

ARCHITECTURE COMMONS

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ARCHITECTURE COMMONS

1. Common ground was the theme of the most recent Venice Biennale (2012). Participants were invited to reflect on common and shared ideas which “go beyond the prevalent professional and cultural tendencies of our time that place such emphasis on individual and isolated actions.” The Golden Lion were given to a study (by Venezuelan-based Urban Think Tank, curator Justin mcQuirk and photographer Iwan Baan) of the physical and social organization of the shared home of a community of more than 750 families in the 45 stories tall Torre David in Caracas. While the study answers the official call for common *ideas*, the Torre David itself adds another dimension: The architecture itself could perhaps be seen as a commons. This competition brief goes along with that step beyond and above the common ground, and asks what an architecture commons might be?

2. The commons in its original Medieval sense is the sharing of natural resources such as grazing land, forests, rivers and fisheries. Common resources were not state-owned or public, but privately owned land on which commoners have certain rights of use. In contrast to unclaimed or waste resources, common resources had definite owners and specific use policies. In recent times, the understanding of the term has been redeveloped and expanded to become an important theoretical and operational tool for a variety of disciplines. In a wide field ranging from activist groups to academic scholars, the commons is being investigated as an instrument to create alternatives to the current extensive privatization of public space.

3. In 1968, ecologist Garrett Hardin published his essay “The tragedy of the Commons” in the journal *Science*. It describes the dilemma caused by the situation in which multiple individuals, acting independently and rationally according to their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource even when it is clear that this is contrary to the commons long-term best interest. Hardin used a hypothetical and simplified example based on Medieval grazing land commons. A herdsman keeps adding cows to the common land. It is in his personal interest to continue to add to his herd, even if the even if the quality of the commons is temporarily or permanently damaged as a result of over grazing. The herdsman claims all of the advantages, while the damage to the common is shared by the entire group. If all herdsman acts similarly, the commons will be depleted or destroyed to the detriment of all. The commons will slowly be destroyed by over-use. The policy implications of this dilemma was clear to Hardin and many others at the time: The best way to sustain a common resource is either through privatization or direct state management. (Hardin, 1968)

4. In 2009 Elinor Ostrom was the first, and to date, only woman to win the Nobel prize in economics, for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons. Her work presents a criticism of Hardin's work. It is based on empirical studies of a number of common pool resources throughout the world and demonstrates how common resources can be successfully managed by groups using it, without privatization or government regulation. It brought the topic of the commons from the fringe to the forefront of scientific attention. Ostrom also contributed to the specific definition of the common goods through an expansion of an already existing classification system. (Originally by economist Paul A. Samuelson (1954) and modified in 1965 by economist James McGill Buchanan). To discuss different kinds of goods or resources in relationship to how individuals cope with diverse public problems in the world, Ostrom's system operates with four different kinds

of goods: public, private, toll and common. Common goods are characterized by a high degree of difficulty in excluding potential beneficiaries, and a low degree of subtractability (that is, other individuals' opportunities for use are not lost due to one's own use of a given good, but something is "subtracted" it). For example, clean drinking water is (or should be) a common good. From a normative view point it is difficult to exclude people from using it, because it is a defined human right. And if a person drink a glass of water, it does not restrict other individual's opportunities, even though some is subtracted. In reality, however, clean drinking water is not a common good everywhere, because roughly three billion people are actually being excluded from it. (Ostrom 2009)

The accuracy and the scope of Ostrom's classification system has been debated. Her interest is primarily in the natural or material resources, but a more precise description separates common goods into two kinds. The natural, limited resources, such as water, land, air, etc., and the immaterial and unlimited, such as culture, social practices, language, etc. In the context of the city, the two come together. There is not direct access to natural resources, the river of clean water has become the service of being able to turn on the tap. Immaterial commons is the way in which we convert the natural resources into services. (Bailey, 2013, Harvey 2011) Ostrom's classification system has also been characterized as being merely descriptive, and thus not functional as a tool for policy and operation. (Bailey, 2013)

