CULTURE COMMONS
for
RESILIENT UKRAINE

Credits: Pasha Youz

Marjo van Schaik - August 2024

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Abstract

No matter what set a conflict in motion, whether it be a democratic or non-democratic regime, the ultimate target of any war is to destroy the cultural identity of the other. Currently this happens in Ukraine. Theatres, libraries, and museums are well aimed targets. It is urgent to restore these cultural venues and the vibrant communities that are giving sense of identity and liveliness. Yet, finances are limited, and priority lies not with restoring cultural heritage. However, there is an abundance of public spaces in Ukrainian cities. For Ro3kvit, Urban Coalition for Ukraine, I researched in what way these public spaces could get meaning in restoring cultural networks, identity and pride. Combining my practical experience in Ukraine with literature analyses, I propose the commons. The key question is: can the model of commons for culture in public space re-establish and fuel community life, cultural connectivity, and sense of belonging in Ukraine?

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I.
Introduction

No matter what arguments set a conflict in motion, the ultimate target of any war is to destroy the identity, the soul and the spirit of the other. Currently this happens in Ukraine. Pictures of the bombed Mariupol theatre went around the world. Less commonly known is that shortly after the occupation of the city, Russians immediately demolished some of the most important monuments, such as the memorial dedicated to the victims of Holodomor. This highlights the differences between Ukrainian and Russian perspectives and demonstrates the importance and the impact of culture.

At the same time, and in a way, rather contradictory, in these times of crisis, there is less money for culture. All resource needs to go to primary matters such as funding the army, rebuilding hospitals, schools and housing. Although this is the most obvious choice at the moment, it might have some serious consequences for the whole society in mid- and long-term perspective unless addressed with a proper consideration. Culture and arts are harshly affected. Traditional institutions, if not bombed, are weakened and are struggling to foster the cultural biotope. For individual artists it is harder to find funding and they must look for new practices and sources of income. Luckily, the support of international partners is unprecedently strong. There are many opportunities for Ukrainian artists to collaborate with or be represented in foreign institutions. Although this is important for Ukrainian artists and cultural diplomacy, it also contributes to brain drain. Moreover, it's not enough to safeguard a strong and resilient cultural biotope within Ukraine. New policies are needed to facilitate and enable a resilient and sustainable cultural network and infrastructure in Ukraine.

Resilience is one of the major characteristics that is needed in any community. During and after times of war the pressure to rebuild as fast as possible is enormous. Under this time pressure, qualities in housing and public spaces that acknowledge symbolic value, including social and cultural interactions and networks are often overlooked. Even in cases of total destruction, there is never a tabula rasa. There are always non-physical aspects of memories, experiences, social and cultural networks related to a specific place and time.

There is a shared feeling that (re)-building should be in line with the identity, values, culture, and history of the community. Taking these in considerations will greatly add to the resilience, sense of belonging and heterogeneity of the community. The shared experience of the arts provides a common ground for social interaction. Art programs, facilities and networks contribute to building a sense of belonging and has the power to transform places. In war this vibrance and sense of belonging is even more important than in 'normal' life, however, also more difficult to realize. There is a popular concern to restore war damaged cultural heritage immediately. Yet, finances are limited, and priority lies not with (re-)building cultural venues. For Ro3kvit, Urban Coalition for Ukraine, I researched in what way public spaces could get meaning in restoring the vibrant communities, cultural identity and pride. Through this research I realized that in Ukraine the model of the commons offer a new interesting perspective. In short, commons is about a community sharing a common good according to their own set of rules (for a more precise definition see paragraph V). Recent examples are energy commons, where a pool of citizens buy solar panels , put it on the roof of a condominium, sell the energy to the inhabitants and the public grid, and distribute the revenue among the members. On this collective path, citizens benefit from, albeit limited, economies of scale, each other's knowledge and skills, as well as a community spirit and experience. Not only do they allow the change of spaces and means of production, but also, they are places where the community takes control through a set of self-determined rules. Thus, new policies are conceived, starting from the practices of self-management and self-government.

In *Commons as ecosystems for culture* (De Tullio) a strong case is being made to embrace the commons as a powerful way of creating sustainable ecosystems for cultural and creative work. Commons can rebalance the biotope by filling the voids of destroyed or abandoned institutes. For example, they usually provide artists with shared means of production, as well as opportunities of relationships with peers and the community in general. At the same time, they are democratic laboratories, through which artists and activists experiment with new policies for the management of collective resources, and propose them to the public decision-makers in processes of policy co-creation. Taking the Covid pandemia as proof, it is stated that "communities have proved to be resilient, able to gather and give answers to basic needs. Shared resources have provided first aid to many". This is why commons are also regarded as a source of inspiration in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. In hindsight Covid was a minor crisis compared to what is happening now in Ukraine. However, as a method it might be even more powerful in war. Applying methods of

Mariupol Freedom Square. Credits: Reuters

Mariupol Freedom Square. Credits: Expolight

commoning on cultural networks in Ukraine is in line with already existing movements. Also, it fits well in with the cultural formats on community driven processes as formulated in UN SDG's and EU policies. Therefore, it can be a strong instrument for Ukraine; in the first and most important place for its impact on life in Ukraine and the Ukrainian rebuilding practices. Moreover, connection to European cultural policy principles offers an interesting extra reward.

