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Doina Petrescu, Alex Axinte & Silviu Medeşan

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Doina Petrescu

The University of Sheffield,
Sheffield, UK
d.petrescu@sheffield.ac.uk

Alex Axinte

University of Agronomic
Sciences and Veterinary
Medicine of Bucharest,
Bucharest, Romania
alexandru.axinte@horticultura-bucuresti.ro

Silviu Medeşan

University of Oradea, Oradea,
Romania
silviu.medesan@gmail.com

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Design-Supported Urban Commons in Collective Housing Regeneration in Eastern and Western Europe

Doina Petrescu , Alex Axinte  and
Silviu Medeşan 

ABSTRACT This paper examines the transformation of the designer's role in the regeneration of collective housing districts in both Western and Eastern Europe, particularly when their actions support the emergence of urban commons. Given the ongoing privatization in both contexts, there is a need to repair the broken and fragmented public amenities of these neighborhoods. To this end, commons-based initiatives offer an alternative approach. Grounded in participatory methodologies and combining methods from architecture, urban planning, social sciences, and co-design, the research provides a comparative reflection on the collective production, use, and transformation of shared spatial infrastructure in neighborhoods in Bucharest, Cluj, and Paris. The findings demonstrate how emerging forms of urban commons (such as informal libraries, community gardens, and civic hubs) lay the foundation for bottom-up, resilient regeneration of collective housing estates, and highlight how these initiatives can be critically supported by designers and citizens across various local, social, and political contexts.

Introduction and Context: Collective Housing Estates in Western and Eastern Europe

Engaging with the concept of ‘urban commons’¹, this research focuses on the transformation of the designer’s role in the regeneration of collective housing districts. The paper proposes a comparative analysis of three case studies, which share the initial reference of the social-modernist project but, by being located in different parts of Europe, have evolved in different political and social contexts. Thus, the practice of regenerative design is to be understood as situated, with ways of doing specific to the local context of planning and dwelling culture. Consequently, our research poses the fundamental question of how design approaches can support commoning practices for urban regeneration in the context of collective housing under different social and political conditions.

Both in Eastern and Western Europe, the ‘generous’ modernist vision and the radical principles of the Athens Charter² have been applied since the 1960s through the most prominent program: collective housing. Based on pre-war precedents, the massive development of collective housing districts shaped European cities and transformed their urban and social landscapes at large. Designers and urban planners participated actively in this top-down transformation as technocratic experts. From a certain point of view, the Western and Eastern blocs seemed to share the same tools of urban planning and values of the modernist project. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, collective housing, which was a political project with different goals, was implemented through different means and produced divergent effects in East and West.

In the capitalist West, the political project of the welfare state proposed a new social contract grounded in the construction of public housing. For example, the French proposition consisted of *Grand Ensembles*, the large government program that began in the late 1950s and 1960s, top-down planned by experts and funded and managed by the state, resulting in entirely newly built estates for a few million of inhabitants. The social project also included the construction of collective amenities i.e., *équipements collectifs* – a mix of basic public services, community and welfare institutions, and private amenities – intended to transform housing estates into new neighborhoods. Schools, sports halls, health centers, socio-cultural facilities, and commercial centers were planned and built from scratch, according to a grid of social distribution (what we will refer to further in this article as the ‘public facilities grid’) at different scales³.

Meanwhile, state socialism in the East was developing rapidly. With one of the lowest urbanization rates in the region, Romania aimed to catch up through an abrupt industrialization process⁴. The modernist project was adopted and thrived in the context of a planned economy, prefabrication, full access to land, and top-down political decisions.

Taken off the market, the socialist state's subsidized housing was 'an integral part of the labor economy'⁵ and was operated as a political tool for achieving 'social homogenisation'⁶. Compared to its Western counterparts, collective housing in the East was not only social housing but 'housing for all.' However, a narrow quantitative approach – focused more on building housing units – coupled with the economic crisis of the late 1970s, led to the production of massive, dormitory-like estates poorly equipped with public spaces and civic infrastructure. This provided an opportunity for inhabitants to intervene through appropriations, improvisations, and make-do tactics to transform these spaces into proper neighborhoods, enacting informal-based commoning practices. These 'latent' commons,⁷ materialized in different ways: community gardens, DIY furniture and adapted infrastructures.⁸

The systemic changes brought about by the 1989 events within the socialist bloc – which also triggered the radical privatization of public housing stock⁹, – further accelerated the erosion of welfare-state policies that had begun in the West a decade earlier.¹⁰ Collective housing estates now face the state's retreat and the dismantling of public infrastructure. Housing, in general, is undergoing excessive financialization, the access to housing becoming an economic merit rather than a 'right.' As such, threatened by gentrification, ghettoization, and rampant individualism, collective housing neighborhoods and their inhabitants are currently confronted with numerous social and environmental challenges, equally in both East and West. These neighborhoods are unprepared to react to current and future crises, such as global warming, depletion of fossil fuels and other natural resources, economic recession, population growth, and employment shortages. To address this, they need resilient regeneration which we believe can build on existing commoning practices.

Theoretical Background

Urban commons

The commons are central to contemporary discussions on democracy, economy, ecology, especially under climate change, and the notion of a good life for all. They refer to the idea that a pool of resources can be collectively managed by a community of 'commoners'¹¹, – individuals who can be seen as agents of commoning – according to agreed governance rules.

