

# Working with Strangers in Saturated Space: Reclaiming and Maintaining the Urban Commons

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**Abstract:** The commons is increasingly invoked as a way to envision new worlds. One strand of commons research focuses at the local scale, on small groups in “traditional”, mostly rural societies; this research asks how commons are maintained over time. Another strand focuses on the commons at a global scale; this is political research that asks how commons can be reclaimed from a capitalist landscape. Here, I bridge these two approaches by theorizing the commons as reclaimed and maintained in the context of the city, through examining the experiences of limited-equity housing cooperatives in Washington, DC. I argue that the urban commons is marked by two distinct traits: it emerges in space that is saturated with people, competing uses, and financial investment; and it is constituted by the collective work of strangers. The challenges of reclaiming and maintaining an urban commons are substantial, but the need for them is urgent.

**Keywords:** commons, urban commons, limited-equity cooperatives, Washington, DC, housing

## Introduction

Scholars and activists increasingly invoke the urban commons. We do so with good reason: the commons calls up a way of collective self-organization outside capitalist logic, and the urban is a compelling site of struggle and desire. Put the “urban” together with the “commons”, and we have rich potential for imagining new ways of collective life. But it’s not as simple as crafting a new phrase: there is something theoretically and materially distinct, I argue, about the urban commons. A commons is a resource that is both collectively owned and/or managed by its members or users; and is valued by its members for its everyday use, rather than for its potential monetary exchange on the market (Nonini 2007). Put more precisely, commoning, as a social process, is a way of collectively managing the resources needed to sustain life (Linebaugh 2008). The urban commons, I argue here, is marked by two traits that set it apart from the commons more broadly understood: the urban commons is enacted in saturated space, by which I mean space that is already densely packed with people, competing uses, and capitalist investment; and the urban commons is constituted by the coming together of strangers. These traits make practicing the urban commons more challenging than commoning in other environments. But these traits make commoning in cities even more necessary. As the world continues to urbanize, and theoretical attention continues to focus on the city, a clear understanding of how the urban commons works is critical.

I use the experience of limited-equity housing cooperatives in Washington, DC as a prism through which to theorize the urban commons. Limited-equity cooperatives, or LECs, are owned collectively by their members, as is any housing cooperative. The difference is that LEC members purchase their membership shares at very low rates, and then must sell those shares for similarly low rates should they choose to leave the co-op. This structure allows for home-ownership opportunities for low-income people, while keeping the housing affordable for future residents as well. It essentially removes the housing from the real estate market, with the goal of keeping the housing very affordable for members (Saegert and Benitez 2005; Sazama 2000). The benefits of this housing are many: residents have more control over their dwelling space than they did as renters; they are often able to form a supportive, family-like community; they have a stability of tenure that renting does not provide; and, above all, their housing costs are kept at affordable rates. LECs, I and others argue, are a form of commons that can help provide the basis for less commodified forms of life (see, for example, Eizenberg 2011). Yet, because these co-ops have no landlords or higher authorities to which to turn, this housing also requires much collective labor on the part of members to maintain. LECs exist in substantial numbers in New York City, and also exist in Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, and a few other cities. Washington, DC has more LECs per capita than any other jurisdiction in the United States, due in large part to city policy, crafted in the 1970s and 1980s, that gives tenants the right to collectively buy their buildings should their landlords choose to sell (Huron 2014; Sazama 2000). Washington is therefore a good place to analyze the range of experiences of this form of housing.

My analysis is based on a three-year research project examining 10 current and former LECs in Washington, DC. The bulk of my data comes from archival sources and from 50 in-depth interviews: 10 interviews with people, like community organizers, developers, and lawyers, who helped tenants associations start LECs; and 40 interviews with current and former members of the 10 LECs studied. In addition, I made site visits to all 10 of the co-ops, observed membership meetings at many of them, and engaged in participant observation in one. My sample of 10 LECs represents a diversity of co-op size (number of units ranged from four to 90), date of founding (1979–2004), demographics of membership (from relatively homogenous in terms of race and class to relatively diverse), and geographic location in the city (they were located in six of the city's eight wards, in a range of neighborhood types).

## Theorizing the Commons

The idea of the commons goes back centuries and spans continents. Early Judeo-Christian thought includes conceptions of the earth as a commons that could provide for all beings (Hart 2006). The English commons were spaces peasants used to make a living, via pasturing animals and collecting food, fuel, and materials (Marx 1973; Neeson 1993; Thompson 1963). The commons was an important element, too, in the early United States: in the eighteenth century Commonwealth of Massachusetts, “proprietors” of a commons were legally enabled to use the powers normally granted towns to regulate the commons through assessing taxes,

electing officers, and passing by-laws (Handlin and Handlin 1969). Of course, in order to create this colonial commons, colonists first had to enclose the common lands worked by the native peoples of New England (Cronon 2003). Today, self-regulation of collective resources is everyday behavior for people in many parts of the world, particularly in the global South: Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen (2001), for instance, describe efforts of people in Papua New Guinea to defend their commons from privatization.

