Complex Ownership Systems Beyond Urban Commons: Hybrid Forms of Occupation Designing Alternative Urban Futures

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Abstract

The research explores the practice of urban commons in the wake of contemporary urban crises, such as housing one, to observe how the concept has evolved from the economic definition (Ostrom, 1990) through its contextualization in urban systems. In particular, it observes the H.O.Me. project in Bologna, an urban common characterized by multiple personal, public and common ownership systems and uses, started as a response to the housing crisis in the city. The first section presents a review of the literature on the commons. Then the commons in Bologna and the H.O.Me. project are introduced, discussing its outcomes and its opposition to local policies such as the Bologna *Regulation for the Collaboration between Citizens and Administration for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons* (Comune di Bologna, 2014), using Living Theory and activist research as a methodological lens. The conclusions provide some contributions for the debate on urban commons.

La ricerca esplora la pratica dei beni comuni urbani in relazione alle crisi contemporanee, come quella abitativa, per osservare come il concetto di common si sia evoluto dalla definizione economica (Ostrom, 1990) attraverso la contestualizzazione nei sistemi urbani. In particolare, viene descritto il progetto H.O.Me. di Bologna, un bene comune urbano caratterizzato da usi personali, pubblici e comuni, nato come risposta alla crisi abitativa della città. La prima sezione presenta la letteratura sui beni comuni da una prospettiva di economia politica. L'articolo introduce poi i beni comuni a Bologna e il progetto H.O.Me., discutendone gli esiti e la sua opposizione alle politiche locali come il *Regolamento per la Collaborazione tra Cittadini e Amministrazione per la cura e la rigenerazione dei beni comuni urbani* (Comune di Bologna, 2014); la ricerca azione e la Living Theory vengono utilizzate come lente metodologica. Le conclusioni forniscono alcuni contributi per il dibattito sui beni comuni urbani.

Keywords: urban commons; urban regeneration; housing crisis.
Parole chiave: beni comuni; rigenerazione urbana; crisi abitativa.

Introduction

At the time when the present article was being drafted in its first version (July 2023, in Bologna), the urban commons known as H.O.Me. (Hub di Organizzazione MEticcia) was under attack by police for the second time since its occupation in May 2023. At the time of this article's publication, H.O.Me. had already been dismantled.

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In late July 2023, the Municipality of Bologna called for a public assembly to discuss the use of the now-vacant space; simultaneously, H.O.Me.'s political collectives called for a public assembly in a nearby park. Two paradigms were visibly clashing over crucial matters related to urban space governance: one, represented by political collectives, reclaimed vacant spaces through direct occupation and collective management; the other, embodied by the Municipality, relied on institutional participatory methods. These approaches reflect different conceptions of decision-making, rights to urban space, and interpretations of the commons, as well as two different modes of inhabiting the city and facing contemporary urban crises. These modes have fed each other in a virtuous circle, especially in Bologna, for decades. This has consolidated a culture of collaboration in institutional politics. Now, the equilibrium that had once been reached needs to be renegotiated again.

The aim of this paper is to unpack the complex interplay between bottom-up stances, public institutional action, and regulatory tools, through the case of the H.O.Me. occupation. In particular, the paper hypothesizes that hubs like H.O.Me. represent innovative configurations of urban commons that combine elements of private, public, and common ownership and use. Through their hybrid nature, these commons directly challenge the institutional approach to commons governance embodied in the Bologna *Regulation for the Collaboration between Citizens and Administration for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons* (Comune di Bologna, 2014; hereafter referred to as the *Regolamento*), raising critical questions about who has the right to define and manage commons in the city.

This paper is based on an ethnographic approach. I applied Living Theory (Whitehead, 2020) while taking part in H.O.Me.'s political collective. The dual role of activist and researcher at the University of Bologna provided a privileged, situated viewpoint; this allowed for the observation of Bologna's urban policies on urban commons, compared to those of the activists.

