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# The Citizen Professional, Mediatization, and the Creation of a Public Domain

By Karin Christof

## Abstract

Situated within the transition experienced by our welfare states, citizens have become ever more involved in the re-use of derelict public housing stock throughout Europe. These citizens are tentatively to be called ‘citizen professionals’ in the urban realm, a term that serves as a sensitizing concept to explore the social worlds of their contributions to the public domain. Employing various types of media to communicate their progress and success, these urban actors seek to gain the trust of the neighborhood and governmental institutions to sustain their projects within a broader community. Just as the media influence and structure cultural domains and society as a whole, the social-cultural activities carried out by citizen professionals in the public domain are mediatized not only by the actors themselves, but also by municipal organizations, policy workers, and governmental institutions.

Grounding mediatization as a socio-spatial concept within empirical practice, the article examines the practices of citizen professionals and describes how they endeavor to attain public acknowledgment by representing their projects as showcases within a public domain. The article builds on pilot interviews conducted in Rotterdam (NAC, Reading Room West) and Vienna (Paradocks) to expound on the projects as lived spaces between mediatized and physical environments. Positioning citizen professionals within contemporary developments in the urban field, the article then investigates the underlying values of the spatial interventions, as well as how governmental bodies relate to their practices. Seen through the lens of mediatization, the article provides insights into how citizen professionals employ their social imaginaries and mobilize their activities around their agenda regarding the creation of a public domain.

**Keywords:** Public domain, mediatization, welfare states, citizen professional, re-use public housing stock, social imaginaries, sensitizing concept, lived space.

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## Introduction

Situated within the transition experienced by our welfare states, citizens have become ever more involved in the re-use of derelict public housing stock throughout Europe. Current economic conditions have given rise to austerity politics and prompted governments to continue to dismantle public provisions. Against this background, active and self-organized citizens gain an opportunity to negotiate for the use of neglected public facilities. Running self-initiated projects, these self-mobilized citizens, whom I tentatively call *citizen professionals* in the urban realm, employ various types of media to communicate their progress and success, and to legitimize their actions within the public domain they have created. In this way, they seek to gain the trust of the neighborhood and governmental institutions to sustain their projects within a broader community. But just as the media influence and structure cultural domains and society as a whole (Livingstone & Lunt 2014), the social-cultural activities carried out by citizen professionals in the public domain are mediatized not only by the actors themselves, but also by municipal organizations, policy workers, and governmental institutions. Therefore, citizen professionals must be able to position themselves in a media-constructed and politicized public sphere.

This article examines the practices of citizen professionals and describes how they endeavor to attain public acknowledgment by representing their projects as showcases within a public domain. I consider physical and media environments as lived spaces (Lefebvre 1991), and follow a non-media-centric approach (Hjarvard 2014) that grounds mediatization within empirical practice (Couldry 2008; Ekström et al. 2016). Through looking into its potential to contribute to the strengthening of an active public arena, it seeks to test out the relative strengths and weaknesses of two competing concepts for grasping the wider consequences of media for the social world: the concept of mediatization and the concept of mediation. In order to shed light on the diversity of the urban actors' practices, this article uses findings from pilot interviews conducted in April 2016 at two projects in Rotterdam (NAC, *Reading Room West*) and one project in Vienna (Paradocks). The study first explains why I chose to use a sensitizing concept. It then goes into the use of mediatization as a socio-spatial concept within the politicization of a public space and domain. Finally, I expound the underlying values of the spatial interventions of citizen professionals, in order to examine how governmental bodies relate to the practices of citizen professionals. I also answer the question of how citizen professionals relate to mediatization and how they use it to mobilize activities around their agenda regarding the creation of a public domain.

## Methodological Approaches

At the core of this empirical analysis are the initiators of the projects, the citizen professionals who take an initiative to experiment with urban and social regeneration projects and combine fields of knowledge and practices outside of their own working fields. In order to show the diversity of these citizen initiatives within urban space production, and question how these urban actors see their contributions to the public domain, I have coined the concept of the *citizen professional*. I use this concept to explore the different ideas of citizenship and professionalism at play in these cases, and to elucidate the degree of commercialization and openness of the public domains they have helped to create. The practices of citizen professionals may differ considerably between different settings, and for this reason I use the concept as a *sensitizing* one (Blumer 1954). Such a tentative description can be tested, improved and refined to arrive at a definitive account, and the description helps us to approach the fieldwork with an open mind to investigate what these practices entail in the urban realm.

The cases considered here are seen against the background of austerity measures taken within the context of welfare state retrenchment, the re-use of derelict or empty housing stock, and the creation of self-initiated cultural spaces. In addition to these fixed parameters, two variable criteria are considered: the extent of openness and accessibility of the public domain, and the degree of commercialization and professionalism of the projects. As this criterion sampling (Bryman 2012: 419) builds on the researcher's professional network as a curator in the architecture and art field, it is important to be aware of having expectations when observing in the field. It is also important to be aware of the risk of interpreting sensations, as academic research can nourish expectations on both sides—not only among those who do the fieldwork but also among those who read the reports (Lee & Brosziewski 2007). Therefore, a combination of qualitative tools such as semi-structured interviews, cameo descriptions of actors and sites, and document analysis helps to arrive at a *thick description* (Geertz 1973; Luhrmann 2015), and provides contextual insight into the practices of the urban actors. Cameo narratives aid in the characterization and delivery of contextual knowledge about places and people. When developing the pilot interview questions, I drew primarily from recent publications in the field (Pakhuis de Zwijger 2013; Killing Architects 2014; Specht & Van der Zwaard 2015; Paradocks 2016a; Steinkellner 2017). In *De uitvinding van Leeszaal Rotterdam West: Collectieve tactieken en culturele uitwisselingen (The Invention of the Reading Room Rotterdam West: Collective Tactics and Cultural Exchanges)* (Specht & Van der Zwaard 2015), for example, the authors describe the process and the thoughts behind setting up the Reading Room West, with topics that range from self-organization to volunteer work. They also describe the media used to increase public recognition.