The idea and practice of the commons has struggled to survive in a world increasingly governed by capitalist economies intermeshed with state regulation. Ecologist Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons", published in the journal *Science* in 1968, became a seminal argument against the commons. Hardin argues that human overpopulation and the resulting overexploitation of natural resources will lead inevitably to ecological disaster. To prove his point, he engages in a thought experiment: imagine, he says, a group of herdsman who share a grazing area. Each man owns a herd of cattle, but none of them owns the land on which the cattle graze; it is a commons. It is to the individual advantage of each herdsman, Hardin argues, to continually add more cattle to his stock, even though the cumulative effect of each herdsman adding more cattle will eventually lead to depletion of the commons. The benefit of adding cattle accrues immediately to the individual owners of the herds, while the cost of degrading the pasture is borne in the long term by all the herdsman as a whole. "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons", Hardin writes, in an oft-quoted passage. "Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all" (1968:1244). Hardin's idea that resources held in common would inevitably lead to tragic outcomes has been enormously influential, becoming, as two commons scholars note, "the dominant framework within which social scientists portray environmental and resource issues" (McCay and Acheson 1987:1).

But that framework has begun to crack. Since the mid-1980s, two streams of thought have emerged that take the commons seriously as a way to manage resources. One stream focuses on how commons are maintained over time, but does not address how commons can be reclaimed in the present; the second focuses on the need to reclaim commons, without addressing how they are maintained over the long term. I address them both in turn.

The first stream focuses on the commons as workable property regime. Concerned with "common property regimes", or CPRs, researchers have in thousands of studies documented cases of contemporary functioning commons around the world. The cases they study range from mountain meadow tenure systems in Switzerland to irrigation collectives in the Philippines. In the earlier years of CPR work, a commons was defined as a natural resource that was not owned by a single individual, and that was managed collectively by its users. Such a commons is marked by its subtractability—that is, its resources can be depleted by overuse, hence the need for management (Ostrom 1990). Over time, "common property regimes" research has been reframed as "common pool resources" study (also known by the CPR acronym), and more recently CPR researchers have evinced an interest in "the commons" more broadly, in order to think beyond the framework

of property per se. Much of the commons management scholarship has focused on five arenas: fisheries, forests, irrigation systems, water management, and animal husbandry, all of which may be loosely described as “natural resources” commons (van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007). Mainstream recognition of the importance of theorizing the commons as workable self-managed property regimes arrived in 2009, when political scientist Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in Economics for her work (Uchitelle 2009).

The second stream of commons thought is less concerned with the empirical details of commons management in particular locales, and is more concerned with what the commons means politically on a larger scale. This stream of thought is enmeshed within the alterglobalization movement, and is associated with an explicit critique of capitalism. The commons, for this group, is constituted by a vast mesh of resources and goods that, it is argued, are collectively produced and should therefore be freely available to all who participate in society—and not just to those with the wealth to buy them (Harvey 2005; Klein 2001; Starhawk 2004). This stream of thought has a more global perspective than the CPR approach, which tends to focus on local case studies. For instance, to reclaim and reinvent the commons in the global North, Mies and Benholdt-Thomsen (2001) argue, requires also defending them in the global South. Embracing a commons approach, they and others argue, requires scaling back the consumption to which citizens of the global North are accustomed, in order to create a more ecologically and socially sustainable world.

Though the two streams of commons thought differ in their approaches to documenting and theorizing the commons, they share an underlying critique of Hardin’s tragedy of the commons narrative. First, the commons is not, as Hardin sees it, open access but, rather, is regulated by a closed groups of users. For Hardin, a commons is defined by its nature as an open-access resource; that is, open to “exploitation” by anyone. To the contrary, many scholars have argued, a commons is *not* necessarily open to all; it is often only open to a certain group of people, and those people make sure to regulate it in order to ensure its long-term sustainability (Bollier 2002; Bromley 1991; Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop 1975; McCay and Acheson 1987). The fishermen of nineteenth century Naples, for example, belonged to groups that regulated access to the urban sea commons. When their collectively generated rules were broken, the reactions were, Armiero writes, “quite severe, including the burning of boats or even shootings” (2011:23). These were not commons that were open to all comers, to use however they liked. Agricultural economists Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop (1975), who theorize self-regulation of the commons, go so far as to argue that a commons is only really a commons *if* it is self-managed by a closed group of users. A commons, for them, is necessarily closed. The exclusionary nature of the commons means that the commons is not necessarily “for all”, which means that the politics that underlie commons formation is critical.

