# 8. Designing, Sustaining and Defending Resilient Urban Commons: The Story of R-Urban

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The question of the commons is at the heart of the discussion on democracy. According to Toni Negri, the contemporary revolutionary project that is democracy is concerned with capturing, diverting, appropriating and reclaiming the commons. The commons, in turn, have been created or are emerging as a key constituent process1. It is a re-appropriation, and at the same time a re-invention.

The question of the commons is also directly related to the discussions on the major environmental challenges we face: climate change, resources depletion and related economic and social crises. The environmental crisis is also a political crisis, a crisis of democracy and a lack of collective control over the resources of our planet, which is indeed our biggest commons. Learning how to govern our planet as a commons is part of the imperative of becoming more resilient2. Resilience is a term used to characterize the way in which systems and societies adapt to externally imposed change3. We understand resilience as a transformative condition, which allows us not only to adapt but also to transform and re-invent our society towards a more balanced, more equitable way of living on Earth. Elinor Ostrom convincingly demonstrated that the commons could constitute a resilient alternative to the current way of governing the world’s resources4. She mainly studied traditional rural commons across different global contexts (exploring fisheries, forests, pastures) and has concluded on a number of principles on how commons can be successfully governed.

## Urban Commons

Sheila Foster and Christian Iaione, two leading scholars in the emerging field of urban commons, have shown that the conditions are far more complex in cities5. Urban commons are ‘constructed commons’ that need a complex governance system. They involve not only commoners but also other urban actors who are external to the community of commoners. These actors are often in multiple interactions with a commons: public actors such as municipalities and the state, private actors such as companies and organizations - as well as various other communities.

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Urban commons have to be understood, designed, supported and re-invented as part of a complex process of transition towards more resilient forms of governance of the cities. For this we need new institutions, new protocols, a whole new infrastructure and agents to manage this process. When we founded ‘atelier d’architecture autogérée’, a collective of architects, we asked ourselves what we as architects can contribute to this. We realised that designing and sustaining urban commons is a special challenge for architects: it obliges them to design collectively and accessibly. It requires them to take privilege and commodity out of design. In a long-term process of commoning, their design should assemble and mobilise, rather than segregate and exclude.

## R-Urban

This was the motivation for atelier d’architecture autogérée when we engaged with urban commons6. We started in 2001 with Ecobox, which was a community garden made out of recycled materials and a social-cultural center installed on a derelict site on Rue Pajol in Paris. We continued in 2006 with Passage 56 in the 20th *arrondissement*, which was a self-managed ‘ecological interstice’ instigating local ecological cycles in the neighborhood and enabling the production and recycling of most of its resources: electricity, water, compost and food. Although local, both of these self-managed projects generated local networks of urban commons, initiated by their stakeholders.

In 2008, we imagined a strategy model called R-Urban as an open-source framework that enables residents to play an active role in changing the city while at the same time changing their way of living in it7. The ‘R’ in R-Urban stands for ‘resilience’, a term that we understood in relation with the capacity of communities not only to take risks, but also to transform themselves in the face of rapid global economic and environmental changes. ‘R’ also signifies ‘resourcefulnes’, situating resilience in a positive light and relating it to the agency of community empowerment8.

Within the R-Uban framework we wanted to create a network of bottom-up resilience in order to give more agency to citizens and grassroots organizations around a series of self-managed collective hubs. These self-managed collective hubs host economic and cultural activities and everyday life practices that contribute to boosting the capacity of resilience within neighbourhoods. All of these hub also constitute a network of commons exploration, to develope and celebrate communities’ resources: space, skills, knowledge, labour and creativity.

## Designing

R-Urban has been conceived and initiated by architectural designers, yet the framework itself is co-produced and open to a wide range of actors. The first step in the implementation of the R-Urban strategy is the installation of physical infrastructure that would create assets for these new self-managed collective hubs. This can be achieved by using available land as well as other existing assets that could be used temporarily. In these spaces, change can be initiated, tested, learned and practiced.

The second stage would involve stakeholders who could use the space provided to share resources and training materials. Other allied organizations and initiatives would also be able to be plugged into the proposed network of civic hubs. The strategy would enable locally closed ecological circuits at the level of the neighbourhoods, balancing the activities of production and consumption: CO2 emissions would be reduced, water and compost carefully managed and waste would be collected and transformed locally under the control of the people involved in the network.

In 2009, we succesfully pitched this model to the municipality of Colombes, a suburban city near Paris. We subsequently set up a partnership for a EU Life+ bid on environmental governance, with which we were successful. In 2011, we identified assets for three possible civic hubs: one for urban agriculture, one for recycling and eco-construction, and the third for cooperative housing.

Agrocité was the first hub, which we set up on a social housing estate. The plot belonged to the city and would be available for about 10 years. Based on this projected timeline, we imagined a demountable building, alongside a 1700 square meter plot of land that would included an experimental farm, a community-garden and a pedagogical garden. Another building included a small market, a café, a greenhouse and educational facilities.

The building and the site would function themselves under principles of economic and ecological circuits. The architecture and spatial organisation were meant to reveal and showcase these circuits, which otherwise would have remained invisible. These circuits would be part of a network that performs at a local scale, with the idea that it could progressively scale up to city and regional level. We started with the community garden as a way of engaging with the local community and the first harvest took place before we began to build. For the construction of the building we used re-cycled materials to showcase the ecological principles on which the strategy was based. From the beginning, we had an economic concern about the function of the building. Our aim was to host explicit economic activities (such as a market or café) at the same time as collective activities that have to do with informal social economies, such as exchange of skills and knowledge and bartering9.

