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The role of architects in initiating, sustaining and defending urban commons in mass housing estates: R-Urban in Grand Ensembles

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Published online: 22 May 2023.

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The role of architects in initiating, sustaining and defending urban commons in mass housing estates: R-Urban in Grand Ensembles

This paper addresses aspects concerning the emergence of urban commons in mass housing estates in France. At a critical moment of societal crisis due to resources depletion and planetary Climate Change, urban commons can contribute and offer solutions to the complex process of transition towards more resilient forms of governance at different scales. In the context of mass housing estates built five decades ago, enabling the emergence of commons can be a resilient alternative to the current urban regeneration approaches. This process needs agencies and actors, and architects can play an important role. In order to provide an example in this sense, we take the case of R-Urban, a project initiated by atelier d'architecture autogérée as a commons-based network of civic resilience implemented in Parisian suburbs. The network consists of resilience hubs located in mass housing estates, which are collectively managed by inhabitants. The hubs function as forms of urban commons, constituting an alternative to the publicly funded *équipments collectifs* of the Grand Ensembles, the major mass housing program of a welfare government that started in the late 1950s and 1960s. As opposed to these *équipments*, the R-Urban hubs are self-managed, being run and funded mainly with civic contribution. The architects are not anymore top-down experts commissioned by the State, but have successively acted as initiators, designers, and co-managers of the project, sustaining the emergence of those urban commons through diverse local alliances. However, in a political context in which the welfare principles have been replaced by market principles (often sustained by the State), keeping this role for architects is a challenge.

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The concept of 'commons' refers to the idea that a pool of resources can be managed collectively through processes of 'commoning', following collectively agreed rules and governance by a community of 'commoners'.[1] There are traditional commons (such as pastures, forests, rivers and lakes) and newly created commons (such as the emerging urban commons and digital commons). In a capitalist society which has been developed specifically on principles of commons enclosure, privatisation and unrestricted exploitation of the planet's resources, many of the traditional commons have disappeared and many of the newly created commons are currently obstructed or under threat. According to Marxist philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, the contemporary revolutionary project is concerned with capturing, diverting, appropriating and reclaiming the commons as a key constituent process.[2] Creating new commons and reclaiming the common resources of collective housing estates conceived decades ago as social welfare provision, and continually fighting against their enclosure, can be such a constituent process, which invents new ways of living collectively in our cities and finally on our planet.

This is because the question of urban commons is related to the many major challenges we face today, notably the lack of democratic control over the (planet) resources and resilience in face of the multiple crises related to Climate Change. Urban commons can contribute with solutions to the complex process of transition towards more resilient forms of governance at different scales, from the neighbourhood to the city, the region, and further on. In the context of collective housing estates, enabling the emergence of commons can be a resilient alternative to the current urban regeneration approaches. This process needs agencies and actors, and architects can play an important role.[3]

The Grand Ensembles

When we speak about collective housing estates in France, we need to mention Grand Ensembles, the big government mass housing programme in the suburban areas of big cities that started in the late 1950s and the 1960s, which attempted to answer the post-war housing crisis and the need for rapid development of the big cities.[4] Architects had an important role in the design of the Grand Ensembles, which were planned by expert teams in a top-down manner and in a relatively short period of time, being completely funded and managed by the State.[5] This was in fact the strength of the approach to implement a social programme quickly and at scale: putting together experts (architects, planners, sociologists, building companies and political representatives) and giving them the means to decide, plan and build while implementing the best actionable knowledge of the time. It was indeed one of the ideal situations for the implementation of the modernist emancipatory project and what was perceived as an ideal condition for architects.

