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01 May 2024

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Public-private gradient

Jacque Tati's *Playtime* is one of the classical representations of the clash between modernity and everyday life. In the movie, Monsieur Hulot enters the typical and generic spaces of the modern city of the 1960s, encountering lobbies furnished with uncomfortable decorative chairs, infinite stretches of office cubicles, mosaics of unshattered windows glowing at night with a multitude of life scenes taking place. Beyond its caricatural aim, the movie highlights how the modern space for collectivity was often prioritizing the representation of modernity itself, lacking the support for human relations, as the timeless presence of Monsieur Hulot exposed the complications and paradoxes of the modern habitat.

In the contemporary city, many of the devices and machines of the 1960s have gone with the digitalization. If in the modern Paris of *Playtime* face-to-face relations were unavoidable –generating much of the film's humour –, contemporary technologies allow to coexist in the same places without necessarily interacting.

The pandemic stimulated a lengthy discussion on the future of urban space and the space of sociability. However, while attention is being paid to open spaces and indoor space reorganization, the growing number of individual households and the shrinking size of their dwellings remain the constant variables of the urban question (Ogden and Schnoebelen 2005).

According to Klinenberg, the individual household is destined to represent most of the urban population in the contemporary city (Klinenberg 2012). The causes are multiple and span from the labour market structure to gender emancipation. Plus, digitalized forms of labour and consumption facilitate the *alone-together* ethos of contemporary urban society.

In parallel, the branches of the digital economy as collaborative consumption and platform economy rely consistently on the concept of *sharing*, from the immaterial sharing of content on social media to a shared trip with a car-pooling app (Botsman and Rogers 2011; Srnicek 2016).

If we leave sociologists and anthropologists the task to unpack the consequences of the current socio-economic shifts, it is legitimate to ask ourselves how the mantra of sharing impacts urban space and collective space in particular.

In the early 2010s, the real estate market was mature enough to embrace the principles of the digital economy, releasing on the market new housing formats for the urban middle-classes, revealing some hints on the modifications taking place in the design of collective space. In this context, co-living was developed as a real estate product emphasizing spaces for 'sharing' and 'building communities'. The first built examples like The Share in Tokyo (2012) and The Collective in London (2013), contain already in their name an explicit reference to communal living and sharing, differently from the hotel labelling tradition of recalling exclusivity and leisure –*palace hotel, suites, inn*.

Co-living is a hybrid concept between commercial hospitality and a traditional apartment building developed as a 'convenient' alternative to flat sharing[1]. Currently built primarily in metropolises like London and New York, co-living schemes offer rooms as small as nine square meters combined with various material and immaterial services considered essential for *"generation rent"* (McKee 2012).

The living units of co-living projects resemble the genericity and standards of the rooms of a hotel, while the collective spaces are characterised by layouts suggesting flexibility and multiple uses.

As a long-stay hospitality format, co-living incorporates commercial businesses like gyms, bars, and co-working spaces combined with a set of amenities as laundries and kitchens. This functional mix generates a gradient spanning from the privacy of the living units to the public space of the street. In most of the built cases, by the explicit aim of co-living companies, the domestic functions overlap with the commercial and collective ones to stimulate proximity –think at The Collective in London, where the basement laundry room serves as a game room hosting tennis tables.

From a design point of view, the 'blurring' between privacy and collectivity took place in office space environments in the 1990s with the rise of the first co-working spaces. Large open-space rooms opened to digital workers and their dematerialized hardware requirements, even from the most different business sectors.

The *Bürolandschaft* became state of the art, combining in a single space couches, tennis tables, workstations, phone pods, interior plants, and whiteboards (Saval 2014).

The apical point of this tendency was reached in 2012 when Mark Zuckerberg commissioned Frank Gehry to design Facebook's headquarters as a single open-plan office space of forty-thousand square meters[2].

In co-living projects, a similar inclusion process of multiple activities in large collective spaces aims to blend principles of optimization borrowed from the hospitality sector with the marketing goal of uniqueness. The results are various and context-dependent but reveal a trajectory of design that could be generalized and applied in other residential and non-residential projects.

