

# 21

## GLOBAL SELF-URBANISM

### Self-organisation amidst the regulatory crisis and uneven urban citizenship

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#### Introduction: For a unitary conceptualisation of self-urbanism

In recent decades, the concept of self-organisation has attracted growing attention in the academic debates concerned with urban issues (de Bruijn and Gerrits, 2018). ‘Self-governance’, ‘self-production’, ‘self-building’ and ‘self-help’ are some of the labels used to indicate various practices that, despite their distinctive features, are all characterised by a prominent role of non-public (individual or collective) subjects and by a very limited role of public authorities in fields in which a public presence is usually considered necessary. All these urban variations of self-organisation can be included under the umbrella term of *self-urbanism*, which denotes practices and processes of making, shaping and living the urban space that are not prevalently and directly mediated or led by public institutions – that is, they are mostly endogenously produced (Moroni et al., 2019). Thus the generative and creative role of local social forces and actors emerges clearly. As such, self-urbanism must be read as one of the constitutive forces of current global urbanism, together with other factors and processes such as financialisation, climate change adaptation, ethnic and religious diversity and socio-spatial polarisation.

However, self-urbanism is not a homogeneous phenomenon. On the contrary, it exhibits a high internal (descriptive and normative) differentiation, even more accentuated than in the case of several other processes that constitute global urbanism. As such, it has never been conceptualised in a unitary manner. In fact, different empirical forms of self-urbanism have generated and substantiated radically different theorisations in the field of urban studies – which, in some cases, have been developed along ideologically divergent interpretative lines, ranging from left-wing ideals of self-determination and emancipation to right-wing ones of the minimal state and individual self-regulation. This is the case of subaltern urbanism (Roy, 2011), urban enclavism and revanchism (Caldeira, 2000), radical urban autonomy (Vasudevan, 2015), neo-localism (Beito et al., 2002), to mention only some of them.

Despite this fragmented understanding of global self-urbanism, in our opinion, a common thread links the buildings occupied by housing rights movements in Rome to the gated communities for the super-rich in Johannesburg, passing through the informal settlements in the suburbs of Maputo, the unauthorised houses built by the middle class along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the retirement communities in the United States and the

radical-environmentalist communities born in Northern Europe in the wake of the alternative movements of the 1960s. It is the linking thread of a specific relationship of otherness (and sometimes even opposition) with respect to ordinary forms of public regulation, production and management of the urban.

The connection produced by this commonality among different empirical manifestations of self-urbanism around the globe thus entails the need to find an interpretative coordinate grid of these phenomena. This would not only shed light on the shared, deep roots of self-organised practices that seem radically different at first sight but would also help to clarify their political, normative and epistemological implications.

For this purpose, this chapter will first analyse the birth of self-urbanism and identify its constitutive features. It will then argue that one of the main implications of self-urbanism is the rise of a new institutional fragmentation that overthrows the traditional boundaries drawn by public authorities (e.g. municipal borders) and fuels spatialised forms of unequal urban citizenship.

## The rise of self-urbanism in the twentieth century

The generic theorisation of phenomena characterised by a significant degree of autonomy from the formal predicaments of public institutions is not new (for a historical overview, see Sørensen and Triantafillou, 2009). On the contrary, specific conceptualisations of self-organisation in the *urban sphere* began to emerge in much more recent times (e.g. in the 1960s in many European countries) as self-organised urban practices clashed with the stratification of comprehensive and detailed forms of public regulation, development and management of space and buildings implemented by public authorities, especially after the Second World War. Such comprehensive and detailed forms of public control spread first in the Western countries and then throughout most of the world (Hall, 2002 [1988]). As a result, the use and development of urban space almost worldwide are characterised, at least on paper, by the significant role of public authorities. This role takes material form in a complex assemblage of different layers of public regulation (e.g. property regimes, building codes, land-use regulations, rules for the use of public space, landscape codes, zoning plans, master plans, strategic visions). The processes of neo-liberalisation have only partially modified this situation so that nation-states and their local ramifications have retained control over some spheres (for instance, planning processes) while relying on the private market in other sectors (e.g. for the housing supply). Therefore, the outcome of neo-liberalisation cannot be read as a generalised deregulation but rather as the development of a complex and contradictory framework in which intense forms of public withdrawal and privatisation in some sectors are accompanied by strict public regulation and control in others (Andersson and Moroni, 2014).

## The complexity of self-urbanism in the housing sphere: A stratified definition

The practices that fall under the label of 'self-urbanism' are extremely heterogeneous in social composition, material forms, ontology, structure and scope. For our purpose of propounding a ground-conceptualisation of self-urbanism, it is, therefore, useful to identify the phenomenon's constitutive components. Our goal is not to propose static typologies or taxonomies but rather to provide coordinates that can make general sense of the complexity and diversification of such a fragmented (and territorialised) phenomenon. We focus on three main questions,<sup>1</sup> centring on one of the various spheres in which self-urbanism materialises – namely, housing.

