

Escape into the City: Everyday Practices of Commoning and the Production of Urban Space in Dublin

Patrick Bresnihan and Michael Byrne

*The Provisional University, Dublin, Ireland;
wearetheuniversity@gmail.com*

Abstract: In Dublin there are many needs and desires which are not met, or excluded, by the pattern of high rent, the commodification of social/cultural life, and the regulation of public space. Against this dynamic, Dublin has seen a number of experiments in urban commoning: people collectively finding ways of opening up space in order to do what they want. This might be as simple as wanting a space to work, to make food or to show films. Rather than trying to change this situation by appealing to existing institutions, these new urban commons are characterized by particular groups of people devising practical ways of escaping the forms of “enclosure” which limit what can happen in the city. This article takes a “militant research” approach to explore the potentials and limitations of these experiments in urban production and organization.

Keywords: commons, urban commoning, urban space, enclosure, militant research

This article sets out to contribute in two ways to the growing literature on the commons, specifically the urban commons. First, it responds to the relative absence of research on contemporary practices of urban commoning, including the forms of “ownership”, production and “governance” which materialize in everyday spaces of urban commoning. Second, it seeks to identify and conceptualize the challenges and limitations at stake in the practices and politics of urban commoning from the perspective of the commons. That is to say, the politics and potentiality of the commons are not interpreted solely with regard to their relationship with capitalism nor are they set out in theoretical or abstract terms. Instead, we explore the obstacles which “commoners” are identifying and responding to themselves. Those who piece together collective forms of creating and exchanging do so in order to meet concrete needs, and in doing so they confront concrete dynamics of power as they encounter both private (market) and public forces. The tensions thus generated, and the way in which the urban commons does or does not deal with them, can help us understand the pitfalls and possibilities of “commoning” as a material practice.

In order to explore these issues, the paper focuses specifically on a set of projects in central Dublin, all of which involve facilitating access to urban space within which to work, play and share in a manner which is not commodified, based on private property or hierarchically organized. These projects, usually referred to in Dublin as “independent spaces”, emerged primarily during a period in which Dublin saw both an intense property boom as well as a dramatic commercialization of the city. Indeed, participants

cite high rents and the impossibility of accessing space for any form of activity which does not generate profit as their chief motivation. Unsatisfied by this situation, people, mostly young and precarious, have devised ways of opening up and producing urban spaces in order to meet their needs and desires. This is what we mean when we say that these spaces signify an escape from the enclosure of the city.

For the purposes of this research we use the term independent spaces to refer to projects, located in buildings, which have a public dimension, operate beyond the auspices of public and private management and which have a grassroots, DIY ethos.¹ All the spaces involve a group of people coming together to find ways of collectively paying rent—thus overcoming the principle challenge with regard to accessing urban space. Rent is paid, for example, through donations, membership, fundraising, providing food, or renting out studio space. In turn, they open up the space to participation and use. This participation might be to attend the events which take place (eg film screenings, exhibitions, gigs, parties) or to avail of resources provided (eg food, bicycle maintenance, education, skill sharing, technology). Often, it can also mean getting involved in sustaining and developing the space itself.

While these practices take place alongside, and typically in tension with, paying rent to a landlord, at stake here is also a set of material practices which generate alternative ways of producing, relating to and “governing” urban space. In what follows we examine in detail the forms of social relation operative here and the political potential and limits of a significant instance of everyday urban commoning.

The following can be divided into two halves. The first begins by situating our understanding of the commons. It then introduces the methodological approach adopted in the research, based on a form of “militant research” which we chose because of our own participation in the projects under investigation and because of the unique potential for militant research in terms of addressing the political potential of material practices. The second half of the article begins by introducing the dynamics of enclosure in Dublin over the past two decades as the context in which new independent spaces have emerged. We introduce and describe how these spaces are accessed, produced and organized and the alternative forms of sociality they require and generate. Finally we address the limitations that have been encountered, particularly the high cost of rent and the frequent evictions that have often rendered the spaces precarious and unsustainable. The conclusion explores some tentative responses to these challenges.

Theoretical and Methodological Introduction ***Commons, Capital, and Social Reproduction***

While our interest in the commons is motivated by the present political situation, we are also guided by the growing literature on the commons. A significant part of this literature focuses on access to common pool resources and common property regimes (Dietz *et al.* 2003; Ostrom 1990). While mostly concerned with the management of “natural” resources, it has extended its influence to other areas of policy-making and resource governance (Dietz *et al.* 2003; Ostrom *et al.* 1999). The basic concern of this approach is to identify and institutionalize forms of resource management that avoid

private or state ownership and control. While these alternatives can provide effective, local responses to questions of resource use, the guiding question remains the liberal economic one: how to efficiently allocate resources amongst “responsible” resource users (Goldman 1997; Mehta 2011). This response can elide more critical questions, effectively normalizing the socio-historical causes of resource scarcity as well as the “exogenous violence” imposed by the process of capitalist valorization (Caffentzis 2010 [2004]; de Angelis 2007, 2010; Federici 2011; McCarthy 2005).

