The Publicness of Urban Commons. Insights from the Brussels Commoning Scene.

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She has a PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from Università IUAV di Venezia and KU Leuven. For her doctoral research, she explored the relationship between property rights, space and the architectural project in the Community Land Trust of Brussels case. Since 2011, as an activist, designer and researcher, she has been building transversal expertise on urban commons by contributing to various projects and initiatives, such as the foundation of Commons Josaphat in Brussels (2012-2017); gE.CO, a European project for the generativity of urban commons (2019-2022); a regional study aiming at designing policies and regulations to support commons in the Brussels Capital Region (2022-2023). She researched the dynamics of inclusion and individual and collective emancipation through participatory action research, as well as art and cultural projects in Rome, Venice, Milan, Brussels, New York, and Athens.

Abstract

If care is one dimension of welfare we need to reappropriate to protect the foundations of a democratic society and democracy, publicness is the other. As Ota De Leonardis pointed out, the final consolidation of the institutions and the operating systems of the welfare state corresponded to the loss of a lively public sphere - as an essential, fundamental public good.
While her observations were formulated at the end of the 90s, in the context of an emerging welfare mix season and growing privatisation, they appear very relevant today, given the more recent developments of the welfare systems, particularly the proliferation of urban commons. While almost inherently representing a complementary layer of existing welfare infrastructures, their operational systems and conditions may fuel the risk of increasing privatism in the welfare sphere.
Vis-à-vis, such a risk, looking at the case of Brussels, I will investigate the publicness of the urban commons as a capability to contribute to the identification of welfare problems and issues and the elaboration of solutions in the public sphere.

Keywords: urban commons – publicness – public sphere – welfare - Brussels

1. Introduction

If care is one dimension of welfare we need to reappropriate to protect the foundations of a democratic society and democracy (Tronto, 1998, 2009, 2013), publicness is the other. Well before and independently from the current privatisation processes resulting from the market intervention, 'the organisational mould of the welfare state at the various levels in which it translates collective, public values, interests, and goals - from everyday practices to systemic organisational effects - tends to generate communication blocks, separations, and segmentations of social relations, isolation, irresponsibility, indifference, privatisation of issues - in short, privatism' (De Leonardis, 1998, p.18). The final consolidation of the institutions and the operating systems of the welfare state corresponded, in fact, to the loss of a lively public sphere - as an essential, fundamental public good - which was animated and precisely constituted around the collective definition of welfare problems and solutions.
While these observations were formulated at the end of the 90s, in the context of an emerging third sector, of a welfare mix season and its ambiguities, they appear to be still very - or even increasingly- relevant today, given the more recent developments of the welfare systems and in particular, given the proliferation of urban commons. Centred on care practices and fuelling social cohesion while improving the conditions of our living environments, urban commons almost inherently represent a complementary layer of existing welfare infrastructures - as the working hypothesis at the core of my ongoing research project. However, their operational systems, rationalities and conditions may fuel the risk of increasing privatism in the sphere of welfare.

Vis-à-vis such a risk, I will investigate the publicness of the urban commons as a capability to contribute to the identification of welfare problems and issues and the elaboration of solutions in the public sphere, as they concern the very social bond we share. To critically assess such a capacity, I will examine the commoning scene of the Brussels Capital Region (BCR), based on my direct implication as an activist and researcher since 2011 and having co-coordinated a regional study on the local urban commons (2022-2023)[1]. I will focus on three initiatives, considering their long-lasting and mature trajectory, which led them from being bottom-up, precarious initiatives and the initiators of the commons movement in Brussels to becoming influential policymakers. The Community Land Trust of Brussels (since 2012) is an organisation aiming at making homeownership accessible for low-income families; États Généraux de 'Eau de Bruxelles (since 2002) aims at the collective and individual re-

[1] *Etude Participative sur les communs bruxellois* (2022-2023), realized by the CLTB, Communa, Ecores and Equal partners, funded by Bruxelles Environnement and Bruxelles Economie et Emploi.

appropriation of water management infrastructures, from the micro-scale of a private garden to the macro-scale of a valley; Communa (since 2013) operates as a platform for the temporary occupation of vacant buildings.

After having briefly framed urban common's contribution to the welfare system, based on De Leonardis's analytical grid for the so-called *impresa sociale* – social enterprise- (De Leonardis 1998), I will address the following levels: the first level is about the existence of a public mandate, coherently supported by public funds and accompanied by administrative interfaces. The second level is the political one, and it is about creating the conditions for the negotiation of different interests and the interpretation of needs as rights as part of larger societal projects. The third level is about institutional care, creating the conditions for the continuous work of institutional transformation, institutions being meant as constructs of social intelligence, domains in which this is deposited, and employed in elaborating shared versions of common goods and further social learning.

