

## Urban Caravanserais, Translational Practices and Transcultural Commons in the Age of Global Mobility

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### Abstract

We are living in times of massive migratory flows, increasing ethnic tensions, and cultural/religious radicalisations. One of the possible solutions to address partially the negative aspects of economic globalisation and the disruptive effects of mass-migrations (including ghettoisation, diminished home affordability, urban anomie) on both diasporic communities and receiving societies is to envisage new housing complexes meant as poly-functional hubs of mutual hospitality. This article puts forward the suggestion to rediscover — in its rather idealised form — the socio-cultural concept, symbolic role, and translational practices of the caravanserai, the place which, in late antiquity, lodged nomads and allowed people on the move to meet and interact with members of sedentary communities. Contemporary architects and designers have already started re-envisioning the role of the caravanserai as a transcultural ‘third space’ that courageously cuts across ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious borders. The 21st century development of the urban caravanserai may also be understood as a model for highly inclusive low-rise, high density urban housing complexes. This model — the transcultural Commons — contemplates a mix of residential units, commercial, and trades activities, craftsman workshops, arts studios, educational enterprises, and public spaces for active fruition. By blurring the boundaries between residential, commercial, social, and creative spaces, it reinstates the productive use of property and the residents’ engagement with the Commons.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Neo-nomadism, global nomads, caravanserai, global mobility, sedentarism, diasporic communities, cultural identity, static quality, dynamic quality, housing, low-rise, high density, transcultural Commons, third space, neoliberal capitalism, cultural translation, translational practices.



The present article starts with a brief overview of key aspects related to neo-nomadism, migrancy, the negative impact of global mobility, and the power of identity. It then

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introduces the notion of transculturality (Epstein 2004, 2009; Welsch 1999, 2009) and links it to the figure of the ‘transcultural nomad’. Further, it illustrates the significance of ‘transcultural third spaces’ (Dagnino 2015) and the balancing dynamics of ‘static quality’ and ‘dynamic quality’ (Pirsig 1991) in correlation with the role of the caravanserais in late antiquity. After describing the latest urban developments and property practices according to a neo-liberal agenda (in that respect, cities such as London, New York, and Vancouver are typical), it outlines the possibly redeeming role of modern caravanserais and transcultural Commons.

### 1. The Janus face of global mobility

When, twenty years ago, I wrote a book titled *I nuovi nomadi* (‘New Nomads’ 1996), a whole plethora of new communication technologies was ushering us into the digital age. Among other things, the information revolution fostered opportunities for global-local interactions, itinerant lifestyles, and de-territorialised work patterns. Within this context of increasing global mobility, I envisaged the emergence of a new social figure — the neo-nomad — and of a new existential approach — ‘neo-nomadism’. I described neo-nomads (or global nomads) as individuals:

capable of easily swimming in the waters of ethnic, social and linguistic differences [...] great experts in sudden metamorphoses [...] who know how to adapt to a world where it will no longer be possible to track down a centre, a direction, a perpetually steady point of reference (Dagnino 1996: 13–14).<sup>2</sup>

I thought of them as pioneers of a new kind of existential and professional mobility — away from linear, consolidated career paths, stubborn material accumulation, unsustainable development, and static, enclosed identities.

In hindsight, this characterisation seems to have captured the symbolic essence of our liquid, de-massifying, and post-industrial times (Bauman 2007, 2011). Twenty years later, though, I am here to acknowledge the somewhat limited scope of that early vision of the neo-nomadic phenomenon. In that slim book, while analysing the socio-cultural effects of a new array of digital technologies, I mainly and inevitably focused on the lifestyle and the ensuing worldview of a specific kind of border-crosser professionals, the so-called ‘knowledge workers’ (Drucker 1999). This meant, however, overlooking some crucial and critical challenges posed by global mobility in its broadest meaning and development. At that time, in fact, I only scantily dealt with what we may call ‘the collateral damages of global mobility’ and the stark differences between voluntary nomadism and nomadism by constraint — the one practised perforce by (economic) refugees, exiles, and migrant labourers. In the final chapter of the book, which I entitled ‘The Faustian Pact’, I mentioned ‘the disruptions induced by intercultural exchanges

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<sup>2</sup> My translation.

and/or by dislocation’; I even listed ‘the sense of de-rootedness and estrangement, the loss of identity, and the isolation of the outsider (whether he or she is a migrant, a nomad, an expatriate, an exile, or a refugee)’. Yet my attention was set upon specific individual subjects and their ‘personal legend’ (Dagnino 1996: 125).