This approach to common pool resources tends to focus on the internal organization of localized (“traditional”) commons, often ignoring capitalist dynamics. A second perspective, in contrast, emphasizes the centrality of the commons to contemporary forms of capitalism (Hardt 2010; Hardt and Negri 2009; Vercellone 2010). According to this reading, the political potential of the commons is seen to lie in the inherent contradictions between the socialization of production within cognitive capitalism. Although we draw on this approach and its analysis of social reproduction as characterized by a tension between life and capitalism, we eschew an analysis which grasps the importance of the commons in terms of its centrality to cognitive capitalism. Rather, for us the centrality of the commons stems from its immediate importance to social reproduction and therefore in our lives. In this sense, if the present crisis is characterized on the one hand by the crisis of capitalist accumulation and on the other by the crisis of social reproduction, we are moved to act and to think by the latter rather than the former (The Free Association 2013).

In this light, we have been drawn to a third perspective which allows us to bring together a concern for situated, everyday practices of social reproduction with a critical awareness of capitalist governmentalities (Blomley 2008; Caffentzis 2010 [2004]; De Angelis 2007; Federici 2011; Linebaugh 2008). Drawing on feminist analyses of social reproduction (Federici 2011), as well as manifold histories of commoner struggles (Linebaugh 2008; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000), this analysis conceptualizes the commons not as an historic anachronism, but as the ever-present “dark” side to hegemonic narratives of “improvement” and “enclosure” (De Angelis 2007; Holloway 2010). It thus demands close attention to the everyday ways in which people escape and resist new forms of enclosure. Through these escapes people immediately produce and sustain common, non-proprietary worlds (Blomley 2008), which are not articulated through existing political terms and references (Papadopoulos 2010).

If we are serious about the commons as a political concept and strategy, we need to understand the “how” and “what” of practices of commoning. However, there is a current paucity of literature on urban commons which first addresses it in terms of an immediate escape from the state-capitalist enclosure of the city and the creation of alternative social practices, and second via a “militant” approach which thinks from within the instituent practices of the commons as well as identifying blockages, obstacles and opportunities.

Researching the Commons

At the beginning of our research we faced a familiar problem. We were both the subject and object of our research. On the one hand, we were researcher/activists

who were interested in the emergence of new independent spaces and the role they played, and might play, in the development of Dublin. On the other hand, we had become involved in these spaces because of our own concrete experiences as “early career academics”, aka precarious knowledge workers.² With no steady income or institutional support from the university, we spent our days sitting alone in our bedrooms in front of the computer endlessly searching for post-docs, lecturing positions and building our CVs. Pressures to publish, to attend the “right” conferences, to fill out applications and apply for funding, as well as simply obtaining an income, eroded those desires that originally motivated us to study. It was out of these concrete experiences, and a desire to do something else, that we began participating in various independent spaces in the city—as a way of addressing our own lived crisis of social reproduction. In this way, then, we got caught up in the production of Dublin’s urban commons—a refusal to embody the pathetic subjectivity of contemporary neoliberalism, a desire to be and do something else.

There was however a gap between our experiences in the city, and the concepts, analyses and strategies which sought to explain and intervene in them. In response, we wanted to develop a different approach to research which could concretely address urban politics from within our own collective practices of urban commoning, from inside the desire and the energy which sustained our spaces and our networks. In addressing this desire we have been helped by the concept of militant or co-research³ (Colectivo Situaciones 2005, 2006; Malo de Molina 2006; Precarias a la deriva 2004; Salvini 2013; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007).

Militant research radically reconfigures the relationship between subject and object, inside and outside. It seeks to transcend these distinctions by inserting knowledge production within actually existing social practices, not only taking sides but taking part in the antagonisms we are bound up in (Salvini 2013). To this end our research has sought to hone in on shared problems, to galvanize collective analyses and discussions around these problems, to weave common frameworks for understanding, and propose shared tactics and “protocols” for overcoming those problems. Central to this is the equality of knowledge and the development of relations that enable a translation across different positions or, as Precarias a la deriva express it, “the search for a common ground that has shattered” (quoted in Colectivo Situaciones 2005). In this sense, we hope that our research process, both in terms of the discussions we have been engaging in and in terms of more formal interventions such as this article and events we have organized, can help us to move from common problems to common questions—from common questions to common notions—and from common notions to common actions.⁴

Dublin’s Independent Spaces and the Urban Commons *Dublin’s “Great Enclosure”*

Dublin’s independent spaces need to be understood in the context of rapid urban development, particularly over the past two decades. We call this Dublin’s “great enclosure” as it is characterized by the privatization/financialization of urban space and the commodification of urban life.

Urban space in Dublin has been subjected to an intense process of privatization, a process linked to the dynamics of financialization. The city has served as a terrain of expansion for the financial sector, granting finance a central role in urban dynamics and granting urban space a central role in wider political economic developments (Kitchin *et al.* 2012; O’Riain, 2012). Publicly owned land all around the docks has been privatized in the form of office-driven development and gentrifying residential construction (Moulaert *et al.* 2003). More broadly, between 1999 and 2008 Dublin’s cityscape changed almost beyond recognition, with office blocks and shopping centres springing up left, right and centre.⁵

It is not only urban space which has been subjected to this process of enclosure, but urban life itself. The political economic development of Dublin, as in other cities, has been marked by pressure to attract inward investment. As capital has become increasingly deterritorialized, city strategies have shifted towards a focus on mobilizing highly territorialized forms of “local advantage” (Harvey 2012; López and Rodríguez 2010) to bolster tourism and other forms of consumption based on specific and largely non-reproducible forms of urban culture (Harvey 2012; López and Rodríguez 2010, 2011; Salvini 2013). In Dublin’s case this dynamic manifests most clearly in the central Temple Bar area, where existing forms of independent cultural production were developed to emphasize characteristics associated with Dublin and Ireland more generally, specifically pub culture, “the craic” and live music—forming a “mini-theme park” (Corcoran 1998).

