

Ann Arbor Taskforce on the Center of the City Commons
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In October 2018 the voters of Ann Arbor, Michigan, approved an amendment to the City Charter for a commons in the center of the city. These remarks formed the basis of a brief talk to the Task Force charged with planning its implementation.

We want an open space; we want a beautiful place; we want a popular place, a place where the people may gather.

When Aura Rosser, an African American woman, artist, and mother, was killed by a policeman in November 2014 we had to stop traffic to find a common place to mourn, to protest, and to talk over the problem. Shortly afterwards we met one cold night in front of City Hall – this place – and so we named the plaza, “Aura Rosser Plaza.” For want of anything else it had to serve as our commons.

In the midst of neoliberalism with its privatizing, monetarizing, and militarism we have to take the long view and a global perspective. Looking seven generations ahead may not be enough. Our temporality derives from the perturbations of the earth system and the Sixth Extinction. We anticipate social and population perturbations of large scale. How we will constitute ourselves in such times will challenge our city, and challenge our own Constitution as a political guide of governance.

There is no community without commons, and no commons without community. The commons is grounded, that is, it is part of the earth and it involves water and dirt.

Looking back we might distinguish commons of subsistence in four settings – water and fishing, highlands and herding, forests and hunting, the field and farming. Human communities formed in all four. Examples of commons in each can still be found. They support forms of livelihood and cultural practices in which consumption and production are not separated. The commons is antithetical to the commodity; it is for use not sale. It does not hide behind walls or fences. The commons is both a place of rest and a place of play where football, track and field, cricket, lacross, racing were played long before they were enclosed.

Although the city appears not among these, this does not mean they are irrelevant to us as city dwellers. Forms of cooperation deriving from them came to influence the patterns of life in the city. The commons does not invite us to look up but to look around. It does not compete for the high places, such as the temples of the Acropolis, or the cathedrals, or pyramids, or for that matter the University’s Bell Tower or its Big House.

The Acropolis sat on a hill overlooking, over-awing, and commanding the people beneath. Below was the agora on flat land which became the social, athletic, artistic, dramatic, and political center of the city, or the polis. The agora means a gathering place or an assembly. In the Greek language words meaning “to shop” and “to speak publicly” derive from agora. This is both an ancient tale from the time of Socrates or Sophocles and a recent story.

Think of Taksim Square in Istanbul, or Tahrir Square in Cairo, or Syntagma Square in Athens, and these were followed by Puerto del Sol in Madrid, and Zuccotti Park in Wall Street, and Oscar Grant Plaza in Oakland. They have been the gathering places of the demos or multitude. Commoning was re-born as of necessity. Security of the person, safety, sanitation, sleep, soup, and song were managed by ourselves. These were the assembly places of our times. Here the Many could recognize one another and then consider the Few. The 99% could come to judgment of the 1%.

So the 1% set their teeth on edge. Reaction set in. Autocrats took over. Fires raged, hurricanes blew, and floods flooded house and home. We no longer had a place to mourn, to share our sorrows, and turn our anger or our wounds to the fury of purposeful action. The commons is without commodity exchange, though commons are rich in other forms of reciprocity – gift giving, generosity, the potlatch, and the abundance of the heart (Luke 6:). The commons is without the class divisions of capitalism which drive one class of people to greed, pride, and endless accumulation and another class to insecurity and desperation in our age of anxiety. These divisions produce huge gaps and inequalities, rich man in his castle, poor man at the gate. Such class inequalities are also racial inequities and make Michigan the 2nd most segregated state in the Union. What has been the African American commons?

The city was cut from the country, and from the production of food. The city dwellers ate the surplus, the city was for the rich and the rulers, the country for the ruled and the poor. The center of the city was the fort, or it might be the court, or very often the center was a port. In other words the principle institutions of the rulers – sword, gown, purse – dominated the town. The common people were now a people without a commons. They were the hoi polloi, the anawim, the plebeians and proletarians, the urban masses, the working class. When not oppressed by war and taxes they were ruled by bread and circuses. The stadium became the only place of collectivity and it was enclosed. I think of Ann Arbor’s main architectural places as the Big House, the University Tower, the Police HQ. The commons historically has been opposed to them. But all is not bleak. Portions of the commons surround the proposed site. The library lot is bordered on two of its sides by kinds of commons – there is the public library and there is the bus depot. This should give us encouragement. The bus provides certainly a collective experience in contrast to the SUV. As part of

public transportation, it signifies the common good. As for the public library, it is our town's glory (apart from the trees), and it contrasts I have to say with the University's libraries which are not common.

This was both an ancient and a modern development. Ten thousand years ago in Neolithic times in the Middle East and just two hundred years ago modern times in the Great Lakes. We may not easily forecast seven generations from now; more easily we can look back seven generations. If we go back seven generations we go to 1817 and the Treaty of Fort Meigs which took the lands of the Wyandots, the Seneca, the Delaware, the Shawnee, the Potawatomi, Ottawa, and Chippewa. Some of this land was in Detroit and became the seed wealth for the University of Michigan. The privatized wealth and knowledge of the University today stems directly from the indigenous common wealth of the past. In light of this it is incumbent on the future Ann Arbor Center of the City Commons that it be a tiny form of restitution for the common lands expropriated seven generations ago. The common good for seven generations hence demands it.

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