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**URBAN CONFLICTS AND PEACE:
EVERYDAY POLITICS OF COMMONS/
CONFLITTI URBANI E PACE:
LA POLITICA QUOTIDIANA DEI COMMONS**

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**Urban conflicts and peace:
Everyday politics of commons/
Conflitti urbani e pace:
la politica quotidiana dei commons**

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Indice

APERTURA/OPENING

Urban Conflicts and Peace: Everyday Politics of Commons

Stefania Ragozino, Tihomir Viderman, Chiara Belingardi **p. 6**

IN DIALOGO/CONVERSATION

Commoning to Commons: On Transformative Practice and the Politics of Everyday Life. In Dialogue with Jonathan Metzger and Stavros Stavrides.

Edited by Stefania Ragozino, Tihomir Viderman, and Chiara Belingardi **p. 26**

DIETRO LE QUINTE/BACKSTAGE

Searching for Affective Spaces: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Wounded Cities through the Case of Caivano's Rione Parco Verde (Naples, Italy)

Fabio Esposito, Stefania Ragozino, Gabriella Esposito De Vita, Paolo Landri **p. 40**

Public Spaces, Domestic Commonality. Some Ethnographic Notes and Theoretical Considerations on Everyday Practices, Commoning, Conflicts and Domesticity in Public

Marianita Palumbo **p. 64**

FOCUS/FOCUS

Commoning Beyond the Crisis: Urban Civic Uses and The Democratization of the Urban Transformation and the Ecological Transition

Maria Francesca De Tullio, Roberto Sciarelli **p. 99**

Unsettling Youth Participation in Relational Space and Commons: Case Study Lusatia

Tihomir Viderman, Rafael Maximiliano Flores de Leon, Silke Weidner, Dominik Ringler, Anna Grebe, Gerd Kaufmann **p. 130**

Everyday Environmental Politics Along the Coast of Thessaloniki
Evangelia Athanassiou **p. 155**

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

Francesca Sabatini **p. 183**

OSSERVATORIO/OBSERVATORY

Thinking the City: The Arena of Conflict

Nikolai Roskamm **p. 204**

Shared Learning Spaces and Urban Transformation. Peace Education Dialogues as an Educational Commons

Luisa Fatigati, Gianmarco Pisa **p. 226**

The Role of Micro-communities for Urban Challenges: A Case Study of Mardin

Zemzem Taşgüzen Polat **p. 249**

Care Infrastructures in Andean Rural Context: The Case of Mongui

Diana Catalina Barrera Agudelo **p. 276**

RECENSIONI/REVIEWS

Unsettled Urban Space: Routines, Temporalities and Contestations. Edited by Tihomir Viderman, Sabine Knierbein, Elina Kränzle, Sybille Frank, Nikolai Roskamm and Ed Wall. Routledge (2023)

Martina Bosone **p. 296**

Thinking and Acting With Care 'As Well As Possible'. Insights From Matters of Care by María Puig de la Bellacasa. University of Minnesota Press (2017)

Giusy Pappalardo **p. 302**

STRISCIA/STRIP

Of Continuity and Disruption: Through Lived Space and Representation

Tihomir Viderman **p. 309**

PORTFOLIO/PORTFOLIO

Naples: Continuity and Disruption

Tihomir Viderman with photographs by Stefania Ragozino and Tihomir Viderman **p. 317**

Urban Conflicts and Peace: Everyday Politics of Commons

Stefania Ragozino, Tihomir Viderman and Chiara Belingardi

Conflict as constitutive of cities

Urban space and everyday life are permeated with visible, sensed, and often unperceived conflicts across multiple scales: from political oppression and struggles over the right to social and cultural difference, to health, ecological, and economic predicaments shaped by geopolitical rivalries and extractive economies, extending into the unsettled intimacies of domestic space marked by precarity, care burdens, and violence, including the persistent reality of femicide. Conflict is not merely episodic or disruptive. It is woven into the fabric of urban life, unfolding through antagonisms that are material, symbolic, and relational, and that persist even in the periods of perceived relative peace. As the feminist body of thought reminds, seemingly harmonious spaces of everyday life often rest on exclusions and discomforts that are displaced or rendered invisible (Ahmed, 2008). From this perspective, conflict can be understood as a relational force that shapes how cities are inhabited, produced, and contested.

Drawing on Lefebvre's (2014 [1946]) theory, which applies Marxist notions of production to the city, the city is conceived as an arena of conflict where contradictions are embedded in its very making, and everyday life is where alienation is most entrenched, hierarchies are reproduced, and contradictions are lived. It is underpinned by the contingency of plural struggles to participate in and shape the core aspects of the city's social, cultural, and political life, rather than being relegated to the periphery or marginalized (see Roskamm, this issue). Lefebvre (2014 [1946]) conceptualizes both conflict and the city as multiple and relational, forwarding the notion that conflict underpins the temporal horizon of never-finished production of urban space. This means that the city is structured by overlapping social, political, and spatial tensions continuously producing fractures that shape how the city is inhabited, appropriated, and contested. Political theory extends Lefebvre's notion of conflict beyond material inequalities to encompass meanings and identities (Laclau,

2007 [1996]), suggesting that antagonisms are foundational to the formation of social identities and political orders. Conflict thus exposes the contingency of social arrangements, opening space for negotiation and agency. What appears settled is never fully grounded. It is always contingent and subject to alternative claims. Conflict thus becomes a structural feature of urban space.

Rather than seeking to erase the frictions inherent in urban life, we invite a reading of the city as the site where multiple, irreconcilable positions continuously collide, exposing injustices and renegotiating meanings and actions (Ragozino *et al.*, 2018; Ragozino and Varriale, 2018). Athanassiou (this issue) exemplifies this by analysing contested waterfronts in Thessaloniki, where development pressures under the banner of ecological modernization reimagine nature as devoid of social dimensions, thus colliding with practices of everyday life reclaiming the coast as a common good. This tension underscores how conflicts in urban space are never solely about physical development but about competing ways of imagining and inhabiting the city. In this sense, conflict is not merely a disruption of social order but it's a very condition of possibility, opening horizons of possibility through new configurations of meanings, identities, and material conditions. However, this constitutive role of conflict also manifests in the mundane frictions and quiet appropriations of everyday life, subtly unsettling established spatial orders through informal, often invisible acts of presence and use by ordinary people (Bayat, 2013). Practices of everyday life, regardless whether premediated or routinized, constitute political relations between subjects, or between subjects and things including nature, but also to oneself including the body, motivations, and emotions (Reckwitz, 2002). It is in streets, squares, and parks where exclusions are enacted and challenged in daily encounters (Watson, 2006). Conflict permeates the rhythms of urban life, embedding hierarchies and contestations into habitual rhythms of urban life.

Peace as aspiration and regulatory ideal

Peace is frequently invoked as a normative ideal, a universal aspiration suggesting the absence of violence or the harmonious

coexistence of differences. Yet peace is deeply ambivalent. It is produced through uneven practices and institutional processes directed at building social relations that can mitigate violence, while often obscuring underlying tensions. Cockburn (2010) highlights how peace is produced in the interstices of everyday life within contexts already shaped by conflict. She points to the gendered labour required to sustain fragile negotiations across difference towards social justice, arguing that peace remains incomplete and unstable so long as militarised structures of power endure. More broadly, perspectives on everyday peace draw attention to how people in specific places actively shape and sustain coexistence, grounded in their tacit knowledge of how these processes evolve over time and space (Elfversson *et al.*, 2023). Fatigati and Pisa (this issue) illustrate this by tracing how educational initiatives in Naples, like the CISV Dialogues on Peace Education, navigate complex social and material conditions through practices that make the fragile work of coexistence tangible. These 'peace geographies' are centred on ordinary people whose practices of coexistence build interpersonal connections across conflict lines, thus subtly disrupting violence and embedding peace in daily life. Rather than emerging from formal agreements, such fragile spatial formations are enacted through situated routines and often improvised adjustments that make living together possible despite enduring fractures (Elfversson *et al.*, 2023). This is closely tied to what Amin and Thrift (2002) describe as 'urban conviviality', where mundane acts of sharing space or fleeting encounters (with difference) help to maintain a precarious social fabric. Even in cities marked by deep structural inequalities or past violence, these small acts provisionally keep open the possibility of coexistence. Peace is hence not an abstract condition but a relational process embedded in everyday spatial and affective negotiations.

Because peace is woven into the textures of everyday life, it also becomes instituted as a regulatory ideal often used to stabilise hierarchies under the guise of consensus. Places are often targeted by imposed policies and urban strategies shaped by globalised standards of order, security, and market-driven redevelopment on the notion that new built environments can overwrite unsettling memories, as in the post-conflict

transformation of Belfast's city centre and waterfront (Esposito De Vita, 2013). Such strategies exemplify what critical perspectives on peace highlight. They show how peace can function as a regulatory ideal that legitimizes and masks systemic violence and oppression by avoiding confrontation with underlying injustices (Žižek, 2008). Seen through this prism, attempts to resolve conflict through technocratic means or superficial agreements can obscure the fundamental antagonisms that structure social and political life, thus risking depoliticising the very tensions that make transformation possible (Mouffe, 2005). Dissent and discomfort are under the banner of universal harmony, frequently silenced in the name of cohesion (*Ibidem*). Through her concept of 'agonistic pluralism', rather than seeing peace as the elimination of conflict, Mouffe (2005) argues that conflict is an inevitable part of pluralistic societies. Peace is not the absence of disagreement but the transformation of antagonistic relationships, where others are seen as enemies to be destroyed, into agonistic ones between adversaries. This perspective reclaims conflict as integral to democratic life, cautioning against any notion of peace that simply smooths over the tensions that sustain politics. Elites in power often seek to replace contestation with technocratic solutions and broad consensus (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Understanding these fragile forms of peace is critical, as they shape not just present coexistence but also the futures cities are able to imagine.

Relational tension of conflict and peace

Our explorative engagement with conflict and peace began in Naples, a city whose urban landscapes are formed through a continual interplay of continuity and disruption. The layering of visible and sensed dimensions of its urban space reveals multiple temporalities, where permanence meets transformation, repetition intersects with rupture, and inheritance blends with reinvention. In October 2023, a student excursion jointly organised by Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg - BTU and National Research Council, Institute for Research on Innovation and Services for Development - CNR-IRISS examined how change runs through Naples. The change pulses through the rhythms of street life and dense urban fabric,

through habitual routines that sediment collective memory, but also through fractures shaped by moments of violence, political rupture, and social upheaval that leave enduring marks on lived space (see Portfolio «Naples: Continuity and Disruption», this issue). The persistence of change, carried by both the vibrancy of urban life and its disruptions, is material, symbolic, and affective (see Strip Of «Continuity and Disruption: Through Lived Space and Representation», this issue). This sense of unsettledness gave rise to the international conference *Urban Conflicts and Peace: Everyday Politics of Commons*. Organised under the AESOP Thematic Group Public Spaces and Urban Cultures by the CNR-IRISS, BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg, and the University of Florence – LAPEI, and hosted by the Department of Architecture at the University Federico II of Naples, in October 2023. The conference brought together diverse perspectives on how urban societies navigate fragmentation and fragile forms of coexistence. Building on these exchanges, this special issue moves beyond binaries of conflict and peace to explore how their relational tension is inscribed in everyday urban life and the contested making of shared futures.

With both conflict and peace revealed to be deeply ambivalent in their political and material implications, we outline the proposition that they are not binary opposites but relational and co-constitutive. Any framing of peace as the absence of conflict is not only unattainable but also conceptually misleading and politically suspect. Urban space and everyday life are imbued with struggles and imbalances, because settlement is tied to endeavors for instituting control, entitlements, and privileges through the construction of distinctive social, cultural, and symbolic spaces (see Wolfe, 2006). Conflict in this sense can be understood as a condition that also creates the opportunity for productive unsettlement, through which the contingency of social arrangements becomes tangible, allowing spaces for renegotiation and alternative futures (Viderman *et al.*, this issue). Collective life is thus sustained in a delicate tension between conflict and peace, reproduced through tacit knowledge and unfolding in the form of repeated, unpremeditated practices and pre-reflective behaviours (Seamon, 2015) that simultaneously reinforce hierarchies and keep possibilities of transformation

alive. These habitual patterns are deeply political. Amin and Thrift (2002) remind us that mundane urban practices can reinforce existing hierarchies but also create subtle openings where established boundaries are tested or transgressed. It is often through such ordinary practices, awkward encounters, or small affective dissonances that conflict becomes perceptible and negotiated (*Ibidem*). Space is not only materially organised but also imbued with affects, meaning that bodies and atmospheres register discomforts, anticipations, and fleeting solidarities. This gives the relational tension of conflict and peace a visceral, lived quality (Viderman and Knierbein, 2020). As cities are composed of intertwined habitual patterns and affective currents, this tension circulates through spaces and bodies, either sustaining or unsettling coexistence.

Insights from contested territories show how the relational tension of conflict and peace is anchored in place, both practically and symbolically, as explored by Esposito De Vita (2018) in her work on territories 'imprisoned' by organized crime and by Wolfe (2006) in his analysis of settler colonialism. This tension is associated with material, experienced, or sensed ruptures in habitual ways of living, belonging, and identification. While conflict is deeply embedded in struggles over territory and everyday life, peace is never simply the absence of violence. It often emerges through embracing agonistic struggles that unsettle entrenched powers, enabling more just forms of coexistence. Esposito, Ragozino, Esposito De Vita, and Landri (this issue) explore this dynamic in their study of Caivano, where attempts to rebuild peace after violence and stigma involve intertwined transformations of social and physical spaces, dependent on local participation even amid deep erosion of trust.

Commons as sites to negotiate the tension of conflict and peace in everyday life

To understand how the tension between conflict and peace shapes the horizon of possibility, we ground it in urban space and situate it in relation to the everyday politics of commons. The commons, in this sense, are not merely alternative modes of managing resources but relational practices that actively negotiate the tension between conflict and peace. They are sites

where this tension unfolds as situated practice, close to everyday life, experienced, negotiated, and lived. We interpret commons as fragile grounds where this tension is actively worked through, showing what kinds of peace societies have pursued, how forms of coexistence have been negotiated, and what kind of futures they might ultimately arrive at.

In 1993, the Zapatistas occupied the Zócalo in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico, evolving into a self-governed autonomous territory that established local assemblies, health services, and cooperatives rooted in collective decision-making (Stavrides, 2022b; Zibechi, 2012). Similar grassroots practices have emerged elsewhere. In Chile, *comedores populares* (community kitchens) were organized by neighbourhoods during the military regime of Pinochet to feed the unemployed and resist social fragmentation. Other examples include the Cochabamba Water Wars in Bolivia against privatization, Indigenous struggles across the Americas, the protection of local fishing grounds in Maine, the long history of communal land use in England, the urban gardening movements in U.S. cities, and civic practices of collective use and management in Naples (Federici, 2021; Sciarelli, 2024). As the austerity policies in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis eroded welfare systems (Adisson and Artioli, 2020; Gatta and Montesano, 2024; Turnbull, 2023), commons gained momentum internationally. Movements from Occupy Wall Street in the United States and the 15M movement in Spain to cultural workers' occupations of theatres and vacant buildings in Italy (Cirillo, 2014) challenged austerity by reclaiming spaces for collective use and experimenting with forms of self-organization. Together, these cases highlight diverse efforts to organize life around cooperation and shared resources outside dominant market and state logics.

The idea of the commons has long evolved beyond managing shared resources or resisting enclosure across plural domains of life, from natural resources over material goods to digital data (Gatta and Montesano, 2024; Ricoveri, 2005). While Ostrom's seminal work (1990) challenged the notion that only markets or states could effectively govern common resources, opening the debate to alternative institutional arrangements, the focus

has increasingly shifted to the relational, affective, and political dimensions of commons (Dardot and Laval, 2015; Giardini, 2010). In this perspective, commons are not simply things to be administered beyond state and market control (Zibechi, 2012) but situated ways of organising life collectively, which are entangled with specific territories and histories (Belingardi, 2014). This allows us to move beyond Ostrom's focus on people who develop shared rules to manage common resources, drawing on Butler's critique of the 'bounded selves' to highlight how mutual vulnerability and relational ties shape practices of commoning. They open possibilities for new institutions, shared norms, models of solidarity economy, and various forms of justice through the bonds of reciprocity and care (De Angelis and Harvie, 2014; Fournier, 2013; Mandalaki and Fotaki, 2020).

In the range from civic institutions and mutual aid structures (Capone, 2022; Vittoria *et al.*, 2023) to informal networks that emerge in fractures of everyday life, commons surface where regulatory frameworks or market pressures exacerbate social needs, embodying distinct political logics (De Tullio and Sciarelli, this issue). They can contest exploitative capitalist accumulation (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Federici, 2021; Linebaugh, 2009) or advance feminist engagements that link care, interdependence, and the politics of reproduction in embodied space (Butler, 2015; Levy and Belingardi, 2025; Velicu and García-López, 2018) with the intent to broaden the theory of the commons by discussing it as a relational politics. However, commons can also be absorbed into regulatory frameworks, where they are often stripped of their political dimension and critical potency. Drawing on the legal and normative traditions of European welfare states, in this context they are associated with the idea of the common good, often rendered abstract and politically inert (Bianchi, 2018). The conflicting vision of commons is illustrated by Sabatini (this issue), drawing on the case of H.O.Me., an occupation of an empty building in Bologna that provides housing for precarious workers and migrants. This example shows how different logics of political self-organisation centred on everyday needs, depoliticized notions of the common good, and economic valorization by property-based governance structures intersect and compete.

This centring of interest on the practices of commoning is reflected in the conversation with Metzger and Stavrides (this issue), which explores commoning as a relational and transformative practice shaping urban life. Stavrides (2016; 2022a) conceptualises urban commons as porous spaces that enable new subjectivities and collective agency, forming shared grounds across differences within the interstices of dominant systems. Metzger (2015; 2016) extends the consideration of commons to assemblages of heterogeneous relations made up of humans and non-humans, shaped by mutual enhancement rather than extraction. His story of "The wolf in the city" illustrates how imaginaries of society as separate from nature sustain exclusions (Metzger, 2015: 23-25). For Metzger, cultivating ecological awareness, aligned with ecofeminist perspectives, becomes essential for imagining strategies of survival. This perspective extends the analysis of commons beyond tangible materialities into affective atmospheres, shared urban experiences, and the textures of collective life. In Federici's words, commoning is set of practices

«by which we share in an egalitarian way the resources we produce, but (they) are a commitment to create a collective subject or multiple collective subjects, a commitment to promote the common interest in every aspect of our lives, and therefore a commitment to reject all hierarchy and inequality and every principle of constructing the other according to criteria of exclusion» (Federici, 2021: 183).

Examples from this special issue, including Palumbo's work on practices of re-domestication of public spaces in Paris, Brussels, and Rome, make visible how commons involve relational labour, shared temporalities, and emotional investments that navigate fragile negotiations toward coexistence. They show that commons are not stable solutions but unsettled terrains where conflict and peace are continuously explored, held together, and reshaped in everyday urban life.

Toward an everyday politics of commons

Commons are not only spaces where collective agency is cultivated and negotiated (Leitheiser *et al.*, 2022). They also represent what Chatterton calls a «complex organism and a network of interrelations» (Chatterton, 2016: 407), generating micropolitical dynamics that spread through swarming,

networking, and subtle infiltration, gradually eroding dominant systems from within. Viewed through this lens, commons become fragile yet generative grounds where differences and antagonisms are not eliminated but rather given form and place, allowing tensions to be inhabited without foreclosing them. This resonates with Lefebvre's dialectic of everyday life (2014 [1946]), where routines that often reproduce alienation also carry seeds of possibility, unsettling established boundaries and opening room for contestation. In this light, commons appear as political sites embedded in everyday life. They involve relational labour, emotional investments, and shared temporalities that do not resolve conflict but sustain spaces of careful disagreement. Polat (this issue) illustrates this dynamic through an example from Mardin, Turkey, where the arrival of numerous people in the aftermath of the Kahramanmaraş earthquake gave rise to self-organised micro-communities to address urgent vulnerabilities. Through weaving new bonds and fostering collective agency in unsettled urban spaces, such practices extend the horizon of possibility, cultivating spaces where futures can be reimaged (Viderman *et al.*, 2023; review by Bosone, this issue).

Feminist perspectives extend the consideration of political notions of commons by foregrounding interdependencies – between people, between people and places, between human and more-than-human entanglements, and between subjects and the meanings they produce. By emphasising these interdependencies, feminist perspectives position care and social reproduction as fundamental to sustaining both societies and ecologies (Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2020). This relational view comprehends environment as inseparable from human life, as in Gago's concept of the «body-territory», (Gago, 2022), thus incorporating in the politics of commons the inseparability of producing goods and services from sustaining social life (Bhattacharya, 2017; Daskalaki *et al.*, 2021; Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Miraftab, 2021) and from producing urban space (McDowell, 1982; Peake and Pratt, 2017). Federici (2004) notably frames such practices not as spontaneous habits or mere tradition, but as inherently political acts with a collective purpose. Practices of care thus become emblematic of broader resistances to neglect and urban violence (Gabauer *et al.*, 2022;

Katsikana, 2021). Because they are affectively charged, they have produced countervailing power in both domestic and urban spheres, fostering self-valorisation and self-determination (Podlashuc, 2009).

The orientation toward interdependence, care, and collective agency directly shapes how we understand the everyday politics of commons as deeply entangled with the tension between conflict and peace. Rather than smoothing over contradictions, these practices create spaces where fragile negotiations unfold and where the unsettled character of urban life becomes a resource for exploring more just ways of living together. The everyday politics of commons thus revolves around affective and spatial practices that nurture bonds, sustain disagreement, and hold open the horizon of possibility. Similar dynamics appear in Barrera Agudelo's account (this issue) of Monguì, Colombia, where care and interdependence become acts of resistance materialised through collective territorial restoration and networks of mutualism. Here, care is framed not as an individual duty in an atomised society but as a public responsibility, creating conditions that sustain life through the collective management of local and traditional resources. Far from being pacified, care is understood as deeply ethical and political, raising questions of justice and coexistence among humans and more-than-human life (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017; review by Pappalardo, this issue). As Fragnito and Tola (2021) remind us, care can also generate conflicts, especially in societies marked by systemic neglect, yet it opens paths for alternative responses to shared needs (Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2020). Politicising the body through the conceptual prism of care underscores that acting together is not just about shared agency but also about recognising differences and vulnerabilities (Geagea and De Tullio, 2024). It demands conditions of interdependence that inevitably raise questions of justice, responsibility, and the burdens of collective labour. This is critical, since acting together is never exempt from conflicts over who does what and how these divisions reflect ingrained gendered and social inequalities (Kern, 2021).

Toward Horizons of Possibility

This contribution has sought to capture the density and ambivalence that shape the relations between conflict and peace

in the contemporary city. It offers a reading that is not binary but relational, grounded in the rhythms of everyday life and in the constitutive tensions of urban space. It places commons and commoning practice at the heart of this endeavour, proposing them as generative grounds where such tensions take form and gain presence. From this perspective, several directions open for further inquiry.

First, the tension between conflict and peace should be treated as an analytical category in its own right, not merely as a backdrop to urban processes. It acts as a structuring force that shapes how people inhabit, relate to, and imagine space. This calls for methods that can trace what moves below the surface of institutional discourse, including affects, atmospheres, underrepresented practices, and micropolitics of dissent. It also requires attention to subjectivities, to patterns of privilege and exclusion, and to the power relations that shape who can inhabit urban futures and in what ways.

Second, commons emerge not only as an object of study but as a critical lens on the contingency of urban space, which is continuously shaped through the tension between conflict and peace. Commons show how societies navigate this tension and negotiate their futures. This invites exploration of commoning as an agonistic, situated, and transformative practice that holds tensions without claiming to resolve them. A further level of complexity concerns the more-than-human dimensions of urban life, extending the analysis to assemblages of heterogeneous relations and their tangible and intangible implications, with particular attention to absences and exclusions. Rethinking the commons from this angle means embracing a relational ethics that connects urban coexistence to ontological justice across multiple forms of life.

Third, engaging with the pedagogical and mutualistic aspects of the politics of commons, as they respond to immediate needs close to everyday life, generates tacit knowledge that connects the intimate scale of everyday relations with broader structural transformations. Commons become inclusive terrains of struggle against the erosion of social ties and arenas for negotiating how coexistence takes shape.

The intention of this contribution is not to provide final answers, nor

can commons be understood as a model to be simply replicated. Instead, it opens questions central to this special issue: What does it mean to live together amid conflict and aspirations for peace? How can fragile yet real forms of coexistence be forged across differences? What places, moments, and relationships keep horizons of possibility open? Where do thresholds appear between a sense of direction and moments of uncertainty that make urban life both settled and open to new possibilities?

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IN DIALOGO/CONVERSATIONS

**Commoning to Commons: On Transformative Practice
and the Politics of Everyday Life.**
In Dialogue with Jonathan Metzger and Stavros Stavrides.
Edited by Stefania Ragozino, Tihomir Viderman,
and Chiara Belingardi

This conversation introduces commoning as a relational and transformative practice shaping urban life. Moving beyond fixed models, it reflects on how commons emerge through collective negotiation, ethical struggle, and more-than-human entanglements. The exchange revolves around the themes of *ethics, institutions, openness, and urban space*, addressing the challenges of maintaining openness without reproducing exclusion. Grounded in lived experiences and critical theory, the conversation highlights commoning as an ongoing practice of building shared ground across differences, creating possibilities for reimagining social cooperation beyond ownership and extraction. The conversation took place on 14 April 2025 online. The transcript has been edited for clarity and coherence, while retaining the relational spirit of the original exchange.

Ethics

Stefania Ragozino, Tihomir Viderman, and Chiara Belingardi: Let's start by examining ethics in and around commons. What it means if commons are conceptualized in opposition to the state or rather as small hardly visible change to urban experience? Are the commons meant to replace existing structures or to fill perceived voids? What kind of society might be built with and through the commons?

Jonathan Metzger: That's a great place to begin. We could easily spend days unpacking this question – it really is that central. But maybe what's most important is how we talk about the commons. Often, when academics point to conceptual confusion, it is to clear the way for a 'correct' definition. However, I think that this confusion can be productive. It keeps the concept open, generative, and connected to multiple forms of struggle and imagination. While a lot of discussions still draws on Elinor Ostrom's important framework, I think more recent

conversations have expanded the field in useful, relational ways. Your question proposes a few contrasts: commons as oppositional to the state, or as small, often invisible shifts in everyday urban life. I would add another common framing: commons in opposition to private property, as an alternative to enclosure. What interests me in relation to this is the distinction between the commons and the commoners, which in many traditional models is taken as granted. Commons are seen as natural resources, something non-human, while commoners are seen as people managing or extracting from these resources. The focus then becomes, how the value is extracted sustainably, what governance system can ensure that the natural resource is not depleted. But I think we need to trouble that separation. Rather than dividing between two fixed entities – non-human resources and humans – I approach commons as an ecology of heterogeneous relations made up of humans and non-humans. Such a conceptualization opens a wider field of consideration, not only of who benefits, but also of who and what is harmed. It invites us to look at interdependences, to recognize the harms we might do to non-humans, and to think about commoning as an ongoing, ethical process, not just a question of access or value production.

Stavros Stavrides: My approach to the commons insists on the verb rather than the noun. It's not just about the commons as a defined thing, but about commoning as an active and open-ended process. I am interested in the potentialities inherent in this process, how it can challenge existing relations of power and ownership. Historically, there have been different forms of commons. Some of them preceded capitalist or market relations; belonged to traditional society mentalities. My entry point is to explore these experiences in search of pathways beyond exploitation and extraction, which I see as the dominant characteristics of the societies we live in today. These societies, whether capitalist or hybrids of capitalism and feudalism, are grounded in systems that exploit and extract. Not that commoning would automatically transcend that, but it carries a momentum, a potential. It gestures toward different ways of living: toward equality, mutual care, and shared responsibility. These are not just abstract ethical values. They can guide actual practices that challenge dominant governance models.

To be clear, I don't believe that commoning is simply an alternative form of economic arrangement. If it is to be taken seriously as a project of collective emancipation, it must challenge both the market and the state. The capitalist state is not the only form of state that has existed, just as the capitalist market is not the only form of market we've known. Commoning must create the conditions for non-hierarchical relations, where care, responsibility, and the sharing of power become central, thus challenging the idea that the state is the inevitable form through which societies must be governed. This also means attending to non-human relations, becoming, in a sense, tenders of land, as some indigenous populations in Latin America describe it. Their relationship with nature is not grounded in ownership (land is not a commodity), but in reweaving connections with the more-than-human world in ethical and non-extractive ways.

JM: Stavros's inspiring reflections on the broader and more open definition of commoning reminded me of work by feminist and ecofeminist thinkers like J.K. Gibson-Graham, especially their playful title *Waiting for the Revolution, or How to Smash Capitalism while Working at Home in Your Spare Time*. The core point they make is that there's already a great deal of activity in the world that doesn't follow capitalist logic. If we just recognize and value those practices, we can build on them. This alone can make a big difference.

The focus on commoning, especially as regards the relationships between humans and other forms of existence, opens up a whole set of complex and important questions. I want to point to one in particular: commoning with whom? This leads us into more difficult terrain of boundary-making. Who defines the commons? What are the boundaries of commons? Who is included, and who isn't? These are persistent and troubling questions. We talk about the commons as something open and inclusive, but the issue of hospitality – who is welcomed, who is considered a stranger, who is trusted or feared – is never far away. There is often a tension between wanting to preserve the integrity of a commons and the fear that newcomers might not respect its values.

SS: As Jonathan said, the question of boundaries is never easy. Rather than define what society is, which I find too abstract, I prefer to ask: What kind of society are we living in? What kind are we trying to build? And crucially, who is this 'we'?

I speak from the position that the society I live in is unjust and destructive – toward nature, toward the very conditions of humanity. I want to be part of those working to change that. In this, I see commoning as a possible path for transformation, because it carries the idea of sharing. It implies collective decision-making and a different way of organizing life. This renders commoning more than just an ethical appeal. It's a principle that can guide concrete practices: how experts who know participate in decisions on equal footing, how we share resources, how we govern ourselves, and how we relate to both urban and more-than-human environments.

That's why I'm critical of the idea, often repeated even among commons scholars, that commoning could make the state more helpful or humane. Historically, from ancient Sumer to the present, the state has functioned as a mechanism for the unequal distribution of power. Its logic hasn't changed, even if actors have. This doesn't mean the state can be ignored. Sometimes negotiation is possible, sometimes confrontation is necessary. But we should be clear: the state may tolerate or co-opt commoning, but it is not its guarantor, and certainly not its foundation.

JM: I'm somewhat agnostic about the role of the state. As Stavros pointed out, its track record isn't encouraging, but I don't see the state disappearing anytime soon, at least not in any positive sense. So perhaps we must consider how it might be repurposed. That said, I'm not especially hopeful. Just look at how international regulations, like those on industrial fishing, are not enforced. We have expensive naval fleets, but they're not used to stop deep sea pirate fishing. There's a clear line of continuity from ancient Sumer, through the enclosures of commons in England, to today's extractive systems. Still, the state isn't going away. Whether we like it or not, it remains part of the political terrain we must navigate.

What this question really made me reflect on is why the commons have become such a central rallying point for the left today. I think it's tied to a growing sense of fragility, entanglement, and the urgent need to rethink how we live. The commons signal a shift from a logic of efficiency to an ethics of sufficiency, from maximizing output to asking what is enough for everyone to live well. It's not necessarily a full commitment to degrowth, but it

implies a fundamental shift in values. And so, the critical question becomes, who is included in this 'everyone'. Who gets to benefit from the commons, and to flourish? That's where the ethical stakes of commoning truly lie.

Institutions

SR, TV, CB: We would further like to inquire into the relation between commons and institutions of society. How do commons relate to institutions (from family to state) and to the existing fabric of society? To what extent can institutions be considered commons? What distinguishes commons from institutions of society, and how might institutions transform through practices of commoning?

SS: We should not limit our idea of institutions to our experience of how they function in capitalist societies, where they often reproduce inequality and injustice. Institutions themselves are not inherently oppressive. There can be institutions of communing – forms that ensure shared access to knowledge, goods, health, education, even pleasure, particularly for those at risk of exclusion. Having this conversation is already a form of commoning: sharing ideas, exchanging perspectives, and practicing an ethics of dialogue. It's not about directing others how to think but about finding meaning together.

Historically, societies did not simply love or hate power. They developed mechanisms to discourage the accumulation of power, like mutual help in agriculture or the rotation of duties in healthcare and other areas crucial for well-being, where expert knowledge should not become an instrument of power accumulation. These arrangements are institutions of commoning: practices that create predictability based on shared values, rather than on law or hierarchy. They can be inclusive or exclusive. They can either prevent or encourage collective inventiveness.

We must also rethink existing institutions. Family, for instance, is not simply a molecule of capitalism. There are examples of societies where families were neither patriarchal nor hierarchical. Such a family was not necessarily based on the exploitation of the younger by the elder, but supported shared responsibility across generations. Markets, too, have existed based on reciprocity and respect, rather than competition and

extraction. Thus, building institutions of commoning means fostering collective inventiveness. Commoning is not about applying a fixed model; it reinvents itself through participation, negotiation, and struggle. There is no ready-made path, but a shared path we create as we move.

JM: This brings me back to how we conceptualize the commons. In textbook terms, a common-pool resource is defined as non-excludable but rivalrous, meaning that while it is difficult to prevent people from accessing it, one person's use still diminishes what is available for others. A family, however, is very excludable (membership is selective) and non-rivalrous (benefits are not diminished by being utilized). It is perhaps closer to a club good than to a commons. However, thinking about commoning today forces us to rethink both boundaries and depletable. Neither concept is as straightforward as it once appeared. With tangible commons, like fisheries or grazing fields, boundaries are relatively clear: you either enclose them or you don't. But with intangible commons, such as urban atmospheres or shared social creativity, boundaries become much harder to define. This also complicates the idea of depletion. With physical commons, overuse can exhaust resources. But with intangible commons, participation might enrich rather than diminish them. Interaction can be additive, not extractive.

SS: Whenever we discuss boundaries in commoning, we must also recognize the need for self-transformation. In today's often hostile societies, those involved in commoning cannot simply act on inherited values; they must develop new ethical frameworks, challenge themselves, and reshape their ways of acting together, because the value system related to commoning is necessarily not something that they have within them, their education, and their experiences. This process inevitably raises difficult questions: Who am I acting for? In whose name? What am I doing?

It's crucial to situate discussions of commoning in their historical and social contexts. Are we speaking about commoning in the abstract, or about specific conditions, like those in Naples today, where legal barriers, traditions like 'uso civico', and local histories shape what is possible? Commoning is not just an ethical aspiration; it is a situated, historical practice. Without attention to specific conditions of a context, we risk misunderstanding both its possibilities and its challenges.

JM: The relationship between value extraction, capitalism, and the institutions raises important questions about how we think about the commons today. In recent years, much of the discussion around the commons has shifted toward digital commons: platforms, the internet, and new forms of mediated sharing. But this terrain is complex. Take platform capitalism – Airbnb, for instance. From a certain perspective such a platform creates a kind of shared resource, a commons of sorts, which is then enclosed and monetized (extracted value from). While people seemingly can share, the fundamental problem is that these interactions are embedded within a logic of profit-making, not grounded in an ethics of the commons. Even if something resembling a shared resource emerges, it is produced through systems structured around extraction and accumulation. It is not commoning in any genuine sense. At the same time, it is important to recognize that capitalism does not merely extract value; it also organizes and produces surplus value, which it then captures. This complexity matters. Can tools developed within capitalist frameworks, such as digital platforms, be repurposed to create genuine commons? Or are they inevitably limited by the logics of capital?

SS: If existing systems offered no possibilities for change, there would be little point in discussing it. Every society contains potentialities for change and for collective emancipation – some have been realized, others not.

Some of the tools and structures we have today could indeed be used differently. But transforming them is not simply a matter of changing roles; it also requires rethinking their substance. The internet offers a powerful example of the enclosure of data. Early on, it created possibilities for decentralized participation and dispersed communication. Alternative, non-centralized models were imaginable. Yet over time, we witnessed the enclosure of data, particularly through platforms like Facebook and various cloud services. Information freely shared has been captured and appropriated to train corporate AI systems. It has been repurposed for profit.

This enclosure was not inevitable. It reflects how capitalist systems appropriate forms of cooperation and collective production. In Marxian terms, the ‘general intellect’ – the collective wisdom generated through shared digital practices – has been systematically captured and commodified.

Inclusion

SR, TV, CB: We would like to explore how practices of commoning can remain inclusive, avoiding the emergence of new forms of exclusion. If commons are conceptually tied to specific communities, how can they be understood in ways that foster coexistence rather than competition? How are boundaries and thresholds defined within commons, and how are they negotiated between conflict and peace?

JM: This goes to the heart of an issue of the inevitability of boundaries, even within practices guided by the ethics of commoning as a fruitful way of living together. No matter how open our intentions, questions of who belongs and who benefits will always arise. Rather than denying boundaries, we must recognize and critically engage with them. Boundaries may emerge unconsciously, but their effects are real. Sustaining commoning requires being alert to how boundaries form, who they include or exclude, how they are consciously or unconsciously enforced, and whether they are ethically justified. The work of commoning is not to eliminate boundaries, but to remain in ongoing, uncomfortable dialogue about how they are drawn, and how they can be challenged and changed over time.

SS: As Jonathan pointed out, the question of boundaries is never easy. It's tempting to imagine a universal humanity without divisions. Yet commoning must deal with boundaries in very specific and concrete ways. It moves toward inclusiveness, beyond the injustices and hierarchies of existing societies, but making this real requires navigating particular historical and political conditions. In Naples, for example, activist groups negotiated with an enlightened municipal administration to create commons open to everyone – excluding only racist, sexist, or fascist actors. Sometimes, temporary boundaries are necessary to protect fragile commoning practices under threat. These measures are defensive, not a valued choice. The boundaries should never become permanent. They must remain porous, flexible enough to defend a space without closing it off. If boundaries harden, commons risk becoming new enclosures, the very opposite of what commoning seeks to achieve.

Inclusiveness remains the most fundamental characteristic of commoning. It means openness to everyone (except those

seeking to destroy commons), embracing difference in all its forms and expressions. As John Holloway reminds us, even as we work toward change, we are not simply the enlightened ones; we are also 'crippled' by histories. We carry traces of old systems, with habits shaped by patriarchy, capitalism, and hierarchy. Education, for instance, still teaches us that it is better to be a lawyer than a mason. Boundaries, where they arise, must therefore always be approached with caution.

In this context, peace is a word easily claimed, even by those who prepare for war. Without justice and equality, talk of peace remains empty. Commoning fosters the conditions for peace through inclusion, care, and shared responsibility. Yet peace cannot be guaranteed by commoning alone. True peace depends on dismantling injustice and exploitation, the deeper roots of conflict.

JM: Stavros's reflections highlight an important point: invoking the commons inevitably raises questions of justice, or I would prefer to call it fairness. I've previously mentioned an ethics of sufficiency, but thinking about the commons opens the question of who has a legitimate claim, who has the right to benefit from what is shared. If we are not constantly attentive to the troubling question of inclusivity and fairness, commons risk becoming insular.

Many case studies show how groups have turned shared resources into forms of collective private property, enclosures that benefit only a few. When that happens, exclusion and conflict inevitably follow, undermining the very principles of commoning. It's important to keep these risks in mind. Even when we think of the classic example – a shared pasture – we should ask, what about those who arrive later, what about the temporary visitor, what about the refugee. Commoning must remain open to those who may not have prior claims, yet whose inclusion challenges us to rethink what sharing truly means.

This consideration brings into focus what I would call the legitimacy of the illegitimate. It is about a beneficiary who may not have contributed to the maintenance of the commons, but is in desperate need of nourishment. This becomes particularly important when thinking about urban commons. My colleague Kristina Grange, drawing on Derrida's work on hospitality, has written about the ethics of welcoming the stranger as

part of commoning practices. Hospitality toward the refugee, the outsider, the stranger, is vital. It prevents commons communities from degenerating into new forms of enclosure or tribalism. One of the key challenges for commoning is how to manage boundaries without replicating exclusionary practices. In liberal democratic traditions, citizenship is positively framed as promising inclusion regardless of belief or behaviour. From the point of view of the state, inclusion mostly depends on legal status – whether someone holds citizenship, refugee status, or another legal title. In commons, inclusion may be based on behaviour and shared ethical principles – rejecting, for instance, racism, sexism, or fascism. However, if commons begin to exclude based on how people think or express themselves, there is a risk of becoming restrictive or authoritarian. The challenge, then, is how to maintain openness while safeguarding the ethical foundations that make commoning possible.

SS: Commoning should not be understood as a process of homogenization (as perhaps communitarianism would think about it), where sharing an identity becomes a condition for belonging. On the contrary, commoning thrives on difference, on creating a shared ground among those who remain different, who want to preserve their difference, but are willing to collaborate. Commoning is a process that gestures towards difference it produces. If commoning loses this capacity to embrace difference, it risks closing in on itself and becoming exclusionary.

While there are parallels with the ideal of liberal citizenship, we must remember that historically, citizenship was often denied to women, children, and outsiders. Commoning must go further, actively cultivating inclusion across categories of difference. Hospitality offers a way to think about this more deeply. Drawing on the idea of the gift, commoning is not about exchange based on equality, but about offering. It is about sharing knowledge, resources, or space to create the conditions for mutual participation. It is not simply about helping those in need, but about offering something that enables others to become equal participants in the commons. For example, when we share our expertise, whether in economics, architecture, urban design, or other fields, we are not exchanging favours. We are giving in a way that creates a common ground, opening opportunities

for others to fully join and shape the collective process of commoning. It is through such gestures that commoning remains open, transformative, and true to its purpose.

Urban Space

SR, TV, CB: To situate the theme of commoning more firmly within urban space, we would like to introduce a post-human perspective. How can commons and commoners be understood through the lens of assemblages, drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari? What research methodologies would you recommend for studying or engaging with urban commons and commoners, while attending to both human and non-human dimensions of their production?

JM: How we conceptualize commons fundamentally shapes how we engage with them. Rather than seeing commons simply as resources to be managed or governance systems to be regulated, I prefer to think of them as ecologies of heterogeneous relations, as assemblages where value is produced by humans and non-humans who create mutual, non-destructive benefits. These relations are productive not through extraction, but through mutual enhancement.

From this perspective, urban commons are not just about human cooperation. They involve more-than-human entanglements, such as creative atmospheres, material ecosystems, and shared urban existences that sustain multiple forms of life. Thinking in this way opens up new potentialities for urban cohabitation. It challenges the traditional Western idea of the city as an exclusively human domain and invites us to imagine urban spaces designed for mutual flourishing across human and non-human participants alike. This perspective reorients both how we retrofit existing cities and how we design future urban environments to support inclusive commons that benefit more than just humans.

SS: There is much to be learned from the ways different cultures, especially those displaced into cities, develop forms of sharing and coexistence. They sustain different relationships with land, introducing hybrid practices that challenge the dominant Western idea of land as a resource to be used and distributed. In my research, I encountered traditions in Latin America where

land is understood not as property, but as a mother. This is not merely a metaphor or a religious belief, but a different way of living together. Instead of seeing themselves as owners or users, people become tenders of the land: taking only what they need and giving back what is necessary for regeneration. This stands in contrast even to the most progressive ideas of Western thought, where land is still primarily viewed as a resource to be carefully managed but ultimately extracted from.

An example from Colombia illustrates how different traditions shape relationships to land. During land redistribution debates, peasant farmers sought private parcels to secure their family livelihoods, with ownership based on a notion of fairer distribution. Descendants of formerly enslaved black people, drawing on traditions of collective life, demanded communal ownership, which was recognized by legal status as collective landholdings. Meanwhile, indigenous groups, rooted in the Mother Earth tradition, rejected the notion of ownership altogether, seeking simply the right to live with and tend the land, allowing it to continue existing as a subject in its own right. These differing approaches show how complex commoning becomes when it confronts systems of governance that do not recognize such diversity. There are no fixed principles to guide this process. Commoning emerges through negotiation and through building shared ground amid profound differences. There is no outside authority to impose it. There are no power relations based on treaties.

Ultimately, commoning calls for rethinking community, cooperation, and justice not as abstract ideals, but as practices continually shaped through acts of difference, coexistence, and care.

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DIETRO LE QUINTE/BACKSTAGE

Searching for affective spaces: an interdisciplinary approach to wounded cities through the case of Caivano's Rione Parco Verde (Naples, Italy)

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Abstract

Discussing urban peacebuilding processes today also means reasoning about the everyday life of cities that are the site of conflicts and power asymmetries that generate injustices at different scales. Urban studies, in which theories, approaches, and tools of urban planning and social sciences intersect, can contribute interpretatively and transformatively to processes of everyday peacebuilding. Often confronted with traumatized places, researchers propose situated approaches and practices that foster the coexistence and protect the most vulnerable groups. Drawing on the project "Futuri (Im)Possibili" (Caivano, Naples, Italy), this paper discusses an interdisciplinary research that aims at urban peace through mutual learning with communities and territorial actors: a process that is not driven by hierarchical decision-making and territorial control but by affective praxis based on active listening, participation and the development of interaction spaces oriented at mending local civil society.

Discutere oggi di processi di costruzione della pace urbana significa anche ragionare sulla quotidianità di città che sono teatro di conflittualità e asimmetrie di potere che generano fenomeni di ingiustizia a diverse scale. Gli urban studies, nei quali si incrociano teorie, approcci e strumenti tipici delle discipline urbanistiche e sociologiche, possono contribuire in chiave interpretativa e trasformativa ai processi di costruzione della everyday peace. Spesso a confronto con luoghi traumatizzati, i ricercatori propongono approcci e pratiche situate che favoriscano la coesistenza e tutelino le soggettività più vulnerabili. A partire dal progetto "Futuri (Im)Possibili" (Caivano, Napoli, Italia), questo articolo discute una ricerca interdisciplinare che mira alla pace urbana attraverso l'apprendimento reciproco con le comunità e gli attori territoriali: un processo che non è guidato da un processo decisionale gerarchico e dal controllo del territorio, ma da una prassi affettiva basata sull'ascolto attivo, sulla partecipazione e sullo sviluppo di spazi di interazione orientati alla ricucitura della società civile locale.

Keywords: urban trauma; everyday peace; affective spaces.

Parole chiave: trauma urbano; pace nella quotidianità; spazi affettivi.

Introduction

Numerous places have suffered the effects of sudden devastation or social and cultural tensions, such as natural hazard phenomena, armed conflicts, riots, or forms of segregation, militarization, and marginalization. These settings are referred to as *traumatized places* and *places to be reconstructed* in a rational logic that conceives them only as objects to be acted upon. Indeed, in most cases, such places are subjected to sectoral policies and approaches, top-down imposed urban transformation processes, and public safety policies based on the ‘command and control’ *logic*, or the logic of pressure policies recognized in so-called ‘peacekeeping’ and ‘peacemaking’ processes (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Jett, 2000; Elfversson *et al.*, 2023). In urban practice, these approaches privilege interventions aimed at redeveloping public spaces or spaces of public use in terms of urban decorum and globalized building standards, which are considered *neutral* (in case of cultural and social conflicts), scarcely criminogenic, and easily defensible. Such interventions are grounded in the idea that *new stones can erase unsettling memories*. A well-known example is the post-conflict urban redevelopment of the city center and the waterfront in Belfast, to distance the narrative of Northern Ireland from the Troubles (Esposito De Vita, 2013). These interventions neither build on the demands of the population nor engage them in collaborative processes with decision-makers at various scales. Conversely, both theory and practice suggest that spatial interventions based on place-making can play a substantial, meaningful role in peacebuilding (Bădescu, 2022; Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2022).

Traumatized places do not only experience forms of ‘advanced marginality’ (Wacquant, 2008) – where spatial alienation, social fragmentation and territorial stigmatization enables extraordinary measures to be imposed top-down – but are also subject to ‘abyssal exclusion’ (de Sousa Santos, 2017) where the invisibility, dehumanization, and inferiorization of social groups lead to a denial of their rights and agency, and thus to their non-involvement in transformation processes. In this paper, ‘urban peace’ is not understood as an event crystallized in time, but as a process geared towards establishing new relationships beyond the polarized lines of conflict and criminal behaviors. This entails the construction of visions away from the forced and

destructive confrontation and injustices of the 'command and control' approach; visions capable of inspiring integrated actions on physical and social space, aimed at *peaceful coexistence* and *constructive dialogue*. This conceptualization is captured by the term 'everyday peace' and is grounded in the experiences and practices of people or groups inhabiting specific territories, who are best positioned to understand how peace and coexistence can be generated and nurtured over time and in place (Elfverson *et al.*, 2023). It reflects a 'spatial turn' (Soja, 2008; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 2016; Macaspac and Moore, 2022) as it aims at a more situated understanding of peace processes through ethnographic, participatory, and collaborative methods. This paper takes the complex horizon of *trauma* as a key to understanding and supporting human behavior and the organization of places in contexts in which people experience the effects of a stressful event – or repeated events – of anthropogenic or non-anthropogenic nature. The category of post-traumatic syndrome is extended to all those conditions in which people live daily with the effects of an event – or repeated events – that may undermine the individual or collective capacity to act and react. In relation to anthropogenic issues, the built environment, geopolitical dynamics, and social conditions play an important role in amplifying and perpetuating *urban trauma*. These dimensions are tied to processes of socio-spatial marginalization whose stigma-producing narratives foster a persistent sense of alienation. These, in turn, undermine the sense of belonging typical to inhabiting places and, often, encourage identification with subcultures that fuel conflicts (Cellamare, 2020). In such sites, the concept of community itself can be misleading, being a driver of division and conflicts instead of developing a *cum munus* (Esposito, 2006). In fact, when discussing social marginalization and spatial peripheralization, there is a tendency to simplify, generalize, and represent communities in opposition, proposing solutions framed by control that accentuate boundaries and expropriate inhabitants of their capacity to aspire and act. In her disambiguation of the concept of 'vita activa', Arendt (2012) emphasizes the need to confront the pressure on the public realm that seeks to diminish human agency and political freedom. In socio-spatial contexts, where publicness is eroded by continuous exercises of power, violence, and showdowns, inhabitants are

deprived of the human capacity for action that is the very essence of humankind.

