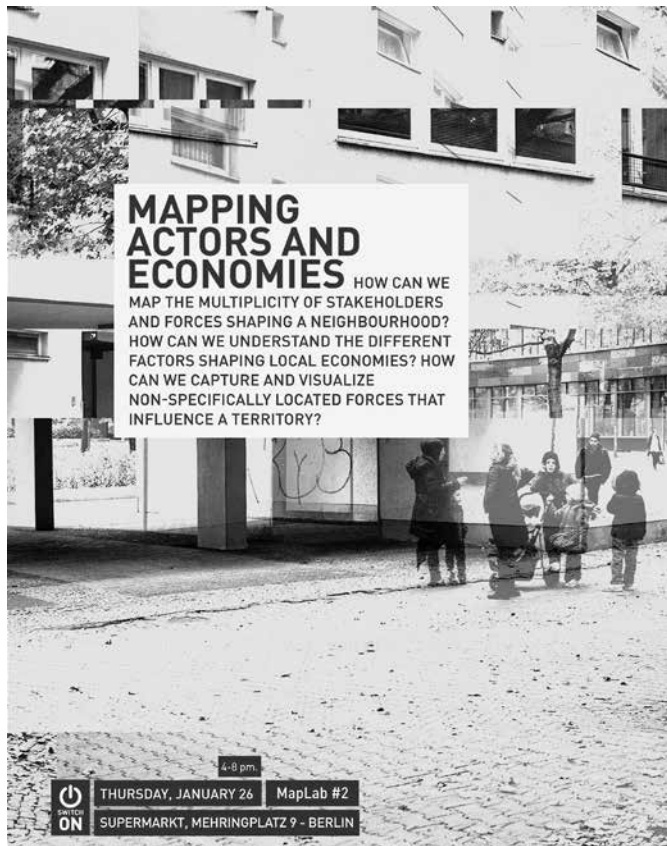# CoMMa neighbourhood
ATLAS

A collaborative platform for mapping hybrid territories

Neighbourhood, mapping, territory, collaboration, participation, knowledge, exploration, commons, everyday urbanism, accessibility

MAPPING ACTORS AND ECONOMIES HOW CAN WE MAP THE MULTIPLICITY OF STAKEHOLDERS AND FORCES SHAPING A NEIGHBOURHOOD? HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENT FACTORS SHAPING LOCAL ECONOMIES? HOW CAN WE CAPTURE AND VISUALIZE NON-SPECIFICALLY LOCATED FORCES THAT INFLUENCE A TERRITORY?

4–8 pm
THURSDAY, JANUARY 26 MapLab #2
SUPERMARKT, MEHRINGPLATZ 9 – BERLIN

Tesserae Urban Social Research develops tools to understand local territories and engage local communities in their transformation. Since the early experiments of bottom-up atlases made in a pre-google maps era with the Florentine *Cartografia Resistente* collective (Tripodi 2008), we have cultivated the idea of implementing a collaborative platform able to allow a wide, multidisciplinary and non-expert participation to the collective representation of urban territories. Two main considerations are at the base of this effort: first, a deep, shared and multifaceted understanding of a territory and the complexity of factors that influence its identity is essential to succeed in any sort of transformative project, either of social, spatial or economic nature. Second, with the increasingly mediated nature of contemporary networked society, spatial representations are not simply replications of the territories inhabited by people: they are extensions, they augment and become part of the territory itself. In this perspective, the construction of complex, participated and transparent representations in the form of local atlases is part of a necessary democratisation of spatial practice: a practice that has grown increasingly hybrid, entwined with the virtual dimension. In the *network society,* concepts such as neighbourhood, territory and community are in fact deeply challenged by the fast transformation induced by information communication technologies and globalization dynamics. Spatial contiguity, traditional citizenship and political representation are not sufficient to understand the complexity of factors that shape local identities and affect policy, governance and development at neighbourhood scale.

In current urban practice and policy, the neighbourhood and local dimension are invoked as the ground where innovation can and must happen, where democracy can be reformed and social justice reclaimed. At the same time, local approaches are limited and sometimes misleading with regards to the overarching global factors affecting any discrete socio-spatial context and inducing social injustice and dispossession. For this reason, we argue than new practices and formats of representation are necessary to reveal such complexity and to empower local society in reclaiming spatial rights. In this article we propose the implementation of collaborative online neighbourhood atlases as an effective format able to mobilize knowledge and resources at local level while revealing trans-scalar relations and dependencies at larger scale.

