

Prefiguring redistributive housing commons: public-cooperative experiments in Berlin, Rome and Barcelona

Prefigurant uns comuns d'habitatge redistributius: experiments públic-cooperatius a Berlín, Roma i Barcelona

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Abstract

This paper examines how movement-led practices are translated into redistributive housing commons through hybrid forms of public-community governance, both existing and potential, in Berlin, Rome, and Barcelona. It situates housing decommodification within post-austerity urban housing crises shaped by rent inflation, touristification, and the financialisation of private rental markets. In these contexts, tenants' and housing-rights mobilisations have expanded, contributing to more assertive policy repertoires while also consolidating alternatives to market provision, notably right-of-use cooperatives and other collective forms of tenure that are increasingly supported by local institutions. Yet decommodification does not in itself secure redistribution: community-led housing remains niche and often economically inaccessible amid shrinking public assets, rising land and construction costs, financial thresholds linked to debt and entry contributions, as well as complex technical procedures. Drawing on a comparative analysis of three "test sites" —Bethanien, Porto Fluviale, and Casa Orsola— the paper argues that access to vacant or underutilised public assets, adaptive reuse, self-rehabilitation schemes, and municipal acquisition can function as socio-institutional forms of "in-kind support". By enabling movement-led practices to experiment with prefigurative politics and redistribute agency, these arrangements offer transferable insights for developing housing commons that are more accessible, potentially redistributive, and scalable alongside public housing.

Keywords

Housing commons, housing movements, community-led housing initiatives, housing decommodification, adaptive reuse and self-rehabilitation.

Resum

Aquest article examina com les pràctiques impulsades pels moviments socials es tradueixen en comuns habitacionals redistributius mitjançant arranjaments híbrids de governança públic-comunitària, tant existents com potencials, a Berlín, Roma i Barcelona. Situa la desmercantilització de l'habitatge en el context de les crisis urbanes posteriors a l'austeritat, caracteritzades per l'augment dels lloguers, la turistificació i la financerització dels mercats de lloguer. En aquest context, les mobilitzacions de llogateres i pel dret a l'habitatge han contribuït a polítiques més assertives i a la consolidació d'alternatives a la provisió mercantil, com les cooperatives en cessió d'ús i altres formes col·lectives de tinença. Tanmateix, la desmercantilització no garanteix necessàriament la redistribució, ja que l'habitatge comunitari continua sent sovint una solució de nínxol i econòmicament inaccessible. A partir de l'anàlisi comparativa de Bethanien, Porto Fluviale i Casa Orsola, l'article mostra com l'accés a actius públics, la reutilització adaptativa, l'autorehabilitació i l'adquisició municipal poden actuar com a formes de "suport en espècie". Aquests arranjaments redistribueixen l'agència i ofereixen aprenentatges transferibles per desenvolupar comuns habitacionals més accessibles, redistributius i escalables juntament amb l'habitatge públic.

Paraules claus

Housing commons, moviments per l'habitatge, iniciatives d'habitatge liderades per la comunitat, desmercantilització de l'habitatge, reutilització adaptativa i auto-rehabilitació.

INTRODUCTION

Across European cities, the combination of hyper-commodification and financialisation of housing, privatisation of public assets, and welfare retrenchment has intensified housing precarity and deepened long-term affordability crises (Marcuse & Madden, 2016; Aalbers, 2016). In this setting, access to decent and secure housing—and the capacity to curb the extractive strategies of corporate landlords and global asset managers—has become a key political-economic challenge (Wijburg, 2021; Wijburg & Waldron, 2024).

While municipal tools struggle to match the scale and mobility of global capital amid shrinking budgets, large-scale public asset sell-offs, and the growth of corporate landlords, cities such as Berlin, Rome, and Barcelona show how these pressures concentrate in evictions and displacement: tenants priced out of their neighbourhoods and households excluded from public provision, pushed instead into increasingly financialised private rental markets shaped by touristification and investment-led restructuring. In response, grassroots strategies to decommodify housing have emerged both as emergency actions (anti-eviction, mutual aid, squatting) and the prefiguration of more durable and/or institutionalised alternatives. Among them, self-managed and right-of-use housing cooperatives have gained, over the last decade, visibility and institutional attention, often supported through narratives of sustainability, social innovation, and the commons (Tummers, 2016). Yet the expansion of these alternatives remains constrained and their distributional effects are uneven. Rising land and construction costs create financial thresholds—linked to debt, entry contributions, and creditworthiness—that can reproduce exclusion (Hurlin, 2019; Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). Decommodification, in other words, does not automatically produce redistribution: housing can be removed from speculative exchange while access remains socially selective.

This article addresses that gap by examining hybrid forms¹ of public–community governance experiments in which municipalities support movement-linked initiatives through public assets, innovative legal frameworks capable of recognising and including bottom-up proposals, targeted funds, and new governance structures based on distributed agency—such as adaptive reuse of vacant public buildings, mid- and long-term leasing, self-rehabilitation schemes, and municipal acquisition—while projects contribute participation, self-governance, and co-production. It focuses on public authorities' instruments that can help bottom-up practices devise mechanisms through which a wider community may claim the “right not to be excluded” (Blomley, 2016) from housing commons (Ferreri & Vidal, 2021), so that collaborative building and living models can benefit not only middle-class groups, but also households whose needs were previously addressed through the shrinking sector of social housing.

Empirically, the paper compares three socio-institutional “test sites” where movement-led practices informed institutional experimentation: (1) Bethanien in Berlin, where a public building threatened by privatisation was occupied both as an affordable housing solution and as a means of protecting the property from privatisation, before eventually being regularised

¹ By hybrid forms of public–community governance, I refer to institutional arrangements in which public authorities provide or retain key resources, assets, funding, or regulatory powers, while organised communities exercise meaningful collective control over the use, management, and long-term stewardship of housing. These arrangements redistribute agency between public and community actors through forms of co-management, use rights, co-production, and, in some cases, co-ownership (Foster & Iaione, 2016; Durose et al., 2021).

through a lease-based co-management arrangement with the district government; (2) the regularisation of Porto Fluviale in Rome, the squatted vacant public asset translated into public-cooperative affordable housing provision through a self-rehabilitation pathway; and (3) Casa Orsola exemplifies Barcelona's mobilisation for municipal acquisition in response to tenants' and tenants' union struggles, as well as the subsequent debate on the possible cooperativisation of tenants.