## 2. The reifying power of cultural identities

Since then, I have spent a great deal of time studying how global mobility impacts on individuals, groups, and societies. One aspect in particular has drawn my attention and led me to re-visit and expand my early theorisations in this area of studies. This critical element is what I call the reifying power of cultural identities (see also Hannerz 1996; Bayart 2005). This power is best seen in action in times and places of massive migratory flows. On the one hand, it feeds upon the sense of displacement, disconnection, or de-rootedness experienced by the newcomers (let us call them *the guests*). On the other hand, it is nourished by the anxiety that members of host societies develop due to a perception of fragmentation of community ties and of disruption of social cohesion. As a result, these massive migratory flows lead, more often than not, to a reassertion and radicalisation of cultural, ethnic, or religious identities in both groups — the guests and the hosts, the immigrant and the receiving. This trajectory eventuates into two broad options in terms of ideologies and their ensuing state policies. The first one — which we might call assimilationism — sanctions mainstream authority over society and the cultural imaginary that underpins it. As various examples around the globe currently show us, this outlook can lead to expressions of nationalistic, ethnic, or religious revanchism. In this context, one culture, upholding the values of integrity and the notion of a supposed homogeneity and ‘purity’, strives to retain dominance over the others and/or to impose its own particularism. To the newcomers, this form of monoculturalism means they need to assimilate as quickly as possible, in the hope of being rapidly accepted by the host society (the slogan here is ‘assimilate or perish’). This entails giving up one’s previous cultural identity (renouncing one’s language, traditions, customs), which inevitably eats away one’s cultural dignity.<sup>3</sup> The second option is the one offered by multiculturalism, which turns out to be little more than, in Amartya Sen’s words, ‘plural monoculturalism’ (2007: 157) and is characterised, as Mikhail Epstein puts it, by ‘the pride of minorities’ (2009: 329). What these scholars imply is that multicultural societies replicate the monocultural paradigm by ‘fracturing’ it in tightly knit homogeneous enclaves.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey C. Alexander (2001).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on assimilation politics, multiculturalism, and interculturalism, especially in a European context, see Chiro and Vadura (2010).

Such a pattern often produces cultural ghettoisation and thus may foster conflictuality as well as ethnic and national fundamentalism.<sup>5</sup> As Ulrich Beck notes, one of the choicest paradoxes of multiculturalism is that:

[I]t emphatically rejects the essentialism of national homogeneity when defending minority rights, yet itself easily falls into the trap of essentialism [...] Multiculturalist moralism shuts its eyes to the potential for violence which has long since been shown to result from giving free rein to ethnic identities (2006: 67).

The post-Yugoslavian writer Dubravka Ugrešić puts it a bit differently:

The hosts do all kinds of things that they're so proud of, while it never occurs to them that maybe they do so not to pull immigrants out of the ghetto, but rather to subtly keep them there, in the ghetto of their identities and cultures [...] to draw an invisible line between *us* and *them*, and thus render many social spheres inaccessible (2014: 225).

### 3. An alternative perspective: transculturality

Both the assimilationist and the multiculturalist propositions hinge upon and sanction the stifling 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. This disruption is being felt even within a purely literary context, where to a certain extent opposing categorisations are advocated: on the one hand, mainstream national/autochthonous writers and, on the other hand, (im)migrant or minority ethnic writers (see Castan 1996; Jurgensen 1999; Orton and Parati 2007). In both cases, cultural specificity and stressed essentialised difference (in ethnic, national, racial, religious, territorial, or linguistic terms) seem to be the epicentre of social and political organisation (and control) at the level both of the nation-state and of the state of literature.

This perspective, however, is not without alternative, and the radicalisation of cultural identity is not inevitable. A third option is possible. It is in this respect that I here introduce the transcultural proposition, on which I have been working in recent years (see Dagnino 2013, 2015). 'Transculturality' (Welsch 1999) is a perspective that frames cultures as dynamic processes of amalgamation and confluence. As such, it rejects the idea of cultures as discrete, self-contained units and, consequently, does not lend support to the reifying power that cultural

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<sup>5</sup> For Welsch (1999) it is the premise that is wrong: '[C]ompared to traditional calls for cultural homogeneity the concept [of multiculturalism] is progressive, but its all too traditional understanding of cultures threatens to engender regressive tendencies which by appealing to a particularistic cultural identity lead to ghettoisation or cultural fundamentalism' (197). Epstein also challenges the mosaic multicultural model, which simply recognises the equal rights and value of self-enclosed cultures and questions the model's ability to address 'the contemporary cross-cultural flows' (2009: 329). Thus, he proposed his own interpretation of the model of cultural 'interference':

Can we move on now from the model of difference (and *différance*) that dominated the humanities from the 1970s to the 1990s?—move on to a model of 'interference', on the assumption that the most beautiful patterns in culture (as in nature) are made by the overlap of waves coming from various traditions, periods, and disciplines? I do not mean 'interference' as in 'intrusion' or 'intervention.' I am thinking of the use that the word has in physics: the mutual action of two or several waves (of sound, light, etc.) in reinforcing or neutralising each other (Epstein 2004: 47).