The pilot interviews revealed that citizen professionals carry out ordinary and habitual tasks that they had been trained to perform in their original professions, such as organizing, planning, thinking strategically, programming, fundraising, and building. They carry out also everyday activities, such as welcoming guests, making coffee, cleaning up, and solving social problems in a group. Through their actions, citizen professionals make a location familiar, concrete, and meaningful. Such a location then becomes endowed with value (Tuan 1977). At the same time, users of such a space find it difficult to reflect or speak about their habitual practices or about experiences that arise from a practical consciousness of how to get around. In practice, it is not easy to enable people to reflect on their place-making when the place is ‘accomplished through repetitive, habitual practices’ that are taken for granted (Moore 2012a: 95). Such a discursive consciousness or thought-in-action is also referred to as ‘practical knowing’ or ‘embodied dispositions’ (Moore 2000; Thrift 2007). One way to gather insight into such a physical know-how is to travel with people and observe how they go around and what they do—what Urry calls ‘travelling with people, as a form of sustained engagement’ (Thrift 2007: 40). It is also useful to observe their routine activities. These everyday experiences and observations can deliver a relevant account of the relation that people have with the world, and how it affects their actions in everyday life.

As the three cases described in this article have been set up and staged quite differently from the way in which communal projects are set up and staged, they beg reconsideration and discussion of the roles of citizens and professionals within a mediatized public domain. Having described the methodological approach used in the research and the implications of a sensitizing concept in the field, let us now move on to discuss the socio-spatial concept of mediatization and its implications for the creation of a public domain.

## **The Citizen Professional, Mediatization, and the Public Domain**

Citizen professionals fit into various social corporate images of a participation society (Binnenlands Bestuur 2013; Twist et al. 2014) (also known as a ‘self-active civil society’ (Beck 2000; Glasz 2015)). Thus, they meet neo-liberal agendas that have been created by governmental institutions, which are positioned within a lively project economy. Ranging from artists, designers, ecologists, and organization managers to researchers, citizen professionals possess the skills of ‘self-mobilized’ citizens (Dalton 1996). They have generally attended higher education and acquired in this way the political skills necessary to formulate their own perspectives on current social and political matters independently of the positions of public parties. While the concept of the citizen professional is

still to be introduced in the field of urban design and planning, the term exists in other academic fields, with differing meanings: within the domain of community health and public services, the citizen professional is considered as a counterforce to the professional (Kuhlmann 2006; Newman et al. 2011), while in development studies citizen professionals are people who strive to make the world a better place (George 2014; Dunworth 2015). These connotations of the driven idealist or the counter-professional do not apply to the citizen professional within urban space production, and the term requires further analysis before it can be used in this field.

Citizen professionals in the urban realm take a tactical cooperative approach by claiming the citizens' right of access to public space or goods. This contrasts with the radical counterculture of the 1960s (such as squatters' groups in the Netherlands), the social and ecological movements of the 1970s and 80s, and the Occupy movement of the 2000s. They may be situated somewhere between the concepts of the self-empowered laypersons (Jacobs 1961; Alexander, Ishikawa & Silverstein 1977) and the spatial agents who—as designers—also integrate social and economic values within a community (Awan, Schneider & Till 2011; Tonkiss 2013). Such self-initiated practices often take place in the cracks of urban development, where urban regeneration has not occurred yet, or is in the process of occurring. Especially in times of crisis, the city represents an interim or makeshift space that gives urban activists space to intervene (Tonkiss 2013). An agency, where it 'acts collaboratively with and on behalf of others' and 'engages in the transformation of space by negotiating existing conditions with the intent of reforming them' (Tombesi 2012: 809), can be considered capable of acting otherwise (Giddens 1984) and opening up possibilities for change.

The word 'activism,' though, has several contradictory meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. When used to denote service to the state with an element of opposition to it, activism can be radical and revolutionary. The word can, however, also signify moderate civic action (Yang 2016), in which dissent is expressed through consumerism-based behavior, such as the choice to live a different lifestyle, avoid big brands, or live in a communal setting. In this sense, citizen professionals can be considered moderate activists, pursuing their individual moral responsibilities that have replaced 'social and socialized political action' (Talbot 2015). Although their cooperation with municipalities and corporations can be seen as a professionalization of civic engagement in order to effect non-violent change, some scholars consider it a form of capitalism in which activism has become corporatized (Dauvergne & LeBaron 2014). In this case, the practices of the activists are banded together with those of existing institutions for a better future. So, how can these initiatives maintain their integrity, independence, and freedom to criticize within such unequal partnerships? Further, to what extent

do citizen professionals follow the same organizational logic that they criticize? I will raise some critical points concerning the corporatization of activism later in the article.

Let us now look into the concept of ‘mediatization’, which has been the subject of many interpretations and discussions. Whereas the concept of mediation refers to ‘any acts of intervening, conveying, or reconciling between different actors, collectives, or institutions’ (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999: 249), mediatization denotes processes in which the media have taken hold of all spheres of social life (Mazzoleni 2008) and constitutes a space for media-related social transformations (Ekström et al. 2016). As mentioned earlier, I follow a non-media-centric approach to mediatization, in which I situate media and their uses relative to other practices (Hjarvard 2014; Krajina, Moores & Morley 2014). In this approach, media are a consequential accompaniment to everyday activities and social life. A non-media-centric approach to mediatization involves the study of different logical structures from different institutions, and in this way leads to the construction of patterns of social interactions (Ekström et al. 2016: 1101). The interactions range from governmental logic to media logic in the public domain. At the same time, a growing body of literature on mediatization recognizes its importance as a sensitizing concept that opens a framework to analysis, and that develops a theoretical understanding of how media and different social institutions influence each other and human relationships (Hjarvard 2013). Thus, mediatization as a sensitizing concept can be a useful tool to elicit social patterns within specific contexts and to investigate the relationships between the practices of citizen professionals and governmental institutions in the public domain.