5. It is widely agreed among contemporary theorists that Ostrom's resource-based definition of the commons is too limited when dealing with the city. Conceptualizing the commons requires three things to be present at the same time: (1) common resources as originally described in Ostrom's work. (2) A community (not necessarily geographically bound nor homogenous), which creates and sustains the commons, share the common resources and define the rules according to which they are accessed and used. (3) "to common", the verb which describes the social process that creates and reproduces the commons. This extended definition of the commons has been called a political one, having the potential to be operational in a city context. (Angelis, 2010, Bailey, 2013)

The political commons inevitably brings with it collaboration, negotiation and micro-conflictuality. Moral questions about what it means to share are not enough; *procedures* for an ongoing negotiation of all three aspects of the definition is needed. What is a common good? How is community defined without being exclusive and what does *commoning* mean? How are the commons regulated? These are fundamental questions which will need constant re-negotiation. Rather than affirming commonalities based on similarities, the commons has to do with regulating relationships between differences; a never-ending process. The political commons understands a common good as a non-commercial means of fulfilling people's *different* needs. It exists only as a result of an active process, and will remain only if constantly taken care of. (Helfried, 2012; Negri, Roche, 2012)

6. Why do we need a commons? Is commons giving up on democracy?

It is widely argued that the state and the market – governments and corporations – have developed an unhealthy, symbiotic relationship in many regards. Both committed to progress and competition based almost entirely on individual freedom and rights, market and state collaborate intimately, and together have constructed an integrated worldview dependent on continuous growth and utilitarian preferences. As particularly exposed in the financial meltdown of 2007-2008, the market is extensively dependent on public interventions, and the state to a similar degree dependent on the market's (well)being. It could be argued that by prioritizing its relationship with the private market to the degree that it does, the state does not really fulfill it's role of representing the public, and the conventional understanding of the private and public as opposites needs revising.

Historically, the market/state partnership has been a fruitful one for both. Markets have prospered from the state's provisioning of infrastructure and oversight of investment and market activity, and the state benefitted from market growth for tax revenue and jobs for people. But in light of the contemporary state/market relationship, instead of attempting to heal the government and the state, many (from the squares and Occupy movement to many small scale, less comprehensive initiatives) has turned towards self-organization and the commons in search for an all together different understanding of democracy, within but beyond the polarized categories private property/public authority.

The shift in the relationship between state and market is is part of a larger epistemological question. Dichotomies such as public/private, subject/object, individual/collective, nature/culture tends to been taken for given, while in contemporary reality, the poles blur into each other. Architects are inherently interested in and

qualified for working with the interface between such polarities, and have a unique, refined set of skills to articulate the gradience between opposites. Using the commons as a strategy to search for new democratic ways to organize production, distribution, exchange and consumption has potential beyond nostalgic ideas of historic commons, and architects ought to play a role in organizing and giving form to it.

7. What is the connection between space and the commons? How can we think about a city based on commons?

Contemporary production of space based on private market forces and/or public investments is characterized by the conception of space as a quantified entity, having a value that can easily be divided and sold. Instead space can be thought of as a form of relations. Not a sum of defined places to control or liberate, but a constitutive dimension of social action, something that “happens” as different social actions literally produces spatial value as a result of communication and negotiation. (Stavrvides, 2010)

In 1968 Henri Lefebvre defined *the right to the city* as the right to access urban resources and create the city collectively as a commons. The values of the city emerge out of the daily activities and struggles of the inhabitants. Individuals and social groups create something common as a framework for urban life, a frame work within which we can all dwell. (Harvey, 2011)

David Harvey elaborates:

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights” (Harvey, 2008)

Hardt and Negri also links the commons to the production of the city and our physical surroundings. An architecture commons is not only based on natural common resources, but is also a cultural and intellectual one. Dynamic, involving both the product of labor and the means of future production. Built up over time and, in principle, open to all, similar to the way a radio broadcast of a television program is available to all of us at the same time. “It is possible to view the metropolis as a factory for the production of the commons”. (Hardt and Negri, 2009)

As it was accurately pointed out at the Venice Biennale, the discipline of architecture can only exist as shared and thus common knowledge. Architecture understood as a discipline can never be a product of a few talented geniuses, but is always collectively produced through collaboration based on the body of knowledge accumulated over time. (Aureli, 2012) But with the understanding of the commons in relation to physical inhabitable space, and the actual production of the city, there is a potential to suggest another architecture commons. A commons which beyond being a foundation of shared knowledge and ideas – a common ground – can be physically inhabited. Inevitably a political commons, the three prerequisites of the contemporary definition of the political commons could inform the architecture commons: Common resources, material and immaterial; a community, in principle open to all; and the act of *commoning* – the ability (and right, in Lefebvre's words) to change ourselves by changing our physical surroundings through constant communication and negotiation.