2. Questioning the publicness of urban commons

The last 10 to 15 years have seen the proliferation of urban commons as political and civic laboratories generated for a variety of reasons, spanning from the reclamation of abandoned buildings to the expression of new individual and collective needs and rights, as well as organisational capabilities. In many ways and from many angles of observation, urban commons developed in the voids left by an overstretched welfare system[2] because of its inefficiency vis-à-vis well-known expectations, or incapable to define and give an answer to emerging needs. Institutions can be stupid and stop working (De Leonardis, 2011). Before introducing the research question addressed by this paper, as part of my current research project[3], it is important to mention here a few almost self-evident arguments supporting on a substantial level the understanding of urban commons as a complementary or additional layer of existing welfare systems[4]. To begin with, the needs urban commons respond to are quite close to those traditionally fulfilled by welfare systems since the early days of welfare history. A community garden is probably the answer to the need for green and community spaces within the neighbourhood, where people can get in contact with the other, both the human and the non-human. Cultivating vegetables is almost an excuse to get the body active and busy while meeting neighbours and like-minded inhabitants. Also, the community-based organisation of cultural activities provides the occasion for creative expression, artists looking for a space to produce their art, and new newcomers joining the local inhabitants while offering their traditional cuisine. On a more engaged level, other initiatives are developed to provide material support and solidarity to the most fragile individuals: refugees, people experiencing homelessness, and people in precarious life conditions. More complex and solid initiatives -

[2] I use the expression welfare system to include welfare infrastructures and approaches including and beyond the state mechanisms.

[3] WELCOMIN investigates the potential in Brussels of what I call community welfare infrastructures -whence the acronym-, as another way to depict urban commons to highlight their contribution to the welfare system. The complete title is *Reclaiming vacancy, federating capacities and empowering communities towards an ecological welfare*. The project is funded by the Brussels Regional administrative actor for research and innovation Innoviris. https://welcomin.brussels

[4] Commons and urban commons are conceptualised as fundamental resources for the fulfilment of basic needs, for individual and collective emancipation (Rodotà, 2013; Rodotà, 2013; De Angelis, 2017; Stauridēs, 2019) -thus, in this sense, implicitly supporting the purpose of the welfare systems, allegedly.

such as CLTs- finally programmatically address needs classically covered by welfare infrastructure, such as housing or daycare centres.
Besides what they do deliver, at the level of their core values and ethics, what they all have in common is care. Looking at the activities commoning initiatives are concerned with, we can recognise pretty accurately the definition of care as provided by Fisher and Tronto (1990, p.40): 'On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible'. Federici in fact, famously theorised the work of commons as a work of care (Barbagallo and Federici, 2012; Federici and Linebaugh, 2019)
While care work has been appropriated at some point first by the welfare state and subsequently by the market—including the hybrid forms of welfare mix—in the last 15 years, urban commons have reclaimed care at the core of their practices and in the hands of the concerned communities.

Last but not least looking at their genealogy, urban commons represent in fact the resurgence of the solidarity mechanisms and forms of reciprocity suffocated by private property, a paternalistic welfare state (Grossi, 2017) and the development of the service market subsequently, but required as an interstitial layer to complement public and privately provided forms of social support, the State and the market dynamics, as theorised by Polanyi (Polanyi, 1944).
These arguments framing urban commons as a complementary layer of the existing welfare system are on the level of a theoretical conceptualisation of these initiatives, built around their core values and speculating on their potential societal role, before any measurement of their actual impact on or inclusion in the existing welfare system and programs[5]. On the other hand, on the level of urban governance, the multiplication of policies and funding programs supporting urban commons seem to demonstrate that their value is increasingly appreciated and finally strategically promoted on the side of public administrations. Across many European cities policies supporting the commons emphasise their direct or indirect contribution to the overall and final well-being and emancipation of individuals and collectives. While in their narratives welfare is not necessarily explicitly mentioned as the realm urban commons are supposed to contribute to, the needs they are *de facto* called to fulfil are those usually covered by a welfare system -and in particular by the spatial infrastructures or the welfare space [6], as suggested in the above mentioned few examples: housing, leisure, a good living environment, daycare centres, green spaces, spaces for public debate and gathering. Because of their highly

[5] The appreciation on a conceptual and theoretical level of the urban commons' potential in relation to a decaying welfare system and austerity regimes is frequent in the literature and narratives produced by engaged scholars and activists. While their interest in the measurement of their actual economic performance or impact is debated, the appreciation of their contribution to dynamics of social inclusion and individual and collective empowerment is often highly advocated, to counterbalance a purely efficiency-centred or market-oriented evaluation of their activities (Castro Coma and Forné Aguirre, 2021). The definition of performance measurement systems is a crucial step in the process of trust building between administrations and commoners willing to collaborate around new forms of management of public or shared resources (Patti and Polyak, 2015; Petrescu *et al.*, 2021).
[6] In the Western world, welfare systems traditionally provide social security and support to individuals' emancipation not only through the financial redistributive system but also through spatial infrastructures, such as mobility infrastructures, spaces for leisure, schools and hospitals, and social housing. Amongst others on the topic of the welfare space, see the work of Munarin and Tosi (Munarin and Tosi, 2014) and Swenarton (Swenarton et al., 2015). Focusing on urban commons as the commons built around spatial resources, this paper addresses their contribution as happening through or at the level of the welfare space.

innovative profile, being generated to respond to specific and emerging needs, and because of their ecological approach to the management of resources, urban commons not only complete but additionally redefine and reinvent the scope of welfare in the direction of what I suggest defining as an ecological welfare.[7]
To conclude: the collective generation and protection of resources that sustain well-being and emancipation; the centrality of care, solidarity and forms of reciprocity in these practices; the increasing number of funding and support programs provided by public administrations validating their contribution allow us to reasonably assume that urban commons are increasingly recognised and integrated into existing welfare systems.

