



# **Alternative Housing Projects “Beyond Market and State”**

On the In(ter)dependence of Housing Commons in Germany

Nora Friederike Bittmann

Department of Urban Studies

Urban Studies Master's Programme (Two-Year)

Master Thesis, 30 Credits

Spring Semester 2022

Supervisor: Defne Kadioglu

**Alternative Housing Projects “Beyond Market and State”  
On the In(ter)dependence of Housing Commons in Germany**

Nora Friederike Bittmann

Department of Urban Studies  
Urban Studies Master's Programme (Two-Year)  
Master Thesis, 30 Credits  
Spring Semester 2022  
Supervisor: Defne Kadioglu

**Abstract**

In this paper the viability of housing commons as an alternative to commercial and public housing provision is examined. With rising financial burdens for renters in German cities over the past ten years, and state and market failing to provide affordable and accessible housing, claims to (re)communalize and decommodify housing are on the rise. The study is contextualized through tracing changing housing policies post-1945, and historic accounts of housing commons in the German context. Arguing for the advantages of conceptualizing housing as a common good, the applicability, limitations, and contradictions of this approach are explored. Founded in the “new commons” literature, the paper highlights the specific characteristics and challenges of urban housing commons and considers them regarding the complex in(ter)dependencies with market and state.

Seven semi-structured interviews with residents of alternative housing projects (based on the principles of decommodification and self-management) and people from supporting organizations were conducted to gain insights into the community. It shows that internal group dynamics, interaction with outside actors on different levels, and the high prerequisites for creating and maintaining housing commons create multiple stress factors, currently preventing the housing commons to unfold their full potential. Mainly the high real estate prices and the consequent need to contribute equity capital prevent the housing commons from becoming a large-scale alternative to other housing providers.

The paper stipulates that despite the threat of more rigid regulation, cooperation with the state is a promising way forward for the housing commons to overcome market pressures and provide a much-needed relief to overburdened renters in the German housing market, while simultaneously opening the possibility to “commonalise” the state.

*Key words:* housing commons, autonomy, collective ownership, state

*In loving memory of my father,  
who did not get to accompany me on this journey.*

(1959 – 2012)

## Acknowledgements

First, I am extremely grateful to my supervisor, Defne Kadioglu, for her time, support, and helpful advice offered at every stage of the process. Working with you has made this project a particularly enriching, valuable, and fun experience.

I also wish to thank Rainer Danielzyk, who has guided me throughout this project and whose constructive criticism has helped to sharpen my thinking.

Special thanks go to my good friend Stella for her encouragement, much-appreciated feedback and ingenious suggestions adding quality to my work.

I would further like to thank all my interview partners for the openness with which they shared their experiences and allowed me insights into their homes, lives and work.

I could not have completed this thesis without the ongoing reassurance of my cousin Clara and my sister Eva. Thank you for believing in my abilities, your kind words, and the sparkle you both add to my life every day. Mama, I very much appreciate your unwavering support throughout my years of studies.

I cannot leave the Souvlakis without mentioning: Barbie, Clementine, Gasolina, Loki, Penna, Sirena – you made my time in Malmö a one-of-a-kind experience, and the many hours in the library would have not been half as fun without you. Stay golden!

Particularly helpful to me during this time was C. W. who enabled me to grow and learn and helped me see the joy of a work in progress.

Finally, I am deeply thankful to G. and G. for providing stimulating discussions as well as joyful distractions to rest my mind outside of my research. Thank you for always asking the right questions and your care.

– Nora Friederike Bittmann  
*Malmö, May 2022*

## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures and Tables .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. BACKGROUND: HOUSING POLICY AND HISTORIC HOUSING COMMONS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 <i>Housing Policy in Germany after 1945 and “The Return of the Housing Question” .....</i>	<i>4</i>
2.1.1 Housing Policy in the GDR: Housing as a Public Good .....	4
2.1.2 Housing Policy in the FRG: Social Housing and Home Ownership .....	4
2.1.3 After 1990: From Housing Policy to Housing Market Policy .....	5
2.1.4 The “Return of the Housing Question” .....	6
2.2 <i>History of Housing Commons: From Worker’s Cooperatives to Mietshäuser Syndikat.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: URBAN HOUSING COMMONS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1 <i>Housing as Commons “Beyond Market and State” .....</i>	<i>9</i>
3.2 <i>From Common Pool Resources to Urban Commons.....</i>	<i>12</i>
3.3 <i>The “Struggle for the Commons”: Enclosure, In(ter)dependence and Solidarity .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>4. METHODS AND MATERIAL: INTERVIEWING HOUSING COMMONERS.....</b>	<b>18</b>
4.1 <i>Research Design, Field Work and Ethical Considerations .....</i>	<i>19</i>
4.1.1 Research Design .....	19
4.1.2 Field Work .....	20
4.1.3 Ethical Considerations .....	21
4.2 <i>Cases I: Housing Projects .....</i>	<i>22</i>
4.3 <i>Cases II: Supporting Organizations .....</i>	<i>23</i>
4.3.1 Mietshäuser Syndikat .....	23
4.3.2 Wohnbund e.V. ....	24
4.3.3 Haus- und WagenRat e.V. (HWR) .....	24
4.3.4 Stiftung trias .....	24
<b>5. ANALYSIS: IN(TER)DEPENDENT HOUSING COMMONS.....</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1 <i>Inside the Commons .....</i>	<i>25</i>
5.1.1 Motivation of Housing Commoners .....	25
5.1.2 Commoning in Practise .....	27
5.1.3 Foundation Phase.....	29
5.2 <i>Positioning the Commons .....</i>	<i>31</i>
5.2.1 State Support and Political Climate.....	31
5.2.2 Positive Examples and Self-Amplification.....	33
5.2.3 Adding Value to the Neighbourhood.....	35
5.3 <i>Open to all? Solidarity and Expansion.....</i>	<i>36</i>
5.3.1 Prerequisites for Participation .....	36
5.3.2 Diversity of the Commoners.....	38
5.3.3 Networking Inside and Outside .....	39
<b>6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>7. REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>I</b>

*I. Interview Guides ..... I*  
a) Housing Projects ..... I  
b) Supporting Organizations ..... II

## List of Figures and Tables

<b>Figure 1:</b> Characteristics of Different Types of Ownership.....	22
<b>Figure 2:</b> Model of the <i>Mietshäuser Syndikat</i> . .....	23
<b>Table 1:</b> Types of Housing Tenure and Provision.....	10
<b>Table 2:</b> Classification of Goods. ....	11
<b>Table 3:</b> Overview Cases I – Housing Projects. ....	22
<b>Table 4:</b> Overview Cases II – Supporting Organizations.....	23

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After being considered solved in the past, the housing question is back on the agenda in Germany. As before, the current crisis is the result of structural dysfunctions inherent in a housing market that is primarily based on the private sector (Holm, 2011). The fundamental problem is that on the one hand housing is a basic existential need that decisively determines people's well-being and their opportunities to participate in society, thus evoking central questions on social justice. On the other hand, housing is a commodity from which owners and investors profit while growing parts of the population have difficulties financing adequate housing for themselves and their families (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018). As long as this contradictory relationship persists, recurring crises are inherent in the system.

The current crisis in the German housing market is concentrated in urban centres and university towns, while rural regions are struggling with vacancies and depopulation (Rink, 2020). A recent study shows that “*nationwide, the structural supply deficit comprised over 1.5 million dwellings*” and that many households in German cities are experiencing above-average rent burdens (Holm et al., 2021). International financialization and speculation on the housing market, as well as a lack of building activity in the past, especially in middle and lower price segments, have led to the current untenable situation. Which can certainly be described as failure of the market, as a significant proportion of households are under-supplied or overburdened with rent payments (ibid.).

The problems are also related to the housing policy of the German government. After the end of the Second World War, there was a short period of extensive state intervention and subsidies to alleviate the acute housing shortage (Egner, 2014). However, from the outset this was seen as a crisis intervention and the long-term plan (at least in West Germany) was always to turn to a market-based model of housing provision (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018). Especially under the conservative-liberal government (1982-1998) under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the state gradually withdrew from its role as a housing provider, thus showing itself to be an unreliable partner for renters. The abolition of the non-profit housing model (*Wohnungsgemeinnützigkeit*) in 1990, the expiry of many social occupancy flats (*Sozialbindung*) and the sale of large parts of the municipal housing stock in the 1990s and early 2000s, led to a far-reaching marketisation of the housing sector. Currently the state mostly focuses on enabling low-income households to participate in the market through subsidies (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018).

As it stands today, it seems that affordable housing provision is no longer guaranteed for an increasing proportion of the population. The glaring deficits in housing provision were also a



central issue in the last federal election campaign 2021. The current government coalition of SPD, Greens and FDP wants to solve the problem primarily through new construction (aiming at 400.000 new units per year, 100.000 of which social housing) and has stipulated in the coalition agreement to reintroduce the non-profit housing model (SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, FDP, 2021, p. 88 ff.). However, it will take time for these measures to take effect and they do not seem to match the scope of the problem given the intolerable status quo.

This has led to an increasing number of voices calling for the (re)communalization of housing, not only to solve the housing crisis, but to fundamentally move away from the provision of housing via the private market. For example, the *Netzwerk Immovielien*<sup>1</sup>, which is campaigning throughout Germany for housing and construction projects for the “common good” (*Gemeinwohl*) advocates such claims. In Berlin there is a citizens' initiative called *Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen*, which demands that large private housing portfolios be transferred to public ownership. Such radical demands show how severe the burden on tenants in German cities has become.

In this context, the aim of this thesis is to explore the potential of decommodified and self-managed housing projects (in the following referred to as housing commons) in German cities as viable alternatives to commercial and public housing provision. Drawing on the theoretical concept of urban commons, the question arises how the housing projects navigate the contradictions between their claim to autonomy and prevailing interdependencies with state and market, and which challenges currently stand in the way of their transformative potential unfolding. The research questions are presented as follows:

- What are the internal and external pressures on housing commons, and how are they dealt with?
- What value, besides affordable rents can the housing commons provide?
- Can housing commons exist as a sustainable, viable, and scalable housing solution without state participation?

Existing research by Balmer and Bernet (2019) focuses on a case-study approach to investigating the challenges of housing cooperatives in Germany and Switzerland, suggesting solidarity between the housing commons as the way to expanding them. Likewise in a case study of the German *Mietshäuser Syndikat*, Hölzl (2022) offers an informative discussion on the essentiality of knowledge circulation through (international) networks to successfully establish housing commons in different national contexts. Other scholars have engaged with

---

<sup>1</sup> The “name „Immovielien“ is a neologism [...]. It combines the word for real-estate „Immobilien“ with the word for many „viele“.” (Netzwerk Immovilien, n.d.).

the relationship between commons and the state. In an illuminating account of the privatisation of cooperative housing stocks in Denmark, Larsen und Hansen (2015) provide an instructive case of commons being appropriated through capital and state intervention. Taking a cooperative neighbourhood in Brussels as an example, Aernouts & Ryckewaert (2019) discuss the implications of government involvement in cooperative structures, suggesting that more differentiated forms of individual engagement are possible in this way than with strictly autonomous commons. Finally, in an international study, Ferreri & Vidal (2021) compared ten housing cooperatives to determine “public-cooperative” policy mechanisms enabling housing commons. Building on the existing research, this study is a further contribution to the arguments concerning the ambiguous common-public relationship, though focussing in more detail on the German market and political context.

In order to answer my research questions, first, a detailed overview and background on housing policy after 1945 and the German housing market will be offered. This is further complemented by a brief outline of historic examples of housing commons in Germany (section 2). Section 3 will first, detail the academic debate on the conceptualization of housing as commons "beyond state and market" and the benefits it offers for approaching the question of housing provision; second, outline the theoretical foundations of new urban commons diverging from Elinor Ostrom's governance approach; and third, discuss the ambiguous interrelations between the commons, state, and market. The methodological part centres around the research design employed for this study, including further information on the selected interview partners, and the housing projects and organisations they are involved in (section 4). In the analysis (section 5), findings from the fieldwork will be synthesised with the conceptual considerations to answer my research questions. Internal group dynamics throughout different project phases, interaction with outside actors on various levels, and the prerequisites for creating sustainable housing commons will be considered. Finally, I will present the concluding hypothesis, that primarily the current situation on the real estate market and the lack of a supporting infrastructure are putting pressure on the housing commons, keeping them from realising their transformative potential in regard to the provision of housing. Cooperation with the state is a promising way forward to overcome market pressures and provide a viable large-scale alternative. I end with a discussion of the results and their relevance for the research on urban housing commons.

## **2. BACKGROUND: HOUSING POLICY AND HISTORIC HOUSING COMMONS**

### **2.1 Housing Policy in Germany after 1945 and “The Return of the Housing Question”**

After the end of the Second World War, there was a shortage of 5.5 million flats in West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG) and 2.1 million in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Due to the influx of refugees from the former eastern territories and many war returnees and evacuees coming back to the cities, 21 million (FRG) and 6.3 million (GDR) people were insufficiently provided for (Rink, 2020). Both states followed different approaches to solve the problem.

#### ***2.1.1 Housing Policy in the GDR: Housing as a Public Good***

The GDR pursued a socialist housing policy and housing provision was designated as a public task in the GDR Constitution (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018, p. 14). Housing was effectively withdrawn from the market, resulting in a historically low rent burden ratio, at around 3 percent of household incomes. Also, it was practically impossible to terminate rental contracts or evict tenants as Schöning and Vollmer explain (ibid.). Despite decreasing population figures between 1947 and 1990 (19,1 to 16,4 = - 2,7 million) there were still 600,000 people searching for a flat at the beginning of the 1970s and waiting time for a flat was up to 10 years (Rink, 2020). In 1971, the state party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei, SED*) therefore decided on a large-scale building program aiming to solve the housing problem by 1990. Housing was built mainly in typical prefabricated slab construction in large housing estates on the outskirts of the cities (ibid.). However, due to a large backlog in modernization and maintenance the demand for housing could not be met. In 1990 the number of people searching for a flat had risen to almost 800,000 while at the same time over 400,000 flats were vacant because of their poor conditions. It was obvious that the GDR failed in its goal of state housing provision (ibid.).

