

– REPAIR AND RECONSTRUCTION FOR URBAN COMMONING: The Making of the Liberated Spaces in Naples

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Abstract

Commoning requires repair. Where capitalist logics of accumulation, enclosure and exclusion produce abandoned space through the city, urban commoners remake that space to serve the needs of inhabitants. Without hiding the paradoxes and risks of repair, based on years-long ethnography in the Liberated Spaces in Naples, Italy, we demonstrate how repair and reconstruction produced the conditions for societal transformation in the city. We show how this was achieved through four connected processes that underpinned the making of these urban commons. In doing so, we develop a theoretical contribution on the relationship between repair and the commons as it affects: the role of practices of material repair of previously abandoned buildings in shaping the commons; the significance of memory reconstruction in reconstituting these spaces; the formation of social bonds and collective subjectivities through these practices; and the potential of repair in the urban commons to expand these practices and prefigure broader social transformation.

Introduction

Repair practices (Boudreau, 2022: 956) and the reconstruction of long-neglected spaces play a key role in shaping Naples' Liberated Spaces. These practices allowed parts of the urban fabric to be transformed in ways that resist logics of accumulation, enclosure and exclusion. The Liberated Spaces emerged in the 2010s when social movements occupied twelve publicly owned buildings that had been left in disrepair, in some cases for up to 30 years.¹ Between 2012 and 2015, these places were reclaimed for public use, aiming to resist privatization through a process that unfolded against the backdrop of the increasing commodification of Naples' historic centre, driven by growth of the cultural and tourism industries (Rossi, 2022; Esposito, 2023; Locorotondo, 2025). Shortly after the occupations began, and within the broader context of the so-called 'new municipalist turn' in Naples (Pinto *et al.*, 2022), the City Council officially recognized the Liberated Spaces as 'commons for civic and collective use' (*beni comuni ad uso civico e collettivo*). This recognition came through Municipal Resolutions No. 893/2015 and No. 446/2016, which acknowledged the significant social value these places had acquired (De Tullio, 2018; Sciarelli, 2024). This article focuses specifically on two Liberated Spaces: Scugnizzo Liberato and Santa Fede Liberata. The first is located near the tourist district in the Avvocata neighborhood; the second in the city centre.

The authors would like to thank the communities of the Liberated Spaces in Naples, particularly Scugnizzo Liberato and Santa Fede Liberata, for their active engagement in the creation of 'liberated urban space' in a city increasingly affected by the proliferation of enclosures. We would also like to thank the communities for enabling this ethnographic research and the interviews. The empirical research for this article was carried out as part of the first author's PhD at the Centre for Urban Research on Austerity (C.U.R.A.) at De Montfort University, Leicester (UK), while the writing took place during a postdoctoral fellowship at the Gran Sasso Science Institute (GSSI), L'Aquila (Italy), within the project 'Social Infrastructures in Question: Local Communities, Social Reproduction, and Habitability in the Italian South' (CUP: D53D23020030001).

1 These include all the experiences that, at some point in their history, have identified themselves as part of the Network of the Commons in Naples, regardless of their recognition by the City Council: 'l'Asilo', 'Santa Fede Liberata', 'Scugnizzo Liberato', 'Ex OPG Occupato-Je so' pazzo', 'Giardino Liberato', 'Ex Scuola Schipa Occupata', 'Lido Pola Bene Comune', 'Villa Medusa-Casa del Popolo', 'Villa De Luca', 'Centro Autogestito Piperno-CAP 80126'. Just outside the Municipality of Naples, there are also 'Ex Convitto Monachelle' and 'Terranostra Occupata', which are part of the same network.

Scugnizzo Liberato was once a juvenile detention centre, later abandoned for 15 years and then at risk of being repurposed by a private art gallery. Santa Fede Liberata, originally a place of confinement for women labelled ‘dangerous’, became a hub of grassroots resistance in the 1960s and 1970s. It remained unused for three decades before being occupied and reclaimed by activists.

Although the Liberated Spaces were established when touristification was still in its early stages, they now struggle to survive in a more hostile environment. Today, the city is marked by resident displacement due to short-term rentals, the erosion of social ties and a growing prioritization of the ‘exchange value’ of urban space over its ‘use value’ (Lefebvre [1968] 2013). In this context, these spaces—self-managed through assemblies and organized as a network—are places of collective and non-commercial use within a city increasingly shaped by tourist-driven enclosures. The Liberated Spaces now host a wide array of activities that are at risk due to the pressures of the neoliberal tourist city. These include activities displaced by touristification, such as artisan workshops and play areas for children, along with family support services and aid for homeless people—populations made more vulnerable by the ongoing neoliberal urban transformation. They also serve as spaces that preserve social bonds and community life, offering initiatives such as communal canteens and cultural programmes. Indeed, after more than a decade, these spaces continue to be shaped by the practices of repair that continue in response to the needs of marginalized local populations. Moreover, the Liberated Spaces are key actors in grassroots campaigns opposing touristification and defending the right to the city. These include initiatives like Rete SET–Campagna Resta Abitante, Mare Libero e Gratuito Napoli, and Comunità dei Parchi Pubblici di Napoli.

Central to all these dynamics is the role of what we refer to as the activist-inhabitant: an emergent subjectivity through which marginalized urban inhabitants—who were not necessarily activists beforehand—become active participants in processes of urban transformation through their remaking of the commons. By reclaiming a part of their neighbourhood, repairing it collectively and restoring its role in supporting collective, social life, the emergent activist-inhabitants resist the expansion of tourist enclosures and affirm, through action, their right to inhabit the city.

The repair and reconstruction of buildings in the Liberated Spaces have been central to both the formation and the development of the urban commons in Naples. Material repair practices, together with the reconstruction of collective memories associated with each space, have fostered new social relationships among inhabitants and contributed to the emergence of new subjectivities in common. Drawing on recent debates on repair and the commons, we show how repair, as a social practice, prefiguratively reshapes the materiality of urban spaces that are enclosed through touristification. Repair offers alternative ways to reclaim collective spaces for their use value, to build and sustain solidarity among inhabitants and to expand the presence and transformative potential of both the commons and commoners within the city (Graziano and Trogal, 2019; Zapata Campos *et al.*, 2020; Thieme, 2021; Smith, 2023). Beyond material reconstruction, repair enables alternative urban imaginaries through the reactivation of memories and the production of subjective meaning attached to place. This reconstruction of memory plays a vital role in the making of commoning subjects and in activating the transformative capacities embedded in their practices. According to Boudreau (2022: 856) the variety of practices that fall under the umbrella term of repair—including the restoration of damaged buildings, objects, urban infrastructure, personal care and the fostering of social connections through community initiatives—are producing the future city by attempting to find solutions in a broken world (*ibid.*). In this sense, repair enacts a prefigurative potential (Dinerstein, 2016: 2).

