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Circular Economy and Symbiosis: The Sustainable Regenerative City Model

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PROTOTYPING SHARED LIVING: COLLECTIVE RESIDENTIAL EXPERIMENTS

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Abstract

This paper explores opportunities for shared collective domestic experiences, using practice based research, activism and performance art/architecture to develop critical responses and new architectural roles and meanings. Two projects, initiated by Studio Polpo, will be explored: a series of residential performances called OPERA (Open Public Experimental Residential Activity) and a newspaper publication titled "Experimental Residential. How Could Short-Term Shared Living be introduced into UK City Centres?". How can the making of the home be used to connect the personal, domestic and familial with the collective? This question is central to both of the projects described. In bringing these projects together we hope to develop and articulate alternative architectural practices, which invite collective concerns and desires.

Keywords: prototyping, shared living, vacant buildings

PROTOTIPI PER L'ABITARE CONDIVISO: ESPERIMENTI DI RESIDENZE COLLETTIVE

Sommario

Il contributo esplora le opportunità di condivisione di esperienze domestiche collettive, avvalendosi di pratiche basate sulla ricerca, l''attivismo e le performance dell'arte e dell'architettura tese a sviluppare risposte critiche e nuovi ruoli e significati architettonici. Si esaminano due progetti, avviati dallo Studio Polpo: OPERA (Open Public Experimental Residential Activity) e la pubblicazione di un giornale dal titolo "Experimental Residential. How Could Short-Term Shared Living be introduced into UK City Centres?". Come la realizzazione della residenza potrebbe essere utilizzata per connettere le dimensioni del personale, domestico e familiare, con quella del collettivo? Questa domanda fondamentale è alla base dei progetti descritti, a partire dai quali si intendono sviluppare e comunicare pratiche alternative di architettura, che stimolino riflessioni e desideri utili per la collettività.

Parole chiave: prototipazione, abitare condiviso, edifici vuoti

1. Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the role of shared living projects as prototypes for real alternatives to the dominance of increasingly privatised, gated and atomised housing. Seeking other ways of living has been driven by the idea that society, through collective actions should shape the way we live, and that this motivation is undermined by property speculation, scarcity and, more fundamentally, the dominance of a neoliberal world view. Our position, rooted within the "right to the city" movement, views the homogenisation and atomisation of cities as a mechanism for abstracting spaces so that they can be speculated, exchanged and controlled according to the laws of supply and demand (Lefebvre, 1991).

In this paper two experimental living projects, both initiated by Studio Polpo and realised in collaboration with others, are explored: a series of performances called OPERA (Open Public Experimental Residential Activity) and a newspaper publication titled "Experimental Residential. How Could Short-Term Shared Living be introduced into UK City Centres?" These projects extend conventional architectural roles and outputs, however fit within a wider strand of collective housing practices undertaken by Studio Polpo which includes feasibility studies, design work, and participatory workshops with co-housing and co-operative housing groups. Practice-based research is also complimented by academic research, by members of Studio Polpo, around the collective production of the build environment, including collective custom build, co-operatives, self-build and co-housing (Brown *et al.*, 2013; Parvin *et al.*, 2011; Udall and Holder, 2013).

Studio Polpo is interested in using prototyping as a mechanism for demonstrating that alternative ways of living in and shaping the city are possible. Controlled risk-taking in vacant city centre sites is presented as a way to explore living together. The two projects use prototyping, in different ways, to critique the status quo and develop alternative narratives in response to the housing crisis. This paper describes a range of architectural and research practices which we have described as "prototyping". This includes the making and testing of new physical products, experimental performances, and publications. We are using prototyping to describe the materialisation of shared living, ready for further reflection and analysis, but also as a critical method for changing urban processes more broadly. As such writing and storytelling have also become prototyping practices, challenging dominant narratives through reflective ethnographies.

