

I S L A N D S

Rethinking the Settlement Form from Property to Care

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Diploma Unit 14

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Introduction

At the very root of the current climate crisis lies the concept of property: a pervasive apparatus of governance that, for centuries, has dispossessed communities of their sources of sustenance, substituting the ethos of *care* with one based on exploitation. By property we mean above all land property, a juridical framework that has reduced existence into a commodity. Within the logic of this apparatus, land is no longer a place to inhabit, but a resource to plunder as ‘standing reserve’ for the sake of profit. This condition becomes legible in the form of the settlement; a settlement is the primary form of sedentary cohabitation and as such it includes not just homes, but all those facilities that make collective life possible, such as streets, paths, fields, gardens, gathering spaces.

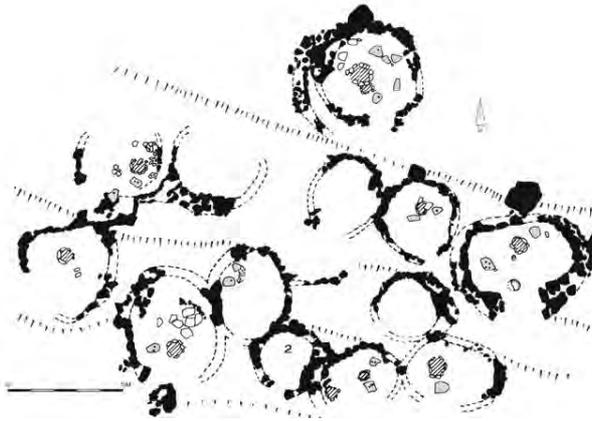
For millennia – and until recently – many settlements in different parts of the world were semi-autonomous and driven by self-sustenance. However, since the dawn of capitalism – but in certain cases even earlier – the settlement has ceased to be a mere form of coexistence to become a device to control people and extract surplus value. From Roman villas to medieval *bastides* and Western colonial cities in the Americas and Asia, from Garden Cities to suburban subdivisions, modern forms of settling were meant to expand ad infinitum land exploitation from the domestic interior to the management of natural resources.

It is precisely this understanding of our relationship with the world – and each other – in terms of *property* rather than *care* that we need to fight in order to deal with the current climate crisis.

This year Diploma 14 will address this crisis by revisiting the settlement both in urban and rural contexts through projects that question its concrete architectural definition from the design of homes to the organization of circulation and landscape. The settlement is ultimately the nexus between planning policies and the design of everyday life, which we will challenge through the introduction of localized practices of commoning. We will reimagine ways to transform this physical form into a space of care: a self-organized ‘island’ in which social relationships are driven by solidarity instead of exploitation. The figure of the island is often construed as a space of exclusion and segregation; yet, its defined form makes it a potential place for autonomy and experimentation within and against both state and market. By conceiving the urban world as a confederation of islands, our projects will address the way in which communities can pursue their emancipation – and give it a significant architectural form.

Against the expansive logic of urbanization, we propose the settlement island as a defined locus that can have a larger effect beyond its limited scale. Transcending the consolidated dialectic of local vs. global, small vs. big, top down vs. bottom up, the settlement as island can be interpreted as a strategic platform for practices of autonomy and self-organization.

I. The Settlement: from Self-sufficiency to the State



Archaeological Plan of the Natufian Settlement of Nabal Oren, Palestine, 10,000 BCE

Settling in one place and occupying this place permanently are the foundational gestures of our condition, which we call sedentism: the practice of living in one place for a long time.

Our civilization – and with it, the culture of property – is based on a narrative of our origins in which sedentary life is understood as inexorable *fait accompli*. Indeed, we take for granted the passage from nomadic to sedentary life, and, yet, this shift has not yet been fully completed, and sedentism is the very last moment of our history as a species that started some 300,000 years ago. Hunter-gatherers lived an unbound existence roaming in tiny groups, but not deprived of permanent points of reference. The anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests that hunter-gatherers understood their territory not in terms of surfaces but as a constellation of landmarks such as mountains, lakes, river, haunts, water holes and other outstanding topographical features.¹ Often transformed into sacred sites, these marks served as means of symbolic and physical orientation and sometimes also for larger gatherings. Recent archeological evidence such as the 25,000-year-old graves at Sungir, east of Moscow, or the 11,000-year-old mountain sanctuary at Göbekli Tepe in South Anatolia, demonstrates that outstanding monumental sites existed also when communities were not yet fully sedentary. This evidence gives us a more nuanced understanding of what would have been the life of hunter-gatherers: not just endless moving, but also cyclical gathering to feast and exchange resources. The land inhabited by the hunter-

gatherers was therefore already punctuated by permanent places that had a special significance.

The passage from hunter-gatherers to sedentism was long and gradual, opening up many variations and ‘experiments’ that complicate our traditional image of nomadic vs. stable life. Arguing against a reading of the passage from hunter-gatherers to sedentism as a sudden ‘fall from grace’ that gave rise to inequality and violence, anthropologist David Graeber and archeologist David Wengrow suggest that between these two distinct forms of life terms existed a variety of practices that mixed permanence and mobility in ways that challenge our understanding of what *settling* means². For Graeber and Wengrow, our ancestors would gather and disperse according to a seasonal tempo, thus experimenting with different social possibilities.

Even early forms of sedentary life were not completely bound to the idea of permanent land possession. Early communities settled in places where opportunities for foraging were abundant, such as wetlands, where – as noted by James C. Scott – food resources were organized according to what today we would call ‘common property resources’.³ Writing about early sedentism, Scott noted how it was pioneered by hunters and foragers who took advantage of the multiple subsistence options their diverse wetlands setting provided. This ecological condition allowed early sedentary or semi-sedentary communities to continuously experiment with the management of their environment.⁴

Early sedentary settlements can be thought as self-sufficient islands, pockets of optimal climatic and ecological conditions that allowed its inhabitants enough comfort to coexist quasi-permanently in the same place without been pressured into the appropriation of resources. This fluid landscape of coexistence challenges the conventional, pessimistic assumption that sees the permanent gathering of people in the same place as the origin of inequality as many anthropologists and archeologists seem to suggest.⁵ In fact, premodern and pre-sedentary landscapes could be read as a constellation of points, or islands, coagulated around places of subsistence or ritual meaning, and sometimes both.

What undermined this open form of existence was, therefore, not sedentism per se, but the rise of the *home* as permanent structure. The more the household and its architecture became prominent and fixed, the more unequal the sedentary islands became, as the consolidation of the home as permanent structure radically influenced the

¹ On how hunter-gatherers managed land tenure see: Tim Ingold, *The Appropriation of Nature: Essays on Human Ecology and Social Relations* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 130-164.

² David Graeber, David Wengrow, ‘How to Change the Course of Human History (At least the Part that Has Already happened)’ in “Eurozine”, 2nd March, 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history/>

³ James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of Earliest States* (Hew Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 57.

⁴ *Ibid.* 59.

⁵ See: Kent Flannery, Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality. How our prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

way in which communities saw the land they inhabited. The rise of the home as a stable structure provided security but it also enhanced a sense of possession, which gradually expanded from the home to its surrounding environment⁶. The need to support to the growing economy of the permanent household slowly pushed horticultural practices towards forms of what we can call intensive agriculture. Unlike the nuanced landscape of the wetland, intensive agriculture such as the one based on cereals requires a landscape where the distinction between wet and dry is far sharper: a simpler, and less diverse habitat. Moreover, while the tempo of foraging was complex and elastic, the rhythm engendered by agriculture is predictable and rigid, based on the clear seasonal sequence of sowing and harvesting. If the emergence of agriculture is undistinguishable from foraging and gardening, its growing importance transformed people's perception of the landscape from something that just offered food, to something to appropriate and cultivate: from an island whose specific conditions should be managed and enhanced, to the abstraction of an extensive swathe of land to be made as evenly productive as possible.

Unlike the multiform landscape of wetlands, the dry agricultural landscape ceased to be an archipelago of punctual diversities to become a surface enclosed by lines in the form of paths, ditches, and sometimes walls. With the rise of agriculture as a form of cultivation, labour became more organized and forced foraging communities to regroup into patriarchal expanded households as it is visible in Mesopotamian houses and villages of the 'Ubaid period.⁷ Here, the gendered division of labour was reinforced by the internal subdivision of the house in which male-dominated rituals of hospitality are clearly separated from women-led reproductive activities such as childrearing and food processing.

