

# Book review of *Housing as Commons: Housing Alternatives as Response to the Current Urban Crisis*

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Inspired by the aim to promote the potentialities of commoning, this book edited by Stavros Stavrides and Penny Travlou contributes to the theory and debate on urban commons and commoning in relation to housing and dwelling while also hinting at tools for its praxis. Stavrides, an architect, scholar and activist has been researching the urban commons for many years and has written at least four other books on the topic. Similarly, Travlou, an academic and activist, has conducted and published relevant research on the topics of collaborative practices, the sharing economy, and the commons, orienting her work by feminist methodologies. Additionally, she has been involved in grassroots initiatives, some of them related to the defence of housing rights.

Written in collaboration with other engaged architects and urban planners, the different chapters of the book draw on the literature of the commons and on a critical spatial approach to examine and theorise on urban commoning practices, models, and struggles. From this perspective, the book examines the characteristics as well as the potential and challenges of these practices and models as responses to the housing problem. Furthermore, it analyses the strategies and tactics employed by actors seeking to contest dominant housing systems and defend alternative models. Remarkably, this is done by including case studies from cities across the Global South and North, challenging the dominance of core-centric perspectives, offering a broader view of the topic and providing material for comparative analysis.

The book is structured into three sections each comprising five chapters centred around a main topic. Parts I and II focus on collective dwelling practices aligned with the commoning ethos and on housing commoning models, respectively. The last section, on the other hand, analyses the impact of neoliberal housing policies on the commons and the collective resistances emerged in response. To make its content richer, the different chapters of the book employ a variety of formats, including scholarly pieces (most of them which are based on participatory methodologies), interviews, and essays, all supported by empirical research and a variety of theoretical perspectives.

## 1. Informal housing, infrastructures and commoning practices

This part of the book concentrates on the analysis of cohabitation practices organised over the basis of a commoning ethos by diverse types of collective actors living in different types of urban and peri-urban informal habitats. Among them, subaltern populations inhabiting informal settlements in

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Brazil and Mumbai, indigenous communities living in camps in the fringes of Australian towns and cities and grassroots collectives in *rurban* squats in Barcelona. The cohabitation practices at issue ranged from the ways in which the different actors organise themselves 'from below' to live together and share the reproductive work associated to it, to the ways in which they produce and design their shared habitat. Additionally, they included the wide variety of strategies and tactics developed by these actors to defend their alternative dwelling practices and their habitat from dominant logics and powers, or to press and manoeuvre the state to get them to meet their needs for dignified living conditions. Furthermore, the strategies and tactics used by these actors to engage new actors in their struggles.

A first-hand examination of these commoning dwelling practices can be found in the chapter written by Cavaldá and Cattano, scholars and inhabitants of two *rurban* squats in Barcelona, who explain the various ways in which their housing communities organise the reproductive task of feeding themselves in a way that seeks to be collective, horizontal, autonomous, socially transformative, and environmentally sustainable. By comparing the organisational systems of the two squats, the authors show that there are many ways to dwell in common. In their words, commoning, rather than being an "homogeneous alternative beyond the state and capitalism, represents [...] a window of opportunities that commoners can explore and experiment in a self-institutionalised and autonomous way" (p.97). Complementarily, Kamat and Dewolkar's chapter on activist infrastructures on an informal settlement in Mumbai offers an inspiring and sensitive account and analysis of some of the strategies employed by subaltern populations to collectively produce, defend and dignify their housing and habitat. As underlined by the authors, the strategies used by local activists engaging in this herculean task were remarkably creative, complex, and dynamic, as they mixed various approaches (i.e.: contention, collaboration, manoeuvring of the state, etc.), different actors (private, philanthropic, religious, state, community actors, etc.), and several adjustments throughout the time according to the different political and governance shifts.

In addition to describing and analysing different commoning dwelling practices, the chapters of this section also explore their potential as well as their contradictions and limitations. In terms of their potential, Burte's chapter on an informal settlement in Mumbai, argues how everyday commoning practices of mutual support and solidarity between neighbours, along with exceptional commoning initiatives such as social gatherings, local festivals or collective political mobilizations are essential for the survival and consolidation of subaltern populations facing multiple privations. Moreover, even if not carried out as part of a coherent and conscious commoning project, these practices are also crucial for the material and symbolic making and maintenance of their housing and habitat. Additionally, according to the scholar, these practices contribute to strengthening the political practice of citizenship of subaltern populations. Furthermore, they could serve as a pathway to expand the commoning ethos in the city.