2. Economics and Politics of Housing Production

The system of housing production is regularly discussed as "in crisis". Compelling contemporary socio-political readings highlight the complicit nature of the housing crisis with the marketisation of the city, demonstrating that it is rooted in politically and financially constructed agendas (Dorling, 2014).

Building on JK Gibson-Graham's alternative "iceberg" representation of economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006) Udall and Holder, also members of Studio Polpo, have put forward an understanding of the dominant mode of housing production that reveals the hidden and unacknowledged supports of building as capitalist accumulation (Fig. 1) (Udall and Holder, 2013). However, the discourse about the crisis rarely addresses structural issues and focuses, instead, on less problematic aspects such as the inefficiency of the construction industry, a burdensome planning system or the shortage of land. It could be argued that these partial responses might even contribute to maintaining the crisis by failing to address its root causes. «There are also arguments that ascribe housing scarcity to structural issues

within the capital model – i.e. an oversupply of housing would undermine the system as a whole» (Till, 2011, p. 4).

Fig. 1 – Participatory and collective hidden supports of (house) building as capitalist accumulation

Source: Holder and Udall (2013)

It is therefore not surprising that housing outputs in UK can still fall well below demand (Inman, 2015), whilst the country is thought to be the fastest growing economy in the G7 (Cadman, 2015). Scarcity, housing need and volatility of the housing market bring housing firmly on the political agenda, but the discourse around solutions is often dominated by a drive to promote one particular type of tenure, home ownership, even though the desirability of being "a nation of home owners" (Thatcher, 1974) has even been questioned within conventional neoliberal economics (Chandler and Disney, 2014). Within this housing crisis context though, and, arguably, stimulated by the global and national financial

crisis, a number of self-initiated and collective models of housing are emerging (Cerulli, 2015; Cerulli and Field, 2011). These try to address some of the inadequacies of UK housing provision, in terms of fairness and justice, with the aim of producing housing that is more accessible, affordable and ecological.

A common trait of the collective non-mainstream models of housing production is the notion of acting otherwise, sometimes this takes the shape of opting out of the market, sometimes it means operating within it in transversal and tactical ways. These initiatives around alternative approaches to housing production share an interest in collective experiences and a concern with the role that individuals and groups play in the wider society and are rooted in a broader trend to understand economics more holistically, in a way that acknowledges impact on the physical environment, justice and wellbeing.

These initiatives are trying to create a shift towards a more just and equitable society, where resources are shared and fairly distributed and where self-interest is aligned with common purposes and collective benefit. They stem from other ways of conceptualising our economic systems, underpinned by non-mainstream economics from the Seventies that questioned the dogma of growth (Meadows, 1972) and argued for the importance of happiness and wellbeing (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Easterlin, 1971).

This agenda has been taken up by the more recent de-growth discourse (Baykan, 2007; Cattaneo and Gavaldà, 2010; Latouche, 2004; Schneider *et al.*, 2010), and the emerging field of happiness economics (Johns and Ormerod, 2007; Frey, 2008; Frey and Stutzer, 2001; Weimann *et al.*, 2015). Historical examples of such initiatives in the UK are diverse, including Levellers and Diggers, Plotlanders, Community Land Trusts (CLT's), Cooperatives and Garden Cities. More recently, the combination of rising inequality and financial pressures with environmental imperatives, has created new interest in the possibilities of co-operative and mutual projects: in the UK alone over 80 new CLT's are being set up and generally community led housing is gathering traction (Gooding and Johnston, 2015).

