Cities of Access

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A few years from now we might look back onto the age of homeownership as a glitch in the long history of human co-habitation. In fact the very idea of ownership is being challenged, as ownership gives way to access: Temporary access to all kinds of resources and services. We no longer care about owning CDs, as long as we can access and listen to the music, we no longer care much about owning a car, as long as we can hop into one and drive off. While these examples are deceptively trivial, they point at a greater transformation promising to fundamentally redefine the way we live in cities.

One of cities main pull has always been about providing access: access to goods, labor, people and ideas. The economy of scale, the density and diversity of cities make access and sharing more effective.

But today in a historic convergence of events, three main forces are changing the nature of access, and prompting the sharing of resources at a scale and efficiency never seen before: First, capitalism is shedding its material origins and increasingly focusing on the commodification of social relations, experiences and culture. The collective hangover from neoliberal capitalism we find ourselves in isn't the cause but rather one of the main symptoms of this malaise. Second, pressing environmental issues and dwindling natural resources underline how—beyond the dichotomy of private and public, Market and State—the key question today becomes how individual interests can be articulated in such a way as to constitute common interests. Finally mobile communication technology enable individuals to self-organize, form trans-local networks that possess the swarming intelligence, real-time flexibility and clout to challenge multi-national corporations and governments alike. Thus online Peer-to-Peer platforms have given rise to radically new forms of production and collaboration, based on reciprocity and mutual gain. Think Linux, Couchsurfing and Crowdfunding or Tahir Square and Zucotti park.

Beyond the virtual realm, the so-called Sharing Economy is starting to fundamentally redefine the social convention that is ownership and the way we organize cities. Moreover it contributes in overcoming the dichotomy between mere top-down and bottom-up interventions and opens the discussing for negotiating between two seemingly incompatible planning paradigms.

To date car sharing is the best known case in point, as car sharing has become the fastest growing sector in mobility—a market in which large corporations are actually going head to head with grassroots P2P-initiatives. According to the Economist, for every new car sharing vehicle that's introduced, 15 privately owned cars are taken off the streets. According to another study, the US has built an incredible 8 parking lots for every car in the country, equaling 110m2 of surface area per car. This is 12 Xs more than what the World Health Organization recommends as the minimum green space per capita for healthy urban environments, and still twice as much space as the greenest cities in the world.

So, without significant sacrifice in lifestyle–we might liberate a huge amount of space in our cities by simply intensifying the use of an existing resource: the average private car, which typically stands parked 23 out of every 24 hours, everyday, unexploited.

As architects, this realization should make us start looking for latent urban resources all around.
In the ubiquitous talk on sustainable cities, there seems to be a consensus that denser cities are the answer, but urban density is essentially being addressed as a mere extensive problem: how to maximize Floor Area Ratios. In the City of Access we should start thinking of density in spatio-temporal terms: the intensity of use in proportion to the available space and infrastructural investment.