The commodification of urban life and the financialization of the city are intimately connected to manifold exclusions, as those who cannot access credit and will not conform to “brand Dublin” have felt more and more like outsiders in their own city, leading to an extraordinary reduction of what is possible in the city and in the richness and wealth of life in Dublin. However, recent years have seen a proliferation of alternative modes of producing urban space and of living the city. There is an “outside” and, as De Angelis notes at a more general level, it is a material, practical outside which is “not confined to the conceptual realm” (De Angelis 2007:30). It is to the “outside” of enclosure we turn now in order to examine its practical constitution.

Dublin’s Independent Spaces

Independent spaces have sprung up all across Dublin in recent years. In different ways, they have created a new set of possibilities in the city. Most of the spaces make possible events and activities which could not otherwise take place, including gigs, exhibitions, workspaces, bicycle workshops, cafés and restaurants, gardens, crèches, film screenings, studio space, political meetings and discussions. A minority have been set up with a specifically political intention. Most, however, emerge in response to a particular dissatisfaction with the city and the limits placed on different aspects of social, cultural and working life. The everyday practices through which we seek to overcome these limits are characterized by a number of elements which we believe have an important transformative potential.

Information on the spaces covered by our research is presented in Table 1. However, a brief description of two of the spaces will be useful in terms of contextualizing our discussion.

Table 1: Independent spaces in Dublin: organizational structures, financing and activities

Name	Date	Activities	Resources	Organizational structure	Financing	Rent per month	Utilities	Size	Former use
The Joinery	2007–present	Visual art and culture, music and gigs	Event space, studio space	Not-for-profit, small group of individuals, volunteer run	Gigs, one-off crowd-funding, occasional public funding, renting out studio space	€1,250	€2,000	2,500 sq ft	Warehouse/light industrial
Supafast	Mid 2012–end 2012	Culture, film screenings, gigs, education, dinners, market	Meeting space, event space, exhibition space, 24 h access, internet, kitchen	Small, informal group, no formal decision making structure, volunteer run	Dinners, donations, monthly contribution from participants	€650	€100	2,000 sq ft	Furniture storage
Exchange	2009–present	Culture, film screenings, education, food	Internet, exhibition space, meeting space	Consensus decision making, non-hierarchical, direct democratic, co-operative, volunteer run	One-off donations, previously had some public support	€984	€600	Approx 1,000 sq ft	Commercial
Seomra Spraoi	2004–present	Gigs, culture, films, education, political events, food, cafe	Meeting space, event space, internet, bicycle maintenance, food cooperative	Consensus decision making, non-hierarchical, direct democratic, anarchist principles, volunteer run	Monthly contributions, one-off donations	€1,650	€350	2,000 sq ft	Warehouse/light industrial
Dubzland	1999–2013	Gigs, music, visual art	Rehearsal space, sound system/music production equipment, workshop	Very small group of individuals, no formal decision making structure, volunteer run	Money raised through gigs			Approx 2,000 sq ft	Warehouse/light industrial
Block T	2010–present	Art and culture, market, education	Studio space, hot seat, offices, meeting space, internet, event space, screen-printing, photo development	Not-for-profit organization, formal structure (including directors, managers)	Renting out studio space, small amount of arts council funding (recently cut)	Upward of €100,000		21,500 sq ft	Office/warehouse
Mabos	2012–present	Small start-ups (furniture making, IT, design), music, art exhibitions, free workshops, education, social space	Office and workshop space, large exhibition/gig space, social space		Regular rent from office/workshop space, funding from Dublin City Council (recently cut)			5,000 sq ft	Warehouse/light industrial

Exchange Dublin is located in Temple Bar, an area characterized by a high concentration of the tourist and leisure industry, with a particular focus on pubs and clubs. In contrast, Exchange is a not-for-profit space in which alcohol cannot be consumed and is open to people of all ages—with a particular focus on young people who are excluded from the majority of social spaces in the area which are over 18s only. Exchange consists of one large room, with sofas and tables dotted around, and a smaller, adjoining room mainly used for exhibitions. The space is run by young volunteers and is open during the day and evening, 7 days a week. Volunteers greet new-comers at the door and explain that the space exists as a social and cultural resource open to all for a multitude of events and activities. Volunteers also take part in a fortnightly assembly which uses consensus democracy to make decisions and delegate tasks. On a given evening one may encounter activities such as a photography exhibition documenting the experience of migrant activism, a make-shift restaurant, a story-telling evening, music, dance classes or film screenings. Activities are generally free, although attendees have the opportunity to make a donation. Moreover, many people frequently hang out in the space simply to socialize. Exchange explicitly describes itself as non-political and emphasizes its openness to many different world views and perspectives, seeing itself as an open experiment in participation.

