

# FOR A CULTURE OF URBAN COMMONS

## PRACTICES AND POLICIES

---

*Verena Lenna and Michele Trimarchi*

“It is in cities to a large extent where the powerless have left their imprint – cultural, economic, social: mostly in their own neighbourhoods, but eventually these can spread to a vaster urban zone as ‘ethnic’ food, music, therapies and more. But it is this possibility – the capacity to make a history, a culture and so much more – that is today threatened by the surge in large-scale corporate re-development of cities”.

Saskia Sassen

*Who owns our cities – and why this urban takeover should concern us all*

## 1. Occupied spaces between reclamation and protest

Appeared around 2011, the Occupy Movement has brought the attention back on the occupation of public and privately-owned spaces<sup>1</sup> to manifest dissent<sup>2</sup>. But occupations have a longer and wider history. Among their noble ancestors are the London occupation led by Gerard Winstanley in 1649, when the label 'squat' was created to describe the illegal occupation of land on the part of peasants, and the Paris anarchic actions led by Georges Cochon together with upholsterers since 1912, eventually supported by creative artists and the press. In that case the logic was based upon the symmetry between unoccupied houses and homeless families.

Without any ambition to cover the wide variety of possibilities and hybrid combinations, a distinction can be made as far as the purposes of occupations and, symmetrically, the role of space are concerned. In such a respect occupations are direct actions aimed either at claiming a space back, or at reinventing it given a state of abandonment or misuse. This is the case of squatting. The 1950s and 1960s gave rise to a diffused and organized movement of squatters in many European Countries, bringing with them a combination of social battles and creative intuitions: the conflictual orientation leading to occupations was fed by a fertile and innovative artistic and cultural action, and the oc-

---

1 Zuccotti Park, the first space occupied by Occupy Wall Street (OWS), is a privately-owned public space (POPS) in New York City. Concerning the history of these spaces in New York City, see Kayden (2000). Concerning the controversial potential of these spaces in New York City, see Smithsimon (2008) and Schmidt/Nemeth/Botsford (2011). Maps and data showing the proliferation of privately owned public spaces are multiplying: London, San Francisco, Toronto and New York City among others. On the risks for a democratic society related to privatization and financialization of cities see Sassen (2014) and Sassen (2015).

2 In the specific case of OWS the protest, which started on September 17th, 2011, was carried out against the logic of the financialization, resulting in speculation and dispossession of resources. It could not have been more effectively expressed than through the physical occupation of a publicly used space, literally enacting the right to the city.

occupied places started to be transformed in venues for cultural events. The 'squatters' widened the field of their action, and conquered the interest and the passion of other continents, spreading in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, US, Canada, Australia, India, Taiwan, Thailand among the others.

But occupations can also be organized to protest, by exploiting the public function or the socio-cultural, symbolic value of a given space to amplify the message and its political importance<sup>3</sup>. Disturbance is produced by suspending the regular functions with non-relevant activities. Notoriously in the late 1960s schools and universities have been often occupied by students carrying out some protests about either social and political issues on the one hand, or specific school controversies on the other<sup>4</sup>. Between the 1960s and our years many things have changed. While then it was part of a wider flow of protests affecting many layers of society and substantially related to class conflict and the growing awareness of labour condition of the working class which also students exhibited sympathy to, now it appears to pursue a much more detailed and specific orientation due to the perceived (and often real) distance between the formal rules and the actual weights of school dynamics<sup>5</sup>.

3 See, for a critical analysis of the various interests and views at stake, Vitale (2007).

4 School and university occupations present common features across the world, also due to the inclination to replicate simple actions, limited time brackets, and formal declarations in order for occupiers to feel part of a wide – and possibly international – community, gaining strength and credibility in their fight aimed at combining material improvements in the premises with looser regulations in exams. The phenomenon has crossed some peak periods, at the end of the 1960s and 1970s, but also in the most recent years. See, among the most recent articles, Barbie Latza Nadeau, "In Italy, angry students occupy schools", *The Daily Beast*, 22 november 2012 ; Paula Alegria and Marcielly Moresco, "Occupy and resist! School occupations in Brazil", *Open Democracy*, 13 october 2017.

5 An eloquent example is the invitation to occupy schools on the part of the group of Parents of African American Students Studying Chinese, who point at: a) less access to challenging courses in high school; b) lower-paid and less experienced teachers;

Unavoidably the two purposes – the reclamation of a resource and the protest – often overlap. In the case of squats, for example, the reclamation of an empty building and the installation of a different *modus vivendi* imply a critique to the system that caused that state of abandonment. Discontent is expressed as exodus, to use the words of Negri and Hardt (2000): the creation of an alternative that tries to escape power and its mechanism of normalization. On the other hand, to occupy a privately owned public space equals an immediate reclamation of its function, while taking advantage of the symbolic setting to protest against the system at large. Protest is performed through reclamation of a park as a representation of what it should be: public space as a dimension for the construction of a public opinion, and where critique could be expressed.

The reactions to occupations have been of different kinds: from evictions to attempts of negotiation with the legal owner of the occupied spaces, to agreement aimed at finally transforming illegality in temporary, legally recognized occupations, often based on a careful evaluation of costs and benefits in society's perception and in urban governance<sup>6</sup>. In any case, only when either the noise was considered less bearable by the establishment, or the legal owners claimed their properties back, specific interventions led to the (often violent) eviction of occupiers or the end of any agreements. Also related to the political colour of local governments.

In this chapter we will specifically look at those occupations which aim at the reclamation of the city, where alternative forms of governance are often experimented as leisure or cultural activities, organized by the persons involved. These two dimensions in fact cannot be distinguished, as samples of alternative urbanisms. Are these occupations about the reclamation of the city or about the creation of different cultural agendas? In fact, what we argue is that those occupations

---

c) three times higher probability to be suspended or expelled from school when compared with white students. See paassc.com.

6 Vitale (2007).

and the activities through which they are performed are about the emersion of a different culture *tout court*: a culture of the urban commons. It is a culture recognizing the right and the capacity of doing on the part of individuals and collectives, taking the city as the object of a continuous and spontaneous re-creation, and the social construction as its main side effect. It is a culture which may survive despite and beyond the dismantlement of the occupations.

What is interesting, through the examples here explored, is that the resource is not reclaimed by acting on a legal level or through some form of administrative intervention, but by practicing and experimenting a different form of governance, based on the engagement of the involved communities. Little by little a vacant site or building are embedded in an alternative, site-specific, spontaneously crafted fabric of exchanges and reciprocities, of individual and collective actions and programs. It is a new life, urbanity being recreated on the base of a different approach to the making of things and of the city. It is in these terms that we will discuss about the occupations, suggesting that the reclamation of the city is not simply about the redefinition of public and private sovereignties, but it is also – and maybe most importantly – about the installation of a different attitude, of a culture of inhabiting à la Heidegger. The practices of urban commons examined below can be considered an expression of that attitude.

When it comes to our cities and the progressive loss of urbanity arising from the growing financialization and the processes of privatization, those practices, generated by the inhabitants and grounded at a microscale, seem to suggest a possible answer, reclaiming the fine grain of the urban fabric by practicing the right to govern it, by practicing the commons as a culture.

## 2. The tragedy of the city: neglect or dispossession?

Despite their heterogeneity occupations are the response to some neglected – either individual or social – need, on the part of either an organized group or a spontaneous agglomeration of people who converge on some major view, not without conflicts and diverging interests. They provide occupiers with possibilities that they could not enjoy otherwise: the basic need of an accommodation, the desire to share creative activities, the intention to express opinions and views at loud voice, the refusal of steady conventions covering inequalities and right violations.

Quite often their emersion is the reaction to missing action on the part of the public administration. It could be just ordinary maintenance to be missing, concerning buildings, a district or any other public asset; they are actions whose timeliness could allow the local administration to effectively adapt the management of resources and regulations to emerging (and even unpredictable) needs, rather than simply ignoring them. In the light of such an absence, occupation often proves a sort of last instance action on the part of those who evidently feel neglected by the urban strategy, or – worse – pay the price of the absence of any strategies<sup>7</sup>.

