# Commoning
# with a small c

## On the benefits of agreeing to disagree

## By Stefan Gruber and Anh-Linh Ngo

TORRE
DAVID

# "Commoning is understood as an arena for encountering and confronting differences."

**Commoning with a small c**
**On the benefits of agreeing to disagree**

By Stefan Gruber and Anh-Linh Ngo

**Deriving from "the commons", the term used for shared resources both material and immaterial, commoning as a verb describes the processes of sharing and negotiating access to the commons. In this text, two of the curators behind the "An Atlas of Commoning" exhibition and publishing project assert the importance of conflict and dissent within that process. In doing so they bring politics and confrontation back to the forefront of the architecture agenda and present the historic notion of "sharing" without ownership as a basis for intercultural understanding.**

The literary critic H. Bruce Franklin once accused J.G. Ballard (the writer who perhaps best incarnates the apocalyptic imagination of Anglo-American culture) of "mistaking the end of capitalism for the end of the world".[1] He went on to ask: "What could Ballard create if he were able to envision the end of capitalism as not the end, but the beginning, of a human world?"[2] Contemporary apocalyptic thoughts are fuelled by accelerating waves of environmental devastation, aggressive privatisation and political polarisation. But they are just as much the product of a crisis of imagination – our collective inability to project alternative social forms of life beyond contemporary forms of domination.

Against this backdrop, the commons debate has emerged as a positive affirmation of another possible world – a radical imagination that ties many seemingly disparate citizen-led initiatives together in a search for a self-determined existence beyond the influence of the market and state. The verb "commoning" describes the collaborative processes surrounding the (re)production of material

**Stefan Gruber**

Stefan Gruber is the Lucian & Rita Caste Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urbanism at Carnegie Mellon University, where he directs the Master of Urban Design program. His office STUDIOGRUBER works at the intersection of architecture, urbanism and research. He co-authored *Space of Commoning* (Sternberg 2016), *The Report* (MAK 2015) and *Big! Bad? Modern:* (Park 2015) and most recently guest edited and co-curated *An Atlas of Commoning* with ARCH+.

**1** Franklin, H. Bruce. "What are we to make of J.G. Ballard's Apocalypse?" in Thomas Claerson (ed.) *Voices for the Future – Essays on major Science Fiction writers*, jgballard.ca/criticism/ballard_apocalypse_1979.html (accessed September 3, 2018)

**2** Ibid.

*Previous spread: An Atlas of Commoning* exhibition view at Kunstraum Kreuzberg/ Bethanien in Berlin, summer 2018. Image: Sebastian Schels

and immaterial common goods. But as is to be expected, in practice, emancipation from prevailing power structures is rarely free of conflict. Commons are subjected to a continuous process of enclosure and re-appropriation in a contested field claimed by a variety of ideologies. Thus, rather than being defined by consensus and suggesting that differences can or should be overcome, commoning is understood as an arena for encountering and confronting differences. Such understanding of the commons is inspired by political theorist Chantal Mouffe's definition of agonism.[3] In her work, Mouffe argues that a pluralist democracy can only exist as long as there is conflict, as long as standing arrangements can be contested.

**3**　See Mouffe, Chantal. *On the Political.* London: Psychology Press, 2005, pp. 29-34.

# "A pluralist democracy can only exist as long as there is conflict."

Mouffe thus challenges the widespread conception of public space as the terrain where consensus can or should emerge. In an agonistic relation, adversaries accept a set of democratic procedures and enter a common symbolic space within which hegemonic conflict takes place. The goal then is to transform antagonism into agonism, while establishing a common respect for irreconcilable differences. Recognising the conflictual nature of coming together and negotiating a common ground,

commoning unfolds with an expressed sensitivity towards the exclusionary dimension of an idea of community derived from collective identity. Similarly, commoners should be cautious about nostalgic notions of community rooted in projections of an idealised past, when public space was thriving and social negotiation seemed intact. Instead, commoning as social practice emanates from the negotiation between declared goals and the everyday realities of situated collective practices. The spatial manifestation of such struggle can be traced along three exemplary axes of tension: *Ownership – Access, Production – Reproduction, Right – Solidarity.*

