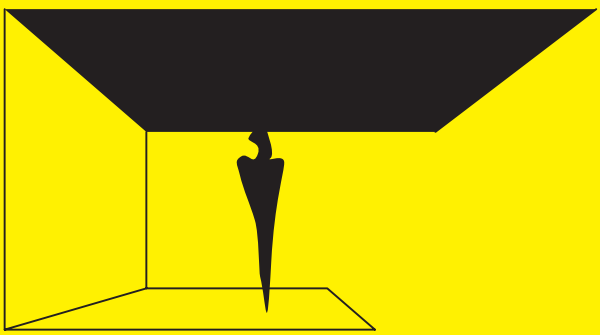
do it

Space Matters

A multidimensional modelling of governance



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Introduction

Space Matters (SM) is a tool allowing the designing of the governance system of a commons-oriented initiative when this is strictly related to the spatial characteristics of a shared asset, built or non-built. Any time the organisation of the commoning practices is affected by the morphology of a given site or building, this tool will allow taking that into account in defining functions, ownership systems, forms of accessibility, financial sustainability and uses. SM can be used both by a single collective and by multi-partner initiatives. In the second case, it will allow discussing not only uses and accessibility but also ownership configurations and the sustainability of the financial capacities of the partnership.

SM make use of tools typically used by architects and designers, such as architectural drawings and models. However, the concept at the core of SM is that these should not be seen as devices requiring exclusive technical expertise, but rather they should be increasingly appropriated by anyone needing to improve their awareness of space and spatial implications on governance systems. For this reason, the tool is presented and made accessible as a “do it” instruction booklet. Inspired by the “do it” project of the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and by the instruction works of many artists, from Yoko Ono to Sol LeWitt, SM provides the step-by-step instructions for setting the process of designing governance systems while relating to a given space: from the realisation of an architectural model or the printing of the required drawings to the facilitation of the process.

Space Matters workshop in the framework of the Summer School Building Beyond, Brussels, 9-11 September 2021.

Within this perspective, the involvement of an architect or designer is nevertheless suggested as one of the possible operations. The purpose would be to provide technical expertise throughout the process, rather than of guiding or delivering solutions. Therefore, their role is reframed as part of a larger facilitating and negotiating process, allowing different forms of knowledge to converge and equally contribute to the modelling of governance systems.

How to use this booklet

The booklet provides the instructions to set up the Space Matters process and some additional hints and suggestions providing further support and elements to clarify the instructions. They could be therefore ignored or adapted depending on the needs of the participants and on the situation.

Instructions

01. Realise an architectural model or print the drawings representing the space you usually occupy or use for your activities and you wish to govern as a collective or as part of a group of collectives and organisations. Have a look at the section of Additional suggestions for more specific indications. If needed, ask the help of an architect or designer.

02. Find an appropriate space to set up your SM session: a sufficiently large room with one or more tables and chairs. Provide paper for personal notes and large sheets for brainstorming, sticky notes, tape, pens and markers, etc. Avatars to represent partners or activities may also be helpful.

03. If not all the involved actors and partners can be present, participants may play the roles of the missing actors. Please look at the Additional suggestions section for more specific indications on fruitfully engaging them in the process.

04. Identify which spaces you would like to share with other actors and/or with your neighbours.

05. For each common and shared space, discuss who will own them, which activities you are going to organise and their rhythm during the day or week, and how you will financially sustain them.

06. If you cannot find a suitable configuration, consider changing one of the elements: ownership, the choice of the space or its characteristics, the program of activities, and repeat 05. The purpose is to identify a configuration of uses, ownership, governance and financial capacity that is sustainable for all involved partners and the project as a whole.

07. Rearrange the initial spatial distribution according to the elements that emerged through the iterations of 05, until you can identify a combination of private, shared and common spaces that is sustainable for all the involved partners.

Additional suggestions and hints

How to realise an architectural model

If the space you occupy and use is on a single floor, drawings will be enough to represent such a space and to facilitate the conversation around the related forms of governance. On the other hand, if your activities involve several floors or a whole building, realising an architectural model will allow you to better understand the spatial conditions you operate within. The most important thing for a successful SM session is to build a model -or print the drawings- at a scale that is big enough to allow participants to sit around and discuss, to explore, to play with it, to reach a good understanding of the characteristics of the space under discussion.

