CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios
Autumn Special Issue (2024)

https://doi.org/10.15847/cct.39176

ISSN: 2182-3030 ERC: 123787/2011
Funding: UIDB/03127/2020

© 2024: Author(s).
Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND

CIDADES
Comunidades e Territórios
CITIES Communities and Territories

Visualising urban commoning: Geographies of precarity, defiance and hope

Visualizando o commoning urbano: Geografias de precariedade, resistência e esperança

Joana Pestana Lages[1], Saila-Maria Saaristo[2], Diana Sanchez-Betancourt[3], Andreas Scheba[4], Suraya Scheba[5], Lucía Abbadie[6], Luisa Escobar[7], Claudia Sanchez-Bajo[8], Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon[9]

Abstract
In this visual essay we draw on photographs from several urban locations across Northern and Southern geographies, particularly focused on the research contexts that are explored within the papers in this Special Issue, to explore the manifold meanings, divergent practices, and variegated outcomes of urban commoning (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2021; Eidelman and Safransky, 2021; Stavrides 2016). By pursuing a visual comparative method, which included collectively selecting and discussing photographs from our research contexts, we engaged in a careful dialogue through which we made sense of the images (Rose, 2008). We deliberated on what they represent, how they relate to each other, and what aspects of the (un)commoning they illuminate. Through this process, we identified four emerging themes that we believe highlight critical aspects of the commons, while at the same time holding our different contexts in place and together: (1) Precarity, violence, demolition; (2) Defiance, hope & the city as text; (3) Advancing socio-spatial relations; (4) Commoning as Human – non-human relations.
Inevitably, there are many ways to interpret and categorise these images, since each photograph has multiple meanings and illustrates various facets of the commoning processes and practice. Nonetheless, through this method, we have been able to establish links between various places and geographies, highlighting the multiplicity and overlaps of common use practices.

Keywords: *urban commoning, visual comparative method, socio-spatial relations*

Resumo
Neste ensaio visual, recorremos a fotografias de vários lugares urbanos de geografias do Norte e do Sul, em particular dos contextos de pesquisa apresentados neste número especial, para explorar os seus múltiplos significados, práticas divergentes e resultados diversos de comuns urbanos (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2021; Eidelman e Safransky, 2021; Stavrides 2016). Seguimos um método comparativo visual, que incluiu a seleção e discussão colectivas de fotografias dos nossos contextos de investigação, através um diálogo cuidadoso por via do do qual demos sentido às imagens (Rose, 2008). Deliberámos sobre o que representam, como se relacionam umas com as outras e que aspectos do comum iluminam. Através deste processo, identificámos quatro temas emergentes que, na nossa opinião, realçam aspectos críticos do comum, ao mesmo tempo que mantêm unidos os nossos diferentes contextos: (1) Precariedade, violência, demolição; (2) Desafio, esperança e a cidade como texto; (3) Avanço das relações socio-espaciais; e (4) O comum como relação entre humanos e não-humanos.
Inevitavelmente, porém, há muitas formas de interpretar e categorizar estas imagens, uma vez que cada fotografia tem muitos significados e ilustra várias facetas do património comum. Através deste método, conseguimos estabelecer ligações entre vários locais e geografias, pondo em evidência a multiplicidade e as sobreposições de práticas de uso comum.

Palavras-chave: *commoning urbano, método visual comparativo, relações socio-espaciais*

1 DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal. Email: joana.lages [at] iscte-iul.pt
2 DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: saila_maria.saaristo [at] iscte.com
3 Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa. Email: dsanchez [at] hsrc.ac.za
4 Human Sciences Research Council and University of the Free State, South Africa. Email: ascheba [at] hsrc.ac.za
5 University of Cape Town, South Africa. Email: suraya.scheba [at] hsrc.ac.za
6 Universidad de la República, Udelar, Uruguay. Email: luabbadie.pim [at] gmail.com
7 HafenCity Universität Hamburg, Germany. Email: luisa.escobar [at] hcu-hamburg.de
8 University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Email: claudia.sanchezbajo [at] gmail.com
9 University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Email: matthew.wilhelm-solomon [at] wits.ac.za

Theme 1. Precarity, violence, demolition

Living in common, especially under conditions of informality, often means precarity. As communities of the margins remake urban spaces - land, buildings and infrastructure - they transgress normalised relations of enclosure and exclusion. In doing so, they have to endure many acts of violence, from the state and other actors, to defend their presence. Their autoconstruction makes them subject to official neglect, or worse, the imminent threat of demolition and displacement, as well the experience of unlawful eviction. This persistent sense of precarity and permanent temporariness, interjected with experiences of police violence and state sanctioned evictions, cumulatively contribute to both slow and shocking violence.