Mediated experiences have a huge outreach and can reveal what is possible within the public domain. This means that they can establish standards of how to conceptualize public space. The mediated experiences to which people have access become more important than the public that is physically present, which can help to effect change in the way people perceive the feasibility of their built environments:

Simply by communicating that such an exchange took place, the work influences people’s notions of what is possible and acceptable in public space, far beyond what was communicated at the moment the work is made (Merker 2010: 54).

It is not sufficient for citizen professionals to operate in a purely physical space any more: it is essential to have also a digital existence—to reach a public that might never physically attend, but is present through the mediated and mediatized events. As such, mediatization serves as a socio-spatial concept that expands the

physical materiality of a place in which primary and mediated experiences become increasingly interchangeable (Jansson 2013). The development of ever more advanced media technologies such as urban sensor networks, location services, and social networking sites, has converted public space into a hybrid arena that has transcended its physical form to become increasingly digitally dispersed, inhabited, lived, evaluated, and communicated by an ever more physically dispersed group of people. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) conclude that the media have become a necessity in our public domain: media are not subordinated to the political sphere, but form a base on which to communicate.

As urban life becomes more and more mediatized, the creation of a public domain represents a hybrid space experienced as a 'new sense of space' (Mazzoleni 2008). This is constituted by not only walls but, above all, also by mass-mediated images. The term 'public domain' refers here to those places 'where an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually occurs' (Hajer & Reijndorp 2001). This public domain is either available to everybody or is aimed at a parochial domain, such as a group of designers or artists who are already present in an area or a group of people who are specifically interested in cultural events (Lofland 1973; Waal 2012). Above all, 'public domain' describes also those geographically dispersed people who follow the activities from elsewhere, as mediatized activities. The Reading Room describes a public domain as a space in which life can be commented on, comparable to the Greek *stoa*, the covered colonnade with a view onto the *agora*, the square of a town. From the *stoa*, different people can be 'challenged to think, act, or perform' (Specht & Van der Zwaard 2015: 128). We can use Lefebvre's concept of *lived* space (1991) to describe such a space in which we perform activities in 'the everyday course of life' (Watkins 2005) as *representational spaces* as follows: "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (Lefebvre 1991: 39). In this sense, space is a process of production rather than a product, representing a site of ongoing interactions and social relationships. Media usage operates as a place-constituting activity that facilitates social practices (Moore 2012b), and creates new ways of spatial experiences and places, be they digital or corporeal spaces, where these exchanges occur.

By mediatizing such a public domain, this new sense of space represents a double reality: it is physically present and digitally transmitted to others worldwide, and media have now been turned into a 'necessity' for the functioning of the political domain and public arena. Against the background of such a mediatized public space, the public domain benefits from a sophisticated self-mobilized citizenry that is interested in maintaining and contributing to the making of a public domain. But what, then, does the creation of a public domain entail?



## Practices of Citizen Professionals in Built Environments

Citizen professionals mediate their activities digitally using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google+ to trigger the curiosity of passers-by, visitors, and future participants. Their cultural actions range from setting up and organizing a reading space to setting up living and working spaces for artists. These socio-cultural places represent just a small selection of what is going on in the public domain, and exemplify situations from which the governments of welfare states have withdrawn, following the financial crisis of 2008. Such situations involve, for example, social tasks and the construction of an urban community (Ward 2003; Fainstein & Fainstein 2012; Hurenkamp, Tonkens & Duyvendak 2012). I will here first discuss the *Reading Room West*, which addresses the socio-cultural needs of diverse communities to come together by setting up a jointly organized physical space in the neighborhood.

Repeatedly used in political debates as the best example in Rotterdam in 2013 (Gemeentebestuur Rotterdam 2015), the Reading Room West has proven its versatility through the use of a mediatised space. Starting as a bottom-up project to protest against the closure of 18 of 24 public libraries in Rotterdam, the initiative activated diverse community groups in the area and organized a communal space for the neighborhood. The action was intended to counter the municipal policy measures and to provide a platform where everybody was welcome (Rooij 2013; Specht & Van der Zwaard 2015; Weenen 2015). Initiated by researchers Maurice Specht and Joke van der Zwaard in 2012, the Reading Room West started off with an initial five-day festival, and then became an initiative that was open five days a week. It provided a cultural program organized by any number of the 100 volunteers involved in the project. The initiators originally squatted in the building, and subsequently negotiated a lease with the housing corporation. This allowed them to create a public domain in which different groups could meet without any obligation to perform or act (Killing Architects 2014). When we enter the Reading Room West in the Centrum district, we find a bright and informal space, containing a few reading tables, chairs, and benches, with a buzz of people coming and going. The space is intended not only to fill a temporary gap in the neighborhood but also to contribute to a sustainable and dynamic community (Stichting E3D 2014).

