COMMONING DESIGN AND DESIGNING COMMONS

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ABSTRACT

This workshop explores the relevance of the notion of commons as an objective, and commoning as a way of doing and being for design. We invite the PD community to reflect on ways in which these concepts help us critically protect and support sustainable futures for communities of humans and non-humans. How can participatory design remain open to multiple ways of sharing and different worldviews? What would it mean for the participatory design community in terms of challenging established notions such as participation, facilitation, empowerment, to name but a few? How can participatory design contribute further to theoretical elaboration and activist practices?

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Collaborative and social computing; Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms.

KEYWORDS

Commons, commons design, communing, collaborative design

1 INTRODUCTION

Commons are often referred to as resources or resource systems that are nurtured and shared by heterogeneous groups of people. Such resources are vulnerable to social dilemmas and require that the community develops various mechanisms and rules to sustain them [13]. From a broader perspective, commoning practices insist on the things that enable our livelihoods [5] and tie us together as human beings [11]. Whereas the theme of the commons has previously concentrated more on the management of shared natural resources [16], commoning practices refer to a wide range of diverse domains such as music, software and urban space or libraries (see [12] for an overview of the new commons, [5] for accounts of activist positions and [9] for infrastructures).

There is currently a lively debate hinging on the notion of commons as a principle for alternative ways of organizing society towards more social, ecological, and sustainable forms; or as an infrastructure for non-capitalist politics (e.g. [2]). Commons challenge the basic assumption that private property or centralized control are the only options when protecting and managing shared resources against depletion and waste. Instead, commons-based forms of organizing typically rely on communication, awareness and self-regulation among the contributors, which in turn are dependent on the infrastructures that make visible an eventual abuse of resources — free-riding or vandalism — and the range of reactions available against them.

The cultivation of commons has attracted some attention of design researchers, activists, and practitioners interested in overcoming the limitation of resource scarcity models when working on new ecological, cultural, humanitarian, or educational projects. This interest comes with the increasing awareness of ecological and climate crisis and visibility gained by the widespread use of resources produced in commons such as open source software and hardware, or content licensed with different mechanisms (e.g Creative Commons). At the same time, this increased awareness and visibility of the commons highlights the moral responsibility of giving back to the commons, the limitations of intellectual property rights systems and authorship practices, and of finding different paths to confront global challenges. However, how to advance these issues is still not

very clear. What can participatory design researchers, activists, and practitioners contribute to commons? How can they contribute to commons-based forms of organizing and commoning activities and what kind of alliances, and between whom, could be formed?

Commons activists, such as Bollier and Helfrich are arguing for a new vocabulary, to move away from a fading era based on specific understandings of what it means to be a citizen and to participate, bringing forward new imaginaries of sharing, caring, and commoning [6]. Taking a further step; if these imaginaries are to be relevant for the Global South and the pluriverse [8], they also need to accommodate a plurality of sharing practices that may diverge and to extend or challenge the notion of the Northern commons. Savazoni, for instance, proposes how an emphasis on alterity and bodily relations in shared property, raised by that the Afro-Brazilian terreiro should be explored [19].

Indeed, territories from the Global South have plenty of indigenous and black practices of sharing that developed through very different cultural paths, typically characterized by the constant struggle with other dominant notions of civilized life. Recognizing such practices and respectfully engaging with the intercultural translation of the epistemologies of the South [18] may contribute to developing a pluriversal discourse of the commons that includes multiple ways of sharing and also the "uncommoning" that might be crucial for giving shape to solid commons [4].

Participatory Design's enduring tradition of collaborative practices is well positioned to uptake some of those questions and to contribute to a research and activist agenda in an original and specific way [24]. Participatory Design, for example, strives to involve stakeholders in the design of things/Things [22]. With an initial focus on work settings, this approach has raised new issues to the forefront, including lately the role of infrastructures and infrastructuring in our everyday life ([3, 14]), its relationship to commons (See e.g. [10, 15, 17, 21, 23]), and to its transformation as an approach in contemporary capitalism [1]. Despite these advances, there is still a need to re-think some key assumptions, such as: what is the meaning of participation; is participation (as generically understood, e.g. in PD) still relevant? How can participatory design remain open to multiple ways of sharing and different worldviews? What would it mean for the participatory design community in terms of challenging established notions such as participation, facilitation, empowerment, to name but a few? How can participatory design contribute further to theoretical elaboration and activist practices?

1.1 Workshop Objectives and format

In this workshop we aim to explore the relevance of the commons as an objective and commoning as a way of doing and being for participatory design activities, especially for those that aim seriously and critically at supporting sustainable futures for all (not only humans). There seems to currently be a lack of infrastructures to cultivate and care for commoning approaches. The available technologies, spaces and organization principles are mainly focused in dealing with scarcity and private property. There is a need to look for broader spectrum issues, not to run the risk of making it too easy to abuse resources, too difficult to make contributions, or embrace pluralities. Furthermore, issues of passing on 'best practices' related

to commoning seem to always pose challenges [7]. The need to connect commoning practices to the variety of cooperative subjects transforming our society is also urgent [20].

Based on the above, we seek contributions that highlight, reflect and raise awareness around some of these questions:

(i) How can we design better infrastructures and frameworks that enable, mediate, protect, and foster the emerging and increasingly complex commoning practices?

(ii) What new design vocabulary, principles, policies, guidelines, and practices are needed to contribute to co-designing commons? How to connect this vocabulary with the one of feminism, environmentalism, indigenous movements, and the other transformative movements populating our common world?

(iii) How to articulate collaborative practices with sharing resources in the long run? What kind of alliances need to be made? Which ones should be unmade?

(iv) How to deal with the contradictions that arise from cultivating commons in capitalist societies and in individualistic cultures?

(v) What is to be learned from activist commoners globally already experimenting with and applying new practices of commoning?

(vi) What other commons-based practices can we learn from indigenous knowledge and sharing traditions?

Our intention is to continue ongoing efforts to link discussions and research done in a commoning framework to collaborative practices found in design around (more established) human but also (emergent) planet centred design, participatory design and open design, and in line with the PDC2020 theme, for Participation(s) otherwise.

1.2 How to Contribute

Interested researchers and practitioners sent position papers reflecting on a current project or case on the theme commoning and participatory design (1 page case/project presentation documented in the website https://blogit.itu.dk/commoning/commoning-design-workshop-pdc2020/).). The papers where reviewed by two of the workshop organisers covering a variety of cases covering different scopes and wide geographical distribution. Organizers also collected cases and examples as a basis for hands-on mapping and discussion during the workshop.

1.3 Workshop Format

The workshop was a full day one. In the first part of the workshop participants presented their cases (5-10 minutes). The aim is to discuss the nature of the commons, the type of commoning that is at play in each case and what kind of design vocabulary, practices and principles have been used (could be used) in its development. Challenges and issues related to the design or the unfolding of commoning practices were discussed. Participants collectively identified possible connections and shared themes between the cases: the nature of commons, the process(es) of commoning at play, the role of designers (if any), forms of participation and the main challenges identified. Selected issues were discussed more in depth along with the type of participatory design research agendas we

need and existing promising directions. At the end of the workshop we planned future collaborations between the initiatives presented. (more info: https://blogit.itu.dk/commoning/commoning-design-workshop-pdc2020/).

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