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Designing for a cooperative economy

(or ecommony)

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Essay 2017

Designing for a cooperative economy

1) The grid and the 'invisible hand'

In this series I want to show how urban design can be deployed to reconnect an economy, that has run wild, with the consumer.

Land Ordinances and the Grid

In 1784, 85 and 87, the "Land Ordinances" were adopted in the United States, three laws allowing the country to be divided into marketable "portions".

Thus, the entire territory was divided into square Townships, of 6 by 6 miles, which were subdivided into (36) of 1 by 1 mile. These sections were again subdivided into (640) 'broadacres' of 50 by 80 meters. This design is still recognizable, not only in the landscape, but also in the cities all over the United States.

An interesting experiment that should give entrepreneurs the freedom to purchase bigger or smaller pieces of land and exploit them through agriculture, industry, shops or housing. An experiment in which spatial planning and economics were connected, while the proposed structure lead to a road network in the shape of a rectangular grid, which has already proven itself in history: this allowed all possible interpretations and completions.

The 'invisible hand'

By giving a free hand to entrepreneurs, the country would flourish, a theory which had been made plausible by Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith in the early and mid-18th centuries. If every producer gets the chance to offer products on a free market, then every consumer will get what he or she will need. For example, bakers who offer their bread on the free market all try to offer the best bread for the lowest price. A process of supply and demand for which consumers would benefit while the bakers would stay sharp and offer new and better products. It would be as if an "invisible hand" made that everybody's needs would be fulfilled. A seductive theory that elevated the pursuit of self-interest to virtue.

Sketch of Swansea Market by E Hull 1871

In practice

Did this theory appear to be true? Has the "invisible hand" done what it was expected to do: the development of products that meet everyone's needs?

Enterprises have grown steadily. Under the motto 'growth is a must' they organize themselves globally: globalization. Consumers, on the other hand, are getting smaller: in order to allow growth, they are increasingly put under pressure to buy the products offered. Meanwhile, a whole science has emerged that investigates how to tempt the consumer to buy. As in the fifties Victor Gruen investigated how to set up supermarkets so that customers would buy as much as possible. Nowadays brain scans are being used to investigated if advertising messages have the most effect. Neuromarketing.

Neuromarketing

Meanwhile, technology companies from Silicon Valley (at Stanford University) organize symposia to answer the question how to make apps more addictive, to make consumers use their smartphone more (the word addiction is avoided here) so providers can collect more valuable data, that can be used to increase sales of products.

Addiction

And the latest news is: camera's in billboards that film passers-by who stop and look at the posters, to find out which ads work best and for what audiences.

Effects of the 'invisible hand'

So the 'invisible hand' has had a major impact on the consumer, which has been manipulated increasingly and put under pressure by big companies that are aiming for to growth. Thus, consumers lose contact with their own wishes and needs.

This alienation is mirrored by producers who have no contact with the consumer. If they did not focus so strongly on their growth, they would realize that they no longer know 'for whom they do it all'.

The 'invisible hand' has, due to the Land Ordinance Act, also had a clear influence on the shape of (US) cities. This is the subject of the next episode.

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2) How the 'invisible hand' is shaping the city

In the previous episode, we have seen how the 'invisible hand' made companies big and consumers small. In this episode I want to show how the 'invisible hand' has shaped the city