The rise of big cities such as Uruk in the 4th millennium BCE has been addressed as the advent of what the archeologist Gordon Vere Childe defined as the 'Urban Revolution'⁸. Childe argued that the formation of large urban societies gave rise to phenomena such as the division of labor and the appropriation of surplus production by an elite. Yet, what prompted Uruk and later Ancient Egypt to become not just cities, but *states*, was their main source of energy: water. While early sedentary communities settled in

places that had a natural abundance of water, early states arose along major rivers whose water was artificially distributed across vast distances. It was precisely the large scale of those 'public works' that required a stronger government and a rigid organization of labor.⁹ Asymmetries in scale and power between the different settlement islands grew dramatically, and the subservient islands lost control of their surrounding territory as well as of their means of subsistence which started to be organized by budding state institutions. This shift affected all aspects of human life, down to the imposition of a new dietary regime based on cereals. It is not a coincidence that the agriculture of all earliest and major 'urban' civilizations such as those of Mesopotamia, the Indus valley, and Ancient Egypt were all based on the cultivation of cereals, which can be accumulated not just for subsistence but also for surplus. Within large societies, grain can be distributed to workers, soldiers, and other large groups who in this way are made dependent on the elite's distribution of food. It is here that agriculture ceased to be a form of subsistence, to become an intensive apparatus that serves two purposes: accumulation of surplus, and governance of the population.¹⁰ The building of large-scale irrigation systems would increase the productive capacity of the state, but damage the ecology of neighbouring communities. This condition would often cause war at the fringe of large city-states and prompt the latter to further expand their territorial control. In the Near East, territory slowly ceased to be understood in terms of autonomous islands, to become a network of hierarchically organized settlements.

However, the rise of complex settled communities did not necessarily lead everywhere to a state-lead 'urban revolution' that erased the previous archipelago condition for good. Even before the development of cities like Uruk, other large settlements existed, such as those built by the Cucuteni-Trypillia culture in an area that stretches across contemporary Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania, and that existed between the 6th and the 3rd millennium BCE. Known as 'mega-sites', these cities contained as many as 3,000 houses and were inhabited by approximately 40,000 people¹¹. Mega-sites like the one found at Maidanetske, Ukraine, were not sustained by large-scale agriculture; they left no trace of city walls or monumental temples. With its

⁶ For a analysis of the consequences of the rise of home as permanent structure see: Peter J. Wilson, *The Domestication of the Human Species* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 57-78.

⁷ David Wengrow, "The Changing Face of Clay": Continuity and Change in the Transition from Village to Urban Life in the Near East," in *Antiquity* 72, no. 278 (December 1998), 783-95.

⁸ V. Gordon Childe, 'The Urban Revolution' in: *The Town Planning Review* Vol. 21, No. 1 (April, 1950), pp. 3-17

⁹ Of course this was a rather complex process that never completely supplanted the sustenance of local communities. Indeed early states such as Sumer Uruk needed to maintain a certain level of villages and household autonomy in order to ensure that these communities could

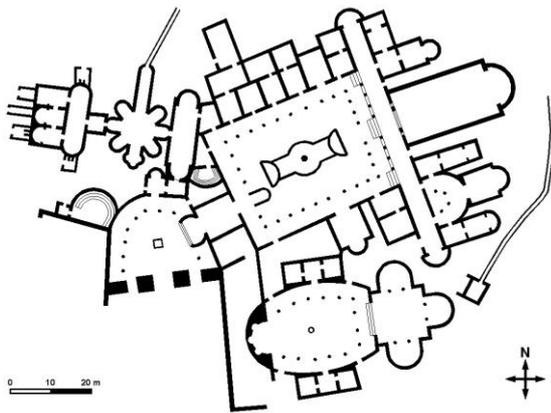
reproduce themselves and thus be conveniently exploitable by the state. See: Mario Liverani, *Uruk, The First City* (Sheffield UK: Equinox Publishing, 2006).

¹⁰ As argued by Scott, early state formation was an exercise in standardization and abstraction – the very tools required to deal with units of labour, grain, and land. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of Earliest States*, 132.

¹¹ On Cucuteni-Trypillia Mega-sites see: John Chapman, Bisserka Gaydarska, Marco Nebbia, "The Origins of Trypillia Megacities", in *Frontiers of Digital Humanities*, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fdigh.2019.00010/full#h14>

rows of more or less identical houses arranged in circle around a central void, this settlement form seems to suggest that the Cucuteni-Trypillia culture was an egalitarian society devoid of manifestations of hierarchical power. The mega-sites composed an archipelago of self-sufficient islands that had a high degree of reciprocal influence and exchange, yet never unfolded into a unified polity. Radical interpretations of the Cucuteni-Trypillia culture suggest that they might have been matriarchal and non-warlike.¹² It is interesting to note these mega-sites were periodically destroyed and rebuilt in the same place: although the significance of this ritual is debated, it certainly undermined the sense of possession that each household represented as a permanent structure.

II. Colonial Islands: Villas, Monasteries, and Towns



Roman Villa at Piazza Armerina, Sicily, 2nd century CE

The Cucuteni-Trypillia mega-sites (or ‘islands’) present an interesting model of settling that combines large scale, self-sufficiency and egalitarianism, and thus seems to escape the traditional tropes of large-scale settlements such as the need for a hierarchical organization. But the evolution of settlement form in the Western world would not follow this direction, and it would rather find its dramatic conclusion in the concepts of extensive urbanization and legalized land property. The urban condition is often thought in terms of fluid ‘circulation’ of people and goods, yet the core of the urban – as this condition was conceived in the West during the Roman Empire – is the concept of property. This concept was designed in order to reduce any *local* customary way to coexist within the universality of the Empire’s law. While customs always depend on local

situations and they are arranged by those that practice them, law is always enforced by an institution that possesses the monopoly of coercive power. In the span of few centuries, ancient Rome scaled up from a group of islands of settlement, to kingdom, to empire; harnessing local communities into a shared framework thus became a key concern.

Therefore, Rome’s conquests were not only based on military power but also on the capacity to impose Roman law, and, specifically, a regime of land use. This regime was based on the distinction between *res publica* – things that belonged to the state and as such could not be traded or commercialized – and *res privata*, things belonging to individuals that could be bought and sold.¹³

When designated as *res publica* or *res privata*, the contingent properties of land – its concrete *use* – were transformed into a patrimonial value since the word *res* addresses things in terms of their financial value. Legalized property is not a prerogative of the individual: it is endowed by the state as the great ‘appropriator’ who, in virtue of its power and authority, grants individual landowners an official title of possession. Beside *res publica* and *res privata*, Romans introduced *res nullius* to address land that had no owners, thus available for appropriation as *res privata*. *Res nullius* was instrumental in the case of colonial appropriation of land from indigenous populations. In this way, Rome could declare customary ways of holding land illegal, and make that land available to individual owners recognized by the state. The mechanism of this appropriation was to transform all newly conquered land into *ager publicum*, public land that the state would then allocate to Roman private citizens in order to occupy and cultivate it.

It is in this context that a new type of settlement island was fine-tuned and rose to prominence: the villa.

The villa was introduced by the Romans as a productive estate based mainly on slave labour. As such, it was a finite unit of production with a strong local character and a defined form. At the same time, it was also tightly tied to the core of the Empire of which it was, *de facto*, a colonizing outpost: an island, artificially created to master a territory. This unit of production proliferated in the 1st century AD when the Roman countryside was restructured in order to empower powerful landowners at the expense of small farmers, making the villa a successful model not just for production, but also for living. The urban elite would spend time in their villa estates relaxing from the pressures of the city while supervising the work of slaves and salaried farmers. The Roman household was ruled by the *Paterfamilias* as the Emperor would rule the Empire;

¹² See: Marija Gimbutienė "Old Europe c. 7000–3500 BC: The Earliest European Civilization Before the Infiltration of the Indo-European Peoples", *Journal of Indo-European Studies* (JIES) 1 (1973): 1–21.

