



## R-URBAN or how to co-produce a resilient city

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### abstract

This note addresses contemporary processes of resilient co-production within the city. With its specific focus on the case study of a project called R-Urban, it aims to present a bottom-up project initiated in a suburban town near Paris. R-Urban is a bottom-up framework for resilient urban regeneration initiated by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa). This note advocates new roles for architects and planners in this process of co-production. It addresses questions raised in trying to implement the R-Urban strategy in Colombes, a suburban town with 84,000 residents near Paris. This strategy explores current possibilities for co-producing urban resilience by introducing a network of resident-run facilities that form local ecological cycles and engage in everyday eco-civic practices. The note demonstrates that progressive practices addressing the need to reactivate and sustain cultures of collaboration, and which proposing new tools adapted to our times of crisis and austerity, are conceivable in local action and on a small scale.

### The co-produced city

Co-production has become a buzzword in our times of austerity: it posits the necessity to engage citizens personally in the provision of public services in a context where these services have become inefficient and need reforming, and where the welfare state is no longer there to organise them. If co-production is currently seen as an economic and social solution to this problem<sup>1</sup>, we also

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1 Co-production is receiving ever greater attention in policy-makers speeches and think tank reports. They are aware that 'co-production has emerged as a critique of the way that professionals and users have been artificially divided, sometimes by technology, sometimes by professional and managerial practice, and sometimes by a spurious understanding of efficiency. It provides an alternative way for people to share in the design and delivery of services, and contribute their own wisdom and experience, in

understand it as a shift in the power relationships revolving around services and production. In a context of urban transformation, co-production is also able to become a political project rooted in Lefebvre's idea of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). It is not only about the manner in which public needs are to be met, but also about citizens' rights. In this case, the citizens' right to the city does not only mean the right to occupy space in it, but also mean to decide how it is developed, managed and used. Also, given the imperative to adapt and find solutions to the long term environmental and economic crises societies face today, our cities need to become more resilient, need to organise in order to adjust and thrive in rapidly changing circumstances. This need for resilience, which cities have little capacity to deal with at this moment in time, in fact comes with a right to resilience for all citizens, a right to be informed about, decide, act upon and manage the future of cities. This would be a truly ambitious co-production project that should involve the entire urban population. Such a project needs ideas, tools and spaces, time and agency. It needs agents and activators. Can architects be such agents? What tools and means can be used at times of crisis and scarcity? How can progressive practices be initiated while acting locally and on a small scale? How can civic cultures of collaboration and sharing be reactivated and sustained in economic, environmental and social terms alike?

### **R-Urban, an agency of co-produced urban regeneration**

These are some of the questions we tackled with R-Urban, a bottom-up framework for resilient urban regeneration, initiated by our research-based office, atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa).

R-Urban is one of the many small-scale initiatives to have emerged in response to the slow pace of governmental procedures and the lack of consensus in further addressing the challenges of global crisis and evaluating their consequences for people's lives. New approaches to urban regeneration are desperately needed in times of economic crisis, and could benefit from the increased social capital attending the diminishment of financial capital. R-Urban was conceived as an open source strategy enabling residents to play an active part in changing the city while also changing their ways of living in it.

This strategy creates a network of citizen projects and grassroots organisations around a series of self-managed collective facilities hosting economic and

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ways that can broaden and strengthen services and make them more effective' (Boyle and Harris, 2009).

cultural activities and everyday practices that contribute to boosting resilience in an urban context. The network, which acts through locally closed circuits, starts at a neighbourhood level and progressively scales up to the city and regional level. In a Guattarian ecosophical vein (Guattari, 2008), the strategy considers social, ecological and economic aspects as equally essential for resilient processes. R-Urban addresses communities from urban and suburban contexts, involving a diversity of actors (i.e. residents, local authorities, public organisations, professionals, civic stakeholders) to take various responsibilities in the project's governance. In contrast to other regeneration projects conceived by specialist teams and facilitated by managerial structures, the architects and planners here take an active role as initiators, facilitators, mediators and consultants in various civic partnerships brought about by the project. This leads to a more effective, faster and more sustainable implementation, and allows for greater participation of non-specialists in co-producing it. The projects are conceived as processes that not only result in a physical transformation of urban contexts, but also contribute to the social and political emancipation of those living and acting in them.

Although anchored in everyday life and committed to radical change, R-Urban is also part of a specific tradition of modelling resilient development starting with Howard's Garden City (Howard, 1889) and Geddes's Regional City (Geddes, 1915), and continuing today with the Transition Town (Hopkins, 2008). But in contrast to these models, R-Urban is no direct application of theory, but tries to develop an exploratory practice and a theoretical analysis, both of which constantly inform one another.