identities tend to display in circumstances such as those induced by mass migration. Working both at a macro-cultural level and at ‘the micro-level of individuals’ (Welsch 2009: 8), transculturality can also represent an alternative mode of identity building which we acquire at the ‘crossroads with other cultures’ and which leads to a dimension beyond any given culture (Epstein 2009: 330). If we relinquish views of singularity and discreteness and accept both that culture possesses a prismatic and ever-changing nature and that cultures are open and mutually transforming organisms in constant reciprocal relation, we may find an alternative to the monocultural paradigm underpinning both the nationalist/assimilationist option and the — only nominally — multiculturalist proposition. Paraphrasing Aihwa Ong (1999) when explaining why she chose the term ‘transnationality’ instead of globalisation to capture ‘the horizontal and relational nature of the contemporary economic, social, and cultural processes that stream across spaces,’ we, too, might say that transcultural, rather than the term intercultural or cross-cultural, denotes the ‘transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination’ triggered by the changed and changing dynamics of cultural production and identity building (1999: 4).

Assuming a transcultural perspective does not mean, however, either positing or advocating the demise of cultural identity (see Dagnino 2015: 127–29). To outgrow one’s primary culture and affiliations does not mean to disown them and their foundational role, rather, it means not to be or feel limited by them. People have always tried to find out where they belong, where their cultural roots are, and they still show a desire for rootedness: ‘the security of an identity’ cannot be ignored or wiped out (Bartoloni 2008: 86). Yet, the still dominant model of a ‘terrestrial’ nationalised, and singular *identité-racine* (root-identity) seems inadequate nowadays to respond to the challenges posed by increased cultural exchanges and migratory flows (Glissant 1997).

I emphasise that assimilationism and multiculturalism, nationalism or patriotism, and local interests and affiliations are the conditions and the forms of organisation of a society, while transculture/ality is an individual condition which is hardly applicable, for obvious pragmatic reasons, at a collective level. Clearly, transcultural policies cannot be imposed by some government agency. Perhaps, transcultural societies may only exist if they are made up of increasing numbers of transcultural individuals who are able to enact translational practices and reproduce transcultural identities/modes of being. That is why transculture/ality should be understood neither as an ideology (as the term transculturalism would imply) nor as a political stance but as a mode of identity formation, as a critical tool, and as a concept for individual

artistic and cultural (that is, translational) resistance to the complex power dynamics expressed on the one hand by global capitalism and on the other hand by nation-states in this era of increasing mobility.

The transcultural perspective suggests that — in line with ‘nomadic’ critical theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Rosy Braidotti (1994, 2006) — the menace or risk of the loss of identity prompted by a destabilising world of global mobility can be overcome by adopting a postnational, rhizomatic (that is, relational), and translational sense of identity. The writer Amin Maalouf (2004), among others, encourages us to look for ‘routes’, not ‘roots’, as the concept of identity stemming from a single totalising origin (root) is discarded in favour of the notion of a plurality of paths (routes) and interpretations.<sup>6</sup> As a result, on the transcultural frontier identity and sense of belonging are not defined by a single, terrestrial native root (the one neatly tracing where you come from), but by an emotional network of ethereal ramifications, non-hierarchical interdependent relations, and mental cartographies: imaginary roots for ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983).<sup>7</sup> In this light, transculturality suggests an approach that privileges intersections, cultural mediation (in a translational mode) and shared ventures rather than polarities and differences. In so doing, it allows us to challenge the limits of monocultural/monolingual identifications and to question their ensuing xenophobic anxieties.

#### 4. The 5D interpretive model of transculturality

Let me push this reasoning one step further. For those who engage — due to their profession or intellectual curiosity — in investigating societal phenomena and in conceiving solutions for societal issues, transculturality may not be just a worldview and a mode of identity building but also a heuristic model. To this end, we might take into consideration what I call the 5D interpretive model of transculturality, which I have outlined in a more recent development of my theorisation on cultural flows and global mobility (Dagnino 2015: 154). Its five dimensions are:

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<sup>6</sup> A founding critique of nation-based identities has already emerged in the field of anthropology from James Clifford’s *Routes* (1997), in which he outlines new forms of belonging that, in Ursula K. Heise’s words, ‘would transcend exclusive commitments to a particular nation, culture, race, or ethnicity in favour of more global modes of awareness and attachment’ (2008: 57). Clifford shows the way in which local cultures form and manipulate their identity ‘from connections to a variety of places (“routes”) rather than their anchoring in just one locale (“roots”)’ (Heise 2008: 57).

<sup>7</sup> The writer Pico Iyer provides an exemplary model when he explains in his interview with Angie Brenner (2007) that to him home is not identified as a country but, rather, as a private metaphysical space, no matter where it is, where one feels comfortable: ‘I am not rooted in a place, I think, so much as in certain values and affiliations and friendships that I carry everywhere I go; my home is both invisible and portable’.