Living in precarious housing conditions and under constant threat of violence can have profound consequences for the mental wellbeing of residents, aggravating their feelings of anxiety, insecurity and vulnerability. The state's continuous criminalisation of occupation, as people struggle to sustain their presence in the face of uncertainty, considerably contributes to high levels of exhaustion. Furthermore, eviction itself is traumatic, violent on bodies and minds, places families on the streets, scatters people across the city to find other spaces to make a home, and unravels the affective connections and forms of commoning created by residents in place.

Residents of Cissie Gool House in Cape Town, South Africa, have had to endure many acts of violence to defend their presence. Among them were several raids by the local state, while violating people's dignity. These acts of violence have profound consequences to the mental wellbeing of residents, especially young children, aggravating their feelings of anxiety, insecurity and vulnerability. The state's continuous criminalisation of the occupation considerably contributes to high levels of exhaustion experienced by residents.

Figure 1. CGH Police raid, Cissie Gool House, Cape Town, South Africa

Photo shared by CGH (2022).

Figure 2. Eviction in Inner-city Joburg, Inner-City Johannesburg (Diamond Exchange), South Africa

Photo by Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2013).

In December 2013, residents living in the building known as Diamond Exchange in Johannesburg, South Africa, were unlawfully evicted by private security. The eviction disrupted and unravelled the affective connections and forms of commoning of many residents, particularly the women-led committee. It put families on the street, forcing many to disperse throughout the inner-city.

Figure 3. Barbershop amidst rubble, Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Portugal

Photo by Joana Pestana Lages (2023).

In the context of imminent threat of demolition and eviction, residents of the Montemor neighbourhood in Portugal show practices of survival and coping strategies. Even the most precarious spaces of inhabitation are crucial for people's livelihoods and for generating income. The writing on the wall reads 'Haircuts available'.

Informality often means state neglect. In Nuevo España, Montevideo, Uruguay, some infrastructure improvements have been achieved as a result of pressure by the neighborhood residents' commission. The pavement of some streets is one of them. This photo shows what happens when the pavement ends and the ballast that accompanies the prevailing informality of housing begins.

Figure 4. The end of the pavement Nuevo España, Montevideo, Uruguay

Photo by Lucía Abbadie (2022).

Theme 2. Defiance, hope and city as text

Murals are important reclamation practices for people living in common. They can instil shared feelings of resistance, belonging and hope, as they imprint an alternative spatial imaginary into the urban fabric of the city. In treating the city as a textual site, communities use public art to make various claims and advance alternative spatial imaginaries and praxis. Slogans like 'land for people, not for profit'; 'where people live matters', and a 'dignified life', question the hegemonic capitalist mode of governing and assert alternative, indigenous values and cultures based on principles of equality, democracy and collective self-help. Furthermore, claims such as 'life cannot flourish without water, respect it, it is what makes you walk', point at the more-than-human aspect of commoning.

This advancement of alternative spatial imaginaries is intertwined with alternative spatial praxis that is both defiant (appropriating imposed narratives and reasserting their own legitimate presence) and hopeful in creating spaces of conviviality and commoning where residents hang out, children play, and the earth responds in support of these alternative pathways.

At the top of the hill in Altos de la Estancia, overlooking the capital City of Bogota, Colombia, a local graffiti reads 'A dignified life'. A message about an imagined future of inclusion and equality for dwellers of the periphery. The homes at the top and the contention wall at the bottom support this narrative of hope. The bushy and unstable green space below, the playground at the bottom, and the sounds from the new occupations behind the hill are reminders of the complex dynamics shaping everyday life in this place. As green bushes keep florishing after the landslides, people continue building homes, streets and dreams as pathways to a more dignified urban life.

Figure 5. A dignified life - Public Art, Altos de la Estancia, Bogota

Photo by Diana Carolina Sanchez (2023).