A platform able to support the collective production of territorial knowledge

On these premises Tesserae initiated the project CoMMa (Collaborative Multi Media Atlas) to develop a platform able to support the collective production of territorial knowledge, with a particular focus on the neighbourhood scale. The neighbourhood is indeed a fleeting dimension to define. A neighbourhood is very often a spatial entity that does not have an official delimitation or correspond to a defined administrative unit or tier. It is rather the contingent product of physical contiguity, historical vicissitudes, psychological, social and economic relations developing in a given milieu, and a mix of morphological and organizational patterns evolving within the wider urban extension. At the same time, to its inhabitants and stakeholders, it has a clear definition, identity and presence. To create a common recognition and shared vision for such an identity is the essential objective of the atlas project. An atlas, on the other hand, is a quite defined object. It is an essential tool of human civilization that historically has supported the appropriation of extended territories and their government. An instrument of conquest and military domination, developed through the expertise of technical *savants,* it has essentially worked at the service of institutional powers. Atlases are typically collections of maps devoted to represent the whole planet, continents or vast regions. Here we propose to reverse both paradigms; that is, we aim at atlases that are produced from the bottom, drawing on local, non expert, every-day knowledge of places, and from the locally concentrated dimension of small territories: not as limited, self-contained spatialities, but rather as fractal elements replicating greater territorial extensions, as nodes and entry point into the increasingly interconnected planetary extension.

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The objective of the neighbourhood atlas is not simply to represent a territory, it is rather that of facilitating its appropriation, transformation and activation. It is about extending its potenti-

alities and meanings, challenging a local identity in the multiple understanding as legitimation, resistance and project (Castells 2010). Conceived as a dynamic archive, the neighbourhood atlas acts a collaborative baseline depicting the existing resources of a community and envisioning its entrepreneurial and solidarity capacity for future initiatives. It is at once a reflexive tool for communities to recognize themselves, and a proactive instrument to form new ventures and imagine new challenges. It focuses on the multiplicity of elements and forces that shape the character of the neighbourhood. It connects personal skills and competences with local networks and social initiatives. It captures the value of a place as a common resource and codifies its use as a commons.

Basic qualities of a neighbourhood atlas

Basic qualities of a neighbourhood atlas identified since the beginning of the process are:

<u>Collaborative</u>: It should be a bottom-up, crowd-sourced, horizontal tool. Produced and validated by a community, it helps redefining and regenerating the community itself. It is based on collective procedures and tools that allow the participation of all the stakeholders in its definition.

<u>Accessible</u>: devised as an online platform, it should guarantee the higher degree of accessibility for the public. It should be simple, intuitive, designed using smart and universal graphic codes. It should be designed in order to provide also offline and diverse form of access, friendly to those who do not have digital literacy or are part of linguistic minorities.

<u>Manifold</u>: The neighbourhood atlas is not a specialised tool, with a specific purpose. It is rather a visualisation of the multiplicity of factors and relations that enrich a community and define their spatiality. It must be able to take into account the complexity of elements that influence a local situation and economy, while simplifying and clarifying such a complexity. It must take in account a wide range of sources, data, languages and formats and combine them in a comprehensible and synthetic output.

<u>Dynamic</u>: The atlas depicts an evolving situation and should be easily adaptable and updatable. While current technologies provide a great deal of flexible instruments, it is especially the social practice and collaborative procedures offline that need to be designed to be sustainable and effective.

Switch On Mehringplatz

In 2015 Tesserae was involved as a partner in the Erasmus+ project EULER. The mission of this partnership coordinated by *City Mine(d)* was to support skills and competences developed in informal initiatives and bottom up projects. We decided to focus our attention of urban processes at neighbourhood scale, to reinforce and disseminate the knowledge that is produced through voluntary engagement and activism and consolidate it as a resource for local communities. The institutional aim of the project was to provide training to social workers, civil servants and engaged citizens. In the traditional education system and training for employment the focus is on the individual curriculum as a tool for competing on the job

market: but the abilities and skills of an individual are not floating in a neutral field, they depend on context and social relations. They are situated.

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Developing a situated learning process, we need to evaluate the competences formed into the specific local context and web social relations. In shifting the attention from competitive economies to collaborative, commons-based economies, we proposed to develop an atlas as an innovative tool to empower local communities. Aimed at visualising and fostering synergies, social capital and relational potentials existing in a given local environment, we named this outcome *Neighbourhood Solidarity Curriculum* to shift the attention to the collective potential expressed by a given socio-spatial milieu.