Where do the commons stand today? A literature review

Ever since it was conceptualized by the economist Elinor Ostrom (1990), commons theory has been applied to an almost infinite variety of tangible and intangible resources, such as natural,

cultural, and urban commons. Similarly, literature on the urban commons is vast and encompasses multiple research domains, from architecture (Boeri *et al.*, 2020; Stavrides, 2016) to sociology (Susser, 2016; Euler, 2018), to urban governance (Iaione, 2015), and economics (De Angelis, 2017). While this proliferation is indeed valuable for enriching the debate, it has also produced a certain vagueness, reducing the commons to a buzzword applicable to participatory urban regeneration projects (Boeri *et al.*, 2020) or to the collaboration of social, private, cognitive/academic, and public actors in urban development (Foster and Iaione, 2019).

Ostrom (1990) set out eight principles to identify the commons:

1. clear boundaries of the community;
2. appropriateness of the rules for commons governance to local needs and conditions;
3. the community's ability to modify the rules;
4. a system to monitor behaviours;
5. a system to sanction rule-breakers and free riders in a regulated way;
6. easy, low-cost means for dispute resolution;
7. recognition from an external authority;
8. nested enterprises.

Since then, an evolution has occurred along two significant trajectories: research on specific urban commons and research on commoning as a social practice. The former focuses on commons as shared resources, while the latter emphasizes the practice of sharing. These interpretations are often overlapping. As noted by De Angelis and Stavrides, «First, all commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people's needs. Second, the commons are necessarily created and sustained by communities. [...] the third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb "to common" – the social process that creates and reproduces the commons» (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2010: 297).
The urban commons literature has developed as a distinct field responding to the specific challenges arising from urban environments. Harvey (2012), Stavrides (2016), and Foster

and Iaione (2016) contributed to understanding how commons operate within cities, where property regimes, governance structures, and resource characteristics differ significantly from the natural resources at the core of Ostrom's focus.

Helfrich and Haas (Dellenbaugh *et al.*, 2015) classified the articulation of the commons into 'things', 'community', and 'systems and practices'. The focus on practices is justified by the challenge of grasping what type of resources are shared in the urban commons: the 'things', which can be a space and the other resources within it, including the potential services generated by their use.

For Harvey, urban commons represent «an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood» (Harvey, 2012: 73). For Euler (2018), commoning is equally at the basis of people's needs to provide for their livelihood and is linked to the concept of care: in commoning, the community not only 'uses' the resources, but is rather engaged in their production, use, and reproduction (what he terms 'reprodusage').

The institutionalization of commons discourses eventually led to what some scholars identify as a 'post-political' interpretation of the commons (Bianchi, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2018), where the radical potential of commons to challenge existing property regimes and power structures becomes neutralized when incorporated into institutional governance frameworks. The risk is that commons become a means of outsourcing state responsibilities to citizens under the guise of participation and collaboration, rather than a genuine reconfiguration of rights and governance (De Angelis, 2017).

This tension between transformative and reformist interpretations of the commons is critical for understanding how different actors in Bologna approach commons governance, as will be explored in the case study.

The commons in the city: the case of Bologna in the light of the literature

This framework leads to a twofold interpretation of the commons in the city.

The first—and most common—interpretation stems from urban studies and critical theory and sees the commons as a subversive force that goes beyond the market–state dichotomy to present an alternative governance system for urban resources. As posited by Martínez:

«The revival of the commons has been triggered by intense and rapid processes of privatisation and the commodification of welfare services, housing, green areas, infrastructure, water and energy supplies, even information, knowledge, and nature at large, not to mention urban gentrification, touristification, and marginalisation trends [...]. It is thus justified to look at how society responds to these threats away from the state and capital forces that engendered them» (Martínez, 2020: 1392).