An architecture commons presents architects with the question of how we can dwell in the city within a common framework, which gives form to more than the single individual's needs and desires, more than quantifiable, commercial volumes, and which we can constantly remake through social practices.

8. Call for an architecture commons

Who

Architecture understood as an authority with regards to the production and inhabitation of the city based on common values has an urgent question at hand. City inhabitants with a *right to the city* hereby commissions all architects, thinkers and makers to envision an architecture commons. The intention is to make necessary and desired dwellings for people practicing the social act of creating the city.

The architecture commons competition is organized by a given community of city inhabitants, desiring to produce (meaning imagine, define, design, detail and build) a commons in which they can dwell.

What

Participants should use the housing block as a prototype for an architecture which functions as a commons while serving as a home for a group of people – a community – in the city. The community must be considered

an authority with regards to every aspect of the coming into being of their home. The community is constituted as a demographic reflection of the city, which must be reflected in the layout and distribution of different types of dwelling units. No person has the right to more dwelling space than any other. Participants are free to interpret the architectural type “housing block” any way they see fit.

Temporality

The competition begins once a community has been established. The community must work towards becoming as close to a demographic reflection of the city as possible.

The community determines the necessary time frame of their particular competition. The competition can be repeated any number of times necessary in any number of cities as part of the ongoing process of defining, creating and sustaining an architecture commons.

Scale

The site of the competition is the city.

The scope of the project depends on the size of the community.

Deliverables

Submissions should be in a form that can be emailed and printed on A4/letter-sized paper. Participants are free to determine use of media (text, drawing, images, etc.) and the length of their submission.

Submissions must address the following:

Participants must define the housing block in terms of distribution and configuration of various types of spaces (shared, public, private), their size and their inhabitation, bearing in mind that the housing block will be inhabited by a community of a given number, which is a demographic reflection of the surrounding city.

Participants must define how the housing block relates to the city, and how its visions and ideas spills over into society.

Participants must define how the housing block functions as a commons.

Participants may use the following three points as a catalysts:

8.1 common goods and architecture commons

8.2 community and architecture commons

8.3 *commoning* and architecture commons

Economics

In recent times, the development of housing projects located in cities has primarily been seen as economic investments. An architecture commons presents an alternative to that, by being not-for-profit. To invest in a dwelling in an architecture commons is primarily an investment in a socially, economically and materially sustainable architecture. This does not imply specific budgetary constraints to the competition, but suggests that participants address the economic condition of their project, bearing in mind that the competition is first and foremost an architectural competition and reflections on economy should be woven into an architectural proposal.

Relevant economic questions could be, but are not limited to, types of funding and types of ownership and use. Funding an architecture commons could involve crowd funding principles. In the US, for example, crowd funding real estate is becoming a realistic option made possible by the recent JOBS act. With regards to the actual site – a piece of land in the city, empty or already built upon – leasing could also be an option. In Amsterdam, for

example, the city leases land to communities for a reasonable yearly fee, on long-term renewable contracts, thereby making increasing land value benefit the common good and being able to influence long term land use policies efficiently.

Evaluation guidelines

Submissions will be evaluated based on degree of architectural quality and originality, as well as potential for a social, economic and material sustainability

The Architecture Commons competition is concerned that many contemporary competitions demands an extreme degree of specialized information for evaluation, thus preventing all but large enterprises from taking part in envisioning a better future. The architecture commons competition encourages participants to prioritize a sharp, open and visionary profile over a comprehensive account for details.

Jury

The jury shall consist of a smaller group of the community's members, *commoners*. It is up to the community to determine the exact number, which however must be an uneven one.

Assisting the jury, but without the right to vote, is a number of professional experts invited by the community. These experts must document proficiency within relevant disciplines or experience from previous relevant projects. Disciplines could be, but are not limited to, architecture, art, design, engineering, anthropology, geography, history, philosophy, economy.