As opposed to the Garden City concept, R-Urban does not propose an ideal model of transformation, but deals with the collapse of modern urban ideals, and their many failures in addressing the future. Also, R-Urban picks up from the Regional City concept the idea of regional dynamics, but in this case on the basis of bottom-up initiatives of local residents. It considers both large-scale processes and small-scale phenomena. Global concerns are addressed locally, but within the existing conditions. The R-Urban transformation is realised in successive stages by investing in temporarily available spaces and creating short-term uses able to prefigure future urban developments.

R-Urban also incorporates many Transition Town principles, although it does not necessarily operate on a 'town' scale, but negotiates its own (e.g. a block, neighbourhood or district), depending on actor participation. No pre-existing communities are targeted; instead, new communities formed through the project must agree on their own rules and the principles to be followed in its management. With its civic hubs and collective facilities, R-Urban tries to lend

visibility to the networks of solidarity and ecological cycles it creates. Architecture plays an important role here: that of hosting and showcasing resilient practices and processes, and of rendering tangible and concrete what would otherwise only remain a discourse. Also, architecture is not only physical, but social and political as well. The inspirations we took from social theorists and philosophers like Guattari, Gorz, Lefebvre, Harvey, Negri and Holloway have been constantly challenged by the reality of our active research approach.

## R-urban in Colombes

After three years of research, we proposed the project to various local authorities and grassroots organisations in cities and towns of France. We conceived of it as a participative strategy based on local circuits that activate material (e.g. water, energy, waste and food) and immaterial (e.g. local know-how, socioeconomic, cultural and self-building) flows between key fields of activity (e.g. the economy, housing and urban agriculture) already contained or implemented in the existing fabric of the city. In 2011, R-Urban started in Colombes, a suburban town with 84,000 residents near Paris, in partnership with the local authorities and a number of organisations, as well as with the involvement of a range of local residents. In its initial four-year period, the project is intended to gradually create a network around a number of 'collective hubs', each of them serving complementary urban functions (i.e. housing, urban agriculture, recycling, eco-construction, local culture), that bring together emerging citizens' projects. Within a context of welfare services being withdrawn, these collective facilities will host self-provided services and citizen-run production units that will simultaneously play a strategic part in locally closed economic and ecological cycles<sup>2</sup>.

Colombes offers a typical suburban context with a mix of private and council housing estates. Suburbia is a key territory for R-Urban: although specific to a modern conception of city, it is one of the most crucial territories to be redeveloped and regenerated in the interest of resilience today. With its mix of private and council housing estates, Colombes is confronted with all kinds of suburban problem, such as social or economic deprivation and youth crime, typical of large-scale dormitory suburbs and the consumerist, car-dependent lifestyle in more affluent suburbs with generally middle-class populations. Colombes nonetheless also has a number of advantages and assets: despite a high unemployment rate (17 % of the working population, well above the

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2 For more information, see <http://r-urban.net>.

national average of 10.2 % in 2012), Colombes features many local organisations (approximately 450) and a very active civic life.

Drawing strength from this very active civic life and from Colombes's cultural and social diversity, we started by launching several collective facilities, including recycling and eco-construction projects, cooperative housing, and urban agriculture units, which are cooperating to set up the first spatial and ecological agencies in the area. Their architecture showcases the various issues they address, such as recycled local materials, local skills, energy production and food cultivation, by means of specific devices and building components. The first three pilot facilities – Agrocité, Recyclab and Ecohab – are collectively run hubs that catalyse existing activities with the aim of introducing and propagating resilient routines and lifestyles which residents can adopt and practice on individual and domestic levels, such as retrofitting properties to accommodate food cultivation and energy generation.

Agrocité is an agricultural unit comprising an experimental micro-farm, community gardens, educational and cultural spaces, plus a range of experimental devices for compost-powered heating, rainwater collection, solar energy generation, aquaponic gardening and phyto-remediation. Agrocité is a hybrid structure, with some components run as social enterprises (e.g. the micro-farm, market and cafe) and others by user organisations (e.g. the community garden, cultural and educational spaces) and local associations.



*Fig. 1 Agrocité inauguration. Agrocité: Urban agriculture hub in Colombes, near Paris, 2013. (aaa)*

Recyclab is a recycling and eco-construction unit comprising several facilities for storing and reusing locally salvaged materials, recycling and transforming them into eco-construction elements for self-building and retrofitting. An attendant ‘fab lab’<sup>3</sup> has been set up for the residents’ use. Recyclab will function as a social enterprise.