The analysis asks which instruments enable the conversion of public or contested assets into durable, non-speculative housing commons; what is needed to move from isolated experiments to more structured strategies; how these instruments redistribute resources, responsibilities, and agency among movements, cooperatives, and public authorities; and under what conditions such arrangements can broaden redistributive access.

This article does not claim empirical originality through a uniform dataset across the three cases. Rather, its contribution is analytical and conceptual: it compares three heterogeneous but institutionally consequential test sites to examine how grassroots housing struggles can reshape planning provisions, stimulate –or anticipate– new legal and administrative tools, and redistribute agency among residents, movements, cooperatives, intermediaries, and public authorities.

From a social innovation perspective, the article examines how grassroots housing practices can inform public housing policy and generate decommodified, affordable alternatives from below. The cases are not treated as models to be replicated, but as situated experiments showing how vacant or threatened assets may become durable, non-speculative and potentially redistributive housing arrangements². Conceptually, the article combines prefigurative politics and distributed agency to analyse how conflictual grassroots strategies can reshape institutional capacities and how access to vacant and underutilised public assets, adaptive reuse, self-rehabilitation, public acquisition and cooperative governance might be recombined to strengthen affordability, sustainability and scalability.

REDISTRIBUTIVE HOUSING COMMONS

Financialisation, decommodification, and the institutionalisation of housing struggles

Access to adequate, secure and affordable housing has become one of the most pressing social and political questions in Europe. Housing is not merely a physical shelter or a consumer good but a key determinant of wellbeing, shaping health outcomes, educational attainment, labour-market opportunities and participation in social life (Rolnik, 2013; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Across Europe, rising housing costs, increasing social inequalities, demographic change and the retrenchment or restructuring of public intervention have made adequate housing

² Dewilde (2022) uses the expression “redistributive housing policies” to refer to policies that weaken the relationship between low income and poor living conditions. She identifies rental market regulation, housing allowances, and social housing as key redistributive instruments; she also states that the most redistributive housing policies include explicit housing allowances and implicit social-housing cost subsidies.

increasingly difficult to access, particularly in cities experiencing strong demand pressures (Scanlon & Whitehead, 2008). At the same time, the financialisation of housing has reinforced its treatment as an investment asset (Aalbers, 2016; Rolnik, 2013), prioritising capital accumulation and property appreciation over its social function and contributing to growing affordability pressures in many urban regions (Fields & Uffer, 2016). A central expression is the “rental turn,” whereby corporate landlords consolidate private rental housing as a relatively low-risk, high-yield investment vehicle (Fields & Uffer, 2016). Although trajectories differ across national regimes, the shared outcomes include rent inflation, displacement pressures, and declining housing security for low-income renters.

In Germany, financialisation has been intertwined with post-reunification restructuring and large municipal sell-offs, including in Berlin (Bernt et al., 2013; Holm et al., 2023). In Italy, securitisation policies (*cartolarizzazioni*) enacted in the early 2000s accelerated the financialisation of public housing by treating public assets as investment vehicles to be valorised, traded and managed according to asset-management logics (Belotti & Arbaci, 2021; Tulumello & Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, 2024). In Spain, the post-2008 foreclosure wave was followed by renewed rentier strategies and expanding corporate landlordism, contributing to rent hikes in high-pressure contexts such as Barcelona (García-Lamarca, 2020; Gil García & Martínez López, 2023).

As homelessness, precarious housing, residential exclusion, and declining affordability for low-income private renters intensify across Europe (Dewilde, 2018), decommodification has emerged on one side as a spontaneous strategy, encompassing necessity-driven practices by households with no alternatives (e.g. squatting, illegal settlements, etc.) and on the other as a political project and central policy horizon (Wijburg, 2021; the *European Commission's European Affordable Housing Plan (2025) Action 7*). Decommodified arrangements seek to secure housing as use value rather than exchange value through mechanisms such as strong public provision, long-term affordability regulation, and collective ownership or governance (Harloe, 1995; Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

Although EU countries differ in the size of their social and affordable housing stocks, as well as in the institutional meanings and ownership models attached to them, many face similar difficulties in responding to contemporary housing pressures. Across European cities, municipalities are confronted with shrinking budgets and diminishing public assets with which to provide affordable housing solutions. In this context, the affordability crisis has become a central driver of mobilisation, pushing housing rights onto political agendas and stimulating municipal experimentation (Wijburg & Waldron, 2024).

Housing movements and policy trajectories in Berlin, Barcelona, and Rome

Berlin, Barcelona, and Rome illustrate distinct but comparable trajectories of how housing contention becomes institutionally legible.

In Berlin, housing activism draws on a long lineage of squatting, self-help renovation and organising, especially visible in West Berlin from the late 1970s and 1980s onwards (Holm & Kuhn, 2011; Vasudevan, 2011). These cycles generated “innovations from below” that later informed municipal experimentation, particularly through cautious urban renewal and self-help renovation programmes linked to the IBA process and the *Bauliche Selbsthilfe* programme

(Katz & Mayer, 1985; Holm & Kuhn, 2011). By translating squatting and resident-led rehabilitation into negotiated renovation strategies, these experiences helped consolidate non-speculative infrastructures and repertoires of negotiation that continue to shape Berlin's collaborative housing field. Their afterlives are visible in building groups, new cooperatives, co-housing initiatives and institutionalised non-speculative property forms with anti-sale safeguards and federated governance, notably the Mietshäuser Syndikat (MHS) (Hurlin, 2019). Since the 2000s, renewed tenant organising against rent hikes and privatisation has pushed Berlin towards more interventionist tools and revived debates about public control over housing (Mayer, 2013; Bernt et al., 2013; Card, 2022; Holm et al., 2023).