The research for adequate dimensioning of collective space has a long history tracing back to the early twentieth-century experiments. In Russia, the Soviet revolution prompted the search for universal and standardized collective spaces at the top list of the State's political agenda, initiating an intense research process among architects and theorists that will lead to various built experiments and failures.

Soviet oversized communal space

In interwar Europe, the search for the perfect housing floorplan for the *existenzminimum* was one of the primary brain puzzles for the architects of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture. Confident in scientific research methods, the participants of the third CIAM presented hundreds of projects

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[1] *"Co-living is a way of living in cities that is focused on community and convenience. Live as part of a community, sharing wonderfully designed spaces and inspiring events, with the comfort of being able to retreat to your own fully furnished private apartment at the end of the day. Everything you need to make the most of city life is included in one convenient bill; rent, concierge, superfast internet, all utilities and taxes, room cleaning, exciting daily events and gym membership. So you can do the living, and leave the rest to us."*. https://www.thecollective.com/co-living/. Accessed August 23, 2018.

[2] https://www.archdaily.com/267366/facebook-frank-gehry. Accessed 6 May 2021.

challenging the minimum dimensions of a ship or a train cabin (Internationale Kongresse für Neues Bauen und Städtisches 1930; Teige 2002). The Taylorist ethos of the *machine á habiter* of Le Corbusier oriented the discussion principally on the micro-scale of the dwelling plan as the extreme modernized reduction of the nineteenth century bourgeoise home.

As noted by Robin Middleton: *"Yet, surprisingly, the single-cell living unit is not included amongst the hundred-odd designs in the report of that title, introduced by the CIAM congress of 1928. All the architects involved considered the minimal existence to be a family affair"* (Middleton 1983, 60)

At the time, to find research on the single-cell living unit praised by Middleton –and the connected collective spaces– one should look at post-revolutionary Russia. While interwar European social democracies pivoted worker's housing around the social subject of the family, the Soviets had the ambition to provide independent spaces to the workers as individuals.

Starting from the mid-1920s, the ministry of economy assigned Moisei Ginzburg and the OSA group to design a standardized dwelling system to apply to large-scale projects of collective houses. In order to accomplish this task, Ginzburg runs detailed research on the correct and convenient sizing of residential projects, realizing some experimental transitional projects like the iconic Narkomfin building in Moscow (Fernández Per Mozas and Ollero 2013).

Having the possibility to collect first-hand information on the behaviours of the inhabitants of the Narkomfin, Ginzburg raised various concerns on the efficacy of total collectivization.

The Narkomfin is divided into a slab of standardized units of various dimensions and a connected pavilion for services. Ginzburg noted how the communal kitchen and canteen of the annex building were actually used more to collect meals to bring to the private apartments than for meal sharing (Ginzburg 1934).

This kind of episode made him more cautious in proposing radical choices as the abolition of private kitchens and the minimization of space for privacy, and soon a design competition will offer him more arguments for these assumptions.

In parallel to the research on standardization to satisfy the urgent housing demand, the OSA also focused on developing an experimental communal house (Dom-kommuna), launching a competition between the Organization in 1927 that will see as winning the proposal of Barshch and Vinogradov.

The Dom-kommuna proposal was composed by a scheme of two crossing slabs of two-hundred-and-fifty meters, one dedicated to six square meter individual lodgings and one to communal services. Ginzburg notes how this clear separation between the residential and the communal required a universal and standardized organization of daily life (Ginzburg 1934, 142). In his opinion, this project and all its subsequent iterations *"suffer from a lack of understanding of the importance of personality in the socialist collective"* (Ginzburg 1934, 138).

The extreme reduction of individual living space led to a paradox: the communal spaces as industrial kitchens and canteens sitting at least a thousand people were contradicting the socialist purpose bringing to *"astronomical dimensions the molecular elements of way of life of the old family"* (Ginzburg 1934, 142).

