

Agonistic Temporary Space

Reflections on 'Agonistic Space' across Participatory Design and Urban Temporary Use

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ABSTRACT

Recent discussions in Participatory Design around infrastructuring and particularly 'agonistic space' offer useful concepts relevant to other fields facing similar issues regarding public settings and related conflicts and contestation among stakeholders. In this paper, 'agonistic space' is used as a conceptual lens to discuss overlapping issues across participatory design and 'temporary use' of space, which is an emerging approach in architecture/planning addressing urban change and land use. This paper focuses in particular on the socio-spatial struggles characterizing 'expanded PD' and temporary use. Furthermore, concepts and issues within discourses and practices of temporary use are identified, which can further expand PD discussions of 'agonistic space'. The paper thus identifies connections between the two practices, which can be a basis for future further research.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design** → Interaction design process and methods → Participatory design

KEYWORDS

Infrastructuring; Agonistic space; Temporary use of space; Architecture, Urban Planning; Participatory planning

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1 INTRODUCTION

Participatory Design (PD) has been expanding from workplaces and workshops to more public settings. Living labs, for example, are more complex, open and 'live' spaces, yet intentionally still somewhat controlled and protected. Such settings, in this paper referred to as 'expanded PD', have entailed new understandings and discourses concerning a shift in PD from the design of physical objects towards 'things' understood as assemblies of humans and non-humans around matters of concern or controversies [1,2]. 'Infrastructuring', a key concept in the expanding landscape of PD today, is understood as staging and maintaining these assemblies in open-ended collaboration processes [3,4].

The notion of 'agonistic space' is discussed in relation to such infrastructuring processes, which involve a variety of stakeholders. The concept of 'agonism' [5,6], explored as 'agonistic space' [3,4], 'agonistic design things' [7], and 'design for dissensus' [8], clarifies how design can address controversial issues and allow a polyphony of voices rather than aiming at consensus. These discussions can be usefully applied to new areas of discourse and practice beyond PD as well, such as 'temporary use' of space (TU). In recent decades, TU has emerged as an approach to more flexible, resource-efficient and inclusive urban planning [9-11]. TU is understood as "temporary activation of vacant or underused land or buildings with no immediate development demand" [12, p.30] and as "low-cost adaptations of the urban fabric that also involve circumvention of conventional urban planning rules and approaches." [13, p.2] (Fig. 1-3).

The expanded PD discussion bears many similarities and overlaps to that in TU. Particularly the concept of 'agonistic space' is useful in understanding the contradicting interests, conflicts and tensions between different stakeholder groups in TU. As a channel for local participation, TU broadens the scope of actors who can be involved in urban development [14-17]. Thus, PD discussions are highly useful and relevant not only in TU but also more broadly in participatory planning, in which design and architecture have been criticized for being too much driven by consensus and thus not genuinely democratic [18-21].

Particularly issues around the distribution of power and including emergent publics through experimental practices [22-23], are related to agonism and interesting to explore across PD and TU literatures. Despite many overlaps, however, the

conditions in which PD and TU occur are quite different, and thus TU also provides further opportunities to reflect upon and expand discussions of 'agonistic space'. In comparison to the expanded, 'live' and public contexts of expanded PD, TU occurs in even more complex and uncontrollable, real-life urban settings, in which many formal and informal processes are underway simultaneously, and diverse stakeholder groups are involved in different ways (such as temporary users, property owners, authorities and politicians). As TU is related to broader issues of urban planning and municipal policy, various administrative and political decisions have a big influence on TU [24-25]. In comparison to PD, particularly spatial and temporal aspects of TU provide opportunities to expand discussions on 'agonistic space'.

This paper focuses in particular on the socio-spatial struggles characterizing expanded PD and TU. The concept of 'agonistic space' is a conceptual lens for discussing aspects of such struggles and identifying similar/different issues as discussed across PD and TU literatures. Furthermore, the paper draws upon relevant discourses in TU to further challenge and develop discussions on 'agonistic space' in PD. The aim of the paper is not a robust theoretical analysis but the identification of connections between the practices, as a basis for my future PhD research, in which I explore TU through my 'Research through Design' practice [25] (Fig.1-3).