The second project is situated in the south of Rotterdam, in the neighborhood of Charlois. *New Ateliers Charlois* (NAC) was set up by socially engaged artists Jaap Verheul and Kamiel Verschuren in 2004, to offer affordable live-work spaces for artists, while also investing in the local neighborhood. As a reaction to the impending demolition of a block of 45 derelict houses in which the two artists were living, they joined forces and negotiated a ten-year lease with the housing association. Within three years, NAC was managing 115 houses with 170



Figure 1. Reading Room West, Rotterdam.

residents, and had turned into the third biggest non-commercial housing provider in the neighborhood. They had done this on a voluntary basis as an ‘art project with an intuitive approach’, as they call it. At the same time, NAC reacted to the Neighborhood Act (*Wet bijzondere maatregelen grootstedelijke problematiek or Rotterdam Wet*) (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelatie 2005; Woonnet Rijnmond 2017), which requires people who want to reside in certain neighborhoods of Rotterdam to have an income above a certain limit (120% of the minimum income). This act had been passed with the intention of safeguarding social diversification in neighborhoods and preventing areas from becoming ‘concentration neighborhoods’—a term used to describe areas in which a high proportion of residents are from ethnic minorities, and where living standards are low (Uitermark & Duyvendak 2008). Thus, NAC opened its premises to a group of artists and students who did not earn enough money to register at the municipality. In addition to providing affordable living space, the two artists also wanted to invest in the local neighborhood, and use a part of the members’ monthly contribution (EUR 20 of the monthly contribution of EUR 110) for art in the public space. They also set up a cultural stimulus fund, the Mya Cultural Fund.<sup>1</sup> Through organizing art and cultural events in the public domain, initiators of NAC aim to add extra social and artistic value to the area.

*Paradocks* (2014) was set up in Vienna by three cultural entrepreneurs whose expertise ranges from urban and cultural research to sociology and design. Inspired by citizen-initiated developments they had witnessed in the Netherlands, they appropriated a vacant seven-story office building in the inner



Figure 2. Wolphaertstraat, NAC Rotterdam @ NAC-member 2004-2017.

district of Vienna to serve as a temporary site of knowledge production, and as a general public domain for people from different social backgrounds and design fields. Considering unused property to be a ‘useless [wasted] resource’ (Philipp 2016), they announced an open call for applications to fill the building with tenants. As ‘enablers’ (as they call themselves), the three entrepreneurs take an approach based on active media use and participation in cultural and art events (Das Packhaus 2016; Pakhuis de Zwijger 2016b). As such, they aim to develop a growing network as a temporary agency that can provide a public domain for the neighborhood. They discuss their ‘case’ at international conferences and events, and collaboratively search for ways to best develop their practice, and to discuss problems they encounter—learning from practice and the potential to create. The spaces in their project can only be used temporarily, but this restriction reinforces the feeling of ‘now-or-never’ (*Jetzt-oder-nie-Gefühl*), which is part of the ‘vibrant atmosphere of the building’ (Philipp 2016). Offering space to 250 users over the past two years, the collective provides such places as a mobility room, bicycle repair shop, photo studio, and ‘healthy lunch room.’ Furthermore, the team of Paradocks has co-developed a continuous presentation platform for the applied arts, in order to strengthen and enable publication possibilities for upcoming artists.

Citizen professionals in two of the cases (NAC, Reading Room West) hold a non-commercial view of the world, applying egalitarian structures within

their initiatives by which either nobody is paid or everybody is paid the same. Paradocks takes a more commercial approach: the enablers want to develop a self-sustaining business model with temporary use, to improve neighborhoods through socio-cultural activities and spaces. What is common to all of the projects is a quest to contribute to the neighborhood, to create and invigorate a public domain, and to give a socio-cultural use to derelict buildings in the urban realm. The initiatives are a response to neighborhoods that have been stripped of their public functions by governmental institutions. Feeling indignation at poorly made or executed government decisions, reactions such as ‘that is not possible’, ‘that should not happen at all’, and ‘we cannot allow that’ prompted their actions and led them to call for the creation of a public space and domain. As stated earlier, such an attitude can be attributed to a growing group of educated citizens who are more alert to issues of public affairs—as a result of the social and educational provisions of Western welfare states (Inglehart 1997). In such a situation, a



Figure 3. DAS PACKHAUS, Vienna @ Veronika Kováčsová.

political sophistication allows citizens to understand political processes and the mass media, and in this way, enables them to take a position and co-shape their environments.

Before examining how mediatization is used to *mobilize* activities around the creation of a public domain, I will discuss the values and moral responsibilities that citizen professionals hold, through their spatial interventions and contributions to the public domain.

## Motives for and Values in the Creation of a Public Domain

Research at the Spatial Planning Department of Wageningen University into the possibilities of involving consultancy firms to better mediate the ambitions and objectives of citizen initiatives showed that initiators of citizen initiatives are characterized by a strong drive to identify themselves with their environment, and that they believe that they can do things better and differently. They also have a strong passion and personal concern for the place and site they want to safeguard, enhance, and develop (Dijk 2014). Indeed, initiators work outside their own fields, and thus consider their projects to be pioneering, where they can discover, learn, and create. They want to show others that it is possible to do things better and differently, by drawing from different sets of experiences and experimenting. For example:

Jaap: You are thinking as kind of an artist, you know. I am always looking for where there is the space, how it can be done differently, how you can connect things, how you can still work with people...

Karin: To create something new?

Jaap: Yes, and to do it better. Because it can, because it is allowed, and that gives a sort of drift to simply do it [...] and also to show that it can be done differently (Interview B).

The approach that things can be done differently and better can be referred to as *research in action*, as philosopher and urban planner Schoen described in his theory on the reflective practitioner that builds on, among other things, professionals' abilities to 'think on their feet' (1983), when they find themselves surprised or puzzled by unknown situations. By reflecting on such uncertain conditions, the practitioner then draws on her prior experience and 'carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation' (Schoen 1983: 68). Or, as the two artists in NAC explain, it is by living in a project that one is prompted to act on certain conditions. They see their involvement as part of a work of art, where they are living in an ongoing experiment. According to Verschuren, their projects are a way of sharing life, based not on the exchange of money but of activities. If everybody lived like that, he claims, the world would be very different (Interview C).