In a capitalist society, which has evolved around the principles of commons enclosure, privatization, and unrestricted exploitation of the planet's resources, many traditional commons (e.g., pastures, forests, lakes) have disappeared. Meanwhile, newly emerging commons (e.g., digital, knowledge, culture) are under threat¹². The process of commoning is an ongoing emancipatory struggle against the continuous enclosure and commodification of our material, immaterial, and social worlds.¹³ However, when applied to the city, the traditional model of the commons no longer fits, requiring a 'new commons' paradigm,¹⁴ that is adapted to the more complex ecosystem of urban actors. Urban commons thrive in

shared spaces, where agents of commoning interact, negotiate and create the commons. Ostrom's 'nested-ness' principle¹⁵, which recognizes commons as embedded in both public service grids and private infrastructure, is considered by Iaione and Foster¹⁶ as essential for the existence of commons in urban contexts. These commons are often seen as a third mode of production, distinct from both the state and the market.¹⁷

In both Western and post-socialist Eastern Europe, the privatization of public infrastructure threatens the existence of urban commons, which rely on collectively shared resources, knowledge, and spaces. Indeed, in recent decades, public property in mass housing estates has evolved. In Eastern Europe, following the post-1989 transition, the state withdrew from the maintenance of public infrastructure, and the full privatization of the housing stock followed by the state's return to its role as a top-down steward of the in-between green spaces limited their transformation to only aesthetic-driven and non-participatory approaches. In the West, some parts of public infrastructure have been maintained by the state, but others have been privatized or are in the process of privatization, often being sold to private developers and corporations.

The way collective action, solidarity, and the notion of 'doing things in common' are understood varies between Western and Eastern European contexts due to their distinct historical trajectories. In Eastern Europe, post-socialist urban commons are either vernacular forms of socialist legacy (such as community gardens) or newly created commons nested in the remains of public infrastructure (such as public libraries or cultural commons).

According to De Angelis, the commons consist of a common pool of resources, both material and immaterial; the process of commoning; and a community of commoners involved in this process.¹⁸ In collective governance, it is crucial for agents of commoning to negotiate the protocols, rules, and practices for sharing common goods. These processes are full of conflicts and negotiations, which can occur both internally among agents of commoning and externally with public, private, and civil sectors. The resulting 'agonistic space'¹⁹ can foster transformations of the commoning process through collectively agreed social rules.

To support the emergence of urban commons in their variety, new types of institutions, laws, spaces, and actors responsible for their production and reproduction need to be invented and developed.²⁰ Urban commons have a much more complex governance system, involving not only agents of commoning but also other urban actors such as local regional and national public and private entities. Foster and Iaione²¹ revisited Ostrom's design principles, emphasizing the importance of 'experimentalism,' which allows for adaptive and iterative design processes. The 'co-city' paradigm points to a potential shift from distinct

urban commons to ‘the city as a common’²², where different agents work together in order to co-design the governance of the city.²³

However, because urban commons in contemporary capitalist societies are not protected by laws from the threat of privatization, implementing such a paradigm at a wider urban level at a broader urban scale would require support from the public sector as an ‘enabling State’²⁴ and a commitment to promoting the development and long-term sustainability of commons through supportive mechanisms. Despite the current lack of public support, in both Eastern and Western Europe, old and new forms of urban commons are emerging within collective housing estates, including community hubs, repair centers, living labs, and other civic institutions. These serve to supplement the diminishing support from the state for maintaining these neighborhoods. Often informal, they are not necessarily structured as traditional urban commons.

In this context, what can designers do to support their emergence as more democratic forms of governance and regeneration in these collective housing estates?

The role of design(ers)

In these processes, architects and designers are no longer solely top-down experts but can play a critical role for fostering new forms of regeneration. By supporting the emergence of urban commons and co-city principles, designers can participate in co-design processes and promote the ‘experimentalism’ emphasized by Foster and Iaione²⁵. Designers shall negotiate and democratize their traditional role as experts by valorizing and mobilizing diverse forms of knowledge.

Numerous scholars are contributing to theorizing the epistemology of design²⁶, seeking to change how design is made and perceived. A shared assumption in this debate is that design is not solely authored by experts, but that anyone can have agency in the design process. Participation can be understood as a tool for designers or planners to partner with ‘citizen experts,’ who are most knowledgeable about how to inhabit the city.²⁷ Design processes within the commons can enable the redistribution and co-production of alternative knowledge. For Manzini,²⁸ design for social innovation occurs when individuals or groups cooperate, recombine existing resources, and act independently of political or economic contexts. In this case, designers can facilitate, trigger, and participate as members of co-design teams to create “new forms of neighborhood, new forms of interactions, and mutual help”²⁹ using their skills and sensibilities.

Using design to foster and produce the commons is also a form of ‘ontological design,’ as described by Escobar,³⁰ with the potential for radical change in how we live on the planet. Design for the commons has a transformative role,³¹ helping to reshape the ways in which the public interacts with systems, services, organizations, and policies. The outcomes of such processes are not designed objects, but rather

designed processes, where designers engage more with “the strategic process of problem definition” than responding uncritically to predefined problem statements or briefs.

Moreover, designers can act as activists³² or simply as ‘concerned citizens’³³ engaged in collective processes of socio-political transformation that often start at the level of everyday life. Commons are not always explicitly organized, but, as Anna Tsing suggests,³⁴ are inherent to life while resisting institutionalization.³⁵ In this context, the designer’s role is to ‘notice’ them as such, recognizing their potential for further commoning.³⁶ Consequently, design practice focuses on inquiring about the conditions that allow ‘latent’ commoning to emerge, providing evidence, articulating narratives, and garnering support for its continuous reproduction.

In conclusion, design processes can intervene at multiple levels to support the emergence of urban commons, offering potential entry points for designers to actively co-design alternative value systems.³⁷ Design can intervene experimentally and supportively in a locally specific, yet translocal manner, strengthening the redesign of other economic cultures. This can be done, for example, by turning private or public property into commons, fostering heterogeneous communities, and strategically nurturing practices of commoning.³⁸

Methodology

This paper focuses on the interrelated aspects of commoning and offers a comparative reflection on the transformation of collective production, use, management of shared spatial infrastructure within collective housing estates built between the 1960s and 1970s in Bucharest, Cluj, and Paris. It also identifies specific agencies of design practice and compares the role of designers in each of these contexts. The case studies include examples of repairing public infrastructure, spatial appropriations, alternative facilities, and neighborhood-based initiatives carried out by engaged practitioners, in collaboration with public and private partners, as well as local inhabitants.