In what follows, we develop our argument through a dialogue with debates on the commons and the role of repair within and through the Liberated Spaces. These theoretical reflections are grounded in long-term ethnographic research, shaped by one

of the authors' active and sustained engagement with these spaces. As such, the findings presented here draw on embodied knowledge developed through direct participation in commoning and repair, and are further enriched by interviews conducted with a range of activist-inhabitants. Through this research, we demonstrate how overlapping processes of repair and reconstruction—encompassing architectural, memorial, relational and subjective dimensions—have given rise to an expansionary form of urban commoning. These processes have transformed not only the reclaimed urban spaces themselves, but also the lives of those involved. While we acknowledge the potential ambiguities inherent in repair practices—particularly when they are co-opted by dominant agendas of state- and capital-led urban regeneration, which reinforce existing forms of enclosure and exclusion—we contend that the case of the Liberated Spaces demonstrates the potential of repair in the commons to serve as a vehicle for counter-power (Hardt and Negri, 2017). In Hardt and Negri's terms, counter-power refers to the collective capacity of the multitude to resist domination and create new social institutions from below. Rather than aiming to seize sovereign power, building counter-power prefigures alternative models of democratic governance and social cooperation beyond the state and capitalist structures. We demonstrate how the Liberated Spaces in Naples exemplify this counter-power in action: they represent a reappropriation of the collective capacity to decide over urban space, reconfiguring it in response to the needs of marginalized residents and fostering alliances among strangers for social transformation.

Repair and reconstruction in and for urban commoning

Repair is increasingly central to the debates on commoning, care and alternative social spaces (Graham and Thrift, 2007; Simone, 2022). Connected to debates on the commons (Stavrvides, 2016; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2019), practices of repair have been shown to confront multiple interconnected crises of financialization, climate collapse and the enclosure of urban space. To develop our argument, we focus on repair and reconstruction as forms of social struggle and prefiguration. We focus on how practices of repair are connected to reclaiming occupied space, remaking this to serve the needs of urban inhabitants. The aim is to explore how repair and reconstruction are central to the reappropriation of the urban commons, impacting upon its form, the practices of commoning that emerge, and the collective subjectivities of commoners themselves. We situate the relationship between repair and the urban commons in recent debates in critical urban studies. First, we explain how repair functions as a social practice that is collective and potentially transformative, without hiding the paradox of repair in a broken world nor the risks involved. Second, we discuss the reconstruction of occupied urban spaces, their making through practices of repair, the importance of reconstructing the memories of these spaces and the forms of commoning that emerge from these practices. Third, we examine the potentially transformative pathways that repair and reconstruction can engender through the new subjectivities and social relations they produce.

- The paradox of repair and reconstruction as social practices
Analyses of repair provide an important lens for understanding the maintenance of cities and everyday life in precarious urban spaces (Amin, 2006; Bhan, 2019; Boudreau, 2022). On the one hand, this work has highlighted the risks associated with repair when used as a tool for urban regeneration that perpetuates capitalist exploitation and enclosure. Corwin and Gidwani (2021: 3) describe the 'double-sidedness' of repair to highlight how forms of urban regeneration, often backed by the state and private capital, can 'perpetuat[e] ... problematic relationships of exploitation and waste'. Repair as a social practice, therefore, cannot be looked at uncritically. Instead, when tracing its effect on the remaking of the city, we must carefully unpack the forms of life it is reproducing and who is participating in and benefiting from the process.

Forms of repair that improve conditions of care for social reproduction provide one example of how repair exceeds the paradox of urban regeneration projects (Graziano and Trogal, 2019: 208). Identifying these forms of repair helps reveal the extent to which such practices in the urban commons can be a means of supplanting and overcoming those institutions and infrastructures that worsen marginalization and exploitation. Making the work of this repair visible also reveals the fragility of the wider societal context in which it emerges, tackling forms of life ‘always in jeopardy of breakdown or wastage and thus in need of recurring maintenance and attention for their continued functioning’ (Corwin and Gidwani, 2021: 1–2). This locates repair in the messiness of survival as urban inhabitants attempt their ‘living as well as possible’ in the present conjuncture (*ibid.*: 14–15). Such repair can both enable urban inhabitants to live in the crisis of capitalism, by reconstructing and remaking these urban spaces, and can also provide a pathway to transform forms of living in the city or to build future cities that are rooted in care and the commons (Boudreau, 2022: 858). The effects of repair as a form of care are important to our subsequent propositions, locating the practices of activist-inhabitants in the politics of repair that produce new collective subjectivities and social relations that can extend the urban commons.

Repair as a social practice, as we use it in this article, embraces a multiplicity of meanings located beyond simply ‘fixing’ material or societal problems. As Smith (2023: 249) notes, a lens of repair for interpreting social change must go beyond Western ‘modalities’ of ‘techno-fixes’ and should, instead, be a way of identifying ‘pluriversal understandings of “transformative” repair’. This view of repair further emphasizes the politics of repair and how it holds the potential to build new social relationships and make new spaces and subjects. In rendering this politics of repair visible, we can, therefore, shed light on how repair in these new social spaces is potentially transformative, as a ‘regime of practice that fosters the imagining of alternative social scenarios’ (Graziano and Trogal, 2019: 205).

Using this lens on repair and its politics captures how collective activity to maintain the social fabric of the city enables care and social reproduction to make living under multiple capitalist crises possible (Huron, 2015; Ponder, 2021). It also helps to identify the often hidden activism undertaken in marginal spaces and their wider societal significance (Zapata Campos *et al.*, 2020; 2022). When framed as ‘mundane activism’, repair does not necessarily rely on the political pursuit of radical structural change. It is, instead, an everyday political practice that simply sustains life and enables survival (Kamal, 2023). Yet, in the case of Naples, this was combined explicitly with an effort towards wider social change.

