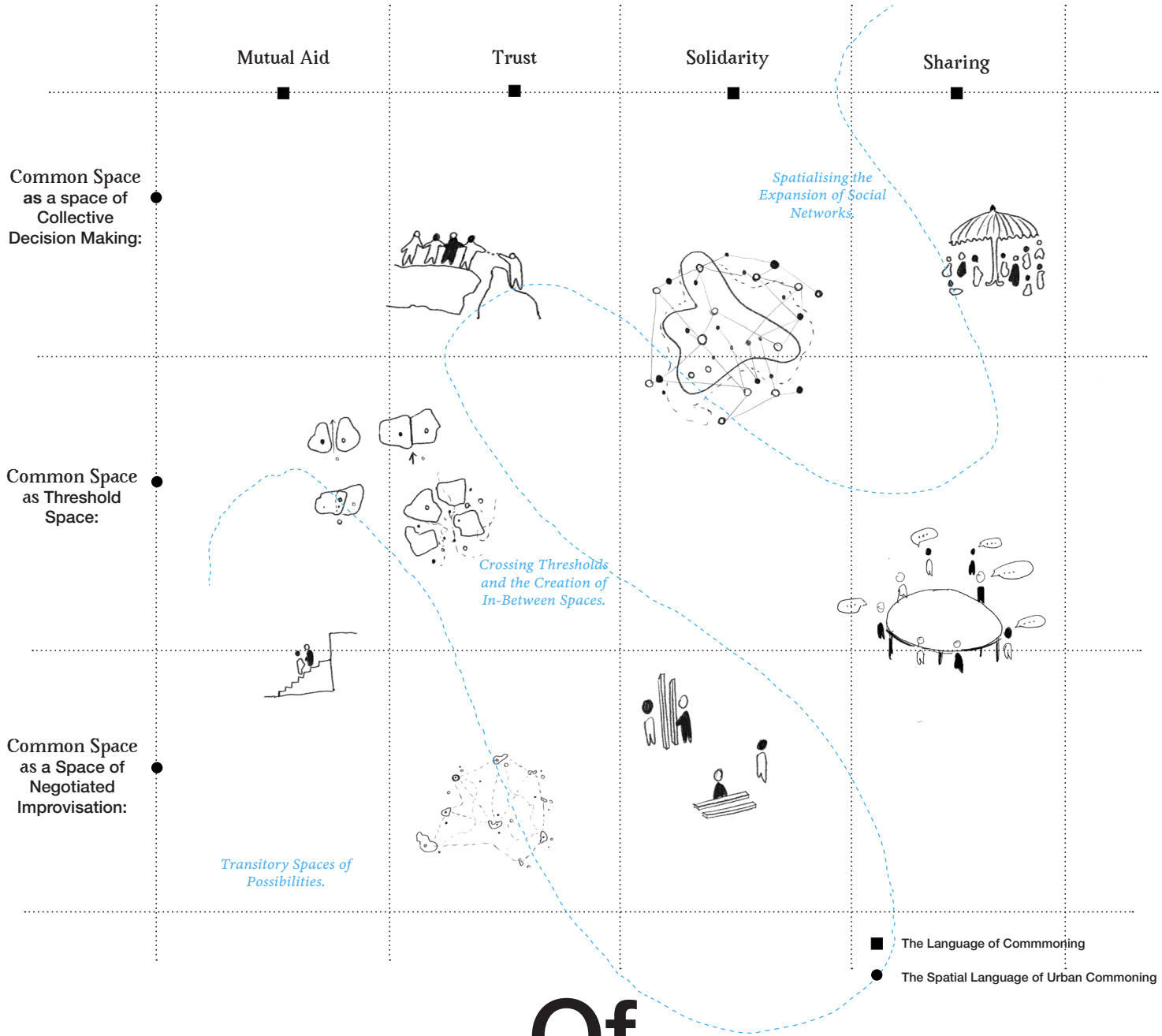
The Spatial Language



Of Urban Commoning

Stephanie Ng

(key words)
commoning, urban commons, solidarity, trust, mutual aid, co-production of space, right to the city, agency, re-appropriation, social movement, biopolitics, social atmospheres, alternative futures, post-capitalism, radical care

How can processes of **urban commoning** construct a ***transitory*** space beyond the existing capitalist production of space? Based on a language of ***mutual aid, solidarity and sharing*** — what kinds of meanings, and experiences would come out of these encounters and how space is an **active participant** within these struggles?

Figure 1: El Campo de Cebada, Madrid: a common ground claimed and created by neighbours for the community

Research Question

ABSTRACT

Today, we are all collectively living in a *"transition period",* and our cities standing at crossroads, faced with a range of transition pathways. (Zaera-Polo, et al., 2017) Amidst drastic environmental, ecological decline, political polarization, the rapid privatization of urban space and the growing crisis driven by current political models where established institutions, systems, polices and governance no longer sustain or reflect the pressing needs of the people—we are propelled to imagine and project alternative futures. It is also a question of how urban dwellers search for opportunities collectively to use their city as a canvas for appropriation, and re-invention through cooperation, pushing the boundaries of collectivity. In a time of TINA, *"there is no alternative"*, I want to argue that the commons of today are the very expression of the possibilities of this alternative world beyond capitalism but rather built upon values of solidarity, trust, mutual aid and sharing—and questioning *what kind of meanings and experiences would come out of these encounters and how space is an active participant within these struggles?*

Whereas Part 1 and 2 attempts to contextualise the macrodynamics of capitalist dominance on urban politics in which the common ground is devalued in the face of capital gain, which out of collective struggle act as a catalyst for people to self-organise and processes of commoning start to emerge. Part 3 focuses on theorising the urban commons where the critical work of the commons in sharing, cooperation and collective resilience becomes increasingly important especially in the context of facing and collectively acting in the global crisis today. Part 4 and 5 unpacks the languages of commoning as spatial and as an emotional compass, questioning whether this diverse language is something that spatial pracitioners can use.

To understand the diversity and complexity of urban commoning in its existence, I looked at both the ephemeral and the more permanent, to the different scales of the urban framework which commons operates in. I explore how the urban commons manifest from to public spaces to grass root initiatives of everyday solidarity are all critical ever-expanding narratives in paving the way for the alternative future actively and continuously challenging the existing capitalist organisation of life.

"The cities of the world stands at crossroads. Amidst radical social, economic and technological transformation, will the city become a driving force of creativity, diversity and sustainability or will it be a mechanism of inequality, despair and environmental decay?"

(Zaera-Polo, et al., 2017)

UNCOMMON GROUND

"The metropolis is a factory for the production of the common." (Hardt and Negri) To reframe this statement to reflect today's condition, rather than fostering or creating the "common" the cities of today have become *"dispossessed of its commons",* (Fasfalis, 2020) as our capitalist driven processes of *accumulation through dispossession*[1] is not only about generating surpluses, but also the ruthless extraction of other's assets and rights. (Harvey, 2019) This type of space created by commodification can be understood as "abstract space" (Lefebvre, 1991) and Lefebvre in hope to produce the "*differential space"* (a space actively produced and appropriated by its inhabitants) insists that this type of space does not simply emerge, but must be actively created and fought for. (Schmid, 2022)

Urban Space according to Lefebvre is not a neutral container but rather a social construct, *"there is a politics of space because space is political."* (Lefebvre, 1991) This implies that the representations of space in both the visual and physical form will always inherently have imposed meanings: from how the space should be used to whom has a right to use and who should not (Leary-Owhin, 2015) – but *to whom's interests do these representations serve?* What the representations created is a *"partitioned city"* (Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2002), where physical and invisible walls of gentrification, homogenization, enclosure, and privatization have been intentionally created as clear indications of the *"us"* and *"them"*—with distinct boundaries that cannot be crossed. (Stavrides, 2019)

[1] "Accumulation by Dispossession" (Harvey, 2012) was appropriated from Marx's theory (1867) that enclosure presents a key component of primitive accumulation and the transformation of social production into capital is through means of mass dispossession. Harvey re-interprets it into the current urban condition as such practices are apparent through privatization and commodification of land; strategies to destroy commons (Stravrides, 2016)

Where capitalist enclosures have attempted to destroy the life-in-common, practices of *urban commoning* have prevailed in collective resistance from social movements to the collective re-appropriation of space, or just mundane initiatives of everyday solidarity—it is in these *transitory spaces* where relations are being re-defined, where we stand in solidarity with each other, and practices of mutual aid and sharing are enacted to ensure our collective resilience.

The alternative world surrounds all of us, it is tangible and constantly being re-shaped by our collective struggle, as the practices of urban commoning have offered us hopeful glimpses of how our cities need to be radically remade. As articulated by Stravrides: *"in those spaces, the seeds of tomorrow's emancipation are being carefully planted."* (Stavrides, 2019)

How to think about the City (its widespread implosion-explosion, the "modern Urban") without conceiving clearly the space it occupies, appropriates (or "disappropriates")?

Henri Lefebvre, 'The Production of Space'

PART 2

THE CITY AS AN ARENA FOR STRUGGLE AND COLLECTIVE RE-APPROPRIATION

The city is the backdrop of our lives, it directly affects the relationships we form with others and our stories cannot unfold without including the spaces that we can occupy or not. As for the city should be the *"melting-pot of races, people, cultures"* (Wirth, 1938), in which the atmosphere of the city is a collective experience of an *"urban reality that is shared by its people"* (Böhme, 2017) However, it is also clear that certain urban atmospheres can be destroyed, through the privatisation and commodification of public spaces seen through gentrification and displacement of communities. This led to the question of whether *the city is merely a passive site or a place where deeper currents of political struggles are expressed and heard?* (Harvey, 2012)

Perhaps, what is more relevant and prevalent today is the narrative of collective struggles in cities, as echoed by the problems of *accumulation by dispossession*. (Harvey, 2019) Linebaugh in the Magna Carta Manifesto (2008), explores how the commons has always been the *thread that connected the history of class struggle into our time* (Federici, 2019). All in all, the commons will always be relevant in our lives as it inextricably ties with the problems of our time, and with every new common created, it will be and need to be a *"product of our struggle"* (Federici, 2019).

This chapter explores how *struggle* can act as a catalyst for resistance against capital and urban control offering the potential of self-organisation to collectively reclaim our right to the city and produce alternative narratives over how the city is developed.

This will be explored through two case studies: the first being spatial resistance in its most urgent form—through protest in the *Occupy Wall Street Movement*, and the second of collective self-determination of city dwellers in occupying and appropriating derelict sites in the case of *Torre David*. Both case studies offers a glimpse into the diverse practice of the re-appropriation of urban spaces, emerging out of the necessity for improvisation in response to the very real conditions and struggles of our uncommon ground.

Figure 2: Occupy Wall Street Protesters holding a general meeting inside an enclosed street in New York City, following the police raid of Zuccotti Park

Figure 3: Torre David residents holding an assembly in the atrium

Public Space Commoning:
Exercising *Collective Right to the City*
in times of Crisis

To what extent do social movements appropriate the use of city spaces and facilitate the creation of common ground?