For the application of the methodology in the training program we selected Mehringplatz and the surroundings of the Südliche Friedrichstadt, an emblematic spot of today's Berlin. Situated in a very central location – once the periphery of West Berlin bordering the Wall – its unclassifiable mix of incongruent elements and landscapes makes up a quintessential Berliner place, embodying all of the contradictions that make up this city's identity. Today, this former social housing settlement conceived in the Sixties by famous modernist architect Hans Scharoun is faced by strong transformative tensions, urban regeneration programmes, new economic trends, immigration flows and latent gentrification. One of the reasons for choosing the Südliche Friedrichstadt as an application area for our project has been the great variety of social programmes, local initiatives and organizations present in the area as a result of a complex composition of public policies, economic opportunities and social demands influencing local development. Understanding this socio-economic scenario, and investigating its implications for the local economy and employment, have been the main objectives guiding our local assessment.

Mehringplatz Anknipsen (*Switch On Mehringplatz*, but also *Let's frame Mehringplatz*) aimed at understanding and fostering the neighbourhood as a common platform where social initiative and entrepreneurship can spread. It has been structured into different modules of laboratories and a set of public conversations on inclusive methodologies for the representation of territorial contexts and facilitation of community initiatives. For this purpose we assembled a toolset for participative urban practice destined to support the training of hybrid professional figures able to employ innovative methodologies of intervention at neighbourhood level. Finally, in testing the tools on the specific context of the Südliche Friedrichstadt we set a further objective in experimenting a prototype of neighbourhood atlas aimed at assessing potentialities and local resources available for social and entrepreneurial initiatives. Although the atlas was not an official outcome funded by the project, we took the

opportunity to benefit from the exercises realized during the training activities to design and, to a certain extent, to experiment the collaborative publication format.

Soon after identifying the objectives of the training programme, its structure and the area of intervention, the successive step was to create a visual identity able to define and communicate the project. A specific graphic concept was designed for the Mehringplatz laboratory both with the aim of promoting the training programme and of testing principles for effective visualisation and place branding as part of the skills necessary to design our neighbourhood atlas. The goals and activities of the laboratories were communicated through a wide set of channels and media in German and English, including posters and flyers announcing the activities in the neighbourhood. Announcements and reports about the laboratories and public events were published on project's website. Social media was used extensively, not only to advertise and repost information about the laboratories, but also as a tool to collect information, complement the field exploration and connect with similar initiatives and resources. After one year of preparation and partnership-building with local actors and institutions, we launched the on-field training program. A consistent, although inconstant, number of participants joined our laboratories and contributed during the successive year to the spatial investigation and data collection about the fast evolving territory of the Südliche Friedrichstadt.

Participative techniques

The programme focused on participative techniques such as urban reconnaissance, collaborative mapping and digital storytelling. They were organised in parallel educational modules, connected transversally by thematic public conversations that involved local initiatives of urban education, community organising and activism. The first module was focused on urban reconnaissance, engaging the participants in a series of exercises of spatial exploration of the neighbourhood. The second module, dedicated to collaborative mapping, tackled the representation the complexity of diverse elements resulting in the urban identity. Finally, the digital storytelling module introduced tools for the production of simple and effective place narratives, aimed at expressing personal points of view within a collective cognitive process. The three training modules have been conceived as successive steps into a socio-spatial analytical process going from understanding the multiplicity of aspects that qualify a given urban context, to representing its key elements, and finally expressing articulated narratives and personal points of view.

Urban Reconnaissance

The Urban Reconnaissance laboratory (URLab) employed a methodology of spatial analysis developed by the *ogino:knauss* collective and adopted by *Tesserae* as a key participative exploration methodology (exercises.oginoknauss.org). The UR method is designed to disentangle the complexity of elements that determine local identities, comparing multiple key perspectives. It employs an online interactive device collecting 64 different definitions of the word *city* based on different dis-

ciplinary approaches. Each definition is connected to a specific exercise of spatial reconnaissance focusing on the related perspective. The definitions are linked to each other in the text and on the website, allowing the reader/explorer to circumnavigate and intersect the multiplicity of connections between diverse morphological, cultural, economic, political and psychological factors influencing, determining and defining urban life, form and discourse.

