

5° CONGRESSO
INTERNACIONAL
SOBRE
AMBIÊNCIAS
5TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON AMBIANCES

**BUILDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE OF CARE.
THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN RETHINKING COMMUNITY PRACTICES AND COLLECTIVE
SPACES.**

**CONSTRUIR UMA INFRAESTRUTURA DE CUIDADOS.
O PAPEL DO DESIGN NO REPENSAR DAS PRÁTICAS COMUNITÁRIAS E DOS
ESPAÇOS COLETIVOS.**

Silvia Lanteri

post-doc fellow

Politecnico di Torino / DAD - Department of Architecture and Design

silvia.lanteri@polito.it

Giulia Montanaro

phd candidate

Politecnico di Torino / DAD - Department of Architecture and Design

giulia.montanaro@polito.it

Martina Spinelli

phd candidate

Politecnico di Torino / DAD - Department of Architecture and Design

martina.spinelli@polito.it

Ianira Vassallo

research

Politecnico di Torino / DIST - Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning

ianira.vassallo@polito.it

BUILDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE OF CARE.

THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN RETHINKING COMMUNITY PRACTICES AND COLLECTIVE SPACES.

CONSTRUIR UMA INFRAESTRUTURA DE CUIDADOS.

O PAPEL DO DESIGN NO REPENSAR DAS PRÁTICAS COMUNITÁRIAS E DOS ESPAÇOS COLETIVOS.

ABSTRACT

This contribution is part of a broader debate on the role of urban and architectural design within the growing attention to processes of spatial regeneration, not only in urban contexts, focusing on practices of care and redefinition of space as an element of collective action outside neoliberal dictates.

From the empirical observation of some ongoing processes, it is possible to deduce more general elements of reflection regarding the role of the designer and of space within commoning processes.

How does the practice of design redefine itself in the context of actions that place at their centre a different doing from the productivist model within which the urban project has been placed in recent decades? What is the role of space as a medium of negotiation within a collective process that evolves with slow and uncertain times and modalities? These are some of the questions that drive our open reflection.

KEYWORDS: Third Places; practice of commoning; Collectif Etc; marginal areas; care.

RESUMO

Esta contribuição insere-se num debate mais amplo sobre o papel do desenho urbano e arquitectónico no âmbito da crescente atenção aos processos de regeneração espacial, não apenas em contextos urbanos, centrando-se em práticas de cuidado e redefinição do espaço como elemento de acção colectiva fora dos ditames neoliberais.

Da observação empírica de alguns processos em curso é possível deduzir elementos mais gerais de reflexão sobre o papel do designer e do espaço nos processos de *commoning*.

Como se redefine a prática do design no contexto de ações que colocam no seu centro um fazer diferente do modelo produtivista em que o projeto urbano se tem inserido nas últimas décadas? Qual o papel do espaço como meio de negociação dentro de um processo coletivo que evolui em tempos e modalidades lentos e incertos? Estas são algumas das questões que norteiam a nossa reflexão aberta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Third Places; prática da comunhão; Collectif Etc; áreas marginais; cuidado.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution explores the role of architectural and urban planning projects and their respective skills within commoning processes, especially when initiated in marginal areas. It draws on the ongoing empirical experience of the Erasmus+ project ASOC -

An(Architecture) School Of Commons¹. This European project, spanning three years, involves alternative architectural pedagogies sharing experiences with rural communities and architecture collectives across Europe. Its aim is to immerse students from three architecture faculties in ongoing commoning processes through experimental and multidisciplinary teaching activities. This serves partly to test the role of architectural projects in creating common goods and partly to help students understand the potential of their skills in strengthening and promoting forms of active citizenship (Arena, 2006). Another goal of ASOC is to foster close collaboration among architecture universities, architectural collectives and local associations. Each entity involved brings its empirical and theoretical experience to the debate, aiming to build a shared pedagogical model. They contribute specific experiences and skills in collaborative care practices, exploring bottom-up design forms and horizontal governance of space. Recognizing the material and immaterial value of certain abandoned and/or underutilized spaces and buildings, caring for them as a collective act, and federating communities through open construction sites and convivial moments are some of the activities promoted by this international network of practices. The main objective is "learning by doing" (John Dewey, 1938), creating a condition of osmosis and mutual learning among the involved partners and between local and temporary communities formed during these moments. The project stems from the desire of the participating architectural collectives to affirm and certify their design approach as an alternative mode (Catalanotti, 2020) to mainstream models and systems (Shneider Till, 2008). Their alliance with architecture faculties on one side and local associations on the other represents a way to highlight the importance of design skills within commoning processes, as well as to assert their presence as forerunners of a model and holders of abilities and knowledge useful in codifying this contribution