If you have never made an architectural model, the following instructions will allow you to build one very easily.

01. Print the architectural drawings at the desired scale: if you wish your model to be 150 cm long, make sure your drawings reach that length once printed. Each drawing will have to represent a different floor of your building. Make sure they are all printed at the same scale, or in other words, they have coherent dimensions.

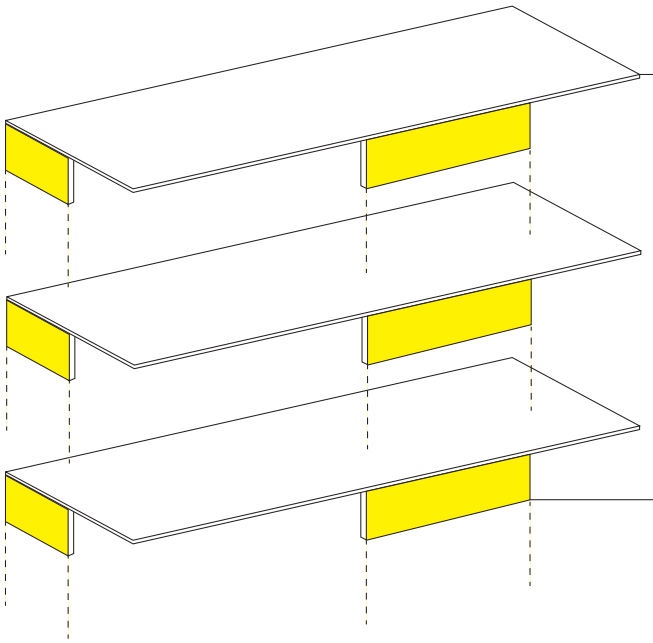
02. Cut out the drawings following the external perimeter of each floor.

03. Paste each drawing on a solid support, like paperboard or any other, and cut it out following the shape of each floor.

04. At this point, you simply have to create vertical supports mimicking the walls of the building you are representing, thus making possible the overlapping of the different levels or floors.

Realisation of an architectural model

Glue the building's plans on rigid supports, floor by floor. This will allow participants to identify the different spaces.



Use vertical elements to overlap the floors without realising all the walls according to the architectural plans. While simplifying the realisation, this will allow understanding the tridimensional aspects of space and the specific configuration of each floor without disassembling the model.

Lexicon

SM aims to help commoning initiatives design a sustainable governance system when space plays a crucial role in the organisation of the activities and the relationship with other actors, partners, the administration, local inhabitants, or neighbours. This tool allows imagining and simulating the most appropriate governance solutions by considering the spatial characteristics of the site or building that is the object or the environment of your commoning practices. It will be essential to distinguish between private, public, shared and common spaces during such a process. Here are some suggested definitions, but you can change and adapt them based on your needs. What matters is that the terminology is agreed upon at the beginning of your session of SM.

Private spaces are spaces owned, used and managed by a single organisation or juridical subject. Public spaces are spaces owned by an administration and/or allowing public use, which means having no restrictions on their accessibility.

Shared spaces are spaces collectively used by several private partners. Ownership and governance can also be shared, or they can be of a single partner.

Common spaces: are spaces owned and managed by one or more organisations and selectively made accessible to an external public based on specific, collectively defined rules.

You could also discuss and introduce: semi-private spaces, semi-public spaces, privately owned public spaces

Criteria to identify and design common and shared spaces

Common and shared spaces are those mostly questioning the governance system of a given organisation. These are the spaces where multiple needs interweave and their management requires the combination of diverse capacities. A few questions may help to determine whether a given space is appropriate:

- Who decides about the accessibility? Who are the owners? Who is going to pay for this space?
- Is the space suitable for the activities(s) you imagine organising? Is it too big or too small? Would you need any adjustments?
- Which kind of accessibility do you need for this space? Who is going to access this space? Do you need to redesign the space to make it more or less accessible?
- What does it mean to take care of the accessibility of the space? And what about the maintenance of this space?
- Are you taking into account safety issues, not only for your space but also for the neighbourhood?
- Could your activities disturb or be dangerous for your neighbours?

