

Housing and the City: Reinventing the Urban Commons

Societies in Movement, Urban Movements, and Urban “Commoning”

There is an ongoing discussion about social movements that is often focused on their defining characteristics. Are these movements constituted through and by specific collective demands, and if so, are these movements demand-centered? Or do these movements potentially constitute social laboratories in which new forms of social relations are tested? There seems to be a crucial political problem underlying such theoretical discussions: Do social movements belong to the mechanisms that contemporary societies develop so as to channel the redistribution claims of different social groups? Or is it perhaps in social movements that the seeds of a different society find fertile ground?

Probably such a political dilemma cannot be solved simply through canonized methods of reasoning. Different social movements in different periods of capitalism's history have created quite different opportunities for collective actions, which go beyond the limits of the society. What has been and continues to be very interesting, however, is that since the last decade of the twentieth century social movements have acquired a central role in transforming the living conditions of popular classes and also their aspirations for a different future. Writer and political theorist Raúl Zibechi proposed the term “societies in movement”,¹ in order to capture a series of phenomena that go beyond typical social movement action: he urges us to think about the ways various forms of collective action, developed in various levels of social life by the popular classes, promote changes or ruptures in power relations.

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

¹ Raúl Zibechi, *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces*, trans. Ramor Ryan (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), p. 11.



Terrace used as an ad hoc common space in a Kesariani social housing complex in Athens, 2011

tally and through bonds of solidarity. Societies in movement provide the ground for the development of movements, which politicize the everyday life of subordinate classes.

Brazilian urban movements can provide a very inspiring example of movements growing from a society in movement. Their demands and especially their forms of organization do not simply express the everyday needs of the popular and excluded classes. Those movements learn from the ways people fight for survival in their everyday life. And those movements tend to integrate the traditional practices of ad hoc solidarity, as we will see in the case later described of *mutirão* [participatory mutual help], to their organized collective actions. Solidarity then, a crucial element of a future emancipated society, is not discovered ideologically as an alternative value, but is distilled from the everyday experiences of small and large urban communities. Obviously, not only solidarity grows in these everyday struggles for survival. It is, however, a movement deeply rooted in these communities that can fertilize solidarity actions and prevent against any prevailing and often hopeless atomism.

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

Commoning, to use a term coined by historian Peter Linebaugh, is a process that characterizes both the everyday strategies of societies in movement and the movements that politicize these strategies.² Commoning is not a contingent phenomenon in large modern cities. Differing from the production of common goods and services characteristic of traditional non-urban communities, contemporary commoning is a metropolitan phenomenon: what writers and political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri term the “artificial common,” “that resides in languages, images, knowledges, affects, codes habits and practices...runs throughout metropolitan territory and constitutes the metropolis.”³ In this context, “the multitude of the poor...invents strategies of survival, finding shelter and producing forms of social life, constantly discovering and creating resources of the common through expansive circuits of encounter.”⁴ Commoning, thus, is a process of production and distribution of knowledge and experiences of those who try to cope with the harsh conditions that characterize their life in large cities. Commoning is an inventive process, a process that involves creation, produces new forms of social life, and new “forms of life” in the Agambian sense, even though it appears as the result of adaptive practices.⁵ The important point in this reasoning is that commoning potentially creates shared experiences and knowledges that overspill capitalist norms. Popular classes, the excluded, and the

2 See Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

3 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 250.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

5 See Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 9.



João Candido settlement on the periphery of São Paulo, 2009

marginalized, are forced to devise ways to survive, and in the process discover forms of social relations that deviate from dominant models. This is how, for example, extended families become transformed from social reproduction nuclei into micro-communities of solidarity and production/use-in-common.⁶

The social context of course differs but in many places throughout the so-called third world, family ties and relations of kin become crucial “mechanisms for securing access to space and other recourses,” as in the case of African street trade.⁷ Thus, “in Ghana it was common for women to ‘inherit’ a trading space from another family member.”⁸ Street trading appears today in all metropolitan areas of big cities, whether these cities belong to the first, the second, or the third world. Actually, this distinction between “worlds” seems today to describe different layers of urban life coexisting or clashing in every such city. And street trading does not have to do with practices of temporarily appropriating only public space. Often, hidden networks of communication and exchanges interconnect the private realm of poor households with appropriated public space so that communities of vendors and neighborhood communities overlap or even coincide.