Urban centers

The marketable plots of the grid are mainly owned and exploited by large companies. Here they can set their own house rules, maintained by their own security. This can lead to the removal of visitors who don't intend to shop. Like socializing high school students, musicians or people who are handing out flyers. As companies become more powerful, more and more public areas change into areas that are ruled by these companies.
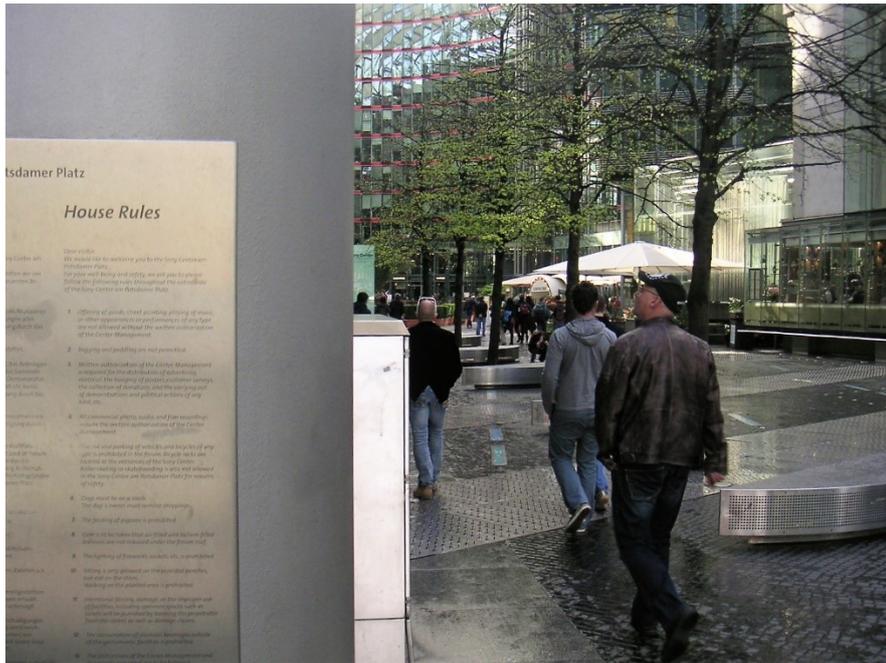
Center Berlin: 'Siemens' house rules

The presence of large companies is also manifested by an omni present advertising.

History

Because profitable exploitation is a priority, it is obvious that facilities that are no more profitable will be replaced by new initiatives. As a consequence, references to the past are automatically deleted. That this can be felt as a loss becomes clear when the appearance of new facilities often refer to the past. Like the 'Italian square' pictured below in Phoenix, Arizona.

Phoenix Arizona, 2008

A development that does not automatically lead to historical awareness, as evidenced by the following anecdote: An American tourist who is visiting an English city asks a resident why the castle (from the 12th century) is built just in the middle of the shopping center, where it is actually standing in the way.

Because of the focus on the exploitation of the grid, residents lose their cultural heritage and, consequently, the material references that provide a perspective on the historical context of contemporary culture.

Periphery

Meanwhile, consumers ended up in the periphery of urban areas. The idea of the "invisible hand" was based on the assumed beneficial effect of self-interest, and this is exactly what we see in the layout of these neighborhoods, where the privacy of individual households is paramount. Here, the consumer, separated from his fellow

citizens, is confronted with a never ending flow of advertisements that infiltrate the home through the TV and social media. Ads that have been tested for their effectiveness by brain scans, in order to tempt consumers to purchase more and more products.

Built for the privacy of the individual household

Overwhelmed and running wild

Now the small consumer is facing the big companies. Not only in the economy but also in the built environment. Unfortunately, the 'invisible hand' has not been able to do justice to the needs of the consumers in their negotiation with producing companies. Instead, consumers are being overwhelmed by producers who are running wild. And so, consumers tend forget about their own needs, while producers forget 'what they're doing it for'. Meanwhile, they colonize more and more public space in the centers of big cities, scarifying the historical context, for more profit.

Another economy

In the next episode, we look at the possibility of interplay between consumers and producers, which allow developments to be based on interaction between consumers and producers. After this it's time to see how this kind of interaction can be promoted by another way of urban planning.

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3) Interaction and development

In the previous episode, we saw how the "invisible hand" filled in the grid, and how it contributed to a weakened position of the consumer. In this episode I want to show how consumers and producers can also work together, taking into account the wishes of the first and not the desire of the latter to grow.

The development of the house

To illustrate this, I will go back to distant past, to the time that the 'Cananefates' settled in our (Dutch) regions. For a start they built a roof above their heads, next to the landing stage of their boats. And they made a fire place within reach. This way they kept dry when it was raining while they could cook without being bothered by the smoke.

Over time, they began to experience the wind as a nuisance. An idea was born: apply walls. And so they came into action to realize this in one way or another. Then they lived for a while in their new situation until they began to have a problem that they had to cook outside. A new wish was born: bring the fire inside the house. The fire place was moved inward and the problem of the smoke was cleared by making an opening in the gable.

