

36th AESOP Annual Congress 2024 Paris, France

“GAME CHANGER? Planning for just and sustainable urban regions”

TRACK 08: PUBLIC SPACE

Planning for cultural diversity, peace and the experience of places

### The Open Orchestra project in the public spaces of Athens: an urban utopia with transformative power?

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#### Abstract

The Open Orchestra is a group of about 150 professional artists and amateurs, founded in spring 2021, in Athens, Greece. Its establishment is directly correlated to the Support Art Workers Action Group that has emerged during the pandemic of Covid-19, as a way to resist to the depreciation of culture and art-workers themselves, many of whom remained unemployed and with no support from the state, during the long quarantines imposed as a protection measure<sup>1</sup>. Even more importantly, the Open Orchestra comes as a continuation of the Paris Occupation of Odeon, when, on March 27, 2021, during the Agora organized by the occupants of the Théâtre de l'Odéon, professionals from the French Symphonic and Lyric Orchestras, musicians from specialized orchestras, occupiers of the Odéon, and students formed a large orchestra of solidary musicians<sup>2</sup>. Following this line, in spring 2021, the Support Art Workers Action Group gathered in Propylaea, Athens, sang and played the piece “El Pueblo Unido Jamas Sera Vencido”, exactly as did the solidary orchestra at Odéon, Paris, a couple of months earlier. This has been the starting act of the Open Orchestra (O.C./ A.O. in Greek). Which started rehearsing once a week, at the Filopappou Hill, in a central public park of Athens, yet derelict and merely abandoned by the Municipality of Athens. It is called Open Orchestra, because anyone who wants to rehearse with it can do it at any time: there is no limitation on artistic level or degree of commitment (one can enter and leave the Orchestra at any time). Organizationally, there is a solid core of 100 people, who rehearse every Sunday. There exists a coordination group, yet decisions are made through open circles organized regularly, in which the whole group participates. This is particularly relevant to the organization of different projects. Every one or two months, rehearsals take place in a deprived neighbourhood of Athens (Victoria square, Perama, Amerikis Square<sup>3</sup>, etc.),

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thepressproject.gr/anoichti-orchistra-pano-apo-150-kallitechnes-enas-chronos-zois-seira-kallitechnikon-politikon-draseon/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNOrtTaZnOs&ab\\_channel=OccupationOd%C3%A9on](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNOrtTaZnOs&ab_channel=OccupationOd%C3%A9on)

<sup>3</sup> <https://long-stories-short.org/2022/02/12/anoichti-orchistra-stin-plateia-amerik/>

instead of the regular one at the Filopappou Hill, and messages such as “Lively Squares” or “We want to dance in squares, streets and neighbourhoods” are delivered in any possible means (e.g. banners, posters, etc.).

The A.O. also gives an open concert every June, in vicinity to the archeological site of Kerameikos and the Acropolis. Yet, most importantly, it provides solidarity to several people and events: performances in several trials of public interest (trial for the murder of Zac/Zackie<sup>4</sup>; trials for victims a sexual violence, rape<sup>5</sup> & murder; etc.), as well as campaigns for social justice and peace, with the most recent example concerning the war in Gaza and Palestine<sup>6</sup>.

The aim of this presentation is to explore how this impulsive bottom-up initiative can/has become “game-changer” at the local (city) and the very local (neighbourhood) level, essentially as an antidote to the harsh regeneration and touristification policies that hit actually the Greek cities. Building upon my own participation to the A.O. during 2021-2022, I seek to understand to what extent such an initiative – a community of joy, care and solidarity, and an urban utopia, as I would like to call it – may be capable of transforming, in the mid-term, both public space and the relations performed within public space. Considering its ephemeral and sporadic performances and actions, to what extent can an initiative such the A.O. play a role in shaping the neighbourhood and the city fabric overall? I am particularly interested in examining the potential of such initiatives yet also the significant challenges they pose as regards appropriation, belonging, and reclaiming the city. After all, what would be needed, from a planner’s perspective, to enhance and leverage such initiatives in a view of coming closer to the ideals of the Just City and the Right to the City? How can planners ensure that such bottom-up initiatives can be taken under consideration in decision-making processes? What kind of spaces could accommodate such initiatives that promote interaction among diverse people yet often they challenge the established status quo?

