

Collective action and habitability in residential contexts

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1. Introduction: housing as a common pool resource

Many urban areas are characterised by the presence of commons: those goods, that are generally defined as "public goods", such as roads, parks, buildings such as schools, town halls, service centres and "private goods" of public interest such as shopping malls, belong to the family of the commons (McKean, Ostrom e Gibson 2000) (Ostrom, *Governing the commons* 1990). Rights over the stock are similar to public goods: these rights of usage are indivisible; rights over the flow are fragmented between users and there's a rivalry that would end, without a proper regulation, in an overexploitation of the resource itself: e.g. think about traffic determined by the excessive presence of cars, perhaps driven by individuals who go from home to work. The space is a scarce resource.

A similar argument could be made for housing: think for example that many European buildings consist of condominiums, legal institutions that provide for the co-ownership of substantial parts of the residential building such as the roof, the floor, the external walls, stairs, access to housing and its appurtenances such as parking lots, access ramps to the garages, gardens or green areas etc. Private and common spaces are designed and used in many different ways by residents: accessibility is a key element to be considered. In order to access a private house, the use of common spaces is needed.

Moreover the house itself, even if it's private and excludable, can be shared by a group of people cohabiting such as a family or students. Heterogeneity of people and interests is a key element affecting this situation.

Finally, a third element like density should be considered: any house, no matter if it is inhabited by a single person and it's fully independent (e.g. think about a villa), it is always part of a common according to the idea it is part of the urban landscape of the context in which it is settled.

Heterogeneity, accessibility and density are in general used by classical studies to define the concept of urbanity (Wirth 1938) (Amin e Thrift 2002) (Cancellieri 2013). Housing is always an urban common because:

- the character of urbanity is defined by the fact that men have populated and changed the context humanising it; therefore housing is undoubtedly an instrument of urbanity;
- the character of being a common pool resource is defined according to what is mentioned above: a house in order to be used has to be in relation with other common spaces, a house can be shared by a group of people, a house is always part of a larger common good like the landscape.

However dealing with the management of the commons in urban areas and, in particular with housing, it is essential to introduce the concept of habitability, since while a context to be habitable must be urbanised, an urbanised area, by contrast, is not necessarily habitable. Therefore urbanity is a necessary but not sufficient condition to make that context habitable.

If we think for example to a city park and its management, the element that makes it interesting to be studied as a common is not because of its urbanity, but because of its usability: if it were abandoned, degraded, or dangerous, but it would remain an urban common in theory or by law, but it ceased to be a habitable good in practice. Therefore the focus of this paper is on the performance of usage and not on the rights to make that particular common good usable. Dealing with habitability and housing there's a list of rights (UNHABITAT 2009) dramatically unattended in many cities all over the world, especially in third world countries.

Urbanising an area doesn't mean only to build on it, but it means to structure an organizational and regulatory government system to face the process of human settlement, able to exploit the complex mix of social, economical and environmental resources and constraints that the territory manifests.

Dealing with habitability, a reflection should be done on the effectiveness that collective institutions can have in promoting it through the process of urbanisation. This article is focused on the role of self-organised communities in producing habitability.

2. An analysis of the institutional concept of habitability

The concept of habitability is strongly linked to performance: it defines how a certain territorial asset should respond to the stress generated by the relation “space-society” (Balducci, Fedeli e Pasqui 2011). This idea was developed by an international group of architects and planners in a chart of rules (dealing with sun exposure, location, infrastructures, air pollution, leisure needs etc.) known as the Athens Charter (Le Corbusier 1965). In contemporary cities limits related to this way of functionalist thinking are evident: consider, for example, the loss of contact with the neighbourhood that derives from the shape of the tower blocks, the loss of the sense of community that comes from the destruction of informal housing and the subsequent relocation of the population in new houses. Habitability was used as the main argument for many nations to remove informal housing.

Today it is now enshrined in law in all industrialized countries that a given house, to be occupied by any person should have minimum standards of performance (e.g., a toilet, a heating system, electric, hydraulic certified by a professional, etc.) (see for example the decent home standard debate in the UK).

The level of habitability and some other relevant standards were never defined: in Italy for example planning rules don't define the minimum quantity of social housing over the total housing stock available in a certain area; it is not defined which housing services should be present in a residential area: a pharmacy, a city park, a car park, a subway, a primary school? Or what? Even housing price is relevant for habitability and it is defined according to the housing market, not by design rules.

Some authors, showing the relevance of community-led housing initiatives, critic “mass housing” assuming the complexity of housing. A house is much more than an empty box to be filled up—it's also a home, a place of social relations and an economic investment for a household (Turner 1977) (Tosi 1994) (Paba, et al. 2012) (Ward 2002).

