

# Urban Commons: De-Commodifying Urban Life

By Ana Džokić and Marc Neelen

It is the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, a chilly but sunny day in Rotterdam. This morning the telephone keeps ringing. And within hours, the first journalist arrives, glancing around somewhat puzzled at the activity around the rundown buildings. We are at City in the Making (*Stad in de Maak*), an initiative aiming to bring defunct buildings into a collective “pool”, to provide for affordable living and working.

The previous evening, City in the Making was awarded a prestigious award for its activities. And with that, our previously low-key work suddenly had hit the limelight. The award is given for a “ground breaking temporary use of empty real estate”. We explain to the journalist how it all started around a set of twin buildings that, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, had become “toxic assets” for their owner – a housing corporation, operating 45,000 social rental apartments in the city. Too bad to use and too expensive to fix, this set of centrally located buildings suddenly lost their economic relevance for the owner and risked being boarded-up for the next decade. Crucially, at the same time, there was a pressing need for cheap living and working space in the city, which would require such buildings to remain open and available.

This contradiction triggered a small group of people to start City in the Making. In 2013, after intense negotiations, we reached an agreement with the owner, who transferred the right of use for a period of 10 years, free of charge. And what started as a mere test to see if these neglected buildings could be opened again, has slowly but steadily grown to a “pool” of seven buildings, which provide apartments and workspace for 35 people. While taking the journalist through the ground-

floor workshops, we explain that providing cheap space in buildings that are at our temporary disposal has become less of a challenge. Instead, the key is to let these buildings become the sites of self-reliant and self-governing communities, by taking property out of the real-estate market and transferring them to collective ownership and governance. In essence: turning them into urban commons.

## Stepping out of the market

The very same day of the interview with the journalist, a group of citizens of a nearby co-housing group contacted us for help. Their initiative, which has been a success for over twenty years, is being threatened with termination now the municipality has decided to sell the buildings in which they are located. The letter of the City of Rotterdam could not have been clearer: they prefer require the residents removed from the premises, for good; so that the buildings can be sold to the highest bidder. On a larger scale, the city has even more ambitious plans in socially engineering the population. Its “Housing Vision 2030” sets out plans to demolish 20,000 cheaper or affordable publicly owned apartments and to replace them with more expensive ones. This effectively denies a substantial segment of the city’s population access to affordable housing. Or, as some more outspoken critics have labelled it: deporting unwanted populations from the city itself. These circumstances point to the urgency of establishing other forms of organising among inhabitants, which can safeguard their existence in the city.

A small, but relevant set of examples can help in this. In Germany, the *Mietshäuser*

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*Syndikat* is a pool of collectively owned and governed apartment buildings. The over-one-hundred buildings in this pool have been taken out of the market, to set them free from speculative real-estate pressures. In the terms of the urban economy, these buildings have been stripped of their commodity value. This makes them available and affordable not only to the first generation using them, but also to each following generation. Moreover, the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* generates a revolving investment fund, with which it takes further buildings out of the market: a snowball that is rapidly building-up speed. The cleverness of the model has spurred a number of international spin-offs, like *Vri-jcoop* in the Netherlands.

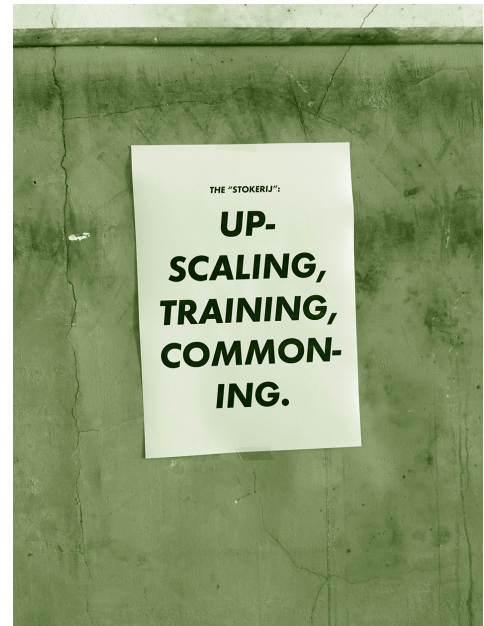
However, collectivising and commoning vital aspects of our lives does not stop with the physical spaces that provide for our livelihood. It also encompasses the economic domains in which we act, domains that can to some degree provide independence from the mainstream economy. Over recent years several “commoned” economic spheres have emerged, from co-operative banks, like Cooperative for Ethical Finance (ZEF) and its subsidiary *eBanka* in Croatia, to more radical models such as *Sardex* – the Sardinian business-to-business interest free crediting system and complementary currency.