Figure 6. (Re)numbering houses, Almada, Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Portugal

Photo by Joana Pestana Lages (2017).

The city councils of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area have opted for an intrusive way of managing neighbourhoods built on occupied land, spraying the house numbers without any consideration for people's homes. In the Terras da Costa neighbourhood, a group of residents and housing rights researchers, got together to design alternative number plates more to their liking. Residents thus reappropriated and transformed the numeration imposed on them through their own aesthetical labour and design.

Figure 7. CGH Land for people, Cissie Gool House, Cape Town, South Africa

Photo by Andreas & Suraya Scheba (2021).

Local art has been an important way of making Cissie Gool House a home for its over a thousand residents. This art is both creative and political, a beautiful reminder of the political demand of occupiers: Land for people, not for profit. Murals decorate many walls of the once abandoned hospital. They are therefore key dimensions of the reparative practices of residents, imprinting an alternative spatial imaginary into the urban fabric of the city.

Figure 8. Tosepan, Cuetzalan, Puebla, Mexico

Photo by Luisa Escobar (2021).

Tosepantomin, a savings and credit cooperative founded in 1998 in the northeastern highlands of Puebla, Mexico, is part of the *Unión de Cooperativas Tosepan*, a union of cooperatives oriented towards the construction of Yeknemilis. This indigenous concept, akin to the commons, roughly translated as dignified life, is based on self-determination, and a lifeway focused on sustaining communities and nature, rather than capital accumulation. The forum pictured was built by the union for assemblies and festivities. The mural besides it with the message in Náhuatl: 'life cannot flourish without water, respect it, it is what makes you walk', revindicates their culture and values.

Figure 9. Through the car window, Altos de la Estancia, Bogota

Photo by Diana Carolina Sanchez (2023).

Through the window of a local taxi, one observes a vibrant street of what was once a poorly serviced informal settlement. Today, a resilient community is here to stay and grow. Residents walking, working and moving in and through common spaces, between vertical housing constructions that exemplify the tenacity and aspirations of urban dwellers. These threshold spaces - crossing boundaries between the household and common - are important avenues for social life, income generation and upward mobility.

Theme 3. Socio-spatial relations

In the most adverse conditions, people organize to support and ensure survival, social reproduction, affective connections, and create spaces for political education, activism and democratic citizenship.

These reparative practices take place in and through a multiplicity of spaces - including halls, gardens, workshops, cafes, and rooftops - that enable communal engagement, gathering, and exchange. Inhabiting these spaces allows residents to connect - among themselves as well as with outsiders - in their efforts to build infrastructures of care. Yet, the materiality and legality of commoning spaces may differ considerably, with some more improvised and precarious and others more established and regulated. These differences undoubtedly matter, either facilitating or hampering the realisation of alternative socio-spatial relations. But regardless, the very presence of these spaces is foundational to commoning, as without them, there would be no conviviality, life-making, material repair, and prefigurative practice possible.

Near the Cornavin Railway station in Geneva, Switzerland, the Ilôt 13 is a self-managed neighbourhood. The Buvette and Maison des Habitants (MdH) seen in the photo, include a concert hall, workshops and a café. The MdH is the headquarters of the association, which is made up of people who live or work in Ilôt 13 (craftsmen, artists, students, parents), housing cooperatives and residents' associations. Built in 1830 as a former coach inn, and after defying eviction, the building has belonged to the MdH since 1985. As an important economic, social and cultural venue in the city, the "Buvette de l'Ilôt 13" promotes alternative ways of living and being together.

Figure 10. Ilôt 13, Geneva, Switzerland

Photo by Claudia Sanchez-Bajo (2023).

The hall in Cissie Gool House is frequently used for political education and organising. It serves as an important space for engagement between residents and outside actors, including social movements, NGOs and researchers. The posters and photographs on the walls offer a reminder of a central political demand of the occupation: 'where people live matters!

Figure 11. CGH; AKH Co-design celebration, Cissie Gool House, Cape Town, South Africa

Photo by Zacharia Mashele (2022).

Figure 12. Inner-City Johannesburg (Msibi House), Johannesburg, South Africa

Photo by Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2022).