Grounded in participatory methodologies, the research integrates methods from architecture, urban planning, social sciences, pedagogy, and participatory design. A shared aspect of all case studies is the practice-based research approach, which reflects the design training of the authors and their direct involvement as both practitioners (e.g., architects, designers, artists, educators) and researchers in the case studies. In the Bucharest and Cluj cases, the authors also have a role as inhabitants, understanding the neighborhood from within.

The research aims to explore the concept of urban commons from the perspective of various spatial practices, set within the context of collective housing estates in diverse social and political situations. The case studies highlight different approaches to design practice, tailored to their respective contexts, resources, and objectives. These range from

socio-politically engaged design-research-practice entanglements to transdisciplinary collectives that set up self-managed civic networks (Paris), engage in cultural events and activist projects (Cluj), and involve relational designer-researchers (Bucharest).

One of the methods used across all practices is co-design³⁹, which involves the participation of locals in the production of common spaces. Historical inquiry is equally crucial, placing these practices within an ecosystem of preexisting forms of commoning (Cluj) or constructing alternatives from the inherited state-run public infrastructure (Bucharest, Paris). Moreover, among the three case studies, the R-Urban project in Paris initially served as an inspiration for the local initiatives *La Terenuri* in Cluj and OPEN Garage in Bucharest.

Case study 1. Bucharest: Community Libraries and OPEN Garage (2020 – 2025) – ‘Discreet’ Commoning

In the post-socialist city, the privatization, underfunding, and fragmentation of public infrastructure triggered collaboration and care among some of its concerned users. From this paradigm of constant threat, a local version of emergency solidarity coalesced around public infrastructure in need of repair. Articulated as a form of latent commoning, it is still nested within the infrastructure inherited from the socialist city. Inquiring into these post-socialist forms of situated commons also involves retracing the historical evolution of housing-related infrastructure from the perspective of its community role.

Triggered by the political transformations of the country after World War II, the operating model of public libraries in Bucharest evolved from a central headquarter toward a network of local branches opened free of charge and mostly located in the peripheral districts of the city. As key ideological tools in the architecture of the communist regime, their initial goal was to tackle high illiteracy rates. Financed and organized by the socialist state, they formed a network of 50 local subsidiaries of ‘popular libraries’ by 1962. Initially opened in district culture houses, workers’ clubs, or nationalized houses⁴⁰, this local network expanded during the large-scale urban operations of the 1960s to the 1980s, some libraries being relocated while new ones were opened at the ground floors of collective housing blocks. Though affected by austerity measures starting in the late 1970s, the network of public libraries was firmly established as a public infrastructure, facilitating the dissemination (of open access) knowledge and enabling civic emancipation, while still exercising state control and censorship. Particularly in under-served housing estates, libraries became critical public resources.

The systemic changes of 1989 severely affected public libraries, accelerating austerity, while 30% of their spaces were lost to the retrocession of nationalized property.⁴¹ In an institutional context increasingly dominated by neoliberal governance practices, the library network managed to survive with minimal public funding, supplemented

by informal contributions from users. Groups of ‘friends of the library’ coalesced around relational librarians acting as community agents, turning some local libraries into implicit community hubs. Practices, relations, and topics increasingly excluded from a commodified social landscape – such as mutual support, sharing responsibilities, and gestures of care and trust – found a home in these spaces.

Against this backdrop, the practice-based research aimed to learn from the libraries’ commons nesting and support their cause through advocacy narratives and spatial activation. Referencing the alternative socialist program ‘Home Library’⁴², an informal library was created by one of the authors of this paper in 2020 in a repurposed garage located on the ground floor of a collective housing block in Bucharest’s Drumul Taberei district. Locals began to participate, borrowing, sharing, and donating books, illustrating the potential of knowledge-based relationships to connect communities. This proximity library became the starting point for the OPEN Garage project (2020 – 2025), which had two interdependent components: a research phase supporting informal commoning practices, and an activation phase developed through cultural and educational activities.

Prompted by the social space created around the book exchange, a wide range of activities were organized over the past years, involving researchers, students, and the local community. The activation of the space adapted its programming to the social dynamics of the area. The garage and nearby public spaces hosted educational workshops, hands-on activities, and gardening sessions for local children, fieldwork for students, and served as a local memory gallery for the community (Figure 1). The



Figure 1

OPEN Garage project-space open in a former garage at the ground floor of a block of flats, in Drumul Taberei collective housing neighborhood in Bucharest, 2022. Photograph by Alex Axinte.

project's design product was a relational device that piloted a community hub, spatializing its support for informal commoning. Sharing the local practice of 'going by the garage' allowed the researcher-turned-librarian and activator to eventually become a 'neighbor'. As the research process, programming, and everyday life intertwined around the garage, the project engaged with a more discreet local form of commoning.

This 'discreet' commoning⁴³ characterised by being relational, implicit, and diffuse, is supported by an ecosystem of informal practices specific to collective housing districts. Avoiding direct confrontation, these practices are less organized but stubbornly resist top-down control and are highly creative. They align with Anna Tsing's perspective on 'latent' commoning as an elusive, interstitial practice inherent to life⁴⁴. Thus, living together is performed (also) through informally driven discreet commoning. In this context, the designer initially noticed and articulated a narrative around as found and implicit commoning practices, gradually becoming, through operating the space, a relational agent between various groups of commoners, arriving not only telling the stories, but also activating and fueling the production of urban commons as a researcher-activator, even becoming neighbor as well.

Case study 2. Cluj: Community Gardens (1970s-Current) and *La Terenuri* Initiative (2012 – 2019) – 'Latent' Commoning

The process of commoning in the Mănăştur neighborhood of Cluj, Romania, started when new inhabitants, primarily from rural areas, began inhabiting the newly constructed housing blocks during the 1970s. Prioritizing the densification of housing units meant that public spaces were overlooked. As a result, the new residents began to appropriate the land between buildings as pedestrian paths, gardens, and meeting places, complementing the not-yet-realized public infrastructure.