The second interpretation sees the commons as a governance configuration that can be incorporated into institutional structures. This interpretation, which gained popularity thanks to Iaione (2015), tends to blur the boundaries between the commons and collaborative governance or participatory practices. This is exactly what happened in Bologna, which is known for implementing the first regulation on the 'Care and regeneration of the urban commons' (the *Regolamento*), allowing citizens to activate *Patti di collaborazione*[1] (Collaboration Pacts) (Comune di Bologna, 2024).
The *Regolamento* (Comune di Bologna, 2014) concerns collaboration between citizens and the administration aimed at the care, regeneration, and shared management of common goods. To foster forms of participatory democracy, these norms are intended to implement the principles of regulatory autonomy and horizontal subsidiarity, meaning that the provision of services is handled not only by public institutions, but also delegated to—or shared with—other actors at different scales (Bianchi, 2018).
The Bologna *Regolamento*, approved in 2014 and claiming to address social inclusion and job creation, sustainability, and civic agency (art. 2), has since paved the way for many other experiments by local authorities (Labsus, n.d.). The *Regolamento*, as Bianchi (2018) notes, embeds a post-political

1 Comune di Bologna (2024). Partecipa: i patti di collaborazione. *Iperbole rete civica*. http://partecipa.comune.bologna.it/beni-comuni

meaning of the commons, reducing shared management to an outsourcing of welfare from the public sector to private citizens.
For Mouffe (2005), the post-political represents a consensus-based approach to governance that seeks to eliminate conflict and antagonism from democratic politics by framing political questions as technical problems requiring expert solutions, rather than as fundamental disagreements about values, power, and social organization. In this view, politics is reduced to administration, and democratic deliberation is replaced by technocratic management. Rather than recognizing commons as sites of political struggle, post-political approaches present them as collaborative management tools where citizens and institutions work together.
The *Regolamento* mainly concerns the maintenance of public spaces and gardens or activities for children (Comune di Bologna, 2024); most often, it involves small neighbourhood communities around simple initiatives. In other words, the objective of horizontal subsidiarity—addressed by the Public Administration through the *Regolamento*—appears to be characterized by narrow scope and limited implementation in the face of contemporary urban crises, excluding practices that provide essential services for sustaining marginalized groups. Historically, Bologna has had a strong tradition of bottom-up stances: *Centri Sociali* (illegally occupied spaces self-managed by political collectives) have proliferated in the city since the 1970s (Mudu, 2004).

> «[The] spatial dimension is embedded in the way CS appropriate (e.g. through squatting) public or private empty spaces to transform them and to ultimately give them back to the community. In this sense, Centri Sociali have always been a strongly spatial phenomenon with strong ties to local geographies, acting as agents of change in the urban fabric. » (Bellotto, 2022: 32).

Therefore, *Centri Sociali* seem to aptly fit the political definition of urban commons: they embed a dimension of political coordination and shared management of a complex resource, rooted in a specific spatial (geographical and geopolitical) configuration in the city, presenting alternative modes of managing resources necessary to sustain people's lives in

many ways—such as food (Moreira and Morell, 2020), natural resources (Villamayor-Tomas and García-Lopez, 2021), or housing (Montagna and Grazioli, 2021).
While the number and political influence of *Centri Sociali* have generally declined since their peak in the 1990s (Piazza and Genovese, 2016), their activities have intensified in recent years in response to growing housing and social inequality in the city. Martínez (2020) identified such housing crises as primary triggers for "subversive urban commons" initiatives in European cities, as communities organize to claim and defend access to basic necessities. In Bologna, in recent years, several occupations of houses and vacant buildings have been carried out by activist collectives.
H.O.Me. is an interesting case because the processes of its creation, management, and eviction display the interplay between urban commons and institutional actors, and because commoners were able, through care and "reprodusage" (Euler, 2018), to provide for their own livelihood and for marginalized groups.