#### ***2.1.2 Housing Policy in the FRG: Social Housing and Home Ownership***

The housing policy of the FRG in the immediate post-war period was also characterized by far-reaching state regulations: a “compulsory housing industry” (*Wohnungszwangswirtschaft*) was introduced which included a ban on termination of existing rental contracts, state-set rent levels and state allocation of privately owned housing (Egner, 2014, p. 13). Unlike in the GDR, however, this was only a transitional arrangement aimed at immediate relief. The state addressed the quantitative dimension of the housing question with large-scale subsidies for housing construction and the promotion of home ownership, to provide large parts of the population with housing (ibid.). In the 1950s alone, the state subsidized the construction of 3.3

million rental flats, and by 1990 the total had risen to almost 8 million (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018, p. 15). For this kind of housing, normally a time-limited social occupancy (*Sozialbindung*) was contractually fixed before the flats could then be rented on the private housing market (*ibid.*). Additionally, (private and public) non-profit housing companies (*Gemeinnützige Wohnungsunternehmen*) played an important role in the provision of housing: “At the end of the 1980s, [they] held about 50 % of all social housing and 26.4 % of the rental housing in West Germany.” (*ibid.*, p. 15)<sup>2</sup>. These companies receive permanent tax exemptions in exchange for providing affordable housing to low-income households in the long run.

The second pillar of housing construction was the promotion of owner-occupied housing, which was aimed in particular at the middle classes and was taken up in the 1970s and 1980s as the population became more affluent, resulting in suburbanization of urban centres (Egner, 2014). Nevertheless, the home ownership rate did not increase significantly over the years and is still today the lowest in Europe at 50 percent (Eurostat, 2021).

In 1966, post-war reconstruction was officially declared complete, and by the 1970s every household in Germany had a flat at its disposal. At least in quantitative terms, the housing question was thus solved, and the federal government gradually withdrew from housing subsidies (Rink, 2020). A decrease in the construction of social housing and expiring social commitments in the 1980s marked the end of the era of welfare state housing policy and illustrate the advancing marketisation of the housing sector (Egner, 2014, p. 16).

### ***2.1.3 After 1990: From Housing Policy to Housing Market Policy***

After reunification, there was another short lived building boom in which subsidies for the construction of social housing and home ownership were raised again. Activities were mainly concentrated on the area of the former GDR to make up for the backlog in housing provision there (Rink, 2020). Nevertheless, the 1990s were characterized by the liberal-conservative turn in state policy under Helmut Kohl, German chancellor from 1982-1998 (Christian Democratic Union, CDU). This was also reflected in housing policy. Central was the abolition of the non-profit housing model in 1990, leading to the sale of large municipal housing stocks, especially to international investors (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018, p. 16). The same was the case for the formerly state-owned housing in the GDR. Together with the expiring social occupancy of many flats built during the post-war period, this led to a far-reaching marketisation of the housing sector. Schöning and Vollmer point out that this change happened in the context of the general restructuring of the welfare state,

---

<sup>2</sup> Where direct quotations from original German texts (refer to reference list) are used, the translation is the author's own.

*“nevertheless, this does not prove to be a rupture of West German housing policy, which, precisely in view of the systemic competition with the GDR, was from the outset not conceived as a permanent intervention in a structurally dysfunctional land and housing market, nor a permanent state-organized housing supply.”* (ibid., p. 16).

In 2001 the social democrat/green government virtually abolished public social housing provision under the Housing Promotion Act (*Wohnraumförderungsgesetz*) and, in contrast to the post-war period, the policy measures now focused on disadvantaged households and no longer on "the broad mass of the population". Later, the Federalism Reform in 2006 (*Föderalismusreform*) transferred the responsibility for housing provision from the federal level to the states and municipalities. Egner describes this development as a shift from housing policy to housing *market* policy (2014).

#### ***2.1.4 The “Return of the Housing Question”***

The current crisis on the German housing market is concentrated in urban centres and university towns, while rural regions are struggling with vacancies and depopulation (Rink, 2020). Low-income households, welfare recipients and other vulnerable groups (such as migrants or large families) are being pushed out of the city centre and can only afford to live in qualitatively worse buildings. A problem that has been discussed for almost ten years as the "return of the housing question" (Holm, 2014).

A recent study on rent burdens in Germany shows that *“nationwide, the structural supply deficit comprised over 1.5 million dwellings”* and many households have above-average rent burdens (Holm et al., 2021). Almost half of the 8.4 million households living for rent in the 77 largest German cities have to spend more than 30 percent of their net income to pay their rent (gross). A further 25 percent pay more than 40 percent of their income and 12 percent even more than half. In addition, poorer households (defined as earning maximum 60 percent of the median income) are significantly more burdened by rent payments than those with a high incomes (140 percent of the median): the former group on average spends 46 percent of their income on rent, whereas the latter ‘only’ pays 20 percent of their income (ibid.).

Especially the international financialization and speculation on the housing market in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008, as well as a lack of building activity in the middle and lower price segments, have led to the current situation. This can certainly be described as a market failure, since a significant proportion of households are under-supplied or have to pay high rents (Rink, 2020; Schöning & Vollmer, 2018). The rising prices in the housing market have also increased government spending on rent subsidies, although the number of recipients has decreased (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018, p. 17).

The current coalition of SPD (social democrats), Greens and FDP (liberals) intends to solve the problem primarily through new construction (aiming at 400.000 new units per year, 100.000 of which social housing) and has stipulated in the coalition agreement to reintroduce the non-profit housing model (SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, FDP, 2021, p. 88 ff.).

A slow reconsideration of housing provision began almost ten years ago:

*“There is a growing realisation that housing is not an economic but a social good and that political intervention is therefore necessary. Displacement effects in large German cities, but also in communities in the immediate vicinity of large cities, are particularly evident among people with low and medium incomes. They pose a considerable risk that opportunities to participate in working and social life are increasingly unequally distributed.”* (Egner, 2014, p. 19)

Whether the current coalition will finally change something fundamentally remains to be seen.

## **2.2 History of Housing Commons: From Worker’s Cooperatives to *Mietshäuser Syndikat***

Although decommodified and self-managed forms of housing have existed for several decades in Germany and elsewhere, only over the last 10-15 years have they been discussed under the term of *housing commons*. Here, I will give a brief overview of two periods in history in which alternative forms of housing emerged and define two key characteristics of housing commons compared to other forms of collective housing currently being discussed.

The first example worth mentioning are the housing cooperatives and building associations that were established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018, p. 12). Industrialisation led to massive urbanization processes and many tenement buildings were created to accommodate the new urban working class. Due to lacking state regulation, these buildings were characterized by poor housing conditions and overcrowding. Although the first legal regulations were introduced around 1900, housing policy was not seen as a state responsibility and almost no public housing existed at the time. Instead, tenants relied on self-help initiatives and organized in cooperatives and building associations to provide affordable housing (ibid.). Some of them exist until today and are established actors with a substantial capital stock on the housing market (*Bestandsgenossenschaften*). The original motive of providing affordable housing is still characteristic of these cooperatives. However, their growth has also led to a professionalisation and thus hierarchisation of organisational structures. Furthermore, the forced political integration (*Gleichschaltung*) during the Nazi era stopped the self-organisation of tenants and aligned housing providers with the centralist state leadership (ibid., p 14). Many of the old cooperatives are now structured more like commercial housing

companies, whose main task is to manage property and where the principle of self-determination is more of a formality (Balmer & Bernet, 2019).

A second peak of alternative housing projects can be observed during the 1970s and 1980s. Albeit in different ways, both squatters and the self-help/new cooperative movement, protested the area wide redevelopment (*Kahlschlagsanierung*) of inner-city neighbourhoods. Many of the residential buildings in these areas had been purposely neglected to force out tenants, creating displacement processes and housing vacancies, while at the same time there was a shortage of housing in urban centres (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018, p. 16). Affected properties were either occupied by squatters or acquired by newly founded neighbourhood cooperatives aiming to secure affordable housing for the local population. Some squatter groups later managed to avoid eviction by either buying the houses or negotiating regular leases at relatively low prices. While in the case of the young cooperatives (*Junge Genossenschaften*), both self-management and decommodification have been maintained until today, this is different for some of the former squatters. Even though some of them negotiated low rents in the long term, this still means a return to market-based housing provision (Balmer & Bernet, 2019; Metzger, 2016).

These historical examples illustrate a key aspect for the further discussion of alternative housing: it is not easy to maintain the initial intentions of decommodification and self-management in the long run, often because of the respective political climate and the overall circumstances such projects are embedded in, but also because of internal structures changing over time.

Currently, cooperative forms of housing are still a niche phenomenon, providing approximately 10 percent of the available rental flats in Germany (Savills, 2019). However, given the current tense situation on the housing market and the wish for participation and engagement, the cooperative model is experiencing a renaissance, potentially growing more important in the future (Heinze, 2020). The landscape of alternative housing is constantly evolving and becoming more differentiated. In Germany, the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* is particularly worth mentioning because of its unique legal structure as a limited liability company (*GmbH*), ensuring the autonomy of the housing projects and making the resale of property virtually impossible (is described in more detail in section 4.3.1).

However, there is a certain lack of clarity in the current discussion about collective housing when it comes to ownership structures. Under the related terms “collective housing” or “co-housing”, different models are being discussed that aim at participation and self-determination of the residents (Ache & Fedrowitz, 2012). This is not only the case in Germany, but a larger trend in Western countries (Ferreri & Vidal, 2021; Tummers, 2016). Not all of the projects

discussed as “collective housing” or “co-housing” fulfil the commons definition, which in particular emphasises decommodification and seeks to avoid future sell-offs. It is therefore important to consider what exactly is being talked about when collective forms of housing are being discussed.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: URBAN HOUSING COMMONS

In this section, I will first discuss the conceptualization of housing as commons to outline the implications this understanding adds to the debate about housing provision. In order to provide a theoretical foundation for my later analysis I will describe the continued development of Elinor Ostrom's original concept towards the “new commons” and highlight the specific context and challenges of urban commons. Lastly, I will discuss the importance of solidarity practices for the creation, maintenance, and expansion of the commons against the backdrop of capitalist appropriation and state control.

#### 3.1 Housing as Commons “Beyond Market and State”

Already 150 years ago, Friedrich Engels described the problems that arise when housing is provided through the private market, creating recurring housing crises (Engels, 1887). According to him the fundamental problem is the understanding of housing (and land) as a commodity on the one hand, and housing as an existential necessity to which everyone should have access to on the other. The dichotomy of the exchange value at which housing is sold or rented on the market and the use value housing has for everyone causes structural dysfunctionalities within the housing market. The problem also arises due to the special characteristics of housing (Schöning et al., 2019, p. 11). Since the land needed to provide housing is limited, housing is by nature a finite good. The higher the demand, the higher the prices. In addition, construction is capital-intensive and involves long planning cycles, which is why an increase in demand cannot be absorbed by an increase in supply in the short term. As exchange and use value move further and further apart, the basic need for living can no longer be satisfied through market solutions. While real estate and landowners profit from rising prices, for a large part of the population it is becoming difficult to find adequate and affordable housing in cities. As Harvey notes: *“It is the failure of individualized private property rights to fulfil our common interests in the way they are supposed to do”* (Harvey, 2012, p. 88).

The extent to which housing has a commodity-like character always depends on the respective legal regulations and the institutional context. In Germany, a large proportion of housing is provided via the private market. But there is a large variety of different ownership and rental arrangements – ranging from individually owner-occupied buildings to commercially



or non-profit rentals to state-provided social housing (Balmer & Bernet, 2015, p. 180 f., see *Tab. 1*).

<b>Owner-occupied Housing</b>	<b>Rental Housing</b>
– outright	<b>Commercially Rented</b>
– mortgaged	– from small/ private landlords
	– from large/ corporate landlords
	<b>Non-Profit Housing (“Social Rented”)</b>
	– public housing (government-owned)
	– privately owned social housing (government-subsidized)
	– cooperative housing (government-subsidized on some cases)
	– “philanthropic” non-profit housing (provided by charitable foundations, religious organizations etc.; government-subsidized in some cases)

*Table 1:* Characteristics of different types of ownership (Balmer & Bernet, 2019), own depiction.

While most available housing units are sold or rented through the private housing market, other forms of housing are reserved for low-income earners, welfare recipients or other vulnerable groups. Although in Germany, the right to housing is not established in the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), it is part of the UN Human Rights Charter ratified by Germany, and the principle of the welfare state also imposes an obligation on the state to provide the subsistence level which includes housing (Krennerich, 2018). At this point, it is important to consider that the institutional framework, which regulates the production, use and access to a certain resource – in this case housing – can be changed. In fact, this always has been subject to the approach of the respective governing political party (see section 2.1; Balmer & Bernet, 2015, p. 183). However, referring to a history of market liberalization, privatization, and the selling-off of public housing stock, research points to the fact that the German state has proven to be an unreliable actor in the provision of affordable housing for disadvantaged groups (Egner, 2014; Holm, 2014; Schöning & Vollmer, 2018).

In classical economic theory, goods are sorted into four classes depending on their level of rivalry and exclusion (see *Tab. 2*). The degree of rivalry determines whether people's use of a good limits others' utility of this good. The degree of exclusivity shows how easy it is to exclude other users from consuming the good, or how access is regulated. This matrix results in four categories with different degrees of exclusion and rivalry. For example, the radio is a public good because it can be used by many people at the same time without affecting the

	<b>Non-rivalrous</b>	<b>Rivalrous</b>
<b>Non-excludable</b>	<u>Public good</u> National defense, FTA radio	<u>common pool resource</u> timber, coal, fish stock
<b>Excludable</b>	<u>Club good</u> Cinema, private parks, gym	<u>Private good</u> Food, clothing, smart phone

*Table 2:* Classification of goods ('Öffentliche Güter', 2016), own depiction

user experience of others and it is difficult to exclude people from using it. In contrast, streaming services that provide similar content are a “club good” because the provision is organised by private companies that get paid for their service. Again, there is no rivalry in use, but excluding people is technically easy.