¹³ For a radical interpretation of the concept of *res* as a juridical category of property see: Yan Thomas, “La valeur des choses. Le droit romain hors la religion,” in *Annales. Histoire, Science Sociales*, 57 année, no. 6 (November/December 2001): 14–62.

while the word *domus* comes from the Greek *domos*¹⁴ (building or layer of bricks), it evolved into terms such as dominion and domination, which address the *dominus* as absolute owner. For the Romans the house was thus not simply an *oikos*, the locus of domestic management, but, rather, the clearest expression of individual private property, the place where the owner controls his *familia*: literally, a group of *famuli*, slaves. Roman society was a patriarchal system in which property, and especially property of the house and of the land, was the most potent symbol. In the course of time, the villa would embody the idea of property by manifesting its self-sufficiency, or island character. Beyond the houses of the proprietor and his servants, villas included all kinds of amenities that made these compounds comparable with villages and even small cities. In the later period of the Roman Empire, villas grew monumentally big and included baths, markets, temples that were often built within villa complexes to reinforce their self-sufficiency – a self-sufficiency that was ideological rather than real.

The villa was therefore a quintessentially ideological architecture, because its self-completeness, its staged pastoralism, and its remoteness hid its dependency on the logistic network of the Empire¹⁵. It was precisely the combination of idealization and ruthless enforcement of private property that made the Roman villa an archetype of colonial logic; for this reason, it was rediscovered in the 15th century Italy, at the dawn of capitalism, when it became the perfect settlement form through which the European elite gentrified rural territories, de facto inventing the idea of countryside as the place of respite from the city, but also of exploitation of rural communities. An early and outstanding example of this resurrection of the Roman villa as a colonial project are the estates created by the Medici family around Florence.¹⁶ By building these villas the Medici expanded their influence beyond the city and reinvested their financial gains into landownership. Another influential example are the villas designed by Andrea Palladio for the aristocracy of the Serenissima, a class desperate to switch to agricultural economy after the discovery of the ‘New World’ in the West and the Ottoman blockade in the East had decreed the demise of Venice’s maritime economy. Like their Roman precedents, Renaissance villas were not mere buildings, but rather villages that included all the necessary infrastructure to

support both living and working outside the city;¹⁷ during the Renaissance the term villa was interchangeable with ‘countryside possession’, hamlet, small town and even *contado* or ‘county’.¹⁸ These definitions of villa demonstrate that, as much as it stresses its image of finite island, the villa is not a punctual entity, but rather an expanded territorial domain, often strategically located next to a village or a small rural town so as to exploit its resources. When the villa is located in a more remote region, then it has to build its own village or town like in the case of the colonial ‘haciendas’ which were a colonial reinvention of the Roman *latifundium*.

If the villa constructed its island-ness as ideological facade, it also gave rise to another settlement type that, at least initially, tried to pursue in earnest a strategy of autonomy: the monastery. Early monastic communities in Europe often appropriated countryside villas for their use, when the collapse of the Roman Empire loosened the links between estates and the Empire’s centre. Western monastic life had actually emerged between Egypt and the Near East as the eremitic pursuit of solitude and meditation; but as life in solitude was actually near impossible, monks started to congregate in loose aggregations where they experimented different ways to live together or apart, switching back and forth between solitary and communal life. With the affirmation of St. Benedict’s Rule in the 7th century, Western monasticism became increasingly driven by collective life, and if early monks often moved from place to place, the Rule prescribed *stabilitas loci*, which meant that monks belonged to one place, in the same way the members of a familia were bound to the domus. This organization made monasteries powerful hubs of production, attracting the interests of rulers and lords who co-opted them by donating the monasteries land and resources. One of the most telling examples of this type of monastery is the famous plan for a Benedictine Monastery preserved at the monastery of St. Gall, drafted under the supervision of Abbot Hatto in the monastery of Reichenau, Germany.¹⁹ The plan was not intended to portray a specific place, and it outlined an ‘ideal’ Benedictine monastery, a complex made of approximately forty buildings arranged in a grid, allowing maximum efficiency in organizing disparate programs: churches, houses, stables, kitchens, workshops, brewery, infirmary, storage, and a special house

¹⁴ A term that emphasized the built character of the house, as it literally means building or layer of bricks.

¹⁵ On the Roman Villa as an ideological artifact see: James Ackerman, *The Villa. Form and Ideology of the Country Home* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

¹⁶ See: Raffaella Fabiani Giannetto, *Medici Gardens: From Making to Design* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Indeed, a 17th century Italian dictionary defined the villa as ‘estate with house’, see: Howard Burns, *La Villa Italiana del Rinascimento* (Vicenza: Angelo Colla Editore, 2012), 16-17.

¹⁸ Palladio called his villas ‘case di villa’ making clear that the villa is not the house, but the village near which the landowner’s house is built, Ibid. 18.

¹⁹ For an extensive analysis on this extraordinary drawings see: Walter Horn, Ernest Born. *Plan of St. Gall: Study of the Architecture and Economy of, and Life in, a Paradigmatic Carolingian Monastery* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1980).

for bloodletting. The result is a plan where the management of life overrides the liturgical functions; as the Roman villas, monasteries were becoming towns whose productive capacity greatly exceeded their self-sufficiency.

As monastic life became increasingly burdened by its productive ethos, a new wave of monastic orders such as the Camaldolese, the Carthusians, and the Cistercians attempted to go back to the original purpose of monasticism as a life of prayer, meditation, and autonomy. In order to pursue their goal these orders chose to build their monasteries in remote regions. In particular, the Cistercians²⁰ were drawn to extremely unwelcoming environments, which they learned to domesticate by building infrastructure such as irrigation systems and aqueducts, as well as reclaiming land for cultivation. These engineering skills were necessary to inhabit inhospitable places far from existing settlements, yet they also compromised the monks' original pursuit of isolation. The Cistercians became exceptional builders, planning and engineering their monasteries as factories in which both the monks' lives and material production were organized in the most efficient manner; as Cistercian monasteries grew in scale and economic output, they expanded into large compounds that included facilities such as the *grange*, a shed-like building for productive activities which can be considered an ancestor of the modern factory. The Cistercians' expertise in domesticating remote places and their ability to construct self-sufficient systems far from urban life ultimately made them instrumental to rulers in order to colonize impervious parts of their territories.²¹ Like the villas of the Roman Empire, monasteries became latifundia, vast landed estates supported by the work of monks as well as of a multitude of lay people, from artisans to farmers. The transformation of the monastery into an institution of power did not happen without conflicts: a radical attack to the increasing attachment to property that plagued monasticism came from the early Franciscans who were committed to renounce the very concept of property by replacing it with the simple *actum utendi*, the act of using things without owning them, which they saw as the only way to embrace an apostolic life of poverty.²² The church contrasted this aspiration by forcing the Franciscans to own their premises which would later become influential and rich monasteries. Perhaps even more controversial



Rila Monastery, Bulgaria – 10th / 14th century CE

were monastic institutions such as the 'Missions', whose politics became tangled with the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of both the Americas and Asia. Missions played an ambivalent role towards indigenous populations, and while they were mostly instruments of oppression, like in the case of the Franciscan Missions established in Alta California in the late 18th century, in other instances they tried to defend indigenous people from exploitation, as it happened in some Jesuit missions of Brazil and Paraguay.

This ambiguity was completely absent in another form of settlement that became a powerful archetype in the history of colonization: the *colonial town*. Planned towns are a way to control territories that goes back to ancient states such as the Indus and Egyptian civilization and peaked with the Greek-Roman civilization; disappeared in the West with the fall of the Roman Empire, the colonial settlement was resurrected with the rise of early European city states and national states such as Florence or France. With it, these states experimented the construction of a system of self-sufficient towns positioned in strategic places such as the *bastides* developed in Southwest France in the 13th century: planned settlements initiated from scratch by landowners such as feudal lords or abbots with the support of the crown.²³ Eventually the gridded bastide became the model

²⁰A reformed Benedictine order.

²¹This is the case of monasteries built in the Lazio region around Rome, such as the abbeys of San Martino al Cimino, Tre Fontane, and Fossanova.

²²See: Giorgio Agamben, *Altissima poverta. Regole monastiche e forma di vita* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2011).

²³For rulers the bastide was a form of territorial control, while for the landowners was a way to improve the productivity of their territory. Quickly built and inhabited by farmers and artisans, these settlements

were planned as gridded towns to ensure an efficient distribution of property both inside and outside the urban core. By receiving a plot of land – often for free. The new inhabitants received a plot of land – often for free – and given significant tax incentives, but in exchange they were obliged to build their house as quickly as possible. The bastide became an extremely efficient form of 'civilian occupation' that distributed masses of farmers and artisans in regions away from large cities, and as such this model was adopted in many parts of Europe from England to Tuscany, from Spain and Portugal to the Baltic countries.

for the colonial towns built in the Americas and in Asia.²⁴ The foundation of both bastides and colonial towns was first and foremost an effort of land survey which inscribed the physicality of the land into the abstraction of calculating reason. By now we have become familiar, even accustomed, with the way a street, a fence, a wall can immediately physicalize the cadastral subdivision of land into different properties. Both in medieval Europe, and in the Americas, this perception and use of the land as a commodity organized by boundary lines was completely foreign. Of course, indigenous communities in Europe and the Americas did have a sense of possession of their own territory and they often traced boundaries or used natural features in order to make land possession visible, but they never conceived these boundaries as delimiting absolute property. It was the absoluteness of geometric lines as they appeared in the form of colonial settlements that allowed them to be mapped and endowed with lawful force.