The key question of this article is: can the model of commons for culture in public space re-establish and fuel community life, cultural connectivity, and sense of belonging in Ukraine? The purpose is to give an impetus to application of this model in urban planning and rebuilding, by designing and enabling public spaces as drivers for cultural activities.

In this article I will shortly explain the impact of this massive deconstruction by war and the importance of focus on restoring networks. Consequently, I will describe the value of public space hereby. This will be followed by a paragraph on commons and how this practice can create an eco-system for culture and vibrant, resilient communities. Next, I will describe some specific case studies and illustrate how this approach already fits well in the Ukrainian context. Finally, I will draw a conclusion and suggest some next steps to be taken. However, first I will briefly explain how this study is conducted.

II.
Research method

This article holds the standpoint of both research and practice. It is based on the thesis that the practice of the commons in public spaces can play an important role in establishing sustainable ecosystems and restoring cultural networks in Ukraine. First, this thesis is affirmed in literature. Secondly, I identified a list of decisive criteria to be rated as a common, based on the literature research. Meanwhile I started to look for initiatives in Ukraine by desk and field research. This resulted in a longlist of initiatives spread over Ukraine, that answered the principles of commoning. During the analysis of the longlist, by comparing the data, I identified some specific aspects. However, due to restrictions in traveling possibilities and language barriers I couldn't do deep site-specific research at all these cases. I decided to include only those cases that I have personally been able to research and visit between December 2021 and April 2024. Thus, I was able to assess the different aspects of commons to the daily practice in wartime and to link both aspects through critical reflection.

III.
Erasing identity by destruction of buildings

In this paragraph I will shortly explain how by deliberate destruction in war not only buildings, economy and social networks are destroyed, but also the cultural identity is consciously severely damaged. As Mačkić put it "If you want people not to return, you wipe out their habitat". Barakat writes "In stark contrast to natural disasters, war and particularly civil or inter-communal violence tend to target the identity of the enemy by destroying symbolic and historic buildings, and by deliberately displacing communities and destroying their vernacular environments. This tendency has implications for the social and psychological recovery of the affected communities and their task of rebuilding." According to Neil Ascherson "One form is social or anthropological identity, the living tissue of familiarities accumulated around language, custom and tradition through which a community recognizes itself and in which it finds continuity - the culture of daily life if you like. The second form is the collective identity which has been constructed and often unquestioningly accepted around objects of so-called high art - our cathedrals or mosques, our monuments, libraries, portable antiquities, famous paintings and so forth". Bevan argues that as societies have become bureaucratized and more global, the importance of buildings as reference points for individual and collective memories (and hence, identities) has increased. Furthermore, he suggests that innate processes of identity construction, in which dominant identities are defined through opposition to subordinated ones, cut across historical periods and cultural contexts.

Mačkić "If you want people not to return, you wipe out their habitat"

The destruction of symbolic buildings and other cultural artefacts can be understood as a process of 'killing memory'. It deprives individuals of the shared culture that provides the condition of the possibility of there being a sense of belonging to a group. Coward argues that this applies not only to cultural heritage, but also to the whole built environment. The objective of urbicide, the deliberate destruction of buildings, is to establish an ethnic or cultural homogeneity while heterogeneity is an existential condition of all being. Unfortunately, "wartime damage to collective cultural identity, on a scale wider than that of the family, is remarkably hard to identify. The fact of

Photo: Fulco Treffers. Kharkiv 2023

destruction often hurts individuals. But communities and nation-states have developed many ways of translating such loss into new forms of self-assertion, or even into denials of the temporary absence of something deemed too important not to be present" (Ascherson).

According to Barakat reconstruction plans "ignore the two most important basic needs for human recovery in the aftermath of conflict: to reaffirm a sense of identity and to regain control over one's life". This crucial sense of identity, already difficult to discern in non-conflict areas, is even more problematic in post-war situations. Not only people, individual and collective have different memories of the pre-war situations, but also, they have different aspirations for the future. "There is evidence of a popular concern to restore immediately war damaged heritage and to revive traditions that before the war had been obsolescent. It can be distilled in the concept of a 'thread of continuity' that people search for when the rhythm of everyday life has been shattered" (Stanley-Price).

To conclude, in reconstruction plans it is important to recognize this invisible damage to the community, to its cultural identity and its sense of identity. In Ukraine the physical renovation of affected Ukrainian cities should also serve as a "moment of national identification and an opportunity to overcome the Soviet legacy of city building" (Breddels). Symbolic violence is defined as a 'soft insensible form of violence, exercised mainly by purely symbolic channels of communication and knowledge' according to Pierre Bourdieu. Ingredients to reduce this impact are education, home attachment, activism, livelihoods, environment, community cohesion, connection, arts and communication and moments of exception (Treffers). After destruction by Russia in 2014/2015 in Mariupol these ingredients became important principles in re-viving the city. With great success. In 2021 the city was blooming and not only did many citizens return, but it even became an example for many other Ukrainian cities.

Accepting that it will be hard to find enough money for reconstructing cultural heritage and knowing the impact of arts and culture on community cohesion, it seems more effective to primarily focus on these insights. Urban structures and conditions must be created that enable (re-)connection and form new networks. Hereby, public space offers the possibility to develop the necessary infrastructure.

