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## Opening workshops

### Pragmatic commoning and degrowth transformations in a neoliberal Nordic welfare state

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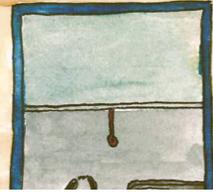
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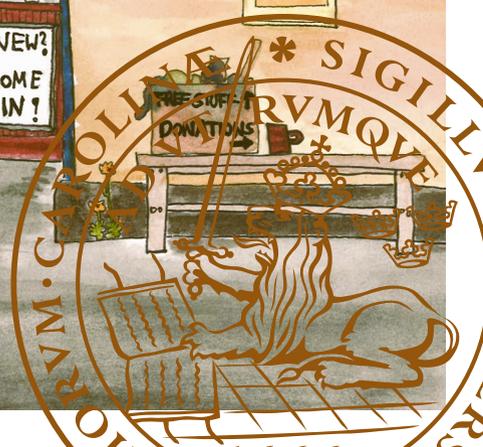


# Opening workshops

Pragmatic commoning and degrowth transformations in a neoliberal Nordic welfare state

CORINNA BURKHART

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY | LUND UNIVERSITY



Opening workshops

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Pragmatic commoning and degrowth transformations  
in a neoliberal Nordic welfare state

Corinna Burkhart



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**Abstract:** Alternative building as an interstitial mode of transformation plays a central role in the discussion of strategies for degrowth. In this debate the questions of how alternative projects can be scaled up and how degrowth politics can gain broad societal support have been identified as crucial. In this context open workshops – grassroots infrastructures for creative activities, such as repair, upcycling, repurposing, prototyping, building and experimentation – have been framed as commons, enabling post-capitalist practices and therewith contributing to social-ecological transformations. I focus on open workshops in Sweden, a neoliberal Nordic welfare state. The open workshops I investigate are organised as associations. I contextualise associations in Sweden as a crucial part of society, while they, however, exist in a tension between a historical welfare state ideal and a neoliberal reality. With the dissertation I examine, how open workshops are organised in Sweden; which challenges co-organisers meet; and what can be learned from these practices and challenges beyond their specific contexts. I investigate these questions empirically with the help of participant observations, interviews and documents. In the analysis I argue that the process of co-organisation in open workshops in Sweden can be understood as pragmatic commoning. Finding and accessing suitable and affordable premises as well as encouraging responsible engagement of association members are crucial for the co-organised open workshops. Commoning practices develop over time and in struggle against embodied neoliberal values and practices. The thesis suggests that such pragmatic commoning can inspire local transformation of social imaginaries when dominant perceptions are in contradiction to desired practices. The case of pragmatic commoning shows how post-capitalist degrowth values can multiply beyond explicit degrowth projects. In conclusion, the thesis asks how degrowth advocates can work strategically with pragmatic non-exploitative practices that emerge within existing institutions and projects. The focus for possible transformation lies here on the contextualized social imaginary and its everyday enactment and reproduction.

**Key words:** degrowth, commoning, social-ecological transformation, neoliberal Nordic welfare state, open workshops, social imaginary, associations, makerspace, Sweden

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# Opening workshops

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in a neoliberal Nordic welfare state

Corinna Burkhardt



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## Sammanfattning

Avhandlingen undersöker föreningar i Sverige som organiserar öppna verkstäder. Öppna verkstäder, vilka också kallas för *makerspaces*, är platser som möjliggör skapande. Verktyg, maskiner och kunskap är delade mellan användarna. Syftet med avhandlingen är att undersöka hur föreningar organiserar sina delade verkstäder, vilka svårigheter föreningarna möter samt vilka implikationer detta har för den bredare akademiska diskussionen om social-ekologisk omställning.

Teoretiskt riktar sig avhandlingen till *degrowth*debatten. *Degrowth* är på svenska översatt till nerväxt, och syftar till ett politiskt projekt som söker att ställa om samhällsorganisation från dess nuvarande orientering mot ekonomisk tillväxt. I stället för att orientera politik efter BNP-tillväxt är tanken att den ska orientera sig efter människans och andra organismers välmående. Värderingar som är centrala i nerväxtidén är till exempel: samarbete i stället för konkurrens, ansvar i stället för exploatering, delande i stället för privatisering och ackumulering.

En central fråga inom nerväxtdebatten är hur en omställning ska kunna genomföras. Nerväxtidéer har hittills testats och blomstrat i små projekt såsom stadsodling eller boendekooperativ, framför allt i södra delarna av Europa, och ofta initierade av aktivister eller för att möta behov i krissituationer. Öppna verkstäder diskuteras som ett exempel av en praktik som både kan inspirera till samarbete, delande och ansvarstagande, vilket skulle behövas om fler saker blir reparerade och lokalt producerade efter behov. I relation till sådana småskaliga ideella projekt är frågan hur de kan bli flera och större. En annan relaterad fråga är hur flera människor kan komma att stödja en nerväxtomställning.

Syftet med avhandlingen är att bidra till nerväxtdebatten och frågan om omställning. Mer specifikt har tre forskningsfrågor styrt forskningen: Hur etableras och upprätthålls öppna verkstäder i Sverige? Vilka är de viktigaste utmaningarna för att skapa och upprätthålla öppna verkstäder som allmänningar i detta sammanhang, och hur kan vi förstå dessa utmaningar? Vad kan en förståelse av detta fenomen, med dess specifika möjligheter och utmaningar, bidra till debatten om strategier för en nerväxtomställning?

För att undersöka öppna verkstäder använde jag mig av kvalitativa forskningsmetoder: deltagande observation och intervjuer. Materialet analyserade jag i dialog med nerväxtdebatten och det lokala och historiska sammanhanget.

Avhandlingen har elva kapitel, vilka jag här sammanfattar. Det första introducerar forskningssyftet och den kontext som beskrivs i början av den här sammanfattningen. Kapitel två är ett konceptuellt kapitel, där jag utforskar nerväxtforskningen i relation till frågan om hur en omställning kan främjas. I detta kapitel introducerar jag också begreppet *commoning*. *Commoning* är verbformen av *commons*, på svenska allmänning, det vill säga resurser som är delade. Att använda verbet *commoning* understryker det aktiva och pågående. En allmänning gemenskapas genom den vardagliga användningen och gemensamma skötseln. Senare i avhandlingen använder jag begreppet *commoning* för att beskriva de praktiker genom vilka föreningar skapar och underhåller verkstäder.

I kapitel tre undersöker jag föreningen som organisationsform. Syftet med kapitlet är att visa den roll föreningar har i Sverige, idag och historiskt. Att förstå det historiska sammanhanget inom vilket föreningar agerar är viktigt för att kunna förstå utmaningar och förhoppningar upplevda i samband med försöket att etablera och upprätthålla öppna verkstäder som föreningar. I detta kapitel diskuterar jag särskilt hur synen på och rollen av föreningar har förändrats i Sverige med det så kallade systemskiftet under 1990-talet.

Kapitel fyra är metodkapitlet, där jag beskriver forskningsmetoderna i detalj. Efter kapitel fyra börjar den empiriska delen av avhandlingen. Kapitel fem beskriver några av mina erfarenheter från deltagandet i en öppen verkstad. Fokuset i detta kapitel är att konkret lyfta fram hur delandet av infrastruktur, material och kunskap i verkstaden kan se ut. I kapitel sex beskriver jag hur fenomenet öppna verkstäder tar form i Sverige: vad är en öppen verkstad, och hur fungerar den.

I kapitel sju diskuterar jag med hjälp av empiriskt material hur öppna verkstäder etableras och organiseras i Sverige. Undersökningen visar att föreningar finner lösningar för att organisera sig genom att testa sig fram. Viktig för en välfungerande verkstad är både den materiella grunden till verkstaden, det vill säga dess maskiner, verktyg och verkstadslokalen. Men också det immateriella: medlemsgemenskapen och dess kultur. Jag visar hur medlemsgemenskapen behöver skapas och underhållas och hur gemenskap förstådd som praktik är grunden till *commoning* i verkstaden.

Kapitel sju pekar på olika problem som föreningarna möter, vilka jag analyserar och diskuterar i kapitel åtta och nio. De mest centrala hindren som jag identifierar

är att hitta lämpliga lokaler (kapitel åtta) och att inspirera tillräckligt engagemang bland medlemmarna (kapitel nio).

I kapitel åtta utvecklar jag först de specifika behov som föreningarna har på sina lokaler. För att vara lämpliga behöver lokalerna tillåta både aktiviteter som låter och som smutsar ner, vilket utesluter många lokaler. Sen föredrar föreningarna en viss autonomi från till exempel kommunen i hur och när de använder lokalerna. Kapitlet visar hur föreningar får tillgång till lokaler med hjälp av till exempel kulturstöd, men att stödet ofta är villkorat och frekvent behöver förnyas. Med höga lokalkostnader är det svårt för föreningar att få tillgång till passande lokaler. Jag diskuterar dessa svårigheter i sammanhang med stadsomvandlingsprocesser, där äldre industriområden försvinner när bostadsområden växer. Med äldre industriområden försvinner också lämpliga lokaler för det slags skapande som öppna verkstäder vill möjliggöra.

I kapitel nio fokuserar jag på en annan utmaning i föreningarnas organisation. Att bedriva en öppen verkstad som förening, innebär ett stort behov av engagemang från medlemmarna. Infrastrukturen behöver skapas, servas och repareras, föreningens administration behöver skötas, och så behöver gemenskapen skapas och upprätthållas. Jag visar i kapitlet att föreningarna försöker fördela ansvar och konkreta uppgifter brett bland medlemmarna, men att långt ifrån alla bidrar eller ens sköter verkstaden ansvarsfullt. Den ojämna fördelningen av underhåll och ansvar diskuterar jag i relation till förändringar i synen på och administration av föreningar som jag spårar till 90-talets nyliberalisering i Sverige. När medlemmar betraktas mer och mer som konsumenter till en service, blir föreningar till serviceproducenter mer än gemensamma projekt av alla medlemmar. Här diskutera jag hur *commoning* eller gemenskapandet är en färdighet som behöver tränas och främjas, särskild när vi inte är vana vid att organisera tillsammans. Föreningar hamnar i kläm mellan ett samorganiserat ideal och den nyliberala individualistiska realiteten.

Kapitel tio är diskussionskapitlet där jag besvarar de tre forskningsfrågorna. Svaren till frågor ett och två ges genom synteser från kapitel fem till nio. Fråga tre rör vad diskussionen om öppna verkstäder i Sverige kan bidra till nerväxtdebatten. Här argumentera jag att *commoning* (gemenskapandet) kan uppstå utan politisk motivation eller trängande behov, utan även av pragmatiska skäl. Jag föreslår att se pragmatisk *commoning* som en symbiotisk förändringsprocess. Förändringen i organisationssätt, beteende och relationerna till verkstaden och till varandra sker

för att möta motsägningar inom dominanta organisationssätt. När det visar sig att det inte fungerar att bedriva en verkstad utan att ta hänsyn till varandra och den materiella infrastrukturen, så blir det upplevbart att andra förhållningssätt är nödvändigt och mer lämpligt. Jag argumenterar för att nerväxtforskning behöver uppmärksamma lokala vardagliga motsättningar inom det tillväxtorganiserade samhället, bortom det nuvarande fokuset på stora motsättningar.

Avhandlingens sista kapitel är slutsatsen som summerar avhandlingen och pekar mot dess relevans inom nerväxtdebatten och för möjlig fortsatt forskning på temat. Jag föreslår att nerväxtforskning som fokuserar på förändringsprocesser kan utvecklas genom att lära sig mer om pragmatiska vardagliga förändringar som leder till, till exempel, commoning. I stället för att fokusera enbart på projekt som har nerväxt som uttryckligt mål, kan det vara meningsfullt att fråga hur icke-exploaterande relationer och ageranden kan bli vardagens norm utanför aktivistprojekt eller krissituationer. För det svenska sammanhanget påpekar jag att föreningarnas roll och potential är hotad när det demokratiska deltagandet och gemensamma organiserandet inte blir reproducerat i det vardagliga mötet i föreningslivet. Medan professionalisering av föreningar kan göra dem mera effektiva, så förlorar de samtidigt sin potential att skapa handlingskraftiga gemenskaper.

# 1 Introduction

Three things: one thing, there needs to be a physical place for these kinds of things [...] Then there must be a culture in place. A kind of, both a kind of framework, for where the outer boundaries go, what you are allowed to do, but also a culture of sharing, trust, curiosity, very high tolerance for failure with things, consideration between people, responsibility, a lot of things like that, sounds like buzzwords, but when we are good people we are like that. And then that we have a lot of resources, a lot of machines that you can't have yourself. (Interview with Bror<sup>1</sup>, my own translation)

In the quote above, Bror highlights three elements that are not only central for an open workshop, but also the focus of this thesis. First, Bror says that there needs to be a “physical place for these kinds of things”, furthermore there needs to be a culture that carries the open workshop; lastly, there needs to be equipment. Bror has been active in open workshops himself and is now employed at a creative hub that hosts an open workshop. Besides hosting the workshop, the creative hub has rooms for events, a co-working space, and studios.

While the physical space is needed to use the machines, it is the culture lived in the workshop that creates the open workshop. Bror connects the culture and the values he lists to what he calls “good people”. For him, the workshop culture needs such responsible and tolerant people *and* has the potential to inspire and strengthen those values in those sharing the workshop.

Co-organised open workshops are answering a need for places that allow manual and digital fabrication to be practiced by citizens, designers, tinkerers, artists, crafts persons, innovators, hackers and builders who do not have access to any private production or creation facility. Open workshops enable activities otherwise marginalised in western societies. Besides enabling “the tangible skills of repair, maintenance and construction” (T. S. J. Smith, 2020, p. 607), they

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym, see 4.1 for overview of interviews and 4.2 for ethical reflections.

enable the practice of co-organisation, including the reproduction of an open workshop culture (T. S. J. Smith, 2020).

With these enabling qualities, open workshops have been discussed as potential elements of post-capitalist convivial futures. In 2019 and 2020 a group of 200 activists were involved in an envisioning and publication project, imagining and formulating such post-capitalist futures. Shared open workshops are part of those imagined futures.

At the same time, the changes made to our living spaces has led people in the same building or neighborhood to share shopping, cooking, washing, cleaning, *repairing*, caring of children, elderly and people with disabilities. Because housing can often be adapted to people's circumstances, most houses and blocks of flats now have large, shared kitchens, *workshops*, laundry rooms, common areas and gardens. (Kuhnhehn et al., 2024, p. 36, emphasis added)

The above quote comes from the publication *Future for all – A vision for 2048* (Kuhnhehn et al., 2024). The publication is based on the work of twelve thematic working groups that worked on the questions “how do we want to live in 2048? And how do we get there?” (ibid., p. 5). Members of the working groups came from social movements struggling for an ecologically sustainable and socially just future, and their common ground is sketched out in the beginning of the publication. Here we find: the orientation after human needs, democracy, space for agency, freedom, safety, solidarity, diversity and responsibility. The working groups stretch topics such as global justice, work, technology, mobility and transport or education (Kuhnhehn et al., 2020). The organisation behind the publication is a central actor for post-capitalist grassroots action and education in Germany. Involving almost 200 people in co-producing those visions for 2048, the book not only provides a detailed picture of how a post-capitalist future could look like but is also built on an inclusive process.

At another point in the same publication, the reader learns about ideas for open source, technology, design and repair.

Most devices are designed to be developed and used without extensive training or access to specialized resources. They can be produced and repaired in *local workshops* by everyone who has familiarized themselves with them. This applies to consumer goods and the means of production. [...] Technology is developed together with the people who use it through participatory, practically relevant

research. Manufacturing processes are made transparent for everyone. Software and hardware are open-source and can therefore be further developed by users based on open standards. This is made possible by *decentralized, self-organized infrastructure*. (Kuhnhehn et al., 2024, p. 40ff, emphasis added)

Both quotes exemplify how this vision for 2048 sees local self-organised workshops as places for repair and production. The workshops are integrated in neighbourhood structures that do not only involve workshops, but kitchens, laundry facilities and gardens, facilities shared among neighbours to do everyday care and maintenance work. The second quote shows a role for shared workshops for more than repair work, but also for co-production and co-development of open-source hardware in a context where all hard and software is open source.

In other parts of the publication, we read that work will not be centred around wage labour, that there will be basic income and a maximum income, education will be more flexible and less competitive, and politics will in more direct ways be made by everyone. Open workshops are presented as integrated parts of everyday life. When trying to single out one element such as open workshops, it becomes obvious that such an integration of open workshops into everyday life is interconnected with and dependent on other changes, changes in infrastructure, values and meaning. To only name a few concrete examples, there are reduced working hours, a participatory approach to technology, innovation and production, flexible education, a more engaged sense of community, a commonisation of care work and reevaluated understandings of what a meaningful life can be like (Kuhnhehn et al., 2020).

I discuss these scenarios for several reasons. This 2048 vision takes an elaborated critique of capitalism, and existing anti- and post-capitalist projects, ideas, movements and concepts and combines them into a vision for the future. The vision is decidedly practical, open and unfinished. In an age of “there is no alternative” to capitalism, other concrete visions are radical and needed. The ideas presented in the publication are not coming out of nowhere. They are inspired by concrete struggles and by ongoing (academic) discussions (see chapter two). What makes *Future for All* different is that it combines many of the ideas and thinks them into the future. On a different level, I find that this serious engagement with the future shows in a beautiful way how entangled social and economic infrastructures, habits, livelihoods, dreams and relationships are. The open workshops described in the publications are part of a bigger puzzle. A self-

organised open workshop infrastructure enables the post-capitalist future and is enabled by it.

*Future for All* appears in the context of struggles and debates for how to reach a more ecologically sustainable and socially just future. With this thesis, I aim to contribute to this discussion. I focus on open workshops and their role in the struggle and possible transformation. Five years have passed since *Future for All* was published; 23 years are left until 2048. The reality of open workshops today is entangled in other “social and economic infrastructures, habits, livelihoods, dreams and relationships” than those imagined for the post-capitalist future developed in *Future for all*. Creating cultures of “sharing, trust, curiosity, very high tolerance for failure with things, consideration between people, responsibility” (Bror, M2) is in tension with surrounding capitalist practices. This tension creates dilemmas, conflicts, frustrations and desperation among those working to sustain open workshops today. At the same time, contradictions between the desired co-organising practices and the dominant capitalist logics provide an opening for change when new forms of relating are tried out and practiced.

After having introduced the broad context of the thesis – open workshops, their potentials and struggles today, and their possible role in degrowth futures – the introduction continues with five sections. First, I develop three core elements of this thesis: I clarify what I mean when I write *open workshop* (1.1), I introduce Sweden as empirical context (1.2), and I introduce degrowth as conceptual context of the thesis (1.3). While introducing these three elements, I share my personal entry point to the topic of open workshops, to the empirical setting in Sweden and to the political and conceptual sphere of degrowth. In section 1.4, I formulate the aim and research questions before closing the introduction with an outline of the thesis (1.5).

## 1.1 Open workshops

Open workshops are places with a productive infrastructure, which is accessible to individuals who want to do crafts, art, hacking, tinkering, prototyping or other making. They are located typically in urban settings and can be equipped in various ways, including bike repair, wood, metal and textile workshops as well as digital fabrication tools such as 3D printers, CNC mills or lasers. They take many

forms of organisation: for profit or non-profit; professionally organised with employees or volunteer run; local self-organised or part of bigger organisation such as a university or local state body. Having introduced these binaries, I want to add that most combine various elements of the above, being partly state funded, having some agreements with local schools or universities, having some people use it as a workshop from which they run a business and others conducting amateur making, art or political organising. What the workshops have in common is that they are permanent places for making and craft.

Open workshops and other shared infrastructures of production exist in diverse geographical and cultural contexts, have different histories and take different shapes (Kohtala et al., 2020). With the thesis I discuss open workshops in the form they take in Sweden and the context they are embedded in.

While open workshops are places for production, repair, experimentation and collaboration, they are not isolated spaces, but part of a growing commons and open-source culture and at the same time part of a capitalist reality. This thesis deals with this entanglement and dynamics. The research explores how open workshops sometimes are places of commoning, but also how they are shaped by the socio-cultural and economic context they exist in. To understand and describe how workshop communities co-organise, I frame their activities as commoning practices. The commons they sustain through their commoning is the workshop with its material infrastructure and open and welcoming culture of sharing.

I use open workshops as an umbrella term for workshops that are open to join for the public. Open does not mean for free, but that they are not reserved for an exclusive group. Non-open workshops are those that are reserved for private use, for educational purposes like in schools or adult education, or for institutional purposes, in for example health or elderly care. Many open workshops require of users that they become members and pay a membership fee. Open workshops are *open* in a context where all other workshops are private or exclusive in the way that they only allow access for professionals, employees, course participants or other closed groups.

Open workshops understood as umbrella term, includes workshops that are specialised for certain crafts or techniques, such as ceramics, digital fabrication, or bicycles or host a broad range of workshop types and machines. There are specific open workshop concepts, like Fablabs. Fablabs are digital fabrication laboratories,

where all Fablabs worldwide are meant to have the same basic digital fabrication tools (The Fab Foundation, n.d.). Bike kitchens, another known format, are volunteer run self-help bike repair workshops. While Fablabs are organised in a global network, bike kitchens are individual small organisations that take all sorts of shapes and are organised and financed in different ways.

What I focus on in this project are open workshops run as associations that aim to provide a broad range of machines and tools, both for digital and manual fabrication. Many of these workshops call themselves makerspaces. Makerspace is also a term used in academic writing to describe such workshops. I have decided to use the term *open workshop* as it better reflects the *open* part of the concept. The term makerspace is not only used to describe open workshops but also used by companies or educational actors that have makerspaces, which are, however, exclusively used by employees or students.

Makerspaces are further connected to a so-called *maker culture* or even the *maker movement*, especially pushed in the US by actors such as the media company Make Community LLC. I see using the term *open workshop* as a way to distance the phenomenon from the limiting idea of ‘making’ towards a broader potential of open workshops for being places of sharing, autonomous repair and upcycling or small-scale production (e.g., Hansing, 2017; Kohtala et al., 2020; Kuhnhehn et al., 2020). In chapter 2.1 (section five), I discuss literature on open workshops and give more insights into academic discussions on the issue.

The term open workshop is used, but not as widely. An example is an interactive map of open workshops in London that uses the term (Open Workshop Network, n.d.), as do individual workshop initiatives. In Sweden, for example, *Lunds Öppna Verkstad*, which would translate to Lunds Open Workshop. In German the term *Offene Werkstatt* is commonly used and would be a direct translation of open workshop (Verbund Offener Werkstätten, n.d.). Most of the associations that I focus on empirically use the term maker or makerspace. They do not use any translated Swedish version, but the English word. Regardless, I have chosen to refer to them as *open workshop associations* to use a descriptive name rather than their own wording. In chapter six I give a detailed overview of open workshop associations in Sweden and discuss other existing open workshop formats.

Before introducing Sweden as empirical context, I address one more question: Why open workshops? In chapter 2.1 (section five), I develop why open

workshops are a relevant case to study in the context of social-ecological transformations. Here I share how I became interested in the phenomenon as it enabled and empowered me to repair and create.

My first encounter with an open workshop was during my undergraduate studies in the city of Oldenburg in northern Germany. I had come to be the owner of a bicycle in desperate need of repair. Living in a small student apartment without any tools and no means to take the bike to a repair shop, I became aware of the *Fahrradwerke*, a bike kitchen run by the local student organisation.<sup>2</sup> As I wanted to repair the bike myself but needed some guidance, tools, and a space to do the repairs, the workshop fit my needs perfectly. I spent many hours there and am still using the same bike today. Besides still using the same bike – which I am rather attached to after having put in all the work – I also still carry the skills, knowledge, and confidence I gained from those hours at the workshop. I have felt empowered many times over when I succeeded in doing bike repair; Furthermore, I have felt frustrated when I have not had the possibility to make use of an open bike repair workshop and had to leave bike repair to professionals – be it due to there not being a bike kitchen or me not fitting bike repair into the everyday life puzzle. Having experienced joys and potentials of self-organised tool, workshop, and skill sharing, I was set to make this part of my everyday life also in the future.

I have used bike kitchens in other places since, but did not live close to a broadly equipped open workshop. When life choices had brought me to a small city in southern England with again no open workshop available to be active in, I investigated in opportunities to co-organise one. Realising how complicated it would be, I ended up engaging in organising a tool sharing pool at a local neighbourhood association. However, being at the same time full time employed as a woodworker, I never made use of the sharing platform myself, and neither did many of the other residents engaged in the association. Most had so much stuff that the sharing library was filled with items to borrow, but hardly anybody needed to borrow anything.

Now I spend my days in a professional workshop, but could not use it beyond the work I was paid to do. Weekdays from nine to five I was engraving words into wood, and I had lots of time to think. From my workbench I had a good overview of the whole workshop and dreamed of appropriating the means of production,

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://asta-oldenburg.de/fahrradselbsthilfe/> for information about the bike kitchen.

to make this workshop – at least from five to nine – an open workshop for locals to use. Instead of starting a revolution, I, however, wrote the application for this PhD project.

## 1.2 Sweden

The PhD position brought me to Lund and the desire to do fieldwork locally made Sweden the empirical context of this project. The purpose of this section is twofold. First, I motivate why Sweden makes an interesting case to study open workshops, and second, I give a general overview of Sweden, framing it as neoliberal Nordic welfare state. In chapter three I introduce the empirical context in more detail.

I did not always see Sweden as the most obvious location to study open workshops. From the beginning, it was a practical choice. I decided to do fieldwork where I live, partly because I wanted to root somewhere and possibly engage in an open workshop beyond a fieldwork stay, but also to avoid emissions-intensive travel. Only after working on the project for a few years, I appreciate that Sweden made an interesting empirical choice. I learned to understand it as an under-researched social-cultural context when it comes to grassroots and social movements for social ecological transformation (see 2.3). Sweden is a rich nation with a welfare state history and an institutionalised sense of the independent individual. Understanding commoning practices and their obstacles in this economic and cultural context highlights the importance that context has for thinking strategies for social-ecological transformation.

Sweden is a country in the north of Europe, has a population of 10.6 million in 2025 (Statistics Sweden (SCB), n.d.), while 69% of its land area is covered by forest (Swedish Institute, 2025). It is known for just that, few people and lots of forest, as well as a furniture company, some music and the social-democratic Nordic Welfare State Model (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1996). What is less known is the immense neoliberal dismantling of that welfare state that has happened in the last three decades, initiated both by social-democratic and centre-right governments and how “[i]n some policy areas, neoliberal reform has been taken further than in any other country in the world” (Thörn, 2023, p. 280).

The elements of the neoliberal shift in Sweden have been summarised as follows: “(1) re-regulations to support the privatization and marketization of the public sector; (2) responsabilization—citizens remade as customers and co-producers; (3) new forms of disciplinary power, such as increased surveillance and new strategies for policing urban protest; (4) new forms of governance, including public-private partnerships; (5) and a move from full employment to ‘standby-ability’” (Sernhede et al., 2016, p. 157 based on Thörn & Larsson, 2012). With neoliberalisation, inequality has risen (Alstadsæter & Roine, 2024; Sernhede et al., 2016; The Lancet Regional Health – Europe, 2023), showing for example in high segregation in Swedish cities (Sernhede et al., 2016) or in the fact that 16% of the population were living at risk of poverty in 2020 (The Lancet Regional Health – Europe, 2023). Later in the text, I discuss the case presented in this thesis as one with the absence of existential crisis (chapter two). By that I am not suggesting that everybody in Sweden is unaffected by any existential crisis; rather, I suggest that the practices which I discuss do not emerge out of a situation of existential crisis or need.

The political shift in the 1990s has been called “system shift” and describes a neoliberalisation of the welfare state. I therefore refer to Sweden today as a neoliberal Nordic welfare state (see also, Baeten et al., 2015). With a global neoliberal economy, it could seem logical to consider Sweden to be just like any other neoliberal democracy; why then make a point calling it a *neoliberal Nordic welfare state*? Referring to Sweden as a *neoliberal Nordic welfare state* highlights the welfare state history and the situation where a far-reaching welfare state has been transformed into a neoliberal one (see also, Christophers, 2013). That history has implications. Economic inequality has increased significantly in Sweden (Alstadsæter & Roine, 2024).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the historical welfare state context has created specific relationships between civil society, individuals and the state. Broad social movements once built the welfare state, but along with their success they have later been incorporated into the state (Peterson et al., 2018). Individuals have had and still have a high trust in the state and its institutions (Henriksen et al., 2019c) and grassroots, and radical activism, even if they have always existed, are, and have been, less pronounced than in other European contexts (Kings,

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<sup>3</sup> The extend of the increase depends on how income is measured. Saying that inequality has increased significantly is based on statistics that do include income gained from capital investments, rather than only looking at income from salaries (Alstadsæter & Roine, 2024).

2012; Pries, 2019). I discuss developments in relations between civil society and the state further in chapter three. The neoliberal Nordic welfare state context comes with its own dynamics of bottom-up co-organising and possibilities or culture of (non)protest. This implies a need to think strategies for social-ecological transformations differently in this context, but it also opens for questions of what can be learned from this context for social-ecological transformations more generally.

The next section of this introduction is about social-ecological transformations and degrowth, and how it became the framework for this thesis.

### 1.3 Degrowth

Degrowth is a growing academic debate and political project calling for a reorganising of society oriented after human and other wellbeing. It is built on an extensive critique of capitalism, capitalism's mantra of economic growth, and the consequential ecological and social unsustainability. However, far from only analysing, criticising and explaining the problem, debates and initiatives around degrowth have an increasing focus on creating different futures and how to go about creating those (e.g., Barlow et al., 2022; Kuhnhenh et al., 2020; Research&Degrowth, 2015).

When degrowth scholars discuss change and transformation, they usually highlight a diverse strategic approach as the way forward (e.g., Barlow et al., 2022; Burkhart et al., 2020a; D'Alisa et al., 2014; Demaria et al., 2013; Kallis et al., 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022). While the wording varies, alternative building as part of an interstitial mode of transformation (see 2.1) remains a core element in the strategic canvas suggested for degrowth (Chertkovskaya, 2022). Building alternatives means creating places of post-capitalist practice, where new techniques, livelihoods and being-in-common can be tried out, learned and trained. These places are understood as places of empowerment and politisation where real differences, even if very small, can be made. The creation of such places or practices further shows that alternative ways of doing things exist and are possible (e.g., Barlow et al., 2022; Carlsson, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Kallis et al., 2020).

Open workshops, bike kitchens, and repair cafés are frequently mentioned as examples for such prefigurative projects of post-capitalist practices (e.g., Baier et al., 2016b; Burkhart et al., 2017; Hansing, 2017; Schmid, 2019, 2020; T. S. J. Smith, 2020). I was introduced to post-growth and degrowth during my undergraduate and graduate studies and started following and taking part in degrowth debates and activism. The personally experienced joy and empowerment of repairing and making now had a political element: open workshops as sites of post-capitalist experimentation and making of futures.

In chapter 2.1, I discuss recent debates on degrowth strategies. Here I continue with a few general paragraphs about degrowth as social movement and academic debate. Degrowth has its roots in the 1970s in France (*Décroissance*) and has been introduced in the English-speaking academic debate with the first international degrowth conference in Paris 2008. Degrowth is a predominantly European movement criticising continuous capitalist expansion as well as techno-optimist answers to climate change such as the mainstream sustainability discourse, green growth or eco-modernism. At its core is the assumption that environmental and social inequalities need to be addressed together (social-ecological transformation) while the overall economic throughput needs to be reduced (Burkhart et al., 2020a). With that, degrowth

envisions a society that puts at its centre a set of ‘values’ that is radically different from that of a growth-led economy: sufficiency instead of accumulation, feminism instead of patriarchy, care (of the self and others) instead of exploitation, conviviality instead of competition, (direct) democracy instead of hierarchy, autonomy instead of heteronomy, commoning instead of privatisation, post-humanism instead of anthropocentrism, decolonisation instead of imperialism and money-free versus money fetishism. (Savini, 2025, p. 2)

Degrowth proposals are explicitly directed towards the overconsuming Global North, emphasising that the Global North needs to give back space to the global South to follow their own path and trajectories (Paulson, 2022). Degrowth ideas have at the same time been inspired by movements and concepts from the Global South. Central are here *Buen Vivir* and radical ecological democracy, but also many other movements and struggles in the Global South, such as Ubuntu (South Africa), the Gross National Happiness Index (Bhutan), the Zapatistas (Mexico), resistance against the oil drillings in Yasuni (Ecuador) and the economic crisis and its repercussions in Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet union (e.g., Boillat et al.,

2012; Borowy, 2013; Burkhart et al., 2020b; Demaria et al., 2013; Kothari et al., 2014, 2019; Paulson, 2017). Dengler and Seebacher position degrowth as “a Northern supplement to Southern concepts, movements and lines of thought” (2019, p. 247).

Degrowth has been criticised for being Eurocentric in its approach of learning and theorising (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). Nirmal and Rocheleau “suggest that degrowth would benefit from broadening its perspective and narrowing its reach” (ibid., p. 467). Nirmal and Rocheleau further “emphasize situated knowledge and action, and ask how degrowth can become radically situated, starting from where it is and rising to the insights, challenges, needs, and demands of the rest of the post-development convergence” (ibid., p. 471, footnote omitted). The authors go beyond the idea of a respectful learning from the Global South that is present in degrowth with its inspirations named above. They call for degrowth to be aware of its ontology and roots to be able to thrive together with other movements in a world of many worlds (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). While the authors explore their ideas with examples from the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Adivasi communities in India, their point on much degrowth research being blind towards the impact its own situatedness has on its theorising is important also when looking at neoliberal Nordic welfare states. The neoliberal Nordic welfare state case shows that experiences of crisis and social movements history are context specific and need nuanced debates on strategy. This is not to say that there is any sameness in the struggles of Zapatistas in Mexico or Adivasi communities in India with the non-fitting of degrowth strategy for Nordic welfare states, but that there is more otherness even with in the Global North than often acknowledged.

In chapter two, I show how much of degrowth theorising about transformative change is inspired by radical activist groups and situations of economic crisis. As Sweden has been impacted less by the economic crises in the early 2000s (Hagbert et al., 2019) and has a different history and practice of grassroots organising than cases in Southern Europe (Kings, 2012; Pries, 2019) which have provided, much inspiration for degrowth thinking, it makes a useful case for expanding the thinking on degrowth strategies.

Having given an overview of the topic and foundations of this thesis, I now turn to the aim and research questions.

## 1.4 Aim and research questions

Experiencing the empowerment of commoning on a small scale, learning about political dimensions of commoning practices, and experiencing strong forces that can hinder commoning practices as co-organised initiatives from the bottom-up, have created and shaped my interest in open workshops, degrowth, and commoning. While at first glance open workshops appear as spaces for making, repairing, prototyping, design, craft, tinkering and hacking, I look at them as cases of commoning efforts within the neoliberalised Nordic welfare state context.

The starting point for this thesis is the need for radical social-ecological transformations as called for by degrowth scholars and activists. For the thesis I adopt a degrowth framework which provides a critique of current and historical growth politics, an elaborate analysis of the complex problems, and a vision for degrowth as part of a future pluriverse.

The focus of the thesis is on the “how” of achieving such transformations. “Why” and “what” questions have been discussed much within degrowth, and the current most pressing challenge is how degrowth can become practice. A central question is how degrowth ideas and practices can spread beyond the group of the already convinced. With this thesis I aim to contribute to that broad question.

More narrowly three research questions have guided the research.

1. How are open workshops established and maintained in Sweden?
2. What are the key challenges for claiming and sustaining open workshops as commons in this context and how can we understand those challenges?
3. In what ways can understanding commoning in open workshops in a Nordic neoliberal welfare state context contribute to the thinking on strategies for degrowth transformations?

The questions reflect my approach to research, which emphasises a grounding in the empirical (see chapter four). The first question asks what is happening on the ground. The second question builds on what has been established with the first, asks for more detail, and for a way to understand the empirical. The third questions ask for implications beyond the empirical case.

## 1.5 Outline

The thesis is structured as follows. In chapter two, I review *literature and conceptual foundations* of the thesis. Starting with degrowth as the broader framework, I also introduce work on commoning as a language to discuss practices at open workshops. The final part of chapter two views degrowth and commoning in the Swedish context. The focus of the chapter is on strategy for degrowth and therein on the role of bottom-up co-organised projects. Chapter three portrays the *empirical context* of the thesis. With associations as organisational form for co-organised practices in Sweden in the centre of attention I discuss how the form of association has developed historically and how neoliberal politics from the 1990s have impacted their role in civil society. This chapter provides an empirical backdrop that helps situate the challenges and possibilities for bottom-up co-organising in the Swedish context, which are explored in the empirical chapters. In chapter four, I describe the *research journey and methods* of this thesis. Chapter five to nine make up the empirical part of the thesis. Chapter five works as an *introduction to the empirical part*. Using ethnographic material, I give an impression of how everyday practices of sharing are enacted at an open workshop. Chapter six describes the landscape of *open workshops in Sweden*, showing basic characteristics of their organisation. Chapter seven portrays ideas of what a *perfect open workshop* would be like and asks how associations in Sweden organise to come closer to their ideal. Chapter eight and nine are each built on a specific challenge developed in chapter seven: the challenges to *(re)claim* access to suitable premises and the challenge to *maintain* the workshop with commoning practices. In chapter ten I *discuss* the implications of the struggle for space and engagement in the light of commoning in the specific context as well as implications for thinking on degrowth strategy. Chapter eleven provides the *conclusion* of the thesis.

## 2 Literature and conceptual foundations

The starting point for this thesis is the need for radical transformation of the dominant capitalist economic and political system. The “why” question for degrowth as social-ecological transformation in the Global North has been answered in many ways and in much detail (e.g., Kallis et al., 2020). Instead of engaging in the discussion of why the current capitalistic system is flawed, I focus on the “how” of a possible transformation, more specifically following the call for a need to talk about strategies for transformation (Barlow et al., 2022; Brand, 2022; Buch-Hansen et al., 2024; Fitzpatrick et al., 2025).

This conceptual chapter is structured around a “zooming in” move. It starts with the broader framework of degrowth as social-ecological transformation (2.1), while within degrowth focusing on the question of “how.” In research on the “how” of degrowth two streams can be distinguished, and usually they are argued to be complementary rather than exclusive (e.g., Barlow et al., 2022; Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024; Büchs & Koch, 2019; Hickel et al., 2022; Savini, 2024).<sup>4</sup> One stream has a focus on reforms, dealing with questions of policy proposals, how to implement them and who could implement them (e.g., Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024; Savini, 2024). The other stream looks at local examples of protests or alternative building and questions of what part they can play in larger transformations (e.g., Savini, 2023, 2025). Based on the empirical focus of the thesis, I focus on degrowth research discussing local alternative building, as part of interstitial modes of transformation (Chertkovskaya, 2022).

The second subchapter (2.2) concerns commoning as a conceptual stream helping to make sense of co-organised shared spaces with both a material reality and as places for subject formation. I draw on this research as it can help understand the

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<sup>4</sup> Trainer (2024) is one exception here, arguing against reforms or symbiotic strategies.

challenges of organising and sustaining a shared resource or infrastructure. Research on commoning can add to degrowth research with its focus on community, everyday care and maintenance as well as commoning subjectivities.

In the final subchapter (2.3), I introduce literature on commoning and degrowth in Sweden in order to discuss how the introduced concepts take shape in the Swedish context.

The chapter links together literature review and conceptual foundations. There is no explicit separation between the two, as I choose to work with concepts that are directly derived from the relevant literature. The chapter, therefore, has both sections that are focused on reflecting debates in the literature and other sections that are more focused on illustrating specific concepts coming from that literature, and which are particularly relevant for the empirical analysis and discussion later in the thesis.

## 2.1 Degrowth, transformation and the social imaginary

In this subchapter, I provide an overview of degrowth literature on strategies for social-ecological transformation. While degrowth is an umbrella for ideas of societal organisation not orientated after a need for economic growth, social-ecological transformations are those that need to happen to put those ideas into practice. Calling the transformation social-ecological emphasises the need to think together the social and the ecological dimensions of current crises and future pathways (Burkhart et al., 2020a). Finding out how such a transformation can be facilitated is the aim of the debate on strategies for degrowth. Some scholars speak also of a social-ecological *transition* (e.g., Savini, 2024), while I refer to *transformation*, which is more common among degrowth scholars and activists as it marks the need for fundamental, systematic changes (see also, Brand, 2016).

The first section starts by introducing general theoretical ideas about degrowth and strategy. In the second section, I explore where degrowth is theorised from and what implication degrowth's empirical grounding has for further strategic thinking. In the third section, I discuss the role that is given to alternative building in strategies for degrowth, what can be learned from them, and whether other

cases could contribute to answering further important questions for degrowth strategies. The fourth section has a more conceptual take, as I introduce the concept of the social imaginary. In the discussion of the thesis, I use the concept of the social imaginary to discuss changes in practices inspired by experienced contradictions within the growth imaginary. In the last section, I focus on how open workshops are discussed in relation to degrowth and how they might be enabling degrowth practices without being prefigurative degrowth projects.

## Degrowth and strategy

Degrowth has been called many different things: an activist slogan, a social movement (Demaria et al., 2013), an “interpretative frame for grassroots activism” (D’Alisa et al., 2013, p. 213), a political project (Buch-Hansen, 2018) or an emerging academic paradigm (Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017). There are many who have written about how degrowth emerged and what it might mean or could do (e.g., Demaria et al., 2013; Kallis, 2018; Kallis et al., 2020; Muraca & Schmelzer, 2017). While in early publications degrowth scholars were mainly concerned with arguing that infinite growth does not work on a finite planet and that serious reorganising of society is necessary to decrease material throughput in the Global North (e.g., Latouche, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010; for a systematic overview, see Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017) discussions have become much more concrete and focused on specific questions regarding degrowth futures, transformations and policies, among others.

