UTRANSLAB: CIVIC IMAGINARIES 2016/17

DESIS NETWORK
Design for
Social Innovation
and Sustainability

THE NEW SCHOOL
PARSONS DESIS LAB

The New School
Parsons DESIS Lab
United States

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Context.

Currently at The New School connections are emerging between graduate programs across the various colleges. In different ways, each node in this emerging network is forming within a climate of cross-disciplinary research and practice; and each is responding to seismic shifts in disciplines by exploring new norms and forms of practice. In order to understand the complex challenges of our times, and to respond in ways that can address that complexity, we need to find new ways to teach, learn and practice.

To do this, The New School launched a series of University Transdisciplinary Labs (UTransLabs) that bring together faculty and graduate students from across the various colleges and programs together with external partners to forge new practices.

Civic Imaginaries: Urban Commons

In 2016 we launched "Civic Imaginaries: The Urban Commons", a year-long inquiry into the urban commons, housed at The New School's University Transdisciplinary Graduate Lab, which seeks direct sharing of ideas and skills between students and faculty trained in different disciplines.

In this year-long course we study the city as an urban commons, a space where a variety of resources are regulated and shared. By 'urban commons' we mean a variety of social arrangements that enable sharing of information, materials and resources among people in a city, for their needs. Arrangements might include: the sharing economy, co-working spaces, and forms of organizational governance.

Civic Imaginaries: Urban Commons

Our course included students and professors from disciplines of Design, Management and Architecture, with professional training in Organizational Change, Urban Planning, and Public Policy.
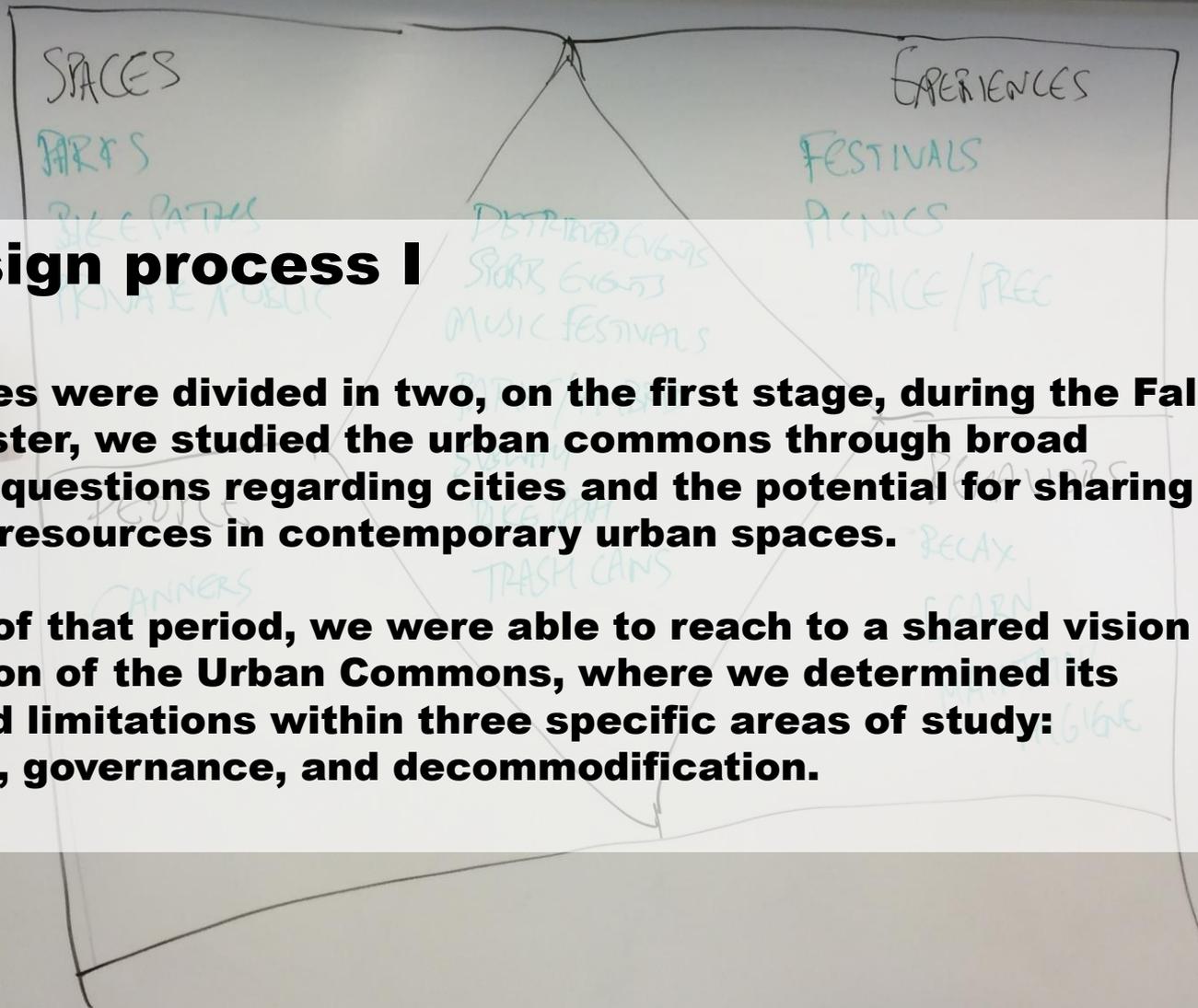
As part of this initiative we collaborated with Christian Iaione, Director of LabGov and Associate Professor of Public Law at LUISS University and Sheila Foster, University Professor at Georgetown University.

