# Ten types of emerging city makers

## Working Paper

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## Abstract

*Today, citizens and professionals form different types of coalitions in order to overcome the challenges arising in cities, contributing to new ways of city making. These coalitions consist of new and emerging groups that represent an innovative form of urban insurgent activism, aimed at transformation and calling for new answers to citizens' needs. These groups are not often categorized and captured in the particular, or beyond a general description. This paper, based on data collected in the city of Rotterdam, presents a characterization of ten types emerging types of city makers in the context of urban sustainability transitions. This categorization must enable a better understanding of the transformative capacity of these new city makers, necessary for flourishing and sustainable communities. The paper concludes that these new types of city makers generally bring value to cities; however, this value could be enriched through more participatory networks that stimulate crossovers and accelerate the transition towards sustainable futures. These approaches need yet to be developed; here systems thinking and design could greatly contribute to the development of these new systemic and participatory approaches. However, in order to develop these new ways of 'participatory city making' it is important to understand with whom and for whom these approaches need to be developed. Therefore, this landscape of emerging city can be seen as an important starting point to stimulate the development of more participatory approaches in city making in the future; and with that feed the debate of how these design approaches can enable systemic change.*

## Introduction

Cities are critical hotspots for socio-technical system transitions towards sustainability, incubating and catalysing socio-economic and environmental change (Wolfram, 2016). Today, citizens and professionals form different types of coalitions in order to overcome the challenges arising within cities, contributing to new ways of city planning. These new coalitions seem to lack a systemic connection to the traditional planning structures, institutions and, consequently to the practices of the actors in charge of it, such as government, planners and architects. Such coalitions take charge, stand in the lead and can be seen as front-runners of urban sustainability transitions (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). They are new kinds of city makers that represent an innovative form of urban insurgent

activism that aim at transformation, calling for new answers to citizens' needs (Linders, 2012; Mayer, 2013). Typically social entrepreneurs, civic volunteers, local activists and similar groups represent these new city makers; they are challenging the traditional ways through which urban services, spaces and buildings are managed.

The goal of this paper is to characterize these new emerging types of city makers in the context of urban sustainability transitions, to better understand their transformative power. A categorization of ten types of emerging city makers is proposed to aid in promoting governance, to deliberately create space for "short-term innovation and long-term sustainability visions linked to desired societal transitions" (Loorbach, 2010, p.163). The categorization is expected to allow for understanding the transformative capacity of these new city makers, necessary for flourishing and sustainable communities.

## Transitions and niche activities

This paper discusses the crucial role cities play in the emergence and formation of grassroots socio-technical niches for sustainability transitions. Drawing on research dealing with strategic niche management, grassroots innovations and urban social innovations, the current transition work also conceptualizes the interdependencies between urban contexts and grassroots niche dynamics (Wolfram, 2016).

Different conceptual models, such as the Multi Level Perspective (Geels, 2002), the X-curve (Loorbach, 2014; Loorbach et al., 2017) and the one longest known, the S-curve (Schumpeter, 1934), have been developed to understand and interpret the dynamics of socio-technical change. All three models depict a change, a transition, from one state to another. In transition theory the concept of a regime is described as "the semi-coherent set of rules carried by different social groups" (Geels, 2002, p.1260). The regime is often the subject of change in transitions and four pathways indicate how this change could unfold: transformation, reconfiguration, technological substitution, and de-alignment and re-alignment (Geels and Schot, 2007). In these pathways one of the sources or actors of change are the so-called niches. Niches represent a critical source of new ideas and practical solutions for system innovations (Wolfram, 2016). They can be considered 'protected spaces' for experimenting with alternative socio-technical configurations, liberated from the selection pressures of the regime (Smith and Raven, 2012). The actors within the niches often act as front-runners. One of the critiques on the understanding of transitions is that there is a presumed, bottom–up, niche-driven bias (Geels and Schot, 2007). Although niche-actors or bottom-up actors are subject of the current study, it is recognized that these actors are not the only source for change.