However, Silke Helfrich (2012) points out that contrary to what mainstream economists want us to believe, these classes of goods are not given by nature, but rather the categories describe the institutional framework in which a good is provided and made accessible. Considering housing, it becomes clear that it is difficult to assign it to just one category because of the various arrangements provided by private, public, and other actors. But that is not the central question: instead of thinking about which category to place housing in, Helfrich argues it is more important to recognise that most resources do not belong to a category per se but *are made into* a certain kind of good depending on the institutional setting. Social negotiation processes, institutional and technical innovations play a decisive role in determining how goods and services are provided and how and to whom access is granted (ibid., p.89).

Provision and access are the two central aspects that need to be discussed when raising the question what kind of good we as the society want housing to be. If there is consensus that no one should be excluded from access to adequate and affordable housing, this points to a desired non-excludability, which, as the matrix of classical economic theory also shows, cannot be achieved through market-based approaches. This brings us back to Engels' argumentation mentioned above, stating that to avoid housing shortages, the use value of housing should form the basis for housing policy and the provision of housing should not be organised via the market. To prevent speculation and secure affordability and access for the public, the decommodification of housing is therefore a central demand in the current discussion (Balmer & Bernet, 2015; Holm, 2011). In distinguishing between public and common good, the form of provision comes into account. The current discussion calls for the correction of past mistakes

in housing policy mostly through greater state involvement in the provision of housing (Heeg, 2018). However, since the withdrawal of state actors has helped to produce the current problems, this might just be a continuation of the German housing policy as crisis intervention (Schöning & Vollmer, 2018), not leading to any systemic change. Therefore, in a second step and complementary to the decommodification of housing, various authors argue for the ownership and power of decision-making being transferred to the people living in the respective buildings (Holm, 2011; Balmer & Bernet 2015). When housing is owned and managed by the residents themselves, they do not have to fear displacement or the sale of the property to investors. In addition, they can better arrange themselves according to their own lifestyles – unlike in standard public housing, which is often based on the traditional nuclear family and has also contributed to social segregation and stigmatisation of residents in the past (Metzger, 2015, p. 44).

Claiming housing as a common good – characterized by decommodification and self-management – thus is embedded into an overarching discussion about power relations, participation, and social justice in urban settings. This idea can be further linked to Henri Lefebvre’s demand for the “right to the city” and his description of the city as a collective oeuvre being continuously produced through the interaction of the different individuals and groups sharing the urban space (1968). Through their emancipatory approach, commons thus have the potential of becoming an instrument to realise the “right to the city” in a concrete and practical way (Metzger, 2015). The specific setting of housing commons in an urban context will be discussed in the following section.

### **3.2 From Common Pool Resources to Urban Commons**

The original commons concept focused on natural resources rather than societal commodities. In her long-standing research on common-pool resources (CPR), Elinor Ostrom (1990) showed how and under what circumstances people can collectively organize to effectively manage the access and use of fisheries, water, or forests. In her institutional economic approach, she identifies eight “principles of managing the commons”, a list of criteria that determine the long-term success and durability of commons. This includes the need for clearly defined group boundaries, participation in decisions affecting the CPR and the group, as well as recognition from outside authorities (*ibid.*, p. 88 ff.). CPRs are thus resources that according to Ostrom are best managed “in common”, referring to a complex set of strategies to collectively organize the use of resources under specific cultural, ecological, economic conditions. A key insight from Ostrom’s work is that people organise in this way because it is more efficient than alternative institutional solutions. Ostrom here opposes the narrative of the

"tragedy of the commons", in which only a powerful state and strongly protected property rights are able to control the selfish and utility-maximizing *homo oeconomici* competing for the use of the pasture in Hardin's famous example (1968).

Ostrom's work is mostly concerned with the complexity of human interaction and how to find the best institutional setting to produce an outcome that benefits everyone involved. Moving up in scale from the individual cases that build the base of her research, she proposes "polycentric governance beyond state and market", to embed the individual commons into overarching institutional arrangements enhancing peoples' capacities to cooperate and solve problems (Ostrom, 2010, p. 664). She does not, however, specify how this superordinate structure should be designed and function in terms of decision-making, legitimacy, and democratic control. This is a point that David Harvey, among others, has critically addressed (2012, p. 88 ff.) – I will come back to this critique when discussing the challenges of urban commons specifically.

As also demonstrated by the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences awarded to Ostrom for her work in 2009, the commons concept has gained momentum not only in a variety of academic fields, but also in civil society and among activist groups. It has been continuously developed and modified since, and the term "new commons" (Hess, 2008) is now being used to discuss a wide range of means and services as commons. These new commons are not limited to natural resources, but include cultural, knowledge, infrastructure and neighbourhood, global, and digital commons (Helfrich & Bollier, 2012; Hess, 2008; Standing, 2019). The concept has also received attention in the field of Urban Studies, with a variety of publications on urban commons discussing how to transfer Ostrom's original work on the CPRs to the urban space (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Dellenbaugh et al., 2015b; Feinberg et al., 2021; Parker & Johansson, 2011).

But where does the growing interest in alternatives "beyond state and market" come from? Hess directly links it "to increasing commodification, privatization, and corporatization, untamed globalization, and unresponsive governments" (2008). It is therefore not surprising that many of the much-discussed major contributions of the current commons discourse were published in the years following the 2008 financial crisis (de Angelis & Stavrides, 2010; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2012; Linebaugh, 2008). What unites these authors is the view that there are certain resources – including housing – that should not be subjected to capitalist exploitation or state control, but instead be organized and owned by those who produce them: the urban dwellers. The three-part definition established in this strand of literature is also used in this paper: Generally, a commons consists of these elements: a *common resource*, defined as

a non-commodified means of fulfilling people's needs; a *community* of commoners creating and maintaining this resource; and the social practice of *commoning/to common*, i.e. the process of negotiating rules and norms within this group, the social interaction in sustaining the common (de Angelis & Stavrides, 2010; Dellenbaugh et al., 2015a; Linebaugh, 2008). In terms of housing, the collectively owned and decommodified property is the "resource", the residents are the community creating and sustaining it, and the social relations within the group and the interaction with their environment is described by commoning. The term was coined by the historian Peter Linebaugh, emphasizing that commons are not a resource, but an active form of relating and interacting socially (2008). All three together form what is described as a *housing commons*. Each of these aspects can look very different for the respective commons in a specific context. There is no blueprint even for two identical "resources" since the inner dynamic of the community and how they interreact their environment will vary from case to case.

In contrast to Ostrom, who pursues a governance approach, the *new commons* authors focus more on the community of commoners and their social practice of continuously (re)producing the commons. This is especially true for urban commons like public spaces or housing. Of course, they need to be built in the first place, but as commons they result "*from people using, consuming, appropriating the city*" (Borch & Kornberger, 2015, p. 8). This also means that the problem of overconsumption, which is central to Ostrom's theory, does not apply here, since urban commons are only created through the shared use of urban dwellers. Additional users are seen as a benefit and usually even desired. Of course, this also has limits, e.g. in cases of overcrowded streets. Understanding commons as an ongoing process of production and consumption, including the negotiation of who (community) and what ("resource") is involved in this, is a central point in the case of urban commons.

Defining the community and the boundaries of a commons is much more complicated in urban areas than it is for natural CPRs. For example, Parker and Johansson (2011) highlight that because of the population density, the potential user base is larger and at the same time harder to define. There might be different social groups claiming a commons resource for them, making urban commons contested spaces. They also add that there are multiple outside actors from different administrative levels involved in the creation and maintenance of the commons, further complicating the process. Stavros Stavrides addresses this point as well, describing the contested boundaries as "thresholds" (Stavrides, 2016). While they might pose a challenge in creating and maintaining urban commons, they also help to ensure the openness of the commons. He refers to the understanding of commons as spaces that are in principle open to all and sees the continuous negotiation process as an important step to achieve this. David Harvey

also points to the danger of commons excluding certain groups through too rigorous boundaries and thus not living up to the principle of openness (2012). In the end, it is the respective community that has a great influence on who is a member and who is not. Unlike Stavrides, however, he argues for greater state involvement in this regard, as he sees the danger of exclusion in decentralised structures and horizontal connections between the commons, ultimately resulting in club goods from which only a small group of users benefits (ibid.). Therefore, in the discussion about commons one should not fall for romanticized notions of communal living, but seriously consider institutional frameworks that allow for the free and self-determined engagement of commoners.

In summary, Ostrom's CPR theory cannot be readily applied to urban space. The question of boundaries and scale poses itself differently than in relation to natural resources. However, the discussion about the new commons, which focuses on the relational aspect of commoning, allows us to look at who is involved in the production of certain "resources" and claims access to them accordingly. The openness and contested character of urban commons are two sides of the same coin. I will discuss this aspect further in the following.

### **3.3 The “Struggle for the Commons”: Enclosure, In(ter)dependence and Solidarity**

It has been established in the previous section that urban commons are contested spaces that different social groups claim access to, and the sharing of the underlying “resource” needs to be negotiated among different actors. In exploring the question of in(ter)dependence of the housing commons, the fundamental relationship with the state and the market are also crucial and will be discussed in the following.

Analogous to the enclosure of the historical commons, a time when common land was privatised in England and thus no longer accessible to all (Linebaugh 2009), the new commons literature discusses "new enclosures", referring to the ongoing threat of the commons being appropriated by capitalist interests and state regulation. In contrast to traditional Marxist thinking describing enclosure as a historically completed process at a certain point in time (“primitive accumulation”), Harvey points out that just like commoning and the (re)production of the commons, their appropriation is an ongoing process:

*"The common is not, therefore, something extant once upon a time that has since been lost, but something that, like the urban commons, is continuously being produced. The problem is that it is just as continuously being enclosed and appropriated by capital in its commodified and monetary form."* (2012, p. 77)

De Angelis and Stavrides highlight this aspect when they talk about the “struggle for the commons” (2010). In the authors' understanding, common spaces are constantly under threat

of being appropriated by capital interests or having the spaces available to them diminished by state regulation. Whether this actually occurs and to what extent is always a question of the power relations in a specific context (ibid.). In this regard, de Angelis points to the ambivalent relationship between commons and capital: since capital always needs new, not yet appropriated resources in order to grow further, there will always be spaces in which commons can first develop – before they are then subordinated to the capitalist logic of exploitation (2012). For example, a self-managed community garden is initially an added value for a neighbourhood, but the upgrading of the urban space might consequently lead to gentrification processes in the surrounding area, displacing those who initially created this value. The constant production of new commons therefore potentially sustains the capitalist system, while also containing the potential to overcome it eventually (ibid.).

The central point in sustaining urban commons according to Harvey is the distribution of ownership (2012, pp. 75, 78 f.). He refers to liberal economic theory, which justifies private property rights on the grounds that they ultimately serve to produce "common good" in the sense of a shared surplus value. This idea is also reflected in Article 14 (2) of the German Basic Law: "Property is a commitment. Its use should also serve the common good." (*"Eigentum verpflichtet. Sein Gebrauch soll zugleich dem Wohle der Allgemeinheit dienen."*). Harvey points out that this is however often not the case, instead the comparatively small group of owners receives a benefit while others are left empty-handed (ibid., p. 75). In his opinion, those who are involved in the production of the commons should therefore also own them – in urban space, this is specifically about land and housing property. Therefore, the decommodification of the commons is so crucial. Only if they are permanently withdrawn from the private market can they escape the threat of capitalist interests. In this context, Stavrides also highlights the role of the state, who as the guardian of private property rights, maintains this important foundation of global capitalism (de Angelis & Stavrides, 2010).

In their logic of functioning based on trust and care among the community, commons are at odds with the logic of capitalist exploitation, and it is precisely here that their emancipatory potential takes effect. To the extent that commons can be permanently protected against capitalist appropriation and expand their sphere of influence, the ground can ultimately be taken away from capital (quite literally so in the case of housing). When considering the long-term perspective and potential success of the commons as an alternative vis-à-vis the market, de Angelis and Stavrides highlight: "*Whatever is produced in the common must stay in the common in order to expand, empower and sustain the commons independently from capitalist circuits.*" (2010). According to them, already a small number of commons makes a difference, because

they are areas of "collective experimentation" that demonstrate that a different world is possible. However, the commons can only unfold their potential if they stay open, spread, and spill over to larger society. Their individualization on the contrary make them vulnerable and would betray their principles, since "alternative enclaves" are not what to strive for in this context (ibid.). When it comes to strategies on how to do this, de Angelis and Stavrides follow the position they postulate of commons autonomous of the state and the market and call for a network of commons "*to disarticulate the power of the state*" (ibid.). In relation to housing, this idea is echoed by Hodkinson, who proposes a three-pronged strategy to realise housing as commons, starting with individual housing commons (1) that strategically resists capitalist enclosure (2), then forming a "*common housing movement*" (3) to "*provide affordable, secure, collectively-controlled housing for all*" (2012). Balmer and Bernet also think along these lines when they call for "solidarity and expansion" among individual projects in response to the challenges of German and Swiss housing cooperatives, and to make decommodified and self-managed housing a viable alternative for housing provision in the long term (2019). Through this approach, a large part of the responsibility to oppose capitalist interests is offloaded onto the commoners, i.e. ultimately civil society.

However, other authors, including Harvey (2012) are not so quick to dismiss cooperation with the state (Cumbers, 2015; Parker & Johansson, 2011). It is precisely because the state has such an important role in terms of property rights and the general (legal) framework in which the commons are embedded that it is important to take it into account in the practice of commoning (Parker & Johansson, 2011). In addition, the scale and complexity of the urban space plays an important role when it comes to the relationship between the commons. Different claimants may make demands on the same resource, or a community may become closed off contrary to the original aspiration of openness and exclude people from access to the commons (ibid.). Therefore, Harvey sees the role of the state also to regulate inter-commons relationships to prevent such tendencies (2012, p. 83 f.). Cumbers also points out that to establish the commons in the long term and to build alternative political and economic institutions, there is no way around engagement with state actors (2015). While the state currently plays into the hands of capital, the welfare state has historically guaranteed the working class freedom from capitalist interests. According to Cumbers, this is where we need to pick up and develop a strong political strategy through engagement with the state, to ultimately democratise and "commonalise" it (ibid.).

