The Commons We Want

A Review of Selected Social Anthropology Literature for the XIX Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons in Nairobi, June 19-24, 2023

Subtheme 2: Commons Towards Urban Transformations

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Introduction

From an anthropological perspective, urban commons have been an area of research for a long time. Urban anthropology, as a subfield of anthropology, has undergone many changes, and "engages explicitly with the question of how social life is structured and experienced within urban contexts" (Jaffe and de Koning 2016: 14). Urban commons represent "shared material, immaterial or digital goods in an urban setting" (Feinberg et al. 2021) for example parks, gardens, community centres, libraries, or public squares. Surrounding the discourse of urban commons, there is an emphasis placed on community participation, inclusivity and a sustainable use of resources and the involvement of future generations.

In our literature research we have chosen to define five themes which experts are focusing on now, expanding the subject area and simultaneously giving you readers a more in-depth look at the main discussions being held now. First, we will be looking at urban farming and how communities are utilising unoccupied land in cities to establish sustainable, productive, and green areas in the middle of urban areas. Second, we will talk about squatting as an urban common, the complex legal aspects surrounding it and why people decide to occupy abandoned buildings in the first place. Third, we'll describe how urban planning is central to creating, managing, and distributing commons in an urban space. Fourth, security is a common often overlooked, however, it is central to maintaining peaceful cohabitation in cities and lastly, we will explore how public transport either is a common or creates new commons and benefits the community.

Every topic has its own set of problems which we have to address and find solutions to, however it is possible to define an umbrella-problematic specific to urban commons as a whole: Privatisation of common goods in a city is driven by private investors seeking the maximal financial value, creating social inequality and exclusion of certain marginalised communities. Many argue that the use of resources should be guided by public interest and not by purely economic supply and demand (Schulz 2015)

The development of urban anthropology in this context is interesting as well. The focus of anthropological research was on non-urbanized cities in the past. This has changed over time. Jaffe and de Koning see three factors that influenced the growth of Urban Anthropology. The first is the city's growth. There are more and more cities, and more than half of the world's population lives in cities today. Another factor is globalisation which has made Urban Anthropology more complex and multi-facetted. The last factor is the interest in studies of countries with a colonial background, particularly considering their context of development, modernity, and decolonisation. While at the beginning of urban anthropological research, the focus was on cities that were colonised in the past, with time, it shifted towards bringing "anthropology home" and doing research in cities of Western Europe and the United States. (Jaffe and de Koning 2016).

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Urban planning

The job of an urban planner is to develop the physical, social, and economic aspects of cities, towns, and other urban areas. They shape these spaces and find ways to enhance their liveability, functionality, and sustainability, ideally creating inclusive, vibrant, and equitable spaces where people can live, work and prosper. Urban planning creates the basis of our civilization as we know it, deciding on the location of important infrastructure such as hospitals, supermarkets and schools, the development and design of neighbourhoods, the layout of public transport systems and the overall accessibility of a city.

Urban planners are also responsible for creating urban commons, spaces where people can meet and exchange stories, and with their creation, combat against the commodification and privatisation of commons in urban areas.

During the process of designing a city, there are delicate balances that need to be respected and touchy subjects that need to be dealt with care: Not abusing power dynamics, including marginalised communities and respecting individual cultural heritages, balancing the fine line between gentrification and providing affordable housing, answering questions of scale are all problems with a solution.

Ecological and Sustainable cities

Sustainable and ecological cities are discussed in a future-oriented manner, as a way of planning a city. Sustainability is becoming more important in today's world, it being one of the main solutions to combat climate change. In this context, the term "eco-city" is often discussed, it being defined by urbanecology.org.au as:

"Ecological cities enable their residents to live a good quality of life while using minimal natural resources. They do so by:

- *Using local materials, and local energy, air and water flows (sunlight, wind and rain) to best advantage.*

- *Incorporating natural ecosystems into urban areas, to host local wildlife, and to enhance the experience of urban public spaces.*

- *Using vegetation to control urban microclimates – to stabilise temperature and humidity.*

