

Urban Collective Intelligence Amateur Cities

URBAN COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

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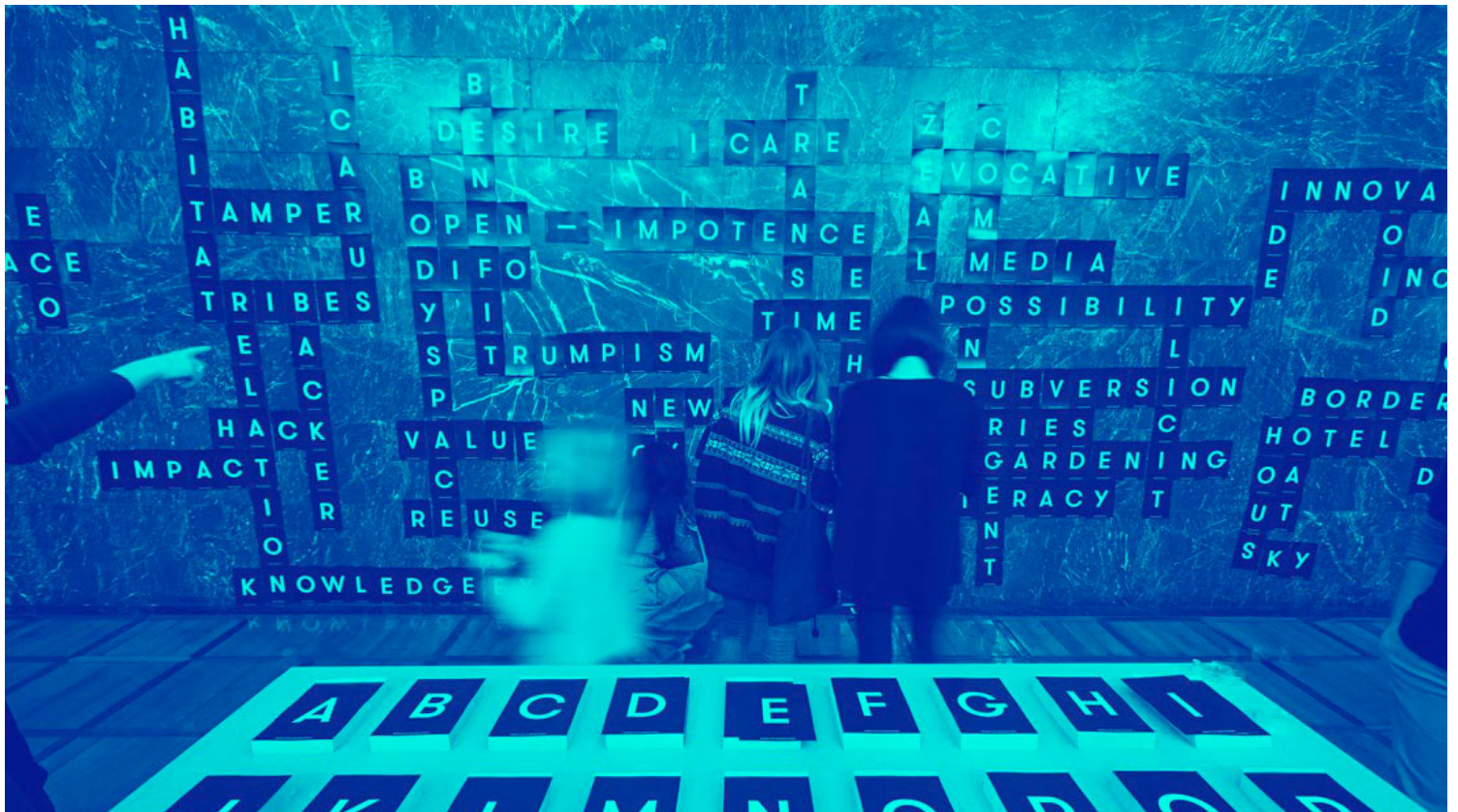
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urbanNext interviews Ania Molenda & Cristina Ampatzidou on amateurcities.com and their aim to provide a platform for a dialogue on urban collective intelligence.



'UrgentCity: Towards a New Vocabulary of Terms' event in Florence 2016. Photo: Luca Chiaudano

Could you tell us a little about Amateur Cities?

Amateur Cities is an online publishing platform and research agency on alternative ways of city-making, presented critically. We like to say that it is a research-through-publishing project.

We started Amateur Cities in 2014 to provide a platform for a dialogue on urban collective intelligence, combining both theoretical and practical voices. Since then, we have been publishing articles that collect, analyze and clarify contemporary urban and technological developments, in order to learn about cities anew – not as masters, but as amateurs. Gradually, we also became more

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active offline. We have been engaged in various research projects that have resulted in workshops, debates and exhibitions. Ultimately, we think they are all forms of publishing. Our goal is to stimulate cross-sector exchange by engaging experts from different disciplines, such as architecture, urbanism, art, science, information technology, media, sociology, and philosophy, to talk about cities.

Why do you think it is important to create a platform that focuses on the theory of cities?