Interaction

Here we can see how the experience of residents can lead to wishes to improve their situation. These wishes can lead to the next phase: a consultation about how these improvements can be realized. In this consultation there will be an interaction between the wishes and the productive possibilities that are available. As a result a new situation can be formed. In this new situation inevitably new wishes will arise. Again and again there will be new wishes and interactions between these wishes and

the productive abilities, or in other words between consumers and producers, can result in a new situation.

This example may be not be historically correct, but it illustrates how the interaction between consumer wishes and the abilities of producers can propel development.

Tri-angled house. Consumers side on the left, producers side on the right. Design: Philip Krabbendam

The unreliable consumer

Self-interest was the basis for the beneficial effect of the 'invisible hand'. This is reflected in the grid, where consumers are housed in separate homes. But how beneficial has the 'invisible hand' actually been?

In their isolation, consumers became vulnerable while producers became great and mighty. The pursuit of self-interest turned out to be precarious. How could this happen? Initially, it would have seemed to be a good idea for consumers to have bakers that would keep an eye on each other in order to offer the cheapest and yet the best sandwiches on the free market.

But what did this worldview look like from the side of the producers? They were confronted with consumers who sad, 'If I can get better goods elsewhere, then I am gone'. Anyone who says something like this to his or her partner signs the death sentence of the relationship.

Losers

Adam Smith had said that trust was a prerequisite for the proper functioning of the 'invisible hand', yet he based his theory on a fundamentally unreliable consumer. Is it surprising then that producers try to be 'big and strong' and that they try to control the consumer as much as possible? A difficult position, especially since there are competitors who try to do the same. Therefore, 'big and strong' is not enough, then 'biggest' is the right answer here.

No wonder that producers are running wild and try to put pressure on consumers in every possible way. And so the consumer's position is no longer as free and comfortable as it was supposed to be in Adam Smith's theory. It appears that producer and consumer are both losers here.

A different spatial design

There is a way to design cities in such a way that they invite to an economy that is based on the mutual involvement of consumers and producers, an economy in which the interaction between the wishes of the consumer and the practical possibilities offered by producers can be the basis of developments. In other words, of a cooperative economy. More about this in the next episode.

Designing for a cooperative economy

4) The street as a practice area

Elsewhere, I have recommended the urban tree structure that liberates residents from their isolation because it enables residents to orient themselves, both socially and spatially. As a result, they have more grip on questions like 'who am I' and 'where am I'. This can support the identity of residents. In this series I want to show that the urban tree structure also allows for a cooperative economy.

Residents' organizations

Breaking free from their social and spatial isolation, not only supports the identity residents. Orientation on others and on the environment also invites to social activities and involvement in the environment. In doing so they become aware their wishes, and discuss how to realize them. Residents' organizations that may arise from this, will have a consumer side, where

residents discuss their wishes, and a producer side, in the form of working groups or a handyman service. Essential is now the interaction between both in the consultation about the practical implementation of the formulated wishes.

Urban tree structure

The number of residents and a defined territory

As the lowest level of urban tree structure I will take the street here, knowing that there are lower levels (portico, cul de sac, cohousing). Now not every street is inviting for the formation of a resident's organization. For the sake of a good overview, a group of 100 to 120 residents seems to be working well.

Another important aspect is a clearly defined territory. This allows residents to know in which territory they can engage.

Facilities for social life

For the life of a residents' organization, it is important that their shared territory includes facilities that support social life, such as children's playgrounds, seats for parents and elderly people, a table for (occasional) feast meals (Barbecue) or coffee mornings. Or a 'green' zone for planting. And of course we can also think of keeping rabbits or chickens.

Example

In 1994, the residents of the Rotterdam Stampioendwarsstraat bought their street from their housing corporation in order to gain control over their direct environment. Now they could furnish their 'own' street. Hereby they were supported by the municipality.

Stampioendwarsstraat in Rotterdam 2005

At the moment something similar is happening: in the Roggeveenstraat the residents are in the process of buying their street from the housing corporation, also for the purpose of gaining control.