But just as in relation to capital, a certain contradictoriness is also apparent here. Metzger points out, for example, that there is a danger that the state will shirk its responsibility by



supporting commons and see them as "new social systems" that are cost-effective for it (2015). Caffentzis and Federici also follow this argument when they warn against the co-optation of the commons by the state (2014). This means that the state uses the concept of the commons to recruit people for unpaid social activities. It then awards funding to non-profits that produce social added value (according to state-defined and capitalist criteria). *“In this way, communal efforts to build solidarity and cooperative forms of existence, outside the control of the market, can be used to cheapen the cost of reproduction and even accelerate the lay-offs of public employees.”* (ibid, p. 98).

So, while there is disagreement about how the commons should ideally relate to the state and there is ambiguity in this relationship, all authors agree that the core idea of the commons is not only to push back capitalist interests but ultimately to overcome them. Conceptualising housing as commons, draws attention to emancipatory forms of organisation beyond the market and the state. The extent to which the commoners are able to sustain, defend and expand the common spaces is crucial for their long-term success and thus realising the transformative potential that is inherent in this form of organisation. In the urban context, they are confronted with a complex setting including various actors and different scales of operation and must assert themselves against capitalist appropriation and state control.

Given the complex, interdependent and often contested environment in which urban housing commons are placed, the question arises as to their in(ter)pendence and to what extent they really can be an alternative “beyond state and market”. As outlined in this section, there is the ideal concept of housing as a common resource: open to all and free from market logic or state hierarchies. In the context of expanding, maintaining, and defending independent and open common spaces, the social practice of commoning and solidarity among different housing commons plays a central role. Challenges and contradictions are an inherent part of commoning and I will discuss them and how commoners deal with them further alongside my empirical material.

#### **4. METHODS AND MATERIAL: INTERVIEWING HOUSING COMMONERS**

In this part, I will explain and justify the methodology of my study including its limitations and discuss the planning and execution of the fieldwork as well as the ethical considerations. Also, I will give a brief description of the cases I chose to investigate. The research design and choice of methods was guided by the theoretical discussions on housing commons as outlined in the previous section, and was chosen because it allows for a varied and nuanced consideration

of the internal and external factors determining the positioning of the housing commons as an alternative “beyond market and state”, and creating a rich picture of their lived experience.

## **4.1 Research Design, Field Work and Ethical Considerations**

### ***4.1.1 Research Design***

In the lived practice of self-managed housing projects, practices of solidarity, inner group dynamics, and interactions with the (institutional) environment intertwine in a complex manner. The housing projects and the communities sustaining them thus are the central node to investigate and shed light on the multi-layered aspects of the question of their in(ter)dependence. Naturally, a qualitative approach is best suited to account for relevant “*places, events, opinions, and experiences*” over time and to “*investigate complex behaviours and motivations*” of housing commoners (Dunn, 2021, p. 149 f.). Seven semi-structured interviews with people living in housing projects and working at supporting organizations, including one expert for housing commons have been conducted (see section 4.2 and 4.3). The benefit of this method is that it allows to stick to the clear thematic focus of the research project, while also openly explore and uncover the relevant dynamics in creating and maintaining housing commons. Interviews are therefore well suited to gain an in-depth understanding of how alternative housing projects position themselves vis-à-vis market and state. In relation to my research question, they precede other ethnographic approaches such as observations, and more unstructured forms of interviews or questionnaires, because the issue at hand is not observable and relevant actions, events and experiences stretch over longer periods of time (Bryman, 2016 ff.), i.e., different phases of the housing projects. The intentional yet flexible nature of the semi-structured interview allows to consider aspects derived from the literature but is open enough to uncover new topics and nuances, resulting in a rich set of data providing information about the “*complexity and contradictions*” in the commoners’ experience (Valentine, 2005, p. 110 ff.). It allows to shed light both on the group dynamics of housing commoners, as well as their positioning in their environment and interaction with outside actors.

As described in the conceptual framework, commons differ according to the composition and rules of the community of commoners, but also according to the environment in which they operate. The present work does not pursue an in-depth understanding of a single case, but rather aims to identify aspects and developments that these housing projects have “in common” in terms of their in(ter)dependency (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 90 ff.). Therefore, the interviews conducted with individuals living in housing projects have been complemented by the insights from people working at different supporting organizations. The selection of the cases and participants has been purposefully sampled (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2021, p. 96 ff.) to account

for differences such as local circumstances, project size, and ownership structure for the housing projects, and the various types of motivations and services for the supporting organizations. The connection to the interview partners was established through personal contacts (friends of friends) in all cases except for formal requests via e-mail in the case of *Mietshäuser Syndikat* and *Stiftung trias*. Being referred to the interviewees through a shared contact helped to create a rapport with them and possibly has positively affected their willingness to participate in the research and the level of trust I was met with (Dunn, 2021, p. 160). However, the sample is by no means representative of the diverse scene of alternative housing projects in Germany. Just as the voices of the individual participants only provide one point of view from the respective project or organization – which certainly is subjective in each case (Bryman, 2016, p. 398). The precise reflection of events depends on the participants accuracy and honesty, which needs to be considered in the analysis of the data. Furthermore, the decision to exclude municipality staff, politicians, and other actors the housing projects interact with was motivated by the fact that housing policy in Germany is the responsibility of the municipalities (see section 2.1.3) and therefore subject to strong regional differences, making it hard to identify clear tendencies with only a limited number of cases. Focusing on the housing projects alone allows to uncover the frictions that arise in the interaction with state and market actors and the role that the inner dynamics of the respective group play in this. Nevertheless, this of course impacts the results, as the data set only accounts for the perspective of the housing commoners

#### **4.1.2 Field Work**

Prior to conducting the interviews, a guide with questions covering the most relevant points was developed – one for the housing projects and one for the supporting organizations (see appendix Ia and Ib). However, during the interviews, I deviated from the order to keep a natural flow of conversation and included follow up questions when necessary (Dunn, p. 152 ff.).

Due to the physical distance between me living in Sweden and my interviewees in Germany, the interviews were conducted and recorded via the video conferencing tool *zoom*. Advantages of the video interview are the convenience, accessibility, and cost-saving manner to collect the empirical data in a short period of time (Gray et al., 2020). This was not only an advantage for me – also for the interviewees, who are very busy with jobs, care work and of course the administration of the housing projects, it meant less time invested than a visit on site. Although in the past reservations against video interviews in comparison to face-to-face situations have been articulated, the “gold standard” (Novick, 2008) of in-person interviews has to be revised (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021), especially in the light of increased use and widespread acceptance

of video conferencing tools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Self, 2021). As recent research has shown there are only minor inferiorities of online settings compared to in-person encounters (Krouwel et al., 2019). All interviewees were comfortable with the setting and did not express any scepticism to conduct the interviews online. In one case technical issues prevented me from conducting the interview via *zoom* and I switched to telephone and note taking instead. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the video interviews prevented me from getting on site impressions of the housing projects which would have provided me with insights to their physical environment and an even richer picture of each case.

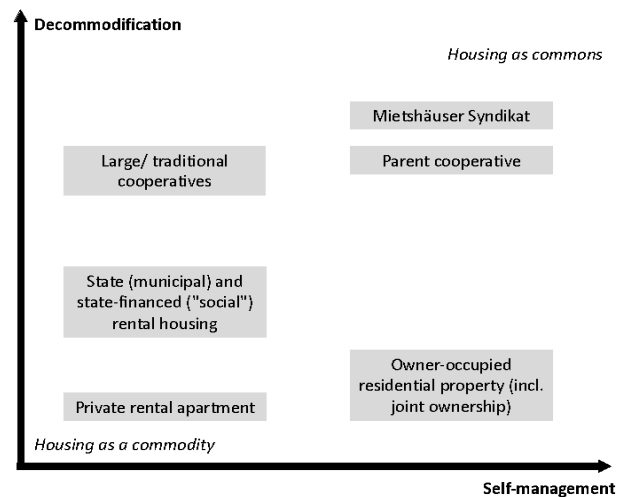
The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed with the help of an automatic voice recognition software (*f4x*). Participants were informed of the completely voluntary nature of their participation and the purpose the data would be used for. Based on the transcribed interviews I conducted a detailed thematic analysis (Dunn, 2021, p. 173 f. Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 377 ff.) the results of which will be presented in section 5.

#### ***4.1.3 Ethical Considerations***

The appropriate and respectful treatment of research participants must of course be considered in every scientific study, especially if it involves such a personal form of research as an interview (Catungal & Dowling, 2005). Even if the group of my interview partners does not belong to a marginalised or vulnerable social group, there are still some aspects to consider. In the case of the interviews with residents of housing projects, I asked about their living conditions and housing situation. Even though this did not involve intimate details of everyday life, it is still private information. Furthermore, in the past, there have been repeated attacks on housing projects and their residents (Ayivi, 2019; Fröhlich, 2021). Often these are cases where the projects can clearly be assigned to a left-wing, anti-fascist scene and the aggressors – if they were identified – usually come from the radical right-wing milieu. Even though none of the projects I interviewed explicitly position themselves outwardly as politically left-wing, this should be taken into consideration, as in the general perception of the public they could nevertheless be assigned to the left-wing political spectrum and thus become a potential target. To protect the participants' privacy and security they were given the option of anonymizing their data, which two of the three interviewees from the housing projects made use of (Int. A and B). In the interviews with the representatives of the supporting organizations, this was less important, as they spoke in their official role and external communication is part of their work.

## 4.2 Cases I: Housing Projects

Following Balmer and Bernet's categorization of different housing types along the lines of decommodification and self-administration (2015; see *Fig. 1*), only housing projects that fulfil both characteristics have been considered in this study, as regarding the claim of housing commons being an alternative beyond state and market, these two factors are essential. All the house projects included in this study correspond to these two characteristics.



*Figure 1:* Types of housing tenure and provision (Balmer & Bernet, 2015).

However, they differ in the specific legal forms, due to their individual histories. They all originated from various social milieus and therefore have different values, aspirations for their community life and the further development of the project<sup>3</sup>. What they have in common, though, is the goal to create alternative living spaces based on mutual support and trust and securing them in the long run. All of them are located in major German cities, but they vary in size and number of the residents.

Interview	City	Inhabitants	Founding Year	Legal Form	Residents
#A	Berlin	3.7 Mio	1972	cooperative	190
#B	Hamburg	1.8. Mio	1988	part of <i>Mietshäuser Syndikat</i> <sup>4</sup>	18
#C	Bochum	365.000	1997	registered association ( <i>e.V.</i> )	15

*Table 3:* Overview Cases I – Housing Projects

<sup>3</sup> I will not go into further detail here, as this could lead to an identification of the projects and thus the anonymity of the interview partners would no longer be guaranteed.

<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of the specific structure of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat*, see “Cases II: Supporting Organizations”.

### 4.3 Cases II: Supporting Organizations

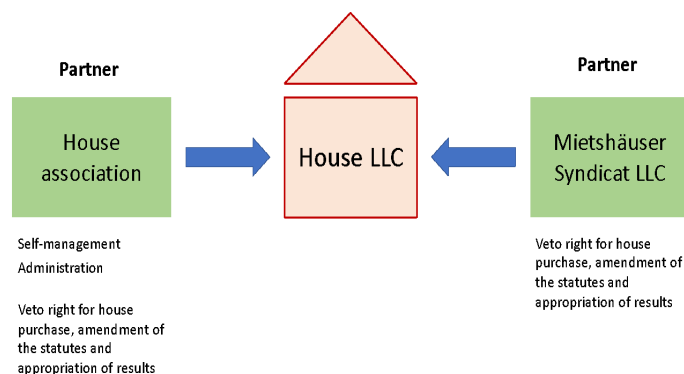
Although all interview partners of the supporting organisations spoke in their respective roles within the organisation, they were also able to draw on their personal experiences in founding and living in housing projects and sometimes jumped in perspectives during the interviews – this was of course considered in the analysis of the interviews. Some of the interviewees have been involved in the organisation since the founding days and therefore were able to comment on changes over time, building on their extensive knowledge of the housing commons scene in Germany through their work in the daily operation of the organisations.

Interview	Organization	Founding Year	Position of Interviewee
#D	<i>Mietshäuser Syndikat GmbH</i>	1992	individual member and commons-researcher
#E	<i>Wohnbund e.V.</i>	1983	founding and board member
#F	<i>Haus- und WagenRat e.V.</i>	2014	founding member, advisor
#G	<i>Stiftung trias</i>	2002	project developer

**Table 4:** Overview Cases II – Supporting Organizations.

#### 4.3.1 *Mietshäuser Syndikat*

The *Mietshäuser Syndikat* (MS) developed out of the squatter scene in Freiburg during the 1980s and was formally founded in 1992. Since then, the network has spread throughout Germany and now connects more than 170 established housing projects and 16 housing initiatives looking for an adequate building (*Mietshäuser Syndikat*, n.d.). Unlike cooperatives, the MS has created its own unique legal structure, which on the one hand is intended to ensure the independence of the individual housing projects, and on the other hand, through their integration into the larger MS federation, puts a stop to the sale of properties (see *Fig. 2*).



**Figure 2:** Model of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* (*Mietshäuser Syndikat*, n.d.), own depiction.

Interestingly, they use the legal form of the LLC (*GmbH*) but use it in a decidedly anti-capitalist way to remove housing from the market in the long term. In addition, a financial solidarity principle between old and new projects is an integral part of the structure and each housing project is required to contribute to a solidarity fund used to help new projects.

#### **4.3.2 *Wohnbund e.V***

The *Wohnbund e.V.* is a network of 180 professionals and organizations working to realize contemporary forms of housing and was founded in 1983 in the context of the self-help movement of the 1970s and 1980s. It is committed to the “*revitalisation of the cooperative movement in the sense of self-administration and self-initiative*” and the “*permanent social obligation (Sozialbindung) of low-cost housing*” (*Wohnbund e.V.*, n.d.). In addition to political and advocacy work in the field of housing policy, over the years, advisory offices have been established in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and in the states of Lower Saxony and North-Rhine Westphalia (Int. E, l. 44), to develop housing projects, provide advice and, in some cases, take over administrative tasks for existing projects.

