

Ordinary Invitations in Spaces of Everyday Life

Arriving in Neighborhood Life through Analogue Platforms

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Conceptualizing neighborhood life as *platforms* by using the platform analogy

Benches, blackboards, soccer courts, street signs, even the space in front of a building, conveniently located for cleaning a bike or chatting to a neighbor on the street...

Have you ever noticed the various *platforms* within an urban neighborhood? Platforms that invite people within that space to take a moment's rest, to observe life, and to engage in everyday happenings? This paper is an invitation to dive into urban neighborhood life by thinking about the non-digital neighborhood platforms in public spaces. It is an invitation to become aware of the various opportunities to actively participate and contribute organically to creating livable, social, vital urban public spaces. Please, join the imaginary neighborhood walk while reading this paper. Enjoy and discover ordinary (but fruitful) facets of everyday life in the neighborhood.

In characterizing specific neighborhood spaces as *ordinary*, the intention is not to imply that they are somehow simple or useless. Rather, referring to them as ordinary hints at the way in which they are frequently undervalued by people using (or not using) these spaces. Or people may not even be consciously aware of them. Let us think of these ordinary, public micro-spaces (Amin 2002) as invitations (see Koch/Latham 2013: 17). Invitations to do something, to make contact, and perhaps even socially interact (or not) with others. This paper aims at expanding our understanding of such invitations, seeing

them as non-digital neighborhood platforms with an element of analogue, spontaneous, and casual social interaction at their core.

The *platform* analogy drawn upon in this paper is influenced by recent debates on *platform urbanism*, which emphasize the digitalization of our lives in cities, where “[d]igital platforms mediate specific services for everyday life in cities, lead[ing] to new relations and interaction between service providers and users [...]” (Bauriedl/Strüver 2020: 274). As implied by this description, most analyses have focused specifically on digital services, such as Airbnb, Uber, or food and grocery delivery services. This paper seeks to contribute a complementary non-digital, ‘analogue’ dimension to our understanding to neighborhood platforms. Non-digital neighborhood platforms might serve as ‘enablers’ for social interaction but should not be pre-defined as *being social* in the sense that social media or sharing platforms usually tend to self-represent. Dominant social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram have become important tools in placemaking and branding neighborhoods and communities (Breek/Eshuis/Hermes 2021). Additionally, specific digital neighborhood platforms also exist. Prominent international proponents include Neighbourly¹ or Nextdoor². At the local level, FragNebenan³ and Im-Grätzl⁴ are two recent examples of neighborhood platforms operating in Vienna, Austria. These cases of digital neighborhood platforms both have an overarching aim of *sharing*, enabling individuals and businesses to give back to the community in the form of time or other resources (e.g., rooms, tools, knowledge). However, (potentially huge) differences in visual appearance, financial construction, and spatial scope, as well as the organization of activities in and for the neighborhood create specific (market) niches. Such platforms enable sharing practices by linking needs and interests through a digital platform. The enabling element might be seen as a key characteristic of both digital and non-digital neighborhood platforms. While the former aim to enable social interaction through digital technology, non-digital neighborhood platforms deploy their materialized existence in micro-spaces within the neighborhood.

This article starts from the position that urban neighborhoods represent focal points of everyday life. Practices of everyday life occur largely through

1 See <https://www.neighbourly.com/>.

2 See <https://nextdoor.com/>.

3 See <https://fragnebenan.com/>.

4 See <https://www.imgratzl.at/>.

unplanned, superficial, fluid, and temporally limited interactions, similar in character to *arrival infrastructures*, which support newcomers (Meeus/Arnaut/van Heur 2019). Neighborhoods can be seen as the built environment in which people form public spaces, allowing for contact, interaction, and more. These platform-like spaces might be considered as entry points from which one might socially *arrive* in a neighborhood, or from which one might *depart* when staying feels unpleasant or uncomfortable rather than inviting. Encounters may or may not occur in these public spaces, but the very possibility exists by virtue of their existence. There is the invitation to become part of the neighborhood, not just as a passer-by, but as an active participant in the form of conversation, activities, or other involvement. As such, arriving in a neighborhood also means making social connections and participating in everyday life.