Strategic niche management has been suggested as a crucial form of policy intervention to enable the creation of robust and influential niches (Kemp et al., 1998; Schot and Geels, 2008). Based on strategic niche management, most analyses of niches dynamics have so far focused on market-oriented technological innovations featuring industry and state actors (Wolfram, 2016). However, recently a growing amount of literature can be found that addresses sustainability innovations driven and implemented by civil actors (Wolfram, 2016a; Wolfram and Frantzeskaki, 2016; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). It is these civil actors that are studied more closely in this paper. By treating them not as one but recognizing their diversity, the goal is to understand their activities better and give these a place within the larger landscape of

socio-technical changes. Also, the identification of particular types of niche actors is expected to aid in recognizing the places and spaces for innovations, also in different urban contexts than the context currently studied here.

To shape the development path of niches three basic conditions have been identified: 1) Expectations of the innovation need to be widely shared among members; 2) Networking is needed, beyond members; and 3) Learning should be experiential and occur in the wider social context of communities (Wolfram, 2016b). These three conditions confirm the need for a better understanding of the specific initiatives or niches and a particular understanding of different types of niches. When they are understood in their particular forms, the expectations of each particular niche innovations can be shared even beyond their members. The particular types could also help in identifying networking possibilities and opportunities between the different particular niches. Third, identification of particular initiatives could support learning between the different particular initiatives as well as beyond. All of the three conditions contain a strong indication towards more participation, within and between initiatives. Participation should occur within initiatives to align expectations, but also between as well as beyond niche boundaries to allow for networking and learning.

Loorbach (2010) identifies three types of activities required for transitions and system innovations: 1) Strategic activities; 2) Tactical activities; 3) Operational activities. Gaziulusoy and Ryan (2017) describe these activities as follows: *strategic activities* involve the formation of long term goals and visions that will lead to changes in the culture and structure of a socio-technical system; *tactical activities* are directed at implementing a transition agenda towards the desired goal and relate to interactions between actors that can build and align the new vision into the regime level; and *operational activities* relate to the experiments and learning-by- doing at the niche level, often with an emphasis on radical and disruptive innovations. As is now hinted at in the definitions of the three types of activities it seems as if the niches only perform operational activities. However, this is not the understanding. Niche-actors are able to perform all three types of activities, although it is often seen that the focus of niche initiatives is on operational activities. Participation within and in between the niches but also between the niches and regime should help in moving niche action from more operational to tactical and strategic.

But too often are such initiatives only loosely supported in an ad hoc manner by policy instead of strategically as part of a broader agenda of transformative change. But also vice versa are such initiatives often very locally oriented, lack transformative ambitions and do not add up to a critical mass. Taking the transition perspective, we argue that it is in between these dynamics of an increasingly entrepreneurial and networking government on the one hand and emerging and developing social initiatives on the other that sustainability transitions could emerge and be accelerated. We thus need to understand the value of these types of initiatives as part of the collective search for sustainable cities, and appreciate that there are more people than planners or designers that make the city. Practically, this appreciation and understanding is expected to lead to insights in recognizing particular niche innovations in cities, being able to identify who to involve in the future activities of city making and how that can be done in a participatory way.

# Third sector

The Third Sector is sometimes used as a general characterization of non-traditional groups of city makers. These include bottom-up initiatives, grass roots or voluntary citizen initiatives; other terms to describe them are civil society, social enterprises, non-profit organisations (NPO) or non-governmental organisations (NGO). The boundaries between the different terms used for these 'initiatives' are often blurred and used interchangeably (Simsa, 2013). However, the third sector does not have a specific theorization, or at least not one as established as the state or market (Corry, 2010). The work of Olaf Corry (2010) on 'Defining and Theorizing the Third Sector' has been very helpful in understanding different theorizations of the Third Sector. The literature studied showed three main directions for defining the third sector: (1) third sector as non-state and non-private organizations, (2) third sector as organizations that do not distribute profit and are driven by social value, and (3) third sector as a process.