*Self-urbanism and internal coordination.* This first analytical question concerns the level and type of coordination among the diverse individual actions composing self-urbanism. Despite being an important component of some cases of self-organisation, *intentional and collective agency* is not a constitutive feature of the phenomenon. In some instances, in fact, self-organised actions lack any collective intent and explicit central coordination because they are based mainly on the individual intentions of actors (Rauws, 2016). Nevertheless, the sum of these individual(istic) acts of self-organisation can evolve into collective outcomes through a sort of spontaneous alignment, or self-synchronisation, which is not intentionally organised by any actor. In this regard, we may speak of *self-coordination* (Moroni et al., 2019). This applies, for example, in the case of informal settlements that develop through the incremental addition of housing units by single households. In other instances, by contrast, urbanites may deliberately join together in order to pursue a common goal or ambition so that their action is guided by some form of internal coordination (Rauws, 2016). In this second case, we may speak of *self-governance*. This is the case, for example, of common-interest housing developments (also known as ‘homeowners’ associations’) that are privately governed residential communities in which the inhabitants directly manage several aspects of daily life that are handled by public authorities in ‘ordinary portions’ of the urban area (e.g. the provision of collective services, such as rubbish collection or street patrolling; Glasze et al., 2006; McKenzie, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Self-governance also applies to the squatting actions led by grassroots urban movements that re-appropriate and repurpose urban spaces and infrastructures in order to claim housing rights and the ‘right to the city’ (Squatting Europe Kollektive 2014; Montagna and Grazioli, 2019).

*Self-urbanism and the market.* The second question concerns the relationship of self-urbanism with the market. In several cases, self-urbanism takes place outside (if not against) the circuit established by the (housing) market, such as when access to housing is obtained by occupying a public or private building. However, this unrelatedness with the market is not a necessary feature of housing self-urbanism. In fact, in many instances, ordinary practices of the real estate market are in place. If we refer again to the case of common-interest housing developments, here the access to dwelling units is ruled by traditional forms of real estate trade. Consider also the fact that non-ordinary (i.e. illegal/informal) forms of the real estate market can occur, as in the case of the housing black market in informal settlements.

*Self-urbanism and public regulation.* The third question concerns the relationship of self-urbanism with the public regulatory system. Self-urbanism can arise *within* or *outside* the public regulatory framework. In the former case, it maintains a formal/legal character. This happens, for example, when different rules of land and building use are respected, but the residents of the community (e.g. the members of a homeowners’ association) decide to regulate certain aspects of the settlement’s life (e.g. the provision of certain collective services or the conduct of decision-making processes) differently from the remainder of the urban area. Non-public rules and procedures are thus established by the inhabitants *in addition* to the public ones. Depending on the specificity of the self-organised practice, the degree of independence from public institutions may differ. Sometimes, broad spaces of autonomy from public control are established, as in the case of several homeowners’ associations in the United States (Nelson, 2005) or radical autonomous communities, such as Christiania in Copenhagen (Coppola and Vanolo, 2015). In other cases, this autonomy is weaker, as in many cohousing communities<sup>3</sup> in Europe (Chiodelli and Baglione, 2014). This may be due to various factors: because the institutional and political conditions impede greater autonomy, because there are no economic, organisational or human resources for residents to claim for greater independence.

If self-urbanism occurs mainly *outside* the public regulatory framework (i.e. in its violation), it acquires an informal/illegal nature. This happens when many (if not all) of the rules of ownership, use and development of land and buildings are breached. As a consequence, a sort of 'space of exception' within the publicly regulated urban body is constituted, and more or less structured forms of non-public control and regulation can be established *to replace* the public ones in force. Nevertheless, such self-urbanism practices do not develop in a space characterised by a complete lack of relationship with public institutions. In fact, there is always some nexus (partial, weak, mediated or indirect) with the latter (Chiodelli and Tzfadia, 2016), which, however, does not completely determine the development trajectory of these practices.<sup>4</sup> The expression 'informal housing and settlements' is often used to indicate these cases of self-organisation outside the public regulatory system. However, the expression should not be limited to denoting 'slums' in Africa, Asia or Latin America. It should also be used to refer to a variety of phenomena widespread in many Western countries, which include the following: the occupation for housing purposes of public and private vacant buildings (Grazioli, 2017), illegal Roma camps (Maestri, 2019), unauthorised housing construction, non-institutional refugee camps and other multifarious examples (Chiodelli et al., 2020).