The second part of this critique is that the commons is not a static thing (as, in Hardin’s example, a field for pasture), but a social process. As Linebaugh writes: “To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst—the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses

relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature” (2008:279). If a commons is not open-access, but rather made up of a closed group of users, then defining that group of users is part of the process of commoning. Gidwani and Baviskar also emphasize the social nature of the commons, describing the commons as “a dynamic and collective resource—a variegated form of social wealth—governed by emergent custom and constantly negotiating, rebuffing, and evading the fixity of law” (2011:42).

This emphasis on the social nature of commons encourages an understanding of commons that are explicitly created by humans, including the “immaterial” world of ideas, knowledge, and culture. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, research has turned in part to the “new” commons, with a focus, most notably, on the internet and the digital and knowledge commons (Dolšak and Ostrom 2003; Hess 2000; Hess and Ostrom 2007b). The new commons are characterized by their human-made nature (Hess 2000). The knowledge commons cannot be physically bounded; nor is it marked by the subtractability that defines natural resource commons. To the contrary, when one uses knowledge, one not only does not take away from the knowledge commons; one adds to it (Hess and Ostrom 2007a). The commons has also been much more broadly theorized by alterglobalization theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009, 2004), who prefer the term “the common”.<sup>1</sup> The common, they argue, is both a source of wealth and the means of producing wealth; it is the basis of life.

Federici makes an important critique of Hardt and Negri, which guides my own theorization. Her critique is that they do not deal sufficiently with the question of social reproduction. Federici is critical generally of the tendency in the alterglobalization stream of commons theorization to be concerned more with the commons in a formal theoretical sense and less in the material way the commons can be used to support everyday existence. As she writes:

[W]ith its emphasis on knowledge and information, [Hardt and Negri’s] theory skirts the question of the reproduction of everyday life. This, however, is true of the discourse on the commons as a whole, which is mostly concerned with the formal preconditions for the existence of commons and less with the material requirements for the construction of a commons-based economy enabling us to resist dependence on wage labor and subordination to capitalist relations (2010:287).

Federici is pointing to a key disjuncture in the study of the commons. Alterglobalization theorists, to whom she is referring here, are concerned with the reclamation of the commons, and do not do much work that addresses the particulars of long-term maintenance of the commons they hope to reclaim. An overemphasis on commons reclamation can veer towards understanding the commons as a thing—a thing that needs to be retaken or even reconquered, rather than an ongoing social process. The CPR theorists, in contrast, are not particularly concerned with how commons are formed or reclaimed, but are more concerned with how they are maintained over time, which can only be understood through examining social processes. The theoretical gap between the politics of commons reclamation and the everyday practice of the long-term maintenance of commons is one that urgently needs to be filled. I do this here, in the context of the urban.

## Why an Urban Commons?

If a commons is socially generated, as Linebaugh, Federici, and others maintain, then the city—a socially constructed entity—might be the best place to look for a commons. But though urban space has been included in the definition of the “new” commons (Hess 2000), little work has been done to theorize an explicitly urban commons. The lack of theoretical attention to the urban commons is surprising given the increasing interest in cities as sites of social struggle; the call for the right to the city is one prominent manifestation of the contemporary concern for urban justice (Harvey 2008; Leavitt et al. 2009; Mitchell 2003). But most commons research does not deal explicitly with the urban.

This is not to say that scholars are not using the term “urban commons”, for in fact the term is used more and more (see, for example, Armiero 2011; Dienel et al. 2011; Gioielli 2011; Kassa 2008; Lee and Webster 2006; Mandizadza 2008; McShane 2010; Newman 2013). But much of the extant work on the urban commons takes the city as a site for the commons without theorizing what may be distinct about a specifically urban commons (with key exceptions, discussed below). Theorizing the urban is important because the very idea of the commons, as studied by both CPR researchers and political historians, has been grounded in the rural experience. Historically, the city was the place commoners were pushed *into*, when they were pushed off the common lands (Thompson 1963). The city represented the site of waged labor, and the imperative to participate in capitalism. How, then, could the city also be a site of the commons? Simply adopting the phrase “urban commons” does not address this fundamental historical question. Theorizing the urban is also important, of course, because the planet is quickly urbanizing (United Nations Population Fund 2007). If the theory of the commons cannot apply in the urban context, it will quickly become a historic relic. Pointing to this lack, a number of scholars of the commons have called for more attention to and better theorization of the urban commons (Blomley 2008; Bravo and De Moor 2008; Bresnihan and Byrne 2014; Foster 2011; McShane 2010; van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007). I turn now to examining two key characteristics of the “urban” that I argue give unique shape to the experience of the urban commons.