However, not everybody is able to live under such conditions. That is why artist Verheul left the project when its members no longer contributed actively to the creation and maintenance of the public domain of NAC—which was the initial objective of the social-cultural project. Verheul describes how he became disappointed with the project, which for him had worked only when the original

idea of a socio-cultural place was upheld, and the place was not a simple provider for living spaces and services. As he explains,

Because I think it's [now] just too much about living [cheaply], and much less about delivering [cultural and social] 'commotion' than it could be (Interview A).

Verschuren believes in his vision of contributing to a change of life by showing how it can be done differently, and still lives in the neighborhood. He is actively supporting a new group of artists who are forming a foundation that will continue negotiations with the housing corporation with the aim of developing social and cultural investments in the neighborhood. He recently also implemented a ferry boat service to help provide better public transport in this part of the town.<sup>2</sup> As such, Verschuren and the team involved in NAC are keeping the spirit of the project alive and trying to achieve sustainable development.

Deerenberg and Kováčsová from Paradocks, in contrast, emphasize that not only pioneering work in the field of urban regeneration, but also the development of a sustainable business model were driving forces behind the project. It was, furthermore, a challenge to experiment and play constructively with a vacant area in the city. After graduating, they have been trying to contribute to a new professional field that deals with the problem of unused space in a city, while also working together with others to create a public domain for the neighborhood. As such, Paradocks is an example of the search for a financially sustainable model (Sturmberger 2015). In a workshop on value creation for self-initiated projects (Pakhuis de Zwijger 2016a), the initiative takers of Paradocks questioned the added value that the project brought to the neighborhood, and tried to develop long-term strategies to put themselves onto the market.

A recurring topic in the debate on the value creation that citizen professionals achieve is the quest for professional acceptance—or the discussion about working as a professional or volunteer. The work that they do in these projects is not generally considered to be professional by others in the field, although the tasks they carry out can be seen as a prolongation and extension of their former professional work. According to Specht, the activities do not cover the professional capacities of what a volunteer does. The activities carried out in the communal projects require a range of skills, such as management skills or organizational skills, that not everyone possesses. Specht found that institutional professionals did not take him seriously, saying: 'Oh, you are a member of this group with the volunteers.' Professionals associate a volunteer with a person who does work that anybody can do, but Specht points out that all the volunteers carry out highly specialized tasks that were previously remunerated tasks performed by municipal employees. The latter now play a smaller role in social and urban projects.

We've always done a lot of voluntary work, it is not new, but we have narrowed down volunteering in our heads to tasks that nobody wants to do, besides a professional, where you really do not need any skills. (Interview D).

Instead, they do 'deliver' services that tend to be previously remunerated tasks of municipalities as they increase social cohesion and livability, enhance safety in a neighborhood, and provide cultural experiences. Therefore, public debate has repeatedly addressed the opportunities for both citizens and the state to initiate and support self-initiated projects (Opbroek 2015; Pakhuis de Zwijger 2016b; Stimuleringsfonds 2017). As Specht and Van der Zwaard (2015: 48) put it, municipalities and governments should continue to invest in 'social physical infrastructure'. As governments want them to carry out former tasks of the municipalities (such as to increase social cohesion and the livability in a neighborhood, and to address and provide cultural education and experience), a part of the municipal budget could be dedicated to sustaining these independently operating initiatives. In order to not run the risk of corporatization of their agency, Van der Zwaard and Specht work as volunteers, since they believe that this is the only way they can keep relationships clear and remain independent of any 'forced collaboration' with other institutions.

The findings of the pilot interviews highlight general developments in society: they find that, as intergenerational studies have previously shown, the values of a largely educated population are geared more towards individual freedom, self-expression, and participation, than towards the accumulation of material values (Bennett 1998). This can be seen as a form of *zeitgeist* of the 2000s. At the same time, interest in politics and civic engagement on a community level increased (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999). This is visible in two of the cases I have studied (NAC, Reading Room West), where the initiative takers consider that life is 'not merely based on the value of money' but on the exchange of socio-cultural activities. It is, however, important to be able to cover expenses at the various stages of the projects. Asked why they carry out their projects, Specht replies:

...because my daughter grows up in this city, and I want her to grow up in a city as good and fun as possible. Thus, if I can do something for this, then I will be doing that (Interview D).

This change of values and moral responsibilities is not only a driving force for the citizen professionals engaged in the projects; it also prompts us to ask: how do governmental bodies relate to the practices of citizen professionals, and how do citizen professionals use mediatization to *mobilize* activities around their agenda regarding the creation of a public domain?

## **Mediatization and the Creation of a Public Domain**

Media is crucial for communication in a social-cultural project, to ensure that the projects gain acceptance from the neighborhood. The use of the media is required also to obtain the support from cooperation partners that is necessary to sustain self-organized projects. Digital representations of projects explain and describe the motivation, goals, people involved, and history of projects, and can act as locations that people can consult before visiting the physical location. Media is—in addition to publicity spread by word of mouth—responsible for spreading the word and obtaining public recognition, and thus the right to a lived space and existence.

To mediate their projects in the neighborhood and in institutions such as housing corporations and public administration, citizen professionals and governmental institutions apply user-generated content (UGC) for their social media platforms and for their websites and blogs.

You increase your reputation while doing the projects, as you organize meetings around themes that are interesting content wise. As such it works naturally as marketing, in practice, as I am driven by enthusiasm. (...) It increases your branding though I have never started for it (Interview D).