If initially the colonial landscape of North-America was an archipelago of sedentary settlements, surrounded by a territory still controlled by indigenous populations, the appropriating logic of these settlements soon spread outside their borders as settlers started to transform the surrounding landscape into clearly outlined fields for cultivation. John Locke, who wrote the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, linked the concept of property to the capacity of people to improve and cultivate land. Yet, as argued by Ellen Meiksins Wood,²⁵ for Locke the labour of land improvement was not linked to self-sustenance, but to the possibility to make land *profitable*. Locke wrote of the Amerindian landscape as a land that was not properly possessed since it was not properly cultivated and thus not productive as land for surplus production was.²⁶ What Locke implicitly attacked was subsistence agriculture, a form of cultivation that did not require any form of property and therefore no labour of improvement. The commodification of land through improvement, and consequent imposition of rights of property, was essentially aimed at the elimination of forms of subsistence economy and the enhancing of agriculture for profit. It was precisely this process in which labour, profit, and commodification of land become parts of the same process that is the original core of capitalist economy. Meiksins Wood argued that capitalism was the product not so much of the European mercantilist economy that flourished since the middle ages, but rather of the enclosure of common land that was enforced in England since the 16th century and

peaked with the parliamentary enclosures of the 18th century.²⁷ Described by Karl Marx at the end of *Capital* as ‘primitive accumulation’, the enclosures were a process of dispossession of land that deprived peasants of their means of reproduction.²⁸ Of course, forms of dispossession have happened throughout history since the dawn of the early city states. Yet the kind of dispossession enacted by the enclosures in England was a dispossession *by law*, enforced by the crown by endowing local lords with lawful titles through which they could privatize common land for their benefit. The result of privations was a gradual process of suppression of the common field villages in which ownership of land was organized through the form of *selions*, scattered pieces of arable land that farmers cultivated individually and cooperatively.²⁹ This process of privatization was justified by discourses on improvement and efficiency: for landlords only a land that was securely owned by one proprietor would be easy to govern while increasing production. In place of subsistence cultivation, in which the produce remained within the confines of village, landowners enforced intense farming and husbandry to serve a larger national and international market. If customary rights to landholding had for centuries empowered peasants with a certain degree of autonomy, the state – not capitalism itself – managed to make this class completely dependent on the market condition. Capitalism was thus born not just through the impoverishment of peasants who were set ‘free’ to be exploited as salaried worker in the big farm or in the factory, but also through the commodification of land and its produce, the most basic resource for the reproduction of life. Only the state, with its powerful juridical apparatus, its extensive territorial control, and its monopoly of organised violence, could achieve this radical transformation of the way people live and relate to the land. Spatially and architecturally this transformation took the form of a landscape increasingly enclosed by lines of property, carefully surveyed and subdivided into fields, plots, parcels, as in Thomas Jefferson’s idea of township which was put in practice – with some modification – in the 1795 Land Ordinance through which the newly formed United States gave form to a violent appropriation of land which was the basis of their state-making.

From the vantage point of this genealogy the sea of urbanization can be understood as a gradual process in which colonial forms of settling, enforced by sovereign states, took over and gradually expanded their exploitative

²⁴ John W. Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 15.

²⁵ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism. A Long View* (London: Verso 2017) 89.

²⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Locke’s Theory of Property”, in op. cit., 109-116.

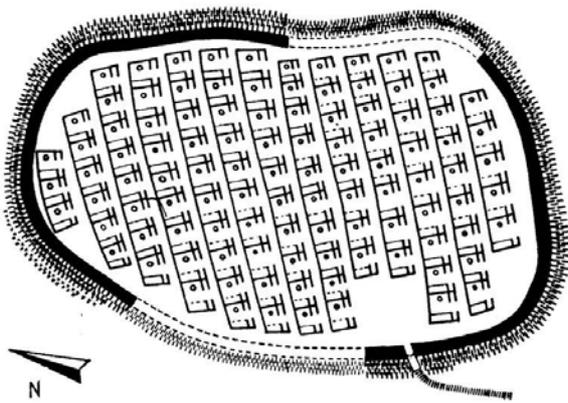
²⁷ Ellen Meiksins Wood, op. cit., 23.

²⁸ Karl Marx, “Part Eight: So-Called Primitive Accumulation”, in *Capital* Volume 1, 873-942 (London: Penguin).

²⁹ See: Gary Fields, *Enclosure. Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 33. The basis of this collective system was an informal set of rights of customs, which derived from consolidated practices concerning the occupation and use of land.

logic. Whether in the form of suburban subdivisions, sites of extraction, free economic zones and all forms of colonial settling, the expansive regime of property became a planetary condition whose scale could only be confronted by the use of ‘cheap’ energy such as fossil fuel. It is therefore not unreasonable to imagine that a first step we should take if we want to address the current ecological crisis is to question the very idea of ownership and to imagine other ways to construct relationships between man and land, and man and man.

III. The Possibility of an Island



Reconstruction of the village of Biskupin, Poland, 750 BCE

Since time immemorial the island has been a potent form or metaphor of inhabitation. Islands always presuppose both isolation and connection, autonomy and interaction as their form is always deeply confronted and defined by the locus of exchange par excellence: the sea.³⁰ In fact, islands – whether real or metaphorical – have seldom existed as completely isolated, but they have almost always formed archipelagos: small or big groups of islands, which can be close or far away from each other. Understood within the terms of the archipelago, islands suspend any familiar geographic and cultural binary such as land vs. sea, isolation vs. unity, fragment vs. whole, urban vs. rural, national vs. international, dense vs. sparse, and most importantly big vs. small. Islands can be many places, big or small, connected with each other, even depending on each other, and yet not trying to co-opt each other into asymmetrical relationships. Yet, as modernity was driven by narratives of conquest, expansion, and civilization – and many actual islands were being forcefully annexed by continental states – the island became the quintessential

metaphor of the idea of exception, something that in all sort of ways is always an *extra space*: a utopia, a dystopia, a paradise, a minority, a gated community... in positive or negative ways what the island is viewed as D. H. Lawrence described it in his story “The Man who Loved Islands” as a place of “withdrawal from the mainstream where it is our duty to remain”.

As geographer Pete Hay has argued,³¹ statements about the island as the one by Lawrence are part of a long tradition that sees the island condition as metaphor for backwardness, irrelevance, and anti-social self-indulgence. To counter this idea of the island we propose to rethink the concept of the island as a place that, while seeking autonomy, it also opens itself up to engage with the world. Yet, the terms of this engagement are not those driven by appropriation or forced inclusivity, but by mutual reciprocity and fair exchange. Rather than islands as ‘places of exception’ against some sort of general norm, we propose the idea of the island as autonomous and yet open form of settling driven by sustenance rather than profit and exclusion. As such islands, are always part and parcel of an archipelago, a confederation of islands which participate in the same polity in order to support and further enrich their self-sustenance. In this idea of the island there is nothing new, it is the retracing of an alternative way to inhabit the world that has existed before and it has even survived through our civilization based on property.

Throughout history, and in different parts of the world, there have been and there still exist communities that seek to achieve sustenance without profit, and that follow an ethos of sharing rather than of individual gain – from Shaker communes to Australian aboriginal settlements to early European monasteries, where the concept of *ownership* was meant to be substituted by that of *use*. The productive success of these monasteries, as we have seen, defeated their original purpose as they became colonizing enterprises, demonstrating a widespread trend of the last millennium: the co-opting of local communities into state systems. This co-opting weakens the autonomy of local settlements which are not only exploited, but also transformed in their very nature as they end up absorbing the laws and ethos of the state – often violently, as it happened in colonized territories. Settlements tend to become hubs in a networked system that is controlled at a central level, as we have described in the previous paragraphs. While interconnectedness and exchange are positive qualities, such networked systems present fundamental problems in terms of ecological and political

³⁰ On the subject, see Godfrey Baldacchino, “Studying Islands: On Whose Terms? Some Epistemological and Methodological Challenges to the Pursuit of Island Studies”, in *Islands Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2008): 37-56.