3. Project 1: The OPERA Programme

In 2014 Studio Polpo responded to an open call for artists to exhibit work in an empty former department store in Sheffield city centre. Our accepted proposal, framed as a durational performance piece, led to the installation of eating, sleeping, cooking and eating facilities into part of the vacant building. This shared living space, OPERA 1 (Open Public Experimental Residential Activity), was open for ten days (the duration of a curated group exhibition) and each evening Studio Polpo invited guests to share a meal, host domestic activities and stay the night. The house was shared by up to six residents overnight, including Studio Polpo directors, our friends and members of the public, and the evening meal usually prompted discussions about shared forms of living, empty spaces and city centre living. Some evenings residents arrived with specific activities to share, including a screening of short films about alternative living arrangements, screen printing of posters, haiku poetry writing, impromptu music making and a workshop about toilet design in relation to LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer) issues. In addition to the residents who contributed in the evening and overnight a large number people visited the exhibition during the day. This created two types of interaction with the project; a quick, usually unexpected, visit and a longer arranged evening and overnight event. After the intensity of the ten day round-the-clock performance, Studio Polpo developed OPERA

into a continued and more sustainable performance programme. We adopted an alternative format, a one day a month event, so that the overnight performances were compatible with other work and family commitments and, generally, life outside the performance.

The infrastructure of OPERA 2 (the kitchen, the bedrooms, the dining area, the sink, the room dividers) was physically nestled within a larger creative arts space, which is occupying a substantial empty retail unit through a meanwhile use agreement with the landlord (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – Washing up in the OPERA 1 kitchen, facing onto the street

Source: Re.Future Collective (2014)

This time OPERA also began to develop a life outside of the performance: although it was curated and performed by Studio Polpo once a month, its infrastructure was borrowed by other groups to host activities, including intimate theatre performances and spoken word events. We are currently exploring a third OPERA model where elements of the performance could be built into a more long term and financially sustainable hosting facility. OPERA shifted from an open call response to a series of events and performances, hosted by Studio Polpo and undertaken in collaboration with others, and we anticipate that future OPERA activity will continue to activate vacant buildings, testing different locations and performance formats.

4. The Field of Residential Performances
Whilst initially conceived without specific reference to other practices, the OPERA programme might be considered as part of a number of projects that blur distinctions

between performance and architecture. The architect Alex Schweder, for example, uses performance art to consider architecture in terms of an evolving relationship between subjects and objects, and through open-ended scripts. «We have to dislodge our habits of thinking about the way architecture works with the subjectivities that occupy it, from prescriptive (program) to exploratory (performance)» (Schweder, 2012, p.104). For Schweder this shift from program to performance of architecture can establish deeply transformative practices: «Architecture conceived around the way we "perform it" gives those engaging with it agency to determine who they become in relation to a space and having that space facilitate their desires, hopes, anxieties and needs» (Schweder, 2011, p. 131). The corollary of this shift is that «occupants of buildings become partial authors of their environments as well as producers of their meanings» (Schweder, 2011, p. 131). A number of projects focusing on the performance of the domestic realm have been performed within galleries, festivals and other one-off event frameworks. These "residential performances" (Orlek, 2015) include: Ikea Disobedients, an architectural performance by Andrés Jaque Arquitectos, which brought atypical households into gallery spaces; the work of French collective EXYZT, who construct temporary architecture projects by living and working in vacant sites before opening them up to the public; Liverpool based Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, a family of performance artists who have turned their spare bedroom into a space for cultural dissent.

The OPERA programme can be read as part of this field of residential performances, cropping up in the city as pulsing moments, questioning and critiquing the dominant modes of spatial production, and in particular, housing. The new relations emerging through this work, between subjects, objects, performers and performed become key outputs and their nature can validate or undermine the legitimacy of specific performances, raising questions about how they are valued.

5. Communicating OPERA

One of the challenges presented by OPERA is how to best articulate the project to those not part of the overnight performances. The prototyping process for products relies upon an external, physical product to be objectively evaluated, tweaked and tested. For OPERA, the physical structures and spaces are only part of the story, and cannot be separated from the social relationships established through the sleepovers; the actions and activities of the participants within the temporary shared house are crucial. Alongside the one off, live, performances, Studio Polpo have been exploring how OPERA and other Residential performances can be documented, articulated and critiqued; how can the value of the performance be communicated and how can transformatory and social claims made by and through the project be commented on? During OPERA 1 Studio Polpo decided not to record much of the performance, limiting documentation to occasional photographs, and diary entries left by participants.