Awards/Prizes

The jury will select any number of submissions they find adept and valuable in the process of creating an architecture commons. No direct monetary awards will be given, but selected participants will be invited to join the community in creating their housing block within the city. The status of the selected participant in relation to the community will then be that of an expert, paid a reasonable stipend for their work. This does not exclude the participant from also becoming a member of the community and eventually inhabiting the architecture commons.

In other words, the prototype produced in the competition remains the property of the participant, but the singular project, which actualizes the prototype becomes the property of the community, and as such, the participant will be paid for it.

Rules/Law

Submissions will not be made public until a final decision by the jury has been reached. Submissions will be considered open source, published under a creative commons license, allowing other people the right to share, use and build upon the work created, given that this happens in a non-commercial manner, and that the work is properly attributed.

Eligibility

The competition is open to anyone qualified to assist in projecting an architecture commons, whether that be envisioning or realizing it, or both.

Excluded from the competition are: Employees, employers or immediate family members of any member of the jury.

Questions

Questions can be emailed to the community, who organizes the competition. The community shall answer all relevant questions received within an announced deadline, and make all relevant questions and answers public on the competition website.

Registration

Registration is not required and the competition has no participation fee. All costs associated with managing the competition, including a reasonable stipend to the experts assisting the jury, are covered by the community.

Anonymity

To ensure the ranking of qualified work over a given participant's renown, competition entries must be submitted anonymously and participants may not communicate with the jury prior to the public announcement of competition winners.

Suggested reading

Anarchitecture, *On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides*, e-flux, 2010

Aureli, PierVittorio, *The Common and the Production of Architecture: Early hypotheses*, in *Common Ground: A critical reader*, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, Marsilio Editori, 2012

Bailey, Saki, *Beyond Ownership – Governing the Wealth of Urban Commons*, public lecture at Commoning the City – The Stockholm Conference, Kungl. Konsthögskolan, 2012

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009

Harvey, David, *The Right to the City*, *New Left Review* 53, September- October 2008

Harvey, David, *On the Future of the Commons*, in *Radical History Review*, 2011

Hardin, Garrett, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in *Science*, Volume 162, December 1968

Helfrich, Silke, *Common Goods Don't Simply Exist – They are Created*, in *The Wealth of the Commons – A world beyond market & State*, Levellers Press, Amherst MA, 2012

Negri, Antonio & Francois Roche, *A Dialogue: Negri and Roche*, Log 25, Anyone Corporation, New York, 2012

Ostrom, Elinor, *Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of complex economic systems*, Nobel Prize lecture, Atockholm University, 2009

Specifically about crowd funding real estate, see for example:

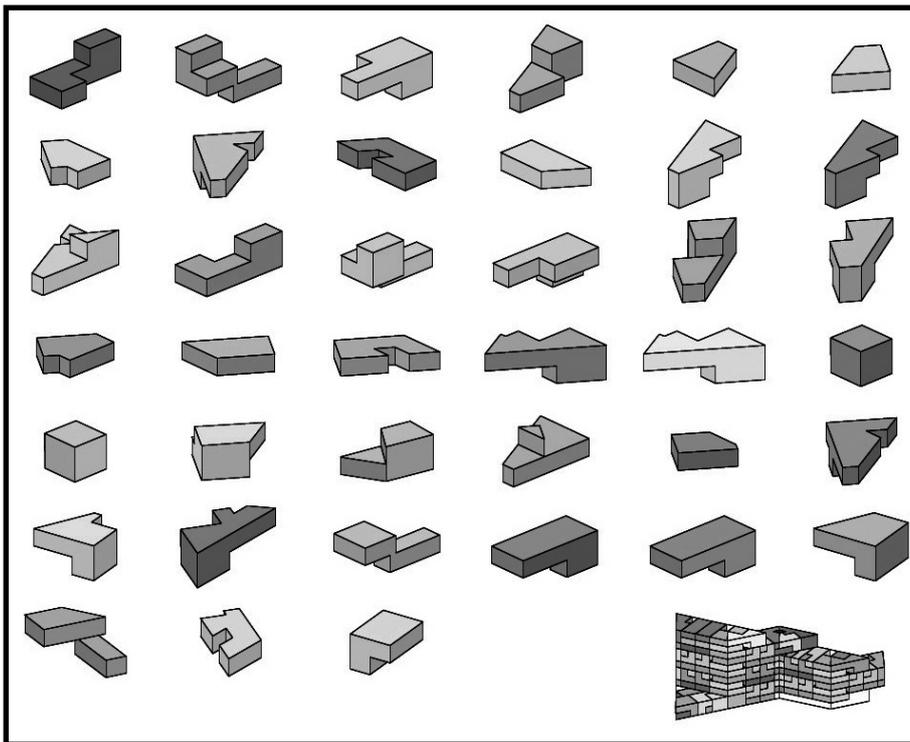
Cortese, Amy, *Washington Projects Invite Small Local Investor*, in the *New York Times*, May 15, 2013