Methodology and data collection

First-hand data collection was conducted through an ethnographic approach (Flick *et al.*, 2004), which allows for the investigation of «the perspectives of participants, the nature and forms of their knowledge, their interactions, practices and discourses» (Flick *et al.*, 2004: 197). Ethnography presupposes a dual role of researchers as both participants and observers. In this paper, ethnography is complemented by Living Theory (Whitehead, 2020), an approach combining autoethnography and action-research.
Living Theory allows me to address three critical aspects: First, it centres knowledge creation on lived experience, «turning to experience as we live it rather than as we represent it in abstract theory» (van Manen, 2016: 124). Second, it establishes academic legitimacy for knowledge created through practice and activism, validating forms existing outside «the prevailing paradigm of logic, cognition, prediction and control» (Bullen, 2024: 366). As Hale asks «Has the research produced knowledge that helps to resolve the problem, to guide some transformation, which formed part of the research objectives

from the start? Is the knowledge useful?» (2021: 14). Third, it acknowledges that researchers inevitably bring ethical and political convictions to their work, especially when experiencing specific material conditions that affect both their research and actions.

The third aspect entails «that theory can and should be generated through practice» (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003: 16) and can have beneficial effects if put to the service «of a practice focused on achieving positive social change» *(Ibidem)*.

Data were collected through participation in the activities of the collectives and in the events organized within the H.O.Me. spaces and open to the public. Broader information had already been gathered due to my ongoing proximity to the collectives.

However, my positionality requires critical reflection on how my involvement shapes data collection and interpretation. Following LeCompte (1987), I acknowledge several potential biases: my political alignment with the collectives, my pre-existing relationships with participants, and my direct involvement. While these positions provide unique insights into the lived experience of commoning practices, they also risk privileging certain perspectives.

To address these biases, I ground my analysis in the theoretical framework and triangulate my observations with documents, public statements, and discussions. This process does not eliminate all bias - which would be impossible - but makes my interpretive framework transparent to readers. The goal is not researcher neutrality, but researcher reflexivity, allowing readers to understand how my situated knowledge both contributes to and limits the analysis presented.

H.O.Me.: reclaiming urban spaces through and for alternative forms of commoning

H.O.Me. emerged from a complex history of occupation and eviction at Caserma Masini in Bologna. This building, owned by the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (Deposit and Loans Public Bank)[2],

2 Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP) is Italy's national promotional institution, a state-controlled financial entity that manages postal savings and provides long-term financing for public infrastructure, local authorities, and strategic national projects. It acts as a development bank supporting Italy's economic growth through investments in

was occupied for more than five years (2012–2017) by Làbas, a collective that organized several community services.
After a violent eviction in 2017, thousands of people took to Bologna's streets in protest, forcing the Municipality to negotiate with the occupants. Làbas was relocated to Vicolo Bolognetti 2, where it continues to provide legal and housing support, food and vintage markets, cultural events, Italian courses, and free healthcare services including a dental clinic (Corneo, 2023a).
My work as a researcher and activist began in 2021 when I became an active member of Làbas. From 2021 to 2023, I participated in *Staffette Solidali*, a project in which activists patrolled the city to provide support to homeless people, particularly after the closure of dormitories and charitable canteens due to COVID-19 social distancing measures. This project later evolved into AIR (Autonomy, Inclusion, Resistance), focusing on Làbas spaces where activists and vulnerable people cooked and shared meals together while accessing shower and laundry facilities. When the H.O.Me. experience began, I was already analysing Làbas as an urban commons.
In May 2023, Caserma Masini was still empty after the eviction—an abandonment publicly denounced by the Mayor (BolognaToday, 2023a). A group of activists, students, and homeless people reopened the Caserma and began organizing its spaces.
The occupation created a complex spatial and governance structure with three distinct but interconnected zones:

- *Private housing spaces*: A portion of the building was dedicated to addressing the housing needs of working poor and students. These spaces functioned as individual or small-group living areas, managed exclusively by residents while requiring adherence to collective agreements about behaviours and maintenance
- *Common internal spaces*: Shared areas within the buildings, including kitchens, meeting rooms, and workshops, were managed collectively through regular assemblies involving both residents and activists. These assemblies established rules for cleaning, maintenance, and conflict resolution

areas such as infrastructure, social housing, and small-to-medium enterprises.