Such a missing ring in the social chain, where the urban palimpsest and the resident community should develop within a consistent reciprocity<sup>8</sup>, combining effectiveness of services and equality of opportunities, indicates an approach to urban administration as an ex-post intervention able to deal with ordinary problems through regulation or funding aimed at rescuing weak components of the urban community (either people or organizations) when their political weight could generate unwanted dissent. Within a political economy conceptual

7 Although many occupations start by initiative of artists, looking for undetermined, abandoned spaces where they can freely express themselves, in a later time they could be reached by the *désaffiliés* – as Castel (1994) defines them – as marginalized individuals because either in precarious conditions or in poverty.

8 See Trimarchi (2014).

grid<sup>9</sup>, no action is suggested when the potential dissent is not considered sufficiently important. This may occur, for example, when there is no solid critical permeability among social groups, when interest bearers are almost invisible, when some specific urban area is not the residence of many local taxpayers.

This weakness of public action in urban management is generated by the awareness, on the part of local administrators, of the main features of voters' choice, which is strongly affected by short memory and narrow sight in adopting decisions in the only case when this is possible: elections. Since voters' decisions appear to be strongly influenced by public action carried out within specific areas where voters live and/or work, and close to the election date, the related need to concentrate visibility of public action in the last period of every electoral term makes it difficult for local public decision-makers to consider urban governance appealing: it may generate consent but in the long run, with the risk of passing it on next-term administrators<sup>10</sup>.

To a long-lasting neglect on the part of municipal administrations, some specific decision aimed at changing the legal framework related to ownership and management is often combined. If *Kunsthaus Tacheles*<sup>11</sup> in Berlin was occupied after a long institutional absence, the impact of decay and some partial demolition, *Teatro Valle*<sup>12</sup> in Rome was suddenly subject to a change in property and management after the abolition of the Italian Theatre Authority (ETI, *Ente Teatrale Italiano*): the theatre was abandoned with no project aimed at future man-

9 See, among the others, Nordhaus, W.D. (1975), Struthers/Young (1989).

10 Buchanan/Tullock (1962).

11 The political and artistic implications of Tacheles occupation and closure are examined by Jones (2012).

12 Despite the intensive discussion and the diffused interest for the *Teatro Valle Occupato* as the experiment of a new approach to theatre management, its story was quite short due to the substantial indifference of the municipal administration towards any possible solutions that could have combined the urgency not to abandon such an important space on one hand, and the needs of a group of professionals otherwise crowded out by the cultural market on the other. See Carrone (2014).

agement, and a group of theatre professionals decided to occupy it in order for its activity to be granted some continuity. In this case the source of spontaneous reaction had been an abrupt dismissal rather than systematic neglect.

Occupy Wall Street<sup>13</sup> pointed at the intrusion of the corporate establishment on governmental decisions, resulting in a growing distance between the 99 percent of the population and a 1 percent detaining most of the wealth of the world<sup>14</sup>. A stable camp was created and day-and-night activity was carried out, until the eviction on the part of New York Police Department on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011. In response to the attacks of that day the message of the occupiers has been “You can’t evict an idea whose time has come”<sup>15</sup>. The movement elicited twin actions in many parts of the world from Great Britain to India, Chile and Greece, and was somewhat associated to the ‘Arab spring’.

In other cases the occupation movement rises as the reaction to some threatened or started action whereby the local public administration intends to change the legal and actual destination of a shared space in order for its transformation to lead to a different use of public facilities. It was the case of Gezi Park in Taksim Square, Istanbul, where the public area devoted to shared leisure time was the object of a development plan. Protesters exploited this occurrence to extend the issues to many controversial changes in Turkish life and in the gradual weakening of the secularism which the Republic had been founded upon. Spread in other areas in the Country, the Gezi Park protest movement appears to have involved more than three million citizens (the official figures are much lower), and the final eviction ended with

---

13 The complex nature of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the ambiguous ebollition of conflicting interests are focused, among the others, by Gautney (2011), and White (2017).

14 In 2017 Oxfam calculated that the 1 percent detained 82 percent of the wealth created in the world. See <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2018-01-22/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year>

15 See Smucker *et al.* (2011).



eleven killed and more than 8000 wounded protesters; more than 3000 occupiers were arrested.

### 3. From 'Occupy' to the Urban Commons

Any occupation implies organization: for a couple of days or for several weeks, to make sure that food can be distributed and basic needs can be fulfilled, as in Gezi Park or at Zuccotti Park; to organize so that the just reclaimed resource could be protected and managed more efficiently or simply differently, as in Rome with Teatro Valle. What is interesting to observe is that the re-appropriation of neglected or mis-used urban spaces allows to experiment alternative uses and forms of organization. In fact, in the mentioned cases the establishment of an alternative governance of the reclaimed resource is the ultimate purpose, especially after the crisis of 2008, as an exasperated reaction to the inability of both the public and the private to manage resources.

What is being reclaimed is not only a building or a square, but also the ability of the involved community to take care of it, and to protect it, together with the right to decide about it, a right which is expressed as (and at the same time is further legitimized by) the capacity of managing the resource. In other words, what many occupations establish are practices of commoning. In fact according to De Angelis and Stavrides (*An Architektur*, 2010) – among many others<sup>16</sup> – three elements define the commons: a pool of common resources, a set of commoners estab-

---

16 In this chapter it is not possible to reconstruct the still open, large debate concerning the definition of the commons, in fact varying across the countries in relation to different cultural backgrounds, disciplinary frameworks and issues at stake. The definition of De Angelis and Stavrides looks adequate as it allows to seize the complexity of commoning as a process – beyond the definition of the commons as naturally given resources – and its capacity to continuously reproduce and evolve as a social construction, involving a variety of actors, balancing regulation and generativity.

lishing the rules to take care of those resources, and a process of commoning to create and reproduce the commons<sup>17</sup>.

As very well known, the discourse of the commons is not new. It goes back to the *Magna Charta*<sup>18</sup>. Dramatically reduced by the enclosures, shared uses of the commons survived especially in less urbanized, peripheral contexts, such as small mountain communities, as showed by the jurist Paolo Grossi (Rosboch, 2015) with reference to the Italian experience. Ostrom (1990) specifically dealt with the governance of natural resources. But, as Mattei (2011) pointed out, the discourse on the commons powerfully (re)emerged in relation to occupations and urban settings, especially after the crisis of 2008, as an answer to the austerity regimes and as an alternative to the neoliberal management of resources.

Indeed in New York City the discourse was consciously adopted and a reflection on the commons started at the beginning of 2012, at the core of the activities of the collective *Making Worlds*<sup>19</sup>. Concerning Gezi, while chronicles of those days report that “a specific kind of urban participation and collaboration is gradually being established in the park”<sup>20</sup>, the discourse of the commons was well known, and Istanbul was in fact one of the cities on the platform of *Mapping the Commons*<sup>21</sup>.

Less noisy than the case of New York and Istanbul – perhaps because of a different symbolic, economic, cultural framework and of a different chain of events – in the same years a variety of occupations and forms of commoning started to proliferate. While continuing the

17 See the interview to De Angelis and Stavrides in *AnArchitektur* (2010)

18 See Linebaugh (2008).

19 To which Verena Lenna, co-author of this chapter, took part while living in New York City during the first half of 2012.

20 As reported in <https://www.dinamopress.it/news/taksim-square-and-gezi-park-occupation-practicing-commons/>

21 See the webpage dedicated to Istanbul, where the activities organized by *Mapping the Commons* are described, occurring during the days of the manifestations in November 2012. <http://mappingthecommons.net/en/istanbul/>

same discourse of the ‘Occupy’ movement, but having the chance of a longer (since less disturbing) permanence, they emerged especially in more densely urbanized contexts, increasingly at risk because of privatization and in the worst cases because of the financialization of the city, from community gardens to abandoned theatres, from empty buildings to airports. Although not corresponding to an unequivocal definition, the expression ‘urban commons’ is used in the scientific literature at the very least to refer to an urban setting and to distinguish these generative practices – as we shall see – from the natural, given commons such as air, water, land, and from those commons whose existence does not depend on any specific location and setting, such as intangible cultural heritage, the digital commons, seeds, just to mention a few<sup>22</sup>.