**Keywords:** Open Orchestra/Athens, culture, art/ist, solidarity, political action, spatial justice, public space appropriation, transformative power

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<sup>4</sup> <https://tvxs.gr/tag/anoichti-orchistra/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.koutipandoras.gr/article/anoichti-orchistra-emeis-georgia-se-pisteyoyme/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEokUPSWKfg&ab\\_channel=%CE%91%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%B9%CF%87%CF%84%CE%AE%CE%9F%CF%81%CF%87%CE%AE%CF%83%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%7COpenOrchestraGreece](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEokUPSWKfg&ab_channel=%CE%91%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%B9%CF%87%CF%84%CE%AE%CE%9F%CF%81%CF%87%CE%AE%CF%83%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%7COpenOrchestraGreece)

## 1. Introduction: getting to know the Open Orchestra, Athens, March 2021

This is an early stage and exploratory research endeavour that emerged literally from the very title of the annual conference of AESOP this year (2024): “GAME CHANGER? Planning for just and sustainable urban regions”. It concerns my personal experience with the Open Orchestra, which could provide a potential example of Game Changer in the city of Athens, Greece, for the transformation of urban everydayness towards ideas and ideals related to the Lefebvrian ‘Right to the City’.

The Open Orchestra, that was established in spring 2021, in Athens, is a group of about 150 professional artists and amateurs. It emerged from the Support Art Workers Action Group (#SupportArtWorkers), which was ‘born’ during the pandemic of Covid-19 to resist to the depreciation of culture and art-workers. Many of those latter remained jobless and without support from the state, after the closing down of theatres, cinemas and arts spaces imposed as a protection measure from the pandemic, in the period 2019-2021<sup>7</sup>. The Support Art Workers Action Group and accordingly the Open Orchestra come partly after the Paris Occupation of Odeon; namely, a large orchestra of solidary musicians, consisted of the occupants of the Théâtre de l’Odéon, professionals from the French Symphonic and Lyric Orchestras, musicians from specialized orchestras and students, who were united at Odéon, Paris, on March 27, 2021, and played the protesting piece “El Pueblo Unido Jamas Sera Vencido”<sup>8</sup>: Some months later, the Support Art Workers Action Group gathered in Propylaia, Athens, repeating the same symbolic move: the performance of “El Pueblo Unido...”.

This has been the starting act of the Open Orchestra (in Greek Ανοιχτή Ορχήστρα/ A.O.). It is called ‘Open’, because anyone can rehearse with it at any time: there is no limitation on artistic level or degree of commitment: one can come and go at any time. Organizationally, there is a solid core of people who rehearse together every Sunday at the Filopappou Hill, a central public park of Athens. There exists a coordination group, yet decisions are made through open circles organized monthly. This is particularly relevant to the organization of different projects; for instance, instead of the regular Sunday meeting at the Filopappou Hill, rehearsals may sporadically take place in deprived neighbourhoods (Victoria square, Perama, Amerikis Square<sup>9</sup>, etc.); in which, messages such as “Lively Squares” or “We want to dance in squares, streets and neighbourhoods” are delivered in banners, posters, etc. The A.O. also gives an open concert every June, in vicinity to the archeological site of Kerameikos (near the Acropolis).

Most importantly, however, the orchestra provides solidarity to several people, groups and events that are thought to need support: performances in trials of public interest (trial for the murder of the queer activist Zac/Zackie<sup>10</sup>; trials for victims a sexual violence, rape<sup>11</sup>, femicide; etc.), as well as campaigns for social justice and peace, with the most recent

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<sup>7</sup> <https://thepressproject.gr/anoichti-orchistra-pano-apo-150-kallitechnes-enas-chronos-zois-seira-kallitechnikon-politikon-drason/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNOrtTaZnOs&ab\\_channel=OccupationOd%C3%A9on](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNOrtTaZnOs&ab_channel=OccupationOd%C3%A9on)

<sup>9</sup> <https://long-stories-short.org/2022/02/12/anoichti-orchistra-stin-plateia-amerik/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://tvxs.gr/tag/anoichti-orchistra/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.koutipandoras.gr/article/anoichti-orchistra-emeis-georgia-se-pisteyoyme/>

example concerning the war in Gaza and Palestine.<sup>12</sup> The A.O. also provides support to groups of residents who fight against urban interventions that are contrary to public interest (e.g. Metro station in Exarchia square in central Athens, etc.). It is important to note that this support usually comes after invitation to the Open Orchestra. The family of Zak/Zackie, after getting in touch with the coordination group, asked the A.O. to perform the day of the trial for the murder of Zak/Zackie in front of the court to provide visibility to a trial that would otherwise struggle to find its way in the Greek media. Similarly, it was the Exarchia Inhabitants Initiative that invited the Open Orchestra to support them. On the contrary, the support to the Palestinian question derived as an initiative of the A.O.