### **The implications of global self-urbanism: The new institutional archipelago in the midst of the regulatory crisis**

In light of the complexity of global self-urbanism described in the previous sections, it is clear that an imagery of marginality and exceptionality cannot be associated with that phenomenon. Self-urbanism includes many practices that are marginal neither in quantitative terms (e.g. informal settlements in many cities of Africa or Asia play a dominant role in the production of urban space), nor with reference to their social and public value (e.g. counter-cultural and political squatting influences urban politics significantly in many cities), nor with regard to the actors involved (e.g. many gated communities are inhabited by groups that are 'central' from an economic and political point of view). On the contrary, self-urbanism must be understood as a crucial component of the current urban age in different parts of the world. This is true not only from a factual point of view but also from an epistemic one. In fact, regardless of their specific features, all (housing) self-urbanism practices allude to two pivotal, critical issues of current global urbanism.

*The regulatory crisis.* The first question concerns the current configurations of public regulation, development and management of urban space. The different variations of (housing) self-urbanism evidence the dissatisfaction and criticisms of growing segments of the urban population with regard to these forms of public control, which are unable to keep up with social innovation to effectively regulate and manage the growing complexity of urban phenomena or to respond to the demands, needs and aspirations formulated by different groups of urban dwellers and stakeholders. Self-organised urbanites counterpose such public failures with the concrete construction of alternatives: those that, directly or indirectly, are advanced by self-urbanism are different and deeply rooted in situated local contexts. They range from extreme forms of elitism, in which a sort of 'secession of the successful' is claimed and public control is criticised for its excessive invasion of the private sphere, to forms of left-wing radicalism in which the disproportionate subjection of the public authorities to the private sphere (for example, to property rights) is condemned in the name of more accentuated and inclusive public intervention. Regardless of this polarisation, it is clear that increasing shares of the urban population are more and more critical of the contemporary public governance of urban space and that their agency builds (contradictory) fragments of alternatives. Against this backdrop, it is worth stressing that self-urbanism does

not arise mainly in ‘intentional voids’ – that is, the spaces left intentionally by public authorities to favour the emergence of forms of self-organisation and social innovation. It springs above all from legislative loopholes or outdated rules, from ineffective and selective processes of policy-making and from ambiguous and contradictory practices of street-level bureaucrats. These generate unintentional interstices (Brighenti, 2013) that are then crafted and contended by a myriad of urban actors as spaces of possibility in which to pursue their goals and agendas.

In short, self-urbanism alludes to the structural shortcomings of public intervention in the urban sphere – as it has been imagined from the beginning of the twentieth century and practiced until today – at its various levels (local, metropolitan, regional and national) and stresses the need to radically redesign the process by which the urban space is regulated, managed and developed.

*The new institutional archipelago.* The second question that arises from a ground-conceptualisation of self-urbanism concerns its institutional implications. Self-urbanism testifies that the current urban age is characterised not only by a deep socio-spatial fragmentation and unevenness but also by a new *institutional differentiation* (and polarisation) *driven by non-public forces*. The current institutional geography of the urban, in fact, is no longer defined by the traditional boundaries (e.g. national and municipal borders) drawn by public authorities, which also established the limits and purview of their sovereignty, spatial control and regulative devices. This geography currently also arises – often only *de facto* but sometimes also *de jure* – within and across these traditional public boundaries, which are increasingly traversed by complex regulatory jurisdictions that may emerge from self-organised, non-public processes. This determines new and complex institutional arrangements that are shaped by constant tensions between centrifugal forces (which aim to move further away from public control in the name of greater autonomy and secession) and centripetal forces (which aim to be incorporated into the ‘ordinary’ city). In essence, the spread of self-urbanism accentuates the transformation of the urban into an *institutional archipelago*, which is not only the result of governance/governmentality strategies and configurations of the public power but also the outcome of self-organised actions by individuals or groups. As a result, new forms of unequal urban citizenship emerge within this institutional urban archipelago.

In the second half of the twentieth century, many countries saw the factual rescaling to the city level of many rights associated with citizenship. This happened, for instance, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with the expansion of social rights related to the rise of the welfare state (Marshall, 1964); a second, different stage of this rescaling process occurred with the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s–1980s and the subsequent entrepreneurial turn of many cities (Blokland et al., 2015). Such rescaling has led to the birth of a new layer (or kind) of citizenship besides the national one: ‘urban citizenship’ – or *citadineté*, to use the words of Henri Lefebvre (1972, 1990). The notion of urban citizenship implies that the fundamental rights of a person are no longer defined only by his/her membership in a nation but are shaped *de facto* also by his/her belonging to a city – which, for instance, deeply influences the quality of the social rights that s/he can claim in the form of social services, such as school or hospitals (Chiodelli, 2013). Differently from national citizenship, *citadineté* is uneven and fragmented by its very nature, always in the making, in tension between pushes for its enlargement and pulls for its restriction (or selective recognition; Varsanyi, 2006; Yiftachel, 2015; Grazioli, 2017). There are various reasons for the uneven and unstable character of urban citizenship, such as the fact that many urban social rights are linked to localised public goods, which are impure by definition (that is, their externality exists as a spatial field of effects; Harvey, 2009) and are deeply moulded by urban policies and local politics. The institutional micro-geographies related to global self-urbanism are another key source of the uneven character of urban citizenship: they can generate different *spheres* of urban rights – and, as