First, the urban is marked by saturation: cities have relatively high densities of population compared with rural areas, host a relatively dense variety of land uses, and are packed with financial investment. A relatively large number of humans on a relatively small amount of space means that people are forced to either share or compete for resources. Sundaresan focuses on the sharing: as he puts it in his work on the urban commons of a lake in Bangalore, India, urban life is marked by “intense sharing of various kinds of resources that support individual and communal capacities” (2011:72). Harvey, in contrast, focuses on the competition engendered by urban life: he argues that there may be instances in which different urban commons come into direct competition with each other. “One commons”, he writes, “... may need to be protected at the expense of another” (2011:102). Community gardens, for example, have been theorized as a form of commons in the city (Eizenberg 2011; Foster 2011; Linn 2007). Yet in New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1980s, community gardens were seen as taking up land that could be used for a different form of commons: affordable housing (Schmelzkopf 1995).

Relatively high densities of population, particularly when land is used as an investment vehicle, can create pressures that make commoning harder. The experience of collectively self-regulating resources in the context of highly saturated space is, I argue, one of the defining aspects of the urban commons.

Second, the urban is a place where strangers meet. In more rural and small-scale environments, commoning is grounded in a community of people who have known each other for years, perhaps going back generations. But urban spaces are places that bring strangers together—and the coming together of strangers holds the potential for conflict (Sennett 1970). In her research on community gardens as commons in New York City, Eizenberg (2011) argues that the community of the gardens is constituted through working together. Though Eizenberg does not theorize this collective work as a specifically urban trait, I would suggest that strangers coming together to work on a common project is a distinctly urban phenomenon. The experience of working together with strangers—people who do not come from the same place geographically, culturally, or perhaps even politically—is, I argue, the second defining trait of the urban commons.

If we take the urban to be marked by saturated space and the encountering of strangers, then a commons built in a city would, by definition, need to take these challenges into account. Analyzing the experience of LECs in Washington, DC sheds light on the challenges—and necessity—of reclaiming and maintaining an urban commons.

## **Reclaiming a Commons in the City**

We begin with the reclaiming. It can be much more difficult to reclaim a commons in cities, where space tends to be highly saturated and fellow would-be commoners are strangers, than in non-urban areas, where population densities and competition for space are lower, and social bonds may be deeper.

First, the saturated nature of cities creates a great deal of pressure on urban land. Cities are already-commodified spaces, where property lines have been drawn and ownership declared at a fine-grained scale. City space is thick with financial investment, and competition for commodified space among a dense population of urban dwellers drives up prices. A major point of pressure lies in the fact that urban commons must be wrenched from the capitalist landscape of cities. In Washington, DC, when tenants exercise their right to purchase their buildings and convert them into LECs, they must pay their former landlords what are essentially market prices for their buildings. They do this often after years of enduring slum conditions, as their landlords have systematically disinvested in their buildings. In order to reclaim a space from a capitalist urban landscape, would-be commoners must participate in capitalist processes.

The case of one former LEC illustrates this dynamic. The building that was once home to this co-op is situated on the northern edge of downtown DC, an area that in the 1980s was just beginning to boom. The building was a rental at the time, and was in poor shape; letters of complaint show that tenants had been organizing against poor living conditions there since at least 1981. In February 1986, a pair of investor brothers bought the building for \$425,000. Just three

months later, the new owners informed the tenants of their intention to sell the building. Because DC law requires landlords to give tenants the first opportunity to purchase the building, the brothers offered it for sale to the tenants. Their offer was for \$1.6 million—nearly four times the amount for which they had purchased it just three months earlier. The tenants rejected the offer, but were determined to stay in their housing. For several years, the tenants fought with their landlords over maintenance issues. Finally, in 1989, the tenant association was able to purchase the building for \$864,300, with assistance from the city, and convert it into a LEC. The landlords walked away with a tidy profit—a return of over 100%, after just three years—and the tenants were left with an old, undermaintained building. If tenants were seizing their own housing without regard for landlord compensation, as writers like Colin Ward describe (see Wilbert and White 2011), that would be a different matter. But tenants must take out mortgages (typically low-cost city financing is combined with market-rate private financing), and they must, of course, pay interest on those loans. This is a commons wrested from capitalist land, but still beholden to capitalism.