To give a scale comparison between the Narkomfin and the Dom-Kommuna by Barshch and Vinogradov, the total circulation area of the latter amounted at fifteen

times more the one in the former –that is considered the social condenser *par excellence.*

This communal space hypertrophy will lead to projects like the realized student hostel by Nikolaev (1930), where the sleeping cabins were windowless and with shared bathrooms any two rooms, or Melnikov's Sleep Pavilion for Zeleny Gorod, *"where sleep is declared to be 'socialist', i.e. where people sleep all together in enormous rooms and where special orchestras and reflectors muffle the 'socialized' snoring in accordance with all the rules of modern science and art"* (Ginzburg 1934, 142).

At the beginning of the 1930s, the central government will reorient its economic planning more on the industrialization of building techniques than on the architecture of mass housing, interrupting the debate on the *dom kommuna*. The result will be the prefab concrete landscape still populating most of the Eastern Bloc cities (Meuser et al. 2016).

The failed attempt of the OSA to fully standardize the collective space of Soviet housing fell apart because of the difficulties of not turning domestic space into commercial space. Ironically, the concerns of Ginzburg on the hypertropia of collective space will return as a design issue in the most mature representation of capitalism as the tech company offices of Silicon Valley and co-living spaces.

The collective space of co-living

The experiments of the OSA will remain as a central reference in the architectural culture filling pages and pages of recent scholarship (Aureli, Tattara, and Dogma 2019). Not only for its ideological premises, but for the capacity of the Russian architects to translate a planned economy objective into a spatial research on innovative forms of inhabitation.

For this reason, when looking at the combination between the micro-units of co-living and its externalized domestic services, the bridging of these projects with the Soviet inheritance is almost automatic. Nevertheless, the economic and ideological premises are on opposite ends, and the economic model underlaying co-living projects is aimed to the higher end of the urban middle-classes, excluding the lower incomes.

In most built cases, the optimization and consequent reduction of the living units' area make co-living extremely adapt to dense metropolises characterized by constant growing land values. Even including in the equation a proportioned part of the spaces shared by all the *co-livers*, the co-living model allows far higher prices per square meter than other ordinary rental options.

What co-living companies define as 'convenient' is the all-inclusiveness of this model. The fact that the monthly rent comprises workspace, gym subscription, and weekly room cleaning, are some of the key aspects of the models' attractiveness. But the services offered are rather a stimulated need for the recipients than an actual need. Comparing the monthly rent per square meter of a case in London and one in New York –running calculations with and without the incidence of shared space– it emerges that the price of co-living is higher than a traditional flat for rent in the same urban areas (see table).

	Average cost (€/month)	Average floor area rental units (m^2)	Average price/m^2 private space ($/month)	Average floor area private + shared spaces per person (m^2)	Average price/m^2 private + shared space ($/month)	Cost/m^2 of low-cost living space in the same urban area ($/month)
Ollie Carmel Place	2.500	28,5	87,7	43,5 (28,5 + 15)	57,47	40 (34,53 euro)
The Collective Old Oak	1.350 (£ 1.050)	10,5	129	17,5 (10,5 + 7)	77	24 (20,40 euro)

The Collective and Ollie co-living economic performances. Sources: The Collective LLC; Ollie; Dömer, Drexler, & Schultz-Granberg, 2014.

The recent research from the French Bond Society shows how in a survey of twenty-five co-living projects worldwide, the number of services offered and the amount of dedicated space are independent of the number of residents (Gautreau and Bond Society 2018). This finding highlights the fundamental difference between co-living and traditional commercial hospitality projects. The number of collective spaces and amenities is strictly regulated by formulas and standards of the industry, which qualify different rankings between hotels. In co-living, the collective space quantity is not conceived only for its residents but for its potential to attract the wider urban population.

Beyond the quantitative data, this approach explains the diffuse attitude of co-living companies to overcharge the symbolic space over the actual space. From observing several realized projects, it is possible to extract some specific qualities of the collective space of co-living and its critical aspects.