On completing OPERA 1 Studio Polpo documented the project on reflection in a number of ways, including making a scrapbook (Studio Polpo, 2015a), commissioning a film (Nesbitt, 2015) and writing papers to present at conferences (Orlek, 2015). One piece of writing presented autoethnography as an appropriate research method for the performance (Orlek, 2015), building on ethnography of design (Yaneva, 2009) and exploring how reflexive positions can be adopted. Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as «an avenue for helping us understand narratively and conceptually a larger relational, communal and

political world of which we are part and that speaks to critical engagement, social action and change» (2009, p. 18). By describing experiences as an active participant, personal narratives are connected with the making of a wider community and culture (Fig. 3). Storytelling becomes an important communication tool; Deborah Reed-Danahay argues that autoethnographic writing can «assert alternative forms of meaning and power from those associated with the dominant, metropolitan culture» (1997, p. 8).

Storytelling and the creation of alternative housing narratives has become an intertwined part of the OPERA prototyping. Reflective, personal and collective writing styles have been used to find meaning in the convivial, sociable and mundane exchanges facilitated through the sleepover performances. Writing has also been used to communicate the material performance framework/set without isolating it from the production of a social and relational project.

Fig. 3 – Mapping OPERA, documentation and reflective written work
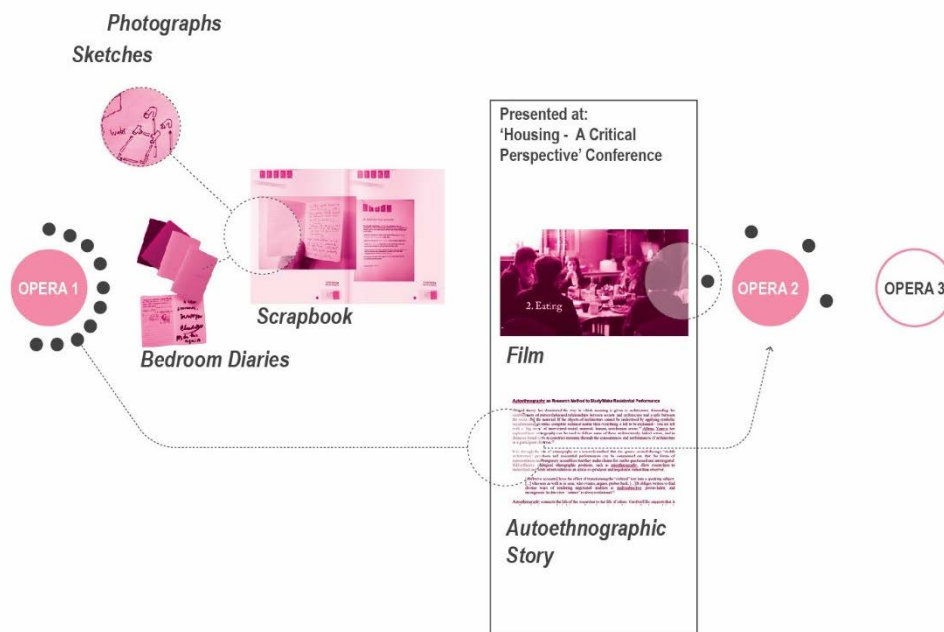
Source: Studio Polpo (2015a)