The first line of definitions is the one that excludes organizations that are state or private; this has not been rigorously used in this study. In this study, the social driven, but private organizations, are included; as well as certain state and public collaborations. For example, privately owned initiatives that strive for improving the food system; or government initiatives that seek connections with public for improving the recycling system. This makes the second definition more leading for this study. However, in this study initiatives that do distribute profit among their members are also included. These initiatives have been included for other reasons: because they strive for improving the processes between different stakeholders and sectors (this is the direction of the third line of definitions). All three lines of definitions are used in this research, this makes that the inclusion criteria are rather broad, and broader than maybe most others would use for 'third sector'. In the current study, the scope was purposely kept broad because to allow for a rich pool of data and a broad and inclusive understanding of the field, even including the, maybe according to others, "fringe" organizations on the edges of the scope. This is also why the rather vague term 'initiatives' will be used in this paper, because it indicates a certain new-ness and does not exclude certain organizations or initiatives that have been set-up with very clear and social driven values but are partly or completely state or private. Evidently, within this broad scope, the organizations that are neither state, nor private are a large part of these initiative groups.

# Method

This study of initiatives has been executed in the Netherlands where the Third Sector is characterized by highly active initiatives that are visible in various policy fields (Pape & Brandse, 2016). The urban scale represents the system boundaries, often the scale the initiatives operate in, ranging from streets, to neighbourhoods, parts of the city or the whole city and sometimes beyond. Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands, is the specific case study city. It is recently receiving attention for its transformative energy and as a breading ground for new city initiatives.

A list of 152 initiatives in Rotterdam was collected over the course of six months. The list of initiatives was drawn up in Excel in the period between October 2016 and March 2017. For the data collection process inclusion criteria have been used rather than an exclusion criteria. This way the literature framed the data collection process and provided a board scope. However, there was a second criterion during the data collection of initiatives: on contributing to sustainability transitions. Again,

this was considered in the broader sense and more an inclusion than exclusion criterion. The sustainability transitions contributions criteria included contributions to environmental and social sustainability, of cities, people and systems that connect them.

The data collection method was diverse and done in a systematic as well as an organic way. The goal was to collect basic information of the initiatives to be able to identify and describe themes, topics and types of initiatives. Over the course of the six months the researchers gathered 152 initiatives through (i) internet searches, that also lead to databases or previous mappings of other projects or organizations (ii) attending initiatives events, openings or initiative networking events, (iii) the network and knowledge from previous projects of the researchers involved, (iv) as well as through interviews that were conducted with key-stakeholders for a deeper understanding of the different actors in the field. During the interviews often other initiatives, as partners, competitors or examples, were mentioned and added to the list.

General characteristics of the initiatives were collected: (i) basic information (such as the name, the website, when it was founded and partners), (ii) the theme or sustainability goal they aimed at contributing to and (iii) the type of initiative (a community group, an event, a network initiative, etc.). For the last category it proved to be difficult to distinguish one from another, the types of initiatives, as was cited from literature before, is extraordinarily diverse. It made the need for a new type of characterization clear.

# Results

The results are presented in three parts. First, the ten types of emerging city makers are introduced. Second the ten types are mapped according to their participatory focus and sustainability focus. Third, the ten types are mapped according to their different (transition) activities. These mappings are done to further understand the different types and their particular strength and value for sustainability transitions in cities.

### The ten types of emerging city makers

The data of the 152 initiatives in the city of Rotterdam allowed the identification of ten types, based on the initial goals and motivations of each initiative. The ten types of initiatives or ten 'types of city makers' can be found in Table 1 as well as in Figure 1: *categorization of types of city initiatives.* It is a non-traditional categorization and includes actors that are maybe not the ones immediately thought of in sustainability transitions. It shows that the field of citizen's initiatives is extremely diverse.

Table 1 Categorization of types of city initiatives

| Nr. | Type of city initiative |
|-----|-------------------------|
| 1 | The community building |
| 2 | The community garden / playground |
| 3 | The community platform / group |
| 4 | The supporting platform / institute (often on a specific topic) |
| 5 | The network initiative, connection makers (often in a specific geographical area) |
| 6 | The building with room for events, experiments, artist hosting etc. |
| 7 | The maker space / lab building |
| 8 | The collective entrepreneurs / event building |
| 9 | The bright idea / innovation |
| 10 | The alternative system (monetary, energy, water, food, etc.) |

