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Arenas of urban future-making

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Arenas play a decisive role in shaping urban futures. As literal or metaphorical venues where various kinds of actions and actors come together, arenas function as the terrain through which urban futures are negotiated, contested, realized, and rejected. The feasibility of creating and sustaining a space for the articulation and materialization of ways of thinking and practicing urban futures plays a decisive role in determining which futures – and whose futures – appear as possible or impossible. This space does not have to be built physically; it can also be established by giving people the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas. If such space is not given, there is literally no room for certain futures. As such, arenas of urban future-making can be spaces of common collaboration or conflictual confrontation.

Conceptualizing arenas

The notion of the arena evokes images of activities such as performances, competitions, battles, and games. Etymologically, the term *arena* derives from the Latin word *harena*, meaning a place of combat, enclosed space, or sandy place. Intrinsicly bound to the Roman amphitheatres and the figure of the gladiator, the strong collective image associated with such places pictures the arena as a definite and close space, as a point of encounter between different levels of society. While arenas rely on difference and multiplicity (it is always different actors and positions encountering each other that constitute an arena), they also rely on boundaries and limitations, as not everyone has access to the arena (it is often only a limited number of actors who appear within the arena versus a huge audience that watches it). Equally important is the contestation occurring in the audience, as some jeer loudly whilst others remain silent in disinterest. Contestation is thus not limited to the central focal point of the arena as the designated space for competing differences.

Despite (or perhaps due to) its multifaceted and somewhat ambiguous character, the notion of the arena offers a helpful entry point to investigate agency in future-making from multiple disciplinary perspectives. In political science, the term *policy arena* describes a ‘set of formal and informal rules that determine the course of public decision-making’ (John and Cole, 2000: 249). T.J. Lowi (1964: 689–90) highlights the connection between policy and government activities as ‘arenas of power’ that can influence structures, processes, and relations and may ‘exhibit particular features of conflict or consensus’ (Heinelt, 2007: 109). More generally, arenas are fundamental dimensions of social worlds where individuals and groups converge to discuss, debate, and negotiate issues of shared concern, often with some degree of contention (Clarke et al., 2018). From this perspective, the arena is the setting for the negotiations of matters of concern constructed through (inter)action and not existing independently of this interaction.

Furthermore, the notion of arenas of development has been useful for understanding the complex processes underpinning socio-material change (Jørgensen, 2012) and journeys towards sustainability in urban areas (Jensen et al., 2015). In this strand of research, the arena is understood as a 'spatial imaginary that brings together heterogeneous elements that seem distant in geographical and conventional cultural space' (Jørgensen and Sørensen, 2002: 192). Here, the arena resembles the idea of a patchwork that links partial connections and multiple stories and addresses conflicting interests and contention about space. Arenas, therefore, 'define the space in which socio-material activities are located, and offer stages on which actions and dynamics can be performed' (Jørgensen, 2012: 1001).

However, in urban research, the arena is still a rather open concept that is more often used as a metaphor and rarely specified in detail. The arena appears to have a kind of intrinsic meaning, which is why it is often used without a clear definition. Sometimes the urban arena is equated with 'the city' or 'the urban' as a whole (see Gandy, 2006); in other cases, it is used to distinguish particular spaces and places within the urban fabric or as a metaphor to distinguish particular socio-material constellations of actors with regard to their localized activities.

Dimensions of arenas of urban future-making

Arenas of urban future-making vary in shape, size, and scale. They can encompass everything from public squares, parks, and streets to offices, city halls, and other spaces of social activity. Arenas are multi-scalar. They can emerge from a direct encounter with a few local actors or develop through a complex framework that ties together various types of interdependencies of actor relations at different scales. Arenas can act as microcosms or as vehicles for larger trends. They can bring together local actors to collaborate on issues directly affecting their immediate environment and serve as grassroots platforms where local voices can be heard and direct action taken. Yet, arenas can also establish relations between the urban and other scales, for example, by occupying public spaces to address global crises and transformation processes. As such, arenas can reach beyond their immediate boundaries and address regional, national, and even global audiences, thereby influencing larger scales of urban discourse (Chandler et al., 2021).