Arriving in a neighborhood through platforms

To capture the full picture of everyday life, considerations of platform urbanism should not be limited to the digital platforms that ‘organize’ neighborhood life. We might also consider neighborhood platforms that exist in public spaces within the material world (specifically, within urban neighborhoods) that can be entered both bodily and cognitively. Materialized platforms are tangible features in the public space. They enable individuals to change the situation in which they are located in real-life, creating the possibility of spontaneous interactions. Such an understanding is built on the assumption that visible, material platforms can serve as enablers for action or interaction, which can variably be pleasant or unpleasant – or, indeed, eliciting no reaction at all. These interactions might take the form of a conversation, fleeting eye-contact, or shared laughter over funny neighborhood goings-on mutually observed by two or more people. These examples already indicate an awareness of ordinary but socially connecting interactions. They might be more meaningful compared to the ‘ordinary uses’ of neighborhood spaces, which oftentimes are merely viewed as passing-through spaces in which people move from A to B.

In this context, the notion of *arrival* is significant, both in terms of newcomers to a neighborhood, but also for long-term residents seeking to become more involved in their community or more ‘connected’ to people and places. Terms and concepts emerging around the *arrival city* (Saunders 2012)

are mostly linked to processes of migration and diversification. Driven by new schemes of international migration and super-diverse neighborhoods, current academic discourses on arrival spaces and arrival infrastructure capture the character of flow, fluidity, and relationships in the urban context at specific points in time (Meeus/Arnaut/van Heur 2019; Schrooten/Meeus 2019). Since Saunders' book, *Arrival City*, was published in 2012, an interest (mostly academic) has evolved concerning the process of arriving in a city and the possibilities and limitations that this entails. While Saunders looks at arrival from the perspective of international migration, other authors, like Hans et al. (2019: 515), expand the notion of arrival city into the concept of *arrival spaces*, understood as those parts of an arrival city that are shaped by international migration. Such spaces include diverse types of migrants, high fluctuation in numbers within these groups, and a high concentration of *structures for opportunities*. Possibilities for arrival in urban spaces can be assessed in terms of the availability of inexpensive spaces for people to inhabit.

The notion of *arriving in the neighborhood* is connected to spaces and structures, which invite and enable one *to arrive*. However, the arrival process is not only relevant for migrants, but also for ordinary residents. The examples of materialized non-digital platforms showcased in this paper shed light on public spaces in urban neighborhoods in which all residents and visitors may arrive, free of charge or at minimal expense, in their everyday lives – irrespective of peoples' length of stay. The examples are manifold both in appearance and potential to stimulate social interaction, but they all include the potential for spontaneous, fleeting encounters. Such interaction might simply entail making brief eye-contact or exchanging a friendly greeting with someone who already seems at home in the neighborhood, but even these minute interactions can contribute to a sense of belonging (see Blokland/Nast 2014). Analogue platforms in the neighborhood might be seen as spaces of encounter (Valentine 2008), open to all newcomers in urban neighborhoods, but also for long-term residents. As spaces of encounter, non-digital neighborhood platforms enable the development of social interaction, relations, and networks, as well as of negotiation of conflict and power (im)balances – all considered crucial elements in cohesive urban (neighborhood) development.

Finding 'non-digital social platforms' in urban neighborhoods

In this paper, the notion of *non-digital social neighborhood platforms* is based on a visual approach that selects *platform spaces*, viewing them as anchor points from which to reflect on their potential for social interaction within a neighborhood. The identification and selection of spaces for analysis in this paper was inspired by Boot (2017: 144) who applied a visual workshop and developed further *streetology* – a framework invented by the Dutch designer Reineke Otten. The aim of streetology is to analyze patterns of everyday life from a visual perspective. Specifically, this approach entails looking at pictures, treating them as stand-alone pieces taken out of context and seeing the process as an opportunity to identify new contexts which might have remained invisible if the picture had shown more visual information on the environment. By repeating the analyses of decontextualized elements in public spaces, new contexts may occur, as well as patterns that can be found in other situations.

As such, the following identification and presentation of non-digital social platforms in the public spaces of urban neighborhoods in Vienna (Austria) is completely subjective. However, reflective interpretation that builds upon the background of current debates in society, planning, and academia is added. This explorative approach – designed as imaginary neighborhood walk – might serve as starting point, contributing an important (analogue) dimension to the concept of *platform urbanism*.

