

Commoning-Based Collective Design

Moving Social Art Practice Beyond Representational ‘Rehearsals’ Into Concrete Social Solutions

EVE OLNEY, Dr
Transnational Institute of Social Ecology, MA_AP
Crawford Arts College, Cork Institute of Technology

This article outlines how a radical practice of commoning-based collective design is developing new concepts of social practices, through a direct democratic common assembly method. A commoning-based approach implies that collective design is being developed with the underlining principles of broader commoning practices and living. This includes an anti-capitalist standpoint and a focus on fairness, equality, inclusion, sharing, self-limitation and self-organisation (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019).

The underlining organizational principles are drawn from political theorist Cornelius Castoriadis’s argument for an ethical and political project of social organisation, which is based upon self-governance through an ongoing process of common assemblies, and Murray Bookchin’s conception of communalism, where “every productive enterprise falls under the purview of the local assembly ... to meet the interests of the community as a whole” (Bookchin, 2015, pp. 17–18).

Two art exhibitions, thematically centered on precarious living conditions, as well as two ongoing social projects, serve as case studies that provide a reflective critique in which I argue how this methodological approach opens a new field of discourse relating to social participation in communal projects. Within this argument, a new critical interplay between art and architectural practices emerges in terms of fulfilling a role within long-term social change.

Mapping the Emergence of Non Disciplinary Practice

This paper argues how a radical practice of commoning-based collective design, which is being developed through two social projects in Cork, Ireland, and Athens, Greece, opens up new fields of praxis for art and architecture by critically situating them within strongly defined social roles. This consideration of collective design is driven by a non-expert ethos that enables self-organised, creative initiatives around social living, which work outside of conventional schemes of disciplinary learning and practice. This particular scheme emerged from an idiosyncratic interweaving of different projects and practice research I was involved in between 2014 and 2017. I began developing a new collaboration of anti-neoliberal praxis, named *Art-Architecture-Activism*, in tandem to working with an Athenian-based urban activist group called Urban React in 2017. The collective design scheme is currently being applied within Urban React's housing project in the suburb of Kaisariani, Athens, and a project in Ireland called *The Living Commons*; two very different projects with different socio-cultural contexts. Collective design, within this context, encompasses a unified response to the immediate needs of the community/group through an inclusive creative practice of collectively re-imagining, designing, building and sustaining different social enterprises and other social and material infrastructures that relate to the general well-being and good health of all individuals. The variety of projects that this entails creates an inbuilt process of skill sharing as well as a sharing of resources amongst the participants.

Inhabiting the Bageion: architecture as critique (Athens, 2017)

Art-Architecture-Activism is a curatorial scheme that employs art, architecture, practice-research and exhibition as an interface for activism, a critique of state institutions, as well as targeting arts funding to initiate long-term social projects challenging precarious social living conditions. The first iteration of *Art-Architecture-Activism* was an exhibition named *Inhabiting the Bageion: architecture as critique* (Culture Ireland funded in collaboration with Athens Biennale) in central Athens, October 2017. The exhibition was the result of eighteen months of collaborative research I was involved



FIGS. 1A AND 1B

Installation of arts project *Urban React: Kaisariani* ethnographically frames the Urban React social housing project as a living museum. Filmed interviews with inhabitants of the housing block are juxtaposed with an interview with a member of Urban React.

1A Installed as part of *Inhabiting the Bageion: architecture as critique*, Athens, October 2017.
Photo: Anthony Haughey

1B *Urban React: Kaisariani*, installed as part of SPARE ROOM, Cork, September/October, 2019.
Photo: Eve Olney



in with Athenian-based urban activist group Urban React,¹ as well as the Masters programme in Cork Centre for Architectural Education, amongst many others. For two weeks it was installed across four floors, in a disused neoclassical hotel that serves as the occasional exhibition space of Athens

1 — <https://urbanreact.wordpress.com/> <https://www.spareroomproject.ie/urban-react> <https://www.facebook.com/Urban-React-Kesariani-1153342938049483/>

Biennale. It presented four distinct curatorial critiques of architecture as a taught discipline, a practice and an instrument of oppressive neoliberal agendas, within an art exhibition format. The accompanying exhibition programme describes the central objective of the exhibition thus:

This exhibition responds to current trends within architectural practice that claim a ‘post-political’ / ‘post-critical’² position in following neo-liberal agendas and policies. The featured work attempts to problematize this attitude by exploring alternative methods of thinking through architecture as an inherently social practice. (*Art·Architecture·Activism Exhibition Programme, 2017*)