Despite the number of variations, these practices – notoriously by now – suggest an alternative approach to managing resources, based on a shared definition of rules, on an attitude of care, on the direct engagement of the concerned communities. As a result the resource should be protected, while and because remaining accessible and available to a multiplicity of concerned communities, fulfilling their rights and their desires. In the next paragraphs we will shortly mention a few examples which might facilitate a more concrete understanding of the kind of activities and the values at the core of urban commons. In particular, we will take into consideration those practices of commoning performed as leisure activities, art or cultural projects<sup>23</sup>.

22 This definition is proposed on the basis of a self-evident difference of the practices here considered from natural commons, hence allowing to take into account the specific conditions in which urban commons are established. In fact while the natural commons are given, the urban commons are the result of a spontaneous, continuous creation. While a critical review of that definition will be possible on the basis of a specific research hypothesis, for the purpose of this chapter we chose to align with the prevailing, quite homogeneous, understanding of the urban commons in the scientific literature. Among others, variations of that definition can be found in Ferguson (2014), Borch and Kornberger (2015), Dellenbaugh *et al.* (2015).

23 The cases here considered are only a few among many others, in general and in relation to the leisure and cultural activities oriented commons in particular. They

### a) Kunsthaus Tacheles, Berlin

As a precursor of the forms of occupation here described, the case of Tacheles was established around twenty years before the ‘Occupy’ movement. It is mentioned here to suggest that alternative forms and settings for art and culture making have deep-seated roots. Present circumstances are probably finally providing us with a fertile ground for their multiplication. Almost twenty years after Christiania<sup>24</sup> a neglected building located in Berlin Mitte was occupied by some groups of creative artists who transformed the partially demolished place into a social centre and a sort of hub for contemporary art and antagonist culture. Also in the case of Kunsthaus Tacheles the story of the occupied space passed across many waves of uncertainty, from the project aimed at completely demolishing it to the intervention of a developer whose aim was to requalify the area with its likely fallout of gentrification. Born spontaneously just after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1988, Tacheles aimed at giving voice to creative artists, as a reaction to the censorship-oriented DDR policy (Rost and Gries, 1992). Visited by Berliners and international travellers, Tacheles was dragged in legal con-

---

have been chosen on the basis of the direct engagement or personal knowledge of the authors, with no ambition to be exhaustive or representative. Together with other cases of occupations mentioned in this chapter these cases are taken from urban settings of developed Countries, belonging to the European context in particular, and experiencing similar economic transformations, although with differences. Other cases, from other Continents and Countries – besides a dedicated, specific research framework and means – would require to be situated on the background of very different economic, political and cultural circumstances, going beyond the ambitions and the actual purpose of this chapter. The information concerning these cases, when not deriving from a direct experience or contact of the authors with the collectives, are retrieved from the web (articles, blogs, official websites). The quoted sentences are taken from the official websites of each examined organization.

- 24 Founded in 1971 by a group of hippies who occupied an abandoned naval base (Lauritsen, 2002), Christiania was formally acknowledged as a self-managed urban area. After various and uncertain interactions between the community and the Danish government, an agreement has been reached in 2011: the residents will gradually buy the land due to a specific fund.

troveries, being cleared, then reopened, then closed, until September 2012, when its community was definitely evicted. Its activity was versatile: not only art production and exhibitions, but also concerts, dance performances and other forms of art were hosted by the cosmopolitan community located in Tacheles, although its connections with the urban grid were not extensively fertile; actually it was known and used by the art milieu, but the urban community was not involved in its life<sup>25</sup>. Tacheles appears as a case of thematic occupation, with its powerful attractiveness towards the art world, and its symmetrical absence from the urban community's point of view.

### **b) Teatro Valle, Rome**

In 2010 the Italian government dismissed the Ente Teatrale Italiano (Italian Theatre Authority), a public agency active in theatre production and distribution, within a wider program of budget cuts. The historical Teatro Valle in Rome, a monument built in 1726, was abandoned, and the realistic option seemed to be its privatization (Povoleto, 2011). A group of theatre professionals, including actors, directors, technicians and musicians, occupied the Teatro Valle in June 2011 to avoid the legal passage to private owners and managers, and to craft professional opportunities that otherwise would have proved difficult. The three-years self-management season appeared to have broken a few conventions, since from Italy and from abroad many theatrical companies agreed to 'donate' their works to the 'Teatro Valle Occupato' (how it started to label itself); in the meanwhile the occupiers decided to transform their informal container into a foundation, and hired a group of experts – among whom the prominent jurist Stefano Rodotà – to write their statute, a wishful document based upon assembly decisions, managers' short-time turnout and a sort of improper use of the label 'common', although no real approach to the culture of commons was actually present in the internal regulations. The strategic aim was to use the foundation as a sort of Trojan Horse in order for political

25 See, on the controversies related to Tacheles, Donelli/Trimarchi (2019).

issues to be pursued through cultural action. In 2014 the legal property of Teatro Valle passed from the Italian Republic to the Municipality of Rome, and the occupiers left the theatre. Apparently there is a project of rehabilitation of the building, although no theatrical and cultural strategy is still visible. The long and uncertain times for bureaucratic procedures leaves the (no more occupied) Teatro Valle in an institutional limbo whose outcome is still unpredictable.

### **c) Macao, Milan**

“The real challenge is not to reproduce what you find in the market”. This, and other similar statements, define the search for a new identity and orientation collectively crafted during the occupation of Torre Galfa in Milan on the part of the collective Macao. A wide community of thirty- to forty-years old professionals active in various areas devoted their energy and creativity to Macao after a working day, aiming to craft a new cultural and social structure to face the future: “We only ask to undermine your mode and to join us in order to try and modify your model together with us”. Romantic and trustful, Macao refused any direct relationships with public institutions, while developing connections with grass-root associations, district committees, universities. The Macao collective started its urban action in May 2012, when an abandoned skyscraper was occupied by around two hundred people led by the group ‘Art Professionals’, unwrapping the banner “We could also think we can fly” (Demurtas, 2013). The strategic aim of Macao clearly was to rethink life, work, relationships, and culture, being aware of the powerful symbolic value that such an interrogative approach to many urban certainties could be offered to the resident community and its institutions. After eighteen months, in which two evictions were carried out, Macao moved to the former slaughterhouse, an abandoned liberty building where the ambitious project aims at offering a new cultural system, a new museum, a library and above all the space for cultural projects with no managerial rules. This can be considered an experiment on action within a cultural commons framework, where the informality and the absence of institutional re-

lationships (Macao even refuses the participation to public calls) may grant the shared responsibility and the cross-fertilization that represent the fundamentals of cultural commons.

#### d) Commons Josaphat, Bruxelles

*“L’utopie commence où la volonté politique s’arrête”*. Shorter than a manifesto, sharper than a program. Commons Josaphat is a *collectif à géométrie variable*, a platform of individuals and associations, militants and inhabitants, established at the end of 2012 with the objective to propose an alternative development for the vacant site of Josaphat, based on the concept of the Commons. The shared resource is a 24 hectares’ vacant site at the core of Brussels, situated between the municipalities of Evere and Schaerbeek. The site was formerly a marshalling yard. Today it belongs to the SAU (Société d’Aménagement Urbain), a company under public law whose majority shareholder is the Brussels-Capital Region and whose main mission is the implementation of development plans in strategic areas defined by the Region. Around and on the site, Commons Josaphat organized a variety of activities: from temporary, light or mobile installations to a collectively conceived manifesto for the development of the area, from picnics to the design of an *îlot modèle* – a prototype of an urban block conceived according to the principles of the Commons. For a long time abandoned and despite many projects – which could not be developed, given the entity of the site – the site is finally the object of a new Masterplan. The first proposal has been presented at the end of 2015 and citizens have been finally called to evaluate its latest version in June 2018, disappointing a large group of associations and inhabitants for the exclusive modalities of the process. Through all the years the purpose of Commons Josaphat, maintaining a non-conflictual attitude, has been to negotiate with the owners of the site a development based on a substantial involvement of residents, on the perpetual protection of land accessibility and of its ecological value. In a city which is demographically growing and which cannot expand beyond its regional borders, land is indeed a scarce resource and the site of Josaphat is one of the last *Zones d’Intérêt Régional*, the

land reserves of the Region of Brussels. Adopting the claim “In case of emergency make your own city”, associated with the icon of a shovel, Commons Josaphat points at a consistent and empowering implication of inhabitants in the making of the city, at the protection of the city as a commons, as a collectively and continuously regenerated opus whose primary purpose should be to give a solid answer to the basic needs of its inhabitants, resisting to any form of dispossession.