#### **4.3.3 *Haus- und WagenRat e.V. (HWR)***

The association started as a loose network in 2008/2009 in the context of the growing housing project scene in Leipzig and was formally registered as an association in 2014. Its members work on a voluntary basis and provide advice for newly forming and existing housing projects and caravan sites. Networking within the local scene, knowledge transfer and political advocacy on the local and regional level are core areas of the HWR’s work (*Haus- und Wagenrat e.V.*, n.d.). For some time now, the association has also been active in the neighbouring cities Halle (Saale) and Chemnitz (Int. F, l. 36 ff.).

#### **4.3.4 *Stiftung trias***

*Stiftung trias* is a community foundation (*Bürgerstiftung*) founded in 2002 working in the areas of land, ecology, and housing. With the capital provided by over 180 donors, it acquires land and thus removes it from speculation. The properties are made available to social and ecological projects on a permanent basis through ground lease agreements<sup>5</sup> (*Erbbaurecht*). While the foundation owns the land, the respective project partners (mainly cooperatives) hold the ownership of the buildings. The social and ecological objectives are contractually agreed upon in the lease and thus ensured in the long term. Currently *Stiftung trias* is involved in 56 housing projects and continuously supervises new projects in development.

---

<sup>5</sup> The ground lease agreement is the right to build or buy a property on someone else's land. The owner of the land grants the holder of the ground lease the right to use the land, usually against payment of a regular so-called ground rent.

Part of the foundation's work also includes the transfer of knowledge between different project partners and advocacy in support of land use that is oriented towards the common good and ecology (Stiftung trias, n.d.). To this end, it networks with other relevant actors and has been a key driver in setting up the *Netzwerk Immobilien* "a network [aiming] to better the legal, financial, and institutional conditions for developing real-estate as commons. This includes policy changes at the federal, country [state] and local level" (Netzwerk Immobilien, n.d.).

## 5. ANALYSIS: IN(TER)DEPENDENT HOUSING COMMONS

The aim of this thesis is to explore the potential of housing commons as viable alternatives to commercial and public housing provision. Against the background of the theoretical considerations, the data generated from the interviews will be analysed.

The first step is to understand group dynamics, and to identify internal pressure points and how they manifest in external interactions (section 5.1). Secondly, the positioning of the commons in their environment is examined. In particular, the aim here is to determine the possible added value beyond affordability (section 5.2.). The last section deals with the openness of the commons and expansion strategies – two crucial points in evaluation their long-term viability in housing provision (section 5.3). In the following subparts I will elaborate on certain key themes that came up during the analysis and will help to shed light on the initial question.

All interviews were conducted in German. Translations are the author's own.

### 5.1 Inside the Commons

#### 5.1.1 Motivation of Housing Commoners

Motivations for people living in alternative housing projects are as diverse as the many existing projects. However, there are some that have been mentioned throughout the interviews: securing low rents and keeping housing affordable in the long run, protecting a permanent right to stay in that place and finally, creating spaces of community and shared values and ideals.

The interviewees from the housing projects all expressed their appreciation and awareness that without the affordable rents they pay, they would not be able to afford to live in these central city areas, let alone at the standard of living they currently enjoy.

*"You know, we're so lucky! We all have such great flats, it's kind of a crazy gift."* (Int. A, l. 98)

*"Somehow, we pay seven euros per square metre warm, no, cold! But nevertheless, for so many people, it's a gift that it's like that."* (Int. A, l. 268)



*“The neighbourhood has been extremely upgraded. Meanwhile, it is so very very expensive to live here. So, none of us here could afford it in any way if we didn't live here. Yeah, so I don't know. So rent and housing prices are already peaking here ...”* (Int. B, l. 96 ff.)

*“But you also have to say we have a luxurious, large building, all incredibly spacious and quite great rooms each. And that makes it doubly pleasant, of course. We simply share a lot of space.”* (Int. B, l. 311)

The main motivation is to ensure affordability and the right to stay for a long time. Made possible in this form of housing. The residents are ultimately also the owners and decide what happens. In this way, they secure a decision-making sovereignty that does not exist in a normal rental relationship. Also, in the case of the alternative projects, there is the idealistic motivation of not trading or speculating with the property and withdrawing housing from the market. Apart from the personal benefit of low rents, there is usually also an idealistic aspiration for the desire to prevent spatial and social displacement processes in the neighbourhood by setting up housing projects and collectively becoming the owners of their homes. This was the case for the projects founded back in the 1980s:

*“Our cooperative in the eighties and the cooperatives founded in Hamburg were always neighbourhood cooperatives that had the goal of securing the social milieu in the neighbourhood. Before the end of the eighties, we had the same logic of displacement as we have today. At that time, with the opening of the border, there was a very, very similar situation with immigration and therefore we saw ourselves as a milieu protection cooperative. We wanted to keep the people living in the district with the lowest incomes in the district and not displace them.”* (Int. E, l. 301 ff.)

Moreover, the most recent wave of housing projects that have been founded in Leipzig emerged parallel to the beginning of the upgrading and gentrification processes in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 in an effort to secure housing for the people in the affected areas as one interviewee explains:

*“And I would say that with the financial crisis, or with the aftermath of the financial crisis, from 2008, 2009 onwards, it became a bit clearer for some people...well, this extremely free time with “it doesn't cost anything”, and if I want to reduce my rent, then I move into another flat because the rent is cheaper and I get another three years rent-free...that will pass. It was all like that, as we call it, a “window of opportunity”. The prices for real estate were absolutely rock bottom, so you could get unrenovated apartment buildings here, 500 square metres, 600 square metres, for 15,000, 20,000, 50,000 euros in some cases, often still in habitable condition. There were also some that were not sold, that were sold for 8,000 euros. But it was foreseeable that this time would end at some point. It picks up easily, or it will pick up easily, or that was the expectation that it would pick up. And then it did. And we want a certain security.”* (Int. F, l. 72 ff.)

However, there were also voices at the time that rejected the purchase of the houses and instead advocated squatting, but the great majority saw buying the houses they lived in as the best way to secure low rents and the right to stay in their neighbourhood (Int. F, l. 114).

A crucial point in this regard is that property prices at the time were low, which made it possible to acquire houses quite easily. Today the situation on the housing market is markedly different, confronting housing projects with financial challenges and making it much harder for new housing projects to live up to the aim of protecting less affluent social groups (I will discuss this issue later in more detail).

Another motivation for living in this form of housing is the community aspect: sharing your home with like-minded people who hold similar values and share a common vision, while also being able to make self-determined decisions about your own living space as a group.

*But yes, a lot of the communal living and what makes it for me is living together with people. Oh, that's very strong. Because there are really cool people living here, that's for sure. [...] Especially with Corona, I really noticed that this is simply the form of living that I like best. And with many people who not only have skills that you can share, but also simply as humans, so that you feel... I feel much more at ease and very safe here in such a context.”* (Int. B, l. 300 ff.)

*“And I come from this 80s no future movement...it was more about really building an alternative here.”* (Int. C, l. 128)

*“There is always art as a connecting factor. That was the case from the beginning. Art and Maarbrücke, that simply belongs together”* (Int. C, l. 146)

*“Actually, it means settling down together, getting a lasting guarantee on living arrangements and the financial affordability of housing”* (Int. E, l. 149)

People who are drawn to this form of living show a particularly idealistic motivation as well, be it in terms of community life, ecological building standards or the involvement in the neighbourhood. This is also necessary to overcome the obstacles of the initial phase and social challenges in the course of the project. People must be committed to this kind of housing arrangement which requires a high degree of initiative and responsibility. On the other hand, they are also rewarded with qualities that an ordinary tenancy or ownership would not necessarily include.

### **5.1.2 Commoning in Practise**

An understanding of the commons is not possible without considering their internal structure and decision-making logics – an essential part of what is referred to as *commoning*. Three themes have emerged as central to the internal dynamics of the commons: the nature of decision-making, social dynamics in general, and the workload due to commitments outside of the project.

Even though there are different legal forms in which the housing projects are organised and not all of them function according to the principle of consensus, they aim to make decisions collectively as an elementary part of the self-image. In practice this can be challenging. Reaching a consensus might be easy when distributing household chores, but especially when

it comes to financial questions like rent increases or the acquisition of new buildings it can take a long time and, in some cases, the decision-making process can last several weeks (Int. B, l. 112). Additionally, it lies in the nature of the consensus principle that decisions can be blocked by individuals who disagree with each other. Again, this mostly occurs with big decisions involving a certain (financial) risk. This makes highlights that commoning involves constant negotiation in mutual interaction. Especially when the projects grow and more and more people are involved, this kind of decision-making becomes difficult, resulting in tensions between further development and staying true to their ideals:

*“So that...there is the idea of horizontal structures and broad participation. And of course, above a certain size, I think it also has certain limits, and you can see that. And in some cases, you can't really counteract that. Of course, this view still remains that people want to do it that way. But of course, it is also obvious that individuals can somehow block things with a veto. [...] And tackling this is not that easy. Because in order to do that, you have to adapt the participation structures in some way. And then you need a consensus again, so to speak.”* (Int. D, l. 43 ff.)

While the smaller projects with fewer residents consistently stick to the original structures, those that grow eventually reach a point where greater hierarchisation is considered and sometimes implemented (Int. A, l. 68 ff.). However, this can lead to consequential problems when members feel they are being bypassed and are no longer involved in decisions (ibid.). After all, participation is one of the fundamental pillars of cooperatively organized projects: *“In such self-determined cooperatives, it must be said that in contrast to the old traditional cooperatives, the willingness of the members' assembly to participate is greater.”* (Int. E, l. 202). However, it is not always matched with the willingness to take over responsibility. This can be extremely frustrating for members who want to develop the project further, e.g., by expanding the housing stock, and are willing to invest time and energy but are blocked by more risk averse members (Int. A, l. 118 ff.). There clearly is a tension between the own aspiration for democratic decision making and maintaining a practicable modus operandi that ensures the capacity for action. But the will to grow can fuel changes in internal structures, as the group is confronted with a variety of demands from the outside during this process. As one resident notes: *“But that [the internal structure] was professionalized to a certain extent and thus also hierarchized. Because of course you can't run a building process like that collectively, that's a total utopia.”* (Int. A, l. 68).

This already demanding situation is sometimes further aggravated by social tensions within the groups. To a certain extent, it is of course normal that there are conflicts and disagreements. However, in the case of housing projects, a special situation arises in which the members are not only roommates, but also collective owners and decide about the project's future together.

Moreover, they usually live together for many years, and certain dynamics or conflicts are “inherited” by new members joining the project: *“Here, a lot of things are always done that way and there are already a lot of old structures and such.”* (Int. B, l. 17). Sometimes, this can lead to initial enthusiasm turning into resignation, even among members who have only been involved for a short time.

*“I find it totally exhausting. At some point I had the feeling that it doesn't make any sense at all to spend my time on these conflicts, which have been passed on here for generations. It's so unnecessary to spend time on it, to somehow put energy into it. Well, because ok, energy is limited. You can move things or not. Then you also have to say goodbye to it if it doesn't work.”* (Int. A, l. 110 ff.)

However, generational change within a project can also be a driver for change as new members bring in different ways of approaching things and pursue the adaption of communication structures that fit the new group constellation better (Int. B, l. 123 ff.).

Another point that is quite crucial when it comes to the internal perspective of the commons is the relatively large amount of time and energy that is spent on decision-making. Especially when members have demanding jobs or a large amount of care work in the family environment, the willingness – but also quite simply the time available – to get involved in the collective processes of the housing project decreases. This point was mentioned by all interview partners. In most projects, this leads to adjustments of the internal structures over the years, for example, plenaries no longer take place weekly or even parts of the self-administration, such as bookkeeping or facility management, are outsourced (Int. F, l. 256 ff., 466 ff.). While these can be solution strategies, they also result in a distance from the original ideal of self-governance and the question of how development is possible within the framework of one's own values becomes an acute question that needs to be continuously (re)negotiated in the process of communing.

### ***5.1.3 Foundation Phase***

The points described above can pose an even greater challenge for projects in the development phase. After all, existing projects have already secured their housing and are moving forward from this basis, therefore being confronted with much less pressure. For new projects, there is a complex set of external demands and internal processes that need to be navigated (Int. G, l. 180). Not only do they have to come together as a group, but they also face a multitude of demands from the outside. Securing financing and finding a plot of land or a building are the highest hurdles to initiating a housing project.

All interview partners from the supporting organizations, dealing with new projects, mentioned the group formation process as particularly challenging, usually costing *“blood,*

*sweat and tears*" (Int. F, l. 363). Finding a group of like-minded people with the same ideas about shared housing and then setting up the structures in such a way that one can successfully go through the start-up phase is seen as a great challenge, which also causes some projects to fall apart (Int. E, l. 24; Int. G, l. 170). A unifying vision of the project or a similar worldview then naturally helps to bring the group together (Int. A, l. 51; Int. G, l. 180).

Besides this, the main challenge is finding a suitable building or land. Because of the current situation on the real estate market, it can take several years to find a property. Sometimes, due to changing life circumstances, it is not possible for all group members to wait so long, and groups break up again before they have really started to realize their housing dreams.

*"[...] that you can't find a suitable object. So, I would say that is the main reason. I know of initiatives that have failed because of this. That is, it goes on for years. And yes, the people are open. They are looking for objects or land to build on. But over a certain period of time, of course, the group also changes, because somehow, well, not everyone has the flexibility to look for a new flat for years but has to decide on something else and then falls apart as a group or as a component of the group, for example. (Int. D, l. 273 ff.)*

In this phase, the group also needs to spend time and energy networking with other (existing) projects or affiliated organisations. Throughout the interviews it was repeatedly mentioned that these are indispensable partners, especially in the start-up phase, who can provide valuable knowledge and contacts (e.g.: Int. B, l. 338; Int. D, l. 242; Int. E, l. 16). The self-management aim of the housing commons presupposes that the group itself takes over everything from finding a property, to financing and, if necessary, building a house, to all subsequent administrative tasks. This means that the learning curve is particularly steep in the initial phase and networks are indispensable.