The commons fundamentally challenge prevalent notions of ownership. Today, the instant access to ideas, goods, and services – in contrast to permanent ownership – opens up new possibilities of societal coexistence. Thereby, sharing is no longer necessarily associated with personal sacrifice. What's more, new forms of sharing offer promising approaches that promote a more resource-friendly existence. However, the current transformation of sharing into the sharing economy bears the risk of exacerbating precarious working conditions and social exclusion. Platform capitalism and the hyper-commercialisation of every aspect of life deny a growing, marginalised portion of society access to resources that are essential for life and cultural development. Air, water, and food, but also land (and housing) are such contested resources. For architects and planners, this entails the responsibility of taking a clear position in the struggle over the collective right to the city. Meanwhile *urban commons* should be understood beyond the notion of "liberated enclaves" or alternative islands of resistance, and tackle questions of scale, duration, and structural change.

**Anh-Linh Ngo**

Anh-Linh Ngo is an architect, author and publisher of ARCH+ magazine. He is co-founder of the international initiative *projekt bauhaus,* which critically examines the ideas of the Bauhaus through symposiums, workshops, pop-up exhibitions and performances from 2015-2019. In 2009 he co-curated the touring exhibition *Post_Oil City.* He co-initiated and co-curated *An Atlas of Commoning.*

*Ownership – Access*

BITTE SCHUHE
AUSZIEHEN
—————————
PLEASE TAKE
OFF SHOES

*Previous spread:* Information about the 25 projects included in the exhibition installation, the first additions to an ongoing visual "atlas" of commoning. Image: Sebastian Schels

**4**  See Stavrides, Stavros. *Common Space: the City as Commons.* London: Zed Books, 2016, pp. 4-5.

Stavros Stavrides sees common space as a non-enclosed threshold space, but one that needs threshold institutions to ensure that commoning remains an open process.[4] In common space, in space produced and used as common, people do not simply use an area given by an authority (local state, state, public institution, etc.). People actually mould this kind of space according to their collective needs and aspirations. Whereas public space necessarily has the mark of an identity – it *is*, that's to say it belongs to, the authority – common space tends to be constantly redefined: commons space *happens* and is shaped through collective action. One challenge of the commons discourse is solving the dilemma of institutionalisation. In Stavrides' opinion, only a continual process of negotiation can prevent the accumulation and consolidation of power and counteract mechanisms of exclusion. Accordingly, beyond the mere sharing of material or natural resources, commoning is a continuous and active practice, commoning is a verb.

*Production*
*– Reproduction*

Beyond challenging the orthodoxy of property, the commons debate contests the separation of functions established by modernism, between living and working or public and private. Instead it seeks new collective forms of living, beyond the paradigms of the twentieth century, which were built upon the foundations of gender politics and domestic labour. Globally, women still perform the majority of unpaid care work and social reproduction. A critical feminist examination of the Marxist economy exposes domestic labour as a hidden form of productive work.[5] The making invisible of unpaid reproductive labour here only serves as one example from an entire arsenal of strategies through which capitalism externalises costs. More commonly, geographic remoteness helps to render the overconsumption of resources, environmental

**5**  See J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, pp. 79–101.

devastation and human exploitation invisible as well, conveniently dissociating our actions from immediate



responsibility. The commons debate counters this approach with a broader, more diverse definition of economy, in which all forms of work – paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive – are recognised as creating value. Kim Trogal points out that care work itself is a form of spatial production. Thus, the experiments on the socialisation of domestic labour in the nineteenth and early twentieth century entail "new kinds of domestic workspace, cooperative forms of organisation and architectures".[6] Similarly, Silvia Federici argues that emancipation must primarily be directed towards the gender-hierarchical division of labour and the dependence of market-based production relations in the kitchen.[7] Only when the domestic sphere becomes an arena of collective political life, and collective forms of reproductive labour form the basis of social reproduction, can alternative forms

One of the exhibitions thematic islands, this one exploring "Production – Reproduction". Image: Sebastian Schels

**6** Torgal, Kim. "Caring: Making Commons, Making Connections" in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice*, Doina Petrescu, Kim Trogal, eds. New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 163.

**7** See Federici, Silvia. "Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation" (2010), in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, ed. Silvia Federici. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012, p. 147.

of economic activity – based on solidarity, commons, and sufficiency – become effective in a lasting way. For architecture this means overcoming the dichotomy of public versus private: spatial boundaries need to be renegotiated, domestic activities need to extend into the public sphere, and, conversely, cooperative care should lead to new typologies of community.