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

The second step is to organize through collective decisions and acts the form of cohabitation (the settlement or the parceling of empty apartments). Throughout this process new forms of common are produced: first, common knowledge is created and shared, knowledge concerning building techniques and dwelling needs and procedures. Urban movements consider the sharing of knowledge as well as the mutual support of all who participate in the creation of their temporary “homes” to be crucial points in the practices of cohabitation.

The forms and processes of occupation directly influence commoning practices. As a leading member of Brigadas Populares (a Sem-Teto movement in Belo Horizonte) has observed, there was a significant difference between land and building occupations in terms of constructing a community of cohabitation.⁹ An apartment building carries, because of its form, a logic of spatial arrangement, which can easily make families focus their attention on their own occupied apartment microcosm. Families tend, in such cases, to withdraw from the practices of commoning that create common spaces, common ways of space management and maintenance and, of course, common forms of organization in order to defend the occupied building.

Land occupations make people from the beginning confront the problem of building a family shelter with the necessary help of others and the emerging community. Auto-constructed settlements thus seem to grow out of the

6 Zibechi, pp. 39–40.

7 Alison Brown, ed., *Contested Space: Street Trading, Public Space, and Livelihoods in Developing Cities* (Bourton-on-Dunsmore: Practical Action, 2006), p. 52.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

9 Interviewed by the author in November 2010.



João Candido settlement's common indoor area for meetings, lessons, and community activities, 2010

awareness that commoning is necessary, helpful, and gratifying, not only ideologically preferable. An ethics of commoning therefore develops side by side with actual practices of commoning.

A lot can be said about the importance of commoning in the creation and arrangement of the settlement in occupied land. Just to take an example, in the settlement of João Candido on the periphery of São Paulo, a common space was created for the community of settlers to use.¹⁰ This space comprised an open area at the center of the settlement for assemblies; facing the open area was a bigger-than-average barrack that functioned as a “community center” where settlement children were offered lessons, various commissions had their meetings, and general assemblies were held. As is typical of such urban movement initiatives, this was also the place for organizing commissions specializing in necessary services enabling the functioning of the community: security, collective cooking, childcare, unemployment support, etc.

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

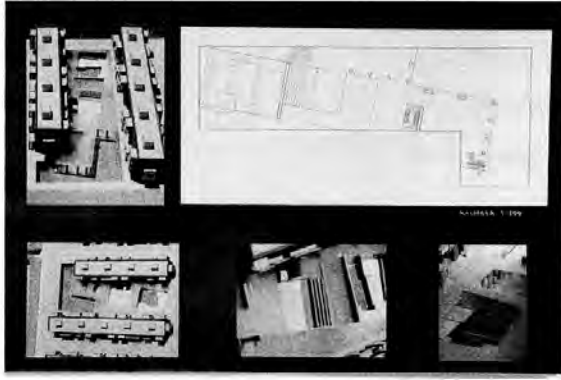
In cases where a movement had succeeded in making the local state accept its housing demands, a new level of potential commoning was created. Let's take as an example the case of União da Juta in São Paulo, Sapopemba. Due to the continuous efforts and acts of the corresponding homeless movement Sem-Terra Leste 1, the state government of São Paulo was to agree on offering the land to 160 families. The movement did not agree with state authorities on a social housing program to be executed by the local state and private constructors. They managed to impose a different procedure for the planning, building, and administration of the project, which directly involved the organizing of future inhabitants as a community. The role of USINA (Centro de Trabalhos para o Ambiente Habitado) was very important in this context. Specializing in participative planning, this organization became the movement's architectural and planning collaborator. Important aspects of commoning developed in the process: drawing from the rural tradition of *mutirão*, a form of mutual help developed between families, USINA has proposed ways of participation in the design and construction of the housing complex based on the common work and abilities of community members.

As one USINA report clearly sums it up: “In the case of urban *mutirões*, the pedagogical process of social change begins with the people's organization in the struggle for land and access to public funding; it continues with the collective definition of projects and is finally consolidated in stonemasonry.”¹¹

It took several years for the project to be completed (1992–1998). People now live in the houses they built themselves, participating in all stages of

10 Observations that follow are based on a visit to this settlement in September 2009 and discussions with inhabitants and activists from Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto (MTST).

