Ross Beveridge: Welcome to The Urban Political Podcast. My name is Ross Beveridge, and I'm here with co editor Markus Kip. In this episode, we discuss how we might democratize housing. In particular, we discuss ideas and practices of housing commons, cooperatives, and the role of the state, drawing on examples from Europe and North America.

We have a guest moderator and three further guests. Moderating is Matt Thompson from the University of Liverpool. Joining Matt are Mara Ferreri from the University of Northumbria, Amanda Horan from the University of the District of Columbia, and David Madden from the London School of Economics.

So over to you, Matt.

Matt Thompson: Brilliant. Well, Thank you very much, Ross and Markus for organizing this discussion and inviting me to moderate it. I'm particularly excited to get us all, us four, in the room today, as I don't think we ever have been, at least I haven't met you guys before, not all of you anyway.

And so I'm really excited to broach some of the questions that I'm going to raise in the next five minutes in this sort of introductory framing and also sort of say a little bit about my interest in this area, too. So let's get going with that.

I mean, since the dawn of industrial capitalism, when a state dispossessed commoners from the means of subsistence and pushed them into selling their labor power in cities, we've arguably been dealing with a near perpetual housing crisis that is extremely difficult and challenging conditions, but providing decent housing for all.

So in fast growing cities in Southeast Asia and Africa we see severe overcrowding, poor quality living environments, alongside the associated dispossession and displacement in rural areas that is driving the explosive growth of urbanization. In the UK, where I'm based, we've been talking about a chronic housing shortage, a lack of affordability for the best part of half a century, not longer.

Across Europe and North America, more broadly and increasingly globally, we see the state both national and local embroiled in processes of state-led redevelopment, state-led gentrification in order to capitalize urban land, leading to violent dispossession and displacement. In fact, planetary gentrification and accumulation by dispossession are arguably the common global urban experience today.

These conditions are becoming so acute, in fact, that many scholars and commentators are talking about the return of the housing question. Stuart Hawkins, for instance. The housing question was originally posed by Engels in his 1872 work of the same name. In it, he identified the central conundrum caused by capitalism for the working class and everyday life:

"That persistently poor quality living environments, scarcity, inequalities, deprivation, and alienation produced by the labor capital relation cannot possibly be resolved without abolishing the capitalist mode of production itself." Engels divided the anarchist crudon and his followers for believing that isolated solutions to the housing question could ever resolve these issues.

But the kinds of localized small scale initiatives such as co-ops and communes that we might call housing commons today, promoted by utopian socialists like Proudhon, were in fact just utopian dreams that misapprehend the structural nature of the problem.

Engel's devastating critique was prescient in many ways. He saw correctly how the bourgeois reformist, as he called it, solution of regenerating deprived areas of housing through state intervention, method he named after Haussmann, the man responsible for Paris's transformation from medieval alleys into grand boulevards, would simply reproduce the problem anew and displaced poor conditions elsewhere.

This in many ways anticipated the difficulties of post-war urban renewal and modernist comprehensive redevelopment, ambitiously advanced by the state in many countries across the world in that post war period and in the interwar period, but which too often produced new slums elsewhere, or even in the very same modern buildings, only a few decades later after they were built.

Partly in response to these state failures to address the housing question, the global movement for reappropriating the housing commons has emerged in recent decades, often taking the form of campaigns for different kinds of what some might call community-led housing, others call collaborative housing, and others still, quoting myself here, call collective housing alternatives.

These generally take the form of specific organizational and legal models, such as cooperatives, which perhaps we're most familiar with, co-housing more recently, and also community land trusts, for instance, but there's a host of many others. Under the banner of the commons, we see struggles for housing justice in very localized contexts, from defending against gentrification to contesting financialization to demanding greater democratic participation in state provided public housing.But these have sometimes even been connected up beyond the local to movements of the urban and translocal scale, so to demand the right to the city or to feed into anti austerity campaigning.

In some cases, such as in Barcelona, the platform for people affected by mortgages, PAH, a social movement aimed at resisting evictions resulting from foreclosures in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, has also played a part in expanding the housing commons, who supporting the establishment of co-ops, and was in many ways the platform for the launch of the municipalist movement in the city. The municipalist platform Barcelona en Comú, or Barcelona in Common, has evolved out of these housing struggles.

The [*now former*] mayor, Ada Colau, was one of the founding members of PAH. And Barcelona en Comú today is engaged in democratically transforming the local state from within, and democratizing the local economy through supporting the development of co-ops and commons. It is the inner bid to prefigure a post capitalist polity.

So there are some really interesting openings here presented by the new municipalist movement for which Barcelona is seen as the vanguard, or the local state to protect and expand the housing commons through this process of state institutional occupation and transformation. However, there are obviously deep contradictions in such an endeavor.

For many autonomous Marxists and anarchist theorists of the commons, such as Peter Leinbau [*?*], the state and capital are antithetical to any notion of the commons whatsoever. The state is the ultimate agent and enforcer of enclosure through its fundamental role in upholding private property rights. Yet at the same time, the organizational articulations of the Commons, like community land trusts and co-ops, must be framed in the legal terms of property in order to access the benefits that come from legislative recognition, policy support, public funding, and state protection from capital and the market.

So I guess the questions that I'd like to consider today, and I hope we can touch upon through various different examples is: what are the possibilities for expanding the housing commons in this current conjuncture through renewed engagement with the state? What are the costs of that engagement, what are the contradictions? What potential is there for housing commons movements to build new institutions for what we might call non-state public housing?

I'll very briefly just go into some of my own personal reasons for looking into this stuff. My PhD at the University of Manchester, close to a decade ago now, was looking at the urban CLT movement as it was emerging across the UK. I was particularly interested in Liverpool, and ended up studying Liverpool and two urban community land trusts in that city, Homebaked and Granby Four Streets.

And I began working with activists to help identify how they might jump through various policy and legal hoops to try and get funding and institutionalize their projects to realize these visions for their neighborhoods. They were putting them in place through the CLT framing. And I began digging into the history of the city and the history of housing struggles, particularly around commons and collective alternatives to public housing.

And I found that actually many of the seeds for the present day activism in Granby and Anfield were stoned in previous waves of experimentation, particularly the 1970s housing cooperative movement. This has been described as Liverpool's co-operative revolution or co-op spring, and it set in motion a kind of a new model for developing public housing, what some at the time called public sector housing 2.0.