In the icons of Figure 1 an attempt is made at showing the different city makers that have a geographical base with a solid bottom or a building. The small squares and the colour yellow are used to identify initiatives that deliberately work on innovation. Where there are figurines of people seen it is clear that people are a large part of the focus of the type of initiatives.
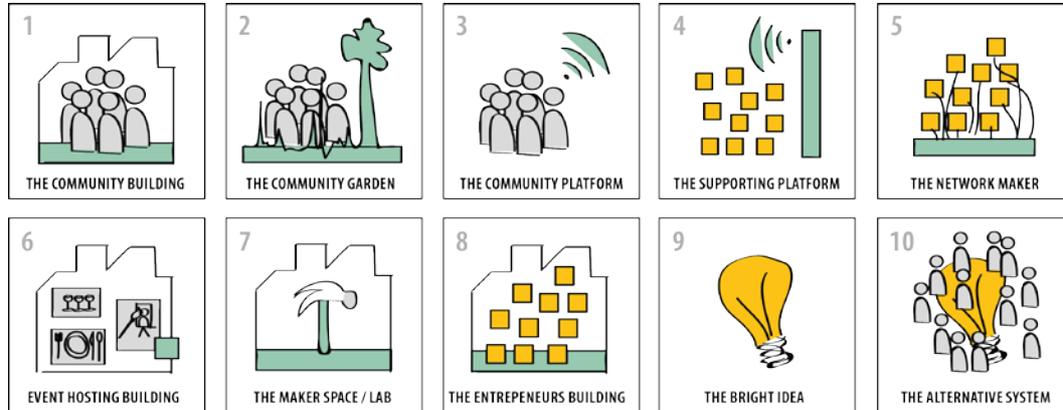


**Figure 1 Categorization of types of city initiatives**

## Participatory and sustainability focus of the ten types of city makers

The importance of participation in city making was identified before as well as recognized by the different actors in the field. Figure 2 shows a mapping of the ten types according to their participatory focus in the city and their focus on contributing to the sustainability transition of the city. Initiatives might also, without this deliberate focus, have an influence on sustainability transitions. This mapping however is made with the intended goals and focus of the initiatives.
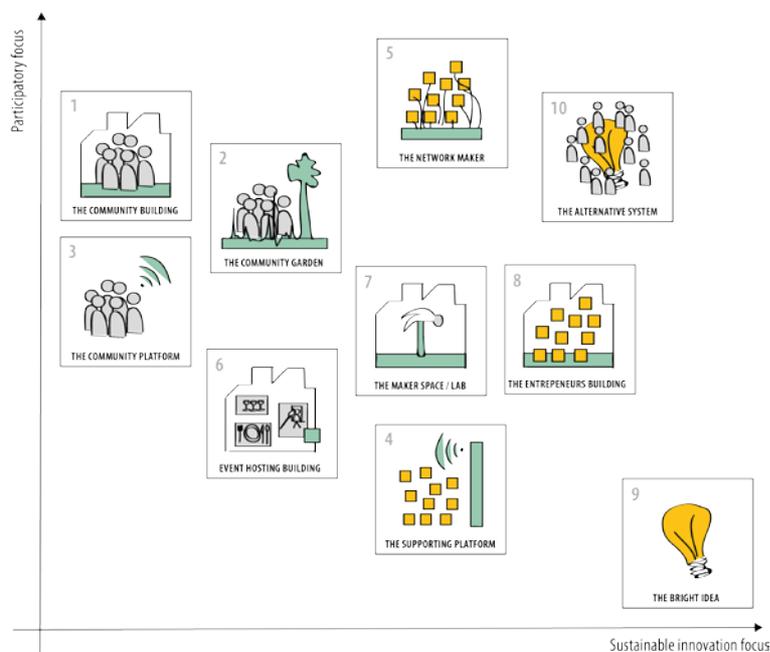


**Figure 2 Mapping of the ten types of city makers according to their participatory focus and their sustainable innovation focus**