Supafast, which closed at the end of 2012, was located in a three-story, ramshackle building in Dublin's north inner city. The ground floor was a large, garage type space which was used to host the dinners which generated income to cover the rent. It was also used for film screenings, political talks, a flea market and late-night electronic music parties. The first floor was composed of an "office space" where some participants typically worked on music projects, organized events or socialized. The second floor, in which we had a make-shift office, was also used as an artist's studio, for life-drawing classes and exhibition space. Events were donation only or cheap, and attendees could bring their own alcohol, making for a very affordable night out. The space was run by a group of friends who met and made decisions on an informal basis. The people involved in running the space explained their motivations in terms of creating spaces where people can do things in their own way, without constrictions, rules or expenses. They talked of the dullness of a city ruled by landlords and publicans with little space for people to participate in producing their own culture and social life. None of this was ever discussed in explicitly political terms, but more so in the sense that participants were fed up of the status quo and excited about doing things differently.

Although these two spaces are somewhat different, they reflect some elements which are shared across Dublin's independent spaces. While not motivated by political ideologies, participants emphasized the importance of non-commercial, open participation in the production of spaces that can make possible the kinds of activities, events, dynamics and forms of social life excluded by high rents and over-regulation. The fact of coming together to create such a space, and the set of material needs and resources which emerge in the process, give rise to the development of forms of working, playing, and deciding together, and the production of shared knowledges and resources.

At first glance, Dublin's independent spaces resemble the occupied social centres associated with autonomous politics and the squatting movement, especially in continental Europe (Carmona *et al.* 2008; Wright 2002). In fact, the spaces we investigate here diverge sharply from those spaces. Autonomous social centres have been characterized by a strong ideological and cultural opposition to capitalism and the state. Social centres have provided important spaces for political experimentation, radical housing politics and counter-culture (Carmona *et al.* 2008; Salvini 2013). However, certainly by the early 2000s a significant internal debate was emerging across Europe critiquing the ideological and identitarian dimensions of the movement (Carmona *et al.* 2008; Provisional University 2010; Salvini 2013), a critique which in the English-speaking world was framed in terms of the "activist ghetto" (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2010).

In contrast, Dublin's independent spaces are characterized by neither an ideological nor counter-cultural identity. In this sense, they have more in common with the practices associated with the literature on "low-cost urbanism" (Tonkiss 2013), both in the sense that they develop a set of pragmatic practices facilitating access to, and alternative uses of, urban space (Tonkiss 2013) and in the sense that they are characterized by a more ambiguous and nuanced political significance (Bresnihan and Byrne 2013; Mayer 2013). They are frequented by a wide variety of people, from trendy artists to asylum seekers, from working class ravers to anarcho-punks, and from community activists to isolated young people and those with mental health difficulties. The spaces are, however, mainly the preserve of young people, often linked into one of the wide variety of non-mainstream social scenes. In what follows, we delve deeper into what is at stake in the material practices and forms of social relations produced within these new spaces.

Owning in Common

The primary obstacle for anyone wanting to do independent activities in Dublin is the high cost of rent. This simple fact means that lots of things we would like to do are blocked. It is necessary, then, for people to come together to share the burden of this cost.⁶ While the lease for a building may be taken out in the name of one or two individuals, the reality is that many more people contribute to paying rent, reflecting a simple yet crucial strategy of collectivizing rent.

Indeed, collective strategies are often evident from the outset; in order to raise the initial finance to pay for the deposit, repairs and rent, some of the newer spaces have relied on fundraising events that are often held in existing independent spaces, or even in people's homes, so as to avoid the cost of renting a venue while, at the same time, extending a network of support. When Block T, one of the larger art spaces (located in Dublin's Smithfield area), first took out a lease on an old tile factory, for example, they were unable to move in because the building was in such bad condition. They organized several fundraisers, with musicians and friends performing for free, in order to raise the money.

The means by which monthly rent is raised varies. A common strategy for artistic spaces is to divide the space into individual studios and then rent them out at a

relatively low cost to artists, designers, writers, film makers etc. In other cases, rent is covered through donations or contributions raised via various activities and events. In Supafast the rent was covered by dinners held twice a month for up to 50 people. While not compulsory, it was hoped that the people who used the building would help in putting on these meals. This could mean cooking and serving on the night, cleaning up after the event or spreading the word about the dinners. People who wanted full use of the building were issued a key in return for €20 a month. They could then use the building for whatever they wanted. We used it to do our research and writing, as well as putting on talks and screening films. Other people used it for work, shows, exhibitions, markets, gigs and as a general social space. If there was any extra money made from these events it went towards the building.

Even those spaces that were financed through studio-rental were committed to putting on a range of other activities, whether to generate money or to provide an alternative space for people to socialize. These take the form of regular cafe nights, music gigs and film screenings. These spaces are mostly Bring Your Own Bottle as well, ensuring that it is a cheaper evening while at the same time contributing to the maintenance of the space. The significance of this becomes particularly clear when we consider how expensive, individualized and disconnected much of the social and cultural activity in the city has become.