During socialism, gardening was encouraged by legislation as a form of collective self-management of the 'residual' public space between blocks and as a response to Romania's economic and food crises in the 1980s. Following the end of the communist regime in 1989, rampant privatization, a dominant anti-communist narrative and sometimes abusive retrocessions of the public domain created the perfect conditions for the majority of urban residents to view these gardens as anachronistic. Many Romanian cities issued local laws criminalizing gardening on public land. Despite this, some of these gardens survived because they provided local solutions for food production, leisure, and green space in densely populated areas like mass housing neighborhoods. (Figure 2)

The community gardens in Mănăştur began in the mid-1970s as a gradual, informal occupation of unused public land, with the support of socialist state legislation.⁴⁵ The inhabitants created a form of allotment gardens in this newly urbanized area which functioned more or less as traditional commons: gardeners shared water from a natural spring, built



Figure 2

The *La Terenuri* initiative's garden was inaugurated in 2013, next to the initial community gardens on Parâng Street. (in the background). Photograph by Ioan Pan.

a common fence around the gardens, bred bees for pollination, shared tools and seeds, established rules to protect the gardens, and spent time working or socializing on improvised and up-cycled furniture.

For urban researchers and practitioners, these gardens, which were in fact forms of 'latent' commoning in Tsing's sense, became a 'living' model of resilience-based neighborhood self-management. Between 2012 and 2018, a group of urban practitioners (including one of the authors of the paper) developed the *La Terenuri* initiative – a cultural project inspired by local practices, aimed at initiating processes of cultural co-production, co-planning, and co-building. Using tools such as events, workshops, and debates, *La Terenuri* sought to 'remix' the traditional urban commons of the gardeners in new hybrid forms.⁴⁶ A practice-based research process accompanied the initiative for six years, demonstrating that the local community could be involved in planning. The research focused on integrating residents' needs, ideas, and commoning practices into official development plans for the *La Terenuri* area. Methods such as ethnography, participatory observation, participatory scale modeling, and advocacy⁴⁷ were used to highlight the value of both old and new urban commoning.

In 2019, a group of inhabitants continued the initiative without the involvement of the urban researchers, cultural workers, or practitioners, organizing a neighborhood festival and advocating for a voice in planning the area. Despite this, the local administration and city planning commission failed to recognize the value of the gardens for urban resilience. They were perceived as a form of 'privatization' due to the fencing and filtered access, misunderstanding how urban commons

function – not as public or private spaces, but as spaces for specific communities that have ‘earned’ the trust to access them. Furthermore, city officials contested the gardens’ low-tech, self-built nature and vernacular esthetics, often employing recycled materials. There was a prevailing rhetoric of ‘civilised’ public spaces in the discourse of Eastern European decision-makers, who compared them to the neat, minimalist designs of Western spaces. Despite this, some features of *La Terenuri* initiative were incorporated into the plans for a new sports park in the area, which included green spaces, an amphitheater, and an open, unfenced layout. However, this public investment has made the area attractive to real estate developers, posing a threat to the survival of the gardens. Throughout this process, the designer played an active role, participating in each phase of the initiative. This involved ‘seeing’ and understanding the gardens as already existing urban commons, protecting and integrating them into new forms of commons and defending them in disputes with other urban actors.

Case study 3. Paris: R-Urban Civic Resilience Strategy and Hubs (2011-Current) – Networked Social and Ecological Commoning

The R-Urban strategy, initiated by the architectural collective Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (co-founded by one of the paper's authors), is a network of commons-based collective hubs that enable civic resilience practices in social housing estates on the outskirts of Paris. The project is based on a co-production process involving local residents and a wide range of actors, including policymakers, small local companies and organizations as well as other civic stakeholders. Implementation began in 2011 with three hubs in the suburban town of Colombes: Agrocité (a community farming hub), Recyclab (a recycling and eco-construction hub), and the Ecohab housing hub. These hubs were located on vacant, city-owned land within an existing *Grand Ensemble*, within walking and biking distance of each other, thus creating a resilient local ecosystem for the circulation of food, waste, recycled materials, repaired goods, knowledge, and cultural exchanges.⁴⁸

The site in Fossés-Jean, one of the mass housing estates built in 1960s, included cultivation plots, a café, a teaching space, a market, a greenhouse, a kitchen, and a workshop. Some participants established small businesses, generating income for themselves and for the R-Urban network. Over the five years of operation in Colombes, ecological parameters were directly improved through the design and function of the hubs: food was produced locally, rainwater was collected and grey water remediated for irrigation, and urban waste was collected and transformed within the hubs.⁴⁹ (Figure 3)

The R-Urban network of civic hubs aimed to supplement the public facilities grid in housing estates, which had been suffering from a lack of public funding, leading to privatization of some services. By introducing commons-based governance, the hubs proposed a new model



Figure 3

Agrocité – R-Urban farm and civic resilience hub – demolished from Colombes and reconstructed in Gennevilliers, near Paris, 2018. Photograph by aaa.

of citizen-managed facilities, different from schools or socio-cultural centers, where citizens are merely users. In R-Urban, citizens run and manage the hubs on a daily basis.

The implementation of the project demonstrated the value of the commons approach for ecological transition⁵⁰ but also the challenges encountered in a capitalist system where management is considered a service and the city a marketing product. The social project of the 1960s has completely changed today: parts of the collective housing estates, including flats and sometimes also public facilities, are systematically privatized, often presented to citizens as a process of ‘urban regeneration’.⁵¹ For example, the housing estate where Agrocité was located underwent urban regeneration in 2015. The newly elected right-wing municipality of Colombes decided to replace Agrocité with a private car park, demolishing Recyclab, and blocking the implementation of EcoHab to clear land for future projects.⁵² A protest campaign by the designers and community succeeded in relocating Agrocité and Recyclab to nearby areas in Gennevilliers and Nanterre. During the relocation, material reuse, upcycling, and temporary and reversible land use proved to be important ecological principles employed in the design of the hubs and the R-Urban approach, contributing to resilience. Another key factor was the decentralized, multipolar, and networked organization. Throughout the relocation process, the users became the ‘advocates’ of the project, participating in the reinstallation process and introducing it to other citizens.