- 1) Time (that is, the historical dimension);
- 2) Context (in terms of socioeconomic realities, technological developments, political processes, geographical variables);
- 3) Practice (in terms of lived experience, language(s), communication, interaction);
- 4) Meaning (in terms of dominant ideologies, worldviews, cultural constructs); and
- 5) Agency (in terms of self-reflexivity, critical thinking, innovation, imagination, cultural translation, creative outputs).

This analytic framework provides a multi-perspectival viewpoint that acknowledges the complexity of social life and facilitates an inclusionary, interdisciplinary approach to the study of cultural products and social phenomena. The 5D model suggests taking into account first of all the specific mode of modernity in which the phenomenon or issue under investigation has developed (Time) — indeed, we know that different societies show different societal states and patterns, even when they happen to co-exist within the same timeframes. We then need to look at the socio-economic frameworks, technological innovations, political processes, geographical locations, and spaces (Context); we also have to take into consideration patterns of behaviour (Practices), as well as sources of narratives and prevailing discourses (Meaning) present at that time in that specific social arena. Last but not least, we have to include in the picture the role and voice of competent, individual human agents, with their interdependent and active experiences (Agency). What emerges from this exploration should then be read in a contrapuntal way, ‘not to impose a false harmony but to achieve a counterpoint of various voices that maintains rather than smooths tension’ (Nelson 2008: 206). The emergence of this polyphony of voices, voices that require processes of cultural translation and interpretation if they are to be understood and unravelled, allows us to think critically and imagine creatively in ways that do not correspond to the dominant contemporary understanding of the world with its belief attachments, political agendas, and social conditioning.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the meaning and role of cultural translation and of translational processes understood as social practices, see Buden and others (2009).



## 5. Transcultural nomads and transcultural spaces

To conclude the exposition of this long premise, I propose endowing the symbolic figure of the neo-nomad with a more complex transcultural perspective, allowing the emergence of ‘the transcultural nomad’. This shift is not merely semantic. This agent of change in global times not only views and experiences the world beyond traditional cultural dichotomies and juxtapositions but somehow fulfils a societal responsibility by promoting concepts of cultural mediation and translational practices that can open up and lead the way towards a transcultural shared ‘third space’. We can think of a transcultural ‘third space’ (or ‘transpace’) not only as a ‘heterotopia’ (Foucault 1984)<sup>9</sup> but also as a mental state and intellectual sensibility achieved through a process of transculturation, or transcultural mediation/translation — this process leads to transcending ‘the distinctions between aliens and nations, friends and foes, foreigners and natives’ (Beck 2006: 66); it thus provides an alternative to the monocultural and monolingual paradigm embodied, on the one hand, by the forced homogeneity of assimilationism and, on the other hand, by the intrinsic separateness of multiculturalism.<sup>10</sup>

Transpaces do not deny the formative importance of native or national cultures and their accompanying worldviews but they allow an openness to the reception, integration and negotiation of other cultures, languages, and worldviews. These all-inclusive spaces of subjective consciousness and cultural possibilities are created anytime people gather under the sign of a third, inclusive, hybridised, globalised culture or practice (let’s just think for example of yoga, global tango, soccer, Kung-Fu, rap or jazz music). For this reason, transpaces can also acquire a tangible dimension through physical locations and bodily transcultural practices.

It is not by chance that I direct the spotlight on material urban spaces, also understood as places (see Metzger).<sup>11</sup> Despite the increasing virtualisation of our lives, the physical — and

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<sup>9</sup> Heterotopia is a concept in human geography to describe places and spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions originally elaborated by the philosopher Michel Foucault (1967) in the course of the conference *Des espaces autres* held under the auspices of the *Cercle d’études architecturales* on 14 March 1967. These are spaces of *otherness*, which are neither here nor there, that are simultaneously physical and mental, such as the space of a phone call or the moment when you see yourself in the mirror. A translation into English by Jay Miskoviec of Foucault’s article, likewise entitled ‘Des espaces autres’ and published in 1984 in *Architecture, mouvement, ontinuité*, was subsequently published in *Diacritics* in 1986 (see Bibliography).

<sup>10</sup> This conceptualisation of the transcultural third space as a means of identity and relationship negotiation, where ‘we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves,’ (Bhabha 2008: 155) not only resonates with Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’, the ‘in-between’ space where hybridisation occurs (1994; see also Rutherford & Bhabha 1990), but, in many ways, it expands it.