Photo: Mariupol drama theater

IV.
Public space for vibrant communities

Reconstruction of public space is another topic that is often neglected in post war reconstruction plans, or at least postponed for years. However, it is known that public spaces are important in restoring social interaction and establishing new social networks. Public space is to be understood not only as non-private outdoor space, but also interior public spaces for recreation, places where people are free to enter, and can meet and connect. The public realm is the world of strangers and the 'street'. These realms are not geographically or physically rooted species of space. They are social territories (Lofland). Understanding the interaction between people and places is essential to reveal the sense of place.
Lefebvre distinguishes between the physical, the mental and the social dimension, identifying these as 'spatial practice', 'representations of space' and 'representational spaces'. The physical dimension consists of the perceived space, the space between everyday reality and urban reality. The mental dimension consists of the imaginary space, as represented by urban planners and scientists, as well as artists, who create relations and connections. The social dimension is the lived, the experienced space, occupied by the people who live there and the people using the space, including writers and artists. These dimensions are connected and in constant exchange. A further analysis of encounters in public space shows that the physical design and the connection with the environment play an important role in determining the social interaction. This is how places of significance can emerge for specific groups. Meaningful places come into being through person-to-place connections. "It is through our engagement with place that our own human being is made real, but it is also through our engagement that place takes on a sense and a significance of its own" (Seamon).
In many post-war situations, there is popular concern to restore war-damaged heritage immediately and to revive traditions that before the war had been obsolescent. This concern seems to answer to a strong psychosocial need to re-establish the familiar and the cherished, following a phase of violent disruption of normal life. The case of Babur Garden in Kabul shows how powerful restoration of a public place can be. The park was destroyed in the early 1990s, when much of the Afghan capital was destroyed. Babur Garden occupies a special place in the hearts of Kabul residents. Its origins date back more than 500 years. The argument to restore was it being part of the national heritage. However, in practice even more important was the fact that the park was a public space where people used to meet each other. Before the fighting, the gardens were a popular spot for strolling. Ancient chinar trees offered respite from the heat. A pavilion served cold drinks. Children could swim in a pool. Of course, the choice to spent scarce resources on rebuilding a park when many were still hungry was contested. However, for the city community the presence of public space was very important. Yet, it demanded substantial finances since it was cultural heritage.

Seamon: "It is through our engagement with place that our own human being is made real, but it is also through our engagement that place takes on a sense and a significance of its own".

The same goes for the reconstruction of public places in Mariupol after the 2014 Russian invasion; after the reconstruction of the "Rainbow' Park in 2018 the neighborhood was revitalized, the park was filled with families and children; small businesses like cafes and shops started to develop around the park. The redevelopment of the Freedom square in 2020 was an integrated symbolic, historic and innovative project, transferring the former square with the Lenin statue into a lively and vibrant place. These expensive projects greatly added to the social community. However, there are also examples of public spaces which changed to vibrant places by communal effort with limited financial resources. To mention just one: in Severodonetsk, Donbas region, there was a small square in the center of the town. For this square elderly people initiated a new design with trees, plants, flowers, benches and paths. The municipality embraced the initiative, found budget and helped in design. The residents maintained the park. It became a popular meeting place for eldery.
In Ukraine there is ample public space. There are large squares, parks, many courtyards and large 'in between' unused plots. These public spaces represent symbolic meanings and memories, individual as well as national. Re-designing these places offer a great chance to establish new meanings and function, and to respect the past with its good and painful memories. However, public space has been a largely neglected topic in Ukraine for decades. In many cases the ownership is not clear. This can be problematic depending on specific circumstances, position of the city government and the relation with private businesses. There is no general understanding of what is needed for a quality space and how to make this comfortable, meaningful and not too expensive. Yet, there are incidental cases that show the opportunities and the impact on the communities. Since the lack of money for public space and culture is to be expected to outlast the end of war for years, it seems most logic to focus on those practices that make use of that what is present in abundance, public space, and at the same time can be realized with limited financial resources by the active community. This combination leads to the commons.

Credits: *Pasha Youz*

V.
Commons as alternative solution

The last decades commons have become a serious topic in the scientific and political debate. Although this practice has a long history, research by a.o. Elinor Ostrom brought it to the table as an alternative economic model in the nineties. From 2009 onwards researchers like Helfrich, Bollier and De Angelis reached out to a larger audience. They introduced commons as a paradigm shift for social transformation. Of course, there are differences in approach and exact definition but in general the concept of commons involves three basic aspects:

1- a community
2- taking control of a shared resource, physical or virtual,
3- through a set of self-determined rules.

It is not about ownership, nor financial profit. However, crucial element is 'a right of action' or 'stewardship' with a focus on long term social relationships. A common is about the shared management of a resource by many. These are very concrete things, which do not exist naturally but are the result of alliances between several parties. There are no commons without 'commoning'. Examples are renewable energy cooperatives, shared mobility projects, entities of shared knowledge, food cooperatives. Commons can generate a variety of values in space from creation of identity, revival of history, preservation of cultural heritage, to provision of education, and so on. The basic premise is that it aims to change a social practice of a shared resource by taking collective responsibility as a community, setting their own set of rules. These resources can be physical, material, like an unused cinema building, or immaterial, like shared knowledge on a specific topic.