"Common space happens, and common space is shaped through collective action" (Stravrides, 2016) —and in the case of the Occupy Movement, it proves exactly this point. The act of occupying "the street" in Wall Street, the symbolic heart of the US financial system (Hammond, 2013)— of assembling our bodies in solidarity situated in the physicality of the public space, collectively exercising our right to the city, it powerfully disrupts the capitalist production of space—converting public space into a political commons. (Harvey, 2019) (Mitchell, 2014) The act of commoning hence arises out of a state of crisis, captured in the movement's slogan *"we are the 99%",* as opposed to the 1% of the super-rich claiming common assets for private interests at the expense of the 99%. (Szolucha, 2017) The slogan explicitly draws attention to the enclosure by capital and the lack of agency of majority, *"with no other option except to occupy the parks, squares and streets"* for their needs to be expressed. This led to the question of *how is physical space an active participant amidst struggle or even more so, as the catalyst through which social transformation can occur?*

Figure 4: Occupy Wall Street Protesters holding up the movement's slogan, "We are the 99%"

The physicality of space and situating the politics of the body in public was intrinsic to the presence achieved and the self-organisation and subsequent formation of a new community for the movement. Although digital technologies and media can be a facilitator bringing awareness to the occupation, it is only though the physical occupation in space, as *"bodies in alliance in the street and in the square"* (Judith Butler, 2011) that collective and tangible solidarity is felt. (Federici, 2019)

The tactics of the Occupy Wall Street Movement paralleled in 750 occupy movements worldwide, although not all with the same objectives, the common attribute across all was to occupy a central public space like a square or park, close to the centres of power and wealth. (Harvey, 2019) (Rogers, 2011) As seen from the *Tahir Square* in Cairo, *Puerta del Sol* in Madrid, *Syntagma Square* in Athens, to the steps of *St Paul's Cathedral* in London all significant as public squares are contested spaces in the urban realm whilst being the important threshold for diverse encounters in the city. As Cutini explains the various symbolic meanings evoked through the square in Italian, *"to go down to the square"* means to *revolt*, and "*to listen to the square"* means to sound out *public opinion*, (Ruivenkamp & Hilton, 2017) so in our collective knowledge, the square is reminiscent of where community is created and grounded in.

Figure 5: Occupied Syntagma Square in Athens (2011): The General Assembly

Figure 6: Tahir Square, Cairo

Figure 7: Puerta del Sol, Madrid

Figure 8: Syntagma Square, Athens

Figure 9: St Paul's Cathedral, London,
Showing a banner reading "Capitalism is Crisis"

How can collective emancipation be experimented and re-invented through social movements?

From the months of September to November, the occupation site became the home to the occupiers and as visualised by researchers at MIT, *Zuccotti Park* was transformed beyond a space of protest into an *informal city* (MIT, 2011); a kind of *living laboratory* for the formation of a self-organised communal life and natural processes of commoning occurred. The co-presence in space gave people the opportunity to construct a kind of *common ground* where not only a sense of joint ownership was asserted but the space is negotiated through collaboration and participatory practices. This was evident through the multiplicities of programmes set up with tasks divided between the occupiers such as sanitation stations, communal kitchens, medical clinics, day care, library, general assembly space and even water and waste management systems. (MIT, 2011) The non-hierarchical, self-governance and participatory aspects of the occupation, most evident in the General Assembly, an open meeting in which everyone was welcomed to participate in decision making and political discussions. (Hammond, 2013)

Perhaps, one of the most significant takeaways from the Occupy movement as well as others is how people begin to self-organise, for the *"construction of the associations, bonds, linkages and networks that are taking place all over"* (Chomsky, 2012) – pushing the potentials of collective action and the organisations of solidarity networks.

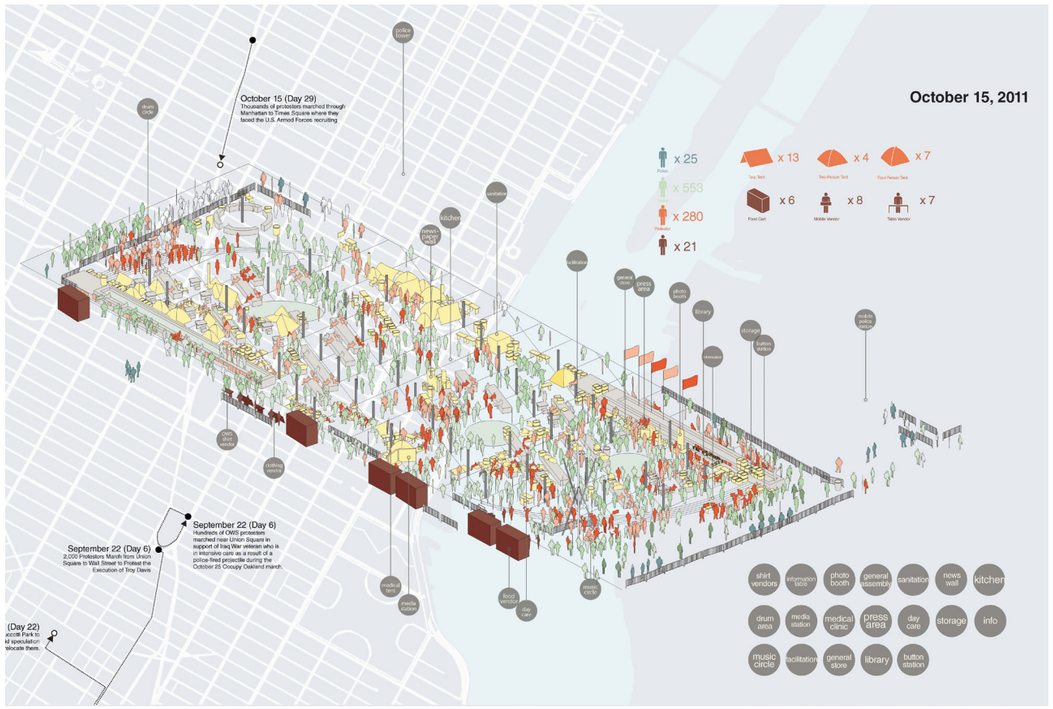


Figure 10: Illustration showing October Occupancy, Occupy Wall Street 2011

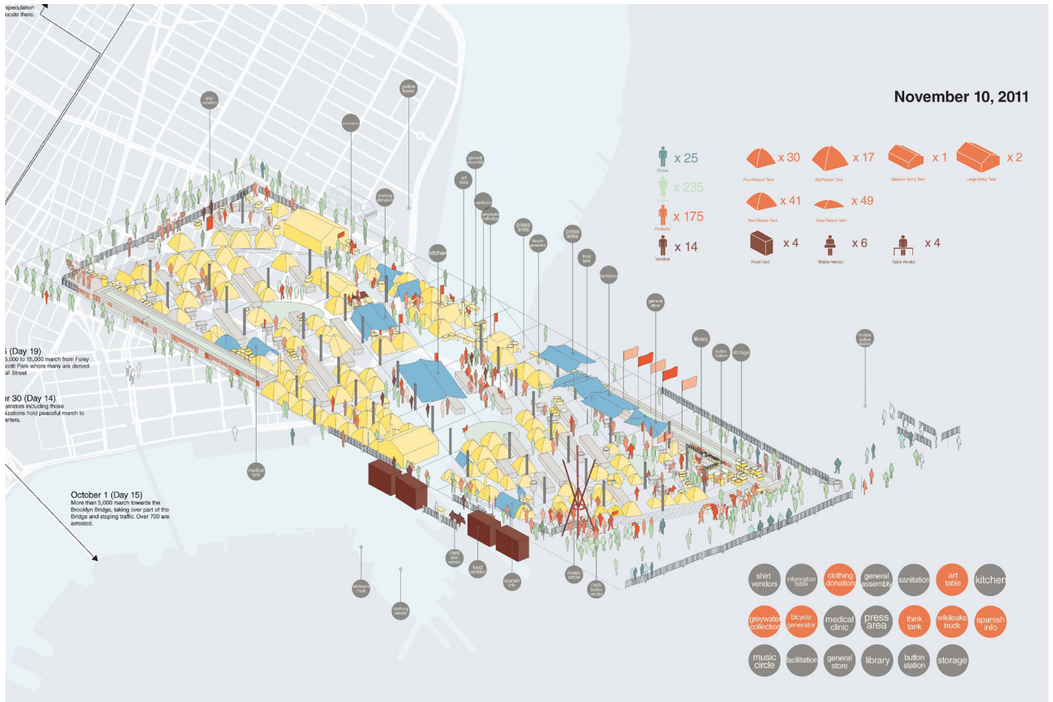


Figure 11: Illustration showing November Occupancy, Occupy Wall Street 2011

Figure 12:Resident of Torre David looking out into the city of Centro Financiero Confinanzas, showing the open edge of the existing unfinished building

Finance Capital into Social Capital:
The Collective Re-appropriation of *Torre David*

How can times of crisis offer opportunities for self-organisation and asserting spatial agency: to discover and often against current forms of urban control towards processes of commoning?

What we know as Torre David today, notoriously known as the world's tallest squat in Caracas, Venezuela, is the result of collective self-determination and of circumstance. Where many would recognize this type of informal inhabitation as an act of dissent, or in the eyes of many architects, it reduced to being *"distasteful"*, a *"failed structure"*, *"a hive of crime"*. (McGuirk, 2014) But what Torre David revealed the stories of 3,000 inhabitants, out of desperate means and neglect from the state, created a self-organised type of urban commons actively appropriating and adapting a part of the urban fabric, who are proud to call this their home and whom otherwise will have nowhere else to live.

This discussion of Torre David is not intended to romanticize this type of living but rather to open the discussion and reflections on how as spatial practitioners can we begin to navigate the difficult terrains between the formal and the informal, and to understand the rather universal urban conditions which influenced how this tower came to be what it is today. To my interpretation, it is a symbol of hope for the potential of self-organisation and asserted agency in creating a collective safety net in an urban fabric which places capital gain over the livelihood of its inhabitants.

The efforts of city dwellers in improvising and appropriating the building one which was never intended for their needs in a direct act of subversion of what was intended to be the icon of finance capital into one of social capital. The story of the rise and later demise of Torre David was directly correlated with the economic boom and bust cycle of the Venezuelan economy (Brillembourg, et al., 2013). The 45-storey corporate skyscraper was intended to house hotel services and offices to be epitome of prosperity of the new finance capital, *'Carcacas' Wall Street',* under a time of financial optimism in district Centro Financiero Confinanzas where Torre David (the main building) was envisioned to be the new *"financial nerve of the city"* (Brillembourg, et al., 2013), just comprising one of the five structures that comprised the Centro Confinancas.