The aim of this presentation is to explore whether this impulsive bottom-up initiative could be considered as – and, even more importantly, could become – a “game-changer” at the local (city) and the very local (neighbourhood) level, as a response to the constant crises that have been hitting the inhabitants of Athens and Greece, in the recent years: debt crisis and austerity, refugee and migration crisis, Covid-19 pandemic crisis, housing crisis, also as a result of tourism regeneration and touristification practices over the last decades.

I seek to understand to what extend an initiative like this – a community of joy, care and solidarity, and an urban utopia, as I like to call it – may be capable of transforming, in the mid-term, both public space and the relations performed within public space. Considering its ephemeral and sporadic performances and actions, to what extend could an initiative such the A.O. play a role in shaping the neighbourhood and the city fabric overall?

I would also be interested in examining, in the future, the potential (if any) of such initiatives as regards appropriation, belonging, and reclaiming the city. And also, what would be needed, from a planner’s perspective, to enhance and leverage such initiatives. Which, to my mind, struggle in favour of the ideals of the Just City and the Right to the City. What kind of spaces could accommodate such initiatives that promote interaction among diverse people yet often they challenge the established status quo?

To comprehend and problematize the Open Orchestra project, analytically, my study is primarily based on the Lefebvrian concept of ‘the right to the city’ (1968). At a second stage, literature related to this concept is also employed (Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2009; Merrifield, 2009 & 2011; Hess, 2021), as well as literature on the more recent discussion on urban and social commons (Ostrom, 1990; Bollier, 2016; Hess & Ostrom, 2011; Bollier & Helfrich, 2012 & 2015; Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2022; Tsavdaroglou, 2018; Πεχτελίδης, 2020; Αρβαντιδης & Νασιώκας, 2015). Methodologically, the present research endeavour is based, insofar, on my own personal experience with the Open Orchestra between autumn 2021 and summer 2022 (precisely from October 2021 until September 2022). The method applied could be thus described as a retrospective participant observation. I also rely on a transcript of the discussion that took place on March 2023 with the members of the A.O. in the context of the doctoral thesis of another researcher from the Department of Geography, University of the Aegean. In the future, I intend to analyze more materials related to the A.O., such as

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<sup>12</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEokUPSWKfg&ab\\_channel=%CE%91%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%B9%CF%87%CF%84%CE%AE%CE%9F%CF%81%CF%87%CE%AE%CF%83%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%7COpenOrchestraGreece](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEokUPSWKfg&ab_channel=%CE%91%CE%BD%CE%BF%CE%B9%CF%87%CF%84%CE%AE%CE%9F%CF%81%CF%87%CE%AE%CF%83%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B1%7COpenOrchestraGreece)

the minutes of the Open Circles, where the members of the Orchestra discuss about everything: its function, the realization of new projects, etc.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section discusses the Lefebvrian concept of the right to the city, while drawing on the linkages of the praxis of the Open Orchestra with the theory of H. Lefebvre. In the following section, attention is paid to the literature on commons that has recently enriched the radical spatial vocabulary (Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2022). In the final section, I draft some preliminary conclusions based on my reflection on the Open Orchestra as commons and as potential game-changer practicing the Lefebvrian 'right to the city' in Athens. And, also, some insight is provided about whether it would be useful and meaningful to question the possible ways (if any) to leverage this kind of socially shared experience, as well as to 'contaminate' the planning practices, the (re)production of urban space, and the city fabric overall.

## **2. Recalling 'the Right to the City' (*Le droit à la ville*): rehearsals with the Open Orchestra in the public spaces of Athens**

Tourism regeneration and touristification of urban centres are processes that have been key for urban transformation worldwide in the recent decades. Mega events and mega projects, local cultures and landscapes, Airbnb expansion even in the most remote places, golden visa incentives, yet also digital nomads, pioneer artists and other social groups included in the so-called 'creative classes' (that cities are supposed to attract in order to become more cosmopolitan, smart, entrepreneur and so on) have all become parts of the storming processes that affect the 'urban' in the twenty-first century. Among the contemporary cities, many are treated by their local and national authorities as 'commodities', while their residents and inhabitants as 'customers' (Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2022: 1134).

