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Chapter 4

Housing and urban commoning

Urban movements and urban commoning

There is ongoing discussion about social movements, often focused on their defining characteristics (Pickvance 1995, Giugni et al. 1999, Coy 2001, Tilly and Wood 2012). Are these movements constituted through and by specific collective demands: are these movements, that is, demand-centred? Or do these movements potentially constitute social laboratories in which new forms of social relations are tested? There seems to be a crucial political problem underlying such theoretical discussions: do social movements belong to those mechanisms that contemporary societies develop so as to channel the redistribution claims of different social groups, or is it perhaps that in social movements the seeds of a different society find fertile ground?

Probably such a political dilemma cannot be solved simply through canonized methods of reasoning. Different social movements in different periods of capitalism's history have created very different opportunities for collective actions which reach beyond the limits of the society. What has been and continues to be very interesting, however, during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first, is that social movements have acquired a central role in transforming the life conditions of popular classes but also their aspirations for a different future. Zibechi has proposed the term 'societies

in movement' (Zibechi 2010: 11) in order to capture a series of phenomena that go beyond typical social movement action: he urges us to think about the ways in which various forms of collective action, developed at various levels of social life by the popular classes, promote changes or ruptures in power relations.

The discussion on social movements tends to focus on activities organized around a collective demand, and it is in this context that forms of organization are being studied and classified. The proposed term 'societies in movement' shifts attention to the ways in which everyday survival strategies of the subordinate classes *de facto* acquire the power to produce changes when, out of need and as a result of an imposed political programme, these strategies tend to become coordinated and collectively pursued. This might possibly give an answer to the political problem connected to social movement action. When a society is in movement, then forms of movement action tend to become inherently politicized. It is not because, as the well-known rhetoric has it, people's conscience is raised to a level of understanding the mechanisms of society, but because people see in practice that different values and social relations can give them the opportunity to take their life in their hands and make it better. Politicization might possibly mean, in this context, becoming aware of the power a collective develops when it is organized horizontally and through bonds of solidarity. Societies in movement provide the ground for the development of movements which politicize the everyday life of 'those below'.

Urban movements are social movements which explicitly express urban demands and often enter into practices connected to urban rights. Urban movements, thus, shape opinions and aspirations that focus on the definition and use of such rights.

There is a long and ongoing debate on the political implications of the kind of collective action and the forms of organization specifically attributed to urban movements (Castells 1977 and 1983, Pickvance 2003, Hamel et al. 2000). What, however, seems by now an almost obvious observation is that ‘they are key to social construction of conflict within the city’ (Hamel et al. 2000: 1). Urban movements may be considered, thus, as movements that are involved in urban conflicts. They do not only struggle for a specific, historically defined urban right but they also use the city as a means to establish, define and perform such a right. Remembering Lefebvre’s discussion on the right to the city (Lefebvre 1991 and 1996), we may even discover urban movements that claim such a right in ways that show that the city is not merely a context of rights but the means and the stake of an all-encompassing effort to collectively shape a common world. In this case, urban movements emerge through the confluence of political struggles which directly challenge political power and hegemony. As we will see, the homeless movements in Brazil may be considered as such a kind of urban movement because they struggle to create in and through city-space communities that challenge metropolitan models of coexistence.

Brazilian urban movements can offer a very inspiring example of movements that grow in a ‘society in movement’. Their demands and especially their forms of organization do not simply express the everyday needs of the popular and excluded classes. Those movements learn from the ways people fight for survival in their everyday life. And those movements tend to integrate the traditional practices of ad hoc solidarity (as we will see in the case of *mutirão*, a form of mutual help developed between families) into their organized collective actions. Solidarity, then,

a crucial element of a future emancipated society, is not discovered ideologically, as an alternative value, but is distilled from the everyday experiences of small and large urban communities. Obviously, not only solidarity grows in these everyday struggles for survival. It is, however, a movement, deeply rooted in these communities, that can fertilize solidarity actions against any prevailing and often hopeless atomism.

Urban movements, when and if they grow out of a society in movement, tend not only to appropriate city spaces, temporarily or more permanently, explicitly or in less obvious ways. Urban movements actually transform or even produce parts of the city, either because they explicitly attempt to produce new spatial arrangements, as in a self-constructed settlement, or because their actions mark specific public spaces, as in a demonstration or street action. What is more important in those movements, however, is that they in a way build upon a crucial characteristic of the societies in movement from which they stem: the creation of common spaces. These are spaces for common use created and supervised by a corresponding community. As we will see, they are produced in common and differ from private spaces as well as from public spaces.

Commoning, to use a term coined by P. Linebaugh (2008), is a process which characterizes both the everyday strategies of societies in movement and the movements which politicize these strategies. Commoning is not a contingent phenomenon in modern large cities. Differing from the production of common goods and services characteristic of traditional non-urban communities, contemporary commoning is a metropolitan phenomenon: what Hardt and Negri term 'artificial common', 'that resides in languages, images, knowledges, affects, codes, habits

and practices ... runs throughout metropolitan territory and constitutes the metropolis' (Hardt and Negri 2009: 250). In this context, 'the multitude of the poor ... invents strategies of survival, finding shelter and producing forms of social life, constantly discovering and creating resources of the common through expansive circuits of encounter' (ibid.: 254). Commoning, thus, is a process of production and distribution of knowledge and the experiences of those who try to cope with the harsh conditions which characterize their life in large cities.