Figure 13: Photo of Torre David Featuring in the 1992 Edition of the Immuebles Magazine

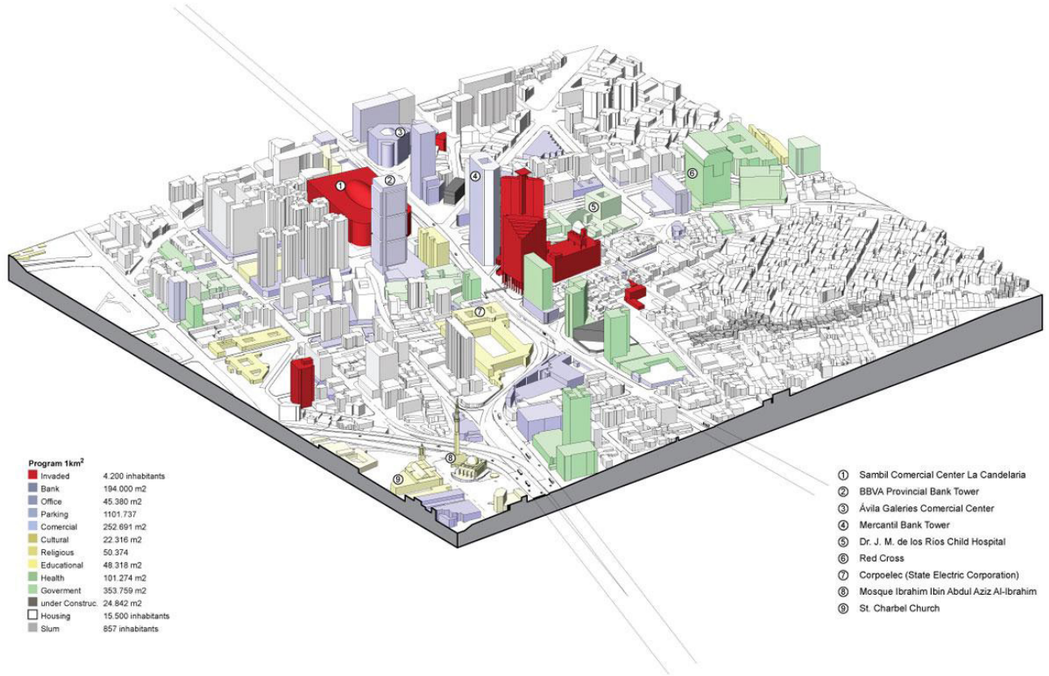


Figure 14: Axonometric Visualisation of the Centro Financiero Confinanzas highlighting the uses of surrounding buildings

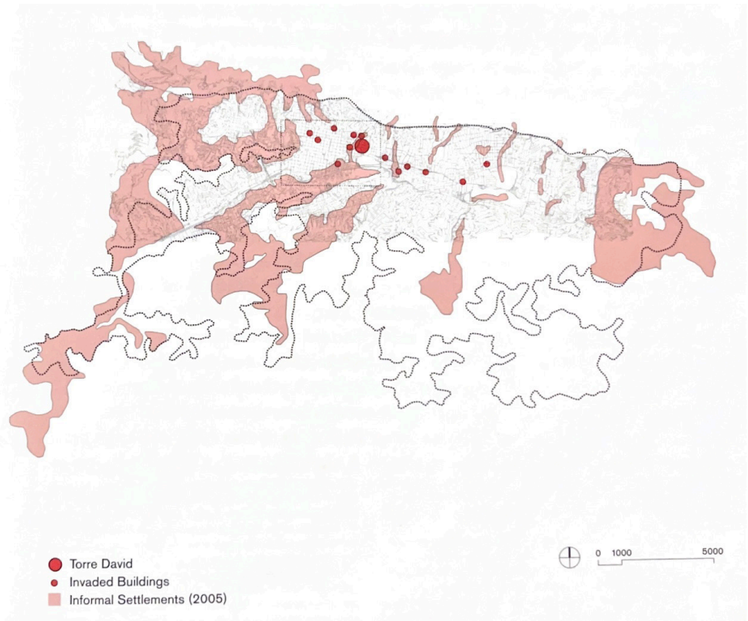


Figure 15: Topological Map of Caracas highlighting Torre David as well other invaded buildings and informal settlements (2005)

Re-appropriation of Space:
Spatial Analysis of the Common Ground

On the 17th of September 2007 was the beginning of Torre David's occupation as we know of it today. It should be noted that this group of initial squatters were already self-organised to some extent with a common goal of searching for shelter in the city. Collective endeavour, ownership and care to the space was quickly established, with communal kitchens, makeshift shelters and together, they cleaned Torre David floor by floor removing the accumulation of rubbish left since the tower's abandonment. (Brillembourg, et al., 2013) After the fear of eviction subsided, that was when the development of social structures and organisation emerged all because of the community's interdependency and self-determination as the tower was completely absent from all the basic services and systems. Perhaps, one of the key attributes of what differentiates Torre David with other typologies of informal settlement was the corporative organisation and management—known as the *Cooperativa de Vivenda Caciques de Venezuela*.

Over time, Torre David truly became a mixed-use building, blending a variety of individual entrepreneurial initiatives with dedicated common spaces that served to bring the residents together. (Brillembourg, et al., 2013) The individual initiatives included grocery stores, salons, hairdressers, tailoring shop, orthodontist and more. What the user-determined programmes created demonstrated the network of interdependency between the inhabitants of the building, each contributing in their own ways to ensure the collective survival and resilience of the urban commons.

Figure 16: Photograph showing on of the residents of Torre David appropriating the space for her tailoring shop

Figure 17: Residents of Torre David work together during a scheduled community clean up

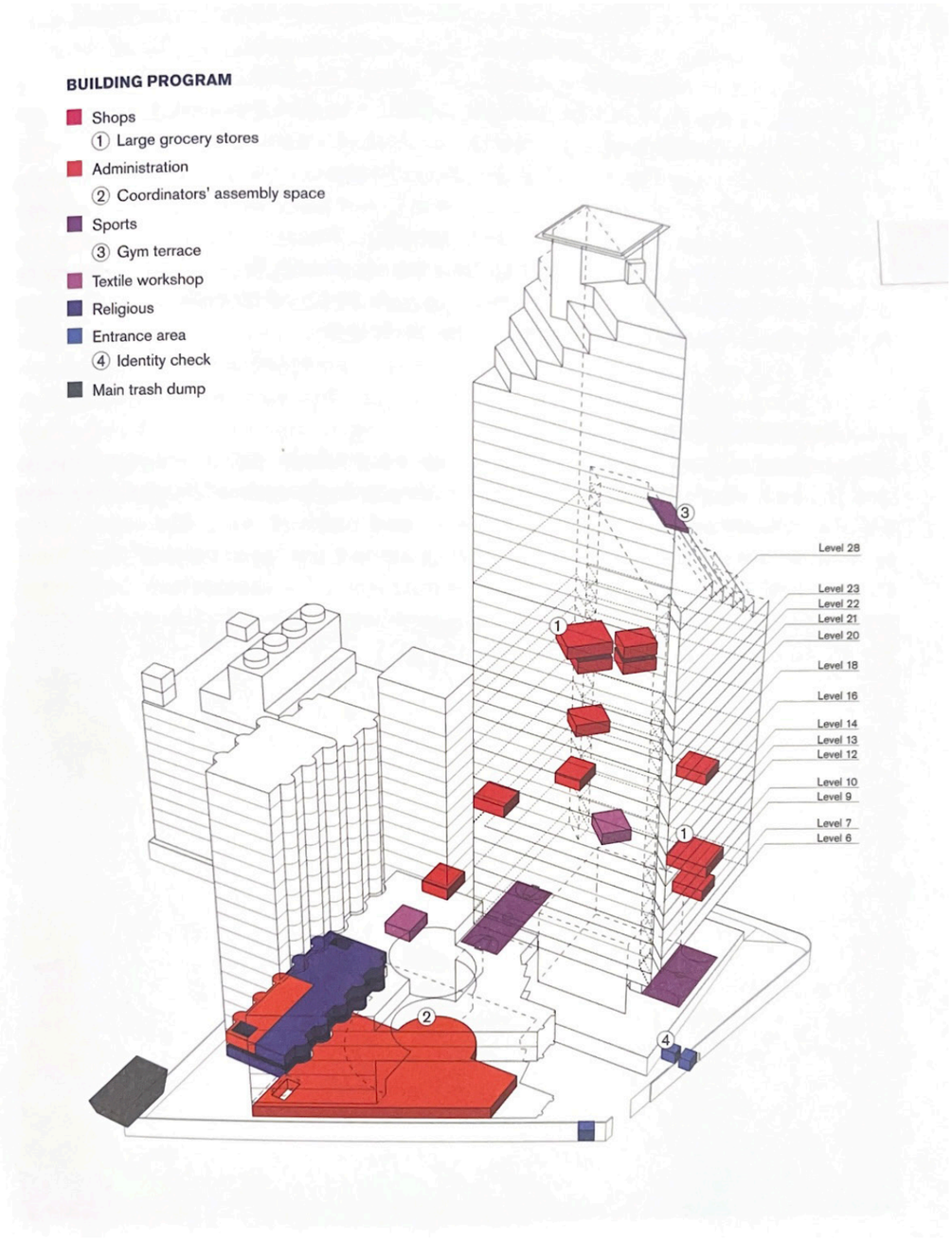


Figure 18: Torre David's Building Program highlighting resident's individual initiatives (following re-appropriation)

Figure 19: One of the Grocery Stores of Torre David

Figure 20: A group of residents of Torre David working together to build a new church for the Tower on the ground floor of Edificio B

Figure 21: Sign showing "Associacion Cooperativa de Vivienda": the registered community organisation of Torre David with the mission to provide "dignified housing, composed of apartments, a communal house, a preschool, a kindergarten, areas for parking spaces and a multi-purpose room" (Brillembourg, et al., 2013)

Figure 22: a family's living room in Torre David

Figure 23: Photo highlighting the residents appropriation and "infill" of the building's facade

What the residents of Torre David achieved is the true and real realisation of *Maison Dom-ino* by *Le Corbusier* (1915) as well as the theory of *support and infill/open buildings* theorised by *John Habraken* (1961). Both frameworks ostensibly advocated for a system of building that separated from the building's permanent structure from its infills which would be incrementally added by the users, allowing each user to appropriate and customise their own dwelling. Interestingly, although architects may have invented the idea, it took the squatters in Torre David in their act of *self-determination* in direct action in designing and incrementally constructing their own infills, and not the architect. This leads to the questioning of *how can architects gain their critical agency and responsibility to foster the processes of commoning and new forms of relations a beyond a top-down practice?*

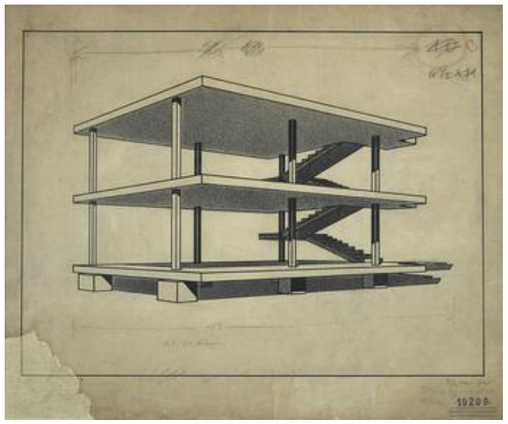


Figure 24: Maison Dom-ino, Le Cobusier (1915)

Figure 25: John Habraken's Open Building Theory of separating the support and infill. "Open building makes a distinction between support and infill. The support represents the most permanent part of the building, like the structure. The infill represents the adaptable part of the building." (Habraken, 2002)