Ecohab is a cooperative eco-housing project comprising a number of partially self-built and collectively managed ecological properties, including several shared facilities and schemes (e.g. food cultivation, production spaces, energy and water harvesting, car sharing). The seven properties will include two subsidised flats and a temporary residential unit for students and researchers. Ecohab will be run as a cooperative.

R-Urban’s collective facilities will grow in number and be managed by a cooperative land trust that will acquire spaces, facilitate development, and guarantee democratic governance<sup>4</sup>.

In parallel, the strategy will be propagated on larger scales: regionally, nationally, Europe-wide. The art and architecture practice ‘public works’, R-Urban’s partner in London, is currently developing a connected project in Hackney Wick: R-Urban Wick.<sup>5</sup> The first R-Urban facility in Hackney Wick is a mobile production unit: Wick on Wheels (WOW). This unit encourages collective production in situ, using local materials, resources and knowledge. It is a participatory project engaging with residents and local artisans to produce, reuse and repurpose.

Flows, networks and cycles of production and consumption will emerge between the collective facilities and their neighbourhood, closing chains of demand and supply as locally as possible. To overcome the current crisis, we must try ‘to produce what we consume and consume what we produce’, as the French philosopher André Gorz puts it (Gorz, 2008: 13).

R-Urban interprets this production and consumption chain broadly, well beyond the material aspects to include cultural, cognitive and affective dimensions. The project sets a precedent for a participative retrofitting of metropolitan suburbs where the relationship between the urban and rural is reconsidered. It

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3 ‘Fab lab’ is short for ‘fabrication laboratory’, a small-scale workshop equipped with various fabrication machines and tools enabling users to produce ‘almost anything’ (Fab lab, n.d.).

4 For more information about the R-Urban cooperative land trust, go to <http://r-urban.net/en/property/>.

5 This collaboration is supported by the Life+ programme in a partnership between aaa, the City of Colombes and public works.

endeavours to demonstrate what citizens can achieve if they change their work routines and lifestyles to collectively address the challenges of the future.

### The ‘right to resilience’

‘Resilience’ is a key term in the context of the current economic crisis and lack of resources. In contrast to sustainability, which is focused on maintaining the status quo of a system by controlling the balance between its inputs and outputs, without necessarily addressing the factors of change and disequilibrium, resilience addresses how systems can adapt and thrive in changing circumstances. Resilience is a dynamic concept with no stable definition or identity outside the circumstances producing it. In contrast to sustainability, which tends to focus on maintaining an environmental balance, resilience is adaptive and transformative, inducing change that harbours vast potentials for rethinking assumptions and building new systems (Maguire and Cartwright, 2008). Although the current resilience discourse is not to be embraced uncritically without paying heed to the sometimes naïve and idealistic comparison of social and biological systems and their adaptability to engendering wellbeing, the concept of ‘resilience’ itself has the potential to include questions and contradictions addressed in terms of political ecology<sup>6</sup>.

R-Urban maintains that urban sustainability is a civic right and creates the conditions for this ‘right to sustainability’ to be exercised, not only as a right to rely on and *consume* sustainability (provided by the remains of the welfare state or bought from private providers), but as a right to *produce* it (allowing citizens’ involvement in decision-making and action). Although sustainability is on the agenda of many urban projects today, this does not necessarily imply that all these projects are political in their approach to the issue.

A politicoecological approach like that of R-Urban will not just positively and uncritically propose ‘improved’ development dynamics, but also question the processes that bring about social injustice and inequitable urban environments<sup>7</sup>. Some voices such as David Harvey (2008) argue that the transformation of urban spaces is a collective rather than an individual right, because collective power is necessary to reshape urban processes. Harvey describes ‘the right to the city’ as the citizens’ freedom to access urban resources: ‘it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city’ (Harvey, 2008: 23). In this sense, R-Urban follows Harvey’s

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<sup>6</sup> We are here joining the ranks of political ecologists who criticise the superficial understandings of politics, power and social construction popularised in resilience rhetoric (see, e.g., Hornborg, 2009: 237-265).