All of this means that all those involved in using and sustaining a given space can feel it belongs to them—a fact which is often immediately tangible. For instance, on the afternoon we first dropped into Supafast, we were offered a key to the building and 24 h access and asked to contribute €20 per month “whenever suits”. Once we began to use the building (from which we conducted much of the research presented here) we were encouraged to transform the space, make decisions and generally take ownership of it as we saw fit—throwing out clutter, re-organizing the space to suit our needs etc. Likewise, the first time we were in Dubzland one of the organizers gave us a set of keys, told us to lock up when we were finished, and left the building. Although we had never been there before or met any of the organizers, we were left alone to hold our event. While this sense of common belonging operated informally in Supafast and Dubzland, others spaces have more formal commitment to ensuring ownership is collectivized. In the case of Seomra Spraoi, anyone can get involved in running the space and making decisions through participation in meetings or by requesting to hold an event there, with Exchange Dublin operating along similar lines.

As such, while spaces are formally rented on the basis of mainstream property norms (ie a fixed number of individuals who are contractually obliged to pay rent in return for access to the property in question), in practice “ownership” of the spaces, or the question of who they belong to, works quite differently. The spaces first and foremost belong to those who participate in and make use of them. Indeed, many of those involved recognize that users and participants taking ownership is a prerequisite to their survival and sustainability. In each case, “ownership is based on human deeds not property deeds” (Linebaugh 2008:45). As such, independent spaces involve an alternative subjective relationship to urban space—one

which operates outside the norm of private property and cultivates common forms of belonging (Blomley 2008).

Producing in Common

Independent spaces are, however, not just about common ownership of a pre-existing resource. Rather, they involve ongoing common production, a wealth of everyday, non-monetary exchange and circulation. A trainee carpenter helping to fix the stairs in return for a key to the building; the use of old bubble wrap taken from a skip to insulate the roof; the loan of a projector to screen a film or the voluntary work of those helping to prepare a meal. This work is usually carried out by those involved, with friends and supporters providing time, energy and skills. The need for such labour is true even at the most immediate level—most spaces are located in buildings which are run down and require work to turn them into a social centre, art space or whatever. This can sometimes involve months of work and to an extent this work never finishes. However, the sense of being involved in the collective production of something we value is one of the most joyful and rewarding aspects of urban commoning. Intervening at this level, in the sense of creating material alternatives, is also a direct intervention in the process of production of a central facet of contemporary capitalism—urban space—and thus of transforming, at the everyday level, the relations of production of the city.

One of the striking things we discovered in our discussions with various spaces was the amount of unpaid or “invisible” work which goes on in these spaces. Several of the people we spoke to have spent years running independent spaces on a voluntary basis. For example, Miranda from the Joinery has been one of a small group who established the space and have kept it going for 6 years without earning a penny. Ben, from Block T, described working 100 h weeks as he tried to balance working as a full time teacher while committing his evenings and weekends to managing the building. “Objectively we’re all crazy to be doing it because it’s working for charity” he said. This statement reveals something about the different experience of work carried out in the everyday reproduction of these spaces. While many participants complain about their “real” work, the voluntary work they do in the spaces was performed out of a strong sense of care and commitment for the project and for the other people involved.

At stake here is the production of what we would call the *manifold commons*. Buildings and spaces are liberated from their simple existence as a disused office building, empty yard, pavement or whatever. Physical space is socialized into a space of multiple uses: for living, eating, learning, listening to music etc. This arises in part as a strategy to meet rent costs: multiplying uses means multiplying footfall and hence income and participation. It’s about making use of what you’ve got. These various uses are overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. This is in contrast to the mainstream “mono-use” of space, according to which typically one type of activity can happen in a given space during a given period. This is extraordinarily unproductive, resulting in an enormous amount of office spaces left empty during evenings and weekends, for example. In contrast, urban commons continually re-

purpose space—after the film screening chairs are cleared away to make room for a party, the morning after the party the space is cleaned up to hold a discussion or writing workshop, which in turn makes way for a baking session. Indeed, often two completely different activities take place simultaneously—for example, dinner is served in the same space as the bicycle workshop every Wednesday in Seomra Spraoi (which can be chaotic but also fun).

This multiplication of potential does not just apply to the space. The ongoing production of the commons multiplies the potential of material resources as well as multiplying the potential of individual capacities. This was made evident, for example, in the preparation of meals for large numbers. Each time we helped prepare one of these meals there was an apparent lack (of time, space, knowledge, resources), but through the socialization of production, the sharing of space, the sharing of implements and the sharing of knowledge, the situation was always transformed and problems overcome. Scrap wood was turned into tables; buckets were turned into sinks; tiles were turned into chopping boards. On one occasion, the food, in the absence of serving dishes, was even served in drain pipes which sat down the length of the table. Rather than thinking about this situation in terms of pre-existing individuals with an already determined set of roles and skills, and an array of finite resources at our disposal, we become transformed through our social and material relations, extending ourselves and the world around us in ways we would not have thought possible.

Peter Linebaugh has suggested the term “commoning” to refer to the fluid, continuous and relational ways in which the living commons, past and present, are produced. Commons understood as a verb indicates the limitations of understanding the commons as a noun, as a static, physical resource, such as a bounded plot of urban space. In contrast, we see how the production of urban commons often involves overcoming apparently “objective” limits. The urban commons described here integrate people, physical space, materials, technologies and knowledge. We cannot talk of the commons outside of these many elements and the multiple ways in which they are combined in response to overlapping wants and needs, negotiated and decided upon collectively.