Against such developments of neoliberal take, it is not without relevance to rethink the Lefebvrian concept of the 'right to the city', introduced by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, in the eve of the remarkable events of May 1968, in Paris. I draw on purpose on the original text ([1968], 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition/ 2009)<sup>13</sup>, and this for several reasons; the main lying in the belief that, in the recent years, 'the Right to the City' has become a fashionable motto, a slogan and a panacea<sup>14</sup>, which, to my mind, alienates us from some fundamental ideas of

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<sup>13</sup> All reference to and quote from the Lefebvrian text in French is freely translated in English by the author, unless if else indicated.

<sup>14</sup> Analytically speaking, the 'right to the city' may be related to various urban issues, from gentrifying urban districts to neighborhood conflicts revolving around the location of a casino, and so on (see for instance John E. Balzarini & Anne B. Shlay (2016) Gentrification and the Right to the City: Community Conflict and Casinos, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 38:4.). See also international agencies, such as UN-Habitat (<https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-05/wuf-5.pdf>). Nevertheless, it is to note the materialization of the 'right to the city' in national law in countries such as Brazil and Colombia, which resulted in that the 'right to the city' became a legal right. See the approval of Law no. 388/1997 in Colombia and Law no. 10.257/2001 in Brazil (see also [https://www.cnm.org.br/cms/images/stories/Links/29092016\\_WhatIsR2C24June2016.pdf](https://www.cnm.org.br/cms/images/stories/Links/29092016_WhatIsR2C24June2016.pdf); Fernandes, 2007).

Lefebvre, that were expressed in his text. Either applied in a variety of campaigns for a 'right to the city' across the globe (Mayer, 2009), or in scholarly debates on urban struggles, there seems to be an ambiguity in the use of the concept (Huchzermeyer, 2013): first, its meaning is taken for granted (ibid.); second, its mainstreaming in the recent literature is often summarized, thus deprived from some of its fundamental assumptions. It is not a coincidence that the 'right to the city' was translated into English only from 1996, and, still, only in part (Huchzermeyer, 2013).

Against this background, I opted for re-reading Lefebvre's original text and his own writing<sup>15</sup>. Which, among other things, is highly polemical towards the experts of the 'urban', such as architects, planners, sociologists, etc., as much as towards research laboratories, universities, intellectuals<sup>16</sup>... This is probably not irrelevant to that Henri Lefebvre (H.L.) believed that any change in the urban everydayness will emerge from below, from the city-dwellers, 'the many' or else *'the masses'*...

According to Hess, Deulceux and Weigand (2009: xi), H.L. expresses the thought of the possible, the achievable – what *can* happen –, and he envisions it. H. Lefebvre describes an *achievable utopia*, which he outlines throughout his text: how may be transformed everydayness within and via the *urban*.

To begin, it is worth noting one of the starting points of his reflection related to centrality:

'It would be more reasonable, pleasant and meaningful to live in the city and work in the suburbs – some of which are far from inhabitable –, and not the other way around, right?' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 76).

In relation to this idea, Lefebvre sets some key questions:

'What are they – what will be – the "socially successful places"? How to identify them? According to what criteria?'

To immediately precise that by 'socially successful places' he intends those that are conducive to happiness (*'lieux socialement réussis'*, *'favorable au bonheur'*) (ibid.: 100). Implying that our cities are not places conducive to happiness. Even more importantly, he posits:

'Every society, every era, every civilization imagined its heaven and hell, its ideal city, its utopia. Utopia is tied to multiple realities, more or less distant, but nowadays, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not tied to the real – to the everyday life. [...] The gaze turns away, abandons the horizon, disappears into the clouds, elsewhere...' (ibid.: 112).

This perception of today's utopia(s) is closely articulated to his description of today's everydayness. H. Lefebvre describes all those who suffer from a very arranged daily life, the catastrophic misery of housing and of suburban dwellers, of those living in housing ghettos,

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<sup>15</sup> On this, see also Huchzermeyer (2013).