We also prototyped a number of ecological devices. For example, we constructed a water-filtration device that was self-built with specialist help. It was the first of its kind in an urban setting. We also tested compost-heating, green walls, drip irrigation and a rainwater container to collect and use rainwater. We compiled quite sophisticated studies on watering and cultivation techniques for the poor urban soil we inherited. Urban agriculture in densely built suburban estates is a completely new field of practice, which explains why many of these techniques and devices needed to be invented.

Recyclab was the second hub we implemented, this time as a social enterprise. It is a recycling and eco-construction unit comprised of several facilities for storing and reusing locally salvaged materials, by transforming them into eco-construction elements. We set up a ‘fablab’ for residents to use. Both hubs were built with ‘reversable design’ on temporarily available public land. They could easily be relocated and rebuilt at any time. The reversibility is an ecological principle implying that the site can be repurposed by other urban programmes, according to evolving needs and conditions. The building itself can be dismantled and repurposed in a different context for different users.

The third hub, Ecohab, was planned to be a cooperative housing hub. Unfortunately, the project was blocked by municipal politicians.

## Sustaining

Commoning involves making and sharing that which supports a community. The practice of commoning is at the same time the practice of becoming community: working out how to access, use, care for, take responsibility for and distribute its benefits. Commoning can take place on private or public property. It can be practiced around open-access resources, such as the atmosphere or waterways, over which there are no formal rules of ownership. It is very important to remember that all those involved in the R-Urban hubs are inhabitants of a working-class neighbourhood. Many are unemployed, and some are retired, but they have become the main stakeholders in these projects based on their self-employment or voluntary work.

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In the Agrocité hub there was a local market where produce from the garden, objects from Recyclab and local handicrafts were sold. Local economy and entrepreneurship were actively supported. A good example is one of the inhabitants who we supported to set up a worm compost business. We set up a compost farm with him and he produced compost for the garden in exchange for using the land for his wormery. He also set up a Compost School and received accreditation as a compost specialist trainer. He now makes a living as a trainer. Many local municipalities need such a specialist, since organic waste is now processed by public services. In two years, he has trained 160 compost masters and many of his pupils have now set up their own compost businesses.

R-Urban advocates a specific cultural and political change, which is to change *how we do things* in order to change our future. Our hope is that new collective practices of civic resilience can emerge, which both reduce the ecological footprint and contribute to reinventing relationships between individuals and collectives.

Such transformational change must take place at the micro-scale of each individual to enable the building of a culture of co-produced resilience at the macro-scale. Commoning means not only having the capacity to acquire space and managing it, but also having the capacity to build relationships that can be maintained and strenghtened into the future. The work of R-Urban has produced ecological repair in a region where much of the land was destitute. Non-human actors contributed to this work – plants, birds, insects, worms, bacteria – that somehow became part of the commoning community. ‘More-than-human communities’10 emerged around the R-Urban eco-commons.

Collective governance, as Elinor Ostrom demonstrated, is an essential issue for a commoning community11. Agreements are needed and a shared concerns must be expressed, not to destroy but to support community resources. In our case this was initiated through a series of gatherings and talks. Some were about decision-making, others were on very technical subjects, concerning how ecological loops could work. It was also important to bring external people to these sites, such as other organisations, institutions and researchers. This meant opening up the co-production process to those that were not the immediate users. As well as the crucial participation of the neighbourhood, the R-Urban governance strategy involved many local, regional and international actors. The project enabled a trans-local anchoring with the aim of greater sustainability.

## Defending

Some institutional partners where more critical than others. One of the key institutional partners was the municipality, which was effectively the landowner. After the local elections in 2014, all those municipal agents involved in the foundation of the project left. They were replaced by a new right-wing municipal team with a very ambitious mayor. She was ideologically against the project and she decided that the municipality would stop the partnership and reclaim the space occupied by the R-Urban hubs for new private developments. This demonstrated how much the process of commoning depends on politics. We were missing a Partner-State12. It turned out that that was critical for the transition towards commons-based urban governance, to facilitate citizen initiatives and to guarantee sustainability beyond the whims of political cycles.

The local decision to dismantle R-Urban triggered a wave of solidarity amongst researchers and residents of Colombes. They have since engaged in different forms of protest against the new political reality. This was a new stage within the commoning process, which was now framed as an advocacy campaign and political struggle to defend the socio-ecological commons, to challenge the local government and claim recognition of the success of the project. A protest petition claiming the positive impact of Agrocité and the other urban units has collected 17,000 signatures. Finally, we lost the case in court for the simple reason that current laws protect private property and do not value the interests of common use or the social and ecological benefits of a civic project. We realised that continuing the opposition on site in Colombes would have only drained the energy of the community. We chose to give up on resistance politics and embrace the adversity by turning it into a new positive start. We decided to relocate the project to the neighbouring city of Gennevilliers, at a small distance from the former location, to be able to allow the users to continue with the project.

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In 2017, Agrocité was reconstructed in Gennevilliers and Recyclab was dismantled and rebuilt in Nanterre. Other municipalities have also shown interest and we have commenced R-Urban Bagneux, where we are currently building two new units. There is also a R-Urban unit in London. Instead of weakening us, our loss in Colombes emboldened us. R-Urban will grow. In order to strengthen the R-Urban commons, we have thickened institutional support and diversified our alliances. There is now a charter, a development agency and a regional network. The R-Urban network now has seven hubs with more than 500 citizens actively involved in using and managing the hubs. We hope that R-Urban will further grow into a civic movement for resilient urban commons13.