How should one read the imaginary neighborhood walk that follows below? It starts easy with looking at the picture of the presented platform and identifying its use, location, and spatial context. Ask yourself questions, such as: what does it look like? Where is it positioned, and what else might be in the direct environment? How do you imagine the local context? Would you find this platform in your own neighborhood? Then, juxtapose your thinking on these questions with the 'Platform for' explanation provided. Now, as invitations include communication, the platform is speaking to you while you read the 'self-description' given by the platform itself. Next, you might begin an inner conversation with yourself concerning whether you would accept or refuse the invitation issued by the neighborhood platform. If you like to compare your own reaction to another (imaginary) one, read the inner conversation by the passer-by. It is a hypothetical formulation, and you may (or may not) find yourself in this conversation. Do you know why you would react similarly to the passer-by – or completely differently? Finally, in case you wonder what is needed to create such non-digital neighborhood platforms,

the explanations on 'character' and 'requirements' may stimulate reflections on both simplicity and complexity of non-digital social neighborhood platforms. Surprisingly, sometimes it merely seems to require ordinary material to create more than ordinary spaces.

"Arriving on platform...": Selection of arrival platforms in urban everyday (neighborhood) life

"Arriving on platform 'INFORMATION': Local activities ahead."

Platform for: Central point of information on neighborhood activities provided by local management. Invitation to participate in activities and initiatives to get to know other locals and the possibility of co-creating your neighborhood.

Information-board to passer-by: *"Hi there, would you like to know what is going on in your 'hood'? Pretty sure, you do not realize how many people take care of your living environment. Well, although not everyone feels attracted to becoming active in the participation process, just give it a try and you will see that your demands and ideas will be heard. In any case, you will be surprised that 'knowing about' activities in your neighborhood already makes a difference to how you will perceive your living environment."*

Inner conversation from passer-by: *"Well there. What's the worst that could happen? I have to walk the dog, anyhow. Why not join the neighborhood walk next Friday afternoon? Maybe there is someone who can explain why the building next to mine is still empty and underused. This does not feel right in a city where so many people are searching for housing. But I have no idea what is going on there, and who leaves a building empty? If no one knows anything, well, I at least have enjoyed a neighborhood walk and put my interests and concerns out there."*

Character: Materialized, visible, provision of information.

Requirement: Material infrastructure, awareness of the intended action, i.e., "read about news from the neighborhood"; someone who takes the time to stay informed; someone who takes the time to read information.

Figure 1 Invitation to inform yourself about activities in the neighborhood and to eventually participate in these



(Franz 2021)

"Arriving on platform 'MEDIATION': Productive conflict management ahead."

Platform for: Various uses and appropriations of public space by different interest groups, which are mediated by intermediaries who balance out different demands, uses, and interests in the public space.

Graffiti wall to passer-by: *"Hi there, I know, this place looks quite ordinary. You often walk through without even noticing how precious this space in the city is to kids and young people. Can you imagine the scarcity of space available to them? Obviously, con-*

flicts are pretty likely if you have limited space and many interests. Playing basketball while skaters and scooters wind around the surface and others would like to take a rest is not always fun. In that case, mediators are trained social workers who can balance out interests through communication. And guess what: it is always about communication. Suddenly, multi-uses of the space at the same time become possible.”

Inner conversation from passer-by: “Look at this, the painting could use some fresh color. Why is there a painting at all on this wall behind the bike racks? Someone is obviously taking care of this park. I did not even recognize a park. It is more like an ordinary space. Well, anyhow, if someone takes care of it, there must be some people using it.”

Character: Subtle sign of existence; existence of human-spatial interactions; communication-based park mediation.

Requirement: Users of public space; human resources; training and skills in mediation; reason for interaction with different interest groups and users in the public space.

Figure 2 Invitation to think about different demands of park users and how to mediate those interests



(Franz 2021)

of different perspectives and interests amongst people using this neighborhood, there is even more: have you ever wanted to learn a foreign language? Read this advertisement on the pole. There is a native-speaker nearby offering to share her linguistic skills with people like you."

Inner conversation from passer-by: *"Come on, why should I stop here and look at the pole of a traffic sign? It is a busy pedestrian street and there is scarcely enough space to pass others by. And I really do not think that putting stickers on public inventory is an appropriate way of decoration. But I like the announcement of the language course. Last time, I noticed announcements for babysitting. It is quite nice to learn about the skills people from this neighborhood are willing to share. Even if I do not call the language trainer, I have learnt a little bit about the people from the neighborhood."*

Character: Improvised and informal; randomly allocated in the public space at eye-level; invitation to read without expectations as to whether a reaction occurs or not.

Requirement: Urban furniture, written information, and messages.