³¹ Pete Hay, “A Phenomenology of Islands”, in *Island Studies Journal* vol. 1, n. 1 (2006): 19-42.

sustainability, as they disempower the inhabitants from the control and care of their resources, natural and human. It is therefore urgent to discuss the ways in which settlement-islands can remain connected while developing local resilience and direct participation – in a word, autonomy.

Such a project cannot identify with a traditional idea of ‘publicness’ or ‘state’ since, as we have seen, the public realm has been shaped in the West as the very guarantor of the existence of private property, and the state has been the apparatus that made this possible. It is, indeed, a project of commoning, a practice that emerges out of the effort of a community to pool resources and share them equitably. Although much has been written about the emancipatory potential of commoning at a political level,³² this practice presents another crucial aspect, namely the necessity for the ‘commoners’ not only to share, but also to govern the common resources in a way that ensures their reproduction, or renewal.³³ In other terms, as resources are not owned and are a common wealth that should survive into the future, commoning implies an idea of stewardship and care that is foreign to the reality of private property, and that often becomes too abstract when it comes to state-based systems. The commoners are *directly* called to take care of the commons – for themselves, for their peers, and for future generations. They can use resources for their well-being, but they need to make sure these resources will be maintained and replenished, therefore establishing a relationship between land and man that is conceptually very different from the modern attitude.

Islands of commoning are fragile vis-à-vis the strength of modern nation-states, but recognizing their existence and studying their spatial solutions is an important step in the construction of a new narrative: a narrative that says that it is possible to live *otherwise*.

As the idea of ownership is so deeply entrenched in European culture, it is perhaps unsurprising that many Western counter-islands have been created or proposed as deeply ideological projects, both religious and secular. While such experiments regularly occurred throughout history, they found both new grounds and renewed urgency in the wake of the European colonial expansion, and, more specifically, in North America.³⁴ The illusion of occupying a ‘virgin’, Edenic ground, coupled with the

relative freedom accorded to the colonists opened up a season of intense experimentation. On the one hand religious groups such as the Shakers, the Inspirationalists, and the Perfectionists, founded rural settlements where they sought to reframe life outside the parallel strictures of established European churches and traditional morality; on the other hand early socialists tried to establish egalitarian communes marked by gender equality and a reorganization of labour. These two tendencies influenced each other, and beyond their many differences they shared important traits, first and foremost an aspiration to direct democracy and self-sufficiency.

One of the most successful examples of this ambition is the Shaker commune of Hancock, Massachusetts, founded in the late 1780s and active until the 1960s, where members farmed their own food as well as developing a woodwork workshop; to construct a sustainable island, they made significant architectural innovations, building residential spaces marked by improved ventilation, good lighting, and running water, as well as introducing an inventive way of integrating furniture and building through custom closets, dumb waiters, lazy susans, and movable partitions.³⁵ All these improvements were not aimed at efficiency for the sake of gaining profit, but, rather, as a way to promote an organized way to coexist, and the commune produced enough to live but avoided accumulation of wealth without a specific purpose.

This attitude, shared by virtually all the North American ‘utopian’ settlements, matches a fundamental feature of systems of commoning as described by Massimo De Angelis: while capitalism is about ‘buying in order to sell’ – that is to say, speculation for the sake of financial gain – systems of commoning are about ‘selling in order to buy’, that is to say, exchange for the purpose of obtaining goods one cannot produce for himself or herself.³⁶ De Angelis thus underlines the fact that commoning is not necessarily mutually exclusive with the existence of a market, nor synonymous with autarky: it simply rejects the possibility of financial accumulation beyond that which one needs to live a fulfilling life.

Another important feature was shared by these communities: the contempt for the idea of ownership and for conventional marriage. Both religious and socialist

³² See for instance Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21 Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), or, for a link to architecture, Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

³³ A fundamental contribution in the understanding of the ecology of the commons is the work of Elinor Ostrom, see for instance her *Governing the Commons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [1990]).

³⁴ See Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976).

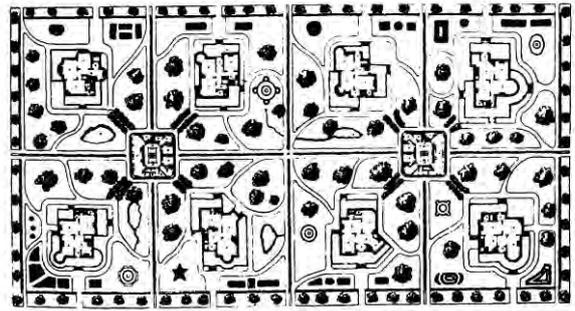
³⁵ All traits common to many Shaker settlements as highlighted in Julie Nicoletta, *The Architecture of the Shakers* (Woodstock, Vermont: The Countryman Press, 1995).

³⁶ Massimo De Angelis, “Grounding Social Revolution: Elements for a Systems Theory of Commoning”, in *Perspectives on Commoning: Autonomist Principles and Practices*, edited by Guido Ruivenkamp and Andy Hilton (London: Zed Books, 2017), 217.

communities rightly identified in the family and, specifically, the family house, the root of a culture of possession that corrupted European society. Domestic labour was socialized and shared in most of these communes which were often serviced by communal kitchens – a trait that is present in establishments as different as the Amana Inspirationalist Villages, the aforementioned Hancock settlement, the Brook Farm communitarian experiment, and the Fourierist North American Phalanx.³⁷ Women’s emancipation was not necessarily pursued in all of these ‘utopian’ islands, particularly the religious ones,³⁸ but the collectivization of domestic labour remained a crucial point of their agenda as it reframed in a radical way the basic unit of commoning present in almost all societies, namely, the household. The household is a system of commoning in which a group of people living under the same roof share economic and spatial resources as well as reproductive care; traditionally, it coincides with the family, the size and extension of which might change depending on local culture, from nuclear family to tribe.

Socializing reproduction means to shift in a significant manner the scale at which foodstuffs, but also the energy needed to cook, clean, and care for children and elderly people are shared. These islands, therefore, were veritable typological laboratories where the idea of home was studied, deconstructed, and redesigned. This raises an important reflection when it comes to the architecture of the island: building types and the spatial organization of even the smallest aspects of living can have a lasting and dramatic impact on the character of the island at large. By undoing the very idea of home – that which, as early as the ‘Ubaid period, had enforced private property and, ultimately, patriarchy – the very settlement form can be altered irrevocably.

IV. Commoning



Plan of a block of Topolobampo commune, Sinaloa - Howland, Deery, and Owen, 1885.

The wave of early XIX century communes of North America experimented with self-sufficiency and shared domestic labour, and while these communities faded towards the end of the century, their ambitions did not completely disappear and can be found, a few decades later, in the work of an important intellectual tradition: materialist feminism. Fourierist communities were already marked by an attempt at gender equality, often more theoretical than practical, and their link to later feminist projects is very direct, as demonstrated by the work of Marie Howland, who had lived in the Familistère of Guise in the 1860s.³⁹ The Familistère was a reformist version of a Fourierist Phalanx – a self-contained settlement virtually independent of nearby Guise and built by industrialist Jean Baptiste Godin for the workers of his foundry.⁴⁰ While the Familistère was far more conventional than its inspiration, consisting as it was of traditional housing units for families, it also represented a significant laboratory in terms of collective childcare and self-organization – food was sold at cost, and Godin gifted the whole structure to its inhabitants to own and manage collectively. Howland had appreciated the socialization of reproductive tasks that the Familistère pioneered; this experience would be crucial when, in the 1870s, she started to collaborate with Albert Kimsey Owen, an engineer of Quaker background who sought to create a settlement based on principles of co-operation. Owen believed speculation on land property was one of the main impediments to true democracy, and suggested public corporations should own the land to avoid this process.⁴¹ When Owen founded a cooperative

³⁷ For a comparison of these diverse experiments we refer to Dolores Hayden, *op. cit.*

³⁸ In the Amana Villages, for instance, labour remained rigidly gendered.

³⁹ Marie Howland’s intellectual trajectory is described and discussed in detail – including the development of Topolobampo – in Dolores Hayden’s “Free Lovers, Individual Sovereigns, and Integral Cooperators”, chapter 5 of *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of*

Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 91-113.

⁴⁰ See Thierry Paquot, *Le Familistère Godin à Guise: Habiter l’Utopie* (Paris: Editions de la Villette, 1982, 2004).