11 USINA, “Self administered Vertical Habitation for Densely Populated Urban Conditions—Co-promo, União da Juta e Paulo Freire Projects.” *Brazil*, BSHF Report, December 2006, p. 17, http://courses.arch.ntua.gr/fst/134924/BSHF_Final_Usina_Brasil.pdf.



A design proposal by students Dimitris Sotiropoulos, Penelope Trianti, and Alexandros Tsonidis from the National Technical University of Athens School of Architecture, for common outdoor spaces in the decaying "Prosfygika Alexandras" refugee housing complex built in 1935 in Athens, 2004–2005

the project by taking decisions collectively. An association of inhabitants, organized in the form of a community of commoners, is now responsible for the management of the housing complex, which includes a community center, a community nursery for 60 children, and a community bakery.

Although they do not strictly speaking belong to an urban environment the *agrovilas* [agricultural villages] of the Movimento dos Sem Terra [Landless People Movement], which were created on occupied land, have a general layout depicting the prevailing commoning procedures out of which these settlements grew. As Zibechi's writes, "Houses are grouped together in one area rather than on each campesino's parcel of land."¹² This creates a settlement with common services and resources as well as the opportunity to integrate communal buildings into the settlement. As MST supports distinct alternative training and education programs for its members, communal buildings can house such activities too (as in the case of Filhos de Depi *agrovila* near Viamão, Porto Alegre, on which Zibechi reports in the text "Landless Workers Movement: The Difficult Construction of a New World"). *Agrovilas* thus become small community laboratories in search of a different society.

Directly influenced by the MST experience, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (MTST), translated as Homeless Workers' Movement developed an experimental model of cohabitation called *assentamentos rururbanos* [rurban settlements]. According to Marcelo Lopes de Souza, "The core of this strategy lies in an attempt to build settlements for urban workers at the periphery of cities, in which people could cultivate vegetables and breed small animals, thus becoming less dependent on the market to satisfy their alimentary basic needs."¹³ Although this strategy was abandoned as unsuccessful, it really contains a very interesting fusion of a commoning subsistence process with an attempt to overcome the intensity of the city-village antithesis.

Common Space—Space as Communing

The process of commoning, which characterizes, as we have seen, Brazilian urban movements on the various levels of their initiatives and practices, has important results in the corresponding forms of production and use of space. Maybe it is not enough to describe the produced space between the "houses" of the settlements, the occupied apartments, or the apartments of the self-administered *mutirão* housing projects as "public space". A new kind of space or, perhaps, new forms of "performed" or "practiced" space emerge out of the constructing and inhabiting practices of the organized "commoners". We could term this space "common" in order to distinguish it both from private and from public space. In common space, in space produced and used as common, people do not simply use an area given by an authority (local state, state, public institution, etc.). People actually mould this kind of space according to their collective needs and aspirations.

Common space is shared space. Whereas public space, as space marked by the presence of a prevailing authority, is space "given" to the people according to certain terms, common space is space "taken" by the people. A community of common-space users develops by appropriating space and by transforming it into potentially shared space. Rules about how this sharing

12 Raúl Zibechi, *Autonomías y emancipaciones: América Latina en movimiento* (Lima: Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Fondo Editorial de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Colección Transformación global, 2007), p. 122. For more information see <http://www.globalpolitician.com/print.asp?id=2186>.

13 Marcelo Lopes de Souza, "Together with the State, despite the State, against the State: Social Movements as 'Critical Urban Planning' Agents," *City* 10, no. 3 (2006): p. 382.



União da Juta social housing complex in São Paulo, 2009

is to be performed develop in the process of creating space as common. But there is an important difference between those rules and the ones imposed by an authority overlooking public space. These rules are made and remade, and therefore remain contestable, by various groups and persons who negotiate their presence in such spaces without any reference to a predominant center of power. In order for common space to remain common there have to be developed forms of contestation and agreement about its use and character that explicitly prevent any accumulation of power, especially of situated, space-bound power.

Common space is in-between space. Common space can be considered as threshold space. Whereas public space necessarily has the mark of an identity, “is” (which means “belongs” to an authority), common space tends to be constantly redefined: common space “happens”.