The demonstrated social and ecological value of the hubs, contributing to resilience,⁵³ led other communities to implement similar

models. Today, new hubs have been built in the Metropolitan Region of Paris, and two others have been established in London's Hackney Wick and Poplar districts. As such, if the designers were initially the conceptors and initiators of the strategy, they gradually took other roles to facilitate and open up the process to other stakeholders, simultaneously orienting the commoning activities toward increased local resilience and further expansion to other scales.

Analysis

To conduct a comparative analysis of design-supported urban commons in collective housing neighborhoods in Bucharest, Cluj and Paris, we are parallelly describing the case studies according to a number of parameters that are key for urban commons (shared resources and spaces, commoning agents, governance, conflicts and the relations with the public, private and civil sectors) as well as from the perspective of design processes and roles (see [Appendix](#)).

Shared resources and spaces

In terms of resource sharing, the OPEN Garage in Bucharest is a community hub that provides space, skills and memories, and contributes to a local community of interests. It is also a research laboratory that shares indoor and outdoor spaces, research tools and educational and cultural knowledge. The shared space is a 15 sqm former garage rented on the ground floor of a block of now privately owned flats. Access is controlled by project's initiator and partners, and occasionally open to the public. The community gardens and *La Terenuri* initiative in Cluj are located in an open field near the housing estate. Shared resources include a water spring, a fence around the gardens, tools, seeds, kiosks, temporary furniture, infrastructure, and immaterial resources such as gardening skills, as well as intergenerational and transdisciplinary knowledge exchange. The shared outdoor open space covers 20,000 sqm of informally occupied land spreading across privately and publicly owned properties. The main green area, which is public, is freely accessible, while the access to the gardens is based on trust. The R-Urban civic resilience hub in Paris consists of outdoor and indoor spaces, tools, and training opportunities, which are all considered resources for the neighborhood. The hub occupies a 1,500 sqm publicly owned vacant space between housing blocks that are occupied through temporary agreements. There is also a 70 sqm indoor space. The access is controlled by the hub members, but the hub is occasionally open to the general public.

Commoning agents

In Bucharest, the 'commoners' are neighbors from nearby blocks, library users from the district, researchers, educators, curators and artists, totaling more than 500 people, including one coordinator and 7 members

of the initial team. In Cluj, there are neighbors from nearby blocks, inhabitants, activists, researchers, and urban practitioners, totaling more than 3,000 people, including the 15 members of the *La Terenuri* initiative. In the case of Paris, the ‘commoners’ are neighbors from the neighborhood, totaling more than 6,900 people, of whom 400 were formal members of the R-Urban organization. 20 members were part of the coordination team (i.e. Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée).

Collective governance: protocols, rules, practices

In Bucharest, the project team initiates activities in response to the interests of local residents. The space hosted several workshops and exhibitions, diversifying its programmes and themes while expanding its team. In Cluj, the gardeners took care of the gardens themselves and only occasionally received visitors. The *La Terenuri* initiative established protocols and rules among the participants. Locals mainly joined the core group, while outsiders participated in events. In Paris, the governance model is based on an assembly of citizens and local organizations that follow a set of rules for contributing to the development of the commons through voluntary work or a percentage of gains.

Relation with the public sector: funding and support

In Bucharest, the OPEN Garage was initially publicly funded through grants, and later through donations and research prizes. Although aware of the project, the municipality didn’t express any interest or support. In Cluj, the initiative was partially publicly funded through European, national and local cultural funds while the gardens were maintained voluntarily by the gardeners themselves. The neoliberal municipality tolerated the existence of these ‘commons’ without fully understanding them. While the gardens were ignored, the initiative was annually funded as a ‘festival’. In Paris the hubs were supported with European funding and sporadically by national and local governments, depending on ideology and interests. The land was also leased for free during the first five years by the left wing municipal council of Colombes, which was also supportive of adopting the R-Urban Strategy. However, the replacement of this council by a right-wing one led to the decision of dismantling the hub.

Relation with the private sector

In Bucharest, the privately rented project’s space was under constant pressure to close due to discontinued financing and attractiveness as a commercial space. However, the Garage library has received donations of new books from a private publishing house and individual donors. The Cluj’s gardens are in constant threat of eviction by private developers because the land they occupy is valuable and privately owned. A project for a park was built by the municipality as a leisure and sports park occupying part of the footprint of the gardens. The design of the park has

however followed some directions from *La Terenuri* initiative. The Paris project occupies public land, which is of interest to private developers. For this reason, it has been threatened with eviction from its initial location by the municipality of Colombes. The relocated project in Genevilliers is currently ‘nested’ in the public facilities grid.

Relation with the civil sector

The OPEN garage piloted an alternative community equipment, specific to collective housing districts. The infrastructure was open to local users (i.e., neighbors, visitors), but also to other organizations (i.e., artistic, educational, civic) that are lacking space in the district. In Cluj, the gardens create green spaces and promote biodiversity in the area. Visitors pass by during city tours guided by trusted neighbors. In defending the gardens, solidarity relations have emerged between gardeners, activists and professionals. The R-Urban network offers a citizen-managed infrastructure for neighborhood resilience. This infrastructure can be used by local stakeholders (including residents, civic organizations and public institutions) but also by other locals who can participate in occasional activities.