#### **f) Campo de Cebada, Madrid**

Created ‘for’ and ‘by’ the neighbours (*“por y para los vecinos”*) after the demolition of a swimming pool in the Latina district of Madrid, also the occupation of Campo de Cebada is a collective reaction against controversial orientations on the part of the local public administration. In such a specific case emphasis has been placed upon a further source of conflict: the symmetrical denial vs. acknowledgement of complexity in urban areas management; while potential conflicts are often dealt with from a static and even passive perspective, Campo de Cebada chooses to “inhabit conflicts” rather than eliminating them. In such a way the issues related to urban management are faced in a constructive way, rethinking their dynamics in order for a consistent rehabilitation process to be started and carried out no more occasionally and unevenly. Complexity can be managed and become a fertile feature to craft innovative shared protocols for decision-making and action; open processes are identified as the most effective solutions to positively live in a complex ecosystem. Also in the Madrid experience occupiers do not plan and act in conflict against public institutions; rather, they keep an open channel in order for the urban community (what they define “the citizenship”) to interact with the urban administration, aiming to facilitate the participated construction of the city. The nature of commons is made ordinary through artistic and cultural events, and the multifold nature of the area, where specific initiatives smoothly coexist with individual and collective uses of the spaces, within a very loose time grid: cultural commons prove pluralistic by definition.



### **g) A Linha, Lisbon**

The project 'A Linha' appears to be a more delicate and complex approach to urban life, in some way substituting the sum-of-individuals logic of conventional tourism with a more fertile shared use of (totally or partially) idle urban areas. In such a case the occupation is not focused on a specific and controversial area, but potentially spread in urban spaces where different uses could be imagined but they are not yet facilitated, encouraged or simply allowed. The 'Atelier Urban Nomads' label clearly identifies the strategic orientation of 'A Linha', whose philosophy is based upon re-appropriation of urban spaces in order for them to be made dynamic through city planning projects. Its main focus is on art, architecture and design, generating informal, playful and participative projects that can be finely tuned to contingent needs and desires. Within such a framework a part of the project is devoted at designing routes "not for tourists but essentially for inhabitants". Routes are the location of events, and residents are encouraged to "be the authors of their projects, not just to be consumers, to inspire a sense of responsibility, of concern and maintenance". Also in this experience the commons approach is evident, combining multiple and versatile uses of urban areas together with cultural visions, social capital and civic responsibility within a socially and culturally heterogeneous urban community.

### **h) Tempelhof Airport, Berlin**

Almost five thousands apartments and commercial spaces, and a public library were at the centre of the project elaborated and proposed in 2014 by the Berlin municipal administration to develop the former Tempelhof Airport site, almost the size of New York City's Central Park. The development was planned on a publicly owned area, therefore the buildings should have been realized by state-owned housing companies. A clear majority of Berliners was decidedly contrary to such a project, and almost 65% of the voters gave their convinced support to the '100 percent Tempelhof Feld', rejecting the option according to which social housing in Berlin should have relied upon Tempelhof, in

such a way subtracting a still empty and idle public area to shared and active enjoyment (gardening, riding bikes, playing football, picnicking, and the like). A sum of private benefits was clearly crowded out by the product of multiple desires aimed at the re-appropriation of a common space. In these cases the maps of urban commons and cultural commons extensively coincide. In any case the dilemma about social housing and the use of vacant spaces appears to be closely associated with another crucial dilemma: how to progressively involve citizens in public decisions and actions? Also from this point of view a commons approach can provide both dilemmas with a credible and possibly sustainable strategic orientation.

### **i) La Cavallerizza, Turin**

In 1997 La Cavallerizza (a horse riding school) in Turin was included in the UNESCO world heritage list. In 2014 a group of residents reacted to the institutional threat to transform it into a private space also containing a youth hostel and other private businesses. 'Unreal Cavallerizza' is the project aimed at intensively using the space on the part of the urban community together with creative artists in order for participative cultural projects to craft a civic identity. Again, the commons approach emphasizes the multiple and shared use of urban spaces overcoming the static and slow institutional destinations, and at the same time rejecting the abuse on the part of privately oriented projects. Before engaging in a sort of ethical and political controversies, we should consider that the core of the problem is generated by the evident mismatch between neglected infrastructure on one hand, and weak civic participation on the other; it is clear that such a mismatch can erupt into conflict when ignored and left boiling for too long time. The good news, in Turin's case, is that after two years of creative occupation the municipal administration acknowledged the value of research, experimentation and proposal carried out by the occupiers, and asked them to elaborate a civic governance project, also declaring the commitment to raise the needed financial resources to fully give La Cavallerizza back to the citizenship. Just good intentions, so far, but an

encouraging starting point towards a possible institutional cooperation between the urban community and the municipal administration.

The previously described re-appropriations interweave cultural and spatial forms of interventions, suggesting unforeseen occasions to reclaim the city and urbanity. Organized as urban commons, their side effect is a process of social construction: an answer to *désaffiliation*<sup>26</sup> and to the destabilizing dynamics of a liquid society, as Bauman (2000) would define it. In all of them space is a resource, an opportunity, a way of becoming. Either at risk of privatization or neglected, spatial resources are reclaimed through cultural activities, by experimenting alternative forms of governance. They are the theatre of a variety of initiatives which trigger the redesign of the existing institutional framework, as a result of the negotiations required for their realization between the administrative actors and the urban community. If on the one hand they could have been fuelled and provoked by the previously mentioned administrative inefficiencies, on the other hand they seem to reveal that some more radical, deep-seated change is at stake.

A system of values is recognizable, despite the diversities, emerging since the times of Tacheles and probably even before<sup>27</sup>: a desire of individuals and collectives to express themselves, while taking part to the making of their living environment, to the preservation of resources and of their accessibility to multiple communities of users, fuelled by a forgotten sense of civic responsibility. A culture of the commons: we suggest this expression in order to identify a *modus vivendi*, a change

26 See Castel and Haroche (2001).

27 *Le droit à la ville* by Henri Lefebvre was published in 1968, at the peak of the season of students disputes. It was about the possibility of taking part to the making of the city, as *oeuvre*, because *l'urbain se fonde sur la valeur d'usage*. The book served as the foundation of the discourse on a substantial and empowering participation in urbanism, situated at the top of the ladder of participation of Arnstein (1969). In 1972 *An Architecture of Participation* was published, collecting the reflections of Giancarlo De Carlo on the matter, following the season of students' occupations and the related reflections concerning the role of the architect and a different approach to the architectural project.

that is pervasive and which in fact concerns many others domains, not considered in this chapter. Commons-oriented initiatives in fact are multiplying and covering a variety of needs: from housing to mobility, from education to food production, not without ideological ambiguities and the risks of co-optation, as Federici and Caffentzis (2013) point out<sup>28</sup>. They manifest the need and the desire to take action, as we shall see in next paragraph.

The commons are generative, generativity being about the ability to respond to scarcity with a creative approach, and about the ability of humans and non-humans to organize and co-operate between the protection of given resources and the elaboration of alternative uses of the existing resources, or the creation of new resources *tout court*. Generativity, recovering the original meaning of the word as meant by Husserl –*generativität* – is about life, about becoming and the generation of possibilities<sup>29</sup>, as well as their emersion and across generations.