A discussion I focus on here is that regarding strategy or organising for change. An outcome from the degrowth conference in Vienna in 2020 is a publication entitled *Degrowth and Strategy* (Barlow et al., 2022).<sup>5</sup> This is the first explicit and extensive engagement with strategies for degrowth transformations. The book, though an anthology, adopts a common framework for how to talk and frame strategy. The framework is an adaptation from Wright (2019), which is introduced in an early chapter of the book (Chertkovskaya, 2022). The framework is built on three modes of transformation, *interstitial*, *symbiotic* and *ruptural*, and two strategic logics, *reducing harm* and *transcending structures* (see also Schmelzer et al., 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> One of the international degrowth conferences, which are influential for the academic debate on degrowth

As the aim of the thesis is to contribute to strategic thinking for degrowth, I here introduce the strategic canvas for degrowth Chertkovskaya (2022) suggests in the book. The interstitial mode describes initiatives that build alternatives in the cracks of the current dominant system. These initiatives can be about resisting, based on the logic of reducing harm, or they can aim at transcending structures by building alternatives or escaping the dominant system. A symbiotic mode that reduces harms is understood as taming, while a transcending logic would be to dismantle current structures. The ruptural mode can involve an act of halting through, for example, civil disobedience, which would be to reduce harm, or smashing in form of, for example, an occupation to transcend structures (ibid.). For degrowth, Chertkovskaya (and by extension her co-editors) argues for a core of interstitial transformation, supported by both symbiotic and ruptural modes of transformation. What Chertkovskaya adds to Wright's framework is an expansion of the category of "escaping" within the interstitial mode. She makes room for a central strategy that exists within degrowth, that is, to build alternatives that are not an escape, but much more visible counterhegemonic spaces that can politicise others and show that alternatives are possible – prefigurative projects. Another difference to Wright's framework is that Chertkovskaya argues for degrowth not to abandon ruptural actions, but to focus on temporary or local scale ruptures, which "can be used to support and stimulate interstitial and symbiotic modes of transformation, and possibly create momentum for transformative change" (ibid., p. 60). While suggesting building strategies for degrowth in all three modes, Chertkovskaya flags that "[c]are needs to be taken that symbiotic transformations are not co-opted, and that ruptures are pursued cautiously, aligning the means with the ends" (ibid., p. 61).

While less explicitly so, questions and ideas about organising and strategy have also been a topic in degrowth publications before. When degrowth scholars talk about change and transformation, they highlight a diverse strategic approach as the way forward. In the much-cited paper by Demaria et al. (2013), the authors highlight that a degrowth transformation needs to involve various kinds of change-making actors or arenas: oppositional activists, intellectuals, practitioners and "revolutionary reformists". This idea has since been built on (e.g., Burkhart et al., 2020b; D'Alisa et al., 2014; Kallis et al., 2020). The framework proposed by Chertkovskaya (2022) can be seen as a refined version of the diverse actors and diverse strategy approach inherent to degrowth.

Next, I want to give a more detailed idea of those actors of change discussed for degrowth transformations. How actors for transformation are framed within degrowth becomes important later in the discussion of where degrowth is theorised from. Early in the degrowth debate, D'Alisa et al. (2013) note that *civil society* is named as an actor for degrowth without any further discussion of what is contained in the concept. With the paper they criticise an unreflective understanding of civil society and point out that civil society is a dynamic arena with some actors potentially being actors for degrowth, but “others striving for the preservation of the status quo” (ibid., p. 214).

To be able to mark that difference, they suggest thinking of *civil* and *uncivil actors* within civil society. Uncivil actors would be those who question the status quo and work towards radical change and degrowth. The concept captures the observation that “[d]egrowth has more successfully flourished in the interstices of grassroots activist spheres, which are less institutionalized, more ground-breaking and radical” (ibid., p. 218). On the one hand, the idea of the uncivil actor describes who has been seen to work for degrowth, as degrowth only in some cases has penetrated “broader socio-political debates” (ibid., p. 217), but also the assumption that only actors who are ready to work at the margins can truly support degrowth.

As examples of uncivil actors, the authors name rural squats in Barcelona which reject “mainstream values such as property, employment, comfort and above all, growth for growth’s sake” (ibid., p. 219). Further uncivil actors or actions which are named are food cooperatives, solidary economy initiatives in Spain and Italy and oppositional activism related to socio-environmental conflicts in the global South, and other social justice struggles such as the Indignados or Occupy movements. Any initiative the authors characterise as civil is at the same time dismissed as being not radical enough to bring as deep a transformation as degrowth would require (D’Alisa et al., 2013).

A recent paper takes a different approach to the question of who could be actors for degrowth. Buch-Hansen and Carstensen (2024) call their approach radical and pragmatic, and suggest the ideal type of the *radical bricoleur* as agent for degrowth transformation. The radical bricoleur is radical in the sense of aiming for social-ecological transformation as understood in degrowth, but at the same time pragmatic in the sense of working with that which is already there: “The reason for this is that degrowth transformations cannot but start out from

currently existing practices, resources, ideas, institutions, cultures and structures – and all these existing social forms inevitably leave an imprint on future ones” (ibid., p. 265).

While the *uncivil actor* aims at implementing a future vision in the here and now through radical practices that build alternatives in order to transcend structures (interstitial mode of transformation) or engages in oppositional activism to reduce harm (interstitial mode of transformation), the *radical bricoleur* also works towards a future vision, but can also engage in symbiotic modes of transformation (see strategic canvas for degrowth (Chertkovskaya, 2022)).

The idea of radical bricolage is formulated as an answer to a paradox that is considered to have emerged in degrowth discussions. It has been observed that, on the one hand, there is a strong grounding of degrowth as a bottom-up project, and on the other hand there are many policy proposals coming from degrowth advocates implying top-down changes (Cosme et al., 2017; D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2025).

Buch-Hansen and Carstensen (2024) argue that a combination of both top-down policy implementation and bottom-up grassroots initiatives is needed (see also Koch, 2022). Radical bricolage is built on the idea of “combined practices of agents positioned everywhere” (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024, p. 270). Agents can be individuals, but also groups and projects. This suggestion 1) highlights the importance of knowing currently existing practices, institutions, cultures and structures in their specific context and 2) suggests looking for already existing agents within those structures. Building on Gibson-Graham’s diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2012), Buch-Hansen and Carstensen argue “that elements from which degrowth societies can be built are already present in current societies, albeit not (yet) on the scale needed for degrowth to materialise” (2024, p. 269). Taken together, the idea invites us to think not only about perfect (radical) degrowth projects and how they might be scaled up, but to think also about non-capitalist practices and relations within more mainstream institutions which could be expanded.

Connecting back to the strategic canvas for degrowth, the idea of the radical bricoleur describes a way in which “existing practices, resources, ideas, institutions, cultures and structures” (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024, p. 265) could be symbiotically transformed.

As part of the same discussion, the paradox of policies as instruments and bottom-up grassroots initiatives as (only) actors, it has been noted that the state is not sufficiently conceptualised within degrowth thinking (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020), but has often been seen as static entity separate from society. Furthermore, there are no suggestions for how the state could change; the focus is on the size rather than quality of the state. The authors argue that degrowth politics need a state, since “living within limits, respecting democracy and freedoms, stopping expansion, etc, won’t happen on their own, they all require organization and force. Who would apply this force, and how? Interstitial strategy approaches omit this question because they tend to see all repression as bad” (ibid., p. 5). Summarising their critique, D’Alisa and Kallis point out that

[t]hose who make degrowth policy proposals address them in a void, without an underlying theory of how, or under what conditions, revolutionary reforms such as those that they imply could ever be realised. Those who favour alternative, grassroots economic practices or an abolition of the state by a confederation of self-governed and ecologically sufficient communities lack a clear theory of transformation other than through a collapse after which, for some unexplained reason, political organization will evolve towards their desired configuration. (ibid., p. 7)

As a way forward for degrowth theory, D’Alisa and Kallis argue for a constructive engagement, advocating a Gramscian theory of the state, which sees the state and civil society not as separate units. The theory assumes an integral state, composed of political society and civil society, which are “organically interpenetrated and mutually reinforcing” (ibid., p. 6). For degrowth strategy, they suggest that what is needed first is groundwork in civil society, with the aim of changing common sense: “This involves rooted practices that demonstrably work, and within which new, post or degrowth ideas and values start making sense” (ibid., p. 8). With this conclusion, they point to the role of prefigurative projects as crucial for the needed change in common sense. At the same time, they call for more research looking at how common sense can change. In the third section of this subchapter, I take a closer look at how prefigurative projects and alternative building are discussed in degrowth, while the fourth section is concerned with common sense and how it can change.

Other research concerned with degrowth transformations similarly concludes that it is a broad societal support that is missing and urgently needed (e.g., Buch-Hansen, 2018; Büchs & Koch, 2019; Hickel et al., 2022; Savini, 2024, 2025).

Buch-Hansen's (2018) analysis of prerequisites for a degrowth paradigm lists four prerequisites that need to be fulfilled for such a shift. Two of them he sees as fulfilled: We have a situation which is a deep crisis, and degrowth is a political project pointing beyond the crisis with radical policy proposals. The two other prerequisites, "a comprehensive coalition of social forces" (ibid., p. 160) and at least passive consent from the wider public are not (yet) in sight. Reading his paper looking for strategic advice, his analysis would also suggest a focus on interstitial strategies to form that comprehensive coalition of social forces and create consent from below. What remains unclear or maybe diverse within the degrowth spectrum is whether the aim is to change common sense to be able to gain support for degrowth policies, or to gain support for a broad social movement that can lead a radical reorganisation of the state or abolish it altogether (Fitzpatrick et al., 2025).

Before closing this section, I introduce Schulken et al.'s (2022) proposal to have an open discussion about the relationship of *means* and *ends* within degrowth strategy. Above, I suggest in connection to the idea of the radical bricoleur and Gibson-Graham's diverse economies that more attention within degrowth research might need to be put on *non-capitalist practices and relations within more mainstream institutions*. Degrowth research and strategy has so far focused very much on the uncivil actors, explicitly working towards degrowth ends with degrowth means. Schulken et al. suggest that "[a]n open discussion about means and ends is thus needed to argue why a particular practice might nevertheless be considered part of a degrowth strategy" (ibid., p. 22). What they mean is that an initiative aiming at building an alternative might not always be able to fully align means and ends, due to dependencies on capitalist structures. Here they refer to a bike repair collective which might be relying, for example, on exploitive labour in a supply chain. The authors highlight that they are not suggesting that any means, e.g. direct violence, should be appropriate. Any strategy should be "guided by degrowth values like autonomy, care, conviviality, democracy, and equity" (ibid., p. 21).

With the empirical material and the discussion in chapter ten, I expand this idea of making a conceptual distinction between means and ends, and suggest that also practices not oriented towards a degrowth *end* have a part to play in degrowth strategy. They are not strategic for degrowth in themselves, but can be part of a strategy as they enable degrowth values and make contradictions in capitalism visible.

With the discussion I ask how practices that are caring and responsible can be scaled wide, encouraging values that make agreement with other degrowth ideas more likely. Changing common sense does not mean that majorities carrying growth cultures need to become radical degrowth activists, but that they need to disembodify growth values and practices.

In the next section, I take a closer look at where degrowth strategy is theorised from. Familiarising myself with the Swedish context and the work of open workshop associations in Sweden, I noticed an absence of the type of uncivil actor and radical grassroots project aligning means and end which are so central to degrowth thinking on strategy. Chapter three is my attempt to understand that absence in Sweden, while the next section of this chapter is an attempt to better understand the uncivil actors, the radical projects, and where they come from.

### **Crisis and cases of degrowth transformation**

In this section, I show how degrowth thinking is grounded in empirical cases of activist projects and situations of crisis. After demonstrating this tendency, I suggest a need to widen the empirical focus in order to better understand how transformations of practices and values can happen.

Early empirical work on degrowth has been deeply inspired by protests and projects that arose in connection to the financial crisis hitting Europe in 2008. The most prominent case is probably 15-M or Indignados, the anti-austerity movement in Spain starting in 2011. Much degrowth thinking has been inspired by cases from Catalonia and Barcelona, looking at projects related to the protests and communities supporting it (e.g., Asara, 2015; Burkhart et al., 2020b; Cattaneo & Di Mauro, 2015; D'Alisa et al., 2013; D'Alisa & Cattaneo, 2013; Kallis et al., 2020; Sekulova et al., 2017). The presence of crisis is something I discuss in this section. In this context, crisis refers to involuntary economic downturn followed by austerity measures and increasing unemployment. It is a crisis that immediately and personally affects the live of large groups of citizens. It creates needs and urgency for those people. This kind of crisis is discussed in degrowth as being an opening for change (Koch, 2022; Schneider et al., 2010).

At the same time, there is what has been called a planetary polycrisis (Albert, 2024), referring to global, ongoing and interrelated crises, including the climate crisis and mass extinction, geopolitical crises, the rise of populism, threats to

democracy, etc. While these crises are global, they affect different communities, individuals and groups to very different extents. Later, I discuss contexts where “immediate crisis” is absent. What I mean by this is that while a planetary polycrisis is ongoing and is affecting people immediately and in an existential manner, there are others who are not immediately or existentially affected by any of the crises. They may be aware of these crises, but their daily lives remain largely unaffected in any significant or threatening manner.

Turning back to degrowth, in an editorial to a special issue on grassroots activism, those who have been able to study the indignados movement have been called “privileged” (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p. 330), as they had a unique chance to study these flourishing alternative and grassroots practices. In the same editorial, the ‘rurban’ squats in Barcelona and Rome are called “the best anthropological and political subject of a degrowth society” (ibid., p. 335). Case studies in the special issue are “examples of the ability to build socially resilient system from below” (ibid., p. 334) located in Barcelona, Italy, the French Basque country and Brussels. The aim of the special issue is to theorise grassroots emergence and endurance from different cases of (economic) grassroots activism. The special issue tries to address the question of how grassroots initiatives thrive against the odds. The editors name two difficulties: first, confrontations with powerful institutions and neoliberal attacks on the welfare state; second, “the highly individualized structure of contemporary society” (ibid., p. 330). This structure causes “difficulties in building strong and lasting bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people, bonds of union that constitute a fundamental resource for collective action” (ibid., p. 330). Reasons for why initiatives thrive despite these difficulties appear to be context dependent but also related to a common factor all projects partake in, which is the moment of crisis and the need for alternative structures to fulfil basic needs, be they material or social (D’Alisa et al., 2015).

Taking a step back, it is interesting to see how alternative building has been conceptualised within degrowth. One prominent way to frame grassroots community organising within degrowth is to call such activities *nowtopias*. The concept was introduced into the degrowth debate mainly through a chapter in the book *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (Carlsson, 2014). Even before this, however, Carlsson and Manning describe nowtopias as “activities responding to localized social need” (2010, p. 927) and as a rejection of wage labour and its institutions. While making general claims, the paper and a book discussing the

concept (Carlsson, 2008) are based on an analysis and critique of developments of wage labour and the middle class in the US. The core cases of counterculture that inform the concept of nowtopia are urban gardening, non-commercial DIY, and biking culture. Carlsson and Manning write that these projects are “based on mutual aid, collaboration, and collective need, despite the forces working against those desires and impulses” (2010, p. 951). What is further highlighted is that these activities are outside the market. “Characteristic of many of these activities is that people are taking their time and technological know-how out of the market and – working for free – reappropriating the waste stream of modern capitalism while using technologies in unanticipated ways” (Carlsson, 2014, p. 182). Nowtopia is a concept widely integrated into degrowth discussions, mainly with an emphasis on the now. It has become a way to highlight that activists are not waiting for others to initiate change, but do start change in local projects. This dedication to non-delegation and to aligning means and ends resonates with the emphasis on interstitial strategies for transformation advocated by many, as discussed above. What is, however, also at the core of the concept is the intentionality of creating something as an explicit alternative to capitalism, and the time and dedication that is implied.

The concept of nowtopia has also been criticised. In their introduction to the special issue *Geographies on Degrowth*, Demaria et al. (2019) criticise the nowtopia concept in reference to one of the contributions (Gearey & Ravenscroft, 2019) in the issue. The critique is that the concept is focused on “archetypical agents of counterculture” (Demaria et al., 2019, p. 438). Gearey and Ravenscroft frame the environmental activism of an elderly community as a nowtopia and call for more attention to the “plethora of ordinary, pedestrian, low visibility nowtopian practices burgeoning in unrecognized corners” (2019, p. 462). The editors of the special issue pick up the critique and call for more research on degrowth subjects “beyond counter-culture or green activists” and to “include those individuals or collectives who are adapting to austerity, downsizing, reconfiguring and transforming their lives in all manner of ways” (Demaria et al., 2019, p. 445). Referring to this call, I want to highlight two aspects. First, the editors note a tendency in degrowth to look at cases close to home, which results in a great deal of thinking coming from similar empirical cases such as urban gardening, food cooperatives, squats, etc. Second, they call for researching down rather than close. Researching down in this case implies understanding how communities adapt to economic downturn, an – at least local – moment of urgent crisis.

As the above shows, the empirical background for early influential degrowth research is strongly anchored in either nowtopian projects carried out by “archetypal agents of counterculture” (Demaria et al., 2019) or situations of austerity and crisis that have created urgency for broader groups to act together and build alternatives to meet their needs (e.g., Asara, 2015; D’Alisa et al., 2015; Varvarousis, 2019).<sup>6</sup> While certainly immensely valuable for degrowth thinking, the tendency of “documenting or celebrating self-contained localised initiatives” (Kaika et al., 2023, p. 1195) has been criticised for not helping with answering to the pressing need of scaling up. The common ground of crisis has been noted (Demaria et al., 2019; Sekulova et al., 2017) and even problematised (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Savini, 2025; Varvarousis, 2019), but not spurred much discussion beyond that.

Before problematising this tendency further, I want to mark that there are many case studies and examples of degrowth practices coming from other contexts, places, realms, and realities. They are, however, not as well integrated in the thinking and strategizing that dominates the degrowth discussion. To exemplify, I highlight a few of these studies that are integrating the not-so-perfect degrowth subjects and contexts into the debate.

With the special issue *Degrowth: Culture, Power and Change*, the editors Paulson and Gezon attempt to highlight a plurality in existing approaches and experiences of living and acting towards “well-being, equity and sustainability rather than expansion” (Paulson, 2017, p. 425). Contributions to the special issue come from various geographical, cultural and economic settings, and are not looking for the perfect degrowth subject but follow imperfect humans struggling for more meaningful lives in the context of economic expansion. With this effort, the special issue shows that degrowth practices can look, sound and be communicated very differently in different contexts. One example is a study on whaling in the Faroe Islands as an example of sharing and conscious local consumption within limits (Bogadóttir & Olsen, 2017). Another case study looks at a religious community in the US, following a “theology of enough”, finding new identities and values (Hall, 2017). Further examples come from the Nordic, which I discuss in detail in 2.3, discussing a lack of need (Rutt, 2020), bureaucratic hurdles (Bonow & Normark, 2018) or the wish to appear not too political (Berglund, 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> Research on commoning shows a similar tendency which I discuss in 2.2

Turning again to the issue of crisis and why it might be problematic that crisis is such a dominant variable in empirical cases of degrowth, I want to mention a study problematising the element of crisis. The study looks at solidarity projects in Athens in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007–2008. The moment of crisis is here framed as a window of opportunity, where hegemonic ideas or dominant social imaginaries can be overcome and replaced – replaced through the experiences of alternative ways of organising through solidarity initiatives. The paper concludes that crisis can be an opening, but that this can easily close or be occupied by other, for examples, xenophobic imaginaries (Varvarousis, 2019).<sup>7</sup>

That crisis can be an opportunity or opening is generally accepted within degrowth (Koch, 2022). What remains unanswered is how degrowth practices should become common sense in and after a collapse or intensifying crisis (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Varvarousis, 2019).

I suggest that there is a paradox here in relation to the situation of crisis. Degrowth proponents have argued many times that “this recession is not our degrowth” (see, e.g., Rilovic et al., 2022) and that degrowth is about a planned decrease of economic throughput. While I do not aim to question that this is what degrowth is about, I want to point to the fact that examples for practices of degrowth often carry that very element of crisis affecting people in their daily lives. While it is utterly hopeful that broader groups join and act in such situations of crisis, co-organising to meet their basic needs, the question of how transformation could come about without such a situation of need remains unanswered. A context where crisis with the same intensity has been absent is the Nordic context. I discuss studies that look at initiatives absent of an immediate pressing crisis or need in the Nordic context in 2.3.

With the above, I argue that degrowth is theorised from examples of radical grassroots projects built by activists embracing degrowth and related ideas or from situations of crisis, where embracing “autonomy, care, conviviality, democracy, and equity” (Schulken et al. 2022, p.21) has been an answer to meeting basic needs. While working from those cases is useful in many ways, such as showing that non-capitalistic ways of relating are not just possible but worthwhile, it cannot give many answers on how majorities not pressured by crisis could embody degrowth values.

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<sup>7</sup> See also the strategic use of crisis in what Klein calls “disaster capitalism” (2007)

Looking only at green activists and counterculture has inspired critique and a call to study *down* (see above). Studying down would mean documenting and aiding the struggles of those affected by, for example, austerity measures (Demaria et al., 2019). Others have also called for degrowth scholars to study *up*, to better understand political and economic interest of those in power (Hickel et al., 2022).<sup>8</sup>

What is being criticised with the calls to study up and down is that much research has been done on groups close to degrowth, those who prefigure degrowth practices out of their own motivation. There are, however, other significant groups missing even when one also looks *down* and *up*. Here I mean those who are not directly affected, nor shocked enough by ongoing crises to be propelled “into questioning the imaginary of growth as a panacea for a better life” (Kaika et al., 2023, p. 1205). There is broad agreement that “self-interested, utility-maximising, instrumentally-minded political agents” (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024, p. 271) will not promote degrowth, but it remains important to add that neither will citizens that have embodied those values.

These are large groups who live comfortably without being “those in power”, but who carry the majority growth culture (see also Brand & Wissen, 2017). Degrowth practices are not only opposed by “powerful agents such as corporations and governments, and the institutional settings created by them” (Chertkovskaya, 2022, p. 58), but also by embodied practices and subjectivities that affect our basic ability to relate to others, human and non-human. Relating back to the broad question motivating this thesis of how degrowth ideas and practices can spread beyond the already convinced, an important question to ask is how such embodied practices and subjectivities can transform in absence of existential crisis or idealistic motivation.

To better understand what might be missing when focusing on projects close to degrowth, I first take a closer look at those projects themselves. I focus on their role in strategy and what can be studied through them, to then also ask for which kinds of questions other cases might be more helpful.

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<sup>8</sup> See also (Nader, 1972) and the discussion that followed on researching *up*.

## Degrowth projects and practices

In this section, I focus in more detail on the patch of the strategic canvas for degrowth that concerns “alternative building”. I discuss what can be learned from these prefigurative degrowth projects, why it is valuable to study them and what role they are said to play in strategies for degrowth. At the end of the section, I suggest how a focus on degrowth practices, rather than projects, could be valuable for expanding the discussion on degrowth strategies (see also T. S. J. Smith, 2020). When answering the third research question in chapter 10.3, I develop what open workshops in Sweden, understood as enabling commoning practices, can say to questions concerning degrowth and strategy.

One argument for studying existing small-scale projects is to better understand the institutional conditions under which degrowth practices can flourish, an important question when trying to understand how they can be scaled up (Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2024). A framework for understanding just that has been introduced by Sekulova et al. (2017). The authors propose the metaphor of ‘fertile soil’ to describe “a particular quality of the social texture, characterized by richness, diversity, unknowns but also – by multiple tensions and contradiction” (Sekulova et al., 2017, p. 2362). The paper highlights a set of factors that play a part in co-creating this fertile soil. The factors are established through a review of literature on community-based initiatives and include: “a shared history of social organizing, protest, and activism; diversity; values of cooperation and trust; concern with justice and sustainability; presence of counter-cultures; actors’ agency and self-empowerment; social networking; non-restrictive external regime; and availability of physical space/s” (ibid., p. 2364). More than suggesting that all the factors need to be present, the list presents factors that can impact the thriving of community-based initiatives. The authors also distinguish between ‘soil’ and ‘fertile’ – it is the factors that make the soil, but the quality of the relations between them that make the soil fertile or not. What is highlighted is that it is not a matter of having conflict-free relations, but that conflicts can be nourishing if addressed openly and constructively. They can help make the initiatives stronger and more resilient (Sekulova et al., 2017).

The presence or previous presence of crisis is not one of the factors listed as co-creating the fertile soil. It is, however, named explicitly in the beginning of the paper, which notes that “community initiatives have mushroomed in a wide spectrum of areas, seemingly in response to the economic crisis stalking Southern

Europe and North America ever since 2007” (ibid., p. 2363). While providing this general list of factors and the idea that the way internal conflicts and contradictions are handled matters to the resilience of the project, the authors highlight that how dynamics play out in specific cases is context-dependent and follows unique logics. A general claim they do make is that the fertile soil needs to be there before the grassroots can emerge and thrive. To illustrate their points, they explore cases in the Barcelona region. Other research discussed above has pointed to specific challenges for initiatives in the form of powerful actors and the highly “individualized structure of contemporary society” (D’Alisa et al., 2015, p. 330). Similar findings come from studies on the claiming and maintaining of commons, which I discuss in 2.2. Generally, it is said that interstitial alternative building for degrowth happens or becomes possible in the cracks and at the margins, “outside the spaces dominated by those in power” (Chertkovskaya, 2022, p. 57).

Their existence at the margins is their way to survive, but at the same time also their limitation. One concern of degrowth scholars is the question of how to scale up niche projects. In a chapter in *Degrowth and Strategies*, Petridis (2022) frames prefigurative projects as seeds for subversive emancipatory institutions, where “[t]he basic idea is that participation in such initiatives helps deconstruct the dominant consumer/capitalist mode of being and creates a new collective political project” (ibid., p. 161). If prefigurative projects “that not only envision but also embody an alternative model of societal organisation in practice” (ibid.) are, however, to last and be more than refuges for concerned individuals with the opportunity to exit to them, institutional arrangements are needed to support and safeguard them (Petridis, 2022). Petridis discusses alternative building in synergy with symbiotic and ruptural modes of transformation. Symbiotic “non-reformist reforms” could create those institutional arrangements needed for prefigurative projects to prevail and expand.<sup>9</sup> Highlighting the need for “non-reformist reforms” points to the risk of less radical reforms leading to co-optation of small-scale radical projects (Kaika et al., 2023).

Thinking further on the challenge of scaling up, prefigurative projects have been discussed as *one part* of a transformation. Their value lies in the way in which they

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<sup>9</sup> Non-reformist reforms is a concept developed by Gorz (1967). Discussing the concept in detail would go beyond the intention of this review. The idea of non-reformist reforms has been developed further by other authors writing in degrowth strategy (e.g., Schmelzer et al., 2022).

provide opportunities to try out, show and learn about how practices, relations, and organisations could look like in a convivial pluriverse. Their role has, however, not always been described in such a nuanced way. Critically examining the role that has been ascribed to prefigurative practices in degrowth thinking, Savini remarks that “the considerable attention given to prefiguration too readily equates the challenge of leading a transition with that of practicing the future” (2024, p. 6). He points out that “[t]hough sometimes inspiring, they often lack the scale to instigate a power shift” (ibid.).

Instead, Savini suggests a combination of actors and modes, and puts words to how a transformation could slowly take shape:

A degrowth transition is [...] likely to follow a nonlinear trajectory. It is based on prefiguration, which occurs in the growth economy’s interstices, and is likely to involve activists, progressive public employees, the self-employed, and civic organizations whose daily work adheres to degrowth principles. Degrowth practices thrive on synergies among one another. This increases degrowth’s popular legitimacy, building a political movement that pushes for regulatory change. And that change enables new practices and reinforces this transitional loop. (ibid., p. 7)

This view on transformation puts emphasis on relations, synergies, practices and non-linearity. The groundwork that D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) pointed out as a necessary step before degrowth policies could realistically be implemented is here not placed only on the shoulders of uncivil actors but carried by a more diverse set of actors (see also radical bricoleur (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024)). While explicit degrowth projects are part of this imagined trajectory, prefiguration is seen in “daily work” that “adheres to degrowth principles”. I see this as a way to widen the focus (of research and strategy) and include relations and practices that are in line with degrowth principles, but happen also outside explicitly prefigurative projects.<sup>10</sup> This again relates to the question of how degrowth values can spread broad and beyond the already convinced. With the case of open workshops in Sweden I trace how degrowth practices can emerge in the everyday and for pragmatic reasons.

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<sup>10</sup> See also Zapata Campos et al. and their discussion on intentionality. The argue “that intentionality may be less relevant in prompting social change than traditional urban social movement and organization studies have previously suggested.” (2020, p. 1166)

With the envisioned trajectory, Savini (2024) addresses some of the hinders that have been identified for degrowth transformations: Scaling up of prefigurative projects happens through a change of the rules, which makes that which is prefigured an easier choice also for others, who are less dedicated. The change comes from below, but aims at non-reformist reforms changing institutions. This view bridges the “divides between those advocating grassroots movements and those promoting the state. It also puts controversies between radicalism and reformism, which often fragment social movements, into perspective” (ibid., p. 7). Lastly, degrowth practices would, with such a relational nonlinear trajectory, also gain more public acceptance and support, which is one of the primary challenges identified for degrowth (e.g., Buch-Hansen, 2018; Hickel et al., 2022).

The focus on relations and practices – instead of projects that are fully and explicitly aligning degrowth means and ends – provides another opening for strategic thinking. The idea of the prefigurative project takes the existence of a group willing and able to build such a project as given. It further assumes that people join such projects when they wish to “exit” (Petridis, 2022), which presupposes that the wish to exit has emerged through some politicising moment prior to joining the project. The prefigurative grassroots initiative is aligning degrowth means and ends and does so from the start, even if not necessarily using degrowth terminology in its identity and goals. Prefigurative projects by definition already embody the values they wish to spread further. While actively needing to be sustained internally and against external forces (see 2.2), the change of common sense has already happened. They are perfect cases to study how it is to uphold such alternative values internally and against dominant normality (Burkhart, 2015). I argue that asking how a change of common sense can happen requires looking at projects that are *not* fully embracing degrowth values. One way to approach this question is to look at practices rather than projects, an idea I develop further in the discussion of the thesis.

Concluding this section, I want to point out that while prefigurative projects have inspired great and maybe unrealistic hope in degrowth thinking on transformation (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2024), it also needs to be said that no bottom-up transformation would be possible without having been prefigured (Savini, 2024). Above I present the argument that an alternative common sense can be lived in such prefigurative projects, but that to better understand changes in common sense it would be useful to study cases

which are not explicitly prefigurative. In the empirical chapters I show how open workshop associations are pragmatic rather than political and how changes in practices emerge for pragmatic rather than explicitly political reasons. To be able to discuss that change better I discuss, in the next section, how common sense, or the social imaginary has been conceptualised within degrowth.

### **Social imaginary in degrowth**

In the second section of this subchapter (pp. 36-41) I argue for a need to research *to the side* and pay more attention to those who carry majority growth culture and practices. While addressing these groups from a degrowth strategy perspective is needed, they are already part of the “what” and “why” discussions on degrowth. Regarding the “what” question, it is clear that this group or the majority growth commonsense, has to change as “degrowth entails profound changes in how humans relate to nature, to non-human beings, and to one another, changes in societal structures and changes in human selves that pertain for instance to what we value and strive for” (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024, p. 265). What Buch-Hansen and Carstensen describe here has been called the need to “decolonize the social imaginary” (e.g., Latouche, 2009).

More recently, D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) write about the change of “commonsenses”. They suggest that understanding “better how and why common-senses change over time (sometimes fast, sometimes slow), how hegemonies get toppled and counter-hegemonic [*sic*] projects prevail” is crucial to further degrowth in thinking and practice. The authors highlight the need to also understand “the role of performance and prefiguration in these changes or how crisis unsettles taken for granted ideas and institutions” (ibid., p. 8).

While D’Alisa and Kallis here use commonsenses, Büchs and Koch describe the growth paradigm as “deeply embedded in people’s minds and bodies” (2019, p. 160), while Savini (2025) works with the concept of ideology (see also, Welzer, 2011). The social imaginary, a concept degrowth scholars have found in Castoriadis’ writings, describes this common understanding within a society, which is embodied and is what gives meaning to everyday practices and directs values and goals. Later on, I argue that in this detail lies also an opening for change. When the social imaginary is in contradiction with the performance of everyday practices, other ideas are consulted.

Varvarousis (2019) investigates the use of the concept *social imaginary* in degrowth thinking. He argues that the concept has been underdeveloped in degrowth, especially the question of how the social imaginary might change, even though “decolonizing the social imaginary” has been a proclaimed step for a transformation away from the hegemony of growth (Latouche, 2009).<sup>11</sup> Varvarousis (2019) aims to fill this gap and goes back to Castoriadis’ work to do so.

Varvarousis (2019) emphasises the focus of the “social” in Castoriadis’ work on the social imaginary. The social imaginary is something that is reproduced between people. As neither Castoriadis himself nor degrowth scholars who have used the concept have explored how a social imaginary might change, Varvarousis identifies the need for case studies investigating this question and grounding it empirically. As Varvarousis has theorised and developed Castoriadis’ concept of the social imaginary for the degrowth debate, I chose to relay on his discussion of the concept which I introduce below.

Varvarousis defines the social imaginary as “the shared collective imagination distilled in specific institutions, which operates as the ‘glue’ that holds a society together by being a representation of it. In each society it is the social imaginary that determines what is real, worthy, possible, acceptable or desirable” (2019, p. 499, emphasis omitted). The concept suggests a majority social imaginary, while there can be “peripheral imaginaries” (Castoriadis, 1975, p. 195, as cited in Varvarousis, 2019, p. 499). Being aware of the existence and human-made nature of the social imaginary is framed as characteristic of a state of autonomy, which is, however, lost in the growth imaginary. The dominant social imaginary requires a majority of individuals to practice and embody it. There is the possibility of peripheral different imaginaries, and the imaginary can be, but is not necessarily, consciously questioned from within (Varvarousis, 2019).

Varvarousis (2019) argues that change of the social imaginary is not theorised sufficiently by Castoriadis, and applies the concept to the Greek crisis of 2008 and the subsequent changes in practices and thinking. He argues that the Greek crisis

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<sup>11</sup> In his writing Latouche emphasises the need for a *decolonialization* of the social imaginary (Latouche, 2009). The use of decolonization in contexts not directly related to a colonialization process has been criticised (see Varvarousis, 2019). Varvarousis still uses the formulation as he sees it in line with Latouche’s thinking and fitting for the Greek case he studies. The process of decolonization is here understood as involving “ideas, places, practices and institutions in a co-productive relationship with each other” (ibid., p. 498).

had a destabilising effect on the social imaginary, thus providing an opening for a new imaginary. In the crisis, new social imaginary significations, ideas previously belonging to a peripheral social imaginary, start to mean something for more people. One example used in the paper is *commons*, which was not a concept used in Greece before the 2008 crisis, but became meaningful when commoning practices became a more visible part of everyday life. “[T]he crisis catalyzed the emergence of *new social practices* and *imaginary significations* that were interwoven into *a new social fabric*” (ibid., p. 508, emphasis added). Varvarousis argues that the moment of crisis and “a state of liminality [are] critical for the delegitimation of prior prevailing social imaginary significations and the emergence of new ones” (ibid., p. 495).

Varvarousis (2019) concludes his paper with two challenges that become apparent with the Greek example. One is that also other alternative imaginaries (like right-wing populism) can grow strong when a dominant growth imaginary is shaking; the other is the question of how commoning and other degrowth imaginary signifiers might hold even if the emergency of the crisis has passed.

“Castoriadis believed that a society can take a different direction if the majority of their members realizes that their priorities are unattainable in the present world” (Varvarousis, 2019, p. 509). This statement appears trivial as it describes the moment where a majority is against the status quo, a critical mass, wanting political change and enforcing it: the very moment that degrowth is said to be far away from (e.g., Buch-Hansen, 2018; Hickel et al., 2022; Kaika et al., 2023). What I want to highlight, however, is that Castoriadis’ framing does not necessarily contain a moment of crisis. An inconsistency between that which is desirable and that which is possible could be understood as an opening for a change in the social imaginary (see also Savini, 2025).

Another study examining the social imaginary and degrowth looks at a housing commons and the commoners’ strategies to maintain their autonomy (Savini, 2023). Autonomy is here conceptualised as “the emancipation of society from the hegemony of the imperative of growth and its ideology of competition and productivity” (ibid., p. 1232).<sup>12</sup> The way autonomy is discussed in the paper describes an open social imaginary, where existing institutions can be questioned.

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<sup>12</sup> Note that autonomy is here used with a relational understanding, not an individualistic libertarian interpretation (Savini, 2023)

What is analysed is how this opening can be maintained. The case shows that “autonomy occurs through its perpetual reproduction” (ibid., p. 1231). Autonomy is understood as a practice, practiced continuously among a group of individuals. To maintain their autonomy and commoning the group actively organises their community through smaller nested practices of commoning and by co-supporting other commoning initiatives (Savini, 2023).

Working with literature on commoning (De Angelis, 2017), Savini (2023) argues that autonomy needs to be reproduced both internally and externally. Externally, autonomy needs to be protected against capital and the State. Internally, it needs to be maintained within the community of commoners: “Internally, autonomy thrives on the recursive reproduction of rules and values and the maintenance of internal coherence. [...] In practice, commoners constantly devise internal forms of organisation to maintain trust, conflict resolution, information flows, participation and solidarity” (ibid., p. 1236). What becomes clear in Savini’s use of the concept of the social imaginary is that (1) the decolonization of the social imaginary is not a one-time event, but a perpetual practice and (2) that it is not a purely intellectual process, but one tied to everyday relational practices, something that is missed when the social imaginary is reduced to that which we can imagine (Herbert, 2021).

With their commoning practices, the housing commons are prefiguring degrowth practices (Savini, 2023). The case shows how prefiguration is about practice and the constant need to reproduce the prefigurative character. Connecting back to the discussion on cases studied within the degrowth literature, this case of housing commons is another example of a community choosing to common out of a conviction that it is the right thing to do. As Savini shows, a great deal can be learned about the process of prefiguring and the social reproduction needed to do so. The example also shows that much dedication and effort are needed to make commoning work within capitalism.

Using a partly different terminology, Büchs and Koch (2019) write about being *locked in* the growth paradigm. They use the concept of *social practice* to understand how “economic growth is not only at the core of various socio-economic institutions but is also very deeply anchored in people’s minds, bodies and identities” (ibid., p. 160). Seen as social practice, economic growth is “a principle with structural properties that is engrained in ways of thinking and acting – for the most part habitually” (ibid.). Here, it becomes tangible that a

social imaginary is not only about what meaning we ascribe, but also about what we do and, by extension, are able to do.

Summing up: I take social imaginary as it is discussed within degrowth literature as referring to the “shared collective imagination, distilled in specific institutions” (Varvarousis, 2019). It is embedded and gives meaning to everyday practices. It is embodied and creates identities, and it is reproduced through those institutions, practices and identities. In the discussion chapter I connect those ideas to the tensions I have observed in open workshops concerning members’ engagement and conflicting ideas of what membership entails (see also chapter three). The concept of the social imaginary helps both understand the tensions at the workshop and how those tensions can be openings for a change in practices.

Here I want to come back to the framing commonly used in degrowth: the need to *decolonize* the social imaginary. Decolonizing, as used by Varvarousis, Latouche or Savini, implies that those successfully decolonizing their social imaginary gain an open or autonomous social imaginary. This autonomous state allows one to critically examine the growth imaginary. This implies becoming aware of structural forces, power relations, the human-made nature of norms and values and their contextual and historical interdependencies. From that state of awareness, conscious reimagination can happen (Latouche, 2009; Savini, 2023; Varvarousis, 2019).

I purposely use *transformation* or *change of the social imaginary* to consider the possibility that a growth imaginary could transform into a social imaginary of degrowth values, without needing to be, or go through a state of an open social imaginary.

Concluding these four sections of the literature review and conceptual framework on degrowth, I want to recap a few points that are crucial for this project. The discussion on strategy is a discussion on the “how” question of a social-ecological transformation. Main challenges that have been identified are the need for broad support and the need to move from ideas to practices, and that beyond small scale projects (Kaika et al., 2023). Much of the literature discussing strategies for degrowth is inspired by examples of degrowth practices that have occurred in situations of crisis or are initiated and sustained by activist groups already convinced of degrowth or related ideas. What is missing in the discussion is an engagement with majorities, who embody and sustain the practices and identities

in line with that growth-hegemony. D’Alisa and Kallis propose research that “can shed light on the institutions that maintain logics of expansion and growth at the domain of political society, as well as the *everyday practices and performances* that permeate society with the language and rationality of growth” (2020, p. 8, emphasis added). Above I have shown how the concept of the social imaginary provides a way to approach those *everyday practices and performances*. To be able to study how a social imaginary might change in interplay with everyday practices and performances, I suggest in the previous section to study cases which are not aligning degrowth ends and means but nevertheless engage in practices that are at odds with capitalist growth rationalities. In the next section, I show how open workshops can be such cases.

### **Degrowth practices at open workshops**

In the introduction to the thesis, I explain what open workshops are and give an overview of how I use related terminology. In this section, I review literature on open workshops. Research on open workshops comes from diverse fields and examines open workshops with diverse interests. Much literature on open workshops, or in this context more frequently referred to as makerspaces and the maker movement, is empirically based in the US and looks at makerspaces in libraries (e.g., Mersand, 2021; Sharma, 2021; Soomro et al., 2023). Another field with many publications on makerspaces is human-computer-interaction research (HCI). With some exceptions, the focus here is on the individual maker (e.g., Landwehr Sydow, 2022), rather than the makerspace (Taylor et al., 2016; Toombs et al., 2015; Vincent, 2023).

I look at literature from the aforementioned and other debates on open workshops with two interests in mind. One is discussions on their potential role in society – as I am interested in their potential role in social-ecological transformations – and questions of internal organisation and the active sharing of infrastructures of production. Concerning the first question, many ideas are put forward. Some ideas concern what open workshops can inspire in their users. A prominent idea is that engagement in open workshops can inspire more skilled and confident approaches towards materials, products and technology (e.g., Brandellero & Niutta, 2023; Collins, 2018; Landwehr Sydow, 2022; Mazzilli-Daechsel, 2019; Rahman & Best, 2023).

Landwehr Sydow (2022) uses the concepts of *material literacy*, *machine sensibility* and *the pliable machine* to discuss the skill and confidence she meets in users of open workshops. Users can understand materials and products and can unpack and adapt them for their own and their community's needs or interests. I want to highlight the ideas of material literacy and machine sensibility, as they also suggest that there are others who do not possess such literacy or sensibility. These concepts further invite the question of whether a lack of material literacy or machine sensibility might be problematic, not just for concerned individuals, but at a larger scale. This highlights the importance of places that enable engagement with materials, technology, and related skills beyond the individual experience.