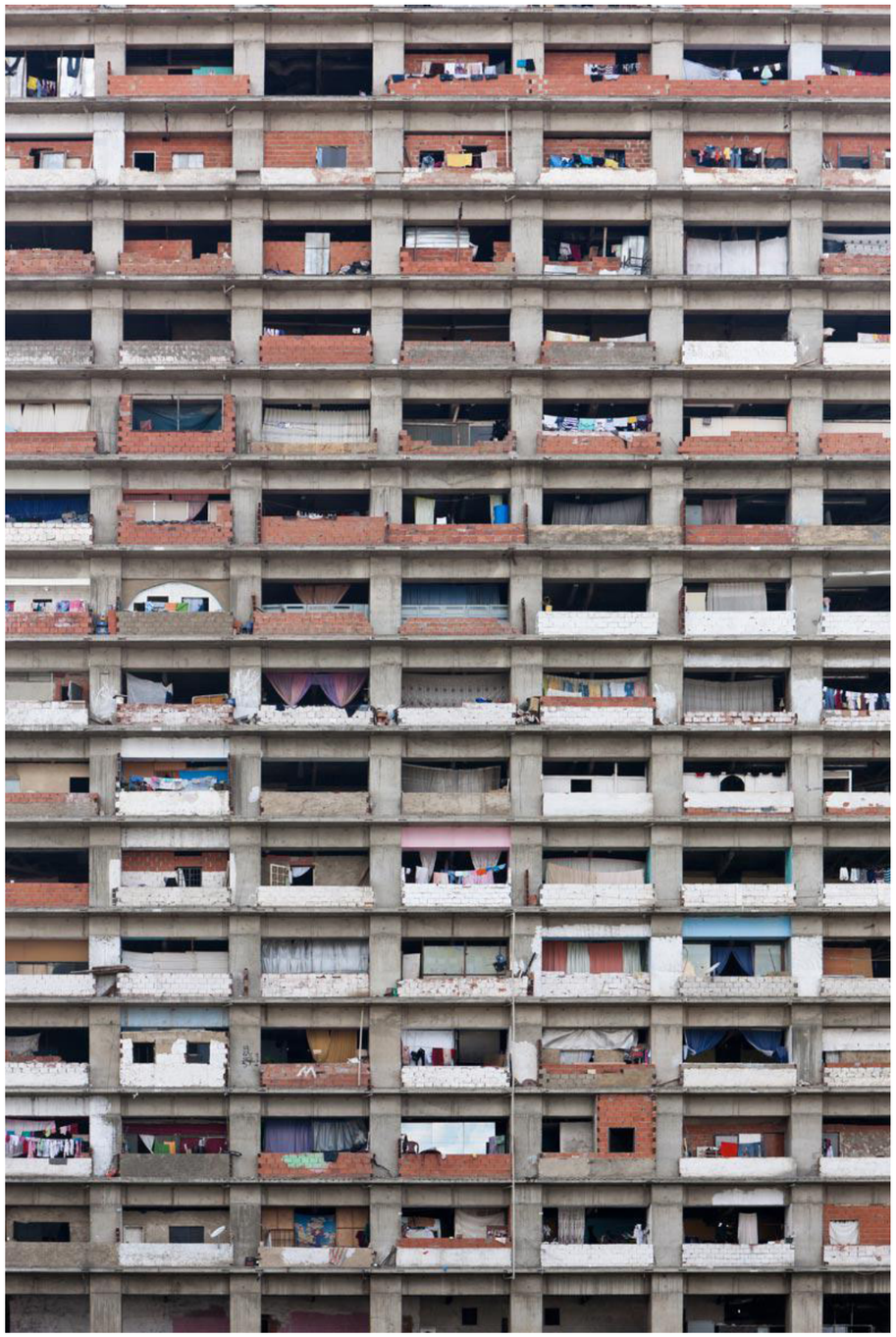


Figure 26: Photograph of the building's façade highlighting the infills added by the Resident

"Urban commoning in particular, considered as a process that 'secretes' common space, may become a force to shape society beyond capitalism so long as it is based on forms of collaboration and solidarity that decentre and disperse power."

(Stravides, 2016)

PART 3

FROM CRISIS TO COMMONING

Whilst the previous chapter offers some clues into the practices from collective struggle in which different groups of people self-organise in actively producing and realising different forms of common spaces and belonging, this chapter aims to further understand processes of urban commoning through exploring various theoretical discourses.

Garrett Hardin's essay *"The Tragedy of the Commons"* (1968) has been repeatedly circulated and cited to undermine commons, but more specifically a common resource existing out of state control will lead to resource depletion due to human nature as selfish[1] He concludes that *"freedom in a commons brings ruin to all"* (Hardin, 1968), and hence as an irrefutable justification for privatisation. (Harvey, 2011)

However, Hardin's argument is far too presumptuous and arguably distant from the nature of commoning, as contested through Elinor Ostrom's *"Governing the Commons"* (1990), she demonstrates many cases of commons cooperating and sharing resources in a sustainable way, developing the framework for self-organising forms of collective management of the *common pool of resource (CPR)*. This is furthered by Massimo De Angelis as he claims that the methods and negotiations of ensuring sustainability of common resources are instrumental parts of commoning.

(De Angelis & Stravides, 2010)

1 Hardin used the analogy of an open pasture, with each herder needing to keep as many cows as possible but concluding that because humans are "selfish herders", the only rational outcome is that every herder will be seeking to maximise their own gain leading to increase their herd without limit— in a world that is limited. (Hardin, 1968)

Although acknowledging the impact both Ostrom and Hardin has contributed to the critical discourse, there are certain limitations in application to our understanding of the urban commons, largely because both Ostrom and Hardin defined the commons as a common pool of resource.

The commons cannot be understood a noun but rather as by the verb *"commoning"*—an *unstable and malleable process of forming social relations.* (Harvey, 2012) Unlike the CPR commons as described by Ostrom and Hardin, urban commons is not just another practice of sharing but must deal with the meanings and peculiarity of space itself—and space becomes the medium in which social relations are realised and expressed. (Stavrides, 2016) Common space is distinct from public, private, or public-owned private space as it is actively shaped and re-shaped by an expanded network of agents dispersing power with collective decision making over place making in a decentralised and non-hierarchical way. Urban Commoning is an act of resistance against any kind of enclosure, with a fundamental precondition to always be open to newcomers; for expanding commoning.

As theorised by Stravides, there are three necessary qualities that sustain and expand commoning— establishing a process of *comparability, translatability, and forms of sharing*, especially that of power. (Stravrides, 2016) Establishing *comparability* is not about homogenisation but embracing and understanding the multiplicities of experiences and identities—for differences to meet. *Translatability*, or the act of translation is the method of building the bridge of communication between people with different cultural, political backgrounds especially when groups of people do not speak the same language. The third characteristic is *egalitarian sharing*, especially the sharing of power and to create mechanisms of control of any potential accumulation of power. (Stravrides, 2016)

Ultimately, commoning is an active process that must be open, transgressing difference and boundaries towards negotiations and collectively decision making to meet on a *"purposefully instituted common ground"* (De Angelis & Stravides, 2010)

Towards a Collective Production of Space:
A Study of the Common Ground through *The Blue House and El Campo de Cebada*

"Common space emerges as an always precarious spatial condition which people shape through commoning." (Stravrides, 2016)

Whereas the previous case studies of the Occupy Movement and Torre David demonstrated the desperate means of everyday city-dwellers to assert a collective right to the city out of struggle (and without architects), this section draws upon *The Blue House (2005-2009)* and *El Campo de Cebada (2010-2017)* illustrating an alternative narrative of collaborative production of common space between city dwellers, architects and authorities, even with architects so far as being initiators or part of urban commoning.

It is not to claim that enough systematic change has occurred for architects or authorities to truly engage with urban commoning (as much change is still needed and both projects were temporary) but rather as a grass root portrayal and gesture towards understanding the necessary roles and cooperation needed between spatial practitioners and authorities in fostering practices of urban commoning. The critical stance of both projects offers a glimpse of the potential role spatial practitioners can have in realising *"spatialised social relations"*, (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017) and the relationship between expanding urban commoning (with more actors taking part in commoning) and how it spatially manifests form, dynamics, and networks.

The Blue House

"The Blue house is referring to a blue screen; the empty screen used in shooting films when the background is put in afterwards. You could say the blue colour of our house refers to a not existing setting Ijburg will be coloured in. Word for word." (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017)

How can the collaborative production of architecture create diverse networks and more specifically, facilitate networks of care? This was explored by the artist Jeanne Van Heeswijk in *Het Blauwe Huus* (the Blue House), in Ijburg, Amsterdam (2005-2009)—an experimental and collaborative research project between architect Denis Kapoori and artist Herve Paraponaris—exploring what happens when radical approaches to planning and community development is employed (O'Neill, 2012; Spatial Agency, 2010; Petrescu & Trogal, 2017) It was negotiated for the building to be taken off market for four years for it to become a project that was experimental in challenging existing models of sociality and care. (Petrescu & Trogal, 2017)

Over the four-year period, artists, artists, architects, writers, scientists, and scholars were invited around the world to live and work in the Blue House coming and going as they like; involving thousands of actors in the duration of the project—truly becoming *"an incubator"* or *"condenser"* for a networked practice. Using diverse inhabitation to trigger new forms of sociality and the incremental appropriation allowed the Blue House to be blossoming unexpected dialogues by these actors over the phased construction of the project.

Exploring this project with the practices of the commoning, there are many parallels. Firstly, because of the project, The Blue House Housing Association of the Mind was established, as a self-organized community, *"as a non-hierarchical form of distribution of resources"* (O'Neill, 2012) to find common ground within the organizational structure—which is in fact shaped by the people. The principles of equal right, active participation in de-centralised decision making was a necessary part as the members and groups developed a large portfolio of small research led interventions.

The members are, as Dennis Kospori states, *"the driving force of the Blue House"*. (O'Neill, 2012)In this de-centralised manner, individual members were actively producing and sharing knowledge, this was also a prerequisite of the project, that they each shared their thinking and what they produced with the other members of the house. Spatially, this was made possible by dedicated spaces in the apartments which allowed groups to spend time developing, also a semi-public flexible exhibition space made sure that the knowledge and creative discussion will always be made open to the public eye, inviting further discussion and new forms of relations. (O'Neill, 2012)

Figure 27: The Blue House, community space

Figure 28: Intervention "Instant Urbanism": a communal garden

Figure 29: Intervention "Pump Up the Blue", by Henrvre Paraponaris:
A proposal to re-scaffold the outside of the building to reflect the continued evolution of the building

Figure 30: Intervention "The Blue House Cinema":
An open air cinema which documented the migration history of residents as well as their new lives in Ijburg

Figure 31: Intervention "Chat Theatre", by Architecture Collective M7red:
Developed as a series of discussions on the biopolitics of public space including issues of immigration politics, role of new media etc.

El Campo de Cebada

What would our public spaces look like if they were designed and built by inhabitants—what are the meanings, experiences and encounters emerging out of it? What does an architecture of negotiated improvisation look like?

