

# COMMONING THE CITY

## Negotiating Top-Down and Bottom-Up Urbanism

STEFAN GRUBER \_F21

JONATHAN KLINE \_S22

**Who or what do you care for, care about and care with?**

**What kind of infrastructures and spaces are necessary to create communities that care?**



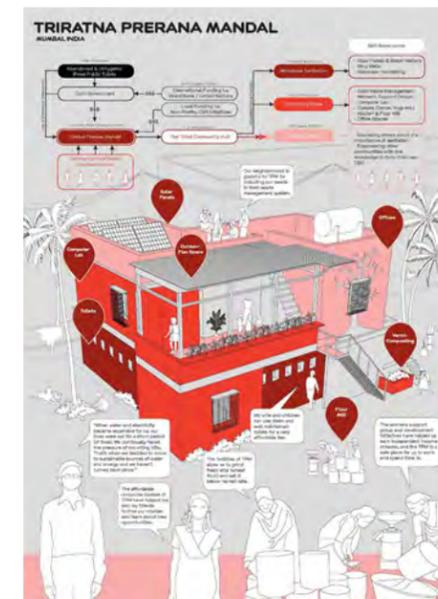
### Background

Commoning the City is a yearlong research-based-design studio focused on social justice and community-led urban transformations. Here, we explore design as an agent of change and how to support citizens in claiming their *Right to the City*. The first semester, taught by Stefan Gruber provides a theoretical framing and uses case study research as stepping stone for developing individual thesis proposals. Building on the studio's shared investigations and a commoning toolkit, students define a research question and begin testing their design hypothesis in an urban milieu of their choice. At the end of the semester each student has framed a design proposal and methodology that is theoretically grounded, geographically and culturally situated, and politically informed. Working empirically, throughout the semester students go back and forth between research and design. The second semester, taught by Jonathan Kline, then supports students in fully developing their individual projects culminating in an exhibition. This year-long studio is required for all second year Master of Urban Design students and open to 5th year BArch students and MArch students. For ASOS students the studio is an opportunity to pursue a yearlong thesis within a structured research context exploring urban commoning. Jonathan Kline's seminar Urban Design Methods and Theories is a co-requisite.



### Research

The commons are emerging as a key concept beyond the binaries of public and private space for tackling the challenges of the contemporary city: How to build community resilience in the face of systemic and growing inequity? How to design with finite resources in the face of accelerating environmental crisis? How to articulate common interests despite splintering social ties? And how to find agency as designers given the scope of these wicked problems? Here, commoning is understood as a set of social practices dealing with the production and self-governance of shared resources and spaces beyond contemporary forms of domination, such as class, gender or race. The studio's research continues to feed into the long term traveling exhibition and publication project "An Atlas of Commoning" in collaboration with ifa (the German Institute for Foreign Relations) and ARCH+. This year, the studio will contribute to the development of a web platform making the research available to a general audience. Throughout the semester the studio will also engage in a series of exchanges with students from the University of Buenos Aires who will be working on the next station of the exhibition "An Atlas of Commoning." Contingent on the Covid19 situation the studio will take a four day research trip to do field work and experience regional initiatives in person.



Above: Case study drawing on *Triratna Prerana Mandal* by Sharleen Devjani and discussion at Design for a Commons Transition Symposium

Right: View of *An Atlas of Commoning* at Miller ICA.

### Care

In line with the Fall's ASOS theme of care, we will investigate notions of stewardship, mutual support and solidarity in urban transformations and the social reproduction of shared

resources and common space. “What would happen if we were to put care at the very center of life?” asks the Care Collective in *‘The Care Manifesto’* while encouraging us to recognize and embrace our interdependencies across scales, from the interpersonal to the planetary. Addressing a world in which carelessness reigns, requires us to first and foremost analyze and understand the forces at play that shape systemic inequities. The thriving contemporary commons debate then offers an entry point for radical imaginings of other possible worlds beyond the binaries and confines of capitalist markets or the neoliberal state. Meanwhile, the case studies assembled in the Atlas of Commoning render visible that these alternatives are already in the making, they are all around us weaving a pluriverse of small, local but open and connected initiatives.

**Program**

Fall: Design-based Research

During the fall semester we will study selected spaces and practices of commoning through theoretical readings, interviews and field work, while drawing from the studio’s repository of 50 previous case studies. The collective research will be intertwined with the development of an individual thesis proposal on how commoning might transform a neighborhood community and site of student’s choosing. Throughout the semester the articulation of a thesis will evolve through research, verbal and visual modes of reflection and design structured around workshops on sociocracy, futuring and transition design amongst other methods.

Spring: Research-based Design

The spring studio will focus on developing the individual design proposals testing the spatial, material and governance implications of the student’s respective hypothesis on urban commoning. For the project students will be expected to take a personal position and formulate a thesis, expressed and explored through design. The site, program and general parameters of the project will be determined during the fall, allowing students to gather data and base materials over the winter break. Thesis projects will culminate with an exhibition and review in the Miller ICA Platform and the creation of a final thesis book.

Left from top to bottom:  
Yashasvi Tulchiya, MUD '21  
Sameedha Mahajan, MUD '21  
Sujan Das Shrestha, MUD '19  
Abhinav Singh, MUD '20

Right clockwise from top left:  
Chi Zhang, MUD '19  
Xioran Zhang, MUD '21  
He Su, MUD '21



**Learning Outcomes**

In this studio you will develop skills for documenting, analyzing and critically evaluating precedents that act as catalyst for the bottom-up transformation of cities. You will learn to contextualize these spatial practices, and ultimately your own design practice, within a broader social, political and economic discourse. As you begin to better understand the forces at play in shaping the built environment and in turn how buildings shape us, you will learn to both question and sharpen the agency of architecture and reflect on alternative more collaborative modes of design and radical imagination. You will further experience how what is often conceived as binary opposition between theory and practice, thinking and acting, can in fact be intricately linked and lead to invigorating synergies. The hypothesis here is that every reading of an urban milieu is also projective, every reflection on what is, entails a projection of what could be, in short a latent design project for an alternate possible future. Utopia is typically thought of as something that lies in the future. Meanwhile in our research on practices of commoning, we will see that everyday utopias are in fact all around us.