The concept of trauma in these contexts, intersecting with themes of public space (Madanipour, 2004), of school as a community garrison (Lecardane *et al.*, 2025), of future studies literacy (Cook, 2017), and of the practices of everyday life (de Certau, 2011), can offer interpretative keys of urban phenomena that go beyond the traditional cause-effect logics of dirigiste approaches. It introduces the logics of *relationality*, *affection*, *subjectification*, and *everyday life* (Elfversson *et al.*, 2023). Towards this aim, a 'praxeological approach' (Reckwitz, 2012) may help transferring the theoretical horizon of trauma into an embedded case study in a context in which the following criteria coexist: triggering stressor event, conditions of segregation (also self-enforced), continuous erosion of the public realm, loss of capacity for action and activation, criminal subcultures and narratives that reiterate stigma and alienation. Caivano, a municipality located in the northern part of Naples (Italy) and a site of turbulent histories, is one of those spaces that calls for alternatives to the 'command and control' approach.

Drawing on an ongoing case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009), this paper describes a context in which the everyday life of communities living in social housing (Brignone *et al.*, 2022; Cellamare, 2020) is affected by a trickle of lawlessness and abuse that reiterates trauma on a daily basis. In this context, the deteriorating conditions of the built environment and social fragmentation are intertwined with atavistic distrust of institutions. Organized crime and its subcultures make it difficult to shape trust within and across communities. Through the theoretical filter of trauma, we discuss an action research activity integrating methodologies typical of sociology and urban studies for co-designing shared futures. In the following sections, we will first examine the literature on urban trauma and successively focus on the concept of 'affectiveness' in the urban field. Further, the case of Caivano is presented in its many critical aspects, and the methodology of the ongoing project "Futuri (Im)possibili - Diagnosticare il presente e immaginare il futuro con i giovani di Caivano"¹ will be illustrated.

¹ The research project "(Im)possible Futures: diagnosing the present and imagining the future with Caivano's youth" is funded by Fondazione Rut and carried out in collaboration with IRPPS-CNR, Fondazione Don Calabria per il Sociale and the support of ILC-CNR and IRISS-CNR. The project started

We will conclude with theoretical and methodological reflections.

Embracing (urban) trauma through affective practices

Trauma is understood as a physiological response to a painful or threatening situation from which there is no way out, and in which the body reacts helplessly by retaining that unprocessed traumatic memory. Levine (2014) explored the biology of trauma, showing how the body reacts to traumatic events and how these very mechanisms can be used to overcome the trauma itself through bodily sensations. In *Somatic Experiencing*, he argues that trauma is what the nervous system retains in the absence of an empathic witness. This is why the need to establish a sense of safety (shelter, stability) in the here and now can be configured as a point of departure for trauma resolution – enabling individuals to feel comfortable in exploring and expressing the feelings underlying the trauma. When trauma is chronic, it is associated with entrenched forms of violence (gender, race, class, political abuse), that usually appear under a veneer of normality. This concealment makes the afflicted even less visible and more prone to conditions of distress/discomfort, including dehumanization, identity alteration, anxiety, and depression.

In urban studies, urban trauma is considered a condition in which conflict or catastrophe damages not only the physical environment but also social and cultural networks (Lahoud *et al.*, 2010). Here we can think of extreme natural hazard phenomena, terrorist attacks, or numerous conflicts and displacements that populate the daily news. Pain (2019; 2021) illustrates some limitations, framing trauma as a common, sudden, rapid event that originates from outside – one that has a long-lasting impact and must be managed by the technical discipline according to the canons of adaptation and resilience. Drawing on post-colonial theories, social psychiatry, social ecology, feminist political theories, and art theory, Till (2012), on the other hand, conceptualizes ‘wounded cities’ as densely inhabited places damaged by histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma resulting from violence perpetrated by the state. For Till, these are not punctual external events but forms of violence that act over the long term and continue to structure current social and spatial relations, and as such also structure expectations of

in September 2024 with a foreseen duration of 36 months.

what is considered *normal*. Commenting on Till's (2012) writing, Shields (2012) focuses on *ethics, affects, and care* by conceiving trauma as stress – a wound that highlights materiality and embodiment as well as less intangible qualities, recovering aspects of place, people, and communities, and the relationships between them. In this vein, more recent feminist, queer, and post-colonial perspectives on trauma have conceived of this condition as follows: *collective*, since it can pervasively afflict particular communities and/or disadvantaged places; *ordinary and material* because it affects the reality and materiality of everyday life; *embedded* because it enters into the webs of social and cultural processes (among many: Cvetkovich, 2003). These positions shift the notion of trauma from a consequence of catastrophe to a *structural condition of everyday life*.

Rittel and Webber's conception of 'wicked problems' (1973) offers an analytical perspective to approach wounded contexts. Unlike tame problems that have clearly defined parameters and single, correct solutions, wicked problems entail shifting definitions, multiple interpretations, and the co-evolution of problems and solutions. Such conceptualizations resist linear, top-down technical approaches and instead call for participatory, iterative, and context-sensitive methods. *Affective urbanism*, which has introduced theories of affect into urban design and planning, is such an approach. Emphasizing the places of everyday life as sites where social inequalities related to categories of difference (gender, class, race, religion, ethnicity, disability, etc.) take material form (Viderman and Knierbein, 2020), it proposes an inclusive perspective that focuses on spatial practices of belonging, re-appropriation, and contestation; on the relationality and materiality involved in the making of place, understood as bodies acting within spaces; on the subject-object and subject-collectivity relationships; and on the power of encounters that connects bodies. Building on Lefebvre's studies on lived space, Viderman and Knierbein (2020) highlight *affective encounters* between individuals and groups as a way to challenge routines and processes of alienation. These encounters can generate new logics of urban resistance and change by giving voice to those who have none, putting different capitals back into circulation, and enacting power in an alternative way, to undermine the silences and absences of not adequately represented subjects. This approach seeks to go beyond the

traditional and detached urban planning tools by prioritizing a «bodily action in embodied space» (Viderman and Knierbein, 2020: 61) capable of mobilizing resources and people, thereby laying the foundations for meaningful everyday places. It embraces design and planning positions that are not neutral but grounded in the social and democratic dimension, guided by protocols of *collaboration*, *cooperation*, and *co-creation*, as well as principles of emotional involvement, everyday life, and the materiality of the urban body. Affective urbanism is operationalized through the practices of *bodies in space* (affective space), such as insurgent planning practices, care-inspired practices, urban commoning practices, and feminist and trans-feminist practices. In line with the theory of practice (Reckwitz, 2012; Schatzki *et al.*, 2001) – which considers the intersecting activities of bodies, minds, objects and their possible uses, cognitive and experiential baggage, emotional states, and their interconnections, activated and repeated over time – the collective making of places avoids abstract and binary approaches cast down from above.

Everyday emergency: social and urban trauma in Caivano (Naples, Italy)

From emergency to trauma

Caivano² is a municipality of the metropolitan area of Naples, lying halfway between the cities of Naples and Caserta, approximately 15 km from both urban centres (Fig. 1). For centuries, this area had been mostly dedicated to agriculture. Following WWII, national urban planning laws had been suspended to promote post-war recovery, reshaping the landscape of the metropolitan area of Naples through unregulated construction of residential buildings, industrial hubs, and transport infrastructure, and incorporating Caivano into the urban sprawl. In the 1970s, Caivano's mainly agricultural character and low-income economy have slightly changed as companies such as Unilever and Cirio bought nearby agricultural land in Pascarola (see the upper left perimeter of the municipality in the Fig. 1) to develop an industrial district. A further transformative event was the 6.9-magnitude earthquake that struck on 23/11/1980, affecting 687 municipalities across the regions of Campania, Basilicata, and Puglia. It killed nearly 3,000

² The municipality of Caivano covers an area of approximately 27 km² and has a population of 35,966 (ISTAT, 2024).

people, injured around 9,000, and left about 400,000 homeless (Ventura, 2006). Beyond the immediate emergency, it exposed and worsened the already precarious conditions –especially overcrowded and decaying housing – in Naples, where over 10,000 buildings were damaged³. In the aftermath, Law 219/1981 established a framework for the reconstruction and development of affected areas. This law granted full commissarial powers to the Mayor and suspended urban planning regulations to enable rapid reconstruction on the metropolitan fringes. The plan proposed a top-down redesign, with around 20,000 new housing units to accommodate about 100,000 people in peripheral and peri-urban areas. While it faced criticism for financial and political speculation (e.g., Mastroberti *et al.*, 2021), from a socio-urbanistic standpoint, it led to the displacement and mass relocation of mostly lower-class families from Naples' center to peripheral blocks, where they lacked material and social ties. Although Caivano was not directly hit by the earthquake, the *Rione Parco Verde* (Green Park District, hereafter RPV) was built on its northwestern edge as part of the reconstruction plan (see Fig. 1 and Fig.2), housing 4,000 earthquake-displaced people, though many units were also illegally occupied. Today, approximately 6,000 residents live in large apartment blocks and temporary dwellings that became permanent and public spaces that were never built or maintained (e.g., parks, playgrounds, streets). Notably, the “Green Park” is not actually a park – the term ‘green’ refers only to the color of the housing blocks. Public spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and streets were either never built or have since fallen into neglect. Today, the area includes two schools, a church, and a few associations offering social, cultural, and sports activities aimed mainly at children. Some residents also spontaneously take initiative in waste management and maintenance of neglected public spaces, as institutions largely ignore the area due to high rates of illegal occupancy.

The rising of wicked problems

The emergency-driven reconstruction approach introduced a core flaw: the provision of housing without the structural and functional

³ In fact, already before the seismic event there was a very high demand for social housing, and a municipal plan to depopulate the city centre through a metropolitan “Periphery housing plan”.

conditions for proper dwelling. Social displacement, institutional neglect, and resulting marginalization worsened the degradation triggered by the initial trauma. Similarly to other well-known fringes of the Metropolitan area of Naples, such as Scampia, the socio-spatial conditions in Caivano provide ideal preconditions for the Camorra to settle in the area (Esposito De Vita, 2013, 2018). Over time, metropolitan and local organized crime established a stronghold in RPV, turning it into what some media described as one of *Europe's largest drug markets*. Exploiting poverty, lack of institutional involvement, and the area's isolated, easily controlled layout (e.g., *cul-de-sacs* streets and surrounding highways), criminal groups relocated from more policed neighborhoods like Scampia (notably after the 2002 feud). Beyond drug trafficking, organized crime sought to control housing assignments and infiltrated local politics, thus criminally reshaping both private and public spaces in RPV. To give an extent of this phenomenon, Caivano's municipal administration has been placed under external commissarial control ten times since 1988⁴, resulting in a prolonged 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2003).

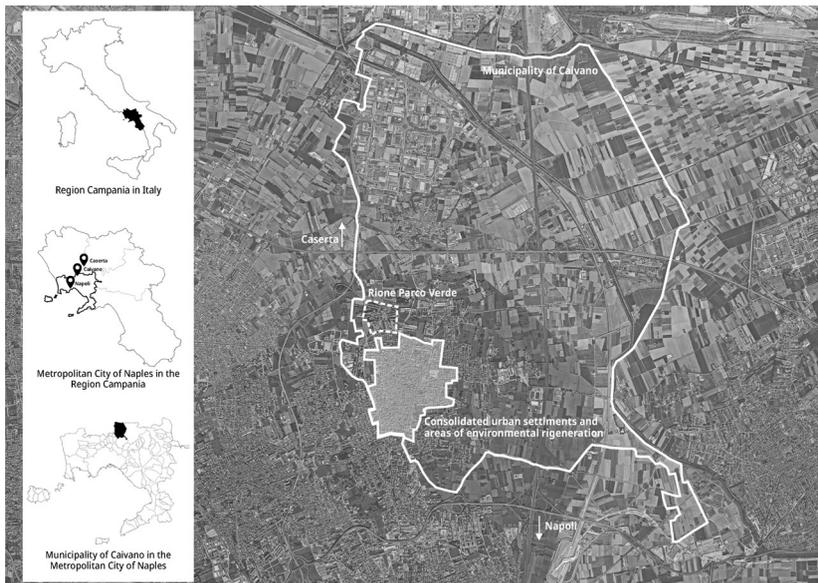


Fig. 1 A map of Caivano, with Parco Verde located on the northwestern edge. Source: Federica Morra's elaboration from OpenStreetMap.

⁴ <https://amministratori.interno.gov.it/index.php?page=StoriaEnteC>.

Organized crime in the area is also linked to environmental crimes, particularly illegal waste disposal. Caivano is part of the *'terra dei fuochi'* (land of fires), an area notorious since the early 2000s for the burning and burying of toxic industrial waste, causing severe pollution and elevated cancer rates and deaths (Flora, 2015). Yet it represents another collective trauma the population has to deal with. Apart from the presence of mafia-like subculture in everyday life, RPV has seen Camorra-related violence⁵ and tragic incidents, including sexual abuse cases⁶. These examples reflect only the surface of the deep-rooted complex issues that pose an obstacle to everyday peace in RPV. Beyond its physical isolation, RPV carries a strong negative stigma – some residents report being denied 'honest' jobs because of their address⁷. To give a glance at how social divisions persist: RPV inhabitants refer to old-Caivano residents as *villagers*, while the latter often distance themselves by highlighting *they're not from RPV* and still (ca. forty years after its construction) call RPV residents *Neapolitans*. In summer 2023, Caivano drew significant media and political attention following a series of criminal events including repeated cases of collective sexual abuse – both victims and perpetrators were minors – within the abandoned Delphina sports centre in RPV (see Fig. 1). While the area had long been neglected, these severe incidents prompted national outrage and state intervention. Yet, the institutional response once again reflects a top-down, 'command and control' approach rooted in a 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2003), replacing local administration with central authority and focusing on militarization (increased police presence, CCTV surveillance) and top-down regeneration.

Is the 'command and control' approach suitable for solving wicked problems?

Since September 2023, the municipality has been under extraordinary commissioner status, mandated by the Presidency

5 See, e.g., Ciccarelli-Sautto clan, or the case of Antonio Natale.

6 https://fondazionepolis.regione.campania.it/fortuna_loffredo.

7 Apart from the problems listed until now, Caivano also suffers from the historical structural differences between Northern and Southern Italy (Barbagallo, 2013). For instance, Caivano has a 16,6% unemployment rate (compared to 12,9% for the Campania region and 9,2% for Italy), low incomes, a higher presence of children, and a very high school dropout rate (reaching peaks of 40% in some years)

of the Council of Ministers, «in order to deal with situations of degradation, social vulnerability and youth discomfort in the territory of the municipality»⁸. The appointed Commissioner is tasked with implementing an extraordinary infrastructure and redevelopment plan⁹, under Decree Law No. 123/2023 called “Caivano Decree”, part of a broader national policy against youth hardship, educational poverty, and juvenile crime¹⁰ operating at the legislative level, implementing public safety policies and a punitive revision of juvenile law¹¹ (Tessitore, 2023). Apart from evicting some of the residents illegally occupying flats in RPV, one key intervention is the recovery of the abandoned Delphina Sports Centre (now “Centro sportivo Pino Daniele”, see Fig. 2), built by the military and entrusted to Police sports groups. Additional plans include converting an abandoned concrete plant into a university facility and repurposing the decaying building of the former “Caivano Arte” theatre into a smaller auditorium and cultural hub near the new sports centre (Fig. 2).

These actions, though also aimed at addressing social vulnerability and improving municipal capacity (e.g., hiring 16 social service workers, expanding police and administrative staff), have sparked controversy. Critics argue the approach is securitarian and symbolic (Cavaliere, 2024), narrowly focused on Caivano without really addressing the local community and broader regional issues.

8 Authors’ translation from: https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/DPCM_18_settembre_2023.pdf.

9 https://presidenza.governo.it/AmministrazioneTrasparente/Organizzazione/CommissariStraordinari/CS_Caivano/DECRETO_N7_20231120_organizzazione_struttura_supporto.pdf

10 https://www.programmagoverno.gov.it/media/r4fjygbf/focus-dl-123_2023.pdf.

11 The “Caivano Decree” established the direct responsibility of the family in cases of school dropout by their children (sanctioned with up to two years of imprisonment). It also revises parental authority, which may be revoked by the Public Prosecutor in cases of mafia association or drug trafficking committed by the minor. In addition, the Decree extends the oral warning by the Questore to minors under the age of 14, who will also be banned, upon proposal to the Judicial Authority, from using or possessing electronic devices and mobile phones. In addition, the Decree also extends the Urban Daspo, a provision prohibiting access to specific areas of cities, to minors of 14 years old involved in violent episodes. As of today, the Decree has led to an increase of the number of imprisoned minors (Carli, 2024)

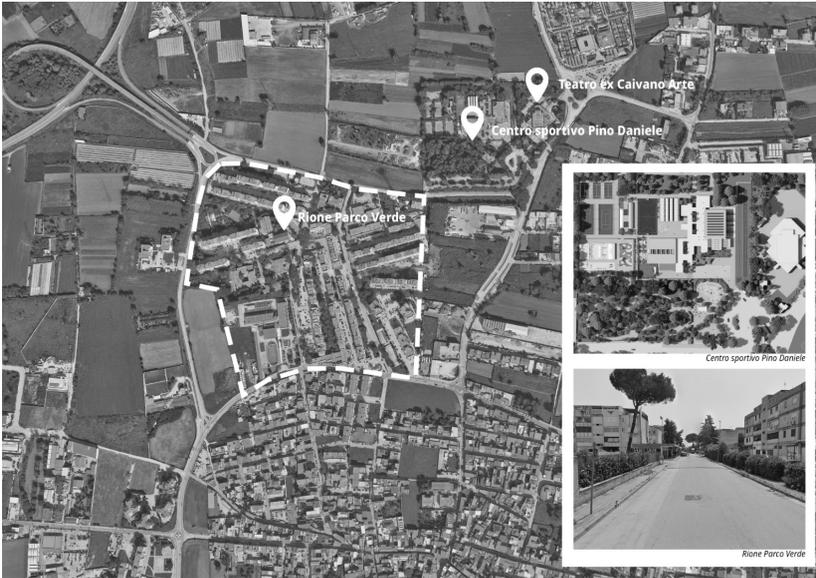


Fig. 2 A zoom on the Rione Parco Verde and its surroundings.
Source: Federica Morra's elaboration from OpenStreetMap.

For instance, the use of the new Centro Sportivo Pino Daniele¹² is restricted upon payment of high monthly fees (comparable with other private sports centres), and the local sports teams and associations have been excluded, even though they struggle to find adequate training spaces. The new, smaller auditorium replacing the old “Caivano Arte” theatre will also have restricted access to those able to pay a higher ticket price. Similarly, the new University building, unveiled in December 2024, remains unused, although some Neapolitan universities had granted the relocation of some of their courses to Caivano. These examples¹³ illustrate how the €55 million “Caivano Plan” appears detached from local specificities and civil society, which have not been meaningfully involved in its development but rather acted upon. By bypassing the principle of vertical subsidiarity, the plan reinforces the marginalization of an already stigmatized and socially excluded population. Some authors argue it

12 The centre, unveiled with big mediatic resonance by the Prime Minister in May 2024 and constructed by the military using €13 mln of public funds, is now managed by the statal ‘Sport e Salute Society’ and the State Police ‘Fiamme Oro Group’

13 <https://www.ilpost.it/2025/01/27/modello-caivano-parco-verde/>.

prioritizes quick, visible, and measurable outcomes over structural, long-term interventions grounded in contextual knowledge and inclusive, multi-level participation (Ferraro and D'Ascenzio, 2025). Despite the criticism, the national right-wing government promotes it as a model to be replicated, with €180 million earmarked for its expansion to other deprived areas in the national context (e.g., Rome, Foggia, Palermo) over the next three years (Colombini, 2025; Taby, 2025).

From 'command and control' to 'affective practices': a sociology of (im)possible futures

The current outcomes of the "Caivano Plan" expose the limitations of the '*command and control*' approach. While not discounting the goodwill, resources, and efforts invested, such a strategy may not be the most effective in addressing the layered material and social challenges that characterize *wounded urban areas*.

In an effort to explore alternative forms of engagement, the "Futuri (Im)possibili" team developed a research design that prioritizes everyday peace, relational repair, and social listening campaigns as fundamental pillars, also focusing on youth in order to transversally involve the very different social realities of Caivano. Here, subjectivation and critical reflection about present and possible future conditions may help to redefine narratives about Caivano, but also to increase local youth's capacity to aspire, possibly enabling them to affect local transformation processes (Appadurai, 2007; Sen, 2005).

The aim is to mend fragmented situated knowledge about the context, foster imagination, encourage subjectivation, and create spaces where residents are no longer passive recipients of external interventions but become active agents in shaping their environment. The research approach shifts the focus from external control to local empowerment by emphasizing explorative and transformative practices. First, *subjectivation* becomes central to our methodology; we emphasize residents' agency, enabling them to actively narrate, imagine, and shape the community around them and envision 'alternative futures' (Cook, 2017). The ability to reflexively consider the anticipatory hypotheses that shape ideas about the future and to examine how these can be questioned, rethought or disrupted altogether, enables us to discover new possibilities in the present or new

pathways to create desired futures (Delanty, 2024), shaping the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2007). Here, traditional sociological techniques such as surveying and qualitative in-depth interviews with local stakeholders aimed at diagnosing local criticalities are accompanied by so-called ‘creative/inventive methods’ (Giorgi *et al.*, 2021), where local residents are asked to produce video narratives about current criticalities and possible solutions. Through brainstorming sessions and focus groups, social workers helped identify key challenges faced by local youth and map out the institutional actors – whether currently present or lacking – best suited to address them. This participatory approach aligns institutional responsibilities with the lived experiences of young people and highlights relevant local stakeholders. Complementing this effort, Street Units operate as a proximity service, engaging youth directly in their everyday environments – such as public squares, schools, neighborhoods, and informal gathering spots. They offer listening and support for personal and family issues, facilitate connections with educational, cultural, and social services, and promote spaces for socialization, dialogue, and reflection.

Furthermore, spaces of affect and practices of *mending* are fostered to build bridges between formal institutions (such as local administrations) and bottom-up initiatives (such as civil society organizations). These connections aim to restore social trust, facilitating more meaningful interactions and coordination among the existing – both grassroots and institutional – initiatives. Finally, we use *affirmative critique* (Braidotti, 2019) as a tool not only to diagnose current problems but to open up possibilities for imagining and building alternative futures. By engaging participants in critical reflection and imagination, we try to move beyond the trauma, stigma, and alienation that have defined life in Caivano, generating *hope* and new pathways forward. The methodology operates through a framework of recirculating and networking existing resources, addressing situated knowledge, and fostering reciprocal awareness among stakeholders. This approach aims to establish *spaces and practices of affection*, where social bonds are strengthened and institutional relationships mended to achieve long-term cooperation and coordination among local organizations through Community Boards.

The idea is to escape the *compressed temporality* imposed by the 'command and control' approach that proposes preconfigured solutions and to embrace a path of long-term reconciliation and the definition of solutions.

An alternative approach to 'wounded cities' and 'wicked problems'

As anticipated, this research stems from an integrated social-spatial approach in which injustice, challenges, and forms of conflict shape places and relationships and are, in turn, shaped by them. By combining a complex methodology for interpreting the local needs – developed through an embedded action-research process rooted in the dialogue with local associations, civil society and public institutional actors – with a collaborative approach to urban design, the proposed approach aims at opening a discussion on how to move beyond the top-down emergency strategies often adopted by public institutions to address the critical issues of peripheral social housing complexes. The study focused on three dualities in order to provide an alternative perspective to support social activation and to contribute to raising awareness instead of alienation and distancing bodies from action in wounded cities.

Urban trauma vs everyday peace

The social and spatial conditions of contested, fragile, and wicked territories were addressed through the analytical prism of *urban trauma* as a starting point for building processes of everyday peace. Constructive positions frame such traumatised, unsettled, wicked territories not only as fraught with violence and instability, but also as spaces in which radical transformation can take place by going beyond fixed perimeters (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). These spaces can accommodate creativity, innovation, and new forms of connection between people and ideas by enacting constructive potential and transformative conflict dynamics capable of healing wounds, trauma, and power imbalances between urban actors (Elfverson *et al.*, 2023).

Research design for Caivano expands on the logic of the 'spatial turn' (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 2008) to nurture a mutual exchange between social sciences and urban planning. The main aim is to trigger the coveted mechanism of transformation of spaces,

of relationships, of everyday life quality, and of institutions of all degrees and types, to initiate a process of deconstruction of the stigma that pervades places and people in contested contexts. Overcoming the stigma that constrains the creative and innovative potential of the communities requires a focus on the production and reproduction of space through collaboration among local associations, civil society, and public institutions.

In such contexts, creative, participatory, collaborative, and situated methods are vital for engaging with the intimate, traumatized, frightened, and disillusioned realities of places, making visible the effects of urban violence and disillusionment (Pain, 2019; Levine, 2014). While discussing creative perspectives may appear secondary where basic needs – such as adequate housing and public services – are unmet, and where organized crime affects everyday life, approaching this unsettling condition through the lens of trauma allows for the emergence of alternative narratives of everyday life, beyond stigma and mistrust in the public sphere.

Emergency regime vs collaborative and creative communities

The connection to everyday life and the creation, consolidation, or expansion of creative and collaborative communities animated by the possibility of imagining feasible, alternative urban futures is not only valuable in itself, but also provides a foundation for planners, policy makers and urban theorists to engage in transformation and governance rooted in situated and unbiased territorial knowledge (Till, 2012). In many Italian public housing estates, the sense of urbanity is frequently eroded by deteriorating built environment, inadequate infrastructure and primary services, as well as the absence of meaningful public spaces to build community. Emergency approaches, administrative receivership, and zero tolerance policies often emerge as a reaction to traumatic events. Yet, these measures follow their own logic, intervening on specific topics and places, without dealing with the social unease of wronged communities or the dilapidated conditions of the built environment. These are, however, shortsighted solutions, which frequently generate a further post-traumatic reaction, reinforcing stigma, mimicking a securitarian narrative, while offering only superficial redevelopment. A systemic approach to

planning in these challenged areas could be more effective in fostering a renewed sense of belonging, positive narratives, and the production of inclusive public spaces for local communities. Raising awareness of the extent of the suffered trauma, fostering affective engagement in decision-making, and combining relational, collective, embodied, and material perspectives in planning can enable the initiation of effective regeneration processes. These approaches, also based on the methods of listening and consensus (Sclavi and Susskind, 2011), strengthen the possibilities of managing conflicts and extending decision-making processes to the inhabitants. They also increase the possibilities of promoting collaborative projects on the basis of a real willingness to work collectively, seeking shared urban and social solutions that are not necessarily based only on economic capital and private investment (Goñi Mazzitelli, 2024).

'Command and control' vs affective space

The theoretical approach and the ongoing empirical experience in Caivano have highlighted the limitations of a 'command and control' approach and securitised territorial management, which have failed to integrate spatial and social initiatives. In the case of Caivano, institutional choices have always generated new and overlapping social, economic, and cultural fractures, creating requalified but inaccessible places, militarised zones, and symbolic but insubstantial interventions that did not consider the inhabitants' demands. In other words, the plan tends to produce visible effects that are not based on spaces or practices of affect, such as listening, participation, and reciprocal knowledge. As such, the plan risks reproducing 'advanced marginality' (Wacquant, 2008) and 'abyssal exclusion' (de Sousa Santos 2017) by suspending the normal institutional order and denying the local community's agency. This approach, which generates an apparent redevelopment without triggering regeneration, risks producing a rebound effect, accentuating alienation and distancing bodies from public space and, therefore, from the *vita activa* that fosters, in Arendt's stance, social and democratic activation (Arendt, 2012).

Drawing on the theoretical framework and ongoing empirical work in Caivano within the "Futuri (Im)possibili" project, we propose the subjectivation of actors and users as co-protagonists

in urban transformation. Their embodied experience, marked by materialities, imaginaries, emotions, discomforts, and aspirations, contribute essential forms of situated knowledge. In contexts shaped by long-standing fragility, where self-respect and institutional trust are eroded, even the possibility of dialogue among different parts of society must be seen as a fragile, yet crucial starting point.

Rather than immediately focusing on capacity-building (Sen, 2005), the Caivano case suggests to begin with incremental steps towards re-activation (Arendt, 2012) to revive human agency and political freedom. *Vita activa* becomes possible only when the neglected corners of the city are addressed not merely as emergencies, but as traumas in need of healing through listening, dialogue, and the co-design of embodied space.

In this light, the convergent perspectives of urban studies and social sciences, and the idea of dealing with (im)possible futures, seem to offer theoretical and praxeological tools to actively intervene in these contexts, in order to mend fragmented situated knowledge, re-orient institutional actions and open up spaces of affect, subjectivation, interaction and listening – possibly offering an horizon of peace to traumatized cities.

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**Public Spaces, Domestic Commonality.
Some Ethnographic Notes and Theoretical
Considerations on Everyday Practices, Commoning,
Conflicts and Domesticity in Public
Marianita Palumbo**

Abstract

This contribution offers an incursion of my ongoing reflections on public spaces and contemporary urban culture under the double focus of commoning and conflicts built on situations observed in different European cities (Paris, Brussel, Rome). My observations will focus not only on everyday practice of producing and taking care of the city but also on past and ongoing spatial projects claiming the importance of commoning. The aim is inherently transdisciplinary: to build a coherent connection between theory, professional practice, and everyday actions. The goal is to uncover opportunities for new heuristic insights that can inform theoretical understanding, project-based work, and daily practices—ultimately reinforcing the political dimensions embedded in our everyday acts. By examining different scenes of interaction, I argue that the social cohesion task we give to public space is not merely ensure by looking for social peace but rather it is by making peace with conflicts. By taking into account the spatiality and social dynamics of urban process aiming at producing a more just city, I advance the idea that empowering domestic practices in public spaces define a breach in the production of the modern-liberal city where more ecological commoning could happen.

Questo contributo offre un'incursione delle mie riflessioni in corso sugli spazi pubblici e sulla cultura urbana contemporanea, attraverso la duplice lente del commoning e dei conflitti, basata su situazioni osservate in diverse città europee, in particolare Parigi, Roma e Bruxelles. Le mie osservazioni si concentreranno non solo sulla pratica quotidiana di produzione e cura della città, ma anche su progetti spaziali terminati o in corso che rivendicano l'importanza del commoning. L'intento è intrinsecamente transdisciplinare, mirando a costruire una relazione coerente tra teoria, pratiche professionali e azioni quotidiane. L'obiettivo è identificare opportunità per nuove riflessioni che possano informare sia il discorso teorico che le pratiche progettuali se non addirittura la vita di tutti i giorni, rafforzando la dimensione politica dell'agire quotidiano. Analizzando queste diverse scene d'interazione sostengo che la missione di coesione sociale che attribuiamo allo spazio pubblico non si raggiunge ricercando la pace, ma piuttosto nel fare la pace con i conflitti. Considerando la spazialità e le dinamiche sociali dei processi urbani volti a produrre una città più giusta, avanzo l'idea che potenziare le pratiche domestiche negli spazi pubblici possa produrre fratture salutari nella produzione della città liberale, da cui potrebbero emergere forme di commoning più ecologiche.

Keywords: Ethnography, Domesticity, Commonality.

Parole chiave: Etnografia, Domesticità, Comunità.

Episode 1 Maintenance Practices: Early March 2023, just before noon, Brussel/Note Excerpt

Antonia, my Spanish neighbour in her 70s, stands in front of her house, broom in hand and apron tied securely around her chest. As usual, she is cleaning the area in front of her door – sweeping and throwing buckets of water when needed. Thanks to her, the sidewalk and street around 115 Rue des Tanneurs stay clean and tidy in every season, ever since she moved to Brussels with her Spanish family in the 1960s. In the way she cares for and maintains this small stretch of sidewalk – sometimes clashing with neighbours who, in her words, «don't care like I do» – she makes it her space, though not exclusively. She takes responsibility without closing herself off. She invests her time, her body, asserting her presence without claiming ownership. As I leave the house, I trip over a hole left by a cobblestone that has been missing for days, right in the middle of the sidewalk. Looking up, I meet the gaze of a worker in an orange work coat. He's trying to straighten the trunk of a tree about a meter from where I fell – it had been knocked over by a car. «You need to report it, madam» he says, referring, I assume, to the public *Fix My Street* platform. «I could report it myself, but it'll be faster if you do it as a citizen. Don't you have a smartphone?» I feel a wave of frustration. In my mind, I wonder why he can't take care of it—after all, he's already working on the sidewalk. At the same time, I think maybe I should just do what Antonia would: fill the hole with some earth or sand and carry on¹.

¹ Fieldwork notes taken during a research about the link between maintenance process and the city material production within the frame of an action-research made in collaboration with the architect studio MAMA for Bruxelles-Mobilité on Fix My Street application. See <http://mama.brussels/office.html#fms>



Fig. 1 My Niegbour on her daily mission, Brussel January 2022
Source: © V. Milliot



Fig. 2 FixMyStreet_Rapport de recherche (glissé(e)s)

Introduction: on public anthropology, urban questions and the use of concepts

As an anthropologist collaborating with architects and urban planners, I find it reassuring to share a commitment to transcending disciplinary boundaries while prioritizing the subject of study itself: cities, urban environments, public spaces². However, interdisciplinary discussions can reveal that, even when using similar language and concepts, we may not be fully aligned in meaning. Recognizing such misalignments is crucial for deepening our understanding of arguments and their differences. I will then begin this contribution by clarifying my perspective and briefly outlining how the urban and public anthropology I defend produces commoning and conflicts in public spaces as object of inquiry and can contribute, with its epistemology, theory and practice, to interpret them today. Originally bounded to exotic and not urban locations (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) anthropological engagement with urban contexts

² This note is an opportunity for me to express my gratitude to the AESOP Thematic Group on Public Spaces and Urban Cultures (TG PSUC, <https://aesop-planning.eu/thematic-groups/public-spaces-and-urban-cultures>) for having been a reflection companion for the last sixteen years.

have been banalized by increasing percentage of human beings living in urban context (more than half of the population following United Nations report, 2019) and consuming urban culture. Studying the city requires anthropologists to explore the production of meaning tied to the production of space, as theorized by Lefebvre (1991), as well as the spatial dimensions of symbolic patterns. This work involves demonstrating the many ways in which space is produced – the *city-making* at the level of citizen as opposed to *city-planning* of decision makers in Michel Agier approach (Agier, 1999).

Precisely at the contact of urban societies, anthropology, traditionally concerned by structural and therefore supposedly stable side of culture, has progressively learnt to account for changes and the dynamic dimension of society (Balandier, 1985) at the very contact of the city, as both the place of power reproduction and social emancipation (Bauman, 2005). When anthropologists describe fragments of cities, they reflect how social reality itself is composed of these fragments. The anthropological gaze required *to see and understand* these fragments as inherently particular, situated and, at the same time, diffused and therefore numerically majoritarian because produced and lived everyday (De Certeau, 1984). Colette Pétonnet coined the term 'floating observation' (Pétonnet, 1982) to describe her investigative method navigating through these fragments. More recently, Anna Tsing has emphasized the 'arts of noticing' and the political importance of polyphony in cultivating an understanding of – and a way of living in – our damaged planet, particularly at the edges and in the ruins of capitalism (Tsing, 2015). Tsing, alongside other anthropologists and philosophers, advocates for a 'new ethic and ecology of attention' (Cottin, 2017; Tsing, 2015). This renewed focus on the importance of noticing and the quality of attention echoes for me anthropologist Marc Augé's notion of 'strabisme' which calls for a multi-scalar and local/global construction of the object of inquiry (Augé, 1995), and Agier's 'decentering gaze', which advocates for a marginal positioning as a heuristic method (Agier, 2015) and allow anthropology to operate a fundamental destabilization of normative definitions, consolidated notions, consensuses, and entrenched frameworks of sense-making. Anthropology, as I use to summarize, examines simultaneously

transparencies and opacities. This approach is both a physical and mental disposition – a commitment to defy stereotypes, change perspectives, observe patiently, and exit the normative dimension of each society (Lamotte and Palumbo, 2012).

Moreover, anthropologists, both by method and by profession, bear the responsibility to return their knowledge to society. They are, in a sense, 'indebted' to the very communities in which their knowledge is generated. Thus, anthropology emerges from and is deeply intertwined with societal concerns and cross on their path architects and urban planners on the field of practice and research claiming a situated approach, taking under consideration power interplay and domination process in the city production. By examining these processes, urban anthropology not only seeks to understand the complexities of urban life but also contributes to address fractures and inequalities produced by urbanization and inherent to the urban environment, underlining the civic aim of what can be defined *public anthropology*³.

Following this scholarship, between urban and public anthropology, I aim to share some reflections on public spaces, conflicts, peace, and commons. Is therefore in the backstage of the anthropologist on the fields, or better, in the pages of its 'carnet de terrain' that I will attempt to bring the readers of the following pages. The kind of knowledge that, built on my interaction with Antonia, my frequent encounters with her, and my keen observation of her gestures, lead me to reflect on our actions in the city – the uneven distribution of knowledge and power to shape urban spaces, the nature of this everyday agency, which is far from being fully acknowledged in formal decision-making and that shows structural epistemic injustice

3 Public anthropology, according to Robert Borofsky, professor at Hawaii Pacific University, «demonstrates the ability of anthropology and anthropologists to effectively address problems beyond the discipline – illuminating larger social issues of our times as well as encouraging broad, public conversations about them with the explicit goal of fostering social change» (quote from Borofsky's Public Anthropology website www.publicanthropology.org. [accessed June 09 2025]). A similar purpose has pushed a group of anthropologists, among which myself, to found a french review called *Monde Commun: des anthropologues dans la cité* published by Presses Universitaires de France. This review has edited special issues on topic such as Violence and Justices (N°1, 2018), Fake News (N°2 2019), Migrants (N°3 2019), Invisibilized Citizenship (N°4 2020). The last number of this collection will be published in 2025 and will be giving voice to reflexions about such "public anthropology" project. See as well Michel Agier, «Pour une anthropologie publique». *Monde commun*, 2018. For more details see DOI: 10.58079/rlnv

we are all entertaining (Fricker, 2007).

Finally, by exercising some reflexivity, it is interesting to underline that the *situations* I will draw my reflection from (two from research fieldwork and one from urban project observation) also exemplify different positionalities in ethnography, ranging from external observation (two cases in which my use of the space does not precede my status as an observer) to that of observant inhabitation (where the daily practice of living or frequenting these places precedes and thus encompasses my role as a researcher).

To conclude, it is important to precise another characteristic of anthropology: its distinctive relationship to concepts. After structuralism, anthropology epistemic approach has established a specific relationship between theory and fieldwork. Somehow fieldwork constitutes the origin and the limits of theoretical speculation. Ethnographers give value to the descriptive capacities of concepts which are considered as instruments and not as finality *per se*. Therefore, in the following pages we will explore situations that prompt the anthropologist to reflect on the interaction between commoning, conflicts, and public spaces, by following a *minima* definition of commoning. We will primarily define it as practices of co-presence and collective action that reestablish a relationship with space – one not based on consumption, but on production, or, better, on appropriation, not in the sense of *making something one's own* (as in ownership), but rather as *interacting with or producing within* a relationship that reflects a state of non-alienation (as articulated by Lefebvre). Emphasis will be placed on the performative dimension of commoning practices as non-capitalist practices (Dardot and Laval, 2015) producing good, such as space, extracted from the productive logics of the market (Harvey, 2011) – and of communities that are expending their openness, as emphasized by Stavrides (2019) and Esteva (2014), the latest being a militant and a disciple of Ivan Illich. It is also important to clarify that, while Italian audiences may be familiar with the Beni Comuni (commons) movement, our focus here is less on the sharing of material goods and more on *communal* practices. That said, theories of care – often mobilized in discussions on the commons to examine the maintenance and equitable distribution of shared resources – remain

relevant to our analysis, though in a different way. Specifically, ethnographic observations call for a reframing of commoning and public space discourses in relation to domestic practices. While ‘domestication’ is often employed in urban studies to describe the processes of everyday use and familiarization with the city, I use the term *public domesticity* to refer to domestic practices – such as cooking, eating, cleaning, parenting, and hosting – that take place in and inhabit outdoor public spaces. The ambiguous nature of common spaces – situated between, and in some ways opposed to, the rigid binary of public and private – appears to share the same performative quality as these domestic practices in fostering conviviality (Illich, 1973) and communality (Esteva, 2012). What I aim to highlight here is that the performativity of commoning practices often unfolds in contexts where a certain degree of public domesticity becomes possible, and that this dimension of domesticity in public space may be understood as a way of practicing, producing, and caring for the city differently.

The street as a common

Episode 2 Street Swap: 13 May 2012/Chateau Rouge-Paris/ reworked fieldwork notes.

At the small informal daily market, African ‘mamas’ sit on recovered cardboard boxes, chairs, or makeshift stools along the even-numbered side of Rue des Poissonniers. They offer passersby their merchandise: safou⁴, yams⁵, dried smoked river fish, neatly arranged in baskets salvaged from the Asian wholesaler down the street, who discards them after unpacking cassava leaves and other imported goods. Other women, dressed in traditional boubous, blend in with potential customers until they stop, open their carts, and offer hot corn to passersby.

Here and there, men speaking Bengali among themselves address pedestrians in broken French, lighting up when they find an English-speaking customer. They stand in front of half-opened sacks filled with peanuts, raw or roasted, spending time carefully rearranging their small mounds of peanuts, which keep toppling over the edge. Behind them, a little further away, a man shields his brazier from the wind using the construction site’s fence near 34 Rue des Poissonniers. That

4 The safou is the fruit of the safoutier (also known as the plum tree or atangatier, depending on alternative names for the fruit). It is an oil-rich fruit native to Central Africa, more specifically the Congo Basin.

5 Yam is a starchy tuber that is widely consumed in tropical regions.

very spot once held a building, then became an empty lot, a wasteland, a shared garden. Today, garbage piles up, awaiting the start of construction. A sign for Operation Château-Rouge announces: «Here, the City of Paris and Semavip⁶ are building six new apartments». The man is roasting peanuts using a repurposed supermarket cart and a perforated metal surface – likely a scrap piece from an old household appliance.

It's Sunday, and as on almost every Sunday here, pedestrians spill on the roadway, cars inch forward and park wherever they can find a spot. License plates hint at journeys of varying lengths to get here [...] Parisian cars are in the minority. On advertisement posters, the faces of Congolese, Beninese, and Mauritian musicians mix with those of religious preachers: in Aulnay, the Church of Sanctification and Fear for the Kingdom is organizing a three-day seminar led by Prophetess Grace Kalombo. To celebrate Colombia's National Fiesta, Wilson Manyoma y su Orquesta invites you on Saturday, July 21, to the Palais des Congrès in Montreuil. Reserve now for the second edition of La Nuit d'Outre-mer at Paris Bercy, organized by Tropique and Espace Production. Madi Bella, the global sensation, and Les 2kiTU, the number one stars, will perform at La Piedra Club Privé on Rue Lafayette. Dyva Lamarkyz announces that her album *Entre Amour et Réalité* will soon be in stores, while Lassa Lacolite's release is scheduled for July 13. Amidst all this, an ad from All United Drinks asks, «What's better? Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, Réunion?» – promoting new canned beverages with packaging that mimics the colors and shapes of each island.

At the corner of Rue Poulet and Rue des Poissonniers, on a small square, the row of African mothers selling goods is interrupted: about fifteen people display plants, potted flowers, and packets of seeds. Everything is placed directly on the ground or on the same baskets and banana boxes as those used by the women selling food. «We came super early to set up» explains one of the organizers. The tree trunks surrounding the square are covered with A4 posters featuring a photo of high heels filled with soil and grass, announcing a Green Swap – a plant exchange organized by the Collectif Culture(s) Urbaine(s). People pass by, some stop; others cross without a glance. A local resident, newly moved into a recently completed building, comes down with a few nasturtium seedlings, exchanging them for a lavender plant. «It will grow well on my terrace—look, I'll put it up there» she says, pointing to her balcony on the top floor of the yellow and gray new building at the corner of Rue Doudeauville and Rue des Poissonniers. «Would you like some tomato seeds?»

⁶ SEMAVIP is a public-private enterprise responsible for the development and construction projects within the city of Paris.

«Yes»

«Where's your garden?»

«In Algiers»

«In Algiers?»

«Yes», «Okay»

The location is strategic, ensuring foot traffic. People trade plants, seeds, gardening tips, and advice.

At the lower end of Rue des Poissonniers, a pedestrian police patrol appears. The women selling safou and the peanut vendors discreetly step away. Ironically, the officers are here to check whether the organizers of the Green Swap have obtained the necessary permits for such a gathering in public space—which they have. So, the police leave, and the illegal safe and peanuts vendors return to their spots.

Tensions flare. Two African women argue over their selling spot just near the Green Swap. A third woman steps in to mediate. Once «you leave, you leave. And if you come back, you can't accuse me of taking your spot», says one. The other woman moves slightly down the street, closer to the Green Swap stands, nearly adjacent to a small table set up by Les Cuisiniers du Monde, a neighbourhood association promoting exotic cuisine. Today, they are serving tea and homemade pastries, prepared by Livia and her husband, who live on Rue Cavé.

The walking patrol returns. This time accompanied by a police car that stops by the Green Swap.

«What now?» sighs one of the organizers.

The safou vendors scatter, their baskets left untouched. Some disappear into the crowd with their shopping bags and carts. Others step into nearby shops, re-emerging as casual shoppers. The women selling hot corn keep walking, blending back into the flow of pedestrians. The Green Swap continues. Now, even an accordion player joins in—a quirky man who strolls the neighborhood on sunny Sundays with his barrel organ. He regularly plays beneath my apartment windows, and some residents, myself included, toss coins down to him. He sets up in the middle of the Green Swap stalls, takes a seat, and begins playing. A police officer, perhaps uncertain or disoriented by this unexpected legal street market mixed with the regular illegal one, approaches the basket of a woman near Les Cuisiniers du Monde. It contains a few remaining 'chikwangué' (a type of cassava bread). From far I can see the vendor owner of the basket watching the scene from across the street, inside a 'bar-tabac', laughing over coffee with a friend.

The officer picks up the basket when: «Can I take it?» Asks a woman from the Green Swap, unsure where to place the plants she wants to trade. «Madam, I don't think you want this for your plants», the officer replies, holding the basket at arm's length. «It really smells bad!» he adds, before walking off with it, leaving the woman to find another container.

A few minutes later, the safou seller returns, reclaims her spot, and rearranges her goods. Another woman arrives, another argument begins, this time in a language I don't understand. The accordionist continues playing. The safou vendor near Les Cuisiniers du Monde turns toward him, stands up, and starts singing:

«Vers les docks où le poids et l'ennui Me courbent le dos...»

The crowd gathers into a circle around them, joining in the chorus of Charles Aznavour's classic song:

«Emmenez-moi au bout de la terre Emmenez-moi au pays des merveilles Il me semble que la misère Serait moins pénible au soleil».⁷

The only person who doesn't know the lyrics — or does not pretend to — is me, the Italian anthropologist.



Fig. 3 Screen Shot. On Line Traces of my PhD fieldwork. La Goutte d_Or, Probably 2013

Source: © C. Girardi

Fig. 4 Rests of Informal Market, Rue des Poissonniers, 2015

Source: © M. Palumbo

All commoning are good but some of them are better than others

Our first step takes us to the 18th arrondissement in northern Paris (France), in a well-known area situated near the Sacré-

⁷ Written and composed by Charles Aznavour 1968 Éditions Musicales Charles Aznavour

Coeur and close to Gare du Nord. The complexity of this area arises from the layering of successive migratory waves and its evolving socio-economic fabric in terms of residential as much as commercial landscape shaped both by national migration and urban policies. For decades, this neighbourhood has functioned as an *immigrant centrality* (Toubon and Massamah, 1990), where newcomers shaped the neighbourhood through distinct traditions, cultural expressions and ways of engaging with the city. Progressively, Barbès has developed into a vibrant open-air trading hub, with Château Rouge becoming an *African centrality* renowned both nationally and internationally (Bouly de Lesdain, 1999; Palumbo, 2014). Over time, the neighborhood shifted from a residential space for working-class migrants to a local manifestation of what Tarrus (1996) 'terms transnational circulatory territories'. This transformation introduced new logics of mobility and commerce, blending formal and informal economies. The public space became a stage for trading practices often perceived as non-European, reinforcing Barbès' image as a space of informality and illegality. While integrating into global economic networks, these dynamics also reactivated stereotypes of Barbès as a *territory of elsewhere* (Palumbo, 2013). If gentrification process has introduced a new urban dynamic, albeit with significant differences compared to other working-class and migrant areas in Paris (Bacqué and Fijalkow, 2006; Chabrol, 2011; Palumbo, 2020), its public space still functions as a pluralist and everyday cosmopolitan experience (Palumbo, 2009; Milliot, 2013) while urban transformations are making more and more visible a conflicts between the clame of different *villages*, the residential one versus the migrant centrality one, differently coping with the City political agenda of a Global Paris (Palumbo, 2013; 2020).

If I chose this scene among many others in my field notebook⁸ it is because it seems particularly appropriate to observe everyday politics of commoning, their functioning as social glue and, at the same time, their interplay with dynamics of urban conflicts and their regulations. First, in this scene we can observe co-presence – of different ways of being and acting in public – producing a

⁸ For an extended analysis of Barbès transformations see M. Palumbo. *Barbès, Château-Rouge, Goutte d'Or. Ailleurs commence ici: anthropologie d'un espace d'altérité dans Paris*. EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), 2014. <https://hal.science/tel-04789784v1>

repertoire of behaviors and modes of engagement that become available for borrowing, circulation, and reinterpretation. In that sense, Barbès' public spaces function as a «relational school» (Joseph, 1998: 87), where human interactions are negotiated through proximity and misunderstanding. These spaces serve as arenas for cultural translation and symbolic bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1960; Bastide, 1970), offering opportunities for hybridization and reciprocity. The repertoire of behaviors and engagement emerging from Barbès reflects its unique relational dynamics, fostering what Arendt describes as 'thinking broadly' (Arendt, 1991, cited by Joseph, 1998). Through the different practices it hosts, the street reveals itself as a flexible, porous, and hybrid space, where misunderstandings and agreements, friction and repair, exchanges and reserve attitude multiply. Moreover, in the depicted scene we find different interpretations of what constitutes public space and how it serves as a space of commonality. Each practice of commoning seems to assert a particular *scale* of public space: The *weak ties* of street-space agreements and episodic reciprocities mix with the processes of appropriation that define spaces of residence and daily use. These processes that transform the city into a familiar space (Agier, 1999) respond here to two different framework (Goffmann, 1991) of domesticating space, articulating two urban scales: at the register of proximity, as the street of a neighborhood, and at the register of affinity, as a street constituting a minoritarian centrality (Raulin, 1988). Centrality and proximity together produce a dual scene for communing practices. Here, the rules of neighborhood sociability intersect with an urban hospitality that accommodates practices excluded elsewhere in the city. This highlights the meaning of public space not solely as the place where commoning can happen but as the possible space for diverse commoning porosity.