Within this experience, the article aims to propose a reflection on commoning processes and the construction of care infrastructures in marginal contexts. These processes provide an opportunity to reconsider the role of architectural and urban planning in defining a different narrative of contemporary territorial dynamics affecting these areas. The intertwining of care and commons offers a perspective that transcends the concept of personal assistance to embrace a broader and deeper vision of "care," understood as a form of resistance and assertion by local communities. Through neofeminist literature, we can highlight this dimension, showing that care is not simply an individual, familial, or exclusively female practice (Federici, 2007). Instead, it needs to be reclaimed as a collective action, as a constant, daily, and permanent process of maintaining the territory and its environmental characteristics, going beyond the mere extractivist logic of land for productive purposes. The contamination between feminist literature on care and the debate concerning commoning processes allows us to highlight at least three fundamental

¹ ASOC is the acronym for (*Architecture*) *School of commons*. Alternative architectural pedagogies sharing experiences with rural communities and architecture collectifs across Europe. The project was selected in the 'Erasmus Plus Cooperative Partnership' call and has a three-year duration (2021-2024). It is a work that intertwines international teaching experiences with experiments in multi-actor alliances to define innovative design practices. For this reason it is defined through an extended partnership between the University of Architecture (Politecnico di Torino, ENSA Grenoble, NTUA Athens), collectives of architects (Collectif Etc, Zuloark, Orizzontale) and local organizations (La Rivoluzione delle Seppie, TiriLab), in between France, Italy and Greece. The objective is to explore the collaboration between these different subjects to rethink pedagogical models and project themes and methods that take into account the main ecological and social challenges underway. For further information, please refer to the project platform: <https://asoc.eu.com/>

aspects for rethinking marginal territories: first, the central role of reproductive approaches (characterized by care actions, daily maintenance, domestic actions inherent in local traditions and non-remunerative) as collective practices (and not individual, confined to intimate and private space); secondly, the role of these actions as opportunities to assert a different value of the territory compared to the productive logics typical of the neoliberal system; finally, the principle of cooperation and mutual responsibility in action, not as a grouping of people united by exclusive interests, but as an opportunity to define collective self-governance processes. Based on the rich body of knowledge and reflections developed through the ASOC project, this contribution focuses on the critical re-reading of an empirical case, the 'failed' project of La Place des Possibles in Saint-Laurent-en-Royans, France.

2. CARE AND COMMONS IN MARGINAL CONTEXTS

For some time, rural areas have been subjected to ideologies that continuously redefine their forms and meanings, influenced by policies that often promote a vision antithetical to that of the city, thus shaping the sense of both rural and urban life. These narratives tend to alternately exalt or demonize one of the two realities, creating complex dynamics of interaction and contrast (Koolhaas, 2021). As early as 1970, in the now renowned book "The Urban Revolution", Lefebvre urged attention to the "blind field" (Lefebvre, 1973: 41) where the traits of a new way of inhabiting time and space were emerging, not reducible to those dichotomous oppositions city/countryside, center/periphery with which we have been accustomed to universally order the world.