Cities are important concentrations of population that are projected to grow in a nearly exponential way in the coming years. Many people move to urban environments hoping that this will improve their lives. At the same time, cities are governed by complex, often financial, processes that disempower and exclude large parts of the urban population. So, on the one hand, the urban environment has a direct impact on our lives and, on the other, it has an enormous impact on the planet, and therefore on all of us. Having an informed conversation about these issues, not only among the elites, is thus a matter of urgency that we all have to address. We think that the accessibility of knowledge about these processes is crucial today in order for people to be able to be engaged in shaping their environment and to stand up politically for their rights and needs.

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**'How to Speak about Urbanism?' workshop at Strelka Institute in Moscow 2017. Courtesy of Strelka Institute.
Photo: Luba Kozorezova**

With UrgentCity, you launched a series of videos that explores the role of language in contemporary urban questions. Why do you think it is so important to define a vocabulary of terms?

UrgentCity is much more than a series of video interviews. It's a research project and an event program, exploring the role of language in contemporary urban questions. It grew out of a concern that the urban discourse today is largely dominated by buzz-words like 'participation', 'sustainability'

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or 'smart city' – just to name a few. They all sound great at first, but we need to look closely at what they really mean and what they stand for. In fact, they are often just another packaging intended to make neoliberal capitalism more attractive. Meanwhile, we need to look for new ways to live together, because the current way leads to self-destruction. Without a new vocabulary, it is very difficult to break out of old concepts. It isn't that we don't have the knowledge or ideas, but a lot of them are isolated in expert, academic circles. We think that if they were more accessible, they could point to new ways of thinking, inspire people and offer alternatives.

So, with UrgentCity we conducted a year-long research project, including the series of video interviews, an open call for new terms, and a number of workshops. The project results have been published on www.urgentcity.eu, but we see it more as an ongoing effort to talk about urgent urban matters, openly and in an accessible way.

Why did you choose a digital platform to articulate and disseminate this content?

We decided to publish online because it allowed us to be flexible. We could post parts of the research step by step and find links between them later on. Another important aspect was that we didn't want it to be a finished product: a book for example. We wanted to be able to add content and modify it as the project grew.

How do you get more input and display the results of the project in other physical formats, such as public events and programs?

Taking part in events and organizing them has become a crucial part of what we do. We are often happy to talk about our work in lectures, but what we find most exciting is to engage with our audience through debates and workshops. They aren't so much a way to present our work as a way we can learn from our audience about how what we do is valuable to them, so that it's not a one way channel. We are interested in initiating a dialogue, and that is done best when people actually have a chance to meet.



Exhibition 'Possibility Space: Over One Hundred Years of Transformation in Six European Squares' presented during the 9th edition Warsaw Under Construction Festival titled 'Plac Defilad: A step Forward' in 2017. Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Wojtek Radwański

To what extent did you achieve your initial goal? Did interdisciplinary approaches find common ground and agreement with regard to specific subjects and terms?

Finding common ground is a work in progress that we might as well continue all our lives, but it also continues to be a struggle, because the disciplinary enclosures still dominate the way we think about education and knowledge-building. They are definitely not easy to break through.

We are very happy that, this year, our efforts were recognized with a Dutch Design Award – one of the most important distinction in the Dutch design world, which shows us that we have touched on an important concern, which peers from the design field share as well. We are still very far from making interdisciplinarity a norm, but the more we strive to make it visible and desirable, the more we have a chance to get there eventually.

What are professionals from fields outside architecture and urbanism bringing to the urban discussion?

We definitely cannot look at the urban domain in isolation anymore. Architecture and urbanism are very strongly connected to the humanities, yet this connection seems to have been forgotten. We can also learn so much from sociology, anthropology and psychology, but these areas of knowledge have been almost entirely excluded from the professions of architecture and urbanism. Information technologies now have an enormous influence not only on how we design, but also on how we live. Yet, our understanding of computer logics is often very poor, so we end up accepting them as they are. We think that this really needs to change. Last but not least, we cannot forget or separate anything we do from both economy and ecology. Architecture and urbanism are entangled in all of this. We need the other disciplines to create meaningful contributions to society. That is what makes architecture political and, at the same time, what makes it interesting.

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Stay Amateur! Debate at Post—Office in Rotterdam 2014. Photo: Giuseppe Licari

Which three terms do you think need to be added to the contemporary urban discourse most urgently?

We like to think about the vocabulary as something that isn't static. It evolves. So, we don't necessarily always need to add or create terms. Sometimes they are already there, but we either forget about them or simplify them. One such example is the word 'amateur', which we have adopted as a part of our name and as a motto. We like it because its meaning has shifted with the rise of expert knowledge and professionalism, which have completely dominated the world in the

20th century. Being an amateur does not signify a lack of skill. It means pursuing an activity out of love and passion. For us, this notion of being passionate and engaged carries an important message and a political potential. So, amateurism, love and politics are words that we are interested in rediscovering, putting them in a different light and showing different connections between them.

How would you value contemporary critical thinking about the city, in comparison with other decades or centuries?

That's a difficult question, because we can't see our contemporary condition from a distance yet, in order to compare it. We do feel, however, that there is a serious lack of critical voices in architecture and urbanism today. It seems like we're refraining from the visions and idealism that shaped the 20th century. Instead, we prefer to focus on temporality, tactical and pragmatic approaches. Perhaps that is the new form of criticism: creating temporary alternatives in real life, instead of on paper. Yet, we live in really challenging times politically and ecologically, and looking only at the 'here and now' may not be enough. So, in a way, we can't afford not to think big anymore. We need to be daring, but in different ways than before.

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