– The urban commons as a reconstructed social space

Repair is a vital practice for the urban commons because it underpins the process whereby neglected, abandoned or enclosed space is repurposed and reconstructed in the service of inhabitants. The combination of the physical act of fixing and rebuilding space and reconstructing the memory and meaning attached to it is integral to establishing and maintaining the commons. As Smith (2023: 252) argues, common spaces where repair occurs ‘become interstitial spaces of care for materials and objects, often fostering and facilitating inter-generational solidarity, learning and continuity of skill’. Commoners reclaim urban space as they remake it in a political claim for rights and access to services in the city. Yet, at the same time, the paradox of this reconstruction persists. As exemplified by capital/state-led urban regeneration projects, which may also involve the extraction of value from the commons (Porter and Shaw, 2009; Mangialardo and Micelli, 2021; Carlone *et al.*, 2022), the meaning and outcomes of repair and reconstruction are not predetermined. Repair can lead to an exclusionary process of restoration that turns neglected land or buildings into enclaves, such as tourist sites, that displace impoverished or marginalized populations (Graziano and Trogal, 2019:

211–12). Restoration projects such as these are distinct from the processes of ‘repair’ we focus on, which are often led by public–private redevelopment plans to exploit and valorize neglected areas. In the following empirical sections, we show how the experiences of repair and reconstruction that we examine do not produce new forms of capitalist exploitation and enclosure but instead offer pathways to broader social change. The Liberated Spaces we focus on (re)open enclosures by reconstructing the right of inhabitants to use these spaces, while shaping prefigurative alternatives for contemporary cities.

Tatiana Thieme (2021:1095) calls on analysis to ‘stay with the breakdown’ to understand repair and reconstruction. This moves from repair as fixing the urban environment, to instead foreground how places under repair—broken and abandoned spaces on the margins—are inhabited, and how these ‘negative spaces’ provide insights into the practice of living in them:

Breakdown ... gives way to new spaces for rethinking the unfinished, not as an opportunity for repair and nostalgia about the past, but rather an insistence on the mechanics and poetics of dwelling in the present, at the interstices, where one can stay for a little while and just be (*ibid.*: 1107).

This understanding of repair and reconstruction allows us to refocus on the everyday challenges of those who inhabit these spaces and the relations of care that they enact. Broken urban spaces are remade in new forms by inhabitants, offering pathways to new practices of urban commoning. Focusing on the inhabitation of broken space, remaining ‘in the breakdown’, therefore, becomes a lens to identify the potentially transformative practices rooted in the mundane forms of living that constitute practices of repair.

Reconstruction through repair requires thinking about what is being constructed, by whom, for what purpose, and with what effect on those involved in the reconstruction. The novelty of repair and occupation produces what has been termed, in the context of urban peripheries in the global South, forms of autoconstruction. While developed in the context of extreme challenges of poverty and exclusion in the global South, this concept is of value as we seek to unpack how urban commoners in the global North reconstruct urban spaces, offering scope for learning from the everyday practices of those seeking new means of surviving contemporary capitalism. Autoconstruction has been applied to self-built urban landscapes in and beyond marginalized communities, including housing (Moore *et al.*, 2022; Pérez, 2022) and community and childcare centres (Narayan, 2023). Self-built housing and community infrastructures can run parallel to formal government policy, creating problems in planning and regulation (Rubin, 2020), embedding informality in urban planning practices (Pikner *et al.*, 2020: 712), and providing means to make democratic claims to citizenship (Pérez and Palma, 2021). They can operate ‘transversally’ in and against official planning, returning to the paradox of these reconstructed commons (Caldeira, 2017). Importantly, for our purposes, they are also conceptualized as materializing hope and alternative possibilities (Moore *et al.*, 2022; Narayan, 2023), offering new forms of being through emergent urban commons that confront enclosure and exploitation in the city.

Autoconstruction also provides a lens for reading the practices of reconstruction through the auto-construction of theoretical concepts (Jiménez, 2017). By focusing on practices of habitation and reconstruction through everyday living within the occupied spaces, our conceptual framework emerges from the lived experiences of the activist-inhabitants. Our approach to the urban commons focuses on the practices of commoning subjects, the changes in everyday life that emerge within these spaces, and how these constitute new forms of social transformation. The activist-inhabitants emerge in their participation in the commons, their repair and reconstruction of urban

spaces, and their new relations with one another. They are central to our analysis of their emergent new collective subjectivities. Commoners are made in the ‘assemblage comprising not only various actors, but also market and non-market mechanisms’ (Zapata Campos *et al.*, 2020: 1162), as they simultaneously transform the meaning prescribed and produced within the commons (*ibid.*: 1153). In practising repair, they reconstruct new collective subjectivities and new imaginaries that reconfigure how we perceive and theorize them.

– Commoning subjectivities and the transformative possibilities of repair and reconstruction

The reconstruction and repair of the commons reverse enclosures and exclusions (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2012; De Angelis, 2017; Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). Repair, in this sense, is a transformative and confrontational practice, tied directly to social struggle. It also builds new social relations and subjectivities in and through the occupation of that space and its transformation (Vasudevan, 2015; Risager, 2016; Fishwick, 2019). Maintenance and care activities reconstruct the social relations between the city’s inhabitants as they remake the space and form new subjectivities.

The occupation of urban spaces emerges from social conflict over access to the city, producing new sites of radical transformation (Vasudevan, 2015). Occupations are ‘eventful places ... created by social actors while, simultaneously, affecting social relations’ (Risager, 2016: 4). A wide literature exists on occupation of different types of space, including workplaces (Azzelini, 2015; Vieta, 2020; Sobering, 2022), housing squats (Grazioli, 2023; Cacciotti, 2024), protest camps (Brown *et al.*, 2017) and public squares and social centres (Guzman-Concha, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2017). This list is non-exhaustive, but, overall, research shows how the forms that occupations take actively change those involved. This diversity, moreover, means that in each instance we must interrogate ‘the different kinds of occupation via the particular spatial features of the sites at which these occupations occur’ (Fishwick, 2019: 398). We must identify the different resources available, tracing how they are mobilized by participants, how they reconfigure social relations within the occupied spaces, and how these social relations reconfigure the occupied spaces themselves.

To do this, we follow the argument that commoning, commoners and the commons are fluid and open and subject to change within and between the boundaries of common spaces (Stavrides, 2016; De Angelis, 2017). Starting from this openness means we do not see commons as bounded spaces closed off from a hostile urban environment. Rather, we see the social subjectivities of those in the commons as being produced in, and producing, new social forms that overlap with those social forms and subjectivities they exist with in antagonistic relations.² In other words, while conducting ‘struggles for a breathing space from where to conceive and organize social life alternatively’, commoners are shaping these alternatives prefiguratively in the here and now (Dinerstein, 2016: 2).