While commoning practices provide an occasion to re-appropriate and bring care back home, as advocated by Tronto, as a condition for a more democratic society, this paper would like to address another dimension of welfare, also supporting a democratic societal project jeopardised by privatisation processes and austerity regimes. Publicness is not a dimension that derives from the implication of the public administration in the delivery of welfare services. In other words, the state does not equal the public, as it is clear by now. Publicness is meant here as the capability to generate and fuel the Habermas' public sphere as a condition allowing citizens to gather and discuss common concerns (Habermas, 1989). As pointed out by De Leonardis, what the welfare state represented until the 80s and before the beginning of privatisation processes and austerity regimes, was not limited to the material and social infrastructures required for the well-being and safety of all individuals. It was the very process and the forum where to discuss about common problems and experiment with solutions, continuously under transformation. The making of the welfare state provided the occasion for the public sphere to exist and take shape, identifying the social quality of life as essential for a good life. Without a well-developed social dimension that allows balance and redistribution of wealth, economic growth is unsustainable and leads to injustice. While this is increasingly acknowledged, the conditions for a continuous debate around the form welfare infrastructures should take must be created and cherished. It is more in the debates that precede and accompany the making of welfare infrastructures and institutions that a societal project unfolds rather than in delivering those infrastructures per se. As Nancy Fraser pointed out (Fraser, 1989), talking about needs is even more important than the needs themselves, as it is during the talking phase that those needs can be properly shaped and defined, including in the definition process the concerned individuals and communities.
On the background of a shrinking public sphere (De Leonardis, 1997), the increasing interest and support of public administrations towards urban commons and the embedding of these initiatives and the related policies in the larger schemes of the welfare system raises a question: to what extent and under which conditions are urban commons creating an opportunity for publicness? Publicness -in this case- being meant as the capability to fuel or contribute to a public debate and public sphere around the ongoing re-organisation and re-definition of welfare as a societal project, whose shared values, needs and rights require to be collectively discussed and negotiated before pursuing their very realisation as a collective responsibility.

What most of the current scholarly debate and even the activists' attention is focusing on is the emergence of new public-collective institutional arrangements and the organisational aspects making them suitable to the needs and expectations of both commoners and public

[7] This is in fact the working hypothesis of my research project WELCOMIN. I understand the word ecological as meant by the deep ecology theorizations (Naess, 1973; Capra, 1997), which urban commons represent quite effectively because of their systemic and transcalar governance schemes. (Lenna, 2023, 2024)

administrations. From defining the deliverables and criteria for performance measurement to the systems allowing the building of trust and shared responsibility between collective and public actors: what seems to be mostly at stake is to design policies and programs where the two opposed risks of institutionalisation of the commons on the one hand, and commonification of the public on the other are satisfactorily negotiated for all involved parties. However, no attention is dedicated to critically evaluating if the emerging policies and programs will, in fact, contribute to fuelling publicness around the needs and rights at stake, towards a new societal project and the welfare system that could support it. The collaboration with a public actor does not necessarily mean a public debate is engendered: on the contrary, it may in fact mask a privatist approach under the form of a multiplication of public-collective partnerships. Beyond the specific needs of a given initiative, the singularities of pilot projects, the proliferation of temporary arrangements, and the pacts culture, what is the space left for a societal project? Is the design of larger frameworks such as urban policies and programs supporting commons sufficient to evoke a public sphere around topics such as how we live together, fulfil different or even conflicting needs, care for ourselves and our living environment, and talk about all these?

While the proliferation of unique, site-specific projects may be considered typical of an experimental or transition phase during which indeed innovative arrangements require case-specific approaches and tests, we cannot avoid considering that in many cases the policies and programs designed to sustain the urban commons are inherently conceived to valorise the site-specificity and uniqueness of the concerned initiatives[8]. Furthermore, we must consider that this is the very first requirement by many activists involved in commoning experiences, who believe the core potential of commoning initiatives would be lost under prefabricated protocols or infrastructures.
If the organisational modalities are a good prefiguration of the societal project that is meant to be achieved and its underlying culture, then the ongoing embedding of urban commons initiatives within welfare systems requires an evaluation of their capacity to fuel publicness on two levels. On the first level, what needs to be addressed is the publicness of urban commons per se, at the level of their original organisation, before and independently from any policy or program. On a hierarchically second, more complex level, the publicness of the conditions generated by the commons supporting programs and policies should be addressed -where possible- as they may amplify, reduce, and, in any case, alter the urban commons original organisational modalities and, therefore, their publicness potential.