In terms of presenting a clear trajectory between *Art·Architecture·Activism* and the commoning practices that emerged from this scheme, I focus here on a mixed media exhibition called *Urban React: Kaisariani* (FIG.S 1A AND 1B), in terms of how it responded directly to ‘local urgencies’³ in Athens. Within the overall scheme, there is a conscious avoidance of a parachute-in type of social engagement that can only offer a tokenistic gesture of exposure and goodwill. Temporary public interventions or short-term, community-based arts projects can reveal prejudicial or oppressive structures of governance and a need for change. But as educational theorist Etienne Wenger argues, developing a long-term “community of practice” requires “an ongoing negotiation of [organisation], identity and cultural meaning.” He states:

Meaningful learning in social contexts requires both participation and reification to be in interplay ... Over time, a history of learning becomes an informal and dynamic social structure among the participants, and this is what a community of practice is. (Wenger, 2010, p. 1)

-
- 2 — The premise of this exhibition was largely informed by an emerging discursive critique of architecture from within visual culture studies and (less visibly) architecture itself. In particular, architectural theorist Douglas Spencer points to the complicity of architecture within neoliberal oppressive ideologies. Douglas, S. (2016) *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic: London, New York.
- 3 — This is one of the points of discussion raised by the editors of this edition.

Therefore, a primary task for the *Art·Architecture·Activism* scheme is to significantly integrate art and architectural practices within other social practices that are integral to community building. *Urban React: Kaisariani* presents a human perspective of Urban React's current housing project in the Athenian suburb of Kaisariani. It consists of a series of filmed interviews with some of the inhabitants of an apartment block who talk about their relationship with the building they live in. It thematically presents architecture as being part of a broader socio-cultural methodological approach to community building.

Urban React's Kaisariani Project as a Case Study for Collective Design

Since early 2017, I have been engaged in an ethnographic collaborative practice with Urban React. Urban React is a collective of activists who share a common interest in alternative modes of teaching and practicing architecture as an inclusive collective social practice. We adopt architectural, economic, and socio-political tools to bring people closer to an autonomous and equitable society in the context of commonspace. Urban React is currently working with the inhabitants of an old refugee housing block in the Athenian district of Kaisariani to renovate their building. The shared goals are to collectively fix the structure of the building, renovate the inhabited apartments, reclaim the central courtyard for the inhabitants' use and, most importantly, renovate unoccupied apartments for homeless families and individuals. Urban React is introducing a co-ownership scheme to protect the housing block from future gentrification and co-option. Additionally, the inhabitants will have a communal ground floor apartment for holding collective assembly meetings to manage the day-to-day running of their living environment.

It is through this project that the concept of a commoning-based collective design began to take shape. Early on in the project it was agreed that we focus on the common problems and needs, as identified by the inhabitants and explore ways of inclusively working together. As people become involved in the collective design process, of improving their own and others' welfare, it is hoped a type of political agency could possibly

emerge and be acknowledged within the workings of the group. It was understood that collective design needs to be an ongoing, long-term, social project that is never considered complete, as the community continues to grow and change. As previously inferred, its underlining principles were initially drawn from a social condition of commoning under direct democracy, characterized by Castoriadis; as a mode of social organization that is self-instituting and self-limiting. As all citizens have the opportunity to play an active role within the instituting of these laws/limitations, through the collective assembly process, Castoriadis believed that they were more likely to be upheld. Within the context of commoning-based collective design, the shaping of new social structures within communities would, therefore, be determined by immediate needs and actions throughout the process. In addition, Bookchin's holistic, social and ecological framework of social development as a means of "reorder[ing] social relations so that humanity can live in a protective balance with the natural world" (Bookchin, 2015, p.14), has facilitated more long-term thinking and planning regarding sustaining the communities that may arise out of this process. Social ecology is based upon the rejection of the idea that humans /society should dominate natural ecological structures. Instead, we must attempt to work 'with' nature in order to co-exist.

Although we understand collective design to be an emergent, inclusive, collaborative, social-cultural process, it yet needs a definable scheme, both philosophically and practically, without necessarily 'fixing' it in a disciplinary manner. The intention is that those who engage with the project will gain experiences and skills where they might be able to identify, in themselves, a more significant social role in the community, through a collective assembly process. Although each collective design project will be different—hence the need for flexibility— each will be grounded within underlining values and principles, as stipulated within the Urban React Charter.⁴ As it is presented as an alternative to conventional architectural practice, these principles are intended to be clear so as not to be confused with neoliberal practices that claim to be community-centered. Urban