In addition to housing, the social project of the Grand Ensembles implied the construction of *équipements collectifs*, a mix of basic public services, commu-

nity and welfare institutions, and private amenities, intended to transform housing estates into new neighbourhoods. Schools, sports halls, health centres, cultural facilities, and so on, were planned and built according to a grid of repartition at different scales.[6]

Today, when there is no Welfare State anymore, the social programme has been drastically diminished in France. However, 10.7 million – i.e. one-fifth of the French urban population – still lives in HLM (low rent council housing), which remains the dominant typology in collective housing estates in France (Fig. 1).[7]

Many of these estates have become ZUS (Zones Urbaines Sensibles), or 'urban sensitive areas', characterised by social and economic deprivation; most of the time, these are ecologically deprived as well, as ZUS were poorly designed and densely built, and lacking green space, becoming true heat islands. At the moment, 4.4 million people live in ZUS, which means 7% of the total French population.[8] These areas located in the former Grand Ensembles of the 1960s and the 1970s, in addition to social problems, struggle today to adapt to current and future challenges, such as global warming, depletion of resources, economic recession, population growth, and housing and employment crises. If in the 1980s the solution was to tear them down, today in the most critical areas, most excluded residents, youngsters for the most part, tend to destroy them themselves during their anger revolts through burning down public buildings and furniture. Since the 1980s, the question of mass housing regeneration started to be addressed through different approaches, mostly in a top-down manner, being financed via the Agence Nationale pour la Renovation Urbaine (ANRU) programmes with public or private developers'

Figure 1.
Quartier des Agnettes, a typical *Grand Ensemble* built between 1955 and 1973 in Gennevilliers, a suburban city in the North of Paris, photographed by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa), 2017

involvement; these have failed most of the time to take into account the interests of the residents.[9]

Today, we know that any form of urban regeneration of these neighbourhoods needs to be part of a resilient transition, which should include both social and ecological aspects, and, most importantly, the participation of the inhabitants themselves. The inhabitants should be involved in the governance of these regeneration processes if we want these neighbourhoods to be resilient. Elinor Ostrom's work has very clearly demonstrated that the mode of governance through commons, based on care and responsibility, is the best approach for ecological reparation and resilience at different levels.[10] In this approach to resilience and commons-based regeneration, architects should play a role different perhaps to the one played in the design of the estates that are now to be regenerated.

In order to provide an example in this sense, we take the case of R-Urban, a project initiated by *atelier d'architecture autogérée*,[11] as a commons-based network of civic resilience, which started to be implemented in Parisian suburbs as an alternative to current regeneration approaches. The network consists in a series of resilience hubs located in mass housing estates which are collectively managed by inhabitants as forms of urban commons.

### Designing the commons: civic hubs versus *équipements collectifs*

In the conception of the R-Urban model, the hubs are a key element that can be understood as an alternative to the *équipements collectifs* in the *Grand Ensemble* modernist project. The *équipements collectifs* were carefully planned (and programmed) with major public investment as part of what was called a 'grid' system. They were part of a complex urban design approach, which included, together with the design of housing units, also the design of public infrastructure and public space.[12]

At a moment when austerity measures have taken a disastrous toll on public infrastructure,[13] the model of civic resilience hubs proposed by R-Urban offers a new type of urban facility which is self-sustainable and citizen-run. The R-Urban governance strategy is based on a multipolar network of such hubs involving local and regional actors, formed around the various nuclei of activities that animate forms of exchange and collaboration.

If the *équipements collectifs* were publicly funded and managed, the R-Urban hubs are managed as commons, providing collective resources for community and enabling its members to develop resilience practices. The R-Urban hubs are run and partially funded with civic contribution, mostly in kind, voluntary work. The process of voluntary participation and commoning is in fact at the core of the functioning of these hubs. As such, the hubs have all the ingredients of a typical commons: a community of commoners, here the users of the hub, a common pool of resources, the hub, managed by this community according to collective

rules and agreements, which is the process of commoning related to the hub network.