3. The making of welfare as a societal project

The relevance of collectively discussing needs and care practices at the core of welfare infrastructures and programs was initially pointed out by Nancy Fraser from a feminist point of view in 1989 (Fraser, 1989,p.292). ‘Needs-talk has been institutionalised as a major vocabulary

[8] In many cases, they are, in fact, taking the form of pacts or agreements specifically designed to respond to the site-specific conditions of a given urban commons. See, for example, the regulations produced in many Italian cities. In other cases, the programs specifically emphasize their flexibility as an answer to the concerned communities' different needs -or even political orientations and origins. This is the case of the Patrimoni Ciutada policy in Barcelona for example, whose design explicitly aimed at keeping into account the variety of practices of commoning(Castro Coma and Forné Aguirre, 2021). Finally, in Brussels, the mentioned study on the urban commons’ conditions funded by the Region, which I contributed to design and develop, revealed the resistance of many initiatives to preconceived frameworks or protocols, whilst on the other hand advocating for platforms and networking structures that could allow for an exchange of tools, knowledge, forms of expertise, ways of doing things.

of political discourse. It coexists, albeit often uneasily, with talk about rights and interests at the very center of political life. Indeed, this peculiar juxtaposition of a discourse about needs with discourses about rights and interests is one of the distinctive marks of late-capitalist political culture.' In her article, Fraser points out that much before the (third) struggle for the fulfilment of a given need, the first struggle is to validate and legitimate a given need as a matter of legitimate political concern and subsequently, as a second struggle, to collectively define how to fulfil such a need. These processes necessarily allude to the need for an inclusive conversation allowing different publics to share their interpretations of needs as a precondition for these needs to be recognised and finally addressed by the welfare system.
Once the needs become the objects of a purely administrative, competent or expert service to be provided, once care becomes a private or market matter, instead of being everybody's business and responsibility, as pointed out by Tronto (Tronto, 1998, 2013), the occasion is lost to seize and change the unjust societal mechanisms trickling down to care dynamics. Though from slightly different perspectives of feminism[9], both Fraser and Tronto argued about the need for care practices to be publicly framed and discussed -the public in both cases not coinciding with the State- as an occasion to dismantle power dynamics, reveal the roots of unjust mechanisms and collectively discuss possible solutions, and through these processes lay the foundations for a truly democratic societal project[10].

A few years later, in 1998, in Europe, these arguments were embedded by Ota De Leonardis in her investigation on the transformation of the European welfare state, on the background of the emergence of the social economy, as a combination of state, market and third sector (De Leonardis, 1998). Also defined as a welfare mix, they represented a main object of observation for the post-welfare speculations. To what extent do the different forms of welfare mix fuel the *social* characterisation of the goods, the actions and the actors implied in the social policies? What matters in De Leonardis's investigation is not an evaluation of the performance of services and policies delivered under the welfare mix approach. The point is rather to capture the publicness of the transformation of social policies. How policies and social services are organised and function determines whether goods, problems, and solutions can be considered common or objects of collective, social, and public action and discussions. The risk to be vigilant about and addressed by De Leonardis's analysis is that of privatist attitudes that could be recognised beyond privatisation, even in formally "public" apparatuses and that are leading to 'indifference towards social bonding, de-responsibilisation towards common goods, withdraw of the individual aspirations within the domestic sphere, separation of different conflicting communities, avoidance of mediation processes and of the otherness they make possible […] Beyond the threshold of privatism, there is no public life and no shared world, but only winners and losers and the competitive dynamics of the market.' (De Leonardis, 1998, p.19)

At the end of the 90s, the risks of privatism and the shrinking of the public sphere were associated with the rise of the third sector, the proliferation of not-for-profits, and the hybrid dynamics of the welfare mix. Today, the new phase in the process of welfare transformation - possibly building on the previous one- is characterised by the increasing implication of urban commons in the delivery of care and welfare infrastructures. The public-collective nature of

[9] Fraser is ultimately concerned about recognizing differences and the creation of conditions that allow interpreting the needs of even marginal communities as rights.
[10] Nancy Fraser uses the expression social welfare, possibly to depict a different version of the welfare different than the welfare state, where needs would not be addressed and defined only by the State as an administrative agent but taken care by society and the different public spheres.

policies and programs involving the urban commons and their potential molecular organisation similarly prompts the question of their publicness -beyond the public support. The analytical grid suggested by De Leonardis – which I will introduce in the following lines- is centred on the organisational dimension, as 'it is through these that social relations are shaped and shared meanings are generated'. Organisations are not simply efficient machines, but they are cultural devices. Even before a given service is delivered, how it is delivered is, *per se*, the expression of a given purpose and cultural imprint. In this case, the question is, are care and welfare practices delivered in ways that foster a culture of the public or, rather, a culture of the private? Learning from what she calls impresa sociale[11], De Leonardis suggests three levels of observation to seize the publicness a given organisational form engenders. Not all of them necessarily fully adhere to the operational conditions of any urban commons.