In the course of the *EULER* programme, this device was the basis of all of the activities of the laboratory. It provided an elaborated taxonomy of the urban field necessary to structure the atlas, and suggested possible analytical categories and layers for the mapping exercises. The four URLabs constituted the main explorative moments to understand the neighbourhood and supplied observations and data to feed the atlas project. The first URLab was dedicated to the *City of Commons*, looking for existing or potential urban commons and outlining the variety of interpretations and uses of this concept. The second, *Platform City*, combined two exercises of urban reconnaissance, *Market City* and *CyberCity*, to enquire the conflation of physical and virtual geographies transforming urban economies and explore the augmented territories produced by digital personal devices and internet connection. The third URLab, *Spontaneous City*, aimed at understanding informal phenomena, tracing manifestations that appear contingent, unplanned or exist outside of formal rules and legitimation patterns. This lab focused in particular on mapping public space – thus shifting the attention to the different intensities of public life (positive/negative) rather than on the legal status of places as privately or publicly owned. The last URLab focused on the creation and use of city tours as a tool for participative urbanism and social mobilisation. This workshop conceived a final outcome in the form of a public walk. It drew on the previous explorative practice to reconnect different places and stories of Südliche Friedrichstadt in one narrative path.

Collaborative mapping

The second training module was dedicated to collaborative mapping. The MapLab translated the explorative activity developed with the reconnaissance module into identify, expose and represent relations among places, actors and powers. Aside from briefly introducing technical resources and competences necessary to employ collaborative GIS tools, the main objective of the laboratory has been to examine the methodological and social aspects connected with the practice of mapping. It promoted the use of collaborative cartography as a tool for public participation, to raise awareness and civic engagement, as well as support local initiatives. It focused in particular on mapping stakeholders activities on the territory, retracing local economies and social capital. The exercises developed during the labs resulted in several draft maps that were ultimately collected as possible layers of the neighbourhood atlas. An essential aspect of the laboratory was the investigation of the numerous possibilities introduced by current internet based applications to connect maps with digital content in diverse formats. This also led to a progressive integration with the contents produced during the third module on storytelling.

PLACE NARRATIVE

HOW CAN WE USE STORYTELLING TO
UNDERSTAND TRANSFORMING PLACES? WHAT
TOOLS AND TECHNIEUS CAN BE CAN BE
EMPLOYED TO ASSESS THE COMPLEX,
MULTILAYERED REALITY OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD?
HOW CAN WE CAPTURE THE GENIUS LOCI
THROUGH MEDIA?

2-7pm.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 21 | StoryLab #2
SUPERMARKT, MEHRINGPLATZ 9 - BERLIN

Storytelling

The last module of laboratories was specifically dedicated to storytelling techniques for community empowerment and participation. With the StoryLab we explored the potentiality of consumer digital equipment for collaborative content production. Starting from the increased technical capacity provided by such tools, the focus of the program has been specifically on language and composition, discussing specific formats of »place narratives« able to investigate spatial context and the social relations within urban milieus. Particular attention was put on the balanced combination of different elements, photography, cinematic image, sound, text, graphics into producing synthetic spatial representations. In the course of this training module we refined a series of formats like »Urban Memo« and »Urban Sketches« specifically dedicated to inclusive and collaborative spatial representation.[1] Urban Memo is a set of photographic cards inspired by the popular memory game that are used first to identify key places, issues and stories of the neighbourhood, and therefore to facilitate discussion and to create storyboards. Urban Sketches are simple video postcards that employ digital storytelling language to the specific goal of collecting personal impressions and place narratives. Furthermore, the StoryLab produced a series of video interviews to local actors complementing the stakeholders mapping process.

Structuring the Atlas

Through the activities of the three labs several types of content were produced to feed the neighbourhood atlas. Having in mind the guidelines drafted at the beginning of the training activity, the final sessions have been dedicated to formatting and systematizing participants' contributions. The results have been collected, edited and mostly published online using different repositories and formats. Diaries of exploration and photographic surveys became posts on the Urban Reconnaissance blog. The Mehringplatz Urban Memo was edited through a publicly accessible Trello board. Several collections of videos, including the Urban Sketches produced by the participants and the interviews to local stakeholders were uploaded on Tesserae's Vimeo channel. A GoogleMaps project was created to geolocate most of the contents and to translate the mapping exercises realised during the workshops into digital datasets. Maps, sketches, itineraries, interviews, as well as photographic and audiovisual recordings combined provide a schematic picture of the Südliche Friedrichstadt. Organised in different layers corresponding to different thematic sections, this map comes to constitute the first core of the Neighbourhood Atlas. The navigation menu was accordingly structured in four sections:

Section 1 – Chronogram
Provides a synthetic excursus on the history of the Südliche Friedrichstadt, with a particular focus on public programmes and planning instruments in the last 30 years.