6. Project 2: Experimental Residential. How Could Short-Term Shared Living be Introduced into UK City Centres?

The Experimental Residential newspaper (Studio Polpo, 2015b) explores how short term collective living can be introduced into unused buildings (Fig. 4). It brings together research about shared models for living, such as co-operative management, with information and diagrams about legal and regulatory procedures for turning non-residential

buildings into large shared houses, including use-class changes, business rates, planning and building control. This information, which often remains within architecture practices and councils or buried in reports has been made public and visual, though the use of timelines, diagrams and drawings, accompanied with case studies and information about temporary environmental upgrade systems. The newspaper is intended as a guide and toolkit to help individuals and groups to take on the lease of non-residential buildings and turn them into shared houses. It is hoped that it will also serve as a primer around which groups can form and includes pull out posters and manifesto statements to support this. The newspaper came out of consultation work undertaken by Studio Polpo for a group of residents who were exploring the feasibility of re-using an empty commercial building in Sheffield, at 121 Eyre Street, as a short term live-work space. Although the initial feasibility request was focused towards a specific building we suggested that funding might be available if the project was framed in broader terms.

Fig. 4 – Experimental Residential Newspaper
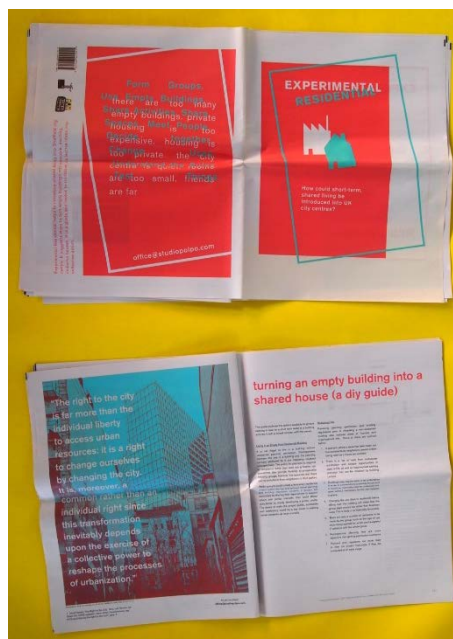
Source: Studio Polpo (2015b)

Studio Polpo secured funding with the prospective residents (who became our clients), assisting them in bidding for a government funded innovation grant and, when, half way through the project, we learned that a legal covenant prevented the building from being used as anticipated we steered the output of the project towards something that documented and disseminated our research in a way that could be helpful for other groups pursuing

similar projects. This shifted the emphasis of the project from a site-specific study, to a more general toolkit, by focusing on case studies. Additionally we prototyped and tested a demountable and low-cost secondary glazing system, which reduces levels of external noise and upgrades the environmental performance of the building fabric, two factors which had been identified as barriers to residential occupancy at 121 Eyre Street and similar projects.

This research was packaged and formatted into the Experimental Residential newspaper, which remains available in print free of charge and online in an electronic format, both shared using a creative commons attribution. In choosing a newspaper format, we tried to align the dissemination of the project with other pamphlets, fanzines and manuals which promote collective and DIY action (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 – Diagrams in Experimental Residential newspaper: management and contractual structures required to set up a collectively managed house in a vacant building
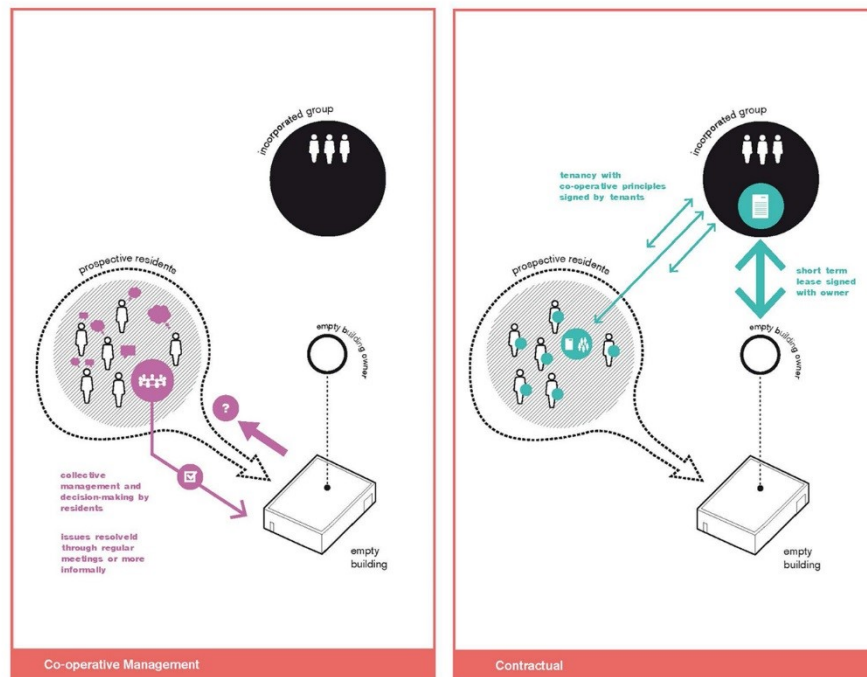
Source: Studio Polpo (2015b)