Roggeveenstraat in The Hague 2017

Practical facilities

For the working groups or the handyman service, set up by the organization, facilities are required for practical purposes. Like a workshop, with tools for the maintenance of homes, the green zone, pavement and street furniture.

But residents can take it one step further. Thinking of the effects of climate change, they may consider a wadi to store the water of excessive rainfall, preventing the sewage from becoming overloaded.

A wadi

Not only practical!

Work or services from 'outside'

A residents' organization can also invite professional producers, from outside their own group. Thus they can decide to appeal to a caterer or a gardening company. Residents can also request the municipality to fulfill certain wishes. They can make arrangements with the municipality, for example, to supply materials such as trees, fencing, pavement, street furniture or playgrounds, which they can use to set up their living environment. In all these cases the interaction between consumers (the residents) and the producers from outside can persist.

Practice

With this series, I want to show how the built environment can contribute to a cooperative economy based on the interaction between consumers and producers. Now, the current economy of the invisible hand'' will not be bothered by street-level experimentation. For residents, however, it can become clear that another economy is possible and satisfying. In addition, the street is a good 'practice area' for the development of a cooperative economy on higher scale levels. More about this in the next episode.

Designing for a cooperative economy

5) Indirect influence on the 'invisible hand' in neighborhood and district

In the previous episode, we saw how, on the level of the street, interaction can arise between residents as consumers and residents in workgroups or a handyman service that play the role of producer. In this episode we will look at neighborhoods and districts. Where the level of the street might be a 'practice area' in the first place, on these higher levels the interaction between consumers and producers may have some influence on the economy of the 'invisible hand'. In this episode some examples.

Involvement in neighborhood and district

Elsewhere I have explained how an urban tree structure can give rise to involvement of residents, also on higher levels, like the neighborhood and the district. As in the street, a clearly defined and recognizable territory is important here. To realize wishes, formulated on these higher scale levels, 'in-house' a neighborhood workshop can be useful.

Neighborhood workshop Noorderhof in Amsterdam

Commons

As residents have begun to organize themselves, many initiatives can arise. That this is more than a nice idea, is evidenced by the practice of car sharing, carpooling or tooling. We see also how a 'give away shop' or a so-called 'clothing library' can be created. Or a 'repair café' for the repair of domestic items.

In addition, we see initiatives to grow vegetables and generate electricity. These types of initiatives can also be called 'commons', a term that originally refers to the use of common land.

'Delivering goods – thanks' Give away shop in Utrecht

All these commons in neighborhoods and districts enable residents to settle their own business, especially in areas where the economy of the 'invisible hand' doesn't function, being the cause of poverty, depletion of natural resources and pollution of the environment.

Clothing library in The Hague

A 'give away' shop and a 'clothing library' ensure that low incomes can obtain things that are otherwise unattainable for this group. And they prevent unused goods or clothes from being discarded. This reduces waste and the use of natural resources. A 'Repair Café' has the same effects.

Cultivating vegetables in the direct neighborhood is also a way to be more independent of the 'invisible hand' that transports vegetables, refrigerated, over high distances across the globe, again at the expense of natural resources and polluting the atmosphere further with CO2.

The same goes for the power generated by solar panels, which means that less energy is needed from coal and gas plants, that, again, use natural resources and produce not only electricity, but also CO2.

Cooperatives

If commons play a significant role in the neighborhood or district, it is desirable that they have a democratic structure to ensure that all stakeholders, both consumers and producers, are done right. To this end, the legal structure of the 'mixed cooperative' can be used, in which the democratic rights of both, consumers and producers, have been laid down.

Such a legal structure also allows formal agreements with third parties. For example, with the municipality about the use of vacant buildings and landslides, or the provision of materials.

Indirect and direct influence

The cooperation between consumers and producers at the level of neighborhoods and districts will not do violence to the economy of the 'invisible hand', although their production may decrease a little bit. This way cooperatives may have an indirect influence on the established economy that produces on a national or international level. But a direct influence is also possible, when cooperatives from neighborhoods and districts confront these producers directly with their consumer wishes. More about this in the next episode.