⁴¹ His ideas on co-operation and urban development are explained in Albert Kimsey Owen, *Integral Co-operation at Work* (New York: John W. Lowell, 1890).

settlement in Topolobampo, Sinaloa,⁴² Howland was instrumental in the introduction of forms of commoning and socialized labour such as kindergartens, laundries, and communal kitchens. Inspired by Howland's ideas, architect John Deery envisaged a variety of diverse residential spaces including spaces for single people, and hotel-type accommodation. The most interesting prototypes were rows of patio houses flanked by rather monumental garden pavilions that would contain communal facilities such as laundries, kitchens, but also spaces for intellectual work and leisure such as parlours and libraries. Differently from early Fourierist and religious examples, Owen, Deery, and Howland's Topolobampo plan did not only experiment with the scale of the internal layout of buildings, but it rather manipulated the actual building types, inventing new urban patterns: the aforementioned blocks serviced by long central pavilions, or groups of neighbouring houses that shared the use of outbuildings for domestic infrastructure. Such innovations made the actual texture of Topolobampo an island that was suburban in density but urban in the intensity of social exchange.

The case of Topolobampo, however, raises a fundamental question: can commoning experiments exist only if they distance their islands from the current condition?

This question is particularly relevant to the construction of potential contemporary islands; in his fundamental study on community strategies *Unmaking Goliath*, urban geographer James Defilippis addressed it, with interesting conclusions.⁴³ Defilippis's work demonstrates that commoning experiments have thrived by occupying the cracks of capitalist systems: for instance, local credit unions have emerged by catering to citizens that the mainstream banking system does not seek to recruit as customers, therefore achieving a degree of community autonomy from corporate entities. Or, workers succeeded in buying out plants that were about to be closed and relocated, to then cooperatively run them and co-own them. As far as architecture is concerned, Defilippis also analyzed the checkered history of community development and community land trusts (CLT) which often addressed areas and social groups deemed marginal by the authorities. As Defilippis showed, it is not impossible for these islands – physical or conceptual – to emerge next to conventional capitalist systems; however, most of the examples he analyzed failed to achieve a lasting effect. Defilippis made a compelling case for the way a community can start forms of commoning within the current reality, but also highlighted the difficulty for these forms of commoning to

survive. In fact, throughout history, those communities that sought to distance themselves from mainstream society usually lasted longer, as, for instance, did the Shakers.

The reason for their longevity, however, might not have been necessarily their isolation, but, rather, their ability to construct a complex layering of different forms of commoning – what Massimo De Angelis calls boundary commoning, or 'the commoning that produces a structural coupling between and among different commons'.⁴⁴ In a settlement such as Hancock, or Topolobampo, or a Cistercian monastery, the inhabitants would engage in a range of diverse commoning practices: pooling food resources, pooling labour resources, pooling cultural resources and so on. Each different sphere of sharing reinforced and contributed to the others, even if they did not exactly coincide, as they might involve a different segment of the population – for instance, an age group, or a group of people with similar interests. The self-contained nature of the more isolated experiments enforced boundary commoning. On the contrary, Defilippis clearly outlined the structural fragility of the forms of community resistance he analyzed by explaining their limited character: the members of the credit union initially shared more than the union itself, meeting at a local church, but in the long run they ended up having nothing in common beside their membership, and the fact that a plant was bought out by workers did not inspire other moments of solidarity. Architecture is a culprit in this condition: CLT developments almost always replicate the types and language of conventional single family housing, failing to construct a constellation of diverse resources able to make a community autonomous.

Settlement islands tend to safeguard their autonomy longer precisely because their isolation allows for a more intense practice of boundary commoning across different aspects of the inhabitant's life. Interestingly enough, however, this is not to say that commoning islands need to remain isolated to survive. The Cucuteni-Trypillia mega-sites are a case in point: big, complex settlements within which we can speculate a variety of forms of commoning took place, and that, in turn, engaged in large scale forms of commoning with other communities near and far. But while much of what we know of this culture is a hypothesis, a more recent example can give us a better understanding of how an archipelago of resilient communities might look like, and that example is the culture of Australian Aboriginal people.

⁴² Albert Kimsey Owen, *A Dream of an Ideal City* (Topolobampo: Murdoch and Company, 1897).

⁴³ James Defilippis, *Unmaking Goliath: Community Control in the Face of Global Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁴ De Angelis, op. cit., 241.

European colonization erased the traces of a society that for millennia had occupied a vast continent⁴⁵ developing a sophisticated and peaceful way of settling which knew no form of land ownership, nor a state system. The colonizers⁴⁶ constructed an image of Aboriginal people as poorly organized hunter-gatherers, barely surviving on what a relatively inhospitable situation could give them.

Not unlike the Roman *res nullius* concept, this image was used to legitimize the destruction of a well-balanced productive system that was a threat to the conversion of the continent into a massive reservoir for the production of materials to be sold elsewhere. In fact, Aboriginal people engaged in a range of agricultural and horticultural activities, as well as practicing animal husbandry and fish farming. For instance, large areas of Southern Australia that saw a dramatic productivity decline after a few decades of European occupation had previously been successfully employed to farm yams and Murnong tubers;⁴⁷ ethnobotanist Beth Gott demonstrated that, through repeated tilling, these crops that maintained the light topsoil in a good condition, contrary to the colonial pastures that ended up compacting it and making it virtually unusable. As the Aboriginals did not farm land to accumulate produce and speculate on the accumulated surplus, the Europeans believed that that their agriculture simply *did not exist*.

Moreover, the most dangerous aspect of Aboriginal culture was the absence of an idea of property as understood in the West. In Aboriginal culture, land cannot be owned: rather, a mutual relationship of belonging, care, and stewardship is established between man and territory.⁴⁸ This relationship cannot be broken, sold, or alienated, and, significantly, entails more duties than rights: as highlighted by Bruce Pascoe, the fishermen who built weirs on many Australian rivers were very aware of the need to limit and organize their activity in order not to impact negatively the regeneration of the stock, nor to harm other communities that lived further along the same water body, sometimes hundreds of miles away.⁴⁹ Astonishingly in such a vast and diverse continent, it seems clear that there existed a relatively cohesive culture across tribes that were quite different and might never directly encounter each other. Trade routes and commercial and social exchange existed and thrived, and the different clan-islands were in contact

with each other in a fluid archipelago condition.

Without romanticizing a condition that is far too complex to discuss here, the portrait of the Aboriginal constellation that emerges through sources as diverse as contemporary post-colonial activists and 1800s colonists is consistently one that challenges many Western categories. It was a condition of intense boundary commoning, both within local communities and across the continent; a society that established a relationship of care rather than exploitation vis-à-vis its territory. It was both a very large scale civilization, but also one in which islands of settlement had complete autonomy. The key in this equilibrium was the ability of each island to manage the productive capacity of its area in a sustainable way, that is to say, a way that was extremely specific to that place – the very contrary of the abstract, extensive logic of Western farming.

⁴⁵ A history of colonization in Australia is reconstructed in Eric Charles Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres: 200 Years of Man and an Australian Forest* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1981). Rolls's book is one of the first texts that started to acknowledge the violence of the European impact on the continent; in comparison with the wealth of studies on the negative effects of colonization in the Americas, until relatively recently there has been comparatively scarce literature on the appropriation of Australia.

⁴⁶ On the complexity of Aboriginal territorial culture, and its strategy of land management, see Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or*

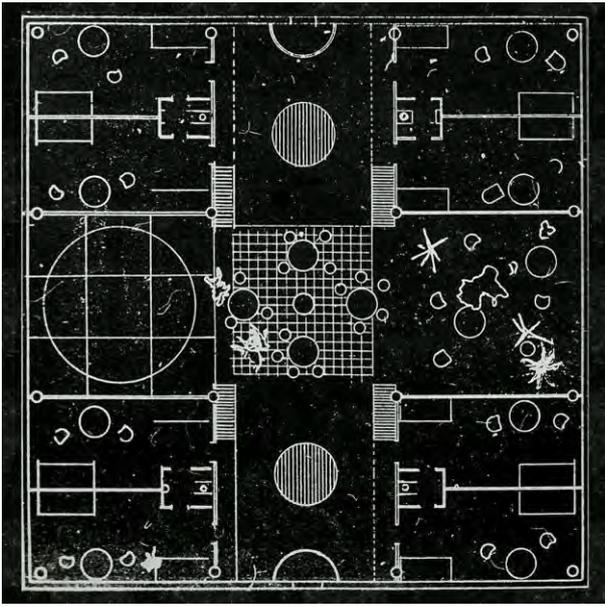
Accident? (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, 2014).