4 — <https://urbanreact.wordpress.com/>

sociologist Karol Kurnicki outlines issues with conventional “architectural solutions” as being “always provisional and elaborated with unequal share from various social actors and institutions.” He argues that as the architectural process normally “excludes everyone except experts,” there is a natural “elimination of criteria not directly related to architectural discourse and practice” (Kurnicki, 2014, p. 86). This excludes and alienates those who do not share the language and specific experience of those leading the project. Architectural theorist Daisy Froud highlights a different kind of problem within current community-based projects. She argues that the input from local residents is often overridden by stakeholders who hold professional profiles of expertise. She points out that despite Britain claiming a long social history of “community architecture” implemented within government policy:

The overall emphasis [in the] most recent government publication on the built environment, 2014’s Farrell Review...seems to be that the purpose of ‘education and outreach’ is to create better informed citizens, who can demand ‘good design’, as opposed to articulate politicised citizens who might question the social, cultural and economic foundations from which design emerges. (Froud, 2015, p.51)

Her example demonstrates a cyclical transference of opinion regarding what is ‘good’ design and what is ‘right’ for a community that inevitably leads to generic repetitions of what already exists. This contrasts sharply with Urban React’s intended strategy of gaining informed input from communities expressing their specific needs, desires and experiential contexts of their living environment. We recognize this as a mutual learning process that every participant, regardless of their life experience, could undergo. For example, the aforementioned ethnographic arts project, *Urban React: Kaisariani*, was initiated as a method of engaging with the existing elder community members. In 2017, we asked people to participate in this project as a way of getting to know each other better and gaining insight into how the inhabitants relate to their building and the broader community. This was an opportunity for us to learn about how they might situate their own subject positions within the block, in terms of feeling a sense of ownership, as well as their attitudes towards potentially being part of a

more organized community. We were invited into the apartment homes of a number of residents to video-record interviews with them. The themes of the questions varied from asking their opinions about specific times in Greek social history; their experiences of changes in the block and the community over the years; whether they considered themselves to be political; and what they think about Urban React's proposal of working together as a community to repair and reclaim the housing block. Through these engagements we gained insight into their needs and concerns. For example, there were concerns regarding the structural damage to parts of the building and most expressed regret that the courtyard—that was once communal and child-centred—was now primarily a car park used for nearby businesses. None considered themselves specifically political yet all held strong views regarding the lack of input from the local municipality. They learned more about how their participation in the project might address some of their needs and what roles/opportunities would exist for them within the renovation. We also gained some insight into the causes of social divisions between different inhabitants. For example, individuals who were more socially isolated seemed more likely to express distrust or resentment towards other ethnic groups living within the block.

In between the organized events within the collective design process, the Greek members of Urban React are regular visitors to those we have previously engaged with. Building up trust and relationships with the residents is a long and slow process. Through ongoing discussions and creative events the inhabitants of the housing block, as well as the members of Urban React, are critically exploring how to be a community and what the individual's role might be within that process. Scholar of social learning and identity development, Joe Curnow, argues the need for 'radical theor[ies] of learning':

In order to truly theorize an approach to enabling radical praxis, we have to start with an understanding of how people learn... [We need to centre] pedagogical approaches in a theory of learning that explains how people become able to participate well in the work of building radical alternatives. (Curnow, 2016: 28)

Within the concept of collective design each particular social project is an educational space: a site of learning. Therefore, as the core group driving

this project, we need to consider what kind of social engagements might lead individuals to re-evaluate their own subject positions for the common good of their community. Curnow argues that “more often than not, people become politicized through engagement in communities where particular political analysis and actions are valued and performed collectively” (Ibid, p. 2). In 2016, one of the first socially engaged projects was organised as a collaborative effort between Urban React, the Kaisariani inhabitants, the Bern School of Architecture and members of AKEA (a collective of leftist architects that participates in the Association of Greek Architects). It was called the *Kaisariani Summer School* and consisted of these groups working together over three weeks, exploring different themes that related to the inhabitants, the housing block and the wider locale of Kaisariani. Discussions centred on the urban context of the block, its socio-historical role within the Greek Civil War, the networks of social relationships and other social structures as well as how the inhabitants viewed the need for both private and public space within the compound of the building. The Architecture students then drew up plans based upon what the inhabitants had discussed with them in imagining future designs for the courtyard as a commoning space. The plans were based on the collective outcomes of this project, which included the following: Playground for children, private spaces for the inhabitants, new open access in case of emergencies, fewer car park spaces, shaded areas, the possibility for children and adults to play and relax together, no gentrification, the preservation of the historical components of the building, and the idiosyncratic self-built additions to the balconies and ground floor apartments were not to be changed.