*"But they [networks] are really essential in such an initial phase. So at the knowledge input level, these [...] references are very important. And after a certain point, I know just as much myself, so to speak. So I know certain things. So I no longer need this [...] exchange for everything." (Int. D, l. 242)*

In addition, there is no specific public funding available for the projects that would relieve some pressure, as is the case for other housing providers. I will discuss the specific challenges of financing later, but it should be noted that setting up a financing plan and collecting sufficient capital is a crucial part of the foundation phase, which ties up the time and resources of the group. All these tasks must be mastered collectively by the group, which requires an immense amount of time and other resources – it is virtually a full-time job itself to get such a project off the ground, as the following comment shows

*„So actually you can't do any kind of paid work there. Or hardly at all. You have to have a lot of time on your hands, and that's what they say. That maybe people were on parental leave or were looking for work or something like that. And then they could somehow, so to*

*...speak, devote themselves full time to certain things in the development, in the search.*" (Int. D, l. 138 ff.)

Even if similar issues continue to arise in later project phases, for example when a project wants to expand, the foundation phase serves as a magnifying lens that highlights these challenges with a different urgency. While the group has an influence on the design of internal processes, it becomes clear here that they are heavily impacted by the current housing market situation, making it extremely difficult to assert their claim to autonomy.

## 5.2 Positioning the Commons

### 5.2.1 State Support and Political Climate

Politicians and city administration have great influence on the success or failure of alternative housing projects. The general atmosphere towards alternative housing providers determines whether, and to what extent they are supported and provided with resources. There are strong regional differences here, as the interviews showed. While some municipalities have clearly recognized (or are increasingly recognizing) the added value housing projects bring to their cities and are aligning their efforts accordingly, in other municipalities it is difficult to obtain support, and in particular cases they are even experiencing strong resistance from individual political actors (Int. A, l 250 ff.).

Common prejudices are doubts about the economic viability of the projects and a fundamental lack of confidence in the alternative form of organisation: *„But when a little bit of community, sustainable, left green filthy<sup>6</sup> comes in, then it has a completely different evaluation and connotation. Then the economic viability is denied, and it is somehow a total waste.*" (Int. A, l. 326). Housing projects have a much harder time fighting for support, especially when the ruling parties do not see a benefit for themselves in supporting the housing commons. In some cases, this goes so far, that political actors block support because they suspect a too high of a (financial) risk for which they do not want to take responsibility (Int. A, l. 330). A negative attitude of key actors in politics and administration makes it particularly difficult for housing projects, especially those in the start-up phase. The current situation in the housing market makes it almost impossible to obtain land or buildings without the help of municipalities (or a benevolent owner): *“If there are no special conditions, there is no project. Quite simple, quite disappointing.”* (Int. D, l. 315). Following the withdrawal of the federal government from housing provision, most interview partners raised attention to the fact that there is only little

---

<sup>6</sup> “Left-green filthy” is a term used by political conservatives and right-wingers, among others, to defame political leftists, greens, and social democrats. Here, the interviewee uses the term for herself to express belonging to a certain milieu and to reveal conflictual relationships with other political actors.

funding available for alternative housing projects. On the one hand, there is no funding specifically tailored to them, and on the other hand, they are not eligible for the funds available to large housing developers. (Int. D, l. 131; Int. G, l.204).

*“So, since these housing groups usually also take care of renovation activities and the like when they buy a house, all the loans and subsidies that the state makes available, for example for energy-efficient renovation...these are the classics in this area. But they are not specific to community housing groups.”* (Int. G., l. 204)

*“At the federal level, you can say that there is no large-scale measure. It is therefore the responsibility of the respective municipalities to find ways, if they have understood that it offers more positive value for the community, so to speak”.* (Int. G, l. 319)

Given that money is one of the biggest hurdles in the realisation of projects, this is particularly disappointing for those engaged. One option open to municipalities is to make building plots available through concept awards<sup>7</sup> and to explicitly prioritise community housing in the project design.

*“The large municipalities... have recognised that these new social movements, if they succeeded in integrating them into new neighbourhoods, would also take on a great deal of responsibility and be a stabilising factor. And that's why there is this model of concept awarding.”* (Int. E, l. 274)

This is increasingly being done, but sometimes rather half-heartedly and not always successfully, as reported by one interviewee:

*“And that is more our experience that there is a bit of green-washing on the part of the municipalities by saying "yes, we would like to have communal living somehow". And then it's just exclusive living for the head doctor and his friends again.”* (Int. G, l. 345)

Furthermore, municipalities also have the option of securing houses through exercising pre-emption rights and giving them to community projects or cooperatives. However, given current property prices, this is also an instrument with limited effect, especially for small and self-financed residential projects: *“So well, no civil society group should have to buy their house for 4.8 million euros.”* (Int. G, l. 376).

However, the housing projects (especially the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* (Int. D, l. 182)) and of course the supporting organisations are campaigning at various political levels to change this and to fight for better funding conditions for the projects (Int. D, l. 166; Int. F, l. 30; Int. G, l. 439). The municipalities that have recognised the added value of the projects, or where there has been political attention and support for many years, as in Leipzig, for example, finance advisory services and make funds available (Int. F, l. 183, l. 219). There is also political support

---

<sup>7</sup> In a concept procedure, the municipality calls for proposals for the development of a certain plot of land. It is not the highest bid that counts, but a suitable concept. The criteria are determined individually by the municipality.

and politicians are profiling this topic. In the end, the housing projects also contribute to the attractiveness of the city.

*“That this somehow has a political impact, that it is openly on the radar of certain political parties, who of course want to and should make their mark with it. That's how politics works, saying "we'll make this our issue, we'll push it, we'll bring in the motions, we'll get the money in the budget" and so on. Of course, this also has to do with the size of the scene.”*(Int. F, l. 538)

At the same time, however, the state or federal level also plays a role, as it is here that decisions are usually made about larger funding amounts and legal framework conditions. And in the long term, these are decisive factors that could help projects, especially in the already strenuous start-up phase. At this level, more fundamental demands about housing subsidies in general are also addressed.

*“Yes, let's say that [...] it doesn't work without this reciprocal relationship. Because it is simply a question of how - and this is also a nice discussion - the public sector actually provides money to self-help projects, which tend to be closed systems. But we can't do anything about that. Owner-occupied flats are also very, very individual systems. And they also get a lot of funding. So from that point of view, it can't be negotiated against each other. There is no such thing as a housing market that is sustainable in itself. There is no housing market without public support and funding. And whether it is building land or whether it is partial subsidies, ecological standards or simply social standards. [...]. Everybody basically uses this support and what the public sector gets for it, we can now ask nice questions. [...] Yes, but that is the character of housing subsidies as a whole, which basically does not mean...lifelong occupancy rights, so to speak, and social justice, social compensation. For example, in our cooperative, we signed up for lifelong occupancy rights. But the investor doesn't actually do that. And that's why we shouldn't give him any money. So this is now a political statement. That means no public funding without long-term occupancy rights. Maybe not for life, but for 25 or 30 years, and not just for 10-15 years, which is what housing promotion is at the moment.”* (Int. E, l. 373)

This shows the additional benefit it would have for the state turning away from the understanding of housing as a commodity. Unlike the commercial companies usually only granting the absolute minimum number of social occupancy years, the housing commons offer long-term occupancy and low rents in the long term, plus they make a contribution to life in the neighbourhood (see section 5.2.3).

### ***5.2.2 Positive Examples and Self-Amplification***

An important aspect of the already existing projects is their function as positive examples – both towards political actors and the municipality, as well as for potential future allies. During the interviews, it was mentioned several times that residents of housing projects experience scepticism and prejudice in their environment when they talk about their housing situation. Some have been unsure of what to expect before they themselves moved into one. One main concern is the fear of sharing one's own private living space with other people



*“I was afraid of it, rather than looking forward to it, I must say” (Int. B, l. 364)*

*“Usually you get so much, so scepticism or so disbelief. But most of the people who have been here once and have seen how it actively works or have visited here for a while or something like that, fully appreciate it in the end and say ok, that's how I could imagine it. That is actually the positive effect.” (Int. B, l. 408)*

However, it was also reported that most people changed their minds after visiting the project and spending time there. And with the ever-growing number of housing projects and their growing presence in public discourse, their perception is slowly changing.

*“But I believe that because it is also observed that it works well. Can they also succeed in getting people to... So you can also see it positively. That groups decide in favor of it, who simply see that it is somehow a construct that works. Exactly, even beyond a small scene.” (Int. D, l. 24)*

Many of the existing projects emerged from the self-help or squatter scene of the 1970s and 80s. With the growing number of projects and against the background of the current situation on the housing market, housing commons are receiving more attention from social groups they did not reach before. Reservations such as poor economic efficiency or unreliability have been refuted, so that housing projects are slowly becoming interesting beyond the alternative scene.

*“They also noticed that we are serious about it and that we are reliable. We have all paid back our loans on time... But yes... We are more of an alternative bunch here and also rather spontaneous. That doesn't always suit everyone. Especially when it comes to official funding, people sometimes have reservations. [...] But in the end, everyone is always amazed at how well it works for us.” (Int. C, l. 117 ff.)*

The model of small cooperatives and associations or the more institutionalised form of the *Mietshäuse Syndikat* are profiling themselves as functioning alternatives to the capitalistically organised housing provision. Not only other civil society groups are discovering the advantages of this form of housing. This development does not only concern new housing project groups, but also - and perhaps even more crucially - political actors and municipalities.

*“Certain prejudices that may still exist elsewhere are more difficult to hold on to here. There are still enough people who have them, but there is a much greater understanding from the key players, i.e. those you have to deal with somehow in the political sphere, in the city administration, on the real estate market, at banks.” (Int. F, l. 550)*

The quality of the own projects is also crucial for this and thus distinguishes them from other housing providers.

*“In my opinion, this depends on the one hand on how far the development has progressed, i.e. in municipalities such as Freiburg, where there are already many projects and where one has recently noticed certain projects. Amazing, they can do it. They can do it, and they are building new projects that look much better than what our municipalities are doing... in terms of quality, and at the same time they are cheaper. Of course, that is simply convincing. In other words, it is gradually catching on. And there are also more and more municipalities that are opening up their funding conditions.” (Int. D, l. 148)*

This is where a self-reinforcing effect comes into play. A larger number of established projects make it easier for new projects to convince the key actors and also makes housing groups approach partners with greater self-confidence, as they now have enough well working cases to refer to. Scepticism is thus increasingly giving way to goodwill and support – even if it must be clearly said that there are strong local differences here. A "self-reinforcement" is clearly setting in, where new projects can refer to successful examples and more easily convince partners in the administration to cooperate. Commoning can thus also bring about change in the institutional setting and help shift the general approach to housing provision.

### ***5.2.3 Adding Value to the Neighbourhood***

Alternative housing projects make a decisive contribution to the quality of life in their neighbourhood – another reason why politicians and municipalities show a growing interest in housing projects. On the one hand, this works through the low rents and/or occupancy rights that make it possible for most residents to live in central inner-city locations in the first place, thereby achieving a kind of "milieu protection" (see section 5.1.1). On the other hand, most projects have either commercial spaces that they rent out to small businesses or semi-public spaces that they and their friends use, but which are also often made available to other civil society groups free of charge or for contributions to expenses (Int. A, l. 16; Int. B, l. 71, 262 ff.; Int. D, l. 262 ff.; Int. F, l. 331 ff.). They thus offer spaces for activities and initiatives that would otherwise have a much harder time finding affordable options. These groups contribute to a lively environment in the neighbourhood, by organizing activities like urban gardening, food sharing, small street festivals, concerts and exhibitions, or by providing co-working spaces. Depending on the housing project, the aspirations and the possibilities for their realisation vary, but in principle the aim to contribute to a pleasant living environment and to promote civil society initiatives is part of the self-image of the housing projects. This positive contribution to neighbourhood culture and city life is receiving greater recognition and is valued by the municipalities and political actors, and consequently housing projects are receiving greater support in some cities now.

*“So there is such a commitment in the sense of civil society, but also people who are committed, and we want to keep them. And we want to do it with them. And they also somehow have a right to be here. And they make the city diverse. And so this sometimes very much to the fore, but in this case not wrong. We are welcoming, and we are...we take people with us, and we make things possible.”* (Int. F, l. 226 ff.)

The housing projects here offer a real benefit for the neighbourhood and create an environment that cannot – or can only with difficulty – be created with partners from the

traditional housing industry (Int. E, l. 274 ff.). However, this aspect also needs to be assessed critically.

*“But of course they still went into areas where traditional investors had not yet dared to enter or so, and in some cases they also had an impact on civil society there. And then, of course, it was also a clientele that you wanted to have. So, somehow in their early 30s, often with an academic background, the first child already there, the second in planning. Of course, they [municipality, politicians] liked to see them there somehow and establish them as actors in certain districts. Or supported them when they moved there.”* (Int. F, l. 236ff.)

It would probably be an overestimation of actual role of housing projects to make them responsible for displacement because the market dynamics are more decisive here. Nevertheless, one should ask what role they potentially play in gentrification processes since this might have implications for future engagement with housing projects in urban development. Due to socially distinctive characteristics of the residents, they can also become small bubbles in the neighbourhood that have no real connection to their surroundings (Int. A, l. 199; Int. B, l. 105). In order to maintain openness and create "thresholds" (Stavrides, 2016) in which the participation of new groups of people can be negotiated and tested, neighbourhood activities are particularly important.

### **5.3 Open to all? Solidarity and Expansion**

#### ***5.3.1 Prerequisites for Participation***

Getting a housing project started and maintaining it over the years is a demanding and complex activity. Some of the struggles are already described in section. Here I will take up the aspects in more detail and explain how they lead to various dependency relationships and exclusion mechanisms.