- *Enhancing the life of the community and relationships between people, by creating convivial social environments.*

- *Supporting an innovative culture which enables people to flourish and develop their creative potential, and use new technologies to improve liveability."* (Ecocity Summit)

This concept is also often discussed in social anthropology, using some already existing eco-cities as examples. Regarding its definition, the concept of an eco-city seems to be one solution to the problems we face in the context of climate change, however, there are also disadvantages of ecological cities, with prominent anthropologists like Sarah Pink critiquing the concept. Social anthropology visualises

the status of ecological cities today, but also speculates on future imaginations of ecological cities. Some important topics surrounding the subject are urban gardening and farming, which will be discussed in the following chapter, pollution prevention and waste management.

There are different organisations that support the concept of an ecological and sustainable city. One project is the C40, a network of the world's leading cities when it comes to climate change mitigation. The participants of this network are mayors and other political leaders, it is organised by local governments and by the public. (C40) There are also smaller projects like the ecocity summit, a conference which takes place once every two years in cities that are striving towards an ecological future, such as Adelaide, Shenzhen, or Rotterdam (Ecocity Summit). Ecological cities are often criticised as there are recurring issues of scaling, inequality, exclusion, North/South wealth gap and affordability.

A prominent example of an ecological and green city is Washington DC. It's neighbourhood of 11th Street Bridge Park is divided by the Anacostia River, with a green bridge that should connect the two banks of the river by offering new green places to both communities. This project united many issues, one being creating affordable housing and bringing together public, private and communal actors together: *"Our goal is a development that provides opportunities for all residents regardless of income and demography. By following a community-driven-vetted process, it is our hope that other cities can look to the Bridge Park as a prime example of how the public and private sectors can invest in and create world-class public space in an equitable manner."* (BBARDC)

In her work when writing about the 11th Street Bridge Park project, Anguelovski shows that ecological cities often are connected to different factors such as income, nationality, or culture. In this context, the term 'green justice' is referenced, referring to the fair and equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among different communities, regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics. It recognizes that certain communities, particularly marginalised and disadvantaged groups, bear a disproportionate burden of environmental harm, such as pollution, climate change impacts, and lack of access to clean air, water, and green spaces. Using Street Bridge Park as an example, she highlights the importance of combatting these systemic problems (Anguelovski 2021).

Urban farming

The origins of urban farming are complex and hard to pinpoint. Different cultures have their own individual associations with the practice, doing it for different reasons and practising different levels of autonomy.

It is estimated that two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities by 2025 (Perez 2021). If this trend continues, then many of these people will be living in areas without access to decent food, shelter, water, and sanitation, more commonly called an irregular settlement. Feeding all these people is a challenge that most cities are unequipped to tackle with their own food production. Food is already

being imported on a large scale which will have to be scaled up even more to truly cover the needs of its citizens.

Considering this context, the dire need for new solutions enhanced by a rapidly changing climate, it is not surprising to learn that almost 800 million people are estimated to engage in some form of urban agriculture worldwide (UNDP 1996).

When talking about urban agriculture, it is important to differentiate between its different forms, as not all can be considered as commons. Rooftop farms or permaculture farms in suburbs or urban areas are all efforts to increase productivity and sustainability, however, they are most often privately owned. In contrast to these practices stand the "urban green commons", a concept that combines social sustainability with environmental and spatial conceptions to create socially sustainable cities and communities (Barthel et al. 2022). Its diverse features are, among others, community gardens and allotments, pocket parks, tactical gardens, city parks and edible/green landscapes and often, food production isn't their only objective.

In this chapter, we will discuss the latest forms of urban farming/landscaping and explain their effect and significance in their respective cultural and historical context.

Edible landscaping

Edible landscaping refers to the practice of cultivating public urban spaces that incorporate ornamental and edible plants. Its primary goal is to boost sustainability and productivity in public spaces. In recent years the movement has been growing significantly, however, it is not a new phenomenon. During the first and second world war, community gardens and parks were turned over to food production to aid the war effort, yet the practice was discontinued after the fighting ended (Matchar 2020).

