

## Built Commons: Reclaiming the Sharing Economy

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**Abstract:** The advance of distributed computing research in the U.S. during the 1990s led to the conception of novel channels for subletting surplus space right after the burst of the U.S. housing bubble. The coincidence of the new technologies with the biggest increase in house prices (1990-2008) resulted in a new sharing culture which we know today as the “sharing economy”. This paper suggests that even if sharing platforms today are failing by exacerbating the housing crises around the globe, they could provoke other *alter-sharing* practices. The paper aims to reevaluate the sharing economy in relation to housing and in particular, its spatial implications. It looks into historical non-digital stranger-shared housing precedents and their architectures by deploying the theoretical framework of the commons as autonomous, resilient grassroots sharing networks. Finally, it explores contemporary online listing accounts looking for spatial evidence for both the effects of the sharing economy today and the potential emergence of alter-sharing practices. While regarding housing as a resource, it speculates if the pressures of its ever-growing scarcity and unaffordability could lead to the emergence of a collective political action.

**Keywords:** sharing economy; commons; housing; architecture

### Introduction

A decade ago, as the sharing economy was just starting to gain momentum, it was initially advertised through stories of resilience and sustainability. This soon gave way to a critical wave and the realization that the practice was, among other things, disregarding employment protection legislation and exacerbating housing crises in metropolises around the globe (Slee, 2017). Recent research points to strong evidence of how short-term rentals are taking housing stock off the market and making it unaffordable through “gentrification without redevelopment” (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018, p.7). At the same time start-up founders and sharing advocates continue building upon the positive “feel-good” rhetoric.

The term “sharing” is very suitable for appropriation due to its lexical ambiguity – one can share a language, a meal, a room (Belk, 2010). The same could be said for the term “economy”, it can relate to both the production/consumption of goods/services, and to the careful management of resources especially in the context of today’s global housing landscape. So it is understandable that in both academia and practice there is a disagreement on what the term “sharing economy” actually means. Koen Frenken and Juliet Schor (2017) refer to this as a “definitional issue”. They argue that the sharing economy is very similar but not equivalent to other preceding practices such as second-hand economy (eBay), product-service economy (car rentals) and on-demand/gig-economy (using the

professional services of a handyman). Instead, Frenken and Schor define the phenomenon as “consumers granting each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets (‘idle capacity’), possibly for money” (Frenken and Schor, 2017, p.5).

Both Belk and Schor and Fitzmaurice argue that stranger-sharing today was enabled through technology. For Belk the decisive development was the emergence of user generated content (Belk, 2014), while Schor and Fitzmaurice understand it as the guarantee for trust between strangers (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015). This paper traces how both stranger-sharing and collective content (value) generation are not new and have an analogue precedent in the face of the commons.

## **Theoretical Background**

The commons have a long history, going back to open-field system England where the term “common” was used in relation to “common land”. Few centuries later Elinor Ostrom (1990) suggested a new definition, arguing that the common is neither private, nor public, but communal. The work focused on grassroots strategies for natural resource governance as an alternative to existing state or privatized models. Another important contribution to the debate is Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s (2009) definition. Here the common (singular) is the social space where the multitude arrives at a shared subjectivity, and which acts as the foundation of the emergence of the commons (plural) – the social product of collective political action. And finally, Massimo De Angelis (2017) suggests that the commons are autonomous grassroots systems for the production and governance of shared resources – both material and non-material. Drawing on the theoretical discourse described above the paper will suggest the potentiality for today’s sharing practices to transform into “commons” as a response and solution to a failing housing market.

Unfortunately, today’s sharing economy platforms have still a long way to go as they currently conceptualize sharing as distributed value. Yochai Benkler (2004) draws a direct comparison between the popular at that time distributed computing trend and the material culture of car-pooling in post-war America. Benkler suggests that today’s sharing practices are originating in projects such as SETI@Home, the distributed computing experiment of NASA as an attempt for an economical supercomputer. The incentive was working through volunteers all over the globe who participated by downloading and running a screensaver and by doing that donating their underutilized computational capacity.

Benkler (2004) explains that idle capacity is generated by specific characteristics of the shared product such as “indivisibility”, which refers to the way a product is bundled and packaged. Computational power is a good example, as it is not fully utilized all the time and this inevitably generates idle capacity. One could argue that housing has the potential to be indivisible too. And here lies one of the main conflicts of the sharing economy in relation to architecture. If the platform is conceptualized to understand sharing in such quantified ways, it proves to be problematic especially in relation to space.