<sup>16</sup> For instance, H.L. writes about research laboratories, universities, experts and intellectuals: "they clash with each other in such a competitive way, with a zeal worthy of a better job, for the benefit of the great Master of economics and politics..." (1968: 111).

in derelict old city-centers, and in successive urban expansions far from downtown. He writes:

'It is enough to understand the daily life of someone who runs from his home to the nearest – or not so close – station of the overflowing subway, to the office or to the factory, to take the way back in the evening, to come home, to regain his strength, and start again, the day after. This generalized misery goes hand-in-hand with the 'pleasures' that disguise it and, which become therefore the means of escape' (ibid.: 108). However, 'neither holiday departure nor industrialised cultural production nor leisure activities solve the problem. The image of all this hinders the problem from being set. The problem is to end with the divisions between 'everyday life/ leisure activities' or 'everyday life/ feast'. The point is to restore celebration, transforming everyday life' (ibid.: 118).

The Open Orchestra comes close to this perception of everyday life and celebration: during the Sunday rehearsals, everydayness changes and it seems to convert *inter alia* to joy, happiness, and sharing. At the same time, the action of the A.O. becomes a claim and an appropriation of public space, and the city overall. The appropriation of the city, even in its most contested and derelict places, when rehearsals take place in neglected public spaces and degraded neighborhoods, becomes – among other – a social demand. Experientially, therefore, following Lefebvre, the A.O. seems to enable celebration to return into the everyday life and to transform this latter into joy yet also into claim, at least temporarily.

In the proper words of one of the oldest members of the A.O., it is explained what the Orchestra is and what it serves:

[EXTRACT 1]

"I've come up with it and I think we all agree that it serves 3 things. On the one hand it is a need for musical and artistic expression, so it has a purely musical and artistic part. On the other hand, it covers a need for a political way out in the dark times we live in, activism and political action from coexisting for 3 hours playing music to going to join other groups to, say, demonstrate in favour of a demand. And the third part has to do with socialization and the pleasure we derive from meeting people, interacting and essentially enjoying this coexistence. [...] I believe that the orchestra [...] has done many things in the public space [...] and I think it has left its imprint in a more or less obvious way at various conjunctures. [...] [The] orchestra is definitely an extroverted ensemble that intervenes in public space, that plays music and attracts people, states things. On the other hand, however, I think it changes us as well very much. [...] It has made me change attitudes, values, mood, to raise questions and motivation to develop more as a person..."

Everyday life is a central concept in Lefebvre's reasoning, and everything contributes to transform it: 'Techniques, art, knowledge, pass into the service of everyday life in order to transform it' (ibid.129).

Art in particular, is put at the service of the urban: 'Leaving aside representation, ornament, decoration, art can become "*praxis* and *poiesis*" '(poetry') on the social scale: the art of living in the city as an oeuvre/ work of art' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 124).

Into his reasoning, Lefebvre drew the term 'poetry' (or the Greek word 'poiesis'), referring to the making of creative work; or, said alternatively, the making of 'oeuvre' that is the creative as opposed to productive –profit-motivated– work<sup>17</sup> (Huchzermeyer, 2013). Lefebvre's engagement with people's desire for creative work was incorporated into his conceptualization of the 'right to the city'; together with everydayness and celebration (the importance of the lived experience and space), happiness, utopia and centrality, are all key – intertwined – elements of this 'right'.

As regards the importance of centrality, in Lefebvre's own words, the right to the city is the right to the 'urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places' (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]: 179).

H. Lefebvre also wonders about the relation of centrality with the ephemeron:

'Why not prioritize over the eternal city the ephemeral cities, and the moving centralities over fixed centers?' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 104).

And elsewhere:

'The ideal city would be the ephemeral city, an endless oeuvre/work (of art) of the inhabitants, who themselves are moving and are mobilized by and for this oeuvre' (ibid.:124).

And, I think, again, of the Open Orchestra (A.O.), which concerns artists and amateurs, yet certainly inhabitants of Athens. Who are both *mobile* – from neighborhood to neighborhood, from protest gathering to solidarity gathering (to claim rights, justice, commons, art, the public space overall, and so on) – and *mobilized* by and for this oeuvre of transforming everyday urban life from misery and desolation to celebration (yet also to claim and demand). From this point of view, centralities are indeed shifting, depending on where are set the stakes of the A.O.: a rehearsal in Victoria Square, Amerikis Square, some derelict sites in Perama (Piraeus), the 1930s dilapidated refugee settlements in Alexandra's Avenue, or outside the Evelpidon courts ahead of the trial for the murder of the queer activist Zac/Zackie, and so on. These moving centralities are set against a fixed and eternal center, in Syntagma Square or even in the Propylaea (University of Athens).