By using these interpretive lenses, it is possible to observe in rural contexts, often associated with conditions of marginality and fragility, the presence of creative and generative forces capable of filling in innovative ways the empty and silent spaces that characterize such territories (Carrosio, 2019; Tantillo, 2023), defined by a rich history and great environmental and landscape value. To address the economic problems and social changes that influence them, new ecosystems are recently being developed in an attempt to preserve local specificities and find innovative forms of rebirth. In this context, hybrid, shared spaces, laboratories of experimentation, and places where inhabitants come together to co-shape services in a creative way while taking care of abandoned spaces emerge. The concept of urban commons thus assumes a new relevance even in marginal contexts of this type, marking an interesting shift in perspective from its traditional centrality in heavily urbanized environments. This phenomenon highlights a significant transformation in terms of the skills involved and the fundamental values that emerge, such as inclusivity, mutualism, and care. Thus, marginality begins to present itself not as a place of deprivation but, on the contrary, as a place where radical possibilities and spaces of resistance can be shaped. Bell Hooks defines this marginality as "spatially strategic for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse [...] a place capable of offering us the possibility of a radical perspective from which to look, create, imagine new alternative worlds" (Hooks, 2020, p. 128).

3. COLLECTIF ETC AND THE PROJECT FOR LA PLACE DES POSSIBLES

In 1989, Ray Oldenburg, in the book "The Great Good Place", coined the term "third places," referring to spaces distinct from home (first places) and work (second places), intending to emphasize rather those other spaces where people love to meet informally. Oldenburg refers to bars, restaurants, cinemas, commercial places, libraries, religious centers, sports centers, parks: collective spaces fundamental to the democratic development of society. In France, the concept of "tiers-lieux" (third places) has evolved into a national policy that emphasizes the relational role of space rather than its physical dimensions. These spaces—'proximity factories'—are open, community-centered engines of socio-economic development and local regeneration. They include coworking spaces, fablabs, circular economy areas, new manufacturing centers, and places for social inclusion, cultural production, and promotion. While initially concentrated in large cities, they are increasingly found in industrial, rural, and mountain areas, sparking local change. These initiatives are driven by local communities to address specific challenges, involving diverse relational, economic, and political models. Each project is unique, reflecting local identities and opportunities, and focuses on new forms of work, social inclusion, and cultural dynamism. Examples include the works of YesWeCamp, which promotes the creative reuse of abandoned spaces, and Villages Vivants, which revitalizes depopulated rural villages with social enterprises. Other notable examples include Le Chalutier, which engages in participatory processes to repurpose abandoned buildings in rural Drôme.

In this context, the present contribution identifies the experience of Collectif Etc² as particularly significant. As one of the most well-known French architects' collectives, operating for about fifteen years in various territories. Initially based in Marseille with numerous projects located in major French cities, recently they have been moving to increasingly remote contexts from the major metropolises with the aim of reactivating "third spaces" through incremental and participatory processes. In this regard, the project for La Place des Possibles in Saint-Laurent-en-Royans stands out as a turning point between the previous and subsequent phases, with part of the group moving from the city to a rural context, challenging themselves not only as architects but also in their deeper life choices. Until that moment, their projects focused on "contested" urban areas – for example, the mobile democratic parliament PaPoMo (proposed multiple times since 2008), or the construction of spaces for socialization and play like Fraternité Belle de Mai (2018) and Parc de la Carraire (2017) – where the occupation of space was seen as a catalyst to question ongoing transformation processes, aiming to bring out social and ecological issues by involving citizens in political decisions and the subsequent management of reclaimed spaces.

² <http://www.collectifetc.com>



Fig 1. La Place des Possibles, Saint-Laurent-en-Royans, France. From abandonment to reconversion, through a design experience and redefinition of an identity. Photo: <http://www.collectifetc.com/realisation/la-place-des-possibles/>

With the project for La Place des Possibles, the collective decided to move to the small village of 1,300 inhabitants, Saint-Laurent-en-Royans, at the foot of the Vercors, in the Drôme. They co-designed with the local community new forms of habitability in contexts different from the previous ones. This project particularly focuses on 2500 square meters of a disused textile factory dating back to the early twentieth century. It was initiated in 2016 by several associations active in the area, including Les Tracols, the owner of the property. These organizations, with different backgrounds and skills, organized themselves collectively and collaboratively, seeking to identify and address the needs and aspirations of the context by organizing meetings with the local community. Through this process of involvement, listening, and valuing local resources, the new role of these spaces took shape.