El Campo De Cebada, *The Barley Field*, in Madrid, was an act of negotiated improvisation creating a common space for and by the neighbours of La Latina. Following the demolition of former sports centre (2009), leaving an empty derelict lot in the city centre and the absence of government infrastructure following the financial crisis—a group of residents, activists and architects mobilised and requested for the use of the site for the community. (Bright, 2013)

The potentials of collaboration between city council and city dwellers are explored through negotiations with the council, aimed to not work against them but rather in collaboration or parallel to them, leading to the agreement for *"temporary and free use"* and for the temporary ceding of the space with a grant (Bravo, 2018). In such way, it was a demonstration of active citizenship, experimenting with participatory and open means of participatory city making whilst also actively being mediators between bottom up and top bottom approaches.

Unfortunately, this was short-lived as following 8 years of participatory city making, the space was again ceased by the administration for the construction of a sports hall. (Urban Alternatives, 2021)

Figure 32: Prior to the El Campo de Cebada. Demolition of the sports complex adjoining La Cebada market

Figure 33: View of El Campo de Cebada showing the programmes established by the urban commons following the occupation of La Latina neighbours

How does a growing network and processes of forming and expanding relations and manifest itself spatially?

Whereas people were previously unknown neighbours, they became *co-creators* and *co-managers* of El Campo de Cebada—weaving new networks of solidarity. Similarly, to all the other case studies explored, collective decision making was exercised over the space with weekly assemblies, with the aim of including *"as many agents as possible in the decision making."* (ArchDaily, 2013) The cumulative effects of grassroot initiatives were described by Bright conveying that *"a neighbour that brings a plant leads to the creation of a collective urban garden…when a group of children wants to play soccer or basketball activates a group of architects to build the baskets and goals…"* (Bright, 2013), and it was the qualities of growth and change which made the space feel like a *"living being"* (Giordano, 2020).

Figure 34: Urban Gardens were planted and collectively managed by the El Campo de Cebada urban commons: a space of care

Figure 35: People gather together in the Open Space for events of all kinds: cinema, talks, debates, theatre, dancing, performances, it has an extremely vibrant atmosphere, shaped by its people

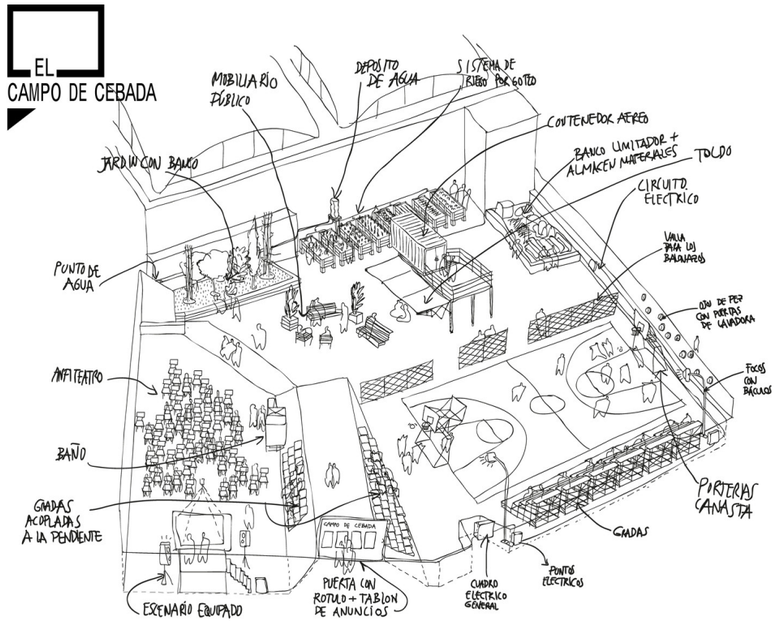


Figure 36: The activities, distribution on the site after just three years of occupation

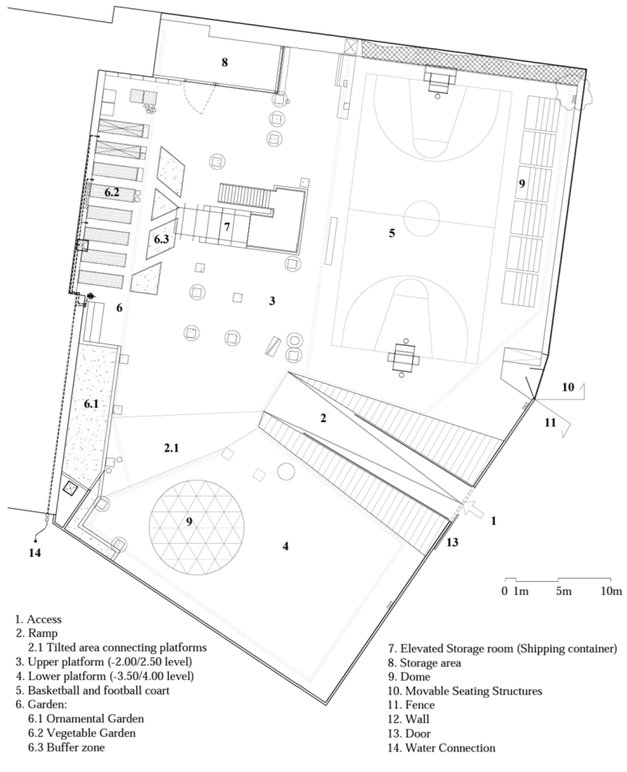


Figure 37: Plan showing the various communal programmes that were established between neighbours and architects

The spatial language of *negotiated improvisation* and incremental (and spontaneous) building was clear in reflecting the different and diverse needs of its people. This was realised through creating a common spatial language of self-build construction, which is like the system of *self-build* (1960s) devised by architect *Walter Segal* giving ordinary people the agency to build and construct an architecture collaboratively between residents and architects.

Figure 38: Walter Segal, the Community Architect who created the "Segal Method" to allow anyone to build their own house

Figure 39: Walter's Way, showing the Segal Method and Lewisham Self Build Group fromed by the residents

This language of self-build construction is a powerful mechanism in urban commoning as it also reflects the notion of the urban commons as not waiting for institutions or authorities to provide the infrastructure of building a life-in-common but built with common decisions. It is also radical in its blurring of hierarchy between architect and user in the questioning of *who says that a user cannot also a spatial practitioner?* Moreover, the materialisation and construction technique of *"handmade urbanism"* (ArchDaily, 2013), in using readily available materials such as recycled wood and steel. Moreover, the furniture is also designed with wheels, enabling the flexibility and adaptability in shaping and re-shaping the space.

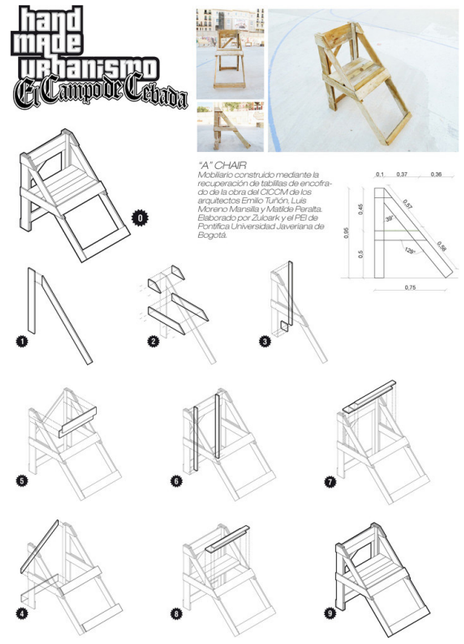


Figure 40: "Handmade Urbanism": showing an open guide of self-building furniture made available for anyone to collectively build a part of El Campo de Cebada

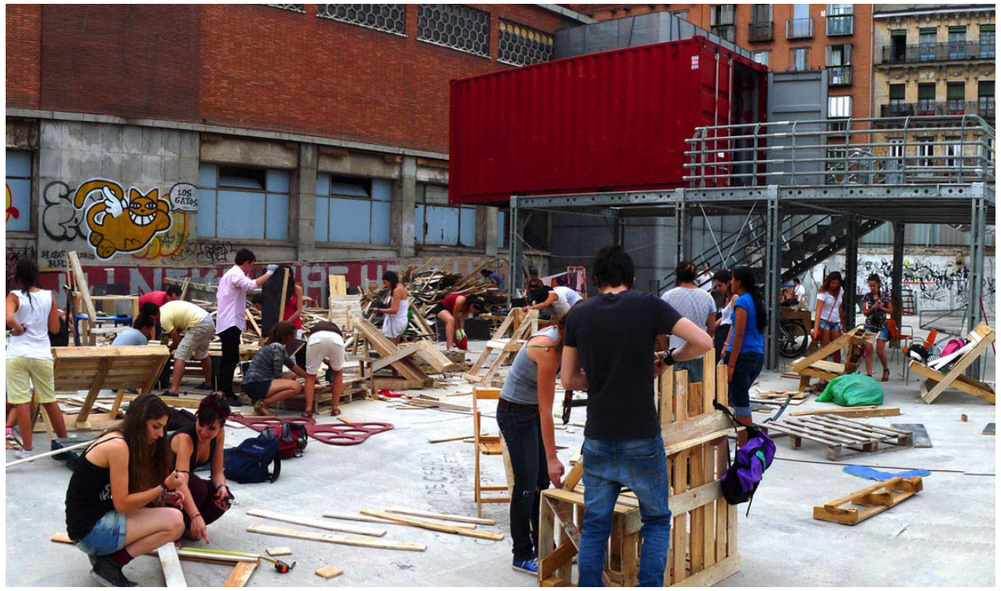


Figure 41: Showing the collective building process on site and mutual aid in building, with "handmade urbanism" workshops available. Street furniture are all created out of recylced materials

Figure 42: The infrastructures of El Campo de Cebada have all been designed and built collaboratively between architects and the neighbours and fosters a sense of pride and owership

Figure 43: The residents met on a weekly basis in an assembly to discuss key issues and needs over the collectively mangaged space. Anyone is welcomed to join with the intention to include as many agents in decision making as possib;e

Figure 44: Neighbours and architects discussing the feasibility of a temporary geodesic dome that covers the space in winter

Reflection as Spatial Practitioners

So, after delving into the various case studies in the realisation of how urban commoning can be understood as an alternative framework in producing common spaces—and the rethinking of such spaces as the spatial manifestation of an *interplay of (expanding) social relations*. The collective re-claim of their active agency by everyday dwellers in an urban condition of neglect and struggle has been inspiring to say the least. It has also made me become reflective of what architects can bring especially when it is so apparent that everyday citizens through their re-appropriation of the city have *realised* to some extent what only exists as theoretical or conceptual idealisations of architects. Here I am thinking of the residents of Torre David out of self-determination in realising Le Corbusier's Mason Domino and Habraken's Open Building concept of support and infill as well as the temporary interventions across all case studies in demonstrating a high degree of resourcefulness in self-building which even architects fail to do so.