### Commoning the housing issue

On the early morning of December 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 it is still pitch-dark when the first buses leave the garage of Belgrade Public Transport company. One by one they go out on route, but some carry rather unusual advertising boards with the messages of the campaign “Welcome to Housing Hell”, launched by the Who Builds the City (*Ko gradi grad*) platform. The messages stand out bright, even if their content projects the far-from-bright housing reality of Belgrade and Serbia: irredeemable mortgages, unprotected renters, energy poverty, forced evictions, non-existent social housing. According to statistics, housing expenses heavily burden 70% of people in Serbia. Who Builds the City campaigns to bring the wide felt discontent around the housing conditions in Serbia into the open.

With 97% of housing in Serbia being privately owned, “regulated” through the market, and without any viable alternative for those who cannot sustainably access

that market, this situation “screams” for ways out. For this reason, over recent years, we have been working with Who Builds the City on a model of housing that aims to collectively create affordable living and working space that is accessible to a large segment of Belgrade’s population. In order to avoid the personal vulnerability of individual citizens, this “Smarter Building” initiative sets out to establish a model of housing as a commoned resource. Much like the line of reasoning emerging in Rotterdam, or as practised by the *Mietshäuser Syndikat*, these spaces would be created outside of the market, thus stripping them from their commodity value and rendering them “inert” from the perspective of the speculative real-estate economy.



City in the making, photo: [stealth.ultd.net](http://stealth.ultd.net)

The work on this model has progressed substantially over recent years, but is haunted by two key obstacles: firstly, the difficulty of repositioning housing from a domain in which unresolved housing conditions are perceived as the personal “failure” of the people affected, toward a broad understanding that this is an unacceptable reality, and, secondly, the difficulty of mounting common actions in today’s society. While the first may be addressed in campaigns, work on the legal framework around housing (i.e. by intervening in the proposed Law on Housing, which was adopted in Parliament in Serbia at the end of 2016) and advocacy work with housing communities, the latter – establishing common action as a viable possibility in today’s society – requires not only per-

sistent groundwork, but also demonstrable examples set in real life.

The prospects for needed commoned resources or initiatives in the city do not stop with housing, but expand to work (cooperative production, for instance), finance and parts of public (or former public) services that have, in the meanwhile, lost their public focus, like energy production.

### Up-scaling, training, commoning

For an increasing number of people life in the city is a struggle. In the context of the city as a site of speculative economies, of cities as investment vehicles, we experience that our place is not guaranteed, but must be claimed, fought for. In the wider European context, large segments of the population have felt this through disruptive changes, like eviction and foreclosures of houses, and the urban poverty from Madrid to Athens or Belgrade. If we want to sustain our ground in the cities, it is urgent to find spaces from which to act, as well as tools and practices to subvert and shift this reality.

So, let's go back to *City in the Making* in Rotterdam for a moment. Could the buildings (gained on a temporary bases) become such spaces? What if there were not seven but many more buildings pooled into a collective resource? What if there were 400? And how could access be gained on a permanent basis? Does it mean that buildings would have to be bought, in order to get them out of the market? How to deal with this paradox, but also how to gain capital for that step? What if pressure mounts up and the inhabitants of the 20,000 affordable apartments that are supposed to be demolished in Rotterdam would join as well? How do institutions look at this prospect? What about the legal framework? Finally, what experience is there to form new practices of governance of such commons, if this opportunity would open up?

These questions have become our driving force, enabling us to see that the buildings available right now can provide a temporary "training ground", from which more resistant, robust urban communities can grow. That "ground" would allow experimentation with forms of governance in

and between communities, to understand how "design rules", as they have been postulated by, for instance, Elinor Ostrom (a pioneering researcher of the commons), can be adapted to permanent contemporary urban communities.

Although many of the people involved so far intuitively understand the basic principle of such a step, in practice we are far from having the appropriate skills and mind-set to make the jump from an individualised life and working career to setting up structures and "institutions" that mitigate our individual vulnerability towards a joint resilience. Participating in an urban garden, or visiting a "commons café" seems less intrusive to our lives than collectively resolving the more essential parts of our lives. In many ways, this is the context and challenge of understanding, setting up and bringing to life contemporary urban commons. For many it is still a stretch to answer these essential parts of our lives through practices of commoning in their own situation.

In this light, it is no surprise that the full-page article on *City in the Making* in the mainstream AD newspaper, written by the journalist that visited us on that chilly morning in Rotterdam, featured much of the adventure of living and working under makeshift conditions in the buildings, but close to nothing on bringing these buildings, as commoned resources, into collective governance. That, it appears, is still a stretch too far to serve its readers.

Commoning livelihood provisions, from housing to energy, has great potential, but equally brings us back to the challenges faced by the early co-operatives (some one hundred and fifty years ago): it requires a substantial contribution from people (in time or financial resources). And more urgently, it brings such provisions into the reach of quite specific groups of citizens, rather than making them universally available to the benefit of all. Therefore, commoning can be seen as a partial solution, or in other cases as a condition to (temporarily) make our lives more resilient, or train ourselves for a *modus* of society yet to come. It is a possibility to take us beyond where we have gotten stuck, failed, or been left to struggle with only our own resources today. ■■■

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