Barcelona's housing mobilisation has unfolded through successive waves: squatting cycles in the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by post-2008 contention centred on anti-eviction organising, legal advocacy and tenant unionism. The combination of mutual aid, direct action and legislative pressure helped drive Catalonia's housing-rights agenda, with the PAH contributing to new governance innovations and legal reforms such as Law 24/2015 (De Weerdt & Garcia, 2016; D'Adda et al., 2018). More recently, the Sindicat de Llogateres has interacted with municipal governance through debates on rent regulation, protected housing requirements, municipal acquisition and pre-emption powers. In parallel, right-of-use cooperative housing has been incorporated into Barcelona's affordable-housing toolbox through municipal land allocation and public-cooperative partnerships (Miralles Buil, 2020; Leyva del Río, 2022).

Rome's housing struggles are shaped by a long-standing "occupation³ city", in which disused—often non-residential—buildings have been occupied and repurposed for housing and mixed social uses, making vacancy and gaps in public provision politically visible (Boano & Talocci, 2014; Grazioli, 2021; Di Felice & Rocco, 2023). Since the 1990s, occupations have operated as a durable infrastructure of "welfare from below", coordinated by movement networks that often mediate between homeless households and institutions (Aureli & Mudu, 2017; Mudu & Rossini, 2017). Compared to Berlin and Barcelona, movement influence in Rome has translated less into rent-containment and more into administrative and legal pathways for social allocation and adaptive reuse of public assets. A key institutional translation is Lazio's Autorecupero law, proposed by housing activists and advanced through political pressure, which enables cooperatives to self-rehabilitate vacant public buildings and access housing under regulated conditions, drawing inspiration from earlier self-help programmes in Berlin.

Operationalising redistributive housing commons

Housing research has increasingly drawn on the concept of the commons to analyse alternative forms of ownership, governance, and decommodification. Following Guisan, Liu and Gerber (2025), housing commons should not be understood as a single tenure model, but as a plural concept describing arrangements and practices through which housing is collectively governed, oriented towards use value, and protected from commodification. In the strand they define as "housing as commons," the concept refers especially to collective housing arrangements—such as cooperatives, community land trusts, and other limited-equity or decommodified tenure forms—that seek to secure long-term affordability and access by limiting housing's role

³ In Italy, unauthorised building takeovers are commonly called *occupazioni* ("occupations"), while English-language scholarship usually refers to them as squatting. In Rome, the housing occupations discussed here are politicised and movement-organised, but primarily respond to acute housing precarity rather than alternative lifestyles.

as a vehicle for capital accumulation. Similarly, Ferreri and Vidal (2021) understand housing commons as collectively governed arrangements that seek to remove housing from speculative market dynamics through decommodification, resident self-governance, and institutional mechanisms capable of preserving affordability and accessibility over time.

More broadly, commons theory understands commons not merely as property forms, but as relational processes linking a resource, a community, and practices of collective organisation or “commoning” (Ostrom, 1990; De Angelis, 2017). Leyva del Río (2022) conceptualises this relation as a “relational triad” involving the common resource, the self-organised community, and the collective activity through which the resource is produced, managed, and reproduced over time. However, the literature also warns that collective ownership or resident management alone does not necessarily guarantee redistribution.

Yet this process remains ambivalent when these alternatives may reproduce mechanisms of social selectivity. These mechanisms may be economic, such as entry contributions, creditworthiness, debt capacity and the ability to absorb rehabilitation costs; institutional, such as allocation criteria and eligibility rules; or socio-cultural, such as complex procedures, reliance on activist networks, cooperative know-how, internal gatekeeping, language, time availability and unpaid organisational labour. Without mechanisms securing permanent decommodification, affordability, and accessibility beyond the initial group of members, cooperative or community-led housing may remain niche, socially selective, or enclosed within the interests of its own members (Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). This article therefore asks under what conditions such experiments can move beyond niche solutions and contribute to broader, more accessible, and non-speculative housing arrangements.

Building on this literature, this article uses *redistributive housing commons* to describe arrangements that combine long-term collective control over land and housing with explicit mechanisms that broaden access for lower-income and racialised households—groups systematically excluded by markets and increasingly underserved by residual social-housing provision (Harloe, 1995) that is meant to target them. Their redistributive value is therefore not assumed from collective ownership or resident participation alone, but depends on whether access barriers, cost burdens, risks, and decision-making power are institutionally redistributed.

Operationally, the analysis evaluates redistributive potential by examining how far each case removes land or housing from speculative exchange; whether lower-income, precarious, or displaced households can access the arrangement through eligibility criteria, anti-displacement protections, low entry contributions, or income-related rents; whether financial burdens are socialised through public assets, subsidies, or public investment rather than shifted onto residents through debt, unpaid labour, or high entry shares; and whether governance is shared among public authorities, residents, movements, cooperatives, and intermediaries without reducing participation to mere responsabilisation.

CONFLICTUAL PREFIGURATION AND REDISTRIBUTIVE HOUSING COMMONS

Conflictual grassroots strategies can be understood as bottom-up repertoires of collective action developed by residents, tenants, housing movements, and community-based

organisations in response to exclusionary housing conditions. They are “conflictual” insofar as they make claims against dominant property relations, market actors, and/or public authorities, often through practices such as occupation, anti-eviction action, protest, direct action, or the reappropriation of vacant assets. Yet these strategies are not only oppositional: they may also generate proposals, negotiations, legal innovations, and co-management arrangements, thereby moving between contentious and institutional arenas.

The notion of “conflictual grassroots strategies” draws on social movement theory and contentious politics. Diani’s (1992) definition of social movements foregrounds informal networks, collective identity, and engagement in political or cultural conflict, while Tilly and Tarrow (2015) conceptualise contentious politics as collective claim-making involving authorities, public performances, repertoires of action, and combinations of institutional and extra-institutional routines. Miraftab’s (2004) distinction between invited and invented spaces further clarifies how grassroots practices may move between institutional participation and direct confrontation with authorities and the status quo. In urban housing struggles, squatting, occupation, anti-eviction mobilisation, and the reappropriation of vacant buildings can therefore be understood not only as oppositional tactics, but also as practices capable of prefiguring alternative housing arrangements and institutional forms (Mayer, 2009; Pruijt, 2003; Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018).