Conflicts

A series of activities took place in Bucharest starting 2021 in the indoor and outdoor space of the garage. Depending on the theme and intensity, some of these activities generated conflicts with the nearby neighbors who felt their privacy was threatened. Over time, the activation of the space was adjusted to respect the boundaries of good neighborliness with events limited to low-intensity indoor events. In Cluj’s case, a real estate developer demolished in 2020 a third of the garden plots and another third was cleared out to ensure the construction of a public park. While local citizen became increasingly interested in gardening, a number of inhabitants initiated protests against the real estate developments and started forming alliances with activists and professionals. In the Paris case, during the regular operation, internal conflicts arose in the governance process, which tended to be solved collectively. However, the main conflict began in 2014, when the new Mayor of Colombes initiated legal action for the demolition of the civic hubs. In 2016 the Agrocité was evicted and subsequently relocated and reconstructed in 2017 in a different town. This conflict generated significant media coverage and sparked interest from other municipalities in developing R-Urban hubs.

Design processes, ‘experimentalism’ and support

In Bucharest’s case the design did not ‘innovate’, but instead tinkered with local informal solutions in the activation of the garage. It is social and transformational, aiming to notice, articulate, support and host local practices of commoning, which are created around the book exchange and shared local history. Design also experiments with different forms,

such as narrative design (informality and memory), or research design (for applied education). In Cluj, the design is activist supporting the gardens, defending and recognizing their social value. It proposes design tools, such as the participatory scale model, used to bring to the table different voices from the neighborhood to discuss and co-design the future of the area. The initiative also designed a series of advocacy processes with citizens and decision makers to raise awareness of the destruction and privatization of their commons. In Paris' case, the design is 'ontological' being a real driver of the process of commons' setting. There are many forms of design involved: design of the strategy (strategic design), design of the infrastructure (architectural design), design of the governance (social design) and design of resistance (activist design).

Roles of designers

In Bucharest's case, the designer was initiator and ethnographer at the beginning, and became facilitator, organizer and more specifically librarian and curator while the OPEN Garage was set up. But in time, through the daily use of the garage, he became also a neighbor. In Cluj, the designer was a political advocate of the community, but also an activist, steward, co-designer and 'co-maker' of the infrastructure of meeting places created at *La Terenuri*. He also acted as a conflict facilitator between the group of gardeners and the other residents, public servants, and planners. In Paris, the designer took different roles to accompany the evolution of the commons setting: from researcher, initiator co-manager, facilitator and strategist in orienting commoning processes toward increased resilience to political advocate and defender of the sustainability of the created commons.

Discussion

All three case studies manage similar material resources, but also immaterial ones, which are critical ingredients for the 'new commons.' Their comparative analysis illustrates urban commons as a process of becoming, which can be hosted in both public and private spaces. The participants are primarily from the local proximity, but the projects also create spaces for meetings and dialogue with specialists, acting as a link between institutions and residents. Such processes require governance protocols, which are explicit only in the case of Paris, as the project had more resources and support and aimed for this from the outset, while in the other two cases, governance is taking shape in the process, being more informal and blending into local ecosystems.

We also notice that the public institutional environment is not necessarily favorable to urban commons in either context - the East or the West - evolving from ignorance and skepticism to distrust and, at times, even evacuation, depending on ideology and short-term interests. In both contexts dominated by neoliberal values and practices,

privatization is a constant threat to urban commons, especially when collectively managed spaces have commodification potential.

The studied initiatives aim to provide a 'space for all', creating the premise for community self-organization, which tends to institutionalize in Paris, given the conditional support from local government, while remaining at informal and low key level in Cluj, and being more research-driven in Bucharest, at least for a while. However, in all case studies, the commons infrastructure opens up to other users than their specific stakeholders enhancing as such the civic life and bringing in numerous social and ecological benefits in the neighborhood.

However, the different conflicts arising within the urban commons projects in collective housing contexts, highlight their limitations but also their capacity of functioning as spaces for negotiation and adjustment. At times, these spaces act as stakes worth fighting for, while at other times, in the absence of supporting programs and formats, they can lead to attrition, community fatigue, and abandonment, as many researchers have demonstrated.⁵⁴

It was interesting to note that the most visible and developed forms of urban commons were the ones most threatening to the established order and, therefore, the most aggressively targeted, as seen in Paris and Cluj. Meanwhile, the more modest and least supported form – the 'discreet' commoning in Bucharest – was, in a way, the most resilient and resistant over time. This could be attributed to their degree of 'nesting' in the neighborhood and their tacit adoption as a way of life shared by the inhabitants.

In defence of urban commons, design encompasses both objects and processes that facilitate and enhance the critical ingredients of commoning, such as relationships, inclusivity, and mutual support. In this process, the designer's role does not necessarily just multiply and expand but adapts to the local ecosystem of resources, actors, and practices. In Cluj, designers supported the vernacular commons to resist land grabs by the real estate market; in Paris, they helped sustain them to overcome demolition through reversible design approaches that allowed their reconstruction in a different context; in Bucharest, they noticed and articulated the value of informal commoning practices, countering the dominant narratives and practices of 'civilising' the open public space. As such, the designer becomes an initiator and facilitator, as in the case of Paris; an activist, as in the case of the threatened gardens in Cluj; or a neighbor opening up a garage to support 'discreet' commons in Bucharest.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how emergent forms of urban commons represent the seeds for bottom-up, resilient regeneration of collective housing estates, with the active contribution of inhabitants. These commons challenge the political and economic structures in place,

resisting commercialization and gentrification, while often being threatened by new enclosures themselves. In the Eastern context, commoning practices developed on the legacy of the socialist city are often ignored and not actively supported by an increasingly neoliberal governance structure. However, although precarious and ‘discreet’, they continue to develop, being tolerated at best but still lacking any public support. In the Western context, although they might benefit from local public support in certain circumstances, they remain constantly under threat from political changes and commercial interests due to the lack of appropriate juridical protection and need to remain vigilant and create alliances in order to survive and develop.

In both cases, instead of being supported by an ‘enabling State’,⁵⁵ these commons tend to be ‘temporary’, with their sustainability depending on the political will of local governments or their capacity to organize in order to scale up. However, these new forms of commons bring a socio-ecological dimension to neighborhoods, which is critical for a resilient transition.⁵⁶ Emancipatory citizen spaces and infrastructures are coming to life and opening up the imagination of what can be done together as a community in times of crisis.

