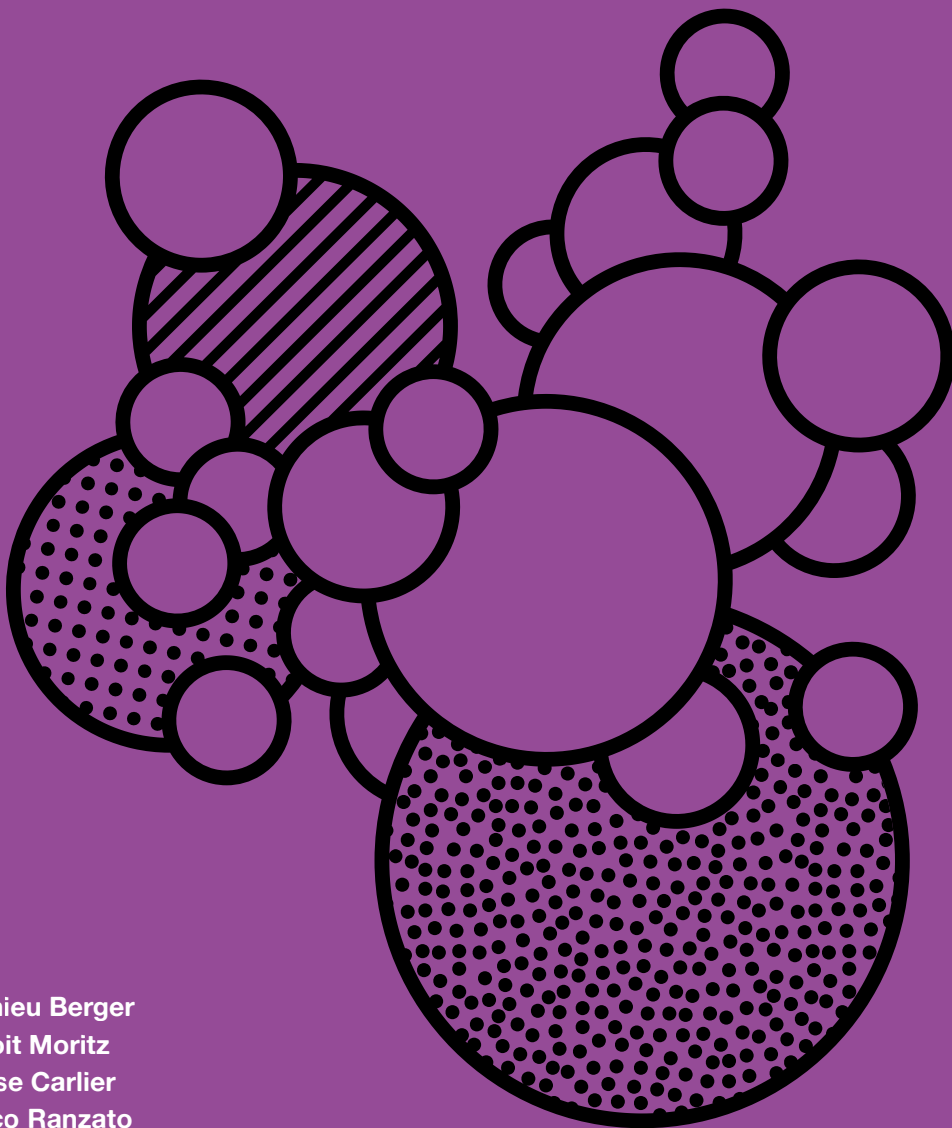


Designing Urban Inclusion

Metrolab Brussels MasterClass I



Mathieu Berger
Benoit Moritz
Louise Carlier
Marco Ranzato
(eds)



Metrolab series

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Questioning some forms and qualities of urban togetherness: friendliness, inclusion, hospitality

Mathieu Berger

By and large, public architecture and city planning are a matter of spatially and materially organising the coexistence of various types of individuals and groups, and the co-functioning of different kinds of uses and activities. By providing an infrastructure for urban togetherness, they take on a crucial societal role. Many issues related to urban togetherness have to do with the space we share (or do not share); they have both spatial causes and spatial consequences. Since many forms of social injustice are also a matter of spatial injustice, a social inclusion policy must also be a spatial inclusion policy.