In other words, the commons are about the possibility of a continuous invention, about the (right to) continuous (re)creation of resources, meanings, tools and contents, in evolution with the changing characteristics of the involved communities and of their environment, according to the desire of individuals and collectives to become. To point

---

28 The word and the concept of sharing for example, isolated from the bundle of other values and principles at the core of the philosophy of the commons, has become a commons-friendly adjective to define activities which in fact are far from the concept of the commons. Uber and Airbnb are examples of the so called sharing economy.

29 Very shortly, we remind here that the concept of generativity came back to the attention of academia in 1995, with the book of Steinbock *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*. In 2012 Marjorie Kelly in the book *Owning our future*, explores the generative forms of ownership, that is to say those forms of property creating the conditions favourable for the life of many generations to come. Ugo Mattei explicitly referred to this concept to describe the commons the first time in 2013, and later in 2015 in his work with Fritjof Capra, *The Ecology of Law. Toward a Legal System in Tune with Nature and Community*. More recently, in 2016 Serge Gutwirth and Isabelle Stengers deal with the concept of *généralité* in *Le droit à l'épreuve de la résurgence des commons*.

out the emergence of a culture of the commons has the main purpose to recognize this sort of paradigm shift, thus questioning under which conditions it could flourish, without forgetting the lesson of Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) about the risks of normalization and corruption of the original values, moving from practices to policies.

#### **4. Loyalty, voice, exit? Action, possibly**

The range of individual and social responses to managerial inadequacy was analyzed by Hirschman (1972) with reference to companies, organizations and public administrations, and has been extensively studied within the political economy textbook wisdom. The (individual or collective) perception of a sound decision-making body and of the related effectiveness of action leads people to simply adhere to the conventional rules, whether they are formally stated or informally acted. It is loyalty.

A more eloquent reaction consists in openly conveying a message to the decision-maker, declaring own dissent against some specific decision or action. It is voice, and it has been evolving using advanced – and possibly quick – tools such as letters, faxes, emails, twitter or facebook posts: this generates a bandwagon effect due to the possibility for the many to add their voice, in a technologically accessible and financially indifferent way. Voice can also be conveyed towards the decision maker through initiatives started by workers and then extended to many social layers, such as sit-ins, pickets, parades and the like, awarely introducing the risk of some material conflict between protesters and public order forces.

In Hirschman's analysis the extreme response is exit. It is a private reaction consisting in the material change of location on the part of citizens who find some feature of local administration unbearably expensive or engaging. It can apply to State legislation, and has shaming examples in the thousands of Jewish citizens who could not bear the weight of having been excluded by social, cultural and economic life; it

can also apply to single individuals or families opting for a less heavy tax burden (such as the many retired persons who move to some 'tax favourable' Countries), and to individuals or families moving to avoid obstacles and blocks against access to the market labour. Loyalty, voice, and exit prove effective reactions to decisions and actions ranging from inadequacy to injustice. These appear to affect individual – and eventually social – life in some specific aspects such as labour regulations, tax regimes, political choices.

In some cases, many of which are described above, the inadequacy of public decision-makers and administrators can elicit a more complex reaction whose features do not limit to protesting and dissenting, but show a proactive attitude aiming to reclaim resources and the rights related to their use. It is the case of the previously mentioned occupations, re-appropriating vacant buildings and sites through practices of care and co-creation, grounded on the responsabilization of the involved subjects. It is action, the action of inhabitants, empowering because proving their agency, though not without obstacles and failures. Not simply a noisy response to institutional inabilities and inefficiencies, but experiments in governance aiming at independence rather than accepting assistentialism, while in almost all cases triggering some sort of interaction with the administrative actors. Indeed, in the various experiences we can highlight some recurring features showing that, although unavoidably moved by specific dissent reasons, action is enabled by awareness, information and competence. Rather an advanced and sophisticated response to institutional inadequacy, framing democracy in proactive terms, beyond the limited options offered by the electoral rituals<sup>30</sup>.

Scenes of a proactive and creative use of resources, occupations are the arenas to experiment new forms of governance, thus elaborat-

---

30 The prevailing weight of the electoral rite upon the more complex processes of a democracy may explain the present crisis of the democratic models, and the magmatic emersion of controversial attempts of direct democracy: the Brexit case is eloquent enough to elaborate more consistent ways to manage public decisions between the representatives' and the electors' layers.

ing alternative views of society, equality, rights; redefining the tools and actions that can keep communities consistently tied and engaged; crafting cultural orientations. Solidly based upon political reasons and views, their features and modalities hence cannot be simply considered protest, which is in fact being replaced with extrovert re-appropriations of the self, of the collective, of resources, as interweaving moments of the same process. Explorations of the possible, they should be rather considered as cultural laboratories. Culture being meant not as *an object* of a – public or private – production, but as a social construction, a doing, a way of living, an attitude: in this case inspired by the philosophy of the commons<sup>31</sup>.

The culture of the commons certainly cannot pervade every box in the institutional grid, but can possibly play a role in those areas where formalistic rigidity may lock social permeability, substituting conventional protocols with spontaneously crafted action. The generativity characterizing the creation of the commons – previously mentioned – can be seen as the opportunity for institutional rearticulation, aimed at filling the gaps inadvertently or indifferently opened by a steady and self-reproducing establishment. In such a respect the needed rigidity of a legal framework in which responsibility and accountability are formally stated may prove inadequate to respond to a continuously transforming urban eco-system, potentially not devoid of the paradoxes and contradictions deriving from a non-planned evolution of the personal, social and institutional organization.

On the contrary, where institutional rigidity has been disrupted by civic proactivity, experiences of occupation are featured by public debates, festivals, movie projections, artistic creativity, community gardening, meal sharing and many others. A panoply of activities, interweaving and exchanging the roles of the public, the intimate and the collective. Hence on the one hand we may observe the spectacularization of the inhabiting patterns, an exposition of the intimate sides

---

31 For an extensive exploration of the various features of cultural commons see Bertacchini/Bravo/ Marrelli/Santagata (2012).

of the collective, a sort of second private nature; on the other hand, the self-organized production of more conventional cultural formats, aimed at the – collective and/or individual – re-appropriation of doings currently being either produced outside and parachuted in the area, or institutionalized<sup>32</sup>.

## 5. Reclaiming the fine grain of the urban fabric

It would be a simplification to state that all occupations result in urban commons; and that all urban commons imply an occupation: not necessarily organizing equals commoning; and not necessarily urban commons require an occupation. What binds them together – despite the differences – is the need to permanently reclaim a resource or to reconceive the way a function is provided, in times of withdrawal on the part of the public administrations, dismantlement of the existing welfare models and growing privatization<sup>33</sup>.

By pointing at the emersion of a culture of the commons our purpose is to highlight the fact that if neglected/vacant sites and buildings are being reclaimed this is not only a matter of re-use, of functional transformation or the result of redefining public and private sovereignties, but rather the expression of a system of values, among which are care and responsibility towards resources, and a desire of proactivity as far as the transformations of one's own environment is concerned. It is the desire of being part of a creative process, beyond the logic of production and consumption. While on the one hand urban commons may first of all provide us with a pragmatic answer to many needs, at the same time contributing to build a fabric of reciprocities on the background of a growing precarity and wealth polarization, on

32 On the direct production of cultural activities on the part of public administrations see Antonucci/ Morea/Trimarchi (2017).

33 ... and the reason why in this chapter we introduce urban commons starting from occupations, bringing together the concerns of urbanisms and those of economics of culture.



the other hand they seem to go beyond urgency and beyond insurgency as expression of a *modus vivendi*, as culture.

The fact that the cases here considered are leisure-oriented and culture-making forms of commons allows us to observe that (to start with) the culture of the commons necessarily represents a turning point concerning the industry of culture. The conventional view of culture adopts an approach based upon formal and institutional assessments. This has been generated and strengthened after the late Eighteenth Century, when the rising bourgeoisie needed an identity and used archaeological remains to justify its power in the social imaginary. This generated the interpretation of culture as a list of objects endowed with such a formal quality as a positive value. In the recent years this label of 'culture' is being slowly but firmly offset by a more comprehensive definition aimed at emphasizing the appraisal features and therefore reconciling the anthropologic glossary (culture as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts) and the economic toolbox (culture as the evolving outcome of the household production function *à la* Stigler and Becker<sup>34</sup>).