Section 2 – Spatial patterns
A set of cartographic layers of the online map:
1. Administrative boundaries
2. Public intensities
3. Transformations
4. Monuments and memories
5. Stakeholders
6. Narratives

Section 3 – Stakeholders
An inventory of local private, public and non-profit organisations active in the territory.

Section 4 – Narratives
A collection in multiple formats (video interviews, digital storytelling, songs) providing personal perspectives and impressions on the neighbourhood.
These four sections represent four fundamental modalities to access and navigate the atlas:

1
The set of tools and methodologies developed by Tesserae is available on the »Practices« section of the website at www.tesserae.eu/practices.

— The *chronological* section provides a linear historical overview on the evolution of the territory. It derives from the confrontation of available documental sources with direct perceptions and oral narratives. The content of this section is linked with the layer 3 of the map (Transformations), dedicated to the ongoing transformations and projects interesting the area and the layer 4 (Memories), dedicated to material and immaterial memories inscribed in its space.

— The second section, *spatial patterns,* describes the geographical extension of the neighbourhood, and adopts the cartographic representation, composed by different layers of geo-located information. Together with the two already quoted above, we created one layer tracing the different administrative limits existing on and around the neighbourhood; one assessing public space (public intensities), that is qualified here by the intensity of its public/social uses rather than by its legal ownership status as public or private; and finally, two layers dedicated to the localisation of the contents related to the successive sections on Stakeholders and Narratives.

— The third section *stakeholders* aims at visualising the neighbourhood as a relational field, determined by social practice and economic interactions. Mapping stakeholders does not necessarily lead to identifying flags on the map of the neighbourhood, as relevant actors may not be physically present in the area or their exact location be irrelevant, (i.e. national agencies and programs, real estate investors, or sharing economy corporations) but their influence produces effects on the socio-economic reality of the neighbourhood. Here we started a tentative taxonomy based on the three main fields Public / Private / Non-profit, but among the future goals of the project one of the most crucial is that of designing appropriate visualisation tools to include interactive graphs and charts.

— Finally, the fourth section is dedicated to the narratives, that is a collection of interviews, personal point of views and impressions contributing to depict the complex urban identity through a polyphonic composition of voices.

Each one of these sections provides an entry point to navigate the socio-spatial reality of the neighbourhood and can be chosen as a privileged approach, but it is nevertheless connected, complementary and interdependent with the other ones.

Much of the digital content required for the realisation of the atlas was produced during 2016 and 2017, and archived online in existing general purpose platforms, but its fruition as a fully accessible and organic atlas is still in progress.[2] As already specified, the implementation of the neighbourhood atlas was not among the institutional objectives of *EULER* nor funded by the programme. Its concept provided guidelines to organise territorial local knowledge, but the investment in the actual implementation of the platform was limited. The operational development of a specific technological infrastructure and a dedicated visual interface connecting different languages and formats into one integrated user experience is planned to be next step of CoMMa. We have applied for new funding opportunities to further develop the prototype. A new Erasmus plus project named COMENSI (Community Engagement for Social Inclusion) is starting in October 2018 and will provide a

new framework to experiment the format. This partnership involving five EU organisations in Palermo, London, Lisbon, Ljubljana and Berlin is dedicated to methodologies of engaging citizens at risk of exclusion in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and will experiment the activation of local hubs both as physical spaces and virtual neighbourhood platforms. Tesserae will coordinate the part dedicated to the neighbourhood platform, drawing on the experience done so far with the Mehringplatz Atlas. This project once again is dedicated mainly to training and competence building, but will support a new step into the implementation of the digital platform.