Commons are not necessarily related to physical space, but an environment steeped in relationships and practices that tell of the symbolic universe within which the community moves (see figure 1). Research into the impact of the Covid Pandemia on the creative commons L'Asilo in Naples showed that the artists mourned the loss of physical place, the physical structure where artists do their work, which causes a major economic as well as organizational problem. The second meaning of place refers to the relational aspect: places are also steeped in relationships, both with the public and with colleagues. For an artist, relationships are essential because they are a necessary condition for the expression of art – that is, the possibility of sharing. The third meaning of place reflects the deepest emotional and psychological states: it is the space where identity is built and affirmed. The rupture of everyday, 'normal' life brings with it a sense of emptiness (Cyrillo). These different aspects of space relate to Lefebvre's space triade. His mental and social dimension of space are especially the domain of artists, writers, architects and reflect the cultural identity. Creative commons based on interrelation structures and shared values and ideas are the intangible drivers of vibrant and resilient communities.

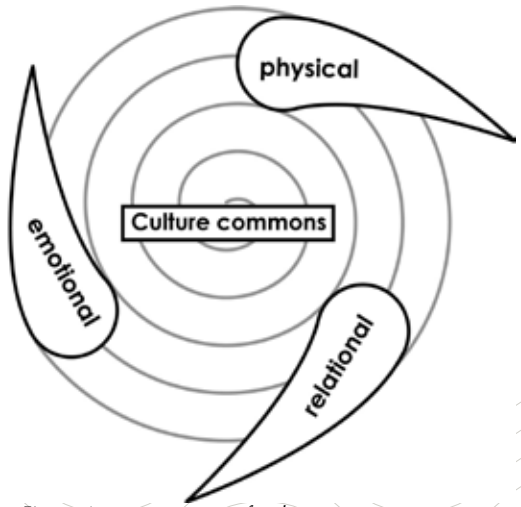


Figure 1 space aspects of culture commons

Commons refer to a different set of values than models with a focus on profit and growth (see figure 2 for a shortened overview). Opposed to the profit paradigm, the commons paradigm is based on the idea that people are social cooperative beings, mutually connected. The strategy therefore relies on social relations, strengthening each other, fair sharing and sustainability. It is not about exchange value and competition: how can I buy or sell more and win on the costs of other people? But about user value: what do we need? Power relations are de-centralized and based on cooperation. Ownership is based on taking responsibility.

Bauwens "Because when class societies disintegrate, when resources are overexploited and run out, pooling resources makes more and more sense".

In Ukraine, as a post-Soviet country, people are inclined to contest these models or to perceive them as being compromised because of associations with the Soviet past, and more precisely the renunciation of private ownership. However, commons are basically different from communism, exactly because essential elements of the value sets are different. It doesn't reject private ownership but does question how this is being exploited. Communism did follow many of the profit paradigm values. The power was highly centralized. While commons are formed through collective decision-making, through assemblies and other forms of direct democracy. The source of decision-making is grassroot, bottom-up, power gained from proven skills and the constant rotation of leadership and authority by different persons, depending on the tasks to be performed. In contrast to top-down exercised power, commoning is the core of the human capacity for freedom: the possibility to start something

new and thus create a world (Peeters). Commoning is reclaiming the power of making fundamental decisions about our lives and doing so collectively.

	Profit paradigm	Commons paradigm
Source	scarcity is a fact	**there is enough if we share**
Strategy	efficiency	**social relations**
Humanity	individuals focus on profit	**people are social beings**
Relation to others & nature	separated	**connected**
Focus	exchange value	**users value**
Power relations	centralized and monopoly	**decentralized and cooperation**
Ownership	exclusive right	**right with a responsibility**
Social practice	competition is dominant	**cooperation is dominant**

Figure 2 value aspects of commons versus profit paradigm (shortened overview)

An interesting example is found in Naples where a new policy was implemented between 2011 and 2021. Communities organized to protect an urban common good were recognized by the municipality as self-managed bodies to be protected and supported, provided they keep the common space they develop open to the city. Important occupied buildings have become spaces of public use: social and cultural centers, education and recreation facilities, spaces of collective memory and productive experimentation, spaces of hosting the most vulnerable or those in urgent need. In an innovative negotiation with a municipal authority that programmatically promised the protection of urban commons, such initiatives developed as generators of "emergent commons" (Stavrides).
L'Asilo, being one of these commons, became the basis for EU policy on commons as ecosystem for culture. L'Asilo was born from an occupation by artists. It defines itself as a commons – and is recognized as such by the city government – because of its direct management of a public building by assemblies of artists, activists, and citizens – groups which are open to everyone and that decide by consensus. Over years, it developed into an interdependent center of cultural production that collectivizes spaces and equipment. Also, it introduced working methods, governing models and policy tools that are successfully applied to other cases in Italy. Here, the model of commoning broke spatial patterns and governance arrangements and realized a change of existing path dependencies.