It should be noted that I am by no means arguing that as spatial practitioners, we can take a passive role to leave everything to the urban commons since they are already proving to be active agents in re-shaping our cities. But rather towards the thinking of *where and how we can find and assert ourselves in the same transitory space as the urban commons and navigate together through the difficult terrain of making wider systemic change possible?*

So, how do we make this possible? There is no definitive answer for this but all I know for sure is that a *participatory process* is the beginning—including city dwellers as equals in city making (similar to the organisation of the urban commons of horizontal decision making and dispersion of power). It would be extremely difficult to imagine change starting from scratch, but fortunately, thanks to many of the architects before us being pioneers of participatory design such as *Lucien Kroll, Walter Segal, Yona Friedman, Frei Otto, Eilfried Huth* (to name a few)(see Figure 47), we are simply *building upon it*.

Moreover, it is apparent that for the practices of urban commoning to develop beyond a temporary or local scale, spatial practitioners need to assert a critical role as public agents representing the key role of intermediaries or mediators between the citizen and administration (as demonstrated through El Campo de Cebada)—and developing a "*double agency?*" in both facilitating and negotiating bottom-up processes of city making. (Brito, 2020)

Therefore, it is a collective responsibility for the collective production of common spaces and common worlds to not exist merely as a speculative future but actively in the making and re-making in replacing the existing capitalist production of space.

Figure 45: Lucien Kroll participatory workshop, showing children working on models for the University of Louvain

Figure 46: Mutual Aid in Building, Students of La MéMé

TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE/ *PARTICIPATORY* PRODUCTION OF SPACE

How can the spatial language of mutual aid, solidarity and cooperation be projected? -- and what are the meanings, experiences and encounters to emerge?

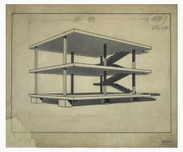
How can spatial practitioners begin to rethink their role in practices of empowerment and care to the people as well as new forms of engagement—creating new roles and relations?

To what extent do social movements appropriate the use of city spaces and facilitate the creation of common ground?

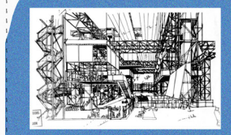
*How does **participatory** building processes induce agency to the people as well as building the social atmospheres of the commons?*

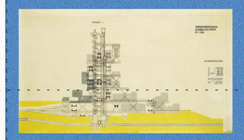
What would our cities look like if its habitable spaces were designed, built and managed by its residents?

Support/Infill/ Plug-in



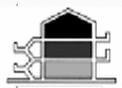
Maison Dom-ino (1914)
Le Corbusier





Stadt Ragnitz (1965-69)
Eilfried Huth and Gunther Domenig

Plug-In City (1960-1974)
Archigram



Support and Infill (1961)
John Habraken

Next 21 (1993)
Osaka Gas Company

-Design is based around a main frame in the form of a multi layered network of tubes carrying essential services and means of transport
- cranes move the individual units in and out of position
- individual units plugged in and out on an individual basis

CARE

AGENCY

Collective Re-appropriation of Space

Torre David (1990-now)
Torre David Residents

COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

MUTUAL AID

Self-Build+ Architect as the Facilitator

Flatwriter (1967)
Yona Friedman

Le MeMe (1970)
Lucien Kroll

Walter's Way (1977)
Walter Segal

Oko-Haus (1991)
Frei Otto

Commons-Based Organisation

Het Blauwe Huis (2005-2010)
Jeanne Van Heeswijk

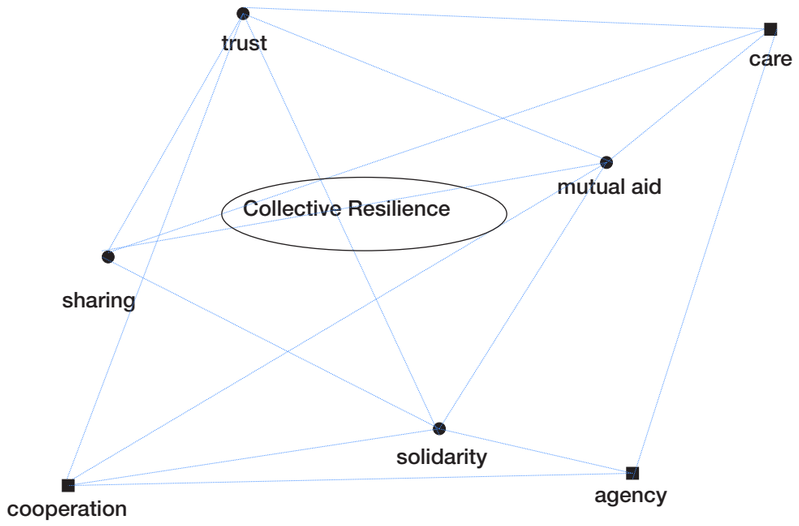
El Campo de Cebada (2010-2017)
Neighbours of La Latina

NON-HIERARCHAL

1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010 2020

MY PROJECT

Figure 47: Situating this dissertation and thinking within a wider contextual discourse, acknowledging the works of architects, theorists and activists that paved the way for such participatory practices. It is also the questioning of where do we situate and how can we contribute and build upon these works?



- *language of commoning*
- *additional langauge of commoning (but not covered in this section)*

PART 4

The Language of Commoning

The Language of Commoning seeks to uncover some of the recurring 'languages'—that are the emotional compass of the urban commons— where urban commons as well as spatial practitioners are able to navigate, evolve and build upon to translate their plurality of experiences into some sort of common ground based on these values.

As explored by Stravides, establishing the processes of *translatability*— the invented means and processes of which language and efforts in practice to bridge together differences and barriers to commoning is critical for the sustainability of the commons. (Stavrides, 2016)

Each language defined is a necessary ingredient, although most of them being mutually exclusive, for the social atmosphere of the commons to flourish. It is important to note that this language and the process of translatability is always a process, but it is about bypassing the barriers to commoning and to protect against enclosure.

A- 1

Mutual Aid

“Mutual aid implies a lavish, boundless sense of generosity, in which people support each other and each other’s projects. It expresses an open-handed spirit of abundance, in which kindness is never in short supply. Mutual aid communalizes compassion, thereby translating into greater ‘social security’ for everyone. It is solidarity’

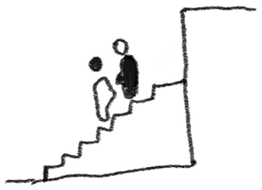
(Milstein, 2010)

“Mutual aid is a collective coordination to meet each other’s needs” (Spade, 2020) Mutual aid is not charity, (Spade, 2020) but strategies of radical coordinated collective care to support vulnerable populations to survive whilst building solidarity.

Kropotkin argues that our society’s moral compass is not predominantly based on love or sympathy, but upon the instinct of *“human solidarity”,* the *“unconscious force that is borrowed from the practice of mutual aid.”* (Kropotkin, 2006) Take bees for example, as studied by Kropotkin, as they are small insects producing honey, something that captures a lot of attention from threats. Seemingly vulnerable, bees are just one of the many animals that takes advantage of the power of mutual aid; by working together and joining forces as seen in the division of work and protecting the hive when a group leaves—the bees develop a powerful network of developing collective resilience in adverse circumstances. (Kropotkin, 2006)

A-2

Trust



"Atmospheres that secure basic trust establishes a base note for the solidarity of the partners in conversation."

Tellenbach

Without trust, it is difficult or almost impossible to imagine participating in commoning. For most of us, we probably have trust in a small circle of people, and these groups of people are usually also the group that we tend to care for—our *'circle of care'*. (Ruivenkamp & Hilton, 2017) Trust creates proximity, but contradictory, it is also inherently vulnerable. Of course, I wish to imagine the expansion of the *'circles of care',* as important in the context of commoning to always be able to welcome newcomers for the commons to not be an exclusive structure.

A-3

Sharing

"And the city, produced through practices of sharing, can indeed become a collective work of art."

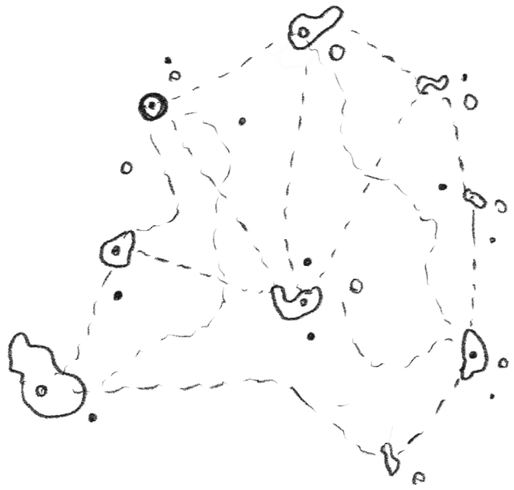
(Lefebvre, 1991)

For common space to emerge beyond capitalism and commodified exchange, an economy of sharing must be established between the commons—the sharing of resources, space, knowledge and most importantly the sharing of power.

As noted by Stravides, *"the sharing of power is the ultimate form of commoning"* (Stavrides, 2016), as through processes of negotiation and inventing practices of power sharing, it creates the premise for collective decision making, trust, negotiation, and cooperation. Power dispersion is about navigating through difference and crafting atmospheres of inclusiveness and trust in its members—towards egalitarian and emancipatory commoning.

A-4

Everyday Solidarity



"We need to learn from the everyday practices of immigrants and street vendors which sometimes produce precarious and short-lived common space cells in official public spaces. There efforts, albeit often connected to survival networks, may teach us that space-commoning may be shaped and invented through quite different forms of group solidarity."

(Stravides, 2016)

Where the urban *"partitioned city"* (Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2002) is a microcosm of the global condition of growing isolated forms of living, distrust of neighbours, withdrawal from forms of communal life; everyday sites and practices of solidarity is what creates community, encounters and a sense of belonging between a heterogeneous group of people.

These gestures and initiatives should not be overlooked or seen to be insignificant as small pockets of solidarity created by micro-communities are often that are often connected to larger survival networks. (Stravrides, 2016) Where Sloterdijk's imagined the city as polyatmospheric and as a 'macro foam' of small bubbles of sociality, I see the small, everyday sites of solidarity as connected co-producers of the shared atmosphere of solidarity in a community.

Analysis will be drawn from the *Vietnamese Nail Salon*, a familiar site on our streets, as a microcosm of everyday solidarity.

The Art of Translation:
in the Vietnamese Nail Salon

The Vietnamese Nail Salon—a familiar urban phenomenon in our cities and streets—will be the site of focus drawing upon the experiences of immigrant Vietnamese workers in the construction of i*ntimate atmospheres of everyday solidarity, trust, and cross-cultural exchange* within the nail salon.