*Right – Solidarity*



The House of One project is the world's first house of prayer for three religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Architects: Kuehn Malvezzi, model: Martin Edelmann (ifa). Image: Sebastian Schels

But how can communities expand their influence and move beyond localised initiatives? Many concepts of

the commons are centred on the definition of a specific community that (re)produces, owns, maintains, and shares the commons. This raises the question of belonging to a community of *commoners.* Inevitably, this also places commoning in a problematic tradition: in contrast to the concept of society, the idea of community traditionally designates a group that is unified by a collective identity and constituted by mechanisms of exclusion and demarcation.

The term, however, doesn't only have an exclusionary dimension, it is also anti-modern: Zygmunt Bauman pointed out that it clings to the narrative of a loss of community in which societal change causes a decline in communality.[8] Consequently, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' early twentieth century writings on the relationship between community and society were compatible with the identitarian trends that culminated in the *Volksgemeinschaft* chimera of Nazism.[9] Today, right wing conservatives and the new right are once again invoking the notion of the community. On the other hand, representatives of the left spectrum bemoan increasing individualisation and fading solidarity in society and are therefore developing alternative concepts of commoning. Juliane Spitta investigates this precarious interpretation of community, which oscillates between appropriation by identitarian and emancipatory movements.[10] In her opinion, a reference to the fiction of the community can only be emancipatory when we overcome the narrow bounds of identitarian affiliation and think in terms of solidarity and globalism. Thus, the politics of commoning should be aimed towards "increasing freedom and agency" for those who don't yet belong. As the pervasive effects of global capitalism continue to spread, the claim for a collective right to the city inevitably implies fighting for a right to the world.

**"The claim for a collective right to the city inevitably implies fighting for a right to the world."**

**8** See Bauman, Zygmunt. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World.* Cambridge: Polity, Year: 2001, p. 9.

**9** See Tonnies, Ferdinand. *Community and Society,* trans. Charles P. Loomis. New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 47, 65.

**10** See Spitta, Juliane. The Fiction of Communiy in *An Atlas of Commoning*, eds. Ngo, Anh-Linh, Stefan Gruber et al. Berlin, ARCH+, 2018, p. 20.

**11**  See Gruber, Stefan. "Designing Commoning Institutions: The Dilemma of the Vienna Settlers, the Commoners, and the Architect" in *Spaces of Commoning,* Baldauf, Anette, Stefan Gruber et al. (eds.), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, p.89.

**12**  Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation," see note 5.

Understood as spaces for agonistic encounter, commoning opens up the possibility of an architecture that is a product as much as it is a process: the cyclical process of negotiating the social (re-)production of space. Architecture renders material our social practices, relations, and values. In turn, the disposition of space defines us. If we can agree on such (albeit non-linear) correlation, architecture can be more than a vehicle for reproducing prevalent power structures, but in fact a potent vehicle for renegotiating social relations. Meanwhile, such negotiation does not begin with architecture. Instead it begins at point zero, with the repetition of everyday practices that over time form patterns and habits, before they consolidate into norms and institutions, and are finally rendered material through architecture.[11] Along those lines, Federici argues that it is only by putting the reproduction of the everyday at the centre of political struggles that the commons movement will gain the capacity to endure: "We cannot build an alternative society and a strong self-reproducing movement unless we redefine our reproduction in a more cooperative way and put an end to the separation between the personal and the political, and between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life."[12] Just as the apocalypse will not occur as a sudden event, so are practices of commoning grounded in the barely visible gestures of day-to-day reality. If we seek to build resilience through commoning, according to Federici, it will always begin with a small c. ■

Stefan Gruber and Anh-Linh Ngo are two of the curators of the exhibition *An Atlas of Commoning*, an ifa-exhibition (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) produced in collaboration with the German architecture magazine ARCH+ and research partner Carnegie Mellon University. The exhibition opened in Berlin during the summer of 2018 before going on world tour. Parts of this text have been edited and rearranged from the editorial by Stefan Gruber and Anh-Linh Ngo "The Contested Fields of Commoning" in *An Atlas of Commoning*, eds. Ngo, Anh-Linh, Stefan Gruber et al. Berlin, ARCH+, 2018, pp. 4-5, as well as the essay by Stefan Gruber, "One of Many Atlases to Come…" in the same issue, pp. 44-47.