Nowadays, there are efforts all over the world to reintroduce edible landscaping into the way we design our cities, oftentimes with more than just sustainability in mind:

- In Atlanta, the City Council planted fruit and nut trees on seven acres of public land, in an effort to ensure that 85% of residents live within half a mile of fresh food (Walker 2019)
- In China's Liaoning Province, rice for school cafeterias is grown in their own rice paddies, which serves as a training ground for budding architects and landscape designers. The goal is to raise awareness about how apparent non-agricultural spaces can help produce food (Shenyang Architectural University Campus).
- Incredible Edible Todmorden, a non-profit organisation in the UK, plants fruit trees and herb and vegetable gardens all over the community, free for anyone who wants to harvest (Incredible Edible Todmorden).

Green activism and guerrilla gardening

Green activism and guerrilla gardening lie at the more informal end of the urban agriculture movement. Guerrilla gardening is a global movement with a broad definition but can be narrowed down to actors occupying space for the growing of vegetables or plants without permission. Many pursue the action due to its informal nature, showing a passion for taking back control of urban spaces and not fitting in with the views of authorities, however, there are some that partake in guerrilla gardening, because they simply do not understand how to obtain permission for legitimate community gardens.

The reasons for green activism and guerrilla gardening vary greatly depending on its cultural backdrop, notably if it is taking place in the Global North or the Global South. Efforts in the Global North were tied to making cities more sustainable and greener, or "beautifying" neglected space and bringing production back into the heart of the city. Self-expression and a push back against government control are also factors that come into play.

Guerrilla gardening in the Global South, however, is characterised by efforts to provide the urban and working poor, living in deprived areas of the city, with fresh, local and free produce (Hardman et al. 2018)

Community gardening

Community gardens take many forms, from more closed-off gardens such as allotment gardens or gated community gardens to PACs (public-access community gardens), however, they are all public green spaces that are collectively managed by civil society groups. Their aims vary depending on their socio-cultural and historical background. For example, PAC-gardens have shaped the city of Berlin, notably the distribution of authority and influencing active citizenship: in widening stakeholder involvement beyond traditional power elites and involving different forms of social and local knowledge, it was a purely bottom-up driven process, combating the extinction-of-experience in modern cities (Bendt et al. 2013)

The city of Detroit provides another interesting example of urban agriculture, with the emergence of "agrihoods", short for agricultural neighbourhoods. Starting off as a real-estate term and a model targeted towards affluent millennials who are increasingly concerned by fresh and "clean" food being available in proximity, a new type of "agrihood" has now emerged. Driven by the growing issue of food insecurity and the structural problem of "food deserts", the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative is providing its neighbourhood with fresh, affordable produce. Adding on to that, they also provide educational programs, cultural meeting spaces and by doing so try to attract new residents and area investment (Adams 2019).

Issues surrounding urban farming

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The nature of urban farming is closely tied to urban commons, however, as we have seen, not all urban farming concepts are true urban commons. Memberships can exclude people with lower incomes, lower education, or a different culture. This form of segregation ties into the effects of green gentrification, where inequities to access to green spaces and infrastructure create patterns of exclusion, segregation, and unequal urban development (Anguelovski et al. 2022). Furthermore, as urban gardening is still largely done by women, some fear that it could backtrack the progress being made, by adding yet another set of responsibilities expected to be taken up by women (Engel-Di Mauro 2017).

Squatting as an urban commons

Squatting is defined as the "unauthorised use of empty premises for housing and/or cultural and political purposes, often considered an outstanding case of urban commons and resistance against neoliberal enclosures and urban policies." These practices are not always organised in a coordinated manner or part of a social movement; however, they usually challenge social injustice, housing unaffordability and urban commodification and are a significant practice for creating and promoting urban commons.
Oftentimes, squats have a long-lasting legacy of protest thanks to their attachment to a specific neighbourhood, and their performative tools and the media attention they sometimes attract, they are crucial in promoting various grassroots coalitions. (Martínez and Polanska 2020).