The case of L'Asilo was from the start intentionally based on the principles of commoning. However, many initiatives often act according to these principles of the commons, without consciously doing so. Through research by a.o. Elinor Oostrom, De Angelis, Helfrich, Bollier of successful projects initiated by a community the above-mentioned essential criteria were found. These projects didn't mean to 'be' a 'common'. However, sustainable community projects happen to act accordingly. In Ukraine there are many small initiatives to be found, but also some larger projects that act according to these principles, spread over the whole country. Generally, periods of crisis and major changes are catalysts for the foundation of commons. Every time a civilization is in crisis, there is a return of the commons. "Because when class societies disintegrate, when resources are overexploited and run out, pooling resources makes more and more sense" (Bauwens). The economic crisis in 2008 started many commons in southern European countries that were most harshly hit. Covid propelled many creative and care sharing commons. Ukraine had on top of these worldwide crisis its own specific moments of change: the disruption of the Soviet Union and the following roaring nineties, 2014 the Maidan fight for independence, the occupation of Crimea, parts of Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts by Russia, followed by the big invasion of February 2022.

Most frequently, commons initiatives are small-scale and informal by nature. They have difficultly to integrate into the formal cultural policies and market domain primarily because they adhere to different rules and creeds but also because they encounter numerous roadblocks to their initiatives. The governmental structures need to develop infrastructures and policy regimes that enable decentralized delegations of authority to leverage commons. Governments could be helpful in convening interested parties to sort through the legal, financial, and administrative complications of new systems to support commons and cooperatives (Bollier). This fits well in the process of decentralization Ukraine was developing before the big invasion by Russia of February 2022. Unfortunately, currently many martial laws are passed relapsing on the former centralized top-down governmental models. However, the success of commons depends not only on the current national situation but also on the local historical context. Cities where people have been able to take initiatives like Ghent and Nantes, are more open to this type of self-government. In Ukraine there are major differences between cities in relation to the openness for public engagement, very much dependent on the mayor and the reigning party.

However, commons are not naturally associated with urban planning, since the latter is traditionally a top-down process. Sevilla-Buitrago shows how capitalist urbanization has eroded the egalitarian, convivial life-worlds around the commons. However, more and more urban designers are seeking to apply the principles of peer-to-peer production to urban environments. Salingaros is one of the pioneers who defined this new discipline called P2P urbanism. The guiding principles of P2P urbanism support the principles of the commons.

Credits: Pasha Youz

Buitrago is also offering an alternative vision for a postcapitalist urban planning, in which the structure of collective spaces is ultimately defined by the people who inhabit them. Planners can either take a position within the projects, such as is the case in the Co-Haty projects by Urban Curators and Metalab. Or they take a position as outside agent and try 'to repurpose their techniques to support the circulation of communal strategies… They can devise new instruments to give the commons adequate space to mature. They can help to ensure the preservation of equality and solidarity between autonomous zones'. More concretely it asks to shift from a closed system of control to an open structure, accepting disorder, disequilibrium and informal space. Creating conditions for unplanned use of the public realm, focusing on the interaction between social and physical elements, how multiple possibilities can emerge in the urban space. Sendra proposes to add points of access to infrastructure in the public realm, such as a community kitchen or power suppliers for developing different activities.

In Ukraine urban planning got less attention for decades as a reaction to the strict urban planning regime of the Soviet times. However, after 2014 urban planning became a topic of interest again as part of the overall force to reform existing relationships between citizens, government and businesses. Professional initiatives like Canactions, Urban Curators and Metalab brought another perspective to urban planning, with education, cooperation and community as key aspects. In 2016 the Ukrainian Government undertook to comply with the principles for sustainable urban development and consequently implemented new laws on urban planning towards a decentralized approach. In 2021 many Ukrainian cities were offering national and international urban planning workshops.

To conclude, commons is regarded as a useful approach to establish sustainable cultural eco-systems. Since cultural commons are situated in the realm of public places, and communities benefit greatly from socially connected public spaces it makes sense to look more closely at these practices in urban planning projects. The question is how planners can relate to this context of commonist urbanization in Ukraine. To come to a better understanding I will describe some representative cases in Ukraine. The purpose of these cases is not to exactly determine what the precise criteria are to define a project as a common, but much more to demonstrate that this practice has been regularly applied in Ukraine by nature.

VI.
Case studies

For the selection of relevant cases I made a long list of cultural networks, projects and initiatives from my own practice in Ukraine, combined with desk research and field interviews with creative and institutional stakeholders. I selected these projects first on the three criteria that define a common:

- community: bottom-up, social and personal, social association, collective action
- taking control of a shared resource, physical or virtual. Driven to change the terms of livelihood and social practices; directly provision of needs
- set of self-determined rules: self-governing, open space for creative, democratic and local participation.

Moreover, since the scope of the research is culture activities & networks and public space the following aspects were applied:

- Culture activities or networks
- Public space (outside or inside)
- Geographically spreading throughout Ukraine
- Timewise spread over different periods of crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Finally, I decided to include only cases I have personally visited, to be able to assess the different aspects of commons to the daily practice and to link those aspects through critical reflection. Thus, the 5 cases following were included: Closer, Flip City, Frumushika-Nova, Urban Space 100, Wooden Lace.