The essay even goes as far as claiming that sharing is an “economically attractive modality of production” (Benkler, 2004, p.342). However, those systems have commercial value only if a certain profit threshold is crossed. Otherwise the idle capacity stays an object of “social sharing rather than market exchange” (Benkler, 2004, p.317). Looking at the house prices curve in the U.S. for the last

decades (Shiller, 2015, p.20), this statement seems to be confirmed. Positioning the two most popular platforms today, Airbnb and Couchsurfing, one can clearly see that the barter platform emerges in 1999 at a low point, while the commercialized market version Airbnb is conceived in the peak of the housing prices, just before the bubble burst.

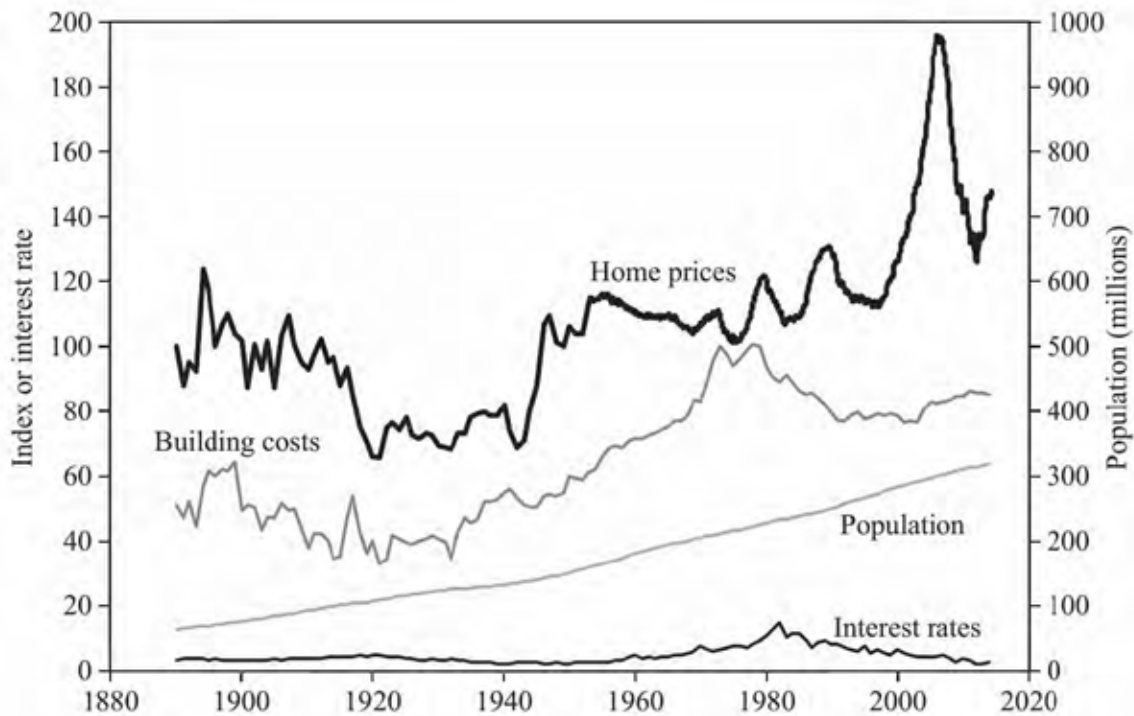


Figure 3.1  
**U.S. Home Prices, Building Costs, Population,  
 and Interest Rates, 1890–2014**

*Figure 1 Schiller's Study of U.S. Home Prices (Shiller, 2015, p.20)*

The technological developments mentioned above coincided with another major shift, one in the housing market. In the last few decades one has witnessed a steep increase in house prices, turning housing into a desirable investment asset (Monnery, 2011, Minton, 2017). The merging of soaring real estate prices and dysfunctional digital sharing platforms has marginalized the practice by reducing it to a transactional scheme. In this context idle capacity often gives way to new capacity allowing for housing units to be acquired as an investment only (Frenken and Schor, 2017). Taking housing stock off the market and exacerbating housing crises all over the world is only one side of the problem. Turning domestic interiors into staged home-themed experiences as in the documentary of Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine (2016) reveals another dark side of the sharing economy today. The work tells the story of an Airbnb user Mark who in the pursuit of constructing the perfect host storyline, ended up giving up his marriage, home and day job. But where does all this leave us and does this mean we need to give up sharing altogether?