The rhizomatic network of hubs which grows organically in each local context is a different solution than the plannified 'grid'. If in the *Grand Ensemble* there was the idea that the *équipements collectifs* have a role in the 'animation' of the dwelling complex,[14] sometimes with a limited participation of users (in the most radical approaches), the R-Urban network introduces the idea of commons-based governance with a fundamental active posture for inhabitants. R-Urban involves aspects of 'urban design' which takes on the form of
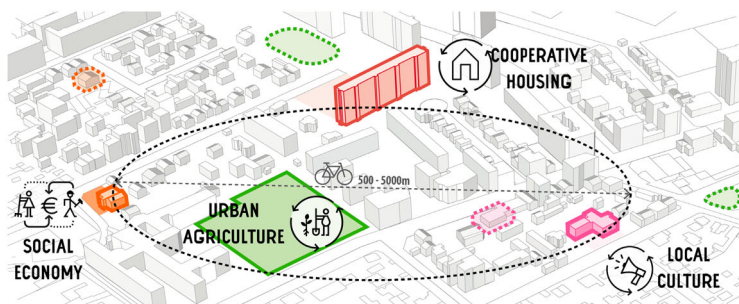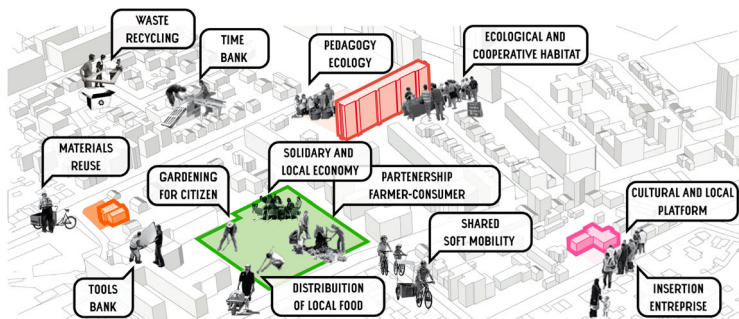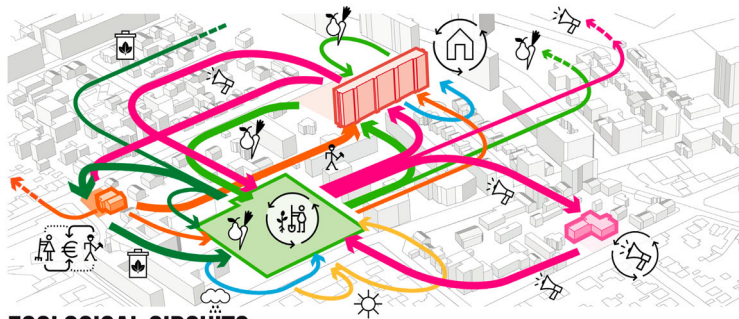
Figure 2.
R-Urban principles: realisation of a network of collective hubs; enabling eco-civic practices to emerge; and developing a circular ecology and economy supported by the hubs network, drawn by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa), 2009

a responsible and active participation of citizen in the co-design and co-construction processes. Also, the R-Urban hubs bring another dimension, which was not tackled by the *Grand Ensemble* philosophy: the idea of a local, ecological, and economic layer, which is important in the resilient transition. R-Urban proposes that the hubs create ecological loops and circular economies in the Grand Ensembles, addressing the failures of the modernist 'grid' by involving the community in working on the economic renewal and ecological repair of the neighbourhood.

These commons-based hubs have proved to be an important tool in this alternative model of mass housing regeneration, providing the physical infrastructure, resources, and space where 'commoning' and resilience can be learnt, practiced and valued. These processes are made tangible through architecture that is based on ecological principles (i.e. reversibility of the land use, use of bio-sourced or reclaimed materials for construction, spatial configurations to enable passive heating, etc.) They integrate also a number of ecological devices that make visible and measurable the resilience activities: food and energy production, as well as water, waste and carbon reduction. Compared with other networked models of urban resilience, such as *Transition Towns*, the hub-based model draws on architects' skills and knowledge, and puts design and design thinking at the centre of the commons-based resilience strategy. Affordable and technically easy to build and manage, the hubs purposely designed for collective use and management can be easily reproduced by communities in almost any kind of neighbourhood contexts, in Europe and beyond (Fig. 2).