Chernihiv

Kyiv

Ivano-Frankivsk

Soledar

Bessarabia

name	place	activity	out/indoor	founded
Closer	Kyiv	Creative center / club	both	2014
Flip City	Soledar	Culture / sport	outdoor	2021*
Frumushika-Nova	Bessarabia	Culture, farming, eco tourism	both	2006
Urban Space 100	Ivano-Frankivsk	Social & cultural events	indoor	2014
Wooden lace	Chernihiv	Preserve cultural heritage	outdoor	2018

* not completed because of war

Name: Closer
What: cultural center, in and outdoor
Location: Kyiv, central Ukraine
Start: 2014
Visited: several times, last time May 2024

Credits: Closer

The events of 2014 encouraged some Ukrainian artists that lived abroad to return to Ukraine. Together with other artists from all over Ukraine, they set up an open space, a creative club. It started with a group of ca 13 Ukrainian artists and developed over time into a core group of 40 members. They found an abandoned factory site in a part of the city in transformation at that time. After some negotiations they came upon a rental agreement with the owner. They were allowed to do reconstruction and repair and in exchange the rental rate would stay low, since there were no provisions. It is a cultural center with club, live music venue, restaurant, clothing and furniture shops, tattoo and radio studios. The governing principles are following the principles of deep democracy: in the team everybody has an equal vote. There is no philosophy, everybody is welcome, to come to an open space and invent the idea, "if you're a nice person and your heart is open" Of course, the Covid pandemic largely influenced the activities and almost the existence, but they survived. Now Closer is in discussion with the government and the owner about rent and financial support. Interesting fact is that one of the initiators has been living for a couple of years in The Netherlands and applied the practices of re-using old industrial places for artists he experienced in Rotterdam and Amsterdam to Kyiv.

Name: Flip City
What: outdoor park
Location: Soledar, East Ukraine
Start: 2021
Visited: December 2021

Credits: Marjo van Schaik

Izolyatsia, a platform for cultural initiatives originated in the Donbas region, launched a program called Flip City in Soledar. The idea was to develop conceptual ideas as well as practical solutions to rethink a typical post-Soviet monotown with the city-forming salt mine Artemsil at its core. The project was run by me and Fulco Treffers, urbanist and architect. We found that there were several groups of active community members. To give an example, a group of musicians turned an abandoned space into a music studio for anybody who wanted to make music. The instruments and gear were bought online. In this area there was no infrastructure for buying or repairing music equipment. It was an open space, the users together agreed upon rehearsal times, cleaning policy etc. Some older more experienced musicians taught and coached the younger ones. We decided to build on these practices and proposed together with a group of local youngsters to redesign an open outside neglected space called Yurchin hill in such a way that it could be carried out and run by the young community. It was received with great enthusiasm and the group immediately started to organize themselves. It requested persuasion of the local authorities; a local politician dedicated himself to the project. The commitment of the director of the local library and Izolyatsia helped to bring it to the next step. Unfortunately, the war ended all these initiatives and activities.

Name: Frumushika-Nova
What: eco-tourism center, indoor and outdoor
Location: Bessarabia, South West Ukraine
Start: 2006
Visited: April 2024

Still from video by Svetlana Perepichal

In the Soviet Union times it happened regularly that villages were evacuated for military camps, training centers, military factories. This also happened to the region Frumushika-Nova in Bessarabia, close to the Moldavian border. Some years after the military abandoned the region, the local government asked Alexander Palariev to come back. He started, together with his sons and with other local people to re-develop the old tradition of sheep breeding and vineyards with wineries. The financial crisis of 2008 hit Ukraine hard and that was the moment that they started to change focus towards tourism. Today it holds open air museums, tourist residentials, restaurant, sheep breeding and winery. Frumushika-Nova appears to be a cooperation of different local people working together. Its overall aim is to make a natural park of the area, that shows, shares and protects the nature, old traditions, arts and crafts. It is driven to change the terms of livelihood and practices in that region. However, although it very much seems to be a joint effort, to the mutual benefit of all, one can question if this project isn't simply a very nicely run commercial enterprise. However, on the other hand, there seems to be an open space for creative and local participation, which makes it sustainable and provides in the needs directly. Thus, it can be regarded as a more pragmatic and non-romantic example of a common such as a.o. Huron describes.

Name: Urban Space 100
What: indoor urbanist-meeting place
Location: Ivano-Frankivsk, West Ukraine
Start: 2014
Visited: several times, last time May 2022

Credits: Urban Space 100

The events of 2014 urged the need to act upon an idea that already existed within an active community. It started with a small group of ca 7 persons that wanted to share practical intelligence to change the qualitative development of the city. To do so they reached out and gathered 100 socially active people, who were willing to invest their practical intelligence in the project and distribute funds to finance other social initiatives. They founded a physical platform to activate the city and to give impulse to initiatives and retains dynamics of their development. They also founded a transparent trust fund for social projects and start-ups which are aimed towards development of the city. The physical place holds a restaurant, radio station, podium, shops, and hosts social and cultural events. This is a special place for urbanists' meetings – for those who share the belief that the city must be comfortable for living: green, eco-oriented, correlated with community interests. 80% of the annual restaurant profit is dedicated to funding social projects in the city. The group of 100 functions as a steering committee; anonymous persons or registered legal entities cannot be co-founder. All decisions are collectively made at the quarterly meetings. The inspiration for this project was fueled by traveling abroad and more specifically by a city restaurant in Bratislava.