Organizing in Common

The collective production and ownership of independent spaces, needless to say, throws up questions about how we organize, manage or “govern” the commons—questions which are thrown up in particular by the open nature of the spaces and the multiple uses they are given. Just as the spaces are not produced in the same way as commercial spaces, they are not organized in the same way. Those who use the space are those who produce it, but they are also those who have a concrete investment in it. From this material and social investment comes a certain right to determine how it is used. This is not an abstract right but a practical, messy one, negotiated with other people in specific situations.

Here it is important to recognize that when we speak of those who “produce” the space we are not simply referring to those who undertake activities normally

designated as work, but rather all those who take part in the space in different ways or forms. Moreover, the way in which different contributions are valued by participants is sensitive to the different capacities and tempos different people bring to the table. For example, in several spaces there are a number of individuals who would be considered to have mental health difficulties. It is generally recognized that they may not be in the best place at a given moment to participate in certain aspects of the space, for example negotiating with the landlord or police, yet this does not mean their other contributions go unrecognized or that they have any less investment in the space.

Supafast was the most dramatic example of a place which did not subscribe to any “hard and fast” rules or decision-making structure. As one of the participants told us: “[i]f there’s no owner then people take ownership of it”. He made clear that this had to be embodied in the everyday running of the place, rather than a rhetorical claim which was contradicted by rules and informal hierarchies.

At the same time, this radically “open” approach to decision-making was limited. In the end Supafast was closed because of an incident with the police. This arose because people with little experience of running a space and dealing with the authorities were left without any support. This led Tom, who had helped set up and run Supafast, to admit that if he was to do something similar in the future he would establish certain ground rules and ensure there were some common understandings about issues such as the police and opening hours.

Barry, from Seomra Spraoi, gave a similar example in which money disappeared from a charity gig hosted in Seomra. While the response is not to assume that everyone is going to steal money if given a chance, some response is required. The important thing was to strike a balance, Barry said, between rules and responsibility—the need for people to actively perform relations of trust, mutuality and respect rather than these qualities being enshrined in institutional rules. Barry spoke of how this was learnt through experience. The sedimentation of these experiences in particular practices was by no means perfect, and certain rules had resulted in “over-institutionalization”, the closing down of different possibilities. He gave the example of the Safer Spaces Policy⁷ which gave guidance on how to deal with people who get violent at a gig, for example. While this is something that is bound to happen, the issue is that they did not want to call the police. In response an alternative form of dealing with such challenges is created which is determined by the people who organize the space, one which is not reliant on the state and its punitive system.

There is no way of making the organization of the commons neat and clear because the boundaries of the commons are always contested. The knowledge that takes shape in certain practices and techniques, the praxis of the commons, is not then a formal set of rules or a set of traditional customs dating back centuries. Because it requires ongoing care and attention Barry referred to Seomra Spraoi as a place of exercise. Rather than exercising your body, like in a gym, Seomra forces you to exercise your social body, one which is always in relation to other people, people who may not always agree with you or seem to share much in common. In this way the urban commons operates as an experiment in different social relations or ways of living together.

Each of the elements addressed in this section (ownership, production, organization) should be understood in relation to the context of Dublin's "great enclosure". As argued previously, the enclosure of the city has operated on the basis of the privatization, monopolization and hierarchical regulation of urban space. DIY spaces are characterized by a set of practices and relations which operate outside of, and even against, this process of enclosure. Urban space is not just opened up, the whole question of its production and ownership is transformed in a manner which undermines enclosure.

However, it is important to emphasize that the production of these urban commons is not derived from any explicit political motivation ("we want to make an anti-capitalist society") or ethical stance ("it is good to share"). It is the immediate and practical result of people seeking to escape the enclosure of the city. Social relations of dependency, trust, care and mutuality can arise when people are forced to sustain forms of life in the city outside commercial interests and state funding. The form of togetherness this gives rise to is very different to an abstract "public" or "community" identified in terms of territorial, social or ethnic characteristics. While some of the spaces certainly reflect particular class and racial distinctions in the city, they also embody a more immediate and material desire to inhabit a different city, one which is not clearly articulated or reflected on, but which comes from a dissatisfaction with how things currently are. The urban commons thus emerges in response to the particular circumstances not as a form of protest but as a way of materializing an alternative, thereby producing an actually existing crack in the city.

Nevertheless, we would challenge a certain leftist perspective, still relatively commonplace within Dublin's social movements, which sees independent spaces in terms of "counter-culture" and "lifestyle", as opposed to more "political" action, normally considered to involve workplace struggles or more macro-level political issues. What is missed in this perspective is of course the insight contributed by feminist and other movements long ago, the importance of transforming the dimension of subjectivity and everyday social relations.

In the urban context, this means working at the level of the relationship to urban space and the relationships through which urban space is produced. In independent spaces our practices of urban commoning strive to "de-alienate the city", to move from our frustration with the difficulty of living a fulfilling life in a Dublin we do not feel part of, to the creation of spaces within which we can reinvent the ownership, production and control of the urban. Herein lies the antagonistic and transformative dimension of urban communing—we open up a crack and set ourselves the task of widening that crack so we can move and breathe more freely.