Through reviews and newsfeeds from other users, reports from the projects are, firstly, sources of information about the events of daily life at the specific socio-cultural place in a neighborhood. As the use of UGC for the coverage of urban life has increased, it has created 'social worlds'—a concept from symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934)—that are bound together by a network of communication and by joint activities or concerns. Social worlds are thus not limited by geography, but by their means of communication (Krotz 2014). In this way, they create new spatial places and practices in the world, and extend the lived space beyond a physical one. As such, they add to our social imaginaries, "that is, the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain" (Taylor 2004: 6).

Mediatization serves to achieve public recognition and to represent projects as showcases within a public domain. Two of the three cases I have studied (Reading Room West and Paradocks) have mediated their motives and process through a publication (Specht & Van der Zwaard 2015; Paradocks 2016b). NAC, however, could not find the necessary funds. The project's initiators still hope to translate their practical work into a cultural reflection on the ambitions and motives that drove their project:



But it is also, as you do so much volunteer work, there is simply no time left to look at yourself calmly of what you are actually doing. What does it entail? It's not just that you have to show the success story but that you once again look quietly: what does it all mean? And where the heck is it going to? It has become such a large work of things and we have had everywhere collaboration (Interview B).

This example shows that public recognition needs to be 'earned' from public institutions and the public that attend. Issues such as public relations, project management, and development all require time for reflection and planning, and this implies that the projects must operate on the same terms as their larger corporate counterparts. This aspect concerns the concept of the corporatization of activism mentioned above. One definition of 'corporatization' involves both parties profiting from each other's involvement and their actions in the public domain. A municipality may, for example, show that it supports these initiatives, which help to provide cultural experiences in run-down neighborhoods. A 'positive' branding then affects the viability of such a space, which helps to increase social cohesion and livability, or enhances safety in the neighborhood. In this way, the municipality, the citizen professionals and the wider public all profit from the corporatization process.

We are, however, dealing with temporary self-initiated projects for the urban realm, and the question thus arises about the role that governmental bodies play in the representation of these spaces. Specht and Van der Zwaard have proposed that municipalities and governments should show that they have a responsibility to support such initiatives and keep investing in social physical infrastructure. Housing corporation Woonstad took up this proposal and presented its vision



Figure 4. Reading Room West used to showcase the fact that the housing corporation Woonstad supports residents' and citizens' initiatives (Molenaar & Feenstra 2015: 30).

for future developments within their business strategy in a document entitled *Ondernemingsstrategie 2015-2018* (Molenaar & Feenstra 2015). This document uses terms such as ‘social return on investment’, and presents its intentions to sustain problematic neighborhoods. Although the corporation uses images of the Reading Room West, it does not mention the project by name in the entire document. It states only that it wants to improve networks of residents and help make partnerships with other parties, in order to give boost the resilience of a neighborhood (Figure 4). How it plans to do that, however, is not described in detail. This document seems to be strategic window-dressing that showcases the corporation’s interest in lively multicultural neighborhoods in which cultural activities take place following citizen initiatives. So, how do governmental institutions relate to and mediate these projects?

The two cases in Rotterdam are described on the municipality website, which contains a digital *Wijkprofiel* (district profile) (Gemeente Rotterdam & OBI 2016a). This district profile provides facts and statistics for all Rotterdam boroughs, such as an index of safety (including criminal offenses and nuisances), details of social conditions (how contact is among neighbors, how many children leave school with acceptable qualifications, and what living conditions are like), and the physical space (how residents experience the built environment, the conditions of public spaces, and the percentage of residences that are vacant). The Reading Room West is explicitly mentioned as a prime example of a ‘special initiative by active residents’ (Gemeente Rotterdam & OBI 2016b). The NAC initiative is not mentioned by name, but described as ‘inspiring residents hosting more than 150 artistic and creative entrepreneurs in the neighborhood’. This lack of media presence of the NAC name emphasizes how the case of NAC has not been sufficiently well perceived by official institutions in the city.

Specht disputes this mediatization of a ‘best of’ example of citizen initiatives in Rotterdam by the municipality (Keijzer 2013; Raeflex 2014; Gemeentebestuur Rotterdam 2015), and describes how it mobilizes around its agenda regarding the creation of a public domain, giving the project an advantage over other projects. He criticizes how the municipality prefers to co-opt initiatives to sustaining them. As to declaring that an initiative such as the Reading Room West is ‘special’, he argues that the municipality’s strategy demonstrates simply that the municipality does not ‘believe’ that the municipality’s policies are aimed at involving citizens. Such initiatives, on the contrary—Specht elaborates—‘should be’ embraced and considered as part of daily practice, and that within a so-called participation society there ‘should be’ many more projects with a similar approach to the one he is taking. Specht concludes that if such projects are to be examples of the participation society,

then we will set up our society so that it [the project] is not a ‘special’ choice. I do not want to be ‘special’ at all, I am particularly fond of what is ‘normal’. Look if it would be normal to do something like the Reading Room, I would not talk to you now. (...) My aim for the Reading Room is that it contributes to a normal functioning as I do. Actually, I would like that what I do is the norm (Interview D).

Specht and Van der Zwaard (2015) further state that, as initiators often feel responsible for the entire project, it is important to consider which tasks can be taken over by others. This will prevent the project remaining dependent on the ones who initiated the process. These persons are often described as *best persons*, who make the difference in a neighborhood—people who have a sense of entrepreneurship and involvement. They have professional capacities in different domains, operating as, for example, scientists, social workers, community workers, organizers, cultural producers, and fundraisers. The most important skill they can have, however, is the ability to mobilize others.