It's a strange coming together of the co-op movement with its own independent autonomous history with the public sector. So in the 1970s, there were some legislative moves towards funding this new system of massive state-central subsidies for developing new build co-ops. And the council as well in the local council retained nomination rights for some of the allocations of the housing. So this is a strange coming together, a kind of public common partnership, as we might call it today. Or what Mara might call a public cooperative nexus.

So, I published this research as an open access book with Liverpool University Press last year called Reconstructing Public Housing, Liverpool's Hidden History of Collective Alternatives.

And the book is really concerned with thinking through how to expand the housing commons through institutionalization and using the powerful tools of the state and not bureaucratic organization more generally. Without succumbing to the bureaucratization, the commodification and the co-option of those things by the state and capital.

And now I'm doing similar work, thinking about it at a larger scale across urban environments through looking at the municipalist movement. So I guess today for me, I'm bringing together two areas of my research. And as I said at the beginning, I'm really excited to be speaking with David, Amanda and Mara today. Each of their work has been really inspirational to the development of my own thinking in these areas.

So, for instance, your work, David, especially with Peter Marcuse in your book, In Defense of Housing, has been particularly inspiring in terms of thinking through the political economy of housing, and the notion of crisis as well. So this, this idea of crisis as being a near permanent condition of capital for housing, particularly,

And your work, Amanda, so particularly your book, Carving Out the Commons, on tenant organizing and housing co-ops in Washington D.C. I found it resonates for a great deal with my own exploration of similar things in Liverpool. Particularly found that the very interesting exploration of how maintaining the hard fought for commons that require maintaining in the long run needs balancing against this more expansionary idea of sort of appropriating new commons.

And your work, Mara, especially with Lorenzo Vidal recently on this idea of the public cooperative nexus and public policies for developing cooperative movement more generally comes to very similar conclusions to my own on public common partnerships and I'd be very interested to hear about what you think around those policy mechanisms and how contradictions entailed with trying to create the kind of non-state public housing in going forward.

With all that in mind, let's begin with you, David, if we can because I think you provide this overarching framing very well indeed in your book with Peter Marcuse. So let's begin with the context of the housing crisis. So what is the housing crisis? What defines it? What's driving it? It'd be interesting to hear how you think it might be different from the housing question as originally posed by Engels at the dawn of it.

David Madden: Thanks a lot, Matt for that introduction and for having all of us here. It's really exciting. I think that the housing crisis, first of all, is a term that we need to be slightly skeptical of. Because as you'll have seen, it's used a lot by many different people for many different reasons. And I think there's some very conservative applications of this concept, and there are some more critical and sort of system transforming applications of it as well. And so I think it's important to be clear when we're talking about it.

I think critical understanding of what the housing crisis points to, as you say ‘a setting angle’, is this ongoing production of residential inequality and disempowerment and dispossession. So it is something that in different times and in different places and different historical periods, capitalism has done in different ways, but it's been relatively constant that the people at the bottom of the class hierarchy, that capitalism necessarily produces, generally are not living in adequate accommodation and the housing crisis names this structural feature of capitalism.

It's something that is produced in an ongoing fashion. You can even say it's one of the crisis tendencies of capitalism. Capitalism produces a class of people and does not produce adequate housing. I think, obviously, the housing question has undergone a lot of transformations since Engels' time.

David Madden: Today, we're dealing with concepts like financialization, precarity, the whole suite of concepts that points to the specific forms of housing dispossession that people experience today. So today it is a matter of privatization of public housing or council housing, which I'm sure we'll talk about a lot in this conversation. It's a matter of working class housing being bought up by big corporate landlords and made unaffordable. It's a matter of different forms of repressive political movements of interfacing with the housing system in different ways. So it's a varied term and a varied question. But I think it points to the structural production of housing inequality and of insufficient housing for people at the bottom or, even in many cases towards the middle, of capitalist class hierarchies.

Matt Thompson: Brilliant. Thanks, David. Just a quick follow up question. Do you buy Engels' general point that we will be with crisis continually, unless we actually get past capitalism?

David Madden: Well, I think Engels had good reason to take that position. I think it makes sense in the context of what he's saying.

I don't think it should be taken to mean that you can't do anything about housing problems or housing struggles in any sort of capitalist context. It may be that you can't solve the housing question under capitalism, but it doesn't mean you can't change it, it doesn't mean you can't transform it.

And I think ultimately the housing system can be altered. And I think if it came to a point where everyone did have adequate housing, I think we would look at this system and clearly it would not be capitalist anymore. So I think it's completely misinterpreting what Engels was saying to use it as a sort of justification for political quietism.

But I think a really important lesson to take from Engels is that housing struggles are necessarily connected to so many other struggles. Struggles in the workplace, political conflict and struggles within the state. And you can't see it as a sort of separate specialized issue that can only lead to technocratic reformist approaches that might alter things in the margins, but are not going to fundamentally change this place of housing within society and basic questions about who is able to live in adequate housing.

Matt Thompson: Okay, great. I think you've alluded to some of the potency of the commons as an imaginary or a discourse or a movement for thinking through how to address this crisis that capitalism reduces.

So I'd like to move on to Amanda and ask you Amanda: What is the salience of the commons really if we take a step back here and think?

I mean, I went into perhaps a bit too much detail around the commons and its different permutations. But what are the commons here in relation to housing? Why has it gained so much traction amongst activists and particularly amongst scholars? I mean, it's what a lot of us talk about in some disciplines, particularly geography.

And how does the commons articulate a compelling alternative imaginary to capitalist and to also state forms of housing? Sorry, not a small question.

Amanda Huron: No, that's great. When I think about the commons - and this is a bit overly simplistic, but I think it's useful- I think about a resource that has been largely decommodified and is collectively governed by the members, the people who make use of that resource. And of course that's the practice of the commons, the sort of practice of commoning, this sort of social act that is really at the heart of it, of producing, creating, reclaiming, maintaining the commons over time.

I think this idea of decommodification, or at least partial decommodification and collective ownership and or governance (and we can apply that to housing) is compelling. It's so clear to people around the world.

As we just heard from David there is - built into the capitalist system - this is this fact that people at a certain level in society simply cannot access the housing that they need to thrive. And so it's very clear that we need a new way to approach housing. And I think it's very obvious to lots of people that what we need to do is remove the profit motive from housing. So to decommodify it in some sense.