From 2019, the collective of architects was involved to assist the network of associations not only in the physical design of space recovery but also in developing a medium to long-term gradual reactivation strategy, attributing social and cultural value to the space. This phase was crucial for discussing and exchanging ideas about the future of the project: through participatory methodologies, it was possible to outline a global medium to long-term strategy, mainly focusing on the architectural transformation of the space. After a year of working on this strategy, the implementation phase began with the first construction workshop. On this occasion, it was decided to involve a wider audience, including not only the local actors already part of the process but also the local population, other active associations in the area, former employees of the textile factory, and young people seeking employment and training opportunities. Additionally, various cultural events were organized, such as concerts, debates, and film screenings, to further engage the local community and introduce them to the new opportunities offered by the transforming space. A large "container" is being co-designed not only in terms of the physical space but also in terms of content, uses, and the entities that will gradually be involved. La Place des Possibles is thus established not as a tool for political negotiation in areas where the use value of land is high, but rather as an opportunity to systematize a range of existing know-how and initiatives, producing necessary services for the community from the ground up and creating a space for mutual and shared exchange.

Similar to previous cases, social, economic, and cultural innovation is at the heart of the process, and this is achieved by developing a reactivation project that does not consist of creating a final image – a completely and clearly defined recovery – but through a project capable of changing direction, bending, and growing progressively along with the various co-construction steps depending on the opportunities that arise. Workshops are organized to work on large silkscreens to be used as interior furnishings indicating various spaces; on the reuse of materials from the plants to transform them into furniture and signage; on the reconstruction of the linear space of offices and training workshops located at the main entrance. It is, therefore, a collaborative learning process in which ‘learning by doing’ is central.



Fig 2. La Place des Possibles, Saint-Laurent-en-Royans, France. A moment of the participatory construction workshop organized for the redefinition of the spaces of the "Place des Possibles". Photo: <http://www.collectifetc.com/realisation/la-place-des-possibles/>

However, the project faced a crisis when the balances created over the years began to falter, revealing the limitations of such operations in the medium to long term. Despite four years of intense efforts towards improvement, the project ultimately failed due to the inability to establish horizontal governance among the different project partners. The lack of collaboration and divergent interests among the involved parties led to the project's closure and dissolution. The association Les Tracols – which had purchased the space six years earlier to carry out its work and catalyze other forms of associationism and services – is closely tied to social assistance, a sector that receives substantial public funding in France. In contrast, cultural and artistic projects struggle to obtain public funding, creating a disparity in opportunities and resources among the entities involved in the process, contributing to the failure of the project with its partial closure starting in 2023.

Nonetheless, failure becomes an integral part of the process to be observed – an opportunity for reflection for both those who were part of it and those initiating similar projects – highlighting the strong specificity characterizing these initiatives, with no possibility of replicability or standardization of practices. Even in the project's failure, it emerges that each participant is integral to its success, with specific skills and knowledge that need to be valued. This awareness leads to greater maturity in conceiving and implementing future projects, where the sharing of values and collaboration becomes fundamental for the success and sustainability of community initiatives.



Fig 3. La Place des Possibles, Saint-Laurent-en-Royans, France. The ASOC project is interested in creating connections between three schools of architecture, with local community projects in marginal areas and a generation of architect-activists organized in collectives from France, Italy and Greece. Photo: Silvia Lanteri, 2022

As Delfini and Snoriguzzi write (2019), these experiences aim to highlight a condition of osmosis between the local community and the project. The focal point is no longer the realization of a spatial design or economic profit but rather the continuous experimentation in shaping the process, a complex entity in constant adjustment, which tries to constitute itself as a form of resistance in opposition to the metropolitan condition.