In terms of habitability the question is not whether these standards should be respected according to the law, but if they are present in the residential area and to what extent, and especially who supplies them. In order to understand if a space is habitable, it is crucial to understand how people use the spaces. These aspects relate to the cultural and social dimension of housing and are typically neglected by functionalist culture that actually never regulated these aspects. However, the performance of a given space is clearly influenced by the way people use it. A territory is defined according to the uses made of it (Crosta 2010).

There are a number of housing situations, where habitability of a context is produced: for example, how many people live in the house to its size and to the number of rooms, the frequency and the manner in which the resident cleans it and collects waste; which are the management mechanisms for managing common spaces between houses like stairs, steps; how are access and parking regulated.

A system of rules is always necessary to manage collective action; the tragedy of commons (Hardin 1968) was determined by a lack of rules. A growing literature (Ostrom, Governing the commons 1990) (Bromley 1991) shows that common goods are better managed if people have a voice in defining these rules and related management.

Biophysical conditions (physical dimension), community characters (social dimension) and the system of rules (institutional dimension) represent the main elements affecting habitability. These three areas of indicators interact with each other in what is called *action arena* and in specific *action situations* and define how habitability is produced. These analytical elements are the backbone of the framework of analysis that is typically used for the *study of the commons* (IAD framework) (Ostrom, Understanding institutional diversity 2005). One of the main merits of these scholars was to provide a scientific basis for the study of collective action. This theory, however, has also had the merit of showing that self-organised community in the form of collective institutions is an effective agent of environmental sustainability, preserving natural resources from overexploitation.

Moving from this theory, there are still few studies (Tang 1986) (Bengtsson 1998) (Vihavainen 2009) showing that self-organised housing communities may be able to preserve the assets collectively managed, avoiding their depletion, and very few studies consider this theory useful for understanding urban development (Webster e Lai 2003). Dealing with urban contexts, it has to be demonstrated that self-organised communities are able to increase housing value governing some specific phenomena typical of urban contexts like land rent.

Assuming this theory not only as a methodological reference for the analysis of community-led initiatives, but also as a theory to be verified, it is necessary to consider residential communities as a particular type of institution for collective action (now on “collective institutions”) engaged in the production of habitability.

Collective institutions are “institutional arrangements that are formed by groups of people in order to overcome certain common problems over an extended period of time by setting certain rules regarding access to the group (membership), use of the resources and services the group owns collectively, and management of these resources and services” (Institutions for collective action 2014). In particular, an institution is considered here as a human organisation with a story, adaptive to the political and physical context in which it lives, which gives a justification for its existence according to a specific ideology, self ruling itself according to formal and informal relations within the group, forming its specific symbolic and values codes. Institutions are natural complex systems that develop self defence and self promotion (Selznick 1957) (Powell e Di Maggio 1991).

Habitability is considered here a good of general interest co-produced at different scales through the action of collective institutions. For the purposes of this article, this wide definition is limited to the following four aspects:

- Who can access the house? Who's the house designed for? How self organising communities can produce and maintain affordability?
- How to balances the autonomy of the group and a sense of community according to regulation imposed from the public over ordered institutions?
- How the usage of informal and formal rules can maintain functionality, practicability, decor and value of private and common residential spaces, through regulating and sanctioning anti-social behaviours?
- Which mechanisms can be used to prevent that residential communities are transformed into community intent on defending their privileges (gated communities) (Atkinson e Blandy 2005), balancing exclusive services and services of general interest?

3. Three types of collective institutions

There are an infinite variety of self-organised residential communities. A taxonomy able to classify all the types in the various countries is not helpful. However, if we assimilate self-organised housing communities

to collective institutions, three institutional recurrent patterns can be identified. This classification uses three basic elements as vectors for the description of institutional arrangements:

- the property regime;
- the system of decision-making;
- the prevalent form of social interaction inside the group.

This classification is partly borrowed from the theory of contractual communities (Moroni e Brunetta 2012) and it's here adapted according to housing. In particular, the authors do not consider the reasons and motivations used by groups (cultural, religious, political, etc.). I agree with this opinion, but I believe that this idea doesn't legitimate ignoring the ways in which people socially interact within the groups. It would not be a coherent simplification with the IAD framework here followed.

In each form of collective institutions all the three forms of social interaction described here are present (pooling, sharing, "commonification"¹) and certainly many others are not treated (e.g. gifting); each form of social interaction is here associated to a specific collective institution because it is more likely to connote that specific model better than the others (see table 1).