Along similar lines, open workshops are discussed as facilities that can facilitate experimental, hands-on, and informal learning (e.g., Richterich, 2022a; Toombs et al., 2015). Besides the empowering experience for the individual, opportunities for mutual learning in the open workshop context are argued to contribute to a “democratisation of innovation” and “breaking through expert silos” (Vincent, 2023, p. 9). Related to the question of innovation is the fact that open workshops are argued to have the potential to be drivers of innovation more broadly and as such even be drivers for – at least local – economic growth (e.g., Rahman & Best, 2023).

This leads to a binary framing that is present in research on open workshops. This framing concerns the question of the potential of open workshops on a societal level. On the one hand, there are those who argue open workshops are innovation hubs with the potential to boost local and even national economies. On the other hand, there are those arguing that open workshops are alternative projects, prefiguring post-capitalist practices of repair, upcycling and co-organised production (T. S. J. Smith, 2020).

This binary framing has inspired Liodaki (2024b) to ask whether making is alternative. To answer the question, she looks at how open workshops in Germany frame themselves and concludes that “it becomes evident that the question of alterity of makerspaces is not easy to answer” (ibid., p. 10). She suggests that open workshops and the contested discourse around them “can potentially play a key role in the process of (un)fixing the meanings of technology, education, innovation, sustainability, community, and development” (Liodaki, 2024a, p. 10).

Rather than establishing which narrative is more fitting to describe the observed phenomenon, I choose a similar approach to T. S. J. Smith (2020) who suggests looking at practices in the spaces rather than their own or imposed framing. Discussing the case of a hackerspace in the UK, he suggests framing open workshops beyond that binary and instead as enabling diverse economic practices, rather than being hot spots for innovation or parts of an anti-capitalist counterculture. He suggests that the spaces can enable “practices currently marginalized in Western societies” (ibid., p. 607) and lists both “tangible skills of repair, maintenance and construction, but also the social infrastructure of interdependent action and solidarity” (ibid.). T. S. J. Smith also describes the hackerspace as a pragmatic construction of a commons infrastructure, grounded in the everyday rather than the spectacular. Rather than framing the entire phenomenon as one thing or another, T. S. J. Smith suggests focusing on the practices occurring within spaces, which he, drawing on Gibson-Graham, conceptualises as practices of being-in-common.

Before looking more closely at further work that focuses on practices at the open workshop, their internal organisation and further ideas on the prefigurative potential, I briefly describe the narrative that suggests open workshops as platforms for innovation. This narrative is built on the constructed story of the “maker movement” (Landwehr Sydow, 2022). The idea of a *maker movement* originated around the for-profit makerspace chain *TechShop* and the media company *Make Community LLC*, with a magazine, online platforms and rapidly expanding *Maker Faires*. While *TechShop* has ended their business, the media company *Make Community LLC* is active. The magazine publishes news and blueprints and much of the content circles around robotics and digital fabrication. *Maker Faires* are hosted all over the US and beyond. They feature makers and their products, hands-on activities, talks and socialising, while local organisers pay for the branding of the event. In popular literature originating from the same group of entrepreneurs, makerspaces have been framed as hubs for innovation and the maker culture as a movement capable of re-boosting economies (Anderson, 2013; Dougherty, 2012; Hatch, 2013). The agenda is here to advance making and to make it into a for-profit business model (e.g., Davies, 2017; Morozov, 2014). Inherent is the idea that everybody is a maker, that making can save the world, and, above all, the economy (Dougherty, 2012). The narrative is at times successful, with a *Maker Fair* at the White House during the Obama

administration (Turner, 2018), while open workshops over all remain a marginal phenomenon (e.g., T. S. J. Smith, 2020).

Makerspaces are only one element of this “maker movement” – the *maker* as problem solver is the central figure and *making* the creative activity. Pointing to the construction of the movement, Turner asks “How did the timeless activities of tinkering, fixing, crafting, and constructing come to huddle under the umbrella term of ‘making’?” (2018, p. 161). Just as the activity of making hides all these “timeless activities”, so does the idea that open workshops originated in the US, inspired by some tech entrepreneurs, hide a more diverse history of shared infrastructure of small-scale repair, production and innovation (Kohtala et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Landwehr Sydow (2022) argues that making is criticised from within hacker communities as a constructed framing (see also Davies, 2017). The maker is here framed as an “entrepreneurial subject” (Landwehr Sydow, 2022, p. 3), while hacking, hackerspaces and the hacker have counterculture connotations, and for some even a criminal one (Richterich, 2022b). However, the term hacker is used broadly (Davies, 2017); Toombs (2016), for example, frames the contemporary hacker as a tech innovator rather than a rebel.

Davies (2017) understands hacking as finding creative, easy, outside-the-box solutions that were not designed, planned, or allowed. Hacking is to not accept any given boundaries or rules, be it of a product or a system, but to find ways around them and improve the product or situation. In Davies’ monograph on maker and hackerspaces in the US, those involved in co-organised maker and hackerspaces clearly distance themselves from for-profit versions of their idea (ibid.). I have observed similar tendencies among actors in Germany who consciously distance themselves from the maker movement and actively work on their own narrative of open workshops (field visit 11/2018, see table 4.1).

Kohtala et al. suggest considering how “‘maker culture’ can be re-expanded” (2020, p. 25) and include more low-tech, craft and bricolage. One way to re-expand is to not tell the one maker movement story, but to include different accounts and ethnographic examples, while being aware of the influence the US maker movement has on open workshop initiatives.

One stream of writing that does not build on the maker movement framing, describes open workshops as places of non-conformity and prefigurative post-

capitalist praxis, both in popular science (e.g., Baier et al., 2016b; Hansing, 2017) and academic literature (Kurzeja et al., 2021; Liodaki, 2024a, 2024b; Schmid & Smith, 2020; T. S. J. Smith, 2017, 2020; Vincent, 2023). Here, open workshops are framed as are part of a counterculture, and the active living of alternatives to capitalism. For example, various authors in the popular science anthology *Die Welt reparieren (Repairing the World)* (Baier et al., 2016b) contrast spaces and practices of repair culture to mainstream culture of consumption and throwing away. Keywords that are used in description and analysis are sufficiency, subsistence and responsibility, repairing as caring, openness, common good economy, empowerment or environmental disobedience (Baier et al., 2016a; Bertling & Leggewie, 2016; Krasny, 2016; Kuni, 2016; Paech, 2016).

T. S. J. Smith portrays an open workshop in Scotland and from this example argues that open workshops can inhibit capitalist practices such as “accumulation of surplus value, individualization, commodification and enclosure and [instead] build commons.” (Chatterton & Pusey, 2020 quoted in T. S. J. Smith, 2020, p. 600). With that “[a] diverse economic space is created, founded on the normalization of everyday practices of mutual ownership and use” (T. S. J. Smith, 2020, p. 600). He describes this creation as pragmatic and a quiet, everyday form of activism. The focus on practice brings forth the importance of not only the infrastructure, but also the relations and identities that are co-created and maintained at the workshop.

The focus on practice that I introduce in the discussion on degrowth projects above is partly inspired by Smith’s framing. I ask what such a focus on practice could mean for strategies for degrowth. In contrast to Smith, who describes a setting where post-capitalist practices appear to be an obvious and non-contested choice, I show in the empirical discussion how non-capitalist practices are in tension with administrative frames as well as embodied neoliberal practices. These tensions show in the everyday processes at the workshops, imply struggles, but also opportunities.

Still encouraging the idea that open workshops host post-capitalist practices T. S. J. Smith in a co-authored paper suggests caution:

Yet, far from being purist oppositional spaces of postcapitalism, open workshops forge a form of shared space, or commons, in a largely privatised urban environment, negotiating the heavily normalised and embedded capitalist practicalities of rent,

profit, and work, not to mention populations lacking experience in the co-construction of infrastructures. (Schmid & Smith, 2020, p. 264)

What Schmid and Smith do not discuss explicitly in their approach is how commoning practices in the workshop setting need to be sustained against capitalist habits also within the workshop. Open workshops are described as sites where commoning practices flourish. Discussing the empirical material, I am inspired by the focus on practices but argue that sustaining commoning practices in the open workshop is no smooth or obvious process.

Others go so far as to see open workshops as prefigurative in the sense that they can inspire more democratic, inclusive and sustainable production and consumption even beyond their user group (see Brandellero & Niutta, 2023), T. S. J. Smith highlights their “social infrastructure of interdependent action and solidarity” (2020, p. 607) as a main potential. What I do in this thesis is to look at the everyday practice of this social infrastructure in the neoliberal context it exists in.

Some research on open workshops has dealt with questions concerning the everyday practice of creating and maintaining this “social infrastructure of interdependent action and solidarity” while not necessarily framing it in that way. Toombs et al. (2015) make a strong point within human-computer-interaction (HCI) research when pointing to the need for care for community and care for the workshop facilities. Their study “document[s] the implicit and explicit effort required to maintain this community within a makerspace, such as donating equipment, teaching other users, welcoming new members or taking on quasi-official roles within the space” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 1416).

Another entry point for research on the internal organization of open workshops is the observation that many examples of open workshops do not hold to the many promises that I also outlined above (Smit et al., 2024). A main shortfall is that many initiatives fail to be as open and inclusive as they themselves would like to be (Capel, 2022; Rahman & Best, 2023; Richterich, 2022b; Smit et al., 2024; T. S. J. Smith, 2020). This has inspired researchers to look at internal organisation and to highlight that openness and community building do not happen by themselves, but require real effort (Brandellero & Niutta, 2023; Á. M. Einarsson & Hertzum, 2021; Smit et al., 2024; Toombs, 2017).

Smit et al. (2024) highlight care and maintenance as crucial; they observe, however, that both are easily neglected. They highlight among other problems that neglect of care and maintenance leads to certain groups (e.g., newcomers or females) not feeling welcome at open workshops. Like Toombs et al. (2015), they see tensions between individualism and collaboration as an explanation for the organisational difficulties. Smit et al. (2024) point towards possible improvements through designed space and designed community care. Á. M. Einarsson and Hertzum (2021), who look at a workshop that is integrated into a public library and has employed staff, similarly suggest a design approach to build community at the workshop. One problem they discuss is that community building does not happen if everybody is always focused on their own private projects.

While the two previous examples have a problem-solving approach to the question of internal organisation, Davies (2017) takes an ethnographic approach and describes what she finds at the hackerspaces she has visited. Two concepts she uses to discuss the practices she finds are *do-ocracy* and the *hackerspirit*.

The hackerspaces Davies visits define as a self-governed infrastructure, a tool-pool and space that is shared among a community. They are typically organised with only few or no written-down rules (ibid.) Davies refers to this way of governing as a ‘do-ocracy’; the one who does is right. She further shows how this is in practice only partly true. Davies describes a consensus culture, where matters that are important to the hackers are discussed in regular meetings and that such a strategy of talking before just doing is appreciated. If discussions get stuck, there is, however, a solution-oriented spirit involved in what is called “the hackerspirit”. One element of the hackerspirit is the ideal of finding easy, creative, outside-the-box solutions rather than having complicated circular discussions (ibid.). What is central to any variation of such organising practice is that open workshops are essentially self-organised and self-governed by the community belonging to the open workshop.

The more managerial approach found in the design approaches, sometimes including even the help of staff (Á. M. Einarsson & Hertzum, 2021), are at odds with the idea of running with few rules, hackerspirit and do-ocracy. A practice of do-ocracy can be criticised for favouring those in the workshop who have the ability and time to do, while on the other hand it opens for “mutualism, friendship, trust and gift relations which such an organizational approach requires” (T. S. J. Smith, 2020, p. 598).

Closing this review, I argue that open workshops make an interesting case to look at for degrowth research. Research on open workshops shows that co-organisation is needed to make them work, but that the everyday reality of co-organising can be a struggle due to limitations in the users' previous experience as well as outer constraints. While Toombs et al. (2015) argue that the contradiction of individualism and care ethics is something found in the entrepreneurial maker or hacker, I suggest, considering the neoliberal context, that the contradiction is a much broader societal contradiction that becomes visible in the setting of the open workshop. While T. S. J. Smith (2020) argues that open workshops can inhibit capitalist practices, there is an equal possibility that (embodied) capitalist practices inhibit open workshops. Observing and discussing this contradiction can help understand how to move towards post-capitalist practices and post-capitalist social imaginaries.

## 2.2 Commoning

In this subchapter, I develop how I understand and use the idea of commoning and commons in the thesis. I use commons' conceptual ideas to discuss what I have been able to observe in open workshop associations in Sweden. Commoning literature offers concepts and language to describe and understand the everyday relations and practices that are crucial for commoning – and for open workshops in Sweden. With a focus on the everyday, on relations and the importance of community, literature on commoning helps understand the grounded material experience of degrowth practices. The aim of the subchapter is to introduce concepts and a language of commoning. With the subchapter I further argue for the approach I am taking in this study, that is to focus on everyday practices when discussing transformations.

The subchapter has five sections. In the first section, I give a broad overview of commons and introduce an understanding of commoning as practice. The second section discusses literature on urban commons as it offers insights into the potential struggles that commoning projects encounter in the urban context and how to conceptualise them. The third section traces ideas about the interconnection and overlap of community and commoning and highlights the importance of community care within commoning projects. The fourth section

discusses everyday care and negotiation as being at the core of the practice of commoning, while the last section discusses the idea of commoning subjectivities as a way to understand the embodiment of commoning values and the unlearning of growth imaginaries.

## **Commons as practice**

I understand commons as a something that is cared for and maintained as well as defended or claimed in a group. The focus is not on the commons as a resource or form of access, but on the process of sustaining it. Here I follow the idea that “the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive” (Linebaugh, 2008, p. 279). Linebaugh established the term commoning to better capture the focus on the commons as activity and their relational character (see, e.g., Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Seeing commoning as an ongoing process also implies that commons are always in a state of becoming and are imperfect (Williams, 2018).

Commons and commoning exist and have existed in many forms and in many geographical and historical contexts. While having existed as such, commons entered the broader academic debate with Ellinor Ostrom’s work on commons in the 1970s, for which she was awarded the Nobel prize in Economics in 2009. Another famous publication concerning the commons is Harding’s *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968). He mistook, however, an open-access regime free of rules and communication between users for a commons. According to his view, the commons were doomed because a resource that is open to all will be overexploited as everybody is taking as much or rather more than possible (see Helfrich & Bollier, 2015). For too many, this misunderstanding is still guiding ideas about humans’ ability to share or not to share, even if the thesis of the tragedy of the commons has been criticised, and even Hardin himself later acknowledged that his publication was misleading (Hardin, 1998).

Opposing the idea of the tragedy of the commons, Ostrom formulates seven design principles for common pool resources, based on case studies on commons. The principals include clearly defined boundaries, locally adapted rules for usage, collective decision-making processes, monitoring, graduated sanctions, easily accessible conflict-resolution mechanisms and recognition by governmental

bodies (Ostrom, 1990). Ostrom's work (e.g., Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom & Gardner, 1993) has successfully shown "that local communities can self-organize and craft institutions" (Singh, 2017, p. 752) to avert tragedies. Ostrom has inspired research that focuses on commons as common-pool resource. A critique formulated against this stream of research is that while focusing on the resource itself, the community governing it, and the instruments or rules the groups use for governance, there is no consideration of "important socio-political processes and contextual conditions that usually underlie the development of commons initiatives" (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021, p. 513, footnote 1).

Coming back to the proposal to understand commons as practice, Gibson-Graham et al. (2016), critic a view on commons that foregrounds property relations. They argue that the property regime as such is not the deciding factor for whether "enclosed and unmanaged resources can be commoned" (ibid., p. 196) and that thinking strategies that privilege "formal and abstract legalities" do so "at the expense of actual practices of maintaining or creating commons, or commoning enclosed or unmanaged resources" (ibid., p. 198). Here they critique a capitalocentric view on the commons – which they ascribe to political economy scholars.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Gibson-Graham et al. argue that when such capitalocentric framing

is linked to the understanding of commons as a form of property then politics focuses on struggles against enclosure and privatisation. This is not to say that these struggles are not important; however, our concern is with a mode of politics that can respond now to calls for a different mode of humanity. In this new mode, humans might take their place as only one in a multi-species community of life on this planet, abandoning illusions of mastery to become 'team players' with non-human earth others. (ibid., p. 207)

Instead of focusing on the future and possibilities that might arise after successful struggles against capitalist practices, they want to encourage research and politics that is focused on the here and now. Aiming to understand everyday organising at open workshops, the focus on the here-and-now and practices of commoning,

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<sup>13</sup> Capitalocentric critique of capitalism is for Gibson-Graham too focused on critiquing capitalism using capitalism's language instead of speaking and writing economy differently and through a non-capitalocentric understanding of economy, and fostering the non-capitalist elements already existing. (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016)

provides a language and entry point for understanding open workshops internal organisation processes and struggles of their reproduction. Foregrounding commoning over the common resource is facilitating an approach of focusing on the processes involved in claiming and maintaining commoning practices. To approach commoning by highlighting both the need to (re)claim commons and the need to maintain them has been developed within research on urban commons which is the focus of the next section.

## Urban commons

The discussion over the importance of property rights, and how zoomed in or zoomed out the analysis of the commons should be, becomes visible in research on urban commons, which I take a closer look at in the following paragraphs. I focus on three questions. First, as mentioned previously, the questions of what should be focused on when researching urban commons: structure or process, and property relation or commoning relations. Second, what is specific about urban commons in the sense of what the ‘urban’ does to the question of commoning. Third, what are the *commons* in urban commons.

Both the question of ownership or property regime and the focus on reclaiming the commons are dominant within debates on urban commons. Within commons literature there is a call to extend these concerns with questions of how to reclaim and maintain the urban commons in everyday practice of care and responsibility (e.g., Ergenç & Çelik, 2021; Federici, 2010; Huron, 2015; Samanani, 2024; Williams, 2018).

Addressing this tendency, Samanani, opposing Mitchell (2017), points to the necessity of extending the structural perspective that Mitchell calls for “in order to attend to how the conditions of possibility for urban commons are created or undermined.” (Samanani, 2024, p. 7). He suggests “that what we are missing is not just a zoomed-out analysis of how the commons are under perpetual threat within urban capitalist economies, but also a zoomed-in analysis of how the commons are actually created and sustained” (ibid.). Building on Federici (2010), Huron argues that a perspective focused primarily on the act of reclaiming the commons “can veer towards understanding the commons as a thing—a thing that needs to be retaken or even reconquered, rather than an ongoing social process” (Huron, 2015, p. 967). What is at stake, then, is to provide perspectives that are

focused on the processes of creating and (re)claiming as well as sustaining and maintaining the commons. Focusing on the “ongoing social process” provides a perspective to better understand how values and practices are negotiated and maintained on the ground, which is crucial to understand change. Looking at how commoning projects are sustained and maintained against capitalist social imaginaries can be an opening to better understand how common sense might change, which is where I interlink degrowth strategies and literature on commoning. This interlinking allows for a broadening of the understanding of the role of non-politicised commoning practices for social-ecological transformation (see also Zapata Campos et al., 2020).

Commons, both in the common-pool-resource framing following Ostrom, and in discussion on new commons, are theorised from the rural experience, e.g. peasant and indigenous resistance (e.g., Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021). Researching commons perspectives from the urban and naming them urban is not enough to understand the urban particularities (Huron, 2015). Huron argues that there are specifically two aspects about the urban that make commoning there different than in a rural setting and that those need to be considered for a theoretical grounding of the urban commons. One is that the urban is characterised by saturation, and second it is “a place where strangers meet” (ibid., p. 969).

Saturation implies high population density and a large variety of land uses, including financial investment, all existing in a relatively small space (Huron, 2015). Lots of people and lots of interests and little space “means that people are forced to either share or compete for resources” (ibid., p. 968). Regarding the meeting of strangers, Huron suggests “that strangers coming together to work on a common project is a distinctly urban phenomenon. The experience of working together with strangers—people who do not come from the same place geographically, culturally, or perhaps even politically—is, I argue, the second defining trait of the urban commons” (ibid., p. 969).

Saturation leads to a potentially challenging process of (re)claiming of commons, while the need to common with strangers impacts also the process of maintaining the commons. Huron suggests differentiating “between the politics of commons *reclamation* and the everyday practice of the long-term *maintenance* of commons” (ibid., p. 967, emphasis added). I use this distinction in the empirical chapters (eight and nine) and show how the two processes are reflected in the open

workshop associations struggle for suitable premises (reclaiming) and for members' engagement that can sustain the workshop commons (maintaining). The case Huron studies suggest the financial resources to free the respective housing from the market as a limitation, while a second challenge is the need to build "close working relationship with strangers" (ibid., p. 971). In her observation, it is the urgent necessity of affordable housing that drives people together and motivates them enough to overcome the difficulty of organising with strangers (Huron, 2015).

When discussing the difficulties of maintaining commoning practice, Huron points to two major challenges. One is for the commons to not be turned into an asset by its commoners. Huron describes how, in some cases, commoners have chosen individual short-term monetary gains over sustaining the housing commons they had established. She describes this as giving in instead of resisting capitalism. In her observation, it is important for commoners to understand the importance of the existence of the commons for themselves and future members (ibid.).

A second challenge Huron identifies "is ensuring working relationships among cooperative members over time" (ibid., p. 975). Her case shows how cooperative groups once the emergency of reclaiming of the commons is over stand in front of the difficult task of organising their day-to-day running. They find themselves in a new position of autonomy and responsibility after having experienced submission. They have to decide on rules together, which includes potential conflicting issues such as who can become a member of the cooperative.

While not going into the point in more detail, Huron describes how a high degree of individualisation and the dominance of capitalist relations is a challenge for the cooperatives. Huron writes that if "newcomers to the commons have lived most of their lives in capitalist structures, explaining how the commons works to them can be a challenge" (ibid., p. 976). Huron has observed that cooperatives that manage to cultivate a sense of family seem to fare best (2015). Unfortunately, she does not take this point any further and the question of how such groups cultivate that sense and what this observation implies for our understanding of commoning remains unanswered.

While Huron initiated a discussion on what the *urban* implies for urban commons, I note the absence of a discussion on what *commons* means in urban commons. What is meant by *commons* in urban commons is important to ask, as

it has implications for questions of both ownership on the one hand and day-to-day responsibility, care and maintenance of commons on the other hand.

When exploring literature on urban commons, the diversity of what is conceptualised as being the urban commons is striking (see also Zapata Campos et al., 2020). While this diversity is inspiring and opens up many discussions it also implies that what is meant by urban commons needs to be specified in every case to avoid misunderstanding. In the following paragraphs I give an overview of this diversity and some implications I see for discussing open workshops as urban commons.

Examples, of what is conceptualised as urban commons are: housing commons (e.g., Huron, 2015; Ruiz Cayuela & García-Lamarca, 2023; Savini, 2023), urban gardening initiatives (e.g., Barron, 2017; Bergame et al., 2023; Eizenberg, 2012; Pikner et al., 2020), and other self-organised infrastructure like libraries (e.g., Williams, 2018) or (repair) workshops (e.g., T. S. J. Smith, 2020; Zapata Campos et al., 2020), elements in public space (e.g., Samanani, 2024) or political organising (e.g., Ergenç & Çelik, 2021). While some are similar in how they are framed as commons, others are different in many regards. A co-organised library, urban gardens, or housing commons are usually characterised by there being a limited and defined community that takes care and is responsible, while there can be an extended and also anonymous user group that needs to follow the rules set by the smaller commoning community. In contrast, public space infrastructures like park benches are open for anybody to use, even if they are maintained by a group of commoners. Those others who use the infrastructure are not obliged to meet any expectations that the commoners might have regarding how this urban commons should be used or cared for, which can lead to conflicts and implies a vulnerability for the commoners (Samanani, 2024). Here, the commoners cannot regulate access to their commons. Different again is the case of understanding bottom-up political organising as urban commons. Ergenç and Çelik (2021) describe a case of direct democracy on a neighbourhood level concerned with city-wide politics relating to public space such as parks, but also hospitals, schools and other public services. Here the urban commons are informed by ideas of the right to the city and build on a claim that any public matter should be understood as urban commons. The urban commons is here the idea that the city should belong to everybody and not be privatised. This framing becomes a powerful political claim, but not a question of sustaining commons through day-to-day care and maintenance.

I do not want to argue that one of these three conceptualisations of urban commons is better than the other. I want to clarify that they are different and that their differences have implications for what responsibility or care for the urban commons means practically. At one end, care and responsibility imply watering a garden and negotiation questions like what to plant and who can harvest how much; in another case, care and responsibility imply a more general concern about how a neighbourhood is changing and an engagement in protesting the (en)closure of public space.

Ergenç and Çelik conclude that “urban commoning is a social process and may take different forms in various contexts” (2021, p. 1057). Ergenç and Çelik describe a diversity in approaches on the urban commons and identify a conceptual gap between more abstract approaches focused on the act of reclaiming and the concrete concerns of sustaining a commons. They frame the gap as temporal one, between the moment of reclaiming and the moment of maintaining or sustaining (see also Huron, 2015). The gap can also be framed as a difference in level of abstraction (e.g. Samanani, 2024) or as a missing conceptualisation of what the commons or process of commoning is in a specific case.

The main takeaways from the first two sections of this subchapter are that commons need to be understood as process in order to understand when they thrive and struggle. In the urban context there are two particular challenges for the practice of commoning. One is saturation, and the other one is urban anonymity. Differentiating the process of reclaiming and that of maintaining the commons helps to understand the particularities of the urban challenges. Similar to what I demonstrate in the subchapter on degrowth and how degrowth practices emerge in situations of crisis, so can commoning practices emerge due to the saturation and desperate need for housing.

The next part of this subchapter is focused on the hands-on process of commoning, both the moment of reclaiming, but also the long-term project of maintaining. Understanding hands-on processes is most relevant in relation to my research project, both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it is relevant as establishing and maintaining maintenance practices is what I have observed and discussed with interviewees. Theoretically, it is relevant as I argue that we need to better understand such processes to understand possible pathways of transformation.

## Community and commoning

The first aspect from the literature that I want to highlight is the relation between commoning and community. Huron describes the relationship of commons formation and community formation as dialectical in the sense that neither necessarily needs to precede the other. Her study shows that commons and community can develop together when the need emerges.

To maintain a commons, there needs to be a community that does commoning. However, there being a community-owned property does not mean that there will always be a community who maintains it, nor that it is a non-conflictual or easy process (Huron, 2015). Here the urban context with its anonymity, diversity, and fluidity poses a challenge. Ostrom writes about rural cases that are the basis for her work on common-pool-resource management, noting that individuals in those rural communities with successful management “have shared a past and expect to share a future” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 88). While environmental factors such as rainfall are uncertain, their community is often stable and homogenous (Ostrom, 1990).

While community is central in commoning, the emphasis on community brings the risk of romanticising it (e.g., Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). For Federici (2010) commoning, community, responsibility and subjectivity are interconnected. The community in the commons sense is not an exclusive group, but is “a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals” (ibid., p. 289). Federici frames commoning as an understanding of our interdependencies with others close and far away, human and more-than-human, and as assuming responsibility according to those interdependencies. Community in this sense is not a defined group that closes itself towards others, but an understanding and respecting of interdependency with others.

At the same time, there is a need to be able to exclude practices that would harm the commons or even destroy it. Discussing this question, Williams (2018) draws on an idea of commoning being *critically exclusive* (Hubbard, 2001, cited in Williams (2018)). In the context of a women’s library, the guarding against certain practices is crucial for the library to be the safe space it is. Exclusion is here not against certain groups, but against practices that would harm the commons and community (Williams, 2018). In an extension to this idea, Williams observes that

“[i]t is practices of inclusion and exclusion enacted by commoners that determine how ‘open’ a particular commons is” (ibid., p. 18).

The idea of critical exclusiveness presupposes that the commoners community who shares responsibility over the commons has the power to decide over matters of use and access and what rules should guide possible exclusions. Such a situation is only given if the urban commons is a specific resource such as an urban garden, a library or housing. Commoning practices that concern public space or urban politics more broadly are different in this regard (see also previous section). Samanani (2024) describes how this implies a vulnerability of commoning initiatives for public space, but also creates a strength, as there is a possibility to inspire ethics of care for public space beyond the already commoning community.

Summing up, there is the community that cares for the commons. It is the commons that calls together the community. The need to manage the commons together is the reason for the community to emerge. This does not mean that it will be a smooth process or that the community will form by itself and maintain itself without management and effort. Second, there is an idea that commoning helps the commoners understand, experience and feel that they are part of something bigger (see also section on commoning subjectivities below): that they as individuals are not atomised as neoliberal understandings make us believe, but that we are interdependent, not only within the commons, but beyond (e.g., Federici, 2010).

While the account of community and commons I have given so far highlights the interdependency of commons and community, Gudeman (2001) suggest to imagine their relation as even closer, and merges them. He criticises modern economist theory that understands the commons as a material resource, and as “something separate from a human community” and stresses that “[w]ithout a commons, there is no community; without a community, there is no commons” (ibid., p. 27). His emphasis is that the commons always also entail a community, or one could say that the commons is not only its material resources but also the community that maintains those resources. It follows, “that what happens to a commons is not a physical incident but a social event. Taking away the commons destroys community, and destroying a complex of relationships demolishes a commons” (ibid., p. 27). In this context, Illich points out that enclosure of the commons is often thought of as a physical takeover and a shift in rights of access, while he highlights that it also marked a shift in the dominating western view on

nature. Nature became something to extract from rather than something to care for together (Illich, 1992; see also Singh, 2017). Enclosure in this understanding “redefines community” (Illich, 1992, p. 51). Enclosure was, then, not just an act cutting people off from their livelihood but also enclosing them from their autonomy and their practice of sharing, community care, and co-organisation.

Closing this section, there are two takeaways I want to highlight: (1) the described interdependency and inseparability of commons and community; (2) the observation that sustaining and maintaining (urban) commons is depended on successful work of sustaining good working relations between commoners. I highlight those points as takeaways as they become relevant in the empirical discussion. There, I discuss open workshop associations’ approaches to build communities and their difficulties with it.

### **Everyday care and negotiations**

Relying on an understanding of the commons as a social relation among people and that which they care for in common, I now turn to ideas about what it means to sustain a commons. In the context of a women’s library in Sydney, Williams frames “mundane practices [...] such as cleaning, making cups of tea, accessioning books, and organising events” (2018, p. 17) as commoning. It is those mundane practices that sustain the library as a commons. Williams argues further that it is through those mundane practices that “spaces such as the Women’s Library can become generative sites of care and justice” (ibid.) and that looking at such practices can help understand how commons are sustained and commoning practices expanded.

In her study, Williams draws on a framework for understanding commoning practices developed by Gibson-Graham et al. (2013, 2016), see table 2.1. The mundane tasks she highlights as being central to the generative character of the commons would be part of what is here subsumed under the performance of *care* through community members. The ongoing negotiation over those care activities as well as about matters of *access*, *use*, *benefit* and *responsibility* are further constituting the commons in their context (Williams, 2018). In that sense, commons are “constituted through ongoing collective decisions” and “performed into being” (ibid., p. 24). Williams further argues that it is through a focus on those negotiations and practices that we can understand “the dynamic role the

physical property plays in shaping the commons” (ibid.). Physical property and the materials that make the library that Williams is discussing are an important part of enabling the existence of that commons, but she argues that it is “the practices of commoning that help us understand how this organisation becomes a commons in the city” (ibid.).

**Table 2.1 “Commons negotiations” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016, emphasis added)**

Access	Use	Benefit	Care	Responsibility	Property
Shared and wide	Manged by a <i>community</i>	Widely distributed to a <i>community</i> and beyond	Performed by <i>community</i> members	Assumed by a <i>community</i>	Any form of ownership (private, state, open access)

Relating back to the discussion on commoning and community above, I want to highlight that community plays a central role in the table compiled by Gibson-Graham et al. (2016). Those who assume *responsibility* for the commons are the basis for the community of commoners, who also manage the *use* of the commons. It is members of that community who *care* for the commons in more practical matters while both *access* and *benefit* reach beyond the community of commoners, both materially through services or surplus that is shared (sold or otherwise) and immaterially by their possible impact on, e.g., dominant discourse (Williams, 2018).

The table helps to understand the different layers of negotiation in commoning practices, while also including property. With the empirical material, I argue that the property, the terms of access, and degree of autonomy that commoners can gain in relations to their commons not just enable, but also frame, those practices of commoning. Following Williams, I argue that it is the practices that make the commons, and exploring these helps our understanding of how a commons remains or becomes a commons, while property, access and autonomy impact (not determine) what practices are possible and how. I therefore combine questions about practices and negotiations with an analysis of conditions for those practices and how the local context frames the practices I was able to observe.

Coming back to the focus on everyday care and negotiations, Williams argues that a focus on day-to-day sustaining practices can provide insights into how commons “produce new languages, relationships, practices, resistances, and ways of being in the world” (2018, p. 19). She sees commons as practices that *refigure relationships*

and which can show and enable “other ways of thinking/doing/being” (ibid.). She attributes these characteristics to the everydayness of the practices involved in commoning, where it is “assemblages and multiplicities of practice” (ibid.) that bring commons into being.

The idea that engaging in certain everyday practices can refigure relationships and lead to new ways of being in the world, connects mundane practices of care to the question of how social imaginaries might transform, an idea I explore in the thesis. The next section builds on the idea of commoning practices inspiring “new languages, relationships, practices, resistances, and ways of being in the world” by looking at those who engage in commoning.

### Commoning subjectivities

In this last section of the subchapter, I explore the concept of commoning subjectivities. The concept suggests that through engaging in commoning, individuals – and with them groups – learn to embody commoning values. Through commoning, individuals become *commoners*, *common subjects* or develop *commoning subjectivities*, not by accessing a shared resource, but by engaging in the act of commoning together with others (e.g., Federici, 2010; Ruiz Cayuela, 2021, 2023; Ruiz Cayuela & Armiero, 2021; Ruiz Cayuela & García-Lamarca, 2023; Samanani, 2024; Singh, 2017; Williams, 2018).

In the case of my research, commoning and subjectivity are interesting to look at regarding two aspects. One is the idea that commoning can produce commoning subjectivities, and the other is that neoliberal subjectivities inhibit the practice of commoning. This relates to the idea that open workshops enable post-capitalist practices and relations (T. S. J. Smith, 2020) or might be hindered by capitalist practices and relations (see 2.2). The concept of commoning subjectivities, and how they can emerge or be inhibited, helps understanding that potential and risk. I discuss both aspects and how they relate to each other.

In a paper on a community in India that has turned the forest which is the basis of their livelihood into a commons, Singh argues that “people become commoners through the embodied practices of caring for [...] a shared common” (2017, p. 751). She frames commons as “affective socio-nature entanglements and as nurturing ground for subjectivity” that enable “the emergence of other-than-capitalist subjectivities” (ibid.). A question that informs the paper is how such

other subjectivities can come into being. Singh portrays engaging in commoning as one answer to that question. She has observed how the practice of caring for the forest results in increased affection for that forest which motivates continued care. Through the practice of care these commoners “cultivate new subjectivities of being forest caregivers” (ibid., p. 757). Confirming this idea is also her observation that forest communities who employ others to care for their forest are less affectionate as they spend less time in and with the forest (Singh, 2017). While Singh highlights a close relation to the forest as forming forest caregivers, other work highlights that beyond the labour or care it is the relations between the commoners that creates commoning subjectivities (Ruiz Cayuela & Armiero, 2021). García-Lamarca describes such relations as “equal, non-commodified, and solidaristic” (2017, p. 429).

Beyond asking how people assimilate commoning values and learn to become commoners, Singh also asks why they would do so. She argues the focus is needed as there is a gap in the commons literature on what motivates people to engage in commoning (Singh, 2017). Her reasoning builds on ideas of affect. Like Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) she argues that people engage in commoning when they feel affected. In the case of the now *forest caregivers*, there was a situation of over usage that caused the local community to be affected. They reacted when seeing their local forest and livelihood being exploited. Singh is here mainly arguing against ideas inhered in the concept of the tragedy of the commons, which does not include any such option for commoners intervening when they witness an over usage. In the case she presents, Singh argues against the idea of the homo economicus and for an emotional human being that reacts to the loss of a commons by protecting it (Singh, 2017).

Similar, Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) argue that by witnessing degradation of (local) commons, not only forests, but also the air or the climate, people can learn to be affected and create commons. Huron, whose research on urban commons I discuss above, points to situations of an urgent need for housing as the moment when tenants co-organise with strangers and create their housing commons (Huron, 2015; see also Ruiz Cayuela & García-Lamarca, 2023). As discussed in the previous subchapter, Varvarousis (2019) argues that crisis can foster states of liminality and that these are openings for new (old) practice, such as commoning, to take shape. This can be due to larger crisis, such as economic crisis and austerity measures (ibid.) or political repression and commodification of public resources

(Ergenç & Çelik, 2021), but also personal, biographical breaks that create openings, and initial civic engagement, “while identification with underlying causes emerges more gradually, through the process of participation itself” (Samanani, 2024, p. 5).

What all the cases in the above paragraph have in common is the observation that situations of experiences of crisis can create pressure and motivation to engage in commoning practices. This occurs both through a necessity and need, but also due to a receptiveness for alternatives when the status quo is in crisis (see also Varvarousis, 2019).

Similarly to what I discuss in relation to degrowth literature and the presence of crisis, there are two questions that arise from this observation. First, a question that some of the above-named publications take up as a dilemma (Huron, 2015; Ruiz Cayuela, 2021; Ruiz Cayuela & García-Lamarca, 2023; Varvarousis, 2019): what happens in or with commoning initiatives once the immediate crisis is over? A second question is: how can commoning initiatives emerge without a pressing need or crisis? In particular, the second question is underrepresented in the literature on commoning and in that concerning degrowth transformations. Here cases from the neoliberal Nordic welfare state context can inspire discussions on strategy. I address this question when answering the third research question in chapter 10.3.

In his research on commoning public spaces and infrastructure in Kilburn, London, Samanani argues that the question of engagement in commoning projects can be described as “a sort of chicken-and-egg situation, where valuing the commons often requires engaging with the commons, but engaging with the commons often requires already valuing the commons” (2024, p. 5). This being one difficulty, he highlights that a similar paradox exists in relation to co-organising with strangers, which is what most likely will be required for commoners in the urban (Huron, 2015). Accordingly, “inclusion requires understanding the value of difference, yet understanding the value of difference often comes from experiences of inclusive spaces” (Samanani, 2024, p. 5).

Unresolved paradoxes like this are a reason for Samanani to argue for a need for more zoomed-in perspectives, to be able to learn “how particular forms of common value are produced and contested within particular situated locations” (ibid., p. 8). In the particular situated location Samanani studies, it is an ethics of

care and activists taking responsibility for public space that create and maintain practices of commoning. What remains an open question is how and why some see that need for care and decide to act upon it, while others do not.

The idea that an engagement in commoning can foster commoner subjectivities which otherwise would not emerge and that such are needed to maintain commons, is clear in the literature reviewed in the preceding paragraphs. What is less foregrounded in this discussion is how capitalist subjectivities might impact how well commons can be sustained, especially in noncrisis situations.

Huron (2015) does not discuss this explicitly, but shares insights from her empirical work, where commoners observe that explaining the idea of commoning and maintaining a culture of commoning can be difficult if newcomers have no prior experience with commoning and “have lived most of their lives in capitalist structures” (ibid., p. 976). The housing commons that Huron studies risk attracting newcomers who are not joining because of their interest or need to common, but out of an interest in cheap housing. The observation that the maintenance of commons might be threatened by an inability to common is something I examine closer in the empirical discussion, where I argue that many joining the workshops are not only strangers to each other (see Huron 2015), but strangers to commoning (chapter nine).

Another related aspect from Huron’s study is what she discusses as an inability to resist short-term gains that individuals can make by dissolving their commons. This could be framed as a difficulty of maintaining one’s commoner identity when surrounded by capitalist structures nourishing capitalist subjectivities. García-Lamarca (2017) found in her case that before new members of a squatting community would be able to identify as housing activists, they needed to *disidentify* with the idea of being a failed house owner, an identity they had embodied in contacts with banks, lawyers and estate agents. This process of disidentification and identification is not without hurdles or something that happens only through passive presence in the new context. García-Lamarca describes a need for pedagogy or re-education, a facilitated process of integration, working against embodied capitalist practices of non-engagement and an expectation of receiving a service (assistencialism) (see also D’Alisa et al., 2015).

Concluding this part on commoning subjectivities, I want to highlight the importance that, for example, Singh puts on understanding the conditions for

fostering commoning subjectivities. She argues for an understanding of subjectivities as processual and part of a never-finished becoming of personality (Singh, 2017). She takes her definition of subjectivity from Read (2011), who understands subjectivities as “ways of perceiving, understanding, and relating to the world” (Singh, 2017, p. 761). Building from there, Singh argues for more research on commoner subjectivities for the following reasons:

First, the current ecological crisis is deeply connected with our ways of being human. Second, the solutions that we are seeking to find our way out of this crisis are increasingly market-based and likely to reproduce the subjectivities and modes of being human that have gotten us into this situation in the first place. Third, we need to understand how subjectivities are produced so that we can actively produce alternate subjectivities. (ibid., p. 769)

The formulation of “producing subjectivities” might be misunderstood as a social engineering idea, while I understand Singh’s approach as a question for conditions that can enable the emergence of other-than-capitalist subjectivities. Rather than producing subjectivities, she speaks of a becoming through relating, inspired by Ingold’s conceptual work on dwelling (Ingold, 2000; Singh, 2017).

A commoning subjectivity “includes a sensibility and concern for the well-being of others with whom it is relationally entangled” and is fundamentally different to the “atomized individual subject of Western thought” (Singh, 2017, p. 760). To be sensible and concerned for well-being, extends to assuming responsibility when the sensibility and concern for someone or something calls for action. Guattari (1995), quoted in Singh (2017), frames the question of how we can be more responsible for both our own survival and “equally for the future of all life on the planet” (Singh, 2017, p. 754) as one of the biggest questions of our time. If this was true in 1995, it must be much more pressing in face of multiple crises in 2025.

Having expanded what commoning subjectivities might imply, I want to go back to the contrast with the non-commons subjectivity, which much of Singh’s discussion is based on. When she discusses what is fundamentally different to that subject in Western thought she draws on scholars and thinkers like Spinoza, Haraway, Ingold and Escobar who argue in different ways for a different understanding of how humans are and how humans relate (Singh, 2017). What I want to highlight is that there are two layers of subjectivity that Singh implicitly

discusses. One is how we learn to relate through experience, the subjectivity that becomes through engagement with, for example, commoning. Second, there is the idea we embody of how we are as humans, less funded through experience, but more like a cultural understanding of how we ought to be or how we can be, e.g., the *homo economicus*. A subjectivity embodied from the dominant social imaginary.

