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Commons

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Further readings

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Commons

The term *commons* historically refers to natural resources that we, the people, hold in common, resources that are the property of no individual and are available to all: air, water, earth. In medieval England and Central European countries, the commons were specific parcels of agricultural land intended for communal use. Nowadays, the city can be understood as the ultimate common socio-spatial resource, a collective cultural construct composed by and for its inhabitants.

Around the notion of the commons, a challenging field of thinking has emerged in economics and political and social sciences, suggesting radically different ways to organise our societies. Elinor Ostrom (1990) put forward the idea of the commons as a collective action that challenges existing perspectives on economics and policy. More recently, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2012) have used the commons as a model to think about the many domains of everyday life that lie beyond the dominant discourse of market economy and state intervention. In these theories, however, there is little notion of how architectural and urban spaces contribute to the formation of the commons.

From the perspective of architecture and urban design, the built environment appears to be a key element of the commons. Concrete and tangible architectural and urban figures (construction systems, spaces, buildings) can function as commons, as they represent an idea of commonality or organise communal practices. In addition, the commons can be looked upon from a procedural perspective, implying the rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation that shape buildings and cities. This encompasses the shared effort of designers, advisers, constructors and owners, but architectural projects are also the result of the commonalities of other stakeholders, such as inhabitants, users and neighbours, who negotiate forces into a new venture.