Second, reclaiming a commons in urban space typically requires working with strangers. Ostrom notes that one of the marks of successful commons is that their members “share a past, and expect to share a future” (1990:88). People who have lived together for generations past and believe that they and their descendants will be living together and sharing resources for generations to come may have a different attitude towards collective governance of resources than those who do not feel this long-term commonality with their neighbors. It therefore may appear that reclaiming a commons in a city would be more difficult than in a more traditional community: the necessary commonality, in the city of strangers, is weak or absent. The reality, as I discovered in my research, is more complicated. There appears to be a dialectical relationship between commons formation and community formation: one does not necessarily precede the other.

The reclaiming of a commons often comes at a point of crisis: for low-income tenants in DC, the point of crisis is when their landlord informs them that the building will be sold, and the tenants realize that they are in danger of losing their homes. This could become a time of chaos and unraveling. But as Rebecca Solnit (2009) notes in her study of collective response to disaster, deep human bonds of caring and mutual aid are often forged in crisis among people who had previously been strangers. In the LECs I studied, tenants had often been relative strangers before their respective crises hit. But when crisis hit, they took action, which required working together, and the collective activity of reclaiming a commons generated community among these groups of tenants. They had to work together to form a tenants association; find a lawyer; find financing from the city and at least one bank; select a developer (in almost all cases, tenants use some of their financing to repair and remodel their severely dilapidated housing); form a cooperative association, including writing corporate by-laws; make scores of decisions about remodeling; decide on house rules; search for new members, if necessary; and many more tasks. It was this collective labor that brought them together.

One former member of an LEC, an Ethiopian immigrant, described the way in which the tenants in his 15-unit building came together in the late 1980s when



forced to confront the imminent sale of their building: “It brings you together as a unit, 15 families, as a unit, it brings you! You discuss, you share their problems. This is the innermost thing. So it brings you as a collective, and it gives you confidence too, really, to decide on things.” Despite seeming barriers of language and culture—his building was made up of Spanish-speaking Central Americans, Amharic-speaking Ethiopians, and English-speaking African-Americans—the tenants association went on to successfully purchase their building. Coming together as a group, they built the collective confidence to make the many decisions they needed to make in order to take control over their housing. This is not to imply that coming together at the time of crisis is an easy ride. Co-op members describe fights they waged over all sorts of decisions on the rocky road to collective ownership. Undoubtedly many tenants associations, unstudied here, failed in their attempts to form LECs, perhaps because of problems bridging differences within the group as much as financial limitations.

The specific challenges of reclaiming a commons in the urban context, as demonstrated here, are (1) coming up with the capital necessary to remove a resource from an urban landscape saturated with financial investment, and (2) building close working relationships with strangers—people of different cultures and languages. Tenants work as hard as they do to reclaim their housing commons because of the urgent necessity of the project.

## **The Necessity of the Urban Commons**

Just as there may be particular challenges to reclaiming a commons in a city, there may also be a particular necessity for the urban commons. Cities are often places of intense financial pressures; people are less connected to the subsistence way of life that may be easier to pursue in a non-urban area, and thus more dependent on selling their labor for wages and paying rent for their homes.

The primary need the urban commons meets in my study is the need for affordable housing within the context of an environment that is saturated with commodification: a place to live that is safe, decent, and in a good location, connected to the social worlds of the occupants. LECs in DC are marked by their affordability. The average monthly fee for the LECs in my sample, in 2011, was less than half the 2011 Fair Market Rent (FMR) for the DC area (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2011). These data follow a larger, earlier study that demonstrated that the average monthly housing costs for LECs in DC in 2003 was about half the FMR for similar units (CNHED 2004). This is highly affordable housing that enables members, as Federici notes, to “resist dependence on wage labor and subordination to capitalist relations” (2010:287).

DC LEC members describe taking advantage of their affordable housing in many ways. One woman was able to stay home and raise her eight children while her husband worked. Another woman was able to quit a relatively high-paying but stressful job, and instead take a lower-paying job that gave her the flexibility to take time off to help her mother with co-op affairs, and to play softball on a neighborhood team. One member was able to quit full-time employment altogether, and piece together a living as an actor. One member was able to provide her sister,

who suffered from a chronic illness, with an affordable place to live, and to help raise her sister's daughter, of whom she is enormously proud. Another quit his job as an engineer to pursue his love of poetry. Several took advantage of their low-cost housing to devote themselves to low-paid or unpaid activist work. And many members described simply being able to live lives on the economic margins with a bit more grace and dignity than if they were squeezed into smaller, high-priced rentals in town, or shunted out to the more affordable far edges of the metropolitan area. These members spoke of being able to buy their children the things they wanted, pay off their consumer debts, and invest in fixing up their apartments in ways they liked. Not everyone, it is important to be clear, uses the commons as a basis for a life less enmeshed in capitalism; one member described spending the money he saved on housing on playing the stock market. But most of my respondents described ways that the commons allowed them to live lives less bound by capitalist imperatives.