To address the limits of socially selective decommodification, this article mobilises the notion of redistributive housing commons. Collective housing experiments are approached as socio-institutional test sites in which desired futures are enacted in the present through shared governance of urban resources, in line with accounts of prefigurative politics and commoning. Prefigurative politics, rooted in social movement scholarship, captures how movements align means and ends by embodying alternative futures in practice (Leach, 2013). In the housing field, prefigurative practices of commoning—including squatting, self-rehabilitation, and cooperative self-management—can generate institutional experimentation and collective governance arrangements that contest market logics while testing alternative ways of inhabiting, managing, and redistributing access to urban resources.

Housing commons are often positioned beyond state/market and public/private binaries, yet their development within capitalism remains inherently contradictory (Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). This article conceptualises housing commons as collectively governed resource systems that enable forms of decommodified housing provision (Vidal, 2019; Guisan et al., 2025), and understands commoning as an instituting praxis grounded in co-obligation and collective activity (Dardot & Laval, 2014). Within housing provision, distributed agency refers to institutional forms that allocate responsibilities and decision-making across movements, cooperatives, intermediaries, and public authorities (Healey, 2007). This moves beyond decentralisation alone, pointing instead to the co-production and co-management of publicly owned assets that may be rendered “commons-like” through shared governance.

Conflict is not external to these arrangements but constitutive of them. In the three cases analysed in this article, institutional innovation emerged from historically contentious practices and situated pressures: occupation and anti-privatisation struggle in Bethanien, long-term squatting and resistance to asset disposal in Porto Fluviale, and anti-eviction mobilisation in Casa Orsola. Conflict is therefore understood as a mechanism through which political opportunities are opened (McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Grassroots actors make vacancy, displacement, or speculation publicly visible, while public authorities may selectively translate

their strategies and claims into legal, administrative, or financial tools. Prefiguration is thus not only the enactment of alternative futures, but also a conflictual process through which movement practices become institutionally legible as feasible housing policy instruments.

Recent work emphasises the multi-scalar and dynamic character of political opportunities, including urban fields in which movements and authorities co-produce policy change (Mayer, 2013). In the housing domain, municipalist governments, new policy instruments, and translocal activist networks can open opportunities for commons-oriented experiments, while legal rollbacks and fiscal constraints may close or redirect them towards more market-conforming outcomes (Holm et al., 2023). This framework helps specify the institutional conditions under which movement-led decommodification can be stabilised into durable housing commons without losing its redistributive ambitions.

METHODOLOGY

The article uses a qualitative, comparative case-study design to analyse how movement-led practices are translated into durable and redistributive housing commons through hybrid public-cooperative arrangements. The empirical basis is intentionally heterogeneous and draws on triangulated materials across the three cases: previous fieldwork, interviews where available, policy and legal documents, municipal and institutional sources, media reports, movement/cooperative materials, and secondary literature. For Berlin, the analysis builds on earlier interviews, participant observation, policy documents and media analysis on Bethanien, drawing on material collected between 2013 and 2026, complemented by fieldwork conducted within the EU project DASH on social innovation and non-profit cooperative housing strategies (2024-2026). For Rome, it draws on policy and legal documents, secondary literature on Porto Fluviale and autorecupero, and the author’s previous research on squatting (2012-2016) and state-cooperative arrangements in Italy and in the Lazio region (2019). For Barcelona, the analysis combines literature, municipal and institutional sources, media material, and interview-based research on housing movements’ organisation, goals, resistance tactics, and advocacy for new legislation. It also examines the use of municipal acquisition and pre-emption as practical strategies for resisting displacement and eviction, as illustrated by the case of Casa Orsola and the growing sector of right-of-use cooperative in Catalunya.

The article does not compare the cases through an identical body of original fieldwork. Rather, it compares institutional pathways through a common analytical grid. This asymmetry is treated as a methodological limit addressed through the consistent application of the same dimensions across the three cases.

Dimension	Question guiding the analysis
Asset trajectory	Was the asset public, private, vacant, threatened, occupied or subject to eviction/speculation?
Conflict / political opportunity	Which contentious practice made institutional action possible?
Legal-administrative pathway	Lease, regularisation, self-rehabilitation law, acquisition, protected rental, cooperative conversion?
Financing / cost distribution	Who pays for land, acquisition, rehabilitation, maintenance and debt?

Dimension	Question guiding the analysis
Access / social selectivity	Who can enter or remain? Are there income criteria, sitting-tenant protections, entry contributions or informal barriers?
Governance structure	Which actors decide, manage, fund, maintain and guarantee long-term affordability?
Redistributive limits	What remains exceptional, selective, underfunded or non-scalable?

The three cities are treated as comparable urban contexts embedded in divergent national housing regimes. Germany is commonly characterised as an integrated rental market, whereas Italy and Spain are more homeownership-centred systems in which non-market/social rental provision is comparatively residual and the rental sector is more segmented (Kemeny, 2006; Scanlon & Whitehead, 2008). On this basis, the article conducts a subnational inter-urban comparison. To capture how tenure structures mediate exposure to rental-market precarity, the analysis considers homeownership rates –Berlin 15.9%, Barcelona ≈63.3%, and Rome ≈71%– (Destatis, 2024; Observatori de l’Habitatge de Barcelona, 2024; Rossi et al., 2025) and compares public housing through a harmonised indicator based on publicly owned/protected dwellings as a share of total dwelling stock: Berlin ≈17.7% (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2025; Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2025), Rome ≈5.4% (ISTAT, 2021; ATER Roma, 2020) and Barcelona’s ≈1.35% (CESB, 2025).

Operationally, the cases are treated as “test sites” because they condense broader housing struggles into institutionally consequential experiments. The goal is not statistical generalisation, but the identification of mechanisms and design features that can inform policy and movement strategy across contexts.