Likewise, the chapter by Travlou and Cameron highlights the vital role of commoning dwelling practices of indigenous Australians and the associated Aboriginal ethno-architecture in preserving their cultural identity. As argued by the authors, these practices have been fundamental in their perennial struggle to resist assimilation into the colonial and settler society while allowing them to maintain pragmatic connections to it. Finally, the chapter by Capanema, Tonucci and Mayer, titled «Weaving commons in Salvador (Bahia, Brazil)», offers a stimulating account of how a collaboration between universities, organisations and urban movements not only contributed to the collective production of knowledge about the problems and struggles of the city, but also led to the creation of a network within which the collective actors could define a common agenda, developed tools for collective action, strengthen their struggles and held the government accountable to their demands.

## 2. Cooperatives, squats, and housing struggles

While the previous section explored commoning practices developed in different types of informal habitats, the second part of the book investigates and theorises around various types of housing commons. Namely, housing cooperatives in Zurich, Mexico City and Berlin; squats in Athens and Berlin; and collectively built housing projects produced by social movements through land occupations in

Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Additionally, this section sheds light on the potential and challenges of these housing models, most of which have been developed and supported by grassroots organisations or social movements to address the housing needs of various populations such as workers, homeless families and refugees.

As revealed by the different chapters, the potential of those models lies not only on their capacity to address (either temporarily or permanently) the housing needs of vulnerable sectors of the population, but also to build up their political and economic agency, including their ability to collectively manage their habitat, and to engage in alternative economic relations. Moreover, it also rests on their capacity not only to address housing but also urban and social problems in an environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive way. All of this, based on fragile but to a large extent viable and alternative models of property, finance, production, design, or/and management of housing, mainly developed from below.

Despite the benefits they offer, the chapters show us that these housing models and the organisations and movements that support them must deal with several key challenges to survive, and thrive. Based on the different chapters, we could categorise those challenges in two sets: external and internal governance challenges. That is, on the one hand, the challenge of navigating their relationship with the state and market actors without being assimilated or annihilated, while at the same time seizing or leveraging the opportunities offered by them. On the other hand, the challenge of collectively and dynamically defining their internal governance rules (mainly those associated with what is to be shared and decided, and how) and of favourably managing internal conflicts or threats resulting from issues such as power imbalances between their inhabitants, or individualistic interests of some of their members.

Concerning the relationship between those organisations and movements and the state, the chapters reveal that they are quite dynamic, moving across a spectrum that ranges from confrontation to collaboration, to co-optation. Additionally, they also suggest that organisations and movements navigate those relationships using different internal and external resources and a wide range of strategies that combine advocacy, and co-production with protest or direct action. However, the different chapters also show that the success of the movements and organisations at navigating those relations has depended not only on their abilities and capacities, but also on the institutional and political constraints or opportunities. Among the latter we can identify, for example, pre-existing favourable institutional or legal frameworks, financial support, or political will from state authorities.

### **3. In defence of the collective right to housing**

The third part of the book reflects on and questions the neoliberal policies that over the last decades have critically affected the right to housing. This is done by providing an account on the different forms these policies have taken in a diverse range of cities across the globe: Athens, Egypt, London, the former Yugoslavia and Medellín. In addition to this, it also sheds light on the different resistances and alternative approaches to market-driven policies emerged in some of these parts of the world.

From a political economy perspective Katerini, architect and active participant in the movements against foreclosures in Athens, argues, in a sharp reflection on the housing situation and the housing struggles in her country, how the welfare state has been dismantled and redistributive policies have been replaced by others which have enabled capital to profit from housing furthering its commodification and financialization. Moreover, she argues how, nowadays, those policies have not only turned housing into a locus of capital accumulation but they have also meant a change in the logics of domination. According to her, in the current times, dominant classes have no more interest in guaranteeing workers “a secure residence where they can maintain and develop their productive potential in stable and tolerable conditions of daily life” (p.234) but instead, seek to discipline workers by depriving them completely not only of their means of production, but also from the means of reproduction, from which housing takes part.

In line with this, the chapter by Piniara on the Barbican Estate analyses one of the earliest realisations of this neoliberal approach to housing and urban policies from an architectural view. From such a perspective, she sheds light on the way in which these policies inspired a range of innovations in

housing design which, in turn, induced a specific pattern of social reproduction for the middle and high classes, designed to fuel capital accumulation. As argued by the author, the development of the iconic estate by the City of London was never meant to be a welfare project for the most deprived but a housing project for the intermediate and upper classes aimed to attract investments in the city, in the context of the rise of urban governance envisioned as a strategy to finance urban growth. The marketing of this new product entailed the construction of a narrative by which the ideal of urban housing and dwelling is based on the values of domestic privacy, individuation of living, as well as quietness and safeness within the city but also a sense of community based on exclusivity and social distinction. This narrative was materialised and enabled by a new type of housing architecture and planning based on the enclosure of urban commons and the spatial dislocation and autonomy of housing from the city.