Members of the "Urban Commons" 2016/17 course included Nidhi Srinivas and Eduardo Staszowski (faculty); Gonzalo Rovegno Rocha, Federico Zuleta Rios, Courtney Loiacono, Lissa Fedrizzi, Younghun Kim, Rachel Murray, Maria Isabel Saffon Sanin, Rosemary Santos, and Cynthia Warner (students).

The design process I

Our activities were divided in two, on the first stage, during the Fall 2016 Semester, we studied the urban commons through broad conceptual questions regarding cities and the potential for sharing and polling resources in contemporary urban spaces.
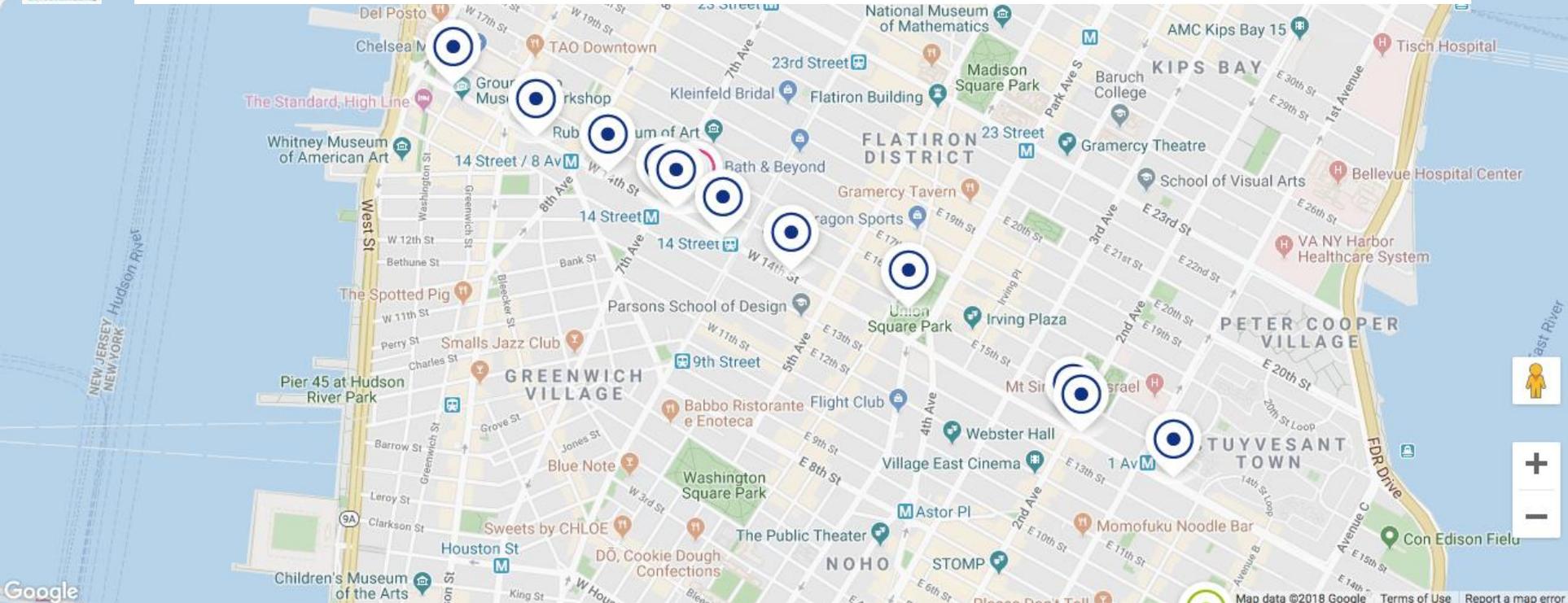
By the end of that period, we were able to reach to a shared vision and definition of the Urban Commons, where we determined its benefits and limitations within three specific areas of study: entitlement, governance, and decommodification.