Designing for a cooperative economy

6) Neighborhood and district: direct influence on the 'invisible hand'

In the previous episode, we looked at facilities in neighborhoods and districts characterized by interaction between residents as consumers and residents as producers, thus embodying a cooperative economy. This new economy can have an indirect influence on the old economy of the 'invisible hand'. In this episode we look at initiatives that may influence this economy directly.

Consumer cooperatives

In some places, residents have set up consumer cooperatives, supermarkets, which allows them to express their needs as organized group of consumers. For example when it comes to health, sustainable production and or animal welfare. As a group, they now have more influence than individual users who can only 'vote with their feet' in regular supermarkets.

Consumer co-op

These coops will, in the first place, approach small producers who engage in healthy and sustainable products. If this happens in many places, major producers will also be willing to listen to the formulated needs, assumed that they don't want to lose their market share.

Healthcare

When there are many residents' initiatives, there are also many contacts between residents, making them feel at home in their surroundings. An advantage, especially for those who are depending on their immediate living environment, such as (parents with) children and the elderly. For the elderly this may be a reason to continue living in their own neighborhood or district, as long as possible. This can lead to the elderly uniting to approach a healthcare provider as a group, as a consumer cooperative, to develop appropriate forms of care. As a cooperative they have a strong position in their negotiations with a professional provider, stronger than when they operate as individuals.

Self-employed workers can establish a 'bread fund' in groups of 40 or 50, in which they support each other in case of illness or temporary disability. In doing so, they form their own insurance, with their own policies and without bureaucracy.

Casual contacts

A urban tree structure can give rise to involvement in the built environment. As a result, initiatives can be created that together form a co-operative economy.

All of this can be supported by facilities that, as a kind of lubricant oil, promote social life because they invite non-obligatory 'casual contacts'. These appear to help residents feel more at home in the built environment, which can increase involvement in fellow residents and in the environment.

Small scale meeting places

In order to invite residents to 'casual contacts' we can learn something from a regular bus stop, where you can talk to someone without scaring the addressee, what can be the case if you appeal to someone in a huge public sphere like a square or a beach.

A bus stop is also public, but with the scale of a private space, which reduces the number of people present. And there's a topic of conversation, like the bus being late, or the weather. In order to invite people to 'casual contacts', we can use the bus stop principle by designing small public meeting places with a topic. Such as views of children feeding ducks, an artwork, passers-by, street performers, or a glorious sight.

'Public private spaces' overlooking passers-by

Neighborhood office

With the rise of the internet, it is possible to work at home. This saves travel time, energy and annoyance in traffic jams. But: at home people are easily distracted by household duties. Perhaps that's why students and self-employed workers, who could work at home, choose to work in a public place, where others do the same.

To facilitate this, we can also think of 'neighborhood offices' where home workers can go to a real office that offers a working atmosphere with facilities like air conditioning, a coffee machine, printers, a skype and lunch facilities.

Because such an office is in the neighborhood or district, there is automatic contact with fellow residents, which benefits social cohesion, while on the ground floor there can be room for childcare and local coop. Practical and also contributing to social cohesion for the children, who can meet playmates here who live nearby, so they can easily visit them at home.

The scale level of the city

Above the levels of neighborhoods and districts is the levels of the city as a whole. Also here we see the possibility of a formally established interaction between consumers, the inhabitants that are represented in the city council, and producers that are working in the municipal services. More about this in the next episode.

Designing for a cooperative economy

7) The city: city council and municipal services versus the 'invisible hand'

In the previous episodes we looked at the many initiatives of residents in neighborhoods and districts and at the interaction that arose here between residents as consumers on one hand and as producers on the other. In this episode we look at the scale level of the municipality, which I will refer to as 'the city'.

City council and municipal services
Municipalities make use of services that can, after consultation, implement the wishes that are formulated in the municipal council. This interaction between consumers and producers is not as direct as in districts, neighborhoods or streets, due to the higher scale level of the city, but that is unavoidable. What can be avoided are the problems that arise as a consequence of the 'withdrawing governance' of the government.

Outsourcing

This meant that part of the work of the municipal services was outsourced to commercial companies. This does not have to be a problem as long as these services remain in charge, and keep in touch with the city council.

