

# THE PROPERTY ISSUE

## Ground Control and the Commons

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“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; but what matters is to transform it.” So goes the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach by Karl Marx, whose 200th birthday is being celebrated this year around the world. Actually, it was Friedrich Engels who subsequently smuggled the “but” into Marx’s formula, thus positioning transformation in contrast to interpretation and reflection.

This exacerbation gave the thesis an apparent clarity—the powerless abstraction on the one hand, the revolutionary agency on the other—that caught the pulse of the 1968 student movement, which was so determined to make a difference, half a century ago. Paradoxically, the urgency for practical change was the context in which ARCH+, an organ for theory, published its first issue in 1968. This example shows how deceptive the contrast between theory and practice can be. Wasn’t that “long summer of theory” (Philipp Felsch), which was inseparable from the student movement, ultimately more effective than its revolutionary performance?

Besides Marx and 1968, another date to commemorate this year is the 80th anniversary of the death of Bruno Taut—a man of action who built vast housing estates in Berlin. Perhaps Taut was also sceptical of the supposed contrast between theory and practice when he summarily reversed the Feuerbach thesis, shortly before he died in Turkish exile in 1938, and stated: “To interpret the world means to transform it.” In other words, only when we change our mindset can we change the world. It’s a revolutionary idea in a profession that places so much emphasis on its maker qualities. And it reflects the central theme of this issue, which focuses on property. What agency does architecture have in times when there are people who yearn for some form of anarcho-capitalism?

## Changing the mindset

The question “Who owns the land?” is of crucial importance for all societies and their coexistence. Those with access to land control the production of space, and the social order. Yet architects seldom explicitly address the question of landownership. Is this because, as Florian Hertweck writes in ARCH+, “architects primarily produce an illusion of the political—not least because they want to see their projects realized”?

The fact that land is as necessary to life as air and water means its use should not be subjected to the glaring folly of free forces and individual will. Land reformers have tried time and again to find a solution to this problem, ranging from Henry George’s push for a *single tax*, the reform efforts of Adolf Damaschke and Silvio Gesell during the Weimar Republic, and the social commitment enshrined in the Basic Law—“property entails obligations”—to the legislative engagement of German politician Hans-Jochen Vogel, a social democrat, to impose a levy on land gains that are earned without any

effort on the owner’s part. The main question is how to prevent only a few profiting from common resources (for an overview see the land issue timeline on the inside cover).

In this context, the Right to the City movement can be seen as a confrontation with the “enclosure of the commons”, which echoes the measures taken in England from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries to “en-

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close” or privatize large amounts of once collectively cultivated land. Smallholder farmers were expropriated and lost their livelihoods, while large landowners took more and more land under their control. For Karl Marx, this “primitive accumulation” was the historical impetus that fired up the engine of capitalism. The violent expropriation of large swathes of the rural population also left them with no other option but to sell their labor as proletarians—an important prerequisite for the Industrial Revolution in England.

“Capitalist accumulation is therefore based on the production of space—that is, on shifting the control of land use and the (loosely understood) architectural act of enclosing land with hedges and fences,” writes Harald Trapp in this issue. The insight into this unequivocally violent connection between the exploitation of capital and the production of space, which historically accompanied not only the privatization of the commons but also the destruction of housing for many people and their displacement, is vital for understanding the increasing financialization of cities and housing today. The process of enclosure is never-ending and has intensified under the conditions of finance capitalism. Developments associated with the financial crisis, from the direct form of foreclosures to the socialization of the losses by big capital, find their parallels in the historical enclosures: just as they once started the engine of capitalism, the mantra of privatiza-

tion has been the driving force behind neoliberalism since the 1970s.

Yet the coupling of property with finance is not an invention of neoliberalism. The essay on ground rent by philosopher Wolfgang Scheppe makes it clear that this has long been an ugly reality of the city. Scheppe’s broad historical perspective takes Venice as an example to dispel the thesis that the financialization of the city is a recent evil. He cites the work of German sociologist Werner Sombart, who, by no coincidence, developed a theory of the city in his magnum opus on modern capitalism in 1902, writing: “Since the limited space available for building in the city area together with the huge and unprecedented concentration of consumers gave the monopolist position of the small number of aristocratic families who had succeeded in transplanting liege conditions into the *urbs* a likewise unprecedented increase in the value of their real property, Sombart sees ground rent as the ‘mother of the city’. [...] He identifies the city’s major landowners, who divided up the city among themselves, as the real creators of the city.”

That Venice today has become practically uninhabitable for the average citizen, Scheppe attributes to a radical change that occurred in spite of historical continuity. While landowners previously depended on the population for ground rent, the reverse is now true in the attractive tourist centers: local residents are standing in the way of those who seek to exploit the land. Housing, which is unprofitable because of the space it occupies, cannot rival the revenues from tourism and the art scene. The commercialization of the city drives out the original residents, who “underperform” in the global competition for the resource of space.