Nonetheless, reclaiming urban commons and harnessing this transformational potential is challenging. The urban characteristics of saturation and social distance between potential commoners make increasing participation and forging new social relations difficult (Huron, 2015: 969). Urban space is ‘already densely packed with people, competing uses, and capitalist investment; and the urban commons is constituted by the coming together of strangers’ (*ibid.*: 963). Repair as a collective act of remaking the space of the commons can overcome this saturation and ‘strangeness’ by forging

2 When we use the term ‘subjectivity’, we refer to Read’s (2010) understanding of it as a dynamic and transindividual process shaped through collective practices of reappropriating the commons, understood not only as material resources but also as shared languages, affects and knowledges. In our research, this perspective is applied to a process of collective reappropriation of a resource that includes physical, memorial and symbolic dimensions, through which a community of commoners has emerged, articulating a new collective subjectivity grounded in shared values such as popular resistance, mutual care and the promotion of education over incarceration.

new bonds of sociality in marginalized spaces. It provides a way of constituting the commons and establishing new practices of sociality and solidarity that establish collective subjectivities:

Repair practices can engage in materialist politics firstly, by organizing against private property in favour of the common, secondly, by participating in radical, transversal pedagogies of ecological re-skilling and thirdly, by *sustaining new forms of sociality which put the centrality of work into question* (Graziano and Trogal, 2019: 206, emphasis added).

As new inhabitants engage in the commons, new collective bonds are created. Zapata Campos *et al.* (2020:1161) demonstrate how wider participation in the commons reduced dependence on work and other forms of commodity exchange, through open collaboration between new and established participants. They state: ‘not only are common spaces open and porous, ... the commoners themselves are fluid, becoming the vehicle by which urban commoning expands beyond defined communities’ (*ibid.*: 1162). This demonstrates how, by participating in the social practice of repair, commoners remake space beyond the commons, changing subjectivities as they move in and beyond its boundaries and providing the means to establish and extend ‘new institutions and rules’ (*ibid.*: 1152). These practices, therefore, have the potential to establish new ‘commoning institutions’ that confront crises and neoliberal urbanization and create porous spaces for the transformation of subjects and cities (*ibid.*: 1154; Pikner *et al.*, 2020). In these ways, repair and reconstruction of the urban commons are integral practices to the making of new collective subjectivities and of new social relations that can, in turn, reshape and transform the city itself.

Understanding repair and reconstruction for urban commoning through activist ethnography

Jeffrey Juris and Alex Khasnabish (2013: 6) argue that ethnography allows an understanding of the complexity of modern movements and their transformative potential by focusing on ‘everyday practices, cultural imaginaries and emerging subjectivities’. An activist ethnography enhances internal understanding of their significance and impact, while itself contributing to social change (*ibid.*). Drawing on Miller *et al.* (2013), we pay particular attention to the socio-spatial dimension of contentious and everyday politics, including the practices of repair and reconstruction. Fieldwork was grounded in interpreting the remaking of the Liberated Spaces in the context of a tourist city through engagement with everyday life, practices and routines, including masonry work, maintenance, solidarity activities and management tasks. From this, the role of repair and reconstruction for commoning emerged inductively, extending well beyond the architectural dimension to encompass memorial, relational and subjective aspects.

Activist ethnography was undertaken in three main sites, with supplementary exploration of the larger network. Two of these sites are the primary case studies for this article (Santa Fede Liberata and Scugnizzo Liberato). Fieldwork took place between 2020 and 2023, while one of the authors’ ongoing commitments to the Liberated Spaces extends to the present day. Since the fieldwork was guided by the researchers’ own positioning and active contribution, the findings of this research stem from their embodied knowledge. This was developed through participation in the processes of commoning and continuous self-reflection, documented through diary entries. Ethnographic work was complemented by a total of 30 qualitative interviews, several of which contribute to this article. These were undertaken in seven spaces, with a main focus on Scugnizzo Liberato (11 interviews) and Santa Fede Liberata (four interviews). The interviews aimed to explore the Liberated Spaces from the perspective and through

the voices of other commoners, including those who initiated the processes, balancing the researcher's own observations and interpretations.

Repair and reconstruction for urban commoning in Naples

We demonstrate, in the following sections, how the varied practices of repair and reconstruction played a crucial role in the development of urban commoning and the making of Liberated Spaces in Naples that underpin potential social transformation. We articulate this argument through four propositions. First, we identify the central role of the repair of physical buildings in previously abandoned urban spaces. Second, we demonstrate how the reconstruction of memories attached to the sites was a practice that ran parallel with the reconstruction of the common spaces. Third, we explain how this repair and reconstruction produced new social relations and subjectivities. Fourth, and finally, we show that the material, symbolic and subjective dimensions of repair extend far beyond acts of restoration. They opened a transformative process, distinguishing this kind of repair as a form of counter-power and a prefigurative social practice.

– Material reconstruction and repair of space

In Naples, every Liberated Space has its own story, but they all begin, according to several of our interviewees, in the same way: with a locked gate, broken architectural components and years of accumulated waste. This describes the material conditions of some publicly owned buildings that had long been neglected by the state. The people who now keep these spaces alive rarely start their stories with traditional political slogans. Instead, they recall the building materials scattered across the floor, the overgrown vines climbing through windows, and the silence of abandoned structures.

At Scugnizzo Liberato, formerly the Filangieri Juvenile Prison, Antonio (site activist pseudonym, interviewed in December 2021) vividly remembered the first time he stepped inside in 2015. 'It looked like a swamp', he said emphatically during the interview. The door was stuck from having several years' worth of fallen leaves piled up against it. Water dripped through the ceiling, one wall was half-rotted by a persistent leak, the floors were cracked open, and the paint was peeling off in long, curling strips. At Santa Fede Liberata, the scene was no different. Giulia (site activist pseudonym, interviewed in May 2022), Raffaele (interviewed in February 2022) and Ciro (interviewed in May 2022) all described finding the site in 2014 in a state of 'total abandonment' and encountering rubbish, toxic waste, and extensive damage to original architectural features such as ancient floor tiles. The convent had been abandoned for over 30 years following the 1980 earthquake. The same was the case with the Tersiane Convent, which later became Giardino Liberato (another Liberated Space), as reported by activists Susanna and Mario (both interviewed in February 2022).