Recently, research was conducted into the present condition and spatial characteristics of social housing complexes in Athens. This research is aimed at locating different forms of relationships between public and private space as they have developed over the years.¹⁴ Social housing in Greece has two distinct characteristics that differentiate it from similar projects in other European and Latin American countries. First, a very large part of the complexes were designed for refugees of Greek origin who came to Greece after the great population exchange of 1923. Second, in all cases inhabitants were not meant to be tenants (renting the apartments from a state social welfare organization) but owners. From the very beginning of these programs beginning the 1920s people entitled to these forms of social support were given property titles provided they buy their apartments at very low prices and through very low rate loans.

The two distinctive characteristics implicitly triggered the inventiveness of inhabitants who in all cases had to live in very small apartments and with limited facilities. The refugees who came mostly from urban populations in Asia Minor had a rich culture of urban public life. They thus soon transformed their social housing ghettos, stigmatized as areas of poverty and immoral behavior (Athenians were rather conservative compared to refugees in terms of family relations and public culture), to neighborhoods rich in communal life. “Visiting, small feasts, and everyday encounters between neighbors wove the fabric of a diverse and porous environment. Terraces, where common laundry facilities were situated, became miniscule stages of an everyday theatricality where mostly women met. During the winter, staircases were transformed into noisy play areas absolutely integrated into the life of the buildings.”¹⁵

Refugee neighborhoods developed into areas of commoning inventiveness, especially through a dense network of exchanges between inhabitants. As author Renée Hirschon observes, this network had an “in-built contradiction...since actions of giving and receiving entailed an inequality of status” although “neighborly relations were equalitarian and universalistic.”¹⁶ It seems that women were those who mainly ensured that neighborhood life provided the group with solidarity and mutual support without, however, the household boundaries becoming blurred or unrecognizable.¹⁷

Commoning, thus, was a multilevel and multifarious process, which created areas of shared uses and recognizable habits. Those areas were not,

14 This research was conducted during the research program funded by the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) from 2009–2011: “Transformations of the public-private space relations in the social housing complexes built in Greek cities.” The research team consisted of Vika Guizeli, Maria Kopanari, Penny Koutrolidou, Christina Marathou, Stavros Stavrides (chief researcher), and Fereniki Vatavali.

15 Stavros Stavrides, “Heterotopias and the Experience of Porous Urban Space,” in *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, eds. Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 181.

16 Renée Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus* (New York: Berghahn Press, 1998), p. 172.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 173.



Mutirão União da Juta, 1993

however, meant to define and symbolize closed communities but were treated by the inhabitants as threshold spaces in which they could meet with people from the rest of the city and create an open publicness. Refugees have outstretched the boundaries of their urban ghettos and influenced, through their open and inclusive cosmopolitan urban culture, Athenian public life.

The fact that both the refugee inhabitants and the inhabitants who acquired access to social housing apartments built by the Workers Housing Organization (OEK, a state welfare organization) were owners has made possible numerous ad hoc interventions in the built complexes. Rich diversity characterizes their ways of extending the apartment's space, by for example transforming balconies into additional rooms, or by projecting parts of the family's life into places of common use such as corridors, open spaces, or terraces. Results in many cases are similar to those illustrated by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay on Naples: the apartment becomes "far less the refuge into which people retreat than the inexhaustible reservoir from which they flood out."¹⁸

Commoning practices of course often clash with individual interests. Especially in OEK's complexes, in which no preexisting networks of cultural homogeneity are present, shared class belonging is not enough to encourage inhabitants' solidarity or joint initiatives for the transformation and maintenance of common space. As we were able to discover in the aforementioned research, commoning tends to become in those cases a practice of protecting and maintaining common property by decisions that exclude "strangers" and "others" from a well-defined community of user-inhabitants. The identification of common space (or any good understood as common) with a closed community essentially changes commoning into a practice of collective privatization. Porosity should be an important characteristic of common space and it is due to osmosis that exchanges between common-space users can take place. Porosity is both a precondition and a performed result of practices of space-commoning.

"The wisdom hidden in the threshold experience lies in the awareness that otherness can only be approached by opening the borders of identity, forming—so to speak—intermediary zones of doubt, ambivalence, hybridity, zones of negotiable values."¹⁹ In common space, differences meet but they are not allowed to fight for a potential predominance in the process of defining, giving identity to space. If common space is shared space, then its user-producers have to learn to give, not only take. Common space can thus essentially be described as "offered" space, space offered and taken the way a present is. True, the offering and acceptance of a present can mediate power relations. But the commoning of space presupposes sharing as a condition of reciprocity.²⁰ Commoning can thus become a form of offering that keeps roles interchangeable.