When the inhabitants that participated viewed the student’s drawing plans that were based on the formers’ suggested needs, it presented a new visual perspective of what is possible within the housing block. In addition, as they were directly involved in creating this new perspective, I would argue that a “subjective and material transformation” (Wenger, 2010, p. 11) occurs simultaneously, through this component of the collective design process. When the people themselves are part of the gradual improvement of their living environment, as geographer Melissa García-Lamarca argues, they may arrive at a point where they begin to “[generate] their own learned political practices” and control and direct “the way knowl-

edge is created and transmitted for [their own] community development” (García-Lamarca, 2017, p.433). To clarify this point, I would argue that in this example a “political practice” can be understood as the inhabitants taking a position and an active creative role in the renovation of their block. Through ongoing events and projects such as the *Kaisariani Summer School*, the intention is that people will gradually become more comfortable in their roles of directing the renovation project. I would argue, therefore, that such collective creative endeavors can enable the people themselves to begin to lead decision-making and continue to implement the changes on their own terms.

The Inter-Changeability between Art Practice and Social Process

Building up relations with the inhabitants of the Kaisariani housing block is a gradual process. Ethnographic art practices such as the filmed interviews for *Urban React: Kaisariani*, as well as the *Kaisariani Summer School* help foster these relations and encourage the inhabitants to form perspectives on their circumstances. One of the vital steps of the collective design approach is in addressing social segregation and isolation. We have already formulated a few tactics in tackling this issue whilst also encouraging participation in the project. Urban React has been using an old van parked in the courtyard of the housing block as an information center. This creates visibility for the project and opportunities to meet with the inhabitants of the block. The questions prepared for the *Urban React: Kaisariani*, video interviews were used here also to interview inhabitants as a social anthropological method of encouraging engagement with the project. Through this endeavor another twenty-nine households signed up to support the Urban React project.

Around the same time, we held communal eating events and other social get-togethers in the courtyard to inspire a different perception of it as a social space. Some of the elder women cooked food and brought it down to the makeshift open ‘café’ by the van in the courtyard. People brought out chairs, sat, chatted, ate and drank together. For that afternoon, it was no longer a car park but a communal social space. Cars were prevented from parking in the courtyard as people occupied the space. Urban React



FIGS. 2A AND 2B

Interlinking artwork to social space in *Urban React: Kaisariani*.

2A Architectural drawing produced as part of the *Kaisariani Summer School*, 2016, where inhabitants and architecture students create future possible designs of the courtyard are used 2B at social events in the courtyard.

Photo: Dimitri Panayotopoulos



members answered questions and engaged in different discussions with people around the project. Those that had not participated in the *Kaisariani Summer School* had the opportunity to see the printed plans that some of the inhabitants had worked on with the students and this evoked further conversation regarding the possibilities of the space being communally organized (FIGS. 2A AND 2B). The posters of the plans had previously been used in the *Inhabiting the Bagieon* exhibition and were now functioning as tools to further progress the development of the renovation project. Here I would argue that the interchangeability between material-as-representation and material-as-process extends the functionality of the artwork as

it moves beyond being a representation of activism (within the exhibition format) and instead becomes part of the *process* of collective action as people use it to think through future developments.

In addition, I would argue that within the idea of collective design, these social engagements can be critically framed as producing alternative kinds of knowing or learning about our community. Through a casual discourse of open discussion, whilst situated in the central courtyard space and being able to express ideas and opinions with other neighbors, people can begin to foster common goals and interests that can be continued within further events in the collective design process. It could be argued that a kind of tacit learning is taking place regarding building up sets of social relations during which ideas and plans are being formulated for the renovation project. Seeking solutions to everyday, practical issues through this scheme can also, therefore, enable a process of re-evaluation that directly challenges everyday attitudes of disinterest, apathy, disillusionment, and fatigue that cause social isolation. Instead of discussing the problems within the housing block in a defeated manner, collective design can inject such discussion within an empowering framework of possibility. As García-Lamarca argues, “People [can] become re-energized and injected with hope, and [can] move through a process of re-belonging” (2017, p. 427), as they collectively work through a common goal. According to Wenger, a community of practice occurs when a group of people collectively accumulate knowledge and practices and “become informally bound by the value they find in learning together” (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). Curnow applies Wenger’s theory to social movements and the kind of “tacit learning [that occurs] rather than explicit training on the ground” (Curnow, 2016, p. 32). I would relate this perception to the kind of learning and knowledge exchange that unfolds within collective design, where “the community itself is the curriculum [as] members are learning, reproducing, and innovating through their work together” (Wenger, 1998 cited in Curnow, 2016, p. 33). It also follows that within the context of commoning-based collective design, art and architectural practice can further be understood as being both analytical tools as well as tools of representation within an emergent radical sociocultural theory of learning and practice.