In nearly every account, detailed descriptions of damaged architecture were accompanied by vivid recollections of what emerged following this prolonged state of neglect. Repairing these spaces to make them usable again was consistently remembered as the first and most essential step. Initial repair work took place at the very beginning of the process, alongside the first public assemblies that announced the reopening of the spaces and invited in the wider local community. The first months in each space were spent in this collective, exhausting effort: scrubbing walls, clearing weeds, sealing leaks, fixing plumbing. At Santa Fede, they began with the entrance hall and courtyard, before gradually transforming the former refectory into a usable indoor space, eventually renovating the first-floor room by room. At Scugnizzo, the initial efforts included the removal of weeds, collection and disposal of rubbish, repair of water leaks and the gradual renovation of the building structure.

Repairs were not simply a necessary response to abandonment; they emerged as a crucial initial stage in the formation of the Liberated Spaces. Subverting the

accumulative logic of enclosure, repair was the first act of commoning. This initial collective labour marked the development of what De Angelis (2017) identifies as the fundamental elements of a commons. Through the act of repairing neglected buildings after their occupation, the commoners (to be) reappropriated the right to use these public resources, reclaiming access that had been denied due to years of abandonment or the threat of private exploitation tied to exchange value (Lefebvre [1968] 2013; De Angelis, 2017). Furthermore, in the act of collectively repairing these places, people began to perceive themselves as part of something larger. As an activist at Scugnizzo Liberato put it when interviewed in December 2021: ‘I initially came just to lend a hand, to contribute what skills I had, but seven years later, I’m still here. Scugnizzo has become an integral part of my life’. Through these shared practices, a community began to emerge, accompanying the simultaneous production and reproduction of both the usable space (resource) and the community itself (De Angelis, 2017). Our first proposition, therefore, emerges directly from this pattern: repairing and reconstructing previously abandoned spaces embodied a process of material reappropriation through commoning and set the conditions for the formation of the commons and the commoners themselves in Naples.

– Reconstruction and repair of the memories of the space

If the first activities in the Liberated Spaces were clearing rubble and patching walls, they came in parallel and interwove with a different kind of repair: one that dealt not with plaster and concrete, but with memory. Stories of incarceration and popular resistance were attached to both sites. These were not just recollected for archival purposes. These stories were actively reconstructed, reappropriated and woven into the life of the emerging commons.

The building that today hosts Santa Fede Liberata had served as a penitential retreat for women defined as ‘dangerous’ since it was erected in the sixteenth century. Women who deviated from the behaviour considered ‘normal’ at the time were imprisoned there to be re-educated by the nuns. When Giulia, an activist at the space, told the story of the site when interviewed in May 2022, she stated that ‘when we liberated this place we also liberated it from the history of violence and abuse against women that had taken place here’. Such an endeavour clearly articulates a commitment not only to recovering past memories for the sake of historical interest. It also reflects an attempt to enact symbolic repair for the neglected lives of those who once inhabited these walls, through collective acts of memory reconstruction.³

This resonates with what occurred at Scugnizzo Liberato, a space that formerly housed the Filangieri Juvenile Prison for 134 years, from 1865 until its closure in 1999 (see Figure 1). The name Scugnizzo Liberato (liberated *scugnizzo*) and the image displayed at the entrance of the space (see Figure 2) evoke both the building’s carceral past and its process of liberation. In Neapolitan dialect, a *scugnizzo* is a street child known for a spirited and irreverent nature. In the image, they are depicted kicking a ball to free themselves from a chain fastened to their ankle—a powerful metaphor of their emancipation. Particularly meaningful is the testimony of Antonio (interviewed in December 2021), who refers to himself as a ‘liberated *scugnizzo*’. While he experienced the Filangieri Juvenile Prison as a site of re-education at the age of 14 between 1989 and 1990, he is now actively involved in the life of the Liberated Space.

The narratives of the space do not dwell solely on pain, as the memory work also resurfaced stories of rebellion and care. This is the case of the episode recalled in Nanni Loy’s film *Le Quattro Giornate di Napoli* (The Four Days of Naples)—staging the liberation of Naples from the nazi-fascists by the Neapolitan people between 27–30

3 We deliberately use the concept ‘reconstruction’ here to refer to the remaking of retained memories of the occupied space in the new context of commoning and the social processes being embarked upon by participants.



FIGURE 1 Grating found inside the former Filangieri Juvenile Prison, preserved as a trace of its past (photo by Martina Locorotondo, October 2022).

September 1943—when young inmates of the Filangieri juvenile prison, the *scugnizzi*, escaped to join the Resistance. It is not clear whether this is a legend or whether such an episode actually took place, but what is relevant is that such an image has been adopted and evoked by activists since the day of the occupation (as in a public statement published on 29 September 2015 by ‘Scacco Matto: Campagna di Riappropriazione Spazi Urbani’ on their social media [Facebook], now, unfortunately, no longer available). The liberation of the former prison symbolically took place on the anniversary of the Four Days of Naples, on the 29 September 2015.

Santa Fede’s birth and development is also deeply shaped by past stories of popular resistance and care. During the interviews with Raffaele (in February 2022) and with Giulia and Ciro (in May 2022), the activists spoke about the story of the ‘Palace of the Old Ladies’, which embodied a proto-community of care in the neighbourhood and forms of popular resistance. At the beginning of the 1960s, a dozen poor and homeless elderly women were housed in the former cells by the Municipality, gradually taking on an important caring role in the neighbourhood. In the absence of kindergartens and amidst widespread poverty, they spontaneously offered help to parents by caring for their children while they worked. The palace was known as ‘O palazzo d’*e* vichiarelle’ (the palace of old ladies, in Neapolitan): Raffaele’s mother used to bring him there. He recalled it as a ‘magical’ place: despite the poverty of the ‘old ladies’, ‘children would always find a biscuit or a sweet word there’. The ladies’ efforts to address the needs of the population and to repair their problems collectively developed over the years, and their presence grew into something larger. A network of solidarity developed around them, and the space also became one of the key sites from which the 1972 protests against rising bread prices were launched.