The second major need the urban commons meets is in giving members control over their housing. While "affordable housing" exists in many cities, in the form of traditional public housing, privately owned but publicly subsidized housing, housing rental vouchers, and other forms, very little housing that is truly affordable is also controlled by its occupants; typically, an outside landlord is making the rules and calling the shots. In a commons, members collectively control their space. LEC members describe making decisions large and small about their homes, including how to renovate their units, what kind of kitchen tiles to choose for the renovation, whether to allow pets, whether to refinance their mortgages, what types of flowers to plant in their front yards, whether to invest in a security camera system, how to deal with family members of co-op members who appear to be dealing drugs, who should be allowed to move into the co-op, and who, crucially, needs to be asked to leave. The transition from letting the landlord do all this work to taking it on as a collective can be rough. One LEC member described the difficulty of collective governance:

It's just us. There's no leader or organization that tells you what to do. It's just us. So if you have a problem and you want something done, we have to do it ourselves. And a lot of people came in here not used to that way of working. They came into this used to being in a position of submission. And they would complain that this is happening, and no one is doing anything! The only way this is going to happen if one of us does it. But I don't think some people could ever adjust to that.

This member is not alone in agonizing over the difficulty of collective control. As she points out, not everyone came into the co-op with the same attitude, or the same experiences in self-governance; they came from different places, as strangers, and had to learn how to work together in order to gain collective control.

Another LEC member compared the difference between living in her building as a tenant, and then later, as a member of an LEC. She talks in terms of the power residents have gained since purchasing their complex:

It gives us the power to control things ... Different things. We have an interviewing committee, for instance, several of the board members are on it, and we get to actually meet the people who want to move in, and of course we do the police check, that

background check and all that stuff to make sure you can get some quality people in here. And that means a lot to me, because before, we had no say, when it was a rental property. I remember the first year I was here, and the refrigerator I had was practically—you went to open the door, you had to do it carefully, because you felt like the door was going to fall off, that’s how dilapidated it was [laughs]! And it took me forever, constantly calling the rental office, saying “I need a new refrigerator, I’ve got two little kids, the food’s going bad”. But as owners, if somebody calls us ... then we just go out and get a new refrigerator, we don’t have to wait and jump through hoops. Or a new stove, or whatever. And that’s what makes the difference. We have a little power, I guess that’s the key word. As board members, and as owners, too.

When the apartment complex was a rental, this woman felt very little sense of power; this changed once the residents purchased the complex. The city is often theorized as a place of alienation; an urban commons, in contrast, gives people an opportunity to connect and collectively empower themselves.

There is tremendous need for greater enactment of the urban commons: a need to reclaim more spaces of all kinds by removing them from the capitalist landscape and governing them collectively. But it is the long-term maintenance of what’s been reclaimed that is the true challenge of the commons. And it may be particularly difficult to maintain a commons in the urban context. It is to the question of maintenance that I now turn.

## **Maintaining a Commons in the City**

For all the difficulty of reclaiming a commons, it is maintaining it over time that is the greater challenge. For once a commons has been reclaimed from a capitalist urban landscape, its continued existence is continually threatened. In the case of LECs, long-term existence is threatened by two primary forces, each of which map on to what I am arguing are the twin traits of the urban commons.

First, long-term maintenance of LECs is particularly difficult in urban environments, saturated with capital investment. These are environments in which space is expensive and sought after. In this context, once low-income tenants finally take ownership, many at some point start thinking about the potential exchange value of their homes—and start wanting to sell out. LECs, that is, are threatened by the promise of the short-term individualized gain that can come from dissolving the commons. In being caught in this tension between maintaining the collectivity of the commons and being co-opted into capitalist markets, LEC members are hardly alone; commoners from the English peasantry to the native peoples of New England have succumbed to pressures of enclosure, to individualize and monetize resources previously managed in common (Cronon 2003; Goldstein 2013). This does not make them unethical individuals, but rather points to the difficulty of maintaining commons in highly commodified landscapes. The LECs in Washington, DC must retain their non-commodified form as long as they are receiving city subsidy in the form of a low-interest loan. But if they are able to pay off the city’s loan without receiving additional public subsidies, they have the option of converting to a market-rate structure. Some LECs have chosen to go this route, while others have steadfastly held onto their affordable status.