**Transition activities and the ten types of city makers**

Last, the ten types of emerging city makers are mapped according to their focus on types of transition activities. The mapping is again made according to the activities that the initiatives purposely act out, not the ones they unintentionally act out. For example, an initiative could perform operational activities of starting a community garden. This could provoke the local government to invest in more green areas in the city. That way the garden could be seen as a strategic activity and a tactical activity, but this was not necessarily the aim of the initiative.
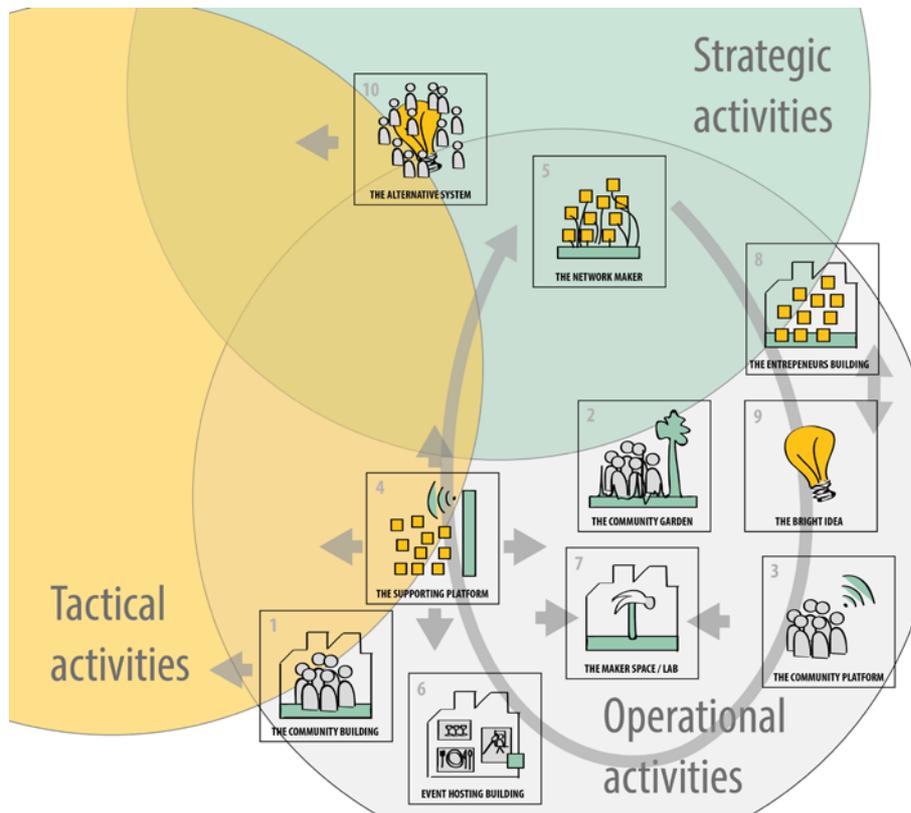


Figure 2 Mapping of the ten types of city makers according to their focus on activities

# Discussion

### The community types (1,2,3)

The community types are close to a more historic understanding of citizen initiatives. The community building, where communities gather, is not directly apparent as an actor in sustainability transitions, neither is it their focus. However, they are important as places for participation in cities, physical spaces where people meet. Their focus is on bringing people together which is important in networking the ideas citizens have. Also, they are often in close connection to local civil servants or local politics making them interesting places of hybrid meeting ground. As also seen in the second mapping, they are one of the few type where tactical and operational activities clearly meet. Similar participatory qualities are found in the community garden, but, on top of that, they provide spaces for contributions towards sustainability transitions in the form of green spaces, air quality or food and gardening. The last community type is the community platform; the drawback of such a virtual

connector is that not offering physical spaces to meet. Therefore, the community platforms are mapped lower on the participatory focus in the first mapping.

### The special buildings (1,6,7,8)

Within the ten types of emerging city makers, four types of buildings can be identified that are used as places for niche innovations and people to interact. These types of buildings are important as they all provide physical spaces for people to meet. With their focus on either innovation or social cohesion they provide network places for niche actors in cities. And, networking was identified as one of the three conditions for niche pathways to develop. The function of the community building was discussed before. The entrepreneur hosting building and the maker space or lab, focus more on innovation. They bring together specific actors around making and doing. The entrepreneur hosting building offers spaces to work and work together, it is a space for others to perform their operational activities. This is also the place where often the 'Bright Ideas' reside. Sometimes these buildings host people with a common ideology, stipulating visions towards different futures. This way their space becomes an even more focused and networked space of actors. The maker spaces are similar in a sense: they attract different kind of people and stimulate others to perform operational activities. The last building type, the event hosting building, is again a place for like-minded people to meet. Often these types of buildings have other main functions (museum, shop, gallery) but they host events, lectures or gatherings for specific types of communities.