I'm interested in this conversation because I'm very interested in this question about the relationship between the commons and the state and this concept of non-state public housing is interesting to me. I'm interested to hear more about what that could look like.

But I think there's a recognition that public housing, at least if we look at the United States context , was this great idea that was never fully funded, fully implemented, you might say, in the United States. And there's sort of a distrust of the state. Of course, that's true not just in the United States, but in many parts of the world.

And so this idea that the people who dwell in this housing are actually the ones who govern it instead of having the state as a landlord is compelling to people who don't think that the state can actually provide the kind of housing that they need.

And so I think that the compelling vision is this idea of people who are building power collectively through claiming and living in and governing this common space, their housing. So that's a very compelling, as you say, alternative imaginary to both the capitalist real estate market and to what we would call in the United States, public housing, state provided housing. That is the compelling vision.

I'll leave it at that. But I do think that It's important to rethink the role that the state could be playing in housing provision.

Matt Thompson: Yeah, interesting. Thank you, Amanda. It's at the beginning you talked about decommodification as the kind of distinguishing factor, I guess, of the commons.

But of course decommodification is something that the state can do too, right? Through public housing. But then of course, as you developed your answer, it moves down towards the path of sort of democratization or participation in housing which sort of does something perhaps which the state in the past has struggled to provide. And I guess that's the clue in that phrasing, you know, it provides paternalism to the state, perhaps. And just like you,I'm really interested in trying to find out how we might reform public housing through this concept of non state. And think about the state in new ways which may be difficult in this conjunction, as I said earlier.

Okay, so let's move on to Mara and it'd be great to hear a bit from, from you, Mara, around this concept of non state public housing as it's been raised, and I first came across this concept in reading your co author, Lorenzo Vidal's work on this kind of housing in Denmark and Uruguay. And then again in both your work around this public cooperative nexus concept. So maybe you can talk us through a little bit about this idea of non-state public housing and other kinds of terminology that does a better or worse job of capturing what we're trying to get at here.

Mara Ferreri: Thank you, Matt, and thank you for inviting me to this discussion. I think what is really intriguing about this idea of the non-state public housing is to refocus the question on what do we mean by public housing. And I think what really distinguishes the current moment from, say, the middle of the 19th century, is that we have a wealth of experiences of more or less successful or unsuccessful or variously successful forms of public policy towards forms of democratization of housing, forms of decommodification of housing. And I think what really characterizes the current conjuncture is a certain poverty of imaginary that comes from a neoliberal discourse around the failure of public housing on the one hand, and also about the actual practical residualization of publicly backed and publicly informed and funded housing in different contexts.

And of course, I'm very aware that I'm speaking from a global north perspective here, but even moving from the UK as a place and a specific history to say Southern European context, public housing has very much is banded around as a concept. But at the same time, its histories can be incredibly different and also can really point in different directions.

So for instance, in the case of Spain, I've been lucky enough to do quite a bit of research recently around the emergence of this new cooperative housing movement, particularly in conjunction with the municipalist movements in Catalonia. In Spain, public housing was very much geared towards Publicly backed homeownership.

And so public housing. It's not what in other contexts is understood as publicly built and publicly managed social rented housing. So inherently, that was a type of public housing that was built to promote homeownership. And therefore, it's a kind of public housing that does not have the long term horizon of decommodification as its aim.

To begin with there is that question of what do we mean by public? When we are discussing or when we're proposing alternatives, I think that's very special and historically specific. And on this point, I'm an avid reader of your work, Matt and Amanda and David, of course, but in terms of taking that historical approach and really thinking about and looking at what were the debates at a specific moment in time around the types of provision that the state was being in many ways lobbied to generate in many cases from nothing or from a philanthropic tradition.

And again, it's interesting to think about how some of these more alternative, alternative in terms of self managed form of decommodified housing which we could imagine as commons, emerged also from that critique of top-down paternalistic management of housing. And one example of this is the whole movement that emerged around mass squatting in London in the 1970s, where a certain governance and a certain policy opening enabled - or some would argue re-codified and reframed - what was very much a reclaiming of housing and self-management of housing. It was not necessarily against forms of privatization and commodification, but it was very much in many cases against the type of public housing provision that was available at the time. Many of the co-ops that emerged in that specific moment had quite strong political ways of rethinking, for instance, gender relations in the household. So you might have lesbian separatist cooperative housing. You might have women only cooperative housing or LGBT types of cooperative housing, or also anti-racist forms of housing.

For instance, the absolutely important and crucial movements in the east end of London around Spitalfields and the Bangladeshi community refusing council housing because of the threat, because of the xenophobia and racism they were subjected to, and therefore generating forms of housing which more closely allowed that self management.

I'm just giving some examples. These examples really do bring the conversation back to what we mean by public in that context. And so, the work with Lorenzo Vidal is a reflection on that, and tries to really think about what has worked. And what could work in terms of reclaiming certain forms of recognition through public policy and reclaiming certain forms of decommodification, but on other terms, in terms of self organization and self governance. I would agree with Amanda, these are the two key issues at stake when we talk about housing commons.

Matt Thompson: Well, thanks, Mara, for that. I can see there's a live issue in this debate around the public versus the common in the principles that they embody and the direction that they are traveling in. And in my work, I'm trying to find commonalities and ways in which perhaps the commons is

pushing notions of the public in new directions, or perhaps even just to realize the principles that it originally started with.

I wonder, David, if perhaps you'd like to explore some of those connections between the commons and the public, whether they are related in any real sense, or whether they are coming from completely different traditions.

That's the public rooted in notions of the state, which is bound up in disciplinary and notions of sort of management and control, and the commons, which is much more about democracy and participation and citizen-led activity which has a completely different tradition. I wonder if you do see any kind of any coming together of these in the near future.

David Madden: Well, I think that's a very helpful formulation that I think I first encountered in something that Margaret Meyer had written, and that is that housing movements have always struggled with and against the state simultaneously.

And I think it's really important to keep this in mind when thinking through all this. I mean, the question of the state itself, just as Mara says, similarly to the concept of the public… the state is far from a straightforward category or straightforward entity. States can do different things in different contexts. Different parts of the state can act in conflict with other parts of it. And it's clear that the state plays a very important role in the housing system as well as is able to act on a scale that few other institutions are able to do. So, it's not really a matter of saying, you know, should housing be state or non-state or where should this dividing line be drawn? I think it's a question of what does the state do and to what extent is it democratized? Who has social and political power and who's able to sort of use the state to exercise it?