Secondly – and more pervasively – to make the hypothesis of a culture of the commons should have the same effect of recognizing the ineluctability of a new idea whose moment has come, as the occupiers of Zuccotti Park proudly stated. This idea in particular has the potential to reclaim the city starting from the inhabiting practices; starting from the capacity to take care of a common pool of resources and to manage them while giving the possibility to multiple communities of users to fulfil their needs or express their desires; starting from the micro-scale of a building or of a square<sup>35</sup>, as catalyzers of larger transformative process which might have an impact at the scale of a whole

34 See Stigler and Becker (1977), who emphasize the process of addiction which each cultural consumer is gradually subject to.

35 On the power of the small scale see Merwood Salisbury/McGrath (2013) and *Small Urbanism*, issue 27 of the urbanism magazine MONU (October 2017).

neighbourhood or at the scale of the whole city, depending on the involved communities.

In other words, the city reclaimed starting from the fine grain of the urban commons and their ecologies, opposing the loss of urbanity that comes with dispossession and neglect. Even in those cases where the morphology of a scrambled egg drawn by Price<sup>36</sup> in 1982 might be recognized, potentially suggesting a horizontal distribution of centralities and opportunities, an indifferent distribution of functions and economic activities, the cartographies of wealth distribution describe in fact a condition of growing wealth polarization and socio-spatial segregation, with sharp contrasts visible and measurable at the scale of the same neighbourhood.

On the background of similar conditions, community gardens and vacant buildings represent in fact the residual, fragmented spatial occasions around which a spontaneous urbanity could still be developed, resisting to further privatization, gentrification and financialization of the city. As Sassen (2014) pointed out, it is a phenomenon whose scale and characteristics have nothing to do with the forms of real estate speculation and privatization of the 1980s, and whose main effect is the loss of urbanity: the loss of the city as a place where everybody has the right to be, to begin with.

In such an evolutionary framework the mentioned urban commons declare the obsolescence of projects and actions based upon culture as a product ('culture *for* the city', 'the city *for* culture'). In fact they suggest that culture is a doing, the making of the city as a commons, using urban space as the infrastructure of a civic project, featured by a regulated accessibility and by fertile reciprocities. In this perspective administrative inefficiencies and inabilities may have offered a providential void: an opportunity to rearticulate the role of administrations, by grounding it in this emerging culture of the commons. In that direction the challenge hence is to avoid to institutionalize and to normalize commoning processes and to preserve a free-zone where

---

36 See Jacobs (2011).

new cultures and approaches to the governance of resources would constantly be experimented, according to the specific evolving needs of the communities at stake.

## 6. A taxonomy of urban commons: features and contradictions

This chapter has been written as the beginning of a shared reflection, built in between the concerns of urbanism and economics of culture. Two distinct disciplinary domains, but in fact overlapping in substantial way when we consider that even in the worst case scenario, which is to say when culture is merely an object of consumption, culture has an impact as far as the design and the uses of urban space is concerned. The proliferation of urban commons, on the contrary, represents the best case scenario: after two centuries of special statute and isolation in ivory towers, the practice of the urban commons brings back culture to its anthropological statute. Practicing the commons is a *modus vivendi* which reclaims the city starting from everyday practices. Beyond protest, as we suggested, urban commons are about action. At the core of it we find values such as the desire to care about resources, to contribute to their governance, less in the spirit of voluntarism than triggered by agency, motivated by the sense of empowerment deriving from the ability and the possibility to organize and to take part to a larger social construction, and supported by a sense of responsibility and self-regulation, so that the relevant resources could be protected while being accessible to the involved communities.

In fact, if there is an example showing how making culture may actually be a political act – political being meant in the sense of Mouffe (2005): transforming society – that would be the urban commons. Examples of what Oldenburg (1989) defined as third spaces, urban commons promise a re-appropriation of the city through micro-practices, organized at the scale of still available or abandoned sites, fragments of spontaneous urbanity resisting to privatization and speculation. While

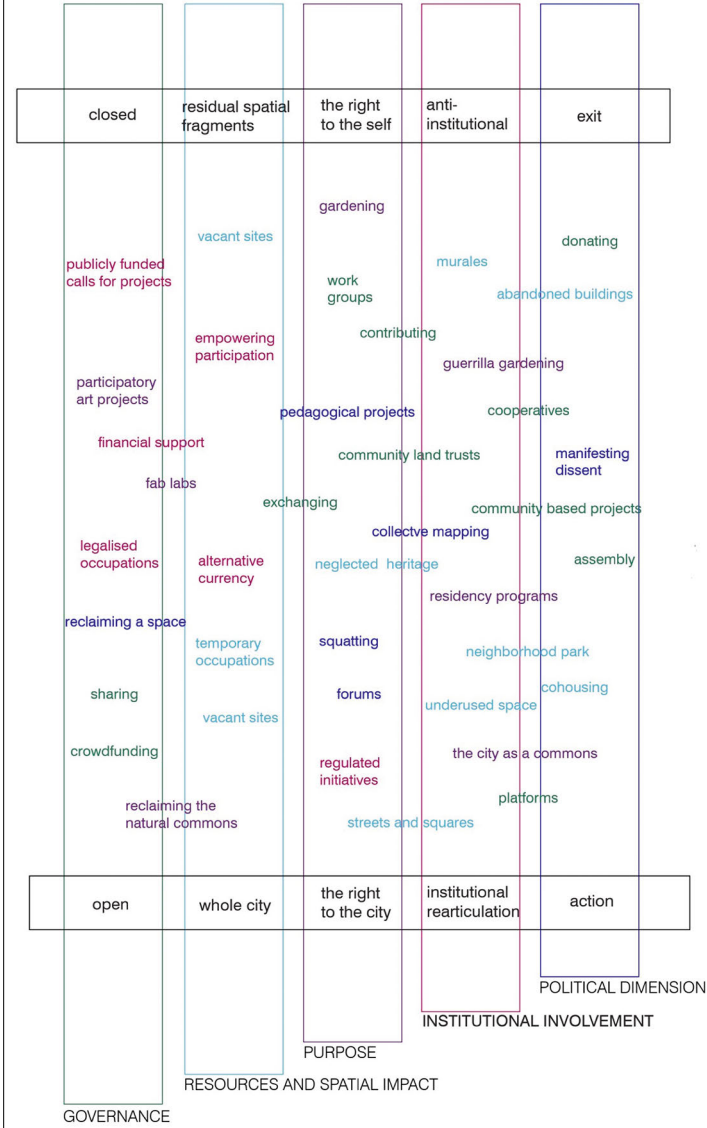
in the short term they could allow temporary explorations of alternative uses, re-imagining the city, testing the capacities of the inhabitants to take care of the existing and newly created resources, in the long term urban commons imply the ability to protect resources, as the result not of mere regulations but of bundles of uses which involve a number of communities and recognize their right to decide about these resources.

If larger scales might be a challenge in terms of the ability to appropriate and manage, small scale re-appropriations allow us to imagine a capillary multiplication of initiatives, reclaiming the city through an acupunctural approach, transforming the urban fabric incrementally in the name of a culture of the commons. At the core of it, generativity as the capacity of continuous re-creation, and the right of individuals and collectives to have a role in the making of their environment, implying the possibility to decide – and, symmetrically – their responsabilization, questioning their ability to continuously re-organise, to govern the resources so that their needs and desires could be fulfilled.

The taxonomy described in the figure below is an attempt to represent the irreducible variety of urban commons. We labeled it dysfunctional: rather than forcing classifications it should in fact disrupt the conventional categories and invite the reader to imagine the range of different situations in which commons-oriented action might arise; the hybridizations but also the contradictory and multivalent aspects of these continuously evolving organizations; their different transformative capacities depending on the (site-)specific conditions in which they emerge and they operate.

As culture-based strategies urban commons appear to be effectively oriented towards offsetting metropolitan conflicts, compensating inequalities with alternative forms of reciprocity and economies, widening the spectrum of access, empowering diverse layers of the resident community to cooperate and cross-fertilize actions. Although there is not yet a systematic analysis on such a crucial impact, urban commons are increasingly becoming popular also among public administrators, though still in a selective fashion. The glossary and some of the values at the core of the culture of the commons seem to have been largely appropriated.