The Exhibition as a Conflictual Space

Besides creating a public forum for different social projects, the exhibition *Inhabiting the Bageion* also provided a creative, critical space within which Urban React was able to build a relationship with the asylum seekers' squat, Notara 26, in Athens. This occurred primarily through ongoing workshops⁵ during the exhibition, where pieces of furniture were constructed for the squat. This enabled Urban React to foster relationships with people who may take up future residence within the Kaisariani block. It is also useful to consider some of the issues that were provoked by the interconnection of collective art and political practice. Urban React hold complimentary political views, but we also need to deal with government and institutional agencies that are related to the Kaisariani housing block. The State currently owns the central courtyard of the Kaisariani block and some of the unoccupied apartments. The left-wing Municipality of Kaisariani⁶ has a long-standing interest in the social history of the building.⁷ Forging relationships might seem conflictual with regard to the anarchist positions within the group. It is useful to reflect upon how the exhibition format provided an example of what happens when such disparate complex sets of relations come into contact.

Although partly self-financed, *Inhabiting the Bageion* also relied on public funding to realise the exhibition. Some of the exhibits represent a particular anarchistic/autonomous political ethos that came into conflict with the overall schema of a publicly funded exhibition format. The main

5 — The workshops were led by Irish artist Seamus Nolan, and the relationship with Notara 26 was initiated and continues to be fostered by Urban React founding member Dimitri Panayotopoulos.

6 — Since first writing this section, the right-wing party New Democracy, led by Mitsotakis, is now in government and the knock-on effects of this on the Kaisariani project have yet to be determined.

7 — Kaisariani was known as a left-wing communist stronghold throughout WWII and the Greek Civil war, and was targeted by the British Army and Greek Nazi sympathisers who set out to defeat communist rule in Athens. As the housing block was the tallest building at the time, it was both used by the Greek Resistance—People's Liberation Army or ELAS and targeted by the British. One facade is still riddled with bullet and cannon holes.

detail of this conflict can be explained within the delicate and incredibly stressful management of the exhibition opening. The expense of bringing the Irish contingent of artists and work to Athens was financed by Culture Ireland, a state funding body that supports Irish cultural and artistic work abroad. This alliance led to the involvement of the Irish Embassy in Athens who offered to organise the catering of the opening. This included an official opening speech by the Irish Ambassador. However, the majority of the people involved in this project held strong anti-state positions and would not be affiliated with any cultural event that involved representatives of the State. It was therefore decided not to advertise the more formal opening. Needless to say, the opening was quite an unpopulated event. I explained the state of play, as best I could, to the Ambassador and she graciously toured the exhibition and spoke to some of the artists about the work and declined giving a speech. Although no specific reason was offered in terms of this discretion, I would imagine that the opening might not have been what she expected. It was sparsely attended and having had a tour of the different exhibits, she might have felt such a formal address would be inconsistent with the environment.

Instead of viewing this experience as exposing some kind of conditions of conflict between art practice and (upholding) political dogma, I would argue that it actually creates a *necessary* conflictual platform where different hegemonic structures are revealed to one another. The need to address such paradoxical social relations also held legitimacy as individuals from 'our' team kept a low profile during the opening. This displayed a refusal in acknowledging the contradictory position of our 'autonomous' exhibition being dependent upon certain institutional support. This avoidance eradicates any possibility for advancing a critical understanding of how the political agency of the exhibition as a platform for social activism might extend into or be reliant upon broader social infrastructures. What it also made apparent was that neither 'side' held complete agency over the other and it instead played out as awkward attempts by both sides to navigate each others' territories. At the very least, I would argue that, the members of the embassy left the exhibition with more of an awareness of the kind of social/ public needs in parts of Athens and the complexities of negotiating solutions through conflicting ideological paradigms.