Propylaea, being indeed the core city of Athens and its historic center, played a role in the primary act of the making of the Open Orchestra. Let us recall that the first concert took place in Propylaea, in spring 2021, when the Support Art Workers group performed the piece 'El Pueblo Unido...', just like the solidarity orchestra of the Théâtre de l'Odéon in Paris, some months earlier. It is no coincidence or surprise that this 'eternal city' center – the business and administrative center, as explained elsewhere by H.L. – did not remain on focus by the Open Orchestra; because real life and everydayness 'happen' elsewhere. Furthermore, as Lefebvre underlines, the eternal-city-center is out of reach for the majority of the city dwellers, let alone the (im)probability to live and inhabit there.

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<sup>17</sup> Huchzermeyer (2013) notes that earlier translators of Lefebvre's subsequent book 'The Production of Space' use the English word 'work' instead of 'oeuvre' (see, Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]:73).

Lefebvre does not equate centrality with the physical centre of the town. As he will argue in a later work, 'virtually, anything is possible anywhere' [...]; 'centrality is always possible' (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 130; quoted in Huchzermeyer, 2013). In other words, as above quoted, centrality is conceived as moveable and moving, entangled, therefore, to the idea of the ephemeral. Hence, the perpetual movement of centralities is intrinsic to the concept of the ephemeral city. [And, as above described, the A.O. practices in purpose this volatility of centralities.](#)

For H. Lefebvre, 'the future of art is not artistic but urban' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 125). Because, as he explains: 'the future of humans is not found in the universe (the cosmos) neither in the people nor in production, but within urban society' (ibid.: 125).

This echoes his deep interest in the everyday life, that is the importance of the lived experience (with)in the urban, which informed his thinking on the right to the city.

H. Lefebvre raised the issue of rights together with the social consequences that come as a result of – precisely – the lack of rights, or, said alternatively, the misery of everyday life, and the pressure exercised to the many – to '*the masses*': rights of age and gender rights, rights to education and training, the right to work, to culture, to rest, the right to health, to housing (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 107). And yet, the right to the city is not understood as a simple right to visit or return to the traditional city: the 'urban', as a meeting place, social right and use value, but also 'as inscription into space of a time which has become a supreme good, finds its morphological basis, its realization, through people's everyday practices' (ibid.: 108). Hence, the right to the city concerns those who *inhabit* the city, and not some Olympian Gods of the new aristocracy, who 'fly' from palace to palace or from tower to tower, transcending everyday life, as Lefebvre eloquently stresses (ibid.: 108). The right to centrality is therefore in the core of Lefebvre's reflection, as much as the concepts of habitat and inhabiting, appropriation and use value (in contrast to exchange value), and, essentially, as aforementioned, the concept of the everyday life of common people.

All in all, for Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city is:

'a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individuation in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre* (the participatory activity), and the right to appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implicated in the right to the city' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 125).

The right to the city – the right to urban life – is, for H. Lefebvre, a condition for a renewed humanism and for democracy (Hess, 2009: 3). To understand the essence of Lefebvre's 'right to the city', we need to take into account, apart from his consideration of the everyday, his ideas of the city together with his critique of the state (ibid.: 4). Among other things, this is not without relevance with more recent theory on commons.

### 3. 'Commons', 'commoning', and 'the Right to the City'

Theory on commons is not without relevance with the modus operandi of the A.O. In this section, we draw attention to the literature on commons, briefly evoking some key points of this seminal body of research.

The discussion on commons often refers to private, state and collective models for managing 'common pool resources' (CPR), that is to say resources without a clearly defined ownership status (Ostrom, 1990). CPRs or 'commons' (Bollier, 2016) are vibrant and dynamic social systems which evolve around values of self-management, collective ownership and the equitable administration of resources or goods created by different communities to ensure the survival and well-being of each of their members individually, yet also collectively through the community (Bollier, 2016; Ostrom, 1990; Πεχτελίδης, 2020: 26).

Still, commons are not simply resources or goods we share, they are the social dimension of the shared (De Angelis, in An Architektur, 2010: 5). Massimo De Angelis (ibid.: 2) points that 'conceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time. First, all commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people's needs. Second, the commons are necessarily created and sustained by communities<sup>18</sup>... [...] [T]he third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb "to common" – the social process that creates and reproduces the commons'. This *commoning* activity or '*commoning*' further describes the social relations that are capable of producing and reproducing, establishing and re-establishing, inventing and reinventing the commons (Tsavdaroglou & Kaika 2022).

