

Sharing economy sounds caring, but let's put it to the ethical city test

November 10 2017, by Ralph Horne



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More than ever, cities face multiple crises posing paradoxical opportunities. Key challenges for cities in the [urban century](#) are climate change, inequality and governance. Where are the solutions going to come from? In cities that are dominated by globalised, market-based forces, how can equity and justice be brought centre stage?

The many virtuous adjectives applied to cities have a compelling, if superficial, attraction – who wouldn't want a city to be "smart", "sustainable" and "resilient"? Similarly, "sharing economy" sounds good, right?

Look at the actual impacts

There has been much talk of the liberating effects of sharing economy platforms. These range from [TaskRabbit](#) and [Deliveroo](#) to [ridesharing](#) and [Couchsurfing](#).

The promise of getting a stream of income from spare time and spare stuff is tantalising. The apparently informal, casual intent of the sharing economy seems innocent enough, but in many cases the [market reality](#) is a step change downwards in terms of equity and justice.

Labour markets [are becoming casualised](#), with the most extreme effects cascading to the most vulnerable. Neighbourhoods exposed to the financialisation of housing become unaffordable, pushing out residents. The examples are mounting, and this is not what was promised.

In [Sharing Cities](#), the latest book from MIT Press on this vexatious subject, Duncan McLaren and Julian Agyeman propose a rather different "sharing" paradigm. It's one that is more attentive to the actual work that sharing processes do for and against human values of community, trust and collaboration. How do purported sharing ideas actually reinforce such values? And how do sharing projects in the [city](#) reflect and reinforce our existing values?

These questions point to the need for more overt attention to civic engagement and activism. We need to call out the dark side of market forces where these undermine justice, solidarity and sustainability.

Do 'solutions' solve our big problems?

The broader point here is about the extent to which any new shiny idea presented as a "solution" actually solves urban problems. To get to the heart of the matter, we need to agree on what these are. Look no further than the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, or the New Urban Agenda in which [Clause 5](#) lays out the ambition:

"... help to end poverty and hunger in all its forms and dimensions; reduce inequalities; promote sustained, inclusive and [sustainable economic growth](#); achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in order to fully harness their vital contribution to [sustainable development](#); improve human health and well-being; foster resilience; and protect the environment."

It is very obvious that, in 21st-century cities, urban humanity faces a set of three key problems:

- environmental sustainability and [climate change](#)
- inequality, equity and inclusion
- inclusive governance and representation.

In developing these ideas, my [latest book](#) applies the concept of "ethical cities" to considering how housing policy settings and market practices actually resolve our urban challenges or add to them. The [ethical cities idea](#) offers a simple yet effective way to scrutinise proposed urban solutions for the work they actually do.

For any sharing economy idea, then, the question is: what will it do to fix these urban problems that we face? If it undermines workers' rights for the most vulnerable, then it is not a solution but merely a new means of capital accumulation. It will make matters worse.

Put simply, the question we need to ask of [uberisation](#) is: what work will it do to either address or exacerbate climate change, inequality and democracy? If it fails on any of these, then we must resist the shiny wrapping and continue our search for real solutions.

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