In such co-presence of different commoning practices, another *common* emerges, here to be understood as a communal experience. As theorized by Gustavo Esteva with the word *comunalidad*, translated into *communality*, these situations open up the possibility to «see and experience the world as a We»⁹: though fragile and ephemeral, continuously composed

⁹ As explained by Esteva himself, the notion of *comunalidad* was coined by two indigenous Oaxaca intellectuals, Floriberto Díaz, Mixe, and Jaime Martínez Luna, Zapotec. See Esteva in Bolliern D., Helfrich S., 2012.

and decomposed through the loss (or gain) of its members and through the effects of external figures: the police officer initially brings the two markets together by placing them on the same side of the scene – as unusual street markets. He later differentiates them by dismantling their unity, seeing one as a *legal* market and the other as *illegal*. Finally, he disappears and gives way to the musician, who then reassembles a new scenic unity, including other passersby while excluding the anthropologist due to her lack of knowledge of French musical culture. This situation reveals the plasticity of what we might call a sequence of differential identifications, shaped by the composition of the scene, shared activity, and the external gaze. First, there is a practical commonality that is not affinity-based but positional, opening to reciprocal borrowing and mutual adjustment. Then, a commonality of complicity emerges, blurring categories and conventions in response to a normative external gaze. Finally, we see a historicized (or inherited) commonality, constructed on the basis of shared Francophone musical culture and common cultural consumption. A sketch of a plastic, flexible, mimetic *We* emerges from this game of association and dissociation, challenging any fixedness or independence from the constant production of otherness and sameness. Yet the possibility of distance and difference between commoning practices might, in fact, be the guarantee of emancipatory dimension of public spaces. As emphasized in Arendt work, politics results from what separates and imposes on individuals a relational effort (Arendt, 1995; Lussault, 2007). This reaffirms the social effectiveness of more distant relationships, as opposed to an overemphasis on proximity and social mixing. Finally, the reminder of the normative code of conduct in public space, with its prohibitions and pre-established uses, comes from the passage of the police redefining order, distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate commoning. Policemen reintroduce a hierarchy that was latent before their arrival, reinforcing a distinction that echoes the specific context framing this street market, remembering to everybody that if commoning can be seen as social glue, not all commoning are equal after all.

First short note for the next space revolution: on the importance of different commoning and the possibility of conflicts in public spaces

Drawing on Southern Urbanism scholarship, Barbès can be understood as a *tropical common* at the level of Paris – a space where the urban fabric absorbs and reconfigures diverse logics of social, cultural, and economic exchange, challenging the Eurocentric notion of urban commons and commoning by embracing the multiplicity of interactions rooted in diasporic and transnational exchanges. These interactions decenter established frameworks of public and private, inviting new conceptualizations of shared urban life. This perspective reframes urban theory by centering the Global South’s practices, experiences, and epistemologies as sites of theoretical innovation (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009; Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004). And yet, despite such interpretations that can valorize the social dynamism of public spaces in this area, Barbès sociability is bothering public authorities. To better understand the situation here, it is not irrelevant to recall that Barbès public space has been shaped by a 40-year urban renovation effort (in the frame of the national well-known *Politique de la ville*), initiated in the 1980s to improve infrastructure and socio-economic development. Grassroots associations have played a critical role in steering these interventions, often contesting municipal policies to prioritize local needs. The dual goals of *normalizing* Barbès while preserving its unique character reflect the complexity of this urban project. Current efforts, including aesthetic reorganization and commercial regulation, suggest a shift toward the *pacification* (Agier and Lamotte, 2016) of public spaces. Here we see another similarity that Barbès shares with others ethnic neighbourhoods of western cities that make this configuration a sort of recurrent urban figures: a mix of working class-low income-exotic commercial centrality where mix of social and cultural otherness take public space. A global landscape of popular and tropical centralities emerges and it is not by chance that these places correspond to the next possible extension of the generic, guaranteed city (Breviglieri, 2018), where urban renewal policies attempt to banalize the urban experience and the esthetic appearance of uses and spaces in order to ensure the *good experience* of

an equally generic citizen. Past and present efforts of public policies of organization, rehabilitation and ordering of public space aim to redefine the architecture of an experience without flaws, misunderstandings, fractures, displacement or conflicts. If we look closely, the primary factor tackled by public policies is precisely the disorder created by the extensive use of the street, its domestication by exotic habits, the exposure of the backstage of everyday life - a routine that produces noise, leftovers, and waste; a routine that, in the street, cooks, sings, laughs, argues, and that, at every level, lacks the restraint of a space without visible fractures, the smooth surface of a well-ordered space where kitchens, plumbing, laundry and pipes are displaced, hidden, invisibilized. These overflowing urbanities are especially tackled as forms of undisciplined appropriation of space often explained socially because «homes are too small so people are outside» or culturally «in southern countries they are used to live outside». This kind of explanation, flirting with social or cultural over-determinism, are far from the thick and fine description of anthropologist Colette Petonnet that, back in the '60, affirmed the enlarged definition of home and its interaction with surrounding space as «familiar space» in sub-proletarian Parisian neighbourhoods¹⁰ (Petonnet, 1979). Similarly, contemporary analysis of architect and urban planner Silvana Segapeli are showing how, in Saint-Etienne as in Turin, social qualities such as sharing, solidarity and proximity originate from the practices of the working-class city. Public policies too often ignore that self-organization, collaborative economy and the dynamics of public-private percolation are reemerge in the ruins of the post-industrial city (Segapeli, 2022). Class conflicts are far to be edited by a post-political city and their visibility, even when is about public manifestation of different commoning practices, is more to be considered a sign of health than the one of illness...

10 Within this frame, she observed among the working class the habit of living not only in an apartment but in an entire neighborhood by weaving continuity between the apartments and the streets, cafes and other neighboring places. This way of living integrates the apartment into a network of places and paths within which it would be a permeable refuge. The richness of the surroundings is therefore fundamental to the constitution of a *milieu*, physical and existential, a fully lived daily life, which brings together the domestic and the public, the interior and the exterior, and compensates for the apparent discomfort of the housing itself.

Episode 3: Through the Belly of Corviale-Rome-Italy/Reworked fieldwork notes.

A house 1 km long. October 2015

Sun is shining and we are on our fifth visit of Corviale. Vincenzo¹¹, an active members of Community X association, an arts and craft laboratory occupying part of the empty spaces of what was supposed to be the public services hub, Corviale Centro, in the urban plan, gave us appointment to visit its home and the one of his mum. We follow Vincenzo and his determined pace towards the main building of Corviale, 1 km long, somewhere in between Largo Domenico Trentacoste and Emilio Quadrelli. Direction 4th floor Piano Libero. On the eastern facade, facing Via Poggioverde, the sun shines directly until midday, and rows of laundry lines alternate with a few potted plants, children's bicycles, and small outdoor cabinets. On the opposite side, along a continuous wall, the apartment entrances follow one another in identical succession, with only minor customizations of the door numbers. Lush plants grow everywhere: in pots placed directly on the floor, cleverly hung on the railing, or thriving in generous concrete planters. Plastic chairs and tables sometimes appear near apartment entrances, accompanied by other objects marking the threshold: doormats of all shapes and colors, including one cemented over to smooth the transition between the corridor and the apartment; small trash bins, gardening gloves, watering cans; various cleaning tools - things useful both inside and outside, which ultimately find a more fitting place outside the home. Other *ready-to-use* objects fill the surrounding spaces: folded table sets, barbecues, umbrellas, parasols, children's bicycles, and scooters. They suggest that the outside is also a space for pausing, meeting, and socializing, unfolding within the immediate two-meter width of the corridor, the wider landings on each floor, or even the areas surrounding the building, which are occupied on the more extended timescale of the weekend.

In 1993, during an interview while visiting with a group of high school students, Corviale architect Fiorentino declared:

«[...] The challenge lies in how Corviale will be managed. That is to say, this experience is both architectural and managerial, like everything in a city, which is not just about facades but also organization, services, transport, and so on. So, let's say, the political management of this building carries the same weight, or even more weight, than the architectural management, which is the small portion that architects have reserved for design. [...]. If the tenant of tomorrow

¹¹ Being impossible to anonymize the general location of the study, people identity has been preserved by alteration of some characteristics as name, age and address and irrelevant biographical details.

expects a paternalistic structure where everything is provided for them, yet nothing is actually given, then clearly, Corviale is doomed to fail spectacularly, because it is evident that it was not designed for a paternalistic model of management. If, on the other hand, the existence of common spaces is used by residents as an opportunity to create collective work initiatives, and if Corviale's management thus becomes a form of community governance, then the situation changes. This, of course, depends on a number of non-fatalist considerations and on the interventions of the municipality, the IACP [Social Housing Managing Institution], social workers, cultural promoters, and so on».

But from the very beginning, this endeavor was far from easy, particularly from a management perspective. The construction of Corviale was finally completed in 1984. However, it was only in 1988 that the bureaucratic process of assigning all the apartments was finalized. The spaces originally intended for commercial businesses, artisan workshops, and offices for independent professionals were rarely (and belatedly) activated due to the difficulty of managing *functional diversity* in a building funded exclusively for social housing. The spaces designed for social gatherings and the co-management of this community of neighbors were never fully appropriated, and a different dynamic eventually took hold on the 4th and 5th floors, where these 'community management' areas had been planned.

After some sporadic occupations that local residents remember as *the drug season*, the empty floors began to be occupied in a more state way around 1995, effectively transforming their intended function from commercial to residential. Modalities and reasons behind these occupations were varied: some residents had permanently lost access to other housing in the city and found themselves in an economic situation that prevented them from applying for social housing or purchasing a home; others were simply adjusting their existing household arrangements within Corviale – practical solutions to a separation that could be managed more smoothly without too much distance, or a young couple seeking independence from their family. For Vincenzo, in not such a stable financial situation, it was a good compromise: he wanted to go back to live in Corviale but did not want to stay with his mum, living at the upper floor. The empty floor was a good chance for him.

Choices of spaces to be occupied and their location within the building was made carefully: a single shop unit, or several small workshop spaces, or even the condominium meeting room (with its beautiful parquet flooring). The occupants made their decisions with restraint, as reconfiguring the spaces required a significant initial investment. The proximity of other family members ensured access to existing water and electricity networks. The modifications were carried out in

stages, with the units being occupied, annexed, and then transformed – either by professional builders or by family members over weekends and holidays. Successive adjustments became necessary, whether due to the arrival of a new neighbor requiring the redefinition of access routes, the need for an extra room, or new financial resources allowing for more substantial investments at a later stage. Internal configurations also change through the years following family evolutions. Twenty years after the first occupations, 120 families now live here. Today, the loggias and walkways, originally intended to ensure movement between apartments and commercial spaces, are sometimes inaccessible, reconfigured, or absorbed into private apartments. As a result, it is often unclear «where one is supposed to pass», both in reality and on the building's plans. The only possible guide is the familiarity gained from navigating Corviale daily – knowing which staircase to take, which elevator is best to reach home – within this rectilinear volume that was initially open but has now been restructured into a succession of private spaces. We follow Vincenzo through this labyrinth. «I was not easy to find a way to make home here. But it was such a chance to be able to install myself here that we are not going to complain. In fact, the fact of having the possibility to shape it the way I wanted, even though with the uncertainty of being able to stay, was a good thing for me».

Once inside, looking at the ceiling, we realize that the apartment was created beneath a staircase. We must be now in the loggia of one of the five former communal-meeting rooms originally planned by Architect Fiorentino for dwellers to gather and organize collective activities which were never activated as such. The floor has remained unchanged from the past, seamlessly extending from the landing into the living space. In fact, the black rubber-studded flooring underfoot hints at the original pedestrian nature of the Piano Libero, which was meant to be part corridor, part gallery, as much as the concrete benches now serving as support of some laundry baskets were supposed to propose resting and chatting moment among neighbors.

Vincenzo's apartment, like some others we visited later – is striking in its banality. Self-built in spaces that were originally intended not for housing, but for commerce and services. Over the years, through successive occupations, informal sales, and unofficial transfers, people have managed to 'make a home' according to their own tastes, needs, and means. What is truly astonishing is not so much what might seem unthinkable – the illegal self-construction within a publicly owned building managed by Italian social housing authorities – which, once lived in and experienced, feels remarkably 'normal'. Rather, it is the thirty years of stagnation and legal limbo in which these families have found themselves. Ultimately, the real risk they perceive is not that of living in an irregular home, but of being deprived of it.

Tomorrow is another day. October 2024

I have not paid a visit to Corviale since few years but I keep update by regular virtual stroll. While the global regeneration project Rigenere Corviale seems to stay stalled, the remodeling of the *free-floor* is quite advanced. On Google Street View, the novelty is immediately apparent: on the northern half of the building, we no longer see the interruption in the facade created by the occupied floor – no more patchwork of heterogeneous materials, no more makeshift frames and improvised closures. Order has been restored through the standardized green metal sliding grids marking today the 4th floor of Corviale as a *green line*. The crane has moved on the southern part as well as orange plastic safety nets delimitating work in progress perimeter.

Laboratorio di Città¹², a research-action interdisciplinary team participating in the project management, has been continuing its work to support families in the relocation process. They have successfully managed to reintegrate some excluded households from the on-site relocation measure and they keep working on the other dimension of their mission: documenting the self-built apartments before their demolition and recording the stories of the 4th floor occupation. Between pictures showcasing the diversity of layouts and styles of the homes and interviews of households retracing when and how they happened to find themselves as illegal tenets of self-built appartements in the 4th floor of Corviale, one of the most infamous social housing buildings of Italy, the banality and exceptional nature of this situation collide.

Yet, another feeling takes over when running into the pictures of the brand-new delivered apartments: standardized in layout, materials, and colors – built, regulated, brought up to code. Certainly, households are for the most all relived of not being anymore the black sheep, the *abusivi*, squatters, which they have for some for over 30 years [...] but I truly wonder what is all this about: what is the true dimension of this act of destruction and replacement of material, eradication and displacement of peoples few blocks away?... Meanwhile we can acknowledge that the long listing victory of dwellers initiative is the change of use of this *free floor* originally thought to be a commercial street up in the air, finally officially converted into a residential floor like the others.

¹² The "Laboratorio di Città Corviale" is a project that was launched in 2018 with the aim of complementing the physical transformation of Corviale, particularly the Fourth Floor, with social actions and policies capable of supporting the individuals directly involved. Their intense local work can be followed here: <https://laboratoriocorviale.it/>



Fig. 5 Communal garden, Nuovo Corviale, October 2014
Source: © M. Palumbo



Fig. 6 Hallway appropriation, Building 2, Nuovo Corviale, October 2014
Source: © M. Palumbo

In between pre-fabs and empty spaces, traces and fragments of “another city”

Corviale is an example of a project where the initial planning envisioned a wide range of spaces for collective, communal use, but these were never completed or activated. It represents a sort of over-programming social-engineering of the community through an extremely generous, even excessive, spatial plan. Beyond the issues related to construction, maintenance, and the activation of commercial activities, it is clear that part of the failure of Fiorentino's project is due to the growing individualization of society. Yet, individuals have taken matters into their own hands regarding the project's shortcomings and its management; groups have organized themselves to activate spaces and provide the missing services. These spaces serve as supports for multiple forms of re-appropriation, extensions, and living areas produced by the inhabitants themselves. We observe how daily practices and community self-organization have hybridized and evolved the same architectural forms, reconfiguring them into new domestic spaces. These actions exemplify dwelling as a set of practices that manipulate the existing, transforming it into a place capable of hosting the multiple dimensions of daily life. The habitability of Corviale empty spaces have been made possible by adapting, mending, and reshaping available spaces, blurring conventional divisions between private and public, formal and informal and reaffirm dwelling as a practice of material reworking of an industrial pre-fab space. These spaces embody forms of commoning where traces of negotiation, conflict, and shared knowledge manifest in the material and symbolic reworking. They contradict the alienating separation of functions central to modernist urbanism, producing instead a relational fabric that reclaims agency and belonging. Here again, echoing the principles of Southern urbanism (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009), this process reveals how marginalized communities disrupt imposed orders to invent their own urban futures. Following Ivan Illich (1984) we could say that here practices embody resisting alienation and reclaiming the right to make-city by recuperating the *art of dwelling*. The in-between spaces of these housing estates are tangible evidence of popular resistance against dispossession (Boucheron and Palumbo, 2023). They are spaces of mending, adjusting, and recovering failures and ruins of the capitalist and

post-capitalist well-fair, asserting the capacity of people to shape and take care of their environments.

Yet, this commoning practice, producing insurgent spaces (Hou, 2010) and performing a territoriality of resistance (Stavrvides, 2016) have become target of discrimination, labeled as *slummification*. If we de-zoom and move from Corviale to a larger scoop Europe, the interstitial spaces of Corviale, echoes the one of La Courneuve, Hanoi, Ulaanbaatar, Dakar, Poznań, Naples, Cairo: a global landscape produced by urban communities in peripheral areas worldwide emerges as a global commoning fabric of infrapolitics confrontations. Here as often, the on-going renewal project erase and rewind, ignoring the emancipatory dimension of these spatial inventions of inhabitants, dismissing them as disorder. *Déjà vu*: commoning and its material production results into an aesthetic of space that is institutionally and formally unbearable. As in Barbès, the normative gaze – preoccupied with the aesthetics of *order* and rehabilitation – overlooks the dynamic processes of making-city (Agier, 2015) and planners fail to recognize the productive potential of informal and hybridized spaces.

Second short note for the next space revolution: Domesticity/private agency beyond homes?

In these global in-between slabs landscape, the act of dwelling emerges as a technique still visible as opposed to a dominant condition of contemporary individuals as consumers and residents of a ready-made, provided space who have lost their art of dwelling. To follow once more Ivan Illich, if the dominant vision of a resident is that of an individual renting an apartment or owning a home whose capacity for interacting with the domestic space is limited to furnishing it, cleaning it, and occasionally seeking a larger space or lower rent, in the abandoned Corviale, the built environment is still a common for dwelling, and the vernacular space has been reclaimed against *the homogeneous space of the garage* (Illich, 1984). These multiple transformations of standard forms make visible a technique of dwelling that manipulates the existing *prefabricated space* to make it a better fit for domestic life. They also reveal the multiple relationships of the domestic sphere with the outside, a connection that has been severed in modernist mass housing architecture. While the forgotten, uninhabitable, and undesirable gaps in the functional grid of the planned city

are made habitable and sometimes desirable through the self-building efforts of communities, the narratives of a unique way of making a home and leading domestic *decent lives* are interrupted, and slums, camps, and transitional refugee settlements emerge as city drafts (Agier, 1999). Resident actions, oppose well-being as a holistic condition gained through socio-spatial self-production to comfort achieved through the accumulation of domestic equipment to cater to never-ending new needs. Here domesticity is at work in activating spaces, from home to the square. This urban collective productivity makes the city without urban planners and produces architecture without architects. Such impertinent practices are addressed as problematic and provoke suspiciousness, marginalization or censoring. We might ask: how come domestication of public spaces appears as an overflow, an exceeding substance, an inappropriate appropriation? On the paths of Henri Lefebvre and its invitation to analyze space genesis, it is interesting to follow François Béguin study of the first *housing modernisation* in Paris at the end of XIX century.

«What undoes the city is undoubtedly this increasingly sensitive privatization of inhabiting practices through all the operators of domestication, the rupture one after another of all the links which ensured communication from outside and inside. (...) the city continues to become more foreign since nothing essential is going on out there» (Béguin, 1977: 324).

Béguin outlines a double phenomenon: while *bringing comfort to home*, public spaces lost their function as places of common and commoning. That is to say that installations of primary network (such as water as running and waste liquid) produced the death of the street as a functional and social gathering space, offering services that were central to the dynamics of collective life. This is not without echoing another part of Ivan Illich famous conference delivered in front of the Royal Institute of British Architects, July 1984 where not only Illich formulate its concept of *dwelling as an art*, but also mentions the degree of common destruction as the measure of our world inhabitability:

«A generation ago, Jane Jacobs effectively argued that in traditional cities the art of dwelling and the aliveness of the commons increase both as cities expand and also as people move closer together. And yet during

the last thirty years almost everywhere in the world, powerful means have been employed to rape the local community's art of dwelling and thereby create an increasingly acute sense of scarce living space. This housing rape of the commons is no less brutal than the poisoning of water. The invasion of the last enclaves of dwelling space by housing programs is no less obnoxious than the creation of smog».

Episode 4 Parc Ouest, Brussel, spring sunny days 11 Avril 2024

It is a very beautiful and warm day for an April in Brussels. Men, women, and children of all ages are strolling around, engaged in various activities – some chatting while sitting on a bench, others taking a short walk in the sun. Kids play on a slide attached to a boat placed on a dry sea of wood chips. Some dig for small treasures in a mound of earth a hundred meters away, in the center of this temporarily repurposed vacant lot. A foosball table, missing several pieces, attracts a few players. Nearby, a chess game is set up on multiple Oktoberfest-style wooden tables. People ride all sorts of different bicycles. A few basketball hoops are mounted at the far end on a remaining strip of concrete. There is even a 'water play area' with a big plastic tube running between the roof of the central pavilion – home to the association managing this temporary park – and the small pond with a fake duck but real fish, created by repurposing the concrete foundations of a long-gone building.

Yet, what catches visitors' attention the most – besides the scattered objects that look like recently landed UFOs and the strange orange boat, seemingly the last trace of a dried-up lake – is the large chicken coop standing right in front of the temporary parc entrance. Even more striking, the chickens and roosters roam freely, as the coop's door remains wide open.

The air is beginning to fill with the mouthwatering scent of grilled meat. This early summer-like afternoon sees several groups – families, friends – gradually settling in with picnic blankets and coolers, ready to enjoy an outdoor meal. Some grill chicken, other sardines, pork, or vegetables. The charcoal is shared, though not necessarily the grills. There's a mutual understanding of how to space things out, ensuring that everyone feels comfortable. Children, like little plate-pickers, wander from table to table, sampling food at every station.

Outside the fence that marks the boundaries of this evolving park, a family watches the scene. The father waves at me, signaling to come closer.

«What is this, madam?»

«It happens once a week when the weather is nice. You can come and have a barbecue here in the park. You bring whatever you want, and here you'll find the charcoal and the grills».

«It's free?» «Yes, it's free».

«Okay, thanks!»

The smoke and the irresistible aroma of grilled food, however, are the freest of all, spreading in every direction.

Near the pavilion, a man arrives carrying a cardboard box with small holes in it. The box reads Nova Pain Kebab Bread.

«Is that for the BBQ?» a child from the park asks.

«In your dreams», the man replies.

Inside, there's no kebab bread – just chicks. He is a local resident who has already contributed a few of his own hens to the park's small farm. Originally from rural Romania, he once dismissed his father's farming lifestyle. But now, he finds himself longing for that connection to agriculture, plants, and animals. When he saw that the park had a place for chickens, he did not hesitate. Since then, he has taken care of the coop, regularly checking on the hens and paying special attention to fertilized eggs and newly hatched chicks.

Half an hour later, I see the family from earlier returning, now carrying groceries for their BBQ. They find an available table and start their own lunch. The mother looks around, searching for me, trying to catch my eye. Finally, she walks over.

«Madam, come taste our spicy sauce – it's the best!»

People invite and get invited, offering tastes of their grilled meat, letting others try their sauces, and sharing tea or beer, depending on their preferences and religious beliefs.



Fig 7. Parc Ouest, BBQ Day
Source: © B. Robles Hidalgo



Fig 8. Parc Ouest, Wellcoming Device, Brussel Mai 2025
Source: © M. Palumbo

The subtle power of temporary: some (planning) hope in time of global ruins.

The last episode of our journey brings us in the transitional urban planning project of an *in fieri* public park in the working class and migrant area of Molenbeek, in Brussel Region (Belgium). Here since 2021 the NGO Toestand¹³ has been charged to organize a temporary park in a west-land owned by Bruxelles Environment, the Green Spaces City Department, to open the west-land to the public and at the same time help urban planners and architects to design the future parc. The NGOs' ethic and politic, rooted in its original path as urban activist reclaiming the vacant spaces of the neo-liberal city, is still alive and well synthesized by the slogan «Parc Ouest, by everybody for everybody» welcoming people at the entrance. Even though their originally presence is planned for a long *trial* period of five years, it is striking to remark that the temporal dimension of the present parc management seems to establish a state of exception that allow to install a moral areas working by its own rules: allowing some daily practice illegals in other city park and public spaces, to take legally, all-dough exceptionally, place in Parc Ouest. This reversed social world have quickly become a popular centrality for neighbors and users at the scale of the city feeling here at home as nowhere else in Brussel. This *feeling at home* surprise the users at three different level: as an unexpected possibility of appropriate public space in a familiar way; as the place of unhierarchiesed way of socializing and interacting among people and with local authority and finally the place for a possible construction of identification and collective belonging as a community of users beyond other community belonging. In the scene reconstructed above the domestic conviviality is present as a transversal factor in all this commoning practices as a main ingredient of social and cultural bridging: not without negotiation, adjustment and misunderstanding, the power of domestic practices in public appears to have a sort of equalizer effect, ensuring everyone is welcome under this cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson, 2011). As Stavrides stated defying the openness as one of the main characteristics of commoning as emancipatory practices, «institutions of expanding commoning do not simply define modes of collective practices but also, importantly, forms of

13 Literally translated in English as «allowing» <https://www.toestand.be/fr>

social relations through which collective subjects of commoning are being shaped. Compatibility, translatability, power sharing and gift offering are indeed forms of relations between subjects of commoning that encourage commoning to expand beyond the limits of any closed community» (Stavrides, 2016: 49)

Ending notes: For the domestic communality revolution yet to come.

Toward a reconsideration of Commoning through Domesticity

The urban situations presented throughout this work, despite their differences, testify to the capacity of certain communities and urban dwellers to reclaim control over what directly concerns them. These actions not only shape spatial practices but also produce landscapes imbued with the embodied traces of social relations, conflicts, hierarchies, and negotiations. Where public spaces seem to function as arenas of radical democracy (Esteva, 2012), we observe a plurality of lives and a diversity of beings whose interactions are inscribed into space. In such contexts, commoning appears to be an ongoing process – inhabitants learn to navigate frictions, transforming public spaces into sites of everyday negotiation and shared life.

A key insight emerging from these ethnographic accounts is the shifting boundary between the public and the private. The domestic sphere is not confined to the intimacy of the family apartment; it extends into collective, social, and public life. These practices of public domesticity respond to the contemporary need to inhabit an inherited modernity, where housing remains monofunctional and planned for an idealized, often unrealized form of collective life. In such contexts, communities re-associate sidelined dimensions of space, bringing forth counter-powers and autonomous organizing in conditions of forced cohabitation and social fragmentation.

This conclusion proposes a theoretical redefinition of commoning by emphasizing its domestic dimension. If common spaces are, by definition, those that exceed the binary of public and private, then a de-functionalized, decolonial, and ecofeminist reading offers a heuristic superposition with domestic practices. This perspective highlights the double emancipatory potential of domestic commoning: liberation from the rigid spatial grid of functionalist urbanism, and from the capitalist system that

reduces both citizens and dwellers to passive consumers. In contrast, the examples explored here show how collective agency overflows, reasserting a capacity to do otherwise, even as these movements toward autonomy are often silenced, reabsorbed, or criminalized.

The variety of urban episodes discussed in this research further reveals how domesticity functions as a key vector of commoning. In the first episode, we saw how everyday acts of care in public space – cleaning, tending, maintaining – assert a form of *direct agency*, an *embodied ethics* of responsibility toward the commons. These practices contrast with more institutionalized logics of care, in which public authorities manage the maintenance and appearance of public space from a distance. In Barbès case, we examined how informal and minority-based uses of the street produce relational commons, resisting dominant visions of public order and community. These vernacular practices illustrate a continuum between home and exterior space found in popular cultures, challenging hegemonic definitions of *being together* in public.

In the remnants of a large-scale housing complex as Corviale, designed to support collective living but never fully activated as such, we encountered practices of reappropriation – either through individual gestures or collective action – that turned ruins into resources for alternative welfare. Here, commoning emerges not as ideology but as a necessity: the creation of shared space, housing, and systems of care unfolds within and against the backdrop of bureaucratic inertia and social marginalization. Finally, in a temporary and experimental context of Brussel public parc project, we observed how exceptionality become a fertile terrain for domesticity in public. These moments, porous and precarious, produced encounters that became the grounds for mutual hospitality and reimagined citizenship—proving that *another urbanism* is possible, and that alternative planning can indeed take shape.

Across these cases, conflict does not signal dysfunction but rather the presence of political life. A subtle line of resistance emerges – not always through ideological engagement, but as a practical rationality that resists the anesthetization of public space. These situated actions reconnect with a domestic mode of inhabiting and caring for space – generating forms of hospitable

publicness that can sustain disagreement, negotiation, and transformation. This is a vision of public space that affirms distance and difference as conditions for democratic life, rather than smoothing them over into anonymity and erasure.

Ultimately, this is a call for a re-domestication of public space – not to privatize it, but to render it livable, relational and open to plural forms of life. We advocate for an urban planning and architecture of domestic hospitality – a practice attentive not only to infrastructure or design, but to the politics of care, dwelling, and commoning in the everyday city. If planning clarifies and organizes space, it must also confront the ethical and political implications of such ordering – particularly when it contributes to standardizing, hierarchizing, and reaffirming the capitalist city as the only viable urban form. Planning and design professions must ask themselves: Are their interventions enabling or constraining the proliferation of alternative spatial agencies? How are they promoting or erasing the possibility for public space domestication? How might they contribute – wittingly or not – to the ongoing redefinition of public space? It is thus imperative that designers, planners, and researchers alike remain attuned to the multiple ways people live, care for, and claim space – often against the grain of institutional intention. To support commoning is not simply to design better public spaces – it is to take sides in the opening of new spatial and political possibilities.

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Commoning Beyond the Crisis: Urban Civic Uses and the Democratization of the Urban Transformation and the Ecological Transition

Maria Francesca De Tullio and Roberto Sciarelli¹

Abstract

The austerity policies imposed in Southern Europe have weakened welfare systems and exacerbated the crisis of social reproduction. In response, since 2011, commoning movements have spread, creating autonomous care infrastructures and regenerating abandoned urban areas. Policies such as Next Generation EU and the European Green Deal have ushered in a phase of public investment aimed at ecological transition and economic recovery, allocating significant resources to Southern European countries. However, these policies remain constrained by neoliberal logic, with conditionalities that risk limiting their transformative impact. Our article analyzes three case studies in Naples, where urban commons – Lido Pola, Ex OPG – Je so' pazzo, and Scugnizzo Liberato – are engaged in participatory design processes for urban regeneration policies. We demonstrate how commoning movements can democratize the management of public investments, fostering more inclusive urban environments and advancing environmental justice claims from deprived and contaminated territories. Nevertheless, tensions arise between the top-down governance of new European investments and demands for democratic management of resources.

Le politiche austere imposte nel Sud Europa hanno indebolito i sistemi di welfare e aggravato la crisi della riproduzione sociale. In risposta, dal 2011 si sono diffusi movimenti di *commoning*, che hanno creato infrastrutture autonome di cura e rigenerato aree urbane abbandonate. Politiche come Next Generation EU e il Green Deal Europeo hanno inaugurato una fase di investimenti pubblici per la transizione ecologica e la ripresa economica, riservando risorse significative ai paesi del Sud Europa. Tuttavia, tali politiche rimangono vincolate da logiche neoliberali, con condizionalità che rischiano di limitare il loro impatto trasformativo. L'articolo analizza tre casi studio a Napoli, in cui dei beni comuni urbani – il Lido Pola, l'Ex OPG - Je so' pazzo e lo Scugnizzo Liberato – sono protagonisti di processi di design partecipato nell'ambito di politiche di rigenerazione urbana. Mostriamo come i movimenti di commoning possano rendere più democratica la gestione degli investimenti pubblici, favorendo la creazione di ambienti urbani più solidali e le istanze di giustizia ambientale che emergono da territori deprivati e inquinati. Tuttavia, emergono tensioni tra la governance top-down dei nuovi investimenti europei e le richieste di gestione democratica delle risorse.

¹ The work is the result of research shared by the authors, listed here in alphabetical order. However, paragraphs 1, 2, 3.2, 4.1, 5.2 can be attributed to Roberto Sciarelli and 3.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.3, 6 to Maria Francesca De Tullio.



Keywords: Commons; Next Generation EU; co-design.

Parole chiave: Beni comuni; Next Generation EU; coprogettazione.

Introduction

The application of austerity policies and conditionalities in Southern European countries weakened their already frail welfare systems and further impoverished vulnerable social groups, aggravating the condition which feminist literature defined as a crisis of social reproduction (Serapioni and Hespanha, 2019; De Falco, 2019; Dowling, 2021). In response, large and long-standing anti-austerity mobilizations emerged in countries like Spain, Greece or Italy, opposing the budget cuts to welfare services and demanding 'real democracy' against the hegemony of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund (Pirone, 2019).

From 2011 onwards, in the major Southern European cities, these demands were expressed in the form of durable occupations of public squares, universities, and other urban spaces which, in turn, became the proving ground for *commoning* practices (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2016; Asara, 2025), such as self-managed clinics, workers' cooperatives, housing projects, urban gardens, and innumerable other mutual aid activities, giving life to autonomous networks of caring infrastructures (Arampatzi, 2017; Gutierrez-Sanchez, 2023; Sciarelli, 2024a). In Italy, a fundamental push towards the emergence of new urban commons came from artists' and cultural workers' mobilizations (Cirillo, 2014; Acosta Alvarado, 2020) as well as the movement for water as a commons and other connections with ecological movements thematising the need for sustainable socionatural relations (Sciarelli, 2023).

In the city of Naples, a new legal arrangement was elaborated by commoners themselves since 2012: the 'urban civic and collective use'. This tool allows the legal recognition of community self-government within the public spaces – often abandoned or underused – that people reclaimed and reopened for public use (Capone, 2021; Micciarelli, 2022). There are currently eight recognized urban commons in Naples, whose rules of governance are established by a 'Declaration', autonomously drafted by each community and recognized by

the city government². All declarations are based on the principle of democratic and horizontal self-government, based on periodic assemblies, open to all, and autonomous from external influences. The acknowledgement of commons' social value was then the basis for the recognition of municipal financial support for their accessibility – as an anti-austerity device, recognising the City Hall's social duties (De Tullio, 2018) – as well as for the dialogue regarding the use of public funds for their restoration. We consider this practice-based knowledge – produced by urban commons – not only as a 'fact' to be observed, but also as a part of our theoretical framework on urban commons, guiding the discussion of our field data.

Now, these commons face a rapidly changing European political landscape. In response to the pandemic, the worsening effects of the climate crisis, and the war in Eastern Europe, EU institutions inaugurated a new phase of economic intervention, initiated by the post-pandemic recovery and culminating in the recent report by Mario Draghi, *The future of European competitiveness – A competitiveness strategy for Europe* (9/9/2024, henceforth Draghi report). The policies promoted by Next Generation EU (NGEU) and the European Green Deal seem to reverse the austerity paradigm, aiming to realize the ecological transition while improving the levels of employment and welfare, reserving the greatest shares of funding to Southern European countries. On the other hand, these plans are still based on solid neoliberal foundations.

This change is also impacting the local level, raising the question about the evolution of the political dialectic between top down governance and democratic management of public resources in Southern European cities. This observation leads us to raise the main questions of this research. Can the interaction between communities of commoners and European investments produce more caring relationships among humans and between humans and the urban environment? Or the neoliberal framework which orients NGEU will prevent such outcomes?

² All declarations and the deliberations regarding the urban civic use of Neapolitan commons can be accessed here: <https://commonsnapoli.org/archivio/documenti-giuridici/>. In particular, concerning the declarations of Ex OPG – Je so' pazzo, Lido Pola, and Scugnizzo Liberato, see: Ex OPG - Je so' pazzo, 2021; Lido Pola, 2021b; Scugnizzo Liberato, 2021. More documentation and literature on the matter is at: <https://www.exasilofilangieri.it/approfondimenti-e-reportage/>.

We develop our analysis by observing the commoning movement of Naples, due to the above peculiarities of this movement concerning the community management of urban resources. Firstly, we depict the theoretical basis of our framework, by framing urban commons and their social-ecological struggles in the context of the economic governance of the European Union. Secondly, we delve into the results of our field work, showing how local experiments and EU policies relate to each other in practice. Namely, we analyze two case studies where three urban commons – the Lido Pola, the ex OPG Je so' Pazzo and the Scugnizzo Liberato – have interacted with urban regeneration projects funded by the PNRR (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza), the Italian program funded by NGEU, and by similar public investments.

Case studies and research methodology

Here we present a brief description of the Neapolitan urban commons whose processes of participatory design became the case studies for our research and our methodological approach. These are the following:

- Lido Pola – Bene Comune³ is a commoning experience started the 17th of May 2013 with the occupation and reopening of the historical beach club and then the restaurant Lido Pola, located in the district of Bagnoli. Lido Pola's community participated in the application to a PNRR funding program aimed at allocating 14 million euros, proposing a project called Po.L.A.R.S. ('Coastal innovation hub for the marine environment and social resilience'), elaborated in cooperation with different Neapolitan research institutes belonging to the National Research Council (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - CNR) and other research and academic bodies. The partnership, although a winner in the first round, ultimately did not secure the funding. However, they later participated in another public call with their project 'LP – Lido Pola Laboratorio Permanente' and successfully obtained funding for its implementation.
- The second case study is provided by Je so' pazzo⁴, a commoning

3 Further information about the Lido Pola can be accessed here: <https://commonsnapoli.org/gli-spazi/lido-pola/#:~:text=Ubicato%20in%20via%20Nisida%202024,massima%20industrializzazione%20dell'Area%20Flegrea>.

4 Further information regarding the Ex OPG - Je so' Pazzo can be accessed here: <https://commonsnapoli.org/gli-spazi/ex-opg-je-so-pazzo/>

experience born in 2015 from the occupation of a former judicial psychiatric hospital, located in the district of Materdei, close to the city center of Naples. From 2022, the community of inhabitants which self-governs Je so' pazzo has been involved in a participatory process of co-design for the restoration of the building, a project worth 16 million euros financed by the PNRR. - The third case of urban commoning we analyze is Scugnizzo Liberato⁵, born from the occupation of a former juvenile prison in September 2015, also located in close proximity to the city center of Naples. Scugnizzo's community too, since 2022, is involved in a process of co-design for the restoration of the building, whose funding amounts to 7,5 million euros.

Scugnizzo Liberato's and Je so Pazzo's communities have been involved together in a unique process of co-design of the restoration works, 'Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo', guided by a team of experts in social innovation and participatory design belonging to the cooperative 'SOS - La Scuola Open Source' ('SOS - Open Source School'). Before the process started, the communities obtained the right to nominate additional six experts which became part of the facilitation team put together by SOS (henceforth, 'SOS team').

Our methodological approach for the analysis of these case studies is based on a combination of participant observation (Musante, 2015) and participatory action research (Cornish *et al.*, 2023; Saija, 2016; Freire, 1970), made possible by our direct involvement within the commoning movement of Naples, including our active participation within the co-design processes. We consider our direct implication in the processes we describe as «a powerful incentive and a useful tool» for social science research regarding processes of grassroots political participation (Font *et al.*, 2012). By presenting our research, indeed, our aim is not simply to analyze the events we witnessed, but to contribute to the collective process of self-reflection and political elaboration carried out by the Neapolitan communities of commoners regarding their interaction with public institutions and their policies of urban regeneration. Action research is an approach that actively involves participants in the study rather than treating them as mere subjects of analysis. This

⁵ And regarding the Scugnizzo Liberato: <https://commonsnapoli.org/gli-spazi/scugnizzo-liberato/>

principle fosters a more inclusive and participatory research process, offering transformative potential while addressing issues of power and hierarchy inherent in traditional positivist methodologies. As a result, those involved in the research can benefit from a more equitable and shared experience (Jacobs, 2018). Unlike traditional research, participatory action research can only be carried out in a democratic and politically engaged environment. This approach also enables research that is directly relevant to a particular community (Bergold and Thomas, 2012), which is precisely our intention.

Our understanding and engagement within these processes has been further deepened by the fact that we are also members of the Permanent Observatory on the Commons of Naples⁶ and one author is member of the Audit Council on Resources and Debt of the City of Naples⁷. Both these new institutions are participatory consultative bodies instituted by the City Government of Naples, in accordance with the demands expressed by the network of urban commons, to facilitate the interaction between the local institutions and the community of commoners. The Observatory has been involved by both the administration and the communities in all phases of the co-design processes.

Regarding the process 'Ad uso civico e collettivo', the first author is activist in the Neapolitan commons network and was one of the experts nominated by the Je So' Pazzo community, and the second author is an active member of Scugnizzo's community, so we could actively participate in the co-design process from its start to its end: we participated in the internal assemblies of the commons dedicated to discuss and organize the co-design process; as members of the Permanent Observatory on the commons of Naples, we were informed by the city government on the characteristics of the co-design process and we could discuss it with the administration; we took part to all the activities, workshops, mapping laboratories and focus groups organized by 'SOS - La Scuola Open Source', which composed the co-design process itself, together with the communities of the commons; finally, we participated in the realization of a survey aimed to collect data regarding the opinions and aspirations of the inhabitants and the commoners regarding the process of

⁶ <https://commonsnapoli.org/nuove-istituzioni/osservatorio-beni-comuni/>

⁷ <https://commonsnapoli.org/nuove-istituzioni/consulta-audit/>

renovation of the commons and their future⁸.

In addition, we carried out a semi-structured interview (following Della Porta, 2010) with a key activist of Je So' Pazzo (Interview #6). Regarding the co-design processes involving Lido Pola's community, we participated in key moments of discussion promoted by the movement within the Neapolitan commons network, and we could follow the development of both Po.L.A.R.S. and LP² projects as members of the Observatory. In addition, we carried out a semi-structured interview with a key activist of Lido Pola (I#1), a focus group with four CNR researchers who participated in the promotion and elaboration of the Po.L.A.R.S. project (I#2, #3, #4, #5) and a final semi-structured interview with another activist of the Neapolitan commoning movement and expert of co-design who was nominated by Scugnizzo Liberato's community to become a member of the team who guided the participatory design, and who also had a key role in the elaboration and conduction of the LP² project (I#7).

We want to clarify that, notwithstanding the authors' direct involvement in the commons of Naples, all positions, statements, and ideas expressed in this article are solely their own and do not in any way represent the collective opinions of the movement.

Urban Commons, Care, and Ecology in the EU Economic Governance

Spending Conditionalities and Democracy in the Post-Pandemic EU

The context of our case studies highlights a tension between the spending conditionalities imposed by the EU to Member States and the democratic claims of collective control on resources. In this section, we will observe how these tensions evolved over the post-pandemic recovery and with which impact on commons' ability to experiment in practice with democratic, ecological, and caring ways of managing public resources.

In principle, spending conditionalities are used by funding authorities to impose certain disciplines to spending authorities, other than technical monitoring obligations and compliance

⁸ All the information regarding the activities which composed the process of co-design 'Ad uso civico e collettivo' can be accessed in its Final Report: <https://lascuolaopensource.notion.site/Ad-Uso-Civico-e-Collettivo-Report-finale-e0eaffe96a1e465496bdfdbdc78352d7>

with overarching legal rules (Vita, 2017). For example, they can be useful for federal States to steer sectors where there is no federal jurisdiction to enact binding provisions (Daintith, 1994). Hence, conditionalities effectively influence spending decisions, even though the strict enforcement of the condition – i.e., cutting funds in case of non-compliance – is rarely implemented, as it would create tensions with the autonomy of the spending authority (Bagenstof, 2008).

Outside of a federal framework, the EU has applied conditionalities to reinforce austerity rules through funding programs (Barca, 2009) and even ‘bailout funds’ during crises. These measures have been criticised in both indebted States – for limiting fundamental rights while proving ineffective for the economic emancipation (Toussaint, 2017; Dollar and Svensson, 2000; Haggard, 1985; Ivanova *et al.*, 2001) – and the financially ‘virtuous’ ones, for hindering State support to ‘good’ investments like digital innovation and environmental protection (on the debate, see Gill 2020; Friends of Cohesion, 2020).

The latter need – to spend for EU priorities – explains the current revival of the ‘partner State’ doctrine (Mazzucato, 2020) that justifies and promotes public investment to leverage and steer private investments towards general interest. Covid-19 provided the alibi for the EU to take action in that sense, by using an emergency narrative and not openly contradicting its austerity ideology (CADTM, 2021). On that basis, the Commission approved a reinforced Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027⁹ and created the *Next Generation EU* (NGEU) instrument for recovery, disciplined by Regulation 2021/241¹⁰. To establish the latter, the EU – benefiting from its higher credit rating – borrowed funds on financial markets that could be spent by Member States according to their National Recovery

⁹ COUNCIL REGULATION (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027, OJ L 433l, 22.12.2020, in <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2020/2093/oj>.

¹⁰ REGULATION (EU) 2021/241 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, OJ L 57 of 18.2.2021, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R0241&qid=1619107328414>. The instituting regulation is: COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) 2020/2094 of 14 December 2020 establishing a European Union Recovery Instrument to support the recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, OJ L 433l of 22.12.2020, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32020R2094>

and Resilience Plans, approved by the EU itself.

Arguably, these novelties were a mitigation and not an abolition of the debt system. Additionally, Reg. 2024/241 still imposes both content and financial conditions. Concerning the former, Art. 6 and 16 require the enactment of EU priorities and particularly green and digital ones, that have to amount to respectively 37% and 20% of the expenses. As for the latter, States have to respect the Country Recommendations linked to the European Semester, with the additional provision of an 'emergency break', capable of impeding the irrigation of funds in case of non-compliance with budget rules. The absence of detailed indicators for social and economic impact – other than quantitative indicators based on the amount of resources invested – reveals the rationality of the regulation: leveraging investments in new market sectors, with a better reputation, rather than effectively fulfilling social rights. For the same reasons, NGEU spending is also conditioned by time constraints, because its purpose is to pursue recovery of the EU economical fabric by injecting big amounts of resources in a short time.

In the Italian context, the PNRR – not unlike austerity measures – saw the Executive (then led by Mario Draghi) as the main decision-maker, with reduced parliamentary debate (De Minico, 2021) and almost no agency for local entities (Civitaresse Matteucci, 2021). Additionally, redistribution mechanisms were made aleatory, as the allocation of resources was only partially predetermined and mostly entrusted to competitive procedures. Due to the amount of resources received by Italy, along with the EU criteria, the planning and implementation of the PNRR created a special regime that did in fact mobilise a budget close to an annual financial law. This regime was based on enforceable financial conditionalities and clumsier ecological and social objectives, as further demonstrated by the fact that the subsequent government, led by Giorgia Meloni, successfully negotiated a less rigorous implementation of PNRR objectives. It is worth noticing that these conclusions shed light on the future economic governance of the EU, as the instrument is also conceived as a laboratory for long-standing policies. Indeed, NGEU inspired the permanent revision of the Growth and Stability Pact that now provides flexibilities to ensure certain investments – like the green and digital ones, but also

the defense sector – without renouncing austerity regulations. Hence – while we focus on environmental policies, that are more relevant to this paper – it is worth noting that this new kind of conditional funding is susceptible of being used for different political priorities, including the creation of ‘war debts’ (De Lellis, 2024) along with the Draghi report, considering Defense as a pivotal sector for the competitiveness of EU economy.

Social and environmental care: the transformative potential of civic uses

NGEU is also one of the main sources of funding for the European Green Deal (EGD), together with the Just Transition Mechanism, the Innovation and Modernization Funds, financed by revenues from the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), and the EU ordinary budget (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2020). On the one hand, the elaboration of the EGD, with its objective of the complete decarbonization of the continent by 2050 and its connection to the paradigm of the just transition (Wang and Lo, 2021), represents an epochal step change for European institutions. On the other hand, the implementation of the EGD also presents critical issues which can be attributed to the permanence of the neoliberal austerity paradigm.

First of all, the EGD relies on liberalization policies and market mechanisms, which showed a very limited efficiency in reducing carbon emissions (Leonardi, 2017), and actually produced an intensification of resource extraction and energy consumption (Dunlappe and Laratte, 2022). Secondly, the juridical framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which plays a crucial role in financing the EGD, shows clear limits in the level of involvement of social actors in the formulation of the recovery policies, also creating a problem of legitimacy (Munta *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, while the inclusion of a policy framework elaborated by unions and environmental justice organizations such as the Just Transition can be deemed as very positive, the dimension of care work is still relegated at the margins of EU transition strategy, even though the inadequacy of the care infrastructures – aggravated by the austerity regime – became increasingly clear during the pandemic (Dowling, 2021; Barca *et al.*, 2024).

Precisely because of these critical issues, the interaction of

EU programs focused on urban regeneration and ecological transition with commoning movements may have a great transformative potential. Recent literature on Southern European commoning movements – often inspired by feminist perspectives on commoning processes (Federici, 2004; 2018) – highlighted the close connection between the creation of new commons, often originating from abandoned urban spaces, reclaimed and self-governed by communities of inhabitants, and the collective organization of caring activities for subaltern social groups and vulnerable territories. While the austerity regime aggravated the contradiction between neoliberal economic management and sphere of social reproduction (Dowling, 2021), grassroots mobilizations emerged in countries like Greece, Spain or Italy attempted to safeguard the social fabric by infrastructuring just, collective and sustainable forms of social provision (Gutierrez-Sanchez, 2023). In all major Southern European cities, for the last fifteen years, it has been possible to observe more or less developed commoning processes aimed at supporting education, access to housing, public health, basing the creation of new care spaces on direct political involvement (Arampatzi, 2017; Cannavò, 2018).

The caring value of commoning processes is not limited to the social fabric but extends to the realm of environmental regeneration (Barca, 2020; 2024). This is particularly evident in the case of natural commons, such as forests or fisheries, where communities that manage them as commons tend to protect them from overexploitation and contamination (Bollier and Helfrich, 2013). However, the same is also true in urban environments, where commoning movements can foster the creation of urban gardens and alternative food networks (Moreira and Morell, 2020), regenerate and revitalize neglected or polluted areas (Capone, 2019), and defend the public management and accessibility of common resources such as water (Bianchi, 2022), ultimately contributing to the emergence of new ecological imaginaries (Asara, 2025).