There has since been a shift towards an alternative reasoning within Urban React. When visiting the Minister for Health and Social Welfare, in 2017, to discuss the courtyard of the housing block, she informed members of Urban React that she was aware of the exhibition and it had given her a sense of the project, with which she empathized. On this basis, she agreed to research the state-owned apartments within the housing block, to determine whether they could be used for the purposes of the project, as well as being supportive of the plan to reclaim the courtyard. We were surprised by this result and it provoked a reflective response from Urban React with regard to it opening possibilities for us to be able to negotiate further on our own terms. As founding member of the Commons Strategies Group, Silke Helfrich argues, “it is not ‘the state’ as such that acts, but in each case specific groups with concrete interests and positions of power act” (Helfrich, cited in Bollier, 2016, p. 2). The positive response from the Greek minister also indicates a potential space of diplomacy between the two different agencies by focusing on the social components of the housing projects. It was these unexpected outcomes—among other things—that informed a reflective critique of the exhibition scheme as both an interface for social action as well as a space for navigating conflictual political agencies. By physically bringing two very disparate agencies into contact with each other the exhibition format served as a very useful reflective tool in terms of understanding both State power and autonomous political power as non-“concrete entities” (Helfrich, cited in Bollier, 2016, p. 2).

Critical Reflections on the Development of Collective Design

Working within a people-led framework of collective design has proven difficult in the Kaisariyani project due to social issues that are historically and culturally ingrained within this fractured community. Building up an inclusive set of relations with the inhabitants is a challenging and slow process. Following a number of instances where some inhabitants displayed racist attitudes towards others at social gatherings, it was understood that there needs to be a more informed and structured approach towards dealing with conflict. For example, as opposed to responding to conflictual situations as they occur, it was agreed that there should be an inbuilt systemic way

of dealing with contestation within the collective design process. In 2018, I became involved in a collaborative practice with Athens-based artist Spyros Tsiknis⁸ and we are currently developing a role-play and participatory workshop that applies a non-violent-behavior approach in dealing with conflictual situations that arise within collective work and collaborative practices. Although I initiated this contact with Spyros, and his work in this field⁹ in relation to the Urban React project, the workshops are now being developed also for participatory artists working with communities. The Irish development agency for collaborative arts, CREATE IRELAND,¹⁰ is including this work within their 2021 annual programme.

Due to ongoing difficulties and delays experienced by Urban React—compounded by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020—collective design as a concept has not developed significantly beyond the analytical up until now. The kind of continuous engagement required to keep people engaged in the project has not been sustainable and, as of June 2020, Urban React are only now reengaging with the inhabitants. When discussing the pursuit of libertarian municipality, Bookchin points out that it “must be conceived as a process, a patient practice that will have only limited success at [times]” (Bookchin, 2015, p.60). Urban React is committed to continuing this project and there are plans to begin to formulate more structured gatherings according to the principles of commoning-based collective design, before any construction begins.

The Living Commons—an Irish Context

It was during this experience with Urban React that I also began collaborating with individuals in Ireland, who were interested in the idea of community building through a people-led collective design process. In response to the ongoing precarity in Ireland that we (as artists) and oth-

8 — <https://spysiknas.wixsite.com/sustainable-art/home>

9 — This project was initially developed and coordinated by Spyros Tsiknas and Yiorgos Tsitsirigos, and is now being further developed by Eve Olney and Spyros Tsiknas.

10 — <https://www.create-ireland.ie/>

ers (in worse situations) are living within, we began developing the idea of creating a holistic, social, ecological, commoning living and working environment in Ireland—called the *Living Commons*. Similar to the Urban React model, the *Living Commons* is researched and developed through cultural co-operative programs channelled through a common assembly mode of governance. The objective of building a direct democratic living and working environment draws significantly from Bookchin’s emphasis on the question of power within the idea of libertarian municipalism. He talks about “the tangible power embodied in organized forms of freedom that are rationally conceived and democratically constituted” (Bookchin, 2000). When partaking in public discussions around current sets of conditions in Ireland, I have noticed a tendency to categorize the social into different kinds of crisis. People situate individual problems within a global scale of crisis that they believe they have no control over. Bookchin argues that people in crisis, “can be mobilized to support...anarchist communist ideals because they feel their power to control their own lives is diminishing in the face of centralized state and corporate power” (Bookchin, 2015, p. 56). García-Lamarca further contends that, “Collective advising assemblies are spaces where people...begin to dis-identify with their position in the dominant economic and political configuration and begin to shed their guilt, shame and fear... and materialize new ways of acting and being” (García-Lamarca, 2017, p. 421).

