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Housing as commons: sites of struggle and possibility

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Introduction

Today, processes of 'accumulation by dispossession' and ever-increasing enclosures are accelerating, commodifying and privatising more land, water, and forests, and expelling peasant populations and low-income classes from urban centres. With neoliberal capitalism, we have witnessed an extraordinary increase in wealth and income inequalities, significantly driven by the financialisation of real estate and housing (Harvey, 2005; 2012; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2019; Stein, 2019). The financialisation of housing has made ownership increasingly unaffordable. In contrast, the privatisation of social housing and dismantling of rent control legislation have rendered rental accommodation increasingly precarious, leading to the forced displacement of previous residents. Neoliberal capitalism has accelerated the privatisation of state assets and services as well as of information and knowledge (Christophers, 2018; Harvey, 2012; Rolnik, 2019; Sassen, 2014).

Our cities and houses play a particular role in these processes. The built environment is considered to constitute an essential channel for creating and storing surplus value (Harvey, 1978; Lefebvre, 1974), to the point that today, capital and real estate have become increasingly interdependent (Aalbers *et al.*, 2020). As they are essential to capitalist profit-making, enclosures and expulsions assume clearly visible forms in urban settings. Within the processes of neoliberalisation, the state has generally acted as a facilitator of capitalist accumulation, fostering regulatory reorganisation that modifies and recreates forms of governance, fostering and consolidating marketised and commodified forms of social life (Peck & Tickell, 2002). When designing urban policies, housing and real estate are thus increasingly conceived as an asset, a way of attracting more wealth (Stein, 2019; Rolnik, 2013), transforming into a 'fictitious commodity' (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]), taken over by finance. Policies are guided by the goal of maximising the value of urban space (Brenner et al., 2010; Rolnik, 2019), instead of being directed, for instance, by the *New Urban Agenda* (2017, p.5) vision of 'cities for all' in which 'all inhabitants' (...) 'are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements'.

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For those dissatisfied with intensifying enclosures and expulsions, the search for alternatives has become increasingly urgent. This search emphasises alternative ways of organising our cities and societies, looking for fair and non-extractive futures within the planetary limits. As one umbrella term that possibly could support the creation of pathways towards that direction, the idea of the commons has spurred much scholarly and activist attention (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021; Federici, 2012). Nonetheless, it is often less clear which approach to the commons is adopted, considering that the concept has been defined in various forms. Institutional approaches, like Elinor Ostrom's Institutional Analysis framework, conceive the commons as 'common-pool resources' to be appropriated (Ostrom, 2005, pp. 79-81), focusing on the management and governance strategies of those resources.

On the contrary, scholars in the Marxist tradition tend to emphasise the commons not as a thing or a resource, but as a social relation, with the essential question being which population group gains access to commons, who controls them and to what effect (Harvey, 2012; Martínez, 2020b). Focusing on the urban commons, they argue that a commons should not be confused with a particular resource itself. For instance, the public space does not equate to urban commons, since it can be appropriated by diverse population groups for various uses and agendas. A public square can be transformed into a common by people assembling there to make claims, but it can equally be used to repress demands through violent means. Put differently, the production of and access to public space and goods are always contested (Harvey, 2012). Some initiatives aiming to establish commons can also risk creating exclusive, homogeneous communities. For example, gated communities that create borders to protect members from outsiders, or demarcation of land for ecotourism by displacing the populations that have lived in the area for hundreds of years, contradict the inclusive and collective spirit central to the concept of commons (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014).

Hence, the commons should not be understood as fixed entities or assets. Instead, they represent dynamic and adaptable social relations between a self-defined group and the elements of their environment deemed essential for their survival and well-being (Harvey 2012, p.73). Similarly, Caffentzis and Federici (2014, p.101) argue that commons are not pre-existing; they are actively produced through collective cooperation. While resources like air or language may appear as shared wealth, they only become a commons through the active and collaborative efforts of people in shaping their lives and environments. They thus advocate for a vision of the commons that goes beyond mere resource management or the provision of social services. Instead, these commons should aim to fundamentally transform social relations and offer a genuine alternative to capitalism, rather than softening its harsh impacts or rebranding it with a more humane facade. Hence, anti-capitalist commons, as envisioned by the authors, serve as autonomous spaces where people can regain control over their means of reproduction. These spaces also act as platforms for resisting enclosures and progressively disentangling from dependence on the market and the state (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014, p.101).