Commoning not only transforms public space while creating common spaces. It directly influences the form of private spaces in houses. A latent social change, which accompanies the development of urban movements, is observable in the way in which households change, both internally by becoming micro-communities of commoners and externally by developing new kinds of relations among them and the communal organization. The changing role of women is central in this process.²¹ According to Zibechi,

18 Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 147.

19 Stavros Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds* (Trento: Professionaldreamers, 2010), p. 18.

20 Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, "Beyond Markets or States: Commoning as Collective Practice," *An Architektur*, no. 23 (2010): p. 23. The interview is republished as "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides," *e-flux journal* 17 (June 2010): http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_150.pdf.

21 Zibechi, *Autonomías y emancipaciones*, p. 246.



Pakistani immigrants who now live in one of the oldest social housing complexes in Athens reinvent common space by having (one after the other) haircuts outdoors on a religious holiday in 2011. Christina Marathou took the photo for the NTUA research program (see note 14)

women often influence popular struggles not as leaders but by supporting and extending existing networks of cooperation that are being built through everyday exchanges between neighboring households. These everyday exchanges of information and services weave the fabric of sociality—and women have a central role in this.

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

A comparison between the spatial logic of a self-built urban settlement in Chile and that of the social housing complex that has replaced it, as recounted by Zibechi,²² is revealing in this context. People in the settlement formerly produced their space by inhabiting it. And they collectively recognized their common area as porous, permitting the osmosis between private houses and common space (the external boundaries of the settlement were, however, rather rigid and recognizable as representing the limits of the community's power). Those same people, when forced to move to the newly built social housing complexes, lost the feeling of belonging to a defined community. Space had become fragmented and rationally divided into quantified areas for private and public use. According to Juan Carlos Skewes, the researcher Zibechi makes reference to in his text noted below, this is how “a transfer from a feminine domain to a masculine world” is effectively imposed.²³ Popular classes survive, especially in periods of crisis or in states that ignore them, based on their ability to generate inventive household and family networks. And it is these networks that at times support the inventiveness of the struggles of “those below”.

On the level of everyday experiences of the urban poor in Brazil, the city becomes the very ground for the constant “struggle for rights to have a daily life...worthy of a citizen's dignity.”²⁴ What sociocultural anthropologist James Holston understands as “insurgent citizenship” is a series of such struggles against the predominant inequality and citizenship differentiation that characterizes contemporary Brazilian society. Insurgent citizenship, however, does not manifest itself in acts and demands focused on the redefinition of contested public space only. These demands are articulated “with greatest force and originality...in the realm of *oikos*, in the zone of domestic life taking shape in the remote urban peripheries around the autoconstruction of residence.”²⁵ This kind of “politicization of the *oikos*” produces the ground on which urban social movements in Brazil develop mobilizations focused on the right to the city. In a society in movement, “insurgent citizenship” creates through targeted struggles new forms of appropriating and using the city and thus belonging to society. Insurgent citizenship is not necessarily a process oriented towards radical social change or collective emancipation. It plants, however, the seeds of collective action and commoning in the heart of the private realm, of the household. The “politicization of the *oikos*”, thus, is not only a means to develop demands and gain rights but is also an emergent process of redefining family relations and spatial arrangements inside the house. Movements have propelled this process by giving to it the momentum of collective inventiveness. This

22 Ibid., pp. 209–211.

23 Juan Carlos Skewes, “De invasor a deudor: el éxodo desde los campamentos a las viviendas sociales en Chile,” in *Los con techo. Un desafío para la política de vivienda social*, ed. Alfredo Rodríguez and Ana Sugranyes (Santiago: Ediciones SUR, 2006), p. 120.

24 James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship. Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 313.