"Spaces of the Expelled"

Di Feliciantonio conceptualises a link between squats as "spaces of the expelled" and spaces of the urban commons. He uses the term "expulsion" to visualise the systemic process at work that influences people worldwide, "expelling them from life projects and livelihoods, from membership, from the social contract at the centre of liberal democracy."
The underlying causes behind the creation of squats are often the drastic increase in real estate prices due to gentrification, the current debt and financial crisis, and the trend of neoliberal economics that in some countries, notably the Global South, which a welfare system provides insufficient support for its citizens. This political economy framing shows how structural socio-economic processes shape the creation of social movements, capitalist accumulation not only being the general context, but also a reason why social movements even form (Di Feliciantonio 2017).
What is so problematic about squats being "Spaces of the Expelled", is the lack of interest the government and public show in supporting them: Health and safety concerns, notably lack of electricity or running water and the tolerance of drugs and other substances are problematics surrounding it.
It is also important to ask ourselves, who these "expelled" are: migrants and refugees, minors, persecuted members of the LGBTQIA+ community and families with young children have special rights, and provoke the question of why the state isn't supporting them, or has even failed them.

"Claiming the urban commons back from privatisation and speculation cannot be separated from the practice of commoning: people coming together, pooling everyday life, sharing knowledge, skills and time: new material and immaterial commons are continuously created." (Di Feliciantonio 2017)

Claiming urban spaces is done in a variety of contexts, which are often linked to a form of protest:

- A protest against the current economics of a nation, which is increasing rents in a neighbourhood, making life unaffordable for its inhabitants.

- A social protest, where individuals gather and create spaces outside of the status quo; this often being a protest against the current system, thus creating anti-capitalist spaces (Martínez and Polanska 2017).

- A cultural protest where precarious cultural workers challenge neoliberal ideas of culture and "creativity" by occupying abandoned theatres and cinemas such as in Italy (Mudu 2004).

- And in the 1980s, the global student protest movement sparked a wave of occupation by the local youth in Switzerland: They occupied vacant industrial areas in the capital city Berne, such as the "Dampfzentrale", the "Gaskessel" or the "Reithalle" for one night to organise a concert or a party, creating a vibrant and successful display of culture. The "Reithalle" as a specific example, was occupied in 1987 and remained successfully in the hands of its occupants, until they negotiated a lease with the city of Berne around the turn of the millenia. It stands as a vivid example of how property deemed useless by the state, when occupied, becomes a cultural hub of national importance, creating a space for all people to live freely and express themselves without judgement. In this case, they were so successful that private investors or even the state saw long term investment potential (SRF).

Security in urban contexts

One debate that emerges in urban anthropology is the provision of security in the urban context. Here the question arises who will guarantee this security. It can be guaranteed by the state, by private or communal organisation, often bringing up the context of neoliberalism. A neoliberal form of government can make it unclear by whom security is guaranteed, as the state is no longer responsible for it. In addition, surveillance comes into play: How far can surveillance go, and at what point is the privacy of individuals invaded? The last issue endangering citizens are criminal organisations, often invading not just individual lives but the entire structure of a city. (Zeidermann, 2022)

The organisation of security is important related to commons. Whose responsibility it is to provide for security, depends on the state. It is not always the government, there are also communal actors that cooperate with the state and private organisations which are hired by individuals. In many cities, there is no one player, but there is hybrid-policing. In countries with a neoliberal system, it is not the

government that guarantees security, as everybody is responsible for their own security. So, when there is not the state-organised security, who is responsible? This is an important question facing anthropologists today. (DCAF)

Safer city programms

Over the last couple of years, by building more and more cities, the criminality in cities became higher. Because of this development, programs were started and are divided in three phases. The first phase is crime prevention, which consists of three parts. The first one is institutional crime and violence prevention by showing people different forms of policing like community policing. The second part of prevention is social prevention, where the focus is on youth, which can be taught in different institutions. And the third is the physical environment, the infrastructure that a city has. A second phase is to find out which factors are causing insecurity and unsafety. Un-Habitat found out that governmental problems like forced land ownerships are often a cause of conflicts in countries like Colombia and Kenya. But natural disasters can cause insecurity. This was observed in Haiti after the earthquake. The third phase is more future oriented and is about enhancing safety through planning. How a city is planned and built has a big impact on the safety and security of the city. It is also observed that cities with a stable government are less susceptible to violence than cities in which the government is unstable. But not only the government is important, but also local authorities and stakeholders. The partnership between authorities and stakeholders is very important. (UN-Habitat)