In this sense, rather than speaking about the commons, we can also speak about commoning, highlighting its processual form and the aspects of its production constituted through social relations: 'This practice produces or establishes a social relation with a common whose uses are either exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry. At the heart of the practice of commoning lies the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified-off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations.' (Harvey, 2012, p. 73). Linebaugh (2008, p.279), however, cautions that it is not simply by changing the noun to a verb that we can secure a non-commodified approach to the commons, as it is also possible to employ the idea of commoning 'to socialize poverty and hence to privatize wealth.' Martínez (2020b, p.1407) takes the anticapitalist orientation even further, arguing that commoning practices are meaningful as a counter to enclosures and privatisations only when they prioritise workers' control over the resources in question and actively promote stateless, non-capitalist alternatives as central to their struggle. Yet the debate on commoning has also inquired about the more subtle and fragile commoning practices, in which they appear as a potentiality, a possibility that might come into existence through praxis (Worby, 2024). In this reading, the strict categorisation of an ideal form of a commons is abandoned and the focus shifts to the relational aspects of the work of commoning, including diverse practices, labour and care, that renovate and transform ourselves and our planet. Attention is thus given to the ways commoning practices generate 'subjectivities of being-in-common' as well

as to the differences and inequalities that do not escape commoning processes (García-López *et al.*, 2021, p.1200).

Urban commons as such have inspired widespread analysis. In addition to Harvey's *Rebel Cities* (2012), other books such as Hardt & Negri (2009), Stavrides (2016), Stavrides & Travlou (2022) and Declève *et al.* (2022) have inquired about the potential of urban commons, under which conditions they can be produced, and for whom. Stavrides & Travlou (2022, p.1) argue that housing emerges as a key focus of urban commoning, particularly for those excluded from the formal city or those challenging dominant housing norms, such as the suburban ideal, alienating housing blocks, or gated communities. They also note that the debate on commons can offer a new perspective on housing, moving beyond the conventional legal, economic, and political framework that frames housing as a site of privacy, private ownership, and individual aspirations (Stavrides & Travlou, 2022, p.3).

Scholars have identified potential for housing commons in various specific initiatives. In these initiatives, many intentions and goals overlap: they are carried out to fulfil housing needs, applied as survival strategies, foster autonomy and self-organisation, and sometimes also arise out of the wish to advance anticapitalist urban futures. Many housing and urban movements have aligned with the search for the Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1968): the search for the right to participate in the making of the city and to inhabit it, along with the idea that 'the urban reality should be intended for its users, not for speculators, capitalist promoters, or technicians' (Lefebvre, 2012 [1968], p. 129). Housing movements recuperate empty bank-owned housing (García-Lamarca, 2017), acquire land titles for residents of neighbourhoods of informal origin (Cabannes & Göral, 2020), foster neighbourhoods' collective organisation and decision-making (Ergenç & Çelik, 2021), and struggle against the financialisation of housing (Fields, 2017), to name but a few examples. Some movements focus more specifically on anti-capitalist forms of housing and living (see Martínez (2020a) for a detailed overview). Housing movements can thus play an important role in contesting the commodification and financialisation of housing as well as demolitions and evictions from rental, private and unlawfully occupied housing.

Land and housing occupations are another set of practices, partly overlapping with the housing movements. Occupations and struggles against evictions can take the form of collectively organised, self-managed movements, such as in the case of the PAH – Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca[1] in Spain, the MTST - Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto[2] in Brazil, or Abahlali baseMjondolo[3] in South Africa. They can also appear in the form of 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat, 2013), through which individuals and families act autonomously to access resources and necessities, for example, through autoconstruction (Caldeira, 2017). In many cases, they operate as a 'reparative practice' (Scheba & Millington, 2023), filling the cracks in the formal provision of housing. Likewise, these everyday strategies join forces to become collective and coordinated, leading to what Zibechi (2010) refers to as 'societies-in-movement', highlighting the already existing practices of autonomy, survival and resistance. Martínez (2020, p.1404) proposes that occupations can be considered an urban commons to the extent that they are characterised as being 'collective, cooperative, self-organised, based on mutual aid, non-exploitative, and a survival practice of the working class.'