This obviously begins with the unmaking of formally, institutionally segregated environments at the scale of an entire city. But it continues in more local urban settings, through an attention to the various expressions of urban inhospitality, i.e. to informal and sometimes subtle dynamics of exclusion of certain individuals or groups (due to disability, age, poverty, gender, education, culture, or sexual orientation), or forms of tyranny exerted by certain uses/activities over others (car traffic over bicycle traffic, built environments over natural environments, offices over housing, tourism over inhabiting, shopping over leisure, etc.).

While insisting on the fact that inclusion in urban life can never be addressed solely through architectural devices and urbanistic solutions, the organisers of this 2017 MasterClass believe that the social qualities of urban environments constitute a basic, necessary — and therefore fundamental — condition for any public action or policy aiming at progressive social change in cities.

To deal with these issues, practices of urban planning and urban design can stop at limiting or regulating processes of exclusion. On a liberal mode, they will then create environments that are officially public, opened to users that are recognised as formally equal. They will rely on the 'paradoxical hospitality' (see Stavo-Debaugé's paper on p.165) of indeterminate, free, open spaces. But urban design (its practitioners and political/administrative principals) can also be more affirmative and pro-active about this ideal of spatial inclusion. Beyond simply limiting exclusion, they can attempt to shape environments that *actually create space and make room for specific groups*. But how, and which groups?

A clarification of the discourses and practices intended to increase the opening — and thus the *publicity* — of public spaces might be relevant, for those who are not satisfied with the generic category of ‘inclusive design’. I will attempt to semantically characterise and distinguish three *qualities* of urban public spaces that are usually considered pure synonyms although they actually draw from different — and potentially concurrent — normative repertoires: ‘friendliness’, ‘inclusivity’, and ‘hospitality’.

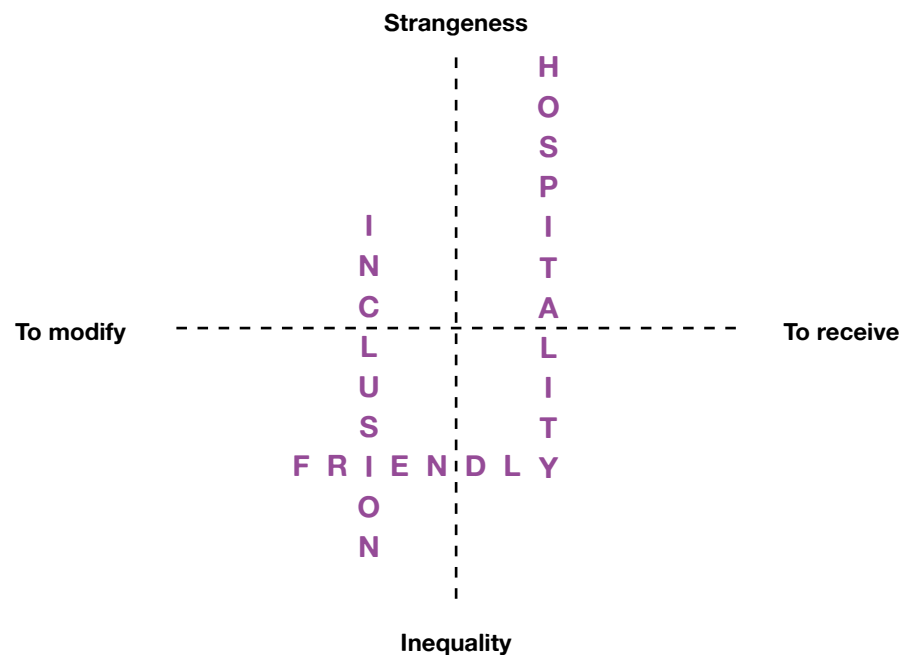


Figure 1: The semantic space for urban togetherness policies

The diagram in Figure 1 is an attempt to formalise a possible semantic space for the relationship between these three notions as they relate to the opening of urban spaces to large and diverse groups; three notions that are used to design urban environments suitable for togetherness.

The diagram is organised along two axes. The vertical axis is related to the phenomenon or the problem that motivates the opening of the urban space. In brief, we could say that in one case this opening is motivated by the need to respond to *inequality*, and in the other, to deal with alterity or, more precisely, *strangeness*. The socio-political relationships involved in inequality and those involved in strangeness do act in their own way upon the organisation and differentiation of our cities. The former or the latter may prevail when one has to consider the opening of urban environments. Is it about opening spaces to the disadvantaged, or to the stranger? Is it a matter of opening them to the ‘excluded of the inside’, i.e. those who are already there and known to be there, or to unknown (people, lifeforms, etc.), coming from the outside?