How to effectively involve the participants

You may organise Space Matters with and for the actual partners of your initiative. But you may also need to involve external participants, for example, if not all the concerned partners could be present during your SM session. In similar cases, Space Matters can still be beneficial: including external points of view may provide valuable and unexpected hints. To make participants contributions more meaningful and dynamic, you may consider the following suggestions:

- Adopt role-playing techniques: participants could imagine being one of the project partners: “what if I was….”
- Ask participants to/share their own experience, past or present.

- Suggest examples and references or ask participants to bring them into the discussion.
- Suggest (impossible) scenarios to overcome possible blockages, such as: imagine you receive a very generous donation, or that the municipality decides to support you for organising gymnastic activities for the neighbourhood permanently, etc

Space-related governance aspects to address during the session

During your SM session, make sure you approach any decision concerning the organisation of space while taking into account and discussing at the very least the following aspects.

Funding and financial capacity

- Which activities may provide the funding required for paying the rent and expenses of your space?
- Who decides about money? Why? And how?
- What would or should be the role of public administration?
- How to scale up/out your commoning practices?
- What would be your ideal situation?

Sharing tasks and accountability

- How do you distribute tasks? Do you have all the required expertise and capacity?
- Who would decide about the different activities? How?
- Would you go for an external organisation to manage the space?
- What are the responsibilities related to the management of your space and performing your activities?
- How could you make your space friendly, inclusive, thus facilitating cooperation?
- Which kind of relationship would you like to establish/maintain with your neighbourhood? What would be the role of your neighbours?
- Which systems of accountability are you going to establish?

A cooperative for helping homeless people (HP), an artist collective (AC), an initiative for food recuperation and work insertion (FRW) and a Community Land Trust (CLT) share the same building. While each partner is the owner of some specific spaces, other spaces will be owned by the cooperative they constituted for the purpose. To set up their cohabitation, they need to agree on managing a large common hall. A facilitator and architect (F) realised the model of the building, and organised a meeting to discuss the use and maintenance of such a common space

F: the common hall has a surface of around 200 sqm. As we previously discussed, we may have two meeting rooms of different sizes, a space to rent to a local organisation or for activities with the neighbours, shared toilets and a common hall. We could perhaps start by discussing how you will manage the activities for the neighbourhood.

FRW: I think we would like to have the chance to use that space once per week, for distributing our food to the neighbourhood and anybody else.

AC: well, in that case, we could not rent it to some other organisation.

HP: why not? If the day for food distribution is Saturday, this will not disturb the organisation's activities. We need to rent that space, it's too big to pay for it.

CLT: I agree, but what about the other partners? I think each of us would like to have the chance to use this space for a specific activity, given its position: this is the only space truly visible and accessible for the neighbours. In our case, we would like to propose actions to support women in their quest for a home. Sundays, unfortunately, cannot be an option since many women have family obligations.

F: well, it's true that this space is very visible. At the same time, the room on the back is still available, and it is accessible through the internal corridor from the common hall.

HP: You are suggesting that that space may also be accessible for external users.

F: well, this depends on you, if you are all interested. In any case, the cooperative will be the owner, as you told me. The maintenance of that space will cost, and we did not discuss renting it, so I suppose you all agree in paying for it?

example of interaction

CLT: indeed, we did not consider renting that space because it is not directly accessible from the street, and we concluded it would have been challenging to manage the access. But perhaps we should revise this based on the kind of activities we will need to organise in general, in the building. It looks like we want to offer a lot to our neighbourhood. I think this is nice, but it takes some good organisation and an overall view of our capacities, financial and on the level of in-kind contribution, so to speak. What can each partner offer to help maintaining our common spaces? This is also the spirit of the cooperative.

The discussion may continue by making a list of all desired activities and the needed number of square meters. On the other hand, determining the cost of the common spaces and related expenses may help to understand if the cooperative would have the capacity to pay for them or rent them instead. Several iterations will finally allow participants to reach a balanced configuration of activities, costs, financial effort, and accessibility requirements.