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Report on the HERA WEBINAR: Rethinking Public Space in Times of Social Distancing

On 11 May 2021, Anna Cabanel and Christian Noack of the European Spa project participated in a joint webinar with two other projects from the HERA public spaces call, 'Food2gather' and 'Putspace' to discuss the impact of Covid-19 in the respective fields of study. 'Food2gather' deals with the roles food play in creating public spaces and shaping opportunities for communication and relations between places and the people that inhabit it, on-site as well as online (<https://uni.oslomet.no/food2gather/>). 'Putspace' examines public transport as a public space, focusing on the traveller's experiences of the atmospheres while using trains, trams or busses (<https://putspaces.eu>). Both aspects were obviously severely impacted by the pandemic.

As the title suggests, the webinar was dedicated to the question of how the new imperative of 'social distancing' restructures public spaces. The idea was to bring the projects' empirical findings together and link them to theoretical deliberations on the impact of the pandemic on the very concept of public space. In what he termed 'grammars of commonality' in the public space, the French sociologist and first keynote speaker, Laurent Thévenot, sees 'distancing' as an integral part of social encounters playing out in the public, besides 'communication' and 'composition', i.e., the formation of interpersonal communalities. Using these 'grammars', Thévenot suggested, will facilitate and understanding and anticipation of the fears of contaminating proximity, and of distancing measures, in all three variations of the public spaces.

In the second keynote, the Dutch philosopher Rick Dolphijn, by contrast, emphasised the transhistorical character and, at the same time, political contingency of the public space, going back to the ancient Greek concept of the 'agora'. Dolphijn suggested an ethnographic approach to each of the public spaces discussed in the three projects.

Both 'Food2gather' and 'Putspace' researchers described the severe impact of the virus on the public practices of food consumption and commuting, pointing at the same time to the fact that perceptions and reactions vary across the European continent. For the SPAS project, Anna Cabanel sketched the negative financial impact of the lockdowns on the one hand, and the expectations of a revival of spa medicine in the wake of corona crisis on the other. She showed how some spas already reacted to changing demands, emphasising the role of natural factors clean air, water and green space in the spas. Others, like the Italian architect Matteo Thun, already started to factor 'social distancing' into new building projects for resorts.

In the final discussion, the panellists and the audience concurred that whatever the differences between the reactions to the corona-crises may be in the various forms of public spaces, the impact of the virus entrenched, and even deepened existing mechanisms of social segregation and exclusion.

The project members of the Spa team enjoyed the thought-provoking theoretical framing suggested by the keynotes. It goes without saying that the seminar was also a great opportunity to learn about what is going on other HERA projects and to realize the many synergies between them and the Spa project.