Commoning is an inventive process, a process that involves creation, a process that produces new forms of social life, even though it appears as the result of adaptive practices. Commoning even offers the opportunity for new 'forms-of-life' to emerge, if by using this, Agamben's, term we attempt to follow his theorizing of an emancipated social life as pure potentiality oriented towards living considered as a goal in itself and not as survival regulated by dominant power (Agamben 2000). The important point in this reasoning is that commoning potentially creates shared experiences and knowledges that overspill capitalist norms. Popular classes, excluded and marginalized, are forced to devise ways to survive, and in the process discover forms of social relations which deviate from dominant models. This is how, for example, extended families become transformed from social reproduction nuclei to micro-communities of solidarity and production/use-in-common (Zibechi 2010: 39–40).

On the level of the everyday experiences of the urban poor in Brazil, the city becomes the very ground of a constant 'struggle for rights to have a daily life ... worthy of a citizen's dignity' (Holston 2008: 313). What Holston understands as 'insurgent citizenship' is a series of such struggles against the predominant

inequality and citizenship differentiation which characterizes contemporary Brazilian society. Insurgent citizenship, however, does not manifest itself in acts and demands focused on the redefinition of contested public space only. These demands are articulated 'with greatest force and originality ... in the realm of *oikos*, in the zone of domestic life taking shape in the remote urban peripheries around the autoconstruction of residence' (ibid.). This kind of 'politicization of the *oikos*' (ibid.: 312) produces the ground on which urban social movements in Brazil develop mobilizations focused on the right to the city. In a society in movement, 'insurgent citizenship' creates through targeted struggles new forms of appropriating and using the city and thus belonging to society. Insurgent citizenship is not necessarily a process oriented towards radical social change or collective emancipation. It plants, however, the seeds of collective action and commoning in the heart of the private realm, of the household. The 'politicization of the *oikos*', thus, is not only a means to develop demands and gain rights but also an emergent process of redefinition of family relations and spatial arrangements inside the house. Movements have propelled this process by giving to it the momentum of collective inventiveness. This is how houses become more complex arrangements, more open towards the community and less hierarchical. Let us not forget that Brazilian society directly maps social inequalities in the layout of housing complexes and apartments. As Caldeira observes, the 'closed condominium' has become the dominant model for the middle- and upper-class dwelling buildings in the 'city of walls', São Paulo (Caldeira 2000: 257). The resulting 'aesthetics of security' tends to spread throughout the city, conferring status value on the fences even in self-built houses in the peripheries (ibid. 293–5).

São Paulo perhaps represents the limiting case of a whole array of divided cities in which class, tribe or culture not only differentiate people but actually constitute the basis of segregating spatial distinctions. Gated communities tend to become a dominant form of housing for the urban upper-middle classes. But the form of closed, controllable and 'safe' housing areas seems to effectively infest the urban imaginary of the middle or lower classes too. Politicization of the *oikos* implicitly or explicitly clashes with these forms of 'corrupting the common', to paraphrase Hardt and Negri. Urban communities, which fence city public space (as streets and parks) inside the walls of their controlled-access enclaves, indeed define a common space for their inhabitants. But this kind of space would be better described as collectively privatized space, space which repels strangers and discourages 'felicitous encounters' (Hardt and Negri 2009: 254). In a way that is directly reminiscent of the fencing of common land by early capitalist agricultural enterprises, in gated communities 'the common is corralled as property' (Hardt 2010: 349).

Commoning appears on various levels of organized collective actions. In Brazilian urban movements and especially in the homeless movements, a first step in the collective production of commons, in and through the city, is the organizing of land occupations. Whether it is landless peasants who organize to occupy large plots in cities or urban homeless people who organize to occupy empty unused buildings, those movements mould out of an agglomerate of families a community-in-the-making oriented towards commoning. In this step, commoning has to do with creating a community of solidarity and appropriating the occupied land as a common resource under rules imposed by the emerging community of commoners.

The next step is to organize through collective decisions and acts the form of cohabitation (the settlement or the parcelling of empty apartments). In this process new forms of common are produced. First of all, common knowledge is created and shared, knowledge concerning building techniques and dwelling needs and procedures. Urban movements consider a crucial point in the practices of cohabitation the sharing of knowledge as well as the mutual support of all who participate in the creation of their temporary 'homes'.

The forms and the processes of occupation have direct influence on the commoning practices. As a member of Brigadas Populares (a *Sem Teto* – literally 'Without Roof' – movement in Belo Horizonte) has observed, there was a significant difference between land and building occupations in terms of constructing a community of cohabitation.¹ An apartment building carries, because of its form, a spatial arrangement logic, which can easily make families focus their attention on their own occupied apartment microcosm. Families tend, in such cases, to withdraw from the practices of commoning which create common spaces, common ways of space management and maintenance and, of course, common forms of organization in order to defend the occupied building.

Land occupations make people confront from the beginning the problem of building a family shelter with the necessary help of others and the emerging community. Autoconstructed settlements thus seem to grow out of an awareness that commoning is necessary, helpful and gratifying and not only ideologically preferable. An ethics of commoning therefore develops side by side with actual practices of commoning.

A lot can be said about the importance of commoning in the creation and arrangement of the settlement on occupied land. Just to take an example, in the settlement of João Candido in the periphery of São Paulo, a common space was created for the community of the settlers to use.² This space comprised an open area for assemblies at the centre of the settlement and a larger-than-average barrack used as a 'community centre', facing this open area. At this centre, children of the settlement were offered lessons, various commissions had their meetings and general assemblies were also held. Typical of such urban movement initiatives was the organization of commissions specializing in services necessary for the functioning of the community: a security commission, collective cooking commission, childcare commission, unemployed support commission, et cetera.