Finally, it is important to stress that the work of socio-environmental regeneration conducted within commoning experiences, even if it is based on autonomy and self-organization, can also intertwine with the delivery of welfare services and connect with the application of urban policies (Sciarelli, 2024a).

Progressive administrations, like it happened in the case of Barcelona (Kussy *et al.*, 2022), have attempted to implement policies of democratization social provision by organizing welfare services by the principle of the commons, that is, supporting the self-management of care workers and internalizing care services through municipal cooperatives. This type of collaborative arrangement for the delivery of care is an important element of municipalist policies (Bianchi, 2024), and can be considered as a form of “public-commons partnerships” which can include several other forms of cooperation between local administrations and organized communities of inhabitants in the management of public spaces, buildings or infrastructures. Such partnerships do not merely resist privatization of public goods and services, but actively prefigure new democratic forms of collective ownership and governance (Russell *et al.*, 2023).

In a similar fashion, the urban civic and collective uses established by the commoning movement of Naples, originally conceived as a local response to the broader European demand for ‘real democracy’ against austerity, contributed to support the creation of new infrastructures of care (Sciarelli, 2024a), and now provide the tools to rethink and democratize the governance of the public policies resulting from European investments too.

First, the framework of the urban civic uses guarantees the communities’ right to participate in any process of urban regeneration involving the structures that the city government of Naples recognized as urban commons. Scugnizzo Liberato’s Declaration, for instance, states that «the community has the right to participate in institutional processes regarding the extraordinary renovation, valorization, restoration or transformation of the structure», and that «the interventions to be carried out within the structure of the *Scugnizzo Liberato* [...] are guided by the principles of shared care for places and self-rehabilitation» (art. 16). All the other declarations contain similar provisions that address the regeneration process. Besides safeguarding the civic use of the common spaces, these provisions open the door to concrete processes of democratization of public works, as they potentially allow – and indeed allowed – the participation of large communities of inhabitants into the administration of public policies.

Second, communities of commoners are bearers of different

values and political priorities than those present in the NGEU policy framework. The collective organization of care work, in particular, increasingly became a central political value within Neapolitan commons, which along the course of the years hosted a vast array of solidarity initiatives and mutual help activities (Ex OPG - *Je so' pazzo*, 2019), fostering the creation of authentic caring communities within the self-governed spaces (Sciarelli, 2024a; see also *The Care Collective*, 2020). Moreover, for the commons of Naples, the question of social reproduction is also connected to the ecological health of their territories (Sciarelli, 2024b). Among our case studies, this is especially true for the Lido Pola, whose reclamation was brought about by the socioenvironmental movement of Bagnoli, and whose community actively participates in the local mobilization for the environmental remediation of the district and the realization of a public beach (Laboratorio Bancarotta and Cantiere Sociale Quarto Mondo, 2014).

The political centrality of environmental care practices is reflected in the Declarations as well, which gives them a juridical basis formally recognized by the municipality of Naples (Lido Pola, 2021b). This, of course, became an important basis for the effort of embedding these values within the processes of co-design which involved the communities.

The co-design processes

Lido Pola

The co-design process from which the Po.L.A.R.S. project emerged shall be contextualized in the political and environmental history of the area of Bagnoli. The district, its grounds, shores and waters have been polluted by a century-long activity of steel production, which developed after the application of the Law for the Economic Resurgence of Naples of 1904, which turned Bagnoli into a special economic zone to attract northern investors (Marmo, 1978). The steel plants, which after the Second World War had become property of the national company Italsider, then ILVA, finally concluded their activity in 1992, leaving the area in the grip of environmental contamination and sudden absence of job opportunities (Laboratorio Bancarotta and Cantiere Sociale Quarto Mondo, 2014).

The question of environmental remediation remained unresolved for decades, and still is. Bagnoli SPA and Bagnoli Futura, the

two public firms created to take charge of the remediation and the urban regeneration, only achieved minimal results (Gardini, 2016). The decree law n. 133 of the 12th of September 2014 put these duties in the hands of a special commissioner nominated directly by the government, a decision that was met with the fierce opposition of local social movements, who criticized the situation of 'permanent emergency' (Laboratorio Bancarotta and Cantiere Sociale Quarto Mondo, 2014) lived by the district. They saw it as a strategy aimed at centralizing the decision-making process, favoring the interests of few investors and speculators. The reclamation of Lido Pola itself, which prevented the privatization of the structure, and its process of autonomous revitalization, expressed the will to reappropriate physical and political spaces of democracy from the grassroots (I#1).

The Po.L.A.R.S. project was born from the initiative of several CNR research institutes¹¹ which contacted the municipality of Naples, communicating the willingness to apply to a PNRR funding call for initiatives of urban regeneration, 'Ecosystems of Innovation in the Mezzogiorno', with a project worth 14 million euros, which would have included the regeneration of the Lido Pola and the surrounding area. The city government communicated that, given the status of Lido Pola as a civic use common, it would have been impossible to apply without the assent of the community. Instead of selecting another area, the researchers decided to involve the community in the elaboration of the project, presenting their proposal to Lido Pola's assembly of inhabitants (I#1; I#5). Lido Pola's community decided to accept the proposal and enthusiastically participated in the drafting of the project, also involving local associations into the consortium (I#1, #5). The IRISS institute of the CNR, whose researchers had already carried out activities of co-research in the area, and one of whose members, also had a central role in facilitating the dialogue between the community and the CNR (I#1,#2,#3,#4; Vittoria *et al.*, 2023). The

11 These include IRISS, ISASI, ISMAR, INM, IBBRM, and INO. The project partnership was later joined by the following entities: the National Interuniversity Consortium for Marine Sciences (CoNISMa); the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV); the Municipality of Naples; the local community of 'Lido Pola - Bene Comune', represented by the social cooperative Quadrifoglio, the association Caracol, and Jolie Rouge APS; and the IDIS Foundation - City of Science (Città della Scienza). Further information about them is accessible here: <https://www.cnr.it/istituti>

final project elaborated by the public-civic consortium foresaw the complete regeneration of the premises of Lido Pola and a partial restoration of the surrounding area, for the realization of research laboratories of natural and social sciences. The most innovative part of the project was the recognition of the civic use of the parts of the structure that the inhabitants reclaimed as commons, which would have continued to be dedicated to social and cultural activities organized in a regime of self-government (Vittoria *et al.*, 2023; I#1, #2, #3, #4, #5).

For the activists and the researchers who promoted the project, Po.L.A.R.S. represented the occasion to realize a research infrastructure dedicated to environmental monitoring, science dissemination and empowerment of the local community, based on a constant dialogue between inhabitants, grassroots organizations and research activities, possibly opening a long path of citizen science (Vittoria *et al.*, 2023). The final project proposal was also coherent and compatible with the demands expressed by Lido Pola's community and the wider socioenvironmental movement of Bagnoli along the course of the years, like the environmental restoration of the area, the regeneration of the seashore, the safeguard of its free accessibility and, in particular, the inhabitants' participation in the process of urban transformation (Lido Pola, 2021a).

Po.L.A.R.S. passed the first selection phase of the funding call. Another success for the consortium came from the city government of Naples, which chose to officially embrace the project, recognizing its value as well as its connection with the civic use of the structure¹². In the end, the project did not pass the final selection, but its realization remains a long-term objective for the network of organizations and inhabitants which contributed to realize it, and the cooperation between the commoners and CNR researchers continues to be active (I#1, #2, #3, #4).

Indeed, Lido Pola's involvement in processes of co-design of public policies continued. By the end of 2022, a consortium composed of associations connected to Lido Pola's community and the IRISS research institute was among the winners of a funding call promoted by the Italian Ministry of Culture, 'Creative Living Lab IV'¹³. The project, 'LP² – Lido Pola Laboratorio

¹² Press release of the City Government of the 16th of November 2021, accessible at: <https://www.comune.napoli.it/giunta/comunicatistampa?id=23671>.

¹³ The website of the call can be accessed here: <https://creativitacontemporanea>

Permanente', involved the activation of a participatory process of urban regeneration and collective organization of sociocultural activities in the district. Each activity was discussed and organized through widely participated assemblies, which consolidated the role of Lido Pola as pole of democratic participation in the Bagnoli (I#1, #7). The outputs of the project included the collaborative mapping, the production of songs realized by young local artists, the realization of a mural and, most importantly, the financing of a process of restoration and self-costruction in the terraces of Lido Pola (I#7).

Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG: the Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo Process

The second case study concerns the use of public resources to refurbish two commons: Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG.

Ex OPG and Scugnizzo Liberato had been transferred from the State to the City under the framework of Law 85/2010 (Federalismo Demaniale - public property federalism). The law allowed the transfer of goods to 'valorise' them. While its general rationality was austeritarian - to valorise them economically and feed local budgets - in this case it was used by the then municipalist city government for a cultural and social 'valorisation': the two buildings were transferred and then recognised as commons. Using this legal path also implied the obligation for the city government to find funding to ensure the valorisation of the goods, according to specific plans. In the case of Scugnizzo Liberato, this fund was granted in 2019 by the Contratto Istituzionale di Sviluppo 'Napoli - Centro Storico' (Institutional Contract for Development 'Naples - historical city centre'); as for ex-OPG, the funding came from the PNRR.

The beginning of the implementation by the new city government - born after 2021 elections - was characterised by at least two choices of discontinuity with respect to the previous policies on commons. The first one was procedural: the facilitation of the participatory processes on the constructions was entrusted to a private actor, SOS, instead of the community itself. The second choice was the mandate given to SOS, requiring to identify a governance model for the spaces - not necessarily corresponding to the existing civic uses - and to ensure the

cultura.gov.it/creativelivinglab/.

economic self-sufficiency of commons, against the idea of public support required by the anti-austerity roots of these experiences. Additionally, since ex-OPG funds were granted via the PNRR, the process for both commons had to follow the tight deadlines of this programme which – according to the process designers and facilitators (La Scuola Open Source, 2023) – did not leave enough space for a good quality participatory process (three months, extended to four).

Commons communities eventually accepted this imposition because of the huge stakes of the funding: demonstrating communities' ability to attract and co-manage public resources for general interests. The tensions around the same choices were navigated through an agreement between SOS experts and the commoners of Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG, together with the Neapolitan Commons Network and the Observatory on Commons. Indeed, the two commons involved managed to appoint their own experts from the Network itself among the members of the 'SOS team'. SOS had its own professionals in the Team, who contributed with their own methodologies, but could also take advantage of the local experts' specific knowledge on commons.

Interviews and participatory observation highlighted multiple risks, especially lying in the possible legitimisation – through the presence of commoners-experts in the process – of experts-activists hierarchies (I#7) and of weak participatory outputs, inevitably compromised by PNRR deadlines. However, the 'SOS Team' also worked to realign the process with the previous policies of civic uses, obtaining a press release of the new government recognising civic uses as the base of the process; consequently, the city also approved a coherent revision of the original mandate. As an output of the participatory processes, the 'SOS team' developed some key recommendations to implement the constructions along with the recognition and enhancement of commons: the principle of an 'open construction site', where future renovation work would be made modular, taking place without the community having to fully leave the space; a participatory steering committee to coordinate different administrations and commoners; an 'explained time schedule', as a way to clarify the roadmap of work in progress and its political meaning for commoners and city residents.

Discussion

Ethical-Political Frameworks in the Participatory Processes on PNRR Funding

Our case studies highlight commoners' attempt to make PNRR projects 'social and environmental by design', thus complementing institutional frameworks that were not providing for such design choices at any level of government. Similar issues were also raised by actors positioning themselves as professionals – CNR and SOS – that could experiment their innovative views on participation on the testbed of their field practice with commoners. These actors took a clear position stating that participatory design processes are inherently non-neutral and always enforcing specific ethical-value frameworks (I#5). Indeed, while participatory design is supposed to redistribute power and enable stakeholders' direct participation in decision-making, authorities' framework and methodology choices determine the concrete access and weight of each social actor (Arnstein, 1969).

Obviously, the conditional regulation of funding programmes plays a crucial role here. To that regard, our case studies show in practice what we have argued about the NGEU. EU imposed timing and effectiveness as strict requirements for the local administration; oppositely, it left commoners' and inhabitants' self-determination to local authorities' political discretion.

Local authorities, in turn, did not explicitly recognise the commons-based urban policies and broadly relied on the mediation of 'expert' bodies. In both cases, the administration's stance was not openly hostile to the commons; however, the absence of a clear political positioning in favour of them had the effect of implicitly strengthening the above EU priorities. In principle, the local government did not intend to use PNRR projects to foster civic uses in commons, but these ideas came from commoning processes themselves. In Po.L.A.R.S., the joint will of CNR and Lido Pola triggered the initiative; in the 'Ad Usò Civico e Collettivo', it was the need to implement the 'public property federalism'. Additionally, in the latter, the original mandate did not involve preserving and improving civic uses. This approach generated dangers for these social-ecological experiments, that by design need self-government to fulfill their political purposes; additionally, the City hall's initial behaviour was probably neglecting efficiency purposes themselves, as

civic uses had proven to produce valuable effects on the local communities (Pascapè, 2017), had been previously awarded with international prizes (like the Urbact good practice¹⁴), and – in the case of Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG – were the reason why funding has originally been granted for the restoration of the buildings.

Hence, the local implementation of PNRR was coherent with the more general policy of the new government of withdrawing from supporting civic uses financially, to the extent that currently some commons find themselves deprived of essential resources, such as electricity. Hence, we can observe that PNRR constraints – because of their lack of attention to participation and self-determination – ended up serving the priorities of the local government, even generating an inconsistency in local policies which is against the own technical rationality of NGEU, which is to create long-lasting virtuous policies.

The same dynamics can be observed in the relationship of the local administration with the PNRR time constraints. Indeed, PNRR deadlines were the reason to impose pressures on the processes, with potential contradiction with commons' values that require broad and consensus-based procedures. At the same time – while the 'Ad Usò Civico e Collettivo' participatory process benefited from just one month extension, with a significant community effort – the beginning of the works was delayed several months. A delay that would have been possibly reduced by the implementation of the recommendations coming from the participatory process itself which included concrete tools to ensure a smooth coordination between the administrations involved, with the supporting and expert role of the communities of reference.

The expansion of the civic uses

Besides these critical issues, we consider these processes also as a significant opportunity for the communities of commoners, enabling them to grow by navigating new political frameworks, acquiring tools to enhance their democratic practices both internally and externally, extending the reach of the civic uses from the self-government of urban spaces to the development of public policies.

¹⁴ <https://urbact.eu/good-practices/civic-estate>

In particular, the commoners successfully addressed the inconsistencies between the PNRR's value framework and their own principles of democratic governance. With the support of the Observatory (I#4), the activists managed to use the co-design process to actually strengthen the political foundations of the civic use: the innovative aspect of Po.L.A.R.S. lay precisely in the dialogue between science and the local community, as the self-government process was preserved within the project. At the start of 'Ad uso civico e collettivo', Scugnizzo Liberato's and Je so' Pazzo's communities obtained that strengthening the civic use of the commons and the process of self-government already active within them would explicitly be listed among the desired outcomes of the entire process¹⁵. Thus, the collaboration between communities, co-researchers in the Observatory, and university consortia helped to recalibrate public policies.

Interestingly, the opposite dynamic also holds true: the interaction with the knowledge of communities of inhabitants and activists has become a strong driver for research activities, as evidenced particularly by the members of the IRISS institute, which came to regard commoners as "research colleagues" (I#2). Members of the Po.L.A.R.S. research consortium also expressed their appreciation for participating in a regeneration process that, when started with the reclamation of Lido Pola in 2013, prevented real estate speculation in the area (I#5).

These positive outcomes highlight how the social and intellectual networks activated by the commons not only attracted funding into neglected territories but also imbued such funds with a strong political orientation, redirecting them toward processes of social cooperation, community-based welfare, cultivation of multicultural communities, and environmental justice struggles. The value-driven nature of these processes directly challenges prevailing political trends in both continental and local policies, and allows them to produce civic values besides favoring economic investments.

These participatory processes of co-design are also particularly significant because they took place in Southern Italy, a region at the margins of the European economy. The commons have mobilized diverse collectives, including marginalized groups

¹⁵ 'Ad uso civico e collettivo' - Final Report: <https://lascuolaopensource.notion.site/Ad-Uso-Civico-e-Collettivo-Report-finale-e0eaffe96a1e465496bdfdbdc78352d7>

and migrant communities that often struggle to participate in local politics. This reflects the deliberate efforts of the activists to create inclusive and solidaristic communities with subaltern social groups.

The pivotal importance of the Po.L.A.R.S. case, in particular, lies in overturning a century -long tradition of top-down decision-making in the area of Bagnoli. What stands out is the critical connection between ecological concerns, autonomous regeneration, and community self-government – a link absent in European policies and unprecedented in past territorial policies. This is also reflected in the outputs of the LP² project, which were elaborated to have a precise ecological value (I#7), as they included phases of investigation, collective discussion and cultural production regarding the relationship between the neighbourhood and the local environment and the sea, besides the works for the regeneration of Lido Pola. These outputs were coherent with the objectives of reappropriating public spaces and reopening the seashores of Bagnoli to the public, something that the local movements demanded for more than a decade. However, these achievements remain insufficient. The Bagnoli case underscores the persistence of a political limitation to this democratic expansion.

A new understanding of democratic accountability in public spending

As a final remark, we can observe that accountability plays a crucial role in commons' participatory proposal on public spending. The NGEU understands accountability on the basis of predetermined milestones, tasks, and time schedules. Additionally, the Italian PNRR largely grounds the same values in the implementation of competitive processes, allegedly capable of ensuring equity in the distribution of funds. From our observation of commons, a different concept emerged, based on their long-standing practice. Since their birth, commons have always considered themselves as new institutions and experimented with their own accountability as a laboratory for an accountable management of public (immobile) resources. A basic example is the fundamental principle of an open assembly, allowing everyone to not only oversee, but also participate in the management of the good with the method of consensus or other methods respecting minorities.

Similar examples exist in our case studies. Interviews (I#5) report that the collaboration between Lido Pola and CNR started from a key question, mutually posed by the two actors: «How can I trust you?». The fact that both institutions accepted to 'stay' in that question is an indicator of their commitment to be accountable to the other and to the city in general and to each other. Concerning the second case study, the experience of ex-OPG (I#6) reports the practice of *controllo popolare* (popular control), based on spotting and denouncing misdemeanours of the public administration and/or private actors. When it came to managing themselves a public resource as a commons, the path led to an effort of narrating their own activities in order to be transparent about their use of resources and involve inhabitants themselves. These stories narrate a process-based understanding of accountability, rooted in a nest of heterogeneous territorial relationships. Moreover, this notion of participation does not pretend neutrality and does not aim to be equally responsive to any beneficiary, but welcomes the need of being specifically responsive to the needs of people who are in a disadvantaged position.

The same topic of trust and accountability is crucial in the relationship with the Municipality of Naples in the 'Ad Usu Civico e Collettivo' process. Interview #7 reports that the effectiveness of the participatory process was hindered by the City Government's decision of not explicitly supporting the civic uses as the governance model for the commons, raising the need for an official press release, granting a minimum of shared values orienting participation.

These circumstances allow us to outline at least two elements about how commons see their own accountability in managing public resources.

Firstly, the communities demonstrated an ability to adopt a policymaker perspective (I#7), thereby taking on responsibility for the general interest. Equally, the ex-OPG interviewee (I#6) highlighted the difference between the ex-OPG community's co-design and the design tools commonly used in different contexts: the way commons deal with social needs is based on the purpose of not necessarily responding all of them – which is often not even possible – but also and especially orienting the people bearing the needs towards revindicative and transformative actions. This shows a complex and relational understanding of accountability,

characterised by the awareness of commoners' and public sectors' responsibilities.

Secondly, activists-experts, unlike in a technocratic paradigm, made an effort of being themselves accountable to the community and explicitly defined their expertise as being politically rooted and open to community input. The process of internal hierarchization based on expertise, emerged in the interviews, was problematized and addressed by experts themselves through exposure in dozens of assemblies where experts' positioning, and their proposed choices were explained and discussed. Similarly, the CNR exposed itself to multiple assembly processes and opened itself up to the territory. Interviews (I#5) highlight a reversal of the peer review logic, declaring that the project would either be developed with the community or not at all, effectively prioritising accountability towards community over other concerns.

Thus, commoning experiments challenged austerity and competitive tools, deploying different mechanisms based on non-neutrality. An issue for further research is therefore if and how these mechanisms could be recognized and proposed as conditionalities or constraints for co-design processes, in order to promote transparency and democracy in a substantial equality meaning.

Conclusions

This study highlights the persistence of austerity logics in NGEU and the transformative potential of commons-based approaches in rethinking public spending and participatory governance within the framework EU funding. The case studies demonstrate how commoners have successfully introduced ethical-political frameworks into participatory processes, challenging the technocratic and efficiency-driven paradigms imposed by EU and national regulations. The collaboration between commoners and experts highlights the potential for co-design processes to foster innovation and redefine expertise as a politically rooted and community-driven practice.

The study underscores persistent challenges related to NGEU and its local implementation. The tension between the rigid constraints of PNRR timelines and the participatory values of commons-based governance often resulted in severe contradictions. Furthermore, the lack of explicit political

recognition and support for commons-based approaches by local authorities exposed these initiatives to vulnerabilities, including resource deprivation and inconsistent policy implementation.

Facing these challenges, the findings reveal a new understanding of accountability in public spending. Namely, commons propose a relational and process-oriented accountability that prioritizes responsiveness to disadvantaged communities, transparency, and collective decision-making. These practices challenge the neutrality of conventional participatory tools and emphasize the importance of trust and mutual responsibility between institutions and communities.

Future research should explore how these alternative mechanisms of accountability and participation can be recognised and safeguarded in legal frameworks at all levels, as a condition to ensure transparency, democracy, and substantial equality in the governance of public resources.

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Unsettling Youth Participation in Relational Space and Commons: Case Study Lusatia

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Abstract

This paper* examines youth participation in structural transformation in Lusatia, a post-coal region in eastern Germany. It argues that institutional frameworks rely on territorial and linear logics of participation that do not resonate with those they are meant to engage. Drawing on spatial theory and the commons, a relational perspective is proposed to explain the disjunction between scripted participatory formats and the contingent, affective, and situated ways in which young people relate to space and the future. While institutions and research often emphasize access, representation, and impact, this paper foregrounds empirical insights that show how participation frequently fails to engage with the multiple and uneven rhythms of everyday life. Reframing participation in relational terms opens a contingent terrain for more situated engagement with futures as at once inherited, envisioned, forged, enacted, and contested.

L'articolo esamina la partecipazione giovanile all'interno di trasformazioni strutturali in Lusazia, una regione post-carbonifera della Germania orientale. Il testo mette in luce come i quadri di riferimento adottati dall'amministrazione locale si basino su una logica lineare e territoriale della partecipazione che non trova risonanza con le persone che vorrebbe coinvolgere. Basandosi sulla teoria spaziale e sulla prospettiva dei *commons*, l'articolo propone una prospettiva relazionale per spiegare la disgiunzione tra i formati partecipativi previsti dalle istituzioni e i modi contingenti, affettivi e situati con cui i giovani si relazionano allo spazio e al futuro. Mentre le istituzioni e la ricerca mettono l'accento sull'accesso e la rappresentanza, l'articolo, basato su dati empirici, mostra come la spesso la partecipazione fallisca nell'intercettare i ritmi molteplici e diseguali della vita quotidiana. Inquadrare la partecipazione in termini relazionali apre un terreno contingente per un coinvolgimento più situato verso futuri intesi contemporaneamente come ereditati, immaginati, costruiti, messi in atto e contestati.

Keywords: youth participation; structural transformation; Lusatia.

Parole Chiave: partecipazione giovanile; trasformazione strutturale; Lusazia.

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Introduction: Ontological Disjunction in Participation

Youth participation has become a normative imperative in urban and regional planning. It is mandated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, Art. 12) and institutional frameworks at various levels of governance. Yet youth participation is frequently perceived as failing to resonate meaningfully with young people or to unlock the co-creative potential of cooperation across structural hierarchies (Matthews, 2001; Löw-Beer and Luh, 2024). Representatives of organised interest and researchers generally attribute these shortcomings to failures in procedural inclusion, limited institutional commitment, or insufficient inclusion and influence relative to normative models of participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hart, 1992; Arnstein, 1969). This paper, however, identifies an ontological disjunction between institutional participatory frameworks and lived experience as a structural reason for the limited resonance of participatory processes. This disjunction arises from how institutions frame space, time, and transformation as structured and goal-oriented, while in everyday life they are encountered as contingent and shaped by uncertainty.

In Lusatia, Germany, a region undergoing structural transition away from lignite mining and coal-based energy, explicit efforts have been made to involve young people in shaping the region's future. These efforts are supported by legal frameworks, including the Social Code (SGB VIII, Art. 8, 11), the Federal Building Code (BauGB, Art. 3), the Brandenburg Local Government Act (BbgKVerf, Art.19), and Brandenburg's State Diet Resolution 'Strengthening the Participation of Children and Young People in the Structural Transformation Process in Lusatia' (Landtag Brandenburg, 2022). Participation in this context is typically invited into pre-scripted frameworks organised around categories such as employment, infrastructure, and innovation (Zeissig *et al.*, 2023; Gailing and Weith, 2023). These frameworks are shaped by a strong territorial logic that assumes a fixed conception of space and a linear, outcome-oriented view of the future (Adam and Groves, 2007). In contrast, young people encounter spatial transformation in ways that are contingent, uncertain, and entangled with everyday struggles. While institutional frameworks and research emphasize the

importance of structural adaptation, this paper argues that an ontological disjunction grounded in spatial theory more effectively captures the difficulties in meaningfully engaging young people in participatory processes.

To investigate this disconnect, the paper develops an analytical lens that conceptualizes participation as a spatio-temporal collective process by combining the concepts of relational space and the commons. A relational understanding situates space as socially and temporally produced, constituted through interrelations, positionalities, disjunctions, and embodied practices (Lefebvre, 2014 [1946]; Massey, 2005; Shields, 2013). From this perspective, futures are not predefined targets but emerge through negotiation between settled and unsettled conditions of everyday life (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). Transformation is therefore not understood as an event but as an ongoing condition shaped by overlapping rhythms, interruptions, and temporal dissonance. In turn, the concept of the commons emphasizes a collective and relational dimension of engagement (Stavrides, 2016; Chatterton, 2016). It foregrounds tensions between institutional scripts and situated practices of negotiating access, recognition, and shared meaning. Framing futures as commons makes it possible to understand how collective horizons are imagined, accessed, or foreclosed, not as abstract policy principles but as contested terrains embedded in the assemblages of human and non-human relations (Metzger, 2016).

Empirically, this paper draws on a qualitative case study conducted in Lusatia in 2024 to examine how youth participation is shaped under the logics of territorial transformation, and how it is encountered and negotiated through the situated experiences of young people. The empirical study consisted of three components, as illustrated in Figure 1. First, a document analysis of policy and spatial strategies published between 2019 and 2023 focused on structural frameworks and debates surrounding participation in structural transformation. This included the federal strategic agenda for structural change, notably the work of the Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment, along with key legislation and planning documents at the federal, state, and regional levels. These were

complemented by regional funding guidelines and evaluation reports on financial allocations in Brandenburg's Lusatia. Youth-specific documents encompassed relevant legislation, strategic plans, participation reports, and position papers, which together delineate the institutional and structural conditions shaping youth participation in the context of structural transformation. The analysis followed a qualitative, interpretive approach focused on identifying how participation and transformation were discursively framed and operationalised across scales. Second, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first half of 2024 with stakeholders from politics, administration, and representatives of organised interest at various levels of governance to explore how participation is understood, operationalised, and linked to broader planning and development strategies such as the Structural Development Act for Coal Regions (Strukturstärkungsgesetz StStG, 2020). While guided by core themes derived from the document analysis, such as institutional understandings of participation, procedural design, and perceived challenges, questions were tailored to each interview partner to reflect their field of expertise, professional domain, and area of experience. Third, two gender-specific focus groups were held with 13 young people aged 17 to 21 in April 2024 in the town of Sedlitz. The decision for gender-specific groups was based on the expectation that lived experiences might be shaped by gendered social norms, and that separate settings would allow for more open and self-reflective discussion. All participants were enrolled in vocational training, and no compensation was provided. The discussions were structured around open prompts concerning everyday experiences of place, transformation, spatial change, and expectations for the future. By contrasting institutional frameworks with the situated perspectives of young people, the paper shows that participation is not experienced merely as a question of access, but as a deeper ontological dissonance rooted in how space and time are encountered. The following sections develop the analytical lens of relational space and the commons, examine the institutional frameworks that shape youth participation in Lusatia, and present focus group findings to illuminate the ontological disjunction between institutional framings of participation and the lived experiences of young people.

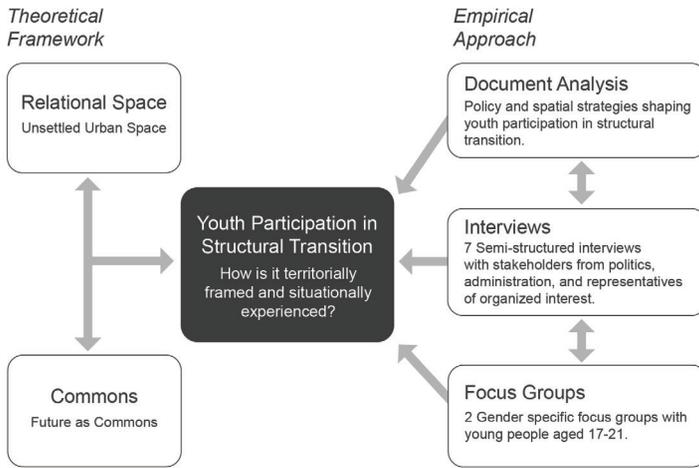


Fig. 1 Methodological components of the study.

Source: Own graphic.

Theoretical Framework: Grounding Participation in Relational Space and Commons

Urban space does not carry static connotations. Particularly in regions undergoing structural change, it is experienced as continuously reconfigured, made and unmade, and shifting across time and meanings. Relational conceptions of space emphasize that it is constituted by a plurality of material and imagined interrelations (Lefebvre, 2014 [1946]), produced through overlapping trajectories of political, social, and cultural life that resist closure or singular meaning (Massey, 2005). Space is produced through time as it unfolds in repetition and disruption, shaped by the uneven pacing of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014 [1946]). Shields (2013: 31) describes urban space as «a process and a horizon of meanings», a temporally charged field of contested possibilities. It carries the sediments of past ways of living and provides the terrain through which futures take shape. This understanding of space draws attention to how transformation is not experienced as a singular moment of change but as an ongoing and often ambiguous condition. The contingency of these futures can be grasped through the conceptual lens of unsettled space, understood as a relational

condition shaped by shifting rhythms, contested meanings, and spatial efforts to restore or negotiate a sense of grounding (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). Rupture and reorientation, rather than exceptions, appear as structural features of urban development. The rhythms of political, economic, social, and cultural reconfigurations shape how societies understand which futures are possible, desirable, or (already) foreclosed. Rather than being defined by territorial stability or developmental endpoints, space becomes a lived temporal horizon.

Urban space is the materialization of past imaginaries. At the same time, it shapes collective orientations toward the future. As Adam and Groves (2007) argue, the future is not an empty or neutral space awaiting institutional inscription. It is already embedded in present-day actions, assumptions, and power structures. Their analysis of institutional temporal regimes echoes Freeman's (2010) concept of chrononormativity, referring to the ways in which time is organised around socially sanctioned expectations of life progression. Linear, outcome-driven conceptions of time are privileged, while experiential rhythms such as uncertainty or exhaustion are marginalised. These frameworks not only favour scripted futures but also determine who is authorised to imagine and inhabit them. In contrast, temporal experience is shaped by rupture, ambiguity, and reorientation, especially for those whose social position renders their futures least secure. Structural transformation is thus not simply a territorial shift or temporary dislocation but an embedded and often precarious condition. This perspective suggests that participation should be understood not just as presence or involvement in scripted futures but as negotiation within the relational spatial and temporal fields.

The concept of the commons provides a complementary lens to relational space. In response to structural challenges and recurring capitalist crises, the commons has gained prominence in urban transformation debates (Stavrides, 2016; Dellenbaugh *et al.*, 2015). Although the idea of the common good is embedded in the legal and normative traditions of European welfare states, it often remains abstract and politically inert (Jessop, 2002; New Leipzig Charter, 2020). In contrast, emerging practices, particularly in activist settings and, to some extent, in urban policy, challenge market-driven and individualistic models of

society (Stavrvides, 2016). These practices engage directly with shared resources and spatial justice through concrete and often conflictual negotiations across arenas of contestation, such as public space, housing, and the communalization of technical and social infrastructure (Dellenbaugh *et al.*, 2015).

The commons has traditionally been associated with the collective management of natural resources, framed as bounded, resource-based systems based on shared ownership and value extraction (Ostrom, 1990). While this early approach emphasised the territorial dimension of the commons, recent work redefines commons as a social and spatial practice rooted in collective agency and contested meaning (De Angelis, 2007; Chatterton, 2016). Stavrides (2016), for example, conceptualizes urban commons as porous zones of encounter that enable forms of becoming and shared political action. In his view, commons is a practice of forging shared ground across difference. It takes shape in the interstices of dominant systems, where alternative ways of relating, organising, and inhabiting space are continually negotiated through situated and open-ended struggle. The topology of the commons is further complicated through the consideration of more-than-human entanglements. Metzger (2016) argues for an understanding of commons as assemblages of heterogeneous relations made up of humans and non-humans shaped by mutual enhancement rather than extraction. This perspective extends the analysis of commons beyond tangible materialities to also include intangible dimensions such as creative atmospheres, shared urban lifeworlds, and the textures of collective existence. In this sense, the commons is not only a terrain of negotiation and building collective agency (Leitheser *et al.*, 2022), but «complex organisms and webs of connections» (Chatterton, 2016: 407), that produce micropolitics that «can spread mimetically and virally through decentralised swarming, networking and infiltrating, countering and corroding the dominant regime as they connect» (Ivi, 411). The commons represents attempts to collectively inhabit uncertainty.

This paper builds on relational perspectives to examine youth participation through the lens of space and the commons. The analysis is particularly guided by the time horizon as the logic of the commons offers a compelling way to understand how futures are collectively negotiated. Futures are embedded in

place, shaped by memory and expectation, and enacted through lived struggle. They are differentially accessible. For some, the future is an open horizon; for others, it is precarious or foreclosed. While institutions treat futures as fixed endpoints, this perspective foregrounds their situated and uneven character. Temporal horizons are embedded in place, tied to memory and expectation, and enacted through lived struggle. What is accessible or imaginable is not equally distributed. For some, the future is an open horizon; for others, it is precarious or already foreclosed.

The relational perspective developed here helps identify the limits of territorial imaginaries within youth participation frameworks in Lusatia. Institutionally framed futures often revolve around normative goals of growth, innovation, or sustainability, yet they obscure the situated and relational dimensions through which futures are lived. Youth participation is structurally positioned as dependent on adults and is functionally framed through the prism of access and institutional offerings (Hieb *et al.*, 2015). Young people are not defined solely by age but by transitions between dependence and autonomy, opportunities and constraints, and present demands and future uncertainty. Their spatial positioning reflects unequal access to infrastructures, formal decision-making, and opportunities (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Hieb *et al.*, 2025). Conceptualising young people through relational space and commons emphasizes their role as situated actors engaged in uneven negotiations over the terms of possible futures. In contexts of structural transformation, they relate to the future not as a goal set by policy but as a field of uncertainty shaped by their needs, attachments, aspirations, and identities. This framework repositions participation as a relational and contested process shaped by concerns about belonging, fairness, and recognition. Participation becomes a practice of commoning futures. It is an effort to engage with the unsettled present through the collective negotiation of possible futures.

It is important to note that while this paper develops a conceptual distinction between participation 'as it is practiced' through institutionalised routines and participation 'as it could be' within a relational horizon of meaning, it nonetheless uses the term 'participation' throughout to refer to both. This dual use is

deliberate, as it foregrounds the central tension explored in the analysis. The two understandings of participation are not framed as a binary pair between a flawed model and its alternative. Rather, their coexistence within the same term highlights a relational dissonance that shapes how participation is framed, enacted, and experienced in practice.

Policy Context: Territorial Logic of Participation

When Germany's federal government decided in 2019 to phase out coal and transition to a low-carbon economy, the regions where lignite had long shaped both economic structures and regional identities were expected to be most affected. This applied in particular to eastern Germany's regions such as Lusatia, which had already borne the social and economic rupture of the 1990s, following the abrupt shift from a planned to a market economy (Günzel *et al.*, 2024). Lusatia (Lausitz) is a historically and culturally distinct region spanning parts of Germany's states (*Länder*) of Brandenburg and Saxony and extending across the border into Poland. It has long been shaped by extractive economies, especially lignite, and marked by successive transitions, from post-war industrialisation under socialism, through post-reunification industrial and demographic decline, to the most recent coal phase-out. Despite this sequence of decisive upheavals, institutional trajectories reveal a continuity that reaches back to the region's estate-based organization in the early modern period, where authority was structured through hierarchical, territorially anchored, and corporatist logics (Neitmann, 2014). Since the 1990s, the region has been staged as a space of opportunity, supported by large-scale investments in landscape restoration and presented as a test bed for realising the post-reunification vision of flourishing landscapes (Gürtler *et al.*, 2020). Yet this aspirational framing contrasts with the lived experience of many residents. The region's social space remains characterised by scepticism toward symbolic promises and fatigue from continuous transformations whose benefits are perceived as unevenly distributed (*Ibidem*). Participatory efforts are thus introduced into an atmosphere already shaped by prior ruptures and unmet expectations. As one interviewee noted, «people are tired of being told the future will be better». To address the anticipated socio-economic impacts of the coal

exit, in 2020, the German Bundestag enacted the Structural Development Act for Coal Regions (Strukturstärkungsgesetz Kohleregionen StStG). The law provides a financial and institutional framework for supporting affected regions, including Lusatia. It allocates up to 40 billion euros nationwide, with approximately 10.3 billion earmarked for the Brandenburg part of Lusatia (Landtag Brandenburg, 2024).

Lusatia is a cross-border region, yet under the StStG its functional delineation follows administrative boundaries, with the Brandenburg and Saxony sections managed separately (Staatskanzlei Brandenburg, 2020). Although the discourse revolves around just transition and spatial cohesion, its implementation reveals a focus on territorially bounded planning logics, including infrastructure, human resource development, innovation clustering, and participatory governance (Gailing and Weith, 2023: 321-324). Despite the rhetoric of this state-led transformation, its core goals remain closely aligned with a performance-oriented logic of growth, efficiency, and territorial capital.

The implementation of this policy is structured through multi-level governance, with funding administered via two primary streams: one under states (*Länder*) authority, the other directly managed by federal agencies. In both streams, the Brandenburg state government plays a central role in programming and decision-making. The territorial logic of this framework is reinforced by the establishment of the regional structural development agency Wirtschaftsregion Lausitz GmbH (WRL), which is jointly owned by the state of Brandenburg and the districts designated as Brandenburg's share of the *Lausitzer Braunkohlerevier* (Lusatian lignite mining district). WRL is mandated to advise on project development, facilitate funding allocation in coordination with state authorities, and implement participatory processes involving regional stakeholders. It positions itself as a connector between state, district, and municipal authorities, with the stated aim of strengthening the region's competitiveness (Zeissig *et al.*, 2023). This institutional configuration reflects Germany's federal architecture, grounded in subsidiarity and reciprocal coordination between governance levels. The result is a territorially bounded regime focused on project delivery and financial accountability. Funding prioritizes

economic development infrastructure, such as industrial and business parks, energy and mobility systems, and research and innovation hubs, in designated regional centres, turning transformation into a spatially selective investment strategy focused on regional competitiveness (Zeissig *et al.*, 2023: 396-398). This logic extends into participatory processes, which are framed by concerns for efficiency, quantifiability, and alignment with policy targets.

In accordance with planning norms, StStG implementation was accompanied by participatory formats. However, as evidenced by public documents available on WRL's website and confirmed in interviews, primarily with stakeholders from the political sphere, participatory formats largely involved federal and state political actors, administrative authorities, municipalities, and selected representatives of organised business and civil society interests. Broader public involvement, including young people or representatives of organised youth interests, remained mostly limited to information-sharing. Interviewees across governance levels pointed to time constraints, political pressure, and procedural rigidity as limiting factors. In relation to youth participation specifically, interviewees noted that state-level authorities tended to uphold the subsidiarity principle more rigorously than many local governments. State authorities were described as more willing to recognise youth organisations and associations as independent actors, and to provide them with material and institutional support. This openness, however, was not reflected in the implementation of the StStG, where participation often depended on individual initiative and the administrative capacity of municipal authorities.

Some of these deficits have been addressed through the STARK programme, established under the federal stream of StStG, which funds local projects aimed at economic diversification, social cohesion, and skills development. In 2024 the Brandenburg Participation Fund (*Teilhabe Fonds Brandenburg*) was introduced as a dedicated funding instrument within STARK. It provides funding through 2027 for non-investment projects targeting children and young people, civil society, and start-up development (WRL, 2024). The projects are expected to contribute to an ecologically, economically and socially sustainable transformation. Although the STARK programme

formally promotes public engagement and youth participation, it is operationalised primarily through project-based funding tied to outputs such as professional requalification, innovation initiatives, and local transformation capacities. In this context young people are cast as future workers or innovation assets, and even (their) cultural initiatives are framed in functionalist terms. Culture is viewed, almost in Richard Florida's (2002) manner, as a 'pull factor' for skilled labour migration. Young people and cultural initiatives are deployed as central arguments of a soft rebranding strategy that counters national media portrayals of the region as fearful of difference and resistant to change. Concerns about right-wing political sentiments are not addressed directly, but are instead folded into this strategy: youth initiatives and cultural projects signal openness and modernity to prospective newcomers (Staatskanzlei Brandenburg, 2024; 2023).

The territorial framing of participation enjoys broad support across the political mainstream. Interviewees noted that all major parliamentary parties, except the radical right, endorse the transformation's core goals and principles. While this consensus ensures continuity, it also reflects a technocratic model of territorial governance rooted in ideas of territorial cohesion, functional equity, and Germany's corporatist tradition (Gailing and Weith, 2023). Participation is institutionally affirmed, yet remains tied to territorial and instrumental framings. Some interviewees expressed concern about this, noting that access to participation is conditioned by grant logic, financial access, organisational form, and alignment with programme metrics. Others described the persistent difficulty of recruiting young participants into existing formats. Although innovation is a central motif in transformation discourse, interviewees also highlighted a disconnect between this narrative and the daily realities of under-resourced municipalities. Under these conditions, participation risks becoming a mechanism of economic rebranding rather than a response to infrastructural or social deficits. Another functionalist dimension emerges in how institutional actors frame their role in supporting youth participation. Youth is portrayed as a life phase oriented toward obtaining qualifications, negotiating autonomy, and searching for self-positioning (BMFSJ, 2017). For many young people,

however, this phase is marked by instability and uncertainty. This perceived fragility is to be stabilised through guidance from associations, clubs, peer groups, formal educational institutions, and adult allies. Participation, in this framing, functions as a stabilising intervention.

Critical perspectives on youth participation likewise remain structured by a territorial logic. Scholarly and institutional critiques tend to focus on barriers to access, procedural fairness, representational gaps, or policy impact (Löw-Beer and Luh, 2024). They caution that although young people are increasingly invited into formalised processes, their actual influence remains limited. This is often attributed to a lack of political commitment or advocacy for youth perspectives within decision-making bodies.

While Brandenburg has introduced a state-wide youth parliament network and various forms of youth representation at the municipal level, such as commissioners for youth or youth advisory councils, these structures remain uneven, particularly in Lusatia, where they are largely absent, or tend to attract politically engaged individuals already attuned to institutional discourse. As discussed in interviews, participation is often framed as a preparation for future citizenship. In this sense, youth participation is folded into functionalist futures, even as the lived spatial and temporal experience of young people remains contingent and unsettled. While most critiques target the tokenistic design of current participation models, a deeper ontological gap persists, namely the one between how futures are conceptualised within institutional frameworks and how they are actually experienced by young people. From the perspective of relational space, institutional framing imposes a temporal and spatial fix that presumes alignment between institutional goals and lived experience. It leaves little space for contradiction and contingency. The commons is similarly bracketed. Rather than emerging as a shared field of ongoing negotiation over meaning and use of space, participation remains tethered to the validation of predefined political goals.

Focus Groups: Lived Temporalities and Contingent Futures

This section draws on two gender-specific focus group discussions centred on experiences of place, views on regional

structural transformation, and imaginaries of the future. Across both groups, a shared dissonance emerged between institutional framings of participation and the lived ways young people relate to change. Rather than encountering transformation as a predefined policy field or thematic intervention, participants experienced it through uncertainty, moral registers, and contradictory attachments to collective futures, grounded in the fragmented rhythms and interruptions of everyday life.

Participants described urban space primarily in terms of its use value, emphasising accessibility, social density, and everyday usability. Rather than aesthetic or symbolic value, centrality was associated with social presence, described as spaces where peers gather and daily life unfolds. One participant noted that being asked to leave or not having any space where one is allowed to stay can be deeply frustrating, expressing a broader dissatisfaction with the lack of informal indoor spaces for gathering. Another participant remarked that there simply are not many places where one can actually spend time, highlighting the importance of access to communal space as a condition of belonging. These views resonate with the conceptual vocabulary of relational space and the commons, even if not articulated as such.

Although environmental and economic improvements, such as cleaner air, landscape restoration, and emerging jobs in renewable energy, were acknowledged, participants primarily framed structural transformation through concerns about financial stability, job security, social inequality, and the viability of future independence. These concerns were articulated not in the language of territorial development, but as a contingent horizon shaped by present material conditions and structural uncertainty. This reflects not so much a rejection of institutional framings as the articulation of a different spatial and temporal logic altogether. It evokes relational space as assembled through proximity, lived experience, and moral evaluation. In the same vein, the future is not a horizon to be reached, but a condition to be endured, negotiated, and forged across categories of difference. In this sense, participation is not absent. It is simply not where institutions seek to locate or contain it. Institutional formats remain structured around abstract policy goals and normative visions, while young people engage with futures

through fragmented routines and relational entanglements. The future appears as a fragile horizon of shared meaning, to be assembled rather than assumed.

Participants' statements reflected a strong attachment to traditional social models of productivity, merit, and autonomy. Inherited traditional views of employment, responsibility, and family operated as central moral registers through which the future was evaluated. The view that work is primarily about providing for one's family was frequently expressed, and financial expectations were rooted in traditional wage-based models. One participant stated that if they were to have a family in the future, they would want to be able to afford everything, linking transformation to questions of long-term affordability and life planning. Another remarked that what had changed most were the prices, indicating that economic pressure was the most tangible effect of the transition. Several voiced resentments toward those perceived to receive support without contributing labour, with one participant noting that some people get just as much money as those who go to work. These sentiments echoed broader discourses of deservedness and social cohesion that structure regional political debates. *Bürgergeld* – the German basic welfare benefit – was frequently cited as an example of perceived unfairness, reinforcing a resentment discourse common in public debates in the region. In this context, value was equated with work, and social cohesion was seen as undermined by perceived undeservedness.

These concerns were particularly salient in the male group, where participants consistently identified traditional success markers such as stable employment and family formation as aspirational, yet increasingly out of reach. Wage levels in vocational tracks were described as insufficient. One participant noted that wages in the gastronomy sector are unfair and that deductions from pay are substantial. Their anxieties reflected a structural tension between ideals of economic self-reliance and the perceptions of a labour market as increasingly precarious. These concerns were closely tied to their own experiences of material vulnerability, especially in relation to housing costs (high rents), which were seen as a key barrier to moving out of parental homes and establishing independent households. This pattern of alignment with traditional notions of work,

merit, and familial responsibility, particularly among the male participants, corresponds with Bourdieu's (2012) interpretation of masculine socialisation as shaped by historically sedimented power hierarchies and structured by inherited assumptions about what counts as legitimate participation in society. These dynamics influence how young men orient themselves toward expectations of autonomy and social recognition. In this view, structural transformation was not associated with opportunity but with deepening insecurity.

While expressing sentiments shaped by competitive resentment, both groups simultaneously placed strong value on collective dimensions of space. There was consistent emphasis on togetherness, safety, and belonging, particularly in discussions about the future. These orientations, however, remained politically ambivalent. While participants emphasised the importance of shared spaces and open infrastructures, they also articulated exclusionary views grounded in perceived competition over scarce resources. This tension signals contested belonging. It gestures toward forms of commoning grounded less in idealised solidarity than in situated moral economies. What is shared is not only space, but uncertainty, suggesting that the lived social conditions remain fragmented and contested.

In terms of political engagement, participants did not reject institutional participation outright but voiced disillusionment with past experiences. One participant reflected that they never knew what happened with their input, while another described being asked about certain topics only occasionally and characterised the experience as more symbolic than substantive. Their previous involvement in formal participatory formats was described as a tokenistic presence. However, across both groups, participants emphasised that they lacked the vocabulary and confidence to engage with institutional formats. Many described a gap between their lived experiences and the technocratic language that characterizes participatory processes. This was not merely a matter of access but about shared feeling that meaningful engagement required knowledge and vocabulary they lacked. One participant summarised this tension by stating that they did not really know what direction things were heading and felt generally uninformed. Rather than indicating disengagement,

their distance from participatory structures stemmed from a perceived exclusion from the regimes of knowledge that determine what counts as a legitimate contribution.

The focus group data affirm the conceptual claim regarding the ontological misalignment between institutional frameworks and lived temporalities. For these young people, the future appeared not as a fixed endpoint but as a field of moral and material negotiation. Transformation was encountered less through policy instruments or development strategies than through everyday routines, shifting landscapes, material insecurity, and the affective uncertainties of imagining one's place in the future. At the same time, participants demonstrated a growing awareness of structural injustice and the challenges of building collective forms of life across difference. This unsettled lived temporality was shaped both by the region's broader structural transformation and by youth itself as a life stage marked by indeterminacy and shifting positionalities. Participation, in this context, lacked resonance with the immediacy of challenges experienced through the multiple, uneven rhythms of everyday life. Institutional formats remained structured around abstract policy goals and normative visions, while young people engaged with futures as contingent, emotionally charged, and situated within unsettled present conditions.