Arenas are also dynamic structures when it comes to their temporality. Arenas can be created for a specific, temporary occasion, event or purpose and dismantled shortly thereafter without leaving much of a trace. Arenas can also exist over a certain period of time or return seasonally and rhythmically in order to draw attention to certain ongoing or unresolved issues in the city. Arenas can also attempt to establish themselves over a long-term period in order to permanently manifest a certain negotiation of urban futures in the urban space. These temporal aspects of arenas are crucial in understanding how they influence and interact with the urban landscape over time. While short-term arenas of urban future-making may not alter the urban fabric permanently, their cultural and social impacts can resonate long after the structures themselves have vanished and reoccur in different forms through other arenas of urban future-making. Permanent arenas can become deeply ingrained

in the identity of a city, thereby becoming fixed points in the urban landscape and providing a permanent space for public gathering and engagement.

Arenas are stages of performance. They are not confined to concrete and steel boundaries and do not have to materialize in the urban fabric. Glimpses of different arenas can also be caught in a dialogue or on-screen, or in written plans or books. Traces can appear in renderings and models (Mélix and Christmann, 2022), be distributed through the digital landscapes of social media (Vanolo, 2016), or be represented in films, songs, or poetry. Arenas can take us into the realm of imagining urban futures that do not yet exist or have never existed. They can be platforms for enacting both utopian and dystopian visions of a different urban society. Through these represented spaces, arenas become powerful symbols and images that can provoke discussion and public debate (Mau et al., 2024), inspire innovation, and reflect our deepest uncertainties and desires in the very process of imagining and reimagining the urban condition.

However, the role of arenas goes beyond providing space for urban future-making. Arenas are not merely locations for actors to meet but can themselves also be considered active participants in crafting urban futures. As focal points where communities gather, interact, and express collective aspirations, arenas can push for innovation; as places of interaction between people, objects, and other kinds of socio-material relations, arenas can create laboratories and testing grounds for experimentation (Evans et al., 2018; Halpern et al., 2013; Thiel, 2020; Wagner and Grunwald, 2019); as built environments with a particular design and shape, arenas can point to a new era and thus anticipate urban development. As such, arenas are pivotal and multifunctional spaces that catalyse and influence urban futures in various ways. They are not merely passive spaces but active sites of negotiation, imagination, and transformation. They invite different actors to envision and implement new ways of urban thinking and living, whether through architectural innovation, social experimentation, or political conflict, thereby potentially redefining urban life.

Lines of inquiry

In all these forms, arenas act as dynamic entities and crucial facilitators in the making of urban futures and allow for reflecting and influencing the way we think of a city and its urban entanglements. We invite papers addressing the following aspects:

- Arenas of urban future-making are significantly shaped by various spatial attributes, which range from their physical structures to the social relations that distinguish them as social spaces. This line of inquiry seeks to understand the interplay of these factors in order to engage with the multiple relations that produce the arena as an urban space of future-making. By examining how these spatial attributes interact, we can gain insights into the processes that influence the development and transformation of urban spaces, and how they might evolve to meet urban challenges.

- The shaping and defining of arenas of urban future-making involve a diverse range of actors and activities. This line of inquiry seeks to address the various roles actors play in the arena and to engage with the barriers they face when trying to participate and contribute to urban future-making. By exploring these dynamics, we can better understand the power relations of different actors in influencing exclusivity and effectiveness of urban futures.
- Urban arenas vary widely in shape, size, and scale. They can be either top-down designed or bottom-up emergent, and be localized in a particular place or range from one city to another. This line of inquiry seeks to address these multi-scalar dimensions of arenas in order to comprehend how scale shapes the arena and its impact on urban future-making. Understanding the scale of these arenas is crucial for assessing their potential to effect change and for devising strategies that are appropriate to their scope.
- Arenas of urban future-making have varied temporalities. These temporalities are crucial for understanding how different types of arena are constructed, experienced, and perceived. This line of inquiry aims to ask how these temporalities influence the arenas' impact on urban future-making processes. By considering the temporal aspects, we can better understand which time frames urban futures are created along, as well as how past decisions continue to shape present and future urban landscapes.

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