2 ELABORATING TEMPORARY USE AS 'AGONISTIC SPACE'

The concepts of 'infrastructuring' and 'agonistic space' discussed in PD offer useful and important aspects that are relevant for understanding and conceptualizing TU. For example, 'infrastructuring' conceptualizes the mediatory role of design in an open-ended process of building long-term collaboration with various participants [1, 3]. 'Agonistic space' further clarifies how design can have a role in addressing controversies and conflicting voices among a variety of stakeholders [1,4]. 'Agonistic space' is useful in understanding TU, which inherently involves large groups of stakeholders with competing interests and agendas [25]. Particularly power-relations in TU are identified as one area that needs further theorizing [13, 26]. However, there are also certain characteristics of TU relevant to 'agonistic space', which are not discussed in PD and thus need to be further elaborated, particularly the spatial and temporal aspects. Space – as in 'agonistic *space*' – is usually addressed rather metaphorically, whereas in TU, physical space itself is at the heart of tensions and conflicts, as space is the object of negotiation, regulation, planning and ownership. Temporally, TU projects tend to have a longer timeframe than in PD, and they are further related to even longer term urban planning.

In this section, I will first elaborate aspects of agonism that are relevant across PD and TU, particularly those related to conflicts, distribution of power and experimentation. Then I will expand to spatial and temporal aspects of TU that need to be more fully considered and developed.



Figures 1-3: As an architect I have been working professionally for 10 years with TU. The cases in fig 1-3 are now the subject of my 'Research through Design' practice [25]. Fig. 1,3: "Kalasatama Temporary" revitalised a former harbour area in Helsinki, Finland, through curated events and citizen activities. © Johannes Romppanen. Fig. 2: Temporary Kera looked for solutions to reactivate vacant office and logistics spaces in Espoo, Finland. © Maarit Kytöharju / Meidän Festivaali

2.1 Aspects of agonism relevant across PD/TU

PD discourse has a history of trying to conceptualize the socio-political dimensions of participation in design, drawing on different concepts across a range of social and political philosophies. Early in PD there were several approaches informed by Marxism [27] and, more recently, by theories of agonism and dissensus from political philosophy. Related and other theories inform parallel discussions in planning and architecture. The sections below highlight some conceptual intersections/connections between PD and TU.

2.1.1 Acknowledging and exposing conflicts

Discussions on 'agonism' in PD and related discussions in TU open up the capacity of design and architecture/planning, to open up spaces of contestation, and expose ongoing conflicts between competing value systems. The concept of 'agonism' articulates a condition of disagreement and confrontation between interests and actors in society, which is seen as fundamental to democracy [5-6]. Consensus, on the other hand, is seen as a stabilization of power, which always entails some form of exclusion, and thus it is problematic as a goal driving

participation. Keshavarz and Mazé point out that conflicts and contradictions are “labeled as threats rather than understood as the essential condition of democracy itself. In this way, consensual forms of political participation can be argued to be incapable of achieving more equality and emancipation” [8, p.11].

The problem is also identified by critics of formal participatory planning, who argue that official, legally required forms of participation are often “tokenistic” [21] and aim for consensus and legitimization of already made decisions [14]. Thus, if participation is disguised as democratic, it is used in fact as a means of control and a way to depoliticize planning [18-19].

Many authors suggest ways for design to foster dissent and contention within participatory processes, such as in ‘agonistic space’. DiSalvo’s definition of ‘adversarial design’, which also builds on agonism, is illuminating: “Perhaps the most basic purpose of adversarial design is to make these spaces of confrontation and provide resources and opportunities for others to participate in contestation” [28, p.5].

In TU discourse, issues similar to ‘agonism’ are addressed as ‘conflicts’, in discussions on ‘right to the city’ and ‘differential space’, drawing from for example Marxist philosopher and sociologist Lefebvre [23, 29-32]. TU’s potential to address conflicts is linked to its capacity to increase and differentiate participation in urban change and land use. Németh and Langhorst discuss the capacity of TU “to expose the ongoing conflicts and contestations between competing value systems, interests, agendas and stakeholders, be they economic, social, ecological or cultural” [33, p.147]. Hillbrandt further points out how temporary uses can be sites of resistance and insurgency, where alternative sets of values can be demonstrated and formal planning decisions questioned [14].