First, the issue of land. Without it, no housing project is possible – no new foundation and no expansion. While in the past it was comparatively easy for housing projects to find suitable properties, this is no longer the case. The prices on the real estate market have skyrocketed so much that buying property and simultaneously achieving low rents is becoming more difficult. By now, the project groups often must bring along a significant amount of equity capital. Members of the project groups have this money either already available or it must be generated through direct loans from the immediate environment, often from friends and families (Int. B, l. 75; Int. C, l. 23; Int. F, l. 363; Int. G, l. 136). This is where the first barrier concerning access becomes apparent: low-income households do not have the necessary resources and usually also do not have a financially strong environment that could provide them with the means necessary to get a foot in the door.

*“And the ability somehow, or the possibility of people, perhaps without having to put 30,000 euros on the table at the beginning, to create a possibility to move in. This has simply become systematically impossible due to the real estate market. So that's just there. But I also notice the openness there. Or rather the desire to think that way. But unfortunately, that fails on a regular basis.”* (Int. G, l. 308)

In this case, the conditions in the market-based environment prevent the commons from (being able to) live up to their ideal of being open and accessible to all. Individual people without the available money or time can always be carried by the group. However, there are clearly structural obstacles and dependencies that exclude different social groups on a large scale. In the search for a plot of land and carrying out various administrative tasks; the group must manage these tasks itself and either bring along the relevant knowledge or acquire it. In principle, members of the established housing projects examined here, seemed happy to provide helpful advice, which is essential. However, not everyone can or wants to take on such tasks in connection with their place of living (e.g., single parents or large families). Even if the motivation and the demand for self-management are still high in the groups at the beginning, it can happen that this changes over the years and a tendency to outsource certain activities emerges. One reason for this can be changes in life circumstances, increased workload in the job. Particularly in the case of cooperatives, the fundamentally high professional demands on accounting, for example, also play a role. By not requiring projects to handle 100 percent of the administration themselves, the model becomes more accessible to those who cannot or do not want to make this level of commitment (Int. D, l. 103).

In addition to the time to take on these tasks, this also requires a certain willingness and organizational knowledge and self-confidence in dealing with authorities. Social capital, in the sense of organisational and sectoral knowledge, or at least the self-confidence to acquire it and interact accordingly with municipalities or other actors, is of immense advantage. These actors may be more sceptical about alternative projects (strongly locally dependent), which makes this knowledge indispensable. The housing projects are dependent on the support and cooperation of municipal and political actors. In the self-administration model, there are no intermediaries (e.g. landlords), and they have to take care of everything themselves.

*“Then there's the organizational effort. People have to somehow cope with it in plenary structures. Not everyone always has to be there. You can also drag a few of them along again, so to speak. But there have to be people who are able to do this work. Not intellectually, but “I'll get involved, I'll do it in my free time, I'll take on the work”. And that's mostly pro bono, or hidden rent payment, so to speak. So the rent is cheap, but it is also cheap because all these things are done on a voluntary basis and on the side.”* (Int. G, l. 376)

This willingness to open up to the collective structures on the one hand, and then being able to afford to participate in terms of time and financial resources on the other hand, are already enormously high barriers for a large part of the population.

In addition, of course, there are the group dynamics, which in housing projects are just as burdened with questions about daily life in community, as with major issues such as loan repayments, buying a property or the like. Especially, but not only, in the initial phase, the group is exposed to a complex mix of demands from inside and outside (see section 5.1.3). While many groups formulate solidarity concepts in their initial project design aiming to include economically or socially less privileged groups, these are usually not realized.

*“Many of the project foundations I have been involved with so far often have the theme of solidarity and quasi mixing and openness for all social classes as a theme in their concepts. But there, of course, more than anywhere else, the economic conditions, especially in the current real estate market, are so challenging that this model and the idea of solidarity simply suffer acutely.”* (Int. G, l. 303)

Diversity thus becomes a concept rather than a lived practice. Money, time, and knowledge are therefore the three most important factors in making this housing model accessible to more people. It should be clear, however, that this is not only due to the projects themselves, but that there are also dependencies and interrelationships with the market setting and state actors that hinder opening the commons.

### **5.3.2 Diversity of the Commoners**

A diverse composition of the residents of alternative housing projects is only given to a limited extent. In particular, the extensive requirements for founding new projects stand in the way. Even if diversity (and in this context also solidarity with groups disadvantaged on the housing market) is certainly a topic of discussion and is reflected in concepts, it is often not a lived practice. Even in existing housing projects, new roommates are often recruited from the circle of friends or through existing personal connections.

*“So you don't even say that they're all university-educated people, there are also a lot of people who haven't studied. But still, it's a different kind of diversity than you'd find in the rest of the neighbourhood. [...] Yes, it's a very elitist kind of diversity that is selected there. That's how I experience it. It's just not, it's not the hairdressers from next door, where you know yes, they're looking for a flat, come on, let's actively approach them, "we'll see that we can accommodate your family". But then it's a Swiss racism researcher and everything on such a... that's all, formally it's diverse.”* (Int. A, l. 183)

*“So they usually come from the community, maybe we know them before or they are friends of friends. I find these get-to-know-you meetings or something, this evaluating of the move-in, embarrassing. You never know what they're really like.”* (Int. C, l. 104)

On the one hand, there are external requirements and framework conditions that currently prevent the desired diversity. On the other hand, the internal structures of the house projects are

also partly responsible for the exclusion of people who are too far removed from the community's ideals. However, there are also developments in this respect that are encouraging and promoting the diversity and openness of the commons (Int. F, l. 137): The most frequently mentioned driver for more diversity was the inclusion of tenant communities – i.e., the group of households living in a multi-family house – in the existing structures of the respective projects. Often this happens when a sale to an investor is imminent, and the tenants fear being displaced. As there is often an average mix of residents, these houses bring real diversity to the housing project scene. Secondly, residential groups are increasingly moving to the surrounding area or to neighbouring towns with good transport links, where market prices are still lower and, in this way, tackle the issue of affordability. Thirdly, some projects are also going into new construction and developing partly elaborate concepts and trying to address underrepresented groups such as migrants with a lot of commitment.

*“But this heterogenization is still rather isolated.”* (Int. D, l. 58)

*“I have to say that I don't know of any project where I would say that there was really an effective instrument to really create a social mix. I know of a few solidarity models that reduce the barriers to entry on a small scale, or sometimes on a larger scale. But I would say that somehow... none of the projects manages to honestly include people from really educationally disadvantaged backgrounds or the like.”* (Int. G, l. 295)

Again, the current market conditions and the high demand on the commitment of individuals in commoning prevent the scaling up of the commons and it may need more support to make them accessible to more social groups.

### **5.3.3 Networking Inside and Outside**

However, it also became clear that the people who live in housing projects or work for the supporting organisations are aware of the lack of diversity and think about and discuss how to create openness for other target groups. There is a great awareness for their own privilege and the wish is articulated to enable others to participate.

*“And yes, we are just sitting on six houses that are worth an incredible amount, whose value has increased totally, and we don't use it. We don't use it to enable other people to do the same or to somehow develop space for great other projects, but I have the feeling that we are just at our stage of vegetating and only revolving around ourselves. I find it totally exhausting.”* (Int. A, l. 105 ff.)

Looking at the groups of people who currently have difficulties on the housing market and looking for ways of solidarity are part of the housing commons' self-understanding:

*“So I would say that is rather self-evident in view of the current situation on the housing market. So, that really means getting out of the little nest that one has acquired and looking around. That is certain, of course”* (Int. E, l. 183)

This idea of expansion and solidarity is structurally implemented in the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* – making it quite unique as a national federation of housing projects. The young cooperatives (or housing projects in other legal forms) tend to be set up as local units and the focus here is more on the local environment, even if there are also structures similar to networks with the founding of “umbrella cooperatives” (*Dachgenossenschaften*). While networking in the neighbourhood is solid (section 5.2.3), the connection with other housing projects depends strongly on the commitment of individuals and can vary over the course of the projects, also due to changes in members: “*We are a member of the Union of Young Cooperatives. But that was very much shaped by... So this membership and our activity in it was very much shaped by these old board members who were very active.*” (Int. A, l. 222).

While housing projects in the start-up phase are existentially dependent on the connection to existing projects (section 5.1.3), these ties become less important as time goes on and the focus of activities shifts to the neighbourhood. Therefore, supporting organisations play an important role in this context. Due to their genesis within the housing project scene, they are very well connected and can establish links between old and new projects. In this way, they contribute to the transfer of knowledge within the community, can advise on problems themselves or refer people to experts (Int. F, l. 39; Int. G, l. 35).

In addition, the supporting organisations also have an external impact, for example by intervening in housing policy debates on the federal level (Int. E, l. 39), by acting as funding partners for the projects and thus ensuring their eligibility for credits and funding by both banks and friends (Int. G, l. 228), or by working with political actors at different levels to improve the institutional framework for the housing projects (Int. F, l. 31).

It becomes clear that solidarity and expansion are closely related and have a dimension both within the housing project community and externally. The fact that the supporting organisations have emerged from the scene is also because the need for support is confronted with a lack of state structures and funding. The active political involvement shows, however, that the goal is not complete autonomy, but rather an attempt to influence state structures to better accommodate the needs of housing commons and ultimately lower the entry barriers so they leave their nice existence and become a viable option for socio-economic groups that are currently still excluded.

In theory, housing commons are open and expanding, enabling more people to enjoy the benefits of these emancipatory spaces. It is therefore important to look at the obstacles housing commons face in sustaining, but also expanding their space. The reality can be quite different for new projects in the founding phase and those already established where it is more about

sustaining and expanding. The former have more friction points with state and market institutions. However, the timeline between these two stages is fluid and issues discussed above arise regardless the stage the project is in.

Every housing commons in itself is of course limited in access. This is also an important function of housing, that not everyone has access, and that privacy is protected. Of course, the openness of the individual commons and mechanisms of exclusion must be discussed. At the same time, the analysis has also shown that apart from personal attitudes, the structural framework conditions also massively impede the opening of the commons. Time, money, organisational methods – all these resources are necessary to get a housing project off the ground. If there were to be some relief here – especially in the initial phase – it could also facilitate access to housing commons for less well-endowed people.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Building on the analysis of the interviews, in this chapter the results will be contextualized in relation to the concept of the commons. The aim of the project was to investigate the in(ter)dependence of housing commons in Germany and to examine the challenges and contradictions that arise in this regard. The specific research questions were:

- What are the internal and external pressures on housing commons, and how are they dealt with?
- What value, besides affordable housing can housing commons provide?
- Can housing commons exist as a sustainable, viable, and scalable housing solution without state participation?

The study only considers housing projects that meet the criteria of decommodification and self-management, as these are prerequisites to qualify as housing commons. The analysis of the interviews with housing commoners from three different projects and four supporting organisations revealed that despite their aspirations, in practice commons fall short of their ideal of being open to all and autonomous from state and market. On the one hand, this is due to the time-consuming and demanding collective (decision-making) structures, creating access barriers and exclusionary effects from within the commons. Furthermore, despite their claim to equality, the commoning process depends on the high level of engagement and commitment of individual members – both positively and negatively. On the other hand, the institutional setting at various levels of government is not geared towards cooperation with housing commons and political actors are not always sympathetic to them. Due to a lack of supportive infrastructure,



commoners bear a heavy burden, especially in the start-up phase, but also in the further course and maintenance of the projects. In response to this, supporting structures have developed from within the housing project community, while at the same time efforts are being made to change the institutional framework in favour of the housing commons.

Through the internal view of the housing commons it has become clear that the motivation of the commoners is based on the understanding that housing as a social good should be provided in a decommodified and self-managed form. This not only results in an alternative form of housing provision in a collectivized form, but a fundamental critique of the market and the state inherent in the commons. They are thus clearly in the tradition of Friedrich Engels and subsequent authors, who identified the core problem of the recurring housing question in the commodity character of housing (Harvey, 2012; Hodkinson, 2012; Holm, 2011).

While particularly the process of commoning based on trust and care among the community is what differentiates them from other housing providers, it is also one of the main factors inhibiting fully tapping into their transformative potential. The strategy of defending commons against capitalist appropriation solely by their own means, as de Angelis and Stavrides (2010) or Hodkinson (2012) argue for, faces certain limits in the reality described by the interviewees. Considering the sometimes lengthy internal (decision-making) processes in connection with the multiple demands made on housing projects in the founding phase, it becomes clear that the consistent implementation of housing "beyond market and state" is not possible – at least under the current conditions. Currently, the advanced privatization and financialization of the housing market seems to make an alliance with state actors inevitable. If housing commons want to leave their niche existence and become a viable alternative for broader parts of the population. This insight points in the direction of Cumbers' call for engagement with state institutions and to make the state a partner in the struggle against capitalist interests (2015), e.g., by alleviating some of the burden housing commoners face.

The analysis of the interviews showed that the willingness of political actors and municipalities to provide support is slowly increasing. Adding to a vibrant cityscape and their active role in the neighbourhood, the housing projects prove that their contribution to the common good goes beyond the provision of affordable rents and that they potentially have an important long-term impact on urban development. In doing so, they provide an important impetus to the current debate on housing provision and highlight the benefits of approaching housing as commons. This is particularly important as the decision to *make* housing a particular

type of good, and thus regulate its provision and access, requires both institutional innovation and social change (Helfrich, 2012). Although there are still large local differences, these positive examples are causing the relevant political actors and city administrations to rethink their approach and implement new strategies when working with commoners. The interviews show that as the number of well-functioning housing commons increases and their presence in the public debate grows, they also become more attractive to social groups that they have not reached before. However, as their popularity increases, so does the risk of co-optation by the state, as described by Caffentzis and Federici (2014). Therefore, it is not only important to secure more support in cooperation with the state, but also to push for long-term institutional change. Strategies and tools discussed being in the context of new municipalism could potentially help to re(democratise) administrative structures (Thompson, 2021).