The difference between settlements like the one in Joao Candido and unorganized ad hoc settlements, especially those of the developing *favelas* in the periphery of São Paulo, is striking. People in organized occupations, as in the João Candido settlement, take care of the settlement and not only of their 'home'. Facilities for collective use are created (for example water tanks, rubbish collection points, community stoves, etc.). The arrangement and maintenance of 'streets' in this settlement is also indicative of practices of commoning. The street is not a necessary 'residual' space but a space formed through collective decisions and collective work.

In cases where a movement had succeeded in making the local state accept its housing demands, a new level of potential commoning was created. Let's take as an example the case of União da Juta in Sapopemba, São Paulo. Due to the continuous efforts and

acts of the corresponding homeless movement Sem Terra Leste 1, the State Government of São Paulo was to agree on offering the land for the settling of 160 families. The movement did not agree with the state authorities on a social housing programme to be executed by the local state and private constructors. They managed to impose a different procedure for the planning, building and administration of the project which directly involved the future inhabitants organized as a community. The role of USINA (Centro de Trabaho para o Ambiente Habitado) was very important in this context. Specializing in participative planning, this organization became the movement's architectural and planning collaborator. Important aspects of commoning developed in the process: drawing from the rural tradition of *mutirão*, a form of mutual help developed between families, USINA has proposed ways of participation in the design and construction of the housing complex that were based on the common work and abilities of the community members.

As one of the USINA reports explicitly sums it up: 'In the case of urban "*mutiroes*", the pedagogical process of social change begins with the people's organization in the struggle for land and access to public funding; it continues with the collective definition of projects and is finally consolidated in stonemasonry' (USINA 2006: 17).

It took several years for the project to be completed (1992–8). People now live in those houses they have built themselves, participating in all the stages of the project by taking decisions collectively. An association of inhabitants, organized in the form of a community of commoners, is now responsible for the management of the housing complex which includes a community centre, a community nursery for sixty children and a community bakery.³

Although they do not strictly speaking belong to an urban environment, the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, Landless Workers' Movement) agricultural villages (*agrovilas*), which were created on occupied land, have a general layout depicting the prevailing commoning procedures out of which these settlements grew. 'Houses are grouped together in one area rather than on each campesino's parcel of land' (Zibechi 2007: 122). This creates a settlement with common services and resources as well as the opportunity to integrate communal buildings into the settlement. As MST supports distinct alternative training and education programmes for its members, communal buildings can house such activities too (as in the case of the Filhos de Depi *agrovila* near Viamão, Porto Alegre, on which Zibechi reports). *Agrovilas* thus become small community laboratories in search of a different society.

Directly influenced by the MST experience, a homeless movement (MTST) developed an experimental model of cohabitation called '*assentamentos rururbanos*' (rurban settlements). According to Souza, 'The core of this strategy lies in an attempt to build settlements for urban workers at the periphery of cities, in which people could cultivate vegetables and breed small animals, thus becoming less dependent on the market to satisfy their alimentary basic needs' (Souza 2006: 382). Although this strategy was abandoned as unsuccessful, it really contains a very interesting fusion of a commoning subsistence process with an attempt to overcome the intensity of the city–village antithesis.

The process of commoning, which characterizes, as we have seen, Brazilian urban movements on the various levels of their initiatives and practices, has important results in the corresponding forms of production and use of space. It is not

enough to describe the produced space between the 'houses' of the settlements, the occupied apartments or the apartments of the self-administered *mutirão* housing projects as 'public space'. A new kind of space as well as new forms of 'performed' or 'practised' space emerge out of the constructing and inhabiting practices of the organized 'commoners'. We could term this space 'common' in order to distinguish it both from private and from public space. In common space, in space produced and used as common, people do not simply use an area given by an authority (local state, state, public institution, etc.). People actually mould this kind of space according to their collective needs and aspirations.

Common space is shared space. Whereas public space, as space marked by the presence of a prevailing authority, is space 'given' to people according to certain terms, common space is space 'taken' by the people. A community of common space users develops by appropriating space and by transforming it into potentially shared space. Rules about how this sharing is to be performed develop in the process of creating space as common. But there is an important difference between these rules and the ones imposed by an authority overseeing public space. These rules are made and remade, and therefore remain contestable, by various groups and persons who negotiate their presence in such spaces without any reference to a predominant centre of power. In order for common space to remain 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.

Common space that is developed through such movement action is in-between space, threshold space. Whereas public

space necessarily has the mark of an identity, *is* (which means *belongs to* an authority), common space tends to be constantly redefined: common space *happens* and common space is shaped through collective action.

Common space is thus space created and recreated constantly by a community which is organized through processes of participation of its members, considered as equals. This therefore has to be a community in movement: a community created in a society in movement through the catalytic activities of social urban movements. A community in movement is a community which is not oriented towards practices that create and defend a secluded microcosm, even if this microcosm presents itself as a 'liberated' stronghold. A community in movement, thus, is characterized by an 'always alert and always generous disposition towards the common' (Zibechi 2010: 136). Alert indeed, because keeping the process of commoning alive means fighting against any accumulation of power. In the *mutirão* construction experiences, for example, careful attention was paid by the inhabitants' association to a rotation of tasks. Participation is a process which produces and educates at the same time. Even the most difficult target, the elimination of differences between manual and intellectual work, was pursued in these collective experiences (USINA 2006: 33).