If, in putting 'margins at the center,' it is necessary to give space to the forms of creative innovation that can germinate there (Carrosio, 2019), the projects presented in this article – and the experience of La Place des Possibles in particular, if read in its final disintegrative phase – show the profound value of the dimensions of collective learning and social cohesion, conditions that are as fundamental as they are fragile if not treated with the right care. It is important to emphasize the complementary role played by the different associations already active in the space, which have contributed by inviting their networks of contacts and strengthening ties with the local community. While Collectif Etc focused mainly on the architectural transformation of the space, other associations worked to maintain and strengthen the ties with the local community, thus creating an integrated and synergistic approach to their involvement. The participating individuals are not only users of resources, but their social practices related to the commons are also shaped by the community's identity dynamics. In this context, the community takes on a central role in various sharing processes, contributing to the socialization of rural space and the "production of locality" (Appadurai, 1996). The case study analysis thus highlights how the processes in question embody the concept of "care" not limited to the individual construction of personal services but embracing the idea of creating a broader infrastructure. The commoners claim the idea of the common good while retaining their singularities by joining a community. This culture suggests a common existence, "an open network of singularities that connect with each other based on the common they share and the common they produce" (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 129). Following the project's failure, Collectif Etc acts as a support network for other realities, not only in relation to associations but also with the aim of acting in a broader social context. This has

materialized in the creation of the French association Superville, which brings together collectives of architects and landscape designers eager to promote social and ecological change. This network has further expanded through the organization of events in Nantes that have allowed other local collectives to present their work, resonating with local institutions and communities.

4. ASOC AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE AN ARCHITECTURE OF CARE

Promoting mobilization and organization from the local to the international level is fundamental in these cases. The collective's commitment in creating networks and collaborations tells of an action that is not isolated, but rather one that aims to share resources, knowledge, and mutual support to broaden its territorial impact and create positive change in society. As already mentioned, this contribution arises from the opportunity of encounter and contamination proposed by the ASOC project, which has allowed close observation of such projects – specifically La Place des Possibles – in different territories straddling Italy, Greece, and France. In this Erasmus+ project, the concepts of care, commons, project, and community have been placed at the center of both theoretical and practical reflection. Questions were asked about what it means to build an “infrastructure of care” (Care Collectif, 2021), seeking to propose an alternative to project forms and methods that fall within established extractive practices, placing the recovery of abandoned spaces in a dimension of care for and by the local community, through the activation of those “voids” (Tantillo, 2023) produced by contemporary socio-economic changes.

Within this framework, the opportunity arose to examine and delve into the dynamics of constructing commons and practices of care in such contexts, considering different territories in comparison. This reveals a substantial difference related to the dynamics of identifying the entities presenting the project in the territory, the possibilities of economic sustenance, the territorial policies in place, and the possibilities of action. Specifically, through some interviews with members of Collectif Etc and other associations present in ASOC, an attempt was made to focus on some of the issues at the center of this reflection. Field experience has amplified the collective's awareness of the situationality of their practices as designers, where situating oneself and situating one's practice are central themes in feminist discussions. To elaborate on this need, one can refer to feminist geographies by citing the work of Donna Haraway (2015): this project need arises from the architects' awareness that their action will depend on the actors involved in a broad sense, designers and non-designers.

The architect transforms from “author” to facilitator of processes (Straus, 1978). As described above, the involvement of the local community in the La Place des Possibles project was progressive, through a series of phases that allowed a connection to be established with the territory's inhabitants. Firstly, the initial step was to meet and connect with the people, associations, and groups already involved in the project. This

initial involvement allowed understanding the needs, goals, and dreams of the community, providing a solid foundation for the continuation of the work.