BERLIN: FROM RADICAL REAPPROPRIATION TO LEASE-BASED CO-MANAGEMENT PATHWAYS

Berlin’s housing crisis, austerity, and movement infrastructures

Germany’s housing system is shaped by a historically time-limited “social housing” model: much provision relied on private actors incentivised through tax breaks, with affordability obligations typically expiring after 30–40 years. As these time limits lapsed, substantial volumes of dwellings exited the sector without equivalent replacement (Stephens et al., 2008). Berlin is especially exposed to that trend because it is structurally a renters’ city, with homeownership just under 16%, making housing outcomes highly sensitive to landlord structures, regulation, and the size of the publicly steered stock (Holm et al., 2023).

Between 1990 and 2012, Berlin sold more than 200,000 municipal units, while social-housing obligations lapsed and new construction stagnated (Bernt et al., 2013). Framed as fiscal consolidation and “rightsizing,” these reforms shifted governance away from stock-based provision toward market-facing interventions and facilitated the rise of corporate landlords. Under intensified gentrification and displacement pressures, policy began to be reoriented in the 2010s: municipal housing companies were tasked with stronger social goals and moderated rent policies, alongside strengthened tenant protections. Berlin’s dense movement ecology has

contributed to shape what becomes politically thinkable and institutionally negotiable.

Public assets as entry points: leases, tenders, and pre-emption

After the 2006 federalism reform, federal steering and funding for social housing declined, prompting municipalities to develop instruments supporting self-organised building groups through advisory infrastructures and facilitated access to public land and resources (Knorr-Siedow, 2008). In cities such as Munich and Hamburg, “socially sensitive” land disposal—selling public land below market price in exchange for social-housing commitments—became a template. Berlin developed a similar toolbox: consultancy for “building initiatives,” concept-based tenders (*Konzeptverfahren*) allocating sites via social/ecological criteria rather than to the best bidder, and a more recent shift from sales toward long leaseholds (*Erbbaurecht*).

A further instrument for countering gentrification-related displacement was municipal pre-emption (*Vorkaufsrecht*) in social preservation areas. In practice, the redistributive reach of these tools depends on which assets are offered, how affordability is weighted in selection criteria, and the legal and fiscal constraints limiting municipal acquisition and investment capacity. Bethanien is relevant because it exemplifies a different pathway.

Bethanien South Wing: from occupation to lease-based co-management

Figure 1 | The south wing of Bethanien complex in Kreuzberg, Berlin, squatted in 2005. Today the NewYork is a space for emancipatory projects composed by an alliance of diverse groups that see themselves as anti-capitalist, feminist and anti-racist and manage the space through an independent/self-organization structure.



Source: <https://www.newyorck.net/en/bethanien-occupation/>

Bethanien is a former hospital complex located in Mariannenplatz in Berlin-Kreuzberg—historically a politically contentious area near the Wall, characterised in the past by high levels of socio-economic deprivation and comparatively high immigration rates. Bethanien became a renewed site of contestation in the early 2000s, as institutional intentions to privatise public property intensified under policy pressures to monetise “underused” assets. Under Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin, districts were required to account for *kalkulatorische Gebäudekosten* (e.g., imputed depreciation and interest), increasing the apparent “indirect” costs of underused public buildings and reinforcing fiscal rationales for disposal and privatisation. In this context, several community services located in the complex were closed or faced relocation, intensifying local opposition amid displacement pressures in Kreuzberg and other central districts.

In 2005, former residents of *Hausprojekt Yorckstrasse 59* occupied three vacant floors of the South Wing following their eviction. This action catalysed broader neighbourhood mobilisation through the *Bethanien für alle* campaign, rooted in anti-privatisation and anti-gentrification organising combined with Berlin’s longer repertoire of squatting politics (Rossini, 2024). Mobilisation subsequently combined contentious action with institutionally legible strategies, notably pursuing a signature campaign aimed at triggering a local referendum. This dual strategy—contentious pressure plus institutionally legible planning—pressured the borough into negotiation and helped establish a citizen working group into the initiative *Zukunft Bethanien* (future Bethanien), able to envision and propose a governance solution that would reduce the fiscal rationale for privatisation by delegating property management to a third-party entity. This approach was formalised in 2009, when the non-profit GSE GmbH (limited liability company) assumed ownership and management responsibilities. In parallel, *Südflügel e.V.* was established as an umbrella association for South Wing users and signed a 15-year lease (renewed in 2024), assuming day-to-day management and maintenance obligations while major structural works remained with the public owner. The resulting arrangement institutionalised a hybrid governance model that combines public-related ownership with user-led co-management and collective autonomy.

The South Wing hosts a mixed ecosystem, including the Yorck59 housing project (around 30 residents in a long-standing co-housing initiative) alongside social and cultural infrastructures. Institutionally, governance is layered: GSE provides a stable legal shell and mediates compliance with building and safety regulations; *Südflügel e.V.* coordinates internal governance (allocation, conflict resolution, balancing uses) and represents the collective in negotiations with the borough. Concentrating administrative responsibilities in a collective body enables institutional legibility while preserving user autonomy.

Berlin case: Analytical implications

Bethanien shows how long-term leasing and user-led adaptive reuse of a vacant public building can reduce public expenditure while securing long-term, low-threshold affordability. By avoiding land purchase and new-build costs, the arrangement sustains comparatively low rents by leveraging a public asset, while co-management and self-managed maintenance reduce fiscal pressures and help shield the building from privatisation without undermining autonomy. In this model, public ownership and long leases operate as “in-kind” support that lowers capital barriers and secures long-term non-market use without requiring major upfront public expenditure. Its limits are decisive for redistribution and scaling: Bethanien remained

exceptional and struggle-dependent, shaped by a specific constellation of mobilisation capacity, neighbourhood legitimacy, and municipal actors willing to negotiate. More importantly, residential recognition remains institutionally ambiguous, as legal and planning categories continue to frame the building primarily as cultural and workspace use. This reflects a broader lack of a housing-specific administrative pathway in Berlin for systematically converting underused public buildings⁴ into affordable housing (that would include explicit access rules). Finally, allocation is not organised through formal income- or needs-based criteria.