It's clear, as Mara says, that states have pursued many different goals with regards to housing and some things that seem like potentially sort of roots towards the partial decommodification of housing often can be ways for states to support markets and to support market actors. So it's quite complex public housing really historically has been itself a site of struggle. I mean, not only to sort of establish it but within it. Between inhabitants of public housing who are struggling for their own residential space and struggling to secure a space within the housing system, to secure power within the housing system, and the state, which often wants to use it for other goals: to control labor or to try to step down on political dissent.

It is complicated and it's clear that the state cannot be an answer in itself because as we said, states do many different things and many times the way, even when states are intervening in housing, they do so for system-maintaining ways. But I think you can't give up on states just because they are so important for the housing system.

So I think, one question then is, can the state be a sort of vehicle for the commons, or can the state be a vehicle for movements to decommodify and democratize housing? You can find plenty of examples historically where that hasn't been the case, but again, it's always a site of struggle.

It's important to certainly distinguish between the state and the commons or social movements. And I think the commons is talking about a sort of ethos, about a set of political, legal and social claims that movements make but they can't really be fully disentangled. Again, I think it's a complicated question, but I think it's not a matter of affirming one or the other so much as understanding them both as sites of struggle.

Matt Thompson: Yeah, I think that formulation of being a site or an arena of struggle was really helpful here, David, for sort of theorizing and thinking through these relations. The state isn't some entity, you know, it's not necessarily just the agent of capital as some Marxist perspectives, very crude ones might fit it. But at the same time, there are forces that play out through it, which are dominant over others.

And I guess it's about finding ways to intervene in that space of struggle that might provide opportunities for the commons and other other counter forces to create their own space with that support. But yeah, I find this idea of struggling for recognition or struggling for space within the state, within public housing, quite intriguing and how then commons and commoning movements will create their own spaces if they lack the recognition. I think this is where issues of class gender and race really come into play.

My own work in Liverpool cooperatives in the 1970s/80s were seen by this incoming Trotskyist militant tendency led Labour Council as a kind of elitist bourgeois project, quite exclusionary. So co-ops are seen almost as like a middle class co-option of what the universality of socialist housing really should be. Yeah, at the same time, of course, they could be critiqued for racist policies. At the time in Liverpool, the public sector was incredibly racist in many ways. I won't substantiate that now with claims but... and of course sexist. There are all sorts of these facts playing out in quite contradictory ways. And I think it'd be interesting to explore some of those dynamics here now.

So Amanda, I'm quite intrigued by your work in Washington. I think it plays into the racial aspects around housing. How channel some of those issues in interesting ways in relation to the lacking of the state, perhaps.

Amanda Huron: Yeah, building on what David was just talking about in terms of the relationship between the state and the commons: One of the things that I find really interesting about the case in Washington, D. C. specifically which is where I've done my research, is, the limited equity cooperatives that we have in the city really exist because of some laws, some tenants rights that we have on the books which were created by a very activist city government in the 1970s.

And this was a city council and mayor who were mostly black people coming out of the civil rights movement, coming out of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, some very progressive people politically on the city council who were really ready to take some serious progressive action in Washington, D.C., the capital of the country, a majority black, 70% black city. They had a really progressive mission when they were elected. The city had not been allowed to elect its own city officials for 100 years. And so, in 1974, we finally got that right back. And it was in 1974 that this slate of very progressive leaders was elected.

But they were also pushed on all of this stuff on lots of anti displacement legislation and tenants rights legislation more broadly by a tenant movement that was very strong in the city in the 1970s. There was lots and lots of tenant organizing going on at the neighborhood scale, at the city wide scale, at the building scale throughout the city in the 70s.

And so, there was a big push on the part of tenants and there was a very receptive elected city council and ultimately mayor who really wanted to do something about this. And so it is an instance where we have a sort of state at the level of the city, the sort of state governance that was open to new ideas and that was excited to try some new things in order to provide safe, decent affordable housing for its constituents.

But of course, that also wouldn't have happened without the pressure from below, from the tenant leaders. That's just to say that there was this very important role that the state has played throughout the city's history in terms of enabling the creation of these limited equity co ops, basically because through giving tenants the right to purchase a building if the landlords put them up for sale and through exercising that right, many tenants associations have been able to buy their buildings and create co-ops. But there's also, you know, a part of that, especially in the early years, in the late 70s and early 80s was very much, a recognition that this was a black city, that most of the low income tenants in the city were black people and that enabling the creation of these limited equity co-ops was a way for black residents of Washington, low income black residents of Washington to own a piece of this city.

That was a really important part of the development of these co-ops historically. And it's always funny to me when you sort of hear about co-ops, at least in the U.S. context, I think there's this general idea that it's like a white hippie thing. That it's some sort of alternative middle class kind of thing. That was certainly not the case for the co-ops that were established in D. C. in the 70s and 80s.

Jessica Gordon Nembhard has a great book, Collective Courage. It's about the history of black cooperative endeavors in the United States. And, you know, these are co-ops that come out of necessity and come out of a long tradition of mutual aid in the black community in the United States.

These are mostly black spaces, at least originally, and then over the years they've been much more brown spaces as well. Lots of immigrants have been part of starting co-ops and some of them are really quite highly racially and ethnically diverse. So there's a real range of them now.

But the development of co-ops in the first place was really related to black political power in the city. That's certainly been an important part of that history here, but I don't think it's just D.C. I think it's in other cities and other parts or places as well. This relationship between the need for low income and black political power. It's also connected to, of course, if you get displaced from the city, you can't vote. For that you're not a part of the body politic of that city anymore because you don't live in the city. And so there's this relationship between the people in power, if their constituents are voting for them they want to kind of keep them in the city. So there's a relationship there. I think recognizing that this really very progressive approach towards tenants rights came out of a largely black movement is important to recognize for sure and that these commoning practices very much came out of a mostly black tenant movement.

Matt Thompson: Yeah, there are so many synergies with that story to the way in which black communities in Liverpool have been treated and have campaigned out of that mistreatment, have campaigned for effective housing alternatives. Particularly Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust today.

