

ETH Zurich
Werk 11

Collectivize!

Essays on
the Political Economy
of Urban Form

Vol. 2

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WERK 11: A Laboratory for Contemporary Urban Design and Research

Established in a former factory building as an outpost of the Department of Architecture, WERK 11 is a laboratory and center for expertise that brings together the various fields that have an impact on today's urban conditions. It provides open ateliers, workshops, and seminar and lecture spaces joining the ETH professorships of Prof. Alfredo Brillembourg and Prof. Hubert Klumpner, Prof. Kees Christiaanse, Prof. Günther Vogt, Prof. Christophe Girot, Prof. Dr. Christian Schmid, and Prof. Dr. Marc Angélli. As a combination of a research center, design studio, and event space, it encourages a dialogue between theory and practice and establishes networks between the academic field and the multiple actors involved in the production of the city. By thinking architecture, sociology, landscape, and urban design beyond their disciplinary boundaries, WERK 11 hopes to both understand and shape existing and future urban and rural environments, whether in the immediate context of the Swiss agglomeration or in the megacities of the Global South.

Among the ETH professorships that operate within the context of WERK 11, the Chair of Prof. Dr. Marc Angélli engages with contemporary urban research, as well as topics on the edge of the discipline, including urban poverty, ageing demographics, and large-scale retail logistics. The Chair's research seminar and lecture series, *Urban Mutations on the Edge (UME)*, investigates provocative ideas and innovative projects that deal with a wide range of topics. Set against more traditional notions of architecture and urban design, this interdisciplinary approach asks what one branch of knowledge can bring to the other.

The second issue in the *Essays on the Political Economy of Urban Form* series explores collectivities with a selection of contributions to the UME lecture series by Massimo De Angelis, Arno Brandhuber and Christian Posthofen, Zvi Efrat, and Jesse LeCavalier.

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“Now, in the word ‘collective,’ it is precisely the *work* of collecting into a whole that I want to stress. The word should remind us of sewage systems where networks of small, medium and large ‘collectors’ make it possible to evacuate waste water as well as to absorb the rain that falls on a large city. This metaphor of the *cloaca maxima* suits our

needs perfectly, along with all the paraphernalia of adduction, sizing, purifying stations, observation points and manholes necessary to its upkeep. The more we associate materialities, institutions, technologies, skills, procedures, and slowdowns with the word 'collective,' the better its use will be: the hard labor necessary for the progressive and public composition of the future unity will be all the more visible."

—Bruno Latour¹

Common interests and collective organizations are back on the political agenda, with nation states crumbling under the weight of debt, welfare states shaving off social security, healthcare, and education programs, and public institutions losing out against private capital. This is

¹ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 59.

particularly felt by those directly affected by government cuts, who are left with no choice but to self-organize for collective action. Whether we turn to popular uprisings against the privatization of water in Bolivia, the *fábricas recuperadas* movement in Argentina, the booming cooperative housing market in Switzerland, or the informal and self-organized cities proliferating around the world, we can clearly see that reformulating common grounds and building up collective associations presents a viable alternative to privatizing public goods.

There is little doubt that the major problems that we face today—such as climate change, poverty, and the effects of the financial crisis—can only be solved collectively. But how are new collectives formed? What kinds of rules, negotiations, and practices help consolidate and facilitate group agendas? How are collectives able to act with a single will when they are

composed of so many diverse, and sometimes opposing, interests?

Urban studies would benefit significantly if the analysis of collectives were to shift its focus from the term's ideological connotations (and the critical question of how it relates to modern democracy) to its operational modes and productive forces. It would then become evident that collective organization forms the foundation of human habitats. Collectives range from the unit of the single household to large-scale organizations that structure our ways of living and our social, economic, and ecological relationships (*oikos*, the Ancient Greek term for the household, is preserved in the English prefix for both *economy* and *ecology*). The city, even in its most privatized form, always relies on common agreements, infrastructural networks, and public facilities that enable the sharing of resources and common goods. Framing the city as the¹⁰

materialized model of a major collective project suggests another way of understanding contemporary collectives, recognizing the "hardware," the urban form, as an integral component of the "software," the social order.