### The alternative system and the network or connection maker (5, 9)

The 'alternative system' and the 'network maker' stand out in both mappings. In the first mapping they stand out for their participatory focus as well as their sustainability focus. In the second mapping they stand out for a focus on operational as well as strategic activities. However, they are quite different. Both their qualities however, lie in being able to connect different people and providing a strategic vision for the future. The 'alternative system' connects people over for example a new recycling system, a new food producing system or energy system. They connect people mostly as individuals with the goal to spread the system and let it grow. The 'network maker' has a different focus; it often connects different groups of people (initiatives) to strengthen the positions of these groups as a collective towards the common goal of these initiatives, not towards its own goal. The network maker is the one that recognizes transformative power and tries to support it by strengthening the network. The alternative system tries to make others part of their own transformative actions.

### Bright idea and supporting platform (4, 10)

The last two types are the 'bright idea' and the 'supporting platform'. The supporting platform is one that contains and sends information to the other types of city makers. They do not connect people but contain information useful for the transition activities of the others, such knowledge on specific topics, tools for different activities, or even information about subsidies. Then finally, the 'bright idea', this is where the actual technological innovations are found. These can be related most to the niche innovations talked about in more traditional socio-technical transition theory. In the cities there are many more 'bright ideas' found then for example 'network makers'. The 'bright ideas' are extremely important, however, it is also important that they do not act in a vacuum and therefore be connected to the other type of city makers.

# Conclusions

The ten types of city makers show that the landscape of emerging city makers is indeed diverse and that the term Third Sector or niche is maybe not sufficient. Often the discussion around these types of initiatives is focused on the use of the different general terms. It is believed that a discussion about the specific and particular is useful in understanding the real world phenomena. By understanding the different particulars, their contribution to the complexity of the larger system can be explored. Also, if all the different initiative or niche actors would be aggregated under one general term they would be addressed according to the same criteria and specific qualities of each type could be lost. In sustainability transitions the need for diversity in experimentation is often stressed, therefore understanding and capturing this diversity is also expected to be important in nurturing the diversity.

The specific value of the ten initiatives can be understood from the mappings and descriptions. However, taking a more participatory approach to city making could possibly increase their potential. The two mappings contributed in showing the particular variation in qualities of the ten different types of initiatives. Different type of axes could have revealed other variations in qualities, but these axes were chosen towards the proposition of a more participatory and active way of working on sustainability transitions. The goal of the mappings was therefore dual: to show the variety and to point towards emerging city makers for a more participatory focus in the sustainability transition of cities. Even without purposely addressing these goals some of the initiatives have a certain impact on sustainability transitions and show transformative qualities. Indeed, they might not necessarily have aspired to contribute to this impact and can also not be expected to do so, since they are often voluntary actions and have little formal positions. Such initiatives have potentially a significant contribution to both more engagement and more diversity of solutions, but so far the majority of these solutions struggle to capitalize on that value. They act in the operational domain, looking for space of action, finding funding, struggling with rules or legalization of their forms. Connecting these initiatives and promoting more participatory interactions towards other initiatives as well as state and private actors could help in mounting their potential.

To conclude, these new types of city makers generally bring value to the cities, however, this value could be enriched through more participatory networks that stimulate crossovers and accelerate the transition towards sustainable futures. However, the different types should not be treated as one and the same, they should all be nurtured and stimulated for their specific qualities. New approaches should be able to value the diversity and include these different types of initiatives in the city making process. The interconnectedness and complexity of the different old and new city makers calls for more holistic, participatory and systemic approaches to creating solutions. These approaches need yet to be developed; here systems thinking and design could greatly contribute to the development of these new systemic and participatory approaches. In order to develop these new ways of 'participatory city making' it is important to understand for whom and with whom these approaches need to be developed. Therefore, this landscape of emerging city makers that participate and contribute to the sustainability challenges of cities can be seen as an important starting point, that can stimulate the development of more participatory approaches in city making in the future; and with that feed the debate of how these design approaches can enable systemic change.

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