7. Enabling Shared Living

The newspaper is intended as a starting point to enable others to prototype within the city, providing a direction and a range of suggestions for turning vacant buildings into large shared housing. Studio Polpo took a conventionally private consultancy activity and

developed it into a practice-based research project that was accessible and useful to a broader audience, and could be applied to any number of vacant properties in UK city centres. One of the strategies we developed for achieving this was to use 121 Eyre Street as a live case study to follow and document. We used timelines to map the project as it developed, updating and modifying them as the project trajectory changed. This was a useful tool for collaboration and communication between Studio Polpo and those involved with 121 Eyre Street, but by including them in the newspaper it is hoped that the process can be understood and replicated by other groups in the future, with an increased awareness about potential pitfalls, required checks and areas of risk or uncertainty. Both a proposed and a real timeline is included, showing snapshots of the ambition as well as the barriers preventing further action.

Similarly, when co-operative management principles are explored, these are presented in the form of general structure diagrams before being applied to the specific case of 121 Eyre Street as a concrete example. Before publishing the newspaper Studio Polpo organised a conversation with housing, regeneration and policy officers from Sheffield City Council (Studio Polpo, 2015a, pp. 34-35). Rather than arrange a meeting with specific agenda and desired outcomes we hosted a lunchtime meal in our studio, which brought together representatives from different (and often separate) departments within the council to discuss the project in an informal environment. The meal was hosted in our city centre studio, which is part of a meanwhile project itself, and using the paraphernalia of conviviality (crockery, cutlery, table cloths and recipes) from the OPERA performances. The meal turned out to be a useful way to establish how the Experimental Residential project might fit into wider objectives of the council, such as increasing activity in the city centre and how councils might enable temporary residential activity, for example by making an empty council owned building available to further develop shared residential prototypes.

8. Initial outcomes from Experimental Residential Newspaper Publication

Unlike OPERA, which focuses on establishing prototypical shared experiences that are live, one-to-one, and fleeting, Experimental Residential uses real world case studies, precedents and barriers, but represents them in a form that can be generalised and built upon. The newspapers content may be used and developed without Studio Polpo, however we have been approached by a number of individuals and groups interested in pursuing strands in collaboration with us. Following the publication of the newspaper, a working group exploring meanwhile residential use has been set up by a participant of OPERA and members of Studio Polpo have been invited to join. Although at a very early stage the group plans to meet regularly and has started to map vacant sites within Sheffield city centre; a resource that is frequently requested by groups establishing meanwhile projects but that does not yet exist. The secondary glazing system, prototyped as part of the research, has also developed following the publication of the newspaper. Studio Polpo have been commissioned to install the system in three buildings, used as studios, workshops and offices. In each case the desire to increase thermal performance and therefore comfort has been an important factor for installation and we were able to use thermal imaging software to test the benefits of the system with regards to building fabric heat loss. In the longer term Studio Polpo would like to explore how the open source product might be developed into a small start-up business. Extending the homeliness, conviviality and experience of OPERA into other aspects of our practice, such as hosting meetings, has been an interesting

unplanned outcome of the two projects. This is an aspect of Studio Polpo's practice that we would like to explore further, mindful that convivial settings (both within and outside of performance contexts) can become exclusive if not sensitively choreographed.