Housing cooperatives and other forms of cohousing have also been examined as potentially contributing to housing commons. Ferreri & Vidal (2022), in their review of public-cooperative policy mechanisms in fostering housing commons, draw attention to a few key aspects: if cooperatives are to contribute toward decommodified housing models, taking housing and maintaining it outside market dynamics, attention must be given to the market and property relations in which they are embedded. They thus consider that to potentially qualify as housing commons, cooperatives should at least present nominal resident collective control over the management and/or ownership as a key criterion (Ferreri and Vidal, 2022, p.155). The literature persuasively argues that housing cooperatives become commons not simply through legal recognition of cooperative tenure, but through additional efforts such as: (a) offering affordable housing for the working class, (b) fostering robust self-managed communities, (c) preventing property speculation, (d) aligning with broader

1 https://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/

2 https://mtst.org/

3 https://abahlali.org/

emancipatory social movements, and (e) reducing reliance on external financial sources and wage labour (Martínez, 2020b, p.1403). Consequently, not every form of 'collaborative housing' (Czischke *et al.*, 2020) can be considered to contribute towards housing as commons. The Community Land Trust (CLT) model constitutes a cohousing model that is specifically aligned with the idea of housing commons, due to its emphasis on taking land out of the market, affordability, and focusing on collective self-management of the CLT (Algoed *et al.*, 2021; Bunce, 2016; Fidalgo *et al.*, 2020).

Focus and origins of this Special Issue

The focus of this Special Issue is on processes of potential housing commoning. This does not mean all contributions in this issue necessarily constitute 'housing commons', but rather potential forms of 'transitional commoning' (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Ferreri, 2023) or 'aspirational commons"'(Martínez, 2020b): practices that are imperfect and precarious, partly due to the world we inhabit as 'in a world dominated by capitalist relations the common/s we create are necessarily transitional forms' (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014, p.101). In this issue, the focus is on cooperatives and housing and land occupations, as forms of transitional housing commoning practices. The five contributions draw from diverse theoretical approaches and geographical locations to explore pathways through which alternative housing futures are prefigured and advanced. This often includes precarious living conditions, highlighting the challenges of temporary or volatile urbanism and improvised solutions (Ferreri, 2021; Simone, 2019).

The Special Issue has its origin in a conference session organised by members of the editorial team for the EADI (European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes) General Conference "Towards New Rhythms of Development" that took place in Lisbon, Portugal, in July 2023. Following an open call for the session "Housing as Commons: Sites of Struggle and Possibility", the authors of this Special Issue participated in the conference to present and discuss their papers. The success of the panel and valuable audience feedback led to the collective decision to develop a special issue. We are grateful to the journal *CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios* for accepting our special issue proposal and for the support they provided throughout the process. We are particularly thankful to the editorial assistant and copyeditor Mariana Leite Braga for her patience, guidance and professionalism throughout the process.

Keeping with the spirit of commoning, the making of the Special Issue was truly a collective effort, comprising several online meetings and peer-to-peer support over the course of 2023 and 2024. Our collective labour and commitment have particularly informed the making of the visual essay, which is the result of extensive online discussions and exchanges where we collaboratively discussed and made sense of each other's photographs. Beyond the authors and editorial team, external reviewers played a significant role in shaping the final output by providing constructive feedback that undoubtedly improved each and every paper. In addition to five full papers, the special issue contains a book review, an interview and a visual essay. These contributions will be briefly summarised below.

Contributions to this Special Issue

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon conceptualises the chronic shocks, like fire, violence, and evictions, faced by inner-city residents of Johannesburg as 'uncommon rhythms' to interrogate their effects on the everyday life of unlawful occupations. Drawing from over 10 years of ethnographic and narrative fieldwork conducted with the residents of these occupations, he builds a rich theoretical framework to examine the urban rhythms through which the city is made and unmade. Following bell hooks (1989), Wilhelm-Solomon notes that focusing on spaces of marginalisation does not mean that these would not also be spaces of agency, home-making and resistance. However, the forms of 'withdrawal' that the residents are forced to endure, fleeing from eviction and police or racist violence, threaten their safety and amplify anxiety in the context of extreme housing precarity, forcing them to adapt to constant disruptions and dislocations. Wilhelm-Solomon's article exemplifies the patterns that can be discerned in commoning – and uncommoning – practices by putting the theory of urban rhythms into dialogue with the notion of the commons. Drawing from García-López *et al.* (2021), he proposes the concept of 'uncommon rhythms' to illustrate the tension that emerges when everyday

practices of commoning – 'affective labour, care and co-becoming' – blend with uncommoning: 'forces of antagonism and divergence'. Wilhelm-Solomon's article expands the emerging scholarly interest in commoning practices beyond clearly delimited notions of ideal forms of commoning or commoning as resource governance towards more subtle and concealed patterns and rhythms of commoning, while paying particular attention to the forces of disruption that shape the everyday existence.