Name: Wooden Lace
What: outdoor cultural heritage
Location: Chernihiv, North Ukraine
Start: 2018
Visited: November 2023

Credits: Rubryka

In 2018, Stanislav Ivashchenko initiated the project 'Wooden lace of Chernihiv' together with a group of caring like-minded people. At first the aim was to create awareness of this specific ornamental wood crafting used as decoration for the houses. The activists photographed the wooden laced houses and created an online museum in six languages with tourist routes. Since 2019, volunteers have been working on restoring the wooden scenery of city quarters. The team includes programmers, historians and journalists. Builders and craftsmen with the necessary equipment work together on individual projects. Different people are involved at different stages and bring in their own expertise. They are driven by shared beliefs and values. Now the volunteers consider the preservation and restoration of the remaining heritage as their main goal. They are negotiating with the owners, who often are not interested in the historic value. The problem is that the houses are usually divided among several owners, and you must come to an agreement with all of them. Money for this is raised on a crowdfunding platform Patreon. After the massive destruction by the Russians spring 2022, the awareness and appreciation for this specific cultural artifact has grown. Interesting fact is that the initiator was inspired to start this volunteer group by his period of living in the United States, where he realized how much civil society can do not only for the community, but also for an individual.

VII.
A small step from Toloka to commons

These cases demonstrate that the practice of commoning is widely spread throughout Ukraine. Although commons as such is not a widely known concept within Ukraine, it used to be fundamental to Ukrainian society already in Cossack times and this form of society organization and managing resources was at the very heart of Ukrainian statehood until the Soviet era. It is known as 'Toloka'. Essential difference with the commons is that these community actions were not structurally organized with their own set of rules, but seem to react on incidental needs. Recently, there is a great revival in these kind of community activities. However, also in projects that are commons according to the basic principles, people are not likely to call their project a common. This might as well be a matter of lack of knowledge of this model in Ukraine. Whereas in Western European cities, people are eager to call a project a commons and proud to show there self-governmental principles, this is less self-evident in Ukraine. For example, on the website of Urban Space 100 it says: "The decisions about which projects will be supported is taken by the co-founders." While in L'Asilo profile it is stated "The cooperative model developed by L'Asilo is commoning by means of open use and management". In practice their way of decision making is very much alike.

These cases show the strength of commons. Although the war totally disrupted daily life, most of the projects are still running, some with even more dedication. The project in Chernihiv, one of the first besieged and heavily bombed cities, due to its close location to the Belarus border, resumed its activities soon after the liberation and substantially grew in number of volunteers. This also shows the resilience and sustainability of commons. However, of course projects in besieged or the frontline cities stopped.

Moreover, all cases confirm the strong connection between public space and cultural networks. Both reinforce each other. Places that are destroyed or endangered, as is the case in Chernihiv, reinforced the social network and double their endeavor. For Urban Space 100 and Closer the physical place is the source of their activities, just as is the case with L'Asilo in Naples. This is where urban planning comes to the fore. The researched cases found spaces by themselves, sometimes with the help of local governments. However, in

the current situation, being forced to deal with enormous destruction, urban planners can take a role in enabling the commoning of projects, as part of the recovery strategy.

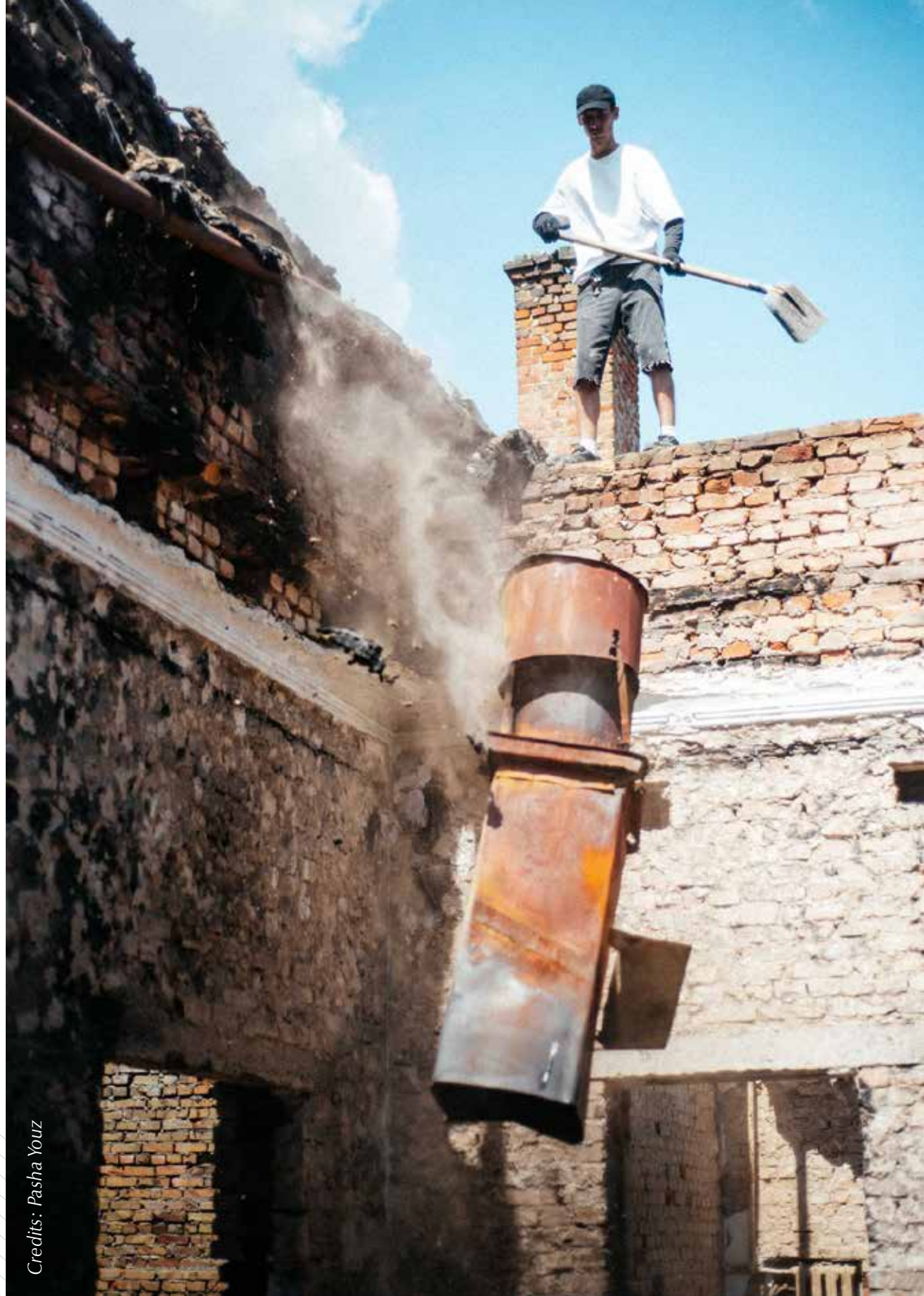
The practice of sharing resources used to be fundamental to Ukrainian society already in Cossack times and this form of society organization and managing resources was at the very heart of Ukrainian statehood until the Soviet era. It is known as 'Toloka'