Its origin follows the devastating aftermath of the Vietnam war, beginning with a Hollywood Actress (Tippi Hedren) and 20 Vietnamese refugees. It was Hedren's humble act of teaching skills of nail care and being in solidarity with the women who lost everything after the war, that created their means of survival in the US—in securing jobs and collective livelihood. For these Vietnamese workers, the language barrier they had was a reason of why they were attracted to the nail job, as they only needed to learn a few phrases of English in order to get by (Morris, 2015). So, I wondered: *what kinds of meanings would emerge out of communication between linguistic barriers?*

In the humble and seemingly ordinary practices of getting your nails done, I observed the forms of translation, sociality, trust and care which occurred between the Vietnamese nail salon workers and their customers. Whilst the Vietnamese workers would converse in their mother tongue, they would also *translate* it into English—expanding the conversation for the foreign customers to also be able to engage in. Acknowledging the differences between the groups, this simple act of *translating out of care* creates a powerful *invitation* and the initiation of a common ground, to join in whilst diminishing the *'otherness'* that can be felt subconsciously by either group with language differences. Interestingly, this act observed is the physical manifestation of Stravides's notion of *translatability* as a condition for expanding commoning. (Stravrides, 2016)

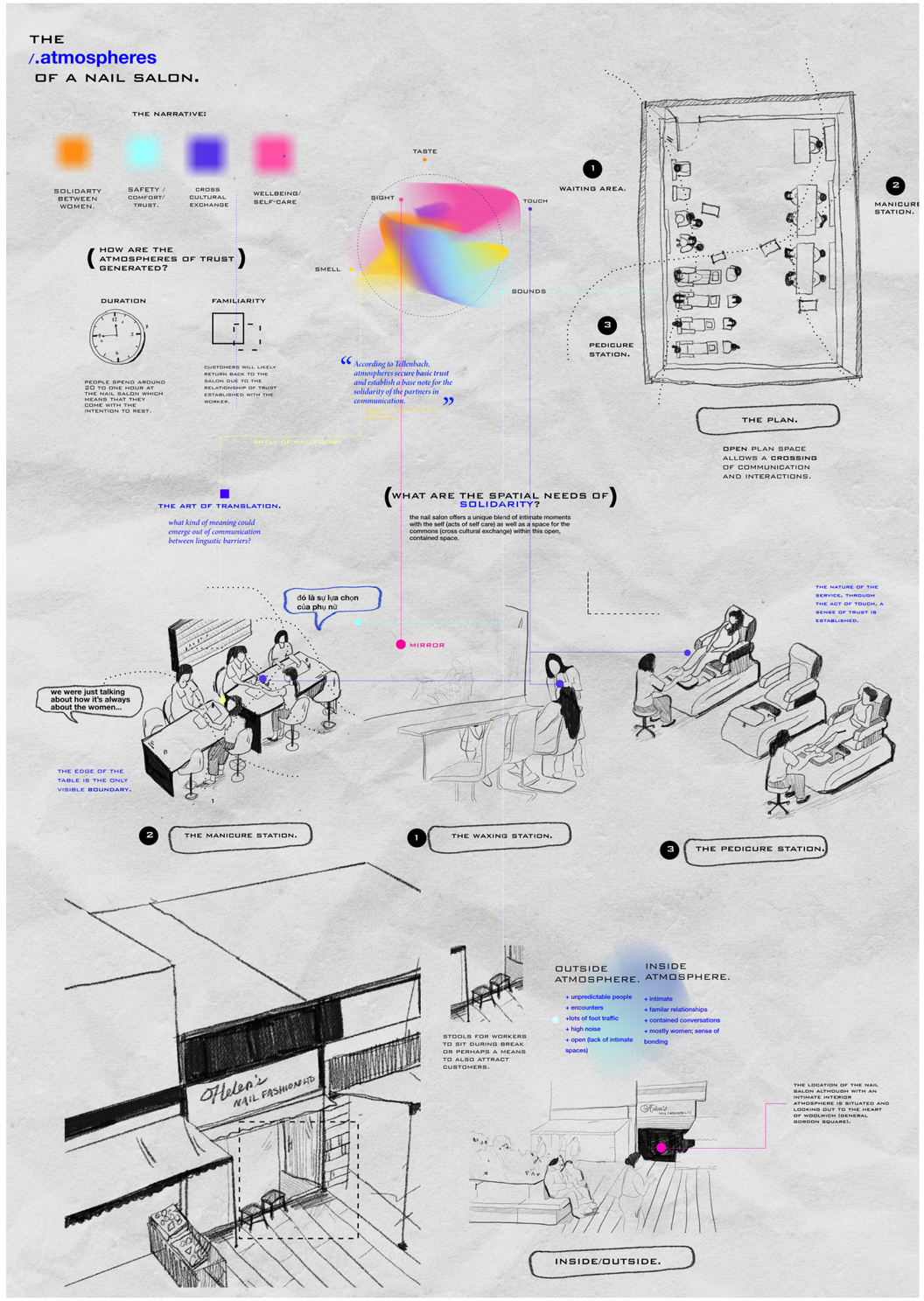


Figure 48: Illustrating my experience in the nail salon through observing the spatial, social and atmospheric qualities that contributed to its atmsophere of solidarity, trust and care.

"space 'happens' as different social actions literally produce different spatial qualities"

(De Angelis & Stravides, 2010)

PART 5

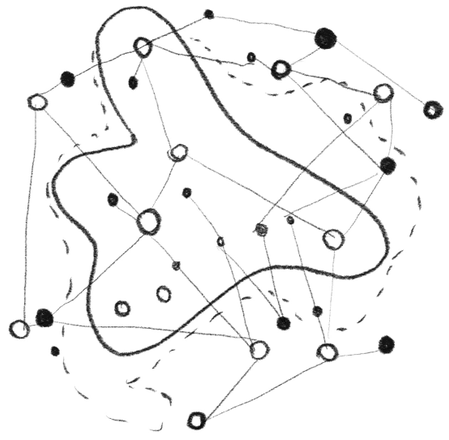
The Spatial Language of Urban Commoning

How is architecture and space itself be an active participant in fostering the sustainability of urban commoning? What are the s*patial peculiarities, dynamics and organisations* which foster the practices of commoning? And how does this spatial language relate to the language of commoning identified in the earlier chapter?

I agree with Foucault as he claims that it is the practices of freedom that drives the spaces of freedom and not the other way around, "*when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom"* (Foucault, 1982), and the necessity of the architect to respond to very real conditions, relations and practices of the urban commons.

B- 1

Common Space as a Space of Collective Decision Making + Expanding Network of Relations:



The Assembly space as the Heart of the Urban Commons

The first spatial language draws upon the *public square and parliament buildings* in its spatial form as well as cultural significance to give realisation to the assembly space of urban commoning—in which I argue is the *heart*/centre of urban commoning. The assembly space as explored through the case studies are the key spaces where a heterogeneous group of people come together making decisions—with the dispersion of power in a non-hierarchical manner—and where, not free of friction but through negotiation to create a common ground for all.

There is no denying of the relationship between the crafting of space and the atmosphere it creates, as the architecture of political congregation, *"is not on abstract expression of a political culture—it participates in politics."* (Mulder, 2017) So what are the *variables* that affects the level of *inclusion and participation* in decision making and what are the conditions that foster it?

A Glossary of Variables that affects the Atmosphere of an Assembly Space:

The variables which I have identified are factors which defines and affects atmospheres, identity, participation, hierarchy, inclusion in an assembly space.

1

gaze

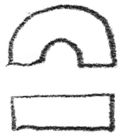
Gaze: is influenced by axis and levelling and as theorised by Foucault (1991), the panopticon gaze has inherent controlling and hierarchical characteristics as you are seen without seeing[1] . (Taylor, 2014) For the common space, it should be egalitarian, for you are seen but also seeing, with a horizontal gaze. (Taylor, 2014)

2

axis

Axis: is an organisation principle used in architecture affecting movement, gaze, spatial relationships

3



form

Form: XML through researching has realised that there are 5 basic typologies found across UN member states. 1.) opposing benches 2.) semi-circle 3.) classroom 4.) horse shoe 5.) circle (see Figure 50) (Mulder, 2017). All these different forms evoke different levels of inclusion/exclusion and the communication of hierarchy

4

fixture

Fixture: is about whether the furniture that defines the assembly space are fixed or whether it can be moved to create different settings

5

levelling

Levelling: is about the relation of one height to another, varying heights in assembly spaces can evoke different levels of hierarchy

[1] Taylor describes the subjects as being subjugated, hence self-polices as they are "an object of information but never a subject in communication" (Taylor, 2014)

There are specific conditions and aims of the assembly space which I have identified intended to create an atmosphere of inclusion and participation:

Aims of the Assembly Space in Urban Commoning	Variable of Influence
1. Representing the non-hierarchical, power dispersion and egalitarian decision making where everyone is equal	
2. Everyone is seen and being seen	
3. Space can be changed to allow both formal and informal settings and can be expanded to accommodate an expanding network of actors.	

Figure 48: A table showing 3 key aims of the assembly space identified and the variables that influence (as identified in the previous page)

Hence, *how can use the variables as a tool of translation to achieve the aims of the assembly space in urban commoning?*

Firstly, the form should be *circular*, the most democratic form as it allows everyone to see and been seen, and be heard. There should be no distinguishable levelling as everyone's gaze should meet the other on an even, horizontal plane evoking no sense of hierarchy and where everyone is considered equal. On the common space, the assembly space should be *open* and *accessible* by everyone, it does not necessarily need to be in a central location but with access points of circulation determining its axis. The furniture of assembly should not be fixed, but *flexible* and can be moved (even can be on wheels) as it should be the active agency of the commons to transform the assembly space to create formal and informal settings and for expanding commoning.