## A (dysfunctional) taxonomy of the urban commons



A (dysfunctional) taxonomy of the urban commons. Every coloured element in the taxonomy is described by its colour and by its position with reference to the different dimensions defined by the columns. By imagining to move the element across the space of the taxonomy, different impact capacities and values are suggested. (graphics and concept by the authors)

The co-operative attitude – co-creating, co-working, co-housing and so on –, the power of sharing and caring, not to mention the word ‘commons’ in itself are mushrooming through administrative websites and calls for projects of any kind. More structurally, programs and regulations seemingly promoting the commons are also multiplying. In Bologna a regulation has been adopted in 2014 making the collaboration between citizens and the city possible. After that first case, in Italy 177 municipalities adopted a regulation for the governance of the commons and other 66 have started a procedure<sup>37</sup>. In Barcelona the model of the public commons is proposed at the base of the platform for participatory democracy ‘*decidim*’<sup>38</sup>, established in 2015 and allowing citizens to propose and decide about their neighborhoods and city. In Lille the initiative ‘*Encommuns*’ started to map and document the commons economy since 2015 and an *Assemblée des Communs* has been established since 2017. The city of Ghent commissioned a study on the emersion and the growth of the commons, with the purpose to elaborate indications for the implementation of supportive public policies<sup>39</sup>.

But as previously mentioned, co-optation is a real threat to the emancipatory potential of the commons and contradictory attitudes of administrations seem to confirm this suspicion: more or less violent evictions are still perpetrated, thus abandoning the city in the hands of speculators and global corporations. It happened – paradoxically? – in Bologna, where the Labas occupation has been terminated despite the successful implantation of projects promoting local agriculture, chil-

37 As reported by Labsus, Laboratorio per la Sussidiarietà, <http://www.labsus.org/i-regolamenti-per-lamministrazione-condivisa-dei-beni-comuni/>

38 The platform can be accessed at <https://decidim.org/>

39 See Bauwens and Onzia (2017).

drens' activities and supporting migrants' rights<sup>40</sup>. In Rome, hundreds of abandoned buildings and heritage, since many years animated by the activities of local associations and collectives, risk to be evicted given the absence of a regulation on the commons<sup>41</sup>.

In Brussels, despite the growth of the movement of (urban) commons and the increasing attention to the emerging forms of co-creation in the city, the regional administration is still hesitating to implement the project of an urban block as a commons in the site of Josaphat. In Berlin the 'Friedel 54' squat has been evacuated to leave the building to the new owner, a corporation based in Luxembourg, on the background of an increasingly gentrified and dispossessed city<sup>42</sup>. Many other examples could be mentioned. In fact privately owned public spaces are multiplying all over the world, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, with dangerous implications concerning the rights and uses associated to these spaces, concerning democracy at large. Without forgetting – as an indicator of the overall climate – the number of battles communities all over the world still have to fight against real tragedies of the commons, happening when the involved communities do not have any power to decide about their rivers, their lands, their forests and other natural commons.

Hence, while it is important to recognise the signs of a still fragile rising culture of the commons, it is important to be vigilant and critical concerning these contradictory signs. If on the one hand a transition towards a commons-based society has been claimed as unavoidable<sup>43</sup>, on the other hand neo-liberal dynamics are evidently still dominant

40 See Mattei (2017).

41 As reported in <https://ilmanifesto.it/roma-il-regolamento-sui-beni-comuni-non-ce-e-la-giunta-desertifica-la-citta/>

42 As reported here <http://www.exberliner.com/features/zeitgeist/friedel54-s-last-stand/among-others>.

43 On the transition towards a commons-based society see the work and research of Michel Bauwens, founder of the p2p Foundation and main contributor of the Commons Transition, on the website <https://primer.commonstransition.org/>. But also Rifkin (2014).

and in good health<sup>44</sup>, legitimizing doubts about the capacity of a commons-based society to emerge and to thrive.

## 7. Concluding remarks: empowering the cultural turn of the urban commons

Having pointed at the emancipatory potential of urban commons both at an individual and at a collective level, learning from the practices we suggest that a problematization of the previously mentioned and other forthcoming policies is a necessary step to avoid co-optation and normalization. While the discourse on the commons possibly re-emerged and could have been appropriated on a large scale – directly or indirectly – thanks to the ‘Occupy’ movement, the proliferation of administrative tools and programs has only recently become more consistent. This is indeed a delicate moment as far as the empowerment of the urban commons is concerned. In the light of the mentioned contradictions a critical, vigilant posture should take into account the ability of capitalism to absorb and neutralize any form of alternative organization rising as a critique to the dominant discourse, as notoriously described by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). This risk was also highlighted by Mattei (2013), who talked about the possibility of a “*détournement a contrario*” of the practices of commoning.

Having in mind what the urban commons are about, their origins and their potential in terms of re-appropriation of urbanity as part of a *modus vivendi*, learning from practices and their underlying values, our working hypothesis is that four criteria should be considered, with the

---

44 While on the one hand, especially after 2008, it has been said capitalism is not working, as the Occupy movement claimed and as Piketty (2013) proved with his work on increasing inequalities; on the other hand, *de facto*, inequalities and richness polarization are growing. Proving that despite its contradictions and *through* its contradictions, capitalism in its neoliberal version is still ruling the world. The privatization of public space, mirrored by the privatization of heritage and culture, is at the same time an effect and a means of the logic of financiarization.



purpose to problematize existing policies and for the establishment of new frameworks of governance:

a) The first is the role of the involved communities in the definition of those policies, programs and regulations, in the name of the right to decide reclaimed by the (urban) commons. Whenever these should be conceived solely at an administrative level, the risk would be to overlook the right to decide authentically implied in the practices of commoning, considering them once again as the object of an external, regulatory framework. The inclination for taking care and for assuming the responsibility concerning the governance of a given resource could only last if backed by a power to decide on the part of communities and individuals. It is a matter of protecting the resource which different uses and rights of those communities rely upon. But also – and perhaps most importantly – a matter of meaning and recognition, motivating the gratuitous actions of the commoners.

b) The second is the ability of those policies, programs and regulations to create favourable conditions to the mentioned generativity of the (urban) commons. While regulation might indeed “discipline the forms of collaboration between citizens and the administrations”<sup>45</sup>, this does not necessarily equal the creation of a climate favoring the emersion of the urban commons, especially when in the same city where the regulations are established evictions are still practiced, raising doubts about the actual purposes at the origin of those regulations. Urban commons – as distinct from natural commons – can be seen as inhabiting practices *à la* Heidegger, between the expression of the self and the social construction. Spontaneous and site-specific, they may certainly be encouraged by the existence of a regulatory framework,

---

45 As stated in the Bologna *Regolamento sulla collaborazione tra cittadini e amministrazione per la cura e la rigenerazione dei beni comuni urbani*. Accessible at <http://www.comune.bologna.it/sites/default/files/documenti/REGOLAMENTO%20BENI%20COMUNI.pdf>

even more so in the case in which these regulations have been collectively defined. Similarly, calls for projects triggering the initiatives of the citizens and other programs may provide the urban community with a relevant contribution in terms of funding, visibility, and networking capacity. But on the other hand they could lead to competitiveness among different initiatives and/or continue to fuel forms of either visible or hidden assistentialism. In other words, the effect of the different administrative interventions and frameworks – singularly taken and as a whole – should be evaluated, between the risk of further fragmentation of efforts and resources on one hand and the possibility to nourish synergies and upscale transformations on the other hand, beyond the limits of the occupied building or vacant site.

c) The third element to consider in the design of institutional frameworks supporting urban commons should concern the actual ability of policies as such to empower an effective protection and governance of the resources at stake. In addition to policies and regulations, we believe that a further tool to be considered should be the project, urban and cultural at the same time. Given the unpredictable, transformative and mutable nature of the commons as site-specific, unique combinations of resources and actors, we consider – beyond policies and regulations – that the project as a trans-disciplinary process could allow the creation of synergies, of long-term strategies, operating on multiple levels at the same time, and connecting different forms of urban commons. If governance is paramount for the sustainability of the urban commons, the project – by virtue of its envisioning power – could be the process facilitating the encounter of different expertises, allowing to scale and to balance the abilities and responsibilities of the involved communities and actors with the characteristics of the concerned spatial resources and of the non-human<sup>46</sup>.