"Arriving on platform 'COMMUNICATION': Unexpected conversation ahead."

Platform for: Designated sitting place for having a conversation; intends to enable communication amongst people from the neighborhood; could prevent loneliness by instigating contact with others one does not know; might lead to an unpleasant or uncomfortable conversation with random people; possibility of creating a sense of 'public familiarity' once a conversation has begun.

Chair to passer-by: *"Hi there, would you like to have a nice conversation? Possibly with someone you do not yet know, who may live nearby, though you might have never met otherwise because you have no common friends or interests. However, you obviously share a sense of curiosity. So, welcome, take a seat, and enjoy the anticipation of seeing whether someone will sit next to you."*

Inner conversation from passer-by: *"Well there. What's the worst that could happen? Maybe I should just sit down and see? Though maybe no one will pass by and sit down? Also, not everyone knows that these chairs are designated to invite conversation. But why should I assume this? Anyway, it might be nice if I move the chairs to catch the sun*

while waiting for some conversationalist. I will give it a try and sit down for a couple of minutes. If nothing happens, at least I will have enjoyed observing the neighborhood in the sunshine."

Character: Materialized, visible commitment: "If I sit down, I'd like to talk."

Requirement: Material infrastructure; awareness of the intended action, i.e., 'to sit down'; for someone else to sit down; conversation.

Figure 4 Invitation to take a seat and to expect a conversation with a stranger



(Franz 2021)

"Arriving on platform 'SELF-REPRESENTATION': Just being yourself ahead."

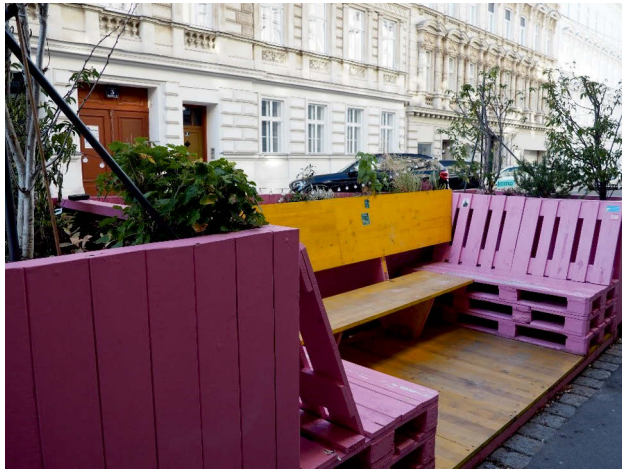
Platform for: Sitting, resting, and conversing in the midst of the neighborhood; intends to expand available public space by reducing space for parking lots. Instead, space for social interaction is provided by offering an inviting place for all kinds of ordinary appropriations, such as whiling away a lunch break, quietly reading a book, or meeting friends outside. The active use of

this space creates a sense of urban vibrancy in a residential neighborhood with limited public space available for active use.

Parklet to passer-by: *“Good afternoon, what a lovely sunny day! Please, take a seat in the shade. It is free of charge and no one is here at the moment. Some people from this neighborhood have lovingly cultivated this area and would be really delighted to see it become a well-used micro public space. It is way friendlier in this big city if we share the outside space and make contact with one another, don’t you agree? What a treat to hang out outdoors without the obligation to consume anything, just being yourself.”*

Inner conversation from passer-by: *“Such a colorful place amidst the greyish, black, and white cars on this street. I feel instantly happier just looking at this inviting sitting area. I was going to go home, but I would probably just end up reading some news on my smartphone anyway. Why not do it here, outside? Nobody minds whether if I sit here or not, so I may as well do it. And I could call a friend to come over and join me for small talk.”*

Figure 5 Invitation to take a seat and to share a micro public space



(Franz 2021)

Character: Do-it-yourself design; accessible, low-commitment sitting area; visual limitation to parking lots next to it; recreational and cooling due to some greenery; consumption free.

Requirement: Designated space in the public space (former parking lot); legal permission; self-organized people to establish, build, and finance the place; regular maintenance to avoid deterioration; people who use the space in their daily life practices.

“Arriving on platform ‘MOBILITY’: Micro mobility ahead.”

Platform for: Various modes of (mainly) micro mobility including e-scooter and bicycle sharing systems as well as tools (e.g., tire pump, repair tools) to maintain their own bike; mobility-related information and orientation within the neighborhood.