In her article 'Emerging Commons: Cooperative Housing in Switzerland', Claudia Sanchez-Bajo argues that the rise of housing cooperatives in Europe is a counter-movement to decades of neoliberalisation of housing that has made accommodation increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible. Locating her study of five housing cooperatives in Zurich and Geneva within Polanyi's double movement theory and Ostrom's work on commons, she explores the motivations, lived experiences and practices of cooperative members. In discussing housing cooperatives in Switzerland historically and in contemporary times, Claudia Sanchez-Bajo shows how they have played an important role in the provision of affordable housing, especially in the country's large urban centres. Their growing numbers are influenced by recent political mobilization – through local referenda – but also increasing international exchange and partnerships.

A key contribution of her study is to illustrate how housing cooperatives go far beyond the provision of accommodation. Through the discussion of the case study projects, the paper provides clear evidence on how housing cooperatives are important social, cultural and economic spaces. As such, they foster collective governance, stimulate economic and income-generating activities, promote learning, networking and building of trust. Through innovative practices of collective and democratic governance, sharing and solidarity, the members of the housing cooperatives aim to prefigure a more emancipatory society where people live in common. This also includes efforts to reduce resource consumption, promote green technologies and increase self-sufficiency to enhance environmental sustainability. Despite significant state support, housing cooperatives in Switzerland face considerable challenges, including access to land, finance and maintaining affordability that constrain their scalability.

Lucía Abbadie's article examines the distinction between 'owners' and 'users' of housing in the northeast of Montevideo, Uruguay, with a particular focus on informal settlements and housing cooperatives, arguing that housing extends beyond physical structures, functioning as a network of social relations and emotional ties. Her theoretical framework is informed by Graeber's anthropological theory of value, Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city, and Holston's notion of 'insurgent citizenships'. Her fieldwork in two neighbourhoods includes interviews with residents of housing cooperatives and is framed within the broader context of Montevideo's historical urban development, where peripheral areas have long been spaces of exclusion and informality, shaped by colonial land practices and ongoing inequality in urban planning. Her study challenges the dominant emphasis on legal ownership, proposing that alternative forms of tenure and communal living arrangements – often undervalued in public policy – may better address the social and emotional needs of urban residents.

Overall, Abbadie's findings suggest that while collective action and shared use of resources can create social resilience and improve quality of life, these models are often inaccessible to the poorest sectors due to their organisational and financial demands. Her work contributes to the study of housing as commons by illustrating how marginalised groups navigate and resist urban inequality and highlighting the importance of valuing grassroots practices and rethinking public policies to prioritise dignified living conditions, relational well-being, and collective approaches to urban inclusion.

The contribution from Suraya Scheba, Andreas Scheba, Diana Sanchez-Betancourt, and John Giraldo Diaz explores informal occupations in Bogotá, Colombia, and Cape Town, South Africa, highlighting their role in city-making amid colonial histories and racialised dispossession. Both occupations challenge normalised socio-spatial relations, offering alternative socio-material relations of care and commoning. The paper examines the fluid and contingent relationship between occupiers and the state, shaped by contested infrastructural imaginaries, citizenship notions, and democratic governance. The authors identify four modes of occupier-state (dis)engagement: collective design and remaking cautious collaborative design, aspirational planning as a vision of co-design, and anticipatory planning as a vision of counter-design. These strategies reveal the complexities of

achieving tenure security and dignified living conditions. Thus, 'Commoning' is problematised as it is imperfectly enacted due to state control, commodification, and enclosure pressures. In Cape Town, the occupation of Cissie Gool House by Reclaim The City (RTC) exemplifies collective design and cautious co-design. Despite initial state engagement, the relationship deteriorated, leading to antagonism and threats of eviction. The residents' internal co-design process, although lacking direct state involvement, aspired to create a participatory planning model, highlighting the tension between state recognition and the occupiers' self-reliance. In Bogotá, the Altos de la Estancia occupation demonstrates a similar dynamic. The community's engagement with the state through the Altos de la Estancia Action Plan and the Technical Working Group (METTRAES) reflects cautious collaboration. However, political shifts and state inconsistencies challenge the sustainability of these efforts. This contribution shows that while commoning practices offer prefigurative potential, they are fraught with governance complexities, community conflicts, and state antagonism.