In this respect it is relevant to mention that the geographic location determines largely the history of a place. All cities close to the border with Russia face another recent history and context, then cities close to Poland for example.

Therefore, it is not only the existence of fertile ground, minerals, industries, large cities but also being close to a front line that has major impact on the context of a place. As an example, Soledar is indicative: it used to be on the way from Kharkiv to Donetsk and to Russia and ultimately Georgia. In 2014 it suddenly became a dead-end city, all roads leading to besieged regions. This accelerated the already existing decline in economy and a deflate of young citizens. However, after 2014 the salt mines of Artemsil partly were being transformed to underground artistic and wellness places. The city was meant to become a tourist destination. In 2023 it has been almost completely destroyed and what is left is under Russian occupation.
The context of Frumushika-Nova is determined by the Soviet times: five villages were chased away for the sake of military purposes. Nowadays descendants of the old villagers returned, and their victim-ancestors are being remembered, not only by restoring the old village in traditional style, bringing back traditional crafts and arts, and a memorial place, but also by bringing back new live, new enterprises and new houses.

Also, a remarkable fact is how many projects fund their own activities with hardly governmental financial support. Urban Space 100 and Frumushika both have an independent earning capacity, enabling the overall aim. Wooden Lace launched from the start, next to the photo gallery website, a fundraising website. This makes the projects more independent and sustainable.

To conclude, commons is a model that is current in Ukraine. There are many successful examples, that show the resilience even in times of war. However, public space is crucial to develop their activities. This is where urban planning can take a role.



Credits: Pasha Youz

VIII.
Creative commons through urban planning

I was surprised how many examples of commons I came across. The selected cases are representative for many more all over Ukraine. Some are small like the example of the park in Severdonetsk, others have international outreach such as Urban Space 100 and Closer. The events after February 2022 showed that in Ukraine there is an undisputed natural attitude of taking collective action. Also, there is ample public space, even though not always uncontested. Urban planners could work on this fertile breeding ground and use not only the wisdom of the community, but also their willingness, ability and action.

Thus, the key question of this article can be answered affirmative. The cases set a clear case that application of the concept of the commons for culture in public space can re-establish and fuel community life, cultural connectivity, and sense of belonging in Ukraine. Firstly, applying methods of commoning on cultural networks in Ukraine is in line with already existing movements. Secondly, the abundance of public space, even in big cities, offers physical opportunities. Thirdly, the traditional and current social involvement is a strong driver for success. However, a challenge will be to realize the system change set in motion after 2014, towards decentralization and community participation. Finally, establishing sustainable creative commons in the public space, also has a positive effect on the vibrance and liveliness of places.

Therefore, it was argued that there is a role for urban planners to use the abundance of public space to enable and facilitate commons. Of course there are many issues to be dealt with. Since the essence of this article is to give an impetus to application of this approach in urban planning and rebuilding, I would like to support the development of a culture commons toolkit for urban planners. What needs attention are questions such as: how can urban planning act as a moderator for commoning of cultural eco-systems? Is there need for a facilitator? Are new techniques available? Can toolkits as developed by eg spacesandcities-toolkit.com/ be used? These questions fall out of the scope of this article. Yet these are next steps for urban planning in restoring a cultural vibrant and resilient Ukraine.

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