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Commoning Artist-Led Housing

A number of artist-led organisations and groups across the UK have recently launched housing projects. These organisations are providing housing for pragmatic reasons, as well as to develop collective and critical artistic practices in response to the housing sector and urban realm. Jonathan Orlek introduces 'artist-led housing' and explores how artistic approaches to housing intersects with practices and institutions of commoning. Jonathan draws from collaborative work undertaken with the artist-led organisation East Street Arts. From 2016-2019 he embedded himself within East Street Arts and undertook an ethnographic study of an artist-led housing project they have initiated called *Artist House 45*.

Artist-Led Housing

Artist-led housing projects allow artists to be resident within neighbourhoods for extended periods of time. They create opportunities for occupants to act as engaged residents within local communities as well as practicing artists. Additionally, an integration of alternative/experimental forms of living into artistic work is often actively supported, for example through live/work spatial arrangements, sharing economies, the provision of a basic stipend irrespective of formal creative outputs, or the accommodation of atypical family units.

Artist-led housing projects have hosted writers, performers, architects, artists, sociologists and researchers, amongst others. Whilst some residents within artist-led housing projects would explicitly articulate their practice as socially engaged art, as a way to emphasise the use of social relations and participatory processes in their work, others have engaged communities in debates, participatory practices and urban interventions more obliquely. A commonality which connects artist-led housing practices across artforms is the development of situated and site-responsive practices which would otherwise be precluded by the separation of space and contexts in which to live (long-term) and work.

Collectives of artists have engaged with and occupied housing in a number of ways and the construction, occupation and management of housing has been integral to the development of artist-led practices from the 1970s. Different relationships between groups of artists, art institutions and housing have been adopted. The Western Front, Vancouver (1972–present), and *Womanhouse*, California (1972) are two very different projects involving the occupation of a house by a group of artists. Both projects were undertaken in opposition to limitations and exclusions within established art institutions and resulted in a merging of domestic experiences and art. In contrast, Martha Rosler's exhibition *If You Lived Here...* (Dia Art Foundation, 1989) and *Medical Care*

for Homeless People by WochenKlausur (Vienna Secession, 1992) both turned high profile institutional invitations into collective projects which sought to provide material support for homeless groups and respond to issues around vacant housing. More recently projects such as *The Blue House* initiated by Jeanne van Heeswijk (2005–2009) and Casco Art Institute's *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (2009-2012) explored the roles and hosted arrangements that an art institution could adopt by moving into, and becoming, a house.

Art, Housing and Commoning Institutions

The commons offers a way of considering spaces, communities of users, and/or ownership models beyond notions of public (state control) and private (market driven). It is used to escape the dichotomy of public versus private altogether, thereby creating openings and criteria for new ways of being-in-common. In the UK the commons traditionally referred to uncultivated land surrounding villages or towns which was accessed by local communities and used to undertake life sustaining activities such as grazing animals, collecting wood and picking food. Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize winning work in economics brought ideas about the commons to prominence. Using game theory Ostrom showed that natural resources (such as forests) can be effectively managed by a community of users, through the creation of self-governing institutions. More recently, ideas about the commons have been used to consider how urban resources, including housing, can be developed, managed and shared in more just and ecological ways. To this end, the commons has been aligned with urban spatial theories and used to investigate the role that participatory and self-organised practices can play in the development of cities. In this context, and consistent with 'right to the city' arguments, the commons refers to the access and management of material spaces, such as housing, as well as more elusive, psychological spaces such as the space of imagination or play.¹ Lauren Berlant summarises this double status of the commons as follows: 'The common usually refers to an orientation toward life and value unbound by concepts and divisions of property, and points to the world both as a finite resource that is running out *and* an inexhaustible fund of human consciousness or creativity.'²

Artist-led housing contributes to discussions about housing and the commons by merging the provision and management of 'real' housing with more elusive, inexhaustible, practices like imagining domestic space differently and using hosted arrangements to play with public/private boundaries. In other words, artist-led housing practices are not limited to envisaged or prefigurative common spaces; they exist both as collectively produced artworks and material, architectural, houses.

¹ Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal, 'Introduction: The Social (Re)Production of Architecture in "Crisis-Riddled" Times', in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice*, ed. Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (London: Routledge, 2017), 3–4.

² Lauren Berlant, 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 396. (Original emphasis.)

Existing studies of housing and the commons have identified the use of 'nested enterprises' as a way of scaling up self-governing practices.³ An example of this nesting can be seen within current Community Land Trust (CLT) networks in the UK. CLTs are nonprofit, community-led, organisations that have been used to develop and maintain permanently affordable community assets, including housing. On a national level the National CLT Network supports member organisations in England and Wales. Regional organisations within this network, such as London CLT or Leeds Community Homes, support multiple projects within a particular geographic catchment. Within individual CLT projects nested principles continue to apply, with co-operative decision-making facilitated through working groups nested within steering groups. Nesting is used here to describe a series of democratically managed memberships operating inside of one another—as in a nest of tables or Matryoshka dolls.

