Be-commoning

A model for the design of new commons initiatives

Charging the Commons

Urban commons *(noun)* Resources in the city which are managed by the users in a non-profit and prosocial way.

Be-commoning *(verb)* The process through which a new (urban) commons is established.

Urban Commons can include any number of resource types, from housing to Wi-Fi, but the main thing that makes urban commons different from public goods and consumer goods is that they are managed by the users through a prosocial, participatory process called commoning. (Dellenbaugh-Losse, Zimmermann & De Vries, The Urban Commons Cookbook).

Whether a Wi-Fi network or a housing cooperative, before people can start using and managing a collective resource, it needs to be conceived, set up and put in place. This is a complex process that includes the design of the resource itself, its governance structure and rules of engagement, the building or strengthening of a community of commoners that will collaboratively manage the resource, and often also negotiations with external actors such as local governments, financial institutions or future neighbours.

Terms

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a resurgence in interest in the (urban) commons. Examples include initiatives such as energy cooperatives, neighbourhood gardens, local transportation schemes (e.g. car-sharing), collective housing, open-source software, community-run libraries, and organizations managing care for neighbours.

These commons – sometimes called resource communities – are presented as collective modes of economic and social organization that could function as alternatives or complements to the market and the state. Their goal is not profit or mere efficiency. Rather they aim to contribute to the collective well-being of the community, strengthen social relations, and give members collective ownership and sovereignty over their resources. They also aim for the prolonged sustainability of local and global social-natural ecosystems, contributing to a more just, socially inclusive, and sustainable society.
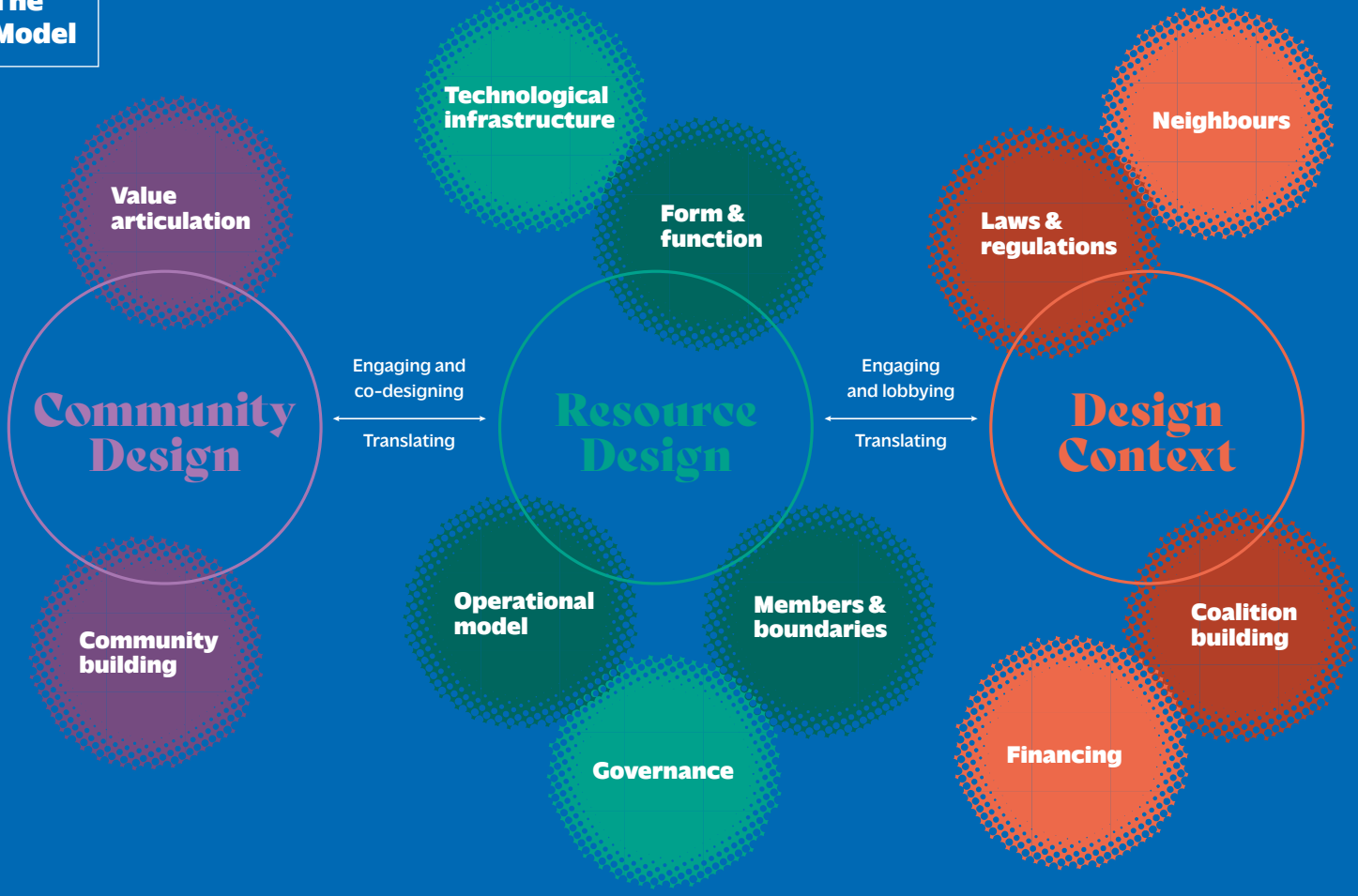
Managing these commons is complex and they do not manifest out of thin air. Before they are up and running, many things must be put in place. A community of prospective members needs to come together to discuss their motives and values. These need to be translated into the architecture of the resource (e.g. shared apartment building) and a formal governance structure, including rules about members' rights and duties. In turn, these need to comply with (local) regulations and be integrated into existing social and economic contexts.

