

## **L200: a model for hybrid common spaces in Zurich**

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Published in German at *dérive* No. 81, Okt-Dec. 2020

**Self-organized spaces managed and used in common around the world showcase bottom-up options complementary to the market and the state for providing urban places that support conviviality, alternative culture, grassroots initiatives, participatory practices, political struggles, and more. Depending on the context they have developed different types of identities, governance models, and relationships with the local municipalities, acting as examples for others to get inspired from and translate to their own realities. In this article we introduce L200 as a community space, which was founded more than two years ago in Zurich's city center, and compare it with spaces like *La Casa Invisible* in Malaga, *L'Asilo* in Naples or *Navarinou Park* in Athens.**

Langstrasse is one of Zurich's most famous streets, an important traffic axis, shopping and entertainment mile. Anyone strolling past number 200 is going to see the L200 space. Perhaps a few people are bent over their laptops while others are having a conversation or setting the table for a meal. Perhaps a discussion meeting is taking place or there might be a party going on. A shop window might be announcing events and advertising a new housing cooperative. Another one might be presenting a new product like the plant fertiliser made from urine while the nearby window shows vases made from coloured concrete that are for sale. "What is this?" is written on a board at the entrance, and next to it another board answers: "Also your space". The premises, which are an event location and coworking space too, is a space that invites everyone to use it, who do not want to exclude others.

The L200 space is run by an association of organizations and individuals without subsidies or any other external financial support. L200 is particularly focusing on developing an inclusive identity through a participatory process, which has the potential to serve as an exemplary model for three different ways of merging the concepts of commons and infrastructure.

First, L200 space is designed and governed as a common infrastructure. As an urban space it is conceived across both physical and digital domains, whose costs, use and operation are shared between the members of the L200 association through a simple cost and space sharing mechanism. Second, since its first days of operation L200 has been infrastructuring the commons, having become the home of various local initiatives that promote urban commons solutions to critical domains like food, housing, digital platforms, sustainable lifestyles, and the like. The space has the potential to provide high visibility to a wider audience and to facilitate exchanges, cooperation, and synergies between initiatives that, although are like minded and prone to networking and working across networks, often stay isolated being kept too busy with their own struggles. Third, L200 is conceived from the beginning as a prototype that is meant to be easily replicated through a detailed documentation of its governance model and other important design decisions. This is actually a process of "infrastructuring" for the creation of such spaces, an easily replicable model of a shared, hybrid, central, and self-organized urban space.

For the different actors involved, however, the starting points and final objectives differ. For some, L200 was conceived as a means to fight neighborhood gentrification. Thus L200 would provide an affordable place supporting small local shops and businesses. For others, L200 is part of a wider claim for the right to the city and the right to centrality, providing a central location with particularly good visibility for promoting commoning practices. From a global perspective, L200 is seen also as a laboratory for developing sustainable models for addressing the urgent climate crisis, reflected by the

high number of initiatives on sustainability, food waste or cooperative housing. L200 is seen also as a digital place allowing experimentation and learning processes based on grassroots digital platforms that are built with free and open source software and are anchored in physical locations namely a way toward an “organic Internet” (Antoniadis 2018).

Community places that promote social cohesion, conviviality, and collective awareness --a necessary ingredient for a democratic society-- are disappearing when are most needed, in times when urban demographics change rapidly and become more and more diverse while digitization leads to more alienation and polarization. It is not difficult to see that all these narratives are actually overlapping and depend on each other. At L200 internal cooperation and synergies are already being formed, between initiatives that concentrate their activity on one domain, let's say food waste, but to which the shared infrastructure provides fruitful and necessary exchanges with related organizations such as housing cooperatives or neighborhood associations.

In terms of specifics of shaping spaces as commons, Stavrides (2016) notes that in the co-creation process of “common spaces” there are certain rules developed about how this sharing is to be performed. Likewise, to keep the space common “there must be developed forms of contestation and agreement about its use and character which explicitly prevent any accumulation of power. Especially, any accumulation of situated, space-bound power” (Stavrides 2016, p.106).

There are many examples of urban self-managed spaces, which could be characterized as “common spaces,” and perhaps the most important challenge that they face independently of their particular focus (culture, politics, sustainability, neighbourhood life) is the difficulty in materializing their intentions toward three key values:

- inclusivity: who feels or does not feel entitled to use the space,
- freedom: to what degree the project is independent from the state and/or the market in the space operation, and
- democratic decision-making: how the power relationships between the different actors contributing more or less to the operation and maintenance of the space evolve over time.