Artist-led organisations do not nest in this way. Nor do they coalesce into a coherent housing movement with shared characteristics, demands and goals.⁴ Artist-led organisations have more complex and indeterminate relationships of scale between individual and collective practices, often combining artistic programming, artist support and commissioning responsibilities as well as self-initiated project delivery. They use open-ended processes, chance encounters and improvisation; artistic strategies which do not align with pre-determined community-based models of participation but instead aim for 'a permanent process of instituting'.⁵ Closer, maybe, to a birds nest, or a site-responsive practice of social and material assemblage. (If this risks being too twee or lacking in collective action, for nest the dictionary also has 'a place filled with undesirable people, activities, or things'—to emphasise solidarities with activist practices and fugitive publics; and question collective desires.)

In *Common Space: The City as Commons*, Stavros Stavrides emphasises the need for commoning practices to continually overflow the boundaries of a community.⁶ This is important to avoid commoning practices from enclosing themselves, forming collectively privatised spaces which exclude strangers and avoid frictions caused by difference. Stavrides draws attention to 'institutions of expanding commoning,' which 'necessarily presuppose an ever-expanding community of potential collaborators'.⁷ For institutions of expanding commoning to be continually open and malleable to newcomers, they must be always in-the-making: 'Expanding commoning does not expand according to pre-existing patterns; it literally invents itself.'⁸ Artist-run projects, including housing, are formed through creative strategies which permanently escape easy

³ Aimee Felstead, Kevin Thwaites, and James Simpson, 'A Conceptual Framework for Urban Commoning in Shared Residential Landscapes in the UK', *Sustainability* 11, no. 21 (January 2019): 6119.

⁴ For a broader discussion on this, see: Emma Coffield, 'Artist-Run Initiatives: A Study of Cultural Construction' (Newcastle, Newcastle University, 2015), 41.

⁵ Gerald Raunig, 'Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming', eipcp, 2006, para. 3. (Original emphasis.)

⁶ Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 31.

⁷ Stavrides, 39.

⁸ Stavrides, 43.

alignment with neatly nested structures; an approach which, at least on the surface, seems to marry well with practices of expanding commoning.

Artist House 45

Artist House 45 is a back-to-back terrace house located in Beeston, south Leeds, which is owned by Leeds City Council.⁹ The first *Artist House 45* residents were Toby Lloyd and Andrew Wilson (Lloyd-Wilson), an artist duo who lived in the house for almost three years (January 2015–September 2017). Following Lloyd-Wilson's residency East Street Arts reflected on the project for six months (October 2017–April 2018). After this period of reflection East Street Arts developed a phase called 'Portraits of the Street' (May 2018–April 2019) in which multiple artists (including writers, painters, researchers and photographers) were invited to live in *Artist House 45* for up to three months and develop a portrait of the house and neighbourhood in response. As part of this phase I moved into the house for a month as a Researcher in Residence (May 2018). More recently, Sophie Chapman and Kerri Jefferis (Sophie + Kerri), an artist duo, moved into the house (May–September 2019). Alongside this programming, I have been developing strategies to question, map and support *Artist House 45* as a practice of expanding commoning. Without pre-determined organisational and common structures, how can *Artist House 45* be communicated within East Street Arts and translated across discrete residencies?

Lloyd-Wilson slowly settled within the neighbourhood as active and engaged citizens, introducing themselves to neighbours first and foremost as residents and blurring distinctions between their life and work. I used collaborative mapping to explore how this led to the 'carrying' of participatory urban practices across different sites and situations. Together we drew connections between visible artistic events and objects and 'under the radar' exchanges. Cut up, fragile, and a bit scrappy, these mappings prompted a discussion about the messy, sometimes ambiguous, connections between national events Lloyd-Wilson have hosted and civic actions in Beeston, including local green space campaigns. As well as making social processes within Lloyd-Wilsons work visible, these mappings also started to shape and change the perception of the project from within East Street Arts.

As *Artist House 45* shifted to a programme of shorter residencies, I questioned how common spaces and knowledge could be passed on and kept alive when residents left. I introduced a 'handover pack' to allow research I had undertaken to be taken on and added to by Sophie + Kerri during their residency. This included written work and drawn observations, including situated experiences from my own time spent living in the house. Although only a modest initial intervention within East Street Arts' wider programming activity, this evolving 'handover pack' begins to explore how commoning practices developed within discrete phases of

⁹ Prior to East Street Arts' involvement, the house was vacant and in need of renovations for a number of years. East Street Arts have leased the property, initially for five years, at a peppercorn rent in exchange for undertaking renovation work required to return it to social housing.

Artist House 45 can be translated across residencies. It also starts to consider how information and situated experiences from discrete residencies can contribute to an ongoing and expanding resource facilitating organisational- and self-reflection.

An open question: how can projects such as *Artist House 45* be expanded beyond one-off pilot projects, whilst retaining their status as both collectively produced artworks and at the same time finite material houses? A starting point in answering this might be Teddy Cruz's proposition, in the forward to *Social Housing—Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice* that: 'We—artists/architects—need to be the developers of our own housing (the new site of intervention is the developer's spreadsheet).'¹⁰ This could include exploring how artist-led organisations could leverage or expand into community development models such as co-operative housing and Community Land Trusts—and in the processes form new and hybrid nests of expanding commons.

¹⁰ Teddy Cruz, 'Foreword: Rethinking Housing, Citizenship, and Property', in *Social Housing—Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice*, ed. Andrea Phillips and Fulya Erdemci (Amsterdam; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 7–14.