Despite the claim to a fundamental openness of the commons, the empirical study has shown that this aim is not currently being realised. As Harvey explains in this context, it therefore makes sense to turn to the state to create a suitable overarching structure to better counter exclusionary tendencies within the individual commons and to reduce other access barriers (2012, p. 88). Again, there is a possibility that some of the autonomy of the commons will be lost in cooperation with state actors. However, it opens the possibility of realising previously unattained ideals and making the commons more open. Under the current status quo, housing commons in Germany are embedded in complex interdependencies. Due to high land and property prices and misfitting state structures, they cannot fully develop their emancipative and transformative potential. Thus, they are not yet a viable alternative on the big scale.

In light of the theoretical considerations on the housing commons and their position "beyond market and state", a focus on overcoming capitalist housing markets while engaging with state actors seems to be a promising way forward. Strategic "public-cooperative" partnerships, can help realise and sustain the commons while simultaneously bringing about institutional change (Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). The data analysis has shown that commoners are currently already pursuing a strategy of cooperation – albeit partly out of necessity. There is no question that cooperation with the state can be contradictory and potentially lead to "enclosure" by the state, in the sense of more regulation and less autonomy for the commons. However, in view of the current housing crisis, this danger is not reason enough to exclude this path from the outset. By sticking too rigidly to the ideal of autonomy, the housing commons would probably remain a rather exclusive, precarious, and small-scale phenomenon. By moving away from idealism, it

may be possible to “commonalise” a larger scale of the housing resource in a more inclusive and sustainable way. The state would then also be involved in commoning. This seems to be a promising way to reconceptualize housing as commons, lift the transformative potential of the commons, and create the structures for a self-determined and post-capitalist way of housing provision.

The study was able to contribute to the elaboration of various points that are important in the evaluation of the in(ter)dependence of housing commons in Germany, focussing on the perspective of housing commoners. Further studies could broaden the circle of interviewees to understand the point of view of political representatives and municipality staff. In the interviews gender-specific difference regarding the workload of commoners did not come up, but this issue has been discussed elsewhere (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019) and could be further investigated regarding the German housing commons. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how alternative housing projects are perceived by their environment, potential new members and groups disadvantaged in the housing market. Considering these perspectives was beyond the scope of this investigation, but these viewpoints may offer further insight into the difficulties of widespread implementation of such projects.

## 7. REFERENCES

- Ache, P., & Fedrowitz, M. (2012). The Development of Co-Housing Initiatives in Germany. *Built Environment*, 38(3), 395–412.
- Aernouts, N., & Ryckewaert, M. (2019). Reproducing housing commons. Government involvement and differential commoning in a housing cooperative. *Housing Studies*, 34(1), 92–110.
- Ayivi, S. D. (2019, March 2). Angriffe auf linke Projekte: Feine Sahne Freizeitzentrum—Taz.de. *Taz*. <https://taz.de/Angriffe-auf-linke-Projekte/!5574358/>.
- Balmer, I., & Bernet, T. (2015). Housing as a Common Resource? Decommmodification and Self-Organization in Housing—Examples from Germany and Switzerland. In M. Dellenbaugh, M. Kip, M. Bieniok, A. K. Müller, & M. Schwegmann (Eds.), *Urban commons: Moving beyond state and market* (pp. 178–195). Bauverlag.
- Balmer, I., & Bernet, T. (2019). Selbstverwaltet bezahlbar wohnen? Potentiale und Herausforderungen genossenschaftlicher Wohnprojekte. In B. Schöning, J. Kadi, & S. Schipper (Eds.), *Wohnraum für alle?! Perspektiven auf Planung, Politik und Architektur* (pp. 259–280). Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
- Borch, C., & Kornberger, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*. Routledge.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods* (5th Edition). Oxford University Press.
- Caffentzis, G., & Federici, S. (2014). Commons against and beyond capitalism. *Community Development Journal*, 49(suppl 1), i92–i105.
- Catungal, J. P., & Dowling, R. (2005). Power, Subjectivity, and Ethics in Qualitative Research. In R. Flowerdew & D. Martin (Eds.), *Methods in human geography: A guide for students doing a research project* (2nd ed, pp. 18–39). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th Edition). SAGE.
- Cumbers, A. (2015). Constructing a global commons in, against and beyond the state. *Space and Polity*, 19(1), 62–75.
- de Angelis, M. (2012). „Crises, Capital and Co-optation: Does Capital Need a Commons Fix?“. In S. Helfrich & D. Bollier (Eds.), *Commons: Für eine neue Politik jenseits von Markt und Staat* (pp. 184–191). Levellers Press.
- de Angelis, M., & Stavrides, S. (2010). *On the Commons. A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides*. AnArchitektur.
- Dellenbaugh, M., Kip, M., Bieniok, M., Müller, A. K., & Schwegmann, M. (2015a). Seizing the (Every)Day: Welcome to the Urban Commons! In M. Dellenbaugh, M. Kip, M. Bieniok, A. K. Müller, & M. Schwegmann (Eds.), *Urban commons: Moving beyond state and market* (pp. 9–25). Bauverlag.
- Dellenbaugh, M., Kip, M., Bieniok, M., Müller, A. K., & Schwegmann, M. (Eds.). (2015b). *Urban commons: Moving beyond state and market*. Bauverlag.
- Dunn, K. (2021). Engaging Interviews. In I. Hay & M. Cope (Eds.), *Qualitative research methods in human geography* (Fifth edition). Oxford University Press.
- Egner, B. (2014). Wohnungspolitik seit 1945. *APuZ*, 64(20–21), 25–30.
- Engels, F. (1887). MEW. In *Zur Wohnungsfrage* (Vol. 18, pp. 209–287). Dietz.
- Eurostat. (2021). *Share of people living in households owning or renting their home, 2020*. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/de/web/products-eurostat-news/-/wdn-20211230-1>

- Feinberg, A., Ghorbani, A., & Herder, P. (2021). Diversity and Challenges of the Urban Commons: A Comprehensive Review. *International Journal of the Commons*, 15(1), 1–20.
- Ferreri, M., & Vidal, L. (2021). Public-cooperative policy mechanisms for housing commons. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 1–19.
- Fröhlich, A. (2021, May 21). Bombendrohung kam von Spandauer Hausbewohner: Brandstiftung, Drohanrufe – Razzia in linkem Berliner Hausprojekt. *Der Tagesspiegel Online*. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/bombendrohung-kam-von-spandauer-hausbewohner-brandstiftung-drohanrufe-razzia-in-linkem-berliner-hausprojekt/27212594.html>
- Gray, L. M., Wong-Wylie, G., Rempel, G. R., & Cook, K. (2020). Expanding Qualitative Research Interviewing Strategies: Zoom Video Communications. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(5), 1292–1301.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, 162(3859), 1243–1248.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2009). *Commonwealth*. Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Verso Books.
- Hay, I., & Cope, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Qualitative research methods in human geography* (Fifth edition). Oxford University Press.
- Heeg, S. (2018). Das Unmögliche denken und fordern. Ansätze für einen bezahlbaren Wohnraum. *Informationen Zur Raumentwicklung*, 4, 110–121.
- Heinze, R. G. (2020). Genossenschaften als Gestaltungsakteure. In R. G. Heinze, *Gesellschaftsgestaltung durch Neujustierung von Zivilgesellschaft, Staat und Markt* (pp. 169–184). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-30907-7\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-30907-7_10)
- Helfrich, S. (2012). Common Goods Don't Simply Exist—They Are Created. In S. Helfrich & D. Bollier (Eds.), *The wealth of the commons: A world beyond market and state* (pp. 61–67). Levellers Press.
- Helfrich, S., & Bollier, D. (Eds.). (2012). *The wealth of the commons: A world beyond market and state*. Levellers Press.
- Hess, C. (2008). Mapping the New Commons. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Hodkinson, S. (2012). The Return of the Housing Question. *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 12(4), 423–444.
- Holm, A. (2011). *Wohnung als Ware: Zur Ökonomie und Politik der Wohnungsversorgung*. 31(121), 9–20.
- Holm, A. (2014). Wiederkehr der Wohnungsfrage. *APuZ*, 64(20–21), 25–30.
- Holm, A., Regnault, V., Sprengholz, M., & Stephan, M. (2021). *Die Verfestigung sozialer Wohnversorgungsprobleme Entwicklung der Wohnverhältnisse und der sozialen Wohnversorgung von 2006 bis 2018 in 77 deutschen Großstädten* (No. 21; Working Paper Forschungsförderung). Hans-Böckler-Stiftung.
- Hözl, C. (2022). Translocal Mobilization of Housing Commons. The Example of the German Mietshäuser Syndikat. *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, 4. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frsc.2022.759332/full>
- Krennerich, M. (2018). Ein Recht auf (menschenwürdiges) Wohnen? *APuZ, Wohnungslosigkeit*(25–26), 9–14.
- Krouwel, M., Jolly, K., & Greenfield, S. (2019). Comparing Skype (video calling) and in-person qualitative interview modes in a study of people with irritable bowel syndrome – an

- exploratory comparative analysis. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19(1), 219.
- Larsen, H. G., & Hansen, A. L. (2015). Commodifying Danish housing commons. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 97(3), 263–274.
- Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Das Recht auf Stadt* (German 1st edition (2016)). Edition Nautilus.
- Linebaugh, P. (2008). *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*. University of California Press.
- Metzger, J. (2015). Soziales Wohnen in der neoliberalen Stadt? Vom Sozialen Wohnungsbau zu Recht auf Stadt und Urbanen Commons. *Widersprüche: Zeitschrift Für Sozialistische Politik Im Bildungs-, Gesundheits- Und Sozialbereich*, 35(137), 43–55.
- Metzger, J. (2016). Gemeinschaftliches Wohnen: Ansatz zur Lösung der Wohnungsfrage? *Nachrichten Der ARL*, 01/2016, 18–22.
- Novick, G. (2008). Is there a bias against telephone interviews in qualitative research? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 31(4), 391–398.
- Öffentliche Güter. (2016). In *Duden Wirtschaft von A bis Z: Grundlagenwissen für Schule und Studium, Beruf und Alltag*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/lexikon-der-wirtschaft/20244/oeffentliche-gueter/>
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Parker, P., & Johansson, M. (2011). *The uses and abuses of Elinor Ostrom's concept of commons in urban theorizing*. International Conference of the European Urban Research Association (EURA), Copenhagen.
- Rink, D. (2020, March 9). *Lange Wege der Deutschen Einheit: Wohnen*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BpB). <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutsche-einheit/lange-wege-der-deutschen-einheit/47280/wohnen/>.
- Saarijärvi, M., & Bratt, E.-L. (2021). When face-to-face interviews are not possible: Tips and tricks for video, telephone, online chat, and email interviews in qualitative research. *European Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, 20(4), 392–396.
- Savills. (2019). *Wohnungsmarkt Deutschland. Eigentümerstruktur am Wohnungsmarkt*. Savills.
- Schöning, B., & Vollmer, L. (2018). Wohnungsnot gestern und heute. *Informationen Zur Raumentwicklung*, 4, 8–21.
- Self, B. (2021). Conducting Interviews During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond. *Forum : Qualitative Social Research*, 22(3).
- SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, FDP. (2021). *Mehr Fortschritt wagen—Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und FDP*.
- Standing, G. (2019). *Plunder of the commons: A manifesto for sharing public wealth*. Pelican.
- Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common space: The city as commons*. Zed Books.
- Stratford, E., & Bradshaw, M. (2021). Rigorous and Trustworthy: Qualitative Research Design. In I. Hay & M. Cope (Eds.), *Qualitative research methods in human geography* (Fifth edition, pp. 92–106). Oxford University Press.
- Tummers, L. (2016). The re-emergence of self-managed co-housing in Europe: A critical review of co-housing research. *Urban Studies*, 53(10), 2023–2040.
- Valentine, G. (2005). Tell me about...: Using interviews as a research methodology. In R. Flowerdew & D. Martin (Eds.), *Methods in human geography: A guide for students doing a research project* (2nd ed, pp. 110–127). Routledge.

## APPENDIX

### I. Interview Guides

Interviews were conducted in German, the following is my own translation.

#### *a) Housing Projects*

##### Getting Started

- Can you tell me about the project and since when you live there?
  - Your role in the project
  - Number of residents
  - Founding year
  - Commercial or semi-public space for other projects
  - Ownership structure and financing
  - Concept for living together/community/sharing

##### Networking

- Do you network with other housing projects? If yes, how do you do it?
- What role does networking play for you?/ What goal are you trying to achieve with it?
- With whom do you network?
  - Other housing projects?
  - People looking for housing?
  - Projects in formation?
  - Other actors: owners, banks, public sector (administration, politics) etc.?
  - Neighbourhood
- Since when do you do networking (in which project phase)?

##### Expansion

- Are there any efforts to expand the project?
- What does this look like? (New building, buying, including new projects, ...)
- Who are you working with? Who are your partners?
  - Other projects
  - Banks
  - administration, politics
  - ...
- Do you pay attention to social diversity during expansion?
- What are challenges? (With actors outside and inside the project)
- What works well?
- Where do you see the project in 5, 10, 20 years?
- How is growth changing the project?

##### Other questions

- How do you decide on the above aspects? (Internal decision making)
- How do you see the future of your project/housing projects overall? What are issues that you are concerned about?

## ***b) Supporting Organizations***

### Getting started:

- Can you tell me about the organization and what kind of work it does?
  - Claim? Goal?
  - Since when/established?
  - Number of funded projects?
  - Selection criteria for funded projects?

### How do you work?

- Is the organization growing? Does the number of projects you work with increase?
- How do you get in contact with new projects?
- Do you/the projects you work with pay attention to social diversity?/ How socially diverse are the members? Is this a topic being discussed?
- What are the biggest challenges for the projects you work with? (with actors outside and regarding inside dynamics of the project?)
- What works well?
- Are there any "failed cases"? What didn't work there?
- What issues are critical now and in the future?

### Networking

- How does the interaction of the projects you work with look like?
- What role does networking play for you? What goal are you trying to achieve with it?
- With whom do you work together? (Criteria?)
  - People looking for housing
  - Other organizations
  - Banks
  - Public sector: administration, politics
  - Owners
  - ...
- What is the relationship with the public sector like?