(see Figure 5 showing the organization of cleaning shifts).

- *Public courtyard and garden areas*: The vast open spaces became a garden open to the public. These areas hosted public assemblies, convivial moments, sports activities, and communal lunches throughout the two months of occupation (see Figures 1 and 2 showing public events).

The political collectives provided the organizational and political capacity to make the occupation function.

Fig. 1 The public assembly which took place in the open spaces of Caserma Masini in June 2023.
Source: the author on June 2nd, 2023.

H.O.Me.'s spatial organization created what can be understood as a "nested commons"- a multi-layered system where different governance principles applied at different scales and to different resources. This arrangement raises critical questions about how we understand possession and use rights in urban commons, moving beyond conventional property frameworks.
The occupation operated through possession rather than

ownership, establishing stability and exclusivity of use without formal property rights (Grossi, 1970; De Angelis, 2017). While the occupation challenged the private property rights of the building's formal owner, it simultaneously established its own internal regime of use rights: private living areas maintained individual autonomy and exclusive use for residents, common spaces operated through collective decision-making, and public areas remained open to broader community participation.

This complex arrangement points to what De Angelis calls «boundary commoning» (De Angelis, 2017: 24): the ongoing negotiation of access, use, and decision-making rights across different socio-spatial domains. H.O.Me. demonstrates that urban commons are not necessarily opposed to all forms of exclusive use; rather, they seek to reconfigure use and access according to different values and governance principles than those embodied in market-based or state-managed systems, actively negotiating membership, responsibility, and participation through the creation of thresholds - porous boundaries allowing encounters (Stavrides, 2016).

On 2 June 2023, a general assembly was held in Caserma Masini. The preparation was open to all groups operating in Bologna's social ecosystem, as the scale of the initiative required broader organizational complexity. The day was full of activities: a social lunch, the assembly, activities for children, and a flea market. The openness of the event indicates a new conception of urban commons boundaries, where both 'common' and 'public' coexist.

The eviction occurred in July 2023, revealing the paradigmatic clash described in the introduction. A public assembly organized by the collectives took place in the adjacent park, while the administration simultaneously organized its own assembly in the nearby *neighbourhood house* to decide the future of Caserma Masini with officially recognized stakeholders (BolognaToday, 2023b).

At present, Caserma Masini remains empty. The *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* assigned temporary custody of the external spaces to the Municipality of Bologna—a governance device aligned with the city's strategy for urban renewal of disused spaces through temporary uses (Boeri *et al.*, 2016).

Fig. 2 The kitchen during H.O.Me.'s second public event in June 2023.
Source: the author on June 2nd, 2023.

Fig. 3 The sign at the entrance recalls "August 8th 2017: we were right", referencing the first eviction that took place in Caserma Masini.
Source: the author on June 2nd, 2023.

Ultimately, H.O.Me. seems to represent a second eviction of Làbas after 2017, and this reveals an interesting dynamic concerning the commons principle of «external recognition of the rights to organize» (Ostrom, 1990: 100). This recognition is, in fact, alternately granted and denied by the external public authority: once evicted from Caserma Masini, Làbas was given a new space. The second eviction reveals the interplay of different levels of entitlement over urban space: activists claimed legitimacy through the use and care of the abandoned building; the Municipality attempted to assert its role through public assemblies aimed at demonstrating general public interest in the space; while Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, as the formal property owner, ultimately exercised its legal rights to evict.The fact that the building belonged to *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* rather than the Municipality meant that the local government had limited power to prevent the eviction, highlighting how property regimes at different scales (national financial institutions vs. local government) can override local democratic processes.

Fig. 4 The writing on the front door encourages the occupants of the housing segment of H.O.Me. to barricade themselves and lock the doors every night. Another writing on the kitchen doorframe reads "whatever happens, do not call the police". Source: the author on June 2nd, 2023.