The paper argues that designers can play a specific political and strategic role here: the role of ‘noticing’, supporting, and defending the emergence of commons as a socio-ecological proposition, as well as contributing to the development of engaged citizenship. The selected case studies are diverse, with different complexities, ranging from gardening practices (Cluj) to cultural and educational spaces (Bucharest), to agricultural and training spaces (Paris). These cases illustrate how a variety of design strategies support commons in different contexts of collective housing estates. Designers act as co-initiators, impromptu facilitators, political catalysts, engaged stewards, transdisciplinary connectors, reflective practitioners, embedded activists, and creative communicators. All cases demonstrate the need for designers to become caring, engaged and embedded in situations, rather than just being ‘concerned’.⁵⁷ They may need to take risks, address conflicts, and engage overtly in political action.

Instead of expanding the designer’s role to cover a multitude of universalist expertise, as was understood in modernist planning, the designer’s role responds to the local ecosystem of resources, actors, and practices, aiming to reproduce the commoning process in the context of collective housing.

These case studies also demonstrate the need for expanding the field of design when we speak about designing for commons. In the planning of housing estates, designers were initially technocrats and ‘experts’. Decades later, regeneration of these estates requires design that supports collective life by empowering inhabitants to take hold of common space while engaging with various institutional stakeholders. A multiplicity of design approaches converges here, from strategic, social,

and service-oriented design to artistic, activist, inclusive, and participatory design, combining established methods with newly invented ones. The diversity of these designs constitutes pathways toward a 'co-city' design.⁵⁸

Each case study presents an exemplary approach that can be applied in similar situations, such as the hub network model developed in Paris, the design-supported civic gardens in Cluj, or the community library in Bucharest. As commons are always situated, these examples can serve communities in other neighborhood contexts in Europe and beyond, but they will always require critical adaptation to local residents' needs and agency. This raises the question that if there is a current need to recognize and support urban commons, there is also a need to recognize and support the related design approaches through education, policy, and institutional collaborations. Whether held by individuals, small teams, or larger transdisciplinary teams, these approaches are based on engagement and alliances with citizens at local and translocal levels, shared knowledge, academic input, funding, and proactive support through policy development. These strategies suggest that design can play a significant role in the commoning process, being social and transformational, intersectional and ontological, and contributing to collective efforts to create a more socially and ecologically just society.

Doina Petrescu is Professor of Architecture and Design Activism at the University of Sheffield. She is also co-founder of the award-winning collective practice Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée in Paris specialised in participative architecture and commons-based resilience and reparative ecologies. Her research is focussed on urban commons, co-resilience, civic pedagogy, feminism and politics of space. She has conducted both small and large-scale research projects, currently leading the UK team within INNATURE EU Horizon project. Her publications include *LiveAct: 10 questions for the Future Here and Now* (2023), *Urban Commons Handbook* (2022), *Architecture and Resilience* (2018), *The Social (re)Production of Architecture* (2017), *Learn to Act* (2017), *R-Urban Act: A Participative Strategy of Urban Resilience* (2015), *Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures* (2009), *Trans-Local Act: Cultural Politics Within and Beyond* (2009), *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space* (2007), *Urban/ACT: A Handbook for Alternative Practice* (2007) and *Architecture and Participation* (2005).

Alex Axinte is an architect, researcher and educator who lives and works in Bucharest. He graduated from the University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest (2004), obtained a Master of Social Science (2018) and was awarded a PhD at the Sheffield School of Architecture, University of Sheffield (2024). He is a lecturer at the Landscape department, Faculty of Horticulture, University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, Romania. His current research projects investigate and

support informal practices of commoning in the context of collective housing in the post-socialist city. He is involved in action research projects, applied education, participatory design and cultural and civic activation. In the context of his PhD research, he initiated the OPEN Garage space-project (2020-2025) for research, mutual learning and community activation and in 2022 he developed The Map of Neighbourhood Libraries qualitative research.

Silviu Medeşan is a Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Oradea, Romania. He teaches sociology, architectural theory, and research in architecture, supervises second-year design studios, and coordinates extracurricular activities. He holds a PhD from the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, based on practice-led research on *La Terenuri*, a participatory design and cultural initiative in a collective housing neighborhood. He is the author of *Form Follows Situation* (Ozalid, 2020) and co-editor of *cARTier. Peripheral Interventions* (Idea, 2016). His research focuses on urban and rural commons and transformative architectural pedagogies, with publications in *Futures*, *sITA*, and *Argument*. Currently, he is an active member of TERRRA Brezoi Network (terra.org).

ORCID

Doina Petrescu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3794-3219>

Alex Axinte  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-5411-0691>

Silviu Medeşan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4853-9596>

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Appendix

TABLE 1.

Comparative analysis of design-supported urban commons in collective housing neighborhoods in Bucharest, Cluj and Paris.