This proves that the social enterprises -*imprese sociali*- and urban commons are not the same[12], thus pointing out a cultural and political shift, the beginning of another welfare season, making it necessary to ask the same questions again[13].

The first level concerns their public mandate, coherently supported by public funds and accompanied by administrative interfaces. Such a public-state profile allows these organisations to operate at the level of rights, to legitimate needs as rights, even as a result of conflictual dynamics that are, in fact, typical of the public sphere.

The second level is the political one and concerns creating the conditions for the negotiation of different interests and for the implied actors to have a role and impact in the decisional projects.

The third level is about institutional care[14], about creating the conditions for the continuous work of institutional transformation. It is essential to point out that De Leonardis defines institutions from a sociological point of view as social practices structured by - and generative of - shared norms, cultures, and meanings. In this key, institutions are constructs of social intelligence: domains in which this is deposited, partly crystallised in routines, and employed in elaborating shared versions of common goods, problems and solutions; and domains, therefore, of possible, further social learning (De Leonardis, 1998, p.25)

[11] The social enterprise as meant by De Leonardis is a form of organisation strongly valorising and fostering the public statute of (their) actions in the realm of social services.

[12] I refer here to a possible overlapping between third sector initiatives and urban commons. While this aspect cannot be addressed in this paper, it is important to stress a major difference as pointed out by many commoners (but not necessarily shared by all). While the third sector initiatives by definition are delivering a service, very often for/in collaboration with local administrations, urban commons are initiated with a purpose of organising activities that would first of all directly benefit the commoners and their communities, therefore not in a service logic, though not excluding a collaboration with local administrations. Nonetheless, given the variety of political orientations and operational conditions -juridical frameworks, funding programs, policies- amongts commoning initiatives, ambiguities are increasingly possible.

[13] While the topic of commons was already well-known in the 90s, those years represented somehow the protohistory of the movement of urban commons emerged after the financial crisis of 2008, responding to increasing privatisation processes and austerity measures.

[14] According to De Leonardis, as repositories of consolidated knowledge and shared meanings, intitutions necessarily exclude other ways of doing things, as during the time something consolidates in finally shared and recognised rules, protocols, organisational structures, the context is already changed and new cultural triggers or needs already started to emerge. Insitutional care is necessary when insitutions do not work anymore. They teherfore 'become visible and object of collective elaboration' (De Leonardis, 2011, p.157). For this reason, conditions should be provided for a continuous exchange of practices and ways of doing and thinking, so that insitutions could constantly evolve.

This grid indicated proves pertinent and suitable to address the publicness of urban commons, not only to continue the investigations of a fruitful line of research which started at the end of the 80s[15] but also in consideration of the constitutive, foundational value of sharing[16] in the case of commons-oriented initiatives. As a value, sharing shapes not only the way a given pool of resources is made accessible but the very life of the commons initiative built around it. Sharing is not only a purpose but also a way of operating and an organisational principle[17]. It is about structuring caring practices by sharing knowledge; it is about communicating and creating the conditions for communication to be effective; it is about access, justice and distributing responsibilities. It is expressed in organisational modalities continuously and reflexively evolving, producing shared meaning and knowledge, potentially fostering publicness, but whose concrete modalities and operating contexts may reduce or alter. Vis-à-vis these general and abstract characterisations, each form of commoning and the context within which they operate – and therefore their organisational cultures – are necessarily unique. The purpose of this paper, looking at the case of Brussels, is to question to what extent the culture of publicness of urban commons is enacted through their operational conditions and to what extent they could allow reclaiming the publicness of the societal project previously implied in the making of the welfare system.

4. The molecular scene of Brussels: three case studies.

The word commons started to circulate in Brussels around 2011, revealing a subterranean landscape of still isolated, disparate and very fragile micro initiatives, mostly based on the curiosity and activism of small groups of citizens, some of them coming from local civil society organisations. The seeds of the urban commons I will synthetically analyse in these pages were planted in those years, and even before in the case of EGEB.

A Community Land Trust (CLT) is a non-profit organisation that aims to acquire, develop and steward property for the common good. Operating for the benefit of a community, CLT's core purpose is to make real estate ownership -particularly homeownership for most of the initiatives situated in an urban context- accessible for low-income households (Davis and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2010). According to the classic model (Davis and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2010), a CLT achieves its goals by dividing the ownership of land from the ownership

[15]In fact we should go back to the work of Habermas on the public sphere -which Fraser criticised and updated from her feminist perspective in the same years of her article on the need-talk (Fraser, 1990). De Leonardis also mentions Marshall and Titmuss for their theorisations on the relationship between democracy and social policies. Given the relevance and continuity of this line of research, and given the increasing relevance of commons-oriented policies and programs, raising the question of their publicness seems not only necessary but also timely.