And there's a sense in which their community has been stolen or the neighborhood and housing has been stolen from them in the past, and by appropriating that space through this collective ownership structure, there's getting a stake back in that place, which can't be taken away from people.

But I do wonder whether there's something here around cooperatives and their status within the commons versus trust. And obviously trusts have their own history, which is really quite problematically bound up in charities and philanthropy holding land in trust for others. There's a sense in which that's problematic, too.

But co-ops, what about co-ops? Co-ops are a stake in the ownership system itself in property. Some people talk about them being collectivized forms of private ownership. But still private ownership, and I wonder how maybe we can start with you, Amanda.

That relationship between cooperatives and the commons. It's intriguing. Are they exclusive, are critiques made against them as being exclusive spaces, spaces which may well create the conditions for strong solidarity and enhanced cultural identity through the process of owning something collectively? Is the common critique against them as being exclusive spaces actually a valid one? And how does that relate to the idea of the commons and the commoning being about a more expansive idea of life?

Amanda Huron: Yeah, I think that is a super interesting question. And I do think they're exclusionary. They're necessarily exclusionary. I mean, you have a key to your apartment door, you lock it when you leave.

That's very important to people is to have a space that is their refuge, that is their home that they can keep other people out of. So by definition, they're exclusionary. Absolutely. And this is, you know, one of the things that I struggled about when I was working on my dissertation, which later became my book, was this question of exclusion.

I think there's different ways of understanding what the commons is. And certainly, I think one understanding of the commons is much, much broader. It's just something that's open to all. And then you can have other sorts of definitions of the commons that are much more bounded. This is kind of following off of Elinor Ostrom and the institutionalists who have studied the commons and thinking of them as these bounded resources and they work because Some people are members, implying most people are not members, but those who are members collectively care for this resource because they know that future generations are also going to be relying on this same resource, that kind of thing. But yeah, they're exclusionary.

Now, they're exclusionary at a certain scale. So, at the scale of the building, if there's 24 apartments in there, you know, there's 24 households that are going to have housing. I do think that they are less exclusionary when we think about them in a broader context. It is the limited equity co-op, at least, - which is the mostly decommodified, though not entirely version of the housing co-op - that I would think of as a commons. I wouldn't think of a market rate cooperative as a commons because it's bought and sold on the market. But with a limited equity co-op, the price at which you can sell it is restricted so that the share is affordable to the next buyer coming in.

Another thing that's really important in terms of thinking about these co ops as commons and kind of also bringing back in the question of racial equity, I would say, is that these are decommodified spaces and as I said, they can only be bought and sold at a certain restricted amount so that it's affordable to the next buyer.

I guess my point was: It's not exclusionary over generations because it is open to future generations of people who are also low income, who may be able to buy into the co-op for a very small amount and keep it going for generations, potentially. And so it's more open in that sense than a typical market rate kind of housing unit would be.

There are maybe a few radical enlightened people who want to keep their housing completely open to all, but for the most part, I think people want private spaces that they can retreat to. Correct me if any of you all think I'm wrong, but that's my coming from the U.S. context.

But going back to the racial equity question, these are limited equity co-ops and they are an ownership stake in a sense, as you were saying Matt, but you can't really build wealth through owning a share in a limited equity co-op. And so in the U.S. context, again, one of the reasons to become a homeowner is to accrue wealth that you can pass on to your children. And you can't really do that in a limited equity co-op. It depends on the exact model of how your co-op is set up, but the ones in D.C. are very limited in terms of the equity that one can accrue.

One person, a black man I interviewed for my research years ago, said: When I first found out about limited equity co-ops, I said, oh well, that sounds like something, a bunch of white people dreamed up to keep black people poor.

And he later changed his mind and he now lives in a limited equity co-op and has a management company that helps manage them. But his point was that this is a form of housing, that's not going to make people rich. And so in a sense, yes, you have control over the space, you have affordability, But it's not an ownership stake the way an ownership stake is generally understood in the U.S. context.

So there's that very interesting, I think, wrinkle there. And, at least in my city, there's been lots of debate over the years over this question among housing providers who help these limited equity co-ops get started... There's been a lot of angst over this question of: If we're going to provide home ownership housing, shouldn't we be allowing people to build some equity through that housing? There's been lots of debates over that over the years here, and I'm sure in other places as well. But I think these are all really interesting questions.

I'm interested to hear what other folks think about this, because I do think in the long term we might all say, yes, we need to decommodify housing, that's important. But if the only way that you can really build wealth is through your housing, then we gotta be real about the fact that that is a consideration for a lot of people, not the poorest of the poor are never gonna be able to build a wealth, but people who are at sort of lower working class might be able to but this housing ownership doesn't allow that. So interesting question.

Mara Ferreri: I might jump in with a case study from Catalonia, from Barcelona, where these debates are raging absolutely in terms of exclusionary versus universal. And again, as I said earlier, there was never that much of a universal public housing provision anyway. Existing provision accounts for under two percent of all housing stock in a city like Barcelona. However, there is still this idea that the aspiration should be this universally accessible provision. In principle, I would very much agree with that, in practice, all public housing has criteria for selection, criteria for access.

And in the case of many cooperative housing that emerged to some degree - and here I'm kind of jumping back to the UK and to the 1970s and beyond - there was always some degree of participation of the public sector in defining the criteria of access chiefly through income, sometimes through nomination through waiting lists. So in terms of access and exclusivity, there can be systems which are quite hybrid. If the concern is about who is able to access those commons, then the question and really the emphasis should be placed on these mechanisms of access. And in the case of this new emergent cooperative housing movement in Catalonia it's important to consider that we're talking about, while still a very marginal sector. However, one that has grown exponentially, and very much has grown through the lease of municipal land for these new developments and in a few cases also to the lease of property in municipal ownership vacant property. And in these cases the lease comes with criteria. The cooperators, the commoners that are involved in this cooperative housing, which are called Cooperativa Ascensión de Uso (users co-ops) which could be seen as a form of zero equity co-op, because even though there is a down payment, the down payment is returned with minimal inflation

indexing, but no equity can be accrued really. In those cases, those who can access the land and can participate in this project have to prove to the state that they fit within certain criteria.