Generous indeed, because commoning is not simply a balance of giving and taking. Sometimes some have to offer more, whether because they know more, they are more capable, or they simply have been more lucky than others in their family life. Generosity is the propelling force of sharing-as-commoning if the corresponding community indeed moves towards collective emancipation and equality. Because what commoning essentially creates is new forms of collective subjectivation. Through the

creation of common space, people change themselves and their communities.

‘The wisdom hidden in the threshold experience lies in the awareness that otherness can only be approached by opening the borders of identity, forming – so to speak – intermediary zones of doubt, ambivalence, hybridity, zones of negotiable values’ (Stavrides 2010b: 18). In common space, differences meet but are not allowed to fight for a potential predominance in the process of defining, giving identity to space. If common space is shared space, then its users-producers have to learn to give, not only take. Common space can thus essentially be described as ‘offered’ space. Space offered and taken the way a present is. True, the offering and acceptance of a present can mediate power relations. But the commoning of space presupposes sharing as a condition of reciprocity (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010: 23). Commoning can thus become a form of offering which keeps roles interchangeable.

Social housing and the quest for common space

A potential research area for locating the forms that common space may take if considered as a crucial element of cohabitation is the planning and production of social housing. The term ‘social housing’ can perhaps be an inadequate term if the aim is to include all kinds of ‘housing provided for people on low incomes or with particular needs by government agencies or non-profit organizations’ as the Oxford electronic dictionaries suggest. But we can take it as an umbrella term that can describe housing projects in which habitation standards and spatial qualities are shaped, at least programmatically, by social welfare logics and not by profit expectancies.

It is interesting to observe how, at least after the visionary declarations of the Modern Movement in architecture (Conrads 1971), social housing was literally reinvented as an architectural and urban planning object which necessarily included a specific focus on the inhabitants' shared space. Spaces of common use were explicitly designed in social housing projects, and their relation with private as well as city public spaces was always an important design problem. Depending on the sociocultural context, spaces of common use acquired different weight in the planned and actual life of the corresponding complexes. The results, however, concerning the social meaning and function of common space, considered as space of shared use among the complex's inhabitants (or any subgroup of them), need to be compared with a view to exploring the connection of those spaces with practices of urban commoning.

The 1920s and 1930s constitute a period of important relevant experimentations, mainly in Europe. It is clear that the socio-economic context of these experimentations played a decisive role in shaping policies of support for workers and people living on low incomes. It was a time in which the city itself was treated as the laboratory of a new society. Weimar Germany's Berlin and Frankfurt, Red Vienna and Soviet Russia's big cities were to become crucibles of an emerging new architecture that produced important new ideas and buildings. Housing was at the centre of such visionary architectural experiments, quite different perhaps in terms of their magnitude, their pragmatic and utopian aspects and their implementation but sharing the same belief that urban space can actively shape a different 'new society'.

What follows, of course, attempts neither to produce a detailed appraisal of modernist architecture's social visions nor to

explore the role of mass housing design in shaping important areas of major modern cities. Focusing on the sociocultural urban contexts already mentioned, this chapter will try only to locate the possible emergence of a concept of common space in the housing projects designed and produced with the explicit aim of establishing forms of communal life quite distinct from those corresponding to rural life and to traditional communities. German architects 'called for a "new community", spiritual and social, in which architecture supported by the revolutionary government would act as a powerful educational force among the citizens of the new state' (Miller Lane 1985: 41).

How, in this context, was common space conceived? It seems that the crucial characteristic of common space was to be located in the very form of space that the new urban communities would identify as their own, shared in different ways between their members.

During the Weimar Republic period in Germany (1919–33), two important factors contributed to a flourishing discussion and praxis connected to the problem of housing. The first was the acute need for new and affordable homes after the devastating war period, and the second was the increasing influence of modernist architects' ideas both on the newly elected Social Democratic government and on the public.

Bruno Taut, the visionary modernist architect who was to become the chief designer for one of the greatest Berlin housing cooperatives, spoke in his numerous publications about a 'social ideal' that would be a kind of 'socialism in an apolitical sense, above politics' (Miller Lane 1985: 48). Taut explicitly asked architects to help people realize that they could become 'organic members [*Glieder*] of a great architectural structure' (ibid: 49) which would house this organic community of the future.

Walter Gropius, the architect and founder of the famous Bauhaus architecture school in Weimar's Dessau, also explicitly referred in his early writings to a coming community that would be expressed and housed by a new architecture. His ideal was deeply inspired by the unity of arts and crafts in the building of great medieval cathedrals, and he even attempted to imagine the social role of architecture in the process of creating 'the freedom cathedral[s] of the future' (ibid: 49).

Social housing, then, during the Weimar period was produced not only in response to a shortage of affordable housing but also to show paradigmatically what a planned welfare city might be like. This is why most of the projects designed and constructed in these years were located on the periphery of big German cities, being 'heavily influenced by the British garden city movement' (Urban 2012: 11). Ernst May's New Frankfurt was conceived, thus, as a network of large housing neighbourhoods with a distinctly suburban character that would prefigure a new model for the city. What he himself named his '*Trabantenprinzip* [the idea of a city divided into semi-autonomous nuclei]' (Tafuri 1990: 206) was a planning principle that aimed at producing parts of a future city which would contain not only houses but also important public and municipal buildings such as churches and schools as well as other community facilities (Miller Lane 1985: 102).