3.1. Housing ourselves

The first form of collective institution is the one in which people house themselves. This community was born with the aim to meet the specific housing needs group's member through the self-production of housing. Typically these initiatives seek to build residential communities that are stable over time.

These institutions are based on joint ownership of the building; each member has the right to use an apartment privately, but accommodations are all owned by the institution that built them. The oldest example is the joint ownership cooperatives. In this institutional framework the decision-making process is typically based on "one person, one vote." The main form of social interaction is aimed at the formation of group (*pooling*).

The role of collective institutions is crucial for the life of the community, since it is the point guard through which the inhabitants base their reason for being in the group, a place of exchange and interaction for management decisions, a formal place to be used with the other institutional actors, especially the public ones. Therefore it is the hinge around which the whole of the group's structure works and thus it has a function of pivot.

One aspect that distinguishes most this particular form of collective institution is that the people choose each other before inhabiting the area, typically on the basis of common characteristics (age, gender, language, place of birth, religion, political ideology, income, etc.) These communities are made by people who opt for elective affinities and usually admit new members internally on the basis of observations of compliance with the system of values in more or less prolonged periods.

The collective institutions of this nature, although typically nonprofit, do not necessarily pursue charitable purposes, but the maximization of reciprocity relations: therefore if a tenant is in arrears, the collective institution would not solve his problem, but it will find someone with sufficient resources to repay the accommodation. In this type of collective institution, the object precedes the subject. Even in those communities that pursue charitable purposes as explicitly inspired by religious values, they do not really help all persons in need who ask, but a selection of them is made according to self-defined parameters.

¹ This neologism is widely used and can be understood as "production of common goods";

Land/building ownership is used by these collective institutions to acquire legitimacy from over-ordered public institutions. In terms of policy, if some form of tax benefit were granted to these institutions or a long-term lease², the advantage of these institutions is that they ensure that such benefits would be stored in an asset lock and the benefit will last.

This is the case for example of Community Land Trust (Swann 1972): at least in the English experience, they have typically the right of pre-emption if the resident decides to sell his home. The price has a maximum cap, which cannot exceed the price that the collective institution agreed with the public authority that granted the benefit. The benefit may be granted because the initiative includes the involvement of vulnerable housing targets under the policy guidance. The benefit can also be given because the business risk is directly on residents' shoulders.

These types of collective institutions have proved particularly suited for residential communities that do not have large financial resources or who are struggling to acquire ownership of the house: think about groups of young families, people placed in areas of high housing pressure, residents in touristic areas, etc. In terms of policy it is important to note that the way in which these institutions operate has limited purposes for the needs of the group: that is, the level of affordability achieved will be proportional to the specific conditions of the residential market in the specific area of that specific group of people. So, unless large part of the local areas will be acquired under similar conditions (i.e., out of the housing market), these institutions won't be able to influence housing policy.

If the coordination of the initiative is carried out by promoters who founded the collective institution, but that does not directly benefit the property (i.e. they won't inhabit there), the autonomy of choice of the group can be removed in whole or in part dealing with key economic aspects: typically the definition of the costs of homes. Similar thoughts may be made as to the selection criteria of the inhabitants, the mode of housing allocation to tenants, the timing of building sites, etc.

As regards the maintenance of residential areas, in this type of institutional arrangement there is a strong informal control both in terms of monitoring people's behaviours and sanctions. In these communities the continuous meetings and exchange facilitate the circulation of information, including the personal one. Therefore inhabitants tend to be informed about what the neighbours do. The infringement of rules is then typically sanctioned through a social disapproval with the consequent social isolation.

It's quite interesting to note that even if the degree of autonomy is limited for inhabitants, collective institutions can be effective in achieving internal cohesion in the group (Bronzini 2014). Having a shared effort and a common goal, it gives the group enough self-awareness and identity as to perpetuate itself.

According to the benefit granted to these communities by public authorities, it is essential that these institutions do not become residential "gated communities", here meant as institutions intent on defending their privileges: these housing initiatives should include services and infrastructures for all the neighbourhood and the city.

A particularly interesting case is that of a co-housing co-operative of self builders in San Lazzaro di Savena (Bologna - Italy). The City has negotiated a series of services that should animate a district with a majority social housing, characterised by the presence of a population with social problems. These services have been introduced as a deduction of infrastructure costs, negotiating directly with the residential cohousing community: the renovation of a skating park into a football green, the realisation of cultural events, the opening of some rooms for repairing bikes and workshop activities, mowing the public park, etc.