<sup>7</sup> Some of these ideas were first developed in Brass, Bowden and McGeevor (2011).

ideas and facilitates the assertion of this 'right' through appropriation, transformation and networking processes, and the use of urban infrastructures. R-Urban perhaps differs from Harvey in scope, as it does not seek to institute a large-scale global movement opposing the financial capital that controls urban development, but instead aims to empower urban residents to propose alternative projects where they live, and to foster local and greater networks, testing methods of self-management, self-building and self-production. In this respect, R-Urban is perhaps closer to Lefebvre's idea of 'the right to the city'. Lefebvre imagines a locally conceived emancipatory project, emphasising the need to freely propose alternative possibilities for urban practice at a level of everyday life. He proposes a new methodology, called 'transduction', to encourage the creation of 'experimental utopias'. Framed by existing reality, this would introduce 'rigour in invention and knowledge in utopia' as a way of avoiding 'irresponsible idealism' (Lefebvre, 1996: 129-130). Lefebvre (1996) underlines the key role of urban imaginaries in understanding, challenging and transforming urbanity and opening the way to a multiplicity of representations and interventions. From this perspective, R-Urban is a 'transductive' project, both rigorous and utopian, popular and experimental. It is a bottom-up approach based on the aggregation of many individual and collective interventions which complement each other, forming metabolic networks that stimulate circulatory changes while simultaneously informing one another. Such networks will accommodate multiplicity and valorise imagination at all levels.

R-Urban could hence be suspected of aligning itself opportunistically with the 'Big Society' principles recently proposed by the UK's Tory prime minister, David Cameron, to implement 'the idea of communities taking more control, of more volunteerism, more charitable giving, of social enterprises taking on a bigger role, of people establishing public services themselves' (Cameron, 2011). But the essential difference is that R-Urban is not responding directly to the onset of the financial crisis and is not embracing a program of economic resilience in which the state is absent: such a program would explicitly promote the reliance on unpaid work to mask the disappearance of welfare structures and the massive cuts in public services. The R-Urban strategy is not relegating economic responsibility to citizens because the state is unable or unwilling to assume it any longer, but claims the social and political right to question the state's power in terms of its role and responsibility. Local authorities and public institutions are integrated in the strategy as equal partners, assuming the roles of enablers, sponsors and administrators. In addition to urban residents and civic organisations, public institutions (e.g. city councils, regeneration offices, public land trusts, schools and cultural agencies) are also invited to take part in this experimental utopia, and to challenge their routines. It is not only the residents



who must ‘change themselves by changing the city’, as claimed by Harvey (2008), but also the politicians and specialists presently in charge of a city.

As such, R-Urban is not only about grassroots innovation to meet social, economic and environmental needs, but also about political critique and ideological expression, affirming the necessity of new social and economic agencies based on alternatives to the dominant socio-technical regime. R-Urban gives its self-organised constituency the means to act locally on a neighbourhood scale, and creates opportunities for actions and activities that could change their future. It affirms their ‘right to resilience’.

Concentrating on spatial agencies and civic hubs, R-Urban tries to supply tools and spaces that will manifest citizens’ existing resilient initiatives and practices. Spatial planning processes contribute to expressing ecological cycles in tangible ways, and help facilitate citizens’ experiences of making and doing.

In parallel to its civic hubs, which represent a new ecological urban infrastructure, R-Urban also puts new political and democratic tools in place: forms of self-governance supporting the emergence of different kinds of formal and informal economic organisation across the network. These are all part of a cooperative civic land-trust, the entity which will govern the entire R-Urban project. Being transferable and multipliable, these tools are realised in cooperation with other partners and concerned citizens.

### **Micro-social and cultural resilience**

Unlike other initiatives exclusively dealing with sustainability from a technological and environmental perspective, R-Urban advocates a general ‘change of culture’, understood as a change in how we do things, in order to change our future.

R-Urban proposes new collective practices, which, in addition to reducing the ecological footprint, also contribute to reinventing near-at-hand relationships based on solidarities (i.e. ways of being involved and deciding collectively, sharing spaces and grouping facilities, rules and principles of cohabitation). The transformation needs to take place on the micro-scale of each individual, each subjectivity, to build a culture of resilience. As Rob Hopkins puts it, ‘resilience is not just an outer process: it is also an inner one, of becoming more flexible, robust and skilled’ (Hopkins, 2009: 15). The culture of resilience includes processes of reskilling, skill sharing, social networking and mutual learning. These micro-social and micro-cultural practices, usually related to individual lifestyles and activities (e.g. food cultivation and waste collection, car-sharing,

exchanging tools and skills with neighbours), elicit attention to details, singularities, and the creative and innovatory potentials found on the level of everyday life. R-Urban maps this local capacity to invent and transform in detail, but also, in parallel, the administrative constraints that block it, proposing ways of bypassing them by way of restated policies and structures.