[16] As a matter of fact deeply intetwined with caring: there is no sharing witout caring, and viceversa, there is no caring without sharing.

[17] Commons are consituted or instituted around the need to jointly establish rules, forms of governance, practices with the purpose of preserving a pool of shared resources. The dimension of sharing defines a porous organisation, whose organisational modalities, rules and the decisional system are continuously evolving as a result of changes affecting the commoners or the pool of resources and therefore requiring adjustments for the sustainability of the commons as a whole. Because of their reflexivity that allows their sustainability Dardot and Laval define commons as instituent practices (Dardot and Laval, 2014).

of built structures. The land is permanently removed from market dynamics, making ownership of the built parts affordable in perpetuity[18].
The Community Land Trust of Brussels (CLTB), the first European CLT, was established in 2012 as a result of the mobilisation of local organisations and grassroots initiatives aiming to address a long-standing housing issue, therefore based on solid political and institutional motivation. Supported by the political constellation of those years, from the very beginning, the CLTB has been established as a "foundation d'utilité publique" (FUP) or a public interest foundation, with a mission centred on the right to housing as recognised in the Belgian constitution. While having a public-regional mandate, the CLTB manages to preserve a commons-oriented governance system, as the decisional power is equally distributed amongst the public, private and civil society involved actors, both in the non-profit organisation and in the FUP[19]. On the level of funding, the solid and regular public support allows them to operate at the large scale of the Region. However, the number of projects is still limited by land availability and accessibility, as well as by some operational conditions.

The political dimension of the CLTB is substantially defined by its effort to provide accessible homeownership to the families that need it most in a global city exposed to intense real estate speculation. It, therefore, characterises the whole process of delivering the projects and the organisation's life.
The tripartite governance structure of the two boards, the Assemblies, the participatory activities supporting the realisation of their projects, the membership campaigns, the site-specific frameworks of collaboration established with other local organisations for the realisation of each housing project: all these activities are conceived and organised and create a public space to talk about and define different needs, to transcend them from an individual to a collective or regional level, to negotiate them across scales and social segments, to distribute the (care) responsibilities. The operational levels of the CLTB – from the microscale of a single housing project to the macroscale of lobbying towards a more supportive framework in terms of policies and land accessibility- articulate the right to housing within the larger urban and societal projects. Homeownership is made possible *through* addressing speculative dynamics and the need for a more inclusive and porous urban project (Lenna, 2020).
Finally, on the level of institutional care, the very approach to property rights and the strong implication of the regional public, together with the mentioned transversal political work, necessarily produce a multifaceted institutional transformation. To begin with, as I have shown (Lenna, 2019), the very concept - the institution - of (private) property rights as a way of protecting a given asset is reshaped from the right to exclude to the right to govern, by equally distributing the decisional power across public, collective, and private actors. While such a change is mainly established by a combination of technical and juridical arrangements, it does make possible a cultural shift regarding homeownership and land tenure models. By contributing at different levels to making real housing projects, all involved actors and inhabitants reappropriate the use value over the speculative value. Material and organisational conditions are provided for a mentality and approach change to individual property, the ownership of land as a commons, and the right to own as a right to govern, between recognition and shared responsibilities. As a result of their multiscalar operational conditions involving various actors and communities, the CLTB managed to influence the land tenure model of other

[18] The land is leased to property owners, who can be private individuals but also other juridical persons.
[19] The CLTB has a dual legal structure: the FUP acquires and holds property, while the non-profit organization handles the development of housing projects. This includes organizing project calls and supporting future homeowners with various participatory activities from the start of their application process.

regional real estate administrators and developers. Recognised by Royal Decree, the model has also finally been established in other Belgian cities, such as Ghent and Leuven. The process of diffusing the realisation of the model – at the national and international level- also substantially fuelled public conversations about the right to housing as part of a societal project.