The discussion on commoning subjectivities suggests that learning to be someone else is part of embodying a new social imaginary. With that understanding, the formation of subjectivities opens for an understanding of the reformation of social imaginaries through everyday practices and can add to questions of degrowth transformation.

In the next subchapter, I zoom out from the more conceptual focus and discuss research empirically based in Sweden and other Nordic countries and which uses a degrowth or commoning framing.

## 2.3 Degrowth and commoning in Sweden

In subchapter 2.1 I argue that degrowth theory is mainly grounded in cases from Mediterranean Europe and that when unreflected this grounding can be problematic. The aim of this concluding subchapter is therefore to discuss how the ideas presented concerning both degrowth and commoning relate to the Swedish context. I do this by discussing literature that places degrowth and commoning ideas into the Swedish and Nordic context, and by connecting concepts from degrowth and commoning to the Nordic context.

The subchapter has three sections discussing literature on degrowth practices in the Nordic context in relation to ideas present in the degrowth and commoning literature. The first section is focused on the Nordic context and the state, the second section focuses on questions of time and engagement, while the final section traces tensions between autonomy and institutionalisation which projects need to navigate in the Swedish context. I focus on practices and projects and do not engage with, for example, discussions on sustainable welfare and degrowth, which is another topic that has been discussed in the Nordic welfare state context (e.g., Emilsson, 2023; Fritz et al., 2021).

## Context and the state

In this section, I engage with literature that broadly relates to questions concerning modes of social-ecological transformation in Sweden, in the sense that I also include a few examples from other Nordic countries with a similar welfare history. I engage with this literature in the context of questions that emerged in the discussion of both degrowth and commoning literature (2.1 and 2.2): how might the Nordic context impact degrowth practices and pathways for degrowth transformations?

With this explicit focus on the context, I start with a general remark on the literature discussed in this subchapter. In some of the publications there is a strong emphasis on the specific context of the cases, the neoliberal Nordic welfare state, and how this context matters for understanding the situation of, e.g., small community-organised projects (Berglund, 2017; Eskelinen et al., 2020; Rutt, 2020). One issue that is discussed in most of the publications considered in this review are the various roles and impacts of public actors in furthering social ecological transformation. In some cases, the role is viewed from a planning or policy perspective (Buhr et al., 2018; Hagbert et al., 2019; Hult & Bradley, 2017) and in others from the grassroots perspective and how actors handle the specific context (Berglund, 2017; Bonow & Normark, 2018; Eskelinen et al., 2020; Rutt, 2020). The idea that context matters and the focus on the position of the state and its institutions leads to a question that comes up repeatedly in the publications. A question posed but not answered is whether the Nordic welfare state context works to enable or hinder a social ecological transformation (Eskelinen et al., 2020; Hagbert et al., 2019). Having pointed out these three aspects, I will in the following sections discuss them in further detail.

As mentioned above, in some of the publications there is a strong emphasis on the special context of the Nordic welfare state and that attention to context is crucial for understanding specific phenomena in time and space. As Rutt writes, this point goes beyond her specific case study, but has the “aim to counter universalizing messages about potentials and risks of urban farming, and instead, bring out the complexities of what happens in and around spaces called urban farms and illustrate the need for research that is mindful of context, in particular, the nature of municipal and national development trajectories” (2020, p. 614). Her study concerns urban farming in Copenhagen, Denmark and how the neoliberal Nordic welfare state is forming the situation of the garden both through

state regulations and habituated behaviours and understandings of gardeners. Similarly, in a study on local initiatives in Helsinki, Finland, Berglund highlights how “[t]his contrast [of how activists frame their work] with many other degrowth discourses shows the significance of local histories in influencing the space available for people to work out alternatives to the status quo” (2017, p. 566). She discusses how activists she researches with in Helsinki avoid political discourse and frame their actions in purely scientific arguments. Berglund relates this to a specific history of techno-optimism and trust in state and science (Berglund, 2017). What she emphasises throughout the paper is that only the close analysis of the historical context allows for a proper understanding of the activists’ approach to their projects. Another example is the edited volume *Enacting Community Economies Within a Welfare State*. The core question here is how community economies can exist “with, within and beyond the welfare state” (Eskelinen et al., 2020, p. 18). The authors pay special attention to the question of how the specific context enables and hinders community economics. The case studies are all located within Finland, while the authors also claim a certain validity for their discussions for other Nordic welfare states. These three publications (Berglund, 2017; Eskelinen et al., 2020; Rutt, 2020) make an explicit point in looking at how the specific context in the Nordic welfare state influences the projects they are looking at, while other studies do assume more “universalizing messages about potentials and risks”. One example is a study about a bike kitchen in Malmö, where the author discusses the bike kitchen as any bike kitchen, and while introducing some particulars about Malmö does not analyse how this specific situation might explain parts of the observations (Bradley, 2018).

These studies from Malmö, Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Finland focus on small-scale community (co-)organised projects. One publication not concerned with small community projects, but relevant when discussing degrowth in Sweden, is the final report of the Beyond GDP-growth research project that presents four scenarios for Sweden beyond GDP-growth (Hagbert et al., 2019). The report is mainly concerned with these four scenarios, why they are needed and how they would enable Sweden to meet a range of sustainability goals. How Sweden could develop into any of the future Swedens described in the scenarios is, however, left open, as this question was not at the centre of the project. While not going into detail about possible actors for the urgent “transition of historical proportions” (ibid., p. 25) there is an understanding that context matters significantly for that

transition. The authors of the report have observed similar tendencies as I discuss in chapter 2.1 and highlight that

[t]he type of societal changes presented within the project must also be understood in a cultural and institutional context, where stories about futures beyond growth in Sweden may be different than those, for example, in Southern Europe where a lot of the growth-critical or degrowth-oriented literature was developed. This is related, among other things, to views on authorities and confidence in societal institutions. Alternative practices (urban farming, local currencies, time banks, barter, child or social care cooperatives, etc.) have also been developed in the context of economic crisis or where conventional institutions can no longer ensure basic needs, such as in Argentina, Greece and Catalonia. However, the point of departure may be different in societies not affected by similar crises and where trust in established institutions is higher. (ibid., p. 46)

It is left open what that means in practice for politics beyond GDP-growth in Sweden. What the observation highlights is how the historic welfare state context might call for different strategies than what is commonly discussed for degrowth (Hagbert et al., 2019).

Staying with the same text, I move on to discuss the second observation I made regarding the literature, that the role of public actors is at the heart of much of the discussion, sometimes explicit, other times rather implicit. Without making any clear statement about it, the final report from the Beyond GDP-growth project seems to assume that transition happens through planning. While in some scenarios local citizen organisations play a bigger role than they do in Sweden today, the report assumes that the change towards more direct democracy and community organising comes not from below, but from above: “Institutional capacity is necessary to drive change. Functioning and long-term infrastructure, both institutional and physical, is particularly needed to broaden opportunities for people to engage in the alternative practices and economic activities shown in the scenarios” (ibid., p. 44). I understand this as a view on transformation, where the state creates enabling conditions for its citizens to become those people who fit the new future. The responsibility and the agency lie in that sense on the planners and legislators.

A paper published within the same project looks at “institutional conditions for advancing degrowth at the local level, especially in a non-crisis context” (Buhr et al., 2018, p. 3). The case study looks at how degrowth ideas feature in planning

documents and agendas from different actors in the small Swedish town Alingsås. The main outcome of the study is that even while there are some individuals working within the municipality who have radical ideas and are critical towards politics centred around economic growth,

actors' opportunities to diverge from the established institutional context, which consists of prevailing norms, values, and regulations about the type of development that is desirable, are limited. This is also the main explanation, as we see it, for why individuals who harbor radical ideas still adapt their work to a mainstream sustainability discourse. (ibid., p. 11)

The outlook the authors present for a future of degrowth in municipality politics is not too optimistic. However, they suggest concrete activities, events and experiments as a way forward to create experience with degrowth and link those to the existing institutional context. While some of the actors interviewed for the study were private actors, such as the local transition towns initiative, the focus of the paper is still how degrowth can be integrated into policy and planning. Thinking this case together with the *radical bricoleur* (Buch-Hansen & Carstensen, 2024), it emphasises the importance of networks of such radical agents to inspire and maintain degrowth practices.

Hult and Bradley take a more explicit stance on the responsibility and transformative potential of public authorities. They

argue that it is not only up to grassroots groups to build up alternative parallel 'infrastructures of provision'. Local public authorities can, and should, play a key role in reshaping infrastructure and routes of provision, to encompass possibilities for citizens to organise, make, repair and share resources in a socially inclusive manner. (2017, pp. 611–612)

While in the degrowth publications discussed earlier in this literature review, prefigurative projects are seen as exclusively organised from the grassroots, Hult and Bradley suggest that local authorities also can and should create, for example, sharing infrastructure. To discuss how municipalities can provide infrastructures for sharing, they study two such infrastructures in Malmö and their interplay with the municipality. Besides highlighting the positive role of the municipality, they name five factors that are crucial for sharing initiatives to flourish. As temporary financial support is an often-encountered problem for sharing initiatives, they

highlight how “involvement and long-term financial support of the City” is crucial. They see a benefit in a “clear frame and rules for how citizens can become involved” (ibid., p. 609) and in a flexible scheme for what can happen in the facilities so as to cater for various groups and changing interests. As a fourth factor, they highlight how civil servants need a climate of political support and stability to be able to act. The last point the authors mention is that there needs to be a willingness from the municipality to think in larger contexts and have a vision for sharing infrastructure.

Here, I want to connect back to how the state is discussed in degrowth research, (see 2.1). What sticks out in the examples discussed from the Nordic context so far is an approach of transformation thinking with the state rather than against the state. D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) criticise degrowth scholars for a lack of scale in their thinking of the state. In the examples from Sweden discussed here, the focus is mostly on the municipal level, not the national level. While in what D’Alisa and Kallis describe as a common view in degrowth literature, the “state as a thing, or a structure, that society should reform (symbiotic metamorphosis) or ignore (interstitial metamorphosis) and only occasionally revolt against (rupture [...])” (ibid., p. 5), in the Swedish cases above, the view is that it would be the state who would change society. It is unclear how the state would become a beyond-GDP state, but its suggested role is to nudge citizens into being better people (Hagbert et al., 2019; Hult & Bradley, 2017).

Whether the three studies presented here (Buhr et al., 2018; Hagbert et al., 2019; Hult & Bradley, 2017) share this non-confrontational, but top-down perspective on transformation due to their theoretical starting point or whether the empirical context inspired the view is unclear. While the state is also perceived as obstructing grassroots engagement (see below), the idea that the (local) state can be an active part of a post-growth transformation is not as unthought of in the Swedish context, which marks a contrast to other degrowth literature discussing grassroots projects (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020).

## **Time and engagement**

Instead of focusing on what the municipality can do to facilitate community-involving projects, Rutt observes how it is difficult even for motivated individuals to spend time in the urban garden in Copenhagen which she focuses her case

study on: “When faced with a choice of what to do with our precious free time, we quickly come to feel that the *idea* of the garden is more exciting than the *reality*” (Rutt, 2020, p. 629, emphasis in original). Time as a limiting factor comes up in similar ways also in cases in Finland and Stockholm (see Bonow & Normark, 2018; Eskelinen et al., 2020). The different studies go in different directions when finding reasons for why this is such a central problem, but time appears as a major limiting factor for many of the initiatives studied.

While Bonow and Normark (2018) observe that time is a limiting factor when there are too few people who have time to water the garden in the summer and when motivated people leave because the time-intense facilitating burden is not shared and becomes overwhelming. Once the leading persons leave, the gardens often disappear (ibid.). The authors argue for more facilitation from the side of the city administration and for more formalisation. Writing with an interest in keeping the gardens alive as gardens that provide food – more than as gardens that are for community building and sites of alternative economies – Bonow and Normark see a need in knowledge support, more long-term perspectives for the gardens to grow and become permanent and a need for less dependency on voluntary commitment. They observe “a typical Swedish problem because there is a different ‘volunteering culture’ in Sweden. The general pattern of volunteering is characterized by a focus on membership and ‘voluntary activities’ are, to a great deal, performed within the framework of an organization” (ibid., p. 514). To mitigate this problem, they envision a formalised role of a facilitator “coordinating resources, planning, knowledge, etc” (ibid.) as is common in some other cities (e.g., Malmö). The lack of time of citizens would then be counterbalanced by professional and more centralised management.

One chapter in the edited volume concerning community economies in Finland focuses on time constrains for volunteer engagement, but comes to different observations, conclusions and suggestions. Observing that time for engagement is a limiting factor for people in their two case studies, an art centre and a food cooperative, the authors ask, “How can people devote their agency and time to constructing community economies, when they should also be able to survive in a capitalist economy, perhaps being pushed to full-time wage labour by disciplining authorities?” (Hirvilammi & Joutsenvirta, 2020, p. 47). In the chapter, they describe how the Finnish welfare system is organised after a strong ideal of “full employment and self-support through wage labour” (ibid., p. 53)

and showcase how this hinders projects based on volunteer work. They describe a situation where fulltime wage labour is the norm and hard to combine with serious volunteer work. People who are not in full-time employment often find themselves confronted with a strong activation paradigm guiding them back towards wage labour. Much-needed volunteer work or other non-wage labour (e.g., care work) is not recognised as work or productive activity. The authors connect this to a strong Protestant work ethic and consumerist orientations that promote an outdated understanding of a good life. Acknowledging the complexity of the described dynamics and how fundamental the practice of trading income for time is they provide two policy proposals to enable a broader understanding of work within the welfare state. The first suggestion is a universal basic income scheme to give more possibilities to informal and volunteer engagement. The second suggestion is a workhour reduction to decrease overconsumption, redistribute work more equally, and give more meaning to work and life.

As mentioned above, Rutt (2020) too highlights the lack of time as an essential factor and provides a similar analysis and suggestions as Hirvilammi and Joutsenvirta (2020). She also observes a clash between a productive imperative and norm of full-time wage labour with needs of the community garden. She further identifies how members of the garden with different employment situations clash through their different habits and norms and different needs from the garden and its organisation. She describes how the garden users become a more homogenous group, that is efficient, organised, and well equipped to handle bureaucratic hurdles but has difficulties finding the time to be in the garden (together).

Describing the issue of time, other interrelated dynamics influencing the thriving of volunteer-led community projects become apparent. One which I already mentioned is a 'productive imperative' imposed both by funding and legislating bodies and as an internalised value of volunteers (Hirvilammi & Joutsenvirta, 2020; Rutt, 2020). Another trend that becomes visible in cases in Finland, Stockholm and Copenhagen is how the "state transforms the transformer" (Lang, 2017 cited in Rutt, 2020, p. 626). Reading about the urban garden in both Copenhagen and Stockholm with the idea of uncivil actors in mind, it is striking how in both urban gardening cases the first thing the group of volunteers does is to form an association. Before even knowing where to garden, the groups form an official association to be a recognised legal body. Rutt (2020) describes how the

association was in the beginning only pro forma. However, later individuals with backgrounds in accounting and management joined and took the association work more serious. The formalisation process legitimated the garden and secured funding and permissions, but it also created tensions and even threatened the garden's existence. Rutt further describes how rules, regulations and bureaucratic procedures for urban gardening are so complicated in Copenhagen that the city for a time had an employed facilitator to help gardening projects navigate the regulative jungle. However, due to budget cuts the service was ended. Many gardens disappeared with the facilitator as they could not maintain their projects without that help. Bonow and Normark (2018) call for such a facilitator in Stockholm to ease the gardens' administrative burden. Similarly, planning-focused studies on the role of the municipality in volunteer projects suggest long term involvement from the municipality (e.g., Hult & Bradley, 2017).

What the three cases show is how lack of time of those engaged in those co-organised projects creates troubles for the engaged individuals and their projects. The lack of time is discussed with its very tangible consequences of there being nobody to take care of, e.g., the garden, but it is also discussed as a symptom of structural problems. The authors name a strong activation paradigm, a productive imperative and an institutionalisation of their initiatives, causing a situation where more time is required for administration and which changes the priorities of the project's members. Rutt (2020) frames her observations of people not finding the time to care for the garden also in the context of a lack of need, as those engaged in the urban garden project garden as a leisure activity. They do not need the food they try to grow.

Both the lack of need and the lack of time inspire one to think about the situation of crisis as context for many interstitial degrowth practices discussed in the literature (see 2.1). The idea of the lack of need highlights that there is no emergency or desperation. There might be a need to connect with other people or to connect with the soil or gardening, but the gardens are not needed for basic nutrition. Another, maybe less obvious difference is how degrowth practices in the context of economic crisis flourish also due to those engaged having time for that engagement. Rising unemployment and strike imply time to co-organise with others, both in interstitial and ruptural modes of transformation.

## Autonomy and institutionalisation

There is one more idea I want to highlight: the practice and suggestion for municipalities to have facilitators who can help associations navigate the city administration. This points to the required administration being a hinder for initiatives to flourish, due to both know-how and time needed for administration and to a high trust in the municipal administration. Considering the idea of upscaling initiatives through integration with municipal actors (e.g., Kaika et al., 2023) the role of the facilitator is interesting as synergies could emerge, and co-organised grassroots initiatives be encouraged. There is, however, a risk of dependency, both financially and administratively, where projects do not survive without the facilitator (Rutt, 2020).

Thinking of the idea of uncivil actors (D'Alisa et al., 2013) and the idea that degrowth flourishes in the “less institutionalized” (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020) points to another issue. While urban gardens are an accepted concept which with some administrative difficulty can be integrated into Swedish municipal administration, the question arises how less accepted, more uncivil practices and projects would fare in this context. If degrowth flourishes in the “less institutionalized”, what does it mean for degrowth transformations if the less institutionalised does not flourish?

It remains an open question whether in the neoliberal Nordic welfare state context, volunteer projects would benefit from more formalisation and integration to existing infrastructures or if more space and time for nonformalised activities would create more resilient volunteer projects. This observation leads to a bigger question that is raised in some of the publications: in what way is the Nordic neoliberal welfare state an enabling and hindering setting for social-ecological transformation? Or what would a strategy need to look like so that it can effectively facilitate social-ecological transformation in this context?

Concerning the question of more integration or more autonomy, it is relevant to look for actors within the Swedish context that have chosen an autonomous way of organising and how the Swedish context impacts their activities. In the following paragraphs I engage with research done on (autonomous) left projects and squatters in Sweden. The aim is not to give a comprehensive review, but to get an idea what can be learned for the question of institutionalisation versus autonomy (for detailed case studies and discussions see, e.g., Creasap, 2021;

Flaherty, 2022; Hansen, 2019; Jämte et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2018; Polanska, 2019; Sernhede et al., 2016).

Research I consulted for this question are studies that follow social movement events or periods and discuss them in their specific Swedish context (Creasap, 2021; Polanska, 2023; Polanska & Weldon, 2020; Sernhede et al., 2016). There are two aspects of the Swedish context that this literature discusses in particular. On the one hand, the consequences and processes of neoliberal urbanism, especially since the 1990s; and on the other hand, the history of popular movements, politics of dialogue, a strong welfare state and the history of cooperation between social movements and state actors (see also chapter three). The studies are writing against the still strong picture of Sweden as a friendly welfare state and the idea of an absence of political discontent.

Activists at autonomous social centres interviewed by Creasap (2021) describe Sweden as a strong and controlling state. They experience that being alternative is difficult, as there is no informal network like in other European countries such as Spain, but also since they experience high pressure to conform. Being different requires one to be ready to be “way out there” (ibid., p. 63, quote from an activist). Strong institutionalisation and conformity are a conflict point for autonomous movements: “In social centers, activists encourage people to break free from existing political practices [parties and formal organisations] and experiment with new ones” (ibid., p. 49).

Looking at squatting in Sweden, some particularities become apparent. Polanska (2023) discusses squatting in Sweden in the 1980s and shows how squatters frame their activities as a last resort strategy after local authorities have failed to meet the need for, e.g., a place for culture and youth. Squatters follow a non-violent approach and are open to negotiation with municipal actors. By paying utilities they made a point that they are not squatting to avoid paying, but that their squatting is due the need to access a place for their activities (ibid.). From the 1990s squatters and police used more violence and squatting ceased being a viable option for activists (Peterson et al., 2018; Polanska, 2023).

In general, there is no established squatting movement in Sweden, unlike in other European countries (Pries, 2019). Reasons for this are that no continuous squatting movement was built between generations and that in the late 1970s as well as 1980s, there was a political consensus over a need for spaces for urban

youth, which meant that the squatters demands were often met (ibid.). For the 1990s and 2000s it is argued that squatting is not more established due to the repression that the practice has met in Sweden. Repression is legitimatised with the argument that squatting as practice threatens the “consensual and ‘democratic’ way of doing politics in Sweden” (Polanska, 2019, p. 100). Polanska describes how, on the other hand, squatters are working towards fixing problems within Swedish democracy, not questioning the state and its system altogether, like other squatting movements might do (see also Polanska & Weldon, 2020).

A more recent squat in Stockholm in 2015 was *Högdalens Folkets Hus* (Polanska & Weldon, 2020). Calling the squat People’s House, the squatters actively create a connection to the People’s House history, as they aim to create a meeting space inspired by the historical experience (see also chapter three). The squat in Stockholm in 2015, like those in the 1980s are part of a much longer struggle for a non-commercial public space in the urban. While the 2015 squat lasted only for a month, associations that were formed in relation to it carried on also after (ibid.).

Polanska and Weldon frame the 2015 squat as urban commons. Their study shows how squatters experience their co-organised practices as empowering and unique. “[W]e don’t have that many experiences in Sweden from this kind of situations” (ibid., p. 1362) says one activist quoted in the paper. While the squatters frame their protest in opposition to privatisation, it becomes also an experience against individualism and for community, support and solidarity.

Summarising the case, Polanska and Weldon state

the squat formed as a clear rejection of Swedish political economic and social practices – specifically, ongoing privatization; top-down political decisions; lack of transparency; government-led gentrification projects; increased housing segregation in Swedish cities; territorialized stigmatization within those cities; and the loneliness and disillusionment which characterized Swedish society – and was focused on building a more communal and cooperative community. (ibid., p. 1368)

Moving away from the specific cases and movement moments and coming back to the question of institutionalisation and autonomy, I point to some more general observations from the literature on squatting and other urban struggles against neoliberal policies. First, the literature shows and states that even if Sweden inspires this image of a functional welfare state and a political practice of

consensus there have always been alternative and self-organised spaces and activist groups opposing majority politics (e.g., Peterson et al., 2018; Polanska, 2019, 2017, 2023; Polanska & Weldon, 2020).

While there has always been opposition, this opposition is clearly shaped by the Swedish context. For example, the openness for negotiation and structured approach of squatters that Polanska (2023) describes, but also the repression of radical voices, who do not agree to the established political practices of negotiation (e.g., Creasap, 2021; Peterson et al., 2018).

Squats and autonomous places are often short lived in Sweden (Creasap, 2021; Polanska & Weldon, 2020). An example that sticks out in this context is the “self-built and self-managed cultural and social space” (Cyklopen, n.d.) *Cyklopen* in Stockholm. *Cyklopen* has a turbulent history, with struggles against both municipal actors and right-wing activists (Hellström & Nasouri, 2019). Today the organisation is established as association and has the needed permits to keep their self-built house, and to continue various activities. While being a clearly radical actor, they have managed to find a balance between autonomy and institutionalisation. While discussed in the context of urban struggles and squatting in Stockholm (Hellström & Nasouri, 2019; Polanska & Weldon, 2020), there is no case study investigating how the association manages this balance between autonomy and institutionalisation. Connecting back to the literature on degrowth and the role of interstitial transformations and seeing it considering the Swedish context, the question of how to balance autonomy and institutionalisation becomes crucial. A certain degree of autonomy is necessary for radical ideas to develop and flourish, while some degree of institutionalisation helps projects to endure and broaden their reach.

Summarising this last part of the literature and conceptual chapter, I ask what the discussion says about the Swedish context that is important for understanding how degrowth and commoning practices might thrive or struggle. There are six characteristics of the Swedish context that I list as takeaways from this subchapter: (1) Sweden has not the same crisis background as cases that have inspired much degrowth thinking and theorising; (2) in Sweden and other Nordic countries, populations in general have a high trust in the state and its institutions; (3) at least some scholars writing about the Swedish context assume that change towards post-growth politics can come as top-down measures from the state; (4) volunteering culture is said to be different in Sweden than in other contexts, and

time constraints are experienced as limiting volunteer engagement; (5) administration for bottom-up organising is complicated and initiatives are welcoming help and cooperation with municipalities; (6) there is high social (and state) pressure to conform and stick to established forms of engagement in civil society.

Engaging literature that discusses degrowth and commoning in the Swedish and Nordic context has pointed to the characteristics listed above. In the next chapter, I deep dive into the contemporary and historical context of associations, which is the administrative form that bottom-up initiatives are using in Sweden. Understanding associations historic and contemporary role helps understanding the background and interrelations of contextual particularities crucial for understanding bottom-up organising practices in Sweden.

# 3 Empirical context: Associations in Sweden

This chapter explores the current form and history of associations in Sweden as the empirical background to the thesis. Taking seriously the assumption that to understand processes of commoning it is necessary to understand the contextualised conditions for commoning, I here establish a basis to understand local practices of co-organising. At the end of chapter two, I list some context-specific characteristics, that impact bottom-up co-organisation in Sweden. To approach those characteristics, I develop how the form of the association – the dominant form for bottom-up initiatives in Sweden – has taken shape historically and how co-organisation is understood in the context of the association. I show how understanding the history and the contemporary role of associations, as well as ideas about that role, is crucial for understanding associations’ struggles, as well as the potential for forming and enabling grassroots engagement in Sweden today.

[Popular engagement] has a cultural heritage of moral and political meanings, originating from different historical periods and characterised by various social conditions, and these meanings still influence how popular engagement is understood and valued in society. (von Essen, 2019, p. 30)

The quote above indicates the aim and reason for this chapter. Understanding the historical context today’s associations are embedded within helps to understand associations’ workings today as well as the expectations towards them, expectations both from and towards the individuals; for example, the member of an open workshop association and how she understands her role in the association. Also, however, engaging with expectations of critical scholar activists trying to think towards how grassroots engagement works and what role associations can play or why they might currently not be the radical actor they could be. The

chapter portrays a contemporary Swedish social imaginary of associations and their roots in popular movements.

The overview intertwines two aspects of this history of associations. I portray on the one hand administrative, economic and political changes impacting associations, and on the other the changing role and meaning that is ascribed to associations. Guiding questions are here: what do associations mean for the everyday life of the individual, what is their relationship to the state and what is their relationship to other actors in society, e.g., social movements? To look at these relations, broader developments in which associations are embedded are included in the overview. The aim of this chapter is, however, not to provide a full literature review over ongoing debates about civil society, social movements, associations, and their histories in Sweden, as this would be beyond the scope of this thesis.

The chapter starts with an account of how the role of associations in Sweden is portrayed today (3.1). Having established that, I give an overview of historical developments (3.2), starting with what has been called “the age of the associations” and concerns in the Swedish case large parts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (von Essen, 2019). The chapter then moves forward chronologically divided in three sections focusing on different periods. A final period, starting fully in the 1990s, is its own subchapter (3.3). I discuss this phase more extensively as changes happening in respect to the neoliberalisation of Swedish politics at that time have direct impact on the situation for associations today.

### 3.1 Associations today

Associations play a significant role in Sweden today and have done so historically. Reading about associations in Sweden, this appears to be one of few statements which are not contested concerning the role of associations and people’s engagement in them.

Based on statistical data from 1992 and 2000, Statistics Sweden published a report on associational life in Sweden (Vogel et al., 2003b). The report starts by highlighting the importance and tradition of voluntary associations in the Nordic countries and continues to highlight that “[b]y international standards, membership and activity levels in Sweden are *extraordinarily* high” (Vogel et al.,

2003a, p. 3, emphasis added). Having experienced problems with too little active engagement in Swedish associations, both during this research project and privately, reading this comes as a surprise, which instils a curiosity as to how the statement comes about. Flipping to the end of the report, it turns out that the authors are deeply concerned about the state of associational life in Sweden.

Associations have not only lost large portions of their members and failed to recruit new members to replace them. They have also undergone profound qualitative changes, such as an increased market orientation, growing conservatism, higher costs, reduced grants and subsidies, less independence from the state and the market, and generally more passive memberships. (ibid., p. 40)

The report ends with a call for a more nuanced approach to the future role of associational life in Sweden – nuanced in the sense that even if associational life and its role in society is broadly regarded as important and significant, this is not something that is guaranteed for the future. Associations are not untouched by developments around them and might not be as strong in their influence on democracy and welfare as some might hope (Vogel et al., 2003a).

Already in this snapshot, the importance of the history of associations and the changing ideas about them becomes apparent. The situation today is described in relation to a past and to hopes for the future. The second sentence of the quote lists “profound qualitative changes” that associations have undergone or are undergoing. In the second subchapter (3.2) I describe wherefrom these changes have happened, while subchapter 3.3 gives more detail about these qualitative changes.

There are about 250 000 non-profit organisations (*ideella organisationer*) in Sweden today (von Essen & Svedberg, 2022b). This makes a comparatively high ratio of organisations per citizen (Henriksen et al., 2019c; Selle et al., 2019; e.g., von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a).<sup>14</sup> Only about ten percent of those organisations have employed staff, which means that most of the activities conducted in those organisations carried out through volunteer work (e.g., von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a).

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<sup>14</sup> Sweden has a population of about 10 million. Other Scandinavian and Nordic countries have similarly high ratios. For a comparison of membership in associations among European countries see (Wallman Lundåsen, 2022, p. 248 ff). Note that here it is membership in associations per citizen, rather than number of organisations in relation to population.

What activities are carried out by associations or what kind of associations are among those 250 000 non-profit organisations? In their quantitative studies on people's popular engagement in Sweden, researchers from Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskola use eleven organisation categories to create an overview of engagement in non-profit organisations in Sweden.<sup>15</sup> The categories are sports, leisure, housing, advocacy groups and unions, social cause, religious, social movements and political organisations, culture, cooperatives, others and those outside of non-profit organisations (von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a, appendix).<sup>16</sup>

I share the list of categories to show the breath of activities that are organised through non-profit organisations. When looking at distribution between the different categories, about half of all non-profit organisations are within sports, leisure and culture, while about one third of all volunteer work is done within these categories (Henriksen et al., 2019c). von Essen and Svedberg also suggest why people engage in these organisations, saying that “[m]ost people who volunteer do so in organisations dedicated to recreation, leisure and culture, and many do so for fun, learning, meeting other people or out of habit” (2022a, p. 20).

While I started with some background on associations, much of the available statistics about associational life in Sweden is focused not on the associations and what they are doing, but on popular engagement, where *ideellt arbete* (volunteering) is one category of engagement. Other categories are giving (donations for, e.g., humanitarian aid or medical research), informal helping (outside the family, but also outside any formal organisation) and political engagement (e.g., petitions, online discussions, contacting politicians). Popular engagement is here studied on the level of the individual (e.g., von Essen et al., 2020; von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a).

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<sup>15</sup> Now Marie Cederschiöld högskola. A group of researchers organised around the institute have conducted population studies on popular engagement since 1992. For an overview of the studies see von Essen et al. (2020) and Essen and Svedberg (2022). The first study in 1992 was part of a larger survey and has been ascribed an active part in the shift in meaning of popular engagement in Sweden in the 1990s (von Essen, 2019). For more on the shift and its implications see 3.3.

<sup>16</sup> The surveys take an engagement perspective and not an organisational perspective. Therefore, it needs a category for engagement that is voluntary, but not within a non-profit organisation but within the public sector, for-profit organisations and other formal networks.

## Active, passive and almost passive members

From an engagement perspective, it is possible to describe membership in associations and whether members are active or passive members, how active they are and whether they are active in several organisations. The population surveys conducted by researchers at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskola show that from the early 1990s to 2019, the proportion of the population involved in voluntary work has been almost stable at just below 50 percent with a slight upward trend (von Essen, 2022; see p. 87 for a visualisation). It is important to not take volunteer work as meaning the same as work in volunteer organisations. Volunteer organisations can have employed staff and people can volunteer for other organisations (municipal or for-profit), and they can do so without being members in the organisation they volunteer for. While in Sweden most volunteer work happens within volunteer run organisations (von Essen, 2022), there is a trend of dropping membership numbers and an increase in volunteer recruitment outside the own organisation (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012).<sup>17</sup> While total engagement has stayed the same at about 50 percent of the population (see above), its composition is changing, with a general shift towards short term and flexible forms of volunteering (more in 3.3).

In Sweden, similar to other Nordic and Scandinavian countries, passive membership plays an important role in associational life. While it is easy to think that passive members are in some sense free riders, there is a more complex history behind the phenomenon. Remarkably, Sweden, with a population of around 10 million, has more than 30 million memberships in associations (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012).

The active member is described as a civic ideal, while the passive member or the almost-passive member is not discussed in the survey studies on popular engagement (e.g. von Essen, 2019; von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a), even though passive membership is a significant phenomenon in the Nordic popular mass movement tradition (Alapuro, 2010b, 2010a; Strømsnes & Wollebæk, 2010).<sup>18</sup> According to Alapuro's (2010b) work, passive membership is historically

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<sup>17</sup> In 2019, 78% of all volunteers were members in the organisation they volunteered for. Between 1998 and 2014 this number had been between 85% and 88% (von Essen, 2022, p. 120).

<sup>18</sup> By almost-passive member, I mean members who do some tasks for one of their associations at some point but are not active regularly over extended periods of time.

connected to high societal trust, a corporatist state model and the federated structure of associational life.

The federated structure implies that members are part of local associations, which are part of regional umbrellas, which are part of national umbrella organisations. The national umbrella functions as interest organisation, invested in national politics (Henriksen et al., 2019c), which (ideally) creates a structure that mediates between citizens and state. In this situation, associations are not only there to organise activities at the local level but have a representative function. For this representative function, it does not matter whether the member is active or not. Members can be part of organisations to be represented, and do not need to take part in any activity, nor actively take part in running the organisation (Strømsnes & Wollebæk, 2010). Rather than “taking part in”, members then “are part of” their association(s) and by extension of society (Alapuro, 2010a, p. 311).

Alapuro (2010b) sees this corporateness as an explaining factor for high membership and low activity rates in the Scandinavian context. Corporate culture invites passive membership, as members do not need to engage as much beyond being member in the associations that represents their interests. In corporatist countries established organisation can have a strong and legitimate role in society and can therefore be left to negotiate for the members’ interests (ibid.).

Siisiäinen sees this large-scale system of organisations as a reason for the observed high levels of trust in the Nordic context. “In such trust-embracing situations, people do not necessarily have to be active in associations themselves; it is enough to know that there are associations that function and can therefore be trusted” (2009, p. 288).

By extension, it has been argued that there exists a “collective memory” of empowering and influence through associations and of the state as friendly actor to cooperate with rather than an enemy, which still today impacts popular engagement and a general trust in state and associations (Henriksen et al., 2019c).

Contradictory to this view on passive membership is an observation that most members do not care much about the representational part of their membership, but join an association mainly to be able to do whatever the association organises, be it sports or taking part in religious practices. Only later on members might be integrated into the representational structures even as active participants in elective representational roles (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012).

A takeaway on passive membership is that it is common in Sweden and has historical explanations. I want to add here that there might, however, be another group of passive members in associations today, which the discussion of the shifts in associational life from the 1990s onwards shows below. While being a passive member to be represented is one thing, there are two other ways to be a passive member. One is as a support member, that is, to pay a membership fee as a donation to support the association without taking part in any of their activities. Another way to be a passive member is to make use of the activities that the association offers, but without contributing actively to its maintenance – in this case, the member becomes a consumer of a service, rather than a co-creator of an organisation. The tension between members consuming from the association and the association being dependent on co-organisation and shared responsibilities is something I develop further in 3.3 and discuss with the empirical material in chapter nine.

In contrast to passive members, many of those who are engaged in associations are not only members in several associations, but also active in several. In 2019, 50 percent of those who engaged in associations did so in more than one. In some discussions this tendency is referred to as cumulative citizenship (e.g., von Essen et al., 2020; von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a). Among those active members are also those who are more active than others and carry the organisations. von Essen (2022) writes about this group as *civil society core group* (*civilsamhällets kärntrupp*). Members of this group are also more figuratively called “eldsjälar” – *eldsjäl* translates literally to “fire soul” and means enthusiast. A fire soul is someone who gives part of her soul for an organisation. von Essen describes them as those “who have longer experience with volunteer work and volunteer organisations” and highlights their significance as they “through their long-term engagement contribute to continuity, take elective roles and carry the organisations history” (ibid., p. 107, my own translation). Further, he reasons that through this core group upholding their organisations, they contribute to the steadiness of what von Essen and others call *civil society infrastructure* (*civilsamhällets infrastruktur*) (von Essen, 2022; see also other contributions in von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a for civil society infrastructure). In a section on stability and change (below), I show how the idea of steadiness and, by extension, the idea of a stable civil society infrastructure, are questioned and criticised.

The same edited volume that contains the chapter concerned with the fire souls contains a chapter concerned with those who do not engage at all, neither as association members nor in other forms of volunteer work. A group that is surprisingly missing in the book and other discussions on engagement are those that are minimally engaged. In my understanding of the available statistics, this is a large group. This is individuals who are members in several associations and who do a few tasks for one or several associations during their lifetime. This group consists of members who pay their membership fees and buy services (e.g., courses) from their association, but do not contribute significantly to any maintenance or administrative work that would carry the association nor to an association culture.

The tension that arises from different levels of engagement and understanding of membership is something I pick up again later in this chapter (3.3). The tension and its context are particularly important for the thesis, as they help understand the lack of engagement and problems with irresponsible use of open workshops which I discuss in chapter nine. I argue that there is a discrepancy between ideas about associations and how they are used on a day-to-day basis.

## **Association life**

After having presented some core characteristics, I now turn to what roles are ascribed to association life (*föreningslivet*) today. In the conclusion to his historical perspective on popular engagement in Sweden, Rolf (2022) summarises both what it means to be active in an association, but also what the engagement means for the association and beyond.

One goes to meetings, gets tasks, arranges social events, organises day-to-day activities and does different elective duties. Organisations then and now are carried by voluntary engaged people. The influence of volunteering on developments in society and democratising processes is since a long time seen as a given. We can even see that organisations that are carried by volunteer work have historically had great influence on politics and economics, but also on geographical space and those parameters from which we organise our everyday life. Not least have they impacted our identities and have been able to contribute to people's development in certain directions and to political mobilisation. (ibid., p. 74, my own translation)

In this quote, Rolf creates a connection between the mundane tasks of engagement in an association, such as going to meetings and receiving and completing tasks, and developments in history, economics, democracy, identity and political mobilisation. Rolf, as he writes himself, is not alone in taking “the influence of volunteering on developments in society and democratising processes” as a given. To associational life is ascribed a crucial role in historical developments of democratisation in Sweden, and the observed change since the 1990s is looked at with concern, due to potential negative consequences for Swedish democracy (e.g., Lundström & Wijkström, 2012; Vogel et al., 2003a; Wijkström, 2012a).

Hopes projected onto popular engagement more generally, by both politicians and scholars, concern “a deepening of democracy, creating active citizens, giving space for social innovation and compassion [medmänsklighet], as well as integration of citizens into society [samhällsgemenskapen]” (von Essen & Svedberg, 2022a, p. 20, my own translation, words in brackets are the corresponding Swedish terms from the original quote). von Essen and Svedberg are critical towards such hopes, as popular engagement can have diverse motivations ambiguous with respect to a common good.

The main concern in this section is, however, not to determine whether such hopes are realistic, but to show that associations do inspire such hopes. The aim is to portray the role of associations in Sweden, and these hopes are part of what associations mean in Sweden. Lundström and Svedberg note in this context that the academic debate on associations in Sweden until the 1990s has focused on “the importance of the sector for democracy and the political fostering of the people” (2003, p. 220). This contrasts with other debates (Anglo Saxon) which are more concerned with the role of the non-profit sector creating job opportunities and welfare (Lundström & Svedberg, 2003).

Another focus on the role of associations is the significance of membership as such. T. Einarsson and Hvenmark write that “[i]n connection to the emergence and expansion of the social movements, membership, understood as the relationship that connects us individuals formally into the context of organisations, has also gained a status of being an essential link between us as individual citizens and the surrounding society” (2012, p. 77, my own translation). They continue by stating that in a Swedish understanding, associations or social movements and membership are tightly linked. Even if

activities could in theory (and are in other contexts) be organised in different ways, in the Nordic or Scandinavian context the associational form is predominant (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012). Other forms of engagement or organising collectively become consequently marginalised and unconsidered.<sup>19</sup>

With the membership relationship comes an understanding of what membership entails. At the core of a dominant membership understanding is, according to T. Einarsson and Hvenmark (2012), the idea that through the association individual members can make their voice heard also beyond the association. Related is also the idea that association practices function as democracy schools (*demokratiskolan*): “A common assumption is for example that I as a member, just by taking part in my association’s inner workings, also learn about democracy, can be part and ‘do’ democracy and through this also be formed as a democratic citizen” (ibid., p. 77). T. Einarsson and Hvenmark point out that this view has been criticised; they highlight, however, that it remains a common idea among politicians, researchers and journalists. Consequently, it is a prominent understanding in Swedish public discourse. This understanding has been called a tradition (*folkrörelse tradition*) (e.g., Lundström & Svedberg, 2003) or more critically a marinade, framed as an understanding so sedimented that it is taken for granted (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012).

## Stability or change

Earlier in this chapter, I shared a quote where the authors describe qualitative changes that have happened to popular engagement. Not all scholars agree on the significance of that change. Robertsson (2021) describes an in-between of stability and change. Within the literature, are some voices that describe a stability of popular engagement, while others observe change. The stability is described by scholars looking at engagement on the level of individuals, which has been stable since the early 1990s (e.g., Svedberg et al., 2010; Vogel et al., 2003a; von Essen et al., 2015). In other publications there is a description of decline in membership and the observation that engagement is less collective and constant and more individual and sporadic (Vogel et al., 2003b). Those arguing for stability suggest

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<sup>19</sup> See both Creasap (2021) and Flaherty (2022) for marginalised collective political organisation in Sweden as well as, e.g., Polanska and Weldon (2020) for squatting in Sweden. See also 2.3.

that since the change that is described by Vogel et al. (2003b) is not visible in their statistics, it might not be anything to be concerned about.