Discussion: Relational Futures

Participation has become a normative commitment across scales of governance, particularly in regions undergoing structural change. Yet, as the case of post-coal Lusatia demonstrates, participation is often tied to territorially defined strategic foresight and linear conceptions of time. Institutional frameworks tend to script engagement around measurable outputs such as innovation, growth, and regional competitiveness, framing people and urban cultures as territorial assets to be mobilised. These framings ensure administrative coherence and facilitate the efficient allocation of investment. Participation invited into these normative framings, as Löw-Beer and Luh (2024) show through their examination of four youth participation formats, may demonstrate good design and generate high initial engagement. However, despite thoughtful efforts such as offering funding for youth-initiated projects, supporting independent

youth-led workshops, or enabling self-organisation in advocacy groups, these formats still reveal persistent implementation gaps. Participants frequently reported a lack of follow-up, weak institutional feedback, or limited responsiveness among political decision-makers. This perception is present even in cases where participatory processes are supported by prominent institutions and designed with considerable care. In practice, participation often stalls in the space between ambitious commitments and structured expectations that remain confined within narrow institutional boundaries. Even impeccable participatory design cannot overcome the limitations of processes where the space for negotiation and impact is already defined in advance. As the focus group data also suggest, participation that is framed around the goal of validating or influencing predefined policy objectives tends to be perceived as symbolic. This paper's central argument is that the limits of participation do not necessarily stem from a lack of institutional commitment alone. Rather, they reflect a deeper disjuncture between how participation is framed within policy logic and how it is experienced within the unsettled lives of young people. By overlooking the situated dimensions through which space and time are experienced, institutional framings risk obscuring the complexity of transformation as it unfolds across intersecting and unequal social positions. This can intensify discontent among those who feel excluded from officially imagined trajectories. Questions of inequality, privilege, or social boundaries are often flattened by homogenising assumptions about (young) people and their aspirations. This disconnect becomes visible in the empirical fieldwork, where young people articulate their positions through comparisons of opportunity and recognition. Expressions of competitive resentment point to broader societal shifts toward individualisation and atomisation of societies.

This paper has argued that youth participation is not merely a matter of institutional access or representational inclusion. It constitutes a site of ontological disjunction between how transformation is scripted within territorial governance and how it is encountered in everyday life. Institutional efforts to foster engagement are grounded in a spatial logic of bounded territories and a temporal logic of predefined futures, while young people navigate transformation through the uneven terrains of

material struggle, everyday uncertainties, and contradictory attachments to shared life. Their aspirations are shaped by the fragmented rhythms of place, the weight of inherited narratives, and the instability of their life stage. As a social category, young people are structurally positioned within transformation itself. Their lives are marked by instability not only due to external change, but also because they are still in the process of forming identities, negotiating autonomy, and facing uncertain futures. They internalize, interpret, and contest dominant models of productivity, merit, and independence through the lived textures of everyday life. It is through these embodied negotiations that they begin to develop an awareness of structural injustice and of the fragile, uneven project of assembling collective futures.

The analytical lens developed in this paper combines relational conceptions of space and the commons to examine the disjunction between institutional framings of participation and young people's situated experiences. By tracing how young people relate to the future through lived, situated practices, participation is repositioned as a process of co-producing shared temporal horizons. Futures, in this view, are not abstract endpoints to be delivered, but contingent terrains to be inhabited, contested, and reimaged. Participation becomes a practice of commoning the future, rooted in notions of space that are lived, rhythmic, and unsettled. It involves the negotiation of difference and the recognition of uncertainty as generative conditions for imagining various forms of collective life. From this perspective, participation is not simply a means to align the involved actors around predefined policy goals but a process that enables young people to build their own understanding of structural transformations and their sense of agency within them.

Unlocking the transformative potential of participation in regions like Lusatia means attending not only to access and impact but to the lived experiences of those whose futures remain unsettled. When futures are framed as relational and collectively inhabited, participation can be understood as a process shaped by the complex, layered, and often messy relations embedded in lived space. This perspective opens the possibility of moving beyond scripted forms of inclusion toward practices that are responsive to the multiplicity of spatial and temporal experiences. In shaping how those affected are included, planning either opens

or forecloses the horizon of possibility. For those to whom ready-made mechanisms for validating preconceived policy goals offer no meaningful orientation, situated practices that engage the uncertainties of relational space and support context-specific, diverse ways of making sense of common futures may resonate more deeply with their lived experience.

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Everyday Environmental Politics Along the Coast of Thessaloniki

Evangelia Athanassiou

Abstract

This paper explores urban waterfronts as sites where competing «ecological imaginaries» (Gandy, 2007) unfold and collide. Formal planning discourses, aligned with global mandates of urban competitiveness, sustainable development, and climate resilience, often conceptualise the coast as a purely natural asset, devoid of social meaning or everyday use value for local residents poised to realise its development potential and thereby contribute to urban resilience. In contrast, resident-led movements are grounded in different ecological imaginaries – ones that view the coast as a common good and as a hybrid socio-natural terrain rich with embedded meanings and material qualities. Adopting this understanding of the waterfront as a contested terrain – where dominant imaginaries of ‘ecological modernisation’ coexist and collide with diverse, lived ecological imaginaries of the everyday – the paper examines the case of Thessaloniki’s waterfront. The case study focuses on environmental politics as they manifest along the Eastern, less developed part of the city’s coastline.

Questo articolo guarda ai waterfront urbani come luoghi in cui si sviluppano e si scontrano «immaginari ecologici» in competizione tra loro (Gandy, 2007). I discorsi ufficiali della pianificazione, allineati ai mandati globali di competitività urbana, sviluppo sostenibile e resilienza climatica, spesso concettualizzano la costa come un bene puramente naturale, privo di significato sociale o di valore d’uso quotidiano per i residenti, pronti a realizzare il suo potenziale di sviluppo e quindi a contribuire alla resilienza urbana. Al contrario, i movimenti locali di abitanti affermano immaginari ecologici diversi, che vedono la costa come un bene comune e come un terreno ibrido socio-naturale ricco di significati e qualità materiali. Adottando questa concezione del lungomare come terreno conteso – dove gli immaginari dominanti di ‘modernizzazione ecologica’ coesistono e si scontrano con diversi immaginari ecologici vissuti nel quotidiano – il saggio esamina il caso del lungomare di Salonicco per il quale è interessante osservare le politiche ambientali poste in essere lungo la parte orientale e meno sviluppata della costa della città.

Keywords: urban waterfronts; environmental politics; urban nature; Thessaloniki.

Parole chiave: waterfront urbani; politiche ambientali; natura urbana; Salonicco.

Introduction

This paper examines urban waterfronts as contested terrains of urban environmental politics. Beyond the age-old conflict

between economic development and environmental protection, varying and often conflicting 'ecological imaginaries', are studied, stemming from different conceptualisations of nature. 'Ecological imaginary' a concept introduced by Matthew Gandy (2007), refers to the changing ways urban nature is perceived in urban planning and design. Different imaginaries are embedded in projects of formal planning, as well as in struggles staged against them. They are also lived through individual bodies in their everyday routines, memories, and sensorial experiences.

Adopting this understanding of the waterfront as a terrain where dominant imaginaries of 'ecological modernisation' coexist and collide with varied, lived 'ecological imaginaries' of the everyday, the paper examines the case of the waterfront of the city of Thessaloniki. It aims to identify how various actors involved in the production of the coast perceive it, in a context of urban restructuring and climate crisis. Questions guiding this research can be summarised as follows: What is the conceptualisation of nature underpinning the visions of top-down policies and local initiatives? How is the coast framed in formal plans and frameworks for resilience and climate adaptation? How is it perceived in local initiatives articulated against specific development plans? The paper examines these questions within the context of Thessaloniki, a coastal city in the European South.

Ubiquitous processes of urban restructuring involving shrinkage of anything public, widespread privatisation, and entrepreneurial management of urban space – as discussed in various contributions from a variety of contexts (Tarazona, 2017) – are in force in Thessaloniki and affect the way its coastal zone is framed and planned. However, there is no textbook neoliberal ideology (Castree, 2008), and each city presents its own local mix of policies, actors, and outcomes, produced in the dialectic encounter of global forces and ubiquitous development mandates and local specificities. In that sense, Thessaloniki's case contributes a South European perspective of the production of urban waterfronts.

In a period where urban development and environmental protection are inextricably connected, it is important to identify the new aberrations of the 'ecological imaginary'. Adopting an

urban political ecological perspective (Heynen *et al.*, 2006), this paper studies the coast as a 'socio-natural' entity, in constant change produced not just by global discourses of urban competitiveness and green orthodoxy, but also by local collective claims underpinned by lived experiences of urban nature. The study employs qualitative methods, drawing on document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Local policy and planning documents from urban and regional levels of governance, brochures and social media by local initiatives, as well as local press reports, are reviewed to trace visions and discourses about the waterfront and the underlying conceptions of nature and the coast. Two semi-structured interviews with members of local coastal groups in the Municipality of Kalamaria complement document analysis by revealing how residents frame their struggles along the coast. The paper opens with a short overview of prevailing discourses around urban waterfronts shaped by global mandates for urban competitiveness, environmental protection, and climate adaptation. It then situates developments along the waterfront of Thessaloniki within broader political and economic changes. These changes are related to austerity politics and economic restructuring performed in the country during the years of economic crisis. In the next sections, regional frameworks and urban plans drafted over approximately the last ten years are analysed for their visions of the coast, followed by a discussion of local initiatives formed around a specific stretch of the urban waterfront. Thessaloniki's waterfront is unveiled as a contested terrain framed as a dormant asset of untapped potential in formal discourses and as a natural common good fraught with embedded meanings and material qualities in informal conceptualisations.

Dominant 'ecological imaginaries' of urban waterfronts

Cities, striving to secure a place in the world, have turned to large-scale urban regeneration projects to reshape their image and promote it as an attractive place to visit, live, and, most importantly, invest (Brenner and Theodore, 2007). In this struggle, urban waterfronts have become a prominent arena of urban interventions, steadily transformed from varied landscapes of productive infrastructures – ports

and industries – interspersed with natural beaches, rocks, and wetlands to globalised landscapes of culture, leisure, and upmarket residences (Laidley, 2007; Wakefield, 2007). Tourism is increasingly becoming a major driver of coastal transformation – whether in pristine beach areas, small fishing villages, or booming metropolitan regions – often sparking opposition from local environmental groups and NGOs, typically framed as a conflict between environmental protection and development (Kousis, 2004).

Large-scale projects of urban waterfront regeneration, typically engaging both private and public actors in new schemes of entrepreneurial urban governance (Doucet, 2021), are ‘property-led’ (Tasan-Kok, 2010), and in many cases have been criticized for aiming primarily at facilitating real estate development, excluding people’s needs and public participation (Wakefield, 2007). Hence, urban waterfronts are often discussed as «sites where urban restructuring processes are doing battle» (Bunce and Desfor, 2007: 251) or, as Knierbein and Christodoulou (2025: 101) put it, as a «(new) terrain for the neoliberal project’s acts of depoliticization».

In the context of climate change and the prospect of increasing flood events and rising sea level, urban coastlines are also recognised as vulnerable coastal and marine ecosystems, which serve as critical zones for implementing climate adaptation and urban resilience strategies (United Nations, 2017; European Environment Agency, 2020; Major and Juhola, 2021; Ocean & Climate Platform, 2022). Their vulnerability arises from the interaction between physical geography and the socio-spatial dynamics of urbanisation. Although each coastal city faces a unique combination of hazards, they are collectively regarded as «hot spots of disaster and climate risks» (Wannowitz *et al.*, 2024: 610).

Urban waterfronts, having lost their productive industrial character, are often projected in planning terms either as dormant opportunities for cities’ overall image and their competitiveness in the world economy or as vulnerable zones of ecological importance that need to be protected. However, as global environmental awareness rises, urban development and environmental mandates are increasingly understood as inextricably linked in the context of sustainable

urban development, urban resilience, and strategies for cities' adaptation to climate change. Hence, the 'ecological imaginary', framed within the current orthodoxies of planning and environmentalism, is not seen as contradictory to development. Quite the contrary, it is typically employed to legitimate spatial policies facilitating privatization and land grabbing, reproducing inequalities and foreclosing people's voices and everyday experiences.

The Greek coast in a changing context

Amidst the full spectrum of austerity politics that were performed in Greece during the economic crisis, spatial policies acquired a prominent position. The years of the crisis have been rich in the production of laws and regulations, reforming the legal framework of urban planning and land development. Notwithstanding the environmental rationale of many tools introduced, the dominant imperative of this period was to accelerate the implementation of land use plans, facilitate land development, and «improve the business environment» (European Commission, 2012: 154) in the country.

Special Urban Plans (SUPs) were first introduced in the midst of the crisis, in 2014, originally as Special Spatial Plans (SSP), in the context of the so-called 'urban planning reform', and their scope and framework of implementation were specified by successive pieces of legislation. SUPs «may modify previous Local Spatial Plans and any general and specific planning regulations applicable to the area of the project, in particular as regards permitted landuses and building codes and restrictions» (Article 8, Government Gazette, 2014: 4460). Thus, they legitimate exceptions to existing plans for projects of «supra-local scale or strategic significance» (*Ibidem*), including programmes of urban regeneration or environmental protection or plans dealing with the consequences of natural disasters and when there is the «need for rapid completion of first-level urban planning by the state» (Government Gazette, 2020: 11678). Indeed, the 2020 Law, which finalised the specifications of SUPs, was aimed, among other things, at «simplification, acceleration and efficiency improvement of the spatial planning system» (Ivi, 11665). In Thessaloniki, in particular, more than 10 such plans are currently being

discussed, are at different stages of maturity, or have already been approved, most of which are located in the central municipality and are initiated by private actors. One of them seeks to unify the full length of Thessaloniki's coastline into one comprehensive plan, while two more are located within the same metropolitan coastal zone. Through this selective 'acceleration' of planning processes, the possibility of integrated planning and regulation of urban space is undermined, or even substituted, and exceptions, public or private developments framed appropriately as strategic, environmental, or urgent, become the rule.

Another development that plays a significant role in the development of the coastal zone of Thessaloniki is the creation of the *Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund* (HRADF). It was founded in 2011, with a mission to «leverage the State's private property», i.e. to cede or develop public land, infrastructure, and other assets of the Greek state. The creation of HRADF, during the economic crisis that sparked in 2008, was a core component of the restructuring measures imposed by the *troika* of the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank, and the European Commission. The HRADF, which in 2016 became a subsidiary of the so-called *Growthfund*, comprises in its portfolio almost every asset of the Greek state. Framed within a modernizing narrative, it functions as the primary vehicle for an unprecedented process of privatization of public land and infrastructure (Hadjimichalis, 2014; 2015). At the same time, it appears to promote a strong environmental agenda, stating that «in pursuing its purpose [...] particular care shall be taken to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the European Green Deal and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations» (HRADF, online).

Several properties along the coast of the Thessaloniki metropolitan area are part of HRADF's portfolio. The HRADF is responsible for outlining a 'development concept' and managing the process of concession or transfer of public land to private companies. The following cases reflect the Fund's agenda for the coast, which focuses on a blend of tourism, recreation, innovation, and commerce, all framed within a narrative of modernization and environmental protection.

The public property where ThessINTEC, a '4th generation science and technology park', is to be developed was added to the HRADF's portfolio in 2013. It was subsequently transferred to a public entity called the Alexandria Innovation Zone, which then ceded it – at practically no cost and for 99 years – to a mixed-economy company combining public and private funds of both Greek and foreign origin. A Special Urban Plan (SUP) has already been approved for the purposes of this project, which lies within the study area of the aforementioned Strategic Spatial Plan (SSP), aiming to unify the waterfront. The development includes laboratories, office spaces, recreational facilities, and a hotel. ThessINTEC aspires to attract researchers and high-tech companies from both the region and around the world. A number of 'green characteristics' are highlighted in its promotional materials, including commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), incorporation of green and blue spaces, and the use of 'nearly zero-energy buildings'. However, the project is situated on a coastal marshland that serves as a habitat for rare bird species and has been identified as crucial for flood protection in the wider area (Wetlands of Greece, online).

The existing marina of Kalamaria – its infrastructure and terrestrial zone – was also ceded to HRADF in 2012. The submitted plan aims, apart from modernizing the marina and its services, to upgrade 'the aesthetics of its land area, with the aim of creating a modern and high-quality pole of tourism, recreation and cultural activities' (HRADF, 2023). In the 77 hectares of land belonging to the marina, the plan designates offices, commercial uses, restaurants, cafes, and a condo hotel. The plan was approved in 2023 but has been stopped by public reactions. The municipality of Kalamaria has appealed to the Constitutional Court against this project twice. The decision is pending.

Two large public properties are in the real estate portfolio of HRADF for 2024-2025. The 'development concept' for Agia Triada camping property is 'Tourism-Leisure, Tourist resort village' and is among the properties for 'immediate exploitation'. Another coastal property, bordering Thessaloniki's airport, is mentioned among «properties in Legal and Technical Maturation Process» and «could include business centers, retail and outlet parks,

science and technology parks, marinas, hotels and residential uses» (HRADF online).

Finally, the shrinkage of public expenditure has curtailed resources available to local authorities. This has severely affected their power to pursue urban policies and to implement spatial plans. Municipalities have outsourced a large share of their services to private companies. In combination with the legitimization of planning exceptions through SUPs and the privatization of land through HRADF, municipalities have been effectively deprived of their planning powers. This dire situation creates a fertile ground for privatisation processes to unfold and new actors - private companies, real estate developers, local and global philanthropic foundations - to claim their part in urban planning and governance.

Awakening the sleeping beauty: ecological imaginaries of Thessaloniki's coast in formal planning

Thessaloniki lies on the coast of Thermaikos Bay. Until the 1960s, it featured an undulating shoreline interspersed with parks and promenades of leisure, mansions, sandy beaches lined with pines, where people used to swim, industries with their smokestacks, and private access to the sea and the port. Today, stretching along the densely built part of the city, the urban waterfront comprises the port, a long landfilled since the '60s and recently refashioned promenade, disconnected stretches of natural, often degraded, beaches, and cliff formations. In the fragmented urban landscape of the city's outskirts, beyond the densely built fabric, the coastal zone consists of a great variety of landscapes. To the west, beyond the city's port, lie logistics sheds and oil storage tanks, rice farms and the wetlands at the delta of three rivers, protected by the Ramsar Convention. To the south, industrial remnants and diffused commercial uses, marshlands, tourist sandy beaches, cliffs, and the city's airport (Christodoulou and Gemenetzi, 2023).

During the last decade, the Thessaloniki waterfront has been the object of numerous planning frameworks, plans, and projects. These have different scales of spatial reference, different delineations of the coast, and a variety of initiating agents and stakeholders. However, common threads can be identified in the conceptualisation of the coast as an untapped development

asset, a sleeping beauty that awaits to be awakened.

The waterfront was first given a prominent role in the resilience strategy of the city's central Municipality. The strategy was the outcome of the Municipality's participation in the '100 Resilient Cities' initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation (Resilient Thessaloniki, 2017). As the Chief Resilience Officers states in her introductory note to the strategy, the basis of their approach was «robust participation and collaboration» (Ivi, 7). One of the four main goals of the strategy is to «re-discover the city's relationship with the sea: Integrate economic and urban development of Thermaikos Bay by investing in the cultural and natural capital of the Bay for improved city life, restoring the ecosystem, monitoring environmental resilience, and designing a new governance system for managing these activities» (Ivi: 15). Thermaikos Bay as whole is identified as the city's «most important natural resource... offering unique opportunities for sustainable urban development» (Ivi, 20). The waterfront is seen as «the most popular public space in the city and the number one tourist attraction». However, the Strategy recognizes that «the full potential of the waterfront and the Bay remains underutilized in economic, environmental and leisure terms». One of the suggested actions to address this problem is to create a 'Land use investment Framework' that will «unlock the real estate potential along the waterfront by delivering diverse development opportunities, on-shore and off-shore» (Ivi, 116). Following the publication of the strategy, a special study was released in 2018 under the same initiative of the Rockefeller Foundation. The study, titled *Framework for the Redevelopment of Thessaloniki's Waterfront*, was presented publicly at the city's Town Hall. It was funded by the World Bank and produced by Deloitte – one of the world's largest professional services networks – without any public consultation or citizen participation. Both Deloitte and the World Bank were mentioned, along with a host of other companies, NGOs, and universities, as partners at the "100 Resilient Cities" initiative, offering their advice and services to a hundred cities from all continents to become resilient. The *Framework* recommended urban regeneration projects and governance mechanisms for activating land development. As suggested in the Framework, «The Municipality should make use of financial instruments

beyond the scope of normal business transactions. ... [It] can also have access to funds and financing through land-based financing mechanisms (the so-called 'Land Value Capture')» (Deloitte *et al.*, 2018: 7).

As expected, the waterfront is a central focus in spatial planning frameworks regulating development and environmental protection in the Region of Central Macedonia, where Thessaloniki is located. This is especially evident in the *Regional Plan for adaptation to climate change of Central Macedonia* (Regional Authority of Central Macedonia, 2021). In the *Environmental Assessment*, the coastal zone is described as «environmentally critical because of its importance for biodiversity, quality of life and support for the economic life of the region» (Regional Authority of Central Macedonia, 2021: 117). The study identifies «strong pressures from the expansion of urban uses, holiday homes and the intensity of its transport infrastructure». It also assesses the coastal zone as «particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as it experiences extensive erosion and faces threats from desertification and flooding» (Ivi, 7).

The *Regional Plan* identifies some of its objectives as particularly relevant to the coastal zone. Namely, 'decoupling of tourism from the international context and focusing on high quality demand, linking new forms of tourism with the dominant model, mitigating seasonality and connecting [tourism] to culture and environmental resources, ensuring efficiency in the use of resources and preventing risks from climate change'. The coastal zone is therefore on the one hand assessed as 'particularly vulnerable' and on the other, identified as a fertile ground for development, and more specifically for tourism. In both cases, the coastal zone is understood in abstract terms as a natural terrain on which planetary environmental risks and economic forces unfold. Their effects need to be mitigated in the former case and effectively accommodated in the latter.

The *Special Spatial Plan for the Waterfront of Thessaloniki* (SSP-WfTh) is an ambitious plan, specifically created with a view to unify and regulate the coastal zone along the urban agglomeration of Thessaloniki. The *Plan* runs along forty km and seven municipalities and has a varying depth inland. It was commissioned by the Regional Authority of Central Macedonia in 2019, publicly presented and open to public consultation in 2021.

The Regional Authority proposed a Special Spatial Plan, i.e., the aforementioned planning tool that was introduced during the crisis and allows for development plans to bypass planning directions and restrictions that are in force in the area. SSP-WfTh aimed to overcome obstacles arising from the differing jurisdictions of governmental bodies, agencies, and property owners, creating a framework to activate land development and accelerate planning processes and implementation on the ground. Nevertheless, things have not proceeded as anticipated. Although final approval from the central government was expected by the end of 2022, the plan has still not been ratified. This delay reflects tensions between the visions of different municipalities regarding the coastline, as well as between other stakeholders involved, such as the HDADF. The SSP-WfTh was opened for digital public consultation twice, each time for a limited number of days, and only after the plan was fully developed and its Strategic Environmental Assessment Impact Report had been published.

The objective of the SSP-WfTh is «the promotion of the big picture, which will include at the same time the enhancement of mobility, the upgrading of the environment and culture and economic development, giving a new, regulated urban, public space to the residents and visitors of Thessaloniki's urban agglomeration» (Regional Authority of Central Macedonia, 2019: 3). Later in the plan's technical report, the plan's objective is further elaborated as follows: «the creation of a waterfront, which will become a pole of development and economic activity and the upgrading of the citizens' living standard, [...], with proposals for an evenly distributed development, which will highlight and enhance the uniqueness of their location and will confirm the metropolitan character of the waterfront» (Ivi, 4). The expected outcomes of the plan, are «the consolidation and enhancement of the metropolitan character of the urban waterfront, the promotion of its uniqueness, the possibility of eliminating the spatial discontinuity observed at present, the restoration of accessibility to places that are currently inaccessible to the public, the upgrading of the standard of living of citizens, the strengthening of the sought-after new brand name of Thessaloniki» (Ivi, 36). During the plan's presentation to the leaders of the local authorities of the metropolitan area,

the deputy regional governor referred to the coastal zone as 'a raw diamond' implying its untapped development potential (Ypodomes, online). The SSP-WfTh delineates the coastal zone in a fragmentary manner, in some cases expanding to incorporate properties that do not actually border the coastline, while in others reducing its width to the size of a cycle path. Apparently, this delineation responds to ownership status and development potential, rather than to functional, environmental, and social criteria.

Formal environmental politics perceive the coast as unique but rough and unrefined, prestigious but vulnerable to human-induced global risks. Enhancing its uniqueness to improve the city's competitiveness in the global economy is the main goal. This overarching goal is combined with the city's adaptation to climate change. This perception of the environment stems from and is related to dominant discourses of environmentalism, those of sustainable development, and its more recent mutations. These discourses dominating environmental politics since the early '90s, embrace 'ecological modernisation' (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000), which advocates that there is no conflict between economic development and environmental protection. Quite the contrary, the two can be reconciled and be mutually beneficial.

Moreover, this imaginary of the coastline sees its development as the prerequisite for its protection and its adaptation to the risks of climate change. Green-washed in this way, planned developments typically promote a specific array of land uses, i.e., tourism and leisure activities, business and technological parks, aiming to promote innovation. Different plans and frameworks promote a common planning agenda that foregrounds the coast as an untapped development asset for the city, a unique, unpolished and vulnerable strip of natural land that needs to be activated for the sake of the city's economic and environmental resilience.

«It is paradise! Leave it as it is!». Ecological imaginaries of the everyday along the coast of Kalamaria

A number of grassroots movements have emerged in parallel to or in response to the above developments along the coast, often with the support of municipalities. Public reactions have

been expressed against specific projects, through a variety of activities which range from legal actions, research, and lobbying to municipal authorities and other actors, to marches, protests, and activities *in situ*.

Focusing on the part of the waterfront that runs along the municipality of Kalamaria, a number of local groups have been mobilized against different developments on the coast, foregrounding its publicness and its value as a 'part of nature' in a highly urbanized environment. Most have been created as neighborhood initiatives, such as the *Movement of Active Citizens of Kalamaria*, the *Association of Residents of Nea Krini*, *Poseidon*, and others. The *Association of citizens of Kellarios Ormos 'Mikro Emvolo'* was created in 2022. It has a legal status and an administrative board and makes decisions through regular assemblies. The Association comprises around a hundred members – mostly women – who aim to protect a particular part of the waterfront of Kalamaria, namely Kellarios Bay, from development and to assert its status as a publicly accessible common space.

There are currently three contested coastal plots of land on this part of the coast. There is the Kodra ex-military camp, part of which was ceded to the Municipality in 2018, and part contains properties of individual proprietors and the army. Another property belongs to the National Bank of Greece, and the third belongs to private owners. All three have been designated as parks and outdoor sports facilities at the General Urban Plan of Kalamaria, in force since 2015. All three are also designated as 'spaces of refuge' in case of earthquake or other emergency by the municipal Office of Civil Protection. However, the municipality is unable to compensate the owners due to its reduced funding from the central state. Hence, the National Bank has appealed to the Constitutional Court and regained its development rights in 2022. On the other plot, construction has already begun, legitimised by a planning permission issued before the plot was designated as a park.

Notwithstanding its overarching character, the SSP-WfTh does not present a detailed proposal for this part of the coast. More specifically, for the ex-military camp, the plan only mentions that another SUP *is imminent*. As regards the other two properties along the coast, it bypasses both of them and designates only a

cycle path parallel to the street. The Association emphasises in its brochure that 'the lack of representation of residents through a formal body allowed for the degradation of an area that is among the most beautiful and least accessible to the wider public of the urban agglomeration'. They see themselves as *the voice* of the area. The group has researched and communicated legal and planning developments related to Kellarios Ormos and has lobbied local authorities and MPs to protect this specific part of the coastline and the unbuilt properties.

They have marched along Kellarios Bay to protest the development of the contested plots and have hung banners with their demands on the properties' fences (see Figures 1 and 2). A number of activities have been organized both on-site and at the local elementary school. They planted trees on the National Bank's plot (see Figure 3), hosted a Christmas celebration with a live jazz band from the municipal conservatory, organized a children's workshop and an exhibition titled "Our Park Through the Eyes of Kids", cleaned a nearby beach, screened films, and more.



Fig. 1 'Unbuilt waterfront. Green for all'. Banner on the fences of the contested property of the National Bank.

Source: Author's photo (2023).



Fig. 2 'The coastal zone of Kalamaria is sending out an SOS. Redevelopment of the coastal front with funding from the state budget. No concessions to business interests'. Banner on the fences of a contested property.
Source: Author's photo (2024).



Fig. 3 Tree planting during one of the Association's activities on the coast.
Source: Author's photo (2023).

The Association has also teamed up with seven other residents' associations of Kalamaria, creating the *Network of cultural associations for the protection of the waterfront of Kalamaria* to coordinate their actions. Its members are often members of other initiatives that do not centre their action on the coast or on other local issues of Kalamaria, but constitute city-wide concerns, like the protection of trees across the city and the fight against the 'regeneration' of the expo site at the city centre. Hence, although very localised the Association cannot be identified as NIMBY environmentalism. Moreover, residents of upmarket flats with unobstructed sea view, which would be affected by the developments on the waterfront, have very limited participation in the initiative (Interviewee #2), although specifically invited by the group.

The Municipality supported – and at times co-organized – events with the group, and it also strives to prevent development and to promote the public character of the camp and the two plots. In May 2024, the municipality along with Mamagea, a local NGO, launched another initiative, entitled *Kodra Park Community*, that was defined as 'a group of citizens, people of all ages, that care about Kodra, this unique space of urban green in the centre of Kalamaria' (from a poster advertising actions of the Community). The Community aimed at activating the ex-military camp and thus claiming it as a public green park, organizing cultural and educational events and workshops of participatory design. The approximately 260 participants communicated through a group chat hosted on Viber and live meetings held in municipal spaces and in the camp when the weather was good. However, this was a short-lived endeavour with occasional tensions between subgroups and individuals. Comments on social media criticized the Community as lacking 'autonomy' as it was a hybrid initiative, involving both grassroots movements and the municipality.

In terms of use, although not public, not designed, and not properly equipped, all three properties are used as public open spaces by residents of the area and the city at large. Bordering the one-hectare property of the National Bank is a narrow tree-lined sandy beach, called Plage Dauville (see Figure 4), with minimal and neglected facilities. The beach is only accessible through the contested plot. Illegal structures

obstruct its connection to the rest of the coastline. Plage Dauville and the property adjacent to it are used for walking, sitting, playing, watching the sunset, and swimming during the summer. Interviewee #2 told me that she swims there in the summer and stressed the fact that the water is very safe and clear. Since the sewage treatment plant of the city became fully functional, phenomena of eutrophication, she told me, have significantly subsided, and all sorts of species have returned to the Bay: «Octopuses, crabs, shell, dolphins know where they go ... The water is really clear, there is a stream coming from the Aegean that cleans the water...We have 200 meters of natural beach. It would be a pity to lose it. Thessaloniki, a city of a million residents, deserves an urban beach. People come every day from all over the city to swim here. There are people who swim all through the year». Remaining unbuilt parts of the waterfront are perceived both as public spaces and as a rare and precious opportunity for urbanites to be exposed to 'nature'. «It is people's *pafsilipo* (sandness relief). It is the city's breath». Natural features of the beach, as mentioned in the interviews, are the trees, the unpaved soil, the flora and fauna, but also the water, the sea breeze, and the sunset. Interviewee #2 recalled her own childhood memories of tree climbing and playing on the streets before the area was developed. What is perceived as natural is, in fact, a fragmented coastline dotted with illegal structures, landfilled parts, wooden and concrete piers, adjacent unbuilt properties partly green and partly covered in asphalt, fences and remnants of previous uses like the weathered remains of an abandoned mini-golf course on the property of the National Bank (see Figure 5). In other words, it is an 'urban nature' produced through the metabolic processes of urbanisation, in which it is very difficult to identify what is natural and what is social (Heynen *et al.*, 2007).



Fig. 4 Plage Dauville, a narrow strip of sand beach with unmaintained facilities. Source: Author's photo (2023).



Fig. 5 The property of the National Bank of Greece, with remnants of the 'mini-golf'. Source: Author's photo (2025).

An intertwined understanding of 'urban naturalness' and publicness, and the emphasis on the use value of the coast for the people, is evident in the group's visions for its future. «We want to save it for us and for our children». Referring to a secluded, and rather 'virgin' – in her words – part of the coast, interviewee 1 said: «There! It is paradise! Leave it as it is! There are only a few cats. You can't hear the cars, just the birds». Asked what could be improved in the future, the same interviewee referred to accessibility for everyone, people, and bikes, preserving the natural ground. Also, she stressed that «the coast needs to be designed having in mind the common good and not private benefit. We need to unify it and not divide it. Even if the SSP-WfTh talks about unification, everyone gives their own meaning to this term. The coast is about nature, about the power of nature, which can be beautiful and dangerous. We need to respect it».

The significance of this coastal area for the residents became more apparent during the pandemic. In a city with limited green spaces, the open, albeit private, spaces along that part of the coast were full of people on a daily basis. Individual bodies, in a condition of collective stress, occupied all parts of the coast, terraces of – then closed – restaurants (see Figure 6), fenced off parking lots (see Figure 7), and the abandoned military camp, walking, sitting, meeting with friends, playing, exercising, thus unveiling the public nature of the coast. Through these «shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people» (Bayat, 2010: 14), the coast was temporarily appropriated and reclaimed as public space.

The conceptualization of nature, as expressed above by the everyday practices and collective actions, differs from the abstract, planetary, socially and politically disconnected 'imaginary' of formal plans and frameworks. It is local, dense with sensorial experiences, memories, and the use value of the coast. These affective understandings of the coast, underpinned by lived everyday experiences of individual bodies articulated collectively, open up a space of transformative politics that challenge hegemonic narratives of formal planning (Videman and Knierbein, 2019). The coast is seen as both a natural entity and a common good. The two attributes, publicness and naturalness, are inextricably linked and inseparable. The

coast is not conceived as isolated from social and political processes, a natural asset, with its own rules and principles, that needs to be protected from human interventions and human-induced climatic risks. It is understood as urban nature constantly produced by social and political processes, as well as by people's everyday presence and collective praxis. It is this conceptualisation of the coast as lived, material and common that also unveils it as political.



Fig. 6 People at the terrace of the beach tavern, closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Source: Author's photo (2021).



Fig. 7 People at the fenced off parking lot of a restaurant, closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Source: Author's photo (2021).

Contesting the Coast: Competing ecological imaginaries in Thessaloniki's waterfront planning

Urban waterfronts have become focal points of urban restructuring and environmental planning. It is at the intersection of these processes that the 'post-political beach' (Knierbein and Christodoulou, 2025) emerges as a privileged site of economic development – crucial for reshaping the image of coastal cities and enhancing their position in the global hierarchy: unique, natural, yet increasingly vulnerable to human-induced climatic risks.

This new 'aberration of the ecological imaginary' (Gandy, 2007) reproduces the enduring dichotomy between nature and society, foreclosing the social and political dimensions of environmental planning, and instrumentalising global environmental concerns as a legitimizing rhetoric for various forms of green grabbing. Framed within the discourse of 'ecological modernisation', the prevailing ecological imaginary of climate adaptation and resilience not only reconciles

development with environmental protection but also generates value *by* protecting the environment, mitigating climate impacts, and adapting to climate risks. In Greece, austerity politics during the economic crisis created a fertile ground for such politics to unfold. Shrunk public expenditure, a new planning framework aiming at accelerating planning processes and promoting investment, and the management of public land by the HRADF created a favourable context for rapid processes of neoliberalisation of space. The widespread land grabbing that ensued is exemplified in coastal zones, where economic restructuring is justified by a development-oriented 'ecological imaginary' of global environmental commitment, at the expense of the coast's public character.

Formal plans, concerning different levels of planning, from a regional strategy to a localized framework for the waterfront of the central municipality, conceptualize the coast as an unrefined and vulnerable natural asset, devoid of social meaning or everyday use value for local residents – a natural asset awaiting to fulfil its development potential and, in doing so, contribute to the city's resilience. They unanimously embrace the pervasive planning agenda of neoliberal urbanism, which is dominated by tourism, recreation, commerce, and innovative technology and green-washed by 'green and blue spaces' and resilience.

In doing so, formal plans commit to global environmental mandates of climate adaptation and energy transition and the indisputable goal of economic competitiveness. At the same time, despite rhetorical commitments to participatory approaches, they remain largely insulated from the everyday lives, present needs, and future aspirations of local communities, pointing instead toward increasingly undemocratic forms of governance.

However, environmental politics along the coast are not determined by hegemonic environmental imperatives, but are constantly performed by assemblages of actors. Local resident-led initiatives, as seen in Kalamaria, challenge top-down development narratives by asserting alternative 'ecological imaginaries' rooted in everyday practices, sensory experiences, and collective claims to public space. Urban nature, in this imaginary, is a hybrid, both natural and social, constantly produced by environmental and social processes

and power dynamics. Thus, grassroots initiatives unveil the political nature of the urban coast and claim it as a common good. They also underscore the need for a more democratic and inclusive planning process and actively open up varied spaces of participation. The dividing line between formal and informal politics is blurring, in the case study, as the municipality opposes plans of a higher level of governance and supports local struggles. Tensions between competing future visions, underpinned by competing “ecological imaginaries”, illustrate the fluid and dynamic nature of urban waterfronts and reassert their political nature.

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

Francesca Sabatini

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.

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 'reprodisage').

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 “reproducible” (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.

SABATO 20 - [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]	LUNEDÌ 22 - [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]	MERCOLEDÌ 24 - [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]
VENERDÌ 26 - [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]	DOMENICA 28 - [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]	MARTEDÌ 30 - [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]

⚠️ TURNI PULIZIE! ⚠️

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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OSSERVATORIO/OBSERVATORY

Thinking the City: The Arena of Conflict

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Abstract

This paper examines how the city is conceptualised and defined as a place of conflict and how a critical urban theory can emerge from this very conception. To this end, I will first analyse Henri Lefebvre's central urban text *Le droit a la ville* (1968) and work out its idea of the city. I will discuss whether 'the city' is a suitable object of study at all and examine Lefebvre's position on this question. Thinking of the city as 'a thing' will play a central role. I will then focus on the definitions of the city Lefebvre formulates. Lefebvre offers various ways of conceptualising the city. One of these proposals is to define the city as a place of conflict. This proposal is to be understood in the tradition of Marx and Engels, for whom the relationship between city and conflict played a major role. I will briefly describe their assumptions putting it in dialogue with Lefebvre, as real expert on the idea of the city highlighted by Marx and Engels. In the other direction of time, the concept of the city as an arena of conflict has various possible connections. I discuss these possibilities and propose a post-foundational concept of conflict with which Lefebvre's concept of the city can be made fruitful. Eventually, I explore the question of whether – and if so, why – a concept of the city centred on conflict might be of interest to urban studies.

Questo articolo illustra come la città venga concettualizzata e definita in quanto luogo di conflitto e come da questa concezione possa emergere una teoria urbana critica. A tal fine, si analizzerà innanzitutto il fondamentale testo di Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (1968), lavorando sull'idea della città che vi si evince. Verrà discusso se la 'città' sia un oggetto di studio adeguato, esaminando la posizione di Lefebvre su questa questione. La concezione della città come entità giocherà in tal senso un ruolo importante. Mi concentrerò poi sulle definizioni di città formulate da Lefebvre. Quest'ultimo propone diversi modi di guardare alla città tra cui quello della città come luogo di conflitto. Questa proposta va intesa nella tradizione di Marx ed Engels, per i quali il rapporto tra città e conflitto ha avuto un ruolo fondamentale. Indagando questa tradizione interpretativa il testo tornerà poi a Lefebvre, voce autorevole rispetto all'idea di città proposta dai due autori. Per altri versi, il concetto di città come arena di conflitto apre a diverse possibili connessioni. Nel testo discuto di queste possibilità e propongo un concetto di conflitto post-fondazionale che può essere messo in dialogo con l'idea di città di Lefebvre. Infine, mi chiedo se - e perché - un concetto di città incentrato sul conflitto possa essere interessante per gli studi urbani.

Keywords: concept of the city; Henri Lefebvre; post-foundational theory.

Parole Chiave: concetto di città; Henri Lefebvre; teoria post-fondazionale.

Introduction

What kind of concept of the city do urban studies have? Is there even a need for such a concept? How and from what perspective can we narrate the case studies that are at the core of recent urban research? What could a theoretical framework look like in which such research is embedded? What is the relationship between the case studies and theoretical discussions? Is there such a thing as urban theory and if so, what exactly does it theorize? Asking such and similar questions is an ongoing task in a field of research and knowledge that bears the city (or the urban or urbanization) in its name¹.

The texts of Henri Lefebvre are a permanent guest in the relevant discussions. Particularly in the field of urban studies, which calls itself critical (or sees itself as such), Lefebvre is without doubt one of the most frequently invoked references. The fact that Lefebvre's books addressing the city and the production of space were written over 50 years ago does not detract from this interest. On the contrary: new waves of Lefebvre are constantly rolling through international debates and producing new approaches and references to the French thinker. Current examples include the comprehensive *Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, The City and Urban Society* (Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2020) or the fiercely contested discourse space that has been working on the Lefebvre-based concept of 'planetary urbanization' for several years (Brenner, 2018)². The most recent new translations of Lefebvre's texts should also be mentioned, for example into English (2016a; 2023), Italian (2014; 2022) or German (2016b). Finally, more recent monographs that deal with Lefebvre's texts, such as those by Stefan Kipfer (2022) or Francesco Biagi (2020), deserve special mention³.

1 Cf. Brenner, 2009; Roy, 2016; or the debate 'What is city? What is critique?' in *suburban* 10(1). <https://zeitschrift-suburban.de/sys/index.php/suburban/issue/view/48>.

2 This stream of thought understands planetary urbanization as a dominant condition of globalized society. However, in urban studies a highly controversial discussion is ongoing about the concept. Some critics accuse the planetary thesis to constitute a totalizing and generalizing exclusion of different things: non-urban and rural places, different claims in critical theory, other positions at all (Derickson, 2018; Jazeel, 2018).

3 In his extensive exposition of *Henri Lefebvre's Critical Theory of Space*, Biagi (2020: 228) argues for a «coherent, aware and precise return to the author's sources», i.e. for looking more closely into Lefebvre's texts themselves and

In my contribution, I would like to examine how – in critical urban theory – the city is conceived and defined as an arena to the conflict, or rather how a critical urban theory emerges in precisely this conception. The starting point of my discussion is to subject Lefebvre's central urban text *Le droit a la ville* (1968) to a close reading and to work out the conception of the city to be found there. First, I discuss whether 'the city' is a suitable object of study at all (i.e. not cities, but the idea of the city) and examine Lefebvre's position on this question, where, among other things, thinking the city *as a thing* will play a role, as we will see (II). I then focus on the definitions of the city that Lefebvre formulates in *Le droit a la ville* (III). In his text, Lefebvre offers various ways of conceptualizing the city. One of these proposals is to define the city as a place of conflict. This proposal is to be understood in the tradition of Marx and Engels, for whom the relationship between city and conflict played a major role. I will briefly outline this line of tradition (IV) and inevitably end up with Lefebvre again, as he is the actual expert on the idea of the city in Marx and Engels. Thinking in the other direction of time – i.e. in the *Jetztzeit*, as Walter Benjamin (1991) repeatedly referred to the present of a writing author – the concept of the city as an arena of conflict has various possible connections. I discuss these possibilities and propose a post-foundational concept of conflict with which Lefebvre's concept of the city can be made fruitful (V). Finally, I consider whether, and if so why, a concept of the city that focuses on conflict might be interesting for the field of urban studies.

So, I am trying to develop my argument along the lines of 'Lefebvre - Marx - once again Lefebvre - post-foundational thinking'. I find this configuration promising for my concern to unfold a definition of the city as an arena of conflict. My thesis here is that the centrality that Lefebvre (via Marx and Engels) attaches to the thinking of conflicts as constitute of the city is itself a post-foundational impregnated thought, on the one hand, and can be analytically sharpened through a post-foundational perspective, on the other⁴.

engaging with them more literally. I would like to attempt such a return with my contribution.

⁴ I discuss the relationship between Lefebvre and post-foundational theory further below

The city thing

Today, Lefebvre's «Right to the City» is considered the best-known urban text, and rightly so – at least as far as the title is concerned. As a slogan and motto for many urban movements, talk of the 'right to the city' has become established and today leads a rather turbulent life of its own (see Mayer, 2009; Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2020). The title of the book is on everyone's lips, but the content of the text is far less well known. However, Lefebvre provides an enormously complex analysis of the urban, urbanization and urbanism and does so far less unsystematically than is often reported.

Lefebvre's *Le droit à la ville* does not begin with Marx, but with Nietzsche. At the beginning of his text, Lefebvre places two quotations from the manuscript collection entitled *The Will to Power*⁵. From my perspective, the second Nietzsche word used by Lefebvre is of particular interest. In the English-language edition of *The Right to the City*, this reads as follows: 'I would claim as property and product of man all the beauty, nobility, which we have given to real or imaginary things'. The original quote reads in full (1988: 41): «*All die Schönheit und Erhabenheit, die wir den wirklichen und eingebildeten Dingen geliehen haben, will ich zurückfordern als Eigentum und Erzeugnis des Menschen: als seine schönste Apologie*»⁶. It is striking that in the many texts on Lefebvre's right-to-the-city-book, hardly any thought has been given to the content and meaning of the Nietzsche quote that precedes it and introduces the founding text of critical urban studies. What exactly does Lefebvre want to tell his readers with these two quotes? I do have two suggestions. Firstly, it is the motif of 'reclaiming' that is probably decisive for Lefebvre. Reclaiming something is a combative stance and here, too, the conflicts that are to be expected can already be surmised. The 'right to the city' is a gesture of reclaiming and Lefebvre's quote marks the level at which it is located. Secondly, perhaps what interests Lefebvre so much about the quote is that Nietzsche

⁵ Various compilations of Nietzsche's posthumous notes have been published under this title, some of which differ considerably. The reference is – at least in the context-free form used by Lefebvre – not unproblematic, also because the title «The Will to Power» was very popular in National Socialist circles.

⁶ In the classical English translation (2015) by Anthony Ludovici: «All the beauty and sublimity with which we have invested real and imagined things, I will show to be the property and product of man, and this should be his most beautiful apology».

is writing about *things*. Nietzsche's intervention is about the shifting back of a merely conferred (but existing) power of effect and interpretation. Things – things like the city – are human-made and we need to become aware of this again. In Nietzsche's words above, at least that is my interpretation, there is on the one hand an initial outlook on the way in which the right to the city is to be claimed (namely as a reclaim)⁷. On the other hand, the subject of things seems to me to give an initial indication of what idea of the city Lefebvre is aiming for in his writing.

What is Lefebvre's idea of the city? In *Le droit à la ville*, Lefebvre proposes various approaches. Initially, he discusses the idea of viewing the city as a text, as a «written book» (Lefebvre, 1996: 102). That is obvious: A book has an author (it is made by man); to write a book, you need a plan; a written book unfolds its effect in its entirety; a book is a thing that collects thoughts. However, Lefebvre urges caution: Those who view the city as a «semiological system» should not «forget the aspect of mediation» (*Ibidem*). In general, the book/the city can neither be separated from what it contains nor from that in which it is itself contained. The city is «a text in a context» (Ivi, 101)⁸, namely in a context permeated by ideologies that can only be opened through reflection. The whole is therefore not directly present in this book. The book produces «mental and social forms and structures» (Ivi, 102) that can only be recognised and understood through an extended analysis. At this point, Lefebvre combines his approach with a materialist perspective: The core of the extension he is calling for is to reintroduce matter/material in the concept of the city. Lefebvre thus supplements his discursive view (the city as text) with the element classically attributed to the city, namely the material: the buildings, the structures, the things. More generally, according to Lefebvre, the city is inconceivable without «practico-material reality»; the city does not exist «without things» (Ivi, 103). What I think is important

7 In *The right of the city* Lefebvre does not define 'right' as a legal right, but as a philosophical-political question (cf. Biagi, 2020: 256). In my opinion, Lefebvre's reference to Nietzsche's [re]claim at the beginning of his text is also to be understood as a point to what possibly holds both versions of rights (the juridical as well as the political-philosophical) together, namely a conflictual core of both versions: Both types of right must be fought for, won, reclaimed.

8 Just as Nietzsche's *The will to Power* is a text in a context, it could perhaps be added here somewhat sophistically.

here: Lefebvre only emphasises materiality (in the city) *after* he has taken the diversions via the discursive (the text, the book). This is relevant because this shift leads to a new starting position, from which the analytical re-reification is something completely different than when it is carried out directly (for example in the classical definition of the city as a collection of buildings). It is a conscious materialisation of the city that Lefebvre undertakes here, and it is also an abolition of the demarcation between the discursive/non-discursive⁹.

Lefebvre's remarks on the city turns not only to things, but to 'the thing' itself. Lefebvre takes pleasure in thinking of the city as a 'thing'. He creates something like a 'thingness' of the city and describes it as a «'thing' which is not a thing» (Ivi, 153). For him, the city is a specific thing that is to be distinguished from normal objects «such as a pencil or a sheet of paper» (Ivi, 102). During this distinction, Lefebvre ascribes to the thing 'city' its own «objectality» [*objectalité*], which he compares with the properties of a language that is in a state that has not yet been appropriated or modified (*Ibidem*). In his reification of the city, Lefebvre refers to Hegel, who described the Greek city as the «perfect thing» [*la Chose parfaite*] (Ivi, 91). Lefebvre wants to re-establish the unity between the thing 'city' and the idea 'city', which has broken apart today, and thus overcome the dualism between thing and idea (spirit). The endeavour of Lefebvre's urban theory is thus to a certain extent to give the city – via its conception as a 'thing' – an ontological, non-essentialist privileged status.