² In Italy it is called "right of superficies", in France "bail emphytéotique";

3.2. Self-production of housing socio-residential services

The second type of collective institution grows in residential communities where the population is the tenant of a single owner. Situations of this kind are widespread in the field of private market (e.g., holiday villages) and in public housing. The inhabitant substantially has no power of decision with respect to matters that relate to the property management; while differing from country to country it is instead regarding the facility and the social management.

Not having the ownership of the building, the community can ask the delegation to the management of a range of housing services that affect significantly the habitability conditions: the management of plumbing, fire protection, electrical, lighting and air conditioning and the control over their functioning, the green management, cleaning, catering services if any, scheduling the usage of common rooms where present, video surveillance, and access, up to the management of rent.

Social management refers to a range of other services such as the presence of a caretaker and a listening point, the promotion of community development, the coordination of cultural activities, the cultural mediation, the conflict resolution mechanisms, etc.

A residential community that lives in this specific institutional framework will improve housing standards by providing a range of socio-residential services the owner is not likely to ensure.

The purpose of these institutions, unlike those of the first type, is not so much to satisfy specific housing needs or ensuring a long stable presence of the group in that context, but to ensure the group members are well-located for the period of stay, which may last from a few days to several years or for life. In fact, in this particular institutional pattern, in contrast to what happens in the first model, the people have no power of decision with respect to the selection criteria of the inhabitants, which are considered as users of goods and services made available by the collective institution. The degree of homogeneity within the group is defined by external factors and is highly variable.

The residents of this model do not generally know each other before moving into their apartments. The main task of these collective institutions will be first to circulate the information. The social interaction will be aimed at sharing information and a range of services and goods that may in some way help to increase the wellbeing of the population.

The level of congruence regarding expectations will be defined based on the information that the group expressed in the context in which it is settled. In this sense, these collective institutions play as a collector of needs and demands with respect to discontent more or less explicit. Moreover it will also act as a filter to the needs expressed by residents against bad property management.

The group living in this institutional pattern tends to be larger than those of the first one. A board of delegated inhabitants is therefore needed on the basis of a system of election.

The wide circulation of information that the institution guarantees on residential, allows this institution to exercise an informal monitoring of social activities. Conversely, since in this institutional pattern the collective institution does not have the function of pooling people and building groups, but to make sure that people know each other and exchange information and services, the type of sanctions that can be imposed are of a formal nature. In other words, the social disapproval of a particular behaviour does not pass by the group, but it is managed by a group of people elected on behalf of the group. Therefore a formal warning will be used to comply with the regulation of home life.

Dealing with the management of conflicts, it should be noted that this type of institutions works primarily with a set of tools for the prevention of them: for example, encouraging the clarification of stakeholders, gathering information on the incident, filtering relevant information by purchasing professional mediation and so on.

These specific collective institutions are used in France and some other countries not only to maintain the building, but also to provide a series of housing services to disadvantaged neighbourhoods that would hardly be guaranteed by the State. This is the case of the Régies de Quartier, which are designed to produce a range of services for the benefit of the neighbourhood.

The Régies de Quartier are local agents designed to produce a range of services that improve the housing conditions of the neighbourhood (e.g., maintenance); moreover they provide a series of projects of social inclusion through work. These institutions are committees of local residents, elected along with other local relevant actors. The level of infrastructure development in the context is then maximized and the danger of creating closed groups is avoided, which is one possibility for the first intuitional model analysed.

3.3. The self-regeneration of the neighbourhood

The third type of collective institution has mixed property regime: there are homeowners sharing some common spaces. A single homeowner has the power to vote on decisions of the development of the context according to the dimension of his property. In residential areas, there may be renters who do not have voting power, but who have a role of advocacy in the development process of the building. This type of institution is similar to that of homeowners' associations (widespread in USA) or to condominiums (widespread in Italy). In this institutional pattern, those who invested more are those who can really influence habitability. It's a democracy based on ownership.

The purpose of these institutions is to attract and concentrate investment in the area in order to treat social problems that characterise the residential area or part of the population that lives there. The opportunity can be provided by the presence of abandoned areas or brownfields, the need to produce affordable housing, the need to introduce a social mix, etc. The shape of social interaction developed by these types of institutions is aimed at the production of common goods ("commonification"), i.e., common pool resources that can be physical assets like affordable housing and infrastructure or intangible ones, like community building services and social capital. The mechanism that allows for the creation of this type of resources is determined by the institutional bond to reinvest the profits realised in that area.

These institutions are focused on creating networks of actors, without which it is hard to achieve their goals: with public entities, with economic and finance investors, with building companies, with social cooperatives, with volunteers, with the parishes, etc. Inhabitants who try to carry out these types of institutions can be considered as promoters of housing development.