In the many inner-city occupied buildings in Johannesburg, shared and communally-managed space is scarce and hard to organize. However, rooftops frequently become spaces of commoning. The washing and drying of laundry by women creates a space for a gendered conviviality and the reclamation of damaged infrastructures to create precarious homes.

Figure 13. Occupation for food production and community gardens, Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Portugal

Photo by Joana Pestana Lages (2023).

Aurio, who works for local a residents' association, walks through the community gardens of the Talude Militar neighbourhood. The gardens are mostly collectively farmed for food, but there is also sugarcane production for the Cape Verdean grogu (spirit) for the distillery owned by a resident family. These locally produced foods and drinks are important economic and cultural artefacts, nourishing the material and social needs of people while binding the community together.

Figure 14. El Molino, Iztapalapa, Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico

Photo by Luisa Escobar (2019).

Social Production of Habitat, a self-managed and non-commodified housing model, has long been advocated by Mexican activists. In the 1980s, organizations from the Urban Popular Movement led the production of a housing complex, El Molino, in Mexico City. The forum and mural in the image are part of Molino's facilities, commemorating the collective organisation behind its development, and simultaneously fuelling it.

Figure 15. Community Pot Nuevo España, Nuevo España, Montevideo, Uruguay

Photo by Lorena Rodríguez (2022).

A cat walks among the rubble. The signs calling for a community food pot. In Nuevo España informal settlement, people organise and support each other even in the most adverse situations. Collectively they establish infrastructures of care to provide for the most basic needs, such as a plate of food.

Figure 16. Inner-City Johannesburg (Msibi House), Johannesburg, South Africa.

Photo by Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2022).

In December 2022, in a building in Johannesburg called Msibi House, a former metallurgical workshop, residents were brutally evicted by an anti-immigrant group claiming to be Operation Dudula. Yet, for over a decade both South Africans and Zimbabweans had lived in the unlawful occupation in relative peace. The passageways became spaces of conviviality and commoning where residents would often hang out and chat, and young men would play cards.

Theme 4. Human – non-human relations

Commoning extends and overflows beyond the human to include relations with the more than human. These human and non-human entanglements run through all the images, in the buildings and infrastructures built, the animals and plants that inhabit commoning spaces, the community gardens that feed bodies and souls, the use of bicycles and focus on circularity, and the ways in which constructed boundaries are transgressed in more-than human insertions into commoning relations.

In these entanglements, human and non-human actors assert their powers to remake commoning spaces. Sometimes slowly and almost unrecognised, other times at an overwhelming speed and impact, human and nature co-produce, break what is there, rearrange and remake life in a never-ending cycle of metabolic relations.

Figure 17. After the Landslide - Hills and housing, Altos de la Estancia, Bogota, Colombia

Photo by Diana Carolina Sanchez (2023).

A green open space surrounded by a vibrant legalised neighborhood. Thousands of informal shelters housing hundreds of families were relocated due to (high risks of) landslides. Since then, nature is slowly growing back, conceiling the contestations over the place. The bushes and green pastures serve as memories of a once rural place, and the community gardens nearby remind us of the daily labour and commitment to feed the bodies and souls of residents.

Figure 18. Housing upgrade Tosepan, Cuetzalan, Puebla, Mexico

Photo by Luisa Escobar (2021).

In the context of increasing financialisation and a financial inclusion agenda, the World Bank recommended programmes to increase access to private finance for low-income families in Mexico. Housing activists advocating for the Social Production of Habitat promoted the inclusion of savings and credit cooperatives, such as Tosepantomin. The house in the photo was upgraded with a microcredit from them. Although Tosepantomin's approach emphasized non-profit loans, family-controlled, community-supported and ecologically sustainable housing production, the framework's financial logic conflicted with these values, placing Tosepantomin in a complex and challenging role.

Resident members of the Codha housing cooperative in Chêne-Bourg, Geneva, have committed to soft mobility, with measures promoting a voluntary reduction in car use and options for switching between modes of living. The design is clean and practical. The focus is on environmental sustainability and community service, with a shared commitment, a common budget and participative management.