Outsourcing sometimes went so far that services were lifted, such as municipal energy supply and public transport. The work of these services was taken over by commercial companies. Due to these shifts, the influence of inhabitants, by means of the city council, has decreased sharply, while the effect of the 'invisible hand' became more and more manifest. For example, inhabitants became now dependent on commercial energy suppliers, operating at a European level. A city council, which believes that these suppliers should work more sustainably, has hardly any influence here. Although commercial suppliers have an eye for sustainability, they continue to invest in traditional coal and nuclear power plants, for profit and growth.

Violation of the public sphere

By withdrawing, the government also lost some of its grip on the public sphere. As a result, companies that settle in center areas could define their own territory to set their own rules. So they can close the area for people who do not come to buy, such as college students looking for a hangout, people who flyer, make music or people who want to use the public sphere for a chat with fellow inhabitants. So also here, the influence of the 'invisible hand' can be experienced.

It should be considered how the municipality could counteract this derogation of public sphere, so that inhabitants can meet each other freely and exchange views on what is happening at the scale level of their city. Making it possible for them to feel at home and may-be create new wishes for the city.

Recapture

When municipalities recapture the public sphere, they can do something about the derogation of the historically-grown inner cities. In the US, the primacy of business has led to an ongoing process of demolition and the construction of new buildings, which has come down to the disappearance of most of the historical context of today's cities. This trend is not so strong in Europe, but yet we can see how the appearance of historical centers are increasingly determined by large, national or international chains. Not so much by demolition and renewal, as well by countless billboards and facade advertising.

Before municipalities can act here, their trust in the 'invisible hand' has to be reconsidered. A political choice!

Come-back of the municipality
In order to limit outsourcing, a similar political choice will be have to be made, in order to shed services again under the authority of the city council, read: the inhabitants. Like transport companies and energy suppliers.
In addition, developments in public space should be directed in a way that a visit to the center is no longer synonymous with visiting a, newly built, shopping mall.

Caring for lower scale levels
After their come-back municipal administration can also support residential initiatives on lower scale levels. For example: (unused) land and (vacant) properties could be allocated to residents. Where necessary, the zoning can be changed. Municipalities can also provide grants to residents' organizations, or give a guarantee if residents want to conclude loans with third parties, in case residents want to develop their neighborhood or district.
Once trust in the 'invisible hand' is reconsidered, municipalities can also feel free to prevent local social structures and facilities from being undermined by gentrification. And to come into action when houses are being bought in great numbers by developers, to be rented out to expats and tourists, causing not only the loss of social structures and facilities, but also the displacement of large parts of the urban population from their own city.

Roadmap to a cooperative city
In this series I wanted to show how an urban tree structure can invite to a cooperative city, provided with an economy based on the interaction between consumers and producers. A change that will not take place overnight. The city must be interpreted as a tree structure, and adjusted as necessary. In addition, social connections and practical facilities will have to be (re)established at each level of the tree structure. In the next episode I want to evaluate the previous episodes and try to look forward.

Designing for a cooperative economy

8) Retrospect and prospect

Because the different scale levels of urban tree structures can invite residents to organize themselves, I have regarded these structure as the basis for a new economy, in which the interaction between consumer and producer forms the starting point. This is in contrast to the rectangular, neutral grid that, according to developments in the US, gives room to the economics of the 'invisible hand', an economy in which producers want to grow, for which they pressurize consumers to buy, day in and day out.

Sustainability and poverty alleviation
The initiatives in neighborhoods and districts show that residents try to reduce the influence of large producers, that tend, in their pursuit of profit and growth, to plunder and pollute the environment rather than to take care of it. Because energy companies are still investing in coal and nuclear power plants they try to provide sustainable energy in their own living environment. And because big companies deliver vegetables that are transported many kilometers over the earth and need to be cooled, at the cost of a lot of fossil energy and pollution of the atmosphere, they start growing their own vegetables in the neighborhood.

Vertical farming

We also see Repair Café's and Give Away shops, initiatives that prevent waste by reusing old stuff, and, at the same time, support residents, who have less and less to spend in the economy of the 'invisible hand', where the gap between rich and poor is growing.
These initiatives try to remedy the negative effects of the 'invisible hand' for humans and the environment, but in doing so, they experiment with the organization of consumers and producers and with the interaction between the two, which means that, at the same time, they lay the foundation for a new, cooperative economy.