So again, we can talk about how exclusive they might be in other terms - in terms of social and cultural capital, in terms of know-how, in terms of participation or non-participation in certain movements. Movements that might enable them to hear about this. For me, it was quite interesting doing this comparative, ahistorical comparison with what was happening in London in the 1970s. These were exactly the same critiques leveraged against the squatters who were reclaiming Recognition for their collective management of the properties they had occupied, which were in municipal ownership. And that's why, within those hybrid mechanisms where the municipality might retain ownership, but the management might be cooperative it emerges. And even then, there was this critique of cooperatives emerging from in a sense, self selected intentional communities in this case, community of struggle. So again, bringing this idea I think of race, class and gender intersections is very important and there isn't enough work on this and I think that's Definitely a trajectory where we should go down further in this discussion.

Maybe one last point I had thinking, listening to Amanda was very much the question of comparing or contrasting the exclusivity in the moment and the exclusivity, which is intrinsic to home as a site, also a certain private site.

And this idea of the longer term openness of these models. And so paradoxically, in some cases, the strength of a cooperative structure or other forms of collective governance was precisely what blocked attempts often promoted by the state to commodify what had been previously a collective or public housing.

And that was the case, and Lorenzo Vidal writes about this in the case of Denmark. But similarly, some cases in London showed that. So in a sense, maybe that's also what we should look at, not so much focusing on the community led, as in the community that is at the origin of these projects, but also thinking about the community for the future community that is coming.

And that's why, with Lorenzo and the article that Matt was mentioning earlier, in the International Journal of Housing Policy, we propose that to really understand these mechanisms, we really need to think about maintenance. Both in the terms that Amanda set out in her work, but also really in terms of: How do you build an infrastructure of laws and policies and powers and counter powers that really does not allow commodification in the long term. And I think that's really the challenge.

Matt Thompson: I think there's a really interesting discussion. Because it shows that all forms of housing tenure are sites of struggle, sites of contestation. And I think that it's not a matter of saying: This is the one housing form, this is the one form of tenure that we should sort of pursue going forwards. I think there needs to be a housing politics that brings together residents of housing, people who inhabit housing across different tenures, across different housing morphologies and tries to democratize the housing system as a whole. So there clearly are potential sources of solidarity between people in housing cooperatives in public housing, people who are struggling against private landlords. And I think there needs to be a sort of approach to housing that brings together people living in all these different forms and transforms the system as a whole, along, as along a certain set of principles.

And there needs to be an emphasis on the people who live in housing. Currently the housing system, certainly here in London and in the UK and in many other places across the world, are moving towards privileging people who profit off of housing rather than people who live in it. The emphasis needs to be on people who live in housing.

And there also just needs to be a general turn towards democratizing housing, giving inhabitants more control connecting housing more deeply to other claims to social citizenship and other sort of deep substantive universal social rights.

Within that direction I think there's space for lots of different forms of tenure and lots of different forms of housing. And there will be conflicts within all these forms as well. I think that the sort of general direction that housing systems are going these days is the problem. It's moving towards increased financialization, increased commodification generating huge amounts of precarity and residential inequality. So there needs to be a different direction, but within that direction, there's space for many different sites of housing practice, I guess you can say, housing politics.

Matt Thompson: Thank you all. That's some fascinating issues you've all brought up there. Lots of questions that I have, which I don't think we can do in 20 minutes or so. But for me, there's a lot here around, as Mara alluded to the policies and procedures for maintenance in the long run. How do we get the state to fund those that might well be delivered by communities themselves or by residents themselves, more democratized forms of public housing?

The issue for me is how do we get beyond reaction? How do we get beyond this idea of reacting to some external threat or some lack or some deprivation, which is what a lot of housing commons movements seem to be born out of a struggle, right? And this is what Amanda alludes to in her work. This idea of solidarity is often created through shared cultural identity or a shared position, a material position in relation to some external threat and a struggle for something better to be put in place. How do we get beyond that? And move towards something that's more proactive and more systematic, how do we start replicating this stuff without losing the very energy, the very organic energy and solidarity? Those moments of people coming together and excitement and energy and creativity that's generated by those campaigns and those struggles. How do we translate those into much more proactive systematic development of this?

And it relates to this idea that you brought up at the end there around housing being the kind of site of subjectivity formation for other struggles. Participation in the everyday life of the neighborhood and managing your own housing seems to be a political school for many people in putting them into other struggles.

I don't know what the question is and all that, but I think there's a connection in all those things around thinking about how we sell this idea of commoning beyond its confines in struggles born out of reaction to create an upswell, a groundswell, if you like, of - if I dare say so - a kind of municipalist politics.

And I wonder if we can start in reverse order and David, do you have any thoughts around that?

David Madden: Well, I think we're seeing a generation radicalized by housing problems right now. And so I don't think this is a political issue that's building from nowhere. I mean, there is widespread anger and a lot of political energy around this issue of housing.

I mean you go to any large city these days and talk to people... I mean, basically any non-rich person is struggling with housing in almost every large city and it's an issue that's there, that's mobilizable. It's something that can be activated in lots of ways as well.

I think intuitively people have a sense that housing is a different sort of thing than some other consumer goods in our world. I really do think that there's some understanding that you need to have housing in order to participate in the rest of political, social, and economic life.

Even amongst people who are largely happy with the political economic system and the state of the world these days, they do see houselessness and homelessness and residential injustice as a problem. I think it is a matter of connecting this to a political strategy, connecting this to a political direction and really struggling in a very concrete way against the groups and institutions that profit from the status quo.

The real estate capital, wealthy homeowners, and other sort of conservative components of the housing system exercise a lot of political and social power. Partly, this takes the form of shaping our ideas of what housing should be for and of who deserves housing and of how housing should look. Partly this takes the form of shaping housing regulations in ways that people don't even understand. But I think it's an issue that can definitely gain traction, has gained a lot of traction already and is something that is certainly deeply shaping municipal politics. And in other cases, also deeply shaping national and in some ways in international politics.

So the question is not: Can we sell Municipalist ideas or the sort of the notion of transforming the housing system to people? I really think it's a matter of harnessing this energy that's out there.

Mara Ferreri: I very much agree with David. And I think the question there is also about creating those connections and alliances between different forms of struggles. Sometimes you might have a very immediate response towards the threat of eviction or the threat of displacement, which has its own rules and its own types of responses from movements, but to really transform those need to start connecting with the struggles, for instance, around greater participation in urban planning or around the greater representation in sites of decision making. And again, I might sound very reformist here, but I think both types of forms of action need to take place. You need to enter certain spaces of power, bring different kinds of demands in those spaces, while also at the same time build a counter power from below that actually eventually will lead to some form of political response.

