

Urban Otium
Materialities, Practices, Representations
International and interdisciplinary conference
Freiburg, 2nd-4th May 2019

Call for Papers

Speed, acceleration, the perceived intensification of time, expediency and efficiency are all recurring catchphrases of our present time, which are closely linked to the urban experience. The ‘hustle and bustle’ of city life, hectic and busyness are central characteristics of the urban space, which supposedly subject the city’s inhabitants to an increasingly functional logic. And yet it becomes apparent how fragile this domination is in characters like the flâneur who moves calmly through the bustle of the city. We can even identify seemingly opposite tendencies: places like urban parks, museums and other recreational spaces, as well as a growing leisure industry suggest to be refuges of deceleration. But at the same time such opportunities can be subject to utilitarian rationality and self-improvement.

In the interdisciplinary collaborative research centre 1015 on “Otium” at the University of Freiburg, these contradictory aspects are being discussed and at the conference on “Urban Otium: Materiality, Practices, Representations” they are going to be analysed in more detail. In interdisciplinary dialogue, free spaces of otium in the urban space can be identified, and through them a discussion on the relation of urbanity and otium can be initiated. In the context of the collaborative research centre, the term otium is not understood as being primarily tied to particular actions or spaces, but rather as the experience of a free being-in-time, an end in itself not identified with the logic of purpose-oriented achievement. The notion can be made more palpable with the help of paradoxical expressions such as ‘productive unproductiveness’ or ‘active inactivity’, which emphasise its social dimension. Against this background, otium and work are no polar opposites, nor can otium and free time (as well as an understanding of “free time” in the sense of “leisure activity”) be understood as synonyms. Moreover, there is a transgressive potential in this understanding of otium: even in situations of the greatest hectic and time pressure moments of otium can arise which enable the individual to free her- or himself of these circumstances.

The connection of the concept of otium with the thematic field of urbanity raises multiple questions: How do opportunities for otium manifest themselves in the urban space as well as in the social fabric in general? Can we establish differences between different kinds of urban spaces (e.g. small town, city or metropolis) and the forms of otium specific to them? Is the traditional dichotomy between city and nature at all tenable in the context of experiences of otium? How does the concept relate to recent developments like the forming of ‘global cities’ or the specific context of postcolonial cities? How can the tension between, on the one hand, structures furthering inequality and, on the other, social autonomy in the city be applied to otium? In what way is gender relevant for urban otium?

These questions will be at the core of the conference, which will consist of contributions from different disciplines, so that perspectives from the humanities, cultural studies and social sciences can complement one another. Already the categories mentioned in the conference title incorporate this idea: (urban) otium manifests itself in the material form of the urban space, in the actions of its agents as well as in differently mediated representations.

The aim of the conference is to connect historical-diachronic observations with reflections on the present, and thus to discuss possible cultural histories of urban otium. Above that, the conference topic should not be approached from a purely Eurocentric or Western viewpoint, but instead the debate should do justice to the global variety of cultures of otium.

The conference will be structured along the following thematic emphases:

Architecture and Urban Planning

Urban otium shows itself in concrete spaces and architectural structures of the urban space: with respect to new types and concepts of cities like the ‘creative’ or ‘global city’, the ‘functional’ or ‘shrinking’ city, the question arises in what ways new and extended open spaces of otium can emerge through the creative potential and specific forms of appropriation emerging in this context. We can observe how older forms of urban planning that facilitated social privilege are addressed by new concepts of society as well as their corresponding cityscapes.

City and Nature - Contrasts, dichotomies, interdependencies

Experiences of otium in a city are possible in various forms and diverse places. Heterotopic retreats such as parks, alleys, graveyards and other horticultural grounds can be seen as paradigmatic examples. In these places, a complex interrelation of city and cultivated or reglemented nature can be observed, in which the seemingly dichotomous relationship between

urban spaces and nature are renegotiated: whereas these nature-related places aim to represent alternative worlds to the urban hustle and bustle, the binary starts to waver in the face of their belonging to the very urban space they seem to contradict. Not only the question concerning the changing meaning of such places, but also movements such as the concept of the ‘garden city’ as well as ‘urban gardening’ come into view.

Experiences of Transgression of Otium in Urban Spaces

Already in previous work of the CRC the transgressive potential of otium became apparent: in otium, the contrast between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* can be overcome. Regarding urban otium, it should be discussed whether and in which forms experiences of otium become possible in urban ‘hotspots’ in addition to the ‘classical’ urban retreats like gardens, parks and museums.

Practices, Ways of Perceiving and Experience Structures of Urban Otium

Forms of urban otium in many cases also draw attention to the sensual perception during experiences of otium. Especially in the urban context – which is not uncommonly characterised by overstimulation – this aspect seems to be of particular importance for observers as well as inhabitants of cities. Figures such as the flâneur or the increasingly present tourist can be regarded as paradigmatic examples. Thus, experiences of otium in the urban context can be focused on from the perspective of their aesthetic representation for instance in literary texts as well as in less mediated research on the impressions and practices of a city’s inhabitants.

Two possible formats are intended: Papers (max. 30 minutes) and shorter contributions (max. 15 minutes)

Exposés of one page (approx. 500 words) as well as a short **CV** are requested by **31.10.2018**. Please send both to René Waßmer:

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Peter Philipp Riedl will be happy to answer any questions you may have:

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