The horizontal axis represents the pragmatic dimension of the opening: what does it mean to ‘open up’ an urban space, or to be ‘open’ as an urban space? The notion of ‘inclusion’ entails the action verb ‘to include’, which makes the subject of inclusion (the one who includes), an actor in his own right. In order to include, one has to act, undertake actions, take measures that will allow to reform or transform a given situation. Inclusion, on the one hand, implies a form of action, and on the other, aims at changing the state of things. It implies the *modification* of both the physical spaces and the social interactions that these spaces are intended to guide; interactions characterised by inequality and/or otherness, strangeness.

No action verb, however, relates to the notion of *hospitality*. Whilst one must act, do, make, etc., in order to include, one can simply *be hospitable* or *show hospitality*. Of course, hospitality can be the goal of a policy aiming at actively giving hospitality to the foreigner, making a territory hospitable, etc., but it is not an essential aspect of the notion of hospitality. The challenge of urban hospitality is not to modify a social phenomenon, but to receive and welcome its expression. Rather than an action, hospitality appears to be both a *disposition* and a *mood*. A hospitable city is one that is available and *well disposed* towards those arriving, those who appear as newcomers, others, foreigners, strangers. For the spaces considered, this disposition goes with what Heidegger called a specific *Stimmung*, i.e. a mood, a tone, an atmosphere that can be perceived and felt.

This difference between inclusion and hospitality in regards to their relation to action (modification vs. reception) also implies significant differences related to democracy and participation. Inclusive policies call upon the ‘citizens’, struggle to make them come, enter and fit into its spaces of discussion and decision. Hospitable democracy does not actively involve citizens; it simply makes itself available and attentive to collective mobilisations and claims.

In an attempt to situate the notions of urban inclusion and urban hospitality on the diagram, one could say that the goal of an inclusive city is to take action on its spaces, territories and populations, in order to reduce inequalities; the challenge for an hospitable city is to show itself apt and disposed to receive things and people that are new, foreign, strange.

What about the *friendly city*? How could it be defined and where should it be situated? On the horizontal axis of the pragmatic dimension, indicating a relationship to action, the ‘friendly’ category is presented as an intermediary one, between inclusion and hospitality. It may consist in modifying a situation in a drastic, intentional way (e.g. when a city such as Brussels suddenly closes off its central boulevards to cars, and claims itself ‘pedestrian-friendly’). Or it may consist in progressively increasing its capacity to receive and welcome new use(r)s through micro-initiatives, many of which originate from the private sector: gay-friendly bars or shops, kid- and dog-friendly restaurants, etc. In both cases, announcement and indication are central facets: it may be enough to state that the bar that I own or the city that I run is ‘kid-friendly’ for it to be considered true. This performative aspect does not apply in the same way to inclusion or hospitality: it is not enough to claim to be an ‘inclusive city’ or a ‘hospitable city’ for these values and qualities to occur. The ‘friendly’ quality can work as a mere promise.

On the vertical axis, the diagram presents the ‘friendly’ initiatives as being concerned with the question of inequalities; inequalities of resources, powers, capacities, etc. They do not deal with the phenomena and relationships involved in strangeness. Indeed, one can only be the ‘friend’ of what one already knows. ‘Friendly’ projects, initiatives, policies, etc., must *pre-identify their friends*: women, homosexuals, seniors, people with reduced mobility, tourists, children, dogs, etc. They depend on problems of uses that are already known and on groups that are already established.

One could also say that the kind and pleasant ‘friendly’ approach can only be directed towards groups whose unequal status is utterable. It would appear incongruous and indecent to speak of a poor-friendly restaurant, a homeless-friendly park, or a black-friendly neighbourhood. The familiarity and intimacy of the friendly approach to opening urban spaces is also inadequate when it comes to characterising the qualities required to receive strangers and newcomers. As we know, the warmest and most attentive hosts are not always the ones that allow the guest to feel at home! The ‘paradoxical hospitality’ of the (liberal) public space must be reminded: a space that appears as freed and unencumbered, where people behave towards one another with restraint or polite indifference, shows the most elementary and fundamental quality of hospitality.