	OPEN Garage in Bucharest (2020–2025)	Community gardens and <i>La Terenuri</i> initiative in Cluj (2012–2019)	R-Urban civic resilience hubs in Paris (2011- current)
A. Shared resources B. Shared spaces (i.e., access, occupation, negotiation).	A. A community hub (space, skills, memories, contributing to a community of interests in the proximity) + a research lab (indoor/ outdoor space, research tools, educational and cultural knowledge). B. 15sqm rented former garage located at the ground floor of a collective housing block of privately owned flats. Access controlled by the hub members. Occasionally public access.	A. Community gardens and open field (water spring, the fence, tools, seeds, kiosks, temporary furniture and infrastructure; gardening skills and intergenerational and transdisciplinary knowledge exchange). B. 20.000 sqm in-between private and public land informally occupied. No indoor space. Free access in the green area (public); negotiated access on trust in the gardens (traditional commons).	A. A collective hub (outdoor and indoor spaces, tools and training opportunities understood as resources for neighborhood resilience) B. 1500 sqm publicly owned vacant space in between housing blocks occupied through temporary agreements. 70m2 indoor space. Access controlled by the hub members. Occasionally public access.
Agents of commoning	Neighbors from the nearby blocks, users of the library from the district, researchers, educators and artists. (n = 500) + 1 coordinator, 7 members of the initial team.	Neighbors from the near-by blocks, inhabitants, activists, researchers and urban practitioners. (n = 3000) + 15 members of <i>La Terenuri</i> initiative	Neighbors from the housing estate and the neighborhood (n = 6900) from which 400 became formal members of the R-Urban organization + 20 members of AAA
Collective governance: protocols, rules, practices.	Activities are initiated by the project's team, acknowledging the local residents' interests and response. The space hosted several workshops and exhibitions, diversifying its programs and themes, while expanding its team.	The gardeners take care of the garden themselves, only occasionally receiving visitors. Project's protocols and rules were established among the participants. Mainly locals joined the core group, while outsiders participated in events.	Governance model is based on an assembly formed by a number of citizens and local organizations following a set of rules for contributing to the common good (voluntary work or percentage of gains).

(Continued)

TABLE 1.

(Continued).

	OPEN Garage in Bucharest (2020–2025)	Community gardens and <i>La Terenuri</i> initiative in Cluj (2012–2019)	R-Urban civic resilience hubs in Paris (2011- current)
Relation with the public sector			
A. Funding	A. Initially, publicly funded through grants, and later through donations and prizes.	A. The initiative was partially publicly funded through EU, national and local cultural funds.	A. Supported with funding by the EU and sporadically by national and local governments, depending on ideology and interests. The land was also leased for free during the first 5 years by the left wing municipal council of Colombes.
B. Support	B. Although aware of the project, the municipality did not express any interest and support.	B. The neoliberal municipality tolerated the ‘commons’ discourse without fully understanding it. While the gardens were ignored, the initiative was annually funded as a ‘festival’.	B. The left-wing municipality was supportive of adopting the R-Urban Strategy. However, the replacement of the socialist mayor by a right-wing one initiated the dismantling of the hub.
Relation with the private sector	Privately rented, the project’s space is under constant pressure to close due to discontinued financing and attractiveness as a commercial space. However, the library has received donations of new books from a private publishing house.	The gardens are in constant threat with eviction by private developers because the land they occupy is expensive and privately owned. The new green space was planned and built by the municipality as a leisure and sports park, following also directions from the <i>La Terenuri</i> initiative.	The project occupies public land, which is of interest to private developers. For this reason, it has been threatened with eviction from its initial location by the municipality of Colombes. The relocated project in Genevilliers is currently ‘nested’ in the public facilities grid.
Relation with the civil sector	The OPEN garage pilots alternative community equipment, specific to collective housing. The infrastructure is open to local users (neighbors, visitors), but also to other organizations (artistic, educational, civic) that are lacking a space in the district.	The gardens create green spaces and promote biodiversity in the area, with locals accessing them occasionally. Visitors pass by during city tours guided by trusted neighbors. In defending the gardens, solidarity relations have emerged between gardeners, activists and professionals.	The R-urban network offers a citizen-managed infrastructure for neighborhood resilience. This infrastructure can be used by local stakeholders (including residents, civic organizations and public institutions) but also by other locals who can participate in occasional activities.

(Continued)

TABLE 1.

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	OPEN Garage in Bucharest (2020–2025)	Community gardens and <i>La Terenuri</i> initiative in Cluj (2012–2019)	R-Urban civic resilience hubs in Paris (2011– current)
Conflicts	A series of activities took place starting in 2021 in the indoor and outdoor space of the garage. Depending on the theme and intensity, some of these activities generated conflicts with nearby neighbors who felt their privacy was threatened. Over time, the activation of the space has been adjusted to respect the boundaries of good neighborliness with events now limited to low-intensity indoor events.	In 2020, a real estate developer demolished a third of the garden plots and another third was cleared for the construction of a public park. While local civil society became increasingly interested in gardening, a number of inhabitants initiated protests against the real estate developments and began forming alliances with activists and professionals.	The main conflict began in 2014, when the new Mayor of Colombes initiated legal action for the demolition of the civic hubs. In 2016 the Agrocité was evicted, subsequently relocated and reconstructed in 2017 in a different town. This conflict sparked significant media coverage and sparked interest from other municipalities in developing R-Urban hubs. However, during the regular operation, internal conflicts would also arise in the governance process.
Design processes, ‘experimentalism’ and support	Design does not ‘innovate’, but instead tinkers with local informal solutions to activate the garage. It is social and transformational, aiming to support, articulate, and host local practices of commoning, which are created around the book exchange and shared local history. Design also experiments with different forms, such as narrative design (informality and memory), or research design (for applied education).	Design is activist supporting the gardens, defending and recognizing their social value. The initiative researches and designs tools, such as the participatory scale model, used to bring to the table different voices from the neighborhood to the table to discuss the future of the area. The initiative also designed a series of advocacy processes with citizens and decision makers to raise awareness of the destruction and privatization of their commons.	Design is ‘ontological’ being a real driver of the process of commons’ setting. There are many forms of design involved: design of the strategy (strategic design), design of the infrastructure (architectural design), design of the governance (social design) and design of resistance (activist design).
Roles of designers	Initiator and researcher at the beginning, the designer became facilitator, organizer and more specifically librarian and curator. But in time, through the daily practice by the garage, becoming a neighbor.	Political advocate of the community & activist, steward and co-designer and ‘co-maker’ of the infrastructure for meeting places, conflict facilitator between the group of gardeners and other residents, public servants, and planners.	The designer took different roles to accompany the evolution of the commons setting: from researcher, initiator co-manager, facilitator and strategist in orienting commoning processes toward increased resilience to political advocate and defender of the sustainability of the created commons.