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The Politics of Commoning and Designing

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This session prompts designers to engage with the political dimensions of working with commons. It brings together practitioners, activists and researchers who explore the tensions and potentialities they encounter when designing for (and from within) commons and 'community economies'. As political theorist Massimo De Angelis (2007) points out, commons can today be thought as the basis on which to build towards futures of social justice, environmental sustainability and a good life for all. However, just as 'community economies' that have at their core the well-being of humans and non-humans alike (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011), they operate within a world dominated by capital's priorities and are thus not only sites of hope, but also sites of struggle as well as targets of co-optation and enclosure. In organising this panel, our concern was that the political understandings of commons and the politics of their contexts often go unaddressed in design work and discourse. Our desire has been to create a space that foregrounds these dynamics and confronts design with the political meanings and implications of commons.

In this short text we introduce three aspects of commons that have implications for design, before introducing the papers in the panel. First, we introduce the common as *a political notion*, briefly considering the implications for design when working with different theories. Secondly, departing from an idea of commoning as an ongoing process rather than something that ends with a completed commission, we suggest that the common demands rethinking the ways in which design relates to the challenge of commitment, and particularly, how commons and community economies are sustained over time. Thirdly, the common demands that production cycles are thought in direct relation to livelihood - where do the resources for cultivating commons come from, how are they distributed, and what could be the contribution of the activity of designing within the political economy of the commons?

Commons as political notion

The common is one of the more significant ideas within contemporary progressive political discourse today, functioning as a transversal notion able to connect different kinds of movements and struggles in different parts of the world. It promises are many and diverse, from outlining an active principle against the enclosures and extractivism that sustains the ongoing privatization of resources, to suggesting an alternative mode of organizing public provisions in more democratic manners. As geographer David Harvey summarised,

> "The common is not something that existed once upon a time and has since been lost, but is something like the urban commons, continuously being produced. The problem is that it is just as continuously being enclosed and appropriated by capital in its commodified and monetized form, even as it is being continuously produced by collective labour [and nature]." (2012: p.77)

The implications of theories of the common are so profound and ubiquitous - that in the face of the present triple crisis of rising mass unemployment, armed conflicts and environmental collapse - design cannot afford to ignore them. To confront and position one's practice in relation to such discourse becomes an urgent task in the field, as the common cannot be seen as simply another trend or optional topic informing practice. There is not however a single, unified theory of the common from which practitioners can turn to for reflecting on their own modes of creation. Rather, the common is a contested notion within political theory, entailing different implications for practice.

Without launching into an exhaustive exploration of the term here, we'd like to outline some initial points of orientations that we find specifically relevant to the realm of design. It seemed important to critically take stock as in the last fifteen years, designers have begun to respond to the challenge of the common in their practices. These have been aligned for instance with the writings of Elinor Ostrom or with the approach endorsed by organisations such as the P2P Foundation, which can be seen to have some consequences. What these share is an understanding of the common that considers it as a set of attributes intrinsic to specific objects - such as air or knowledge. The common here is seen as a political effect of a compound of specific characteristics, for instance, the impossibility of becoming fully enclosed. While it is easy to see why the approaches that understand the common as 'commons' or 'common goods' would be especially relevant for design, other, more neglected approaches to this notion open up new possibilities. More specifically, feminist and Marxist approaches to the concept of commoning shift the focus from properties that are intrinsic to the goods being taken into consideration to the social relations that frame and sustain their production and reproduction.

To put it differently, these theories reject the idea that there are goods or social objects that are *naturally* in common: both in the case of natural resources such as water or cognitive products such as software, *the common is first of all a mode of political action that challenges property as an absolute right to exclude*. Here, the common speaks of the forms of organization that sustain the autonomous cooperation of the social, and importantly create social spaces that subtract value from processes of capital accumulation and appropriation. From this angle, the ethos for practice that emerges complicates the one offered by *peer to peer production*. As Matteo Pasquinelli put it, in the latter "each node of the network" is posited as having "virtually the same power as any other" (2008;.66) but in a binary model such as this one, there is no nuanced explanation of surplus, and how the nodes might product and exchange in asymmetrical ways. The implications for design and design practice then, is the need to engage its own political economy. This means to better account for the economies of practice within existing 'parasitic' and asymmetrical conditions (Pasquinelli, 2008) and through that practice, remake those very economies and relations.