What May managed to plan and constructed in Frankfurt, Gropius envisaged establishing as an urban planning gesture of considerable magnitude in his project for a 'cooperative city' on the outskirts of Berlin (Tafuri 1990: 222). Both seem to insist on the idea that the future communal city should preferably be constructed on land previously not built on and through a completely new architecture. The choice, however, to create these

new housing areas outside the existing big cities already imposed important characteristics on the designed common space. In the new housing neighbourhoods (*Siedlungen*), people would share communal facilities and outdoor space which could not become part of the city's network of public spaces and public buildings.

Essential to the modernist innovative logic of social housing planning was the idea of minimum dwelling (*Existenzminimum*). The urgent need to cut down costs and to develop construction techniques based on speed and standardization forced planners and architects to reduce the space of individual houses and to devise typologies with limited variations. These needs, connected to the choice of developing new forms of communal life, produced various proposals for transferring certain functions of the house to communal facilities and buildings, for example recreation and laundry, but also communal meals and health and childcare. We can actually trace the different paths followed by Russian constructivists, German Bauhaus architects and Viennese municipal architects along the same line of producing common space as space of shared everyday uses. The crucial differentiating point is the degree of autonomy attributed to the constructed or proposed new urban housing structures.

New Frankfurt was conceived of as a series of suburban nuclei. Autonomy was thus an explicit planning target, but could only be established at the expense of keeping the new areas separated from the rest of the city. The idea and the experience of a cohabitation community was based on the shared class characteristics of the inhabitants and the use of common facilities which, supposedly, created bonds of sociality and shared habits. Common space was explicitly established through planning and was meant to functionally bind the inhabitants who shared

common similar needs which they could not satisfy individually. Modernism's prevailing functionalist logic seems to have almost equated sharing with need. The new spiritual and social brotherhood would thus be the result rather than the prerequisite of a rationalized and efficient planning focused on the hygienic and productive promises of a functional 'garden city'. This kind of community, however, (and the common space created for it) would be a socially uniform community kept apart from the rest of the city and thus unable to link to the other potential or existing common and public spaces in the city.

Supposedly expressing the rationality of 'liberated work' (Tafuri 1990: 214), working-class and cooperative *Siedlungen* were meant to provide images 'of a possible alternative to the capitalist city as a whole' (ibid.). Their planning, however, reduced them to precarious urban enclaves with no power to influence the rest of the city by establishing expanding networks of commoning.

What perhaps created an anti-enclosure dynamic in some of these social housing projects was a planning innovation that changed the character of the open space between the buildings. Departing from the model of housing neighbourhoods with buildings arranged alongside the street or around an inner shared court (a layout predominantly used during the nineteenth century), modernist planning introduced the idea of free-floating buildings (often tall) with large open spaces between them. Depending on the project, this kind of planning might possibly create osmotic boundaries for the complex's common space. For example, the 'finger plan' (Miller Lane 1985: 90), which places buildings perpendicular to the surrounding streets, potentially opens the space between the buildings to general access. Such shared spaces may be gradually integrated into the network of

city public spaces, especially since those pre-war social housing complexes have by now become part of the city's dense fabric.

The case of Red Vienna differs in a significant way from the corresponding German cities' housing projects, in a way that directly affects the character of common space included in the social housing complexes. As Eve Blau shows, Social Democrats decided 'to build urban *Gemeindebauten* rather than suburban *Siedlungen*' (Blau 1999: 172). Thus, the municipality of Red Vienna decided to build housing inside the limits of Vienna and not on the outskirts of the city. Instead of designing autonomous or semi-autonomous urban islands, Viennese architects and planners had to find ways to insert large building complexes into the existing urban tissue. The typological choice made seemingly followed an already-established housing neighbourhood type in which buildings were arranged around an inner court. The city-building office's guidelines, however, encouraged important innovations in this typology that had crucial impacts on the uses and forms of each complex's shared communal space. The 'Red *Höfe*' had communal facilities in the courtyard areas, buildings for a communal laundry, a kindergarten and, in one case, a central collective kitchen and dining room (ibid.: 213). The central courtyard, which had dimensions comparable to a small city square, had access both to communal and to private spaces (ibid.: 228) and thus became the main common space for the buildings' inhabitants. What is important is that although this courtyard was clearly separated from the rest of the city's public space by doors and passages often of monumental proportions, direct access and use of the courtyards was (and still is) possible for 'outsiders'. Compared to the traditional Viennese housing courtyard, then, these common spaces were more open

to public use (ibid.: 230). However, one cannot miss an overall spatial arrangement that gives the impression of a potentially enclosed community which explicitly marks its presence in the city through a recognizable spatialized collective identity. It was in the turbulent period which followed that these complexes had to be not only interpreted but also actually experienced as 'red bastions' by the workers-inhabitants in their resistance against the Nazis (Zednicek 2009: 15).

Common spaces both in Red Vienna and the Weimar Republic's cities were indeed spaces planned for and offered to the residents in the hope of introducing or encouraging communal aspects into their everyday life. One can even take these planning acts as 'pedagogical' in terms of the development of a communally organized new society. Inhabitants, however, for reasons having to do with historical context but also with deeply embedded cultural habits, did not seem prepared in all cases to follow the architecture's inherent potentialities. Women, for example, were offered facilities that would relieve them of certain everyday burdens or, at least, give them opportunities to share those burdens. Were the mechanical common laundries common spaces that helped in working-class women's emancipation by giving them the chance to socialize and become visible as workers themselves (working in private household maintenance)? Blau suggests that *Gemeindebauten* blurred 'the boundary between public and private living space, between housework and work performed outside the home, between family and larger community' (Blau 1999: 215). This indeed produced a fertile ground for the development of osmotic relations between the inhabiting practices focused on private space and those focused on the communal and public space. We cannot actually speak,

however, of practices of commoning which tended to overcome the boundaries of a situated homogeneous community, even though these communities were projected as prefigurations of an emancipated future society.