9. Prototyping Shared Living

In the work explored, prototyping took place through the format of self-initiated performances and written work. It took the form of outward facing enabling work by Studio Polpo, such as the publication of DIY manuals and open invitations to participate, as well as internal processes of critical reflection, through academic publications and ethnographic writing.

Prototyping through Performance

The structure of overnight performances allowed us to demonstrate in an immediate, live and collaborative way, how vacant buildings in the city centre of Sheffield could be inhabited and reused as shared houses. Our physical interventions prompted discussions about shared living, but they also facilitated familiar, sometimes mundane, domestic tasks such as preparing meals, washing up and brushing teeth. Performing these familiar and convivial activities outside of familiar domestic spaces produced alternative visions for city centre living, and through OPERA an open network of individuals interested in pursuing shared living in the city has emerged. The familiarity allows anyone to participate and contribute knowledge, reaching beyond those that may usually engage with contemporary art or theatre. Framing the project as a performance allowed us to use familiar architectural tools and skills (designing room layouts, working with fabricators, communication between stakeholders) but deploy them to unfamiliar and open ends. As architects we were not interested in fixing and prescribing spaces/uses and instead were motivated to create an open framework for testing, playing and experimenting with others. Through the performance we constructed and curated invitations and boundaries. Reflecting on OPERA through the use of theory and peer residential performance practices allowed us to construct these with raised awareness, both in future OPERA performances and hopefully in future longer term shared housing.

Prototyping through Writing

Initially we undertook OPERA activities with limited focus on documentation, "we just did it". Following the first performance we explored the theoretical landscape and used academic writing to place OPERA within a critical context and situate it alongside other performances. Writing has become an essential part of Studio Polpo's prototyping of shared living. The articles that we are writing about OPERA provide a method of inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) as well as way to communicate the project both individually and collectively, with a view to shape future OPERA events.

Our reflexive accounts of OPERA have allowed us to share our thoughts and experiences in way that can be passed around, questioned and shared, both by ourselves as individuals, as a practice, and by others. This approach builds directly on an understanding of writing practice that members of Studio Polpo have explored through academic publications (Udall and Holder, 2013; Orlek and Cerulli, 2015). «We write as a performative action, naming and drawing attention to these economies, not as alternatives but as part of multiple,

heterogeneous economic ways of acting and interacting that make up the built environment» (Udall and Holder, 2013, p. 64).

10. Conclusions

Both projects explore how prototyping has been used by Studio Polpo to test shared forms of living. The projects explored demonstrate ways of living that critique dominant housing crisis narratives and suggest other ways of living together. The intended scope of the two projects differs significantly. OPERA has a relatively low threshold for participation, the projects fits within existing living patterns/choices, taking individuals out of this for one night to demonstrate diverse living possibilities. The newspaper is intended to enable a more significant leap into collective living arrangements by providing resources to groups and individuals interested setting up large shared houses in vacant buildings. Despite these differences both projects are effective as invitations to collectively act and imagine otherwise, within the housing crisis context.

At times these have been complimentary, with OPERA functioning as a taster for further commitment enabled by the Experimental Residential newspaper. These invitations encourage opportunities for sharing in the production of domestic spaces, shifting conventionally private and individual endeavours into more public activities and co-operative economies. This shift from private to collaborative activity is also echoed by the way Studio Polpo practices architecture. In responding to open calls for artwork, research calls for papers, and applying for public funding we have been able to shift our practice towards more open-ended and experimental trajectories. This means that we can develop ways of practicing architecture through prototyping, as well as introducing prototypical architectural objects into the built environment. By increasing invitations to be part of this active urban prototyping practice, we believe that lasting, transformative opportunities and narratives for living together will emerge.

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