Pole to passer-by: *“Hi there, do you need a quick ride? You find here all sorts of options to move from here to somewhere. Of course, you might prefer to walk. But what about using a bicycle or e-scooter? Rent it here and return it elsewhere. Got it, this might seem too complicated as you do not know whether there is a similar mobility hub at the place you want to go. But I see, you do have your own bike with you. Put some fresh air into your tire. You see, you can also use this super convenient tire pump over here. And if you need some help with a repair, why don't you ask just this young guy returning an e-scooter?”*

Inner conversation from passer-by: *“Well, this comes as a surprise: all kinds of support to use sustainable modes of transport in one place. I have never seen that before. The planners of this place even included a map to orientate myself in the small streets of this neighborhood. This is much more convenient compared to the small digital map on my smartphone. The tire pump really comes handy to put some fresh air into my tires. I will use it right away and will be even faster on my bike arriving to my next meeting. I am wondering if I am the only one using this professional tire pump. Next time I come by this place, I will use the little repair pillar to check my bike frame and fix some screws.”*

Character: Visible and inclusive due to its various services for different modes of micro mobility; empowering due to its support for self-servicing and maintaining own bike or scooter; central mobility hub to use bike or e-scooter sharing.

Requirement: Designated space in the public space (former parking lot); cooperation with micro mobility providers; commitment to principles of sustainable mobility and sharing; financial means to build and maintain this mobility hub; people who use these services.

Figure 6 Invitation to maintain own means of micro mobility or to participate in sharing micro mobility



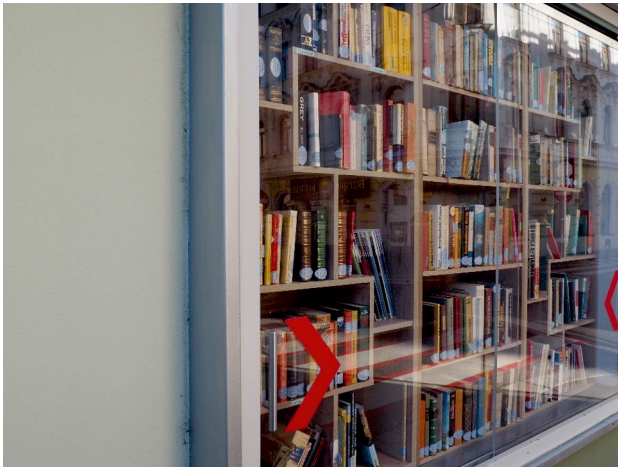
(Franz 2021)

"Arriving on platform 'SHARING': Circular economy ahead."

Platform for: Exchanging books and contributing to a sharing economy; spending some time exploring the books on offer; associate with other book readers and lenders.

Public bookcase to passer-by: *"Hey, dear friend. When did you last read a book? Look at me, I am filled with all sorts of books. From novels to children's books, to cookery books and dictionaries. I am sure you will find at least one book that interests you. And guess what? You will not only enjoy a good read for free, but you will also be contributing to a more sustainable future. Wondering why? Well, you do not need to buy a book which will remain in your bookshelf at home, lonely, and only read once. You return it to this bookcase so that someone else can enjoy it after you. If that person also returns the book, we will have managed to create a circular lending system. And I am really proud that I have become a much more active space instead of a boring shop window nobody paid attention to. So, please, help yourself!"*

Figure 7 Invitation to lend and read a book, and then to share the book again



(Franz 2021)

Inner conversation from passer-by: *“Books. I have so many books at home that are not used. I mean, you read a book once, maybe a second time years later, or you give it to a friend who appreciates a book recommendation. But, in general, they take up quite a lot of space in my home. And I do not want to throw them away. This bookcase could be a good opportunity to pass along at least some of the books from my home. It is nice to imagine someone else taking pleasure in reading it. It seems like a subtle way of sharing resources with strangers, who are in fact not so strange after all, since we share a common interest in books.”*

Character: Vehicle to create micro activities amongst people; stimulation of attractive ground floor use; do-it-yourself design; cost-free sharing.

Requirement: Bookcase accessible in a sheltered public space to save books from wet conditions; bottom-up initiative to build a public bookcase; substantial financial investment; people who donate books; people who borrow books.