25 Ibid., p. 312.

is how houses become more complex arrangements, more open towards the community and less hierarchical. Let us not forget that Brazilian society directly maps social inequalities in the layout of housing complexes and apartments. As Teresa P.R. Caldeira observes, the “closed condominium” has become the dominant model for the middle and upper class dwelling buildings in the “city of walls”, São Paulo.²⁶ The resulting “aesthetics of security” tends to spread throughout the city, conferring status to the fences even in “autoconstructed” houses on the peripheries.²⁷

São Paulo perhaps represents the most extreme case among a wide array of divided cities in which class, tribe, or culture not only differentiate people but actually constitute the basis for segregating spatial distinctions. Gated communities tend to become a dominant form of housing for the urban upper-middle classes. But the form of closed, controllable and “safe” housing areas also seems to effectively infest the urban imaginary of the middle and lower classes. Politicization of the oikos implicitly or explicitly clashes with these forms of “corrupting the common”, to paraphrase Hardt and Negri. Urban communities, which fence in the city’s public space (as streets and parks) inside the walls of their controlled-access enclaves, indeed define a common space for their inhabitants. But this kind of space should be better described as collectively privatized space, space that repels strangers and discourages “felicitous encounters”.²⁸ In a way directly reminiscent of the fencing around common land by early capitalist agriculture enterprises, in gated communities, “the common is corralled as property.”²⁹

Common space is thus space created and recreated constantly by a community that is organized through the processes of participation of its members considered as equals. This, therefore, has to be a community in movement. A community created in a society in movement through the catalytic activities of social urban movements. A community in movement is a community that is not oriented towards practices that create and defend a secluded microcosm, even if this microcosm presents itself as a “liberated” stronghold. A community in movement is rather characterized by an “always alert and always generous disposition towards the common.”³⁰ Alert indeed, because keeping the process of commoning alive means fighting against any accumulation of power. In the *mutirão* construction experiences, for example, careful attention was paid by the inhabitants’ association to a rotation in tasks. Participation is a process that produces and educates at the same time. Even the most difficult target, the elimination of differences between manual and intellectual work, was pursued in these collective experiences.³¹

Generous indeed, because commoning is not simply a balance between giving and taking. Sometimes certain individuals have to offer more, either because they possess the needed knowledge, are more capable, or simply have been more lucky in family life. Generosity is the propelling force of sharing-as-commoning if the corresponding community indeed moves towards collective emancipation and equality. Because what commoning essentially creates, is new forms of collective subjectivization. Through the creation of common space people change themselves and their communities.

26 Teresa P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) p. 257.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 293–295.

28 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p. 254.

29 Michael Hardt, “The Common in Communism,” *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 3 (2010): pp. 346–356.

30 Zibechi, *Dispersing Power*, p. 136.

31 USINA, *Self-administered Vertical Habitation for Densely Populated Urban Conditions*, p. 33.

Urban Communities Reinventing Themselves

Commoning creates subjects of action. Not simply in the well-known way in which acts define actors. Commoning does not attribute identities to collectives. Commoning changes the way collective identities are constructed and performed. As people collectively produce commons, they create themselves. A collective identity then is not the identity of a community of belonging. If a community in movement is a laboratory where forms of common are invented and tested, if a community in movement invents itself as it invents its spaces and institutions, then this community is a community in the making. It cannot be summarized in a name or an identity.

Such a community produces and diffuses the common. If “the institutions of the common are the organizational force of the collective appropriation of what is produced by all of us,”³² then communities in movement are in a constant process of organizing: forms of organization are being tested, not because innovation or efficiency is sought for, but because the means are always projected on the ends. Not fixed identities then but perhaps strongly defended collective values: equality, solidarity, common responsibility. And these values have actually grown in the everyday practices of societies in movement.

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

There is a long discussion about the tactics of the powerless. Philosopher and writer Michel de Certeau³³ speaks about those tactics as ways to make use of space and time, by employing a shared practical wisdom, or *metis*, the Ancient Greek term for practical wisdom and cunning associated with the Goddess Metis. Observing the practices of inhabitants who appropriate and transform the public spaces surrounding their housing building blocks, urban sociologist Richard Sennett suggests: “Improvisation is a user’s craft.”³⁴ And that, “The work of improvising street order attaches people to their communities.”³⁵

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

Communities in movement oriented towards the common develop when inventiveness is practiced collectively. The *mutirão* tradition is necessar-

32 Gigi Roggero, “Five Theses on the Common,” *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 3 (2010): p. 370.

33 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

34 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 236.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 237

ily linked to this kind of inventiveness. People augment their capacities by sharing resources, by helping each other (all help one family at a time in the harvesting of the family's crops or in building the family's house). People who invent in common create, use, and inhabit invented spaces. Urban and regional planning professor Faranak Miraftab goes so far as to claim that "Invented spaces are those...occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo."³⁶ Inventiveness in this context, involves a kind of creation that is expressly emancipated from the rules of the production and use of public space.