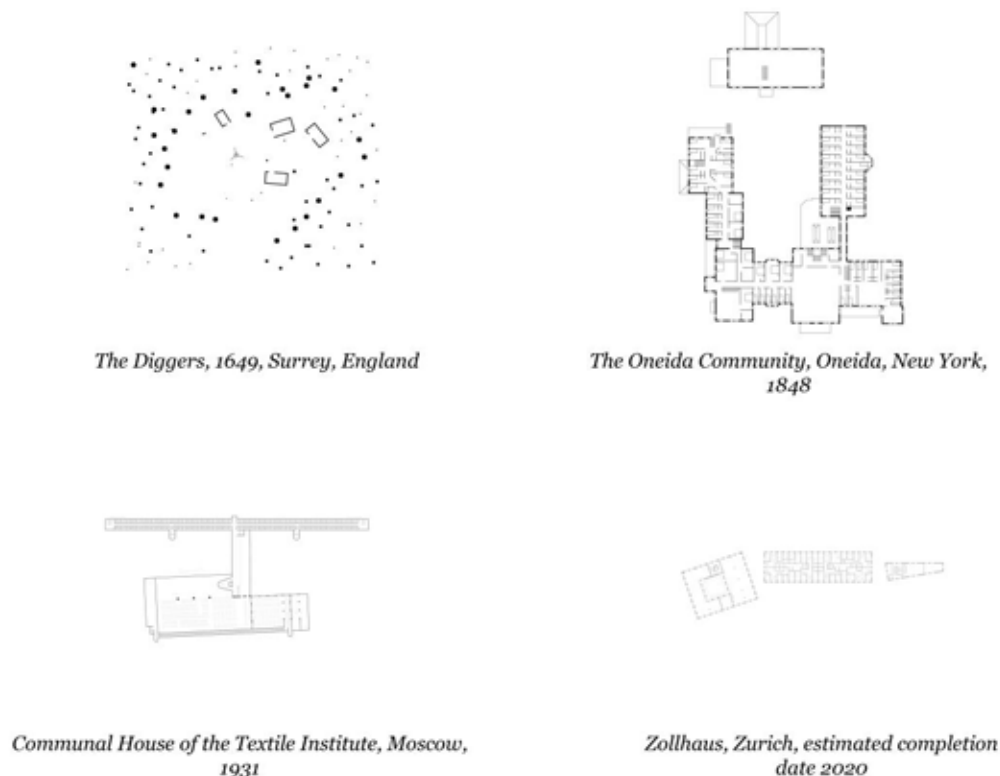
## Research Methods

The paper argues that technology was merely the channel and not the reason for today's sharing popularity. Moreover, it claims that "sharing economies" have existed before in various analogue forms. The historical overview will construct a genealogy of stranger-shared housing and place the sharing economy within a tradition of preceding practices. It will also examine the relationship between the home and the common and how it has been actualized in space historically to then further assess today's sharing economy.

Following the historical overview, the work is going to introduce accounts of contemporary platforms through analysing online listings. The investigation will explore listings as constructed images of today's domestic condition but also as an economic marker.

## Historical Overview

The following historical overview will explore a group of cases where the relationship between the home and the common was manifested differently and, essentially, formalized to a various extent. This includes the Diggers in Surrey, ca. 1649, the Oneida Community house in Oneida, New York, 1848, the Communal House of the Textile Institute in Moscow, 1931, and finally, Zollhaus in Zurich, estimated completion date 2020.



*Figure 2 Historical Examples of Stranger-shared Housing*

The Diggers are quite often referred to as one of the first accounts of autonomous counterculture projects. In fact, they have acquired an almost mythological status for many following counterculture