We have coined the term be-commoning for this process: the various tasks that must be thought through and carried out to develop a new commons. This process often involves professionals with expertise in law, architecture, construction, finance, and technology. It also requires skills in project management and orchestration to guide a community through the various steps needed for them to become a commons.

The be-commoning model presented here aims to provide insight into this process. It can serve as a general overview, a starting point for setting up a commons, or as a research agenda to explore successful commons design and management.

The Model

Community Design

- Value articulation
- Community building

Engaging and co-designing →
← Translating

Resource Design

- Technological infrastructure
- Form & function
- Operational model
- Members & boundaries
- Governance

Engaging and lobbying →
← Translating

Design Context

- Neighbours
- Laws & regulations
- Coalition building
- Financing

Community Design

A commons revolves around a community of commoners that makes use of a communal resource, and collaboratively govern it based on their shared values and goals. It is therefore vital that these commoners trust each other, and agree upon the fundamental values for their commons. Hence, the discovery and alignment of members' values as well as community building are principal aspects in any be-commoning process.

Community building → Building and maintaining a community of commoners is essential. A sense of community may emerge from the numerous activities inherent in the be-commoning process in which members can become familiar with each other, build mutual trust, share knowledge, co-create and celebrate milestones. There also may be long interruptions - e.g. waiting for an exterior decision- which ask for special attention, as in these periods the dynamics and enthusiasm may weaken.

Value articulation → Prospective commoners need to identify the values that are decisive for designing the various facets of their commons. This includes the alignment of individual motivations and collective aspirations. In such a collective quest, communities – perhaps guided by external moderators - need to articulate the most fundamental values of the initiative and explore the conditions and the extent to which members want to share and manage joint resources.

The values articulated and insights gained during the community design activities need to be translated into the design of the resource itself, whether it is a housing coop or a community garden. This includes the set-up of governance and management models.

The Model

Resource Design

Form & function → The resource itself needs to be shaped in alignment with the values of the community. This concerns its aesthetics, as well as its functionalities. For instance, in co-housing initiatives, the building itself needs to be designed, including its arrangement of private, collective, and public spaces.

Governance → A legal form needs to be chosen, matching the ambitions and values of the community. Members also need to deliberate about the ways in which they want to take decisions and resolve conflicts. This process also includes the initial setup of rules concerning rights and duties of the members, likely containing a reward- and sanctioning scheme.

Operational model → to be sustainable over time, a commons needs a value proposition that aligns the costs of using and maintaining the resource with income or contributions from members and/or external actors. This includes agreement about which tasks will be professionalized as well as an operational model allow-

ing for day-to-day management, including rules about priority or privileges in case of scarcity.

Technological infrastructure → Some urban commons may require a technological infrastructure, e.g. a digital platform to reserve shared cars, or a micro-grid managing energy production, distribution and consumption. The interfaces and algorithms of these technologies need to be aligned with the values of the group.

Membership & boundaries → Communities need to determine their allocation criteria for new members: what are the requirements to join the commons group? Also, communities need to establish their relationship with the broader surrounding (neighbourhood): who do they identify as neighbours? what forms of exchanges do they aspire with the neighbours and how to realize them? To what extent can non-members also make use of the community's resources?

An urban commons is situated in a broader spatial and social context, as well as in an existing landscape of regulations, policies, and financial instruments. These may facilitate the realization of an urban commons, or inhibit its foundation. Such constraints need to be taken into account in the design of the resource itself. Yet, at times, these external factors are negotiable. Lobbying, networking, coalition building or legal and financial redesign may become necessary endeavours in the be-commoning process.

The Model

Design Context

Coalition building ⟼ Communities are recommended to ally with –state, market and societal - professionals offering guidance and resources such as knowledge, expertise, finances, organizational and communication support, confidence-building, land acquisition, networking and education. This "hybridization of knowledge" is valuable for reaching high-quality commons arrangements. In addition, in such lengthy, multidimensional co-creation processes the role of devoted mediators orchestrating the whole be-commoning trajectory is increasingly emphasized.

Neighbours ⟶ New commons may receive opposition or suspicion in society about their collective initiatives, despite their own widespread optimism about their beneficial impact. For various reasons, current residents in a neighbourhood may be critical about the establishment of a commons in their surroundings. It could be helpful for commons to consciously communicate about the functioning and societal contribution of their initiative, and to engage with neighbours in a constructive dialogue.

Financing ⟶ Existing financial instruments offered may not match well with the needs and specific conditions of a commons. Hence, communities often need to seek alternative financial instruments and development strategies through which collective initiatives can be supported within existing or new forthcoming financial frames of banks, state authorities and funds.

Laws & regulations ⟶ Coping with the institutional, economic, socio-cultural and political context on local, regional and national level is key for evolving a commons initiative. This can include actions such as tuning or translating the project ambitions to policy requirements and regulations, for instance by engaging in storytelling, lobbying towards public administrations, or taking part in the political process, in order to render the project legitimate or appropriate.

Colophon

Partners