<sup>11</sup> In this article, space is understood, according to a sociological perspective, as the social space in which we live and create relationship with other people, societies and surroundings. I am prone to conflate the two terms, ‘places’ and ‘spaces’, in an effort to transcend the dichotomy inherent in the way the two concepts have been historically understood in the fields of Urban Sociology and Human Geography (Agnew: 2011). Following Jörg Dürrschmidt (2000), Jayaram uses the terms ‘locale’ and ‘milieu’ instead of the more conventional pair of ‘place’ and ‘space’ (continued on next page):



not only symbolical or psychological — dimension of space maintains a fundamental and undisputed centrality. The suburbs in which we live, the boulevards and avenues along which we walk, the town squares and coffee shops in which we gather, the parks in which our children play are all physical spaces (see Neal 2010). Should not we thus try to re-envision the way we share (or do not share) those spaces in order to generate and promote a mode of being in society that can be alternative to the totalising cultural monolithism assumed both by the assimilationist and the multiculturalist paradigm? Is it not indeed by working on spaces — and on practices performed in them — that we can envisage the urban environments, the residential developments, and the community initiatives of the future? I am here advocating those transcultural ‘third spaces’ that will facilitate the fruitful and harmonious encounters between the sedentary and the transient, between local populations and transnational or diasporic communities — beyond the binary opposition of ‘us’ and ‘them’.<sup>12</sup>

In this regard, the past can be a great teacher. Let us think, for example, of the open-ended, trans-social, trans-class, intercultural souks, caravanserais, oases, agorae, and harbour cities of ancient times. Those ‘spaces’ (from Aleppo to Samarkand, from ancient Alexandria to Constantinople) promoted the crossing of ethnic, religious, and national identity boundaries. Those hubs of cultural confluence and ‘mutual hospitality’ expanded our cultural horizons.<sup>13</sup> They inspired the writer Italo Calvino (1972: 43) to write how, by night, around the campfires of Euphemia, a fictionalised city of barterers and merchants, people came from ‘seven nations’ to tell their stories of ‘wolves, sisters, treasures, scabies, lovers, battles’ and weave their memories ‘at every solstice and equinox’. In those souks and ports of the past, the wayfarers and the sedentary played their respective and respected roles. While trading goods under a tent, by a fire or near a sailing boat, they would also trade memories, ideas, craftsmanship, and cultural practices (music, food, religious rituals, and beliefs). As observed in the publisher’s

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[...] a distinction needs to be made between the *locale* (place) and the *milieu* (space) dimensions of the urban form. The *locale* dimension of a city, that is, its physical/territorial boundary, is demarcated, even if arbitrarily, administratively. That is what we see on the map; and that is what administrators define as the jurisdiction of the city. The *milieu* dimension, on the other hand, is identifiable in terms of the processes around which the city dwellers’ life revolves. These processes could be (a) social (involving groupings and intra- and inter-group interactions, with varying degrees of complexity resulting from size and composition of the population), (b) cultural (referring to ways of thinking and acting), and (c) political (having to do with relations of power/control, not necessarily in the formal sense) (2009: 17).

<sup>12</sup> A note of caution is in order here: the distinction between sedentary and transient communities is less straightforward and much more complex and problematic than generally assumed; more often than not, diasporic communities tend to re-territorialise in another space/place.

<sup>13</sup> On the concept of reciprocal hospitality see Malherbe (2000), *Le nomade polyglotte*.

comments on Tom Schutyser's photographic book *Caravanserai: Traces, Places, Dialogue in the Middle East* (2019), '[t]hese staging posts formed the world's first globalised overland network and stand as a testament to a flourishing period of multicultural exchange in the Muslim world' (5 Continents Editions 2019). These were the participatory and shared spaces of ancient times.

Obviously, this highly-romanticised account of the historical role of caravanserais lacks in complexity. More studies would be required to unearth and bring to light the complex dynamics and inevitable cultural conflicts that must have arisen among such diverse and numerous groups of peoples in late antiquity. Accordingly, it would be interesting and particularly relevant to understand the role of past cultural mediators, translators, and negotiators in addressing, managing, and resolving disputes and cultural differences occurring in these inns of the past.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the lack of documentary evidence and historical data hinders the study of the social dynamics of these facilities (Bryce, O'Gorman and Baxter 2013).<sup>15</sup>

## 6. The balancing dynamics of static quality and dynamic quality

Yet, despite the fact that, in the last two decades, global mobility has become the defining element of our contemporaneity, we have increasingly forfeited the caravanserai's inclusive, open-ended, and mutually enriching way of conceptualising space. An unchallenged neoliberal outlook and course of action has progressively eroded the three pillars on which, I argue, a balanced, societal dynamics necessarily rests: 1) 'cultural exchange', 2) productive land/property ownership, and 3) the Commons. Let me here explain what I mean by the 'erosion' of these three pillars.

- 1) The mutually enriching process of 'cultural exchange' has been gradually stifled by:
  - The homogenising landscape of the shopping mall (Voyce 2016);
  - The isolating incommunicability of vertical urban towers; and
  - The fragmentation inherent in socio-economic urban ghettos and ethnic enclaves (Abramovitz and Albrecht, 2013).
- 2) The productive ownership of property has progressively morphed into a mere lucrative — though totally sterile — form of capital investment (Rolnik 2013). To mention just a few among the consequences of such a development:

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<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the role of the caravanserai in late antiquity, see Haidar (2014), Bryce, O'Gorman and Baxter (2013), Campbell (2011), and De Cesaris, Ferretti and Osanloo (2014).