Regarding its relationship to inequalities, we have seen that the friendly approach is closer to the inclusive approach than it is to the hospitable approach. But here, too, we need to point out discrepancies that do not appear on the diagram. It was previously mentioned that ‘friendly’ actions need to pre-identify their ‘friends’ and work to improve the specific situation encountered by this or that type of people, considered as a (sub)group of users — and often consumers — of the city. The ‘inclusive city’, on the contrary, aims at general, universal inclusion. After all, inclusive design is also known as ‘universal design’ or ‘design for all’. Inclusion is concerned with masses, with the (underprivileged) population at large, whereas the friendly approach cherry-picks its target groups.

There is also a civic aspect to the inclusive approach that seems absent from the friendly approach. Inclusion aims at making the disadvantaged a full member of their urban community: a citizen. The ‘friendly’ approach is more interested in the individual seen as potential user and, often, as a potential consumer. For instance, it will address the issue of poverty strictly in commercial terms: there are more ‘budget-friendly’ supermarkets than ‘homeless-friendly’ parks.

Let us conclude with a word on the quality of *hospitality* in urban spaces; this notion is a central one in the students’ work at the Metrolab 2017 MasterClass. Inspired by the works of Joan Stavo-Debauge (2017), it seems to be the most elaborate of these three notions denoting the ‘opening of urban spaces’, both as a theoretical concept and as a guide for design practices. Interpreting Stavo-Debauge’s works, we proposed to define hospitality as the general quality of any urban space that all at once *invites, allows, hosts, eases, and shelters*.

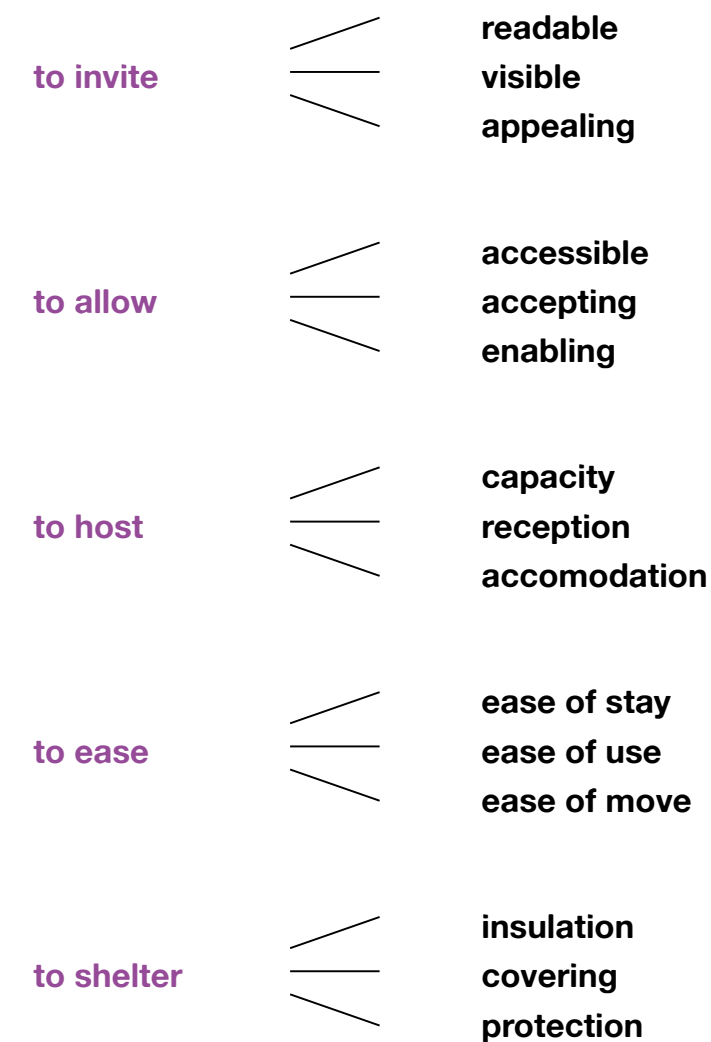


Figure 2: The hospitality of urban environments and its criteria

As the diagram in Figure 2 shows, each of these five semantic aspects of hospitality may be related to three sub-aspects. Together they can be considered as a matrix of criteria used to describe, analyse, and assess the four ERDF Brussels projects used as case studies during the MasterClass. This first analytical framework, which was still schematic and provisional, has been discussed, criticised, and adapted by the MasterClass’ participants, through a dialogue with the various Master tutors and in the light of the empirical observations conducted on these four very different sites by different groups of participants, each with its own sensibility and approach.

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