



PolyU Design

# PhD

**Seminar Winter Session 2018**

**Jockey Club Innovation Tower (Block V)**

**9:30AM–6:30PM on 28 Feb @ V1201**

**9:30AM–7:00PM on 1-2 Mar @ V1310**

# THE COMMONS

**Design Social · Design Economies · Design Making**

# PhD Seminar Winter Session 2018

28 February (Wed) to 2 March (Friday)

THE COMMONS

Design Social · Design Economies · Design Making

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Prof. Uta Brandes · Prof. Peter Lloyd · Dr. Thomas Fischer

PolyU Design · CUBIC RESEARCH NETWORK

Department of Applied Social Sciences 香港理工大學應用社會科學系

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# Why the Commons?

## Thinking Design Social, Design Economies and Design Making

GERHARD BRUYNS & HANNA WIRMAN

### Thinking Commons

Elinor Ostrom's original publication on the *Governing the Commons* (1990) was the first in a line of work dedicated to questioning the dominant models of managing and sharing natural as well as human-made resources. The *commons*, as a concept, builds its premise on an understanding of how natural resources (referred to as "Common Pool Resources") are co-shared amongst a number of individuals and groups. Moreover, the commons transect social, economic, technological, and scalar questions. The concept addresses economic aspects, on equal footing with those questions of the social, or, with questions of the technological. It embeds its functionality within *small groups* (*users of kitchen or telephone*) or in a wider domain, within the *civic* (*public spaces and parks*). It is both *local* (*a village*) and *global* (*use of the oceans*) and can materialise in a *restricted* (*a house*) or *boundless* (*immigration*) format.

The commons remains social at its core. It operates through choices and scenarios. It is where self-interest of the individual is set against that of the collective where the commons materialise. In a historical context, this *singular versus the group* establishes specific understandings of reciprocity amongst kin. Closer examination of social crisis has shown the effectiveness of the commons in their resolve to address moments of uncertainty, as a social problem-solving model. Co-operation in food gathering, child rearing, and defence – in whatever formats – remained co-dependants of a broader collective action. As Ostrom states:

*Collective-action problems pervade international relations, face legislators when devising public budgets, permeate public bureaucracies, and are at the core of explanations of voting, interest group formation, and citizen control of governments in a democracy. (Ostrom, 1998, 1-22)*

The commons, in the more contemporary sense, has reverberated into the domains of political ecologies, and as such the very nature of political-economic approaches to territory, governance and types of economies (Ostrom, 1988). With its origins in classic political philosophy, the commons has become multi-disciplinary in application. It has effected discourses around asset management, environmental ecologies, urban design, geopolitical debates on human rights, and production of knowledge. It has relied on rational choice theory [related to game theory<sup>1</sup>] and the theory of public commodities to reformulate economic positions away from an dominant economies of consumption against those of choice, speculation, and exchange.

For Bollier and Helfrich (2015), the question is more far reaching. First, for them the processes of the commons, its co-action, co-production, or co-operating – either at scales of a high-rise, in an urban village deeply embedded in rural regions, in artistic communities, research settings or, related to collectives in cyberspace – remains a *universal* necessity. Second, to this effect, although the commons may be regarded as a social occurrence derived from ancient principles, it still retains a *modest appreciation* in hyper-industrial and modernised societies. Third, the commons define an *'open source' paradigm shift*. In this shift, the commons represents a repositioned world view, one that impacts both material, or formal, as well as conceptual conditions, as *process*. Fab labs, hacker spaces, jamming, the sharing economy, the reformation of the civic, types of governance, private, the public, and, as such, the urban, are each reframed once placed within the domains of the commons concept. In *Commonwealth* (2009), Hardt and Negri harnesses the concept in their reformulation of a broad based political-economic critique questioning institutional logic against the advantages and disadvantages of governance models, capitalism, and social movements. In Sohn et.al (2015), the commons is used to reformulate 'publicness' in an attempt to exposes latent possibilities within the civic and urban space in times of crisis. A wealth of other examples are found that excavates the commons in a variety of discourses.