movements culminating with the SF Diggers group in San Francisco in the 1960s (Carlsson and Elliott, 2011). The story of the Diggers begins in 1649 as they settle on a piece of common land in St George's Hill, Surrey and start cultivating it. The historical background of these events was accompanied by the already on-going enclosure in England which minimized common pastures and woodlands that used to be available to all manorial tenants under the open-field system (Gurney, 2015). Other historic events of the same period included the English Civil War (1642-1651), the overthrow of the English monarchy with the execution of Charles I., and the following takeover of Oliver Cromwell (1653-1658). At the time cultivation of common land was comparable to today's squatting culture. It was a strong political statement but also a solution to an urgent necessity. The same period was marked by a famine in Northern England in 1649, and generally, food and wool production were regarded as very profitable enterprises at the time. The home on the other hand was by far not understood as something valuable. Apart from a rather wealthy urban segment of the population, it served purely utilitarian functions. Perhaps this is also the reason for the limited historical material on the architecture of the colony. John Gurney offers a brief description: "they have built them some few little hutches like calf-cribs, and there they lie anights, and follow their work adayes still with wonderful joy of heart" (Gurney, 2015, p.73). Those lines depict an agglomeration of small-scale agrarian buildings scattered through the wood. The built structures are used only as collective bedrooms and the rest is defined by the spatial condition of the landscape. The common land, which is also the site of the production of the common in this case, is also reflected in the architectural language. Borrowing the architectural vocabulary of the site of production of the common, "little hutches like calf-cribs" affirms the insignificance of the home. One could even argue that the home was inserted in the predominant condition of the common.

The Communal House of the Textile Institute in Moscow on the other hand suggests the reverse case by attempting to reproduce the common in the home. In fact, a very particular kind of common. The building dates back to 1931, a time in Soviet Russia when housing was particularly involved with reinventing the "byt" or the everyday life of the Soviet citizen (Trotskii, 1973). This political project was truly important to the extent of the state relaxing banks borrowing policies in 1929 for housing projects that addressed the question (Crawford, 2015). The common here was used to support a certain political project through architectural form. Similar to the Diggers the architectural language was borrowed from the site of collective production - the factory. But this time it was inserted into a new housing typology, one where the private spaces were minimized to "sleeping cabins", completely identical and efficiently stacked together. In that sense the Communal House of the Textile Institute has succeeded in inserting the common, in this case an externally constructed one, in the home. As Christina Crawford (2015) points out there was no place for a mid-scale familial gathering, the choice was between the individual and the "ideological family". This managerial way of dealing with domesticity had a very strong sense how architectural form could be engrained in the domestic condition and have behavioral consequences, essentially formalizing a political ideology through spatial arrangement.

The Oneida Community was founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848 in Oneida, New York. The specific historical context included the American Independence and the Civil War. This was a time of exploration, prospecting dreams and the utopias of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier. Having initially originated as a religious community, the Oneida were very skeptical towards both private property and marriage. They advocated for common ownership and polyamorous relationships. Their ideology

was strongly expressed in their “architecture of the complex marriage” as Dolores Hayden (1976) refers to it. The space was very carefully orchestrated especially in relation to the production and sustenance of the common. The Oneida believed in having designated spaces for specific uses (Hayden, 1976). Here too the private bedrooms were as small as possible in order to encourage social interaction. At the same time private space was superseded by Oneida’s “Victorian Sexual Revolution” as described by Hayden (1976, p.187). Besides being minimized physically the very essence of privacy was ruled out. Additionally, mid-sized living spaces were scattered along the corridors between the bedrooms to both surveil and encourage interaction. Those spaces had a function to police and sustain the community’s behavioral protocols. And finally, there were the large-scale gathering rooms, where the communards could enjoy the community’s company and the common was consumed in social terms. Those different scales of architectural interventions related to the common in different ways and constituted together an intricate strategy between space and social code. In that sense one could argue that there was a complete correspondence between the common and the home. The common has managed to permeate every aspect of the domestic and was strongly expressed in space.

The historical overview will conclude with a housing project by the Kalkbreite cooperative in Zurich. Having originated from various squats during the city’s real estate bubble in the 1990s cooperatives developed an efficient strategy to counteract real estate speculation. This happened at the time of a state-driven relaxation of the interests rates from banks allowing for cooperatives to kick-off housing projects all over the city. According to the new cooperative ownership model units were not owned in traditional sense but corresponded to shares which the members could acquire. The shareholders were paying back the loan through their rent which, independently from market prices, would go lower once the initial construction costs have been repaid (Bridger, 2016). This alternative housing micro-market is reflected in the architectural diversity of the unit mix in Kalkbreite’s project Zollhaus. The building offers great variety of flats from a studio to a 8-person unit and even some completely open floor plan units, free for the residents to spatially equip them as needed. The specific housing units are self-contained and private and there are designated large-scale gathering spaces in the building. Zollhaus has managed to counteract the market dysfunctionalities by collectively engaging in the conception and delivery of the physical space of the home. Unlike any other cases, here one can see a common which is the very subject of the commons. At the same time the common-home relationship is facilitated by the cooperative which leads us to today’s sharing practices.