The housing policies that were developed in Soviet Russia during the same period after the 1917 revolution were obviously even more connected to the building of a new society. Right from the first days after the revolution, architects, planners, elected workers' representatives and officials got involved in a fierce exchange of ideas and proposals in search of the city and housing spaces that would not only prefigure but also create the coming communist society. This fermenting period of engaged modernist art and architecture productions would come to an almost abrupt end as the Stalinist era violently imposed a different political as well as cultural perspective. Starting from the experience of ad hoc-created housing communes in the first years after 1917, a huge debate unfolded on the meaning, the qualities and the form of space to be shared by cohabitants considered as the 'test-bed for trying out new ways of organizing life' (Khan-Magowedov 1978: 343).

State ownership of urban land together with centralized planning at various levels of economy and land use created a different context for housing policies from those in Red Vienna and the Weimar Republic. What made it possible, however, for innovative and promising ideas about common space to be formulated was the visionary quest for a different community of cohabitants who were to develop a new kind of communal life in and through the new architecture.

An important new housing type which was developed during the 1920s from such a perspective was the so-called

dom-kommuna (communal house). According to Anatole Kopp, this is 'an urban element functioning as a small autonomous commune in relation to a whole series of services and facilities' (Kopp 1970: 130). More specifically, the *dom-kommuna* was considered, according to the constructivist group of architects OSA, as a 'social condenser' (Thomas 1978: 272 and Kopp 1970) and as a spatial structure through which the transformations of social life in the form of a collectivist organization would take place. The idea of social condensers in fact connects the urgency of housing production to the design of new architectural types meant to shape new everyday habits for the inhabitants. Such innovative design proposals were meant to concretize in spatial arrangements new collective habits scrupulously studied and even 'measured' by architects deeply immersed in the functionalist efficiency logic but also inspired by the political project of producing the 'new man'.

The *dom-kommuna* was not simply a large apartment house with some added communal facilities. It was a building/community in which people would share spaces that used formerly to be considered part of individual apartments (kitchens and dining rooms, laundry equipment and rest areas), as well as spaces and facilities formerly connected to the public life of a whole city (recreation areas, libraries, nurseries, workers' clubs, etc.). Common space, thus, in the 'communal houses' was going to be of various kinds and forms and was in many different ways connected to city space and to the private cells. As the research progressed during the 1920s, this architectural type evolved through an expansion of the communal or common parts of the building at the expense of the private ones. The architect T. Kuzmin, among many other experts, proposed a kind of 'super-collectivization of life' that was based on a very strict, army-like

spatiotemporal organization of everyday life in such communal houses (Kopp 1970: 152–5). As Kopp neatly remarks, this was ‘a house so “communal”, that it ceased to be a house’ (ibid.: 144).

Research on the *dom-kommuna* housing type ended abruptly at the beginning of the 1930s. It was even ridiculed and condemned by Party decisions that equated it with the most extravagant and utopian proposals advanced by architects with views similar to Kuzmin. But the motivating ideas of the *dom-kommuna* as well as its experimental realizations have shown that a redefinition of the relation between public and private space in a housing complex is not only possible but can also create new kinds of communal space. The idea of the ‘social condenser’ already contains a belief that spatial forms of organization can catalyse, encourage, accelerate and even inspire changes in social life. ‘A new life demands new forms’ (ibid.: 145). Common spaces acquired a crucial role in giving shape to this new life. What was debatable, however, was whether these spaces should belong to an autonomous building-community or become part of a network of spaces that could be extended throughout the existing cities or implemented in the newly created ones.

One of the mistakes of the Soviet avant-garde planners seems to have been that they believed that new cities could be designed and constructed by using the *dom-kommuna* as a repeatable building block. Indeed, however, ‘city planning was more than architecture on a large scale’ (Thomas 1978: 276). We really cannot know if the Soviet cities would have been more common-oriented if the ideas of planner advocates of the *dom-kommuna* type of housing collectivism had prevailed. We know, however, that after the ‘defeat of modern design’ (ibid.:

275, also Kopp 1970: 235), from 1930 on, architecture was more connected to a monumentalizing praise of the 'Socialist State' than to a search for spaces of collective emancipation. From the mid 1920s a new model of housing was already starting to emerge. As Khan-Magowedov observes, 'The closed system of the communal house was being replaced by large dwelling complexes made up of sectional housing, shops, children's facilities, canteens etc.' (Khan-Magowedov 1978: 346). From this to the last days of the USSR there was a long road of city-planning decisions that shaped many urban environments (some of them presented as new model cities). It seems, however, that an important shift in planning during the 1930s favoured the design of public spaces and facilities at the expense of potentially communal spaces. Public spaces were meant to be used by inhabitants of large complexes but were more identified with the state than with a potential community of inhabitants.