This collective institution uses the neighbourhood as a social base. Therefore the members of the group are selected by the fact that they live or are interested in living in the neighbourhood, or are concerned for the welfare of the residential community or even have an interest in raising the level of property values or to prevent its depreciation.

For this type of institution it is essential in the process of birth to be recognized, as well as having a legal form established by law, in order to be able to become privileged partners of the local administration in respect of the development programs and propose initiatives that have economic and social relevance, not just cultural.

There are many other experiences, for example in France, the case of the H'nord project in Bordeaux, where a group of residents are building social housing estates. This case shows that this kind of legitimacy occurs when public and collective institutions cooperate. In that project, the group of residents support the idea of a strong social mixité in the area and therefore it is promoting the construction of housing that will not only provide community members with a moderate income, but that will also house the weaker social classes.

Being institutions that aim to represent the neighbourhood, it is essential for them to have systems of internal participation on a representative basis that collect the interest of most of the inhabitants. As the activities that are performed often have business implications, it is clear that these people elected must develop a set of managerial skills. This type of activity can be carried out in a voluntary or paid way.

One key thing that helps the growth process is that activists leading the institution do not become those who are entrusted with all activities and essentially they lose their connection with the people because of their management role. The risk of losing the stimulus for institutional growth is phenomena such as the personification of the institution, the decline in participation in the social base and the excessive enlargement of the institution in terms of field of activity and business.

In general the growth of the institution is essential to implement a series of projects and initiatives aimed at the growth of the community, to ensure that the organisation is not treated as a place of complaints about what works or not in the neighbourhood. For this it is fundamental not only to organise fun and entertainment activities, but real actions of community building, intended to change the professional conditions and life of the people involved who are not necessarily in deprived conditions or who are in need of professional caretaking and social services.

The aspect that differentiates this type of institution from the two described above is that it develops projects that will substantially mobilise the neighbourhood through the use of resources that are available to inhabitants involved and that the institution is able to recover from the public or private sector. For more information about techniques and methodology, see the Asset Based Community Development approach (ABCD) (Provasi 2004). The manner in which the resources are mobilised to realize community building is to find funding, skills and time to carry out asset transformations, such as building housing and commercial spaces for rent, the construction of community centres, paid parking, green spaces, etc.

To maintain the initiative in time, it should be noted that this type of institution is unable to offer an informal control on the behaviour of the people and even the renters of their homes. They then will have formal tools for both the control and sanctioning of antisocial behaviours: a contract, a regulation, a charter of values, etc. In general this type of institution is keen to adopt a series of tools for the prevention of conflict.

These institutions are geared to the production of tangible and intangible assets. They become promoters of an idea of the neighbourhood according to the ideas of the part of the local community mobilised, and it cannot match the overall neighbourhood's interests. Usually these organizations work as agents of local development, and they operate an integration between organizations working in the same area.

In terms of policy, local authorities involved with these kinds of institutions should be willing to change the mode of planning, not placing themselves in the position of someone who already has a preconceived solution to the problem, but by discussing in detail the steps and welcoming proposals in an evolutionary perspective.

4. Conclusions

Thanks to the analytical description provided and through the cases mentioned, it emerges that:

- the ability of these institutions to respond in terms of affordability is undoubtedly limited to the context in which they operate, so they can hardly be thought of as a tool to regulate the housing market; they can be used to limit dysfunctions produced by it;
- self-organised residential communities are an option for policy whether they are self-activated or are mobilised from the outside by other organisations. Internal cohesion of the community is built in many different ways. This is a guarantee that the initiatives could be replicated even if the people do not have the strength or the interest of self-activation;
- The degree of informality that these communities are able to use to put pressure on anti-social behaviour is an indispensable factor to make the environments more habitable and these institutions through direct activation of the inhabitants can achieve sufficiently high levels of control through informality;
- Collective institutions, even the first type, do not automatically become gated, but they can offer different and numerous means for enriching the neighbourhood with services and infrastructure and intangible assets. These institutions are keen to work with cheaper infrastructure and services.

Institutional patterns	Aims	Property regime	Decision-making	Form of social interaction
<i>Housing ourselves</i>	Meeting the housing needs of Community	Joint Ownership between members	One head = one vote	Pooling (formation of the group)
<i>Self-production of housing services</i>	Improvement of housing standards	Community renters with a single owner	Decision by the single owner	Sharing (information, goods, services etc.)
<i>Self regeneration of a neighbourhood</i>	Concentration of resources in the area	Homeowners' communities	Property majority	Commonification (production of common goods)

Table 1 Types and characters of collective institutions. Analytical elements are adapted from the contractual communities' theory (Moroni & Brunetta, 2012)

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