a consequence, different degrees of urban citizenship. In fact, the 'spatial autonomy' linked to many practices of self-urbanism often triggers processes of differentiation of the rights available for the subjects of the practice in question. This emerges, for instance, in relation to the case of homeowners' associations: by providing specific services only to their members (e.g. sport and recreational facilities, open spaces, private security), homeowners' associations grant them additional social rights, which are not available to the rest of the inhabitants of the 'ordinary' city (for instance, due to municipal budget constraints). Something similar (although for different reasons and through different mechanisms) happens in instances of political self-organisation, such as squatting for housing purposes. Here self-managed welfare provisions and public utilities subsidise those that are not provided (or overtly denied) by public action; they are devised by activists and squatters and then 'offered' to other marginalised urbanites as forms of 'commoning' (Linebaugh, 2008; Dadusc et al., 2019). In all these latter cases, self-urbanism reverses the constitution of citizenship as a device of differential inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) by *expanding it selectively*. By the same token, an opposite-directed process of *contraction* of urban citizenship can be fuelled by self-urbanism – for instance, when some basic social rights are denied in informal settlements under the pretext of their illegal status or restrictive internal rules are enforced inside gated communities.

### Conclusions: The epistemic value of investigating global self-urbanism

Diverse practices and processes of urban self-organisation have been at the centre of a thriving stream of academic research that, mainly over the past two decades, has stimulated significant and popular theorisations in the field of urban studies (such as, for instance, subaltern urbanism). One of the shortcomings of such research is its tendency to neglect the horizontal connection among different episodes of urban self-organisation around the world, which, however counterintuitive it may sound, must be read as different empirical manifestations of a single phenomenon that we called 'self-urbanism'.

As argued in this chapter, the specificities and roots of self-urbanism are to be found in the crisis of the regulatory mechanisms that have governed cities in the past century. One of the radical outcomes of such a crisis and the consequent spread of self-urbanism is the creation of a new institutional archipelago of non-public origin. This accentuates the fragmentation and unevenness typical of the notion of urban citizenship. The latter's political and normative implications can either stimulate policy innovations or contradictory governmental approaches, according to the situated contexts where these differential forms of self-urbanism unfold. On the one hand, self-urbanism can be a vehicle for the creation of alternative spaces and channels for claiming and regaining rights for marginalised groups (very much in line, for instance, with the repertoire of actions, demands and conceptualisations concerned with the right to the city, radical autonomy, subaltern urbanism). On the other hand, it can become an instrument that encourages the disengagement of public action from ruling the urban space and taking care of spatialised inequalities, thereby fostering the secession of the successful and the marginalisation of 'undesirable' urbanites.

In light of these elements, a ground-conceptualisation can help to grasp the epistemic value of self-urbanism as a key part of current processes of global urbanism, as well as being an analytical lens through which to observe its development trajectories and impact on broader questions pertaining to the segmentation of urban citizenship, spatialised inequality and urban justice(s).

### Notes

- 1 While each of these questions is described in this section in dualistic terms for analytical purposes, the reality of self-organised practices is characterised by the simultaneous coexistence of fragments of all of them.



- 2 Retirement communities, gated communities and cohousing communities are specific kinds of homeowners' associations (Chiodelli, 2015). Today, homeowners' associations host almost 70 million people and represent around 80% of houses built in new subdivisions in the United States (Clarke and Freedman, 2019).
- 3 Cohousing is a form of intentional residential community characterised by communitarian services and facilities (e.g., kitchen and dining room) managed by the residents and for the residents, shared values among the inhabitants (e.g., environmental sustainability), high degree of participation of residents in the management of the daily life of the community and self-selection of the inhabitants, which is essential in order to create a close-knit, interactive and dialogic community. Cohousing was born in the 1960s in Northern Europe. It then spread mainly to Southern Europe and North America (Chiodelli and Baglione, 2014).
- 4 There are exceptions to this dualistic framework. For instance, there are self-organised housing practices that are conducted in a constant relationship and negotiation with public authorities. This is, for instance, the case of squatting for housing purposes as practised by housing rights movements in Rome (Grazioli and Caciagli, 2018).

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