With an extended perspective on collective participation, Bruno Latour's city metaphor, quoted in the epigraph, includes other entities within the grouping of human actors: materials, institutions, technologies, and skills are stakeholders in the formation of collective gatherings. What Latour calls the "parliament of things" challenges common ways of negotiating shared interests; as a flexible framework between human and non-human agents and between stakeholders, procedures, technologies, and physical objects, the "parliament of things" constitutes a livelihood that is common to all. According to Latour, collectives have a significant role to play in reassembling a world that has been divided into

matters of fact (science) and matters of concern (politics). Beyond simply representing a group's common will, collectives face the challenge of bringing facts and values together by establishing a new kind of constitution—one that includes all participants in the process and constantly translates their voices into common agreements and new social contracts. By asking two basic questions—"How many are we?" and "Can we live together?"—Latour sketches out a constitutional framework for the formation of new collectives: a framework that gradually institutionalizes and orders the complexity of stakeholder relationships and propositions.²

Latour's reconceptualization of how collectives are formed gives the built

2 "The distinction between two new assemblies—the first of which will ask, "How many are we?" and the second, "Can we live together?"—will serve political ecology as its Constitution." Bruno Latour seeks to replace the previous separation between facts and values with a constitutional framework where the collective is given the task of establishing new power relationships. In this process, political ecology, which stands for "the right way to compose a common World," will bring together the two terms "science" and "politics." Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, 8.

environment a more active role in the construction of the social realm; his work is therefore critical to understanding the relationship between collectivity and urban form. When we recognize buildings, traffic networks, and sewage systems as agents that determine how we can live together, we also frame collectivity as a cross-disciplinary project connecting social studies, political economies, and technological sciences with urban planning.

Urban form affects collective organization in two different ways: as an operational logic for the management of our everyday environment and at the same time as a political body. This relationship is all the more manifest in the erection of new settlements on uninhabited land; the planning and building of new towns is most efficient when their physical structures and social visions correspond. In "The Haunt of the Rural," Zvi Efrat provides

a historical overview of planning in Israel, from Merchavia, the first permanent prototype of a cooperative agrarian settlement, to more recent gated communities that serve as "facts on the ground" for the state's political and territorial agenda. In order to translate its social vision into practice, early Zionism developed "a new language and with it a new architecture of environmental and social reform." Its rural location also precluded any reference to earlier urban models. Neither city nor village, the kibbutz, and the Israeli new town that was derived from it, represented the "idealized social cell" as well as the "allegorized national body." However, Efrat argues that Zionist planning engaged with more than just the social values of the burgeoning state; it was also developed as part of a national strategy to distribute migrants across the whole territory of Israel. The initial vision of communes

and cooperative associations thus transformed into Israel's contemporary "ludicrous masquerade of an intensified political, ethnic, and religious battleground." Does the evolution of the kibbutz from its early days as an open and idealized collective to its present state as a secluded, gated, and militarized community reveal the limits, or even the utopian nature, of inclusive collective practices?

The kibbutz was modeled after the utopian communities of Robert Owen, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Charles Fourier, and Edmund Spenser, a group of social reformers who believed that utopian thinking could serve as a driver for social change. Fourier's Phalanstères, early nineteenth-century apartment complexes designed to house insular, radical communities, provided a model for progressive movements that followed, including the Paris Commune of 1871 and twentieth-century feminism. Similarly, Owen's

unrealized design for New Harmony, Indiana, projected an alternative world and community founded on the ideas of utopian socialism, cooperative movements, and scientific innovation; New Harmony's goal to alleviate poverty and improve society would be accomplished by the design of its physical structures.

Jesse LeCavalier explores in "Mental Liberty: Robert Owen's Utopian Machine" how Owen's quest for harmony was realized in a very particular and integrated manner and according to contemporary developments in economics and the social and technical sciences. Owen's scientific approach to social organization prefigures Latour's "parliament of things," whereby collectives are formed by human and non-human actors. The careful arrangement of buildings and the particular relationship between architecture, social organization, and infrastructure constituted two key

components of New Harmony's scheme, which used objects, procedures, and scientific knowledge to order social relationships. According to LeCavalier, "the phalanstery can also be understood as an engineering operation in which heterogeneous input would be formed into homogeneous output in the form of newly designed moral and mentally liberated individuals"; that is, social engineering and logistical operations would determine the production of collectivity in New Harmony.