ROME AND LAZIO: SELF-REHABILITATION AND AUTORECUPERO AS PUBLIC-COOPERATIVE TRANSLATION

Rome's housing crisis: vacancy, marketisation, and the “occupation city”

Rome's housing crisis is marked by a structural, long-term affordability problem (Insolera, 2001). As Grazioli (2021) notes, the city's paradox lies in extensive vacancy alongside deepening housing insecurity, with roughly 57,000 families facing housing inadequacy and segregation. Since the 1990s, deregulation and divestment have reduced protections for low-income tenants and weakened the buffering role of public renting. In parallel, local governance has increasingly relied on emergency measures rather than systematic decommodification, including relocation into temporary accommodation such as the *Centri di Assistenza Alloggiativa Temporanea* (CAAT/SAAT). These have been widely criticised for high public costs (around €37–45 million per year), degraded conditions, and entanglements with local rentier interests⁵.

Against this background, a durable ecosystem led by three main housing movements provides housing and services amid institutional failure by occupying and repurposing abandoned buildings into housing and mixed social uses⁶, making both vacancy and gaps in public provision politically visible. This enduring movement capacity forms the political backdrop against which Self-rehabilitation Law (*Autorecupero*) could emerge as a plausible institutional translation of radical practices.

The autorecupero pathway: Lazio Regional Law 55/1998

In 1998, Lazio⁷ adopted Regional Law 55/1998 on the self-rehabilitation of real estate⁸, explicitly designed to regularise squatted and abandoned buildings through cooperative housing. The law was sustained by bottom-up pressure by housing movements and residents.

⁴ In 2024, Berlin's *Schneller-Bauen-Gesetz*, introduce the *Erleichterungen für Umnutzungen im Bestand* (§ 48 BauO Bln) reforms easing non-residential building-to-housing conversions.

⁵ https://www.cartainregola.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/comune-roma-piano-di-intervento-per-il-sostegno-abitativo-23-maggio-2014-sostegno_abitativo.pdf

⁶ The IUR maps (2025) record 41 squatted residential buildings, 72 self-managed socio-political-cultural spaces, and 8 formerly squatted buildings legalised and rehabilitated through the Autorecupero Law. <https://iurmap.org/ultime-mappe-2025/>

⁷ Lazio is the region in which Rome is located.

⁸ For the original text of the law see: <https://www.consiglioregionale.calabria.it/upload/istruttoria/Regione%20Lazio%20-%20L.R.%2011%20dicembre%201998%2C%20n.%2055.pdf>

Together, they framed *autorecupero* as a socially, economically and environmentally viable tool as a socially, economically, and environmentally viable tool for increasing affordable supply by recovering underused public assets.

The law allows public entities—municipalities, public housing companies, charity institutions and other public bodies—to identify vacant or underused buildings, prioritising central locations. These properties are then acquired and included in City Renewal Plans (*Piani di Recupero*). Public calls for tenders invite self-rehabilitation cooperatives formed by prospective residents, often former squatters and low-income households. To be eligible, cooperatives must: be composed of more members than the number of dwellings, include households whose incomes fall below thresholds for subsidised housing, only admit members without other housing property, and explicitly state self-rehabilitation/self-building as their primary goal in their statutes.

The interventions explicitly combined public support with resident *sweat equity* enabling cost reductions while maintaining the property in public ownership. Public funds from the Ministry of Infrastructure cover structural works, while cooperative members contribute by undertaking part of the rehabilitation. Once completed, the building becomes part of the public housing stock (ERP) and is leased to cooperative members that, under social rent schemes, repay their loan share through monthly instalments, locking it to long-term affordability and redistributive logics (Rossini, 2020). Members of the cooperative also manage routine maintenance and common areas under a non-speculation covenant. Yet, Rome's *autorecupero* programme has produced a small but concrete corpus of projects in the city for a total of 197 dwellings (Di Felice & Rocco, 2023).

The *Piano strategico per il diritto all'abitare* (Strategic Plan for the Housing Right) 2023–2026 shows clear signs of renewed municipal commitment, since it explicitly frames “recovery and self-recovery” as a core, long-term policy line. Operational steps are outlined as a new regulation, a new call, and the unblocking/definition of specific pending projects. Within this same renewed “recovery” agenda, *Porto Fluviale RecHouse* (the case study) is explicitly included.

Porto Fluviale: contested reuse and institutionalisation

Figure 2 | Porto Fluviale's façade, painted by street artist BLU during the time it was occupied.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/PortoFluvialeRecuperato/>

Porto Fluviale—a former military warehouse in Ostiense, named after the street where it

is located—has been occupied since 2003 by approximately 56 households from 13 countries, organised within the *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa* (one of Rome's three main housing-movement groups). Residents gradually transformed the building into a mixed-use common: housing on upper floors and ground-floor workshops, cultural activities, and neighbourhood events, with the courtyard functioning as civic space (Boano & Talocci, 2014; Di Felice & Rocco, 2023). Located in a context of land valorisation, Porto Fluviale came under renewed privatisation pressure in the early 2000s, as national programmes to monetise and dispose of public real-estate assets—via securitisation initiatives—encouraged the sale of underused state property. As a Ministry of Defence/Aeronautica-owned complex, it remained exposed to auction/disposal scenarios, contributing to sustained eviction risk during the first decade of occupation. Attempts to clear the building were repeatedly resisted through alliances between residents, activists, and professionals, which helped push legalisation onto the agenda. A first pathway centred on *autorecupero* (2013) was contested among inhabitants because it required residents (organised in a cooperative) to access a subsidised mortgage (*mutuo agevolato*) to finance the “secondary” works and pay a public housing rent only after the mortgage is paid off. This cost architecture was contested because not everyone could afford the mortgage.

The Porto Fluviale RecHouse project marks the most recent institutional turn. Promoted by the Rome city council and funded through the national PINQuA programme (2021), it seeks to translate an occupation-born commons into administratively legible public housing (Di Felice & Rocco, 2023). Official project materials indicate that RecHouse will formalise the settlement within public housing assets (*edilizia residenziale pubblica*, ERP), maintain the existing community through a special tender (subject to ERP eligibility requirements), preserve and renew ground-floor social and cultural uses, and deliver a significant energy-efficiency upgrade. Funding is reported as €11 million under PINQuA (with the overall investment also reported at around €13.2 million from PNRR-linked sources), and completion is expected in 2026 (project duration: October 2021–March 2026). The post-project tenure is explicitly framed as ERP under a rental regime, rather than a right-of-use cooperative model.