The second urban commons are the Etats Généraux de l'Eau à Bruxelles (EGEB)[20]. EGEB slowly originated from the political mobilisation of a small group of citizens willing to react to the realisation of a *basin storage,* a water retention basin in the area of Place Flagey, a decision taken by the Region without proper public communication and debate (2002). As an alternative to this decontextualised technological device, the inhabitants proposed to address the issue of flooding with a hydro-ecological approach by considering the hydrography and topography of the whole concerned valley. This would have meant taking into account not only technical issues of the water infrastructures at the scale of the whole valley or the morphological characteristics of the valley and of the urban fabric but also the anthropic components: the culture of water management from the macro scale of the competent administrative actors to the micro-scale of individual households dealing with flooded basements or watering their gardens. At the core of such an approach, EGEB proposed the concept of reclaiming water ecologies and their landscapes as a commons [21], which means establishing a transcalar, multilayered governance system based on the recognition of multiple competencies and forms of expertise and distribution of responsibilities. Their approach developed and was refined through the years through a variety of projects and initiatives: from regionally funded projects in collaboration with local organisations, universities, civil society and municipalities of the BCR; to collective cartographies and walks across the most problematic neighbourhoods designed to increase the awareness and exchange knowledge about water management and water ecologies, between the human and the non-human.
Each activity has a political profile by creating the conditions for negotiating different interests and reframing individual and specific needs into larger societal and ecological projects. The nature of many of their activities also creates a public arena where water management and water ecologies can be addressed from different perspectives and angles, taking into account the similarities and differences of diverse hydrographic conditions, the conflicting interests, and the unequal wealth distribution across the Region.
The purpose of EGEB's activities and their *raison d'être* is deeply institutional and oriented towards what De Leonardis defines as institutional care (De Leonardis, 2011). From the beginning, their goal has been to reshape the culture of water management in the BCR by instituting a common-public perspective to avoid the risk of a private and technographic approach. Each of their projects, particularly those involving actors from the regional public administration, is conceived to prefigure and possibly enact new approaches to water management. Independently from their results, they offer the occasion to explore different mindsets and the hypothesis of a cultural shift: from pipe-based water management to a landscape-based generative[21] governance. Such a clear mission is not always adequately supported. The discontinuity and irregularity of public funding -in contrast to the case of the CLTB- jeopardises and slows down the transformative process, which therefore occasionally shrinks on the level of small-scale, informal initiatives, perhaps more accessible to other social segments and nevertheless relentlessly contributing to a capillary mentality change.

[20] EGEB is the acronym for Etats Generaux de l'Eau de Bruxelles. The organisation is regularly mentioned in the plural form on the web page and other official documents. https://www.egeb-sgwb.be

[21] I use the word generative as De Leonardis does (De Leonardis, 1998), to refer the richness and resourcefulness of organizational arrangements focused on fostering sharing, relational exchanges, debate and publicness.

Despite not having a public mandate, the EGEB are increasingly recognised as a valuable expert in establishing ecologically sustainable water management systems. Their holistic approach to the living environment of humans and non-humans embeds the complexity of interweaving scales, forms of competencies, and the pedagogical frameworks to develop and support them. EGEB are increasingly involved as experts in the elaboration or revision of regional policies and Master Plans or in the implementation of pilot projects, thus furthering the required cultural change.

The third case study is Communa, established in 2013 by the initiative of a few students willing to experiment with sharing a living space while organising activities for the neighbourhood. Today, Communa is a professional actor organising temporary occupations of vacant sites and buildings in the BCR. As the landscape of temporary occupations can be very diverse in terms of purposes and, as a consequence, organisational modalities, it is important to point out that while not defining themselves as an urban commons, the organisational profile and the core values of Communa substantially align with the spirit of commoning: sharing and taking care of resources, learning how to live together, empowering involved individuals and communities. To briefly synthesise the occupation process here, once an agreement has been made with the owners, the building is renovated to comply mainly with safety regulations, and a public call is launched to invite local collectives and organisations to join the occupation. Meanwhile, many activities are organised to develop knowledge about the neighbourhood and establish relationships so that the project can respond to local needs. Within such a process, the shared pool of resources is not only the empty buildings they occupy -mostly publicly owned[22]- but also the forms of knowledge and financial capacities of the involved actors, the site-specific resources and forms of local expertise of a given neighbourhood, the economic contribution of all the involved initiatives contributing to the functioning of the project.

Not only does Communa operate as a commons, but its purpose is to enable communities so that each project can progressively learn how to govern itself and become autonomous. Therefore, it could be said that Communa operates as an infrastructure facilitating the establishment of urban commons. However, to this day, the core team continues to be involved in each of its projects.

On a political level, we may say Communa projects live—and therefore politically expose and deal with—the contradictions of a global city, whose vacant sites simultaneously and paradoxically experience the tension between speculative projects and the needs of the local inhabitants for housing, social and recreational facilities, and good-quality public spaces.

The open configurations of their projects result in heterogeneous mixes of initiatives, combining a diverse range of needs and interests[23]. The morphological quality of their projects reflects and sustains the spirit of their commoning approach. It is the physical space of a building that provides the conditions for the negotiations of different needs and interests. Their porosity combines safety and privacy for the most fragile inhabitants with the public accessibility of other spaces serving as neighbourhood facilities. In the projects of Communa, inner courtyards, wherever possible, tend as much as possible to stay open, as a continuation of the public space. Thorugh space and because of space, living together becomes a political project as these different needs and rights while being recognised, are reshaped within a larger collective project. While this may remind the case of CLTB projects (Lenna, 2019), the

[22] “On a des lignes éthiques assez fortes derrière ça. Quand le projet immobilier n’a pas de sens pour la ville selon notre perspective on fait un choix et en général nous avons une préférence pour les pouvoirs publics ou pour des privés mais qui ont une vision sociale” (interview, July 2022).