## Changing the practice

What can we do? Not much, because there is no alternative but to politicize land. A lot, because everyone else has failed to do so until now. Yet there is no avoiding comprehensive reform if we want to define the city as a commons for all. It starts by changing our mindset, by denaturalizing land with the help of a philosophy of land. This means strengthening our understanding that land is always a cultural, social, and therefore a political product (see the contribution by Milica Topalović). And we must arm ourselves against the arguments of those who propagate the dogma of privatization.

For example, many apologists of private landownership invoke John Locke who justified private property under natural law on the basis of an individual’s personal investment of labor. This line of argument offers a point of attack since by linking the claim to ownership with labor, Locke also links economic with political theory. From here, a political economy of the city can be developed, showing that the current state of *Ownership and Access*, as the first section of this volume is called, is anything but “natural.”

Another realm whose order has always been presented as natural, is the domestic sphere. While Karl Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* provided a profound theory for the capitalist, industrial mode of production, he ignored the reproductive labor, that is, all activities in the domestic sphere such as raising children,

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care, cooking, cleaning, and house-keeping, which to this day fall outside of the economic equation—still largely at the expense of women. The second section, entitled *Production and Reproduction*, reveals this blind spot with the help of feminist theory, and examines the domestic sphere as a genuinely political place where the transformation of social conventions and gender hierarchies materialize. The domestic realm presents an opportunity to develop new forms of community and commoning to

renegotiate the traditional home. Ultimately, the land question cannot be discussed without mentioning the housing question—the two are closely intertwined.

With this in mind, this issue of ARCH+ encourages land law reform, returning governance of the land to the local level in order to attain a socially just society. The many contributions on politics and economics reveal not only prevailing lines of conflict, but also the potential to redefine policy with the long-term aim of establishing land, and thus the city, as a common good.

There are alternatives to the land laws regulating the relationship between people and the land on which they live. This becomes clear in Naomi Klein's essay on the struggle of indigenous North Americans to regain their ancestral land use rights. A central focus is empowerment, as people form new solidarity networks to defend existing universal rights while simultaneously negotiating new ones. The third section thus examines the notions of *Right and Solidarity*. Here we have to broaden our perspective to take the context of global capitalism into account. The territorial subjugation that occurred around the world in the course of colonialism persists today, under the term "land grabbing," as a means of capitalist accumulation (see Oana Bogdan's contribution). The topic also reveals that our legal system is designed in favor of financial capital, which has long since abandoned the concept of the nation-state and enjoys a mobility that people can only dream of.

Despite financialization, digitization, and virtualization, space does not disappear from the equation. Global technology companies such as Google, Microsoft, Airbnb, and Uber are no longer satisfied with the commercialization of all of our social actions. They are investing their stock market profits in buildings and land. And following their respective business logic, they have also started planning the cities of the future. In projects like Sidewalk Toronto by Sidewalk Labs, part of the Google holding company Alphabet, residents are tapped as a data source, which artificial intelligence uses to regulate the distribution of space. Can the instruments of platform capitalism be used for positive ends, as Trebor Scholz proposes with his concept of platform cooperativism?

### Toward a practice of the commons

What instruments are available to use and manage land as a commons? In the first step, gains from the sale of building land and real estate speculation can be limited or skimmed off for the community, for instance on the basis of new tax mechanisms. Established models such as land funds and foundations, community land trusts, and leaseholds are also available. Over the long term, principles of the social economy must form the basis of the urban economy. What the practice of the commons, also called commoning, might look like will be examined in our next issue for the project *An Atlas of Commoning: Orte des Gemeinschaftens* in cooperation with the ifa (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations). The instruments of change are available, but as Manuel Shvartzberg Carrió points out, the first step is "a radical reinterpretation of what change means and the radical democratization of those processes with which change is implemented." In short: what matters is to change our mindset.

This issue was produced together with guest editors Arno Brandlhuber and Olaf Grawert (station+, DARCH, ETH Zurich) and builds on the content of the film *Legislating Architecture—The Property Drama* (GER 2017), which was realized together with director Christopher Roth. *Legislating Architecture* describes a model for thought and action that addresses the rules and principles of architecture. Architecture is understood not only as a built environment, but as a social realm. This juxtaposition of material aspects (built, spatial) and immaterial aspects (political, economic) creates spaces for action that architects can imagine and occupy. *The Property Drama* is the second film in the series and dedicated to questions on land, and its accessibility and use: Who creates laws? What shapes architecture? Who owns the land and why?

This publication is also the result of research for the project *An Atlas of Commoning: Orte des Gemeinschaftens*, an exhibition by the ifa (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations) in collaboration with ARCH+. It serves as a theoretical introduction to a further edition that will explicitly deal with the practice of the commons and the topics addressed in the exhibition. *An Atlas of Commoning: Orte des Gemeinschaftens* will be published to coincide with the opening of the exhibition at Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien in Berlin on June 22, 2018.