L200 shares many commonalities with existing projects, but also important differences in trying to address some inherent contradictions that appear over time. In the following we will include a few remarks comparing design decisions at L200 compared with those of three selected projects that actively try to find solutions to preserve the above values of self-organized spaces: *L'Asilo* in Naples, a model of the ‘civic use’ (uso civico) in the commoning processes in Italian cities; *La Casa Invisible*, a landmark project for the right to the city struggles in Malaga, Spain; and *Parko Navarinou*, a collective claim for green public space in a very (politically) vivid neighbourhood in Athens, Greece.

## **The physical space**

L200 is located in an especially central and visible location in the city. Langstrasse is one of the busiest and most diverse streets at the heart of Zurich, connecting two central districts (4 and 5) with high quality urban life. It is in close proximity to many active urban nodes including the newly built cultural center Kosmos, the art cinema Riffraff, and the convivial Josefstrasse and Limmatplatz. Its main space has an area of only 75 sqm that may be flexibly organized for various uses throughout the day. Although its surface is rather small, there is a wide variety of activities with very different needs sometimes in the course of a single day, which might take place even in parallel. The relatively small size of the space and its very high visibility are two key differentiating factors compared to other similar community spaces, and they have influenced significantly the space’s identity and its distinct characteristics.

High visibility is generally considered as a spatial quality of critical importance. In the case of L200 it

supports our claim of the right to centrality that means to regroup differences in relation to each other (Lefebvre 1991), aiming to bring alternative underrepresented voices on the main urban stage and at the same time aiming for diversity. In other words, rather than treating alternatives as “special” cases, from this standpoint they belong to a wider collection of voices across social, political, or economic bubbles. As we explain below, this proves to be a goal that requires a constant effort.

## Identity and otherness

The identity of the L200 space is explicitly defined as neutral. It does not try to secure a place in the market by establishing a "brand" as a new competitor, but to promote holistic thinking and inclusive values. The choice of the space's name was such a decision: L200 refers to the physical location derived from the address at Langstrasse 200.



Figure 1. L200 entrance showcasing two explanatory panels including the question “What is this?” (Was ist das?) and the main motto “Also Your Space” (Auch Dein Raum)

In the case of goods used in common, there is a risk that individuals will try to appropriate them. Therefore, a decisive rule of the spatial concept was: no member should dominate, neither the space itself through extensive use nor its overall identity, for instance, in communication and appearance to the outside. On the one hand, this rule came as a result of the desire for diversity and inclusivity. On the other, it is based on more pragmatic reasons required by very high rental costs, by a rather small size of space and by the multiplicity of actors involved in its founding, because L200 came to life from a wealth of aims, needs, projects and actors.

Similarly to L200, *La Casa Invisible* has been initiated in Malaga through a merge of four “traditions” as described by Kike España [2]. In this particular case they are the classical squatting movement together with other social movements, with academics, artists and creators without a workspace in the city. Then two additional generations entered this constellation namely the 15M-Movement and more

recently feminism and climate change activism. Still, although the project is “against any form of community identity or self-reference,” “this never works ideally” and mechanisms like the *acogida* (welcoming) are devised for newcomers.

In the process, however, Kike España identifies a so-called double danger, which is “of not being open enough for new people and new ideas to engage with and, at the same time, of losing the radical and politically experimental form of doing things in the city (not just being a place for activities).” To this respect, L200’s claim is different since it explicitly presents itself as “a place for activities”, but which also include radical, alternative, and progressive ones.

Comparable challenges and dilemmas are faced by the key actors of Napoli-based *L’Asilo* --the so-called “inhabitants”-- those that are frequenting and contributing to the space. As described by Antonio Vesco [3], “it is absolutely true that l’asilo can be perceived from the outside ALSO as a space managed by a closed community of subjects.” But “it is also true that their efforts to maintain an openness and an effective accessibility of that space are constant [...] the more they feel capable of (and good at) welcoming people outside the community of the inhabitants, the more their clan spirit grows. Because this ability gives them the confirmation that they are a community capable of applying the “best” principles of commoning.”