2.1.2 (Re)distribution of power

‘Agonistic space’, and related concepts such as ‘agonistic design things’, are a useful lens for examining and negotiating the (re)distribution of power among stakeholders, which is identified a key issue in PD and also TU literature. In design for social innovation, Emilson & Hillgren discuss “whether an agonistic design thing can be a kind of extended knowledge alliance that can include more heterogeneous actors and, consequently, their knowledge and their experiences” [7, p.65]. They also argue “that an agonistic design thing might be of relevance when engaging in social innovation, and that this requires redistributing power and resources” [Ibid, citing 34].

In TU, tensions related to power, ownership and access are evident. For example, the redistribution of power in handing over temporary spaces to / from users are key points of tension. Temporary use empowers those actors that are traditionally excluded from urban planning decisions and occupation [33]. In a standby point of urban development, the users of temporary spaces can be transferred the power over the use and maintenance of space [23]. However, this legitimization of people and activities is challenged if temporary uses are suspended in favor of more profitable development [23,31,33]. The criticism concerning exploitation of temporary use(rs) views

TU ultimately as an instrument for commercial development and gentrification, which inevitably leads to displacement of the temporary users [22,31,36,37].

TU discourse is quite polarized in this respect and more nuanced understandings are called for [13,26,31,35]. Thus, ‘agonistic space’ provides a useful lens for exposing and further addressing the tensions and dynamics between empowerment and exploitation, experimentation and displacement in TU, in more nuanced and detailed dimensions.

2.1.3 Alternative visions through experimentation

Experimentation is a further element that connects expanded PD and TU. Experiments and prototypes are discussed as an integral part of how PD can address agonism and how emergent publics can be acknowledged and included. Similarly, TU is identified as an experimental approach that can challenge formal urban planning and which has potential to create ‘alternative urban futures’ [17, p. 506] through experimental activity.

In the context of Malmö Living Labs, Hillgren et al [4] discuss prototypes as ‘agonistic space’, where ‘things’ can be acted out, revealing questions, controversies and opportunities that can have impact for social change in the long term, even if they might not be able to produce tangible outcomes in the short term [see also 7, 38]. Binder et al suggest an approach of ‘democratic design experiments’: “Hence, participatory design, or rather collaborative design practices, may well be seen as democratic design experiments extending the forms of mediation and representation in politics through *thinging* and the making of publics” [39, p.156]. Thus, experimentation serves as a channel to expose controversial matters and to give voice to those that are usually unheard.

Temporary use is similarly characterized as an experimental approach into urban development. Németh and Langhorst see TU as an “instrument to encourage more realistic, pragmatic, and incremental approaches to urban transformation” [33, p.149], which accommodates testing of a wide range of uses and their effects. In this way, they suggest that “spatial planning and design could begin to operate more in terms of a continuous editing process of urban transformation” (ibid). This experimental and iterative approach is linked to participation: “Urban vacant land may render visible the role of the neighborhood resident as co-author of the spaces and places they inhabit and as empowered participants in urban development processes” (ibid).

These above discussed aspects of conflict, (re)distribution of power and creating alternative visions through experimentation are examples of how PD and TU discourses potentially overlap regarding ‘agonism’ even if different theoretical frames and vocabularies are used. However, there are aspects of TU that are not adequately discussed in PD and thus TU can further help elaborating and deepening the discussion on ‘agonistic space’. In the next section I will discuss the spatial and temporal aspects in TU, which need to be more fully considered and developed concerning ‘agonistic space’.

2.2 Expanded spatial and temporal aspects of temporary use

As discussed above, there are interesting and revealing conceptual overlaps between discourses of TU and extended PD. Yet, the conditions in which PD and TU occur are quite different. Thus, TU also provides opportunities to challenge and expand discussions on ‘agonistic space’, as shortly outlined below in relation to some of the spatio-temporal aspects of TU.

2.2.1 Spatial dimensions of temporary use

Physical spatial dimensions of TU are particularly interesting concerning ‘agonistic space’. In PD, ‘agonistic space’ might be understood to refer to space on a conceptual level, as in ‘design space’ [40] rather than a physical space. In TU, on the other hand, physical space is the concrete site of agonism itself as the place, where temporary use activity occurs, but also as the object of negotiation, regulation, planning, ownership, interpretation, and so on, as will be explained in paragraphs below.