In their paper, Joana Lages, Saila-Maria Saaristo and Miguel Tomé offer a historical overview of public housing occupations in Portugal during the PREC era, paying particular attention to the neighbourhood known as 'Bairro 2 de Maio' in Ajuda, in the western part of Lisbon. A central concern of the paper is to explore the factors that fostered the emergence of occupations in post-revolutionary Portugal, as well as those that contributed to their endurance and regularisation. In response, the authors contend that decisive factors included the scale of housing precarity, the opportunity to set political change in motion, and the role of previous networks as mobilising structures for collective action frameworks. At the same time, they argue that the longevity of occupations was intimately linked to the specificity of the historical and political moment, including the empathetic attitude of the state and general public, and solidarity among the resident committees. In advancing knowledge of the factors that triggered and supported the mobilisation of urban residents in this historical period, the authors contribute to understanding of this particular moment in Portuguese history. At the same time, guided by a commitment to 'radical memory work,' this work is important for remembering the past as a central orientation to informing just futures.

In addition to these five papers, the Special Issue also contains Luisa Escobar's review of the book *Housing as Commons: Housing Alternatives as Response to the Current Urban Crisis*, edited by Stavrides and Travlou (2022), an interview with the architect and urban planner Manoel Ribeiro, conducted and edited by Joana Pestana Lages, and the previously mentioned visual essay 'Visualising urban commoning: Geographies of precarity, defiance and hope' that we collectively created.

Conclusion

Our concluding reflections began by addressing the most pressing and severe issues highlighted in this Special Issue: **forced displacement, evictions and precarious housing**. Recognised as a grave violation of human rights, forced and unlawful evictions often lead to homelessness, erode human dignity, and contravene established international laws and standards. Despite the presence of comprehensive legal frameworks at both international and national levels – including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and numerous national regulations – forced displacement and unlawful evictions persist with alarming regularity. From the informal settlements on the periphery of Lisbon to the occupations in Cape Town, these evictions expose stark inequalities and systemic injustices that disproportionately affect marginalised communities. This ongoing phenomenon underscores a troubling gap between legal protections and their enforcement, as well as the constant tensions between private property rights and the right to adequate housing. The persistence of forced evictions is not only a legal and political failure to realise the right to housing for everyone, but increasingly also a social, economic and moral challenge, demanding urgent collective action. So, in many cases, while laws aim to guarantee the security of tenure, prevent arbitrary displacement, and provide alternative housing or remedies, implementation often falls short.

As seen by the examples of Uruguay and Switzerland, promoting and supporting housing cooperatives can provide affordable and sustainable housing options, while keeping land and housing accessible and out of speculative markets. Despite their differences in geography, both experiences point to solutions of permanence, even if they point to different social groups (with

fewer resources in the case of Uruguay and mainly middle class in Switzerland). Likewise, both experiences show us that housing cooperatives go beyond the mere provision of housing, they are also important social, cultural and economic spaces, to be nurtured and fostered. As a new wave of housing cooperative movements is rising, the combinations of non-speculative solutions must explore alternative management and financing mechanisms such as crowdfunding and cooperative financing, or ethical banking.

This imperative would benefit from engaging with future reforms in relation to the digital space, for instance, looking at how technology tools in research (i.e., digital mapping tools), governance (i.e., digital participatory platforms) or alternative finance (i.e., crowdfunding for land acquisition) could support collaboration, resource sharing, and participatory planning. Furthermore, in advancing a relational lens, as cities grapple with both housing insecurity and environmental degradation, housing efforts should consider aligning practices with climate mitigation and adaptation. Finally, considering current forced migration and consequent anti-immigrant sentiments, it will add great value to explore how commoning efforts in diverse locations could foster the inclusion of migrant-led occupations and initiatives.

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