Auxiliary policing

Beside the police and other forces organised by the state and privatised organisations, there are also community-based security providers like neighbourhood watches. These community-based organisations cooperated often with the police and are also called auxiliary policies. (SSR Backgrounder) These are mostly volunteers, who want to secure the neighbourhoods in addition to the police. It is said that such community policing is, besides securing people, also a way to build trust between the citizens and the police. But this is a discussed theme and the opinions differ. (Graeme, 2021)

Mobility in cities

Mobility is a human need and is also a theme which is discussed in urban anthropology. Depending on the city, there are different types of mobility. There is public transport, which is mostly organised by the state. These days, car sharing and bicycle sharing facilities, are an important part of mobility in cities. It is noticeable that mobility often comes up in relation to sustainability because transport is one of the largest emitters of CO_2 (WEF).

Another issue that is important in the anthropological debate on urban commons is access to public transportation. Access varies by location, whether urban or rural. What we can tell from anthropological literature is that public transportation is not only relevant to get from point A to point B but can have more important functions for society. It discusses how access to public transportation can improve connectivity between different communities.

Transport systems in cities are often complex and multi-facetted, whether it is organised by the government or the state, it is privatised or it is organised communally. One problem that arises when the transport system is organised by the state, is that local interests are often left unconsidered. Often politically strategic areas or touristic neighbourhoods are better connected than neighbourhoods that are dominated largely by locals. (Kemmer 2019) It is a problem on which there is not that much literature, but with a large potential on becoming more relevant in the future.

One text which shows the different meanings of public transportation very well is by Laura Kemmer. In her text she shows that the so-called 'bonde', a tramline in Rio de Janeiro, is not only important as a means of transportation but is a place to meet other people, a public space. The 'bonde' was abolished and so the neighbourhood was no longer connected to the city. There were protests organised by local communities that demanded the tramline back. In this context, *promissory things* become important: The relationship of the government and the local community is visualised as the community demonstrates its interest in getting the 'bonde' back. They cannot achieve it communally, mainly because they lack means of finance; the community then turns to the state and the state makes promises that they cannot always keep. (Kemmer, 2019)

Ban of private cars

In the context of ecological cities and safer cities, private cars have been banned in the centre of the city. An example for this development is Oslo where they abolished parking places for cars and replaced them with bicycle lanes. The mayor of Oslo hopes to lower the CO2 emissions by banning private cars in cities. (WEF)

Alternative transportation and future trends

Sustainability in cities will continue to play an important role in the future. Many cities want to achieve the status of an ecological city and because of this, I assume that cities will start to look to sustainable peers, like Oslo, for guidance and inspiration. In the future, there will be more bicycles and fewer cars in cities and shared mobility will start to become more mainstream. (Lambert, 2016) In many Swiss Cities, PubliBikes, a shared bicycle facility, are becoming very popular and are used by a lot of people. A question that is still on my mind, however, is whether communally organised sharing organisations

will come up too. Carsharing firms like Mobility are not a Commons anymore, as it is privatised and a third party is making money off it.

Conclusion

Urban commons are a theme in anthropological research, which will become more and more prevalent in the future. We can see that the number of people living in cities is rising and so is the development of anthropological research in urban commons. The studies are often future oriented and urban planning plays a central role. The planning influences different aspects like security and sustainability, resource allocation and the establishment of urban commons also in decision making over urban spaces (see subtheme 10 on bottom up institution building).

In the future, we think that urban Commons will increase and their impact will significantly shape the way we live our lives in urban spaces and how we interact with our surroundings. Thus another way than just state and private sector management is needed (see also subtheme 1 Commons and the SDGs).

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