In addition to the constitution of the city-thing, Lefebvre proposes – as a further approach to the concept of the city – a difference-theoretical distinction, namely the distinction between «the city» and «the urban» (Ivi, 103). According to Lefebvre, the city on the one hand could be conceptualised as the immediate reality and as a practico-material and architectural fact, while the urban on the other hand could be conceived as a relational social reality that is perceived and (re)constructed exclusively by the thinking mind. But Lefebvre does not trust this conception. He warns – immediately after proposing it – that such a differentiation is

⁹ The reintroduction of materiality into the discourse is reminiscent of the post-Marxist theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), who – some twenty years later – developed a very similar movement of thought (see also Roskamm, 2022; 2021).

dangerous and insists that the relationships between the city and the urban must always be analysed with the utmost caution. What he fears is that, in separating the urban from the city, an ontological exaggeration is being applied to the urban that does not do justice to the complex urban problems. The urban, Lefebvre warns, is not a «philosophical entity» and has neither a soul nor a spirit of its own (*Ibidem*). Lefebvre thus remains rather reserved towards the specifically introduced *urban difference* between the city and the urban.

Nevertheless, the proposal is worth mentioning, not least because it is still virulent today in some urban discourses. This is probably also because we encounter the difference between the city (the thing) and the urban (the process) again in David Harvey's work. Harvey argues that: firstly, «processes are more fundamental than things»; secondly, «processes are always mediated by the things they produce, preserve and annul»; and thirdly, the «permanence produced by processes» functions as the «fixed and immobile basis of everyday material existence» (2000: 29). Harvey then derives the ontological primacy of the process from his first premise. For Harvey, the city is the inhibiting, static and hindering, while the urban as a process is the flowing, moving and shaping. What Harvey's critique – which has done much to avoid thinking about 'the city' in contemporary urban studies in favour of talking about 'the urban' (see Brenner and Schmid, 2014) – threatens to sideline (and this is presumably precisely the risk that Lefebvre warned against), however, is that the thinking of the thing points in yet another direction. Any simple 'object versus process'-thinking not register the dialectical interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between both: things trigger processes, and processes trigger things. The question of whether the city or the urban (or urbanisation) should be placed at the beginning of critical urban theory cannot be clearly answered with Lefebvre. His thoughts are more suitable for putting forward arguments against the question.

'At this point the city should be defined'

With these words Lefebvre proposes some definitions of the city – again with sympathetic hesitation. According to him, the city could possibly be defined as the «projection of society onto the ground» (1996: 109) perceived and realised in the mind.

This attempt reveals the internal resistance that Lefebvre had to fight against. His provisional definition of the city is – and this is probably also an expression of his intention to correct the reification of the city thing that he himself had undertaken – doubly secured against being material substance. On the one hand, it is a projection (i.e. at least an image, nothing to touch, nothing with its own materiality; but perhaps also a projection in the psychoanalytical sense, a defence mechanism with which inner conflicts are displaced through the depiction of one's own emotions and desires) and on the other (as an additional protection against becoming substance, so to speak) something that only arises in thought. Because of the abandonment of the material core of the city, this definition seems to get stuck halfway. As a second variant, Lefebvre therefore proposes to define the city as an «*ensemble of differences between cities*» (*Ibidem*). How fragile, too, such a structure is, is shown by the fact that he supplements the ensemble of differences with an addition (between cities) and thus – as he himself admits – places an unsatisfactory «*emphasis on particularities*», which threatens to lose sight of the totality of the phenomenon (*Ibidem*)¹⁰. Here, the attempt to materialise the radical relationality in the differences between the physically-spatially defined entities called 'cities' fails due to the unmediated shift from the ontological to the empirical level. Lefebvre himself also seems to sense this, at least he hastens to emphasise that both proposed definitions are not exhaustive and by no means exclude further attempts at definition.

Another definition of the city that can be found in *Le droit à la ville* is the one that is probably most present today when talking about Lefebvre's concept of the city. Here it is about the city as a place of possibilities and the possible (Lefebvre, 1996: 156). It is a hopeful possibility that Lefebvre assigns to the city. It is a positive, but also a paradoxical attribution of meaning. It is an occupation with holes, abysses and fissures, which Lefebvre identifies as the actual substance of the city. Through its voids, the city becomes the «*medium (milieu, means, mediation, intermediary) of the transformation*», the «*theatrical space that blends the illusory and the real*» (Ivi, 25). The voids do not exist by chance, Lefebvre (Ivi, 156) proclaims, but they are the

10 On the important question of totality, see for example Goonewardena, 2018.

logical expression of the fragmented, alienated social, they are the spatial expression of the incoherence that constantly breaks out, of the impossibility of closing society. But at the same time, and this is the point, they are also the place of the possible. The positive possible, the overcoming of alienation, the realisation of utopia – all this happens, according to Lefebvre’s proposal, in the urban interstices and residual areas¹¹.

Finally, Lefebvre addresses the classic theme of urban-rural conflict in his approach to a definition of the city. Historically, he argues, the violent clashes in the cities can be traced back to the confrontation of urban reality with industrial reality. According to Lefebvre, the urban-rural antagonism has by no means disappeared; on the contrary, it has even intensified in the most industrialised countries and has led to «latent conflicts», which repeatedly comes to light under urban conditions (Ivi, 72). All urban conflicts, according to the classic Marxist thesis here, ultimately stem from the opposition between the city and the countryside. Possibly, as Lefebvre argues, the city can thus be defined as a «place of confrontations» – as an area of «conflictual relations between desire and need, between satisfaction and dissatisfactions» (Ivi, 109). According to Lefebvre, it is in the city that the battles for power are fought, where different interests clash, not least class interests. For Lefebvre, it is the city itself that becomes the actor. The city is the place and arena of the class struggle and the associated urban-rural conflicts, but it is a place that itself makes a difference. The city is in a kind of dialectical interrelationship with the conflicts that take place within it. Partly the city is the result of these conflicts, partly it produces them.

Class struggle and the city

The approach to the city via the conflicts that take place in it is a legacy of Marxist thought that Lefebvre utilises for his definition of the city. This line of tradition is best illustrated by examining

¹¹ However, Lefebvre hesitates to assign an ontological status to his voids, too. Ultimately, they seem to be only spatial containers that contain the elements of the possible, but not the power to assemble them. Only the «social forces» would ultimately be capable of realising urban society (1996: 157). Lefebvre is also attested elsewhere that he is «extremely cautious» when there is a danger that the things he investigates could be hypostatized (cf. Revol and Shields, 2023: xii).

the original texts. I would therefore also like to take a brief look here and ask what the connection between the city and conflict looks like in the texts of Marx and Engels.

In his early writing on *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Friedrich Engels passionately and vividly describes the social conditions in English working-class towns. He depicts the economic and everyday hardships of the proletariat and analyses the reality of the workers' lives using statistics, tables and even urban sketches. Engels is outraged by the social situation he experiences in the cities. He is primarily concerned with the starting point of the social struggles of his time and sees the city as the place where social movements are formed. Engels explains the revolutionary potential of the urban industrial reserve army and analyses the consequences of the permanent violence that manifests itself structurally in the English working-class cities like Liverpool and Manchester. In his analysis, he mixes classical urbanist thinking, which is orientated towards urban relations and conditions, with a theory of revolution that identifies such relations as forms of structural violence. On the one hand, Engels clearly borrows from the contemporary urbanist narrative, in which the city is conceptualised biologically as a body that can be healthy or sick. On the other hand, the idea of class struggle and the hope for the proletariat expand Engels' image of the city and save it from a deterministic and reductionist closure. For Engels, too, the city is seriously ill and must be healed. However, the cure that he wants to give to the cities is not an urban planning cure, but a cure that takes place through confrontation, revolt and uprising. For Engels, the city is a place of revolution, and thus also a place of conflict, a place of urban turmoil and deviant behaviour. For him, urban conflicts are always part of the solution and less part of the problem. However, such a solution is only possible through urbanity itself. Due to the proximity created by centralisation, the workers begin to feel as a class, they become aware that although they are weak individually, together they have power. This process takes place in and through the city:

«The great cities are the birthplaces of labour movements; in them the workers first began to reflect upon their own condition, and to struggle against it; in them the opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie first made itself manifest; (...) Without the great cities and their forcing

influence upon the popular intelligence, the working-class would be far less advanced than it is» (Engels, 2022: 127).

For Engels, the great towns are therefore pathological on the one hand and reveal the suffering and misery of the exploited workers. On the other hand, however, they are also the places where the struggles of the workers begin and condense into the (victorious) revolution of the proletariat. Here, too, the cities are the arenas, but also a necessary condition for the emergence and success of this revolution.

The city is also a theme in Karl Marx's texts. For Marx, the examination of historical materialism and urban conditions belong together, because the city is both a material prerequisite and a form of expression of capitalism. Marx uses the city primarily as a category and result of his historical analysis of the division of labour and, like Engels, sees it as the place of origin of the proletariat. He draws a complex picture of the power structure that emerged in the pre-capitalist and early capitalist city, which, guided by different interests, produced a variety of inclusions and exclusions. Marx's diagnosis is that the «rabble of these towns» was too powerless and that the journeymen and apprentices of the still primarily artisan-organised economy were too tied into their «filial relationship» (Engels and Marx, 2022: 40). Only through industrialisation and the accompanying progressive alienation of labour would the conditions have become so uncomfortable, the number of the «rabble» so much greater and the supposedly harmonious structure so disturbed that a revolutionary proletariat could form in the cities. In this story, too, the decisive historical step comes in the form of urban conflicts.

The city therefore certainly plays a role in the thinking of Marx and Engels. The city is an expression of capitalism, and it plays a role in the class struggle. But it is more an effect or phenomenon and neither Marx nor Engels is concerned with a *theory of the city* (but with a theory of political economy and a theory of revolution). A specific Marxist concept of the city is only included in rudimentary form, if at all. This in turn changes Henri Lefebvre. In his book *Marxist Thought and the City*¹², Lefebvre undertakes a journey through the texts of Marx and Engels

¹² The book was published in 1972, followed by a translation into German in 1975, English in 2016 and Italian in 2022.

and analyses the role that the city plays in these texts. In and with his explicit analysis, Lefebvre evaluates and discusses a Marxian concept of the city (see Biagi, 2022: I). Lefebvre develops his approach by first placing the city in the context of Marx's actual perspective, i.e. by considering it within the framework of the critique of political economy. Lefebvre writes that «the bourgeoisie invented political economy; it is its condition, its means of action, its ideological and scientific milieu» (2016a: 91) and therefore it (the bourgeoisie) should be attacked precisely in this area. However, such an approach requires «courage» and – «like any struggle in hostile territory» – also harbours specific dangers (*Ibidem*). Lefebvre thus critically alludes to the two (in his view) fundamental evils of Marxist dogmatism, which he also repeatedly emphasised in other texts: empiricism and economism. According to Lefebvre's actual thesis, the city could help to ensure that the critique of political economy does not degenerate into economism and that the view of the «conditions of existence that can be empirically determined» (Ivi, 27) does not degenerate into empiricism. Lefebvre's thesis is that the city is not only the empirical or real core of Marxist thought, but above all that the city – as a theme, as a problematic – can save Marxist thought from stagnation and keep it alive by importing its own complexity and heterogeneity. In his consideration of the city in Marxist thought, Lefebvre once again emphasises the connection between the city and conflict, or more precisely, between the city and class struggle. The «class struggle occurs in the city», formulates Lefebvre (Ivi, 145) and he adds that «emphasizing the relationship of conflict in his [Marx] consideration of the past was an essential component of his argument and an achievement of historical materialism» (Ivi, 6). Lefebvre develops his idea of the city with and in this passage through the urban aspects of Marx's thinking. In his urban theory, the city is conflictual in nature: it is the site of conflict, it is the result of conflict, it ultimately consists of these very conflicts themselves.

The city is the place of struggle and conflict – Lefebvre, Marx and Engels all agree on this. This approach thus describes something like the common basis for the field of critical urban research¹³.

13 Stuart Elden (2016: xiii) writes in his preface to the English translation of *Pensee marxiste et la ville* that Lefebvre emphasises the enduring relevance of Marx's thinking not least by showing that this thinking still helps us today

Lefebvre develops his thoughts on a concept of the city based on his study of the texts of Marx and Engels. His approach to describing the city as a place of conflict, which Lefebvre creates in his urban texts, derives from the role that Marxian thought ascribes to the city. Such a definition is not yet fully formulated in the texts of Marx and Engels, but it already exists in rudimentary form. Lefebvre works this out as the basis for a critical theory of the city. The conflicts, one could perhaps say, are the transmitters of Marxian thought that make Lefebvre's urban theory a Marxian theory. Or to put it another way: in the urban conflicts of a critical urban theory à la Lefebvre, the class struggle is abolished¹⁴ and haunts the cities.

The essence of conflict

If we accept the definition of the city as a place of conflict, it is helpful at this point to consider what a conceptual understanding of conflict might be. Conflicts are social phenomena that can be found wherever human societies exist. Georg Simmel (2009: 227) already ascribes «sociological significance» to conflicts and poses the question of whether «conflict comprises a form of association»¹⁵. In the sociological literature on conflict, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s (Cosser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1972), but also in many current texts (Kriesberg, 1998; Hartmann-Piraudeau, 2022; Rajagopal and Behl, 2022), conflicts are often categorised as 'constructive' and 'non-constructive'. In such a conception, the 'constructive conflicts' are then regarded as important and productive components for social development. Post-foundational theory takes a different approach. Post-foundational thinking is a field of theory that is based on the premise that absolute reasons are not possible in social and historical contexts (Landau *et al.*, 2021). The explicit elaboration of post-foundational theory only emerged in the early 2000s with the significant contribution of the Vienna-based political theorist Oliver Marchart (2003; 2007). Marchart is concerned with the outlines of a political ontology, which he develops by going

«to understand contradictions and conflicts».

14 Abolished in the sense of the German word *aufgehoben*: the class struggles have dissolved into the urban struggles, but they are still contained within them; the latter are afflicted by the former.

15 In the original German text, Simmel writes «*Vergesellschaftungsform*», which could perhaps be better translated as «process of socialisation».

through a large pool of political and social theory: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, to name but a few. Marchart interprets the thinkers as – at least in part – post-foundational thinkers, even if these thinkers themselves never described their thinking in this way (if only because the term was not yet available in their day)¹⁶.

In post-foundational theory, conflicts are also seen as central to social and historical development, but from a different perspective. The significance of conflicts, this is the point, arises from the assumption that social and historical processes are necessarily contingent. If everything could be different – that is what contingency means – then there are alternatives to everything and everyone. The validity of these alternatives must be constantly renegotiated. There is nothing non-negotiated. Conflicts thus show the ultimate contingent nature and the limits of all idea off objectivity (Laclau, 1990: 17): There are always multiple, opposing and irreconcilable positions; there is never an objective and self-contained whole. That is why there are conflicts, always and everywhere¹⁷. Marchart (2018) calls this constellation ‘antagonism’, and his thesis is that a fundamental antagonism can be found at the bottom (or the abyss) of all social relations. Marx’s class antagonism is generalised in such a view and conflicts are ultimately nothing other than the expressions of a general constitutive antagonism. Conflicts are thus an instance that, on the one hand, are reminiscent of the contradictions and antagonisms of late capitalist modernity. On the other hand, conflicts carry a certain negativity that makes it difficult to functionalise them for the positive shaping of society (social engineering, urban planning).

While in some areas of the social sciences – including urban

16 Such a procedure can also be applied to Lefebvre: Lefebvre’s thinking is clearly interspersed with post-foundational pieces. The similarities to recent post-foundational political thoughts are not only in the shared insistence on the impossibilities of last reasons, but also in the claim to constantly deal with, and challenge categories such as totality or necessity ([1958] 1971; [1961] 2002). Far from stating that everything is random and arbitrary, Lefebvre’s aim is to re-enact categories of totality in order to fight the permanent struggle to explain why the last reason and the final totality are not possible and what follows from this lack of finality (on this thesis in detail: Roskamm, 2017; 2021).

17 Marx and Engels are important inspirations for the formulation of a post-foundational theory, if only because the class struggle plays a decisive role there (cf. Marchart, 2013: 263-330).

studies (see Saporito, 2018) – there has been a tendency in recent years to place conflicts at the centre and present them as productive, in the context of post-foundational theories there is a decided criticism of attempts to transform conflicts into positive beacons of hope for social development. Conflicts, according to the thesis of such thinking, are constitutive for the emergence of society. In this interpretation, antagonistic conflicts are never productive, positive and functional: they drive society, but cannot be used in an application-oriented manner for a somehow organised positive plan for progress. Conflicts are not divided into good and evil or productive and unproductive. They have a different function: they are a foundational element of social processes. They cause constant change and an unstoppable struggle for hegemonic positions. Conflicts are not functional, not positive and not productive, they are simply there and necessary. What is seen as positive or negative, productive or unproductive is the result of contingent and conflictual disputes.

Conclusion

What does all this mean for us¹⁸? How can the definition of the city as a place of conflict be interpreted and actualised? Lefebvre, as I have reported in this text, conceptualises the city as such a place in a Marxian tradition. Understanding the city as a thing and thinking of it as a place of conflict means ascribing certain abilities to it. The city thing is capable of mobilising and assembling activities. People argue in the city, the city is a matter of dispute. This is why the city is, as Walter Benjamin (2003: 60) once wrote, «the arena of the struggle for existence and of the class struggle»¹⁹, and it is not by chance, but because it is what it is and because it does something. The city, as Engin Isin (2002: 284) puts it, is a «difference machine» that creates differences and assembles identities, it «relentlessly provokes, differentiates, positions, mobilizes, immobilizes, oppresses, liberates»; it is a place of conflict because these conflicts are produced and fuelled by this difference machine; it is the «battleground through which groups define their identity» by staking their claims and fighting their battles. The city as a

18 «Us» probably means here: urban studies or critical urban studies.

19 To be precise, Benjamin does not say this as his own observation, but in his interpretation of Berthold Brecht's poems. However, the fact that he agrees with such a definition is clear in this as well as in other texts by Benjamin.

concept, «as an object of thought and experience» (*Ibidem*), arises from these conflictual attributes and experiences.

To conclude this short contribution, I would like to return to the questions posed at the beginning: What does the concept of the city outlined here mean for urban studies? What kind of urban theory results from this thinking? How can such an understanding of the city enrich or guide empirical research into urban processes? Some suggestions for approaching such issues can be repeated: A possible continuation of the thinking of the city as an arena to the conflict is to ascribe an ontological-hauntological role (Derrida, 1994) to conflicts in a post-foundational urban theory (Roskamm, 2017; Heindl, 2020). Lefebvre's thinking can be interpreted in precisely this direction: He asks what the city *is* (this is the ontological part) and he links this question to his interest in what haunts the city (this is the hauntological part). Lefebvre thus teaches us, and this is also element of the post-foundational approach²⁰, that such operations must always be carried out with caution and care. In my opinion, it is not so much a question of how post-foundational thinking extends Lefebvre or vice versa: in fact, and this is what I want to show in my text, the two approaches to thinking conflict as constitutive complement each other and come quite close: Lefebvre's city/conflict approach is post-foundational in character, and explaining this can be helpful for a current interpretation of the definition of the city as an arena of conflict, since it is precisely this matrix of thought that helps to avoid positivist short-circuits and foregrounds factors such as vagueness, contingency and controversy. Social-theoretical justifications of the urban are not firm and stable foundations, but likewise precarious and controversial objects of dispute. They form a shaky stage from which a critical-reflexive thinking about the city can begin, for example about the question of the materiality of the city (its materiality, its matter); about what

20 Even if there has only been a marginal space for such a focus in my text, it goes without saying that Lefebvre's approaches can and must also be critically reflected upon (if only to maintain their topicality). In more recent approaches, for example, the rather «heteronormative point of view» in some of Lefebvre's observations is questioned (cf. Revol and Shields, 2023: xviii; cf. also Buckley and Strauss, 2016; Kinkaid, 2018). Stefan Kipfer's confrontation and expansion of Lefebvre's undogmatic Marxism with Frantz Fanon's work on alienation and colonial racism (2022) is also helpful for such an update.

it excludes and what is newly created through this exclusion; about its material and ghostly nature and its set pieces; about current forms of spatialisation and displacement. What these approaches have in common is that they describe the city as a condensation of conflicts, contrasts and antagonism. The city is the result of hegemonic endeavours. In an approach in which urban conflicts are seen as formative elements, urban social movements, which are traditionally of great importance for urban research, take centre stage. In their actions, the right-to-the-city activists draw attention not least to the fact that the axes of conflict have differentiated and multiplied (Viderman *et al.*, 2023). Diverse and small-scale urban clashes have emerged from large-scale systemic struggles from which the urban is composed, constructed and destroyed. The «social movements actualise antagonism» (Marchart, 2013: 410) and they prefer to do so in an urban context. For this reason, movement research is important for understanding the city.

The city is a condensed space. However, not as in liberal-pluralist conceptions of urban life as the epitome of density and diversity, but what is condensed in it are conflicts: the city is a «struggle concept» (Kipfer, 2022: 15). The city can preferably be grasped through its lines of conflict, through an approach that is able to recognise and explicate the constitutive antagonistic element. In such a perspective, urban appropriation efforts – in the form of organised urban movements, but also in the form of daily struggles for emancipation in the context of the everyday politics of commons – become the focus of an analysis of various forms of urban contestation. The right-to-the-city movements are in a position and predestined to repeatedly pose and negotiate urban questions in and with their practice. To obtain a coherent picture, however, it is also necessary – at least if one wants to follow Lefebvre – to rub and confront this practice with urban theory, and to do so incessantly.

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Shared Learning Spaces and Urban Transformation. Peace Education Dialogues as an Educational Commons

Luisa Fatigati, Gianmarco Pisa

Abstract

This article explores the potential of peace education as a transformative practice in urban space, through the analysis of the peace education Dialogues experience promoted by the CISV (Children's International Summer Villages) Local Unit Naples and other Italian cities. Drawing on experiential learning and the *Mosquito Method*, the project reframes conflict as a space for negotiation and collective re-signification. The educational practices engaged youth, local communities, and institutions in the co-creation of temporary commons, revealing how participatory learning can generate new spatial configurations. The study highlights the pedagogical role of urban space and calls for forms of governance that recognize education and conflict as constitutive dimensions of democratic cities.

L'articolo esplora il potenziale dell'educazione alla pace come pratica trasformativa nello spazio urbano, attraverso l'analisi dell'esperienza dei Dialoghi sull'educazione alla pace promossa dalla Unità Locale Napoli del CISV (Children's International Summer Villages) e da altre sezioni italiane. Basato sull'apprendimento esperienziale e sul *Mosquito Method*, il progetto riconfigura il conflitto come spazio di negoziazione e di ri-significazione collettiva. Le pratiche educative hanno coinvolto giovani, comunità locali e istituzioni nella co-creazione di commons temporanei, rivelando come l'apprendimento partecipativo possa generare nuove configurazioni spaziali. Il contributo mette in luce il ruolo pedagogico dello spazio urbano e richiama la necessità di forme di governance che riconoscano l'educazione e il conflitto come dimensioni costitutive delle città democratiche.

Keywords: peace education; commons; conflict transformation.

Parole chiave: educazione alla pace; commons; trasformazione del conflitto.

Introduction

The relationship between conflict, peace, and commons in urban space directly calls into question the forms of coexistence and social negotiation, pushing beyond the traditional dichotomy of conflict and pacification. Conflict cannot be reduced to its potentially destructive dimension, nor can peace be understood merely as the absence of tension: both must be viewed as open-ended and continuously evolving processes, shaped by the collective practices emerging within urban

contexts. From this perspective, the interaction between knowledge, lived experiences, and situated practices becomes essential to building peace as a daily experience of mediation, transformation, and renegotiation of shared space. On the basis of these considerations, this article examines the educational initiative Dialogues on Peace Education, promoted in 2024 by Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) Naples.¹

CISV International is a secular volunteer-based organization affiliated with UNESCO, operating in seventy countries worldwide. For over sixty years, it has worked in the field of peace education and active citizenship through programs aimed at intercultural dialogue and the constructive management of conflicts. In response to questions raised by the association's junior branch (young people aged sixteen and up), following the Israeli retaliation that ensued after the massacre carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023, CISV Naples designed the Dialogues on Peace Education by creating learning spaces distributed both inside and outside institutional settings: commons, public parks, research institutes, and association headquarters across the national territory.

The specific aim of this contribution is to explore the Dialogues as a concrete practice of educational commons, where dialogic interaction functions as a key tool for collective knowledge production, shared governance, and social inclusion. Drawing on theories of dialogic education (Freire, 1970; Bakhtin, 1981; Biesta, 2006), dialogue is here understood as a transformative relational practice enabling participation, mutual recognition, and the co-construction of meaning within plural learning communities.

The article investigates how the sharing of knowledge and the development of collective strategies for conflict management can redefine the role of urban space in building peace. It seeks to delve into the dialectical relationship between conflict and commons, highlighting the generative potential of social negotiation in urban settings and reflecting on how educational and participatory practices can effectively function as devices for spatial and political transformation.

¹ The educational program was developed within the framework of the CNR-IRISS project *Land, Practices, and Policies for the Regeneration of Cities and Territories* (Scientific Responsible: Gabriella Esposito).

Dialogues as an educational commons

The term 'educational commons' refers to a pedagogical and social practice grounded in the collective co-production, shared governance, and open access to learning spaces and processes. Unlike general commons theory, which primarily focuses on the shared management of resources, educational commons specifically concern the formative and relational dimensions of education, understood as a situated, horizontal, and transformative practice. In this perspective, education is not merely a service, but a participatory process through which communities learn together, co-produce knowledge, and co-define the spaces and modes of learning.

Education has sometimes been defined as an 'impure public good', insofar as it shares certain features with usual public goods – such as non-excludability and non-rivalry – but is also subject to institutional constraints, and, above all, market dynamics and unequal access mechanisms (Hess and Ostrom, 2007). Building on this reflection, and in response to ongoing processes of privatization and fragmentation in education systems, a perspective has emerged that conceives education as a commons, in which learning communities actively participate in defining educational content, spaces, and practices through shared governance.

Over the past decades, the concept of education as a 'common good' has gained growing relevance in international discourse, notably since the UNESCO Delors Report (1996), and in later theoretical elaborations that conceive education not simply as a service, but as a collective process of democratic knowledge-building and social cohesion (Biesta, 2006). In this view, the common good is not a resource to be owned, but a social practice rooted in cooperation, participation, and mutual care.

The debate on commons has developed along different theoretical trajectories. Elinor Ostrom (1990) made a decisive contribution to understanding the shared governance of common-pool resources, focusing on locally-based institutions and self-organized rules. On the other side, Dardot and Laval (2014) proposed a more radical and political conception of *commoning*, seen as a collective praxis that produces subjectivities and institutions, challenging the public/private dichotomy. In this view, commons are not merely goods to be managed, but social processes that ground new forms of democratic coexistence and institutionality. According to the

latter two authors:

«The praxis that establishes the commons is the self-production of a collective subject through the continuous co-production of legal norms. [...] Every established institution tends – once constituted – to become autonomous from the act that created it. [...] Thus, the praxis of the commons is both the activity that founds a new normative system and the ongoing effort to renew that institution, in order to prevent it from becoming entrenched in what has already been established.» (Dardot and Laval, 2014: 445)

This is an instance of “generative democracy” (Dardot and Laval, 2014), in which, on the one hand, the *commons* define an innovative grammar of practices and a new normative instance, and, on the other, reconfigure the social space as a place where the entire range of social services are defined and practised in public form. As Roberto Morea has pointed out:

«Let us be clear that this not about ending public services and replacing them by commons. It is a matter of democratising public services so that they emanate from the social needs of the citizenry and of making sure they cannot be privatised. [...] In the struggle for economic democracy, [...] employees and users of the products have control of the company, thus replacing the shareholders. [...] All issues of productive relocations can contribute to a system harmonising economic and social needs» (Morea, 2018).

In the sphere of social relations, educational commons can be understood as a transformative practice acting on at least three dimensions. First, they enable a renegotiation of the relationship between communities and the environment, through relational and ecological approaches (Mattei, 2011; Bollier and Helfrich, 2012). Second, they foster equity in gender relations by promoting inclusive and horizontal educational models (hooks, 2022; Corsi, 2024). Third, they encourage the communitization and open circulation of the results of creative and cultural work, through shared knowledge production practices (Bauwens *et al.*, 2019; Federici, 2012). Culture, therefore, should be understood as a constitutive part of the social environment and a progressive force capable of expressing and contextualising words and orientations in order to “socialise” in any field, to act the transformation (Gramsci, 1975).

As confirmed in a different context by Michel Bauwens, Vasilis Kostakis and Alex Pazaitis:

«In commons-based peer production, cooperating actors create shared value through open systems of contribution, govern labour through participatory practices, and create shared resources that can, in turn, be utilised in new iterations. [...] At this stage, commons-based peer production is a prefigurative prototype of what could become an entirely new mode of production and a new form of society» (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis, 2019: 6).

The concept of educational commons can be understood as a shared learning space, not predetermined by rigid hierarchies, but open to the co-creation of knowledge and collective transformation. As suggested by theorists such as Hill (2010) and Biesta (2006), education as a common good entails a participatory process engaging a plurality of actors, both within and beyond formal schooling. In this perspective, the notion of the *educating community* becomes particularly relevant, as it highlights the transformative role played by all components of the urban fabric – public institutions, civil society organizations, families, and cultural actors – in co-producing inclusive and informal educational environments. Education, as a learning practice and social function, is not only a (fundamental) service provided by the State, but also a (interactive) horizontal, networked co-creation process involving schools and associations, local authorities and citizens.

Within this perspective, peace education, conceived as an educational practice ‘for’ peace and ‘with’ peace, conveys, in turn, a pedagogical function and a social value, as an educational practice (a form and instance of learning, training and sharing a set of knowledge, acquisitions and practices) and a peace carrier (a field of acquisition of theoretical and practical contents related to peace, a context of experimentation of methodologies and practices inherent to peace, in the widest plurality of its topics and meanings).

The strategic role of education in promoting peace, and, especially, in post-conflict peace-building, has been, for the first time, highlighted in the fundamental UN Secretary-General Report “An Agenda for Peace” (1992), according to which:

«In the aftermath of international war, post-conflict peace-building may take the form of concrete cooperative projects [...]. I have in mind, for example, [...] joint programmes through which barriers between nations are brought down by means of [...] mutually beneficial youth and educational projects. Reducing hostile perceptions through educational exchanges and curriculum reform may be essential to forestall a re-emergence of cultural and national tensions which could spark renewed hostilities» (Boutros-Ghali, 1992: 32).

The core of such perspective lies in the overcoming of the traditional dichotomous conception of the link between conflict and peace: having conceived conflict, particularly social conflict, as a *datum* of social relations and a generative factor of positioning and transformation, peace comes to be not simply the absence or latency of conflicts ('negative' peace), but a continuous generative process of creation and affirmation ('positive' peace) of equitable and inclusive relations, marked by the recognition and protection of human rights and the construction and expansion of social justice (Galtung, 2000). The educational setting and goals issued by the educational commons can offer a proper space to promote 'positive' peace (supporting equity and promoting harmony, also through empowerment measures, in the society) and overcome a mere 'negative' peace (helping contrasting trauma and positively solving conflicts, normally existing at societal level, Fig. 1).

$$\text{Peace} = \frac{+ \text{Positive Peace}}{- \text{Negative Peace}} = \frac{\text{Equity} \times \text{Harmony}}{\text{Trauma} \times \text{Conflict}}$$

Fig. 1 The "peace formula" according to J. Galtung (2020).
Source: Gianmarco Pisa.

Differently stated, conflict is here confirmed as a decisive issue in shaping public space through commoning practices. From this perspective, public space is not conceived just as a neutral entity, but as a space co-produced by communities, where social cooperation and shared responsibility redefine access, use, and governance. The commons, therefore, delineate a mode of producing and inhabiting public space that is relational, participatory, and conflictual – anchored in processes of

negotiation, care, and political subjectivation. Within such framework, 'conflict' and 'commons' share the same dialectical relevance: just as conflict represents a subjectivation instance and opens spaces for the advancement and consolidation of participation and democracy, so common goods preserve the places of civic well-being and allow social organisations to exercise their participation and self-organisation.

In such a vision, at the same time holistic and constructivist, the educational process comes to intercept both the space of the generation and sharing of knowledge, acquisitions and practices, and the space of the manifestation and realisation of social and relational dynamics, the fabric of relationships that nourishes and enlivens the general social dynamics.

Taking up Dardot and Laval (2014), it is a mass movement, a succession and connection of multiple and continuous mobilisations and clashes, transcended into creative political forms, which make democracy a constitutive principle and reject any attempt to redefine and re-establish hierarchies:

«The politics of the commons is thus a new key to open up the road to emancipation [...]. It leads to the introduction everywhere, in the most profound and systematic way, of the institutional form of self-government, which we will take care to distinguish from what, in the 20th century history, has been called "self-management", which, if we want to be faithful to what the term means, is limited to the dimension of organisation and only concerns the organisation of things» (Dardot, Laval, 2014: 459).

Educational commons as transformative spaces of co-learning, social justice, democratic participation

Drawing on Gert Biesta's understanding of education as a process of subjectification, educational commons are not simply spaces of shared access, but co-constructed environments in which participants are invited to appear as subjects, through acts of dialogue, dissent, and relational engagement. It is from this perspective that the experience of the Dialogues can be interpreted as an educational commons, not merely because of its horizontal and participatory nature, but because it enabled subjectivation and co-authorship in public space.

The Dialogues process is configured as an *educational common* experience, where knowledge and peace-building practices are

developed in an open and collaborative way, creating a shared and transformative learning space. Conflict is not treated as an event to be avoided or repressed, as a 'negative issue' in itself, but as an inescapable component of social coexistence and a generative learning opportunity. Building on the lesson of Johan Galtung (2000), the factors of the conflict dynamics are highlighted, not only in relation to its visible, direct manifestations, e.g. direct (physical) violence, but also in its non-visible, latent motivations, e.g. the structural (basic contradictions at economic and/or institutional level) and cultural (topics and issues pertaining to attitudes, perceptions, narratives) factors of violence (Fig. 2).

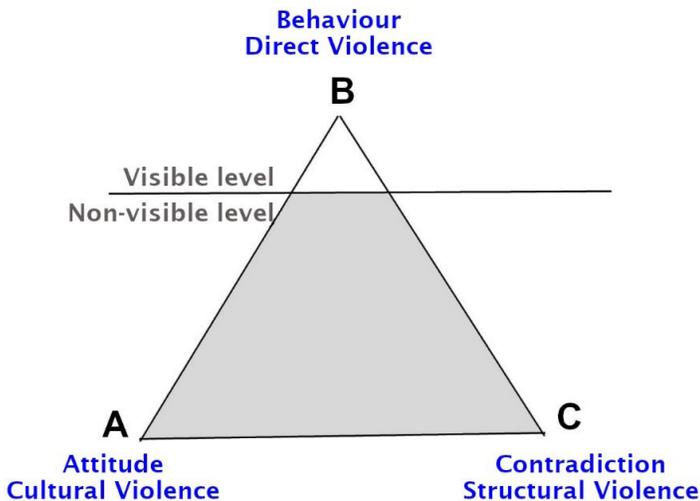


Fig. 2 The triangle of violence according to J. Galtung (2020).

Source: : Gianmarco Pisa.

Recalling the methodological guidelines proposed by L'Abate and Porta, the essential elements (among them, the operators' training and peace education) for the prevention of violent conflict has clearly been identified (L'Abate and Porta, 2008). Following Danilo Dolci's perspective, which sees conflict as a tool for development and transformation, the process has implemented practices to understand its dynamics and transform them into opportunities for negotiation and co-construction (Dolci, 2020). In a circular process of such nature,

the reciprocal maieutic process, through the socio-educational practices of co-learning and action-research (or 'education-intervention'), opens spaces for the subject's empowerment and personal and social strengthening and promotes well-being and inclusion, thus activating the 'promise' of the person's integral development, in his/her personal, creative, intellectual, moral and, ultimately, social potential (Fig. 3).

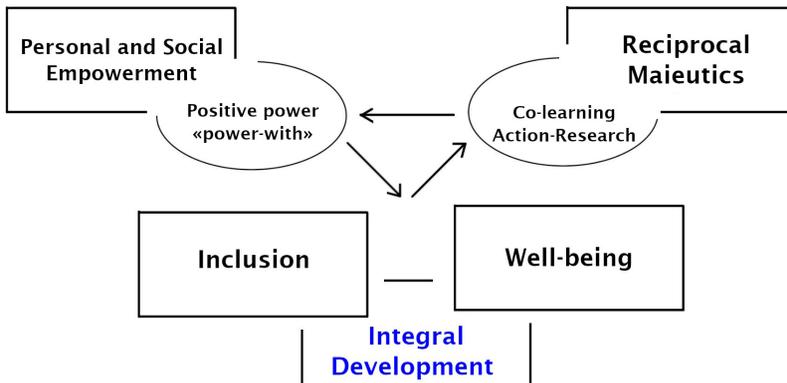


Fig. 3 The RMA (Reciprocal Maieutic Approach) scheme according to Danilo Dolci (2020). Source: Gianmarco Pisa.

The interaction between the *educational commons* – as a social practice capable of offering additional opportunities beyond traditional educational models – and the *urban commons* – as a shared social space enabling experimentation with cultural and social practices – reveals an unexpected potential. This intersection also carries a strong political dimension, as it reclaims public space as a site for conflicts and negotiations, collective agency, participation, and democratic coexistence. This dynamics contributes, moreover, to defining the theoretical framework and the comprehensive structure within which, among others, the methodology developed and put into practice through the CISV Dialogues takes on consistency. It aims, first of all, to activate the 'common space of fruition' by inhabiting it and crossing it with educational practices of strong social value, insofar as they generate potentially transformative processes and build different views on places and the broader social and relational context.

It is, at the same time, a potential extension of the approach issued by the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) in relation to heritage places as a whole, animated by heritage communities (art. 2) and oriented to «reinforce social cohesion by fostering a sense of shared responsibility towards the places in which people live» (art. 8).

Secondly, it envisages the possibility of acting the participatory dynamics as a transformative practice, i.e. capable of triggering formative and self-formative processes, nourishing reflection and dialogue about the self-perception in relation to the surrounding space and the system of 'proximity relations', but also soliciting questions and proposals on the regeneration of public space: from the social rediscovery of previously abandoned or disused spaces up to the elaboration of ideas and proposals for urban transformation.

The experience of the city of Naples, as the urban context of such experimentation, offers a scenario of noticeable interest and innovation. Here, in fact, the social practice of the Naples Laboratory for a Commons Constitution has taken shape, aimed at stimulating the elaboration of proposals and projects 'from below' for the management and valorization of commons. The emergent topic of such experimentation is to stimulate the participation of citizens and channel it towards a process of social regeneration, also through forms of urban civic communities, capable of adopting regulations useful for the shared and open management and for the planning of quality and innovative activities.

So, coming back to the opening reflection:

«A creative peer process could lead to a model in which society becomes productive through the citizens' participation in the cooperative co-creation of value through the commons. In this pluralistic commons, multiple forms of value creation and distribution would coexist, but most likely around the universal attractor that is the commons. We do not advocate a kind of «totalitarianism» of the commons, but rather to make the commons a fundamental institution orienting all other social forms, including the state and the market, towards the attainment of the larger common good and autonomy» (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis, 2019: 8).

Mosquito Methods and Commons: Educating Through Conflict

The concept of educational commons goes beyond the mere application of commoning principles to the educational field. It entails the collective constitution of learning environments where educational agency is shared, negotiated, and continuously redefined. Drawing on Gert Biesta's theory of education as a process of subjectification – not simply qualification or socialization – educational commons are understood as spaces in which individuals are not reduced to roles (students, citizens, beneficiaries), but are invited to appear as subjects through acts of speech, dissent, and encounter (Biesta, 2006; 2010; 2021). In this sense, commoning becomes a pedagogical act: a way of practicing education that resists instrumental logics and embraces uncertainty, plurality, and relationality. Educational commons are thus political in nature, not because they promote a specific ideology, but because they constitute shared spaces where the question of «what we are doing here together» remains open, negotiated, and meaningful.

This theoretical framing finds a situated expression in the CISV Dialogues on Peace Education, which represent a significant empirical practice to explore the intersection between knowledge, conflict, and the transformation of public space.

The initiative took shape through an educational methodology aimed at creating a learning environment conducive to critical reflection on conflict and its transformative potential. The adopted practice was configured as a space of continuous negotiation between languages, disciplines, and forms of knowledge, moving beyond hierarchical models of learning towards a horizontal and dialogical dimension (Dolci, 2020). An educational process can only be effective if it goes beyond the vertical transmission of content and creates instead conditions for encounter and interaction: it must be 'resonant' (Rosa, 2020; 2023).

The educational practice was grounded in experiential learning, structured through participatory activities that allowed participants to explore conflict dynamics and develop peaceful resolution strategies. Nonviolence was proposed as an active and intentional method, also including forms of civil disobedience inspired by historically significant experiences, such as those of Gandhi, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King. Group dynamics, analyzed through Tuckman's model (forming, storming, norming,

performing, adjourning), highlight how group development follows identifiable phases and requires adequate facilitation (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). In this framework, the model was applied to foster awareness of collective processes, prevent discrimination and constructively manage inner tensions. The aim was to understand how awareness of group dynamics can help prevent discrimination and manage personal conflicts.

In particular, the Mosquito Methods – a methodology developed by CISV Sweden (CISV Sweden, 2009) – offered practical tools to approach conflict not as an obstacle, but as a space for collective transformation, where tensions and divergences become grounds for negotiation, citizenship, and cooperation.

The Mosquito methodology is structured around four iterative phases (do, reflect, generalize, and apply) and makes use of tools such as the «communication triangle» (ivi, 33) (actions, intentions, implicit assumptions). It identifies three primary conflict response modes: Hit (attack), Run (flee), and Stand (consciously engage), suggesting that conflicts become fruitful if people engage in the third mode. Through the repetition of the four phases, conflict can be recognized both as a structural component of human coexistence and as an opportunity to generate new forms of citizenship and cooperation.

What emerges is a critical and situated educational perspective, capable of promoting direct interventions in real urban contexts and enabling genuine processes of social transformation.



Fig. 4 CISV Educational Approach.

Source: CISV International, *Big Education Guide (Big Ed)*, Chapter 1, 2023.

From Places to Processes: The Journey of the CISV Dialogues

In each setting, urban space was not merely the physical backdrop for educational action, but functioned as a dynamic device through

which conflicts, negotiations, and transformative possibilities could emerge.

A pivotal episode occurred during the first meeting, hosted at the Ex Asilo Filangieri, a well-known laboratory of commons-based practices in Naples. During the Stand Up. Conflict & Resolution workshop – an activity engaging adolescents and adults in a participatory simulation of conflict dynamics – an unanticipated intrusion disrupted the event: a group of local youths entered the space unannounced, moving through it chaotically, with no apparent constructive intent and a clear desire to disturb the ongoing activity.

Some of the Asilo residents, who personally knew the newcomers, attempted to engage with them, explaining the purpose of the session and requesting respect for the shared space. Similarly, some of the adult CISV facilitators tried to involve them, describing the activity and inviting them to participate. The response was a firm refusal: the youths claimed they were «neither students nor teachers», rejecting any form of inclusion. They continued to move through the space in a disordered and indifferent manner, eventually shouting provocative remarks and throwing small objects, heightening the tension in the room. At that point, the atmosphere became untenable: the younger participants felt frightened, and it was no longer possible either to integrate the newcomers into the activity or to ask them to relocate to another part of the space. Even the option of remaining as silent observers was declined. As a result, the activity was suspended, and the CISV youth were escorted out of the venue to ensure their safety. Some adult facilitators, together with Asilo residents, chose to remain and safeguard the space, attempting to de-escalate the situation without relinquishing it entirely.

The incident had a strong emotional impact on the group. The adolescents involved in the workshop expressed surprise, discomfort, and frustration at not being able to complete the activity. Some voiced a desire to better understand the motivations of the other youths, while others reported a sense of helplessness in the face of such unpredictability. The moment was experienced by many as a rupture – a tear in the paper sky of the stage (Pirandello, 1988) to borrow an image evoked by one participant, referencing Pirandello – that challenged everyone to confront a real conflict within an educational space designed to simulate one.



Fig. 5 CISV Workshop at Ex Asilo Filangieri, Naples, 16 March 2024.
Source: CISV Naples.

This experience required deeper reflection, for which the Mosquito Method proved a valuable analytical tool. Its iterative structure – do, reflect, generalize, apply – enabled participants to process the event as a dynamic sequence, questioning both the emergent dynamics and the available responses. Particular attention was given to the three proposed reactions to conflict named in the previous paragraph: *Hit*, *Run*, and *Stand*. The decision to interrupt the activity – a posture of withdrawal – was collectively reframed not as the only possible response but as a situated choice. In a subsequent facilitated discussion, participants explored how it might have been possible to *Stand*, embracing the rupture as an integral part of the educational process while still upholding safety and mutual respect. This reflection unfolded during two follow-up meetings organized at CNR-IRISS, bringing together researchers, peace practitioners, and members of the involved communities.



Fig. 6 CISV Workshop at Villa Floridiana Park, Naples, 21 April 2024.
Source: CISV Naples.

The first session focused on a collective analysis of the event, guided by the 'communication triangle' framework (actions, intentions, implicit assumptions), investigating both the motivations of the intruding group and the reactions of facilitators and adults. The exercise proved crucial in uncovering the cultural and structural roots of the conflict, highlighting latent fractures between different communities and the importance of rooted mediation practices.

Subsequent workshops took place in two symbolic urban spaces – the Floridiana Park and Capodimonte Park – public areas rich in historical and social meaning. In these settings, the activities centred on recognizing conflict as a collective social dynamics, distinct from individual reactions, and on developing listening skills, negotiation strategies, and the capacity to coexist across differences.

The final workshop of the project's first phase – jointly promoted by CISV, CNR-IRISS, and CNR-DSU – served as a moment of synthesis and systematization. The interdisciplinary approach adopted allowed for the construction of a shared vocabulary along three thematic axes: peace education, spatial justice, and participatory governance of public space.

In this framework, *peace education* was defined as a process of cultivating positive relationships, critical reflection, and mutual recognition across differences. *Spatial justice* was understood as the right of individuals and communities to inhabit and transform space in equitable and inclusive ways. *Participatory governance* referred to the capacity of diverse actors – particularly marginalized groups – to actively shape decisions concerning the management and use of public space. This framework laid the foundations for a theoretical and operational agenda for future action. In this context, the idea of an itinerant workshop was born – a tool to consolidate the trans-local dimension of the process, connect different practices and contexts, and strengthen collective competencies in nonviolent conflict management.



Fig. 7 CISV Workshop at CNR-IRISS, Naples, 19 October 2024.
Source: CISV Naples.

The itinerant workshop is now traveling through various Italian cities, hosted by local CISV branches, fostering dialogue among territories and communities, and confirming the transformative

value of a place-based participatory methodology. A particularly significant step occurred in Florence on December 1st, 2024, where a delegation of researchers and youth from CISV Naples met with the Junior Branch of the Florence section.

This encounter served as a moment of restitution and transmission, during which the outcomes of the activities conducted in Naples were shared, and methods, tools, and reflections were presented to deepen collective understanding of conflict. A symbolic handover took place between the two sections, reinforcing the continuity of the educational process and disseminating a commitment to a culture of peace grounded in participation, co-responsibility, and nonviolent mediation.

Following this step, the Florence section initiated a collaboration with Rondine Cittadella della Pace, an organization that fosters creative conflict transformation through the cohabitation of young people from conflicting countries. Rondine's involvement enriched the Dialogues initiative, offering new perspectives and tools for approaching conflict in constructive ways.

The same trajectory continues with Horizon Naples 2025, an intensive summer camp that will take place in the Spanish Quarters of Naples from July 22nd to August 3rd. The camp will involve twenty-two young people aged sixteen to seventeen from the fourteen Italian CISV chapters, along with approximately five staff members. The initiative aims to generate a tangible local impact by strengthening the connections between CISV communities and Like-Minded Organizations (LMOs), which share similar values and practices.

The project is being developed in collaboration with three key institutions: FOQUS – Fondazione Quartieri Spagnoli, active in Naples since 2013 in the field of socio-educational regeneration; Fondazione Pistoletto – Cittadellarte, a contemporary art foundation promoting the work of Michelangelo Pistoletto and currently focused on the topics of peace; and Castello di Rivoli – Museum of Contemporary Art, which hosts an active education department and promotes art as a tool for education and intercultural dialogue.

Horizon Naples 2025 builds on the CISV Dialogues experience. The Naples Local Group has chosen to collaborate with partner organizations engaged in peace education through different languages and methodologies. Together with participants from

various CISV Italian chapters, the camp will explore topics – such as conflict transformation, citizenship, and intercultural dialogue – continuing the themes addressed in the Dialogues. In this perspective, the involvement of institutions like the Pistoletto Foundation – whose founder was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize – will contribute to reinforcing the conceptual continuity between the two experiences, particularly in relation to the role of art in promoting peace and social transformation. The camp will be organized into three integrated phases, engaging participants daily in educational and artistic activities with local children and residents. The first phase focuses on community education and engagement through workshops on the Charter of Rights with FOQUS. The second phase involves urban regeneration through art via performative actions co-designed and delivered in tandem by the Pistoletto Foundation and the Educational Department of the Castello di Rivoli, combining their respective approaches to art, education, and peacebuilding. The third phase is dedicated to communication and outreach, culminating in a public final event to share the experience and strengthen local networks. Each day will be structured with morning activities conducted by LMOs, afternoon educational labs led by CISV, and evening moments of community building and sharing. Two urban explorations will help participants reflect on their experiences in relation to the local context. Horizon Naples 2025 thus stands as a frontier educational lab, blending knowledge and practice in a transformative perspective. The experience aims to leave a lasting impact both on participants and on the local community, contributing to the creation of a widespread educational community based on listening, cooperation, and collective creativity.

The final stage of the Dialogues cycle is scheduled for 2025 in Gorizia–Nova Gorica, a city symbolic of both conflict and reconciliation. It will provide an opportunity for critical reflection and forward-looking projection. The event aims to consolidate the path taken, enhancing the situated approach, the activated trans-local networks, and the educational methodologies tested. In this emblematic context for European history, the values referring to peace as a territorial practice, the city as a political space to inhabit, and the education as a tool for spatial justice and collective transformation will be reaffirmed.

Open Conclusions

The CISV Dialogues experience has provided a privileged ground to explore, through situated educational practices, the transformative potential of peace education in contemporary urban contexts. Far from conceiving peace as the mere absence of conflict, the pathway developed through the Dialogues has demonstrated how conflict can become a vital material for learning, coexistence, and the re-signification of space. In this perspective, peace is not an outcome but a relational socio-educational process, capable of shaping ways of inhabiting and modes of governing public space.