And I think sometimes the kind of typologies that we have discussed today - so the committee land trust, the cooperative - they can be incredibly exclusionary types because of the technical know-how required to even bring about these kinds of options. What I've seen in many different contexts is that it ,in a sense, always is the missing piece or is the last step.

And sometimes you're struggling to remain in place or you're struggling to maintain a public ownership of a resource. And you might be content with that and not do the extra step because the extra step might take five, seven years of incredibly bureaucratic process fighting to carve out that space. In a legal sense, economically, it might require capital, it might also require building specific types of policy and that might not be what the housing movement is ready or wants to do. But I suppose in a more positive sense, and I would agree, there is so much anger and the experience of precarization and displacement has now permeated many different social groups in the vast majority of cities that something could really emerge from those.

And I think it's drawing those connections, it's making those connections between those who are experimenting with these models or those who know about these models and the demands from below.

Amanda Huron: Yeah, I think this really resonates with me and with work that I'm seeing happening right now in terms of tenant organizing in D.C. I mean, there's been an explosion of tenant organizing

because of the pandemic and just the economic devastation of the pandemic and the job loss. And obviously this is happening around the world. But it has been pretty incredible to see the organizing that's coming out of that.

To this question about housing as a potential site of political participation, which David brought up and Mara was talking about, I think this is really key. There's an organization, founded in 1978 and very active in the eighties and nineties, called Washington Inner City self help. And they were a black-led organization. They helped start a lot of limited equity. They did tenant organizing and they also helped connect tenants to development and finance and stuff to get these limited equity co-ops started. And they really saw their work in terms of helping get these co-ops started as a way to both provide affordable, secure housing to the tenants in the short term, but also as a way to train political leaders. Because the process of starting the co-op, of keeping that co-op going over the years was, as we've been discussing, this democratic process that was very much a learning process for the people involved.

So this group saw this almost like a training academy. These co-ops are for people, low income tenants, who would then - they hoped - go out and be more involved in their neighborhood and community and city more broadly and be more politically engaged because of the experience that they'd had in helping run their co-ops.

I think this certainly happened to a certain extent. I don't know the degree to which that really took place. But this idea that this housing co-op, that these housing commons could be a training ground for political leadership, I think is a really interesting one.

But I think along with that - Mara was just talking about this, the effort that it can take sometimes to really keep these things going - there is so much labor involved in maintaining these spaces over time. It's so much work. I have studied these spaces. I also lived in a limited equity co-op, a very sort of multiracial, multi income co-op for six years. So seeing up close the amount of work that was required to keep this space going made an impression, I'll say. And I think that that's really important to recognize.

One woman I interviewed said she wanted to help tenants start limited equity co-ops so they could stop worrying about their housing and just come home and have a nice affordable place to live. Stop worrying about their housing. But in fact, becoming part of a co-op meant that you might end up spending a whole lot of time worrying about your housing and making sure that you were able to hang on to it and keep it going through all sorts of financial and social challenges.

So I do think it's just very important to recognize the work of commoning in general. And to recognize that this is potentially where the state can come in as a support for commenting practices.

I definitely do not want to give up on this concept of public housing or social housing. There's lots of, of course, ways to conceive of this. But this idea of state provided housing, I think, is crucial to thinking about how we can kind of move towards more just directions with housing.

Matt Thompson: Amazing. Thank you all very much. As you were talking, it's really throwing up questions in my own head and about my own work around this and my experience of some of the cooperators in Liverpool. What they've been through and the activists doing community land trusts today there. And there's a similar experience of kind of post development blues, as they called it. Almost like postnatal depression, where you have given birth to this new thing in the world, this community group, this cooperative organization, and this actual piece of new housing that's being

developed and designed by this community. And suddenly you're left with this walking baby and mentors need to be paid. You might actually have to speak to your fellow co operators about how they might not be coming to enough meetings or whatever, and you start to do all the nitty gritty managing the difficulty and the boringness of the bureaucratic process that then unfolds over the next few decades.

And this degeneration of co operatives and other kinds of powers and commons through that process of bureaucratization, death by bureaucratization, is such a common one. I feel like it's almost like we ask too much of the commoning movement, to be doing all the technical know-hows, as many of you have talked about here, to become experts in this stuff, when there are already experts out there. Because there's a kind of sense in which we shouldn't be outsourcing things to these experts because they've got other agendas, there's profit making to be done.

So I guess my final question, a bit of a wrap up here, is the sense of where to draw the line. In the same way that municipalist politics conceives of it, we need to think more clearly in the movement, if you like, about where the amateurism has to stop. Where the democratic decision making has its bounds, and beyond which there's the experts, the specialists.

You may well be able to impart knowledge and train people in certain aspects of it, but actually, you know what? Maybe it's best left to them. To get on fulfilling some of these more mundane aspects of professional aspects of doing quite complex housing developments. And I guess that's the question which is now currently occupying me and I wonder if any of you have ideas? What are the institutional configurations and partnerships or arrangements that might begin to articulate that relationship in ways which maintain the democratic ethos of commoning and the drive of it, but at the same time seems to take off some of that weight and pressure of having to run everything as a group. And I mean, maybe this would be my final question.

I'd like to thank you all really for a great discussion. Maybe we can finish with some reflections on that? Or in fact, please just let us know about anything that you think is important to this discussion as a way to wrap it up.

But thanks again for joining us today. It's been great. I really enjoyed it. Maybe we can start with David and then Mara and Amanda.

Speaker: I think this question of expertise and relationship to housing movements is an interesting one. One of the things that housing movements have long done is connect tenants and other residents of housing to experts and specialists who can sort of help them navigate a hostile housing system.

It's really important work and the housing law is incredibly complicated . Having clinics or education sessions where people learn about their housing rights is incredibly empowering and it's a really important thing that housing movements do. Helping people negotiate with housing officers or with social workers, helping people in housing court...

My students sometimes ask me: After I graduate, what's the best way I can make a career in urban politics and housing? And one of the good ways is to become a left wing lawyer because it's really, really important helping people not be evicted or helping people bring cases against abusive landlords.