⁴⁷ Beth Gott, "Ecology of root use by the Aborigines of southern Australia", in *Archaeology in Oceania* 17, (1982): 59-66.

⁴⁸ See Deborah Bird-Rose, *Nourishing Terrains* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

⁴⁹ Bruce Pascoe, op. cit., 138.

V. Care



Ivan Leonidov, *Plan of a Communal House, Magnitogorsk, USSR, 1930.*

Across the world people constantly engage in forms of commoning: within the household, in schools, in community gardens, on the workplace.⁵⁰ These practices take place within a system – that of financial capitalism – that lets them be just as long as it can extract profit from it. For instance, a corporation might encourage its employees’ carpooling or childcare initiatives as ultimately it will reap the benefits of a more cohesive and well organized workforce. However, systems of commoning can become dangerous to the status quo when they manage to destabilize accepted notions such as profit, ownership, or the family. Western institutions – the state first and foremost – have sought to repress islands of commoning that threaten the conventional settlement of the age of capitalism. Strikingly, this repression does not stop at the physical, actual dismantling of these islands, but it also involves the rewriting of a narrative that portrays the commoners in a negative light, as uneducated enemies of progress – that is to say, profit, or, better, accumulation. A response to the ecological crisis therefore has to produce not only solutions, but also a new imaginary that can find in these repressed examples a source of inspiration. The ecological and the political are inextricably linked, and they cannot be separated from issues of form, representation,

and even aesthetics.

James Defilippis argued that many of the examples of community action he studied were swallowed up by the market precisely because they did not conceive of themselves as oppositional to the system, but just as alternatives.⁵¹ Authorities and commercial competitors didn’t quite see the situation that way: they clearly perceived commoning islands as enemies. If we follow Defilippis’ logic, it is crucial to recognize the oppositional character of community organization, or local commoning, or islands of commoning. This oppositional character can be defined as antagonism: a form of self-awareness, self-representation, and political consciousness that draws a line vis-à-vis what a community *cannot* accept.

In many ways, such antagonistic charge was present in the North American utopias; however, their protagonists were often unclear as to the way the very settlement form, and its architecture, could contribute to the construction of a new narrative. And indeed, architects are most often tasked with giving form to practices that are already existing, reinforcing processes rather than spearheading them. However, a rare historical moment in which architects have been called to actively reimagine a form of life that was antagonistic to its antecedents is the first decade and a half after the Russian revolution of 1917. The most interesting projects developed in this exceptional conjuncture have not been realized, but they are a significant example of the effort of a group of architects and economists who sought to undo altogether the settlement principle we inherited from Western capitalism.

The most extreme example was probably the scheme developed in 1930 by a team of members of OSA – Association of Contemporary Architects – led by architects Mikhail Barschch and Mosej Ginzburg. Barschch, Ginzburg and their associates presented this scheme in three iterations that differed in some design aspects but can be discussed as a single principle as the project for a ‘Green City’.⁵² Green City represented a complete rejection of the city as we know it.⁵³ While a railway system provided a linear backbone to organize a critical mass of housing, industry, and leisure facilities, the settlement form was not envisaged as a linear city but rather as a constellation in which buildings could spread out in the vastness of the forest surrounding the backbone. Although the Green City would have a form and an orientation, it had no centre, nor

⁵⁰ For an extensive discussion of commoning as practice, as well as of its political meaning, see Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: Principles for the Transition to Postcapitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

⁵¹ Defilippis, op. cit., 12.

⁵² See Pier Vittorio Aureli, Martino Tattara, “The Forest and the Cell: Notes on Mosej Ginzburg’s Green City”, in *Harvard Design Magazine* Vol. 45 (2018), 18-26.

⁵³ The work of the OSA group is described by Anatole Kopp – who labelled their attitude as ‘deurbanist’ – in *Town And Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917–1935*, trans. Thomas E. Burton (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 163–86.

real hierarchy. The proposal coupled the possibility of a very large scale strategy of boundary commoning, with a local organization that would empower communities to make their own decision independently; the idea that the revolution would ultimately do away with the state altogether was still present in this scheme, although it had been already dispensed it in reality. Not by chance Friedrich Engels had titled one of his most influential essays “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State”:⁵⁴ the deep connection between these three institutions was very clear in the minds of the early Russian revolutionaries and of the OSA architects, and Green City attacks all the three of them. It dissolved the family through typological experimentation, the state through the establishment of a constellation of localities, and it erased the very principle of property by making all land a commons. Stretching endlessly, maybe to the extremes of Siberia, the City would be nothing more than the commonwealth of a myriad islands that could be as small as the unit of an individual citizen: and in fact the heart of the proposal was not so much the infrastructural ribbon, but, rather, the scattering of one-person cells that Ginzburg imagined spreading out into the forest.⁵⁵ This extreme individualization of the living unit, however, was not meant as a plea for solitude and isolation, but, rather as the indication that the forest – the natural ground – should become to the inhabitants the actual living ground, the place where encounters, intellectual exchange and play could happen. Individual huts would be a mere space of shelter and reproduction, seasonally needed or abandoned depending on the rhythm of the individual inhabitant, an inhabitant who would be liberated from traditional ties and hierarchies. While it was never implemented,⁵⁶ Green City remains an inspiring attempt to construct a settlement form that is resolutely new. Moreover, in the project the forest does not become a productive field – a reserve of timber, or a place to be colonized and farmed. It is simply itself, a land that can occasionally give to its inhabitants something – wood, mushrooms, fish – but that also requires respect and responsibility. Ironically, the OSA architects might not have known that the Siberian forest had been inhabited for millennia in a very similar way by semi-nomadic tribes who had to be ‘taught’ by Russian colonizers what sedentism, ownership, and accumulation were – as late as the XIX

century.⁵⁷

Green City does not only show us that architects can have great agency when it comes to the redefinition of a new form of life, but also that an architectural expression is needed in order to give consistency to the political claims of this way of settling *otherwise*.

It is possible to see architecture as the mediator of a long transition between nomadism and sedentism that has not been completed yet – and that perhaps never will, or never should be. In this transition, the settlement form has become instrumental to the construction of a violent and exploitative relationship between man and its surroundings. It will only be possible to overcome this condition if local communities will understand and manage their own resources with an awareness that has been erased by centuries of large-scale state and market structures. Such community control should not be seen as a regressive form of nostalgia, but merely as the most direct way to stimulate responsibility and to develop responses that take into account the specificities of a given habitat. Moreover, local control does not mean isolation, or rejection of state and market: any contemporary project – be it political or architectural – has to relate to these institutions, and settlement islands should work in order to make them become more equitable and sustainable. While the state up until now has served as the protector of private interests, it is not impossible to imagine it becoming an instrument of wealth redistribution rather than accumulation; similarly, market exchange can exist even without the production of extreme social asymmetries, if profit and accumulation are taken out of the equation. What settlement islands can do, therefore, is to function as examples where the relationships between local and global, man and land, labour and wealth are reframed in a way that sees every single actor – from the individual to the community to the state – as directly responsible not only of his or her own happiness, but of the common wealth of all and everything.

This pursuit is not just a pragmatic one, as it also entails the rethinking of human relationships: such islands of local awareness are only possible if we engage in the practice of commoning, and if we question not only ownership, but also the state, and the family.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, translated by Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Kerr, 1902). Original German version first published in Zurich in 1884.

⁵⁵ Although Green City was a collective project, archival material supports the idea that Ginzburg’s own input was particularly important when it came to the development of the individual cells, as shown in Moisej Ginzburg, *Dwelling: Five Years’ Work on The Problem Of the Habitation*, trans. John Nicolson (London: Fontanka, 2017).

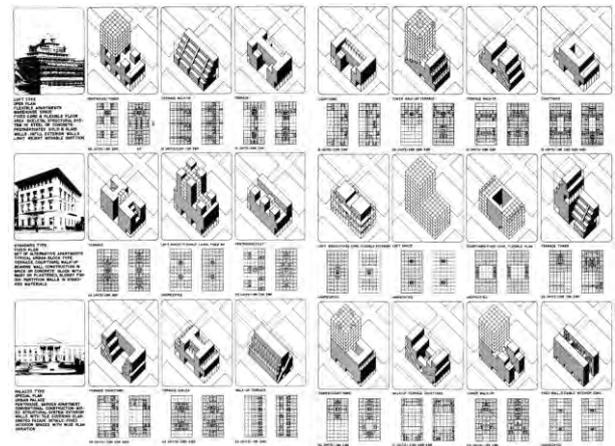
⁵⁶ The work of the OSA group could be read as implicitly critical of the top-down control exercised by the state over the local soviets; not by

chance sociologist Mikhail Okhitovich, who gave the group its ideological and economic ambitions, was sent to a gulag and eventually executed in 1937 for his political positions.