LECs that have elected to remain affordable even once they have the option of “going market-rate” have often done so because they have a core of members who remember the fight to purchase the building in the first place, and are dedicated to maintaining an affordable housing resource in their neighborhoods. The mission of the place is in their bones, and they are not going to give it up. One early member of a co-op that was founded in 1979 and remains limited equity says, in response to a question about why they have not converted to market-rate:

I think it would take a couple of us dying off [laughs], and my daughter too [who also lives in the co-op]. Because we incorporated to preserve affordable housing in Glover Park. That was kind of our mission. Other than our co-op, I don't know of any affordable housing in Glover Park, and maybe not even in Ward 3 [the city's wealthiest ward]. And the location is excellent. And those of us who went through the early stuff, which I guess there are maybe four of us, are still really committed to preserving affordable housing.

The dedication of these “maybe four” co-op members is admirable. But this is an apartment complex made up of 62 units. Someday the people who are committed to the commons may die, or move out, or change their minds. For a commons to be maintained over generations, new members must understand the importance of the commons for themselves and for future members. Just as importantly, long-term maintenance of the commons requires members to care about the ability of future, as-yet-unknown members—strangers—to access this vital resource.

In several of the extant LECs I investigated, members were genuinely conflicted over the idea of converting to market-rate ownership. Some members, like the woman quoted above, were dedicated to maintaining their spaces as non-commodified, collective housing options for working people. But other members wondered if it might not be better for themselves and their neighbors to dissolve their LECs, take the money they could make from selling their units in a hot real estate market, and use that money to make other choices. For example, the immigrant leader of a successful LEC in the gentrified Adams Morgan neighborhood led her co-op through conversion to market-rate condominium status, sold her unit, and used the substantial proceeds to buy land and a home in her native El Salvador. For someone who had worked in low-wage jobs most of her life, this was something of a personal feat. But this action, of course, destroyed this commons as a resource for others like herself in the future.

Dissolution of the commons affects members unevenly, depending on personal resources they each bring to bear. In 2004, for example, the membership of one co-op narrowly voted to convert to condominium status; but only three of the LEC members were able to afford to buy into the new condominium structure, and the rest appear to have returned to the rental market. At the time that I interviewed her in 2010, one elderly former member had moved twice since the co-op had dissolved six years previously, and was in the process of packing up to move yet again. She had received a buyout of about \$4000 from the developer leading the condominium conversion process. This was not enough to enable her to secure quality, stable housing in the wake of losing her collective ownership.

The danger of commons dissolution is very real, and has material effects on people's lives.

If the first challenge of maintaining commons is resisting the seduction of the short-term, individualized gains that can result from the dissolution of the commons, the second challenge is ensuring working relationships among cooperative members over time. Once the exciting but exhausting struggle to purchase and renovate their buildings is over, co-op members often find their commonality receding. If strangers have gone through the reclamation process together, they are no longer strangers. But paradoxically, once they have succeeded in reclaiming their space from the capitalist environment, they now may return to a position of having fairly little in common. Certainly they often seem to lose their common zeal and drive for collective work. The Ethiopian former LEC member quoted above reflects on the difficulty of maintaining a sense of collectivity over time: "After you become a cooperative, then it is a new problem. Then you have to maintain it. It is easy, really, to bring people [to organize the co-op], you tell them, they come, but then you have to maintain it, it is not the same." In this co-op, once the crisis was over and they all owned their building, this was when the hard work really began—and this was when differences and conflicts among people began spilling out. The man quoted above believes that the real challenge to keeping a collective project like a co-op going is the individualizing nature of life in a capitalist society. He explains:

Here [in the U.S.], because of this division of labor, the alienation is further gone, really. People in my hometown [in Ethiopia], for example, we live together, we don't even have an extra room or anything, or anything, we live together, we decide things, we share everything. Because of limitations. Here [in the US], people can afford to be individual, and they have their room. At the same time, when they have their rooms, they are devoid of their families, they don't share their family's interest, I mean really, they are different. So they've now grown to be individually, further, further. But, for people who are poor still, they depend on somebody. The affluent people, they are the ones that have the luxury. These people [in Ethiopia] I mean really, they might not have their own, even here, separate rooms, they might sleep together, they have contact with their families more, they get together with their families more. So they are not more alienated. Because, because, this [the US] is a capitalist country.

This man tried to start a cooperative business based in his co-op, which he envisioned as a way to generate jobs for co-op members, and as a way to keep the cooperative spirit alive in his building—but he was unable to raise the necessary start-up capital. He ultimately moved out, disillusioned with people's ability to work collectively in a capitalist society. Several years after he left, his co-op converted to a market-rate condominium status.