So there's definitely an important role for specialist knowledge. But I think the other thing to realize is that housing movements have always had a critique of expertise and a critique of expert knowledge at the same time. One of the reasons housing systems look the way they do right now is because working

class people, people of color, women, lots of different people who live in housing are not considered to be experts on housing. Even though it's many of these groups of people who are doing the work of maintenance and social reproduction that we were talking about. On the household scale, and on The neighborhood scale, and the scale of the city as well. There's an important politics of knowledge within the housing politics, or within the field of housing as well.

I don't know that we can really speak in the abstract about where the line should be drawn between inhabitants, activists, specialists and other people. I think these roles are negotiated on a daily basis in different housing collectives and different housing movements and tenants and residents associations. These are sort of live questions that are answered practically, and I don't know that it's useful to come up with an answer in the abstract. But I do know that one of the important functions of housing social movements and something that really should be on the radar of critical housing scholars is this question of the politics of knowledge within housing and within cities more generally.

Mara Ferreri: I think there is definitely a long history with ebbs and flows about the proximity between expert knowledge production and housing movements. And perhaps in the UK, in London, there has been a little bit of a flow more recently because of the mobilization against demolition of public housing, because of the mobilization against gentrification through planning processes.

I don't know, I always look at other examples and see some hope in the ways in which movements organized to reclaim the space and the time and the expertise for self education around housing in all its facets: legal, economic, in terms of governance and technical support or forms of indirect subsidies through advice and information services have almost always been present. For instance, in the case of cooperative housing, there was some degree of state involvement and an important growth of the sector.

And I'm thinking about the situation in Uruguay, for instance, or the situation in the Netherlands more recently with some of their co housing models. And it was the case in England in the 1970s, where there was an education officer from the Cooperative Housing Agency who was precisely meant to take that place. So this on the one hand.

On the other hand, I also think that This will always need to be paired up with a recognition of the intrinsic value and the often non verbalized knowledge of maintaining a place as a home, collectively or individually. And that is the kind of knowledge that doesn't usually belong to the written or the spaces of knowledge production to the universities, to the professional bodies. But it's the knowledge of this differential commoning, as Elsa Noterman would have it, of just maintaining certain spaces and the social reproduction that comes with it. And those are often practices which are gendered, which are racialized, which are devalued. I would say the two elements are really important to hold together, even though they kind of take us in different directions.

Amanda Huron: I think these are such important questions. I think about this question of specialist knowledge. So many of the co ops that I have worked with, studied, become friends with just would be so psyched if they could get a sort of reliable, trustworthy outside entity who could come and just help them manage their home in a way that was respectful of the dwellers of the inhabitants, the owners but that also could just get things done. David, of course, you know much more about this, I don't know much about it, but I do know that in New York, you have as an organization that I believe kind of fulfills that role to a certain extent with the co-ops in New York.

But yeah, to be able to have a trusted, reliable outside institution that maybe is connected to the city, or maybe it's a separate type of organization to be able to help the co-ops manage everything, I think that

would be incredibly useful and would take a lot of the weight off the shoulders of co op board members.

This actually relates to your earlier question, Matt, which I thought was so important about how we get beyond the reaction crisis mode in terms of thinking about maintaining these. It was good I had my mic off because I was laughing pretty hard when you were talking about this sort of idea of, once you've established the co-op, it's like you fall into this postpartum depression.

It's so true! And how do you keep that energy alive? And I think if there were some sort of trusted outside maybe publicly funded organization that could just handle the boring stuff, the bureaucratic stuff, and that might free up the co op members a bit to engage a bit more politically and socially, both within the co op space itself, and also in the broader space of the neighborhood in the city.

One thing that I've seen that has worked at some of the co-ops that I've studied is: people recognize this pattern, of course, in their co-ops. They say now that we got what we fought for, this is when we all started arguing, for instance. Or this is when things became less communal. Once we actually got our housing, we all kind of retreated into our apartments because we had won the battle and that was it. But as it turned out, of course, the battle is ongoing for life in terms of housing. It is a constant struggle. But I think the co-ops that seemed to do the best were ones who really addressed that head on and said: Okay, well, let's think about other projects that we can engage in other ways to continue to do this kind of work.

So for instance, one co-op started a community garden in the space in the lot behind them. And that was a way to extend their commoning work into another project outside of, but Related to the housing co-op. But it gave them a place to put their creative energies and that idea of the excitement of starting something new because I do think that's really important to have that ongoing creativity.

I think you use this word before Matt, but this idea of collectively creating these spaces together is a profoundly creative act. And that I think is a lot of what gives people the energy to continue with it. It's fun. I mean, there's lots of arguing, there's tons of arguing, but there's a lot that's fun and, and very deeply satisfying and empowering about it.

So I think if there's ways to move those energies into other realms, maybe beyond the co-op, then that can be exciting for folks. And that can potentially - ultimately actually even help - the co-op itself, because that energy is still continuing to flow. I think there's some hopeful prospects for thinking about the expansion of the commons over time.

But all that said, I still do think that in order for that to happen, we really do need better structures in place for supporting these spaces, and whether that comes directly from the state like a state agency, or whether that's a state funded entity NGO type entity, I do think that's really critical for giving people kind of the breathing room to develop and do more politically.

Matt Thompson: Brilliant. Thank you all for answering even my rather convoluted question in very convincing and compelling terms. Just to finally just sort of wrap this up, I feel like it's about channeling that energy that you mentioned there, Amanda, into, like you say, the political questions that go beyond housing or beyond the bureaucracy of housing into those other political questions that we're concerned with about the neighborhood and about the city more broadly. I guess for me that's the promise of municipalism and starting from the politics of the urban every day as Ross Beveridge and Philippe Koch would call it. starting with these aspects of everyday life in housing, in dwelling, in the neighborhood and trying to somehow expand them out to assemblies: to people's assemblies,

neighborhood assemblies, city based assemblies that can channel and continue this. It's kind of energy and it's kind of deliberation beyond perhaps the more technical questions. Where that goes, we don't know, I guess.

Lastly, something about what he said reminded me of something people in Liverpool have said in the past around when these housing commons campaigns finally won that battle. And the question a lot of people I've spoken to asked each other is this: Do revolutionaries ever retire? It's a funny formulation, I think. And it's a question to consider. Do we actually ever retire as revolutionaries in trying to change the world?

And I guess I'll leave it on that note. Thank you once again for being here today and having a great chat.