⁵⁷ On the colonization of Siberia see Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011). The culture of the Siberian Native Tribes is discussed in James Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia’s North Asian Colony 1581-1990* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

In its oppositional potential, the construction of an island might seem an act of rejection more than anything else – and yet, the project of commoning islands should be animated by a principle that is fundamentally inclusive: care.⁵⁸ As highlighted by Elke Krasny,⁵⁹ the current crisis is first and foremost a crisis of reproduction – reproduction of ‘natural’ resources, and social reproduction. The social and the environmental are two sides of the same issue, the endgame of millennia of asymmetries painstakingly constructed through culture, technology, institutions – and architecture. Shifting to a perspective in which each individual’s relationship with his/her habitat is one of care is therefore the most basic step that can be taken against the status quo. Rejecting accumulation therefore does not mean to embrace a life of suffering: it means taking the actual amount (of things, of space, of food) that will make us happy without harming someone else. Rejecting the state does not mean to advocate chaos, but, rather, to take direct responsibility of what we do to each other and to the land at large – for, after all, we might not live on the same land all our life, which means that the whole planet is our home. Rejecting the family does not mean disregarding the ties of love that keep a household together, but to free the people we love from being obligated to serve a specific purpose in the system. All of these conditions describe acts of care – for the environment, for other humans, for our own bodies. The island can encourage an architecture of care as it is a space its inhabitants understand and read as a consistent body. In its finiteness, the inhabitant reads the island as his/her space, as the sphere where care begins to take material form and have material effects. The sea of urbanization – of sprawl, of colonization, of resource extraction – has blunted our perception of what each of us can do for our environment. In contrast to this, the island is not only the place where we settle – even if just for a while – but also the starting point from where can depart in the attempt, ultimately, to understand the logic of the sea.

VI. Project



O. M. Ungers, *Roosevelt Island Housing*, 1975

The projects will address existing settlements that can be a part of a city, a suburban subdivision or a rural village; the choice of context is up to the individual participant. In the development of the thesis, the site selected will be important not just as context in its own right, but also as an exemplary case study that may stand for a larger urban phenomenon. The studio is organized in three steps: analysis, design, and representation. As in previous years we regard the moment of analysis not as a precondition, but as an integral moment of the design process itself. The work will start from an in-depth research of the history of the chosen settlement, by analyzing the social and political conditions that produced it. We will specifically focus on issues of property and on the way property was spatialised throughout the architecture of the settlement, from the subdivision to the scale of domestic space. The research will tackle both the inhabitants as subjects, and the forces at play in the development of the settlement. The most important questions will be: what prompted the introduction of property titles? What political regime shaped the settlement? What economic and planning policies were at work and why and how they changed? What were the juridical frameworks that transformed the commons into private land? Which were the conflicts at play? What kind of architectural typologies were introduced? What kind of habits did these architectural typologies presuppose?

In short: what was the political economy and the resulting morphology of the settlement?

It is important to emphasize that the research will simultaneously focus on both planning and architecture – to the scale of its most detailed resolution. In the studio we will assume that apparently ‘innocent’ details such as the

⁵⁸ Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny (eds), *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for A Broken Planet* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

⁵⁹ Elke Krasny, “Care”, in *AA Files* 76 (2019), 38-39.

height of a fence or the position of a front door are crucial indicators of what kind of policy and what kind of habit or subject was implied in the planning regulations that produced the settlement.

In the last decade planning has been divorced from architecture. This has given the impression – especially to architects – that in the late phase of capitalism planning, and especially state-planning, has disappeared to be replaced by an unbound ‘free market’ condition. This impression is deeply misleading: in order to work, the market is always supported by state regulations which are often as responsible for social inequality as is capital. Today, planning policies are still at work and the greed of investors is not only protected by these policies, but often encouraged by them. Only the state has the juridical power to grant *rights* and often these rights are meant to preserve the status quo rather than guarantee social justice. For this reason, it will be very important to analyse and question current policies and regulations and attempt to devise strategies of commoning that can gradually alter and transform the existing condition.

In Term 1, both the historical analysis of the settlement and a careful reading of existing policies will lead each student to produce a written essay as well as drawing an ‘analogous map’: a single drawing that will serve as summary of the themes at stake in the research.

The analysis and the analogous map will lead, at the beginning of Term 2, to the formulation of an individual, specific brief whose main goal will be to reimagine strategies of ‘border commoning’ and self-sufficiency. The brief will be fine-tuned to the historical analysis and it will put forward realistic scenarios of how communities can organize and enhance their commonwealth. The brief should be bespoke to the selected site, but it can also refer to other concrete examples found in places where community commoning is already happening in the form of Community Land Trusts, communal gardens, food cooperatives, grassroot credit unions and so on.

At the beginning of Term 2, each participant should frame the main urban and architectural strategies that might be realistically implemented. These strategies will go from very simple gestures such as removing a fence or building a sidewalk, to more complex design operations such as proposing a radical retrofitting or rebuilding of the housing stock, to more comprehensive transformations that will entail the total transformation of the settlement. The most important issue at stake is that projects – as much they will be radical – will not start from a tabula rasa. Every project will tackle existing conditions where even the most simple design operation can have important consequences. It will be up to the individual to choose the scope of the intervention, considering the outcomes of the research developed in Term 1.

We would like to stress the fact that our focus on simple gestures is not a question of interest in simplicity as a value in itself, but, rather, an attempt to reimagine options that can be implemented by anybody, that are legible and clear in their intentions, and that can therefore be discussed, accepted or rejected.

The project will be illustrated by few and strategic drawings – architectural line drawings in Term 2, and visual renderings in Term 3 – which will not just document the final outcome, but the entire process from the beginning to its possible completion. Each project will tackle different scales at once: we will work simultaneously at the territorial scale, and at the domestic scale. The latter will have a particularly strategic importance because, as we have seen above, the domestic scale has always proved to be the most impactful in the shaping of settlements, both in terms of form and politics.

Another important aspect of the project that will be taken in consideration is the issue of labour. Capital profits immensely from the unpaid work performed at home in activities such as cleaning, cooking, but especially *caring*. Lately, the logic of unpaid work has been expanded from the realm of the house to the realm of work itself, which, as in the case of domestic work, is largely unpaid. The big challenge of the project will be to reclaim labour from this logic in a way that is self-valorising for the community, rather than a form of extraction of surplus value.

After the main design strategy will be fixed in its overall frame, in Term 3 we will focus on representation, which we consider a vital part of the project. For Diploma 14 representation is not just the production of beautiful pictures, but also a possibility to visualize something that is not a mere object, but a *process*. We will try to make visible something – a strategy of commoning – that takes time to be develop and is more about maintenance rather than a final product. This is way to challenge conventional architectural images, which tend to illustrate a desired endgame or outcome rather than exploring the process through which we construct and inhabit our world.

VII. Studio Structure



The Cure in 1982

Every Tuesday afternoon we meet for a unit pin-up; we review every project in a collective feedback session. On Thursdays we are available for individual desk tutorials. During Term 1, we run a 6-session Open Seminar series on Wednesday afternoons – although this is not, strictly speaking, part of the unit's programme, participation is encouraged. Generally speaking, we look forward to a shared debate and exchange of ideas: while the projects reflect the specific position of the author, and therefore the output is strongly personal, the process is collective, and we hope that the unit's participants will, as much as possible, work together and help each other.

5th year students will hand in their Technical Studies report following the 'late option' schedule. From the end of Term 1, we will work very closely with the TS tutors to help each graduating student develop a technical book which is a fundamental component of the final portfolio. We see TS as an opportunity to expand and deepen the agency of the project: not a problem-solving endeavour, but, rather, a crucial moment of experimentation.

The unit trip will take place at the beginning of January, right before the start of Term 2. The destination will be in Europe. Students will book their own flight and accommodation; prices might vary but from experience we know the expense can be contained to £500 or less.

Black and white printing will be required in Term 2; in Term 3 some colour printing will be needed.

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