What is the time of the common?
Inasmuch as the political economy of practices must be opened up, the common compels designers and creative workers to rethink the role of temporality in their practices. The time of the common is different to the time of the 'project', the common is never finished and needs ongoing care. Yet for designers whose work is situated in the 'gig economy' for instance, it is becoming increasingly difficult to commit or care for alternative and more sustainable modes of creation in the long-term.   The demands on designers and researchers in this context is to

produce quickly and to produce on a project by project basis. It is perhaps clearer that through temporary situations, particularly temporary urbanism, designers have enabled temporary forms of commons through their projects. While such initiatives are often well supported, the wider problem is that existing funding infrastructures rarely support longer term projects and will not invest in activities unless they provide immediate, tangible and measurable outcomes.

In the knowledge economy, in which contemporary design and academia is located, demands to make everything 'productive' reveals the extent of the ongoing intensification of value extraction demanded by financial capital, in which speed itself is crucial vector. As network theorist Matteo Pasquinelli has put it, claims to Intellectual Property (and therefore its rent) are based on competition that exists rather in time than space; it is played out in speed differentials. He writes, "actors in a knowledge economy are engaged in a *race against time*, rent applied through a provisional hegemony along time" (2008; 98). Many digital products will ultimately become freely available online, but what customers pay for is the newness of the latest release, or the privileges to preview novel audio and visual materials (the release of Beyonce's latest visual album 'Lemonade' on paid access platforms TIDAL or HBO, is one recent high profile example). As Barbosa, Reimer and Mota's paper in this session raises, the use of temporality in urban development is another visible manifestation of intensification that keeps urban sites 'active' and 'productive' during redevelopment. The value generated through creative projects in such cases stays with the owners of the property, and yet it relies completely on the social relations that practitioners and inhabitants alike create.   These are social processes that demand time and affective investment, and could be understood as an example of what Stefano Harney has named 'synaptic labour' (Harney, 2015: 176); this is the work of relaying information and affects as the unrecognised source of value later attributed to a given product. These forms of labour and social relations, exploited and divorced from their makers quickly, take time to build if they are to be genuine.

If cognitive capitalism is based on speed, in which we everything we do must be productive in order to sustain our own being, it seems to us that the common requires a very different politics and conceptualisation of time.   This is not to argue that it is a matter of counterposing speed to 'slow' living, but is rather *a struggle over the control and determination of the rhythms of life*. While commoning is often understood, particularly in architecture and urbanism, as a predominantly spatial form of organising, including the occupation of public spaces and squares (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2010) or the cooperative organisation of the domestic and reproductive activities such as housing, laundries, shared kitchens (Hayden, 1982; Choi and Tanaka, 2014), it is time as well as space that also needs reclaiming (Stavrides, 2013).

The projects presented in this panel implicitly contain questions around time and, from our perspective, highlight the need to reclaim time for the common. The papers give examples of initiatives that demand people's time if they are going to succeed, so how can the political economy of 'giving time' and the temporality of such projects be critically understood and developed?

We want to suggest that design might contribute to the reclaiming of time in two ways, which seem to us to have developed separately until now. The first is through designers' own organisational and work procedures.   We are referring to those creative and progressive experiments that practitioners deploy in their everyday working environments.   Recent experiments include designers closing their offices on particular days of the week to support their staff's well-being; giving them time to care for others, their families or community projects. While this might not be specific to design, as any other organisation or profession might equally

undertake such initiatives, the location of one's everyday work practice and life rhythms are important sites of intervention and remaking.