Unlike these projects, in the case of *Parko Navarinou* in Athens, this inherent contradiction is spelled out as a concrete disagreement between competing groups. Stavrides summarizes it by means of a (rhetorical) question: “Is the occupied park a place of the movement, part of the anti-capitalist movement’s network of squatted places and open only to those who belong to the movement, or is the park an open common space that has to provide to different people the opportunity to enjoy and create what capitalist urbanism has deprived them of (green areas, urban gardening, free access to alternative events, open and imaginative playground areas, etc.)?” (Stavrides 2016, p.247).

Another challenge that *Parko Navarinou* has to address is the use of the park by drug addicts who frequent the neighborhood. The most recent (difficult) decision to make was to extend the “big playground” project to the entire park and to install an additional entrance gate. That together with the fence erected a few months ago, now considerably limits the park’s accessibility but better protects the children, its most vulnerable users.

At L200 such dilemmas have been discussed in advance within the initiating group, and the agreed-upon resolution was that failing to keep the space neutral and open to all types of usages would be against its main purpose. Therefore, the desire to be as inclusive as possible is made explicit, by choosing a neutral name representing the actual postal address, by using “Also Your Space” as the main motto, by placing the question “What is this?” prominently in the space’s facade (Figure 1), and in the overall communication and decision-making.

Access to the space for activities is, for instance, on a strictly First-Come-First-Serve policy, subject only to a few standard rules on respect, consideration, inclusion etc. Most importantly, after any event or installation, the space has to return to its previous, relatively neutral state.

In spite of being aware of these “dangers” since the L200’s initiation, to avoid the domination of the space’s identity over time --not only by powerful actors, but also by powerful types of usage (e.g., art, technology, politics, ecology)-- is still a task more difficult than it might seem. The L200 operation is a continuous struggle in keeping a certain balance, as some usages become more popular or intentionally or not, members try to appropriate the space.

## Legal form and decision-making

L200 is an association (“Verein L200”), which by the Swiss Law is a very flexible form of bottom-up organization. Note that the Swiss Confederation is a direct democracy through which citizens tend to be more empowered than in a representative democracy. As political engagement is part of the everyday life of Switzerland’s inhabitants, this democratic exercise enables a multitude of self-organized expressions of community. A Verein enables its members to act collectively based on a set of principles constituting its establishment. The L200 Verein counts today around 150 members [4] and has an elected board of five people, making everyday decisions and holding the activities in accordance with the association’s principles. Aside from the board and the yearly general assembly -- in the first two assemblies around 30 members have joined-- at L200 there is an elected general manager and a users’ group staying in communication in order to organize the daily space operation and maintenance. Participation in the board is open and there has been significant turnover of board members. Since the model is still in development other imposed rotation rules are not yet in place, but they will be considered in the near future.

The coordination of such a diverse set of groups and activities becomes a challenging task subject to complex decision making. In practice the initial set of values and corresponding rules have been defined through quick adaptations over time by the core group (general manager, members of the board and president, and members of the users’ group), and were presented for approval to the general assembly together with the situations in which some of the rules had to be enforced or refined. [5] For example, a rule was introduced stating that big organizations (i.e., with more than 20 employees, commercial activities, and national or international scope) are not allowed to use the space for co-working. Also, there are certain limits on the number of events per organization and per type, number of co-workers per organization, maximum duration of window usage, and more.

The decision-making process of L200 departs significantly from the regular assemblies taking place at places like *L’Asilo*, *La Casa Invisible*, and *Navarinou Park*. Such regular assemblies are clearly important participatory tools but at the same can cause “participation fatigue” --especially in Switzerland where people participate typically in many associations-- and an inevitable “domination” by the “regulars”.