The design process II

The following stage, during the Spring 2017 Semester, the course was intensely practical, devoted to strategies for transforming the urban commons in terms of a chosen project area that was born out of our understanding of the Urban Commons benefits and limitations. The themes identified were: alternative economies, dynamic governance, and reclaiming spaces. This revealed an opportunity to understand the interplay between design and management in urban settings, through seeking for creative experiences in urban activism and innovative forms of social analysis. We used the themes identified as lenses to recognize and enact the urban commons. Applying methods for defining communities and what resources they hold in common; methods for defining modes of engagement and co-creating the urban commons; and methods for prototyping design interventions with users.

How We Learned

- We chose 14th street as a test-bed for studying the urban commons. About 2.5 miles long, the street spans Manhattan East to West, crossing distinct and quite different neighborhoods, from the Lower East Side (Loisada) to Chelsea and the Meat Packing district.
- Analyzed field observations by clustering photos tied to themes like "abundance," "in conflict," "wasteful," "restrictive," "underutilized," "open," and "modified"
- Wrote love letters to 14th Street that highlighted the positive, the painful, and the future possibility of the space(s)
- Applied frameworks for categorizing acts of commoning: Small or large acts? Acts that regenerate, maintain, extract, or degrade? Acts that share or cooperate?
- Analyzed specific acts of commoning through the lenses of typical challenges and typical strategies related to commoning.

Three Lenses

⊙ DYNAMIC GOVERNANCE ⊙ ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES ⊙ RECLAIMED SPACES

Through our research about the Urban Commons emerged three different lenses:

- Alternative Economies

- Inclusive & Dynamic Governance

- Reclaiming Spaces

Alternative Economies

We explored different economic models that differ from the mainstream capitalist model of today. Our current system promotes ideals of value exchange and the marginal cost of production almost always being greater than zero. In this system, individual interest is driven by material gain and physical and intellectual property are meant to be privatized and protected. Alternative economic systems promote ideas of shared value creation, the marginal cost of production remaining close to zero, collaboration, connectivity, and the sharing of ideas.

Inclusive & Dynamic Governance

As we explored the urban commons, we considered what it means to govern a common good or resource. We studied models of alternative forms of governance that promote inclusion, and enabled disenfranchised groups to gain power through commoning. We also studied dynamic forms of governance, those that cultivate evolving structures for decision-making and maintenance. These models promote ideas such as membership, stewardship, horizontality, and collective ownership.

Reclaiming Space

Our exploration of reclaiming space centered around repurposing spaces for new kinds of access and value. The reclaiming of spaces included the opening or reopening of access to a particular space, from private to public ownership in order to produce greater social value or good for a community. This reclamation can include the activation of a space, but can also new forms of ownership, governance, or stewardship.

What We Learned

Many of us saw "with new eyes" in our field observations, exploring with curiosity our urban physical and social surroundings. We moved from taking the city-as-arranged as a given, to imagining new uses and arrangements. Now we are asking, how can we activate parts of 14th Street to amplify or manifest acts of commoning?

We surfaced unknown and unanticipated hopes for the future of the 14th Street urban landscape, with various ideas concerning nature and rest, community, and mobility. Some of the new arrangements and uses we imagined were:

. A new 14th street currency.

. Hubs of interaction and respite among the rushed flow of pedestrians.

. The first commons-based transportation network / infrastructure through a complementary circuit.

. Pop up maker spaces in abandoned or underused buildings, to collaborate on joint projects that create new ideas for the use of public space in a particular neighborhood.

Open Questions

As a way to expand our understanding about ways of commoning we also partnered with Dimeji Onafuwa, Design Researcher & PhD Candidate, School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University, and Kakee Scott , PhD Candidate, School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University & Visiting Researcher, DESIS Lab. Through their research they've been exploring different frameworks to illustrate challenges and strategies that can be applied to acts of commoning.

How to platform allyship for recommoning?

How does language foreclose or enforce particular meanings as conceptual enclosures?

How to negotiate boundaries between open and closed systems?

When does recommoning call for counter-enclosures?

In what ways do human capacities generate or deplete a commons?

How to reconcile commons-based and rights-based logics?

How can external governing mechanisms foster conditions for commoning?

Costs and benefits can never be evenly distributed, so there will always be concerns with equity.

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