Commons flourish and expand in all the sectors of life. They are not only material, such as earth, the oceans, energy and water, but can also be intangible, such as education and knowledge (Πεχτελίδης, 2020: 27, 29). Even more importantly, commons 'are a socially minded way of thinking and doing that crosses times and cultures and can be used in very different realms, from community-supported agriculture to software programming to cooperative forms of drug development' (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; see also <https://freefairandalive.org/learning-to-see-the-commons/>).

A famous critique of the commons came as early as 1968, with the article of economist Gerrit Hardin "The Tragedy of the Commons". Hardin argued that common resources will inevitably lead to a sustainability tragedy, because the individuals accessing them would always try to maximize their personal revenue and thereby destroy them. The policy implications of this approach are eloquent, as it is implied that the best way to sustain the resource in question would be through privatization or state control (quoted by De Angelis in An Architektur, 2010: 4).

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<sup>18</sup> [...] 'Communities are sets of commoners who share these resources and who define for themselves the rules according to which they are accessed and used. Communities, however, do not necessarily have to be bound to a locality, they could also operate through translocal spaces. They also need not be understood as "homogeneous" in their cultural and material features' (De Angelis, in An Architektur, 2010: 5).

Against this conceptualization, Ostrom (1990), at the first place, and later other researchers as well, showed that there exists, indeed, a third way – beyond markets and states – and this concerns community self-management and self-government. Furthermore, in a completely different vein from standard economics and the rationale of Hardin's "tragedy" – for whom "rational" is the action of taking more than one's fair share of collective wealth, while displacing unwanted costs onto nature – Bollier & Helfrich (2019) propose the idea of "Ubuntu Rationality"; that is a different worldview, ethic, and set of social practices. As the authors explain, the Bantu tribal worldview could be summarized by the axiom "*I am because we are*". In this perspective, they postulate that commoning does not refer to some distant utopia but constitutes an unacknowledged "Nowtopia" (ibid.) Said alternatively, commoning is a "realistic utopia" (Wright, 2018; quoted in Πεχτελίδης, 2020: 39), implemented here and now.

This conceptualization of commoning and commons resonates with the idea of utopia that goes through the text of Henri Lefebvre on his 'Right to the city'. Lefebvre writes about a realizable utopia through the transformation of everyday life *in* and *by* the "urban". This idea of a realizable utopia, that is a utopia that can be realized right here right now, or –to employ Bollier's & Helfrich's (2019) neologism – a "Nowtopia", is directly correlated to Lefebvre's questioning about the "socially successful places", which, as aforesaid, are those that promote happiness (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 76). In this reasoning, realizable utopias are conducive to happiness, and this could also be the case of commons and commoning.

Stavros Stavrides suggests an additional reason that leads us towards Lefebvre and his notion of the "right to the city". For Stavrides, 'to think about a city based on commons we have to question and conceptualize the connection of space and the commons' (quoted in *An Architektur*, 2010: 16)). To think about space as related to the commons means to conceptualize it, after Lefebvre, as a form of relations rather than an established arrangement of positions. In this way, as Stavrides points, space becomes intrinsic to social action and "happens" through different social actions, which nurture different spatial qualities. This then means that when claiming space as a form of commons, we oppose the idea that each community exists as a spatially defined entity; rather we opt for a network of communicating and negotiating social spaces which retain a "passage" character (ibid.: 16).

This "passage" character– or versatility of commons (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019) – echoes again H. Lefebvre's urge to prioritize the ephemeral over the eternal: as briefly discussed in the previous section, Lefebvre suggests that the ideal city is the ephemeral city. The ideal city would be an endless work of art on behalf of its inhabitants, who would both be moving and mobilizing by and for this work of art (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 104, 124). This mobilization to which refers H.L. is nothing less than social action, that is to say *praxis*. As Stavrides points, space becomes intrinsic to social action. Commoning, on the other hand, does become a social praxis (De Angelis quoted in *An Architektur*, 2010: 4). In this line of thoughts, we could maintain that the A.O. is social praxis and commons. Besides, "praxis and poiesis" '(poetry)' on the social scale is 'the art of living in the city as a work of art' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 124), according to the Lefebvrian concept of the 'right to the city'<sup>19</sup>. Said alternatively, as pointed by Stavrides, for Lefebvre, the 'right to the city' is the right to

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<sup>19</sup> And it also, as aforementioned, what H.L. expects art to become (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 124).

create the city as a collective work of art. Therefore, the city can be fashioned 'through encounters that make room for new meanings, new values, new dreams, new collective experiences' (Stavrides quoted in An Architektur, 2010: 16).