[23] Initiatives are chosen based on Communa's social mission, while ensuring compatibility with building activities and the neighbourhood.

operational conditions of Communa are different, primarily because of their projects' short and uncertain duration.
Finally, according to their words, Communa does have an institutional goal. Through their projects and lobbying strategy, their objective is to change the culture of temporary occupations beyond the simple management of an empty building and towards the experimentation of long-lasting infrastructures for social cohesion and the neighbourhood's well-being. Towards this goal, specific juridical frameworks and tools should be provided to improve the feasibility of socially oriented temporary occupations. Vis-à-vis these ambitions, Communa, despite being very well known and involved in a growing number of projects involving regional actors and other community-based organisations, is still suffering because of the irregular funding opportunities or the short duration of their projects.
However, as the CTLB and EGEB, they are also increasingly recognised for their expertise. In addition to their projects and numerous activities open to the large public, their implication in research projects and regional studies represents an occasion to influence further the culture and the public debate on issues such as urban vacancy and waste, the problems of temporary frames of occupations, speculation and gentrification processes.

To conclude, a few transversal observations. While these cases today do not represent the average operational conditions of urban commons -particularly in Brussels- they were also initiated by small groups of individuals. The success of their projects, the support of local and regional public actors, and the lobbying and networking capacity made them grow. Their political impact and their action of institutional transformation started in the embryonic stage of their existence. Relentlessly, project after project, they became more robust as a result of continuously sharing resources and problems, supported by the thin, invisible fabric of commoning that characterises the Brussels scene. Therefore, their projects represent shared solutions, and innovations emerged through public debates and mobilisation around care, welfare and well-being issues. Far from being solidified in a final set of rules, protocols, and ways of doing, their experimentation will continue to address and involve different communities and actors, evolving according to new needs and site-specific conditions. Their projects are multilayered and transcalar operations, enacting the conditions for talking about needs and rights while taking care of care (pun intended). On another level, these urban commons or commons-oriented initiatives, being increasingly recognised as regional experts in their domains of activity, are in the position to influence the public debate when this takes the form of a master plan, a new urban policy or funding program, a study on a given urban issue.
Overall, in addition to the specific and concrete achievements of their projects, they contribute to reclaiming the publicness of welfare as a system in the making and a neverending societal project.
On the other side, different forms of fragility affect them, potentially reducing their publicness. The precarity of funding in the case of EGEB and Communa diminishes their range of actions, impacts their sustainability as organisations and slows down the processes of institutional change as the duration of the projects does have an impact in terms of changing mindset, building shared vocabularies and new ways of doing things. In the case of CLTB, the limited number of realised housing units conveys the idea of a limited impact on the target public. While the narrative is about the right to housing and homeownership for the most fragile households, only a limited number of applicants can have access.
Their recognition of urban commons being increasingly apparent[24], the public-regional actor could also play a re-distributive role (Fraser and Honneth, 2003) by providing more continuous

[24] As expressed by number of programs and policies. In Brussels, waiting to be realised, they have been formulated in the *Etude participative sur les communs bruxellois* (2022-2023).

or substantial financial support, possibly complementing other funding systems for the commons to achieve greater autonomy. This would mean reclaiming the public's- state classic redistributive capacity to fuel societal, decentralised work of welfare transformation.

5. A research plan

As a piece of ongoing research and given the limitations of a paper, the reflections developed in the previous pages are necessarily incomplete, also considering the embryonic stage of the development of policies and programs supporting the urban commons in the BCR. While having been suggested in the mentioned study, they are far from being implemented. Rather than offering an exhaustive evaluation of the publicness of urban commons in Brussels, this paper traces a research plan. In this final paragraph, I suggest two additional levels to be further investigated.

The first one should consider the molecular quality of the commoning landscape in Brussels. While I only addressed three well-established commoning initiatives in this paper, even their understanding remains incomplete without considering the multiplicity of other urban commons that sustain and amplify their actions, possibly increasing their publicness capability. I use the word molecular to describe a condition that is indeed primarily fragmented, characterised by very diverse conditions -but also many similarities- not rarely engendering fragility or a sense of isolation, but that simultaneously allows the more introverted initiatives to stay protected and small. While knowing about other initiatives, many do not have the time and resources to commit to larger projects, networking, or knowledge exchange. What are the characteristics of publicness for such a thin but resilient fabric, if any? Or do they represent another form of privatism? How do smaller urban commons contribute to the life of the larger?

The second level concerns necessarily the policies and forms of public-collective shared governance that still have to be implemented in Brussels. For this reason, in my analysis, I could only address the publicness of urban commons initiatives per se rather than as embedded in supporting policies or programs. On the one hand, this indicates further research and comparative approaches addressing those cities where supportive frameworks operating at a larger scale are already in place: Barcelona, Turin, Bologna, Naples, Grenoble, and Paris, to mention a few well-known cases. Then, having learned from other cities, in the case of Brussels this second level of inquiry becomes, for the moment, an invitation to share the phase of implementation of tools and policies so that in the process of defining needs, rights and finding solutions, welfare could be reclaimed as an instituting -as in French, *instituent*- societal project.

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