The state or local authorities often tend to criminalize the creation of "invented spaces" of citizenship that emerge in struggles for decent living conditions.³⁷ Oppression, whether or not it is direct, often tends to separate these actions from the lawful acts of "invited" participation (mostly aimed at legitimizing already decided policies). The lesson of Prosfygika Residents' Coalition, a coalition formed at the Prosfygika refugee settlement in Athens, is perhaps useful. To be able to claim their rights inhabitants need to be able to destroy the sanitary zone that separates them from the rest of society by stigmatizing them as "dangerous others", as marginalized poor who are considered as being responsible for their own misery.³⁸

Inventiveness can be seen in the practices of movements reclaiming public space. Reclaiming thus does not mean taking back what was taken away. Any act of opening, appropriating, and redefining existing public spaces contains the seed of transformation—the transformation of public space to common space. In the example of "occupy" movements, public spaces were not simply occupied as temporary stages of collective protest. Common space as porous, inclusive, threshold space was created through acts of establishing networks for common living, and for shared everydayness. In the Syntagma Square occupation in Athens, people organized themselves into emergent micro-communities, sharing space and coordinating their practices through open everyday assemblies. Tent cities were created in most of the occupied squares and within them new ways of producing and using common resources and services were tested. Couldn't this be considered as an instance of a new urban and social paradigm, the paradigm of the "city of thresholds?"³⁹

Tracing the history of the specific urban void Trianon Terrace in a central area of the city of São Paulo, urban researchers Zeuler R. Lima, and Vera Maria Pallamin observe how this place "continues to be reinvented" as different collective acts, organized by different movements, spatialize struggle and give form to the "representation of differences". Space-commoning in such cases is "widening the exercise of citizenship from the abstract realm of the nation-state to the concrete realm of urban spaces."⁴⁰

Through the practices of commoning, people literally reinvent community as a form of social coexistence. As Zibechi explains in his analysis of the Aymara movement in Bolivia, "The Aymara did not simply migrate from rural areas to El Alto with a community consciousness that they 'revived' upon arrival. On the contrary, they created another type of community—they re-invented and re-created one."⁴¹

36 Faranak Miraftab, "Invented and Invited Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists' Expanded Notion of Politics," *Wagadu: Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies* 1 (June 2004): p. 1, <http://web.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol1-1toc.html>.

37 Faranak Miraftab and Shana Wills, "Insurgency and Spaces of Active Citizenship. The Story of Western Cape Anti-eviction Campaign in South Africa," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 25, no. 2 (2005): pp. 200–217.

38 See Stavrides, "Heterotopias and the Experience of Porous Urban Space," in *Loose Space. Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, ed. Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens (London: Routledge, 2007).

39 See Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds*, and also his article "Squares in Movement," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, 3 (2012): pp. 585–596.

40 Zeuler R. Lima and Vera Maria Pallamin, "Reinventing the Void: São Paulo's Museum of Art and Public Life along Avenida Paulista," in *Ordinary Places, Extraordinary Events. Citizenship, Democracy and Public Space in Latin America*, ed. C. Irazabal (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 80–81

41 Zibechi, *Dispersing Power*, p. 19.

Communities in movement are neither replicas of preexisting rural communities nor do they simply employ the extended family social bonds, which indeed form part of the accumulated experience of the participating people. Communities as equalitarian and commoning social organizations are continuously being created, crafted by and through the acts of inventive commoning.

People, in their everyday survival struggle actually reinvent spaces of common use, sharing them with others, creating them collectively as able urban craftsmen. Collective inventiveness flourishes in societies in movement but it is in the communities in movement, collectively crafted, that this inventiveness acquires the power to develop forms of life oriented towards an emancipating society. Extending and re-appropriating the production of the common gives power to communities of commoners, as these communities create themselves.

This text contains parts of a book the author is working on titled *Inventing Spaces of Commoning*.