Figure 19. HC3-Codha, Geneva, Switzerland

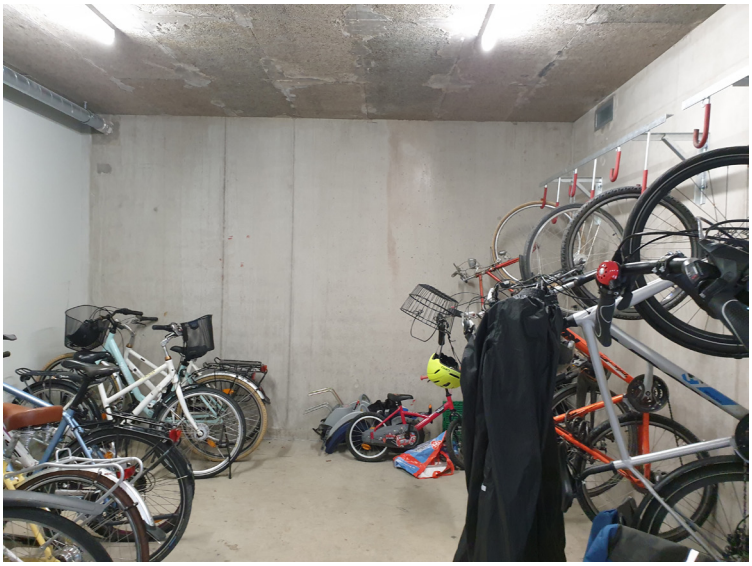

Photo by Claudia Sanchez-Bajo (2023).

Figure 20. Kalkbreite, Zurich, Switzerland

Photo by Claudia Sanchez-Bajo (2023).

Local residents in Zurich mobilised to design and build the Kalkbreite housing cooperative. Designed and managed in a participatory way, the ARPA project offers communal living spaces open to everyone in the city, multiple shared spaces for cooperative residents, including kitchens, and conscious efforts to limit their impact on the environment. In addition to focusing on environmental sustainability and resource circularity, the cooperative provides venues for the surrounding community and preserves the already existing Zurich tram depot beneath.

Figure 21. Paved road on Nuevo España, Montevideo, Uruguay

Photo by Lorena Rodríguez (2022).

Neighborhood life in Nuevo España overflows the boundaries of what is deemed possible. The urban bus, the lights and the pavement are all the results of community action by the Nuevo España neighborhood commission. Through incremental and collective transformation of socio-natures, urban infrastructures are made that support community living.

Figure 22. Map of places where photos where taken

Own elaboration by Joana Pestana Lages.

Conclusion

Through a visual method, we were able to engage in a comparative discussion and analysis that made these otherwise different cities, spaces and practices, legible to each other. Through this method, we were able to draw connections across multiple sites and geographies, surfacing the multiplicity and overlaps of practices of commoning. We contend that this visual conversational approach offers a modest contribution to contemporary discussions on tactics for advancing comparative urbanism in global urban studies (see Robinson, 2022). These include the remaking of material infrastructure and the insertion of alternative socio-spatial imaginaries and praxis. Furthermore, the visuals make clear that commoning is not only about collective management of resources, but also about conviviality, and the mental and emotional load of living in uncertainty. Despite this, people assert their visions and bodies into the fabric of the city, through acts of reappropriation. Commoning emerges as a prefigurative practice that includes repurposing, improvisation, care, embodied relations, exhaustion, and imagination.

Acknowledgements

Joana Pestana Lages acknowledges the funding by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), with grants CEECIND/00473/2018, and 'Care(4)Housing. A care through design approach to address housing precarity' [PTDC/ART-DAQ/0181/2021]. Saila-Maria Saaristo acknowledges the funding by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), with grant 2023.07870.CEECIND.

References

Eidelman, T. A. & Safransky, S. (2021). The urban commons: a keyword essay, *Urban Geography, 42*(6), 792-811.

García-López, G. A., Lang, U., & Singh, N. (2021). Commons, Commoning and Co-Becoming: Nurturing Life-in-Common and Post-Capitalist Futures (An Introduction to the Theme Issue). *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space, 4*(4), 1199-1216

Robinson, J. (2022). Introduction: Generating concepts of 'the urban' through comparative practice. Urban Studies, 59(8), 1521–1535. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221092561

Rose, G. (2008). Using Photographs as Illustrations in Human Geography. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 32*(1), 151–160.

Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common Space: The City as Commons*. London: Zed Books.