Initiating and sustaining the commons: the first R-Urban network implementation

The implementation of the R-Urban framework started in 2011 in Colombes, a suburban town near Paris in partnership with the local council and a number of civic organisations.[15] Three hubs were planned in Colombes: Agrocité, Recyclab and Ecohab. Agrocité, a hub of urban agriculture, was located on a 2000 sqm plot of vacant land near Fossés Jean, a large *Grand Ensemble*; Recyclab, a hub for material recycling and eco-construction, was built on one lane of a disused road; and the Ecohab housing development was to be built on a vacant plot of land midway between the other two hubs. All three hubs were located on publicly owned land and within easy walking and biking distance from each other to enable the circulation of food, waste, recycled materials, repaired goods, people, knowledge and cultural exchanges within a network of resilience based on urban commons (Figs. 3 and 4).[16]

From 2011 to 2016, some 6900 citizens participated in the Colombes R-Urban sites from which 400 became active stakeholders. The majority participated in Agrocité's micro farming and community garden plots. We have designed a building which was constructed from recycled wood to house a café, a teaching space, a market, a greenhouse, a kitchen and a workshop space. The site became a hub for ecological education and community learning.

Some participants set up small businesses and generated income for themselves and for the R-Urban network. Together with the value created through voluntary work, all these contributed to increasing the value produced by the urban commons in time, which ultimately translates into value for resilience.[17]

However, we realised how challenging it is to set-up and sustain a commonsbased transition in a capitalist society which has been developed specifically on principles of commons enclosure, privatisation and unrestricted exploitation of the planet's resources.

We realised how difficult it is to advocate bottom-up governance of an urban estate in a (neo-liberal) society used to marketing the management of the city and understanding its governance as a service, rather than a duty of care. The social project of the 1960s is different today. Parts of the mass housing estates are privatised and this approach is usually 'sold' to citizen by their local governments as 'urban mixity'.

It was the case in Colombes: the Fossés Jean mass housing neighbourhood entered a stage of urban regeneration. Paradoxically, it was in the name of this urban regeneration that the newly elected right-wing Mayor justified threatening Agrocité with eviction. In June 2015, the Mayor decided to replace Agrocité with a temporary private car park and expressed their intention to demolish Recyclab in order to clear the land for future city projects.[18]

This incident confirms that setting up urban commons today is not only a social, economic and ecological project, but also a political project. It is subverting the capitalist order and its dominant modes of production. It is reclaiming and capturing resources which are embedded in capitalist transactions and redirecting them to commoning dynamics.

When the Mayor asked for the demolition of the two hubs through a litigation procedure at the Tribunal Administratif, it was indeed a challenging moment for the R-Urban community, and for us as designers and initiators. We had to quickly learn how to organise resistance through press campaigns and civic protests. We realised that creating urban commons does not only mean to support them throughout their development but also to overcome their potential enclosures.

Defending the commons: reversibility and relocation

We learned from this incident that in the absence of protecting laws, architects need skills not only for designing and building but also for defending the urban commons they have initiated and making them resilient in adverse conditions. What happened in Colombes is not new; across the globe, urban commons were and are continually under threat.[19] In general, there is a lack of specific legislation to protect the commons[20] and there is no political definition of what could be called a 'right to commoning'.[21] In the absence of such legislation, the commons depend on the good will of local governments and external administrations which can refuse to recognise the legitimacy of self-organisation as it was the case with R-Urban in Colombes (Fig. 5).[22]

We finally lost the case in court. In February 2017, Agrocité started to be dismantled. Steadfast positive, we took inspiration from self-defence techniques in aikido to 'blend' and move around the punch in order to stop an attack! We negotiated the relocation of the hub in a neighbouring city with a left-wing municipal team. We used also the fact that Agrocité was designed for a reversible installation incorporating resilience principles such as the possibility for dissembling and reassembling.