In other LECs, a core of original founders remains dedicated to doing the work of the co-op, but as new people move in, they may take the commons for granted. One member wondered whether people who moved in after the collective purchase process had been completed would recognize the importance of participating in the work of the co-op: "The community spirit", she worried, "it will lessen". Another member told me that the very affordability of her co-op works

against it: people move in for the “cheap rent”, and not because they want to be part of an ongoing enterprise of collective ownership. If newcomers to the commons have lived most of their lives in capitalist structures, explaining how the commons works to them can be a challenge.

Several co-op leaders mitigated against this problem by making a point to invite trusted family members to move into the co-op—people who understood what the co-op was all about. The children and nieces and nephews of co-op founders I interviewed all seemed to appreciate the work their mothers and aunts had put into helping establish their homes. And they all seemed to participate in the work of ongoing maintenance, in different ways: one spent her day off each week helping her mother in the co-op office; another was on the security committee of her co-op, which was led by her aunt; a young man represented his co-op, of which his aunt was one of the founders, in meetings at which community members attempted to organize against the coming of a Walmart to their neighborhood. Giving preference to trusted family members can, of course, veer easily into nepotism. It appears that preferring family members is one way co-op members may sometimes skirt the challenges of working with strangers; that this strategy is necessary points to how challenging working with strangers can be.

Indeed, the strongest co-ops seem to be those that cultivate a sense of “family”, be it biological or social. A number of LEC members spoke of the “family feel” of their buildings. One member referred to his co-op’s community room as “the family room”. Another longtime co-op member, an HIV-positive African-American man in his 50s, relates how, over time, his co-op has become like a family to him:

This building, the [members] in it, we have a building family. And that feels very good. It feels very good. People care about each other, they watch out for each other. I had a roommate, a very close friend here, for almost 20 years, who passed away in December. And this is a teeny, tiny apartment ... So that’s a long time to be in a small space with someone. So it’s very different now. And I’m just getting used now, to basically living here alone. And so it helped to be living in a building where I knew the people, people sort of knew what was going on with me, and were very kind about that. Even the little boy one day, downstairs, a 13-year-old boy, just came up to me and said, how *are* you? And I was so amazed that he—I didn’t even know what he was talking about, because it just didn’t even occur to me that he could be expressing concern because he knew my friend had died. He said, well, how are you doing? Are you okay up there? And I was so touched by that. Because this kid is 12 or 13. I wouldn’t even guess that he even knew I was in the building [laughs], or paid any attention to me whatsoever, any of that. But people do care about each other.

This man is part of a community that started off as strangers and has become a family, even across difference. The possibilities for extending such commoning across race, class, sexuality, age, and culture are exciting.

The twin pressures of the urban commons discussed here—the pressure existing within the context of saturated space, and of working collectively with strangers—are intertwined. The pressures of life in a capitalist urban environment leave less time for nurturing bonds with family and friends, let alone creating new ties with strangers. Yet in order to change the balance of power in the contested urban environment, what is precisely needed is to create networks with people who were

once strangers but could become allies and even friends. This is the specific challenge of the urban commons: to weave new networks of trust and care amid the alienating pressures of the capitalist cityscape.

## Conclusion

An urban commons, I have argued here, is not just a commons that happens to be located in a city. It is, rather, a specific way of experiencing collective work, among strangers, to govern non-commodified resources in spaces saturated with people, conflicting uses, and capitalist investment. One challenge is to reclaim the commons: to work with strangers to wrench resources from a capitalist environment. A second, and perhaps more difficult, challenge is to maintain this commons over the long haul, when those participating in its maintenance may still be relative strangers, and the threat of enclosure constantly looms. A close examination of the experiences of LECs in Washington, DC points out both the difficulties of and need for the urban commons.

As scholars and activists move forward with calls for reclaiming the urban commons, it is crucial to recognize the particular challenges to commoning urban space. Rather than romanticize the urban commons, or assume they exist in certain utopian ways, we must critically examine how they are reclaimed, how they are maintained over time, and how they succeed and fail. Examining the urban commons through a lens that is both empirical and political, we can gain a greater understanding of how commoning works more broadly—and how new worlds can be built.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Hardt and Negri speak not of the *commons*, but of the *common*. They explain the distinction: “We are reluctant to call this the commons because that term refers to pre-capitalist shared spaces that were destroyed by the advent of private property. Although more awkward, ‘the common’ highlights the philosophical content of the term and emphasizes that this is not a return to the past but a new development” (2004: xv). I disagree that the commons are a thing of the past; my point in this paper is that they exist and are produced continuously. However, though I am concerned with the commons, when referring to Hardt and Negri’s ideas, I use the term “the common” to be consistent with their work.

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