The initiators of the NAC project feel that Dutch public institutions do not hear or recognize them. The project received a ten-year loan of EUR 150,000 from the housing corporation De Nieuwe Unie, to renovate the houses for which they had been given a lease. They were then confronted with a take-over by Woonstad Rotterdam in 2007 (Lensen *et al.* 2010). As the agreements with the former housing association were binding, Woonstad Rotterdam proudly announced



Figure 5. Deerenberg criticized in the press for her position as ‘real estate agent’ (Blatakes 2016) @ Liane Tschentscher / Marija Jociute.

its continuation of existing agreements to support the artists who live and work there, and its plan to make it an ‘art zone Oud-Charlois’ (Gelder *et al.* 2012). The

term ‘support the artists’ is, however, misleading, as the NAC foundation agreed to take out a loan to develop the houses in self-management, in collaboration with the former housing corporation. This may be the reason, as artist Verheul has suggested, that the project was not nominated for best neighborhood practices in Rotterdam in 2013. The jury considered that NAC was a project run by the housing corporation, which was paid for the project. NAC was not, according to the jury, self-initiated or self-organized.

In Vienna, the public perception and mediatizations about Paradocks proved more controversial with regard to the temporary use of derelict buildings. As the project became a successful showcase for some policymakers, Deerenberg was criticized in the local media for her style of managing the group of users and deciding who was allowed in and who was not. Critics considered that Deerenberg played the role of a real-estate agent who was more focused on hip design and youngster companies than on a diverse socio-cultural temporary use of the space. She excluded, to a certain extent, financially weak organizations and individuals from Packhaus, which, as a socially inspired project, had received a municipal starting research grant of EUR 12,000 (Blatakes 2016) (Figure 5).

However, the Paradocks team took steps to position itself within a mediatized landscape. Cooperating with like-minded people in other parts of the world, the initiators of Paradocks established an internationally oriented creative shared space initiative, which invested in social platforms, and shared ideas, friends, and people (Paradocks 2016b). The project cooperated also with institutions in art and architecture, urban planning, and economics (Biennale Architecture Austrian Pavillon 2016; New Europe—Cities in Transition 2016; MAK—Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art 2017). One partner of Paradocks, Conwert (which owns 26,711 properties in Europe) refers to the project as the biggest project it has undertaken within its policy of corporate social responsibility (Conwert Immobilien Invest SE 2017). Deerenberg stated at the workshop meeting on community finance in Amsterdam (Pakhuis de Zwijger 2016a) that she felt it was quite difficult for the project to survive. The project at that time required a collaborative model with the housing corporation to tackle the issue of vacant housing plots. This would make it necessary for the project to hop from one place to the next. This need, in turn, prompted the initiators to reconsider how they ‘should’ position and profile themselves in the field. Deerenberg asked:

Does their community move along with them? Or do they still have to create a community [when they move to a new location], as it is now more about users of available working space? (Interview E).

All three cases have received international public recognition: Paradocks through its frequent participation in art and architecture events and by being part of the City Makers network (Urban Agenda for the EU 2016); NAC and the Reading Room West as examples of *Wild Sites* in Rotterdam, amongst others. Artist Thomas Rustemeyer (2014) made drawings of the organizations and activities of the projects during his residency in Rotterdam (Kraft 2016) and exhibited them in an international art context (Figures 6 and 7). NAC concludes proudly that it received more invitations from cultural institutions outside the Netherlands than in its own country, where it has not achieved what it had hoped for:

I had hoped that the project had gotten copycats in other places and there were maybe other community agencies, as well as financial partners that had stepped into. We have tried, but failed, or so, although we have spoken with a number of parties (Interview C).

The description above concerns how citizen professionals use mediatization to mobilize activities around their agenda regarding the creation of public space. I will now summarize the main findings of this article concerning how their practices relate to mediatization and how their activities are mobilized around the creation of a public domain.

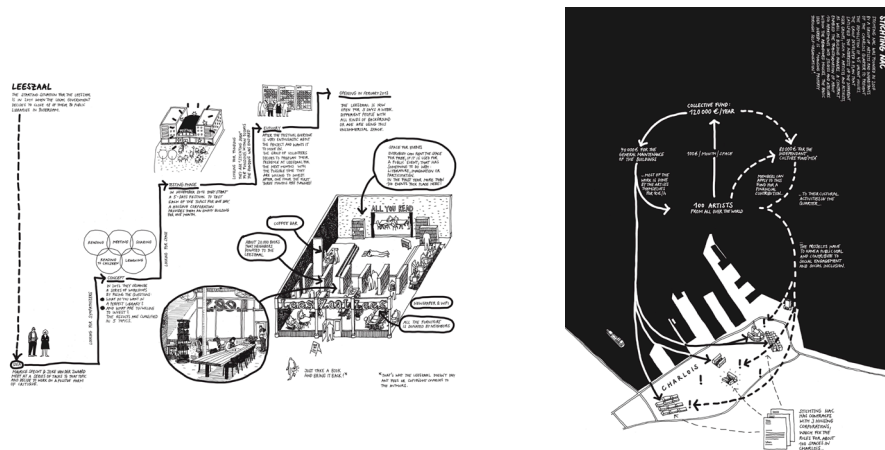


Figure 6 & 7. Reading Room West and NAC Rotterdam from *Wild Sites Rotterdam* (Rustemeyer 2014) @ Thomas Rustemeyer.

## Conclusions

The three cases described here arose as a result of planned or implemented actions of governmental institutions resulting from austerity measures. These actions were, for example, closing down libraries, tearing down houses, and leaving an office building empty for years. In these processual, bottom-up developments, citizen professionals tend to cooperate with municipal institutions to negotiate user contracts that often concern temporarily available public facilities that are abandoned or derelict. The agreements reached can lead to deeper cooperation, which in turn leads to corporatization activism in which opposing parties work together towards a common objective. The role of the initially critical party may in such circumstances be weakened, as it promotes and mediatizes its activities to achieve a common aim with the policy makers or municipality. The latter, on the other hand, are eager to showcase these projects (and other examples) as proof that financial cutbacks can be countered by active, engaged citizens who care about their city. The question then arises about what is the true objective of the various corporation partners in the public domain.