## **Commons and commoning**

The issue of commons lies at the heart of discussions revolving around co-produced democracy. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) define commons as something that is not discovered but produced biopolitically:

We call the currently dominant model 'biopolitical production' to underline the fact that it involves not only material production in straight economic terms, but also affects and contributes to producing all other aspects of social life, i.e. the economic, cultural and political. This biopolitical production and the greater number of commons it creates support the possibility of democracy today. (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 9-10, author's translation)

A sustainable democracy should be based on a long-term policy of commons as well as the social solidarities understood as such. 'Creating value today is about networking subjectivities and capturing, diverting and appropriating what they do with the commons they give rise to' (Ravel and Negri, 2008: 7, author's translation).

According to Ravel and Negri (2008), the revolutionary project of our time is all about this capturing, diverting, appropriating and reclaiming of commons as a constitutive process. This is a reappropriation and reinvention at one and the same time. The undertaking needs new categories and institutions, new forms of management and governance, spaces and actors – an entire infrastructure both material and virtual.

R-Urban endeavours to co-produce this new infrastructure which is simultaneously a reappropriation and reinvention of new forms of commons, ranging from collective, self-managed facilities and collective knowledge and skills to new forms of group and network. The facilities and uses proposed by R-Urban will be shared and propagated on various scales, progressively constituting a network that is open to various users and includes adaptable elements and processes based on open-source information.

Rather than buying it, the R-Urban land trust currently established in Colombes bypasses the fixation on notions of property and negotiates land for (short and long term) uses rather than ownership. The right to use is an intrinsic quality of

commons, as opposed to the right to own. As in previous projects, a specific focus here is on urban interstices and spaces that evade financial speculation, if only temporarily. This is also the position of Holloway (2006) who, having analysed various forms of and initiatives for transforming society, concludes that 'the only possible way to think about radical change in society is within its interstices' and that 'the best way of operating in interstices is to organise them' (Holloway, 2006: 19-20, author's translation). This is exactly what R-Urban does: it organises a range of spatial, temporal and human interstices and transforms them into shared facilities, it sets up a different type of urban space, neither public nor private, to host reinvented collective practices and collaborative organisations, it initiates networks of interstices to reinvent commons in metropolitan contexts. This type of organisation involves forms of *commoning*, ways of ensuring the expansion and sustainability of the shared pool of resources, but also ways of commonality as a social practice.

### R-Urban's future

R-Urban is on its way. Agrocité, the first civic hub of the R-Urban strategy, has been built. The pioneering activities to have emerged as early promoters are currently revolving around specific micro-economic activities: a school for compost services on a regional scale, a community-supported agricultural scheme, a chicken coop, beehives and a continual workshops for promoting *savoir-faire*. At the same time, we have initiated activities for tracking, collecting and re-using/recycling specific local waste. In combination with the networking of local actors, these activities have helped us establish RecycLab, which hosts social economies, local recycling and eco-design activities. We are working on improving the economic models of these two R-Urban units and preparing the administrative and financial arrangements for the third, EcoHab. The R-Urban land trust is developing as a cooperative network involving all R-Urban stakeholders and partners in the management of all R-Urban facilities, properties and infrastructures.

In the coming years, we will nurture the diverse economies and initiate progressive practices in the R-Urban network in Colombes. We will reactivate cultures of collaboration and sharing. We have designed R-Urban to be a process and infrastructure that can grow with time, being easy to appropriate and replicate. We will be testing it for a while, before leaving it to burgeon by itself. Will it succeed? For how long? These questions are to be answered in a few years' time. For now, it is a visionary attempt to realise more democratic and bottom-up processes of resilient regeneration in a suburban context, a process specifically designed to be appropriated and followed up by others in similar contexts.

This note aimed to introduce the case of a bottom-up, resilient regeneration project, advocating other roles for architects and planners as initiators and mediators of change and as social innovators able to put radical social and political theories into practice. This note on the R-Urban project nonetheless underlines the notion that radical change is not going to happen in modern society without the involvement of many. Change needs to be multiplied and propagated rhizomatically, in a multitude of self-emancipatory processes amongst those wishing to change their current lifestyle. As suggested by Holloway,

[I]f we want to take seriously the idea of self-emancipation ... we need to look at people around us – the people at work, in the street, in the supermarket – and accept their own way of being rebellious, despite their external appearance. In a self-emancipated world, people shouldn't be taken for what they seem. They are not contained by their assigned identities, which they overpass and break into pieces, going against and beyond them. (Holloway, 2006: 2)

R-Urban is for people who are now 'at work, in the street, in the supermarket'. It is up to them to take the effort further, 'against and beyond themselves', towards a radical change of society.

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