The 'new-commons', focusses on knowledge. With knowledge as a commons, the information paradigm is decentralized in both its production and ownership. Intelligences, intellectual property, and the civics' role are tested through digital information which has, in the conventional sense, always been closed-off and commodified. For Ostrom, irrespective of being labelled as; 'digital', 'electronic', 'information', 'virtual', 'communication', 'intellectual', or 'technological' (Ostrom, 2007, 5) they all speak to the sharing of a universal domain where material, knowhow, and data is collective. In this light the common-pool resources become economic and legal in nature, differentiating between the 'rights to' against the 'rights from' in terms of *who has access to* information and *who can derive rights from* each data set. Reference to the legalities of common property (Bromley, 1986; Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975), transference of rights and the open access of knowledge, in whatever format, remains at the heart of the questions posed in the light of the knowledge-commons versus knowledge economies. In respect to digital media and popular culture, a range of practices from social media to game modifying communities has long helped to destabilise the traditional idea of centralised authorship. Media texts, products and concepts such as video games are not only remixed and reconfigured, redefined and deconstructed by 'small' actors but, alternative economies and new ways of doing have emerged on the side. Everything from 'participatory media' and 'fandom' to 'piracy cultures' and 'Kickstarted' design education is in one way or another linked to a larger idea of the commons.

With this as framework, and in the landscape of the creative class (Florida, 2012), the volatility of the global economy and the emphasis placed on design as capital means - the commons and its valance to design needs to be re-examined. Ostrom (2008) herself mechanises the praxis of design when postulating principles for governing sustainable recourses. Amongst others design is applied to; clearly defined boundaries, proportional balance between benefits and costs, collective choice arrangements, monitoring conflict resolution, minimal recognition of right to organize, and nested enterprises. Having both theoretical and empirical depth, the impact of the commons in terms of *Design Social*, *Design Economies* and *Design Making* remains an equally enormous palette of design choices.

In terms of *Design Social*, the commons and any link to the social requires reconstruction. The inclusion of the commons into the social realm exposes deep rifts in both the use and application of social models, social life and of being 'social'. Design's impact on the multitude of aspects that are generated by the social, that is to say, knowledge, language information sets and codification of life and societies requires a constant reaffirmation of the praxis and practices of design. Echoing Hardt and Negri (op. cit.) the question of common rights, access and legalities derived from a specific stance on property, the poor, biopolitics, and the immediate landscape impact each type and nuanced practice simply highlights design's challenged position to address social. How can both the commons and design help communities to construct networks, markets, identities, buildings, plans, rules, or other governance mechanisms that help promote their longevity and resilience?

For *Design Economies* the aspects of the commons question dependencies on the dominant and homogenized (Bollier, 2015) market systems. Market exchanges in a global monoculture disregard innovation based on their ability to generate capital. The possibility of a subsystem to operate in parallel to dominant systems, suppresses the notions of other forms of economic thinking. Design expressed as economies, the question of the commons impacts moments of transformation in specific value systems. Not only relevant to exchange economies, that form part of microeconomic thinking (Varian, 1992), the relevance of the commons is traceable in gift structure (Cheal, 1991), or what Einstein (2011) terms 'sacred economies' as redress for socio-economic transformations. With this fixation on 'real market' economic forces, on goal driven processes specific to Asia, *Design Economies* questions forms of entrepreneurialism, type of economic partnerships and how design can facilitate or create joint visions through new types of design strategies and incentives.

The link between *Design Making* and the commons is found at the intersection of the design as making, and its ever-evolving relationships towards individual, communities and societies. Thanks to increasing democratisation of knowledge and technologies in recent years, the Internet has been pivotal in providing a versatile and free platform for people to facilitate "Do It Yourself" or "DIY with others". Two notable areas of development which contribute

to “DIY with technologies” are commons-based peer production (Bencher and Nissenbaum, 2006), and digital fabrication (Gershenfeld, 2012). Whether this is in the form of hacking, jamming or ‘co-production’ (Low, 2012) Design Making and the commons translates into questions of communication tools, products that generate bonds between people, spaces that are capable of supporting commoning, but also methods and design processes that help to generate empathic relationships between people and designers.

As conveners we hope to, in each of the three instances of *Design Social*, *Design Economies*, and *Design Making* to, not only expand on the notion of the commons but, to provide an opportunity to reconsider practices of design, thinking, and making against larger paradigms of thought. With the participation of Uta Brandes, Peter Lloyd and Thomas Fischer we hope to magnify the link beyond the normative concepts and conditions that link, challenges as well as alter design thinking, and its link to the commons. Design is therefore challenged to better articulate ways forward, in both its analytic and synthetic conditions of praxis.

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i) See Ostrom’s *Rules, Games and Common Pool Resources*, originally published in 1994.



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