Having established a well-defined (simple) interface between the space as a common infrastructure, and the non-curated usage by the different members, a wide variety of activities can take place without having to allocate unlimited time for discussions, decision-making, and conflict resolution. We call this a *structured laisser faire* participatory design approach allowing every member to have access to the space for certain periods of time as if it was their space, given that they respect the same right for all other members (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Examples of L200 activities: a children workshop and a large public event. A detailed list showcasing the high level of diversity achieved is documented online [4]

### **Relation to the City as renter and the question of sustainability**

L200 is renting the space from the City of Zurich but at its market price. For the members of the association, however, the space is a commons, increasing the density of use and sharing its time-space in creative ways by constantly changing uses over the course of a week and even during a day. From the very first days of its operation, L200 became home to the Forum 5im5i association, [6] which is active in support of small shops in Zurich's Kreis 5 and against the impact of gentrification on neighborhood life, to the NeNa1 cooperative housing project that works toward imagining alternative and sustainable ways of living and working together, Transition Zurich that is active in maintaining a

wide network of initiatives promoting sustainable and ecological lifestyles, and NetHood a transdisciplinary research organization developing a wide variety of tools for self-organization at the neighbourhood level. Having started already with the involvement in the infrastructuring process of such a diverse group of actors, which although like minded had different audiences and methodologies, the general aim for diversity became fast one of the core characteristics of L200's identity.

This was important both for political and social reasons, as well as for economic ones, since the use of the space by many actors, as a common infrastructure, was necessary to meet the very high rental cost. This sharing strategy not only reduces dramatically the cost for each individual member, but at the same time makes available, again at low individual cost, a pool of resources necessary to run the space successfully and take advantage of its particularly high visibility.

It is important to note that neither particularly profitable commercial activities (e.g., a bar or a restaurant) enable cross-subsidization, nor does the L200 space itself enjoy financial support from external actors (e.g., the municipality). This is an important distinguishing characteristic of L200, which is self-sustainable in regards to paying a high rent to the City, unlike *L'Asilo* that receives significant support from the City of Naples, or *La Casa Invisible*, which by operating a bar has its own fundraising mechanisms. *Parko Navarinou* relies on donations in exceptional cases like the recent infrastructure costs for the playground extension and the new gate. The work that such an enterprise entails is carried out by L200 members voluntarily. In concrete terms this corresponds to about 2 "person months" (full time jobs), which are roughly distributed among four to six people.

A natural question arises: Is the lack of any sort of subsidies from the City or any other external support a conscious choice? And if yes, why not? There are differing views currently in the L200 association, other being more open to receiving external support and other less. Those members that defend the position of staying away from such support argue that having to pay the market rental price as a tenant of the City provides a strong sense of independence and sovereignty, which is very valuable. Arguably it offers more freedom for defining the identity and governance of the space and it is more resilient against future withdrawals of the initial support. Others see their work as a contribution to the local community, and as a necessary experiment in the development of a more sustainable economy, thus turning L200 into an attractive place where appropriate organizations can provide effective support.

Will it still be possible to carry out all the work required to keep the business running free of charge? There is a discussion among the members of the association as to whether certain activities should be paid for or whether it should continue to rely on the voluntary work of the members in the sense of self-help. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Also a transition process through which some people get paid for their work and others do not would not be easy. Nevertheless, there are always new members who want to make an active contribution to the L200 space, despite that not always is their integration that easy, even sometimes not being successful. More than two years after taking over this central location, many processes are still informal and depend on individuals. What does it take to establish a stable organisation that can also be supported by constantly changing actors?

Today L200's tenant-landlord relationship with the City of Zurich is placed somewhere between the harmonious relationship of *L'Asilo* with the City of Naples and the confrontation between *La Casa Invisible* and the City of Malaga. Another alternative intermediate case is *Parko Navarinou*, a form of "tolerated squat."

In principle, the L200 model may be applied also with success in the free marketplace when spaces are rented from private owners. So the creation of such spaces could continue without the need for negotiations with external actors on special privileges and painful compromises. In other words, the achievement of the L200 also lies in using novel cost-sharing mechanisms to develop strategies for paying high rents in central locations without waging political battles.

City subsidies are more likely to be granted for projects in peripheral locations, while properties in central locations are often deliberately rented out at high market prices. Paying the market rental price brings L200, aside from some obvious disadvantages, the advantage of being able to use the space also for commercial activities.[7] The cost-based prices for spatial use by members [8] do not currently include a profit margin for the L200, nor are there mechanisms for profit sharing, in the case of sales.

To date such activities have been typically pop-up shops by small producers like Atelier Pnoe and bfair, and low entrance fees for concerts or film screenings. So far, these have often been organized by the filmmakers themselves or belong to the series *Filme für die Erde*, which is itself a kind of public domain. But in principle there is no limitation for commercial activities by “bigger players” subject to the non-domination of the identity rule, which for now forbids the placement of logos of big companies in the windows. This rule applies as well to political parties, religious groups etc.