Specifically about the city of Amsterdam's land lease policies, see for example:

City of Amsterdam Development Corporation: *The use of public ground lease in European cities*, no date indicated



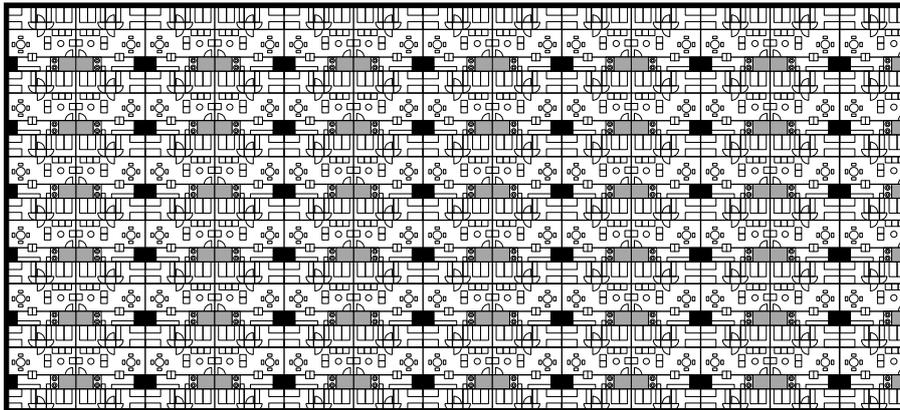
Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Hochhausstadt*, 1924



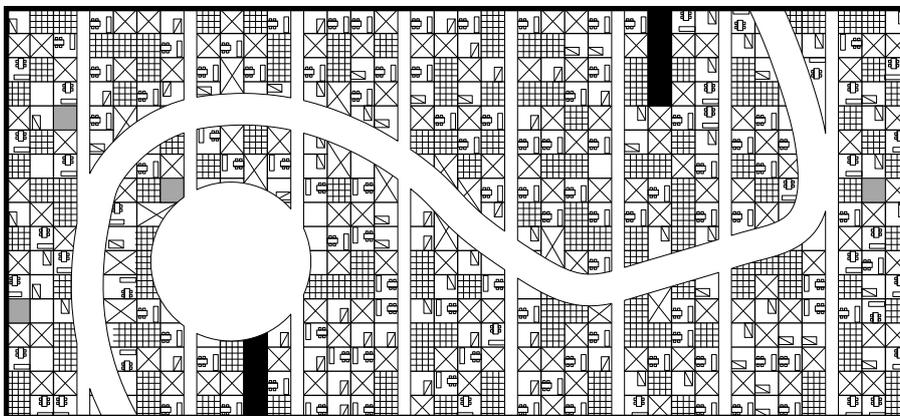
PLOT (now BIG), The VM-houses, different apartments types, 2004-05