The term 'citizen professional' as a sensitizing concept has helped in the approach to the different actors without any pre-conceived notion that they fit into a special image of a citizen, be it the activist, self-reflexive, ecologically conscious, socially engaged, good, or responsible citizen. The term *citizen professional* was not used during the pilot interviews, in order to avoid the risk of influencing or steering the conversations, which were being conducted to investigate the social imaginaries within the projects how the initiators envisage their collective social lives. The designations that the actors use to describe what they do varied from 'social organizers' and 'cultural producers', to 'enablers' and 'urban professionals'. As expected, holders of different professional skills positioned themselves differently in the field. Conceived as spatial agents or modest civic activists, citizen professionals address another way of living. They often describe their projects as experiments that allow them to invent, decide on a destination, and figure out how to perform while carrying out the projects. Like Schoen's reflective practitioners, they appreciate the value of spontaneity within their practices, because it allows unexpected things to happen and spontaneous programs to arise with people arriving in their lived spaces.

As reported earlier, the work performed by citizen professionals is carried out differently from the way in which community projects are normally implemented: operating in the space between governmental institutions, neighborhood groups and residents, the actors are often not considered to be professionals in the field. This failure to recognize professional competencies is a recurring point of irritation for the urban actors, as cooperation partners from housing associations and municipal agencies often fail to take them seriously when negotiating about

the uses of derelict public buildings and the creation of a public domain. Therefore, they wish to be acknowledged by others in the field as offering more than mere volunteers' contributions. In this work, using the term 'citizen professional' as a sensitizing concept helped to lay bare the social imaginaries of these actors in their diverse articulations of living arrangements, moral dispositions, and social commitments. I have looked at how these self-initiated projects tackle questions of public maintenance and the creation of a public domain for the community.

As we have seen in the cases described here, media are essential and indispensable tools to mobilize activities, attain public recognition and achieve acceptance in the public domain. A public domain as a politicized space requires proper mediatization, to ensure that the intentions that the citizen professionals pursue are neither lost in the mediation process along the way, nor corporatized by governmental institutions, to be used to deliver socio-cultural services to problematic neighborhoods—that is to perform tasks that were formerly undertaken by the municipalities. Mediatization thus serves as a means to achieve public recognition: citizen professionals endeavor to obtain public acknowledgement through their different media uses and by representing their projects as showcases within a public domain. Citizen professionals, therefore, and governmental institutions look for a legitimatization of their contributions and actions to the urban realm. As their projects are mediated not only through their usergenerated content but also in publications from official bodies, it is essential for citizen professionals to play the game and to remain actively involved with the media, to mediate their social imaginaries. In order to get their messages across, they must adapt to the way the media operate and use their social media platforms, personal websites, and blogs to inform the wider world that their lived spaces are made meaningful through their practices.

Policy makers and municipalities, however, are not ready to give such initiatives a sustainable place within their daily practice. They are prepared, when showcasing these projects as best examples of neighborhood initiatives, to state that such initiatives should take place more often to ensure the social viability of a neighborhood and enhance its safety. However, the media attention of these actors turns out to be window-dressing rather than any attempt to support actively the stated policy of stimulating citizen participation. Further data collection will show whether the initiatives driven by the social imaginaries of these actors can be attributed to a modest civic activism with intervention in the world, or a corporatized version of top-down community making.

As we have seen in two of the cases (NAC and the Reading Room West), working as a volunteer is a way to position oneself as a critical agency in urban regeneration projects: taking such a position can help to avoid conflicting interests with governmental institutions. However, such a practice cannot be

considered to be a guiding principle when intervening in the creation and use of a public domain. Such an approach is possible only for those committed and self-mobilized citizens who have sufficient financial means to continue without receiving payment. This said, the actors may very well be operating precariously, as they have a lifestyle that does not accommodate the consumerism-based mode of living. More important for them is that their position of financial independence from governmental institutions allows them to criticize freely, and there is no risk of them falling prey to a corporatization of activism. On the other hand, the case of Paradocks demonstrates that choosing to establish oneself as an independent professional organization that combines socio-cultural ambitions with a goal of arriving at a proper business model for the agency can facilitate making a living within an upcoming urban field of temporary use.

The lived spaces of the citizen professionals within the projects are part of a process of production in which different groups of people experience and live through their lived and mediated images and spaces and as such appropriate the spaces. Through their social practices they help to facilitate sites of social relationships, and the exchanges that are necessary for socially livable neighborhoods. The practices of citizen professionals raise the question of which community groups in a neighborhood they will address and involve, and for whom the public domain will be available. Within the cases described here, the answers are parochial groups of designers and researchers at Paradocks, artists and students at NAC, and an open public domain at the Reading Room West. Only the latter has not excluded specific groups of citizens, and established a public domain in which everybody is welcome. However, as moral responsibilities have dislocated social and socialized political action, the making of our public domain requires more research on the mediatization of citizen professionals' practices, to reveal what the social imaginaries they possess imply and what they can mean for the future making of our urban environment.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Mya Cultural Fund was created within the foundation NAC to stimulate the artistic activities of its members in the area. The abbreviation stands for “mind your area, move your ass”. A yearly contribution of EUR 20 from all members is saved, and an official call is subsequently made from which the best proposal is selected <http://stichting-nac.nl/cms/activities/pfitem.php?iid=29&lng=EN>.

<sup>2</sup> The ferry boat service is run on a self-initiated and personal basis. Started in 2017, the boat service links the borough of Charlois with Katendrecht. The latter neighborhood is close to the center of Rotterdam and has undergone extensive gentrification in the last few years: <http://veerpontzuid.nl/>.

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