The plot of Arno Brandhuber's and Christian Posthofen's photo essay is also based on a collective vision, albeit one complicit in the dystopian totalitarian state of North Korea. The sequence of associative images from the capital Pyongyang depicts the inner logic of the North Korean regime and its symbolic legitimization. Particularly striking in this allusive and intimate foray into a foreign territory is the way

in which the state deploys ideological determinism and manipulates the people's imaginary in order to form a collective. However, the indoctrinatory practices apparent in dictatorships and even religious fundamentalism are also to be found in advanced democracies operating in the neoliberal market. Different collective beliefs are here similarly conditioned by symbolic manifestations and celebrations and the commodification of power. By introducing the term "orientating imaginations" (*Vorstellungsorientierung* in German), Brandhuber and Posthofen describe how architectural form is ideologically infiltrated to shape and enforce a collective identity. Brandhuber and Posthofen argue that the phenomenon of "orientating imaginations" is also occurring in Berlin today; the city demolished the Palast der Republik, and the iconographic memory of the former socialist GDR that it represents, in order to

reconstruct the historic Prussian castle and the national identity of Germany's feudal regime.

Collective organizations can be both exclusive and inclusive, because collectivity and identity always form a complex that is responsible for both the spread of ideologies and the negotiation of common interests between multiple entities. If common grounds are today increasingly influenced by the capitalist form of "production in common"—the exploitation of common goods and resources for the interests of private capital—then collective organizations are shaped by the exclusive practices of capitalism, which ultimately erodes any common ground.

In "Plan C & D: Commons and Democracy," Massimo De Angelis reflects on the options available for people to shape society after the devastating 2008 financial crisis. De Angelis identifies four future economic scenarios and focuses

on "Plan C&D," which is based on commons and democracy. De Angelis argues that only this alternative can assume the long-term governance of the commons and challenge capitalist "production in common." In pursuing the goals of "social justice, freedom, and emancipation," Plan C&D "[organizes] social cooperation around the expansion and integration of alternative modes of social cooperation based on shared resources and their horizontal government by communities." De Angelis frames "commoning," the management of shared goods, as a major component of an alternative economy. As the reproduction of society depends on the middle class, De Angelis argues for a commoning based on social values other than those dominated by private capital. The term "explosion of the middle class" refers to the huge amount of energy necessary in order to reconstruct common grounds as

shared among all social classes and to overturn the prevailing system of value production.³ If "the explosion of the middle class seems to be our only hope to save ourselves from alienation, poverty, and ecological disaster," then we must transform ourselves by changing how we relate to others and act collectively.

What are the implications of collective organization for planning and construction? Larger urban transformations are inextricably linked to the transformations in our everyday livelihoods; we must therefore pay greater attention to the way in which collectivities are formed on different scales and between different social strata. We must also address Latour's questions about how contradictory urban dwellers can live together and

3 While it is increasingly difficult for the European middle class to maintain their status, the middle class in emerging world powers such as China, India, and Brazil is "exploding" in a demographic sense. Because of economic growth, millions of people in the lower classes will become middle class, which will significantly alter consumption patterns and energy use and create additional challenges for sustainability goals.

produce a world that is common to them. Whether it refers to commoning, social engineering, or the creation of frameworks for co-production and shared resources, to “collectivize” means here to continuously establish practices that “collect” different lifestyles, social manifestations, and beliefs. In the face of neoliberalism and the individualistic attitudes of busy urbanites, the second edition of *The Political Economy of Urban Form*, edited by the ETH Chair of Prof. Marc Angélil, explores different practices, strategies, and ideologies around collective organizations and actions. From fictional utopias to built social laboratories and dystopias, the present issue reflects on urban form as a manifestation of our collective existence and experience.

Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. London: Harvard University Press, 2004.