<sup>15</sup> The absence of historical data requires innovative methodologies, such as material culture; thus, through the perspective of social architecture, Bryce, O'Gorman and Baxter (2013) argue, drawing upon Blake (1999): '[T]hat the built environment reflects the social system of the time and the ways in which that system is expressed, reproduced, and experienced and therefore reflects the structure of urban life' (210).

- Tiers of existing affordable and social housing have been zoned and coded out of existence, with the inevitable homogenising effect caused by gentrification.
- Growing numbers of properties are being kept empty by virtue of being first and foremost a financial investment — thus subtracting social and cultural capital from local communities.<sup>16</sup> It has been shown that empty properties pose a threat to the lifeblood of local communities:

Empty properties contribute to residential instability and a weakening of social cohesion, which undermines the stability of communities, with the social glue that holds communities together melting away (Fox O'Mahony 2015).

- The social fabric of local communities is compromised by a free-for-all real estate market increasingly dominated by anonymous investors who have no ties to nor responsibilities towards local communities (Rolnik 2013). As a consequence, we witness an increased disinvestment by property owners and wealthy elites from local communities.

3) With respect to the erosion of the Commons, public spaces are increasingly being commercialised or even replaced by the so-called POPS — Privately Owned Publicly-Accessible Spaces (Schmidt, Németh & Botsford 2011) — which often have a less inclusive character than truly public spaces. This process is linked to the progressive withdrawal from the street and the insistence on privacy and territoriality, giving houses and the development of gated communities an even stronger role as refuges centred on oneself and one's family (see Sennett 1976). Urban public spaces have been increasingly under neoliberal attack and often been transformed into centres of private commerce and consumption where security and private interests are highly prioritised, threatening the notion that public space is for all to enjoy (Low and Smith 2005). Since the publication in 1961 of Jane Jacobs's monumental work, many studies have been conducted on the erosion of the Commons and of public services in major metropolises inside and outside the West,

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<sup>16</sup> The UK Government's explicitly acknowledges the problem of empty homes. In the Foreword to the Consultation Paper on 'Options for Dealing with Squatting' (2011), the Government recognises that 'we must also tackle problems affecting the wider housing market and bring more empty homes back into productive use' (<https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/legislation/bills-acts/legal-aid-sentencing/squatting-eia.pdf>). 'Yet,' Lorna Fox O'Mahony (2015) remarks:

[T]he Government has displayed a notable lack of censure towards owners who leave property empty; and, indeed, accepts that holding empty residential property is a legitimate or practical financial strategy. This — in turn — highlights the Government's conception of real property ownership as a proxy for capital investment, away from [...] an understanding of land ownership that is material and organic. The new model of 'ideal citizen-owner' is not the person who makes productive use of land, but the capital investor.

leading to regulatory practices that often homogenise, sanitise, and exorcise difference from public space (Kohn 2004; Miller 2007; Németh and Hollander 2010).

The compound effect of these latest urban developments and property practices leads to greater polarisations and juxtapositions throughout society. It also has another consequence, subtle yet worrying: it imperils the needed balance between local communities and global cultural trajectories, between territorial stability and transcultural mobility, between — I would argue — ‘static quality’ and ‘dynamic quality’. I here briefly recall the two components of Robert Pirsig’s value-based *Metaphysics of Quality* (1991). ‘Static quality’ is the fundamental structure of culture itself. It is the asset that comes from fixed rules, from the tradition and values that have expressed them. ‘Dynamic quality’, on the other hand, is an asset external to any individual culture and cannot be caged in any system of precepts but needs to be constantly rediscovered according to cultural development, which implies openness to the other, to the unknown, and to alternative ideas. The two qualities need each other to exist and prosper: dynamic quality — the ‘neo-nomadic’ quality of freedom and cultural exchanges, if you like — creates the world in which we live, but only the configurations of static quality, the quality of ‘sedentary’ order, keep it functioning.

But how do we restore, achieve, or re-imagine this balance? On the one hand, how do we ensure that the stability patterns of local communities aren’t fractured by the pressures of globalising mobility and by potentially devastating forms of anomie; on the other hand, how do we avoid the erosion of basic structures of cultural meaning, values, and points of reference among diasporic and (im)migrant communities? In both cases, how do we neutralise the shared sense of estrangement and its main noxious consequence, cultural radicalisation? These questions inevitably lead to a broader set of reflections and enquiries: What makes a community nowadays? How can the local, territorial, symbolic, culturally specific, and professional elements of society act and interact in the creation of a common sense of belonging? What gives cultural value to land, to place and to community living in times of global mobility? How do we re-envisage the role of local communities and cultural identities in this age of increasing disruption of community bonds and traditional sense of belonging?