Against this background, it is worth exploring the idea of the Open Orchestra as commons. This hypothesis needs further research which lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

#### **4. Who can do it? Planning, planners, game-changers and the A.O.**

The Open Orchestra seems to enact many of the ideas that shape the concept of the 'right to the city' as theorised by H. Lefebvre. To paraphrase Stavrides (op. cit.) this is *inter alia* the right to create the city as a collective work of art. Without any doubt, the A.O. challenges the established status quo, claiming more democracy, more justice, peace, equal rights for all, open spaces in the city – beyond exchange values, regeneration programmes and hasty touristification. Despite all the above, the question remains about whether this impulsive bottom-up initiative and socially shared experience named Open Orchestra (A.O.) is somehow practicing the 'right to the city'. Similarly, we could hypothesize that, in the way that it has been created and functions, the Orchestra could be considered as commons as well. Yet, for the time being, this remains a hypothesis that needs further investigation.

The difficulty to assert whether the Open Orchestra practices the 'right to the city' as outlined by Henri Lefebvre resonates with a question which remains dominant in the existing literature: '*Who can do the Right to the City?*'

H. Lefebvre is very explicit about this:

'No one is authorized to make the synthesis of the signals of the city. Neither the sociologist, nor the economist, or the architect... Only a praxis can assume the possibility and the demand for synthesis: the 'gathering' of what is segregated, isolated...' (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 92).

As a praxis, the right can only be brought about by 'groups, social classes and class fractions capable of revolutionary initiative' posits elsewhere Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]: 113). These are the ones to indicate their social needs, to overturn existing authorities, and to 'claim a future that will be their own work' (ibid.).

In other words, the 'right to the city' has to be asserted from below and connected to social movements (Harvey, 2008; Mayer, 2009). Even more importantly, Lefebvre calls for a reversal of roles between 'the experts' and the many:

'Only the taking in charge by the working class of planning and its political agenda can profoundly modify social life and open another era: that of socialism in neo-capitalist countries' (Lefebvre, 1996/1968:179; quoted in Huchzermeyer, 2013).

And elsewhere:

'Urbanism' (as a profession) should 'try to model space as a work of art' (Lefebvre, 2003/1970:180; quoted in Huchzermeyer, 2013). The 'sense of the oeuvre' must be shared

also by ordinary people, or else 'urban consciousness will vanish' (Lefebvre, 1996/1968:77; quoted in Huchzermeyer, 2013).

Against this background, I am wondering whether my starting questions – regarding a planner's perspective on initiatives like the Open Orchestra – are opposing the essence of the Lefebvrian concept of the 'right to the city'. I think that, among other things, Lefebvre urges the 'experts' of the urban to find a common step with the non-experts, i.e. the city dwellers – the many. Does this mean to promote more participative planning practices? Does this mean to reflect on how such initiatives, which do shape social relations in the city even in some micro-scale, could also shape space at the metropolitan scale?

In any case, it is interesting to recall the reflection of Massimo De Angelis on commons, who suggests that it not possible to name the subject of change; expressions such as working class, proletariat, multitude, etc. – he says – 'may be more or less useful depending on the situation, but generally their usefulness is mainly correlated to crucial questions of "frontline"' (quoted in *An Architektur*, 2010: 5).

At the closure of this final section, it seems that the stakes set by H. Lefebvre in the eve of the events of May 1968 are still very up to date, while the transformation of the everyday life in and by the "urban" – that is the realization of a realizable utopia – are not yet achieved. Does the A.O. succeed in getting closer to such stakes in today's Athens? This remains another open question. In this text, I tried to provide some insight based on my reflection on the Open Orchestra as commons, but also as potential game-changer that is practicing bits and pieces of the Lefebvrian 'right to the city'. I remain concerned about the possible ways to leverage this kind of socially shared experience, and how these could 'contaminate', if possible (and meaningful), the planning practices, so as to impact the (re)production of urban space and the city fabric overall.

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