Some final considerations

The experience done so far has been very productive in outlining the potential of the online atlas format and identifying relevant issues to be considered in its implementation. The four characteristics initially identified as »collaborative, accessible, manifold, dynamic« confirm themselves as essential design principles. Some aspects that have emerged in their concrete application:

1) An issue that needs to be considered in the design of the platform is how to include collaborative online tools that could facilitate the collective redaction of the atlas. Nevertheless, the importance of collaboration must not be confused with the ability of everyone to publish and edit online content. It is not the everyday practice that must conform to digital protocols, rather the opposite. The digital platform must be understood as a tool, as a means and not an end in itself. Although it is essential to design an user experience (UX) that is inclusive and friendly also for less digitally–skilled people, the objective is not to create an online community focused on a new, specialised social media; the point is rather to provide a useful digital extension to territorially rooted communities able to improve their capacity to interact locally. It is therefore essential to foster the social practice of mapping communities also in physical spaces and through social events, and to use the atlas as a way to trigger face-to-face interactions. The production of an atlas must primarily be a mutual process or recognition and self-empowerment between a community and a territory.[3]

2) The accessibility of the atlas is an important aspect of its design: it is not simply a matter of making information openly available, but especially the designing of a simple and clear user interface, organised according to intuitive navigation logics

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2
A detailed account of the activities and outcomes of the EULER - Switch On Mehringplatz project is accessible online at www. tesserae.eu/publication/ switch-on-mehringplatz.

3
The incoming COMENSI project, for instance, will experiment the use of the digital platform in connection with the management of neighbourhood hubs, combining social practices happening in incubators located physically in the neighbourhood with online tools.

and with inclusive visual languages. Its content should also be usable for less skilled people, linguistic minorities, impaired people, children, etc. It should be compatible with most popular devices and operative systems, allowing interoperability with other platforms and social media, and the increasingly crucial compatibility with mobile devices and their operative systems. It is therefore very important to refer to technological ecosystems and developer communities that could maintain updated its software and preserve its existence as a public archive in the long term.

3) The multiplicity of perspectives, languages and formats composing the atlas is its defining feature, but its restitution in an overall simple and friendly user experience is a challenging design task. Remarkably, the explosion of collaborative mapping platforms like Googlemaps and Open Street Maps and the pervasive use of applications based on their cartographic visualisations has produced the predominance of a popularised bird's eye experience of territorial representations.[4] The practice of collaborative mapping tends to be simplistically reduced to pinning flags on standard geographical map tiles, often with the effect of obscuring their effective legibility and interpretability in a fog of punctiform datasets. The idea of atlas we have committed also includes such standard forms of representation, but considers this modality as only one of the possible ways to organise and navigate content. There is an entire multiverse of information that cannot be simply reduced to quantitative or locative data but are nonetheless essential to understand local identity, quality and value. It is important to acknowledge how also indeterminacies, absences, omissions, latencies, impressions, fleeting temporalities and states of exceptions affect spatial identities and create place effects (Bourdieu 1993). It is therefore necessary to design innovative solutions to represent such parallel dimensions by connecting diverse content formats, blending cartographic representations with text, images, sounds, graphs and other available audio-visual grammars in an immersive and dense experience able to reverberate the substantial complexity of the object of representation.

4) The experiences done so far demonstrate that it is often not difficult to start mapping projects able to mobilise local communities in producing reflexive knowledge about their territories, but their outcomes are often limited in time and purpose, and tend to remain single snapshots in given historical moments. Their survival online is often very fragile, and tends to become soon inaccessible if not disappearing as a consequence of technological obsolescence, lack of maintenance, hacking attacks etc. What is challenging instead is transforming such operations into sustainable processes able to accompany a local identity in its evolution and proactive capacity in a longer perspective. Here technology and know-how can help to increase capacity, but essential is the establishment of a spread culture of participation and responsibility able to transmit competence and engagement among people and generations. It is crucial to establish continuity between local policy processes and a dynamic archival memory of communities and movements.

This effort requires an investment of public or common resources able to sustain local culture and territorial knowledge.

On the other hand, promoting and enforcing the extensive use of digital devices and media platforms for social purposes opens-up to a whole set of concerns regarding issues of privacy, data ownership, value extraction as well as energy consumption. Social and environmental sustainability of open source social media tend to be obliterated in their generally positivistic caption. Disguised behind the progressive labels of smart, sharing, cooperative technologies, the voluntary participation to online practice in fact results in unrecognised labour, data mining and value extraction that feed the increasingly opaque and aggressive transnational corporate infrastructure. Taking part in the development of digital infrastructure for bottom-up, communitarian and humanitarian purposes calls for developing a critical consciousness and cautious political ecology of the digital production, questioning the status quo of knowledge and communication and opening up the imagination to possible new cooperative models.

4
I develop this reflection in the paper *Telescoping the City. Technological Urbiquity, or Perceiving Ourselves from the Above* presented at the Above. Degrees of Elevation symposium in 2016 at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Edinburgh, and in course of publication in a special issue of *Space and Culture*.

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