In one of the first built examples of co-living, The Share in Tokyo (2012), Niklas Maak describes the space on the sixth floor as *"a kind of communal living room –a mix between a club, a restaurant, and an artificial forest with hammocks –as well as a large kitchen, a space for theatre performances and film screenings or lectures, and a library"* (Maak 2015, 143). Even in the reduced space of a 1960s apartment building reconversion, the sheer number of services contained is all aimed to stimulate an interior landscape of the *overlap*. Even if the theatre room could never be used as a theatre, its value stands in the difference from a traditional residential project and in the potential for unexpected uses. The *overlapping* approach describes the attempt of the first co-living projects to imitate the communality of the New York lofts of the 1960s distilled by its original cultural premises.

In The Collective in London, one of the most extensive realized examples, the collective space is distributed on each floor. The ground floor and the first floor host the building's public program with a gym, a co-working space, and a café. The plan is organized in two overlapping slabs, and the central core hosts on each floor collective kitchens, library rooms, and game rooms. This rational layout clarifies the gradient from public space to private space occurring in co-living. In The Collective rooftop on the fifth-floor terrace, the alone-together lifestyle is enhanced by the presence of plastic igloos for self-isolation. The critical aspect of the collective space of this project lays probably in the intermediate domestic spaces distributed on each

floor. The professional kitchens are populated with fictional café and restaurant signs. The library room is surrounded by libraries filled with fake books wallpaper. The laundry room hosts tennis tables and pool tables in combination with the professional washing machines. In all of these rooms, the impression stimulated is the gamification of domestic labour into something exceptional that can transcend the efforts and ordinariness of everyday life.

The same strategy of markings and tags is widely employed by The Student Hotel, a Dutch company with dozens of listings around Europe that primarily targets international students. What in The Collective is suggested as a gamified experience of space, in The Student Hotel in den Hague becomes a manifesto or a set of 'instructions for living', since one can find a tag at the entrance on the café stall claiming *"HOME AWAY FROM HOME."* However, the most iconic tag developed by The Student Hotel is probably the message in the rooftop swimming pool in the Florence Lavagnini project: *"THE BEACH IS BORING".* This iconic part of the project quickly became an 'Instagram spot'[3], making its use as a pool subordinate to its marketing value. Plus, the reduced size of the pool of three by eight meters circa allows for a limited occupancy.

In all these cases, we could note how the penetration of digital technology into everyday life has a fundamental role in shaping collective space. The consequences are visible on two different levels. The first is one of the modes of interaction in collective space once populated with digital devices for work or leisure. The second one operates on the representation of space through social media, which has a role in the voluntary charging of signs of spaces that transcend functionality.

The concerns of alienation of Mr. Hulot and Ginzburg in the collective space of the modern city may have found reincarnation in a paradoxical landscape. Think of the omnipresent 'social table' of a co-working space or a bar. A ten-meter-long table in a room targets principally the *solo living* urban population described by Klinenberg (Klinenberg 2012), allowing individuals to feel immersed in a crowded place. Nevertheless, this unobstructed landscape does not require any barrier since everybody carries one with their laptops.

As seen in the rooftop swimming pool in Florence, the collective space of co-living and its decorations and symbolism is one of the manifestations of the economy of *"enrichment"* (Boltanski and Esquerre 2020). The exploit of symbols is used for commercial purposes, setting the use-value of space in the background.

The transformations of collective space are part of a significant shift in the city's broader public space, where pure civic space struggles to be separated by commercial space (Alkemande 2018). Nevertheless, the commercial nature of the collective space of co-living suggests design attitudes since it is subject to the highest pressures of the market for maximum optimization. A similar pioneering role was played by the American Hotels of the early nineteenth century, which would later influence the technical and cultural features of the ordinary apartment building (Sandoval-Strausz 2008).

One of the main aspects that could be extracted from co-living as an object of study is the complete hybridization of the traditional functionalist categories. Once translated in other projects, this trajectory could suggest focusing less on specific uses in the construction of supports that enable domestic and social life.

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[3] #thebeachisboring hashtag currently accounts for more than 877 posts on Instagram, almost all with the same angle on the swimming pool of TSH Lavagnini. https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/thebeachisboring/. Accessed 6 May 2021

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