Rome case Analytical implications: *autorecupero*, public investment and cost redistribution

The law thus institutionalises a pathway “from occupation to habitation”, turning squatted buildings into decommodified cooperative housing while keeping assets in public ownership (e.g. see Via Saredo as a completed, small-scale conversion)⁹. Rome/Lazio provides the clearest approximation of a programmatic redistributive-commons approach through *autorecupero*, combining public ownership, public housing-aligned eligibility, and collective co-production. The pathway can expand public housing while preventing the disposal of vacant public assets through reconversion, but its cost architecture also shapes inclusion: cooperators often finance internal ‘secondary’ works through a subsidised mortgage and only later transition

⁹ An example is the former municipal kindergarten in Via Saredo is an earlier and highly illustrative example of *autorecupero* in Rome. The approximately 700 m² building was assigned under *Autorecupero* Law for self-rehabilitation in 2005. The project was promoted by the cooperative *Inventare l'Abitare*, established by low-income families in alliance with housing-rights activists, and resulted in the creation of 11 dwellings plus a shared common space, housing around 35 residents. The total investment was approximately €396,000, largely covered through a subsidised loan from the Region/City (€366,684) complemented by cooperative co-financing (€29,438).

to a public housing (ERP) rent, which filters out non-creditworthy households. The more recent Porto Fluviale trajectory (RecHouse/PINQuA) is framed as a shift away from resident-financed mortgages toward publicly funded rehabilitation, with residents required only to pay an ERP-based rent. As rehabilitation becomes more capital-intensive than earlier *autorecupero* experiences scaling—especially with energy-transition requirements—depends on stable public funding. It can absorb major costs but may become primarily a fiscal challenge if rising costs are fully shifted onto institutions; otherwise, projects oscillate between ad hoc regularisations, emergency containment, and market-oriented asset disposal.

BARCELONA: RIGHT-OF-USE COOPERATIVES AND THE MUNICIPAL PRE-EMPTION

Financialisation, evictions, and the turn to municipal instruments

Barcelona's touristification is often traced to the post-1992 Olympic "re-imaging" of the city, when waterfront renewal, flagship public-space projects, and international place marketing consolidated the "Barcelona model" and reoriented development toward visitor-facing, consumption-led regeneration. This shift has had lasting effects on land values and the residential fabric. After 2008, Barcelona also exemplified Southern Europe's housing crisis: from debt-driven homeownership and foreclosure to renewed rental financialisation, rent inflation, and platform-mediated tourist pressures, disproportionately affecting low-income and racialised households (García-Lamarca, 2020; Gil García & Martínez López, 2023). Housing movements have been central in politicising displacement and pushing housing onto municipal agendas (Rossini et al., 2023). This section focuses on two channels translating contentious claims into non-speculative arrangements: (i) public land leases for right-of-use cooperatives (*cessió d'ús*) and (ii) municipal acquisition used to curb speculative displacement and secure collective control.

The right-of-use cooperative model

In Catalunya, the current wave of right-of-use cooperatives (*habitatge cooperatiu en cessió d'ús*) started in the mid-2000s. This housing cooperative model grants members long-term, stable use rights while ownership remains with the cooperative (and, in public-cooperative variants, land remains public through long-term surface-right/leasehold arrangements) (Leyva del Río, 2022). The core decommodifying safeguard lies in restricting transferability and resale since members cannot capitalise on housing appreciation (Miralles Buil, 2020). In Barcelona, the model has become institutionally legible largely because municipal land allocation and partnership mechanisms treat cooperative delivery as part of the non-market/affordable-housing toolbox (Ferrerri & Vidal, 2021). Scaling depends on a layered support infrastructure: long leases on public land, technical intermediation, and mixed financing arrangements involving ethical banks and solidarity finance, alongside public support where available (Ferrerri & Vidal, 2021). Sector organisations and cooperative developers have helped stabilise the model as an "implementable" solution, while flagship projects such as La Borda illustrate how struggles over urban space can crystallise into durable non-speculative tenure (Cabré & Andrés, 2018).

Yet, even where projects operate within protected/affordable regimes, entry contributions remain relatively high in Barcelona (due to land and construction costs), reproducing barriers for precarious households (Vidal, 2019; Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). The Barcelona experience therefore shows how decommodification does not automatically resolve distributional inequalities.

Casa Orsola: negotiated acquisition, anti-displacement mobilisation and the limits of municipal purchase

Casa Orsola should not be read as a straightforward case of cooperative housing, nor as a simple exercise of pre-emption in the strict legal sense. Rather, it is included because it shows how tenant mobilisation can force a municipal acquisition/negotiated social purchase that removes an at-risk rental building from speculative circuits and opens a debate on how such acquisitions might be systematised or recombined with cooperative governance. Its relevance for this article therefore lies less in the purchase itself than in the political and institutional discussion it triggered: the limits of acquiring overpriced central-city assets at market value, the role of third-sector managers such as Hàbitat3, and the possibility of future collaboration between tenants' unions and right-of-use cooperative models.

Barcelona has increasingly deployed municipal acquisition and municipal pre-emption as anti-displacement instruments, often activated under tenant mobilisation, allowing public or mission-oriented actors to redirect buildings away from speculative circuits (e.g. Rossini & D'Adda, 2025).

Casa Orsola, a residential building in Barcelona's Eixample district housing around 20 households illustrates a related mechanism: a negotiated social acquisition triggered by tenant mobilisation and shaped by a broader policy environment in which municipal acquisition has become a central anti-displacement strategy. As investor pressure intensified and eviction risks grew, tenants and allies—largely organised by the Barcelona

Tenants' Union—mobilised publicly under the banner “Casa Orsola resisteix,” turning the building into a widely recognised symbol of resistance against speculative eviction dynamics. In response, Barcelona City Council and the non-profit foundation Hàbitat 3 negotiated the purchase that halted evictions. Hàbitat 3 now manages the flats according to social criteria and rents, removing the asset from speculative resale. Yet, the high market-based acquisition costs were considered controversial.

