

Theme: Citizens and Civil Society Actors in the City Commons

The creation of city-centre conversational spaces to facilitate social cohesion and combat mental health problems.

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The global increase in city dwellers is consistently matched with rising mental health issues¹. Although individuals live in closer physical spaces, there is a rising trend of them living alone and engaging in little to no inter-personal contact². Isolation is becoming a primary source of suffering by engendering mental health problems such as depression³. Although there is no universal panacea, this article will present one possible remediation through the creation of “conversational spaces”. These are spaces which allow people to convene outside of consumer or product/object narratives⁴. This article will present an intervention aimed at facilitating conversation which occurred on the Rokin Street, a central artery of Amsterdam.

Premise 1: Human beings have an innate desire to communicate and share life experiences.

Premise 2: City-centres are ideal as they are areas of flow with a high diversity of people.

Premise 3: Although humans yearn for interaction with those around them, they often mutually withhold from doing so through fear of being rejected or misunderstood.

Conclusion: Specific spaces must be created which provide individuals the necessary pretext to engage in meaningful discussion with each other.

The notion of conversing with people in public spaces originates from ancient Greece and specifically the Athenian philosopher Socrates. His methodology of approaching conversation was so powerful it became a school-of-thought called *Maieutica*. The term *Maieutica* is derived from the ancient Greek word *maieutiké*, meaning the *art of being a*

¹ Caracci, ‘Urban Mental Health.’

² Bauman, *Liquid Love*.

³ Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton, ‘Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review.’ - PubMed.’

⁴ Nelson et al. ‘Empowerment and Mental Health in Community.’

midwife.⁵ Successful dialogue allows participants to “birth” their thoughts, as opposed to imposing beliefs on others through rhetoric and persuasion.

Why might we have an interest in rediscovering the ancient practice of street conversation? Many people feel they are floating through their city life devoid of any anchorage. Unhinged from others and society they experience a degeneration of their sense of self. Lack of contact with others deteriorates self-esteem and makes it difficult to imagine returning to or discovering a narrative of connectedness with the city and its inhabitants. In their article *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, Baumeister and Leary explain that forming social relations is an innate yearning which people will seek to fulfil even in harsh circumstances⁶. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs places interpersonal human relations in the middle of the list, as a central feature of human wellbeing⁷.

Human contact increases happiness levels, and, according to the neuroscientist John Cacioppo, it can be a major contributor to life expectancy. In his book *Loneliness*, he explains that those suffering from loneliness are 14% more likely to be sent to an early grave⁸. Holt-Lunstad et al. argue that that isolation could lead to an excess mortality similar to the effects of smoking, obesity and alcohol⁹. The study collected data from 300,000 people over 7.5 years and concluded that “individuals with adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor or insufficient social relationships”. These findings demonstrate that in our globalised world, where instantaneous communication through multiple mediums is commonplace, loneliness is asserting itself as a primary source of suffering.

What, if any, are the relations between city living, loneliness and mental health? According to Mazda Adli, psychologist and director of the Mood Disorders research group, the combination of social isolation and urban density can, in certain individuals, instigate “city-stress mental illnesses”¹⁰. Although city living in itself does not detriment mental health, if a propensity for mental illness exists, urban density will accentuate this.

In her RSA publication *Turning Strangers into Neighbours*, Nicola Bacon explains the importance of developing community resilience and how this can be done by improving local social networks¹¹. The number and quality of human connections we have is crucial to our health: “There is evidence of a correlation between strong social networks and wellbeing: those who know more people in their local neighbourhood tend to be happier than those who do not”. She argues it is relatively inexpensive to organise activities which will improve resilience and connections regardless of income and social class. Creating weak ties between individuals of a locality will develop resilience. This may manifest itself through a greater

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*.

⁶ Baumeister and Leary, ‘The Need to Belong.’

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ ‘Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection.’

⁹ Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton, ‘Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review.’ - PubMed.’

¹⁰ TEDx Talks, *Stress in the City*.

¹¹ ‘Turning Strangers into Neighbours - RSA.’

sense of belonging leading to a reduction in crime and more ‘collective efficacy’ - a readiness of citizens to get involved if they see a problem in their locality.