Ecommony
So an urban tree structure can contribute to the development of commons with a cooperative economy, to an 'ecommony', as an alternative to the economy of the 'invisible hand' in which producers 'run wild' and pursue consumers with a never-ending stream of, advertising messages, tested with brain scans, while they deplete and pollute the earth and mess up cities without respect for the historical context.

Urban tree structure; basis for an 'ecommony'

Municipal politics
The administrative structure of municipalities is in principle suitable for the interaction between consumers and producers. The council can act as a consumer organization and the municipal services can play the role of producers. But in practice we see a government that is withdrawing and that outsources services and gives commercial companies a lot of freedom to manifest itself in inner cities. Because of this, residents have lost control over the supply of energy and the functioning of public transport, and also over the public life in inner cities, where companies can set their own rules that are intended to promote the buying behavior of consumers.
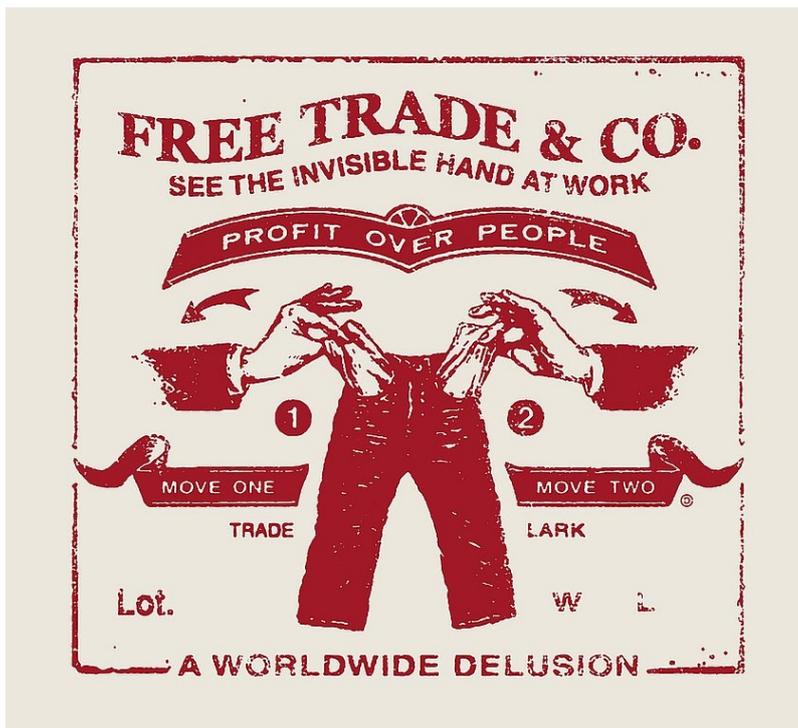
Christopher DOMBRES

The withdrawal of the government in favor of the 'invisible hand' has also led to gentrification and large-scale sales of housing, as a result of which social structures and facilities disappeared, while less well-off residents were displaced.
To change this, an important political choice must be made in which the blind faith in the wholesome effect of the 'invisible hand' is abandoned.

Higher political levels
The tree structure does not end on the level of the municipality. Above this level we see counties, or states, and the country as a whole ... Here we also see governments withdraw and believing in the 'invisible hand'. With the result that governments lost their influence, for example on the railways and the postal services.

Copyright: Herman
Ladies and gentlemen, this train is not going to leave. You can travel via Schiphol Airport. I'm telling you this because the sound system is also broken.

Other companies that are of great importance to the society have moved to even higher levels, where they can release themselves even more from the influence of the national society. Like the aforementioned energy companies, or airports, ports and banks. A problem that will have to be solved on these higher levels.

A long way
If the economy of the interaction starts 'bottom up', in streets, neighborhoods and districts, and ascends via the municipalities to counties and the country, then there is still a long way to go. And we can expect the 'invisible hand' to strike back. (As happened at the end of the 19th, beginning of the 20th century) We will not always be able to count on politicians who hope to join banks or global companies after their political career. Or on politicians who flowed in from this world into high administrative positions.
In any case, it is encouraging that the number of cooperatives in the Netherlands has risen sharply in recent years. Perhaps 'common sense' is on the winning side.