Figure 3 | Mobilisation day in defence of Casa Orsola.



Source: author's photo.

Following “blocks in struggle” such as Casa Orsola —where tenants claimed the right to stay put against speculative interests—, coalitions between the Tenants’ Union and right-of-use cooperatives have begun discussing the use of pre-emption rights not only to municipalise assets but also to “cooperativize” them; that is, to support pathways through which collective actors (sometimes including tenants themselves) can convert an existing rental building into a right-of-use project, provided adequate technical and financial capacity is available (Rossini & D’Adda, 2025).

Barcelona case Analytical implications: acquisition, tenant mobilisation and the cooperative horizon

Casa Orsola is analytically different from Bethanien and Porto Fluviale because it does not emerge from the regularisation of a squatted public asset, but from tenant mobilisation around a privately owned rental building threatened by speculative displacement. Its relevance lies precisely in this difference: it tests whether anti-eviction struggle can be translated into municipal or socially negotiated acquisition, protected rental status and, potentially, future cooperative or tenant-led governance. At the same time, the broader Barcelona case illustrates the expansion of right-of-use cooperative housing as a decommodifying model, while also showing its social selectivity due to high entry costs and the cultural capital required to navigate complex cooperative, administrative and technical procedures.

On the other hand, Casa Orsola highlights municipal acquisition as a possible bridge between mobilisation and durable decommodification. A contested private rental building is converted into protected stock, safeguarding sitting tenants and expanding socially governed housing in built-out neighbourhoods. Yet the scalability of municipal acquisition and pre-emption strategies is constrained by market-linked purchase prices and political selectivity. Their redistributive outcomes then depend on post-acquisition rules that stabilise rents and access over time.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: RECOMBINING THE THREE PATHWAYS

By examining three distinct urban policy pathways alongside three specific test sites, the analysis identifies the conditions under which housing commons may become redistributive

Table 1				
TEST-SITE	INSTRUMENT	CONFLICTIVE TRIGGER	REDISTRIBUTIVE POTENTIAL	MAIN LIMIT
BETHANIE	Public asset + lease-based co-management	Occupation + anti-privatisation referendum pressure	Low-cost adaptive reuse; public-related ownership; autonomy	No formal income/ access criteria; residential ambiguity; exceptionalism
PORTO FLUVIALE	Autorecupero / RecHouse / ERP	Long-term occupation + resistance to disposal/eviction	Public housing eligibility criteria; public ownership; preservation of community; public investment	Cost burden in earlier autorecupero; slow implementation; exceptional regularisation
CASA ORSOLA	Negotiated/social acquisition + protected rental + debate on cooperativisation	Tenants & Tenant Union mobilisation against eviction	Anti-displacement; conversion of private rental stock into protected/social stock	High acquisition price; budgetary issues; depends on political visibility

and highlights alternative strategies for expanding affordable housing provision.

The cases (table 1) show how movement pressure can be translated into durable, non-speculative housing when public authorities mobilise assets (public buildings), powers (acquisition) and administrative / legislative tools. Yet, while decommodification can be achieved through different routes, redistribution depends on how access rules and cost burdens are designed, funded, and enforced over time. Rather than functioning as “portable models,” these experiences operate as test sites that expose potentials and limits.

Read together, the cases suggest that no single pathway resolves the redistributive problem; rather, they point to possible hybrid pathways for improving scalability while preserving affordability. For instance, public acquisition could be combined with a right-of-use cooperative structure, through which organised tenants contribute via affordable and income-compatible financing mechanisms, analogous to the resident-financed component of Italy’s *autorecupero* framework. This could lower the fiscal burden for public institutions while maintaining decommodifying objectives for residents. Such hybrid form of public-community governance would combine public ownership, explicit eligibility criteria, shared economic responsibility, and collective co-production within a single institutional arrangement.

These cases also point to vacancy and adaptive reuse as strategic levers for expanding affordable supply without relying only on new construction. Yet their scalability requires institutional infrastructure that is still weak: transparent registries of underused public assets, routinised calls for adaptive reuse, legal pathways for building-to-housing conversion, standardised co-management agreements, and stable funding streams able to absorb rehabilitation and energy-upgrade costs without shifting them onto precarious residents. EU debates similarly note that many Member States still lack coherent regulatory and financial pathways and effective coordination, leaving local authorities and community actors to navigate fragmented and ad hoc frameworks¹⁰.

The article therefore proposes a recombinatory policy horizon based on several design requirements: searchable registries of underused public assets; routinised calls for adaptive reuse; legal and planning frameworks that institutionalise building-to-housing conversion; anti-privatisation clauses combined with long leases and standardised co-management agreements; and stable funding streams able to absorb rehabilitation and energy-upgrade costs without offloading structural costs onto precarious residents.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the cases can be read as practices of commoning that generate institutional experimentation and hybrid arrangements for governing housing beyond market logics. The comparison suggests that the contradictions of housing commons: The comparison highlights a central contradiction of housing commons: while decommodification can be achieved through leases, programme-based self-rehabilitation or acquisition, redistribution remains fragile when access is selective and capital costs rise. The comparison suggests that these tensions can be mitigated when public resources are unlocked to lower economic barriers

¹¹ <https://www.feantsa.org/resources/repurposing-vacant-spaces-into-homes>

(entry costs, mortgages) and combined with explicit eligibility criteria and income-calibrated rents. Redistributive capacity and scalability increase when distributed agency is institutionally organised without offloading structural responsibilities onto residents—as illustrated by Bethanien’s co-managed public asset and cost-reduction logic, Lazio’s *autorecupero* as collective co-production of public housing, and Barcelona’s municipal pre-emption, potentially coupled with cooperativised tenant governance.

Interpreted through prefigurative politics, these cases show how commoning practices generate institutionally legible experiments in governing housing beyond market logics, yet remain vulnerable to exceptionalism and rising costs. Moving from “test sites” to redistributive channels therefore demands not the replication of whole models, but the routinisation of a sequenced institutional pathway through which cities can convert prefigurative experiments into administratively repeatable redistributive housing commons.

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