The historical examples described above provide evidence that stranger-sharing is not really new. In fact, it has often been related to a socio-economically driven collective response. If the steep increase in housing prices of the past few decades has indeed led to the emergence of a new subjectivity, the following contemporary accounts will investigate how this is actualized spatially in today’s sharing economy.

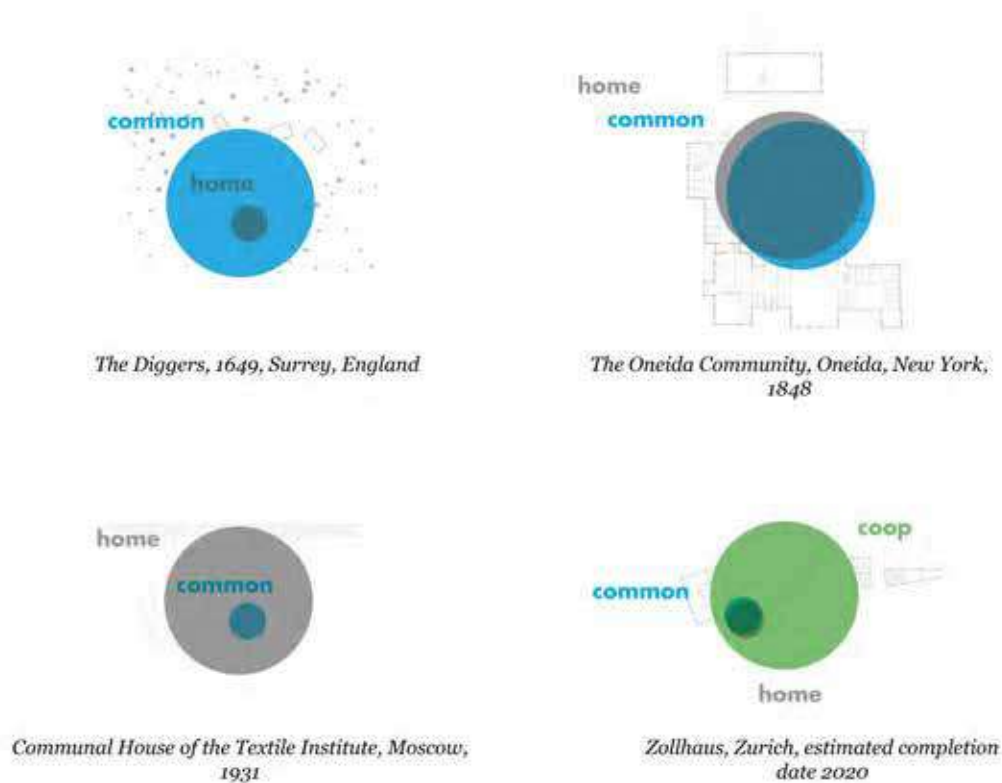


Figure 3 Common-Home Relationships in Stranger-shared Housing

### Today's Home Sharing

One could perhaps draw a comparison between today's sharing practices and the pursuit of the "byt" in Soviet Russia, as the common has been conceived and managed outside the community - by the platform. How exactly does this impact the architecture?

Preliminary study in the form of online listing analysis is to explore this question further. Airbnb distinguishes between four "home types": entire place, private room, hotel room, shared room. From that one could assume that there are two different types of space occupation – parallel, when there is actual co-habitation in the same unit of guest and host, and non-parallel, when the host and guest are there at different times. The following study is going to focus on the "shared room" category, as these would be the type of listings where negotiation would be most present. The selected listings were acquired from a publicly accessible dataset of Airbnb listings provided by OpenDataSoft (<https://publi.opendatasoft.com/explore/dataset/airbnb-listings>).