The second, and perhaps more significant arena to engage with time might be through the practice of design itself. How might design practice lead to the reconceptualisation and experiences of time? Time is a biopolitical construct, or rather time as we know it and experience it is a particular *concept of time*. Scholars of the historic commons of England and Wales, describe some of the temporal rhythms of that common life and particularly highlight its differences with time as we normally conceive of it today (Federici, 2004). They tell us of a calendar marked by collective events, fetes and many celebrations and holidays, based on cyclical and seasonal time. They emphasise in particular those events that marked moments of mutuality and collective life (Kropotkin, 1908). The transformation from feudal life to industrialised capitalism, and with it the creation of a labour force for that industry, demanded the standardisation of measuring time and the abolition of such moments of collective 'free' time understood as a common. It took management a long period to discipline workers to turn up for work, and the abolition of collective events of joyful celebration played an important part in this process (Thompson, 1963; Ehrenreich, 2007). The scholars Michelle Bastian, Larissa Pschetz and Chris Speed have suggested that design has the capacity to open up alternative experiences and understandings of time. They suggest we need to "redesign time in order to better address current concerns"[1] and that a new field of 'Temporal Design' is emerging. What are the creative mechanisms and ideas that would facilitate this in the creation of new commons? It is perhaps even in the intersection or cohesion between these two areas of action, in which time might be reclaimed? Considering how one's energies and creativity can be invested in longer term goals, brings us to the question of one's own livelihood.

Livelihood

A significant implication of the common for design processes, is the challenge it brings to design knowledges, which are conventionally conceived as part of a professional practice separate from a private sphere of life. Conversations around the rising precarization of labour in the last twenty years have already highlighted the ways in which, for many workers, the flexible paradigm of cultural and creative labour became the norm, and according to which there are no more boundaries between life and work. While this blurring has so far played out arguably in favour of capital accumulation, recent theorists grappling with ideas of commoning encourage us to reconsider the process from the perspective of an increased liberation from the centrality of work in our life practices. The political economist Massimo De Angelis speaks of the importance of co-produced livelihoods, livelihoods that are autonomous from the circuits and value practices of capital. He writes of the ways we need commons "in which bodies can live, nurture, prosper, desire and even collide without being measured by money, but instead make up their own measurement of each other and 'things'." (De Angelis, 2007; p.5) These are the time-spaces that are not mediated by the measures of the market.

When speaking about design and the common, we find designers and researchers particularly engaged in local collective experiments and initiatives around reproductive activities. Significant examples including urban agriculture, farming and gardening (Krasny, 2013), work around collective energy schemes, new civic initiatives and new forms of co-housing and

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[1] See http://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/school-of-design/news-events/temporal-design-an-interdisciplinary-workshop

cooperative forms of development.   These practices are important not least for the ways in which they provide inhabitants with an opportunity for different experiences, values and relationships in their everyday lives.

These practices often work with new kinds of social economies. For example, co-operative forms of eco-housing develop mechanisms that restrict speculation, make housing inclusive through innovations in borrowing as well as working with 'in-kind' contributions (Pickerill, 2015). As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have argued, the proliferation of commons and social economies, such as the ones mentioned above, represent a different kind of economic freedom that is not the one of the market, yet is very different to the centralised economies of the former socialist countries (Dardot and Laval, 2015: 396). Such practices of social economy can become prefigurative of a more democratic and just society, as they are one of the few forms that is capable of mobilizing desire of living otherwise, in a social body that is otherwise depressed and burnt out. However Dardot and Laval also point out that while alternative practices have pedagogical effects and support processes of subjectivation, such an eco-social transition could end up being a series of closed, isolated experiences and re-constitute an illusional retreat from systemic power relations. What is significant is these initiatives should not just be based around economic pluralism, but rather be understood within a scenario in which civil society self-organises at all levels in order to construct a force that is strong enough to contrast extractive and financial capitalism. Even alternative forms of production by themselves are not enough in the struggle for the common. Rather, the important question to address has to do with what form could be given to social and public policies which would able to supplement various kinds of common associations, and how to construct effective networks of decision making, beyond localism. Obviously the design of digital tools and smart technological objects and infrastructures,a s well as services and logistical models have a huge role to play in such developments.