This paper proposes is that one practical way to inspire resilience and wellbeing is through conversation. Not only does this remedy loneliness but actively contributes to a deeper sense of trust and connectedness, thus increasing our psychological wellbeing. In his essay *Metropolis and Mental life*, George Simmel perceives city dwelling as inherently regressive: “life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress peculiar personal interests and incomparabilities”¹². In contrast, Richard Sennett describes his understanding of the city as a place of encounter and flourishing: “A city isn’t just a place to live, to shop, to go out, and have kids play. It’s a place that implicates how one derives one’s ethics, how one develops a sense of justice, how one learns to talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself, which is how a human being becomes human”¹³. This is the emancipatory vision we wish to encourage and participate in creating.

Scientific research has been conducted on the impact of talk on people’s lives. Psychologists from Washington University monitored a group of 97 undergraduates to measure the impact of talking on their wellbeing¹⁴. The findings showed that the happiest people were those having deep meaningful conversations, with lower happiness levels amongst those engaging only in small talk. They conclude with a note on Socrates’ dictum (‘the unexamined life is not worth living’) stating that “our findings suggest that people find their lives more worth living when examined--at least when examined together.”

How can inner-city conversation spaces be created in practice? In July 2015, we introduced a “protected space” on the consumerist scenography of the Rokin Street, running through central Amsterdam, in which conversation was encouraged. A space was defined in the intersection between the Rokin and one of its alleyways through to a 2 by 4 meter rectangle made with white duct-tape and chalk. This was visually appealing and would thus incite passers-by to stop and look. Inside this space were chairs and a sentence: “Have A Seat!” We installed a blackboard with the words: “*Conversation of the day: Why should we have conversations with strangers?*”

What we provided was an opportunity, for anyone who wanted, to sit and have a conversation. Each intervention lasted two hours during a quiet time of the day. Almost 60% of the passers-by interrupted their linear stride to look up at the conversation space and read the words on the blackboard. Around 5% of the people stopped and wanted to engage in a conversation. Over two hours 20 people stood within the marked space and were involved in discussions. They congratulated this action which had provided relief from the busy

¹² Simmel, ‘Metropolis and Metal Life.’

¹³ Sennett, ‘The Civitas of Seeing.’, 4

¹⁴ Mehl et al., ‘Eavesdropping on Happiness.’

surroundings and allowed them to engage intellectually and heart-fully with their fellow city-dwellers.

Little to no small talk occurred and the people engaging in the project openly discussed ideas and thoughts of concern to them. This ranged from reflections on forgiveness to the role of education policy in assisting young people to flourish. Once a platform for discussion had been established participants brought forward thoughts which they wished to share and receive criticism on. This openness of heart and mind was made possible due to the boldness of the demarcated space which made explicit the intention of the project.

Does the act of dedicating urban areas to conversation risk becoming a synthetic, regularised experience devoid of the uncertainty and excitement many commentators lament as the direction in which cities are changing? On the contrary, each new encounter may be accompanied by the exhilaration of the unknown, as people of different localities and ages encounter each other to discuss topics of interest. Thus, it may even contribute to Baudelaire's vision of the city as a place allowing the soul to "give itself utterly, with all its poetry and charity, to the unexpected emergent, to the passing unknown"¹⁵.

There is great potential for applying this form of intervention across cities in both standardised and spontaneous forms. Conversation spaces could be equipped with discussion topic generators, flashing up questions on a screen offering people nearby the possibility to exchange on them or not. Conversation hubs could be set up in spaces of "dead time", such as train stations, where people often wait in a bored or frustrated fashion: "A long time before your train? Don't wait in vain! Step into the conversation space." Through creatively activating these areas, otherwise known for their bland homogeneity, an exciting new dynamism would be injected into urban life. For Theodore Zeldin, having conversations with different people and civilisations is

"... a humbling experience which makes one conscious of the enormous difficulty of living in peace, but which also gives one great hope every time one succeeds in having a conversation which establishes a sense of common humanity, a mutual respect. After such conversations one can never be the same person again"¹⁶.

We would love to know what you think.

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¹⁵ Quoted in Lees, 'The Emancipatory City?', 13

¹⁶ Zeldin, *Conversation.*, 94

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