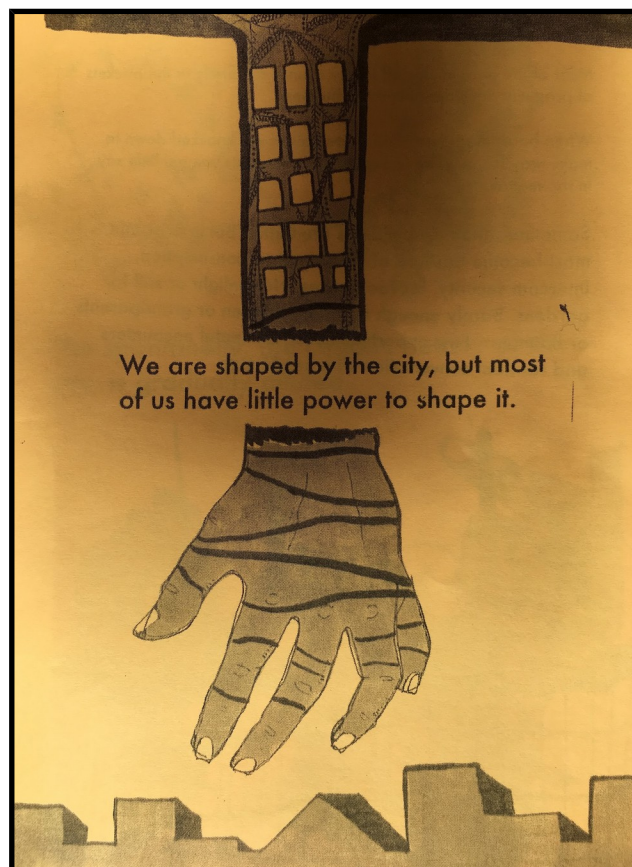


Figure 10. Example of a printed anarchist zine used as a campaigning tool by Right to the City – Brisbane.

CONCLUSIONS

*"We change ourselves by changing our world and vice versa.
This dialectical relation lies at the root of all human labour.
Imagination and desire play their part." (Harvey, 2003b)*

This study has explored the engagement practices, the envisioned narratives and the crafting mechanisms put in place by Right to the City – Brisbane, an activist organisation that challenges conventional practices of local governance by encouraging a shift in the role of citizens as city co-producers and peer producing alternative imaginaries of the city. In particular, we have examined how Right to the City – Brisbane addresses Harvey's questions for the uniqueness of activist movements in terms of unpacking "what kind of city [...] what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values [the activist group] desire" (["David Harvey: The Right to the City," September-October 2008, p. 1](#)).

We have shown how Right to the City – Brisbane deals with a global issue such as the shrinking of democratic opportunities for urban residents to realistically engage and participate in civic matters, especially in local governance. The activist organisation responds to the local context – nuanced by the high influence of private developers in the decision-making arena – by gathering the principles of Lefebvre's (1996) concept and capitalising it as a form to recruit already politically frustrated citizens. In order to engage with the local reality, with other urban residents, and with the political praxis, Right to the City – Brisbane embraces playfulness and fun as active principles. Their decision to have fun while dealing with the serious business of challenging local governance, has attracted criticism from other residents who disagree with their mechanisms and political linkages, but, at the same time, has resulted in a refreshing alternative for the local activist landscape in Brisbane, attracting a growing number of youngsters, often on the fringes of political engagement and participation. By actively promoting anti-hierarchical, anti-capitalist and citizen-led empowerment values and engaging in internal political practices of redistribution of decision-making power, Right to the City – Brisbane portrays itself as a DIY activist movement with a strong resemblance of contracultural anarchist organisations from past decades. This characterisation is, in addition, supported by the group's engagement in public disobedience actions and alternative protesting.

Right to the City – Brisbane co-produces a series of narratives expressed both visually and verbally, in which they convey a particular form of understanding and projecting the city. Permeated by their members' political worldview, Right to the City – Brisbane imagines a fair city where the principle of social justice stands as a beacon for practicing inclusive participation practices. The Brisbane that this activist group construct imaginatively is also one where citizens can be assumed as part of a sustainable political ecology. The group also imagines a city that effectively redistributes power among its stakeholders, and that, by doing that, challenges forms of centralisation of resources, capital and infrastructure. These urban imaginaries are narrated as the blueprint of the type of city Right to the City – Brisbane activist would like to produce and live. Their imaginaries provides the guidance, in the shape

of principles and values, for the future city. Furthermore, such imaginaries also inform the type of citizen the group members attempt to build: a one with the willingness, skills and agency to transform the ideas into actions. The significance of unpacking Right to the City – Brisbane imaginaries relies on the provision of more meaningful insights for the overall process of local governance in cities. These urban imaginaries contain specific information that Odendaal (2006) suggests may not be captured by current top-down urban planning procedures.

Right to the City – Brisbane crafts such urban imaginaries by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions of representative democracy and its governance mechanisms. The group promotes citizen experience as a legitimate form of knowledge for shaping the city, moving close to direct democracy practices. As organic intellectuals, citizens should know what is better for the future of their inhabited spaces. This statements defies the verticality of governance models in which expert knowledge, embodied and practiced exclusionary by city authorities – and recently highly influenced by private developers under neoliberal governance paradigms. Right to the City – Brisbane members act out the city they imagine, performing as ethical role models for their fellow residents. As the city – and the citizenship also – implies an everyday construction, the group members define the type of city they may like to encounter and share with, by performing it and by lively showing to others how to make it their urban commons (Foth, 2017). Right to the City – Brisbane combines a city-crafting strategy that involves the production and reproduction of contracultural values materialised in printed media, and a thoughtful resistance to digital media, which gives the group a sense of uniqueness especially when compared to social movements focused on networked activism. The group and their city-crafting strategies reveal a distinctive form of peer-production based on a combination of digital and *vis-a-vis* interactions. The engagement and participation discourse and practices of this local movement are informed by a collective expectation for a different city, and a different assumption of their role as co-producers. In this sense, Right to the City – Brisbane expands the definitions of peer-production exercises beyond the dominant definition centred in merely digital networking schemes.

The unique forms in which Right to the City – Brisbane engages, envisions and crafts the city, all based in a hyperlocal interpretation of global issues related to inequality and citizen disenfranchising in city governance and production, resembles a Janus-faced duality. This activist organisation advocates for a progressive and preponderant role of citizens in the task of co-producing Brisbane, while at the time, it sources inspiration from values, practices and worldviews anchored in countercultural movements from past decades. Perhaps, this duality may overcome the outreaching and engagement-related issues experienced by other social movements around the world, interested in reimagining the city.

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