In the field of architectural design it is possible to find examples when people are working concretely with alternative economies (such as cooperative housing) and questions are beginning to be explored around how such initiatives can become operative at a larger scale, moving beyond isolated instances. The urban theorist Neil Brenner, for instance, has recently discussed the ways that grassroots tactical urbanism might actually become a real challenge to neoliberal urbanism. He suggested that while many guerrilla efforts might not be as radical as they claim to be, grassroots urbanism might pose an actual threat to the capitalist management of the city once they direct their work at multiple levels, in an effort that he calls 'institutional redesign' (Brenner, 2016). One example he offers is *Cohabitation Strategies* proposal for a new housing model for New York. Their proposal makes strategic connections between a Land Bank, a Community District Land Trust, a Mutual Housing Association, a Cooperative Housing Trust and A Housing Credit Union. Through these five interconnected initiatives, they aim to develop a legal and economic structure for commons, beyond isolated instance. They propose, in their own words, a "hybrid model for the production of permanent affordable living" (Rendón and Robles-Durán, 2016). *Cohabitation Strategies* also organise themselves as a cooperative, and in this way are a good example of the possible convergences between both design work and the re-construction of one's own self-organisational practice and conditions of livelihood.

To put it differently, designing for 'the common' demands that production cycles are thought in direct relation to livelihood; where do the resources for cultivating commons come from, how are they distributed, in other words, it means to position social reproduction at the core of design thinking. Short of this, even otherwise participatory and inclusive design efforts risk to achieve little more than a 'feel good' effect that actually stands in the way of more meaningful political

change. Moreover, from a materialist, feminist perspective, social reproduction requires addressing the asymmetry between waged and unwaged time from the perspective of the work conditions faced by designers themselves; to question 'the invention of work' (Gorz, 1989) and indeed 'the problem of work' (Weeks, 2011). The common thus also invites to reimagine what design practices could become if the livelihood of those involved in them found ways to be less dependent upon the market. If we take up commons as invitation- the role of designers needs to be transformed into something we may not be able to even recognise, as the roles created to meet capitalist needs won't be the same as those meeting commons needs.

Concluding points

The papers gathered here in this session all further the exploration of the common that we have sketched above, and articulate its practical traction in the context of concrete design practices. All bring implications for the future training of designers and architects, suggesting a widespread need to collectively acquire new skills, such as how to implement participatory budgets or rethink institutional infrastructures. They suggest that designers need skills for common, and for this they need experiences and exposure to the common to learn from in everyday life.

The paper 'Design Togetherness, Pluralism and Convergence', highlights that the institutions of higher education can be a good place to begin this learning, when Monica Lindh Karlsson and Johan Redström explore new organisational forms and techniques in their studio teaching. Their paper pays attention to the politics and dynamics of such an initiative, exploring not only successes, but some of the more hidden ways that exclusions and hierarchies can emerge in group settings. Initiating democratic, collaborative ways of working in educational contexts, opens the possibility of their future sustainability, as once students' have directly experienced these social forms, they have greater capacity to initiate new ones themselves, in their own future situations and lives.

Designers working for commons often evoke other values in their work, such as participatory, openness collaboration, yet as Sanna-Maria Marttila's article 'From Rules in Use to Culture in Use – Commoning and Infrastructuring Practices in an Open Cultural Movement' makes clear, we also need monetary strategies for the common alongside strategies for property. Their case study highlights the importance of such strategies when working "with a range of actors with different motivations and commitments." Their paper helps to open up discussions around who profits and who benefits from open resources such as theirs, and how to design might positively work with those difficulties.

The reflection on the project outlined by Janaina Teles Barbosa Maria Hellström Reimer and João Almeida Mota in 'Designing participation for commoning in temporary spaces: A case study in Aveiro, Portugal' similarly points to the difficulties of around labour and compensation in temporary urban practices. Theirs is the enduring task of sustaining participatory urban interventions that must work within given constraints of temporary resources and finite social energies. Their intervention provides a good practical illustration of the argument Brave New Alp put forward in their contribution 'Commons & community economies: entry points to design for eco-social justice?', that design can and should be understood as action on the 'frontier' of appropriation. They suggest that design action is *located* on the borders of property, taking value from the commons and appropriating it, often for a client rather than themselves. This notion of 'frontier' work, emphasise for us that working for the common in the field of design means recognising the ways design redistributes knowledge and social relations in its objects.

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