However, as Jovanović's chapter on the Yugoslav housing economy reveals, the marketisation of housing policies was not a process that happened overnight, nor did it follow a unique path. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, the process began in the mid-1960s through changes such as, for example, the sources of finance for public housing from municipal and republican funds to commercial banks. However, the process clearly accelerated in the mid-1970s and 1980s in the context of the global neoliberal turn in the world economy, to the point that today, according to the author, there is a strong bias among politicians, against any proposal that deviates even slightly from a capitalist orientation.

The marketization of housing and urban policies is not exclusive to hardcore neoliberal approaches. In one of the chapters of this section Ortiz and Smith, interviewed by Travlou, point out how even Medellín's urban policies, internationally recognised for their social orientation, were formulated with the main purpose of attracting investments to the city. In contrast to the elitist narrative of London's housing state discussed above, Medellín's social urbanism was seasoned with a discourse of redistribution to the poor. However, as Ortiz and Smith critically argue, even while these policies improved the infrastructure and connectivity of some deprived areas, this was more of a 'cosmetic solution' that did not tackle the roots of urban inequalities nor addressed key issues such as affordability and accessibility to decent housing. In fact, housing policies in Medellín remained aligned with the market-oriented ones applied in the rest of the country and in most Latin American cities.

These hardcore market-oriented housing policies are, however, not exclusive to Latin American cities. As Hagrais shows in his chapter, also in Cairo the proposed solution to the housing deficit was the massive construction of new housing units. These are generally built with low quality materials and a standardised design which does not reflect housing practices or meet people's needs. They generally lack collective facilities, are built in areas far from urban centres that are additionally not very suitable for urbanisation and are sold to the popular classes at exorbitant prices with the support of predatory credit schemes. In spite of this, this popular model, which – as substantiated by the extant research on the subject – prioritises profit over welfare, has yielded in Cairo the same results as in Latin American countries. These include: massive abandonment of housing by its new owners, indebtedness, and the precarisation of an already poor population coupled with the exacerbation or emergence of new urban problems, as well as substantial gains for developers and private financial institutions.

## Key takeaways

As outlined, the book offers a comprehensive and insightful examination of urban commoning in relation to housing from a perspective that emphasises the power of collective action and the importance of solidarity, organisation, resistance, and bottom-up innovations. The various case studies from both the Global South and North, presented in the book in scholarly articles, reflections, and interviews, shows the diversity of models, practices, and struggles associated with commoning. These examples illustrate the extent of their applicability and viability in different urban settings across the world while revealing that there is no singular, correct or standard approach to commons; instead, there is a rich array of paths and perspectives.

By bringing together the insights of architects and urban planners engaged in research and

activism, the book critically analyses the ways in which organisations and collectives from different cities struggle to advance or defend their alternative housing and dwelling practices and models based on commoning principles. Moreover, it examines the potential of these practices and models to offer viable solutions to housing and even broader urban or social problems, as well as to foster the development of socially and economically equitable, politically empowering, and environmentally sustainable approaches to housing and dwelling. Based on this critical analysis, the majority of chapters move beyond a romanticised view of these models, practices and struggles, instead acknowledging their inner contradictions and the external challenges arising from their embeddedness in capitalism.

With regard to the political-economic side of the analyses presented in the book, it has to be noted that, while the concept of financialisation of housing is seldom employed, many of the chapters discuss other related processes such as commodification and neoliberalisation of housing policies, particularly when assessing the challenges and limitations faced by housing commons. Additionally, when read from the perspective of housing activists and engaged researchers, the book offers an array of tools to contribute to the expansion of housing commons as its chapters provide a detailed and extensive account of the strategies and tactics developed by collectives and movements to advance and defend these models and practices. Additionally, although the chapters are not particularly concerned with policy recommendations, their accounts of the institutional framework supporting housing commons in different contexts may hint to the articulation of proposals to protect and stimulate their emergence and growth.

In conclusion, the book makes an interesting and novel contribution to the theorization, analysis and debate of the characteristics, potentialities, contradictions, and challenges of housing commoning models and practices, as well as the strategies and tactics employed by different organisations to sustain or expand them. Moreover, it also serves as a valuable resource for practical examples, tools, insights and inspiration for activists, planners, and researchers committed to advancing housing and urban justice.

## References

Stavrides, S. & Travlou, P. (eds.) (2022). *Housing as Commons: Housing Alternatives as Response to the Current Urban Crisis*. London: Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350234543>