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Introduction: Common Life at the LiAi

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Common Life is the theme of the third term of the MA programme at the “Laboratory of Immediate Architectural Intervention”, taught at Umeå School of Architecture. The main course in the term is called “Architectural Intervention, Realization and Consequences” and it aims at enabling the students to adopt a more reflective approach after their first year, in order to start developing a position as architects and as researchers. The semester is also a transition towards the final term in which students are to develop their Master’s Theses. This publication gathers the results of a collective effort to carry out a research assignment that is conceived to prepare the students for some of the challenges they will have to face in order to complete those theses.

The course focuses on architecture’s ability to provide, through its transformative power, conditions of ‘possibility’ for the sharing of various spaces, times, processes and other things. Producing uncertainties, contingent relationships and unexpected effects can help define more positive value systems than that of the building-as-consumable-object. We understand the building as a relational object within a complex meshwork of other things, people and technologies, and we explore the notion of architecture-as-an-emergent-‘gift’: a relational practice that enables encounter(s), and affords the sharing of moments, conversations and, why not, lives. Inhabiting the spaces, discourses and events of this common life, we try to develop a faithful and true care for the situations we are enmeshed in, and perhaps discover ways to displace what is, in order to ‘architect’ what could be and what ought to be.

Homes are very close to us, we inhabit them with our bodies, emotions and thoughts, we make them and they make us. How much are we ready to share of our lives? What can we obtain from sharing? What can we share? Are there degrees of sharing? What is our role as architects and the role of architecture in affording such ‘sharings’?

There are various forms of collective housing that propose and rehearse many different forms of sharing functions, spaces and other “things”. Social and public housing usually encourage one or other form of sharing in search of affordability. Experiences of cooperative building often include shared facilities and spaces, some times shared activities. Student housing, women dormitories, workers dormitories, elderly homes, asylum homes, camps, monasteries, schools and other situations and forms of habitation offer multiple examples of diverse degrees and ways of sharing “things” through and in architecture. Multi-family dwelling, co-housing and many self-built initiatives and developments involve various degrees of shared and common spaces, often aiming at encouraging encounter, social exchange and collaboration.

Can we think of other ‘cultures’ of living that are based on sharing and fuelled by relational architectures? Can we think of a city made of shared, rather than public, spaces? How can we think the common in dwelling and inhabiting?

Life in the city has changed dramatically as a result of transformations such as an ageing society, financial crises, increased unemployment and inequalities, urban asymmetries, migration flows, the rise of the knowledge economy, the digital revolution... and particularly due to the increasing influence of neoliberal theories in approaches to societal and economic organisation.

The meaning, access to and possibilities of using the city’s collective spaces has also changed. Public squares, streets, parks, gardens and other types of open spaces of the public realm have become part and the object of corporate and political agendas of branding cities that have carried out an almost complete commercialisation of collective spaces aiming at short term profit. This has led to an excessive and obsessive programming of urban space in which public space has become a trading device, another commodity in a global market. Besides this all-encompassing commercial programming, leisure activities are massively projected and scheduled in these previously shared spaces, leading to an increasing ‘festivalization’ of cities that leaves very little or no place for everyday life. Many are thus excluded from collective spaces not only because of the increasing costs associated to the use of these spaces...
but also due to the ever-growing obsession with safety and security.

On a different level, the increasing commercial privatisation and hyper-regulation of the spaces traditionally understood as collective (public squares, parks, gardens, streetscapes, etc.) seriously undermines the possibilities of genuine political disagreement that is eliminated through consensus-based management and policing of such spaces in what has been called by some ‘the post-political city’. This is also increasingly generating alternative practices that engage differently in the production of other forms of collectivity that challenge public/private oppositions and imagine different ways of establishing the ‘common’. As these groups shift to the production and inhabitation of their own spaces, many of the traditional collective spaces become less plural and diverse, or are left even more in the hands of commercial interests. The relationships between these two interrelated processes is one of the research fields at the LiAi.

During the course of the third term of the MA program, under the theme of ‘Common Life’, we are exploring, intervening and thinking through the possibilities of inventing other ways of being and living together and of establishing the common, particularly in relation with ways of life, strategies for dwelling and spaces of coexistence.

On the one hand we explore some of the existing forms of organisation of life and try to understand the conditions and distribution of collective and shared spaces in the city; and on the other hand we try to invent, enable and produce alternative situations, spaces and conditions for lives based on radical ‘sharings’.

The main assignment of the course asks the students to intervene by designing architectures for dwelling that afford and encourage the sharing of spaces, functions, conversations, lives and other things. Students had to work both individually and collaboratively as a group in order to carry out three main tasks: a collective research report on ‘common life’, an explorative intervention that could assist them in their investigations of three assigned areas of the city of Umeå; and a speculative design proposal.

The collective research report had to include first a general framing of the context of housing, ways of life, habitability and coexistence in Sweden, with reference to the state of things in Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. Ideally this would include an analysis of legal frameworks, statistics, forms of access to dwelling, development modalities, prices, construction companies and their roles, management procedures, political views, controversies, rules and regulations, etc... but in the end this has proven too large a list of sources to be processed, although it has served as an interesting background for discussions and working sessions throughout the term.

The report had to include also a gathering and critical analysis of alternative experiences, strategies, movements and actions in and around the ‘borders’ of dwelling and coexistence, with a look at liminal actions, situations, interventions and proposals to conceive and to build communities of coexistence and inhabitation outside or in the margins of the general context investigated in the first part. This part is approaching experiences of ‘baugruppen’ in Germany and ‘byggeomskaper’ in Sweden, different forms of co-housing, housing cooperatives, and other more radical experiments and experiences.

Additionally, the students have also been exploring and analysing the local condition and context of Umeå, including a more detailed exploration of three particular areas that we selected for them: Ålidhem, Ersboda and Röbäck. In these areas they have investigated the conditions and intensity of coexistence, diverse forms and ways of life, dwelling and housing, as well as the degrees of sharing and experiences of life in common. They were to identify and/or make opportunities for intervention aiming at establishing further projects of sharing and collective inhabitation, what has led to several very interesting projects of which the report gives accurate account. These interventions were understood also as heuristic devices aiming at the construction of starting points and platforms for the development of speculative design proposals.

Finally, the report had to gather the results of a work of critical comparative analysis of interesting and radical examples of habitation architectures as case studies of coexistence and sharing. We provided a long list of around thirty cases, documentation and references of the projects, to which the students were supposed to add one more case each, related to their own (diverse) cultural backgrounds and memories. The cases cover both ancient times and contemporary situations and are not constrained geographically.

The making of this report was not only conceived as a pedagogical situation aiming at the development of certain research skills and the discussion of examples of sharing and notions of common life throughout the history of architecture, but also and quite deliberately - as a process of sharing and a situation of life in common within the studio, where the students were confronted with the challenge of organising their own coexistence, relations, procedures and methodologies in order to produce individual and collective pieces of work to be articulated into a single, comprehensive and complex document.

In our view this publication constitutes a proof that they have largely succeeded in their collective journey, in spite of the unavoidable difficulties, challenges and differences in approaches, commitments, degrees of engagement and interests. We believe that something ‘common’ has been established and affinities developed along lines of reflection and discussion. Common Life at the LiAi goes on. //