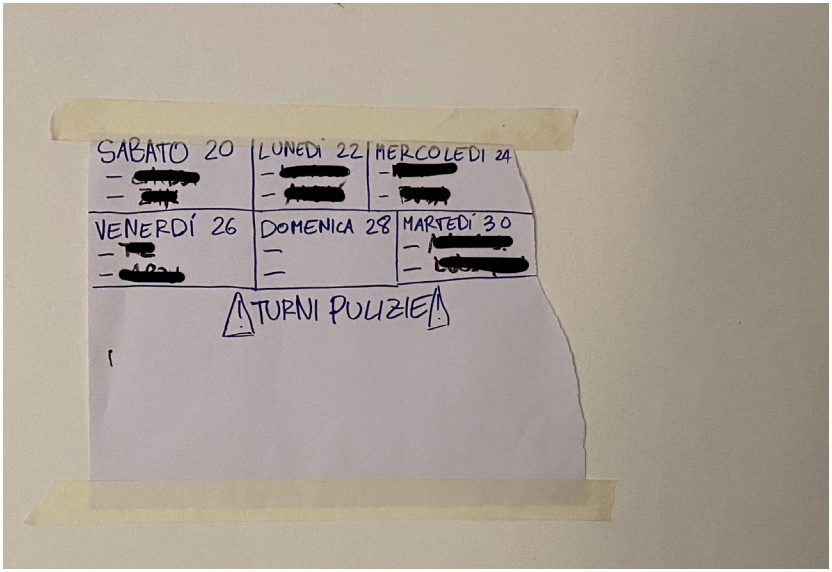

Fig 5. Cleaning shifts in H.O.Me. Source: the author on June 2nd, 2023.
Source: the author on June 2nd, 2023.

H.O.Me. and urban commons from a Living Theory perspective

This study examined the interplay between bottom-up initiatives and institutional frameworks for urban commons governance through the case of H.O.Me. in Bologna. The analysis reveals fundamental contradictions between the goals of Bologna's *Regolamento* (Comune di Bologna, 2014) and the city's actual response to urgent social needs.

H.O.Me. successfully combined elements of private, common, and public space use, creating what can be understood as a "nested commons" operating according to Ostrom's (1990) principles, while adapting them to urban conditions. This hybrid model managed to provide essential services—such as housing, food, healthcare, and legal support—to people excluded from the formal welfare system, while maintaining democratic decision-making processes through regular assemblies.

The study suggests that Bologna's *Regolamento* is aimed merely at regenerating local public spaces, with civic participation embedded in the process—thus confirming Bianchi's (2018) thesis on its post-political character.

H.O.Me. prioritized the material reproduction of life itself. This is critical for understanding how urban commons represent more

than just sites of participation—they are essential infrastructures for social reproduction (Euler, 2018). Ostrom observed how communities organize around resources necessary for daily life (Ostrom, 1990). As Federici (2018) argues, commons are fundamentally about the reproduction of life itself, not just resource management. H.O.Me.'s emphasis on providing housing, food, and care demonstrates this reproductive dimension of urban commons in practice.

The case demonstrates that urban commons can successfully operate across multiple regimes of use and governance—simultaneously appropriating privately owned space while creating internal systems that recognize both individual privacy rights and collective decision-making authority. This complexity suggests that binary oppositions between private and common property may be less useful for understanding urban commons than frameworks capable of accounting for nested, overlapping, and contextually negotiated property relations.

The broader significance of H.O.Me. extends beyond its specific context to broader questions about urban futures in an era of growing housing, climate, and inequality crises. The occupation demonstrated that alternative forms of urban organization remain possible, even within heavily regulated contexts, and that civil society holds the capacity for rapid and effective responses to urgent needs. Whether such capacities can be supported—rather than suppressed—by institutional frameworks remains an open question, one likely to determine the future viability of urban commons as tools for addressing, rather than merely managing, contemporary urban challenges.

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