Arriving in the neighborhood, or ready for departure? Reflecting on the potential for new relations and interaction

Did you enjoy the imaginary neighborhood walk? Do you feel elevated, maybe because you recognized some analogue platforms which also exist in your own neighborhood? Were your responses similar to the platform invitation, or similar to the hypothetical inner-conversations from the passer-by? Building on these experiences, we now think about the connection between the invitations issued through analogue platforms and to make (active or passive) use of this (new) awareness to create new relations and interactions within our own neighborhood (Bauriedl/Strüver 2020). Fig. 8 aims to systemize the non-digital social platforms in urban neighborhoods based on their potential to create, actively or passively, (new) relations and interactions (x-axis), as well their invitation to arrive in or to depart from the neighborhood (y-axis).

While the information-board (example one) and the graffiti wall (example two) might invite passers-by to learn about and reflect upon the neighborhood, the character of these interactions remains quite passive. One might ‘merely’ read or think about the role of activities that go on in the neighborhood but, in being better informed, this might nonetheless support the individual’s arrival in the neighborhood. The parklet that serves as a sitting

Figure 8 Reflecting on the potential for new relations and arrival in the neighborhood



(Franz 2021)

island (example five) might elevate an individual's arrival in the neighborhood by supporting self-representation in everyday life and facilitating them in becoming familiar to others from the neighborhood. Use of the conversation chairs (example four) and the public bookcase (example seven) both involve a visible activity (i.e., to sit down or to take a book and return it later). Both examples also entail an element of communication and 'tangible intention', indicating an interest in having a conversation or sharing same interests. As

such, both platforms may have the highest potential for interaction and for creating new relations. The traffic sign (example three), as well as the mobility pole (example six), provide knowledge about existing services in (and maybe even outside of) the neighborhood, as well as repair tools and micro mobility services to even leave the neighborhood (and later return). Nevertheless, both service platforms remain at the individual level and might only allow for interaction (through support) and new relations in the neighborhood in a passive sense.

However, why are there no examples for analogue social platforms in urban neighborhoods included in the upper left segment of Fig. 8? Platforms which actively invite one to leave (rather than remain within) the neighborhood, and to socially interact elsewhere? Perhaps, those platforms might not exist. Alternatively, they may seem so radical in appearance that we ignore, avoid, or reject them. More likely, however, they do exist and actually represent our tangible and self-created social network existing of stronger ties to friends, families, colleagues, and others. But those ties probably do not create spontaneous interactions for new relations or opportunities to arrive in the neighborhood.

Drawing on the imaginary neighborhood walk in this paper, we might ask: what makes analogue platform urbanism distinct from digital platform urbanism? Obviously, both impact upon everyday urban life by providing and mediating services through platforms (Bauriedl/Strüver 2020). However, the difference may lie in the details. Digital platform urbanism emphasizes the technical aspects in the 'new organization' of everyday life, where so-called *service providers* interact with *users* through digital platforms. This requires a distinct practice of active engagement with others. There is no reason to use a digital platform unless one is interested in the consumption of a specific service. On the contrary, analogue platform urbanism differs in intention, character, temporality, and economic value extraction. The service provided on the platform is represented as an invitation to interact socially. This invitation might be accepted or refused; yet, in both cases it cannot be guaranteed that social interaction will (or will not) take place. What happens will happen as analogue platform urbanism consists of material platforms in the public space being used (or not used) by human beings.

The materialization of the platforms might be planned by civic or even public actors. Also, the location and maintenance of these in the public space represents intended practices. However, the actual use of the platforms and the resulting interaction between human beings can only be enabled. Such

interactions are unplanned, occurring spontaneously with high fluidity (in the sense of its non-binding nature) between *users* and *service providers*. The *social value* of analogue platform urbanism cannot, however, be priced, sold, or bought.

Recapitulating the seven examples in this paper and thinking about them together as social platforms shows that the appearance and character of non-digital social platforms in urban neighborhoods are manifold. They are all tangible invitations to participate in neighborhood life, but their variety may differ between neighborhoods within a city, as well as across cities and countries. Nevertheless, they most likely exist everywhere and, in a sense, provide evidence of a travelling concept of neighborhood practices performed through platforms. We may learn from these practices by reflecting upon our role as residents in neighborhoods, but also on the role of planners in supporting the co-creation of *ordinary spaces* and the role of policymakers in thinking differently about infrastructure. A more differentiated understanding of all sorts of urban infrastructure not only concerns the question of accessible infrastructure and how to organize their services efficiently through digital and analogue urban platforms. It is also about the pronunciation of an invitation to engage in (neighborhood) life. Everyday.

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