8.1. Common goods and architecture commons

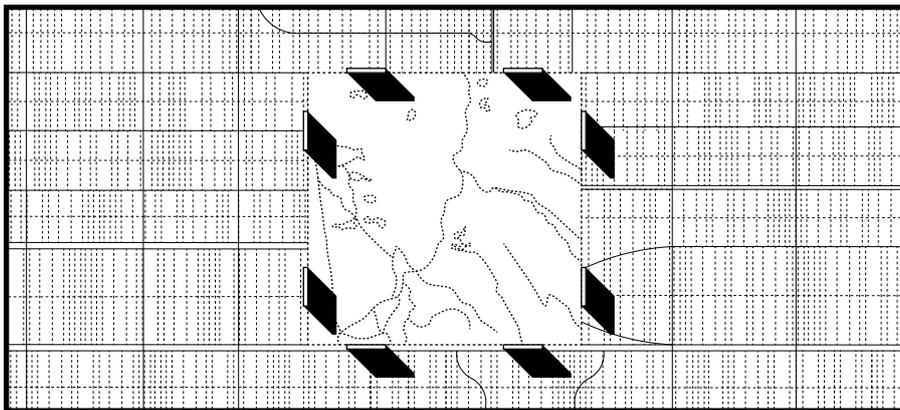
How is an architectural common good characterized – material or immaterial? How is the individual represented and articulated in the architecture commons? Does the commons strive for equality, does it respect every person's right or desire to be different?



Archizoom, *No-Stop City*, 1969



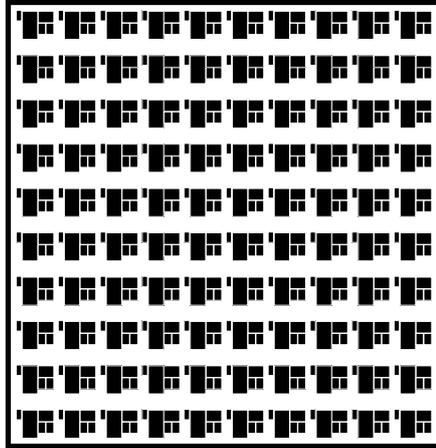
Kazuyo Sejima, proposal for low-rise housing, 1987-94



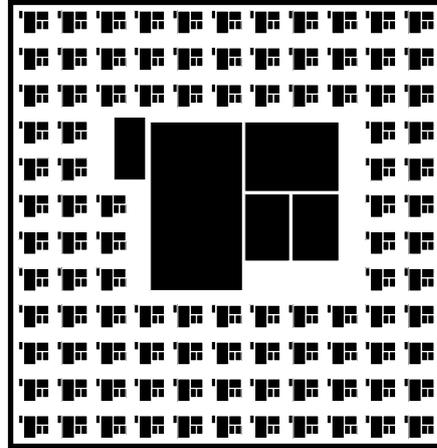
Dogma (PierVittori Aureli and Martino Tattara), *Stop City*, 2007

8.2. Community and architecture commons

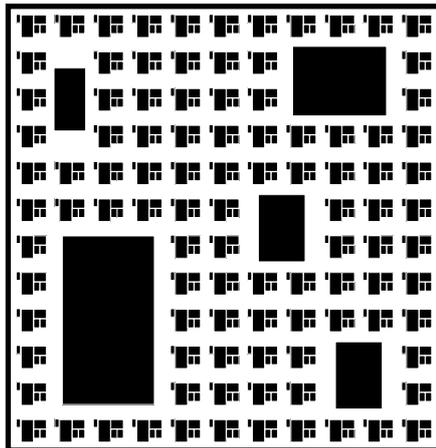
One of the biggest challenges for a community is to remain open and diverse. Considering limit as an architectural idea and tool seems inevitable in avoiding the gated community. Does the architecture commons stop or is it unlimited? Is it generic or does it have distinctly different zones and artifacts?



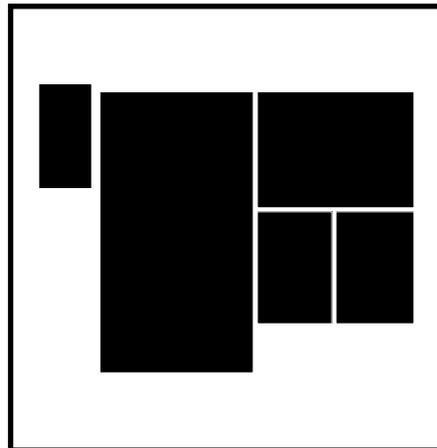
100 units, 7200 m²



100 units, central common space, 7200 m²



100 units, distributed common space, 7200 m²



Central common space, 7200 m²

8.3. Commoning and architecture commons

How is commoning and program relate to each other? Every person knows what it means to share and is thus a de facto commoning expert. But does commoning thrive in central or distributed common spaces? Are private units logically incompatible with the commons, or can they be a field within which the commons is negotiated? What is the difference between common and collective?