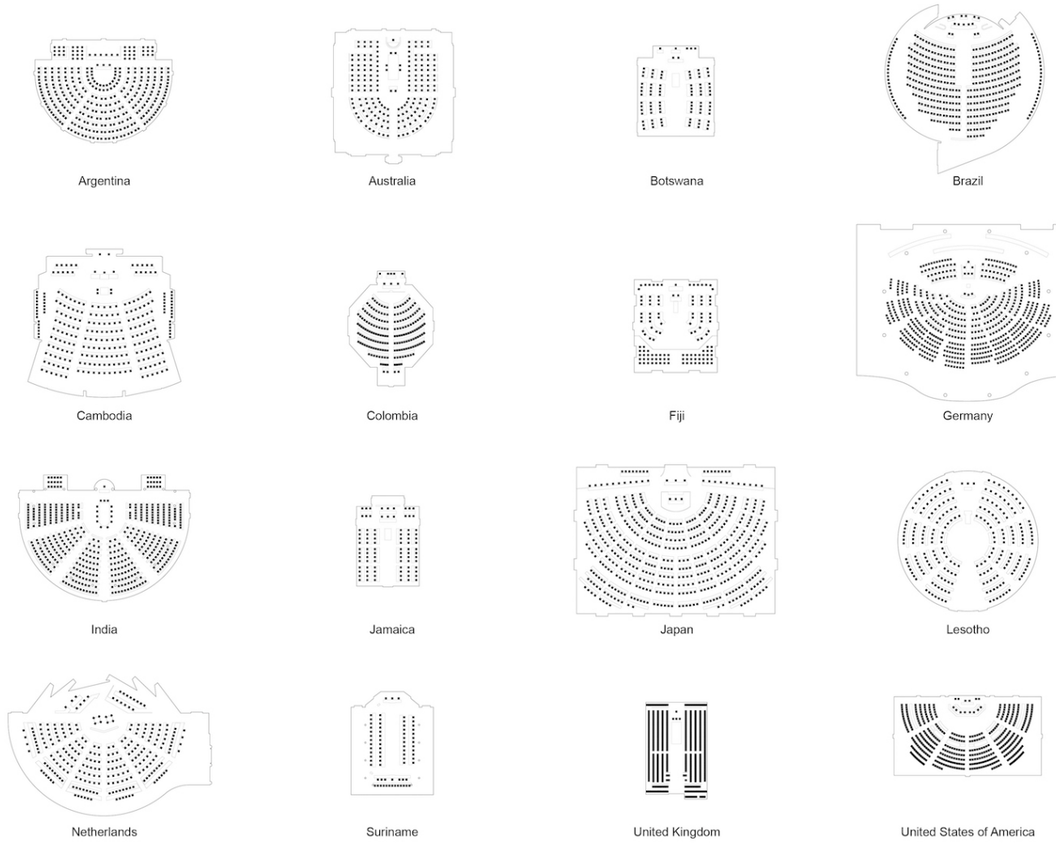


Figure 49: Plans and typologies of parliament buildings around the world

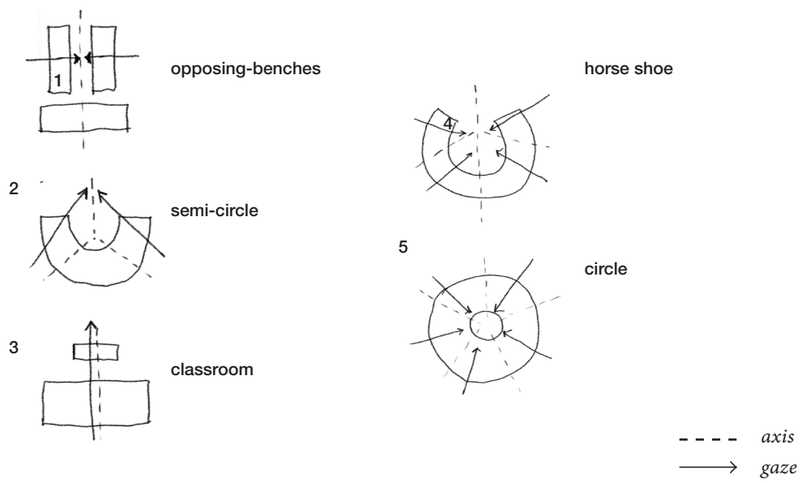


Figure 50: Illustrating what XML found has the 5 main typologies of parliaments across the UN member states, focusing on the differences in axis and gaze created through its spatial setting

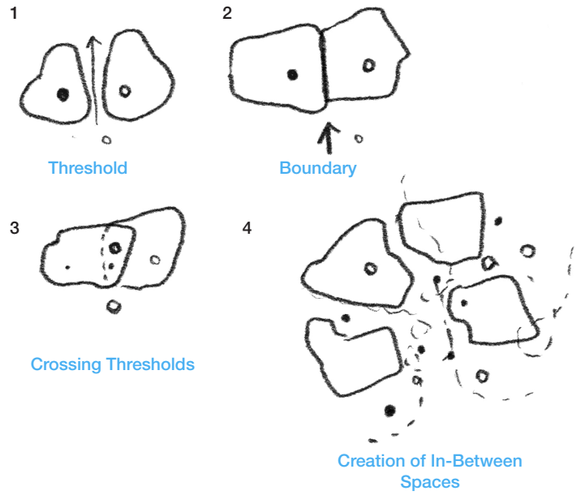
Figure 51: The Assembly space in Torre David

Figure 52: The Assembly Space of El Campo de Cebada

Figure 53: The Assembly space of Occupy Wall Street Movement

B-2

Common Space as Threshold Space:



Crossing Thresholds and the Creation of In-Between Spaces.

Thresholds as a:

"*mediating* zone" (Stavrides, 2019)

"place of *negotiation with otherness*" (Stavrides, 2019)

"point where *two different worlds* meet." (Stavrides, 2019)

"point of both *contact and separation* through the practices that *cross it*". (Stavrides, 2019)

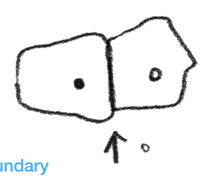
Glossary

1

Threshold

Threshold: neutral point with both the possibility of contact and separation

2



Boundary

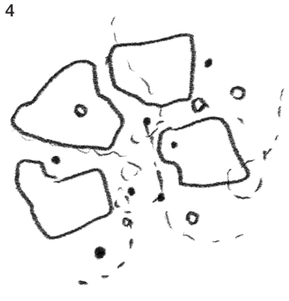
Boundary: defining two spaces without thresholds; with a definitive edge of separation.

3

Crossing Thresholds

Crossing thresholds: the act of opening up negotiation and contact between two entities; resulting in the blurring of boundaries.

4



Creation of In-Between Spaces

Creation of in-between spaces: the result of crossing thresholds. In-between spaces are the spaces of negotiated sharing.

Whereas the existing urban condition is one of the "*partitioned city*" (Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2002), common spaces must find its meaning through destroying these walls—crossing thresholds towards the creation of in between spaces. It is only through *negotiation* can thresholds between two entities be crossed.

So, what does in-between spaces look and feel like?

Firstly, when designing for in-between spaces, attention should be paid to the *materiality* used, as different materials on a sensory and sub-conscious level creates different degrees of openness and enclosure (for example, how a solid wall does not feel the same as something more permeable or porous like a curtain, although arguably, they are both means to establish a boundary).

Moreover, the ability of the user to *shape* their own thresholds is important and can be achieved with moveable boundaries that can be open or closed depending on their needs.

Lastly, it is also important to transform the surrounding streets to the common space as they are also a threshold of passage, with an *inviting atmosphere*. There is often a definitive boundary to what is felt to be the end of common space, as in the case of El Campo de Cebada is the wall. However, it is critical for the common space to not exist as a separate and isolated entity but to *relate to a wider context:* of the neighbourhood and city—and to cross and appropriate thresholds of the city itself with the language of commoning.

Figure 54:

The crossing of thresholds and the creation of in-between spaces is evident in the corridors of Torre David as social interactions and activities transform the corridors into a space of play, a place to chat with neighbours: a common space

Figure 55: The physical wall establishes a boundary between the common space of El Campo de Cebada and the rest of the neighbourhood. The opening and the movement to move into the space creates the crossing of thresholds.

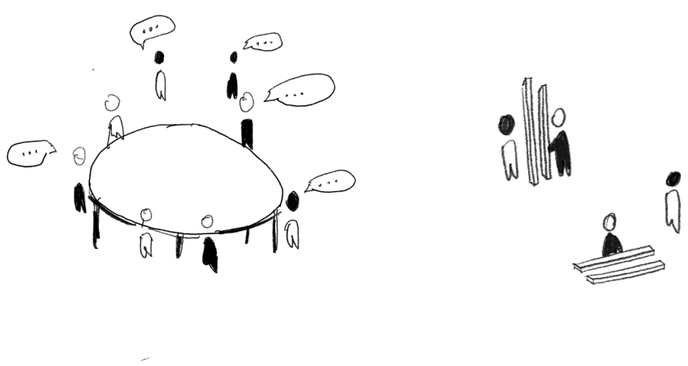
Figure 56: The threshold space of Torre David, showing the entrance to the building

Figure 57: shows the cut out of the boundary of El Campo de Cebada, and offering a window (using the washing machine door) into the activities of the site. As a means to also expand commoning and attract new agents.

Figure 58: Showing the crossing of thresholds through the inhabitants appropriating the building and cutting through a wall to create innovative in-between spaces of encounters to adjust to their needs

B-3

Common Space as a Space of Negotiated Improvisation: of Mutual Aid + Collective Self-Determination:



A Space of Possibilities.

Negotiated improvisation relates to negotiations (collective decision making) to reach a common agreement over how space manifests itself but still allowing for spontaneity and individual improvisation of appropriation. Allowing for a spatial language of improvisation within the framework of negotiation is critical as it relates to *"the right to change ourselves by changing the city."* (Harvey, 2008) Ultimately, common space is shaped and transformed by the commons who use and appropriate them (eg. the square can be place of relaxation or protest depending on the type of activity exercised.)

Moreover, as the language of construction is something that needs to be negotiated between the commons and if there is, the architect. If there is an architect, it is critical for them to develop a system of self-building that an incremental process and even if it is an established method of construction to leave the necessary room for improvisation: for the commons to be the key agents in shaping and taking care of it.

Lastly, *is it possible for the construction language (process and method) to relate to the language of commoning (mutual aid, soldarity, trust, sharing) and if so, how?*

Mutual aid in building should be encouraged—building together itself is an act of commoning as it generates trust and solidarity between the commons and forms a collective sense of ownership and pride in the space. Moreover, the shift to sharing needs to be considered especially in the *materialisation of the space*—through the sharing of materials, of knowledge and of reusing/recycling materials.

Figure 59: Showing the collective building process on site and mutual aid in building, with "handmade urbanism" workshops available. Street furniture are all created out of recylced materials

Figure 60: Neighbours and architects discussing the feasibility of a temporary geodesic dome that covers the space in winter

Figure 61: Intervention :"Pump Up the Blue", by Henrvre Paraponaris: A proposal to re-scaffold the outside of the building to reflect the continued evolution of the building

Figure 62: A group of residents of Torre David working together to build a new church for the Tower on the ground floor of Edificio B

PART 6

RE-ENCHANTING THE CITY THROUGH COMMONING

As I began my research into practices of urban commoning, I quickly became intrigued by its possibility and attempt to create an alternative world of collective emancipation, but at the same time, I felt powerless and without any active agency. As whilst I saw the cities around me seemingly developing in a rapid state of transformation—with buildings growing taller and taller, with more and more investments poured in its construction, I also saw and felt the destruction of communities through top-down practices of gentrification and displacement of people. It was a desperate and powerless questioning of *who is the city for if it's not for the people?* (Although the answer was very clear to me, I knew that city-making has been and still is very much a top-down practice) but I did not know where I fit in the picture as I am about to enter this field.

If anything, the practices of urban commoning have been extremely hopeful in understanding the power of collective solidarity but at the same time, often temporary, short-lived, or cannot move beyond a local scale. As existing within our cities, the urban commons are still subjugated by authorities, and across many cases living amidst very real fears of enclosure. But I know for sure that the *radical potentials of urban commoning have not been fully realised yet*—as although urban commoning have succeed in creating transitory spaces it is only through collective wider systemic change that it can gradually replace the existing capitalist production of space.

Moving to a more optimistic note—*how can we imagine the city re-enchanted by practices of urban commoning?*

For starters, we need to liberate our view of the city—to see the city not in its fragments, boundaries, or partitions but through its *thresholds*—as within these passages we discover the possibility of *encounters, emancipation and appropriation*. An enchanted city manifests itself as ordinary city dwellers truly live the language of commoning—of *mutual aid, trust, sharing*—where the possibilities of a transitory space to emerge.

As demonstrated through the urban commons, it is only through crossing the thresholds of difference and of control where we can find ourselves in a liberating mediating zone that makes room for *new* meanings, *new* dreams, and *new* collective experiences to *grow* and more importantly *blossom*. (De Angelis & Stravides, 2010)

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