## 7. Challenging the existing: 21st century caravanserais as transcultural ‘third spaces’

Suggesting solutions to the sort of conundrum I have just outlined would seem far-fetched to say the least. As social scientists and comparatists, however, we might (indeed, should) put forward the idea to recreate in the 21st century those transcultural Commons of the past — those spaces, in particular those caravanserais, so apt to foster the communal production and fruitful sharing of ideas, dreams, aspirations, customs, and memories.

From the age of late antiquity until the advent of the railroad, caravanserais — often state-sponsored — provided accommodation for caravans, merchants, and nomadic people along the trade routes of Central Asia, North Africa, and South-Eastern Europe (De Cesaris 2014; O’Gorman 2007). Many of their traces can still be found in those cities which were prominent at the time, from Aleppo to Samarkand, from Damascus to Valencia (Burns 1971).

The typical caravanserai was a two-level, square, rectangular, round or hexagonal arcaded complex, with an open central courtyard. Its design and community spaces were meant to encourage interactive participation between locals and people on the move while at the same time providing social utility. Apartments lined the interior of both floors, with shops and warehouses on the lower level and family quarters on the upper. Communal activities and interpersonal membership were encouraged not only through trade and negotiation but also through public facilities such as shared kitchens and dining areas, bathhouses, small gardens, and spaces for prayer (Ahmad and Chase 2004). Most of those amenities suggest the social significance of ‘breaking bread’ together and of ritual storytelling (Brackney 2012: 29). Indeed, the functions listed above — cooking, dining, commerce, worship, sharing leisure time, and storytelling (or any other form of creative expression) — are still at the core of spontaneous social interaction and community building.

In such surroundings, a vibrant cosmopolitan society was forged by individuals of distinct cultural, religious, and professional identities united by common endeavours, cultural curiosity, creativity, or just pure economic ambition. As Van Dyke explains:

The caravanserai ultimately excelled in providing a utilitarian system which could be endlessly configured to provide the cultural and everyday necessities of its varying tenants, thereby functioning as a cultural exchange in its own time (2011: 45).

Larry Harvey, the founder of the ‘Burning Man Festival’, which is annually held in a temporary city in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, also emphasises this aspect:

Though fueled by mercantilism, [the] legacy of [the caravanserai] to us is a grand commerce of ideas — a swirling exchange of languages, legends, technologies, philosophies and art that helped shape nearly every aspect of our modern world (Harvey and Mangrum 2014).

It is no wonder that the 2014 edition of ‘Burning Man’ was called ‘Caravansaray’.

The role played by caravanserais as hubs of intercultural exchange has been critical through the centuries and justifies their rediscovery by modern-day urban planners, architects, and social analysts.<sup>17</sup> On a more visionary tone, the 21st century caravanserai may be imagined as a complex that not only replicates but amplifies and further develops its original concept. It might therefore contemplate a mix of residential units, commercial and trades activities, craftsman workshops, arts studios, educational enterprises, and public spaces for active fruition. This poly-functional configuration would provide some sort of continuity and cross-pollination between private and public spaces, between individual and collective activities, between working time and leisure time. The closest thing to this modern concept of the caravanserai are some pioneering and visionary experiments attempted in the 1960s–1970s by the likes of Lou Sauer, Werner Seligman, Kenneth Frampton and Theodore Liebman. These architects mainly focused on housing complexes broadly branded as ‘low-rise, high-density’. Discussing a recent New York exhibition on this subject,<sup>18</sup> the architect Karen Kubey (2012), executive director of the Institute for Public Architecture (IPA), indeed remarked that low-rise, high-density solutions are:

[...] dense enough to achieve urban benefits such as access to public transportation and civic and commercial amenities, while also providing a sense of individual identity for residents and accommodating an integration of [common] open spaces (para. 5).

Once again, one can stress the importance of an integrated use of the Commons and the role it can play, as envisioned by the landscape architect Karl Linn. In Linn’s view (2007), neighbourhood Commons represent urban variations on the traditional village green bringing neighbours and strangers together — much as the caravanserais did in the past by bringing nomads and non-nomads together.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A re-interpretation of this concept in now-a-days terms has been proposed in East London. ‘Canning Town Caravanserai’ (caravanserai.org.uk) is an experiment in temporary urbanism promoted by the firm of architects the architectures Ash Sakula. It offers informal spaces for chance encounters between locals, travellers, and temporary residents through a series of platforms for cultural events, commerce, play, and gardening. In Toronto, architects at LGA Architectural Partners were given the task of reconstituting an old warehouse in order to provide a safe haven for the homeless. Taking their cue from the permanent but adaptable structure of the traditional caravanserai, they conceived twelve group ‘houses’ and linked them through a central public space. Each ‘house’ is furnished with a shared kitchen, which can be thought of as a liminal space between privacy and sociability, thus creating the conditions for collaboration and negotiation. These are only preliminary attempts to infuse modern visions of urban housing and social living with the spirit that animated the caravanserais of the past, those crucibles of cultural cross-fertilisation.