All in all, L200 is a non-commercial open space, used by members of the association from the closer or further neighbourhood and also by small firms often within the sustainability framework. So L200 is a venue for common activities like the Tuesday’s cooking group, for social events like anniversaries, celebrations or dinners with friends, a wide variety of open-to-the-public events, workshops, exhibitions, co-working between 09:00-17:00, and for numerous informal ad-hoc gatherings and interactions, especially during the regular opening hours (daily between 17:30-19:30). Because of the Covid19 pandemic, the opening hours are now limited to Tuesday and Friday. On these days, passers-by can drop in to ask questions, make first contacts, socialize and discover what’s happening at L200.

Even with relatively low occupancy rates and difficulties during the Corona crisis, the L200 has generated enough revenue to pay the rent until the end of 2020. The question of remuneration for voluntary work will arise at the latest when profits are made, and from then there will be an opportunity to continue investing in infrastructure and communication.

### **Infrastructuring the commons**

A key resource of the space due to the L200’s location is its sidewalk interface made out of six large street windows and the facade on a busy street corner. The exterior can be designed as an information infrastructure allowing small shops to display their products, activist groups to promote their campaigns, and the like.

For many of the L200 members, and especially for those promoting urban commoning alternatives to the market, even having an affordable place in the center of Zurich, where they can display their work and engage more people in their project seems like a luxury. It is often that passers-by in arguably the most frequented street of the city just drop-in, motivated by a sign on a window or an interesting activity taking place in the space. Indeed Zurich showcases a variety of vibrant and well-functioning associations, networks and clubs that experiment with new forms of cooperation for sustainable urban life in relation to food, money, housing, digitalization, and more. The existence of spaces for information, negotiation and convergence are of critical importance in particular at the neighborhood level, where the assemblies provide ‘the basic unit of democratic participation’ (Jacobs 1961, pp. 405-427). Bringing in the same location all these different actors in the city together with people that are not necessarily active in this “scene” promoting an alternative to mainstream is already a step toward the L200 project’s vision; there are not many places in the city, hosting such diverse publics. What is even more interesting, however, and challenging too, is to promote (and design for) more substantial interactions and synergies. New common services can be created, including digital ones, public facing interfaces and regular platforms, and other dissemination activities, which offer a design space for infrastructuring the urban commons. For that, the L200 is an ideal living laboratory.



Figure 3. An example of a parallel use: the fair trade startup *Crowd Container* using L200 as a pick-up location for already ordered fruits from local producers, and Radio Lora, the radio station of the neighbourhood, initiated during the 80s movement that has a strong political voice against racism, fascism, and patriarchy.

The L200 space resides among a large ecosystem of initiatives, organizations, businesses, and individuals, and there is (almost) no constraint on who can become a member. This means that even if all work for the space operation would remain voluntary, the existence of L200 itself can contribute to the economic benefit of its members, as it promotes the development of the projects not only by the favorable rent, but also by the quasi automatic networking among the members, and as these projects become directly visible to passers-by simply through the presence of their operators in the space. That is important especially for commoning initiatives that often struggle to find adequate funding to advance their research and action agendas, and reach a wider audience. The L200 space as a laboratory for action research, as a dissemination platform or as a networking venue increases the credibility and potential impact of a project proposal.

The regular “platforms” created as collaboration between members such as this of ISOC Switzerland and NetHood (7at7.ch) and this of Transition Zurich and NoSweatShop (Tuesdays for Future or in Swiss German “Ziischtig fürd Zuekunft”) are very good examples of this infrastructuring element, since both were funded exactly because of their intention to use the L200 common space with proven visibility and popularity for projects. The main objective was people’s engagement in learning processes around critical issues in times of increasing threats from Internet giants and climate change respectively.

### **The digital space**

From its inception L200 is conceived as a hybrid space, with a local-only WiFi network used to engage visitors in digital potentially anonymous interactions, file sharing, and more. It focuses on well supported free software like NextCloud and Etherpad, what is called the MAZI toolkit, co-developed by NetHood in the context of the Horizon2020 project MAZI [9]. A public web server located in the basement of L200 is under development with the goal to host a wide variety of self-hosted services (e.g., web sites of small local artists and businesses etc) to be used by its members

instead of commercial hosting services. In addition, members of the association (i.e., rao GmbH and NetHood) are slowly developing free software tools for internal management like an open calendar, bookkeeping, and more, which will eventually become part of the L200 prototype for acquiring and running a central space as a commons.