By using methodological tools rooted in experiential learning – particularly the Mosquito Method, which promotes a transformative reading of conflict dynamics – it was possible to activate individual and collective awareness, to defuse reactive mechanisms, and to open up spaces of constructive engagement among diverse actors. The method not only guided the educational practices but also made visible the pedagogical potential of space, turning it into a site for democratic and inclusive experimentation. The places crossed by the Dialogues – from the Ex Asilo Filangieri to public parks, from the neighborhood contexts like the Spanish Quarters to the networks activated in Florence with Rondine – have revealed the capacity of participatory education to prefigure new spatial and social configurations, which can be observed in the reclaiming of neglected urban spaces, the activation of intergenerational dialogue, and the emergence of new forms of civic responsibility among participants – especially young people – who began to reinterpret their role within their communities. In these settings, the interaction among young people, local communities, and cultural institutions has fostered symbolic and material reappropriation of space, nurturing a sense of belonging, active citizenship, and micro-transformations in the young participants that can counteract marginalization and exclusion. However, several critical questions remain open: to what extent can the processes activated be embedded in the practices of urban governance? How can we avoid the risk that meaningful, yet still fragile, experiences remain isolated instead of evolving into lasting frameworks of political and territorial intervention? In cities marked by fragmentation, inequality, and systemic vulnerabilities, participatory educational practices – such as

those activated through the CISV Dialogues – can act as powerful tools for nurturing belonging, co-responsibility, and micro-transformations. However, these practices alone are not enough: without public policies capable of institutionalizing conflict as a resource and care as a governance principle, even the most meaningful experiences risk remaining fragile and isolated, rather than evolving into enduring frameworks of democratic transformation.

In this light, the Horizon Naples 2025 initiative stands as a meaningful testbed for deepening the relationship between education, participatory art, and urban regeneration. The involvement of local communities, cultural institutions, and allied networks contributes to consolidating alliances, activating shared knowledge, and building more durable forms of transformation. The upcoming stages – culminating in the final meeting in Gorizia–Nova Gorica – can reveal not only opportunities for evaluation and renewal, but also critical spaces for questioning the educational devices and material conditions enabling democratic transformation of inhabited spaces.

The challenge remains that of imagining and practicing a form of urban governance that does not avoid conflict, but embraces it as a constitutive condition of cohabitation in cities – a governance that recognizes education not as an accessory function, but as a foundational device, for building a more just, pluralistic city capable of producing peace through difference.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of joint research and presents reflections shared by both authors. While the contribution is unified in its structure and argumentation, Luisa Fatigati developed the conceptual framework and authored Sections 1, 4, and 5; Gianmarco Pisa authored Sections 2 and 3. The open conclusions (Section 6) were co-authored by both.

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The Role of Micro-communities for Urban Challenges: A Case Study of Mardin

Zemzem Taşgüzen Polat*

Abstract

This article aims to explain the role of micro-communities that emerged from local and everyday life in Mardin (Turkey), focusing on social, cultural and participatory production practices. In Mardin, tourism threatens to erode the city's unique urban fabric and social cohesion whilst public spaces suffer from underinvestment. Citizens struggle with urbanization challenges that prevent them from creating shared memories and experiences in their daily lives. On the other hand, diverse communities are developing innovative social practices and fostering alternative forms of cooperation engagement that offer promising avenues for commoning. This article aims to examine practices where the approach of urban commoning is used to explore the potential and limitations of these practices in urban production and organization. Whilst these examples demonstrate various micro-community practices, they also underscore the critical role of spontaneous, open-source knowledge and a participatory approach in shaping the extent and character of commoning processes.

Questo articolo si propone di analizzare il ruolo delle micro-comunità emerse dalla vita locale e quotidiana di Mardin (Turchia), concentrandosi sulle pratiche di produzione sociale, culturale e partecipativa. A Mardin, il turismo rischia di erodere il tessuto urbano unico e la coesione sociale della città, mentre gli spazi pubblici soffrono di sottofinanziamento. I cittadini affrontano le sfide dell'urbanizzazione che impediscono loro di creare memorie ed esperienze condivise nella vita quotidiana. D'altro canto, comunità diverse stanno sviluppando innovative pratiche sociali e promuovendo forme alternative di cooperazione che offrono prospettive promettenti per i beni comuni. Questo articolo mira a esaminare casi studio in cui l'approccio dei beni comuni urbani viene utilizzato per esplorare potenzialità e limiti di queste pratiche nella produzione e organizzazione urbana. Sebbene questi esempi dimostrino varie pratiche di micro-comunità, sottolineano anche il ruolo cruciale della conoscenza spontanea e open-source, nonché di un approccio partecipativo nel determinare portata e carattere dei processi di commoning.

Keywords: micro-communities; urban commoning; public space.

Parole Chiave: micro-comunità; commoning urbano; spazio pubblico.

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Introduction

Throughout history, Mardin has been at the core of commercial and cultural networks; today, it is one of the most prominent historical and touristic cities in the southeastern region of Turkey. Despite its importance, the ongoing political friction between local and central governance results in the destabilization of municipal service delivery in Mardin. The problems in Mardin reflect not just two contrasting governance approaches but also a deeper political conflict, one that led the central government to dismiss the mayor and replace him with a governor. Consequently, this generates spatial contradictions and inconsistencies in public investment. Key challenges include restrictions on cultural expression, gentrification pressures, and the privatization of public spaces. In this point, micro-communities play an important role in maintaining the vitality of urban life. This study aims to discuss the tactics and practices developed by local communities in response to these challenges within a general framework of the urbanization process.

Virani (2020) suggests to understand communities as made up of a number of micro-communities, such as a local small business group. In another article, Virani (2017) explores micro-communities – small and hyper-small groups of people connected by shared activities, age, neighborhood, ethnic minority status, and etc. For Bailey (2010), micro-community can be exemplified as voluntary and community organisations (quoted by Virani, 2020). According to Amin (2002), micro-communities share same sense of place and urban identity. According to these definitions, groups and initiatives operating in different fields in Mardin can be defined as micro-communities. They are all small-scale groups sharing the same sense of place and urban identity. “Dara Cosmos Research Center”, “13 Square Meter Art Collective” and “Xlab” are volunteer-driven initiatives that foster urban development via social projects. Beyond being a small business group, the “Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative” supports agriculture through local seed production and sustainable farming methods. The group also aims to promote social integration between different ethnic groups. These micro-communities are bound together by shared activities.

The strategies adopted by central and local governments fail to respond adequately to the opportunities and challenges arising

from paradigm shifts in the city's historical significance. Mardin has great potential with its historical and archaeological richness, agricultural resources and it is still a developing city in terms of population and urbanization. Yet its challenges are growing faster than they can be solved. The main issues include insufficient urban resources and infrastructure, consumption-focused tourism, and profit-driven urban planning. These problems not only deepen urban-public conflict but also prioritize profit-driven development over public needs. The existence of urban planning does not necessarily imply that it prioritizes the well-being of the residents. Stavrides (2018) argues that societies are moulded by the geometries of power and this is manifested in Mardin's growth-oriented perspective. This approach tends to homogenize and exploit urban life, perceiving the city predominantly as a mere collection of buildings. Consequently, the city lacks the socio-spatial conditions necessary for residents to create shared memories and experiences in their daily lives, such as places for rest, recreation, and children's play.

Prioritizing tourists over urban residents leads to the gentrification of buildings and the commodification of urban spaces. Thus, an attempt is being made to create a 'museum city' stripped of inhabitants and Old Mardin is being transformed into a 'ghost town'.

«Value in cities is created not only by bricks and concrete, but also by connections to public transport and other public facilities (schools, parks), the presence of cultural venues, entertainment establishments, bars and restaurants, and finally also by intangible things like the 'atmosphere' or 'vibe' in a particular city or neighborhood. That atmosphere, however, is again determined by the people who live there, what they do, by life on the streets and in squares, and so on» (Lijster, Volont and Gielen, 2022: 20).

Some studies frame the city as a common endeavor and argue that commoning can be reshaped its unstable, problematic urbanization trends through enduring, stable, and scalable decision-making structures (Foster and Iaione, 2016; Méndez de Andrés, 2024). According to Foster and Iaione (2016), there are different kinds of urban resources, such as a variety of open spaces, infrastructure and public spaces in the city. They conceptualised "co-city" concept to imagine the city as a "infrastructure" in which

a variety of urban actors cooperate and collaborate to govern and steward built, environmental, cultural, and digital goods through contractual or institutionalized a particular partnerships (Foster and Iaione, 2022: 191). Considering Mardin's centralized, top-down urbanization policy outlined above, this co-city approach demands a deeper examination of urban communities and their practices.

«[...] Partnerships involve cooperation and collaboration between civic, social, knowledge, public, and private actors that support the creation and governance of shared and common resources by an identified group of people, a community, vested with the responsibility of maintaining and keeping accessible (or affordable) the resource for future users and generations» (Foster and Iaione, 2022: 191).

This paper illustrates how micro-community practices in Mardin have successfully achieved this through the production of local (traditional) resources and spontaneous actions and activities. These communities occur in different areas and in different ways, such as agricultural development, participatory art, the commoning of knowledge, and social production. According to Federici (2019), community-support agriculture, food co-ops, information sharing, alternative mode of production etc. are more than dikes against the neoliberal assault on our livelihood. Commoning practices are shaped by the specific historical, political and social contexts in which they are embedded (McCay, 2002 cited in Arbell, 2023) in everyday life. For this reason, strengthening them and fostering new collaborations are expected to inspire the creation of new communities while further advancing the concept of commoning. «Such commoning practices are not only about sharing common space but also about experiencing different urban space» (Eynaud, Juan and Money, 2018: 621).

Micro-communities use participatory production processes to reproduce urban space and commons at the level of a local community. In that sense, this paper shows that the aforementioned micro-communities in Mardin gather around the 'social form of commoning' (Euler, 2018). Through the reclamation of public space for collective engagement in participatory practices, participants cultivate new forms of social relations and modes of social interaction shaped by the richness and diversity of common sense. Nonini pointed out that «intellectual and cultural

commons can be created and regenerated only through social exchange and sociability. Often the more intense and frequent the social interactions, the greater the use-value of the intellectual or cultural products that come out of them» (Nonini, 2006: 167). At the same time, each community cultivates sociability in distinct ways. Though socially impactful, such influence remains circumscribed, affecting particular groups rather than transcending age or social strata.

The main questions of this study are: What type of urban environment does Mardin provide for its residents under the destructive impacts of neoliberal urbanization practices? How do micro-communities that perform independently within the city contribute to the discourse on commoning? How do community practices influence urban decision-making and contribute to shared urban governance?

In the first section of this paper, the theoretical and methodological background is given. Public space, participatory production, social practices and everyday life are the concepts that are investigated in more detail. In the second section, an overview of Mardin's public space and urban life is illustrated. In the third section, communities that are the subject of this study are explained, such as "13 Square Meter Art Collective", "Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative", "Dara Cosmos Research Center" and "Xlab". Besides this, the study conceptualizes the students of Mardin Artuklu University's Department of Architecture as a micro-community. The conclusion summarizes the main contributions of this study and suggests some possible avenues for strengthening the foundation of commons in Mardin.

Theoretical Background

«To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relationships to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive» (Linebaugh, 2008: 279 as cited in Venugopal, 2020).

The role of public space in commons studies is controversial. Stavrides (2018) defines the difference between public and common spaces. According to him, public space is the space

that is created and controlled by a specific authority that also establishes the rules. «Urban ordering, the metropolis itself, is a process, a stake, much in the same way that dominant social relations need to be reproduced every day» (Stavrides, 2015: 9). Stavrides (2016) defines commons space as 'threshold spaces', in other words, 'in-between' spaces located neither inside nor outside, public nor private in which «Community's relation to space is multifaceted. It activates practices of care and exchange, processes of production and social reproduction as well as the construction of shared world views» (Stavrides, 2022: 88). The creation of common space does not necessarily imply the complete erasure of borders. Infact, «just like with a musical instrument, such as a violin or guitar, there must be the right degree of openness and closedness, in other words a certain degree of porosity, in order to be able to produce sound at all, and thus to be able to play» (Lijster, Volont and Gielen, 2022: 23).

Venugopal (2020) notes that commoning is an everyday practice. She analyzes some examples of urban commoning from all over the world and emphasizes the importance of common sense. According to her, «commoning is not just a project against commodification and enclosures, but an experience where the participants' habits, perceptions and social relations are transformed» (Venugopal, 2020: 9).

To understand these complex urban realities, it is necessary to investigate social practices in everyday life. These practices play a crucial role in shaping and fostering new forms of resistance. In Stavrides' words, «emergent new forms of resistance are importantly connected to acts that shape urban space in order to create new social bonds and build forms of collective struggle and survival» (Stavrides, 2015: 10). Fournier (2013) pointed out that places where people can develop new forms of sociality, knowledge and cultural exchange are important. Additionally, «they offer a space for the development of relations based on cooperation and sharing rather than appropriation and exclusion» (Ivi: 442). Although the city is ruled by the ordering mechanism, different spatial and social patterns can emerge from people's everyday practices and spontaneous encounters. These dynamics change from city to city and Mardin is an important city because it's home to diverse ethnic and religious groups.

Changing urban patterns are reshaping how communities relate to one another, with the most significant changes occurring in public spaces. The relationship between urban space, social relations, and community practices demonstrates a consistent pattern of mutual influence and dynamic reciprocity in the city.

An overview of Mardin's public space and urban life

This research adopts a mixed method including interview, field research and desk activities. As an academic leading architectural project courses, I work with students to research various urban topics, ensuring our city data remains current each semester. Data on the collectives derives from both firsthand observations and publicly shared documentation. Besides this, the visual materials featured in this article represent a selection of student projects produced during different semesters. Specifically, information about "Daracosmos" was obtained from an interview with Pelin Tan via Zoom. "Xlab" is an organization whose work I have closely followed as part of our architecture faculty's student community. Data on the practices of the "13 Square Meter Art Collective" and "Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative" were collected through surveys and desk research.

«It is here that the ephemeral qualities of the city are no longer a distant vision of the grand master plan, but instead the minor gestures of claiming the city: a rolled out blanket, the filigree outlines of a future shelter, the meticulously arranged flower pots squatting the sidewalk, faded paint lines on asphalt providing an elusive support structure for the Saturday flea market, the brewing of coffee and shoe shining, clotheslines weaving connections among neighbors across narrow alleys. It is here that day in, day out, the city of commons is being unglamorously but collectively reproduced» (Gruber and Miller, 2016: 256).

Mardin is composed of two parts: Old Mardin (Eski Mardin) or Upper Mardin (Yukarı Mardin, as the citizens of Mardin say) and the New Town (Yenişehir) or Lower Mardin (Aşağı Mardin). The names were influenced by the topography of the region. Old Mardin, officially designated as 1st Degree Urban Protected Area, and New Town, characterized by substantial urbanization during the 90s, are both subject to distinct yet equally neoliberal

urbanization mechanisms. The key urbanization practices of Old Mardin are the tourism and touristic regulations, whereas for New Town, it may be referred to as “random urbanization”. With its traditional houses, madrasahs and churches, Old Mardin has endured to this day by adapting and reinterpreting the medieval building system, urban fabric, and way of life. From domestic practices and neighborhood relations to small-scale commerce and children’s street play, the everyday practices of Old Mardin diverge markedly from the rhythms of the New Town. Despite the social and physical differences between these two regions, authorities are attempting to standardize all practices from design resolutions to organization of daily relations underpinned by insufficient resources.

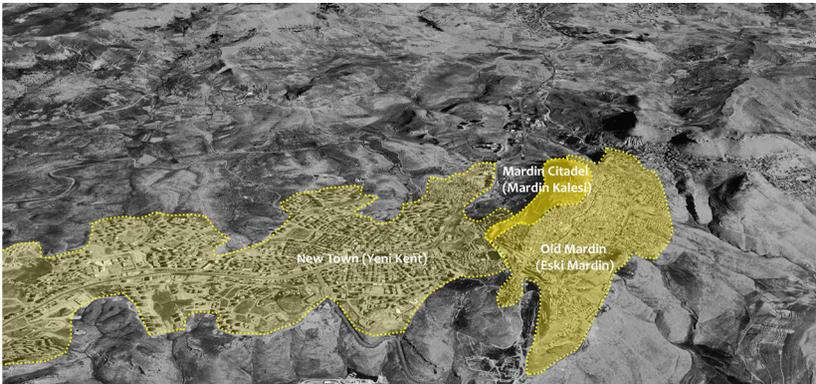


Fig. 1 Edited Google Earth Map illustrating Old Mardin and the New Town.

Source: Author and Sibel Çamurdaş.

New Town was designated as a development zone in Mardin (Centre) Master Plan approved in 1985. As part of this plan, Old Mardin was also declared a 1st degree urban protected area. Despite its significance in conserving the historic city center and identifying the New Town as a development zone, this urban master plan did not propose a sufficiently holistic framework. The urban planning process prioritized evacuating Old Mardin’s historic center and reducing pressure on it. This resulted in an overconcentration on tourism and service-sector development (Yekbun Aksu and Altınörs Çırak, 2018). The existing master plan that regulates land-use planning has been in use since 2013. On the other hand, the Municipality prepared a report and

criticisms against this plan are prominent even in this report.

«The existing zoning plan demonstrates insufficient capacity to accommodate current migration patterns and projected demographic growth. For planning mechanisms to have substantive impact, they must bridge the gap between normative aspirations and grounded feasibility. Therefore, it is aimed to prepare a new Master Plan» (T.C. Mardin Artuklu Belediyesi, 2019: 130).

Another significant challenge stems from the incongruity between proposed plans and their real-world application. For instance, parcels designated in the implementation development plan as public and social infrastructure zones, including parks, schools and playgrounds, were unexpectedly offered for sale in 2020. By prioritizing piecemeal revisions, these decisions erode planning integrity, privatize communal spaces, and institutionalize extractive practices that disregard public needs.

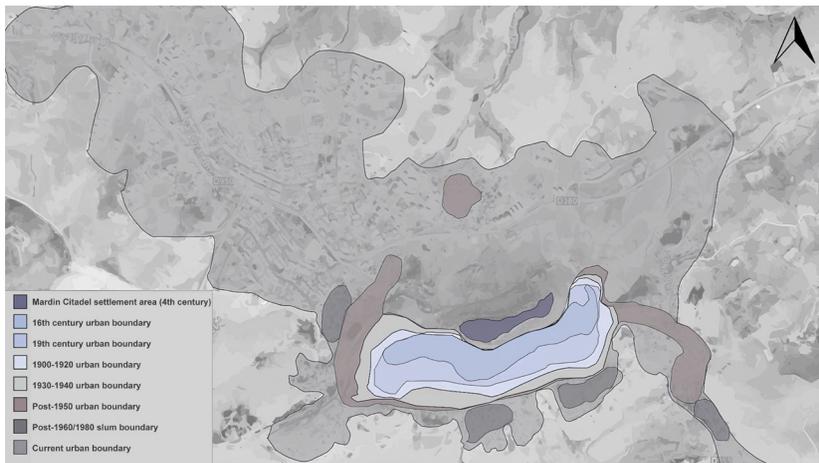


Fig. 2 Historical growth map of Mardin.

Source: Musa Tekin.

The physical 'threshold' space (Stavrides, 2016) of Old Mardin is Diyarbakır Gate. During the Middle Ages, it was named as such because merchants and goods coming from Diyarbakır city entered Mardin through this gate. Although no gate ruins remain from that period, the name "Diyarbakır Gate" is still

in use today. Despite its potential as a threshold between the New and Old Towns, is currently being developed in ways that undermine this opportunity. A shopping center with multi-level parking is currently under construction.

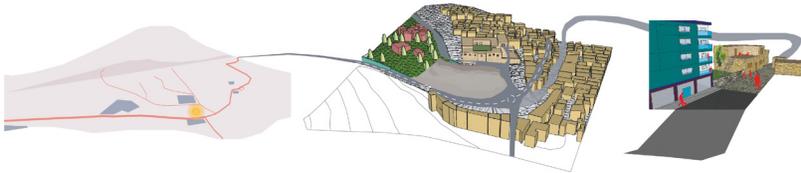


Fig. 3 The model illustrates Diyarbakır Gate as a physical threshold of Old Mardin. Source: Ümit Yılmaz.

The map below shows Diyarbakır Gate (in green) and Cumhuriyet (Republic) Square (in red). Tour buses drop off their passengers at Diyarbakır Gate and tourists walk along First Street which is lined with shops and cafes on both sides. Then they reach Republic Square followed by Government Square at the end of the street. In Republic Square, tourists can take photos in front of the Mardin sign, ride a horse, sit in cafes around the square, or enjoy many other attractions. These activities mirror the generic tourism strategies of many cities and lack local distinctiveness.

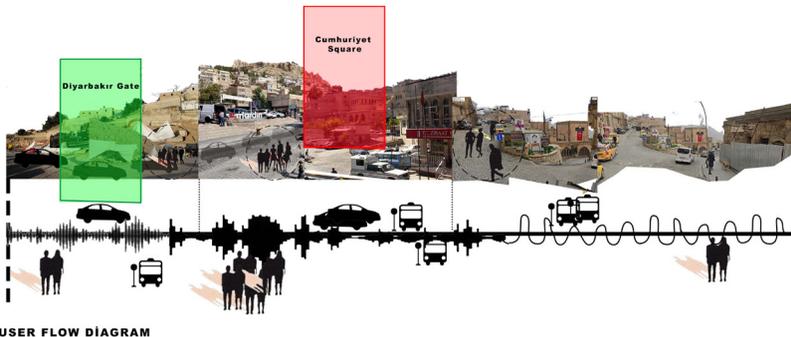


Fig. 4 User flow diagram of First Street (Birinci Cade)
Source: Aslan Ekinci.

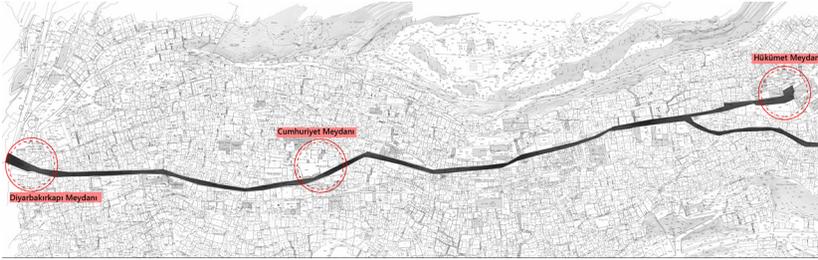


Fig. 5 First Street ('Birinci Cadde' in black), Diyarbakır Gate (circle on the left), Republic Square ('Cumhuriyet Meydanı' circle on the middle) and Government Square ('Hükümet Meydanı' circle on the right).

Source: Sibel Çamurdaş.

In Figure 5, the black color represents First Street (Birinci Cadde), while three circled areas mark Diyarbakır Gate (on the left), Republic Square (Cumhuriyet Meydanı) and Government Square (Hükümet Meydanı). These squares are notable both as key arrival and gathering points along a tourist route also due to the absence of other squares in the Old City. While Republic Square serves its intended purpose, which means tourism photo plateau, Government Square is currently used as a parking lot, limiting its ability to function as a public space.

Old Mardin has been evolving into a touristic city over the past ten years. The houses around these squares have been converted into tourist attractions such as hotels, cafes, restaurants, etc. Today, numerous traditional houses lining First Street have been transformed into touristic shops. This is the common problem in many neoliberal cities worldwide. Free public spaces in cities are sold to private developers and transformed into spaces of consumption such as corporate coffee chains, bars and restaurants, shopping malls or executive flats (Minton, 2009 as cited in Fournier, 2013). Another important feature is street renovation that was carried out in 2013-2014. During this process, the usage of the buildings on First Street changed, the facades of shops and houses were refurbished, and shop signage and shutters were uniformized. Before standardization, each shop displayed distinctive signage with unique fonts, as can be seen in the photos of Woodworkers' Bazaar and Kayseriye Passage.



Fig. 6 The signages of Woodworkers Bazaar (on the left) and Kayseriye Passage.
Source: The Author.

The most important recent change in the Old Town has been the sudden decision to evacuate historical building (Old Government House), which had been serving as Mardin Artuklu University Department of Architecture from 2012 to 2023. In January 2023, authorities decided to relocate the Department of Architecture from its long-time home, where it had educated students for years. The students' relationship with Old Mardin's traditional urban fabric – including socio-cultural interactions and established connections with local residents – has been deeply impacted.



Fig. 7 Mardin Artuklu University Department of Architecture (former building 2012-2023).
Source: The Author.

While this is the case in the Old Town, in Yenişehir (New Town), the topography is no longer utilized to its full potential, resulting

in random settlements where apartments are built regardless of whether the terrain is either rocky or it is agricultural land. New Town faces the challenges of urban transportation systems, a lack of green areas and public places.



Fig. 8 The construction practices of New Town.

Source: Murat Çağlayan, 2015.

While Old Mardin undergoes the homogenizing effects of tourism, the New Town remains largely neglected, lacking essential urban infrastructure such as squares, walkable streets, and public spaces. Mardin's construction practices disregard crucial urban planning factors, including density, social facilities, parcel setback distances, and transportation needs. Key considerations, such as density, social infrastructure, etc., are often ignored, resulting in a city that lacks basic urban rationality in terms of floor heights, urban facilities, and overall density. One consequence of these urbanization problems is the absence of public spaces designed for social interaction. The New Town, characterized by high-density apartment buildings, limits urban vitality by prioritizing residential function over social and communal needs.

In the light of the data presented which illustrated the realities of Old Mardin and New Town, there is an urgent need for new commoning practices to emerge from within urban and social

life, despite the inherent challenges. As summarized above, while Old Mardin naturally sustains informal social interactions, these emergent community dynamics fail to materialize in the New Town's planned spaces. This dichotomy exemplifies Jacobs' (2017) critique of modernist planning where Old Mardin's sidewalk rhythms persists organically, and the New Town's regulated spaces produce what Sennett (2013) terms 'the fall of public man'.

The following section will investigate the spaces and conditions that facilitate socialization practices and participatory production dynamics and their role in facing urban challenges which are crucial for fostering commoning processes in Mardin.

Potentials of Micro-communities in Mardin

In Mardin, numerous urban needs persist that are not adequately addressed due to rent-seeking urbanization practices, the regulatory mechanisms associated with its status as a touristic city, and the commodification of its social and cultural life. Especially in the last decade, urban regulations have accelerated to transform Old Mardin into a tourist-branded city. The key factor behind this situation was Mardin's inclusion in UNESCO's Tentative World Heritage List in 2000. After that, Old Mardin saw a rapid shift from residential to tourism-centered buildings. On the other hand, Mardin's rapid evolution continued after its UNESCO rejection. The reasons cited in UNESCO's report underscore systemic preservation challenges and problems in Old Mardin. These can be summarized as follows:

«The management organization lacks adequate technical staff and necessary resources. Current challenges include the complete absence of a site management plan and failure to enforce existing conservation zoning requirements. The city faces four critical threats: intense development pressure, inadequate understanding of conservation requirements, widespread poverty, and severe resource constraints» (Çağlayan, 2021: 11).

The documented problems not only persist but escalate, as the divide between preservation needs and development pressures widens alarmingly. These conflicts encompass a spectrum of interventions, including the renovation of streets and the

conversion of traditional houses into restaurants and hotels. Access to non-touristic public spaces in the Old City center may be possible through streets, terraces and connecting areas. These terraces serve as spaces for traditional Mardin activities such as flying kites, hosting gatherings, open-air cinema during summer evenings and flexible areas that facilitated casual interactions and conversations among people. Flying kites is not an activity reserved for festivals but a common practice in Mardin daily life. Especially popular amongst children and teenagers, this socialization practice embodies togetherness and fun.



Fig. 9 The photographs from Mardin Kite Festival, 2018.

Source: Haberturk.com.

While tourism has significantly impacted Old Mardin, its traditional urban fabric, with intricate network of intermediate spaces, streets, and staircases, continues to provide essential spaces for the formation and expression of micro-communities. There are many micro-communities such as “13 Square Meter Art Collective”, “Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative”, “Dara Cosmos Research Center”, “Xlab”, etc., in Mardin. All these communities enrich different dimensions of social life. These might be simple everyday practices such as watching films, flying kites, taking photographs, gathering for food, and cooking. Participatory production is the center of the communities. Besides, all these initiatives operate in Old Mardin for different reasons. For instance, all of the art collectives are gathered in Old Mardin for acting in alleys, abbaras (vaulted alley or arcade), traditional bazaars and shops, etc. While they require the spatial fabric of Old Mardin,

the prevailing sense of solidarity fostered by close proximity remains equally vital. Unlike others, “Dara Cosmos” emerges as an exception. It aims to produce research that fosters unity between Dara village and Dara archeological site. For this reason, it gathers in Dara at various times each year with flexible volunteer groups. In the following paragraphs, these communities will be described in more detail, along with their functioning.

“13Metrekare Art Collective” is an independent organisation established in Old Mardin. Organizing events, holding workshops, hosting art seminars, etc., aiming to create a platform in which people from different backgrounds can come together to share knowledge. The statement below is available on the website of the community:

«In a region which lacks the direct involvement of locals in artistic production, creating this kind of platform is critical for us. 13Metrekare Art Collective is an interdisciplinary organization composing of professional volunteers and students from different fields such as photography, architecture, painting, sculpture, creative drama, linguistics, and anthropology. It takes its name (13 square meters) from its space and dimensions» (Website of “13Metrekare Art Collective”¹).

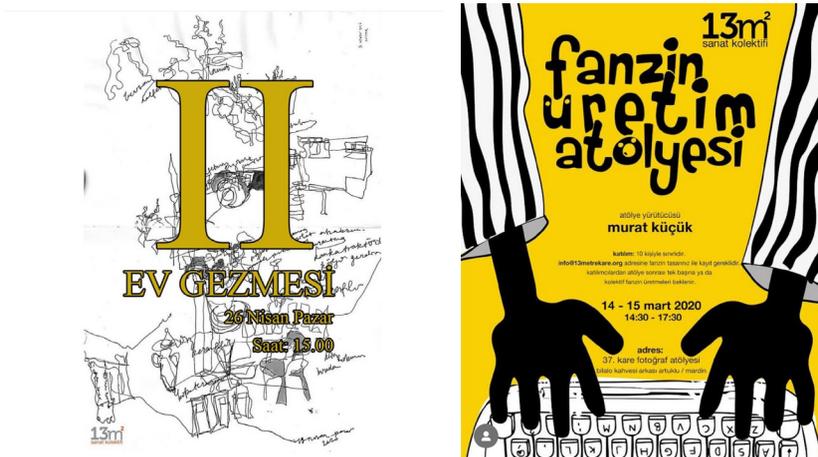


Fig. 10 “13Metrekare Art Collective” event posters: “home visit” and “fanzin workshop”.

Source: 13metrekare social media account.

¹ <https://13metrekare.wordpress.com/>, consulted on 12/3/2025.

“Dara Cosmos Research Group” has been doing research in the Dara archeological site in Dara village since 2014. Pelin Tan who is a professor at Batman University, some academicians, students, and artists from all over the world, as well as local people, participate and actively research with the team. It aims to protect Dara not only in terms of the archeological ruins but also the village itself (houses, the olive trees, the geomorphological features of Dara, etc.). In the interview with Tan (2023), she summarized the research on the archeological site and its surrounding village:

«The Dara Cosmos Research Team, led by *Hala* (The aunt) from Dara, has been diligently documenting the archaeological site and the village since 2012. Through numerous field visits with national and international scholars, the team has amassed a substantial photographic archive of Dara. Our primary objective is to establish a comprehensive digital archive of these photographs and make it openly accessible to the broader research community. We advocate for a holistic approach for the preservation of Dara, centered on safeguarding the “sense of place”, fostering strong community ties among the villagers and supporting the continuation of local production practices» (interview with Tan, 2023).



Fig. 11 Photographs from the meetings held in Dara village.
Source: Dara cosmos social media account.

“Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative” aims to find the best local seed for the soil that doesn’t require water, power or fertilizer since climate change and drought are expected to affect Turkey as well as the rest of the world

in the medium term. Additionally, to multiply this seed for the future, and thus to keep soil and nature alive. Enabling the social integration of Syrian female refugees has been another top priority for this project.

«In the field studies conducted in Mardin and surrounding areas, the neighborhoods, especially in Midyat, Dargeçit, and Savur districts were visited to establish direct contact with small farmers who are self-sufficient but lack financial opportunities. They cannot engage in industrial production due to the nature of their fields, and the ancient seeds utilized like Sonik, Beyaziye, Iskenderi and mostly Sorgül. During the field studies, the 1650kg of local seed available, was purchased from small farmers with the aim of replanting in suitable fields» (Website of “Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative”²).

“Xlab Social” is a social and community platform that was founded by the students of the Architecture Department of Mardin Artuklu University. It is a laboratory that generates both intellectual and physical results through collaborative processes, engaging in discussions, generating discourse, and creative dialogue. *Xlab Social* created an earth library in Kahramanmaraş which was affected by the earthquake in 2023. This project is a collaboration of several initiatives (“*sivildusun*”, “*mitost.ev*”, “*kolubakollektifi*”, “*pocolanaworks*” and “Xlab”).



Fig. 12 “Xlab Social designed” and constructed playgrounds and music classrooms in the village schools.

Source: “Xlab” social media account.

² <https://www.topraktantabaga.com.tr/>, consulted on 12/1/2025.



Fig. 13 Mud-brick library construction in Kahramanmaraş.
Source: "Xlab" social media account.

This study's final case examines how architecture students formed a micro-community to resist the evacuation of their department building. The students swiftly organized themselves, adopting a participatory decision-making process to establish a clear sequence of actions. The students employed a multifaceted approach to the campaign, including: utilizing social media platforms to disseminate information and updates, producing and publishing videos showcasing their academic activities within the building, engaging in formal meetings with relevant authorities, issuing press releases to garner public support and organizing sit-in protests. Throughout their campaign, the students effectively disseminated their messages and provided significant public support. The students' resistance gained media attention with their struggle featured in several national architectural platforms and local newspapers. Although they could not change the decision to move, they made some achievements. For instance, the department moved to a building whose physical condition is better than the initial plan.



Fig. 14 Students' sit-in protest.

Source: "Artuklu Architecture Student (*mimartuklu*)" social media account.

Food systems in cities, like urban-rural connections, have long been key to commoning. "Soil to Plate" aims to reinforce this connection by partnering with smallholder farmers while simultaneously increasing urban visibility for disadvantaged city residents. This initiative represents a significant effort to establish local food networks as an alternative to proliferating supermarket chains in neoliberal cities – systems that increasingly marginalize small food businesses. While Turkey's first social cooperative, "Soil to Plate" seeks to boost social welfare through member income redistribution, it does not operate as a fully self-organized effort. Its organizational structure – particularly regarding community formation, sustainability, and internal governance – significantly deviates from established commoning principles

and practices. Despite its limitations, this cooperative may inspire the formation of future communities that more fully embody the principles of commoning. In contrast, “13Metrekare Art Collective” demonstrates a strong alignment of shared values and practices that exemplify commoning principles. Street cinema, art sessions, collective memory records, oral history studies, etc., provide participatory production that leads to cultural commoning.

«The culture revolves around practices in which meaning is given to our lives and to our (urban) environment. In other in the practice of commoning there is always an intangible, imaginary or aesthetic moment, in which we sense and make sense of the world in a particular way» (Lijster, Volont and Gielen, 2022: 18).

In addition, “Dara cosmos” and “Xlab Social” represent the knowledge of commoning. Through the dissemination and public sharing of knowledge derived from their professional practices, they create ways of communicating with other groups and communities, co-producing and developing solutions to urban and social problems. “Artuklu Architecture Students” constitute a significant micro-community within the city not only because they preserve the current functioning of the Architecture Department building but also for the intellectual and creative life of the city. They generate innovative ideas and design proposals that address a wide range of urban challenges and dreams throughout their undergraduate architectural education. Located 20 km beyond the urban core, “Dara Cosmos” demonstrates periodic rather than sustained activity and influence. Although it is a visible community for urban activists and Dara people, most people with different interests remain unaware of its existence. This poses a significant barrier to the community’s progress and remains one of its most critical weaknesses. All the cases listed above reveal different levels of commoning for the city.

Currently operating as a closed community, it does not aim to have contact with other groups or initiatives. “Xlab” and “13 Metrekare” stand out as bold actors in urban activism to highlight urban issues. They raise awareness by tackling urban challenges and addressing community needs through collaborative partnerships and interactive workshops. The “Woman’s Touch Project”, which took place in 2022, is one such initiative. Dilan Demir’s *Hallederiiz* (‘we will handle it’) installation, installed to protest the collapsed

retaining wall for six years, was among the workshop's most impactful pieces:

«Pedestrians and stray animals remain in danger due to the lack of safety precautions or warning signs. Despite residents' repeated appeals to local authorities, this issue remains unresolved. Due to the constant change of administrators of municipality – even mayors – repair has been constantly postponed and even forgotten with the rhetoric of “we will handle it”. [...] What factors have led to these urban ruins in the city? How and when will it be repaired?» (Demir, 2022, “Womens touch Mardin”).



Fig. 15 Dilan Demir's installation *Hallederiiiiz*.
Source: “Womens Touch Mardin” social media account.

By highlighting urban issues, these initiatives can spark the formation of new communities united around urban activism. On the other hand, primary vulnerabilities are the constrained volunteers and the failure of artistic endeavors to achieve broad integration into everyday practices.

Conclusion

This study aimed to develop a framework for understanding urbanization in Mardin, analyzing how micro-community practices respond to urban and social challenges. The topographical duality of the city also manifests itself in everyday practices and governance approaches. New Town is considered a transient location, requiring minimal economic and urban investment in terms of social infrastructure. In contrast, the Old City undergoes frequent restructuring for tourism, rapidly changing its functions,

and steadily losing its residents. This research highlighted the significance of collaboration among local micro-communities allowing the fostering of new public opportunities and influencing governance mechanisms. Community practices are derived from daily practices and collective experience of the citizens. In this article, the importance of cooperation between local micro-communities, in terms of increasing new public opportunities and directing governance mechanisms, has been emphasized. Although their current impact remains limited, each initiative's field of activity plays a crucial role in shaping future urban commoning.

To enhance the livability of the city, it is essential to develop the collaborative capacity among communities of the public. All these micro-communities are based in Old Mardin, where they are practicing. Old Mardin provides various spaces for local communities to gather and interact, whereas the New Town encounters many challenges. How can the New Town create some opportunities to change this? While this study doesn't focus on the question, the urban practices of social encounters and interactions that define Old Mardin are largely absent in New Town. Consequently, the presence of accessible and inclusive public spaces within the New Town could have facilitated these practices. While subject to regulatory frameworks, public spaces possess the inherent potential to foster social commoning. In the context of Mardin, spatial deprivation of New Town considered a significant obstacle to the emergence of a vibrant and inclusive public life. Like elsewhere, Old Mardin's community spaces are steadily disappearing, tightening the urban fabric and restricting movement. Despite this negative urban picture, the initiative to enrich urban and social life is possible through the efforts of communities.

To sum up, these micro-communities have fostered novel social practices rooted in the local and everyday life of Mardin. The gradual erosion of Old Mardin's unique character due to commercialization and consumption, coupled with the New Town's failure to meet the evolving needs of its residents, significantly influenced the social and cultural organization of young people, students and women in different areas. Since these communities operate in different fields, they lack the motivation to expand or collaborate with others. To illustrate, achieving consensus on

urban challenges or developing cohesive spatial patterns seems unfeasible. “13 Metrekare” and “Xlab” – an art collective of young artists and a student initiative – occasionally collaborate to create participatory art. Every artistic production emerges from Old Mardin’s spatial patterns, transforming interventions into the urban fabric into acts of artistic expression. On the other hand, these communities struggle due to their small scale, funding challenges, and isolation from diverse socio-cultural circles.

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Care Infrastructures in Andean Rural context: The case of Monguì

Diana Catalina Barrera Agudelo

Abstract

This article examines rural care infrastructures as spatial, political, and collective systems that challenge dominant notions of rurality as a passive or residual space. Through fieldwork in Monguì, Colombia, the study identifies three types of care infrastructures – extended family/neighbourhood, sustained collective, and emergency collective – and analyses how they emerge in response to state neglect, environmental policies, and extractive pressures. The article argues that care must be rethought as a territorial function, not a private or feminized burden, and explores how spatial strategies can redistribute care responsibilities. Collective infrastructures, often rooted in informal or community-based practices, serve as alternatives to centralized planning and financial development. The study calls for a reconfiguration of rural planning that acknowledges dispersion, autonomy, and the potential for tourists and external actors to become co-responsible participants in sustaining rural life.

Questo articolo analizza le infrastrutture di cura rurali come sistemi spaziali, politici e collettivi che mettono in discussione le concezioni dominanti della ruralità come spazio passivo o residuale. Attraverso un lavoro sul campo a Monguì, in Colombia, lo studio identifica tre tipi di infrastrutture di cura: famiglia/domestica estesa, collettiva e collettiva d'emergenza – e analizza come esse emergano in risposta all'assenza di strutture statali, alle politiche ambientali e alle pressioni estrattive. L'articolo sostiene la necessità di ripensare la cura come funzione territoriale, e non come onere privato o femminilizzato, esplorando strategie spaziali in grado di redistribuire tali responsabilità. Le infrastrutture collettive, spesso radicate in pratiche informali o comunitarie, si configurano come alternative alla pianificazione centralizzata e allo sviluppo finanziarizzato. Lo studio invita a una riconfigurazione della pianificazione rurale che riconosca la dispersione, l'autonomia e il potenziale per turisti e attori esterni di diventare partecipanti corresponsabili nel sostenere la vita rurale.

Keywords: care infrastructures; coloniality; rural areas.

Parole Chiave: infrastrutture di cura; colonialità; aree rurali.

Introduction

Colonial hegemonies, particularly those operating under the guise of protection, reveal how the rural territory is traversed by contradictory regimes of control: simultaneously legalized,

criminalized, contested and defended. This article analyses the spatialization of coloniality, understood as the attempts at subalternization of territory and rural bodies. It seeks to demonstrate, across different scales and through cases, involving reforms, surveys and organizational plans, how the notions of reserve and residuality are entangled and in tension in the planning of Andean rurality.

The article describes the infrastructures of care, understood as the social, symbolic, and affective ecologies that sustain life and develop in the interstices of these contradictory control logics. Care not only opens a broader perspective on the rurality crisis, but also serves as a critical node for rethinking the coexistences, re-existences, and negotiations among rural socio-spatial ecologies. The analysis draws on a case study of Monguí, an Andean town in Colombia.

Monguí is a small rural town 4.234 inhabitants in the eastern mountain range of the Colombian Andes. Of its 69.64 km², 0.75% is designated as urban land, while 68.9 km² is classified as rural. Monguí, along with other nearby rural villages, is dependent on the city of Sogamoso, particularly for access to public and social services, given their proximity, ranging from 30 to 180 minutes of travel time.

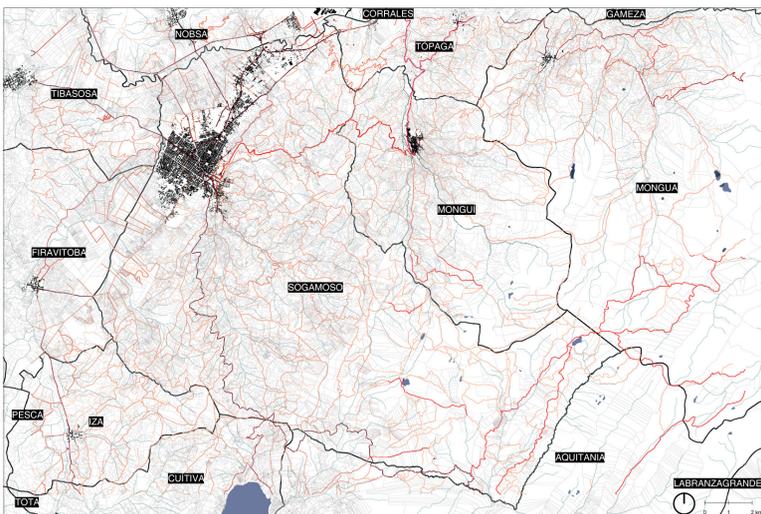


Fig. 1 Map of Monguí and Sogamoso.
Source: Author's work.

Conversely, Sogamoso depends on ecosystem services and labour from these rural areas. The relentless expansion of extractive activities (mining, extensive agriculture, and tourism) from the city into the Monguí's rural territory intersects with protectionist policies, such as the delimitation of the Siscunsi-Ocetá Regional Natural Park¹ (PNR)

In other words, rurality is marked by a dual and inherently oppositional condition of conservative and extractive reserve. On the one hand, rural areas must be preserved as sources of ecosystem services and natural resources. On the other, they are to remain economically subservient to urban centres. This paradoxical dependency positions rurality as a 'reserve', and demands protection for the rural landscape – thereby limiting local agency – while exploiting it for economic purposes.

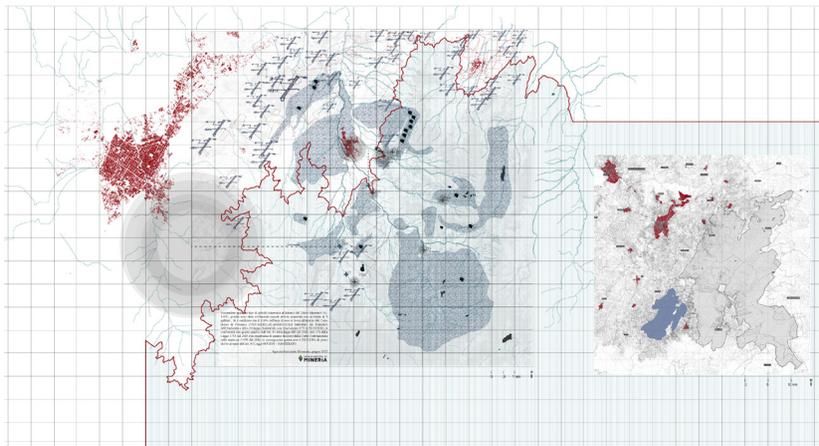


Fig 2. Cartography of Siscunsi-oceta Regional National Park. Park delimitation and mining licenses.

Source: Author's work.

The paper examines the genealogy of the notion of 'reserve' and the consequent notion of 'residuality'. Following Foucault (1984), 'genealogy' is understood as an ontology of the present: a

¹ The Regional Natural Park (PNR) is a category of protected area at the subnational level in Colombia, created by the regional environmental authorities (in Monguí is Corpoboyacá). Its main objective is to conserve strategic ecosystems, such as paramos, high Andean forests, or water recharge areas, guaranteeing environmental sustainability and the well-being of local communities.

cartography of the acting and conflicting powers of the past, used to problematize the present conditions of rurality, questioning how a hegemonic system like colonialism persists in rural territories, now subordinated as suppliers of raw materials, cheap labour, and life-reproduction functions sustaining the urban-industrial centres of accumulation. The concept of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) offers a response – understood as the matrix of multiple dominations (race, class, gender, episteme, and territory) that remain anchored in the common sense of the bodies inhabiting the present.

The Notion of ‘Reserve’ and the Spatialization of Coloniality in Andean Rurality

A genealogical perspective on the notion of ‘reserve’ reveals how it has been historically materialized through bodies and space. In Andean Rurality, this process can be traced back to the historical period of the Colony and the Viceroyalty of New Granada, 1537-1777.

Building on this framework, the residual character of Colombian rurality can be approached as a trans-scalar instrument to consolidate urban and state exclusion, through agrarian reforms and neoliberal policies that have characterized the 20th century and the internal migration patterns within the country².

According to Herrera (1998), in Andean territories, the *pueblos de indios*³ (Indian settlements) were among the earliest instruments of domestication of spaces and, consequently, rural inhabitants, in opposition to the *ciudades de Blancos* (white cities). *Pueblos de Indios* worked as a device to domesticate dwelling and being, aiming to control Indigenous populations by relocating them into fixed and nucleated urban settlements. This process entailed disrupting Indigenous territoriality and imposing a colonial spatial and symbolic order that aligned with the Christianizing project of the ‘noble savage’ (Castro-Gomez,

2 Internal migration is part of the period of exodus of violence, refers to the period 1920-1960, with armed conflicts between Liberal and Conservative parties. The conflict caused more than 113.000 deaths and the forced migration of over two million people from rural areas to cities.

3 These are nucleated settlements, carried out with the first ordinances (1526) and with the authorization of the Spanish crown to concentrate the Indians to teach them the doctrine, through the prohibition and persecution of their living practices considered ‘savages’ (Suarez, 2015: 133).

2021). This was accompanied by the conception of a homogeneous rural space, and a household organization that separated male and female roles (Rappaport Cummins, 2016). The imposition of the patriarchal family model, which displaced the elongated matrilineal family model of Indigenous communities⁴ (Gamboa, 2004), was accompanied by the trauma of uprooting from the land (Herrera, 1998), and the introduction of new crops and animals to meet the dietary needs of the Spaniards living in the white cities (Colmenares, 1984). These changes profoundly modified territorial power relations and represented a material attempt at subalternization. Spatial delimitation, detachment from the land, and spiritual annihilation lay at the core of the colonial project.

The Pueblo de Indios represents the political-religious project, while the notion of 'reserve' was embedded in a second spatial device, driven by economic interest (Herrera, 1998): between 1595 and 1642, the administrative and fiscal figure of the *resguardo* was created (Fals, 1957).

«*Resguardos* were a colonial institution created by the Crown to group Indigenous peoples into *pueblos* and allocate them communal lands, whose ownership remained under royal tutelage. These lands were inalienable and intended to support Indigenous communities so they could meet their tribute and labor obligations. [...] It was introduced as a means of controlling land-based production, primarily through the system of *encomienda*⁵ for the indigenous people» (Colmenares, 1984: 89).

This property ownership ensured that agricultural output went directly to the Crown bypassing colonizers or newcomers. This arrangement also responded to reports of expropriation and the Indigenous demographic catastrophe, which, as Colmenares (Ivi, 139) notes, went beyond the humanitarian intentions, as claimed by the Laws of the Indies for the protection of indigenous peoples, to include economic issues as the loss of population

4 Kinship units maintained autonomy within larger coalitions. Women held central roles in households and communal realms, and maternal lineage determined descent, land rights, and leadership succession.