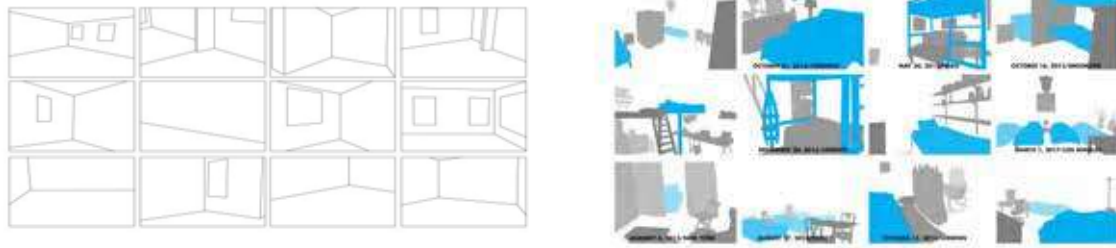


Figure 4 Built vs. Shared Space – Airbnb Shared Room Listings

If one takes a closer look at those spaces, one can see that the room outline doesn't change much. What is regulating the negotiation of space is the arrangement of the furniture. The fact that the architectural envelope has been rendered absolutely obsolete, and that furniture is the main representational medium, asserts the assumption that perhaps the sharing economy was not only a result of an economic crisis but of an architectural one too. In a time when housing is treated and traded as a valuable asset, the domestic interior is the only artefact where one can trace the agency of the inhabitants. In this scenario the architectural elements constituting the typology such as walls and thresholds are almost too precious for any interventions.

A closer reading of online listings reveals various strategic uses of furniture such as surplus, scarcity, affect, utility, presence. In some of those cases the furniture is there not only to negotiate shared space but to overcome a spatial issue too like surplus or scarcity.

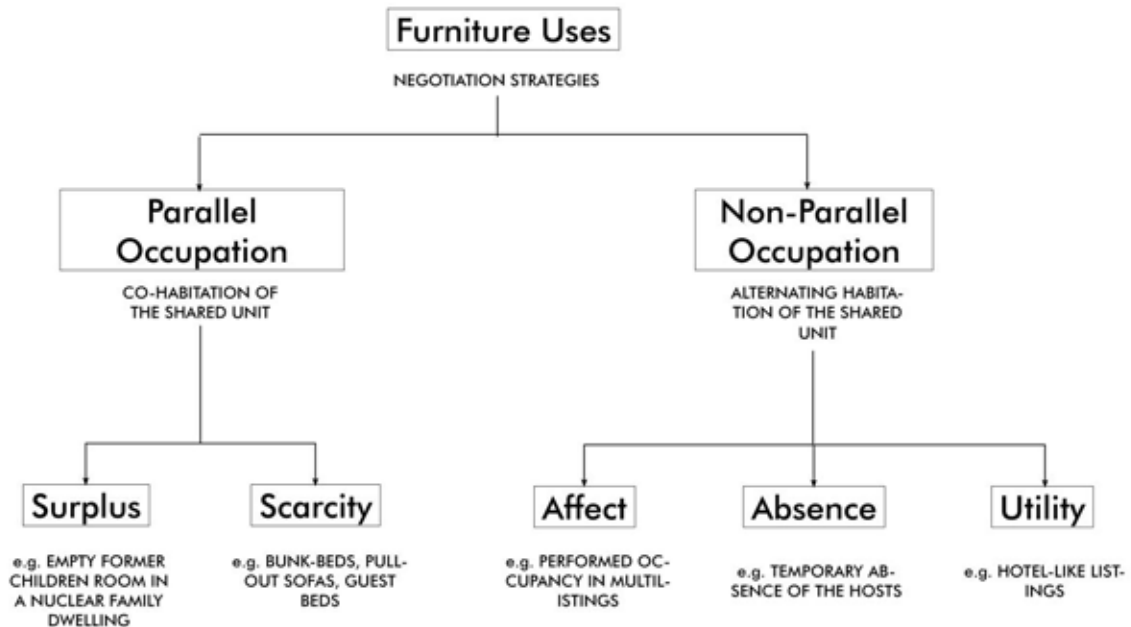


Figure 5 Sharing Negotiation Strategies Through Furniture

In a moment when housing has become so valuable, furniture is deployed not only to negotiate space with other people but also to negotiate space with a conflicting architectural design.

## Conclusions

Sharing has indeed proven to have destructive effects on the accessibility of housing (Slee, 2017; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018) but it hasn't always been that way. Sharing economies have historically existed in other forms and successfully managed not only *not* to exacerbate market speculation but to counteract it. Without underestimating the sharing economy's negative effects, the pressures of the dysfunctional platforms and market could act as the common ground for new housing concepts to emerge. These new models could, similar to the Swiss cooperatives, have the potential to counteract market failures and create alternative economies.

There is a new generation of platforms which, having witnessed the dysfunctions of the existing models, has other aspirations. Notions such as networked home ownership (Doma, Strelka Institute), diverse economic transactions (Nookzy), or platform cyber currencies (Bee Token) address the question of value and how it can be retained within the community. It is perhaps simply a matter of time for those new alternatives to gain wider popularity and reclaim the otherwise conflicted practice.

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