The Limits of the Commons

Having examined the transformative potential of the commons in Dublin's independent spaces, we would like to turn our attention to some of the blockages and obstacles we face. The immediate and concrete challenges we raise here also signal significant political challenges and sets of power relations that are important for our spaces and, we would argue, for the city more generally. Although there are significant challenges with regard to what we might call the internal composition of

the commons, for instance informal exclusions and hierarchies (we certainly do not want to romanticize these spaces!), for reasons of space we would like to focus here on the relationship between the commons and its outside. The two key difficulties that the spaces have encountered are rent and evictions. The former relates to the relationship between the urban commons and the private real estate sector, while the latter deals with the relationship between the commons and public institutions (Andres 2013; Bader and Bialluch 2009; Colomb 2012).

The principal challenge confronted by independent spaces is that of rent. Even in the context of one of the most dramatic property crashes in recorded history (Kennedy and Quinn 2012), rental prices in Dublin continue to be extremely high. As in other cities, the kinds of buildings that spaces spring up in are typically former light industrial or warehouse spaces (because they are large enough for public events) of poor quality and situated in inconvenient and hard to locate places (because they are cheaper). Despite the fact that many of these buildings would surely be unrentable on the commercial market, rent costs of between €1500 and €2000 per month are standard. In addition, independent spaces typically face significant maintenance (due to the poor quality of the buildings), and utility costs.

There are a number of issues worth setting out here. First of all, spaces often close down due to inability to pay rent or because participants feel maintaining the space is too burdensome. Second, paying the rent absorbs time and energy that could be much better spent elsewhere, a fact lamented by many participants. Third, a large portion of the wealth generated by the spaces is captured by the landlord: it is privatized. In short, landlords profit from the urban commons (as do, in turn, their creditors). This is particularly problematic given that landlords and their financiers (banks) have been at the forefront of the project of enclosure.

The issue of rent can be conceptualized in terms of a “value struggle” (De Angelis 2007) between the commons and real estate, in which the value practices associated with the urban commons come into direct conflict with the extraction of value via ownership of property deeds and access to credit associated with real estate and property speculation. On the one hand, independent spaces attempt to prioritize common value practices while, on the other, they come up against the reality of private ownership.

The second key problem is that spaces are frequently shut down or evicted. Recent examples include Seomra Spraoi, Supafast, Subground, Dubzland, Russell St Men’s Shed. Health and safety regulations play a role here, as do the police. Seomra Spraoi was forced out of its Mary’s Abbey location when the police raided in 2008 and subsequently had fire officers condemn the building as unsafe. Similarly, Supafast was visited a number of times by the police before being declared unsafe by fire safety officials.

The issue of rent and the issue of evictions signal the problematic relationship between the urban commons and the city’s real estate market and the public institutions (with their regulation of space), and this in turn is indicative of a set of power relations within which practices of urban commoning are embedded. With regard to the public institutions, there is clearly a failure to legislate for health and safety in a manner which empowers citizens to participate in the production of urban space; make empty spaces which meet safety standards available to citizens; and

control rent prices. With regard to both the failure of vacant spaces to be made available and out-of-control rent prices, it is clear that public policies which sustain and promote the real estate market and property speculation have a role to play.

Most spaces have interpreted evictions and rent as inevitable problems. This reflects the way in which they have to some degree internalized, or come to experience as inevitable and normal, the dominant sense of what is possible in the city, and by extension, who has the right to define how urban space is used—what we might call, following Ranciere (2004; see also Swyngedouw 2009) a particular policing of the city. Independent spaces have thus responded by either seeking to work within dominant norms of the city or by disappearing underground.

With regard to the former, some spaces have attempted to cooperate with Dublin City Council (DCC) and other public institutions. Several spaces have sought funding, a strategy particularly favoured by visual art spaces which have access to city council and arts council funding streams.⁸ Funding can make it possible to rent higher quality properties, often ones which meet health and safety regulations.⁹ DCC also runs a “vacant spaces” programme which teams up projects and landlords to temporarily make use of vacant spaces. This approach, however, runs into immediate and pressing limitations. These “partnerships” are primarily open to visual art spaces because of their eligibility for various funding streams and because they are seen by the city council and other institutions as enhancing real estate and the urban economy more generally. This means that many such spaces are somewhat “closed” with regard to the possibilities they hold and those who can participate. For instance, many such spaces are “curated” (often with curatorial residencies funded by the arts council) such that their public exhibition space is not open to all. The price of this strategy is essentially to transform the space to become more like public institutions, functioning (to a greater or lesser extent) according to their logics and criteria, thus diluting the common dimension.¹⁰

A second strategy, once again favoured by art spaces, is that of renting out studios to individual artists. This strategy, however, tends to change the dynamic within independent spaces, reducing the social dimension of spaces, cultivating a sense of individual ownership of studio space and creating a landlord-like relationship between those who run the space and those who rent a studio. This strategy, thus, involves becoming more like commercial spaces, once again diluting the dimension of commoning.

Many participants in the more “underground spaces” are reluctant if not opposed to collaborating with DCC and other public institutions and/or developing more commercial models of financial sustainability.¹¹ For such participants (ourselves included), it seems that sustaining the urban commons by rendering them visible and governable according to frameworks or criteria which undermine the commons is not an option. The very reason many spaces are set up is to make possible things which are not possible within public or commercial institutions, not only activities but also sets of relations, a certain freedom and leeway to experiment, the relinquishing of ownership to all participants and so on.