Do we have time for all this?
If the need for growth and the ongoing advertising bombardment that incites consumption has cooled down, we may also work less and have more time to actually live in the cities where we live.

Reinterpretation of the city
Cities are generally designed, broadly, as spatial tree structures, but if we want to use these structures as the basis for an 'ecommony', they will have to be provided with clear boundaries between the different levels, as well as social and practical facilities at all levels. This requires a reinterpretation, which will be discussed more in the next episode.

Designing for a cooperative economy

9) Reinterpreting the existing city

In the previous episodes we have seen how an 'ecommony' can be supported by an urban tree structure, which has clear boundaries and social and practical facilities at all levels. This requires a reinterpretation of the city.

Reinterpreting existing cities
For this we will have to look for a clear boundaries of each scale level and for appropriate social and practical facilities. Here lie spatial, social and economic problems where solutions may come easy, but we must be prepared that reinterpretations can also be a real challenge.

Streets
Unfortunately, streets are usually not suitable for street communities. They are generally too long and do not provide grounds for defining clear territories, and thereby room for facilities that can support social life or practical facilities. If we are lucky inner courtyards can be used here.

Collective garden 'de Driehoek' in Katendrecht, Rotterdam (Netherlands). Reinterpretation of an inner courtyard by residents, in cooperation with ecologist Peter Kremer and landscape architect Marieke de Keijzer.

Higher scale levels

Cities are generally subdivided into recognizable districts and neighborhoods, all with their own character and their own facilities. Enough oppotunities for reinterpretation in the direction of an urban tree structure. Even in post-war new housing estates. Around 1960 a neighborhood was designed in Delft, called the 'Poptahof', according to the then prevailing principles of Modernism.

Poptahof in Delft (Netherlands). Van Embden, 1962-1964

High-rise apartment blocks were placed in a spacious setting, with plenty of light, air and green. But little attention was paid to the possibility of a social life in the neighborhood.

More than 40 years later, this area was redeveloped as an urban tree structure. The high-rise sections were included in six courts, where residents can meet each other. A little park in the middle, with a playground and a primary school, connects the courts and its inhabitants with each other. And at the point where it touches the territory of the district, a threshold area has been designed where local residents can have a look at the life that takes place at this higher scale level.

Concept, developed by Palmbout Urban Landscapes

At the moment, two of the six courts have been realized. And also the park the middle has also been laid out, including the school, playground and threshold area.

The first realized court, Molenaar & van Winden, 2010

Not everywhere new housing estates will be reinterpreted so easily. In many cases reinterpretation will be a real challenge: spatially and socially and economically.

A real challenge (The Banlieu of Paris)

Grid cities
In the United States, different scale levels are not always recognizable in the neutral and 'infinite' structure of the grid. Yet there are also reasons for this. Existing facilities can, if present, be interpreted as centers of neighborhoods and districts to be demarcated, and supplemented with social and practical facilities that form the basis for a cooperative 'ecommony'.

Grid City Los Angeles

In addition, existing 'gated communities' can be interpreted as street levels.
If neighborhoods and districts are 'domesticated' due to the presence of social and practical facilities, that allow a cooperative economy, an 'ecommony', residents may be prepared to venture outside the fences ...

Historical context
In urban areas in Europe much of the history is still reflected in the built found. This is an opportunity to design new buildings in relation to an historical context. Difficult enough, but more meaningful than a steady stream of innovation that erases all references to history.

New home in the casco of an old block (Spijkenisse, Netherlands)

Completion in historic center (Bruges, Belgium). Architect unknown

Why should it have to be easy
The reinterpretation of the city will be a comprehensive operation, not only for designers, sociologists and economists, but also for municipal councils and municipal services, and last but not least, for the residents. But let us take initiatives like the 'commons' and the increase in the number of cooperatives, as an encouragement to engage in this operation, in order to free ourselves from the inconveniences and the dangers of our belief in the 'invisible hand' and take economics into our own hands again. In doing so we probably will have to overcome many difficulties, but why should it have to be easy?!

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