One interpretation of the coexistence of stability and change is that the total amount of engagement (as it is measured in Svedberg et al. (2010)) has remained constant, while its character is changing (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012). Those claiming that engagement is constant have used the concept of *civil society infrastructure* (*civilsamhällets infrastruktur*) to explain the stability (Henriksen et al., 2019c; von Essen et al., 2015; von Essen & Svedberg, 2022b). Here I explain the idea of civil society infrastructure, to be able to problematise the way it is used. It is framed as the infrastructure that upholds engagement in Sweden. The infrastructure is made of (1) the many associations that exist and are so institutionalised that their core, aims and running are not easily influenced by societal changes, (2) the values that are connected to associations and the engagement in them, engagement as something good and the importance of being an active citizen, (3) the existing political and financial support structures for associations, (4) a tradition of engagement and (5) a high trust in society by a high proportion of citizens (von Essen & Svedberg, 2022b). Following this idea of the civil society infrastructure, the associational landscape in Sweden could be described as so big and so institutionalised that it will keep on rolling even if less people engage collectively and constantly.

Seen from afar, with statistical goggles, the idea that engagement is stable and sufficient can be argued for. What is, however, absent from this debate about stability is a qualitative engagement with how association administration and engagement in associations looks in Sweden today. Others have described qualitative change in the administrative framework associations need to work in, how they adapt to it, and the character of engagement (e.g., Altermark & Dahlstedt, 2022; Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022; Wijkström, 2012a). The qualitative changes described suggest that the infrastructure itself is changing significantly with respect to all points above (1 to 5) and with it, popular engagement.

With this thesis I add to the observation that changes are happening; however, I also use the concept of civil society infrastructure as it highlights the interconnectedness of ideas about civil society organisations, their day-to-day running and the administrative structure framing their organisation. At the same time as qualitative change can be observed, strong and maybe nostalgic ideas about

association life and its popular movement heritage survive. To be able to better understand where these nostalgic ideas come from and how the supposedly stable infrastructure developed, I provide a historical context of associations in Sweden in subchapter 3.2. In 3.3, I come back to this tension and show how qualitative changes in engagement are discussed.

### **Context specific**

In the beginning of the chapter, I describe how I was puzzled by the claim that popular engagement in Sweden and other Nordic countries was extraordinarily high compared to other countries (Vogel et al., 2003b). Independent of the question of how this statement comes about, what is meant by engagement, or what kind or quality of engagement is high, the idea of quantitatively comparing popular engagement at national level is problematic due to the substantial differences in how engagement is organised depending on different welfare systems or other historical developments (Kings, 2012; Lundström & Wijkström, 1997).

Related to the quantitative comparison and its inadequacy is the practice of applying concepts developed in, for example, the US context, to the Scandinavian context. One example are discussions on social capital or general trust and its decline due to a decrease in face-to-face contact through volunteer engagement (Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 1993). Scandinavian countries are in this context described as having so-called “broad” engagement, describing high membership numbers, but few active members (Dekker & Van Den Broek, 1998). Following Putnam’s ideas, it would be expected that broad engagement would lead to low social capital. Strømsnes and Wollebæk (2010) argue that the thesis does not hold for the Scandinavian case as social capital is high while engagement is broad. They argue that social capital should not be understood as being caused by engagement in voluntary associations, but that such engagement instead institutionalises social capital. While the argument could appear to be like the question of the chicken and the egg, it is relevant in the context of this thesis as it points to particularities of the Swedish case: Low levels of active membership with, at the same time, high levels of trust and a self-understanding of a strong civil society. Furthermore, the argument shows that understanding derived from and for, e.g., the US context might be useful for contrasting with the Swedish case rather than for explaining it.

A second theory that is argued to not hold in the Swedish or Scandinavian/Nordic case is the idea of *crowding out*. Being able to establish that it does not apply is highlighted as of the main findings in Henriksen et al. (2019b). The idea of crowding out is that strong welfare states crowd out civic engagement. Henriksen et al. argue that popular engagement is high in Scandinavian countries and disagree with the idea of crowding out. They acknowledge, however, something like crowding out, in the sense that volunteer engagement in the Scandinavian context is not located in welfare, but mainly in sports, leisure and culture.

For both issues, crowding out and social capital with passive membership, the central argument as to why these ideas are not true in the Scandinavian/Nordic context is that it is precisely the context that makes the theories not work. Both edited volumes (Alapuro & Stenius, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2019a) argue that the specific history of associations, popular movements and their role in the Scandinavian welfare states is why these ideas do not hold for Scandinavia. That history is at the core of the next subchapter.

Summing up so far, this subchapter about the state of associations and popular engagement in Sweden today shows four things: how members fulfil their role is crucial for the association; associations are an integral part of Swedish society and carry an important role; the way associations are organised is changing; the Swedish (or Nordic) civil society infrastructure has developed in close connection to the welfare state, and understanding dynamics today requires an understanding of this specific context.

Associations are member-based organisations, where the member base carries the association by legitimising its existence, financially through membership fees but also through organisation, as members taking responsibility for administrative and other tasks. Members carry the day-to-day running and the culture of the organisation. This set up requires that enough members are sufficiently active. The crucial role of members and how member identities have changed over time becomes relevant for understanding different approaches towards the sharing of responsibility in open workshops which I discuss in chapter nine.

Through their character of involving citizens in co-organisation processes, associations play a vital part for social reproduction in Sweden, both for creating and maintaining learning, socialising, sport, community, culture, housing infrastructure, but also as the actor with the responsibility, experience and role to

reproduce the democratic skills and identity of Swedish society. They play a weighty role in the self-image of the social welfare state with high social trust. While the image is carried forward it is doubtful how much of it stands up to a closer look. Understanding the specificities of Swedish associational life is crucial for thinking about how commoning might be claimed and sustained under conditions of welfare state restructuring.

The second subchapter below aims at giving the needed historical background to understanding how the image and role of associations has developed and how it is changing.

## 3.2 Historical context: Associations

“The popular mass movement tradition” or “marinade” is used as explanation for the particularities of the Scandinavian/Nordic popular engagement situation. The idea of the “Swedish model” (e.g., Trägårdh, 2007) is based on the important role popular movements have had in forming the Scandinavian welfare states. This subchapter gives an overview of the formation of the Swedish welfare state and the role of associations and popular movements.

In an article from 2019, von Essen chooses the so-called revolution congress (*Revolutionsriksdagen*) from 1809/1810 as the starting point of his overview of popular engagement in Sweden (von Essen, 2019).<sup>20</sup> With the establishment of the congress, after the diet of the four estates was abandoned, came the right to form associations in 1865.<sup>21</sup> von Essen argues that the right to form civic associations “made political engagement possible” (ibid., p. 31). However, von Essen also argues that during the “age of the associations” it was mainly citizens from the wealthy classes that formed associations and had time and resources to

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<sup>20</sup> One could start even further back, as Stenius (2010) does. He traces, e.g., ideas of “work, not charity” to pre-modern times or discusses the significance of the Nordic peasantry for later development of popular engagement.

<sup>21</sup> With the constitution from 1809, Sweden’s monarch was to share power with the newly established congress of the estates (Nobility, Clergy, Burghers and Peasants [*Bönder*]), which in 1865 was replaced by the congress (Essen, 2019). For a detailed account of popular struggle in Sweden see p. 277-432 in (Mikkelsen et al., 2018).

engage in social and political questions. Associations were concerned with charity, and engagement was paternalistic. Rather than encouraging political engagement from other classes, it helped prevent unrest (von Essen, 2019; see also ch. 5 in Wijkström & Lundström, 2002).

The time following the establishment of association up to modern-day Sweden can be discussed in four periods. First, the time leading up to the outbreak of the second world war which is dominated by the *old social movements (folkrörelserna)*, followed by the time of the so-called *strong society* and the emergence of the so-called *Swedish model* in the 1940s. In the 1960s, the emergence of *new social movements* marks a break with the Strong Society. The last period starts fully with what has been called a *system-shift* in the early 1990s.<sup>22</sup> In the remaining parts of this chapter, I describe events and developments from each of these periods, and contextualise them with political and economic developments. Table 3.1 gives an overview of the periods.

**Table 3.1 Overview of historical periods in relation to the development of associations.** Periods are organised after their approximate beginning.

Period	Economic developments	Political developments
Old social movements (1890)	Urbanisation, Industrialisation, then Depression	Democratisation, Rise of nationalism in Europe, neutral position in WW2
Strong Society (1940s)	Post-war upswing, period of growth	Strong Social Democratic government; People’s Home
New Social Movements (1960s)	Deindustrialisation	human rights, peace and environmental activism
System shift (1990s)	Financial crisis	Neoliberalisation, privatisation, marketisation

### Old social movements

Sweden in around 1900 was still a mainly agrarian society, but with rapid and ongoing industrialisation and urbanisation (Schön, 2012). With the quickly growing economy, the amount of industrial and other manual workers tripled

<sup>22</sup> The centre right government at that time called their politics – the explicit dismantling of the welfare state – a system shift. I use the term, as do other critical scholars, not to follow their rhetoric, but to mark the shift and its impact on the welfare state (see, e.g., Altermark & Dahlstedt, 2022).

between 1890 and 1910. At the same time, these workers were politicised and radicalised as elsewhere in Europe at the time, demanding citizen's rights (Östberg, 2021).

von Essen argues that “popular mass movements emerged in the later part of nineteenth century and in the course of time they changed Swedish society and restructured civil society” (von Essen, 2019, p. 32).<sup>23</sup> The largest and most influential of those popular mass movements or old social movements in Sweden were the free churches, the temperance movement and the labour movement. They demanded “social justice, religious freedom and political rights” (ibid.). They challenged the status quo, and the charity focus of associations of the previous decades. One important struggle was to establish welfare as a social right and to move away from welfare through charity.

Looking at associations today and the dominance of sport, leisure and culture associations, one can ask what social movements fighting for “social justice, religious freedom and political rights” have to do with the history of associations in Sweden. Henriksen et al. give one answer to the question when they describe how “[t]he popular mass movements gave rise to a vast number of local organisations and branches that organized everything, from sports activities, scouting, libraries and social events to folk high schools and mutual insurance companies” (2019c, p. 5). These local organisations were run in democratic structures and based on individual membership. Membership implied rights and possibilities for influence (Henriksen et al., 2019c). T. Einarsson and Hvenmark (2012) add to this description that it was the increasing engagement of thousands of citizens, who dared to raise their voices and in parallel found new ways to co-organise to meet their interests. Interests could be political change, but also to take part in sports or to be sober. The emerging larger organisations with their local branches and large number of members is what is framed and celebrated as *folkrörelse* (ibid.).

While von Essen (2019) describes historical developments, he is tracing how the developments change or define the meaning of popular engagement. He argues

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<sup>23</sup> *Popular mass movement* refers to what in Swedish is called *folkrörelsen* and means specifically those organisations that emerged out of social movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Popular mass movement does not mean the same as social movement, which would be much broader.

that the popular mass movement tradition (*folkrörelsen*) influences popular engagement today as it made a normative ideal for popular engagement. He argues that because of an imperative for organisational democracy

[p]opular engagement [...] was construed as active membership and not as before as an action in itself. Due to the dominance of the popular movement tradition this construction of popular engagement lasted until the early years of the 1990s. Conceptually, there was no room for popular engagement outside the (popular mass movement) organisations, and the active member became a civic ideal. (ibid., p. 32)

What it means to be a member in an association is a question I ask later with the empirical material. Understanding where the strong tradition of membership comes from is, therefore, relevant. What it means to be an active member in the later part of the nineteenth century is, however, not discussed much further in von Essen's paper, except that it is an engagement with the organisation and loyalty to the represented collective (von Essen, 2019).<sup>24</sup>

Others have discussed ideas of how the active member or the engaged worker within the popular movements was to be. Two concepts should be mentioned here: the ideal of the respectable (*skötsamme*) worker contrasted with the wilful (*egensinnige*) worker. The respectable worker was self-disciplined, and to be respectable was a way of distancing oneself from impulsive and undisciplined parts of the population. To be respectable implied an organised meeting culture and was tightly connected to the temperance movement, but later spread beyond those circles. Self-discipline was not limited to political organising, but part identity, and a way to protect one's own family from economic difficulties as well as social authorities and charities. The respectable man was sober, and in his free time would engage in associations to advance collective interests (Rolf, 2022). The self-discipline has also been framed as a strategy to advance in labour conflicts, where both employers and non-disciplined workers were seen as hinder (Ambjörnsson, 1988). Rolf argues that the self-discipline is part of the success of the labour movement and has helped to build the popular movement structure and heritage

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<sup>24</sup> von Essen gives a very summarised account of the time period, which can make the changes that happened appear to have come about almost by themselves. See chapters by Greiff and Lundin and Ericsson and Nyzell for a detailed account of struggles fought during that period (Mikkelsen et al., 2018).

(2022). Wilfulness, in contrast, was a more conflict-orientated way to try to advance one's own and collective interests (ibid.).

In the spirit of organising together, people did not just form local associations but also created spaces for both recreation and political engagement: People's Parks (*Folkets Park*) and People's Houses (*Folkets Hus*) (Pries et al., 2020; Rolf, 2022). The popular movement with its spaces made an alternative public that emerged in a context where previous political spaces like village or parish meetings and later municipal assemblies became exclusive and inaccessible for the working class (Josephson, 1993). Established and maintained from below and together, they enabled further movement building. Beyond their significance for the popular movements, they played an important educational role with, for example, cultural events, evening classes and libraries (Pries et al., 2020). While people's parks and houses were established from below, already early on sport associations originating from the popular movement organisations became integrated with state administration. Already in the 1920s, municipalities in the spirit of public health became interested in sports associations and "sports fields were drawn into city plans and received economic support" (Rolf, 2022, p. 62).

Pries et al. argue further that "old People's Parks and Houses can also be understood as experiments that prefigured the emerging welfare state" and that "[t]he very fact that spatial planning, especially for leisure and recreation, became an essential part of the Swedish welfare state is due in no small part to this legacy [people's house and people's park movement]" (2020, final section, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph).

Summarising, it can be said that the old social movements with their struggles laid the foundation for what is today considered the popular movement tradition and heritage as well as what has turned into the welfare state. As the next section will show, the integration of some of the ideas of the People's House and People's Park and the old social movements also meant their institutionalisation and a dramatic change in their dynamic.

## **Strong Society**

In 1931, the military killed five people at a workers' protests in Ådalen. The event is commonly framed as having made the labour movement of the time change to a less confrontational strategy. This change is framed as the beginning of the

culture of political consensus, compromise and cooperation which Sweden has become famous for (e.g., Östberg, 2018; Rothstein, 2003; von Essen, 2019). Ericsson and Nyzell (2018) challenge this picture and show that there have been (violent) protests and strikes also in the years after 1931. Ericsson and Nyzell point to the *Saltsjöbaden agreement* from 1938, that was formed between the Swedish Employers' Confederation (*Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen, SAF*) and labour unions (*Landsorganisationen, LO*) as the important event for a less conflictual relation.<sup>25</sup>

During the second world war, Sweden was governed by a broad coalition including all parties in parliament except the communist party. Politics at the time were focused on “the good of the nation and social unity” (von Essen, 2019, p. 33). After the war, the social democrats formed the government all the way until 1976 and continued with a political aim of a strong society, implying cooperation and compromise (e.g., von Essen, 2019). This strategy of cooperation also contained a close relationship between political power, administration and the popular mass movements.

Stråth (2005) argues that the Swedish term *samhälle* – from the verb *hålla samman*, which means ‘keeping together’ – implies a society including the state and not an idea of a civil society in opposition to the state. Stråth states that *samhälle*

connotes both *Gemeinschaft*, community and political organization/administration. *Samhälle*, *Gesellschaft*, society, *societas* even became synonymous with the state in the twentieth century. When the social democrats argued for the welfare state they talked about the need for a strong society. *Samhälle* was never in opposition to the state or seen as something between market (or family: Hegel) on the one side and the state on the other. (ibid., p. 36)

Launched by the social democrats in the 1920s, the framing of society as *people's home* (*folkhem*) grew strong in the 1940s.<sup>26</sup> The *people's home* implied an idea of society as a home “fully equipped with modern, rational and egalitarian practices”

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<sup>25</sup> SAF later joined with the Federation of Swedish Industries (*Sveriges Industriförbund*) to form the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (*Svensk Näringsliv*). Svensk Näringsliv is today a leading conservative, neoliberal lobbying group.

<sup>26</sup> This history of the people's home has been contested and been said to be a narrative planted by the social democratic party only later, in the 1990s (Edling (2019) in Creasap, 2021)

(Stenius, 2010, p. 60). The state on the level of the municipality was to be the provider of social welfare (von Essen, 2019). With rational and efficient methods, equality was to be achieved (Carson, 2005). As welfare was a social right and to be provided through the municipality, “[v]olunteering for social care was considered as paternalistic charity and immoral, and was also considered outmoded, unscientific and amateurish” (von Essen, 2019, p. 33).

The labour movement now promoted the idea that the ordinary citizen was to work and during leisure time engage in popular associations (Ekström von Essen, 2003; von Essen, 2019). As workers’ leisure time increased, municipalities were expected to offer spaces and activities. Leisure and education became a social service organised by municipalities in collaboration with local associations (Rolf, 2022). With access to libraries and other culture, educational, or sport facilities, citizens in turn were expected to participate in popular education, sports and engage in civic organisations (von Essen, 2019). von Essen concludes his discussion of that period by saying:

There was no decisive differentiation between civic action and volunteering; popular engagement was constructed as active membership in civic organisations. (ibid., p. 34)

von Essen’s discussion of the formation of the strong society and people’s home gives insights into what the changes implied for state politics, welfare and the everyday life of citizens. When taking more of a movement perspective, it remains important to highlight the development from the so-called old social movements whose struggles had led to the strong position of the social democratic party in the first place. Peterson et al., who write about social movements in Sweden from the 1950s onwards, give a short contextualisation:

During its 44 years of uninterrupted government (1932–1976) the Social Democratic Party’s construction of the Swedish model was firmly rooted in the political culture of the popular movements (*folkrörelserna*) that emerged during the initial phase of industrialization. Through the practice of creating procedures for consulting and negotiation with movement representatives, recruiting movement leaders to government, and funding opportunities for movement groups, the government fostered close ties with some movement groups, which led to a political culture of consensus, cooperation, dialogue and compromise. (2018, pp. 379–380)

The popular movements were integrated into the state in various ways. Besides the close cooperation, they also themselves became more centralised and uniformly organised. Henriksen et al. describe this as vertical integration, implying

that the majority of local associations have been members of regional organizations that in turn have been members of national organizations. Historically, this model has institutionalized communication structures from the local level to the national level and vice versa. Within a democratic polity, this federated structure has added to the potential of many organizations to influence deliberations and decisions within the public sphere and in formal decision-making fora. (2019b, p. 204)

The vertical structure implied that members, by being active members, would (ideally) be able to influence local, regional and national politics through their organisation (see also Rolf, 2022). Associations, both local branches of larger organisations or local leisure and culture associations worked to meet their members interests, while people joined them because they represented their interests.<sup>27</sup>

While the emerging welfare state and integration of movement organisations and claims into the welfare state, was a success for the old social movements, it also brought with it an institutionalisation of the former bottom-up character of those movements. The strong social democratic party integrated those movements, but at the same time also lost connection to the grassroots (Pries et al. 2020). There were plans to transform People's Houses and Parks into Citizen's Houses (*medborgarhus*) and Citizen's Places (*medborgarplatser*), but few of those materialised. These new houses and places "would be owned and managed by municipalities rather than by local movement coalitions" and "such plans signaled that the era of grassroots energy and improvisational, movement-led placemaking was giving way to the age of expert-led 'rational' planning" (ibid., p. 10).

Associations for leisure activities were still run by citizens – or one could say, they were now run by citizens, while before they were run by the People – but now within an even more integrated and formalised structure. Engagement in these associations is often intrinsically motivated (Henriksen et al., 2019c). In the case of leisure associations,

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<sup>27</sup> Local leisure, sport and culture organisations would typically be members of national umbrella associations (*förbund*).

people direct their civic engagement towards their own leisure world, and volunteering may be done just as much for the volunteers' own sake and in organizations in which they take a special interest and enjoy belonging to. Volunteering from this perspective has a clear intrinsic dimension. In this case, volunteering typically aims at providing a 'club good' to the benefit of the members themselves, who have a collective shared interest in protecting this good. (ibid., p. 8)

The quote points to a situation where the motivation is intrinsic, but still there is an awareness of a collective interest. Highlighting the intrinsic motivations is important to mark the contrast with volunteering as it is understood in the Anglo-Saxon context. Volunteering there is understood as an act motivated extrinsically, in the sense that it is to help others. Using the term *volunteering* to describe popular engagement can therefore be misleading in the Swedish or Nordic context (see also von Essen, 2019); helping others is the task of the welfare state.

To conclude this section on the time of the strong society, I formulate three main takeaways regarding developments which still influence association life in modern-day Sweden. First, the time of the strong society has been made into what is known as the "Swedish model" and which is still being related to beyond Sweden. Ericsson and Nyzell explain the idea of the Swedish model as follows:

The concept of the Swedish model has several distinct albeit closely related meanings: (1) the Swedish welfare state in the twentieth century; (2) the institutionalized system of negotiations between workers, employers, and state which developed during the first decades of the twentieth century, with the Saltsjöbaden Agreement being the crucial cornerstone; and (3) the spirit of consensus and the willingness to compromise, which, for the most part, is said to be characteristic of the way political decisions were made in twentieth-century Sweden. (2018, p. 355)

Points (2) and (3) from the quote are particularly relevant as takeaways. On the one hand, institutionalisation of social movements as well as cooperation of social movements with the state, and on the other hand the establishment of a spirit of consensus as a norm for political decision-making.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In a footnote, Peterson et al. (2018) clarify how consensus culture does not imply that involved parties always find a consensus, but that there is a norm that involved actors lay their differences aside to be able to come to a decision together. Ericsson and Nyzell (2018) go further and argue that the idea of a consensus culture as a particular Swedish thing is version of history pushed by

The second takeaway from the time of the strong society is that leisure organised via associations has a long tradition, which started during the time of the old social movements, but was institutionalised during the time of the strong society.

Lastly, there is the observation that popular engagement in this context is often based on intrinsic motivation, implying that individuals engage in an association out of their own leisure interests. In that context, popular engagement is understood as active membership and implies caring together for the club or association to make one's own leisure possible, but not as caring for others. The personal leisure interest as motivator for collective organising is something I come back to when discussing the empirical material, as it is a reason for open workshop associations to be formed.

### **New social movements**

The so-called new social movements emerged in the 1960s. They are to be understood in the context of the old social movements and the strong society, as they are not just concerned with different struggles but also are opposed to previous relationships of cooperation and consensus between public administration, government and social movements. They are in opposition to the institutionalisation and status quo (Peterson et al., 2018; von Essen, 2019). However, as Rolf (2022) remarks, even though the new forms of engagement emerged and protests grew strong, the infrastructure of associations and their workings remained stable.

In their discussion of social struggles from the 1950s to 2015, Peterson et al. identify the following conflict areas and resulting new social movements in Sweden: “conflicts on urban space (‘the right to the city’), peace and disarmament, anti-capitalism, gender inequality and sexuality, ecology, solidarity, global justice and racism/anti-racism” (2018, p. 379). Groups active in those struggles can, however, be concerned with issues from various conflict areas (Peterson et al., 2018). In general, involvement in these struggles was less tied to membership in specific organisations, and brought a shift in the organisational form as compared to the old social movements (Creasap, 2021).

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the Social Democratic party but not reflecting Swedish politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See also J. Andersson (2006) for a critical perspective on the idea and reality of the Swedish model.

With the new social movements came a critique of the people's home, the strong society and the social engineering behind it (von Essen, 2019). The centralised welfare state was criticised for leaving not enough room for local democracy and private initiatives. This critique from the left can be understood as “reaction against the consensus orientated people's home capitalism and the paternalizing social engineering” (Trägårdh, 2006, p. 235, my own translation). The comfort of the strong society was criticised for being constructed at the cost of direct democracy and autonomy (Trägårdh, 2006).

Squatting as contentious practice peaked in the 1980s and was mainly an urban phenomenon (e.g., Polanska, 2023; Polanska & Wåg, 2019). While the focus here might often be on the contentious element, examples such as *Mullvadsockupationen* in Stockholm, which lasted for almost a year between 1977 and 1978, were also places for implementation of direct democracy and co-organisation (Hallberg et al., 2018), which can be understood as alternative building. Less contentious but equally engaged in alternative building through direct democracy were neighbourhood movements in the early 1970s (Creasap, 2021). Ekberg (2016) frames occupations and counter urbanisation (*gröna vågen*), as well as collective living, as practices used by groups engaging in prefigurative politics in Sweden in the 1970s.

In the context of shared infrastructure of production, one project deserves attention. Sweden has had a successful textile industry that experienced restructuring from the 1950s and a crisis in the 1960s and 70s. The crisis led to the closure of a large majority of factories and the unemployment of many workers in a female dominated sector (Andersson-Skog, 2020). In a struggle to keep their jobs, a group of female textile workers in the northern Swedish town of Skellefteå started a workers' cooperative called *Norrkläder*. The case is interesting, as workers' cooperatives are unusual in Sweden and their attempt to take control over their means of production and livelihood is exceptional in the context. In their struggle, they produced two songs with an alternative record label (MNW – Musiknätet Waxholm) – one song calls for the takeover of the machines to make them dance for the workers and for needs rather than the capitalist's money

(Algotssömmerskorna, 1979).<sup>29</sup> This example of a cooperative-run workshop was, however, short lived, as it survived for only two years (Andersson-Skog, 2020).

The period of new social movements can be seen as one with attempts to once again establish spaces for movement building and prefigurative alternatives, and where a leftist critique towards the strong society and People's Home was formulated. At the same time, new social movements were institutionalised (Östberg, 2021) and the civil society infrastructure carried on (Rolf, 2022). What is particularly interesting for the thesis and its question of transformation is the struggle of activists at the time to claim physical and administrative spaces for alternative democratic organising, ones that did not fit the established civil society infrastructure. In chapter eight, I argue that such space is also lacking today.

### 3.3 System shift

The Swedish Social Democratic model was, until the 1990s, characterized by policies aiming at reducing social inequality by developing welfare services that were delivered almost solely by the public sector. The role of civil society organizations was to support these policies and voice concerns rather than to provide services [...]. This division of labour largely mirrored the strong centralist and corporatist tradition in Swedish nation building. (Henriksen et al., 2019c, p.16, referring to Lundström & Wijkström 1997; Sivesind, 2017; Knudsen & Rothstein, 1994)

What Henriksen et al. (2019c) point to here is the unique situation that originated the *system shift* that marked Swedish politics in the 1990s. The shift has been framed as a shift from *voice* (political work or advocacy) to service (social care) (*röst till service*), a formulation first used by Lundström and Wijkström (1995). Almost twenty years later, Lundström and Wijkström (2012) write how they could as well have called it a shift from member to volunteer or customer, from contribution to compensation, from association to foundation and company, from membership fees to donations and buying of services. Wijkström and Einarsson (2006) use yet another name for the same development when naming their book *From Nation State to Business (Från nationalstat till näringsliv?)*. The

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<sup>29</sup> Available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q03YNFJ8988> (accessed 2025-06-13)

point of all these formulations is to highlight the effects of the 1990s political shift on the non-profit sector (*ideell sektor*).

In contrast to the situation that is described in the quote opening this section, civil society organisations would from the 1990s also do service provision within welfare. Opening welfare provision for non-state actors was an intended political move, already introduced under the social democratic government, but taken further by the conservative government in the 1990s (Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022; Lundström & Wijkström, 2012). The policy was supposed to deliver more options and better quality in welfare provision. The idea was that non-profit organisations would start to offer services and complement state and municipal welfare services. Instead, a welfare market established itself. Lundström and Wijkström (2012) argue that political actors at the time genuinely thought they would open the welfare monopoly for non-profits to innovate. However, it should have been logical to expect that the unregulated market that was opened would do what it did: attract for-profit actors who have established themselves since, while non-profit actors play a marginal role (Henriksen et al., 2019c; Lundström & Wijkström, 2012).<sup>30</sup>

While the discussions about the non-profit sector and the *system shift* is focused on those changes (e.g., Altermark & Dahlstedt, 2022), there have also been changes for civil society organisations that do *not* provide welfare. The remainder of this section is focused on changes in non-welfare-providing associations. Before going into detail on this question, I provide a short overview of the developments in the 1990s more generally.

Already in the 1980s, the social democratic government got inspired by neoliberal ideas (Peterson et al., 2018).<sup>31</sup> The entrance of neoliberal ideas paired with the decline of industry in the 1970s, and severe economic recession and crisis in the 1990s (e.g., Creasap, 2021) opened for welfare cuts and what Carson (2005) calls a paradigm drift; where equality became too expensive, efficiency takes over as leading paradigm.

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<sup>30</sup> In 2013, 3% of welfare employment lies in the non-profit sector, 20% in the for-profit sector (Sivesind, 2017)

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed account of how neoliberalism took root in Sweden and how its Swedish version has developed since, see Pressfeldt (2024).

J. Andersson describes the experience of the dismantling of the welfare state as “national trauma”:

The 1990s were obviously a national trauma in the sense of the social hardships that they brought along and that had, through the post-war period, almost disappeared from the Swedish public consciousness. With the exception of the turbulent years of the 1970s, there was virtually no unemployment in Sweden throughout the post-war period which also means that there were virtually no memories of unemployment in Swedish society. [footnote omitted] Suddenly a young generation were confronted with a social reality their parents had never encountered. A generation who grew up in an era of steady welfare expansion was confronted with the end of welfare, or at least, with cutbacks rather than reform. (2009, p. 238)

With her description J. Andersson highlights the exceptional character of the shift and what it meant for the population. Having shared this brief description of the situation in the 1990s, I focus in this subchapter on three levels that impact associations’ position in society and their day-to-day reality. First, the level of the state and how the entrance of the concept of civil society has shifted the frame for associations. Second, the level of the association, in the sense of how associations adapt or fail to adapt to ongoing marketisation. Included here are both direct changes in funding policies, but also indirect changes, showing changing ideas about associations and membership. Third is the level of the individual. While ideas about membership also concern the individual, in this last section I discuss how more general ideas about the individual in modern neoliberal Sweden impact the work of associations.

## State

In the section on the strong society, I write about the term *sambälle* and how the time of the strong society stands for the emergence of the Swedish model and the idea of a society that encompasses the state and the people and their organisations. The strong society refers to a unity of those elements. With the introduction of neoliberal thinking and theory, new terms also entered the Swedish debate, both public and academic. One of those is the term *civil society* and its Swedish translation *civilsambälle*.

The concept of *civil* society, *civilsamhälle*, was an invention taken over from the Anglo-American neo-liberal discourse and introduced as an instrument to express distinction between society and state, where earlier at least a high degree of overlapping, if not synonymity, had existed. (Stråth, 2005, p. 41)

While the state had been the friend or even part of the family (*folkhem*) there was now a formulated opposition. An important point of debate was how the new concept widened the idea of popular engagement from being about active membership in organisations for leisure or political advocacy to bringing in popular engagement through volunteering for social causes in welfare services (von Essen, 2019). The introduction of civil society meant a break with “welfare as a tax-financed universal social right, produced by professional social workers in the public sector” (von Essen, 2022, p. 35).

Furthermore, the influence of neoliberal thinking and politics impacted ideas about the role of popular engagement. While popular engagement up to then had been integrated with state bodies,

[i]n the liberal tradition popular engagement is seen as a counterweight or an alternative to the government and the state. The citizen engaged in civic action is perceived as a watchdog limiting the power of the state and struggling for political rights, and the humanitarian citizen engaged in volunteering for social causes is perceived as a moral actor (von Essen, 2019, p. 38)

Discussing these observations on how neoliberalisation has shaped popular engagement in Sweden shows how engagement in Sweden was not previously framed in such antagonistic terms. The Swedish associational infrastructure comes from a practice of cooperation between the organised public and the state, and the introduction of these new ideas imply intended and unintended changes to that infrastructure. In the first part of this chapter (3.1), I introduce the concept of the civil society infrastructure, and that some argue that it is so strong that civil society engagement is stabilised by it. In the following, I show how elements of the infrastructure are changing and how that is impacting engagement.

## Associations

Looking at changes that happened with neoliberalisation and how associations have dealt with them is relevant as it helps understand the context which associations that form and act today are confronted with. Open workshop associations in Sweden have not existed for long.<sup>32</sup> However, they are formed within the existing infrastructure, which is built from the past: A universal welfare state model that has taken a hard hit with neoliberal politics.

As already mentioned above, one change was that non-profit organisations/associations could now enter as welfare providers, within healthcare, elderly care, childcare, education and more. How associations have worked with that change is a distinct question, which I do not address here.<sup>33</sup> I focus on associations that continued with what they had done until the 1990s, organise culture, sports, leisure, etc. and how their work has been affected by the neoliberalisation of Swedish politics in the 1990s. However, as the form of the association is similar and policies can apply to both associations concerned with welfare and those that are not, there are overlaps and some ideas and discussions around welfare-providing associations are relevant here too.

The literature shows that there are two dimensions in those changes. First, there are direct changes in policy regarding how associations can access funding or how their work is reported and evaluated. This is a development that Lundström and Wijkström (2012) refer to as *from contribution to compensation*, implying that instead of obtaining state grants to do their work, associations are now given tasks from state actors, which they then receive compensation for. The change could also be framed as how NPM (new public management) within the public sector impacts how the non-profit sector is administrated (see also Lundström & Wijkström, 2012). A second dimension is more indirect and maybe less visible: slower changes concerning understandings of what associations are, what they are

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<sup>32</sup> *Fabriken*, a makerspace in Malmö, was the first makerspace in Sweden and started 2012 (Seravalli, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Concerning associations working with social issues, it has been argued that instead of associations making demands to the state on welfare improvements, the state makes now demands on organisations as to how to perform welfare services. This has been framed as a depoliticising, but also been challenged as too simplified (e.g., Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022; von Essen, 2019; Wijkström, 2012c).

good for, how they are best organised and who does the organisation. Both dimensions reinforce each other and together change the *civil society infrastructure*. With this framing of two dimensions, I want to highlight how “both *character of* and *ideas about* Swedish civil society are changing” (Wijkström, 2012c, p. 15, emphasis added). Åberg argues that “organizations are moving away from a traditional mass-based, democratic, federative structure towards a professional, service-producing non-profit model” (2013, p. 556).

The most obvious structural change is an observed change in funding and evaluation of the activities of non-profit organisations. Gustafson (2012) discusses how for-profit accounting practices are used but not suited to evaluate non-profit activities. The mismatch is due to the fundamentally different aim of for-profit and non-profit, or maybe more fitting *for-ideal* and *non-ideal* organisations have.<sup>34</sup> Ideal-based organisations work “with the aim to accomplish the missions the organisation has” (ibid., p. 200, my own translation), which is a much broader aim than “steering towards maximising profitability and creating wealth” (ibid., my own translation). Value created by non-profits is difficult to quantify and impossible to put in monetary terms – still, that is what is being attempted. Evaluating activities takes away time from doing the very activities, while what defines as success is unique to the organisation and implies that general measurements are not a good indicator. Gustafson (2012) concludes by saying that as long as accounting is not adapted for non-profit activities, organisations will have to exert this effort themselves to show their value.

While accounting or reporting to funders is one part of the game, getting funding is another. Bäckström Olofsson and Mery Karlsson (2022) show through their case-studies how new funding schemes have made the non-profit sector more project oriented: start and end date are required, as well as a measurable goal; organisations are further required to define a target audience for their activities and therefore necessarily have to exclude others. The necessity of defining a target audience creates a service setting towards that group, and division between project implementers and receivers. A final point the authors raise is how funding that is to be used towards a specific target group does not allow for advocacy, as such work would not be directed to the target group but towards politicians, which has

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<sup>34</sup> Åberg (2013) uses the terms *ideal-based* relations, identity, goals to describe non-profit. Ideal-based would be closer to the Swedish “*ideellt*” which is usually translated to non-profit when translated to English.

depoliticising effects. Money is given to cooperate with state institutions, but not to confront them (Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022).

Furthermore, Bäckström Olofsson and Mery Karlsson point out that what is not required from funders is also shaping the associations. In one of their case studies, there was no requirement from the funder's side for democratic involvement of members. While being a treasured core of the popular movement tradition, it risks falling by the wayside when relations of implementers and receivers are indirectly favoured through funding schemes. Bäckström Olofsson and Mery Karlsson highlight, however, that organisations still manage to work with advocacy and direct democracy, when working strategically within the rules enforced by the funders. Other scholars too describe a change in how conflicting values that non-profit organisations have to relate to are impacting their organisation. Conflicting values in this case are *local embeddedness* and *democracy* coming from the popular movement tradition and *efficiency* and *productivity* from neoliberal thinking (Åberg, 2013).

Kings (2012) points to another effect on democratic values cherished from a traditional popular movement perspective. She describes how the relationship between local branch and national umbrella organisations is changing in character. In the popular movement tradition, this was a channel for communication and advocacy. In the case she is analysing, very little of that is left. The umbrella is a way for local branches to obtain funding, while the democratic influence is diminishing. Along similar lines, Åberg (2013) describes how study-organisations have fewer local branches, as they merge locally to create more efficient administration. Here too, efficiency is prioritised over democracy.

Åberg (2013) further describes how local branches are turned into service-producing offices running day-to-day operations. They are no longer local branches with local democratic participation. Åberg shows how local embeddedness and democracy are still part of the rhetoric and identity, and put forward to funders to motivate eligibility, while practices are guided by a production rationale.

While changes in funding practices are one reason for associations to change their prioritisation, associations can also be forced to adapt practices and logics to be able to survive alongside for-profit actors offering similar services/activities (e.g., sports, leisure). Another way associations come into closer contact and

cooperation with for-profit organisations is that funding in the form of sponsorship from the for-profit can bring better financial resources and less administrative burden than applying for municipal funding (Wijkström, 2012c). Next, I discuss the more indirect impact which comes through ideas of how to best organise or manage activities.

In this context, it becomes useful to look at the group of associations that make up the largest proportion of all associations in Sweden: sport associations. Sport associations serve as an example where commercialisation has gone further than in other cases, not just in professional divisions of sports clubs, but also for youth and amateur sections. Sports associations are also being looked at with jealousy from other associations, as they are popular with the public as well as state and business actors. On top of their popularity, they receive sponsoring and state funding (Norberg & Redelius, 2012) and, what is revealed in my material, they are also looked upon with some curious envy over how much member engagement they mobilise.

Taken together, sports associations in Sweden have 3.3 million members and there are about 20,000 local sports associations across the country (ibid.). There is large diversity among those many associations and developments of commercialisation are not happening everywhere and in all sports to the same degree. Such developments go faster in urban areas and in more popular sports like football (e.g., Norberg & Redelius, 2012). Norberg and Redelius (2012) describe how clubs work increasingly with customer-focussed thinking. More explicitly, they discuss examples of how clubs become companies to be able to receive funding, which however diminishes democratic influence from members.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, members are increasingly seen as customers buying a service or product from the sports associations. Norberg and Redelius share examples of how commercial actors offer, for example, activities for children and how also associations start offering camps or extra training to create additional income.<sup>36</sup> Training is then directed to those who can pay for it rather than to anyone who is a member.

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<sup>35</sup> Since the 1990s sports associations can run parts of their activities in limited companies (*Aktiebolag, AB*). With the 51% rule, the original association must hold at least 51% of the shares and so keeps the majority of the votes (Norberg & Redelius, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Sport associations get funded through tax money. I do not know how or if tax funding changes for those associations that own limited companies (*Aktiebolag, AB*).

Another view on sports associations provides a relevant insight into the question of democracy or association democracy (*föreningsdemokrati*). As described above, democratic organisation which allows local associations and their members to influence politics on the national level is diminishing. Forslund's (2016) observations in local sports associations provoke the question of whether those supposedly democratic structures are so democratic in practice.

Forslund describes a situation where members show very little interest in contributing to the democratic running of their local association. He describes how members have opinions about how things should be run, but are rarely dedicated enough to become informed and involved to do something about those ideas. In the end, it is those who do put in the time and effort to be part of the board who run the association (*eldsjälar*), while others have little influence. The board with a lack of time and overburdened with tasks, tries to do their work efficiently and avoid interference from members. Their aim is to make the association survive; democratic organisation is less of a priority.

Forslund goes so far as to describe their practises as “democratic theatre” (ibid., p. 82), which is performed so as to create an illusion of possible influence for members. The theatre is annual meetings which in principle are the deciding organ of an association, but in practice are information meetings from the board to the members, where most decisions are already made. Forslund also describes how members would rather pay more than do something themselves. Forslund concludes that instead of pretending democracy, it would be better for the association to adapt a “modern management model” (ibid., p. 85).

What is important and interesting with this argument is that it puts the focus of the democratic practice on the level of the local association, rather than on a democratic ideal inherited from the popular movement tradition.<sup>37</sup> Forslund is clear in portraying the problems with both a false image of democracy and a lack of engagement. His conclusion is that to efficiently provide a good service to members, the association would do better leaving democratic ambitions aside. Whether the conclusion is logical depends on what an association is supposed to be good for. Is it to *efficiently provide a service* or should it work as *democracy school* and be a forum to nurture societal trust?

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<sup>37</sup> Sörbom (2005), for example, questions how democratic or political engagement really was in what is considered the traditional popular movement associations.

Forslund's (2016) description of a problematic situation regarding member engagement and the impossibility to unite expectations of service provision and democratic structure provides an example of how neoliberal thinking is impacting small local associations. Members do not engage (enough) and expect a service, while experiences from the board make Forslund see less democracy and more expert management as a solution. More generally speaking, there is a risk that development will lead to organisations where the non-profit character is still central, but which are organised as non-profit corporations such as those that exist in the US context, "where there is less emphasis on internal democracy and more on hierarchical, efficient and service-producing organisation" (Åberg, 2013, p. 552).

The example shows how understandings of what an association should be good for, what roles members should have and how it is best organised are changing. Focusing more on the relation of the individual to the association, Åberg argues that

changes are believed to have the capacity to alter the logic of civil society organizations since roles such as member or participant, which involve ideal-based relations, are replaced by ideas of customers, which indicate calculative relationships. The former concerns non-exchangeable relations, based on the actors' identities, whereas the latter are relations that are exchangeable and where mutual gain is the main focus. Thus, such changes may alter the rhetoric as well as the priorities and the way actors think about the activities. (Åberg, 2013, p. 554; referring to Hvenmark 2008; Wijkström & Einarsson 2006; Sjöstrand 2000)

Åberg describes a change in rhetoric and perception concerning the role of the individual in associations. Engagement is no longer conceptually limited to membership and participation guided by intrinsic motivation, but for a common purpose. With the 1990s, the role of the volunteer, the donor and philanthropist (re)entered Swedish vocabulary and conceptual thinking about popular engagement (von Essen, 2019; Wijkström, 2012b). With these relations, a logic of mutual gain is now part of what is understood and practiced as engagement.