A final approach, and one which reflects these concerns, has been to “go underground” or “fly below the radar” (ie attract as little attention as possible). This strategy has been relatively effective—it has allowed some spaces (eg Seomra Spraoi) to come back to life following eviction and many others seem to be surviving in this fashion.

However, it has its limits. First of all, it is more effective for some spaces than for others (visual arts spaces tend to fare better than, say, late-night electronic music venues), and many spaces have been shut down despite “flying below the radar”. Moreover, it involves accepting a greatly reduced degree of visibility in the city. This means it is more difficult to attract people to the space (and hence to meet costs and sustain spaces more generally) and a reduced capacity to affect change in the city.

Conclusion

This article has contributed to the growing literature on contemporary urban commons by examining the emergence of Dublin’s new independent spaces in and against a context of urban enclosure. Drawing on our participation in these spaces we have been able to describe how new practices of urban commoning are generating collective forms of ownership, production and decision-making that depart from the alternatives of public or private. At the same time, we have identified the challenges and limitations that these independent spaces face from both private (market) and public forces. Here we want to finish with a provisional outlook on the future for these spaces and the direction in which our research is moving.

In the context of continuing financial and regulatory pressures, DIY spaces in Dublin are faced with two options: to become more like other spaces in the city (in terms of extracting rent from people, becoming bureaucratically “transparent” etc.) or going “underground” (implicitly accepting a position of marginality in the city). Both options, as argued, are problematic from the point of view of sustaining and enhancing the commons.

These dilemmas come back again and again to the question of power relations between the urban commons and its outside (the public and the private), they point towards our limited ability to become a visible presence in the city and to be sustainable on our own terms, a limited ability to impact on health and safety regulations and rent prices, and a wider inability to transform power relations. The question of how to move forward here is an open one. It seems to us, however, that the path forward must pass through the opening up of a collective discussion among DIY spaces. Indeed, we hope that this article and the wider research-militancy project it is a part of can form part of this process.

Moreover, our sense is that it will be necessary to engage with and challenge public authorities in the city, particularly DCC. However, this task is problematic. How can the urban commons, almost invisible from the point of view of public institutions and uninterested in translating itself into the terms of representative politics, fruitfully interact with the city council? How can the commons engage with the public, contaminate and transform it? These questions require further thought and, most importantly, ongoing experimentation.

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in which we developed the ideas presented here which could not have happened with the support of various independent spaces (in particular, Seomra Spraoi, Supafast, Hendrons Collider and Dubzland). We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of all those involved in the Provisional University/Gradcam Commons Reading Group as well as all the participants at the Struggles in Common encounter organized by the Provisional University in May 2013.

Endnotes

- ¹ DIY, or “Do-It-Yourself”, is an idea and movement which promotes independent cultural and productive activity.
- ² We have participated, to varying degrees, in Seomra Spraoi, Supafast and Unlock NAMA. We have also organized many events in Exchange Dublin, Loom Studios and Dubzland Audio-Visual gallery, and we rented a studio for a number of months in Block T.
- ³ The tradition of militant research has many lineages (Malo de Molina 2006; Salvini 2013), but the most influential can be traced to the research techniques employed by the *Operaisti* in the Italian factories of the 1960s (Wright 2002).
- ⁴ After writing this article we organized a meeting to bring together people involved in independent spaces. Over 80 people attended and all the spaces discussed in this paper were represented. The discussion focused on how independent spaces can support and sustain each other against financial and regulatory pressures. There was a lot of enthusiasm on the night but nothing concrete has materialized from it thus far. See the following blog post for more details on the event: <http://provisionaluniversity.wordpress.com/2013/07/15/dublins-independent-spaces-where-to-from-here/>
- ⁵ Across the country retail park and shopping centre space doubled between 2005 and 2010 (Kitchin *et al.* 2012).
- ⁶ Although there are a small number of housing squats in Dublin, there are no squatted social spaces. This arises partially from the fact that squatting presents significant legal problems under Irish law. There have been attempts at occupying social space, some of which the authors have been involved in, but these have been very short lived.
- ⁷ “Safer Spaces Policy” is a document written up by a collective identifying some basic, shared principles which are designed to ensure that the space in question is free from abusive, threatening or discriminatory behaviour. See the Seomra Sparoi “Safer Spaces Policy” at this link (scroll down to bottom): http://seomraspraoi.org/copy_of_about-us-1
- ⁸ We have recently learnt that Block T, one of the most dynamic and well known creative arts and cultural spaces in the city, has had its arts council funding cut completely this year. It now relies entirely on the income raised from renting out art studios and exhibition spaces.
- ⁹ For instance, Exchange Dublin, which covers rent via a subsidy from DCC, is one of the few spaces with a city centre location and high-quality building.
- ¹⁰ We would like to stress here that this is an ambiguous process in which many aspects of commoning can be kept alive.
- ¹¹ In such instances, participants have often had experiences with DCC which they describe in terms of “bullshit” and “bureaucracy”, and/or feel very uncomfortable with the idea of charging money for access to the space. The people who set up Supafast, for example, were against the idea of renting out individual studios on the basis that they did not want to “become landlords ... taking money from people who don’t have any to begin with”.

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