Perhaps what the early modernist Russian architects failed to understand is that common space has to be more of a catalyst for new social relations than a ready-to-use mould in which those relations would be forced to take shape. The planners of the post-1945 USSR were too much directed towards establishing functional urban environments in the service of a state-controlled productive machine obsessed with development and the East-West antagonism. Common space, fragile and context-sensitive as it is, could have been a very important empirical as well as theoretical invention of architects as well as of active inhabitants during a period of social experimentation in a potentially post-capitalist society. 'Social condensers' and '*dom-kommuna*' prototypes are, nevertheless, valuable experiments and ideas in search of common space's attributes and

qualities as well as in search of inhabiting practices that may be oriented towards a collectively organized common life.

It is in this context that Red Vienna, the Weimar Republic's cities and the early Russian urban experiments become comparable. The search for a new life which is oriented towards communal habits and towards the development of new communitarian links between people was connected to architectural proposals meant to encourage, sustain or even create this process. What in all cases seems to be crucial is the lack of active participation of inhabitants in the process of devising architectural solutions, as well as in the process of transforming common spaces through use and collective forms of appropriation. Common space may potentially come into existence only when people actively shape it and are shaped by it, and only when they keep on creating sharing practices in it and through it. Common space is more a kind of spatiality that may emerge through sharing than a container which will shape a wished-for community. Common spaces, which either force this community to come into existence or produce spatial boundaries to such an emerging community, are bound to give ground to new forms of enclosure. Inventive architectural solutions can contribute invaluablely to the dynamics of common space creation. But architecture alone cannot guarantee that designed spaces will become commoned spaces, spaces of commoning and spaces-as-commons.

Urban communities reinventing themselves

Research that was recently conducted into the present condition and spatial characteristics of social housing complexes constructed in Athens may add interesting findings about the role of planning and design in the creation of common spaces.

This research explicitly aimed at locating different forms of relationships between public and private space and how these forms have developed over the years of their use.⁴ Social housing in Greece has two distinct characteristics that differentiate it from similar projects in other European and in Latin American countries. First, a very large proportion of the complexes built were designed for refugees of Greek origin who came to Greece especially after the great population exchange of 1922. Second, in all cases inhabitants were not meant to be tenants (renting the apartments from a state social welfare organization) but owners. From the very beginning of these programmes in the 1920s, people entitled to these forms of social support were given property titles provided that they bought their apartments, at very low prices and through very cheap loans.

These two distinctive characteristics implicitly triggered the inventiveness of inhabitants who in all cases had to live in very small apartments and with limited facilities. The refugees, who came mostly from the urban populations of Asia Minor, had a rich culture of urban public life. They thus soon transformed their social housing ghettos, stigmatized as areas of poverty and immoral behaviour (Athenians were rather conservative compared to the refugees in terms of their views about public culture and everyday socializing habits), into neighbourhoods rich in communal life.

Refugee neighbourhoods developed into areas of commoning inventiveness especially through a dense network of exchanges between inhabitants. As Hirschon observes, this network had an 'in-built contradiction ... since actions of giving and receiving entailed an inequality of status' although 'neighborly relations were equalitarian and universalistic' (Hirschon 1998: 172). It

seems that women were those who mainly ensured that neighbourhood life provided the group with solidarity and mutual support without the household boundaries becoming blurred or unrecognizable (*ibid.*: 173).

Commoning, thus, was a multilevel and multifarious process, which created areas of shared uses and recognizable habits. Those areas were not, however, meant to define and symbolize closed communities but were treated by the inhabitants as threshold spaces, spaces in which they could meet with people from the rest of the city and create an open publicness. Refugees overflowed the boundaries of their urban ghettos and influenced, through their open and inclusive cosmopolitan urban culture, Athenian public life.

The fact that both the refugee inhabitants and the inhabitants who acquired access to social housing apartments built by the Workers Housing Organization (ΟΕΚ, a state welfare organization) were owners has made possible numerous ad hoc interventions in the built complexes. Rich diversity characterizes their ways of extending the apartment's space, for example by transforming balconies into additional rooms, or by projecting parts of the family's life to places of common use such as corridors, open spaces or terraces. The results in many cases are similar to those mentioned by Benjamin in his famous essay on Naples: the apartment becomes 'far less the refuge into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out' (Benjamin 1985: 147).

Commoning practices of course often clash with individual interests. Especially in ΟΕΚ's complexes, in which no pre-existing networks of cultural homogeneity are present, shared class belonging is not enough to encourage inhabitants'

solidarity or joint initiatives for the transformation and maintenance of common space. As we were able to discover in the aforementioned research, commoning tends to become in those cases a practice of protecting and maintaining common property by decisions that exclude 'strangers' and 'others' from a well-defined community of users/inhabitants. The identification of common space (or any good understood as common) with a closed community essentially changes commoning to a practice of collective privatization. Porosity should be an important characteristic of common space, and it is through osmosis that exchanges between common space users can take place. Porosity is both a precondition and a performed result of practices of space-commoning.

Commoning not only transforms public space while creating common spaces. Commoning directly influences the form of private house spaces. A latent social change which accompanies the development of urban movements is observable in the way households change: both internally by becoming micro-communities of commoners and externally by developing new kinds of relations between them and the communal organization. The changing role of women is central in this process (Zibechi 2007: 246). According to Zibechi, women often influence popular struggles not as explicit leaders but by supporting and extending existing networks of cooperation which are being built through everyday exchanges between neighbouring households. These everyday acts of information and services exchange weave the fabric of sociality, and women have a central role in this. In such a context, new family forms emerge which contribute to the 'creation of a domestic space that is neither public nor private but something new' (Zibechi 2012: 39).