T. Einarsson and Hvenmark (2012) discuss changes in how membership is conceptualised and practiced as a change from a multi-dimensional perspective on and practice of membership to a separation into multiple one-dimensional or few-dimensional relations between individuals and associations. What they mean by multi-dimensional membership is that members could have several roles in their associations. Members can support their association, act as ambassadors for

the association, be an active member in the sense of doing tasks within the association, they are main funders through their membership fees and are principals of the association in the sense that they, through the internal democracy, decide for the association, while the association should act in its members' interest. That these multi-dimensional relations are being replaced by one- or few-dimensional relations becomes, according to T. Einarsson and Hvenmark, visible both in a decrease in membership, an increase in volunteers working for organisations that they are not members of and a change in how organisations address the public to gain their support or sympathy. "Instead of like previously recruiting mainly members, there is now talk of guardians, supporters, volunteers, donors, fundraisers, friends, patrons, mentors, fans, informers, ambassadors, activists" (ibid., p. 83, my own translation). Understanding a member as, e.g., a consumer of a service makes the member into someone who is expected to act with only intrinsic motivation. For multi-dimensional members there is an expectation of an intrinsic motivation in the sense that members join associations to be, for example, able to exercise, but also with some "understanding, that one is part of a collective that goes beyond the individual" (ibid., p. 88, my own translation).

The most discussed role of those listed by T. Einarsson and Hvenmark (2012) is the role of the volunteer (see also, e.g., Henriksen et al., 2019c; von Essen, 2019). Members can be volunteers, but a so-called *plug-in volunteer* (Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022) can also be someone recruited from the public to do a specific pre-defined task for a short period. Platforms to connect organisations and individuals interested in volunteering are growing in Sweden. One example is a nationwide platform called *Volontärbyrån* (volunteer agency). In 2002, 55 organisations were looking for volunteers via the platform; in 2011 it was 1355 organisations (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012); in 2024, there are 3244 organisations registered on the platform and 854 missions (*uppdrag*) (Volontärbyrån, n.d.). This is only one platform, and there are many more, for example regional or municipal platforms. The missions advertised on the platforms very much resemble job advertisements, where individuals with matching experience and qualifications can apply. The missions are built on tasks that are defined by the organisation. The volunteer can do what others have deemed to be a task that needs doing. What I want to get at is that, while volunteering in this manner requires a willingness to give time to a cause bigger

than one's own interest, it does not require the volunteer to take any larger responsibility for planning or evaluation, or for the association.

With a less critical view, Henriksen et al. argue that “the multitude of different organizations, which play different roles, also makes accessible *a variety of different volunteer roles and tasks*. In short, this means there are many open avenues, open positions and *varying identities*” (2019c, p. 13, emphasis added). Following T. Einarsson and Hvenmark (2012) and their idea of the multi- vs one-dimensional relations I would argue that, there are many diverse tasks to be done through volunteering, but all within the identity of the volunteer. Identities that involve taking more responsibility are not as accessible (or demanded).

Two ways associations address members, often not explicitly but implicitly, is as subscribers or consumers of the specific purpose of the association. As subscribers or consumers of politics, members give donations to organisations and professionals do the politics. Members choose the political project they support by choosing an organisation, but without gaining or claiming any democratic influence in the organisation. This process can also be framed as professionalisation (Papakostas, 2012). Thinking of political parties and membership in those terms, “party politics would no longer be about citizens together making politics, but that there is somebody who does politics for us” (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012, p. 87, my own translation). Transferring this to an association that is concerned with leisure activities (like an open workshop), this would mean that the workshop is not organised together, but that some are organising it for others.

A simple observation to summarise the changes at state and association and individual level is, that with the construction of a market, you will get companies, and on the individual level you will get capitalist subjectivities such as consumers, volunteers and entrepreneurs (Wijkström, 2012a).

In the literature this chapter is based on so far, the focus is on associations that have a long history and are highly institutionalised (e.g., Åberg, 2013; Forslund, 2016; Harding, 2012; Kings, 2012; Wijkström, 2012a). The literature I discuss is concerned with associations that are part of larger umbrella organisations (*förbund*). Work that looks at how changes in the 1990s have affected associations asks about what has changed for existing associations (e.g., Åberg, 2013;

Wijkström, 2012a). What is less prominent is work on how new associations or associations trying to establish new practices handle the changed preconditions.

A study on national study organisations (*studieförbund*) and new actors that want to access those organisational resources (monetary, network, infrastructure) shows that the national study organisations act as gate keepers and new groups struggle to establish themselves (Harding, 2012). This is a case where new actors want to enter existing institutionalised umbrella structures. For the case that I look at, there is no existing umbrella organisation that could hinder or enable their survival.

In general, the literature suggests that establishing associations is and has been easy and without many barriers or hurdles. Groups “almost by default” organise in the association format and “[f]urthermore, the openness in the legal system to setting up associations and their (direct or indirect) governmental support means that it is attractive for people to form or join associations” (Henriksen et al., 2019c, p. 7). Associations “hold legitimacy and public trust and may often be supported financially or otherwise, without ceding much control, by central or local government” (ibid.). Henriksen et al. wrote this in 2019, while other literature suggests that receiving financial and other support is today connected to indirect control by the party (state or private) providing the support (e.g., Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022).

While the observation that groups “almost by default” form associations if they want to organise activities with others might still hold (see also Rutt (2020) for such observations in Denmark) I want to shed light on the question of whether those associations also survive *by default*. This is something I discuss with the empirical material in chapter nine. I would argue that this is an important question if it is assumed that popular engagement in Sweden happens through associations. This leads to follow up questions when thinking about commoning practices and social ecological transformation. How can new practices, ideas and concerns be established? This applies both at the local level, and also regarding national politics. As I have described above, local associations in their ideal welfare state version are vertically integrated with regional and national umbrella organisations, and in this way democratically connected to national politics (Stenius, 2010). What does it mean when this connection breaks (Kings, 2012) or cannot be established?

## Individual

While much of the above has already been about the role of individuals in relation to an association, as member, consumer, subscriber, etc., in this last section of the chapter I focus on how understandings of the individual in society more broadly have changed with the shift in neoliberalisation and how those impact the situation of associations. As this chapter is about the Swedish context, I focus on ideas that are focused or adapted for this specific context.

The first take on individuals in Sweden today that I want to introduce is what Törnqvist (2019) calls *individualised collectivism*. In her study on communal housing, she conceptualises individualised collectivism as “a cooperative ambition formed in accordance with notions of individuality and independence” (ibid., p. 901). Törnqvist traces the combination of on the one hand, individual autonomy and, on the other hand, collectivism, to the idea of Swedish state individualism, which she describes as an “institutionalized form of interpersonal independence grounded in the collectivist logic of the Swedish welfare state” (ibid.). Her empirical material shows how individuals living in collectives enjoy what one of them describes as “company without demands” (ibid., p. 906). The collective living helps individuals out of involuntary solitude, without involving them into “heavy dependencies” (ibid.), “overabundance of emotional labour” (ibid., p. 907) and “emotional investments” (ibid.), while allowing for flexibility, freedom and openness.

Törnqvist frames her observations within general theories about increased individualisation in neoliberal societies (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Individualisation here is framed as a process where (love) relations are increasingly short term, fluid and avoid dependencies, “following a consumption rationale” (Törnqvist, 2019, p. 902). In this context, Törnqvist argues for communal living not to be contrasted to individualism but to be seen as part of it. In the Swedish context, Törnqvist relates to the idea of what has been called a *Swedish Theory of Love* (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015). Here Swedish state individualism is conceptualised as being made of a specific relation of the individual to the state. Berggren and Trägårdh argue that Sweden makes a unique case where the individual is in direct relation to the state. This direct relation is formed through the welfare system addressing the individual rather than the family unit like it would in other welfare states (e.g., Germany). As result, the individual becomes independent from family relations, which offers true freedom regarding the choice of company. State individualism accordingly is based on a “strong

alliance between the state and the individual aiming at making each citizen as independent of his or her fellow citizens as possible” (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2010, p. 16) and frees the individual from personal responsibility (Trägårdh, 2006).

While more critique can be levelled at Berggren and Trägårdh’s book (e.g., J. Andersson, 2009; Stenius, 2010) one critique I take up here is that the idea of state individualism forgets about associations and the central role they play in social reproduction in Sweden. While the individual might be freed of family dependencies through a direct connection to the state, it is illusionary to suggest that individuals are freed from personal responsibility. While associations do not run welfare services, they are essential for other functions, as I show above, and they do not work if nobody takes responsibility and everybody avoids dependencies (see Stenius, 2010). The idea of state individualism is therefore problematic in two ways: (1) it misses an important part of social life and (2) pushes an illusion of individual independency further. While Berggren and Trägårdh (2010; 2015) argue that the state individualism is something coming from the time of the strong society and some essential Swedishness, others have argued that it is part of a specific, if dominant, discourse about Sweden and its history (J. Andersson, 2009).

The idea of *individualised collectivism* provides a valuable concept to understand observations of individuals choosing to share infrastructure at their own convenience without committing themselves to any further responsibilities or dependencies. To connect the phenomena to the Swedish context with help of the idea of *state individualism* is helpful as it, being a dominant idea, can help explain the observed understanding of collectivism. It is, however, less useful as an explanation of a tradition of independency as it misses the influence of co-organisation and interdependencies in the influential associational life.

The subject in the idea of state individualism would be someone who has experienced independence from other humans in her personal life, does not make herself depended on family or other forms of personal community, but relies on the welfare state for support. Missing in the idea is that this state individual has also been socialised through taking part in activities organised by her co-citizens (Stenius, 2010). A relevant follow-up question about this subject is whether she will assume here total independence from others (as is suggested to her with the idea of state individualism) or understand her responsibility to co-organise with her co-citizens? Stenius argues in this context that “[s]trong state welfare

system weakens individual citizens' sense of duty or the ability to take responsibility for their own lives or the lives of others, thus also inhibiting incentive, leadership and originality" (ibid., p. 42). In a documentary thematising Swedish state individualism (Gandini, 2016), the social theorist Zygmunt Bauman was interviewed speaking about independency and happiness. In the interview he describes how being taken care of by the state leads to comfort, but also a situation where citizens unlearn how to socialise, negotiate, cohabitate, discuss, agree and navigate differences (Bauman, 2016).

While the concept of individualised collectivism is based on observed behaviours and values today, there is also a question of the intended role of individualism by neoliberal policy. Pressfeldt (2024) who traces the engineering of Sweden into a neoliberal country in the work of economist Assar Lindbeck, discusses how shaping the neoliberal individual was part of the idea and success of the shift in the 1990s. He writes how, in line with those ideas,

[e]xposure to market forces can be interpreted as crucial in shaping individuals into "entrepreneurs of themselves", by providing them with proper incentives, a transformation that is impeded by the welfare state's shielding of individuals from the direct impact of price signals and risk. These individuals are seen as responsible for their own lives, making decisions, and engaging in actions (such as taking risks) within the marketplace. In doing so, they not only navigate the competitive market system but also contribute to its reproduction. (ibid., p. 197)

In contrast to the idea of the homo economicus, the entrepreneur of the self is not based on the idea that humans are naturally rational profit-maximising beings but that humans can or need to be shaped into that strategic entrepreneur through exposure to market logic. The forming of entrepreneurial subjects was seen as crucial for the transformation into a neoliberal state (Pressfeldt, 2024). In relation to association life, I argue that when market thinking is given such a central role it can help explain struggles for engagement for commoning projects.

As I have shown above there is a discussion about what roles are available for individuals to take on in relation to associations. What is missing in that discussion is attention to those individuals and their socialisation who would take these roles in associations. The two framings I introduce above, *individualised collectivism* and the *entrepreneurial subjects*, can provide some idea about dynamics at play in socialisation in a neoliberal Nordic welfare state.

After many pages of present and historical context as well as understandings of that context, I want to again highlight the need for this exploration with what J. Andersson calls “institutional stickiness”.

To that extent, important aspects of institutional stickiness are the continuities embedded in language and discourse around the welfare state. Therefore, we need to give serious attention to history, not in the narrow sense of institutional path dependency, but in a broader sense of political culture, ideologies past, and institutional legacies that together shape and set the boundaries of discourse. The historical inheritance of a social democratic or a liberal model and the institutions integral to these act as elements that structure policy change, not only in terms of institutional constraints but also in terms of what it is possible to speak of and how it is possible to speak of it in political language. (J. Andersson, 2006, p. 454)

Digging in the historical context, looking at both institutional change and change in the understanding of those institutions, has brought forth ideas and concepts that can help understand struggles open workshop associations experience today. The exploration in the context of associations in Sweden today and in the past has helped me understand that there is a heritage of associational life and popular movement, which is ascribed with great agency in the past and hopes for the future. While in the present there are worries about the state of associations and the norm of the active member, I see that the discrepancy between the ideal of the association life and the reality of neoliberal policy and subject creation is not discussed to the extent that is needed. How can individuals be expected to give their time, energy and engagement for causes beyond themselves when they experience individualised collectivism and learn to be entrepreneurs in all aspects of their life? In the social imaginary developed with neoliberalisation of the welfare state, engaging with and taking responsibility in associations is no longer worthy or desirable.

Exploring the changes that have happened in Sweden from the 1990s and onwards I want to highlight a few takeaways. New ideas and practices around associations have transferred associations from a situation where they are part of a *samhälle*, a close cooperation or even unity of state and civil society to an understanding where state and civil society are antagonistic or at least separate. With neoliberalisation associations are seen increasingly as service providers working towards efficiency rather than as co-organised elements that prioritise democracy and broad participation. What the chapter has shown is that these

developments happen as intertwined processes where administration, national politics, ideas, international developments and individual behaviour come together. This last section on the system shift suggests that the civil society infrastructure is changing not by design, but through shifting practices and understandings.

While neoliberal capitalism and its destructive consequences are in no way unique to the Swedish context, this chapter shows that Sweden is a special case in the sense that here the neoliberal state was built on a welfare state. While there remains a legacy of generous welfare politics around, for example, childcare, in other ways Sweden could be argued to have exposed itself even more to neoliberal exploitation than other countries (Thörn, 2023). The welfare state period has left a heritage of high trust towards the state, an integrated civil society, and only marginal practices of antagonism. In sum, the shifting contours of associational life in Sweden – between democratic ideals and managerial realities – set the stage for understanding the tensions, possibilities, and everyday negotiations of grassroots engagement in the chapters that follow.

The chapter shows how the idea of the co-organised association is an important cornerstone for Swedish democracy and even identity. The chapter further shows how political developments of first institutionalisation and disconnection from the grassroots, and then neoliberal politics, threaten the democratic and co-organised character of associations. This is relevant for the empirical part of the thesis as it helps understand the struggles associations face in maintaining their co-organised character. More broadly, the historic and cultural background of associations in Sweden is crucial for thinking about democratic transformations, and the capacity to work together for a common good.

Understanding the history of associations in Sweden which I describe in chapter three as a history of a social imaginary shows how a social imaginary can change over time; how practices and understandings of how to be a member in an association change with new ideas of the role of the state and civil society. While new dominant ideas directly influence policies which then impact associations' ability to get, e.g., long-term funding, ideas of sound organisational practices can have more indirect influences. Similarly, subjectivities change along with ideas over what roles individuals play in associations.

## 4 Research journey and methods

“I’m a thing-finder,” says Pippi one day to Tommy and Annika.

“A thing-finder, what’s that?” asks Tommy.

“A person who finds things,” says Pippi. “The whole world is full of things, and someone needs to find them. And that’s what a thing-finder does.”

(Lindgren, 1947, translation Elisabeth Kallick Dyssegaard)

During large parts of this PhD project, I have read about Pippi Longstocking, a fictional character created by Astrid Lindgren, and some of her everyday adventures.<sup>38</sup> Every time I read the section that starts with the above quote, I find myself thinking that it makes an interesting illustration for an approach I aim to follow in qualitative research. The sequence continues with Pippi and her friends Tommy and Annika setting out to find things. Pippi finds her first thing – a rusty metal can. She discovers uses for the things she finds and makes them into something. Tommy and Annika find things only after being pointed by Pippi to look in two tree stumps. Both find one thing: Tommy a notebook with a pen and Annika a necklace. In contrast to the things Pippi finds, these are already defined when they are found – and they were in perfect hiding spaces.

I see Pippi as open-minded creative “thing-finder”, who can find unexpected things in unexpected places. She is curious about them and makes them into something meaningful, things that in others’ eyes are not noteworthy. Tommy and Annika find things in obvious places, and they are already named and defined when found. They do not inspire interpretation by the finder.

For me, this illustrates an approach to qualitative research that can be seen in ethnographic work. There is a curiosity for the unexpected and a sense in which something that at first sight might seem insignificant holds potential keys to understanding.

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<sup>38</sup> This is when reading again and again “Kennst du Pippi Langstrumpf?” to my daughters.

As I share in the introduction to this thesis, the motivation for this study is both theoretical and empirical: the desire to contribute to research on post-capitalist alternatives and a curiosity to understand open workshops in general and the running of them in particular. To learn about open workshops and how they can be run, I took an ethnographic approach, using participant observations, interviews and document analysis as my methods. With these methods I aimed for a rich description of the complex situation in order to be able to answer “*how*” questions. I give detail on how I used those methods as well as on how I analysed the collected material in part 4.1. In 4.2, I reflect on ethical questions concerning this project and in 4.3, on limitations along the projects journey. I close the chapter with final remarks (4.4). Before turning to 4.1, I share some thoughts on my methodological approach.

One aspect of the methodological approach is that I give time and detail to the empirical work, both for the collection of empirical material, and also for the analysis of the material. Here I am inspired by ethnographic work, which puts emphasis on the importance of empirical work:

The advice is that it is possible and recommendable to learn from a field. Observers are convinced that there are things ‘out there’ that we do not know despite all the books and articles we have read. There are interactions and processes, performances and routines, riddles and ambiguities that we cannot figure out at the desk. This does not suggest pure induction [...] but, rather, empirical research that communicates with theory and previous research. (Wästerfors, 2018, p. 315)

Participant observation is concerned with “interactions and processes, performances and routines, riddles and ambiguities” – with everyday practices and processes which constitute whatever phenomena it is we are interested in. In my case, I was interested in the everyday interactions that form the open workshop. I took a zoomed-in perspective (Samanani, 2024) aiming for strong empirical grounding (Gibson-Graham, 2014).

Gibson-Graham (2014) argue for an approach of *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) and *weak theory*, where “weak theory does not elaborate and confirm what we already know; it observes, interprets, and yields to emerging knowledge” (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. 149). This does not mean that *strong theory* does not matter or should be ignored, but that there is a lot to be found at its edges and in the detail of the everyday (see also Katz, 2017). Such an approach can then help widen “the

field of economic ‘realities’ and multiplies the dynamics at play” (ibid.). I adopt what Gibson-Graham describe as “an anti-essentialist approach, theorizing the contingency of social outcomes rather than the unfolding of structural logics” (2012, p. 33).

I call this chapter of the thesis *research journey*. Here I mean a journey that has a purpose, a directed curiosity, principals for how to travel as well as a starting point. This journey can be described in retrospect but was not mapped out in full detail from the start. I describe the starting point for this journey in the introduction to the thesis. It is a combination of my everyday human experience, as well as my academic and activist engagement. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) describe such a process of the formation of a research interest, and the explicit acknowledgment of this process, as characteristic for interpretive methodologies.

Interpretive approaches are built on an abductive logic of inquiry: “[A]bductive reasoning begins with a puzzle, a surprise, or a tension, and then seeks to explicate it by identifying the conditions that would make that puzzle less perplexing and more of a ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ event” (ibid., p. 27). To identify those conditions, the researcher uses an iterative-recursive approach, which implies a spiral movement inspired by the idea of the hermeneutic circle. The researcher goes back and forth between that which is puzzling and possible explanations that make the situation less puzzling. Explanations can be found in other empirical material and inquiry as well as in relevant literature dealing with similar cases or, for example, historical developments. The goal is not to find one definite answer or explanation to the “surprise,” but to come closer to understanding the conditions that make something less perplexing (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Previous experience as well as publications (e.g., Baier et al., 2016b; Hansing, 2017) suggested open workshops as places of degrowth prefiguration, providing a place to study the experience and maintenance of such prefigurative practices. The reality I found in Swedish open workshops was, however, different. This “tension between expectation and experience” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 33) led me to search for explanations. In chapter 4.1, I describe in detail how this research journey unfolded, empirically and analytically in dialogue with literature and concepts. While the initial participant observation pointed me to the tension, later observations and interviews as well as readings on the social-cultural context form the search for explanations. Sharing the research journey is a way to show that the

“surprise” did not “emerge from the field” or occur at “random” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 28), but because of prior and new knowledge and experience.

In the introduction to the thesis, I shared some stories to relate to the reader how the topic and focus of this dissertation came about. The anthropologist and writer Kirin Narayan writes:

[a] writer’s voice necessarily implies a self with certain sensibilities, regardless of whether the first person is used. Bringing in an “I” and set it rolling (like the spool it resembles), and you’ll be unfurling a long thread, a thread you can then use to artfully stitch together diverse experiences and insights. (Narayan, 2012, p. 96)

The quote above highlights not only the stylistic potentials of using storytelling to connect “experiences and insights” but also makes an important methodological statement. Regardless of whether the “I” is used, the writer and researcher is always there in the text with her certain sensibilities. To use Donna Haraway’s terms, knowledge is always situated. As a researcher, I do not see myself as an objective tool following protocol, thereby explaining research objects to others, or as an eye seeing from nowhere. I am a situated human being and the circumstances I study are equally situated (Haraway, 1988). Rather than aiming for objective descriptions or explanations, I aim at entangling the dynamics I observe while paying attention to context or the situated circumstances.

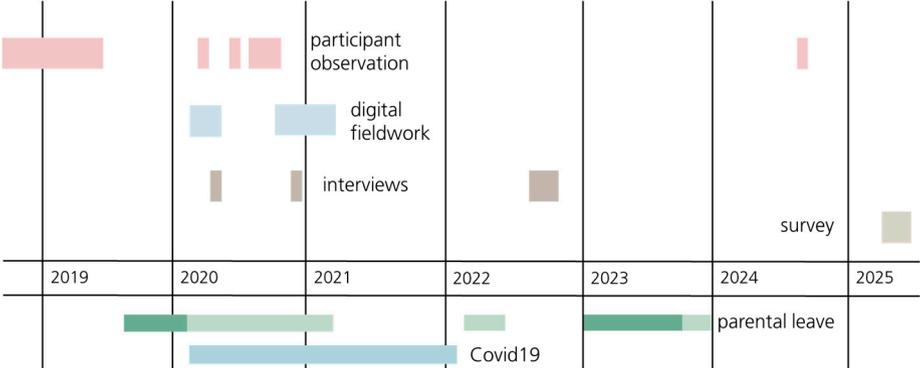
The learning that informed the text is not something I did alone. The situatedness of the researcher and the case need to be seen together. Haraway writes that “situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals” (ibid., p. 590). Images produced from such a standpoint are “the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere” (ibid.).

## 4.1 Methods and material

In this subchapter I describe the methods I have used in data collection and analysis. I also show how the various phases of collection and analysis are connected and have informed each other. In figure 4.1, I show the different phases in a timeline that contains the whole thesis process. I started engaging empirically

with open workshops in Sweden in fall 2018 and followed developments at different intensities until fall 2025. The timeline shows two longer parental leaves during which I paused the empirical engagement almost completely. I was still following developments via (social) media but did not actively search or engage.

The empirical work for this thesis was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic which is marked in the timeline. It coincided with the period when I had planned to do extensive fieldwork. During the first months of the pandemic, I focused on following maker culture globally and digitally as it had a phase of high activity. While the pandemic continued it became apparent that planning for fieldwork implied a high degree of uncertainty, and I decided to put more weight on interviews.



**Figure 4.1 Thesis timeline**

Empirical work over the time of the dissertation process. Included in the timeline are the COVID-19 pandemic (here the period when restrictions were active in Sweden) as well as periods of parental leave (dark blocks indicate full-time parental leave, lighter blocks part-time parental leave).

As the timeline shows, I was able to do some months of participant observation during the pandemic after the first wave had ebbed and restrictions were lifted in Sweden. Some open workshops were open during more intense phases of the pandemic so self-employed members could keep on working while contact was discouraged. In this situation I judged it unethical to create more contacts by engaging in participant observation.

Instead, I continued with what can be described as digital fieldwork (C. Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016). This included participation in virtual events, such as a

Maker Faire and an online knitting group, and observations of digital interactions and resources shared within maker communities. While these engagements did not become a main source of data, they informed my understanding of the broader cultural and social dynamics of maker practices and complemented the in-person fieldwork and interviews.

In the end, the methods that helped me create the bulk of the empirical material used in the thesis are participant observations as well as semi-structured interviews. Beyond those main methods, I have collected documents related to open workshops in Sweden in a broad sense. In the following sections, I describe in detail how I applied the methods and what materials were created. In each section I account for how I applied the method and reflect on the approach in the context of this project.

Before turning to describing my processes of data collection, I want to comment on the extended study period or rather period of my life that I have been busy with this thesis. While the purpose of the timeline above is to visualise fieldwork periods in relation to my parental leave and the COVID-19 pandemic, it also shows that I started this thesis project seven years ago. During this time, I spent less time at open workshops than I had hoped but engaged more with the broader context in which these open workshops exist – everyday life in contemporary Sweden – than I had expected. Spending these years in Sweden allowed me to gain proficiency in Swedish which in turn enabled me to do empirical and conceptual work in Swedish. It also enabled me to engage in an everyday and experiential way with institutions, literature, media, history and politics that all shape open workshops in Sweden.

### **Participatory observation and fieldnotes**

Between fall 2018 and fall 2024 I engaged in participant observation in open workshops and events concerning open workshops. I here use a broad understanding of participant observation, including one-time event participations, both in person (2018, 2024) and online (2020, 2021), frequent engagement in a few selected cases (2019–2020) and long-term observation of a few selected cases (2019–2024). Table 4.1 shows an overview of the different occasions of participant observation.

**Table 4.1 Overview of participant observations**

Occasions of participant observation, period, and material created and collected

	<b>Period</b>	<b>Material</b>
<b>Initial phase participant observation</b>		
Workshop as member, phase 1	04–06/2019	Field diary
Incubation pilot project	05/2019	Fieldnotes, documents
Pilot study open workshop	01–06/2019	Fieldnotes, documents
<b>2nd phase participant observation</b>		
Workshop as member, phase 2	06–11/2020	Fieldnotes, documents
Upcycling workshop, face-to-face & online	2020, 2021	Fieldnotes, documents
Pilot study open workshop, follow-up	2020-2024	Field diary, documents
<b>Event participation</b>		
Networking event, Germany	11/2018	Fieldnotes, documents
Örebro Maker Faire, Sweden	09/2024	Field diary, documents
<b>Online events</b>		
Online knitting group	04/2020	Field diary, documents
Virtually Maker Fair 2020	05/2020	Field diary
Maker Faire Rome	12/2020	Fieldnotes, documents
Scenario workshop: repair and circular economy	03/2021	Field diary, documents

Regarding the material collected and produced, I differentiate between fieldnotes, field diary and documents. By fieldnotes I mean detailed descriptions of my observations as they are typically done in ethnography (Emerson et al., 2011). What I call field diary are reflections regarding the research process and my own experience in the field. I took such notes when I could not get informed consent but made notes documenting my activities and thoughts rather than observations.<sup>39</sup> Emerson et al. are critical towards a division of fieldnotes and field diaries when the division is based on the idea that there is a need to keep personal and “objective” observations apart. This is, however, not my meaning with the distinction. When I was able to write fieldnotes I only wrote fieldnotes and did not separate my reflections and actions from observations.

Documents are those that I collected in connection to the different field sites and events. This can be screenshots of social media content produced by open workshop associations or event organisers, reports and other published materials. In the following paragraphs I describe the different observations in more detail.

<sup>39</sup> See 4.2 for ethical reflections on questions of informed consent in the open workshop setting.

From fall 2018 to summer 2019 I conducted initial participant observations with the purpose of establishing contacts with workshop associations and to get first impressions of open workshops in Sweden. The selection of field sites was at this stage very open. As the purpose was to get first impressions, I did not narrow down the selection with any criteria except that an open workshop should be involved. I found the field sites with the help of online searches, a newsletter and through a colleague. In my initial contact with the respective groups, I stated that I was doing research on open workshops to hear if they were willing to engage. All groups were positive.

For the initial participant observation, I became a member of one open workshop and used it for sewing projects. At another workshop I was able to join the preparation and pilot of an incubation and networking event for product design and marketing. At yet another association I joined in a planning and pilot study to establish whether the local community would enjoy access to an open workshop and how it could be realised. I also joined a networking event for open workshops in Germany. The idea with the initial fieldwork phase was to establish contacts for further fieldwork and to get to know the context of open workshops in Sweden.

During this phase I kept a field diary, collected documents and made fieldnotes. In the workshop I became a member of, I kept what I call a field diary. In this workshop, the high fluctuation of other users required a longer period for me to gain consent that felt ethically sound.<sup>40</sup> I still made notes, but these were focused on my own experience of getting to know the workshop. In the other cases I had full consent and wrote extensive fieldnotes.

The field visits were different in character. Most field visits lasted from a few hours to half days during afternoons and weekends, while the networking event in Germany went over several days including evenings. My empirical engagement at that time was broad, including different actors and geographical contexts. I understood this time as explorative to get an idea about field sites where I could engage more after the upcoming parental leave (see timeline, figure 4.1).

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<sup>40</sup> See 4.2 for ethical reflections.

A second phase of participant observation took place between June and November 2020.<sup>41</sup> During those months I carried out a total of twenty visits to one workshop, most visits lasting about two and a half hours. The visits were mostly in the afternoons during hours open for regular members. I tried different ways of participating. During the early weeks of this period, I helped others in the workshop and had no creative project of my own. Later, I started a sewing project of my own which I describe in chapter five. The different strategies gave me different entry points into conversations and observations, and in hindsight I can say that they enriched the material I was able to collect.

To talk about *collected material* risks simplifying the process of fieldwork and the writing of fieldnotes. Emerson et al. frame writing fieldnotes as the moment an “observer/researcher sits down and turns a piece of her lived experience into a bit of written text” (2011, p. xiiv) and highlight that even if fieldnotes play an important role in ethnographic methods the actual *process of writing* fieldnotes is all too often overlooked and undervalued. Emerson et al. therefore argue to pay more attention to how fieldnotes are written as it is from those notes that the researcher later constructs the analysis and arguments. For that reason, I consider it important to not only include the participant observation in the description of the applied methods, but also the process of writing fieldnotes.

As all participatory observations were either in the evening or weekend, I did write notes about the observations the next morning or the next weekday morning. In some cases, I took notes a few days after the observation. Besides a handful of exceptions, I did not take notes by hand during the observation. The few times I did, I noted quotes or made bullet points so as not to forget situations. When writing fieldnotes, I described chronologically what had happened during the observation. Writing extensively was meaningful as I did not want to limit my later analysis too early and because I noticed that chronological writing helped me remember. Through noting apparently mundane things I remembered in more detail other things that I had observed during the field visit.

Inspired by Emerson et al. (2011), I consider writing fieldnotes to be a part of the initial analysis, as writing fieldnotes is always also a selection of what happened in the field. No two observers write identical notes for the same situation. As

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<sup>41</sup> In November 2020, the workshop closed due to new recommendations for the reduction of the spread of COVID-19.

Emerson et al. highlight, this is not only a matter of different style or focus, but also of “different *lenses* to interpret, frame and represent. [...] [I]n this sense, [descriptive fieldnotes] are products of active processes of interpretation and sense-making that frame or structure not only what is written, but also how it is written” (2011, p. 9, emphasis in original).

I undertook, for example, no systematic or detailed descriptions of what people made. With a broad interest in users’ understanding of the workshop and its organisation, I described relations between users and between users and the workshop, how machines were used, how volunteers interacted with other members. Much of my notes contain content from conversations I had at the workshop, both about the organisation of the workshop, but also about how and why people use the workshop. I also included my own reflections as well as how I used the workshop in the notes.

Parallel to the ongoing field visits in one workshop I was in the process of becoming a volunteer in another workshop. Unfortunately, I had to cancel the process early on when the usage of public transport became discouraged by public authorities in fall 2020 to reduce the spread of COVID-19. At the workshop where I was a member, the new recommendations meant that I had to end participant observation and could not follow a plan I had to engage more in other workshop areas. I had so far focused on the textile workshop, but had planned to also engage in 3D printing, pottery and wood working.

Following the involuntary stop of this phase of participant observation I engaged in digital fieldwork and in an initial and open analysis of the material collected so far (2018–2020). This analysis provided the basis for the interviews I conducted in 2022. In the last two sections of this subchapter, I describe the methods used for that analysis. Besides informing the interviews, the fieldnotes have also found their way into the thesis in some quotes.

During 2020 and 2021 I engaged in digital fieldwork. When the COVID-19 pandemic made in person fieldwork impossible a discussion on online methods bloomed up in email lists leading to collective lists of possible approaches for “doing fieldwork in a pandemic” (Lupton, 2021). In the following paragraph I describe briefly how I approached digital ethnography for this project. I do so briefly, as the material collected is not material I analyse in depth. I include it, however, as it has formed my understanding of the context of open workshops.

In spring 2020 I had an open approach to digital engagement with open workshops. On the one hand, I followed what individual workshops did in the situation, and on the other hand I observed broadly how the pandemic was being met by makers or maker communities. I followed German and US newsletters email lists (e.g., different *make*: newsletters; newsletter by *Verbund Offener Werkstätten*; an email list *@lists.hackerspaces.org*) and took part in online events. For some weeks I was a member of an online knitting group, and I explored “Virtually Maker Faire” (Maker Faire, 2020). During this time I kept a field diary in which I also saved quotes and pictures from the online material as well as links.

When my in-person fieldwork was interrupted in fall 2020, I decided to try out two different online methods to interact with open workshop users in addition to observing the developments. I designed a survey inspired by story completion method (Braun et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2019; Gravett, 2019; Kitzinger & Wood, 2019; Rogers, 2019; B. Smith, 2019) aimed at finding out how closure of open workshops affects their users. Furthermore, I made a booth at an online held maker faire organised from Rome, with the aim to discuss in small focus groups about motivations to be active as makers. The turnout was very low with one person joining the livestream at the maker faire (interview O2, see table 4.2) and four completed surveys. The last online event I visited as digital fieldwork was a scenario workshop organised within the research project “Repair in the Circular Economy” at Linköping university.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

As pointed out above, in fall 2022 I conducted a series of interviews with various individuals involved in the organisation of open workshops. The initial participant observation in 2018/2019, as well as the fieldwork in 2020, had provided me with a sound foundation from which to conduct interviews. Firstly, I had established contacts in the field and knew people I wanted to interview and to ask for further contacts. Secondly, with the experience from the observations I had gained an understanding of the landscape of open workshops in Sweden. By landscape I mean which actors are involved in the organisation of open workshops, what workshops there are and how they relate. I had, however, many open questions regarding details and wanted to get other perspectives on the dynamics I had observed and been told about during participant observations.

Finally, with the initial analysis of the material gathered to date I had an idea about themes that connected issues important to those in the field and related to dynamics I was interested in. Those themes provided a background for my interview questions.

The interviews allowed me to be *exposed* (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) to different views on the workshops. Learning during participant observation that workshops depend on their internal organisation and relations to municipalities or other funders, I purposely selected interview partners who could help me understand those dynamics, by seeing them from different perspectives. I here chose an approach to triangulation, which is also called intertextuality. The idea is to look for more nuances, detail and contradictions through different perspectives that can help make the encountered surprises less surprising (Denzin, 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

I started by contacting actors related to the workshops I had engaged with during participant observation and then also decided to do a trip through southern Sweden to visit further workshops and conduct interviews. In table 4.2, I share an overview of all conducted interviews. Besides the interviews from 2022, I did three interviews in 2020: two of them were direct follow-ups from the participant observation in 2018 and 2020, the third was a spontaneous interview that I conducted during online ethnography. Besides showing the different interviews, the table also shows the duration of each interview and the mode it was conducted in. The code and pseudonyms are used later in the empirical chapters to reference interview quotations. I use four different codes, depending on the role of interviewee.

All interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews as this format allowed me to come to the interview with a basic set of themes I wanted to cover during the interview, while leaving plenty of room for the interviewees to freely articulate their views on those themes and to explore other reflections that came up during the interviews (Valentine, 2013). I recorded all interviews with a voice recorder and later transcribed the recordings. In the paragraphs following the table I describe in detail how I went about the interviews.

**Table 4.2 Overview of interviews**

Overview of the interviews including code, interviewee with role and pseudonym, date and duration in minutes. Codes and pseudonyms are identifiers for interview quotes later in the text. Member of a workshop association (WA), working in relation to an upcycling workshop (UW), management (M), other (O). Only interviewees who are quoted in the thesis have a pseudonym.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Interviewees (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Duration</b>
WA1	Board member, workshop (Lars)	10-2022	82
WA2	Volunteer, workshop (Maria)	10-2022	65
WA3	3 board members, workshop (Philip, Walter, Robert)	10-2022	110
WA4	Board member, workshop (Axel)	10-2022	98
WA5	1 board member workshop & MoS & 1 volunteer (Pär, Sven)	10-2022	70
WA6	2 board members, workshop (Albin, Gunnar)	10-2022	71
WA7	Board member, workshop (David)	10-2022	49
WA8	Board member, workshop (Karl)	11-2022	69
WA9	Board member, workshop (online) (Simon)	11-2022	79
WA10	Board member, workshop (Noah)	11-2022	48
WA11	Founder & former employee workshop (Julian)	12-2022	45
UW1	3 employees upcycling workshop (online)	12-2020	34
UW2	Employee upcycling workshop	09-2022	30
UW3	Employee upcycling workshop	09-2022	45
UW4	Manager upcycling workshop	10-2022	59
UW5	Employee upcycling workshop	10-2022	43
UW6	Manager upcycling workshop	11-2022	37
M1	Sustainability manager municipality	09-2022	26
M2	Manager creative space (Bror)	09-2022	66
M3	Employee municipality, former open workshop member (Mai)	09-2022	65
M4	Sustainability manager municipal housing	11-2022	33
O1	Activistresearcher open workshops, Germany (online)	05-2020	46
O2	Maker, Italy (online)	12-2020	46
O3	Board member repair café	10-2022	63
O4	Fablab initiative (online)	11-2022	44

When selecting interviewees, I started by approaching workshops or individuals active in workshops that I already knew from the participant observation. I also contacted municipalities via their contact forms to get in touch with employees who work as contact persons or managers in relation to workshops in their municipality. Other interviewees were recommended to me during interviews. When it proved difficult to book interviews with board members in workshops close by and to get a broader view, I decided to also do a weeklong fieldtrip in Southern Sweden to visit further workshops and conduct interviews.

I contacted all interviews via email or direct message on Facebook. I first asked if they would be interested in contributing to a study on open workshops through being interviewed. When I received a positive message, I let the interviewee suggest date and place for the interview. In three cases I organised a room to meet as this was more convenient for the interviewees. When the practicalities were decided, I sent a document to each interviewee, which contained information on the implications of taking part and a consent form (see appendix A). I sent this before the interview to give the interviewee time to read through the document. Later I also went through the document with the interviewee before the start of the interview.

Generally, it was easier to book times with those I interviewed in their professional position than those I interviewed in their role as board members or volunteers. Interviews with employees happened during the day at their workplace, those with board members in the early evening or weekends connected to open evenings at the workshops. During the ongoing pandemic I conducted three interviews via videocalls. In fall 2022 I conducted all except two interviews in person. The choice against in-person interviews was in those cases due to logistical reasons.

When mapping out potential interviewees, I prepared two general interview guides, one directed towards board members at open workshop associations or others directly involved with the running of an open workshop, and one guide for municipalities and other funding/supporting actors (see appendix B for both general guides). The interviews with workshop members contained four subgroups of questions concerning: organisation, personal role, other members and the future. The interviews with municipal actors or others in management roles contained questions on the role of the municipality, its view on the workshop and future perspectives. When I had booked interviews, I took the respective general guide and adapted it to the specific interview. While keeping most of the general questions, I also added case specific questions. I based these on my previous knowledge of the respective workshop. I had previous knowledge from participant observations, and I carried out detailed readings of every workshop's homepage, wiki, online available brochures, media articles and social media prior to the interview. Preparing in this way allowed me to explore why they organised in specific ways. Often, I noticed differences between how associations organise when reading on their webpages. I could then ask explicitly how they reason about their way of organising and inquire about how different practices had come about.

I also see informing myself before visiting a space as a way to respect the interviewees' time and effort. It is part of how I understand good research practice, as I would not have wanted to ask for details that are available online and therefore waste their time. Some examples for adapted questions are: *You offer a lab membership. How did you land on this system? Have you had this from the start?; You have a very extensive wiki for the workshop. What is the idea behind the wiki? How did it develop? Is it used a lot? And how do you create a culture where members contribute and use the wiki?; How is it to no longer be the head of board? Do you miss being on the board? In what way?*<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned above, all interviewees had received the information and consent form prior to the interview. In some cases, the interviewees had invited other board members to join the interview. In these cases, I did not know if the additional interviewees had seen the consent forms prior to the interview. To be prepared I brought printed versions with me to every interview, in both English and Swedish. I went through the documents with the interviewees, and all interviewees gave their consent to be interviewed and recorded.<sup>43</sup>

During the interview I used the guide mostly to remind myself of topics I wanted to talk about, I hardly ever asked one of the preformulated questions; it was more a list of topics I wanted to remember. In most interviews the topics came up by themselves; people just told me the story of their association and its workings and went through many aspects I wanted to know about. Having the guide there in front of me gave me security and showed the interviewee that I was prepared for the interview, which again is something I felt was important to value their effort.

Except for two interviews which were conducted in English, as it was preferred by the interviewee, all other interviews were held in Swedish. At that time my Swedish had become fluent, and I did not experience major language problems during the interviews. Sometimes I struggled reformulating questions, finding different words to explain my question better, but mostly conversations were fluid. Often, I did not need to say much at all. When a question was misunderstood, I often received answers that were equally interesting, and then at a later point asked my question again in a better formulated version.