5 «The *encomienda* was the basis on which social and economic domination was organized during the first centuries of colonization. It was a mechanism of appropriation of the indigenous surplus that combined legal coercion, personal dependence and territorial control» (Colmenares, 1984: 45).

meant the loss of labour, and a decrease in capital accumulation and transfer.

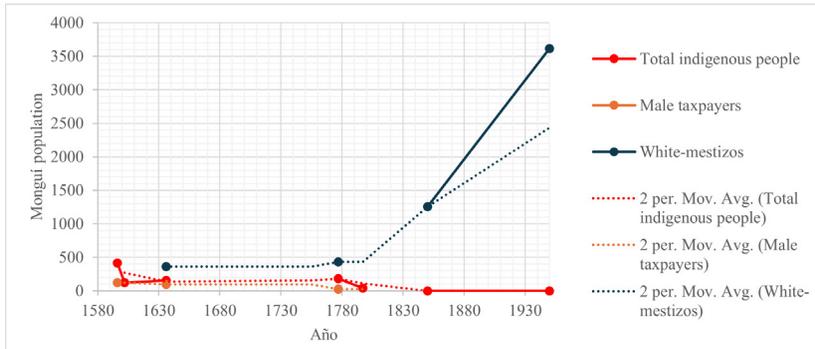


Fig 3. Monguí population chart.

Source: Author's elaboration of data collected by Colmenares, 1984: 102.

In Monguí, the *resguardo* was established on April 21, 1635, by the Visitador Juan de Valcárcel (Fals, 1957: 76). No documents specifying the geographic delimitation have been found even if the 1636 visitation records registers 362 white-mestizos. They were not allowed to own lands, therefore they settled within the *resguardos* and paid rent directly to the Indigenous inhabitants. This type of leasing, which was illegal because the land belonged to the Crown, was well-known to the authorities but went unpunished, as these payments constituted part of the tribute collected (*encomienda*). To report or prohibit these practices would have resulted in a decrease in tribute revenue. Consequently, this arrangement remained formally intact for 119 years, until the Second Royal Decree of Pardo in 1754, when the Crown decided to sell part of these lands to the white-mestizo settlers who had already consolidated their physical occupation of the territory. These sales demonstrate the increasing power of the white-mestizo population and reveal the economic motivations of the crown behind the legitimization of private property. It is here that the paternalistic stance of the Crown towards the Indigenous peoples becomes blurred, revealing the *resguardo* land as a 'reserve' property.

«There were international difficulties that demanded money, and a quick way to get that money was through the sale of royal land. Thus, it was ordered to make compositions, deciding that all land whose owners

could not present titles should be sold, and that land that had not been occupied and used after 1700 should be put up for public auction [...] This process led to the end of many *resguardos* and the partial sale of others, and was the origin of a class of laborers: the *agregados* [tenant farmers] » (Fals, 1957: 83).

In Monguít, the reduction and partial sale of the *resguardo* was carried out in 1755 by the Oidor Verdugo y Oquendo (Mojica, 1948: 197). Finally, in 1777, the total sale of the *resguardo* to the already residing whites-mestizos was accomplished by the Corregidor Campuzano y Lanz. At that moment '*agregados*' were created, another displacement device: expelled Indigenous who had no other choice than to occupy and share other *resguardos*. In the case of Monguít, they were displaced to the adjacent *resguardo*: Mongua in 1777 (Mojica, 1948: 273), «and upon moving, they settled in a portion of territory that continued to be called Monguít, which is now a *vereda* [rural district] of Mongua» (Correa, 1938: 283).

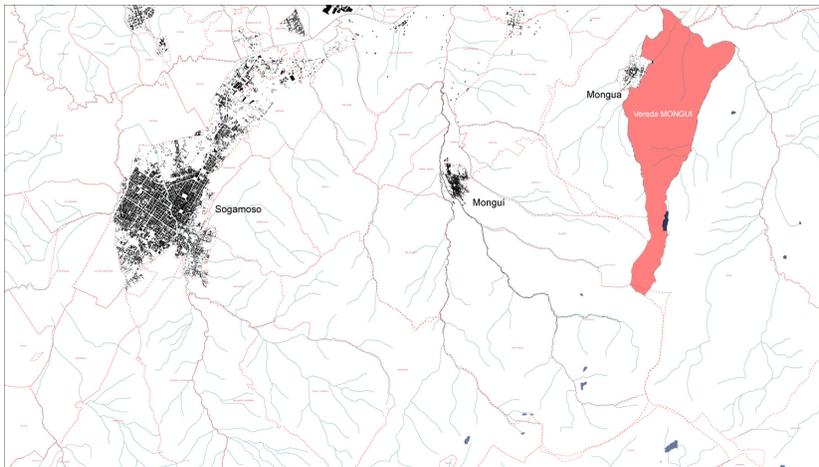


Fig 4. Cartography vereda Monguít. Possible location of the '*agregados*' indigenous people in the municipality of Mongua.
Source: Author's work.

The Indigenous peoples of Monguít attempted to reclaim the *resguardo* status through the Spanish judicial system: «In 1796, Bartolo Pirateque, on his behalf and on behalf of the residents of Monguít, requested the reconstruction of the population and the return of their *resguardos*» (AGN, 1796: 114). In the archival records, it appears as received but not resolved. Migration to *resguardos* already inhabited by culturally different Indigenous

communities often led to conflict. For this reason, another request was submitted the following year, which likewise went unanswered: «The Indians of Monguí complain about the lack of land and the harassment they are victims of in the Town of Mongua and ask to be returned to their town» (AGN, 1797: 550). These petitions highlight the significance of the concept of 'reserve' for the Spanish Crown and the white-mestizo population, who extended their territorial dominion by appropriating the core spaces of rural life: the *pueblo de Indios* and the *resguardo*.

Finally, it is not only land that acquires the character of a reserve for the Crown and the colonial urban elites, but also the bodies. Through the tribute, a biopolitical mechanism of control is consolidated. Tribute was collected in specific amounts of gold, agricultural products, or servitude labour, calculated according to the number of tributary Indigenous people per *resguardo*. Colmenares (1984) and Fals (1957) explain how the taxation systems imposed by the Crown were a mechanism of control and subalternization. These legitimized mechanisms of servitude included the Indigenous tax obligation and personal services (1555), the mining *Mita*⁶ (1570), the urban *Mita* and rental of Indians (1578). This system was further reinforced through the implementation of the patriarchal family housing model because high taxes and demographic decline among Indigenous populations led to the inheritance of debt within nuclear family structures. Those who paid tribute were Indigenous men, either married or single, of productive age – typically between 18 and 50 years old (Colmenares, 1984: 65). However, agricultural and artisanal tribute was produced by the family unit. As such, the *resguardo* emerges as an economic and spatial institution that illustrates the threefold logic of exclusion and reservation within rurality: (1) agricultural and service-based exploitation, (2) reduction and partial sale, and (3) total sale.

The Residual Character of Rurality

With the end of the *resguardos* in 1810, individual property ownership triumphed (Fals, 1957: 98). In the 19th century, driven by ideas of strengthening the economic power of the nation-state, state policies focused on the colonization of *tierras baldías* (vacant lands). These were legitimized through Law 14 of 1870 Use of Vacant Lands and Management of Colonists. Later, in 1961

⁶ Forced labor system.

the agrarian reform aimed to redistribute land by promoting the colonization of 'nobody's land'. In 1970, during the Alliance for Progress in collaboration with the United States, the Properly Exploited Property (DNP, 1970) was introduced.⁷ This sequence of policies reflects a recurring denial of rural subjects' presence through the legal fiction of 'nobody's land'. Through legal loopholes regarding private property or non-nucleated/urban settlement patterns, rural territories continue to be put by the State under a totalizing and residual category known as the '*resto rural disperso*' (scattered rural remainder) (DNP, 2014: 7). This term was used by the Colombian State until 2001 to describe everything that fell outside the urban domain. Residuality, therefore, defines the sphere of Colombian rurality. This notion flattens the rural dimension, its spaces, ecologies, landscapes, and inhabitants, by interpreting it solely through the lens of production (agriculture) or, in some cases, protection, as with so-called 'natural reserves'. As a result, land-grabbing processes have been produced and reproduced, tied to the social and economic marginalization of certain bodies, spaces, and rural territories.

The exploitation is also carried out through legal and illegal mining. Of the 22 mines surveyed in 2022, only two held authorized extraction titles. These two companies have been operating for more than 25 years and possess titles granted before the foundation of the Siscunsi-Ocetá RNP. According to former mine workers currently seeking to legalize their mining rights, their efforts have been obstructed by the influence and power that large companies exert over regulatory agencies. This legal paradox becomes particularly evident when one considers the scale of production and the environmental harm caused by these legally sanctioned companies – revealing how environmental regulations and legislation are often subordinated to market interests. Those operating at the margins of legality are predominantly the sons of peasant farmers, equipped with technical training that enables them to explore and assess the feasibility of mineral extraction on their own land. However, tensions have emerged between these miners and local farmers and environmental advocates, particularly around issues such as poor waste management, water scarcity, and landscape degradation.

7 To consult the thesis by Avila Torres, D. (2013). *Representaciones del campesinado cundiboyacense 1976-1990*.

Finally, the conception of rurality as a reserve is further reinforced by protectionist policies that designate peasant-owned lands as providers of ecosystem services. Although these policies aim to conserve biodiversity, their implementation frequently overlooks the subsistence economies and traditional land-use practices of local communities. This dynamic is exemplified by the case of the Siscunsi-Ocetá Regional Natural Park (RNP), where regional legislation overlaps with entire plots of privately-owned peasant land, thereby restricting customary agricultural activities. As a result, the burden of conservation, along with the conflicts it generates, is disproportionately placed on rural inhabitants, who are compelled to navigate the tensions between environmental tourism initiatives and their own need to sustain subsistence livelihoods on their land.

Care Infrastructures

In response to the absence of spatial policies beyond a protectionist and extractivist vision of rurality *care infrastructures* becomes central to understanding how rural communities sustain life. While the term 'infrastructure' typically refers to operative, artificial, and functional systems this definition proves insufficient when addressing the lived realities of Rural Andean territories. Simone, in *People as Infrastructure* (2004), expands this notion by demonstrating how in the absence of formal systems, infrastructure becomes embodied in the relational, affective, and everyday interactions between people and their environments. This broader understanding is essential for interpreting Andean rurality, where infrastructure is not merely technical, but social and ecological: built through generations of interdependence, reciprocity, and collective life-making.

This reframing invites us to recognize *care* as a central logic of territorial dynamics. Tronto (1993) defines care as «everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world in such a way that all can live in it as well as possible» (Ivi, 103) – a definition that resonates deeply with peasant realities, where the boundaries between care, labour, and ecological stewardship are blurred. In these subalternized contexts, the ethics of care proposed by Tronto becomes not just a moral stance but a material and political infrastructure for survival, autonomy, and resistance. It allows us to understand care not as an auxiliary function within

capitalism, but as a counter-hegemonic ecology.

The concept of care infrastructures thus emerges as a category to make visible the embodied, affective, and symbolic mechanisms that sustain life under overlapping regimes of extractivism and abandonment. From a peripheral position (Anzaldúa, 1987), rural subjects navigate and reconfigure these hegemonic conditions through practices that, while less functional to capital accumulation, are fundamental to the maintenance of socio-ecologies that uphold the collective character of the territory. Care infrastructures emerge within the interstices of contested rurality, shaped by the persistent condition of being a reserve for global, urban, and care demands, and functioning as an essential mechanism for territorial defence and coexistence.

Care infrastructures emerge as forms of resistance rooted in the body – land – territory framework (Cabnal, 2010). This perspective understands the defence of territory as an extension of caring for one's body – the first site of contestation and resistance. Caring for the land thus entails opposing extractivist practices and dispossession, confronting all forms of violence that threaten its ecological and cultural integrity. At the same time, it embraces a notion of territory as a physical, cultural, social, and political space in which collective care takes place. In this context, vulnerability and struggle transcend everyday life to become a political act of reclamation and preservation.

To understand how these care infrastructures materialize, semi-structured surveys were conducted. The findings reveal that rurality functions not only as a reserve of care but also as a collective territory for political re-existence. Carried out in 2022 with members of 24 families from Monguí, the surveys focused on household economics and community organization, allowing for the identification of three distinct care infrastructures: (1) the extended family/neighbourhood infrastructure; (2) the sustained collective infrastructure; and (3) the collective emergency infrastructure.

Extended Family/neighbourhood Infrastructure

Care relies on an expanded network of caregivers. In some families women work in agriculture, lodging, or home-based businesses and receive support from relatives and neighbours in care for children and crops.

«I have helped raise two of my cousins. My aunt is a single mother and worked all the time, sometimes having to travel outside of Bogotá. So, my cousin was raised with us until he was five years old, between my grandmother's house and ours, and she would come every 15 days when she could. Then, when he started school, his mother paid another aunt in Bogotá to take care of him in the afternoons, and when he went on vacation, he stayed with us» (M.B.)

This paid care work is informal and payments are not always monetary – ranging from 5.000 to 15.000 COP per hour – but are also made in nature, such as with food or lodging (Quevedo *et al.*, 2021). As Federici (2020) explains, the attack on social reproduction disproportionately affects women, who compensate for the lack of policies and spaces that guarantee social protection through their own labour. This has resulted in a condition of a 'double presence'⁸ (Balbo, 1987) as caregivers on paid work and unpaid responsibilities. Consequently, mothers rely on other women, often within extended kin or social networks.

According to the national time use survey (DANE, 2022) in Colombia the total average working hours of women in rural areas is 14 hours per day; 62% of this time is unpaid work, which means women in rural areas receive payment for 38% of their daily working time. On the other hand, the average working hours of men in rural areas is 11 hours and 29 minutes per day; 27% of this time is unpaid work, which means they receive payment for 73% of their daily working time. The distribution of time between paid and unpaid work for men does not change between rural and urban areas; while rural women spend an average of 48 minutes more on unpaid work and 3 hours and 29 minutes less on paid work compared to urban ones. This asymmetry in the distribution of time and remuneration responds to a logic of subordination of rurality, in which subsistence economies, linked to land, feminized bodies and unpaid work, function as reserves of care. Rurality is then marginalized and actively instrumentalized as a space of life extraction and gratuitous social reproduction.

Fals explains that the fragmentation of indigenous reserves and the contradiction between dispersed property ownership and the nuclear family model are currently evidenced by fragmented and

⁸ Balbo refers to the 'double presence' of women in the labour-market and in the domestic care work.

peripheral properties within the municipalities (Fals, 1957: 129). In Monguí, 18 families cultivated plots located at a considerable distance from their homes, generating dependencies and placing a greater care burden on neighbouring households.

«Right now, we have a vegetable garden, a couple of rabbits, and about 1.200 m² of crops – currently potatoes, but at other times we grow peas, corn, and beans. But it's a lot of work. If it weren't for Doña Carmen (the neighbour) or my mother-in-law, who come to help me, cook lunch sometimes, or feed the rabbits when I can't make it up there, it would be really hard. Besides, I work at a kindergarten during the week, and on Sundays I help my sister at her restaurant. My husband can rarely help me, because he works in the steel mills. [...] When would I have time to do it all? » (C.A.).



Fig. 5 Fragmented property and peasant displacement.
Source: Author's own work.

This infrastructure calls for a spatial reimagining. How might certain spaces enable the redistribution of care? Reframing care as a territorial function – rather than a private or domestic responsibility – necessitates the design and planning of spaces capable of disrupting existing asymmetries. This entails the

development of collective spatial strategies that alleviate overburdened and feminized subsistence infrastructures, while fostering proximity, mutual support, and justice in rural life.

Sustained Collective Infrastructure

This refers to solidarity-based works, people refer to them as '*Mandatos*'. These are events organized by the community, at the neighbourhood, district, or inter-municipal level, to carry out maintenance, restoration, or the direct construction of structures for public use. According to residents, several rural roads, the elderly care centre⁹, the church, and various chapels in the municipality have been built that way. These collective works also concern reconstruction of houses at risk, with fundraising through the «*bazar* or telethon». This is a method of collecting money, in which people are usually located in the town square on Sundays, and sell food, cultural activities, raffles and games, for a collective or private cause.



Fig. 6 Mandato del Tejal.
Source: ©Ricardo Saenz.

⁹ The rural elderly care centre offers daytime services, such as lunch, health, and recreational activities. It is managed by the local health centre and the municipal government.

«One 'Mandato' was for the Tejal bridge, which was falling apart, and the mayor's office, nor anyone else, was doing anything. That bridge connects the center with the rural areas of Tebgua. We called people together through Facebook and on the street [...] The mayor's office lent the backhoe, people donated money, food, and materials, but the most important thing is those who put in their work [...] Different sessions were held, from 05/07/2020 to February 2021, people came especially on weekends, when they could take time from their chores» (R.S.).

«With the 'bazares', we managed to buy the uniforms for the town band, raise money and materials for the community hall of the *vallado*, or for example for when people have gotten sick, that they have to pay for operations, or very expensive chemotherapy in Bogotá, and that the family does not have how else to help» (F.B.).

L.B. says «in the end we do know that today there is someone who is going through a difficult situation, then we show solidarity because we can all contribute a grain of sand and you don't know if tomorrow it will be our turn». The notion of vulnerability and collective interdependence is encompassed in the subsistence perspective (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999) which goes beyond the connotation of underdevelopment and poverty. It focuses on the production of life, instead of on the market. Interdependence is the mechanism on which subsistence communities are based.

Collective Emergency Infrastructure

The radical Interdependence (Lang and Mokrani, 2013) co-produced spaces where human agency and ecological systems are deeply intertwined. This infrastructure is particularly recognized in the co-care of the territory, especially after some emergencies. People organize not only to extinguish fires within the municipality, but also to protest against extractive companies and environmental protection policies that grant licenses while disregarding their subsistence economies. They also coordinate among neighbours to negotiate austerity measures and water distribution during periods of drought.

«What we do is take care of the territory, because that is what we depend on for the future, like with the moor fire [...]. The church and the mayor's office warned through the speakers, and between the people of

the town, the police and the civil defense we organized to go up and put it out. There were people cooking at night, while shifts were made to turn off what we could» (L.B.).

Open Considerations of the Spatiality of care in the Andean rurality

The first infrastructure – rooted in extended family and neighborhood networks – emerges in the domestic margins between homes and fields. It reflects a dual form of relegation: geopolitical and internal to rurality itself, where care asymmetries become more pronounced. This infrastructure must also transition toward the collective, acknowledging that care cannot continue to rely solely on isolated or feminized bodies.

Collective care infrastructures represent a means of spatial collectivization, transforming physical and infrastructural needs into shared responsibilities. Situated in streets, plazas, *páramos*, and bridges, these infrastructures challenge the conception of rurality as a reserve or residual space, instead highlighting it as a pre-existing collectivity – an alternative to financial capitalism. Giving space to care implies that these human infrastructures become spatial devices, whose redistribution demands new frameworks of participation. This prompts a crucial question: how might external actors – such as tourists – become engaged not as extractors or spectators, but as co-responsible participants?

This raises a key issue: how can care be decentralized spatially? Beyond the plaza, what other collective forms might emerge that resist centralized planning while recognizing rural fragmentation as a condition for autonomy?

To break with the dominant dialectic of care infrastructures, the state, the market, and urban disciplines must become active agents in repairing historically extractive territories. This requires a shift away from protectionist planning toward the recognition of rural dispersion, non-urban settlements, and community-based care as essential spatial strategies.

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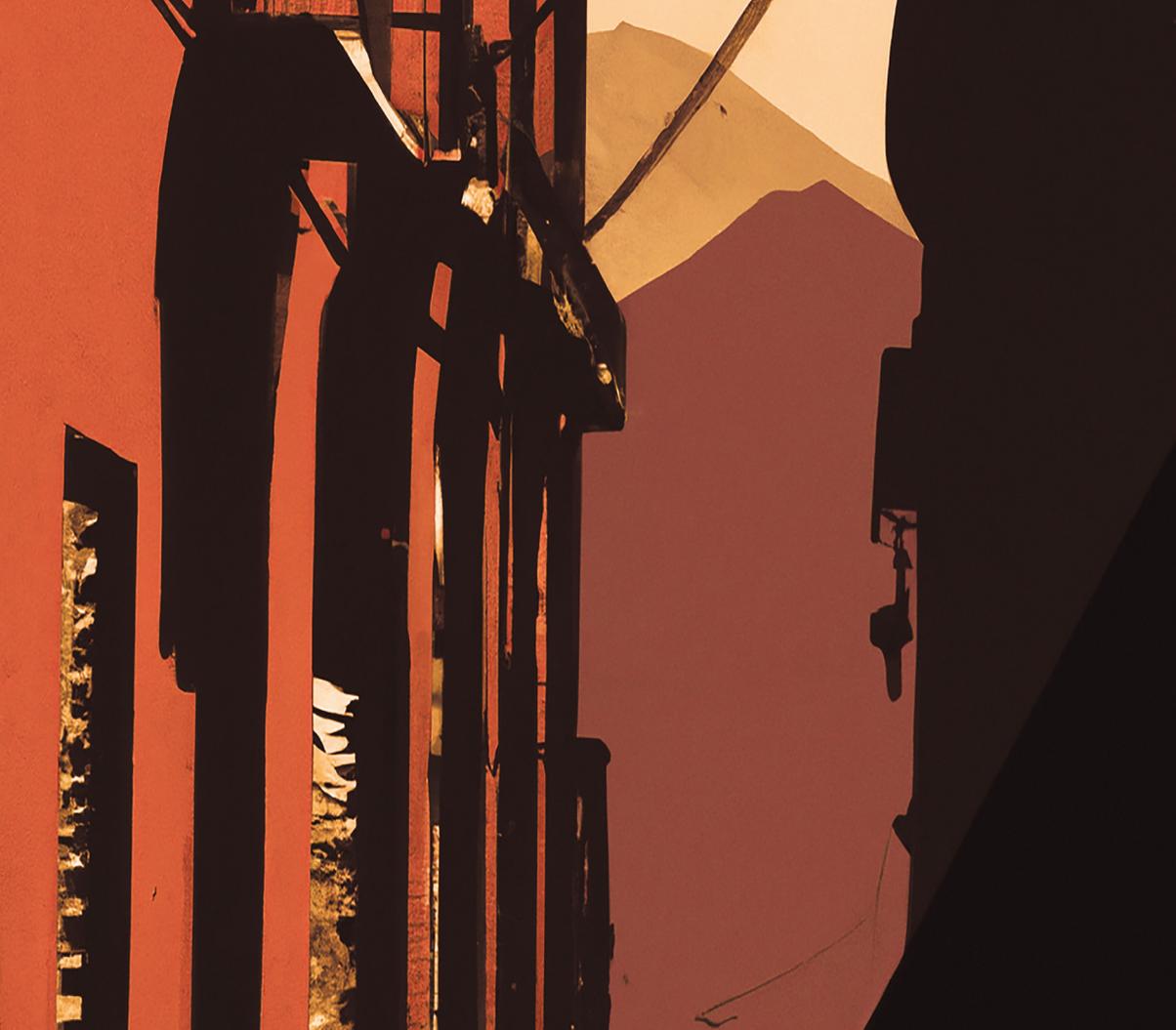
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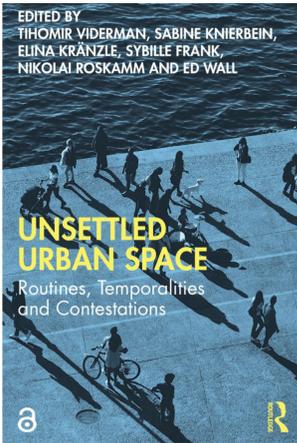
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RECENSIONI/REVIEWS

**Unsettled Urban Space:
Routines, Temporalities and Contestations.**
Edited by Tihomir Viderman, Sabine Knierbein, Elina Kränzle, Sybille Frank, Nikolai Roskamm and Ed Wall.
Routledge (2023)
Martina Bosone



Unsettled Urban Space is a compelling and timely contribution to contemporary urban studies. Edited by Tihomir Viderman, Sabine Knierbein, Elina Kränzle, Sybille Frank, Nikolai Roskamm, and Ed Wall, the volume proposes a radical reconceptualization of urban space as inherently unsettled, dynamic, and relational. From the opening pages, the editors articulate a clear objective: to rejoin the social, cultural, and political dimensions of urban everyday life (p. 4), emphasizing the

interdependence between collective modes of life and individual bodies (p. 5).

The notion of «unsettlement» serves not merely as a descriptive category but as an analytical lens to investigate the continuous processes through which urban space is shaped, challenged, and reimagined. The editors advocate for a renewed perspective that recognizes how urban environments are co-produced by overlapping layers of routines, temporalities, and contestations. This vision restores the intricate links between daily life experiences, socio-political structures, and cultural meanings, offering a holistic framework that captures the richness and complexity of urban existence.

The distinction between a synchronic or diachronic analysis of the relationships between humans and their environment is particularly interesting, as it highlights the fact that the particular relationship between land, physical-spatial layout and inhabitants reflects the multidimensional values that people assumes as

guide to orient their actions in the space and in the time, thus determining different modes of transformation and development of urban contexts (Fusco Girard, Trillo and Bosone 2019).

Grounded in a relational understanding of the city, the volume draws inspiration from critical urban theories (Roy 2016; Brenner 2009; Lefebvre 1946) and affective approaches (Curley 1985; Reckwitz 2002; Hardt 2007). The editors conceptualize urban space as a fluctuating and affective field rather than a fixed structure (p. 9). This approach underlines that individual actions, emotions, and routines are deeply embedded within broader collective patterns (Garfnkel 1967; de Certeau 1984; Butler 1990), reinforcing the inseparability of personal and societal dimensions in urban life (p. 5).

The book is structured into three interconnected sections: *Urban Routines*, *Urban Temporalities*, and *Urban Contestations*, each providing rich empirical illustrations and theoretical insights.

The first part, *Urban Routines*, highlights how everyday practices produce and transform urban spaces: the power of bodily routines can disrupt and reframe collective urban experiences (pp. 19-25), even unsettling normative gender dynamics (pp. 26-39). A politicized management of public space impacts social interactions (pp. 40-51) and, conversely, these interactions, in their freedom of expression and intent, are carriers of collective values that embrace multidimensional issues of the public space (freedom of use, right to public space, economic availability, social relations). The multidimensionality and complexity of the issues involved in the dynamics of people's use and transformation of space necessarily require consideration of the different needs and visions expressed by different categories of stakeholders operating in urban contexts. In this context, research plays a fundamental role in reconnecting theoretical and cognitive investigations to dynamics that occur thanks to and beyond concrete projects, both at the physical and social levels, thus attributing to researchers the dual role of active makers and academics (pp. 52-66). The organization and the management of urban routines (both from institutional and community perspective) have a central role in determining mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion linked both to socio-cultural dimension (the reinforcement or to the instability of collective memory) (pp. 67-77) and to socio-physical dynamics (tensions between different

groups, job insecurity and housing exclusion) (pp. 78-90 and pp. 91-107).

All the abovementioned issues cannot be separated from a reflection about the role of time in understanding urban transformations. In the same way of urban routines, in the volume a very topical aspects emerges regarding the multiple perspective by which the time has to be considered: it is not only a perceptual question (how different social groups experience and perceive urban time), but also a social question that regards the relation between the needs linked to a specific age and the capacity of a space to satisfy them (pp. 129-139). Furthermore, it influences also the way through which the temporality of strategies of control and social ordering influences personal biographies (pp. 114-128) and community actions (pp. 140-152), thus determining the rhythms of settlement and unsettlement (pp. 153-165) with related impacts at social, cultural, environmental and economic level. So, temporality is interpreted as the cyclicity of urban change, determined and influenced by capitalist dynamics, compared to which transformations in the sense of belonging to a place and the collective memory occurred (pp. 153-165). However, temporality is also interpreted as a historical time in which the action assumes specific ideological and political connotations (pp. 166-178 and pp. 179-182).

In the final section, the authors introduce the urban contestations as practices that questioning power relations prevailing in the urban space, highlighting the importance of embrace dissent and difference as constitutive elements of public space (chapter. 22). The contestation is considered as generative practice that, through a positioning and placement act, «Setzung», (pp. 214-223), can transform the affective and political landscape of cities (pp. 202-213), assuming also a cultural mission in articulating alternative urban imaginaries and challenging dominant narratives of development (pp. 224-235). Of course, also in this case insitutions and citizens play a fundamental role in the evolution of urban contestations both in terms of impact scale (Brenner and Schmid 2015) and of coherence between goals and the effects of real actions: local disputes can become wider political crisis (pp. 236-247) and caring for the poor and providing services may betray their aim reproducing instead esclusion and social control.

Across all chapters, the theme of interdependence between individual agency and collective structures is consistently emphasized. Urban space is a living field where personal emotions, social routines, political struggles, and cultural practices continuously interact. The book shows that unsettlement is not a marginal phenomenon but a fundamental characteristic of urban life, opening opportunities for rethinking belonging, participation, and spatial justice.

Moreover, *Unsettled Urban Space* enriches the understanding of cities as spaces where affective, social, and political dimensions co-exist.

In conclusion, *Unsettled Urban Space* offers a powerful and inspiring contribution to urban studies. By reconnecting the social, cultural, and political aspects of urban life and emphasizing the deep interdependence between individuals and collective formations, the volume provides an essential framework for critically engaging with contemporary urban realities, highlighting the need to interpret them in an evolutionary perspective. It is a vital resource for scholars, practitioners, and activists committed to understanding and shaping more inclusive, dynamic, and equitable urban spaces.

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**Thinking and acting with care ‘as well as possible’.
Insights from *Matters of Care* by María Puig de la Bellacasa.
University of Minnesota Press (2017)
Giusy Pappalardo**



While conducting my fieldwork for a research project focused on multifaceted forms of territorial heritage (Magnaghi, 2020), I sat on the wet soil in front of an old house surrounded by trees, weeds, ants, and piles of things waiting to find their place, in a messy yet vibrant yard far from the chaos of the city.

Lara, a young farmer in her thirties with a background in anthropology, sat close to me. When I asked why she moved here, she had no doubt about

sharing the story of her choice:

«Someone has to take care of this small corner of the world, this house, these trees, these nonhuman things. It is not just because I own it or have inherited it; heritage can be a burden, an obligation, a chain that perpetuates oppressive dynamics. It is because I chose it. Care cannot be imposed on anyone» (my thoughts, written based on Lara’s story; notes from the field, 2022).

She was talking while I touched the soil, recognizing it as a living entity, woven into a web of interdependent life, immersed in a net of caring relationships: the garden, the open-air kitchen, the animals wandering nearby, the fruit hanging within reach, the composter.

The conversation and the surrounding landscape recalled *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds* by María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), published by the University of Minnesota Press in the *Posthumanities* series (258 pages). This book, I argue, has significant potential to shape a transdisciplinary perspective on urban studies. Working at the intersection of feminist materialist epistemologies and

environmental humanities, María Puig de la Bellacasa is a scholar who transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries. Moving from the assumption that the world ‘we’ inhabit is a complex web of life – recognizing that ‘we’ encompasses a range of positionalities – books like *Matters of Care* provide a profound exploration of these intricacies.

This work contributes to reframing the understanding of socioecological dynamics and proposes pathways for ‘thinking and acting with care’, not as a romanticized or unproblematic notion, but as a critical framework, even within ambivalent and contested terrains.

The reading is engaging yet demands ‘careful’ – a deliberately chosen word – attention, as it explores the intricate domain of Science and Technology Studies (STS). This academic field emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, profoundly shaped by Thomas Kuhn’s seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

STS examines the interplay between scientific knowledge, technological systems, and society, emphasizing that science and technology are deeply entwined with social dynamics – far from neutral or purely objective – and significantly shaped by power structures. STS scholars explore how scientific knowledge is constructed and validated, its societal implications, ethical concerns in technological development, and its relationship with policy and governance.

In examining the cross-fertilization of diverse forms of knowledge, STS underscores the importance of civic engagement in the co-production of knowledge and the ongoing challenge of bridging the gap between expertise and public understanding.

STS critically interrogates the concept of the technological fix – the idea that technical solutions alone can resolve the contemporary systemic crisis – highlighting how this approach often obscures its deeper political dimensions.

The crisis, when viewed through Puig de la Bellacasa’s perspective that problematizes the notion of ‘we’ that prompted it (Do ‘we’ all have the same role? Who is included in this undifferentiated ‘we’?), can be conceptualized within the framework of the Capitalocene (Moore, 2015), which centres capitalism’s role at the core of the crisis.

Returning to STS, this field has been profoundly influenced by the

French thinker Bruno Latour, a key figure in developing Actor-Network Theory. His concept of «matters of concern» (Latour, 2008) – which challenges the presumed objectivity of «matters of fact» – serves as a pillar in Puig de la Bellacasa’s work.

Both in the Introduction (*The Disruptive Thought of Care*) and in Chapter One (*Assembling Neglected Things*), Puig de la Bellacasa’s perspective is clear when shifting from Latourian «matters of concern» to her feminist frame of «matters of care».

«I propose a notion of “matters of care” crafted in discussion with the problems stirred up by Bruno Latour’s idea of “matters of concerns” and the knowledge politics underpinning it. I read Latour’s move to rename matters of facts as matters of concerns as responding to aesthetic, ethico-political, and affective issues faced by constructivist thinking and its particular form of criticism of things. Not only does Latour’s notion represent a particularly influential way of conceiving knowledge politics in technoscience, but it also introduces the need to care in a particular way. This conversation with Latour reveals that the implications of care are thicker than the politics turning around matters of (public) concern might allow thinking. Involving a feminist vision of care in the politics of things both encourages and problematizes the possibility of translating ethico-political caring into ways of thinking with nonhumans» (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 26).

Thinking with nonhumans recalls the opening vignette of this text and becomes explicit in Chapter 5 of the Book (*Soil Times: The Pace of Ecological Care*), where Puig de la Bellacasa engages with the specific landscape of socioecological care related to soil.

Between these chapters, readers can explore Knowledge Politics (Part I) and Speculative Ethics (Part II) through the author’s connections with a constellation of thinkers, each adding specific layers to the epistemology of care. One is Donna Haraway, who emphasizes the importance of positionality in constructing situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991). In other words, Haraway argues for abandoning the presumption of universal and absolute objectivity in the processes of knowing and narrating.

Although these concepts have been more or less integrated into the theory and practice of urban studies (see, for example, Sandercock, 1998), such an approach often remains overlooked when it comes to a deep and committed reflection on how scholars and practitioners construct their narratives related to

the contexts they engage with.

To what extent is positionality fully incorporated into the shaping of contexts and processes through scholars' and experts' narratives in the field? From my perspective, this remains an open question that deserves attention.

Haraway also illuminates the centrality of relational ontology, focusing on interconnectedness and kinships and their potential to help 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) of the contemporary age, differentiating the uncritical 'we' of the Anthropocene from a variety of nonhuman perspectives. With Donna Haraway, care is first and foremost a relational act.

However, as Puig de la Bellacasa states, this relationship is not always bidirectional; what is being cared for does not necessarily reciprocate the same act of care. It is the web of caring relationships and care labour that shapes the world, but this cannot be assumed to be a burden for some without recognition or at least problematization, particularly when considering caregivers or care workers (see also Federici, 2012; Barca, 2020).

In this web of caring relationships, a question remains: Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? Addressing this question cannot be considered separately from exploring spatial dynamics as power dynamics. Positionality matters in the form it takes within space – within our houses, offices, public spaces, neighbourhoods, cities, and rural and metropolitan contexts – as conditions that actively participate in the web of care.

What can be done from the perspective of 'undisciplined' scholars – including myself in this group – who consider the care of socio-spatial and natureculture dynamics central to the work we do within the territories we engage with? María Puig de la Bellacasa does not offer any easy or readily applicable solutions, but she certainly contributes to shaping our perspective, 'as well as possible', with her words throughout the book.

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STRISCIA/STRIP

Of Continuity and Disruption: Through Lived Space and Representation

Tihomir Viderman

The four posters presented here were developed by Saskia Wacke and Ruqian Sun, Master's students in architecture and planning at BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg. They were created as part of a study excursion to Naples, undertaken from 2 to 9 October 2023 and jointly conceived by the Chair of Urban Management at BTU and the Institute for Research on Innovation and Services for Development of the National Research Council in Naples (CNR-IRISS). Framed around the conceptual tension between continuity and disruption, the excursion explored how this tension is inscribed in the material, social, and symbolic textures of the city.

The posters were developed as two complementary pairs. One poster was produced before the excursion, responding to the narrative representation of Naples in Elena Ferrante's novel *My Brilliant Friend*. The other was produced afterward, drawing on situated encounters with the city. Together, these paired posters explore how perceptions shift through embodied experience of urban space and its representation. They also reflect how visual methods in architecture and planning can support relational understandings of urban space, shaped by overlapping discursive, spatial, and temporal layers. Creating two posters, before and after the encounter with the lived space of the city, invited students to reflect on how interpretations are shaped by positionality, situated experience, and the act of representation itself. The 1925 essay on Naples by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis served as a conceptual anchor for this explorative exercise. Blending personal observation with critical reflection, they describe the city as porous, challenging compartmentalised views of urban life by showing how spatial and temporal conditions unfold through the interplay of solidity and fluidity, visibility and concealment, sensed and formal hierarchies, tangible and imagined boundaries. The notion of porosity foregrounds the city as a field shaped through the

entanglement of lived space, representation, imagination, and interpretation. This attention to contingency also unsettles the boundary between experience and its representation. The posters produced before and after the excursion visualise this relational topology. Translating impressions from text and from encounter with lived space into visual form shows how interpretation not only reshapes what is represented and experienced but is also reshaped by those engaging with it. This interplay between experience and representation formed the conceptual foundation of an open-ended process, where interpretation shaped and expressed students' understanding of how urban space is produced. Instead of closure, it invited attention to temporal fragmentation and the imagining of future possibilities.

Fig. 1 Visualisation of a house in Naples based on the reading of Elena Ferrante's novel. (Author: Saskia Wacke, 2023).

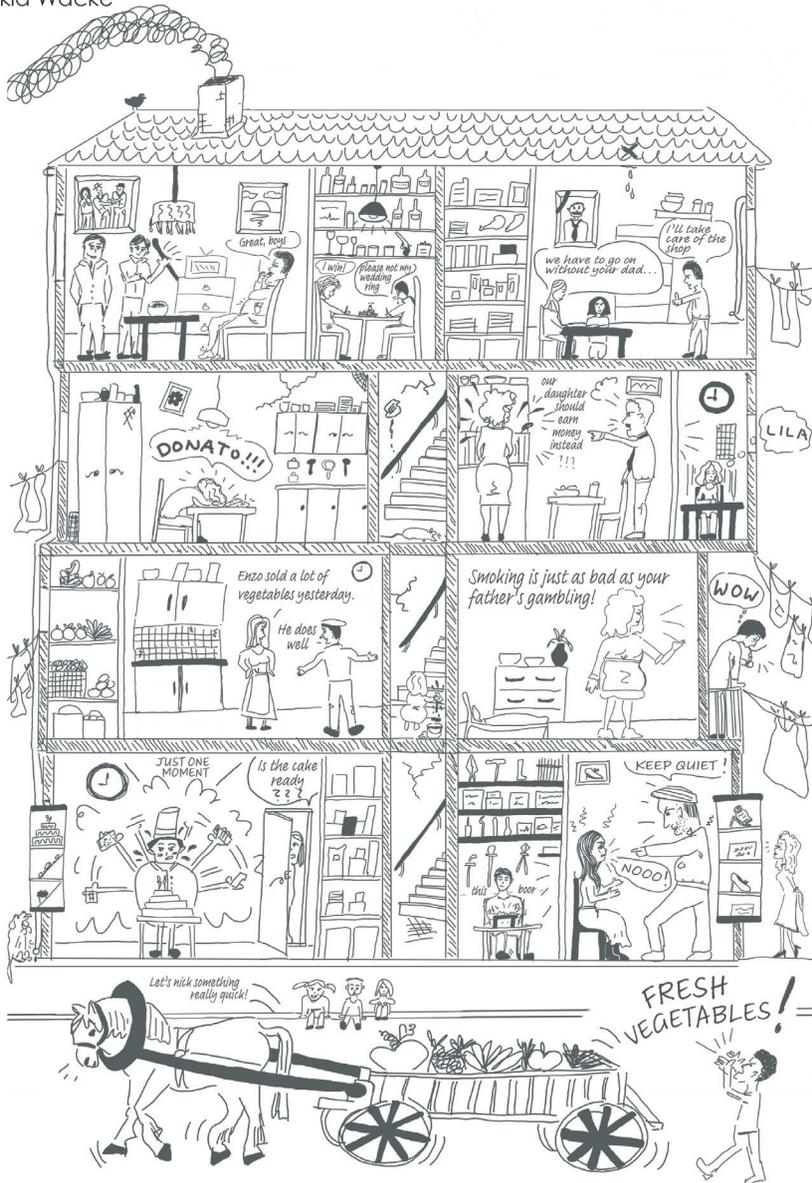
Fig. 2 Visualisation of a house in Naples based on experience from the excursion. (Author: Saskia Wacke, 2023).

Fig. 3 Perception of urban life in Naples from the reading of Elena Ferrante's novel. (Author: Ruqian Sun, 2023).

Fig. 4 Perception of urban life in Naples from situated encounters with the city. (Author: Ruqian Sun, 2023).

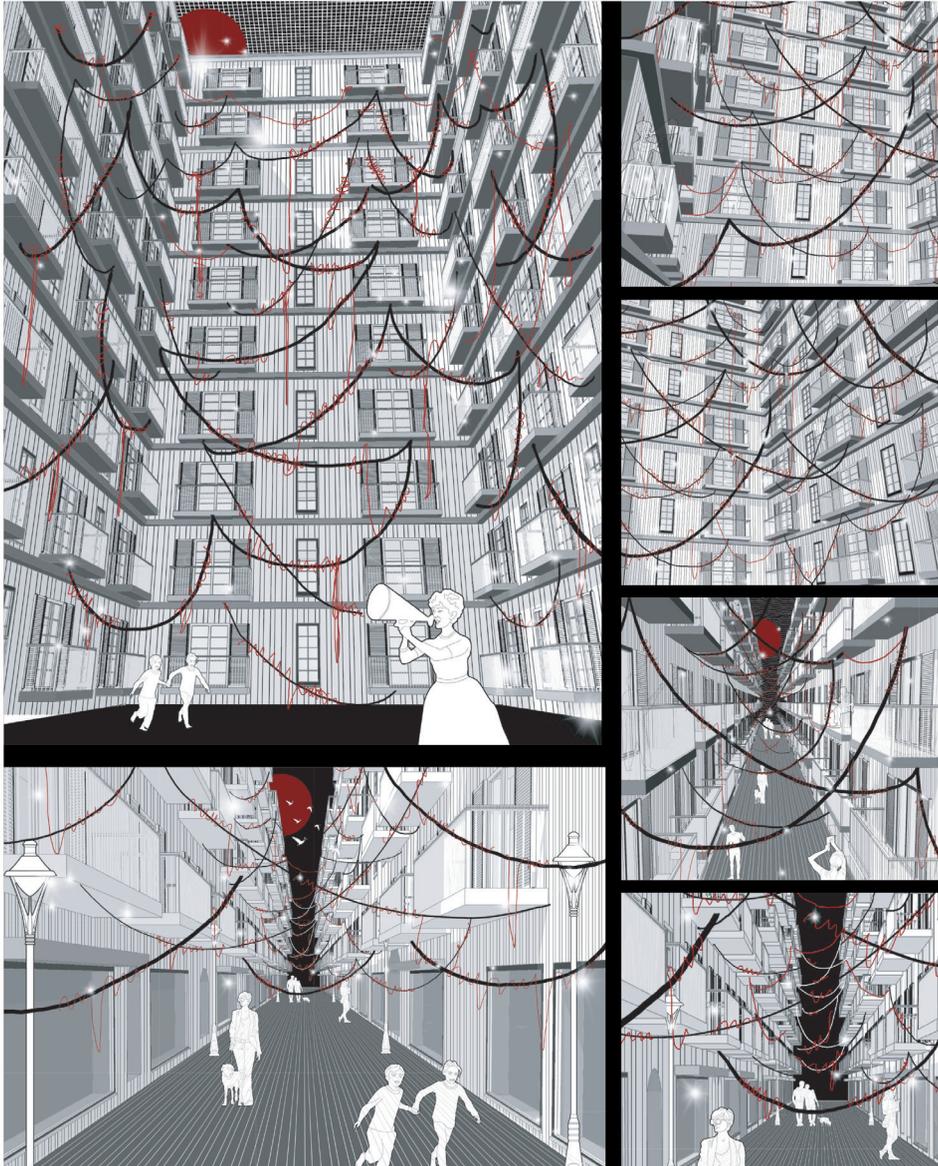
A House in Naples

Saskia Wacke



Naples' Nets

Ruqian Sun





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PORTFOLIO/PORTFOLIO

Naples: Continuity and Disruption

Tihomir Viderman
with photographs by Stefania Ragozino
and Tihomir Viderman

Continuity and disruption formed the conceptual lens of a study excursion to Naples undertaken by Master's students in architecture and planning at BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg from 2 to 9 October 2023. The excursion was jointly conceived and organised by the Chair of Urban Management at BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg and the Institute for Research on Innovation and Services for Development of the National Research Council in Naples (CNR-IRISS). Naples was approached as a city shaped by the interplay of permanence and transformation, repetition and rupture, inheritance and reinvention.

Change is immanent in the city. It runs through street life, stories, the spectacle of public spaces, the city's architecture, and the landscape, dominated by the silhouette of an active volcano on the horizon and the openness of the sea. The dense urban fabric reveals centuries of adaptation, where spatial forms carry traces of past struggles, desires, and negotiated ways of living. Continuity manifests in morphological layers of the city, in buildings, plot structures, spatial arrangements, street patterns and enduring public spaces. It appears in habitual routines that structure collective life, by normalising spatial and temporal rhythms, from the scale of the individual body to collectively negotiated social orders (Shields, 2013; Viderman and Knierbein, 2018). Daily choreographies of movement, market trade, home-making practices, or the spatial arrangements defining the permeability between home and public space illustrate how repetition structures daily life and reinforces spatial familiarity (Jacobs, 1961). These rhythms enable tacit knowledge to accumulate (Lefebvre, 1991), sedimenting social memory into the city's material and symbolic textures (Viderman *et al.*, 2022). Disruption emerges where these patterns are fractured. It manifests through moments of violence, political rupture, social upheaval, sudden shifts in economic regimes, or cultural reorientation. These moments are not simply erased from the urban fabric. They are absorbed into the city's layers and

continue to shape how space is lived and imagined. Their traces persist – in collapsing structures, displacement, severed accessibility, and socially transmitted postmemories (Mady, 2018). These disruptions reverberate through lived space, intensifying tensions in cities marked by individualisation, de-solidarisation, and the rise of a politics of fear (Ajanovic *et al.*, 2015; Viderman *et al.*, 2022).

Urban form and its horizon of meaning are continuously produced and reproduced through socio-political tensions and materialities of everyday life. They are conceived through expert visions and contested representations, lived through everyday routines and encounters, and experienced and imagined through visual, discursive, and affective registers (Lefebvre, 1991). Individuals and collectives alike are entangled in these dynamics through socio-politically ambivalent relations, which are performative of both visible and invisible structural conditions (Viderman and Knierbein, 2018). The tension between continuity and disruption reflects shifting configurations of power that manifest in urban space materially and discursively (Lehtovuori, 2010).

Naples is imbued with power, the power of nature, of institutions, of organised crime, of people, of everyday life. In recent years, large parts of the city have been reinterpreted and repurposed, shaped by the tension between unfulfilled promises of urban growth promoted by the post-war welfare state and emergent practices of reclaiming and reimagining space. The city's layered morphology reveals how urban space occupies a prominent position in negotiations over the urban condition, channeling the hopes, needs, and claims of multiple institutional and non-institutional actors (Massey, 2005). Continuity and disruption do not appear as opposites but as overlapping temporalities. Each carries political charge. Continuity is associated with temporalities that are perceived as stabilizing, while disruption evokes temporalities in which urban space appears in turmoil, routines break down, time accelerates and change unfolds abruptly (Viderman *et al.*, 2022). Continuity may preserve inequality and conceal structural forms of violence, while disruption may hold transformative potential. It may also open up horizon of anticipation and struggle, in which urban space is reimagined, claimed, appropriated and lived (radically)

differently (*Ibidem*). Neither of these temporalities unfolds linearly. They blur, coexist and intersect (Madanipour, 2017). Whether a moment is experienced as continuity or disruption depends on personal histories and collective agency. This perspective invites reflection on how spatial change affects different groups differently.

This conceptual framing guided the design of the excursion. Students first engaged with narrative representations of Naples by reading Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (2016), exploring how representations modulate urban experiences and shape both perceptions and expectations of urban space. Narratives not only depict urban life but reflect and shape how cities are emotionally and spatially experienced (de Certeau, 1984). They form interpretative frameworks through which places are imagined and internalised. Building on this preparatory work, students immersed in a week of situated learning in Naples, engaging with the city through curated site visits, guided walks, conversations with local actors, and unscripted urban encounters (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This two-step approach enabled reflection on how urban meaning is shaped through both representation and embodied experience. Students encountered stories and actions that unearthed the city's multiple layers: archaeological excavations beneath residential buildings, the transformation of neighbourhoods, the reuse of properties confiscated from criminal organisations, struggles for public access to the sea, and regeneration initiatives in Bagnoli. These situations exemplified the contested nature of urban futures. Situated learning, understood as a process of acquiring knowledge through immersion in context-specific practices, enabled students to participate in Naples' unfolding urban narratives (*Ibidem*). Through immersion in its urban life and its representations their imaginaries and interpretations were continuously unsettled, revised, and expanded.

Aiming to attend to the contingency of meaning in urban space, the engagement with Naples developed as a multi-layered learning terrain shaped through narrative representations, curated experiences, unscripted moments, and critical reflection. It explored how various modes of perceiving, experiencing, and representing the city generate interconnected expressions of urban life that link past legacies, present

conditions, and futures that are both envisioned and anticipated. This photographic documentation captures selected moments from that collective engagement. It seeks to offer glimpses into atmospheres, gestures, and spatial situations shaped through movement, observation, conversation, and reflection. It reflects the affective and reflective dimensions of the excursion and invites consideration of Naples as a city that is at once inherited, imagined, envisioned, claimed, forged, enacted and contested.

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