As in the everyday solidarity networks developed in the Asia Minor refugee settlements already mentioned, women in Latin America have used their presence in specific public spaces (such as the open-air market) to enhance or even build networks of dissident action and movement initiatives. They thus liberated themselves from a dominant taxonomy of gendered roles which attributed to women only responsibilities and rights connected to the realm of *oikos*.

A comparison between the spatial logic of a self-built urban settlement in Chile and that of the social housing complex which has replaced it (mentioned in Zibechi 2007: 209–11), is revealing in this context. People in the settlement used to produce their space by inhabiting it. Moreover, they collectively recognized their common area as porous, permitting an osmosis between private houses and common space (the external boundaries of the settlement were, however, rather rigid and recognizable as representing the limits of the community's power). Those same people, when forced to move to the newly built social housing complexes, lost a feeling of belonging to a defined community. Space had become fragmented and rationally divided into quantified areas of private and public use. This is how, according to Juan Carlos Skewes, the researcher Zibechi mentions, 'a transfer from a feminine domain to a masculine world' is effectively imposed (ibid.: 211). Popular classes base their survival, especially in periods of crisis or in countries in which the state ignores them, on the improvising inventiveness of household or family networks. And it is these networks that at times support the inventiveness of the struggles of 'those below'.

Commoning creates subjects of action. Not simply in the well-known way in which acts define actors. Commoning changes

the way collective identities are constructed and performed. As people collectively produce commons, they create themselves. A collective identity, then, is not the identity of a community of belonging. If a community in movement is a laboratory where forms of common are invented and tested, if a community in movement invents itself as it invents its spaces and institutions, then this community is a community-in-the-making. It cannot be summarized in a name or an identity.

Such a community produces and diffuses the common. If 'the institutions of the common are the organizational force of the collective appropriation of what is produced by all of us' (Roggero 2010: 370), then communities in movement are in a constant process of organizing: forms of organization are being tested, not because innovation or efficiency is sought for, but because the means are always projected on the ends. Not fixed identities, then, but perhaps strongly defended collective values: equality, solidarity and common responsibility. And these values have actually grown in the everyday practices of societies in movement.

Testing, experimenting and identities-in-the-making – there is a term which can probably capture the dynamics of commoning: 'inventiveness'. People participating in communities of commoning, people as commoners, have to invent forms of survival. People have to live and people want to live even though a decent life is denied them. This vital force creates movement in societies. But this is not enough. People have to devise ways to live. People try to find help and try to take advantage of every available means.

There is a long discussion about the tactics of the powerless. De Certeau (1984) speaks about those tactics as ways to make use of space and time by employing a shared practical wisdom

or *metis*, the ancient Greek term associated, for example, with the cunning of sailors, hunters and athletes as they have to face context-specific difficulties and opportunities (Detienne and Vernant 1991). Observing the practices of inhabitants who appropriate and transform the public spaces surrounding their housing blocks, R. Sennett suggests: '[t]he work of improvising street order attaches people to their communities' (Sennett 2009: 236).

These crafts of the poor have deeply influenced the practices of communities in movement. People have carried into their movement this collective wisdom and this ability to improvise by making use of what is available. This inventiveness is transmitted throughout the metropolis by subaltern channels of communication, by the spread of rumours and tacit knowledge which implicitly moulds models of action and patterns of practices (building crafts focused on '*bricolage*', recycling, etc.). And people always learn how to modify models, how to improvise according to recognizable motifs, how to discover and correct and how to 'make better'. This kind of sharing of knowledge and experience supports the emergence of commons. Knowledge and experience become forms of commons.

Communities in movement oriented towards the common develop when inventiveness is practised collectively. The *mutirão* tradition is necessarily linked to this kind of inventiveness. People augment their capacities by sharing resources and by helping each other (all help, for example, one family at a time in the harvesting of the family's crops or in building the family's house).

People who invent in common create, use and inhabit invented spaces. Miraftab goes so far as to claim that '[i]nvented spaces

are those ... occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo' (Miraftab 2004: 1). Inventiveness, in this context, involves a kind of creation which is expressly emancipated from the rules of public space production and use.

Often the state or local authorities tend to criminalize the creation of 'invented spaces' of citizenship which emerge in actions focused on rights connected to decent living conditions (Miraftab and Wills 2005). Oppression, direct or not, often tends to separate these actions from the lawful acts of 'invited' participation (mostly aimed at legitimizing already-decided policies).

Through the practices of commoning, people literally reinvent community as a form of social coexistence. As Zibechi explains in his analysis of the Aymara movement in Bolivia which we have already encountered, 'The Aymara did not simply migrate from rural areas to El Alto with a "community consciousness" that they "revived" upon arrival. On the contrary, they created another type of community – they re-invented and recreated one' (Zibechi 2010: 18–19).

Communities in movement are not replicas of pre-existing rural communities nor do they simply employ the extended family social bonds, which indeed form part of the accumulated experience of the participating people. Communities as equalitarian and commoning social organizations are continuously being created: crafted by and through acts of inventive commoning.

People in their everyday survival struggle actually reinvent spaces of common use, sharing them with others, creating them collectively as able urban craftsmen. Collective inventiveness flourishes in societies in movement, but it is in the communities

in movement, collectively crafted, that this inventiveness acquires the power to develop forms-of-life oriented towards an emancipating society. Extending and reappropriating the production of the common gives power to the communities of commoners as these communities create themselves.