Figure 5.
Civic protest against the Agrocité
eviction from Colombes, 2016,
photographed by and courtesy of
Analia Cid

In the following year, we started to rebuild Agrocité in Gennevilliers in the Agnettes neighbourhood, another *Grand Ensemble* in the Parisian region, located this time in a communist municipality, which still had a strong social agenda. Also, in the same year, Recyclab was dismantled and rebuilt in Nanterre. The materials used in the initial construction were 95% reused, in a full cradle-to-cradle manner. The R-Urban members were pro-active in maintaining and relocating the functions while the infrastructure was not yet there. The former users became the 'experts' of the project, participating in the reinstallation process and the start of activities in the new location. They were motivated by this new opportunity which offered a new life to the project. Some of them continued to be active in the project in the new location together with new users living in that neighbourhood (Figs. 6 and 7).

New roles for architects

The R-Urban experience demonstrates the need for expanding the field of architecture and design when we speak about commons. If in the past, designers acted as technical 'experts' and designed buildings and urban estates, like in the case of the Grand Ensembles, now they might design agency for the regeneration of life and well-being in these estates by empowering inhabitants and stakeholders to become active in the process of reclaiming and reinventing common resources for collective processes of economic development and ecological reparation.

Architects should not wait anymore for a top-down public commission, knowing that current politics of development have drastically changed since the 1970s. Across the world, austerity measures have affected the provision

Figure 6.
Agrocité's relocation in the core of Les Agnettes Grand Ensemble, Gennevilliers, 2018, photographed by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa)

Figure 7.
Recyclab's relocation near to La Défense, Nanterre, 2020, photographed by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa)

of public infrastructures and the welfare principles have almost disappeared from public policies. In the R-Urban case, public institutions and municipalities were not the clients of the project, but one of the stakeholders within a multi-stakeholder approach. We have successively acted as initiators, designers and co-managers of the project, and sustained the emergence of urban

commons through diverse local alliances. Bringing multiple skills, expertise and transformative vision, and at the same time the capacity to occupy different positions and to maintain trust in the relation with inhabitants and other stake-holders, we played a number of roles that the municipality was not able to play in the process of neighbourhood regeneration. However, we learned also that these new roles for the architect are not easy to sustain. In a context in which the management of cities is driven by neo-liberal policies often supported by the State and its institutions, to be a 'commoning' architect is indeed a chal-lenge. Architects need to recognise the political implications of a commoning project today. To support such a project, in addition to being good designers, they should play an active role, even an activist role, in strengthening the commons. This can be done in many ways, for example, by trying to turn private or public property into commons and working with local stakeholders on changing policies, by fostering communities of commoners and nourishing practices of commoning in a strategic way, and by advocating for the value of commoning. Ultimately, the architect might also act as a 'concerned citizen'[23] who engages in long-term collective processes of social and political transform-ation that often start at the level of everyday life, in people, houses and neigh-bourhoods.

Conclusions

The experience of R-Urban reveals another stage in the mass housing project. Just as the creation of the Grand Ensembles was a political project at that time, their regeneration today involves a different kind of politics. R-Urban proposes a political ecological approach involving directly the inhabitants taking part in governance. Also, if the Grand Ensembles were meant to urbanise (sometimes rurally con-nected) suburban territories, R-Urban aims at bringing the rural back into the urban through infrastructuring commoning practices which reconnect mass housing inhabitants with nature and increase the neighbourhood resilience. If the current regeneration of the Grand Ensembles is done through a capitalocentric approach, R-Urban puts forward a commons-based approach, which values the contribution of inhabitants and is centred on their individual and collective well-being as well as on the ecological sustainability of their living environment.

The R-Urban experience suggests the need for new and broader forms of design practice based on engagement and alliances with citizens at local and trans-local levels, sharing knowledge, academic inputs, funding and pro-active support through policy developments on co-produced resilience. In this way, the design practice becomes itself a commoning activity serving the collective efforts to move towards living and producing value differently in a more socially and ecologically just society.

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