Finally, the Corona crisis created the need for spaces that can provide suitable infrastructure for groups to participate in online meetings or stream their discussions for online audiences. So L200 has transformed to a laboratory for creating such hybrid spaces using open source conferencing tools like the BigBlueButton platform and recycled audio-video equipment in the context of the 7at7 series (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: A hybrid event both physically in the L200 and online in the context of the 7at7 series, <https://7at7.ch/sep20/>

### **L200 as prototype**

Reducing the overhead for space management, and making it easy for anyone to contribute, has been a strategic choice that is actually part of an on-going action-research process, for which digital tools can play a key role. These tools further facilitate the coordination and collective awareness among diverse activities that take place in a single location. Then the L200 can become an easily replicable prototype of a hybrid urban living lab. It showcases the power of sharing the operation of successful central spaces in the city, turning them affordable and multiplying their reach for communication and interaction with the public, due to good accessibility and high visibility. At L200 is the value of centrality democratized.

## Acknowledgement

L200 is a collective work par excellence, and many of the ideas and design choices presented in this article have been developed in collaboration of the authors with the rest of the co-founders Claudia Modellmog, Elin Braun, Martin Furrer, with the initial supporters Res Keller, Hans Widmer and Guido Holenstein, with the new members of the L200 association board, Jasmin Helg and Anastasia Nechalioti, but also with many other active members of the L200 space.

## End notes

[1] The article was written originally in English (this version) but published in the German language in *dérive* No. 81, Okt-Dec. 2020, translated by Thomas Raoseta & Claudia Modellmog.

[2] Interview of architect and activist Kike España about *La Casa Invisible* by Kristina Tešija titled “We need to expand radical democracy”. Available at: <https://www.kulturpunkt.hr/content/we-need-expand-radical-democracy>

[3] Personal communication with Antonio Vesco, researcher of the *L’Asilo* project and activist, based on the forthcoming Report 4 (Case Studies in Italy) of the Heteropolitics ERC Horizon2020 project, available upon publication at <https://heteropolitics.net/>

[4] The member profiles are very diverse. From more opportunistic cases, who became members to profit from the “welcome offer” of a free event, without the intention to renew their membership for the next year, to members who don’t use the space at all, but keep paying their yearly membership (50 CHF / year for individuals and 100 CHF / year for organizations) to support the overall cause. Until now these tendencies were balanced keeping the average number of members to around 150. In case there is a significant increase of members our current decision is to try to create more spaces like L200, instead of refusing potential usages due to lack of availability.

[5] See <http://langstrasse200.ch/pub/werte/> for the latest draft of L200’s values and corresponding rules.

[6] More details about the different organizations active at L200 are available at: <https://langstrasse200.ch/pub/de/projekte/>

[7] There have been discussions for introducing “differentiated” pricing between commercial and non-commercial uses. Because we decided not to perform such characterizations, which could lead to disagreements about what is commercial and what is not, we have introduced a voluntary price differentiation scheme for the case of events. More specifically, according to the current model the “normal” price for events is 70/100/120 CHF / hour, which is close to the market price in this neighbourhood. But we also offer a “solidarity” price of the same amount up to 4 hours that anyone can take. So, we don’t enforce the normal price but big organizations or funded events are “strongly encouraged” to take it. In reality most events happen with the solidarity price, which was initially the “normal” one and the higher was called “institutional”. In some cases of funded projects, like the [Zat7.ch](http://Zat7.ch) series or the Crochet project, the “normal” price is paid. That proves to be very helpful for the economic sustainability of the L200 project. This is the current draft of the price list, which has not changed much since its first version: <https://www.langstrasse200.ch/pub/de/werte/l200-pricelist-oct2019.pdf>

[8] Any kind of spatial use requires a membership in the L200 association. That is deliberately kept relatively cheap and is not negotiable: the group of users of a common must be clearly defined, one of Elinor Ostrom’s most important rules.

[9] See <https://nethood.org/mazi/> for an up-to-date description of the MAZI project and its main outcome: the MAZI toolkit.

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