

SOCIAL KEYNOTE SOCIAL CITY



The theme of the IGSS Conference 2023 is the study of urban development through multidisciplinary approaches: ecological, political, economic, and social. The social is perhaps the most evident of these, as cities first formed from the convergence of different populations in one place, for the production and exchange of goods and ideas. From the beginning of urbanization, cities provided space for social activities — spaces which belonged to the social civic body. Markets are some of the earliest examples, but with the development of city-states, this expanded to include spaces for collective governance. We can see this in Jericho, one of the first trading cities, and in later Mesopotamian and Greek city-states. In Republican Rome, the Latin term *civitas* described the social body of the citizens, united by law and forming a *res publica* (“public body”) — the source of our present-day word “republic.” The concept of civic space represents collective identity.

A second idea of shared social space is embedded in the medieval concept of the Commons, land that is shared and used by all citizens collectively. These were not residual or marginal spaces in urban or extra-urban contexts, but places where citizens interacted socially, and which belonged to the “community.” With the advance of neoliberalism, the very concept of a shared commons has been nearly forgotten. In 1968, in his essay entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons” the ecologist Garrett Hardin argued that when many people enjoy unlimited use of a limited resource like water or a pasture, they will exhaust the resource and may destroy it. The economist Elinor Ostrom — who received a Nobel Prize for her work on the commons — disagreed. From the 1980s onward, her research on the economics of common-pool resources that are run neither by the market nor the state, showed that these are well-managed locally over generations through co-operation (Ostrom 1990).

Many cities today are in the grip of neoliberalism, which continually pushes for the commodification of common spaces and resources. The challenge is to resist this privatization and to assert the value of the civic and the commons. In so doing, civic governments and planners must move past the top-down impositions of urban form and infrastructure — what is usually thought of as urban form-making — and instead support grass-roots initiatives that assert the value of both the civic and the commons. The French theorist Henri Lefebvre saw the value of such bottom-up re-appropriation of urban space to unleash new potential for the social dimensions of urban life. As a professor at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* during the May 68 uprising in Paris, Lefebvre looked at the ways people imbued urban space with meaning — projecting their own views onto urban space, changing and appropriating it

through their imagination (Lefebvre 1991). Contemporary examples of such reappropriation include popular movements to resist freeways, reclaim streets for children and parks for homeless encampments, and the squatting of uninhabited buildings. Such bottom-up initiatives to reclaim urban space for truly public use are invaluable change-agents in the dynamics of contemporary urban development and should be recognized as such.

References

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Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Originally published 1974.

Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Christine Macy, Professor at Dalhousie University in Canada, joins the symposium through Zoom. Photo courtesy of Çiğdem Karatopraç.