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<sup>42</sup> I do not share the full adapted interview guides in the appendix as many of the questions would make it easy to identify which open workshop associations and municipalities I have visited.

<sup>43</sup> One interviewee joined spontaneously towards the end of one interview. Here I went through the information and consent after the interview.

The interviews I conducted in workshops were all combined with a guided tour. Except for once when I was shown around after the interview, visits would begin with the guided tour. Interviewees showed me the workshop, and were already then sharing a lot about the workshop and its different parts, anecdotes and history. I did not audio record those conversations, and in hindsight I would say that those tours functioned as ice breakers. When later sitting down in a quiet place we had already been talking and could continue the conversation in the form of the interview. After the interviews I made detailed notes about these tours. On my little fieldtrip I first took notes by hand, often just after the interview, and then during the following days typed more extensive versions. When transcribing and analysing the interviews almost a year later, those notes have been immensely helpful to put me back in the situation of the interview and remember the situations and atmosphere. I share more about the transcription when describing methods of analysis later in this subchapter.

## Documents

Documents play an important role in this thesis even if no structured document analysis or search was conducted. In the beginning of the thesis work (2018 and 2019) I saved any document I found that related to open workshops in Sweden, but also documents from a broader geographical context, mainly the US and Germany. Documents were primarily web content, but also leaflets or newspapers clips. Those documents informed my understanding of the phenomenon on the go. I catalogued documents to be able to use them later if they should appear relevant.

During the pandemic (2020 and 2021), when access to workshops was restricted, I collected online materials in connection to developments related to the pandemic and the so-called maker movement. Again, I took an approach to collect anything I could find, which very quickly proved to be impossible. Especially in spring 2020, immense amounts of online materials were produced discussing the state of the movement, the many initiatives involved in producing missing medical equipment as well as a wave of DIY ideas for what to do at home during lockdown. After the first months of the pandemic, I was much more selective and only followed developments in Swedish open workshops, while skimming newsletters (e.g., *Make:Community*, *Institute of Making*, *Verbund offener Werkstätten/anstiftung*) to maintain an overview.

I continued with a selective approach after the pandemic. I followed (1) the umbrella organisation Makers of Sweden; (2) those workshops at which I had conducted participant observation; (3) as well as, sporadically, other workshops in Sweden via their webpages and social media.<sup>44</sup> In preparation for the interview series in fall 2022, I read online materials provided by workshops and other actors I interviewed. Here the focus was not to analyse the materials in a systematic way, but to gain understanding about the specific cases to ask informed questions. When writing the empirical part, I have gone back to documents to complement the empirical material. Documents are referenced when I use them, and I have not included a list of collected documents in the thesis.

To summarise, I used four different categories of documents: (1) documents (reports, websites, slack, minutes, agendas, videos) from the spaces I visited and conducted interviews about (Sweden); (2) Media reports about workshops, but also repair, making more general (Sweden and abroad); (3) documents related to making in other countries (mainly Germany, UK, US); (4) Media and self-reports of the maker scene during COVID-19 (links to shared spreadsheets and texts, blog posts, email list discussions, podcasts, videos, newsletters, etc.). I did not analyse documents systematically but used them to inform my general understanding of open workshops and to observe trends and patterns over time and space.

## Survey

To be able to present an up-to-date overview of open workshop associations in Sweden, I run a survey inquiring after basic information, such as number of members or size of the workshop in sqm (see appendix C for results and an overview of the questions). The survey was active in June 2025. With the help of a contact I established during participant observation, I was able to distribute the survey through Makers of Sweden's (the umbrella organisation for open workshop associations) internal communication. In total, 15 of the 22 active open workshop associations answered the survey. For the remaining seven associations, I could partly complete the overview with help of information available online. The results from the survey allowed me to give detailed information about the characteristics of open workshop associations in Sweden in chapter six.

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<sup>44</sup> Mainly Facebook, but periodically also Instagram. Makerspace associations in Sweden at that time were more visible on Facebook than on Instagram.

## Analysis

The method of analysis I use is inspired by Emerson et al. (2011) as well as Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). Rennstam and Wästerfors describe analysis and writing analysis as craft, where crafting is understood as based on two things, skill and creativity (Sennett, 2008). The researcher needs to know her craft, be skilful and thorough in her work, but also needs creativity to form something meaningful from the materials. The material limits and stimulates the analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

As described above, the analysis for this thesis is built mainly on two types of materials: fieldnotes from participant observation and material generated from interviews. Documents have also played an important role in the thesis but have not been part of the systematic analysis I describe here. Table 4.3 shows a schematic summary of the analysis. The purpose is to show how empirical engagement and analysis followed each other.

**Table 4.3 Schematic summary of the analysis**

Table shows the time, activity of material collection and creation as well as created and collected material

Year	Activity	Created and collected material
2018-2020	Participant observation	Fieldnotes, field diary, documents
2021	Initial open analysis of fieldnotes	Coded fieldnotes, memos, broad themes
2022	Semi-structured Interviews	Audio files, interview notes, transcripts,
2023	Analysis and re-analysis of interviews and 2 <sup>nd</sup> analysis of selected fieldnotes	transcription notes, coded transcripts, memos, index sheets, mindmaps
2024	Continued analysis while writing	Mindmaps, empirical chapters, thesis draft

In 2021, I analysed the fieldnotes written to date, which inspired me to dig deeper on some topics with the help of interviews in 2022, which I then analysed in 2023, when I also re-analysed a selection of the fieldnotes. In the following paragraphs I describe the process of analysis in detail.

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) describe analysts of qualitative data as confronted with three problems when meeting their data: chaos, representation and authority. *Chaos* refers to the immense amounts of data that have been collected and the disorder it is in. Even if data might be stored in files neatly catalogued, the fieldnotes or interviews contain possibly relevant aspects all

throughout them. *Representation* describes the problem of not being able to represent all that is in the data, and that the researcher has to make choices. *Authority* refers to the problem of insecurity regarding whether the data provide a basis to say anything new or interesting. The authors suggest that the researcher may address these problems with three activities: sorting, reducing and arguing. *Sorting* refers to getting to know the material and can involve (re)reading, browsing, (re)coding, memo writing with the aim to get familiar with the material. *Reducing* refers to the researcher cutting away, zooming in on and condensing material. Lastly, *arguing* is the creation of theory on the basis of the material in dialogue with existing theory and research (ibid.). As these three steps have guided my process of analysis, I structure the following subsections after the steps of sorting, reducing and arguing. Although I describe them consecutively it is important to note that they also happen concurrently.

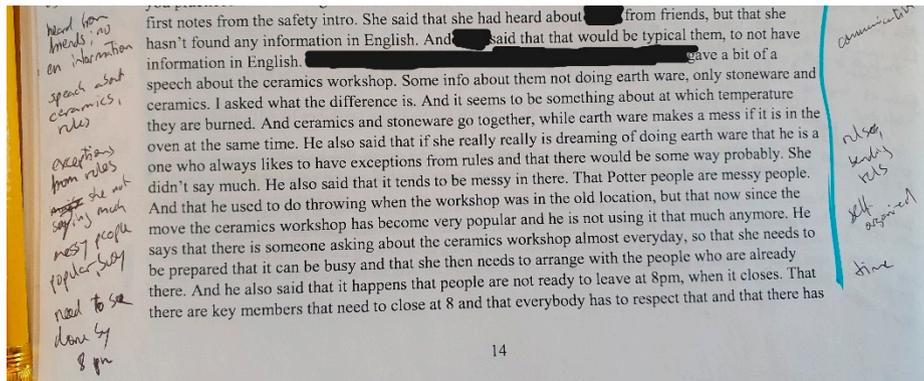
While most of the sorting happens in the beginning and most of the arguing in the end, the process is not linear. Sorting and reducing happen together. After first sorting through open coding and reducing by focusing on some cases more than others, I collected new material and sorted again, even the old material. Sorting and reducing arguably happens already when writing fieldnotes, which are always only a fragment of what happened (Emerson et al., 2011) and during interviews by asking certain things and not others. Reducing also still happens long into the process of arguing when empirical parts are condensed and arguments sharpened.

In the spiral movement of the interpretative research process, the process of analysis of empirical material leads to new questions which require the creation or collection of more material or to consult different literature, which can then lead to new clues for the analysis and new sorting of materials (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

### *Sorting*

For the initial analysis in spring 2021, I engaged in open coding (e.g. Emerson et al., 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) of the fieldnotes from the different occasions of participant observation (table 4.1). Open coding involves identifying and formulating “any and all ideas, themes or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). Figure 4.2 shows an example of my open coding on paper. In the left margin there are codes from the open

coding. These are descriptive and summarise content. The picture includes also codes in the right margin. These are codes from focused coding that I did later; focused coding is still fine grained, but “on the basis of topics that have been identified as being of particular interest” (ibid.). The aim is to understand the topics of interest better and in more detail (ibid.).



**Figure 4.2 Example from coded fieldnotes**

An example from my coded fieldnotes. In the left margin are codes from the open coding. In the right margin are codes from focused coding, supported with coloured marking. Some parts are blacked out to hide place and individual names (Photo by author).

The initial coding in the picture says for example, “heard from friends”, “no information [information in English]”, “ceramics, rules” or “exceptions from rules” or “need to be done by 8pm.” In the focused coding these have turned to “communication” and “rules, bending rules”, “self-organized” and “time”. Coding in this method of analysis does not involve sorting passages to predefined codes but finding ways to describe and summarise notes in a few words (Emerson et al., 2011). Through open coding I was able to get to know the material. I could reduce the extent of chaos and was able to identify themes and patterns that I then reflected on in memos.

Memos are written down “ideas and insights” (ibid., p. 185) that arise during coding. Memos can contain reflections on codes and how they could be analytically interesting. This would be individual or groups of codes that appeared often or were related to so-called *key incidents*, moments in fieldwork and other empirical engagement that open a new insight for the researcher (see Emerson, 2004; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Memos I wrote during this first phase of analysis concerned, for example, *dynamics between available infrastructure, space, skill and community; service attitudes among board members and workshop users; auditing of workshops by funders; organizing vs. doing/making; sharing; co-organizing in Sweden and its difficulties* or *covid and digital events on making*. Some of the ideas in those memos I have developed further into themes and are now part of the analysis presented in the thesis. There were, however, several steps in-between the open coding and memo writing and the analysis I present in the thesis.

### *Reducing*

The initial analysis helped me to decide how to move further with the project and the empirical work. Getting to know my material in detail allowed me to engage in a first step of what Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) call reducing. Following suggestions from Emerson et al. (2011) I considered (1) how prevalent different codes/code groups were, (2) how relevant the workshop members considered them, and (3) how relevant I judged them in relation to my research interest. I decided to focus on internal organisation and dynamics as well as dependencies on external actors (e.g., municipalities). The focus came from the observation that associations were struggling to sustain themselves. The fieldnotes showed struggles with community building, skill sharing, maintenance and unstable or uncertain relations to funders and how those topics were relevant for the associations. At the same time, these themes related to my research interest in co-organisation and maintenance of commoning infrastructure. Having observed how association members struggled with maintenance and community building, I was curious to learn more about that struggle and other dynamics within the workshop organisation.

This interest formed the basis for the semi-structured interviews I conducted in fall 2022. The aim with the interviews with board members of the associations was to map out their internal organisation as well as their dependencies and cooperation beyond the workshop (see also interview guides, appendix B). In the interviews with municipalities and other actors supporting open workshops the focus was on their perspective on the role and organisation of those workshops (see pp. 141-146 for interview methods).

To analyse the recorded interviews, I decided to transcribe interviews, in order to be able to code and mark in written text. I used different tools to aid the transcription process. I transcribed some interviews “by hand,” meaning I

transcribed them through listening and simultaneous writing in a text programme. Here I did not aim at an *ad verbum* transcription, but skipped double words, filling words as well as breaks. I judged this approach to be adequate as it fits the method of analysis which is not concerned with exact wordings (Crang, 2013). Further on I used three different transcription tools (Teams, Microsoft Word and goodtape), which gave helpful results and shortened the process immensely. I then read and corrected the transcript while listening to the interview. At this point I also wrote memos. When the transcripts were completed, I engaged in focused coding of the interview material.

This process happened one year after I conducted the interviews, as I went on parental leave before being able to analyse the interviews (see timeline, figure 4.1). Focused coding means a “fine-grained, line-by-line analysis on the basis of topics that have been identified as being of particular interest” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). At this point I had a sense of points I wanted to make with my analysis, and I coded with those in mind. The codes were orientated after ideas for empirical (sub)chapters on space, time, skill, funding and community (care) as bottlenecks for the associations. Figure 4.2 above shows some codes from focused coding. The codes (“communication”, “rules, bending rules”, “self-organized” and “time”) relate to internal organisation as well as engagement. With further reduction and analysis, the empirical chapters developed from those initial themes and ideas.

When working with the interviews, I listened to the audio file while reading the transcript. I used the comment function in a Word programme to mark and comment. In parallel, I made index notes by hand on paper. By index notes, I mean that for every comment in Word I wrote a code on paper. For example, “p. 2 welcoming” or “p. 6 sharing.” Comments are longer and explain how I see a certain passage relate to, for example, “sharing.” The index papers helped me to later find passages I wanted to use to build arguments. I also made more general comments about the interview to note differences between the interviews and whether there was anything that interviewees highlighted.

That access to spaces was an issue for many of the open workshop associations was clear from the interviews. Through the coding I developed more detail and identified different issues, one concerning suitability and another concerning availability, affordability and accessibility – this theme developed into chapter eight. Another example is the theme of “time” or “lack of time” which I identified during participant observation, and how that affects workshop members and the

organisation. During the focused coding I realised that engagement and the lack of it captures the dynamic I was after much better. The theme of engagement became the starting point for chapter nine. Another topic that appeared repeatedly in the interviews was how skill was shared among members. Only after developing a theme of sharing did I notice the experiences of sharing I had made myself during participant observation. That experience of sharing is the basis for chapter five.

After this round of focused coding and memo writing I thought I had a clear idea about how I wanted to structure the empirical parts of the thesis, which themes to focus on and how to discuss them. However, in the actual writing process, I realised how much more I needed to develop those themes and conducted another round of sorting, coding and memo writing.

Summing up the *sorting* and *reducing* process of the analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), I have carried out open coding of fieldnotes, two rounds of focused coding on interview transcripts as well as one round of focused coding on part of the fieldnotes – those fieldnotes most relevant to the direction the thesis had taken by then. In my experience, the analysis was, however, not over at this point, but carried on extensively while I was writing and rewriting the empirical parts of the thesis.

## Writing as analysis

One tool for writing the analysis that Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) discuss are excerpt-commentary units (Emerson et al., 2011). One unit consists of four parts and helps organise the written analysis. The first one is the *analytic point* the researcher wants to make. To illustrate that point, the researcher chooses an *excerpt* from the material (part three). Before that quote, there is a short contextualising note, an *orientation* (part two) to bring the reader into the situation the material comes from. The last component of the unit is an *analytical comment*, a longer discussion of how the quote relates to the analytic point. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) point out that a whole analysis could be composed of such units. This idea of excerpt-commentary units has guided my writing. Furthermore, my writing has been guided by the idea to *show not tell*. Instead of declaring that a certain thing is the case (tell), the idea is to show how something is the case (e.g. Emerson et al., 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). For example, instead of declaring that motivating workshop members to engage with

maintenance tasks is difficult for open workshop associations, I show with quotes and description how it is difficult.

The empirical analytical chapters (7–9) are built with those units.<sup>45</sup> To build the chapters with the empirical material I made mind maps focused on the themes of the chapters, like for example engagement for chapter nine. With the mind maps I was able to create an overview of analytical points I wanted to make, how to connect them and how to build the chapter. The analytical points and excerpt-commentary units are informed by the empirical material,<sup>46</sup> while the form of the chapter and understanding of the analytical points are also informed by the conceptual foundations introduced in chapter two. The conceptual was there from the very start as it informs the research interest (chapter one and introduction to chapter four, see also Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). After the initial conceptual driven phase of the project, I engaged with open workshops empirically, which I have described in this chapter. Here, the empirical with its surprises has been dominant. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) state that the surprise often comes when conceptually informed expectations meet an unexpected experience in the field. The empirical and interpretative research process is then about understanding and analysing surprises to find explanations to make the surprise less puzzling. In the following paragraphs I describe this process more explicitly as it played out for this thesis.

Seeing open workshops as part of a post-capitalist future within a degrowth context is the background for the thesis. To understand better how such spaces are organised in the everyday was the starting point for the thesis. In the research proposal, I wanted to understand how it is to be part of a prefigurative community in tension with mainstream capitalist practices. Engaging empirically, I found rather individualistic spaces with people working on their own in private or professional projects. Here the focus shifted towards understanding why this is. How workshops, that are potentially prefigurative of commoning, are reproducing the same patterns visible in neoliberal capitalism.

To understand this, I chose to dive deeper empirically, with a focus on how associations work on claiming their space and maintaining it, looking more closely

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<sup>45</sup> Chapter five and six are also empirical, but descriptive rather than analytical.

<sup>46</sup> Not all empirical material shows equally much in quotations in the thesis. Much of the material has informed the interview questions and the analysis even if it is not visible in quotes.

at the struggles and the hinders for organising workshops through commoning practices. To understand these challenges, I conducted further empirical enquiries with the help of interviews. Analysing the interviews, I identified the need to engage in literature discussing associations in Sweden, their history and role, to understand better what it means to be active in an association and what role associations play in Sweden.

Already at the beginning of the empirical work in 2019, I was struck by the strong culture of associations' internal organisation, the roles, the role of the general assemblies and their performance. A deep dive in the culture of associations in Sweden provided the historical context to understand observed practices as part of a culture of associations. Further understanding the context allowed me to see observed struggles for engagement as a trend and interlinked with neoliberal developments in society at large. Engaging with literature and the history of associations in Sweden made the surprise of the struggles with co-organising I had observed less surprising.

While the associations did not explicitly frame their struggles as a struggle for commoning, the literature on *commoning* provided a conceptual language that help me describe the culture and care needed for the workshop. The idea to engage this literature and conceptual work only came late in the analytical process, as a way to discuss the empirical material. Ideas on commoning opened a way to frame my observation as a struggle for (re)claiming and maintaining commoning practices in a neoliberal capitalist context.

Commoning as conceptual stream interlinks well with the overall frame of degrowth. While the empirical reality I encountered seems far away from ideas on degrowth transformations, I still use degrowth as a frame for the thesis. The connection is relevant in the sense that it provides an opportunity to ask why a potentially prefigurative post-growth practice might be difficult to sustain in its local context. Such understanding can contribute to conversations on strategies for degrowth transformations.

In this chapter, I have described the process of this thesis. The research journey including applied methods of both empirical engagement and analysis. I also shared reflections on the “iterative-recursive abductive engagement between theory and lived experience” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 36). The remaining part of this chapter is devoted to research ethics, limitations and some final remarks.

## 4.2 Research ethics

Following good research practice as described by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2017), I designed the project in a way that would help me answer my research questions without harming any of the people who were involved in the research. A first general step concerning research ethics was to determine whether the research would involve sensitive personal data (Etikprövningsmyndigheten, n.d.). I did not aim to collect, or see any risk that I would accidentally collect, sensitive personal data, which meant that no approval from an ethics board was needed for the project.

In the following I reflect on two ethical concerns – informed consent and pseudonymisation – that I encountered during this research project, and address how I dealt with them in practice.

### Consent

A standard part of treating interviewees or other research subjects well and with respect is to work with informed and voluntary consent. For the interviews I used an information and consent form (see appendix A) as I describe above (4.1). For participant observation, the question of informed and voluntary consent is less straightforward.

There are several aspects that make the consent process more complicated. One is the temporal aspect, as participant observation can be conducted over long time periods and individuals' position on consent can change over time. Understanding consent as an ongoing process, rather than a onetime event, is a common practice in participant observation (Alexiades & Peluso, 2002) and a process I followed during my fieldwork. For the observation at both the pilot incubator event and the pilot study over the idea of a workshop (see table 4.1), the groups were so small and the periods short enough that I could talk with everybody involved and obtain their consent for me to take part as a participant observer.

For the participant observation as workshop member, I needed a different strategy. Before engaging in the field, I had an expectation that I would find a rather tight community at the workshop and that I could get their consent for the research. During initial contacts and the initial fieldwork in 2019 it turned out

that there was no such tight community and that obtaining consent from the board of the association would not have meant that there had been an internal process involving all members. Another issue that I had to consider for the question of informed individual consent is that open workshops are dynamic places. The user group changes continuously, meaning that new people join all the time. Others might only take part in one event held at the workshop but not become a member of the association. Here, it is not only the temporal aspect – that people can change their mind – but also that the group of people I was encountering was constantly changing. Many users of the open workshops I have met only once during the fieldwork period.

Nevertheless, I took several steps to obtain informed consent. I did contact the association board to ask for consent from their side and to consult with them on how I could reach out to members, inform them about my research, and how individuals could opt out of it. We agreed that I would set up posters around the workshop informing about my research project. One suggestion from the board was that the poster could include a picture of me so people could recognise me (see appendix D for the poster). In practice, the poster has worked well. When talking to people I could refer to the poster, inform them further and obtain consent in conversation. Most people had seen the poster, but few had read all the way through it; however, I do not judge this problematic as they could do so at any time if they wanted to know more. With individuals I talked to repeatedly and who became key informants and contacts during the participant observation I was able to establish an ongoing conversation and their informed and voluntary consent.

## **Pseudonymisation**

I could not guarantee interviewees or people I met during participant observation full anonymity, and did not promise it either. There are not many open workshops in Sweden and many of those who are active within those few know each other across Sweden. Anonymity within the community is therefore difficult to provide. Furthermore, those who are active know about difficulties at other spaces, which means it might be possible to identify other workshops, and the individuals involved there. It is, therefore, more accurate and ethical to speak of pseudonymisation. In practice I use pseudonyms and do not name open workshop associations I have visited during the study. In some sections I refer to specific open workshop associations, but only when presenting publicly available material, and I do not

disclose whether I have also visited those spaces I discuss there. As the study is not concerned with presenting a detailed picture of a specific workshop, but with dynamics in open workshop associations in Sweden more generally, I have judged that the quality of the study is not affected by this measure.

When quotes disclosed details such as place names, place-specific actors or infrastructure, I have generalised those as to make them unidentifiable. The same applies for excerpts from my fieldnotes, in which individual names are also pseudonymised.

### 4.3 Limitations

In hindsight, it would have been valuable and interesting to include open workshop associations' use of internal online communication tools, in particular discord and slack, in the study. C. Hine (2015) argues that the internet and its tools are no longer a separate cyberworld which we can decide to *not* study. She frames the internet as being embedded, embodied and everyday. While early social science research that used online formats as materials was concerned with online phenomena, she argues that today all is also online. In this project the in-person communication between association members at the workshop is not more important for understanding community dynamics than the communication on slack or discord. Late into the study I was able to become a member of two slack groups and could observe the importance of the communication tool for a community that hardly ever meets at the same time in the open workshop. As it was only in the end of 2022, I decided not to do any systematic fieldwork and analysis on slack. The association I joined in 2018 and conducted participant observation at only used Facebook at the time, which I did not observe systematically as it was almost dormant. Had I conducted participant observations at an association with an active slack community it would have been essential to also participate there; as there was no active online community in parallel to my participant observations on site, I consider it as something that would have been nice to have, but lacking it does not lower the quality of the study.

## 4.4 Final remarks

In this chapter I have shared how this thesis has taken its shape. I shared methodological underpinnings as well as how I applied methods in the field. I shared in detail how I analysed the material I created and collected. Rather than putting labels on what I did, I have invited the reader to see how I worked to write this thesis.

In the following five chapters I present my analysis of the empirical material.

# 5 Introducing the empirical

This chapter builds a bridge between the methods chapter and the empirical chapters. The main part of chapter five (5.1) shows details from my participant observation and gives impressions of what sharing an open workshop can be like. The aim of the chapter is to give an ethnographic description of the everyday material reality and interactions at an open workshop. I describe my experience of making a jacket at an open workshop. When retelling this part of the fieldwork, I pay particular attention to how knowledge, skills, materials and the available space at the workshop are shared. In a short second section (5.2), I give an overview of the remaining empirical chapters (6–9) and the discussion in chapter ten.

## 5.1 “May I?” or how I learned to iron.

In the methods chapter, I describe different phases of participant observation at different open workshop projects. During a three-month period in fall 2020 I visited one open workshop several times a week every week. The first weeks I spent most of the time talking to people, helping if I could, and only doing small repair projects when it was not busy. I then decided to work on a bigger project myself. I opted to make a jacket for my daughter and to use an old pair of dark red Manchester trousers as fabric. I had previous sewing experience and was familiar with the textile workshop from the initial fieldwork in 2019. The project was, however, more advanced than what I had done earlier. There was also a material challenge as I had a limited amount of fabric and only rather small pieces.<sup>47</sup> Figure 5.1 below shows two stages of the jacket. (A) shows the fabric that I sourced from the trousers; the shape of the trousers is still visible. I have placed bits of the pattern

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<sup>47</sup> Trousers for a grown-up do have quite a lot of fabric, but narrow bits in between the seams down the legs for example, and at some places the trousers were rather worn, and the fabric could not be used

that I cut out from paper on the fabric to see how to best make use of the fabric. Picture (B) shows the jacket at a later stage. I have arranged it to get an idea of the final shape. The sleeves, the pocket and parts of the lining are attached; the collar is still missing.



**Figure 5.1 The Jacket in the making.**

(A) Bits of the cut out pattern are placed on the fabric. (B) The jacket is taking shape. (Photos by author)

I had decided to work on my own project, as it sometimes was rather quiet at the workshop, and I wanted to have something to do while being there. I continued taking detailed fieldnotes that reflect both what I observed at the workshop and my experience of making the jacket. However, it was only when engaging in focused coding about three years later that I noticed how the jacket project allowed me to experience how skill and material sharing happened at the open workshop. When coding, I had conducted interviews with board members and volunteers who had told me about the informal sharing culture at their open workshops. Coding the material again, I realised how others shared skills, materials, and ideas with me many times.

I was given direct help as response to questions and experienced how other members were interested in my project, commented on it, and inquired about it. In the following paragraphs, I share excerpts from my fieldnotes to highlight some aspects of the process and how the open workshop affected it.

I was at the workshop a bit before 5pm and had some sewing stuff with me. A pattern I bought to make a jacket, size 2 years. I had printed it in the office and now needed to glue together the 33 pages to one big sheet, that I'd then cut into pieces again.

When I arrived, Laila was in the sewing room. Today she was the responsible host and already working on her stuff. She was preparing a pattern for a shirt. She started making some space on the big table in the textiles room. I told her that I was waiting for people I'd promised to help with some sewing, so I'd not need much space. But I also showed her the pattern, and she thought it cute. Later when I had it all glued together, she commented on how small it was, while it did cover half of the table and was 33 A4 pages.

I am sharing this quote for context, as it gives insight into the working process and the environment I worked in. I used the workshop during open evenings when regular members are allowed to use it. In this excerpt, it is an early evening during the week. When I arrive, the responsible volunteer is using the textile workshop. She makes space for me so that we can share the big table in the textiles room. It is a high table to stand at; it is approximately two by three meters and is placed in the middle of the room so that people can use it from any of the four sides. Laila and I knew each other a little bit; she was new to the workshop but was there regularly and we had talked before. She makes space without me asking and is interested in what I work on.

In the excerpt, I write how I say to her that I will not need much space as I am mainly there to help somebody else. A few weeks earlier someone had walked into the workshop to ask for help with the sewing machine. I had agreed to help, and we had scheduled to meet that day. Laila and I were working at the big table when Olivia joined us in the textile room.

I thought Olivia didn't know any sewing at all, that was how it sounded when I had agreed to help, but she just didn't know how to use the electrical sewing machine. She wanted to adapt a pillow to have in their cargo bike. We looked at the pillow for the bike together and I think I had a firm suggestion on how I'd do it, thinking she didn't know sewing, but she agreed. I also had all my recycled zippers with me, and she was going to need one, but mine were all too short or too long and she also seemed uncomfortable taking one of mine and said she would go to the second-hand store to get one, as well as for the fabric she would need to make a second pillow. So, she started unpicking the seems that needed unpicking. And I started to realise that she would probably be busy with that until the workshop would close. But it was no problem. We were all three busy around the big table in the sewing room. I have never seen the sewing room so occupied.

I thought later that it was also easier to talk than usual, all three of us standing around the table doing our things while talking, usually it would be more difficult because

of loud machines, having the back turned to the room, doing stuff that needs more attention. But now we were all turned towards the table doing things without machines, just with the hands. Unpicking, drawing, and cutting and gluing.

At some point Olivia asked me if I could just show her now how the machine works and then she would come another time and do the sewing. I only needed to show her where to put the thread. I think I would forget after one time, but I also told her that there usually is someone there who can explain it again. And she has experience with sewing, just not with an electrical machine. When leaving she seemed very thankful for me showing her, while I think she wouldn't even have needed me. But it was nice meeting her and nice to be able to help somebody.

I have more notes from that day, and they show a convivial time. We talk about personal things as well as crafts and traditions. I am not sharing any more detail of our conversation here; the point is that we had an enjoyable time together. Sharing the table, working on our projects and being able to socialise. I also note how that is unusual. Usually, the textile room is not that busy and even if there is more than one person working in it, it is rarely the case that two would share the table and do work that allows for a longer conversation. The sewing machines are placed along the walls of the room, which means that if one sits at a machine their back will be turned to the table. Sewing machines do not make that much noise, but enough to make it difficult to talk while one person is sewing. Conversations become more occasional. However, while sewing there are many moments which do not require the sewing machine and provide an opportunity for talking. This early evening at the workshop provides an example of us sharing the workshop, working on our projects, and sharing skills and time.

Further notes from that day describe another example of skill sharing. Here someone with knowledge of the CNC mill helped a potter to make a little stamp with her logo to mark her pottery with. They walked forth and back between their laptops and the mill, working on the file until they got a stamp that met her requirements. Later Laila, the potter, and I discussed freelancing, as the potter is freelancing, and Laila has a wish to do so. Laila shared with me later that it was both intimidating and inspiring for her to be able to talk to others who had managed to establish themselves as free-lance designers. Being at the open workshop allows Laila and others to share their experience with free-lancing activities and to work together.

On other occasions during the following weeks people engaged in my sewing process in various ways. I got comments on the choice of fabric and on details like the shape of the pocket. I also received a spool with a colour I missed, and help from Laila on how to use the overlock machine which I had never used before. I experienced how others were interested in my project, and shared materials and their skills with me. In some cases after I asked, and in other cases on their own initiative. The comments on the pocket were, for example, not something I asked for, but something one volunteer, commented on repeatedly. I did not mind and learned something about how small details like the positioning and shape of a pocket can make a big difference for the overall look. I have been asked if I had made the pattern for the jacket myself, which I had not, but it shows the level of expertise that is common at the workshop, as people assumed that it might be my own design. I also learned by seeing what other people did; for example, how another person used a specific ruler to get an angle right when adapting a sewing pattern. My notes from the weeks when I made the jacket show how people share small bits with me on various occasions. It is not that somebody helps me all throughout the project, but from time-to-time people engage or I ask for help regarding specific questions.

The next excerpt is from the point at which I was supposed to add the collar to the jacket (see also Figure 5.1 B). Here I needed something called “interfacing”, and I did not even know what it was. Laila was around that day, and we had been working alongside one another for a while. We talked about her work and my work, design, and drawing. The following excerpt is from my fieldnotes from that day.

At some point I asked her for help with the collar, and she helped me figuring out how to read the pattern and gave me some interfacing. Again, she gave me stuff. [...] She showed me how to attach the interfacing. You do it by ironing. And then she also showed me how to iron. I was ironing as I always do, gliding the iron gently over the fabric steaming a bit before I put down the iron. She looked at that and was like “may I?”, with a laugh and a bit of discomfort for telling me that I do wrong. She continued “My teachers always said that it doesn’t do anything like that” and she shows me how to do instead. Putting weight and strength in the movement and really pressing the iron down on the fabric while moving it and steaming at the same time. I tried that again the week after and it really makes such a difference.

In this instance, I learned how to iron. I thought I knew how to iron, but I did not. Laila saw me and felt a need to help me and to show me how to do it better.

She had also given me material I needed and helped me interpret the pattern and the explanation for it. Even though there are explanation videos for the pattern available online, I still needed help understanding how I was supposed to carry it out. I would probably have been able to figure it out, but it might have involved some trial-and-error.

The whole episode I describe above only took a few minutes. Skill sharing as I experienced it happened on the side. We talked and then I ask her for help and later we talked more about other things. In this case skill sharing happens in a spontaneous and informal way. It is not organised as mentoring or by providing courses. In the case of Laila sharing with me, she, as someone educated in fashion design, was helping me, an amateur, with some previous knowledge. However, it was not planned in anyway, and we did not make an appointment for her to help me; she was there when I had a question and helped me with it.

Before moving on I want to share one more incident. Again, I had troubles understanding the pattern and received help.

When arriving I didn't know where to work as Laila and Liam, who I had not met before, were using large parts of the textile workshop. I asked if I could use part of the high table and have the jacket lying on his (Liam's) fabric and he was like "sure!". So I did that. It also meant that we would face each other while working. I got out the explanation for the pattern and tried to understand the next step. But I didn't get it. It had happened previously that I had a really hard time understanding, but this time I really didn't. I made some sounds of not understanding, which made him ask me if I had any question. And I just said "lots". He came over and I showed him the pattern explanation and read the sentence I didn't understand and showed him, what I understood, and where I was stuck. He didn't look at all at the pattern explanation but took the jacket as it was then and just looked at it. Turned it around, inside out, pulled the lining of the sleeve in the sleeve, made himself familiar. He then showed me what he would do next and how he would do, but I was still standing there with the booklet, pondering over how I was supposed to do. It seemed very logical what Liam was suggesting, but I felt I need to understand what was behind the explanation in the pattern. He said, "now you just have to do it". And I told him that I find it difficult to drop the explanation and he started pinning the seam he thought I should do next and said that sometimes they [pattern guides] are just not good and that he wouldn't follow it. I said "But you know what you are doing." He answered, "Yes, I do" and was laughing.

I then did as he said. I also learned a new way to set the needles. He then did some sewing himself and I could actually help him there – it was how to set the tread in the machine. After I had done my seam, he wanted to see the result and checked if I had ended up with the two midpoints on top of each other and I did and received a compliment for that.

In this case, I received help from someone I never met before. He too has an education as fashion designer and was happy to share his knowledge with me. The fieldnotes from the week after show that I was not able to reconcile with the fact that I had not understood the pattern. In the end I understood what I was supposed to do, and that what I had done with Liam's help was wrong and that I would need to undo it. Here, the help I got was in the end not the help I needed. However, it is a case where someone whom I shared the workspace with, but who I had never met before, helped me without any hesitation.

By sharing my process of creating the jacket and the occasions people shared ideas, time, materials, and skills with me, I show how spontaneous sharing happened at the open workshop. There is no specific routine or process for it, and it is not organised in any way. The sharing happened through us working in the same room, engaging in similar activities, but with very different skill levels. Using the workshop together allowed us to learn from each other and help each other.

The sharing I experienced around the jacket project required very little effort from the one who helped me. It was a few minutes here and there, and those helping me did so while doing their own projects. I did have basic skills and a project I worked on. I have also observed how others received help with techniques they did not know at all. Like one member who wanted to 3D print a flowerpot and had never printed before. She got help from a volunteer, but she had specifically asked, and it was clear that it was a favour from the volunteer and not something he would have done for any member. Another example could be the potter I mentioned, who received help making a stamp. There are limits to how much help one can expect to get. On the Facebook page for the workshop, I have observed how someone asked for help with the CNC mill and received an answer from one volunteer that he could only help people with a good basic knowledge, as it otherwise is too time intensive for him. Time for sharing and helping is balanced with the time needed to work on one's own projects.

The excerpts and other fieldnotes further show how we negotiate the space and make room for each other. Examples in the experts concern mainly the big table

in the textile room and how we arrange our things to make room for everybody. Other notes show how I had to wait to sew when the textile workshop was used by groups during safety courses. They used the room as a place for introductions and some general information, as it is relatively quiet. During that time, I paused my work as to not disturb them with the sound of the sewing machine. I have in some cases observed how other workshop areas were too busy and how people had to postpone their visit. A recurring issue has been how some workshop areas, such as the woodworking workshop, impact the rest of the workshop through the noise that is emitted. This is an example of when sharing the workshop did not work that well, or the facilities were not fit for the kind of sharing that is practiced.

The spontaneous sharing of space, infrastructure, materials, and skill is something that I also have been told about in interviews. I now turn to that material to give some examples beyond my own experience. On a very broad level, the undogmatic and spontaneous sharing described above is said to be a “maker thing”. Here are two examples where interviewees explicitly refer to that maker thing.

Yeah, everybody helps each other. It’s something that... Well, yeah. It’s a maker thing. You share your tools. You share your knowledge. You share your experience. (Noah, WA10)

Or, at another interview, I ask why the interviewee uses the open workshop.

This is what makes it “makers”, to teach each other and learn from others and together, that is what attracts me. (Gunnar, WA6)<sup>48</sup>

In this instance, the workshop is presented as, by definition, a place for sharing, teaching each other and learning together. Gunnar has machines at home, but he still comes the open workshop as it is the learning with others that matters for him.

In another interview, I ask specifically about practices around skill sharing and learning (WA3).

Philip: For most people it’s still a hobby workshop. I think people take the time and everyone has done so for me in any case. When I’ve asked how things, you know, I

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<sup>48</sup> Except quotes from interviews done in English (WA10, M3) all interview quotes are translated by me.

don't know how to use this, but then you kind of get a briefing and then they stay with you a little bit and show. Then after that you're expected to know a bit yourself

Robert: And then there is also – you know a culture thing. And that really works now. It's that if someone asks me and I can't, I usually refer to someone I think knows. Well, it is. Universal nowadays like "I don't know, but I think Aaron knows".

They describe a culture where people ask for help and can easily receive basic instructions for specific machines or tools. There is, however, an expectation that one does not need a lot of help and is able to use the tool alone after, which would imply some basic knowledge about, for example, what a machine is used for. They further describe how people can be referred to others with more experience. Later in the interview, they also describe how members set up small introductory courses if they are asked repeatedly for help with a specific workshop area.

Courses as opportunities to share skills more formally is a recurring strategy at open workshops. In chapter 7.3, I further write about courses and how they, besides the dissemination of skill and knowledge, also function as community care.

Above I have shared examples of when sharing at open workshops functions well. The excerpts and quotes can create a somewhat romantic picture of how people help each other with their creative projects. That I asked about this culture of sharing in many of the interviews was not because I had experienced it myself and was thrilled to hear about this culture at other open workshops. Rather, it was because I had experienced that it oftentimes felt impossible to ask more experienced members at the open workshop for help. Even if I have experienced that people have shared skills and materials with me, when I worked on the jacket, I also experienced thresholds to access other workshop areas. Beyond my personal experience, I have observed how some people obtain help, learn how to use machines, but that it is not something that happens to everybody to the same extent.

To nuance the romantic picture further, I share an entry from my field diary from initial fieldwork.

I found the textile workshop a bit messy. Someone had used the sewing machine and obviously not cleaned up after. Thread and pieces of fabric lying on the floor. This sort of thing annoys me. Why can't people clean up after them? I had to clean before starting to work. Just as it says on the A4 taped on the wall. "Clean up after you, so that others don't need start their making by cleaning up under the chair".

Just what I had to do before starting to make my stuff. Well, it wasn't much work, it's just annoying.

In this entry I am annoyed about a messy textile workshop. There were not many rules at that workshop; one of the few was that you clean before you leave. I also write how it was not much work to clean, but I am annoyed by the carelessness. Other days I found a sewing machine, or parts of it, missing. Later in the diary I write how I start bringing my own equipment, such as scissors or bobbins.<sup>49</sup>

I discuss such and more severe incidences in more detail in 7.3. There I discuss maintenance of the workshop as caring together and as sharing of responsibility for the common infrastructure. Here, I shed light on carelessness or misuse to show possible limits of or frustration with sharing of equipment and skill at the open workshop.

Discussing these aspects of sharing is not to say that it is impossible to have a shared open workshop, but rather to highlight that the beautiful spontaneous sharing that I describe in the beginning of the chapter needs to be cared for. It needs the maintained space, the engaged members, and a local culture of sharing, and all of these need to be cared for by workshop members.

With this introduction to the empirical part of the thesis, the quote from Bror that I share in the very beginning of the thesis becomes alive. Bror highlights the need for space, which becomes apparent in the fact that people need and use the workshop for their activities, and as sharing limited workspaces is a topic throughout the chapter. Furthermore, he mentions the importance of equipment. I describe how it is shared in the everyday practices of the workshop. Further, he highlights the need for a certain culture. This chapter introduces both the spontaneous skill sharing as part of the culture, but also indicates problems that can arise when a culture of care is not strong enough.

In the next section I provide an overview of the remaining empirical chapters and the discussion chapter.

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<sup>49</sup> Sharp textile scissors are a game changer when sewing; it is no fun to cut fabric with any other scissor. Therefore, I decided to bring my own. Bobbins carry the bottom thread in the sewing machine. As the bobbins with the colour I used disappeared, I started to have my own with the right colour and would always take them home.

## 5.2 Overview

What follows are four empirical chapters. The first empirical chapter describes open workshops in Sweden and provides an overview of how they are organised (chapter six). Chapter seven asks how a perfect open workshop would be like. The question regarding a perfect workshop is inspired by an interview question I asked in order to be able to discuss dreams and visions with interviewees. In the chapter, I show what goals interviewees have for their workshops, which at first glance are about the physical infrastructure, but on closer inspection are more about the way that infrastructure is used and organised. Chapter seven makes visible that not all associations are able to arrive at their dream workshops. The chapter answers the first research question, which asks how open workshops are established and maintained in Sweden. In chapter eight and nine, I discuss why not all associations manage to establish their perfect workshop. Chapter eight deals with the difficulty of accessing suitable space, first by showing the associations' perspectives (8.1, 8.2), and then exploring dynamics in planning and neoliberal urbanisation to contextualise the problems. Chapter nine is focused on an imbalance between tasks that need to be done to maintain the open workshop and members of the workshop that are ready to commit to those task and responsibilities. Again, I start with a perspective from the workshop associations (9.1 and 9.2), to then discuss the situation in its broader context (9.3). Chapters eight and nine answer the second research question, which enquires after challenges to claiming and maintaining open workshops as commons in the Swedish context. The empirical chapters five to nine are followed by a discussion chapter. In the discussion chapter, I first synthesise the findings from the empirical chapters by answering research questions one and two. The main part of the discussion chapter is dedicated to answering research question three, which asks what the case of open workshops can tell beyond itself, to broader questions on degrowth strategies.