<sup>18</sup> The ‘Low Rise High Density’ exhibition was held in New York at the Centre for Architecture in April 25–June 29, 2013, <<http://cfa.aiany.org/index.php?section=upcoming&expid=254>> [accessed: 27-Mar-16].

<sup>19</sup> See Fox:

Linn was in the business, quite literally, of creating rootedness: where a garden flourished, Mr. Linn believed, so, too, would a community. His gardens are noted for their use of native plants,



Envisaging a constellation of 21st century caravanserais spread across the urban landscape might also contribute to finding creative solutions to another compelling need of our liquid societies: the re-territorialisation of our social networks. Indeed, we need to find ways to fill the gap (find the ‘third space’) between immaterial and material forms of belonging, between the places we inhabit with our bodies and the multiple allegiances we develop across our virtual, cultural, and spatial wanderings. Spaces may well be temporary while human relations last and now more than ever represent the only stable moorings; yet, in order to develop lasting human bonds, we still need the physicality of those spaces specifically designed to encourage human interaction.

### **Conclusion**

Our cities are increasingly becoming alienating spaces built on affluence, social division, isolation, aggressive consumerism, and racial or ethnic ghettoisation (Fujita 2010; Wacquant 2009). The opening of the world to globalising forces and growing migratory patterns seems to produce, by reaction, new closures, renewed siege mentalities, and resurgent segregationist impulses. This to a social scientist should not come as unexpected. Yet, as social scientists, we understand that this trajectory urgently needs to be dealt with. Architecture and urban planning — if conceived to serve a broader social cause and approached from a transcultural perspective — can do much to counter this undesirable development. They can do so by conceiving spaces for encounter and cultural translation and by providing spaces meant as ‘community anchors’ (or moorings) for permanent or temporary re-territorialisations. Advocating a civic, socially-engaged architecture through urban experimental projects is not just a utopian ideal. Enlightened self-interest as well suggests considering that same route. If not properly addressed, the negative aspects of economic globalisation, the disruptive effects of growing migratory patterns, and the ensuing massive re-locations of people can adversely reverberate at all levels of society. As Cambridge Professor Emeritus of Law Kevin Gray warned as long ago as 1994, if ‘we fail to endorse a broader collective participation in the goods of life [we] will eventually observe a polarised society participating in its own disintegration’ (1994: 48–49).

It is up to the current and new generations of designers, architects, and urban planners to envisage a network of transcultural caravanserais as future hubs of hospitality, as ‘homes’ away from ‘home’. It is up to them to re-create those ‘neighbourhood Commons’, those communal institutions of cultural translation where the ‘static quality’ warranted by rootedness and

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bubbling fountains, colorful mosaics, benches positioned to encourage face-to-face contact and, above all, their involvement of neighborhood residents (Fox 2005: § 4).



sedentariness co-exists with and is enriched by the ‘dynamic quality’ brought by individuals and groups riding the waves of global mobility. Architecture and design cannot be given the burden to cure a world-in-crisis grappling with cultural radicalisation and the upsurge of xenophobic tensions. Yet new projects and new spaces for more inclusive and participatory ways of being together and for more harmonious and variegated forms of urban cohabitation may produce positive effects (Su-Jan 2016; Valentine 2008). They might show us how to make up for the growing loss of territorial roots, for the dangerous disappearance of mutual aid, for the lack of physical exchange, and for economic systems ever more disenfranchised from the values of local communities.<sup>20</sup>

If an experimental use of the Commons may offer an alternative to the battle between public and private, then, as Justin McGuirk observes, we should find ways in which communing is not limited to reclaim the use of community gardens and public spaces through limited and often short-lived ‘acts of autarchy and resistance’. Instead, it should inspire planners and pioneers of a new urban politics to reimagine the city as Commons and to develop a common strategy for managing it.<sup>21</sup> The ultimate question is that posed by McGuirk (2015): ‘Can commoning be scaled up to influence the workings of a metropolis — able to tackle questions of housing, energy use, food distribution, clean air?’

And, within this greater urban vision, can transcultural Commons provide us with a network of modern urban caravanserais, of ‘third spaces’ meant to cut courageously across and bring together ethnicities, cultures, and religions?

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on how architecture and urban planning are redefining their strategies in order to come up with creative and interdisciplinary ways (often involving an integration of interior design and industrial design) to ‘make places’ for the community, see Leveratto (2015b and 2016). As Leveratto suggests:

[...] urban space develops, as any other interior, around the ‘gesture’ of the subjects who inhabit it, in a dimension in which the possibility to exert a real control on their environment is explicit, even though only symbolically. This is a control through a gradual process of bodily projection, which represents the ‘range’ of the innate ability to live in the world by ‘taking care of it’ (2015b: 11).

<sup>21</sup> See in this regard the vision put forward, among others, by Gehl (2010) and Leveratto (2015a, 2016).

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