The *Living Commons* has a specific focus on those who are currently living precariously, including the homeless, people in emergency accommodation, direct provision¹¹ and/or in an insecure rental situation. The objective is to begin with a systemic structure that can coordinate social projects as self-governed political projects. Non-expert does not assume that participants have equal knowledge as people have variable social advantages and disadvantages. A people-led process does assume an equal capacity to contribute and learn and become an active, self-empowered

11 — Direct Provision is the Irish government’s accommodation scheme for people seeking asylum. There is widespread condemnation and activism regarding having these for-profit centres shut down due to the inhumane conditions that people are forced to live under. See, <https://www.masi.ie/>

member of a community. A number of social enterprises will be initiated by engaging with existing projects, in perma-farming, a people's kitchen and bakery, near zero energy initiatives, as well as food and craft markets. Reflecting upon the logistics of the Urban React project, we concluded that the *Living Commons* requires fulltime active members that can steer the project through the process of collective design towards a more holistic political project of direct democracy. A marked difference to the Kaisariani project is that we are initiating a commoning community as part of the collective design process, whereas Urban React are working with an existing (and segregated) group of inhabitants as well as future incoming inhabitants. Unlike Greece, we have the advantage in Ireland of an arts council funding stream that grants sufficient autonomy to the projects and artists it funds. We¹² secured arts funding in 2018–2019 through the *Art Architecture Activism* scheme with a proposal of producing long-term projects that address the Irish housing crisis. The projects—that included the *Living Commons*—were given a public platform through a collaborative exhibition in a disused former bank in Cork city, in September 2019, titled *Spare Room*.¹³ *Spare Room* became a vehicle from which to begin engaging with existing social projects in Ireland and beyond, that (whether subconsciously or deliberately) work on principles of commoning and/or self-organization in Ireland.

Over the two weeks, the former bank space held thirteen different exhibitions and twenty-three workshops and discussions of commoning practices around eating, making, seed banking, self-building, printing, reinstituting, mapping networks of existing commons and digital commoning (FIGS. 3A AND 3B).¹⁴ *Spare Room* also functioned as an inclusive social space. Over the two weeks of the exhibition, we had a steady footfall of curious locals, shoppers, and people with children coming in from the rain. People could sit and have a free drink or something to eat and have

12 — Myself and social arts practitioner and curator, Kate O'Shea, co-produced the second iteration of *Art Architecture Activism*.

13 — <https://www.spareroomproject.ie/> <https://www.facebook.com/spareroomproject/>

14 — <https://www.spareroomproject.ie/programme>



FIGS. 3A AND 3B

Spare Room exhibition and social space in Cork city, Sept/Oct, 2019 became a vehicle from which to work on principles of commoning and/or self-organization in Ireland. Over the two weeks of the exhibition, we held twenty-three workshops and discussions of commoning practices.

Photo: Shane J. Horan



a chat with others in the space. We had regular visits from some of the elderly people living in the community. There were printing materials for kids and outdoor space where people could just hang out. Schools and colleges brought classes to visit and engage with the themes raised within the exhibits. This is beyond the organized eating events and daily workshops and discussions. Over this time we connected with numerous

schemes and organizations who are interested in becoming involved in the *Living Commons*.

Conclusion

Through the collaborative scheme of *Art Architecture Activism* artists and architects have worked fluidly and within multiple roles, across different social projects, such as *Urban React's Kaisariani Project* and the *Living Commons*. In addition to this, I would argue that, those who have participated in the scheme have succeeded in firmly situating their creative practice within the social in very concrete ways. As previously discussed, this approach can extend the lifespan of the artwork into the social for the long term. A striking example of this is artist Seamus Nolan's contributions to both the *Inhabiting the Bagieon* and *Spare Room* exhibitions. In the former Athens project, the outcomes of the collaborative workshops he organized included making furniture for a squat. This additionally supported the social role of securing an ongoing relationship between Urban React and that group. In Cork, he responded to a Dublin-based squat's need for roof repairs and built a roof in the outdoor space of *Spare Room*. This exhibit was accompanied by a film made by the squatters that presented some of the productive values of living communally. When the exhibition concluded he dismantled the roof and brought it to the squat in Dublin. Where *Art Architecture Activism* has succeeded the most, I would argue, is in the growing numbers of people, groups and projects it has interconnected. The understanding within the organizational structure of the scheme is that projects/issues are represented by the people directly involved, in whatever way they see fit. However, should they want input or help with anything, that is also available. For example, the Cork Travellers Women's Network¹⁵ exhibited their posters and material on Travellers' rights to housing. They asked for support regarding curating their material and this resulted in additional posters being made by print artist Kate O'Shea and the scaffolding that supported their work was made

15 — <https://triskelartscentre.ie/cork-traveller-womens-network/>

by architect Aideen O'Donovan and Athenian-based artist Mohamed Hachimi. By providing a creative and collaborative open platform as an exhibition/social space, those with common issues can use creative practices to engage with other projects as well as the wider public. Applying this praxis to long-term living and working projects such as the *Living Commons* has, in turn, resulted in the development of a commoning-based collective design. As I have argued and demonstrated above, the emphasis on employing creative collaborative processes as a mode of addressing social issues, problem solving and finding consensus within community groups, can enable an inclusive praxis that is based upon the common good for the community in question.