TU involves negotiation about access and ownership to/of space. The users of temporary space gain temporary “ownership” or power over the use of space (within limits) [23, 33]. Affordable space can enable new activity and open up possibilities to groups such as art and culture, new business, youth, immigrants and so on [11]. However, for what purpose the space can be used, by whom, how long, for what conditions, etc. becomes an object of regulation and negotiation, where authorities and owners have decision-making power [24-25].

The physical qualities of space can inspire users and prompt ideas on how it can be used, but also restrict the activity through regulations and technical requirements. Use of space is regulated in the zoning plan and building codes. Temporary use is an interesting case concerning regulations, at least in Finland, as there are no specific regulations concerning the temporary. Thus, regulations are subject to interpretation and can be negotiated, but also used by the authorities as a tool to execute power [24-25].

Agonism in TU can thus materialize in specific tangible and spatial as well as social interactions regarding ownership, regulations, conflicting values and goals and the role of TU in longer-term planning and development.

2.2.2 Expanded temporal aspects of TU and planning

Temporary use of space is usually connected to longer-term urban (spatial) planning of an area. Understanding agonism is key here, as TU can be an important way to introduce and handle agonistic issues concerning planning and participation.

Planning also gives a further temporal dimension to TU, which is mainly considered ‘short-term’ from urban planning perspective, which impacts decades of future ahead. Yet, what is considered ‘short term’ in planning context is much longer-term than ‘long-term’ in PD discussions concerning ‘agonistic space’ and infrastructuring. The timeframe of TU can vary from weeks to years or even decades.

The word ‘temporary use’ or ‘temporary land use’ itself is open to debate. Some criticize the term ‘temporary use’ as dismissive, arguing that the term “has real impacts on policy and

planning decisions”, leading to ‘temporary use’ being considered secondary to market-driven development [35, pp.38-39]. In this way, the intrinsic values of TU as ‘differential space’ (and thus, ‘agonistic space’) are not acknowledged properly. Whether TU can have real value in exposing alternative views and critical discussion about planning decisions, or genuinely serving as a tool for experimenting the future, is not quite clear.

These spatial and temporal aspects of TU open up very concrete challenges in terms of ownership and access, legal / structural factors, conflicting values and goals, and temporal dimensions. All these are also connected to broader issues of conflicts and distribution of power among different stakeholders, as well as the role of TU in experimentation and creating alternative urban visions. The physical temporary space itself, with its limitations and possibilities, can be seen as a very concrete ‘agonistic space’, where diverse and alternative voices, practices and visions can be expressed and prototyped. Thus, TU as ‘agonistic temporary space’ has potential to expose controversial issues about urban planning, development and policy for critical discussion and to make spaces where disagreements and confrontations can be handled in productive ways.

3 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have discussed how concepts from participatory design, particularly that of ‘agonistic space’, are useful in understanding and conceptualizing issues that are under-explored within the discourse on temporary use, such as the conflicts related to power relations and experimentation in TU. This paper has focused on complementary relations between expanded PD and TU, including overlaps, gaps and differences, where notions of agonism and related ‘designerly’ approaches are useful. I have further opened up the discussion to expanded spatial and temporal aspects of TU, which provide opportunities for broader understanding of ‘agonistic space’, from which PD might also learn.

These conceptual considerations regarding ‘agonistic space’ in TU also open up more concrete and practical questions. For example, agonism in TU can materialize in tangible spatial as well as social interactions, such as the following: 1. Handing over the ownership/power to/from users in the beginning and/or end of TU process, and related contracts, 2. Interpreting regulations, which are tailored to concern the ‘permanent’, 3. Conflicting values and goals between users, owners and planners, 4. Decision-making within the municipality, f.ex. building authorities’ vs. cultural services’ views and goals. PD approaches building on ‘agonism’ can be a way to bridge conflicts and expose controversial matters in these situations. Therefore, design interventions in concrete situations such as the above are further areas to explore relations between PD and TU in my future research.

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