---

46 Concerning the role of the project as a process of responsabilization see the forthcoming doctoral dissertation by Lenna (2019).

d) The fourth aspect to be questioned would be about the radicality of the transformation concerning the functioning of institutions and administrative frameworks, towards a commons-oriented society. How could they be transformed by the cultural turn of the commons, while supporting them? We imagine that an iterative logic is what would allow a continuous adaptation of policies and projects to the needs and characteristics of the emerging urban commons, by absorbing and amplifying their logic. This could happen – once again – making sure that the concerned communities could have a decisional role about policies and projects based on their practices, needs and expertises, between the right to manage resources and the responsibility that this implies.

On the basis of these elements we suggest that further research should be developed concerning the existing policies and the emerging approaches, with the purpose of investigating upon their ability to interpret and to contribute to the cultural turn expressed by the urban commons. In 1961 Cedric Price was asked by the theatre director Joan Littlewood to design a theatre as a flexible armature, capable of adapting to a variety of performances and uses, a laboratory for fun, able to be transformed according to any cultural program and to the desires of any kind of user.

The Fun Palace was designed as a very simple structure, allowing almost any kind of transformation, with very little constraints and already including the machineries required to move walls and other architectural elements across the volume. Should we suggest an image to describe the policies and institutional frameworks supporting the emergence and the proliferation of urban commons, it would be something very similar to the Fun Palace: a structure still necessary for practices to happen, but minimally defined and capable of continuously responding to the very life of those practices. Our magmatic society, in a stage of intensive mutation, needs to disrupt the conventional formats.

## References

- An Architektur (2010): "On the Commons: a public interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stravros Stravrides", *An Architektur: On the Commons*, 23.
- Antonucci, F./Morea, V./Trimarchi, M. (2017): Public Decision-Making Processes for Cultural Projects: A Political Economy Perspective, in *Proceedings of 6<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Law, Regulations and Public Policy*, Singapore: GSTF, pp. 109-12.
- Arnstein, S.R. (1969): "A ladder of citizen participation", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35/4, pp. 216-24.
- Baumann, Z. (2013): *Liquid modernity*, London: Routledge.
- Bauwens, M./Onzia, Y. (2017): *Commons Transitie Plan voor de stad Gent*. In opdracht van de stad Gent. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/ybyj5qd4>.
- Bertacchini, E./Bravo, G./Marrelli, M./Santagata, W. (2012, eds.): *Cultural Commons. A New Perspective on the Production and Evolution of Cultures*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Boltanski, L./Chiapello, E. (1999): *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Borch, C./Kornberger, M. (2015, eds.): *Urban commons: Rethinking the city*, Abingdon, Routledge.
- Buchanan, J.M./Tullock, G. (1962): *The calculus of consent: logical foundations of constitutional democracy*, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.
- Carrone, I. (2014): "Quale futuro per il Valle Occupato?", *Doppiozero*, July 9<sup>th</sup>.
- Castel, R. (1994): "La dynamique des processus de marginalisation: de la vulnérabilité à la désaffiliation", *Cahiers de la recherche sociologique*, 22, pp. 11-27.
- Dellenbaugh, M. *et al.* (2015): *Urban commons: Moving beyond state and market*, Basel: Birkhäuser.

- Demurtas, A. (2913): "Macao, I primi diciotto mesi del collettivo culturale. A Milano si sperimenta un nuovo modo di fare cultura", *L'Espresso* 43, October 12<sup>th</sup>.
- Donelli, C./Trimarchi, M. (2019): "Where is Berlin? Cultural commons and urban policy among real and virtual walls", forthcoming in *European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes*, 2.
- Ferguson, F. (2014): *Make\_shift City*. Renegotiating the urban commons, Berlin, Jovis.
- Gautney, H. (2011): "What is Occupy Wall Street? The history of leaderless movements", *The Washington Post*, October 10<sup>th</sup>.
- Hardin, G. (1968): "The tragedy of the commons", *Science*, 162, pp. 1243-48.
- Heidegger, M. (1962): *Being and Time* (translated by Macquarrie, J./Robinson, E.), Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hirschman, A.O. (1972): *Exit, voice, and loyalty. Responses to decline in forms, organizations, and states*, Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Jacobs, F. (2011): *The eggs of Price: an Ovo-Urban analogy*, Big Think (bigthink.com).
- Jones, J. (2012): "The closure of Berlin's Tacheles squat is a sad day for alternative art", *The Guardian*, September 5<sup>th</sup>.
- Kayden, J.S. (2000): *Privately owned public spaces. New York City Experience*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Lauritsen, P.W. (2002): *Christiania*, Copenhagen: Kirsten Corvinus.
- Lenna V. (2019): *The project of property as emancipation. A Community Land Trust in Brussels*, forthcoming doctoral dissertation.
- Linebaugh, P. (2008): *The Magna Charta manifesto. Liberties and commons for all*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mattei, U. (2011): *Beni comuni. Un manifesto*, Bari: Laterza.
- Mattei, U. (2017): "L'occupazione dei beni comuni è vera politica", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, August 10<sup>th</sup>.
- Merwood Salisbuty, J./McGrath, B. (2013, eds.): *Scapes 8: Triggers: Urban design at the small scale*, New York: CreateSpace.

- Negri, A./Hardt, M. (2000): *Empire*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Nordhaus, W.D. (1975): "The political business cycle", *The review of economic studies*, 42/2, pp. 169-90.
- Ostrom, E. (1990): *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Piketty, T. (2013): *The economics of inequality*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Povoledo, E. (2011): "Outrage over a storied Roman theater's future", *The New York Times*, June 27<sup>th</sup>.
- Rifkin, J. (2014): *The zero marginal cost society: The internet of things, the collaborative commons, and the eclipse of capitalism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rosboch, M. (2015, ed.): Paolo Grossi. *Le comunità intermedie tra moderno e pos-moderno*, Torino: Marietti 1820.
- Rost, A./Gries, A. (1992): *Berlin*, Berlin: Elefant Press.
- Sassen, S. (2014): *Expulsions. Brutality and Complexity in the global economy*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Sassen, S. (2015): "Who owns our cities – and why this urban takeover should concern us all", *The Guardian*, november 24<sup>th</sup>.
- Schmidt, S./Nemeth, J./Botsford, E. (2011): *The evolution of privately owned public spaces in New York City*, *Urban Design International*, 16/4, pp. 270-84
- Smithson, G. (2008): "Sunset in the imperial city: how New York's public spaces presage the end of Empire", *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, 6, pp. 230-44.
- Smucker, J.M./Manski, R./Gaçuça, K./Palmer Paton, L.M./Holder, K./Jesse, W. (2011): "Occupy Wall Street: you can't evict an idea whose time has come", *The Guardian*, november 15<sup>th</sup>.
- Stigler, G./Becker, G. (1977): "De gustibus non est disputandum", *American Economic Review*, 67/2, pp. 76-90.
- Struthers, J./Yong, A. (1989): "Economics of voting: Theories and Evidence", *Journal of Economic Studies*, 16/5.

- Trimarchi, M. (2014): *Urbs et Civitas: una mappa della cultura*, in De Biase, F. (ed.): *I pubblici della cultura. Audience development, audience engagement*, Milano: Angeli, pp. 138-50.
- Vitale, T. (2007, ed.): *In nome di chi? Partecipazione e rappresentanza nelle mobilitazioni locali*, Milano: Angeli.
- Weller, R. (2016): *The city is not an egg: western urbanization in relation to changing conceptions of nature*, in Stenier, F.R./ Thompson, G.F./Carbonell, A. (eds.): *Nature and cities: the ecological imperative in urban design and planning*, Cambridge MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- White, M. (2017): "I started Occupy Wall Street. Russia tried to co-opt me", *The Guardian*, November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