The next steps include securing a site for *The Living Commons* and beginning to interconnect groups already involved in self-organization in Ireland, through collective design programmes. As previously argued, the objective is to build up a broad social framework where people are democratically responding to their own and others' needs. Within this ongoing and explorative scheme, individuals can situate themselves according to how they perceive their own subject position within their community. A lack of experience in specific fields does not disqualify people from finding and securing a role for themselves. An acknowledgement of different modes of 'knowing' can contribute to shifting normalized assumptions about seemingly concrete sets of sociopolitical conditions. As cultural theorist Irit Rogoff argues, this entails placing value on

knowledge that would [...] be presented in relation to an urgent issue, and not an issue as defined by knowledge conventions, but by the pressures and struggles of contemporaneity ...in the sense that ambition knows and curiosity knows and poverty knows. (Rogoff, 2010, p. 10)

It is by working across different modes of knowing that commoning-based collective design can move art, architectural and other creative, cultural practices beyond mere representational social actions and into more concrete long-term social solutions. Based on the outcomes and responses we have had from both the *Inhabiting the Bagieon and Spare Room* projects, as outlined above, I argue that it also opens up a critical field where people can situate their own subject position on their own terms regarding how to be

part of a sustainable and equal community. In the *Urban React Kaisariani* project, this is being pursued through ongoing creative projects with the inhabitants. In the *Living Commons* project, we are using the collective assembly process to reach a consensus regarding the means and methods of building up a community based upon mutual needs and human-led values. This praxis of learning through collective design integrates the philosophical within the doing/practice. It is hopeful that such a social nexus of community learning and doing can build a culture of resistance counter to the current oppressive dominant structures and create real change within our societies. *

LITERATURE

- Bollier, David and Helfrich, Silke: *Free, Fair and Alive: the insurgent power of the commons*, New Society Publishers, 2019.
- Bollier, David: 'State Power and Commoning: Transcending a Problematic Relationship'. *A Report on a Deep Dive Workshop convened by the Commons Strategies Group in cooperation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation*. Kloster Lehnin, near Potsdam, February 28–March 2, 2016. <http://commonsstrategies.org/state-power-commoning-transcending-problematic-relationship/> (accessed May 3, 2018).
- Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, New York: Verso, 2005.
- Bookchin, Murray: *The Next Revolution, Popular Assemblies and the promise of Direct Democracy*. London: New York: VERSO, 2015.
- Bookchin, Murray: *The Murray Bookchin Reader*, ed. Janet Biehl, Montreal:New York:London, Black Rose Books, 1999.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius: *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Trans. Kathleen Blamey, Polity Press, 2005.
- Curnow, Joe: 'Towards a Radical Theory of Learning: Prefiguration as Legitimate Peripheral Participation' in (eds.) Springer, Lopes de Souza and J. White, *The Radicalization of Pedagogy: Anarchism, Geography and the Spirit of Revolt*, London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Froud, Daisy: 'Normal People' and the Politics of Urban Space, in Froud and Harris (ed.s) *Radical Pedagogies: Architectural Education and the British Tradition*, RIBA Publishing, 2015.
- García-Lamarca, Melissa: 'Creating Political Subjects: collective knowledge and action to enact housing rights in Spain', *Community Development Journal*, Vol 52 No 3 July 2017, Oxford University Press.

- Kurnicki, Karol: 'Towards a spatial critique of ideology: architecture as a test' *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, 38:1, 80-89, DOI: 10.3846/20297955.2014.893642, 2014. (Accessed September 8, 2016).
- Phillip, Davie: 'The Art of Commoning', *Durty Words*, Ed./Designers, Kate O'Shea and Victoria Brunetta, Self Published, Limerick, 2018.
- Rogoff, Irit: 'Free', e-flux journal #14 March 2010, p.10. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61311/free/>
- Spencer, Douglas: *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic: London, New York, 2016.
- Wenger, Etienne: Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: The Career of a Concept, 10.1007/978-1-84996-133-2_11. 2010. <https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/09-10-27-CoPs-and-systems-v2.01.pdf> (accessed September 12, 2018).
- Wenger, Etienne: Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: *The Career of a Concept*, 10.1007/978-1-84996-133-2_11. 2010. <https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/09-10-27-CoPs-and-systems-v2.01.pdf> (Accessed September 12, 2018).
- Wenger, Etienne, McDermott, Richard and M. Snyder, William:(2002) *A guide to managing knowledge: Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Boston Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