5. OPEN QUESTIONS

Conceptualizing and framing commons as contextually grounded processes, this contribution explores how Collectif Etc – and specifically the project La Place des Possibles – demonstrates attention to the processes of appropriation and reactivation of marginal spaces of various kinds. This attention is shaped around the different realities that host them, transferring aspects of the experience of urban practices to extra-urban contexts. The focus on how commons reproduce over time in relation to the infrastructure of relationships that are created can help highlight further questions about how they are produced, generating effects on the place where they take root. In such processes, commons often play a role in shaping the outcomes of the common resource system and in producing specific local identities (Appadurai, 1996; Mosse, 1997). Using the concept of commoning introduced by Linebaugh (2008) and later developed by Bollier and Helfrich (2015), commons are assumed to be processes rooted in the general reproduction of the community, emphasizing their blurred nature, which encompasses not just a set of property relations but also associative practices around specific resources, places, and buildings that are collectively managed regardless of their legal form (Ostrom, 1990; Hardin, 1968). From this perspective, commons are not just legal and economic resources but also important social resources that bring people together in a space for a common purpose. In this way, the concept of commons is close to that of community, as their shared use can be seen as an important part of the symbolic construction of society itself (Cohen, 1985; Fournier, 2013). These spaces and the related processes of occupation and reactivation can be seen as a socio-ecological glue that helps to constitute the communities that inhabit them. By conceptualizing commons in this way and exploring how they reproduce over time in relation to broader social changes, it is possible to understand not only the dilemmas of resources but also how specific places and identities are constructed. It is not simply about explaining how the use of resources influences commons but rather exploring how different processes of commoning co-evolve and how they are embedded in the societies that use them (Nightingale, 2011). In these processes, the role of the designer is also changing, increasingly focusing on recognizing and valuing local skills, acting as an observer and facilitator in the process of caring for the territory. The described projects demonstrate how openness to dialogue and collaboration with communities, as well as the creation of networks of local actors, can enrich the professional background of architects and lead to more meaningful and ecosystemic results, albeit fragile in some cases. Specifically, within the context of the collectives, there is a clear desire to make themselves available to this knowledge, enriching it with experiences matured in urban contexts and transferred elsewhere. This synergy between the architect's skills and local knowledge allows for greater integration and mutual enrichment, contributing to a more inclusive practice sensitive to local specificities.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

AA.VV. (2021). Tiers-lieux à but non lucratif, open access

Appadurai A. (1996). The Production of Locality. in Appadurai, A. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London.

Bollier D., Helfrich S. (eds) (2015). *Patterns of Commoning. The Commons Strategies*, Amherst, Massachusetts. pp. 1-12.

Carrosio G. (2019). *I margini al centro. L'Italia delle aree interne tra fragilità e innovazione*, Donzelli, Roma.

Cohen A. P. (1985). *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Ellis Horwood, London.

Delfini A., Snoriguzzi R. (2019). *Contre Euralille : une critique de l'utopie métropolitaine*, Les Étaques, Lille.

Federici S., Caffentzis G. (2007). Notes on the Edu-factory and Cognitive Capitalism. *The Commoner*, vol. 12(2007), pp. 63-70.

Fournier V. (2013). Commoning: on the social organisation of the commons, *M@n@gement*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 433-453.

Hardin G. (1968). The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, vol. 162, pp. 1243–1248.

Hardt M., Negri A. (2004). *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin Books. New York

Hooks B., Nadotti M. (2020). *Elogio del margine/Scrivere al buio*, Tamu Edizioni, Napoli.

Koolhaas R. (2021). *Countryside, A Report*. Taschen, Cologne.

Lefebvre H. (1973). *La rivoluzione urbana*, Armando, Roma.

Linebaugh P. (2008). *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London.

Oldenburg R. (1989). *The Great Good Place*, Da Capo Press, Boston.

Ostrom E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Mosse D. (1997). The Symbolic Making of a Common Property Resource: History, Ecology and Locality in a Tank-Irrigated Landscape in South India. *Development and Change*, vol. 28(3), pp. 467–504.

Nightingale A. (2011). Beyond Design Principles: Subjectivity, Emotion, and the (Ir)Rational Commons. *Society & Natural Resources*, vol. 24(2), pp. 119–132.

Straus D., Doyle, M. (1978). The Architect as Facilitator: A New Role. *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 31(4), pp. 13–17.

Tantillo F., (2023). *L'Italia vuota: viaggio nelle aree interne*, GLF editori Laterza, Bari.