Activists described this earlier history as a key source of inspiration in shaping what would later become today’s commons. Before the current occupation, the site had already undergone a transformation—from a place of confinement for women labelled



FIGURE 2 Plaque at the entrance to Scugnizzo Liberato (photo by Martina Locorotondo, July 2021).

as deviant to a space of self-organization and grassroots resistance. Most notably, it had previously hosted a community of care before the latter, formed around marginalized subjectivities—particularly elderly and poor women. From the outset, there was a conscious effort to reconstruct this memory in collaboration with those who had once

inhabited the space.⁴ This deep engagement with memory was not treated as an academic exercise. It did not take place in the solitude of an archive or through online research, but through collective storytelling that brought people back to these sites to share their recollections. Activists, neighbours, former residents and even passersby contributed stories, fragments and images. This process of memorial reappropriation—unfolding in parallel with the physical reclamation of the space—played a key role in the formation of a new community of commoners. It was through the weaving together of shared histories, values and struggles that this collective subject emerged.

Ultimately, the reconstructing and recalling of otherwise erased experiences of imprisonment, resistance and abandonment emerge as practices of repair. They aim to rescue from the shadows the memories of the people, which have been condemned to oblivion by official historiographies but are instead crucial to our collective histories. The practice of reconstructing these memories operates as a form of repair for the people and places that suffered these histories of oppression, as captured in Giulia's quote at the beginning of this section, while overwriting these sites with new histories of liberation.

Our second proposition, therefore, emerges from this collective work of remembering. The formation of the commons goes beyond physical reappropriation to encompass the reconstitution of symbolic meanings (Vieta, 2020) and collective memories (Olick *et al.*, 2011; Tomaney *et al.*, 2024) attached to the site. Therefore, our second proposition demonstrates the crucial role of reconstructing memories associated with these places, in shaping new social bonds and forming the commons. Here, the intersection between the physical repair of the occupied space and reconstruction of new imaginaries associated with it play a key role in constituting new common spaces in the city.

– Reconstructing social bonds and the emergence of new subjectivities

As our interviewee, the activist Raffaele recounted (February 2022), even before they reopened the doors of Santa Fede, their guiding principle was 'let's reconstruct the places to reconstruct communities'—a vision that ultimately led them to liberate the space. This statement demonstrates how the reappropriation and actual reconstruction of the physical space was intended to enable, and indeed led to, the reconstruction they refer to as the 'broken community's thread' (*ibid.*). Every Sunday, Giulia explained (interviewed in May 2022), activist-inhabitants gathered for assemblies while simultaneously engaging in manual repair of the space, joined by other neighbourhood inhabitants contributing to the effort (see Figures 3 and 4). A similar experience unfolded in Scugnizzo Liberato, where occupation triggered a collective mobilization of neighbourhood residents who joined to take part in the reconstruction (interviewed in October and December 2021). At his interview in December 2021, Antonio described how, on leaving his house, he noticed the door of the Filangieri open and suddenly became involved, contributing to cleaning up and offering his own van to dispose of the rubbish.

Giulia (interviewed May 2022) first became involved in Santa Fede by refurbishing the walls of the former refectory, which she wanted to use to rehearse amateur theatre with a group of other people joining. Marta (interviewed October 2021) first entered Scugnizzo Liberato to ask for a place to rehearse with her band—therefore motivated by a personal desire in a neighbourhood with no facilities—and she immediately committed 'to fix, to help, to clear, to try to recover the site'. Through Giulia and Marta's accounts of their first involvement (several activists reported similar stories) a recurring pattern emerges: individuals enter the space with a personal need or desire and begin to integrate into the liberated space while shaping it, precisely by

4 See the YouTube video filmed in the early days of Santa Fede (2015), available at: <https://www.YouTube.com/channel/UCj6bYNgPnQxgjTIDNRtDZTQ>.



FIGURE 3 One of the first assemblies at Santa Fede, held in a space still under reconstruction (source: commonsnapoli.org)

contributing to the recovery of the area they envision for their own activity and the space as a whole. Indeed, in the same interview Giulia explained to me that people used to ‘adopt a small part of the space’, restoring it physically, as part of a collective process but also in relation to their personal hopes and desires for that space (a theatre workshop in her case). Author Martina Locorotondo’s own experience followed the same trajectory: her integration into Scugnizzo Liberato began through direct participation in ongoing masonry work. It is through this embodied engagement—and observation of recurring patterns over time—that we argue that the collective practice of repair functions not only as a means of spatial transformation, but also as a way for people to build a shared sense of belonging and mutual purpose. By offering their time, energy and tools to reclaim neglected spaces, participants help lay the foundations for a newly formed and continuously growing community.

Beyond the initial phases, reconstruction and repair still constitute a moment of becoming part of the collective process and building relationships between heterogeneous subjects in making Scugnizzo Liberato. Cristiano, another activist at the space, interviewed in May 2022, illuminated the meaning of these practices in a public assembly by pointing to a wall on the ground floor that we had recently renovated together over the summer. He noted that, while some parts had been restored to perfection, others were less refined, explaining that this unevenness reflected the collective nature of the work: ‘we all did it together, both those who had carpentry skills and those who did not’. His aim was to emphasize the value of a shared process carried out by a heterogeneous group. This example demonstrates that reconstruction and repair, as commoning practices, create opportunities not only to reappropriate space as a resource, but also to remake the fragmented urban social fabric by bringing together diverse individuals—workers, activists, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood

