

The Return of the Repair Shop: Between Consumerism and Social Reproduction

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*Today on the Maintainers blog, we're excited to have a post from Valeria Graziano and Kim Trogal on a research project they've recently begun on repair shops. **Valeria Graziano** is a Research Fellow at the Art and Design Research Centre, Middlesex University, UK and **Kim Trogal** is a Lecturer in architecture at the Canterbury School of Architecture, University of the Creative Arts, UK. They have jointly authored the article [‘The Politics of Collective Repair’](#), in Cultural Studies (2017) and are currently editing a special issue of Ephemera called [Repair Matters](#).*

We are currently involved in a research project focusing on the emerging phenomenon of new kinds of repair ‘shops’ in various countries across Europe, aiming to compare the transversal practices and political impacts of their different organisational setups. ‘Repair Shops’ are projects and social enterprises that trade repaired and restored goods from furniture, white goods, to textiles and electronics. A current burgeoning trend across Europe, they include initiatives like the Remakery in Edinburgh, La ReciCreativa just being launched in Granada (ES); Cittadella dell’Altra Economia hosted in the spaces of the RiMaflow factory (Trezzano sul Naviglio, IT); Ri-generation in Turin (IT) focused on white goods; The Loop repair stores in London, specializing in fixing furniture; and the first mall dedicated to recycled and repaired goods in Sweden, called ReTuna Återbruksgalleria, among others. Significantly, they are undertaken not purely as businesses, but rather as initiatives that aim to confront the environmental impacts of consumer waste, support ethical and affordable consumerism, alongside aiming to provide new trades and opportunities for employment. Therefore, these are hybrid entities that appear somewhat halfway between charity shops or second hand stores selling repaired goods, and community workshops where different people and organisations come together to learn and share various skills or to collectively repair a variety of household objects. These shops are also different from other recent initiatives that focus on community repair, such as repair cafes and restarter parties. Repair shops exist not in a pop-up format, as a fair or as a regular meeting, but rather as more permanent features of the urban high street. Their permanent spatial dimension allows them to impact their locales at a different level and at a different temporal scale, which we want to explore.

Moreover, Repair Shops are also contributing to a new ‘visibility’ of repair practices in the urban landscape, a characteristic which is in itself to be analysed as a layered and complex phenomenon, as it can both contribute to, or offer some kind of protection from, the widespread gentrification of city centres (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2007; Brown-Saracino 2013). This visibility or performativity does not come without its own ambivalences however, and we are looking into the ‘diverse economies’ (Gibson-Graham 2008) such spaces implicate, and the level of engagement of different kinds of participants (which vary in terms of their age, race, class, levels of education, income, and lifestyle, to mention a few factors). Secondly, we are interested in exploring the kinds of ‘ecologies of practice’ (Stengers 2013) these spaces are contributing to, in relation to different economies. The hypothesis we are currently working towards is a co-emergence of two potentially antagonistic circuits of repair (in the expanded sense), which we temporarily label ‘repair as solidarity’ and ‘repair as poor economy’. By this we mean the differentiation between repair practices that are organised in such ways as to strengthen a different politics of social reproduction and those who remain reactive, re-entrenching existing inequalities through the way they involve participants. As such, we are interested in the ways that repair practices might ‘fix’ (or not) the shop and contribute to the rethinking of such spaces as a contemporary proposition, which might be working against the pervasiveness of consumption in urban landscapes. Considered from this perspective, the shop can be unpacked as a significant kind of social space and public space of encounter.

Historically, some commercial activities and shops have been read by urban geographers and sociologists alike as vital spaces of encounters for neighbors and residents living in an urban locale.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg for instance, described “beer gardens, main streets, pubs, cafés, coffeehouses and post offices” as “third places” (Oldenburg 1989), that is, as privately owned spaces which come to fulfil a public function, as site of sociality outside the home and the workplace. His claim was that by functioning as the meeting grounds for local communities, they contribute to the functioning of a healthy democracy and increase social equality by: offering opportunities of relating with diverse people; providing the opportunity for local political involvement to grow at a grassroots level; and offering access to local networks of mutual aid and psychological care (Oldenburg 1989), which all emphasise the positive potential of such establishments. While we believe it would be equally important to explore the more controversial ways in which such “third spaces” can connote specific registers of economic and social exclusion, we are interested in seeking a traction of Oldenburg’s theories in relation to repair shops, asking to what extent do these Repair Shops constitute a ‘third space’? In examining repair shops, we are specifically interested to find which organisational elements actually contribute to support, or prevent, the outcomes of local initiatives that aim to create circuits of sustainable economies, both in social and in ecological terms.

To what extent might the use of shops for non-commercial uses constitute a useful element in enabling a shift away from consumption and throw-away societies? The use of shop space for other, non-commercial uses and goals, are not necessarily divorced from their more openly commercial drives. The uses of repair shops for workshops and social events can also be juxtaposed with the ongoing turn in contemporary corporate retail spaces, and especially flagship stores, towards providing ‘experience economy’ environments. These offer customers memorable ‘experiences’ (such as ludic or instructive activities; interactive displays; scripted exchanges with personnel, etc.) geared toward constructing affective ties with the brand. This comparison appears particularly timely to bring to the fore as the new wave of community repair shops offering experiences of making, learning and social encounters, are appearing at a time when the retail sector is being discussed as in deep crisis. This crisis is brought on by the exponential growth of online shopping on the one hand, and by the automation of customer care in the store themselves (e.g. automated cashiers) on the other. Both these processes are reducing the numbers of workers in retail and therefore the claims of the repair stores to provide opportunities of employment must be explored against such broader scenario.

What makes repair shops an interesting case in these contexts is that their aims and outputs are geared towards *the ultimate reduction of consumption and waste*, so while they seem to partially align with urban trends of the ‘experience economy’ at the same time they might offer some concrete tools for disrupting it. In the context of the retail crisis, they also offer an interesting perspective on employment and consumption, which can be seen as two aspects of the same cycle the success of each contingent on the other. Repair Shops here might also offer an interesting trajectory for new kinds of way for making a living, that are tied to more complex notions of livelihood (Gibson-Graham 2006) beyond mere employment.

This sets up a field of tensions that we wish to explore: on the one hand, the various initiatives and stores that we are focusing on have all invested a considerable amount of time in communicating their social goals and values to their constituencies and funders; on the other hand, there is still a need to explore the actual concrete impact of the principles as these projects progress and become more established over time.

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