

City Mine(d) as 'Participatory Platform'

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Though the collective City Mine(d) on occasions, for reasons of pragmatism, presents itself as an NGO, charity, non-profit association or even a company, what it really aspires to be is a platform. More precisely a 'participatory platform' deriving its bare existence from the coming together of people's ideas, awareness and concerns, and aiming to be a device to forge an urban civil society. It hopes to do so by enabling innovation, the exchange of ideas and sharing experiences without leaving the personal gratification of participants and a sense of fun aside. Urban civil society is defined here in its broadest sense, as the urban public sphere, the physical and political space where people come together to develop ideas and alliances and where settled beliefs are challenged. City Mine(d) does not have a hard boundary, but rather a gravitational core consisting of a set of methods and practices contributing to urban civil society. The development of a 'participatory platform' is happening with varying degrees of success. The continuous output of projects in urban public space -like Micro-Marché-Midi-, the involvement of volunteers, strong footholds in Brussels, London and Barcelona and an international network around urban in-between spaces are the first signs of the emergence of this platform. However, the system is far from functional. The 'participatory platform' borrows its name from information technology. A closer look at the phenomenon in that same industry allows us to draw conclusions that could clarify the work of City Mine(d), whilst also providing inspiration for others intervening in urban political, social and public space.

The term 'participatory platform' emerged as recently as 2005 in an attempt to describe the proliferation of social networking websites. Two years later, the presence of these sites increased dramatically, with the social network Facebook counting 43 million users spending on average of 20 minutes per day on their site, MySpace with 168 million members, Wikipedia 60 million views per day, LastFM counts 20 million active users, Flickr 4 million and del.icio.us 2 million users. Some observers see these interactive communities and host services replacing the old internet, and speak of a second world wide web. What marks the change from the 'old internet' is that websites are no longer isolated information silos, but become platforms that visitors can use as software to add to or with which to create their own data. To some this heralds a social and political online revolution, in which the internet is no longer driven by a core group of designers, but where every individual becomes an 'online citizen' and part of a global democracy. Though pompous statements like these arouse suspicion, one cannot deny that the user-friendly and lightweight architecture of websites allow more user participation. This, combined with the open source formula of innovating by pulling together features from independent developers, means that more people are using, testing and feeding back on websites, spotting bugs earlier and thereby making the sites more reliable. Once a critical mass of users is reached, a network effect kicks in, meaning that the more users there are, the more meaningful and valuable it becomes to take part. A traditional business school formula for success.

The way 'participatory platforms' manage to harness collective intelligence is what makes them interesting and a potential source of inspiration for groups like City Mine(d). Their online presence becomes a portal to the collective work of its users, and user engagement, activity and reviews become a process of ongoing development. Some even note that 'users pursuing their own selfish interests build collective value as an automatic by-product.'

In a sense this is also what City Mine(d) aspires to through its presence in public space: the result of a collective effort that brings together the self-inspired efforts of disparate agents. Though ambitions are similar, outcomes are as yet nowhere near as close. In terms of harnessing collective intelligence, urban interventions are often still stuck in the age of Tripod and Geocities (remember, those mid-'90s web hosting services that came with a then awe-inspiring WYSIWYG page editor?). Why are urban interventions as yet unsuccessful in initiating real world 'participatory platforms' that reach a critical mass of participants while

at the same time meeting political objectives?

A closer look at 5 characteristics of online 'participatory platforms' might inspire:

- 1. 'Architecture of participation':** online 'participatory platforms' have a 'built-in ethic of co-operation'. The website is an intelligent broker harnessing the power of the users. In cases like Myspace, Facebook or Flickr, the fact that people add their personal data or images makes it potentially interesting for other users. In an urban intervention City Mine(d)'s role has similarly been described as that of a broker, identifying the personal interests of potential participants, and safeguarding that these interests are met in the course of the project. The success of projects –like MicroMarchéMidi or LimiteLimite to a large extent are dependent on the way this broker role is played.
- 2. 'Syndication, not co-ordination':** syndication is the design by which a section of the website is made available for other sites to use, often for web feeds that provide a summary of a website's recently added content. City Mine(d) never considers urban interventions as a finished art work. Its presence in public space is often no more than a physical and temporal framework for other artists and activists to make a case. For each intervention there is a tension to manage between an open invitation and a clear, directing framework.
- 3. 'Design for hackability':** online this implies that barriers to re-use are extremely low, most of the software is open source, and there is little intellectual property protection. If urban interventions want to contribute to a public sphere, they must be designed in such a way that people can easily take ownership of them; either by creating some sort of impact on the development process, or by gaining access at no cost during the moment of staging or presentation.
- 4. 'Perpetual beta':** 'beta' is used to describe software that hasn't left the development stage. Since users are considered to be co-developers on a 'participatory platform', they constantly require new material to test and work with, rather than the finished, 'boxed' products. In a similar way the work of City Mine(d) is not lab-tested and boxed before being shipped. Rather, in an early stage a public space is 'occupied', sometimes even with activities unrelated to the envisaged intervention. The fear of losing face by issuing an unsuccessful beta in public space has been a cause for nothing to happen at all. Besides, these betas are often the first steps towards the networks on which urban interventions are built.
- 5. 'To the long tail, not just the head':** small sites make up a large part of the internet's content, and a lot of applications only serve small niches. Therefore a 'participatory platform' is no longer an engine or server with rock solid architecture, but consists of small pieces loosely joined together. Similarly, it is City Mine(d)'s conviction that the creative and innovative strength of cities lies in their in-between spaces (KRAX), and the creation of a true public sphere will depend for a large part on the successful involvement of the small initiatives that happen in the 'cracks in the city'. These two pages raise the question whether – parallel to the emergence of online 'participatory platforms'- groups like City Mine(d) can initiate real world 'participatory platforms' that would be able to use the wisdom of the crowds and 'the long tail' to build an urban civil society. The comparison above is not meant to be a roadmap or a recipe, but rather it places these phenomena next to each other in order to see if there are lessons to be learned, as with platforms.