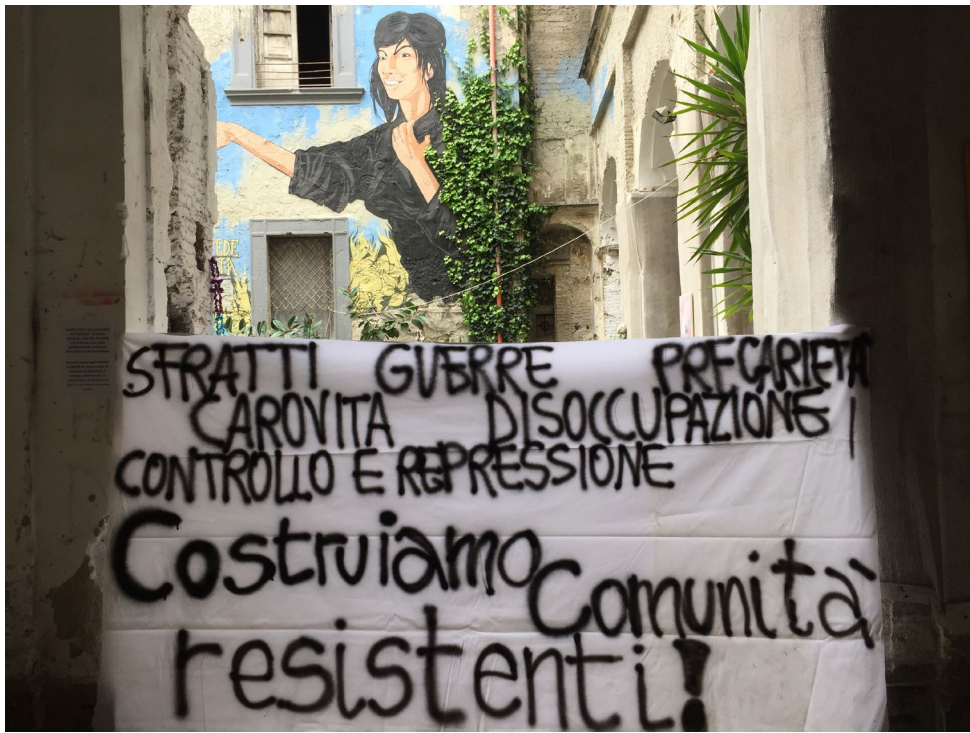


FIGURE 4 Architectural detail with a mural of Santa Fede in the background and a banner in the foreground reading: ‘Evictions, wars, precarity, high cost of living, unemployment, control and repression / We build resistant communities!’ (photo by Martina Locorotondo, April 2022)

and displaced artisans—whose practical knowledge and collaboration are essential to this collective effort.

This effort not only contributes to shaping a collective subject in the form of an open community. Empirical evidence also points to the emergence of a new subjectivity—one we refer to as the activist-inhabitant. Stefania’s reflections are particularly meaningful in this regard. She is one of the most actively engaged participants in repair practices arriving in 2021—understood both as manual maintenance and refurbishing work, and as the repair of social relations through the project ‘La Bottega di අමුණා Ammā’. This project seeks to build solidarity among mothers facing harsh living conditions in an increasingly exclusionary city like Naples.⁵ When I asked Stefania (interviewed in September 2024) how her involvement at Scugnizzo had changed her life, she described the experience as both socially bonding and personally transformative, placing particular emphasis on the role of the physical space and her engagement with it, and on the development of a renewed and deepened connection to her territory. As she put it: ‘Scugnizzo has deepened my roots in this territory more than ever before—it’s something material, physical, tied to the space and to the opportunities for gathering that it creates’.

Beyond this example, a recurring pattern has emerged from embodied reflections and field observations. Individuals from diverse backgrounds, through their participation in collective labour—consistently oriented toward reconfiguring space in

5 It is called ‘ammā’—meaning ‘mum’ in Sinhalese—as the first request for support came from a Sinhalese mother.

response to community needs—undergo processes of personal transformation. They become active subjects in shaping the physical, relational and political fabric of the city. This shift is especially evident among those who had no prior experience of activism. Often, they begin by offering practical help—a way of engaging with others not through political or intellectual discourse, but by sharing skills and contributing to tangible tasks. Over time, this hands-on involvement becomes a gateway to collective engagement: attending assemblies, understanding shared governance and gradually participating in the commons. This process frequently leads also to a growing interest in political issues previously overlooked, and, in some cases, to embracing more contentious struggles, such as opposition to touristification or involvement in reclaiming public services.

Ultimately, through these deeply material and symbolic acts of repair, participants began to mend fragile social ties and to constitute themselves as active subjectivities. This is not primarily through ideological alignment, but through the shared labour of reclaiming space for the neighbourhood and shaping it in response to the evolving needs of its inhabitants. In this process, individuals—previously ‘strangers’ (Huron, 2015), heterogeneous in age, class, education, and race—begin to perceive themselves as inhabitants, developing a deeper connection to the territory and discovering their collective capacity to act upon it. This marks a process of subjectivation, in which individuals become active inhabitants, enacting in practice their right to inhabit and use public space, while resisting the ongoing expansion of tourist enclosures. In doing so, those who became commoners moved from being passive objects of urban transformation to becoming its agents—collectively organizing to create Liberated Spaces as concrete alternatives to the neoliberal city.

Drawing on these findings, and building on Jason Read’s (2010) notion of subjectivity as a transindividual process shaped through shared engagement with the commons, we argue that repair emerges as a constitutive practice through which individuals are reconfigured as political and social actors. Therefore, our third proposition is that the reconstruction and repair of Naples’ Liberated Spaces functioned as key arenas through which a dispersed collectivity was assembled—not only in material terms, but also subjectively—through iterative, embodied acts of commoning.

– Learning from the Neapolitan Liberated Spaces about repair in and for commoning

Drawing on the work of Valeria Graziano and Kim Trogal (2019), we approach repair as a politically relevant practice—not to obscure its inherent paradoxes, but to critically engage with them through empirical research. This requires careful attention to what is being repaired and for whom. From their Foucauldian perspective, Graziano and Trogal (2019: 206) argue that repair does not exist ‘outside of dominant governing regimes and practices, but [is] shaped by them’. For this reason, they caution against treating practices of repair as ‘discrete objects considered in isolation’, detached from broader systems of power and governance.

This is particularly relevant in the current context of austerity urbanism, where bottom-up urban regeneration policies—including those linked to urban commoning—are increasingly adopted by local administrations as strategies to manage debt and compensate for reductions in state funding. In these cases, the responsibility for repairing, maintaining and managing public assets is often delegated to social actors (Carlone *et al.*, 2022). Under austerity, public–commons–private partnerships may co-opt the value generated by grassroots initiatives or shift the burden of public property maintenance onto the unpaid labour of so-called ‘active citizenship’. As Carlone *et al.* (2022: 2) observe, the buildings targeted by commoning policies are often not immediately usable. Having been neglected and left in disrepair by public authorities, they must undergo extensive renewal and transformation before they become ‘exploitable resources’. Similarly, Mangialardo and Micelli (2021: 6) argue that in times

of economic hardship, local governments may tactically allow self-organized groups to use non-strategic properties for social and economic development initiatives—while effectively holding those assets until the real estate market recovers. In this context, community-led restoration risks contributing to rising property values through unpaid work, as part of a wider process of gentrification and multiplication of the enclosures.

Carlone *et al.* (2022) offer a compelling example in their analysis of the 2016 *Regolamento dei Beni Comuni* [Regulation of Commons] adopted by the City of Turin. This regulation introduced *patti di collaborazione* [collaboration pacts], formal agreements between the local administration and ‘active citizens’ for the maintenance of public spaces and delivery of inclusive services. The authors argue that these projects often prioritize real estate redevelopment, overshadowing goals of civic engagement and social inclusion, which are essential to the very idea of the commons (*ibid.*: 6; see also Saporito and Vassallo, 2020). Similar risks might be envisaged in another example of top-down development of partnerships between administrators, third sector, private sector and active citizenship in Italy, such as the Labsus project and its *patti di collaborazione*. Encouraging local communities to assume responsibility for the upkeep of public goods—in an urban context marked by deepening inequalities, especially in access to housing—may ultimately contribute to the economic valorization of specific urban areas while neglecting the actual needs of the population.

On the other hand, Graziano and Trogal (2019: 204) highlight that repair ‘cannot be defined and determined by extant governing rationalities—there are always scopes for approaching, practicing and organizing repair “differently”’ and it can become ‘a source of counter-power and “counter-conduct”’ (Foucault, 2009: 195). This is the kind of repair we have explored in this article: initiatives that reappropriate the commons and foster social forces capable of confronting neoliberal enclosures through repair and maintenance. These include social centres, housing squats, rural co-operatives and reclaimed factories across the globe. However, given the increasing co-optation of both the notion of the commons and practices such as repair in state and capital-driven urban regeneration programmes, it becomes urgent—especially through the lens of the Naples case—to identify what sets apart repair as a form of counter-power or alternative-making (Hardt and Negri, 2017). At the same time, we must also confront its inevitable ambiguities, particularly in the context of austerity urbanism.

In the Liberated Spaces of Naples, we identify two key features that characterize repair as a form of counter-power and prefiguration, resisting the risks outlined above. These features build on the three propositions developed so far and underpin our fourth. First, repair in these spaces is not limited to the physical rehabilitation or cosmetic restoration of damaged buildings to restore urban ‘decorum’. Rather, it is a process through which inhabitants reclaim the power to act on and decide collectively about space as a commons. This reappropriation allows for the daily reconfiguration of these places based on the needs of marginalized populations, rather than market imperatives. For instance, spaces like Scugnizzo Liberato and Santa Fede Liberata have been shaped by a range of everyday demands: migrant communities needed venues for cultural celebrations; neighbourhood youths sought a place to watch football matches; children required free spaces to play; homeless people needed a place to eat and socialize; and artisans displaced by touristification needed workshops (see Figures 5 and 6). Such a reappropriation of decision-making over a space for the benefit of marginalized inhabitants is what clearly distinguishes this repair practice from that of fixing a building while increasing its economic value and delegating decision-making over it to institutions. Through these spatial choices, the buildings have been remodelled from an abandoned juvenile detention centre and penitential retreat for ‘dangerous women’ to liberated spaces of sharing, education and mutualism open to the territory, within and against an urban context increasingly devoted to the extraction of capital.



FIGURE 5 Children playing football during the soccer course by Spartak San Gennaro at Scugnizzo Liberato (photo by Martina Locorotondo, December 2021)

Second, fieldwork has shown that, through an ongoing reconfiguration of space, new alliances are formed between heterogeneous groups cooperating in a transformative process. This is what we identify as the second characteristic of repair as a counter-power and prefiguration in the Liberated Spaces. Through the empirical examples of the masonry work in the ground floor at Scugnizzo Liberato and the first reconstruction works in Santa Fede, we have shown how the practice of repair in this context is configured as a unique opportunity for ‘strangers to come together’ (Huron, 2015: 963). This process is not only about sharing knowledge and skills, working collectively and reconstructing material space. It also creates opportunities to forge new alliances and political subjectivities—ones capable not only of surviving the multiple crises of contemporary capitalism, but also of working together today to act as subjects and not objects of urban transformations. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for a broader social transformation yet to come (Dinerstein, 2016: 51; Boudreau, 2022).

Our fourth proposition is that the practices of repair enacted within the Liberated Spaces became transformative precisely because they involve the collective reappropriation of decision-making power over space. These spaces were reconfigured in direct response to the needs of marginalized inhabitants and through the forging of alliances between strangers committed to social transformation. In sharp contrast to state-led urban regeneration initiatives—which often outsource restoration to the unpaid labour of citizens—this process opened possibilities not only to address deep-rooted inequalities and forms of oppression experienced by residents, but also to imagine and enact broader transformations beyond the physical boundaries of the Liberated Spaces.

Conclusion

Repair and reconstruction are an integral feature of the Liberated Spaces. We have identified the multiple and overlapping practices of repair for commoning: (1) the collective physical repair of previously abandoned buildings; (2) the reconstruction of the memories



FIGURE 6 Artisan restoring an antique piece of furniture at Scugnizzo Liberato (photo by Martina Locorotondo, December 2021)

attached to the site; (3) the simultaneous repair and reconstruction of social relations between otherwise isolated inhabitants, and the development of new subjectivities, which we have termed ‘activist-inhabitants’; and (4) through the repair and reconstruction of these spaces—against the backdrop of capitalist enclosures imposed by the tourist city of Naples—the transformative potential of these emergent subjectivities that might extend beyond the occupied sites of the Liberated Spaces themselves.

The paradox of repair as being both a pathway to social transformation and restoration of social order remains a key problematic for future research on the commons and commoning. Beginning from the politics of repair, we have critically reflected on the conceptualization of repair as a practice in critical urban studies and how it either exacerbates injustice or promotes counter-power and prefigurative relations. We have also considered important insights, too, about the risks of the urban commons being coopted into exploitation, enclosure, and capitalist accumulation in the tourist city.

We have identified in two ways how repair and reconstruction in the Liberated Spaces in Naples acted as building a counter-power and prefigurative form of repair. First, the practices of material, symbolic and subjective repair in the Liberated Spaces are a process through which inhabitants regained decision-making power over an abandoned public space, reappropriated its use value and reconfigured it based on the needs of the marginalized population. Second, we showed how these practices brought together heterogeneous actors, fostering cooperation and alliances that stretch beyond the act of rebuilding toward broader societal transformation. These two features distinguish repair in and for the commons from similar activities carried out within urban regeneration projects. However, the paradox can never be avoided once and for all, as the meaning of these practices can change in changing political contexts. Recognition of the risks and ambiguities of repair in the commons, and its potential cooptation into exploitative projects undertaken by the state and capital, must therefore be at the forefront of everyday practice in the commons and its future theorization.

Further interrogating the forms of repair and reconstruction across the plethora of occupied spaces is an important avenue for future research, positioning repair as a vital conceptual lens through which to understand the commons, commoning and commoning subjects as they confront enclosure, financialization and ecological crisis, while working to build and sustain alternative imaginaries and material urban inhabitation of and for the future.

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