For the empirical chapters I have chosen to first provide empirical detail and develop analytical points with the material. Towards the end of subchapters and chapters, I put those points into dialogue with other literature and conceptual ideas. The level of abstraction increases from one chapter to the next. The discussion in chapter ten is where I synthesise and engage more conceptually with the material.

## 6 Open workshops in Sweden

In this first empirical chapter, I describe Sweden's open workshops during the time of my study, from 2018 to 2025. My knowledge about the open workshops comes from interview material, observations, and a survey, as well as material published by either the workshop associations themselves, their funders, or the umbrella organisation *Makers of Sweden* (MoS). Materials are websites, including wikis and Facebook pages, and also brochures. Before describing open workshops during the study period, I share some historical examples of shared infrastructures of production in Sweden and temporary developments in relation to craft and non-industrial fabrication, to add a local context (see also Kohtala et al., 2020). I do not aim for any systematic overview, but to give impressions of the local histories of (shared) making. To do so I use two examples: a shared workshop in the city of Stockholm active for 27 years until it closed in 1999, and so-called *hobby rooms* found in many housing complexes. After that I turn to temporary dynamics concerning crafts and making in Sweden more broadly.

From 1972 to 1999, an open workshop called *Verkstan för alla* (Workshop for everybody) was active in central Stockholm. The open workshop was run as a *fritidsgård*, a municipal-run centre for after school activities, but was open to all with no age restrictions. The workshop moved twice; while all locations are in central Stockholm, the third was in a housing area and more children with parents were using the workshop (Stockholms Stad, 1986), while before the workshop was attracting mainly grownups.<sup>50</sup> The workshop had facilities for textiles, carpentry, ceramics, metal and jewellery, and photography, as well as bike repair (Verkstan, n.d.-b). Later, early digital techniques became available (Verkstan, n.d.-a). In 1985, 24 individuals were employed at the workshop, sharing 14.2 full-time equivalency of employment (Stockholms Stad, 1986, p. 5). The staff

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<sup>50</sup> Personal conversation with a former employee of *Verkstan för alla*.

maintained the workshop and guided users in the different techniques.<sup>51</sup> In 2025, the building that housed the open workshop until 1999 still hosts a workshop, but now as part of a municipal programme supporting those dealing with mental health issues (*sysselsättningsverksamhet inom socialpsykiatri*). I became aware of this open workshop through personal conversation with one of the former employees. I am not aware of other examples of such municipal-run open workshops, but would assume that they existed in similar forms also in other municipalities in Sweden at the time.

What I share here about the phenomenon of the *hobbyrum* is based on personal experiences and exchanges. The hobby room is a room often found in the basement of apartment buildings, which those living in the building can use to work on small building projects. This could be, for example, the restoration of furniture. A room of the kind which I have used was in the basement of our apartment building from the 1950s. The room was previously a *mangelrum*, still hosting an enormous mangle, which in the past was used to flatten sheets after washing; by the time I used the room it was covered in dust. It was unclear how other residents used or understood the room. It was called hobby room, and I used it to build a nursing table. There was no equipment in the room, I had my own tools, but it was an indoor space open to all residents, which allowed one to do manual craft activities that make noise and dirt, and which would not have been possible to do inside the flat.

While this is an isolated experience, I have heard about long waiting lists from other housing associations. Connected to this experience is the fact that in apartment buildings built later, such rooms do usually not exist. As I edit this chapter a new housing development in Lund is advertised. It is part of a larger redevelopment of the former industrial area at Öresundsvägen. The apartment building advertised is called *Verkstan på Västerbro* (workshop in Västerbro), presumably aiming to reference the industrial past of the area. There is, however, no workshop planned in the building. The only common areas that are visible in the plans are the inner yard with bicycle parking, two tables and a lawn. The basement is a carpark, there is no indoor area for common use, which would allow for repair, other manual work or community activities (JM, n.d.).

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<sup>51</sup> See footnote 50

Both examples indicate that the opportunities, and possibly also the interest, in doing repairs or manual work in urban areas are diminishing rather than expanding. At the same time craft, both as product and activity, is enjoying popularity in Sweden. Sweden has a long tradition of *Slöjd* – non-industrial production and manufacturing – and there are craft-focused international trends, blooming not in the least through social media.

*Slöjd* is the traditional practice of making items with materials and tools that are locally available. Items produced can be knives, boxes, furniture, or textiles. While no longer a matter of necessity, it still is an integrated part of Swedish culture. *Slöjd* is part of the school curriculum, celebrated and criticised: the former as it carries on the tradition of a practical element in education when popularly taught skills are dominantly focused on the digital and intellectual; the latter for the same reasons.<sup>52</sup> Apart from school *slöjd* there is an active *hemslöjd* (home *slöjd*) umbrella organisation with many regional and local organisations. They preserve craft techniques and arrange among other things courses and markets. Furthermore, there are professionals, crafts people sharing their skills and selling their products. I describe *slöjd* here as it implies a shared frame for a set of skills and practices for creating everyday objects with simple tools. While many might not have used the skills they learned or tried to learn in school *slöjd*, they have once held a needle and thread and a carving knife in their hands. Furthermore, the *slöjd* frame gives traditional craft techniques an established place. Co-organising shared places for production is, however, not part of the *slöjd* traditions.

Then, there are the more recent trends both for doing crafts like knitting, embroidery, ceramics, wood carving or visible mending, and for consuming crafts from local manufactures or on online marketplaces like Etsy. In 2022, videos showing DIY (do-it-yourself) projects were among the most viewed on TikTok in Sweden (Edfeldt, 2022). In the same year “the self-knitted item” became the “Christmas present of the year”, as announced annually by the Swedish trade association (*Svensk Handel*). The product is supposed “to represent the times we live in”, “must be a novelty or have attracted new interest during the year”, and “must represent a high sales value or be sold in large numbers” (*Svensk Handel*, 2024).

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<sup>52</sup> As for example during the so-called butterknife debate (*Smörknivsdebatten*) in 2016.

Another trend with a different audience, but also involving craft and digital fabrication, is *Cosplay*. The idea is to play a character from popular movies, games, series or comic and while it is possible to purchase costumes, a core element of the subculture centres around their creation (see, e.g., NärCon, n.d.).

The living interest in *slöjd*, as well as the aforementioned trends in craft, show the relevance creative making has today. Open workshops which allow for engagement with such crafts, however, do not enjoy the same popularity.

So far, I have contextualised open workshops in Sweden with respect to different fields of craft. Other fields that open workshops are related to are robotics, digital fabrication, coding and what is framed as STEM more generally – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Sweden understands itself as country of engineers and a driver of technological development (e.g., Wetterberg, 2021). Open workshops are attracting technically-inclined individuals, and the US-stirred maker movement discourse centres in large part around robotics and programming (e.g., Make: Magazine, n.d.).

In this introduction to the chapter, I have pointed out some developments in Sweden and beyond that make up the background to manual and digital fabrication in open workshops in Sweden today. One aim was to highlight the diversity of interests that potentially meet at open workshops. While there is a broad interest in skills enabled by open workshops, they are not as numerous as it might be reasonable to think based on the general interest in crafts and fabrication portrayed above. In the following, I introduce open workshops as they exist in Sweden today, first with a general overview of different formats (6.1), and then with detailed information about open workshops organised as associations (6.2).

## 6.1 Open workshops today

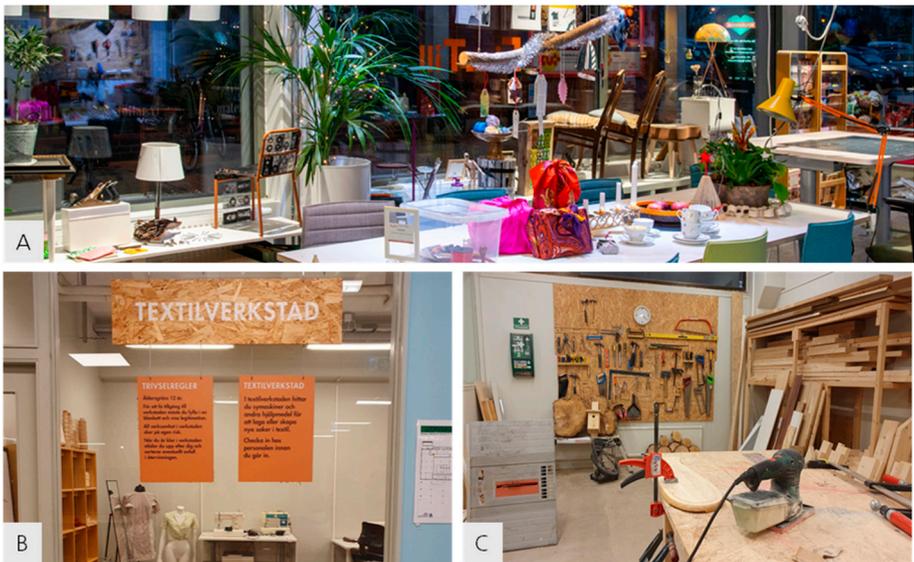
In this thesis, I focus on open workshops that aim to provide a large variety of tools and machines, are organised as non-profit associations and are open for anybody to join and use.<sup>53</sup> In subchapter 6.2, I describe these open workshops in detail.

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<sup>53</sup> Except for age restrictions.

Before doing so, I list other formats that exist, but which I have not focused on empirically. The purpose of listing them here is to mark the difference from the open workshops I do focus on, and to provide a broader context. First, I briefly describe upcycling workshops (*återbruksverkstad*) and bike kitchens (*cykelköket*), as those are most similar to the open workshop associations that I focus on. Second, I list a few more formats such as *KKV* (*Konstnärernas Kollektivverkstad*, Artsist collective workshop), which others have included in discussions about creative infrastructures in Sweden (e.g., Xie & Persson, 2022).

Upcycling workshops (*återbruksverkstad*) are small workshops which are run by staff and are meant as a service to residents to enable repair and small-scale building of home-use items. Figure 6.1 shows some impressions from upcycling workshops.



**Figure 6.1 Impression from various upcycling workshops**

(A) The main room at *Fixa Till Norra Fäladen* in Lund, closed since December 2020 (LKF, n.d.)<sup>54</sup>; (B) Textile workshop at *Återbruket Skärholmen* (Photo by author); (C) Woodworkshop at *Återbruket Skärholmen* (Photo by author)

<sup>54</sup> For image sources see 12.1.

The upcycling workshops I encountered are fully financed by one or several external organisations, which can be municipal agencies or NGOs. They cover costs for materials, rent, and the salary of the employees who run the workshop. They are small workshops with limited equipment. Upcycling workshops typically have sewing machines, bike repair equipment, as well as tools for light wood or metal work. Some have space for swapping clothing and other items, while one of the spaces I visited also has tools that can be borrowed to take home (drills and other small electric tools and sewing machines). Upcycling workshops are housed in retail/service properties in residential areas and are open during the daytime on workdays. It is a service to the citizens in a residential area, but open for all and functioning as a neighbourhood meeting space. There are only few examples of such spaces in Sweden, some of which were only open as temporary projects. Examples for upcycling workshops are *Fixa Till Linero* (Lund), *Fixoteket* (Gothenburg), *Återbruket Skärholmen* (Stockholm).

Upcycling workshops aim to enable a broad range of repair and upcycling practices and are open to the public, but differ from open workshop associations in their organisational form. They are service places for small repair and upcycling projects with the aim of inspiring citizens to do more upcycling and repair. Experiences from workshops that are or have been open also show their function as socializing spaces for the local neighbourhood (UW 1-6).

Bike kitchens (*cykelköket*) are self-help bike repair workshops. They vary in format, but are in Sweden often organised as associations and are volunteer run. Volunteers help with repair, and the association has tools as well as spare parts from old bikes, but also new items that are frequently needed (e.g., tubes). The upcycling workshops I note above can have integrated bike kitchens. Typically, bike kitchens are open in evenings or at the weekend. Bike kitchens are a phenomenon beyond Sweden, and there are studies carried out on such workshops, both in Sweden (Bradley, 2018; Valentini & Butler, 2023; Zapata Campos et al., 2020) and beyond (Batterbury & Vandermeersch, 2016). I have not conducted empirical work on bike kitchens for this thesis, as my interest in this project is workshops that allow for diverse techniques and repair and making more broadly.

Other workshop formats that are open to the public are mobile initiatives that come to different parts of a city providing a few hours' access to some easy repair tools. One example is *Pop-up ReTuren*, a service in Malmö. *ReTuren* was

previously an upcycling workshop with a fixed location and regular opening hours. *Pop-up ReTuren* comes to different parts of the city, allowing citizens to leave things they cannot dispose of via household recycling. Other citizens can take from the material. On some occasions, *Pop-up ReTuren* has upcycling and repair events. However, in 2023 the popup closed for the season in mid-October, and only six of the 18 pop-up occasions included upcycling and repair events (Vasyd, 2023).

Another example of small open workshops receiving public funding are small creative rooms that exist in many municipal libraries. They mainly cater for children and provide only basic materials like pens and paper. Some libraries provide access to, for example, 3D printers (e.g., *Halmstad Stadsbiblioteket*), have dedicated workshop facilities with events and staff (e.g., *Bubblan, Kulturkvarteret Örebro*) or provide small electric tools which can be borrowed (e.g., *Garaget, Malmö*). Other examples can be workshops in museums that invite visitors for events or free creative activities, while often limited to certain audiences, for example, school children. Such workshops have limited equipment, do not allow for individual access and are often restricted to facilitated activities (e.g., *Bubblan, Kulturkvarteret Örebro*).

Other organisations that have specialised workshops are education association (e.g., *ABF, Vuxenskola, Medborgarskola, Folkuniversitetet*). Here, workshops and ateliers are used for courses and study circles. Another category is artist collectives (*KKV*), where artists share workshops; these are, however, directed at professional artists. Another type of workshop which does not fit the frame of the open workshop, but is broadly equipped as such, are shared workshops, which are open to employees of companies or students and staff at universities. Such workshops are, just like open workshops associations, often called makerspaces, which might suggest including them in the same category. I have, however, excluded them as they are not open to the public.

In these examples, the productive or creative infrastructure is only a minor part or accessory to a space with a different purpose, and there is very limited equipment (e.g., library, recycling, art) or accessibility only in connection to a course or group activity, or for a professional group. The open workshops I discuss in this dissertation are organised as non-profit associations, and they are open for people to use for their own projects, independent from scheduled courses or workshops.

## 6.2 Open workshop associations

“The association was formed in October 2020 when a handful of people thought that Västerås needed a real makerspace.\* The goal was to create a place where everyone can realise their creative and technical ideas regardless their age, experience or needs.

A fantastic idea should not be stopped by missing tools. We want to give everyone in Västerås access to the tools of making: 3D-printers, laser cutter, sewing machines, saws, drills, mills, lathes and whatever else you might need!

*\*Makerspace: A place for unhindered making of all kinds. Woodworking, 3D-printing, sewing, programming – and get inspired by the other members!*

(Makers of Västerås, n.d., italics in original, my own translation)

This statement from the *Makers of Västerås* suggests what open workshops are about, and how they are established and organised. In the case of Västerås, as is true for many of the other open workshop associations in Sweden, a small group of people wanted a space for their creative and technical ideas, and to get there they started a non-profit association. The open workshop they plan is supposed to be open for everybody; it should have all the tools one could need, and be a place where members can be inspired by each other.

I start this subchapter with a general overview of such open workshop associations in Sweden. For this overview I have mapped active open workshops in Summer 2025. Creating the map points to one aspect of the dynamic around these open workshop associations. The list of workshops is changing as new associations form and workshops close temporarily or permanently. Some associations exist for years before they are able to open a workshop. Another difficulty is the fluidity of the category. Almost all open workshop associations in Sweden call themselves “makerspace” or “makers of” a town, while there are also non-open workshops that use such names.

With the help of a survey, as well as information available on websites and social media, I found 22 active open workshop non-profit associations in Sweden in 2025 which also have access to a physical workshop. The map in figure 6.2 shows where those 22 open workshops are located (for a list of the included associations see appendix C).



**Figure 6.2 Mapping of open workshops in Sweden**

Dots indicate locations of workshops that are run by non-profit associations and are open and active in July 2025. See appendix C for a list of associations included in the map. Map layout by author. Data source: Survey, see 4.1. Base map: GADM, 2023; © Lantmäteriet, 2021.

I have further found 21 associations that have closed their workshops, dissolved their association, or not (yet) opened a workshop (see chapter eight, p. 245, for a map, appendix C for a list).<sup>55</sup>

The format of open workshop associations, inspired by makerspaces, started in Sweden in the early 2010s. Those associations operating workshops now were founded between 2011 and 2021 (see appendix C).<sup>56</sup> The first association-run open workshop opened in Malmö in 2012 (Seravalli, 2014). *Fabriken*, which later became Malmö Makerspace, is now closed. Around the same time several associations started across Sweden, with *Stockholm Makerspace* opening their first workshop in 2013. During the period of this study, I have seen new workshops open, others disappear, and some remerge or move between different premises. While I limit myself here to describing this dynamic as part of the open workshop landscape in Sweden, I discuss why this is happening in detail in chapter eight.

To illustrate some of the character of the open workshop community in Sweden I share a situation I observed at an annual meeting of *Makers of Sweden* (MoS). MoS is an association that works to create connections between open workshop associations and initiatives in Sweden. The umbrella organisation of open workshops in Sweden was founded in 2016 after a Sweden wide networking project for open workshop associations initiated by *STPLN* in Malmö (Allabolag, n.d.; Svensson et al., 2016). The aim of this umbrella organisation is to facilitate exchange between associations and to help with reoccurring issues concerning most of the associations, such as funding, insurance, and membership management. Furthermore, MoS aims to increase the visibility of open workshops for both politics, business, and the public. The organisation hopes that more visibility and understanding will lead to better funding opportunities and a better chance for the long-term existence of open workshops in Sweden (Makers of Sweden, n.d.). However, during the period of my study, MoS has struggled to maintain itself and has not had the resources to do much beyond surviving and

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<sup>55</sup> Makers of Sweden have helped me establishing this list of associations, through distributing a survey to their member associations. Furthermore, I have used a list published on their homepage as one basis for searching after open workshops in Sweden. For more information about the survey see chapter four.

<sup>56</sup> One active association started in the early 1990s. This association is linked to a *uppfinnare förening* (inventors association), which I see as explanation for the earlier start of the association. Their open workshop opened only in 2022.

creating basic connections between associations, helping some associations in their attempts to get started and organise annual meetings.

Any non-profit association in Sweden has to hold one annual general assembly. The meeting formally functions as the highest decision-making body for the organisation. A board is elected by the general assembly and administers the association according to statutes and tasks decided by the general assembly. For MoS, these meetings usually take place at one of the member organisations' workshops.

I was able to join one such meeting in person with about 15 others, while there was an equally big group joining the meeting online. We sat on a collection of different chairs and old couches in various conditions, filling almost half the hosting workshop. We were turned towards a wall that had the online part of the meeting projected onto it. During the meeting I made the following note:

In connection to the report from the current year we make a round with both online and offline participants. The head of board asks a representative from each association to speak and goes from north to south or tries to. He has an overview of which open workshops there are and says the city names and sees if there is anybody present at the meeting to share what is going on.

I am sharing this note as it shows something about open workshops in Sweden. There are so few of them that there is time in a half day meeting with lots of other points on the agenda for all of them to give a short status update. Furthermore, the small size of the community allows for the head of the board to have an overview of most of the spaces, their names and statuses. However, this is only true for most of the spaces; he – and the others in the room – are not sure about the status of all the workshops. All of this seemed perfectly natural and according to what would be expected in the context.

Table 6.1 summarises characteristics of open workshop associations in Sweden, which I describe in more detail throughout the remaining parts of this chapter. The aim is to share a basic understanding of the phenomenon. In my empirical work I have observed various forms of open workshops in Sweden. They are different in many aspects, for example, scale (be it the square meter of the workshop or the amount of members), variety of technologies or skills (diversely equipped to very limited equipment), the influence from certain occupations or

educations dominant in the respective municipality (e.g., engineering or design) or the economic organisation in terms of funding and ownership.

**Table 6.1 Overview of characteristics of open workshop associations in Sweden**

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<b>Open workshop association</b>
Organised through a non-profit association formed to run the open workshop
Volunteer run (no paid staff), different roles for administration, maintenance, and community care
Workshop with professional and semi-professional tools and machines (sewing machines, 3D printers, CNC mills, laser cutter, carpentry, smithy, screen printing, etc.)
Mainly housed in industrial buildings, but also in Universities and other public owned or managed property
Different group or individual access from a few hours a week to 24/7
Mainly from and for individuals who want a space to make things or realise their projects
Funded through membership fees, sponsorship, public and private grants; grants can be monetary or a service such as being hosted in a municipal building

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**Internal organisation**

All open workshops that the empirical part of this thesis is based on are organised as non-profit associations (*ideell förening*). The open workshops are self-organised spaces, where the association *is* the open workshop. The open workshop association has a board recruited from and elected by its members. The board is mainly occupied with administrative tasks such accounting, membership management, insurance, communication with and responsibility for external relations (for example with the municipality, with a landlord, with other local or national associations). Furthermore, the board is responsible for organising routines and structures to ensure the day-to-day running of the open workshop. Some boards delegate this task successfully to other volunteers, while in some cases the board holds the main responsibility for the day-to-day operation. While all open workshops I visited and where I conducted interviews with board members are organised slightly differently, there are some reoccurring strategies for sharing running and maintenance tasks in the workshop.

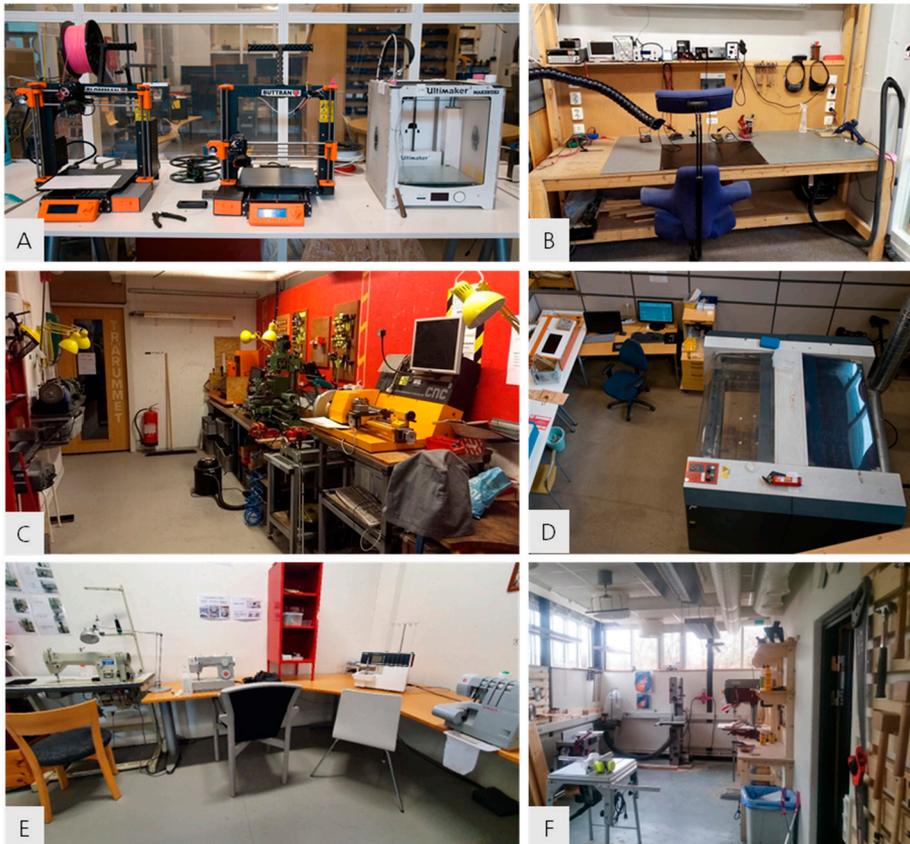
One way that shows to be dominant and successful is that there are volunteers responsible for specific areas of the workshop (*områdesansvariga*). The volunteers make sure that tools in their area are available and in good shape and that machines are served. That does not mean that they will always have to do all repairs, but they again can work together with users of the area they are responsible for. Often those volunteers will know the workshop well and be passionate and knowledgeable about the tools and machines they care for. In some cases, they have a budget for spare parts and consumables or to even buy smaller new tools and machines.

Another role that many open workshop associations use in their internal organisation is the role of the host (*värd*). Hosts open the workshop at open day/evenings. Not all open workshop associations organise such open days/evenings, but those that do often have the role of the host. The host welcomes members who come for the open day/evening and can help with questions. The host is responsible for keeping the workshop open and welcoming during those hours and to answer or redirect questions that members might have. Hosts often know many of the available tools and machines but are not expected to be able or have time to answer all questions. They can refer to other members or other sources, for example, online tutorials.

Explaining the role of the host, I mentioned that not all open workshops have open days/evenings. Furthermore, open days/evenings do not mean the same thing in all open workshops. In some open workshops they are occasions where non-members can visit the open workshop, in some cases to use the workshop in other cases to inform themselves about the association. In other open workshops, open days/evenings are for members who do not have individual access. Again, how the possibility of individual access is organised varies for the different spaces. Individual access implies that members have a key; often this is a tag of some sort. Members with individual access can use the open workshop at any time the association has access to the building. Open workshops that are in municipal or university buildings are usually closed and secured with alarm systems during some hours of the night, while other associations can offer their members 24/7 access (see appendix C). I write more about how members can obtain individual access in a section on funding further along in this subchapter.

## Infrastructure

The workshop size ranges from 0 to 1300 sqm. 0 as there are some open workshop associations that have not (yet) succeeded in finding a suitable and affordable premise for their workshop. Leaving aside the biggest open workshop in Sweden (*Mikrofabriken* in Gothenburg at 1300 sqm) the other workshops that I have data for are between 90 and 325 sqm, with an average of 183 sqm (see table appendix C for more detail).



**Figure 6.3 Impressions from different open workshops**

(A) 3D printers at *Makerslink*, Linköping (Makerslink, n.d.-a); (B) Electronics workplace at *Makerslink*, Linköping (Makerslink, n.d.-b); (C) Metal workshop at *Stockholm Makerspace* (Stockholm Makerspace 2018, October 20); (D) Lasercutter at *Makerslink*, Linköping (Makerslink, n.d.-c); (E) Textile workstations at *Makers Jönköping* (Makers Jönköping, n.d.-b); (F) Carpentry workshop at *Lunds Öppna Verkstad* (Lunds Öppna Verkstad, n.d.)

The images in figure 6.3 above shows impressions from different open workshops in Sweden and a selection of their productive infrastructure. To enliven the images, I share the notes of one of my visits to an open workshop. This open workshop, like many of the others, is housed in a multipurpose former industrial building managed by the municipality. The building is located in a typical Swedish business park, outside the city centre, with road infrastructure made for trucks and cars, big roundabouts, fast-food restaurants, gas-stations and retail stores for building materials, furniture, gardening supplies. I am traveling by car, it is evening – the open workshop’s open night, an occasion where regular members can use the workshop and newcomers can visit before becoming a member. I travel by car as public transport is scarce at this hour and in this area.

There is life and light in the building when I come in. Many signs for different projects. I find the open workshop at the end of the building, pass a café that is closed, but looks inviting and multipurpose. A bike kitchen where some people fix bikes. The workshop is open, there are people arriving, some already there. Greeting each other, more than just “hi”, but talking to each other, checking in, talking about what they are working on. I am addressed by somebody, I say that I am to meet Daniel, that I’m a researcher. They say he isn’t there yet, but they are in no doubt that he’ll come. I ask if it is okay if I look around, and it is. It’s a big room with two long tables which make the centre of the room (or if not the geographical centre, it’s the centre of attention). There is a big corner with sewing equipment and materials, there is an electronics part, some 3D printers, some shelves with stuff, a white board, a CNC mill (I think). Another visitor is there with a child, they talk to one member of the association, and I join them. The child is curious, wonders if one can make stuff here and the answer from the member who shows us around is “yes, that’s what it is about basically”. The visitor wants to know about the wood workshop and there we learn that the open workshop will have to move until May 1st next year and that the wood workshop is not in its best shape. Because of the moving there is not much energy or sense in doing so much about it. But the visitor is rather interested and the one responsible for the wood workshop just arrives, so he shows us the room. The wood workshop is big, but messy. Tools lying around, material lying around, machines not ready to be used. Seeing the carpentry workshop, I understand that the space needs a lot of organizing. There are also some very big professional machines, which I have not seen before.

The short episode shows some features that are typical for open workshops. A central part of an open workshop is its tools and machines. What I describe in the

note above are some of the tools and machines available in most open workshops: 3D printers, CNC mills, sewing machines, as well as electronics and carpentry. Other common workshops or machines are laser cutters, metal workshops, electronics, (textile) printing, lamination and sometimes pottery, and often located in a container in a yard, a smithy. In some places there are special rooms for painting and even the possibility to work on cars. In the excerpt I write about two professional industrial machines. These were machines that came to the workshop through contacts but are hardly used as they require expertise that few possess. This exemplifies a reality where machines are often not what the association would buy if they had all the options. They use what is available to them at a low cost. This is not the case for all workshops I have visited, but for many with respect to parts of their machines park.

The open workshop I describe in the excerpt has two rooms. It is difficult to say what would be typical for an open workshop in Sweden as they have very different floorplans. Some have one big room that the associations divide in smaller rooms or units by building walls or even another floor into the room. Others have a small room, which they then need to divide into two even smaller rooms to delineate space for loud and dirty (wood, metal) and one space for clean and not so loud (textiles and electronics). Again, other spaces have several small rooms, not big enough to house all machines and comfortable working spaces. What is the same for all open workshops I visited is that they did not design the building they are in according to their needs, and neither could they choose from a large number of options. They all need to make do with a location they could get and adapt it to their needs.

As I write in the fieldnotes, due to the upcoming move a big part of the workshop is not in a usable state. There are a few things I want to highlight here. One is that often machines, not necessarily whole workshops, are out of order for a while, for various reasons. In this case, it is the upcoming move, and it would be too much effort to tidy up before. Other reasons can be missing spare parts, which are hard to get, or that they are delicate machines that easily break, especially when they are used by a group of people with mixed expertise. Another problem can be that responsibilities for repair are not clear and skills for the repairing are scarce, something I discuss in more detail later in the thesis. In other cases, it can be that nonfunctioning machines are bought at a low price with the plan to fix them.

When visiting the workshop, I learn that the associations will have to move out from the building. Repeatedly, open workshops end up in locations that they can only use temporarily, as they are, for example, in buildings that are supposed to be repurposed or even torn down. Open workshops can then use these buildings with low or no rent, but also with poor terms as they might need to be evicted on short notice (*rivningskontrakt*). Getting a new location is often not easy and associations might (temporarily) end up without a space they can use. Finding a suitable – even short-term – location is one of the main challenges open workshop associations face in Sweden (see chapter eight).

Before moving away from the excerpt and on to how open workshop associations are funded, I want to pick up one more aspect. In my notes I write “some shelves with stuff”. To someone who has never been to an open workshop this might sound unspecific and non-informative. This shelf stands in, however, for a certain degree of clutter that I have met in open workshops. In some cases, it might be a rather orderly collection of, for the outsider, random stuff, or it might be creative chaos; in others it has probably gone beyond that. In any case, many open workshop associations have shelves, sideboards or boxes with seemingly random materials, leftovers from projects, donations, stuff people collect and think they or others might use in the future or simply stuff that has not been cleaned away. While there is a risk for things piling up and the space turning unusable, there is also the opportunity for inspiration and repurposing.

## Funding

Regarding funding, there are two approaches that I want to distinguish. Most open workshop associations in Sweden depend on grants or other support they can get from their local municipality, a university or other actor. This can be grants that open workshop associations need to apply for, or it can be the opportunity to use a location with reductions on rent or without rent. A few open workshop associations have chosen to go another way to avoid being dependent on other parties for their access to buildings. However, rents are high, and tax regulations make it difficult for non-profit associations to get rental contracts. Two open workshop associations in Sweden have therefore formed their own limited company (*Aktiebolag, AB*). Those open workshops are still organised as non-profit association, but that non-profit association owns a limited company. I discuss this as a strategy to access spaces in chapter eight.

No matter the organisational form, with or without limited company, the main and most continuous income for all open workshop associations are membership and access fees paid by the members. Membership fees vary between different associations. The fee depends on different factors and there is some difference in what is included in membership, depending on how access is organised or on what equipment is available (see also appendix C). Generally, my observations show that associations charge no more than they need to cover costs and to build a small buffer for investments or troubles in the future.

As of July 2025, 20 of the active open workshop associations expect members to pay a membership fee that amounts to between 50 and 1200 SEK a year, with an average fee of 332 SEK.<sup>57</sup> Comparing annual membership fees does not reveal a great deal, because they entail different things. While at some workshops paying the fee might allow members to join events at the workshops, at others it allows for access once or several times a week when hosts keep the workshop open. Looking at fees for individual access, they amount to 38 to 1200 SEK a month. It is only eleven associations that can or want to allow individual access against a fee. Discounting the two most extreme cases, fees range from 150 to 525 SEK per month.<sup>58</sup> Seven associations allow their volunteers individual access (see appendix C).

Number of members varies between 10 and 1000 members for the 15 associations that answered in the survey. Only five associations have more than 80 members. Members are those paying the yearly membership fee and not all of them are actively using the workshop. In Stockholm only 350 of 1000 members actively use the workshop; in Kalmar 100 of 280 use the workshop (see appendix C).

Another funding source for associations is sponsorship and grants from companies or banks. This can be onetime sponsoring with machines, tools or grants. Sponsors are listed as partners on the association's homepage. Associations also receive in-kind donations; often these are things companies or other actors no

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<sup>57</sup> At *Mikrofabriken* that runs a different model members pay 1200 SEK a month which includes 24/7 access to the workshop.

<sup>58</sup> To contextualise those monthly fees with costs in Sweden: a gym membership would be between 349 and 650 SEK a month. Here I checked gym chains and what I would need to pay in Lund (*Attci, Gerdahallen, Nordic Wellness, and Friskis & Svettis*, July 2025).

longer need. They can be machines from school workshops and industry, or consumables like filament for 3D printing.

In chapter five I described, with help of an ethnographic vignette, how everyday sharing can look like at an open workshop. The aim was to give the reader a sense of the experienced character of the phenomenon. In this chapter I have described the organisational frame and basic characteristics that are the field for the experience. The aim of the two chapters has been to describe the phenomenon of the open workshop association rather than to analyse it.

The empirical chapters that follow are analytical rather than descriptive. In the next chapter (chapter seven), I discuss how associations go about creating their workshop. The discussion sets the foundation to answer the first research question: How are open workshops established and maintained in Sweden? Focusing on the everyday materiality and relations at the workshop sheds light on how commoning practices are explored, established and maintained. The chapter reveals two challenges associations encounter when claiming and maintaining their open workshop. I discuss those challenges in detail in chapter eight and nine.

## 7 Making a perfect open workshop

I am one of the three founders. There was a guy called Thomas who asked me and my brother if we wanted to join and share a workshop. He wanted to have a CNC mill and could not have it in his one-room apartment. So, he had found workshop premises and asked if we wanted to join. A few more joined. They had lost access to the university workshops when graduating and we started the association. (Philip, WA3)<sup>59</sup>

When people have shared their stories with me of how they became members of their open workshop association or how they, together with others, started the association, there is a recurring theme. It is about how they wanted *access* to bigger or more professional machines or how they wanted to *have* and *use* an open workshop in their hometown. It is often about machines, such as the laser cutter, that are too big, dirty, loud, and expensive to have at home. Some also mention that they want to share a workshop and be inspired and surrounded by other makers. I have been like that too. Many times I have thought, ‘if I just had that tool’ or ‘if I just had access to an open workshop with all those tools, I could make and repair all those things.’ What they, and I, did not think about are all the other aspects that need to fall in place for a workshop to be there and to work as a welcoming, accessible space that enables people to make what they need or dream of. I have not heard anybody saying that they joined or started the open workshop because they were so excited about *organising*, *administrating* and *maintaining* a shared workshop.

Having ideas about a perfect workshop and organising it are very different things. This chapter shows what people who organise open workshops in Sweden do to work towards their dream workshops. The discussion is focused on the internal organisation, and the first research question: How are open workshops organised

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<sup>59</sup> Throughout the empirical chapters I refer with pseudonyms to the interviewees. The code behind the name refers to the interview. See 4.1 for an overview of all interviews.

in Sweden? I start with organisational questions such as: What workshop spaces are needed? How is space allocated within the given location? How is the workshop kept running? The discussion of the empirical material shows that the question also needs a discussion of how, through its organisation, an open workshop can be open and enabling.

Basic pillars for the idea of the open workshop are facilitating skill sharing, and that it is open for anybody who wants to engage in making and craft. In chapter five, I show what such skill sharing and workshop sharing can look like in practice. In this chapter, I show how it is to organise a workshop that can facilitate such sharing.

I call the chapter *making a perfect workshop*. The title is inspired by a question that I asked in many of the interviews. Towards the end of the interviews, I asked the interviewees what their perfect workshop would be like. I asked them to imagine a situation where resources such as space, time or money would not limit the workshop. While much of the interviews focused on experienced difficulties and the solutions the associations implemented or tried to implement, this question invited them to talk about dreams, ideas and expectations. The chapter title reflects the question and does not suggest that there is something like *the* perfect open workshop.

The chapter is divided in four subchapters. The first subchapter (7.1) is focused on the productive infrastructure of the workshop: all the tools, machines, and the space to use them that inspired the funders to start their open workshop association. The subchapter also contains a section on what else needs space in the workshop: space for storage and social activities. The second and third subchapter (7.2 and 7.3) are about how the open workshop is organised. Here I frame organisation as an organisation through routines. Routines are practiced by the workshop community and keep the space running. First, I show how routines come about and are adapted over time (7.2); then, I discuss different routines and how they help the workshop to become a co-organised and welcoming space (7.3). The chapter closes with a discussion and summary (7.4), in which I discuss the first research question as well as takeaways from the chapter. With the help of empirical details, I show how commoning emerges through community building. The analysis shows that this process cannot be simply defined through rules but comes together through practices which need to be established and reproduced.

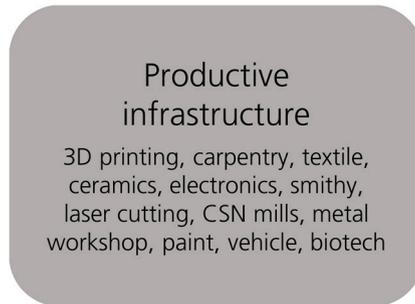
It could seem counterintuitive to start with the productive infrastructure, move to the routines and then to the community that created the space and the routines. However, I argue that since it is the productive infrastructure, the machines, and the space to use them that brought most members to the open workshop, it is also legitimate to start this discussion there. The routines and the community who enacts the routines and maintains the open workshop are in that sense side products, even if they are essential for the survival of the open workshop.

## 7.1 Productive infrastructure

This subchapter is focused on the productive infrastructure of the open workshop. By productive infrastructure, I refer to the equipment of the workshop in terms of machines, their quality and type as well as the available and needed space for them. There are some tools and machines that are found at all open workshop associations I have visited and are the most popular in many of them, including the laser cutter, the carpentry workshop, 3D printing facilities and CNC mills. How many other workshop areas there are depends on the available space. Other workshop areas might include metal workshop, painting facilities, textile workshop, ceramics, smithy, and electronics. Some workshops have facilities for car and bike repair and assembly. In one interview, lab facilities for biotechnology were mentioned as something to have if there were more resources. I list these workshop areas to show what equipment open workshops can have. The productive infrastructure takes the biggest part of the space the open workshop associations have at their disposal. To visualise components for a perfect open workshop, I have made a box with all those elements of the productive infrastructure (see figure 7.1 below). It is at the centre of that perfect open workshop. In the sections that follow I add further components that need to be in place.

The elements that would be the productive infrastructure for a perfect workshop are the backdrop for what follows below. The section is built around quotes in which board members or volunteers share which aspects of the physical infrastructure they miss or how the workshop might to be their dream workshop or a perfect workshop. The point is to show that the productive infrastructure is

important for those organising and using the workshop, as this is what motivates them to organise the open workshop.



**Figure 7.1 Physical infrastructure of production**

Illustration of the central aspect of an open workshop, the productive infrastructure with common workshop areas.

The spontaneous answer of one of my interviewees, Maria (WA2), a long-term member and volunteer of an open workshop association, would like them to have “more and bigger machines. Now we got kind of small machines, as this is what fits the space and such, that can be bought privately.”

Here, Maria speaks about the actual equipment in the workshop. More and better machines give more opportunities for projects and make working in the workshop a professional or smooth experience. She comments that the machines they have today are small, since bigger ones would not fit their workshop. This hints at the fact that the space is maybe not the optimal size for the activities that people want to do there. It is not the members’ requirements for the machines that decide about which machines the association has, but the space they have available. At another workshop, they miss facilities that would be required to have a ceramics workshop including a fire safe space for an oven. In this context, Pär (WA5) also highlighted the importance of having a combination of modern technology, such as 3D printing or electronics (robotics, etc.), and traditional crafts such as weaving. He adds later that ceramics and other crafts could attract another user group. The machine park and the size and properties of the available space are tightly linked. I discuss suitable space and how associations can get access to such in more detail in chapter 8.1.

Later in the interview with Maria, we come back to the characteristics of the workshop.

And then it would have been nice to have it a bit more soundproof. There are those who might want to talk, maybe sew or fix something, draw, or whatever else you might want to do without needing to hear them [carpentry and metal workshop]. [...] And then it is also rather limited with storage space, it would have been nice with more storage space. (WA2)

What becomes tangible here is that when having a workshop and sharing it with others, it is not enough to just have a room with machines. There is a need for storage space – which I pick up in a section in this subchapter – and the space also needs to have other characteristics; in this case, separate rooms for quiet and loud tasks and sound insulation in between those rooms. In another interview a similar aspect comes up. Karl (WA8) talks about a clean and a dirty workshop. For him there is a need for a clean space, but also a need for a space where one can be loud and make dust and dirt, where one does not need to be careful and respect others' need for clean and quiet work environment.

As the quote at the very beginning of the chapter exemplifies, people start an open workshop because they cannot have the machines they want to use in their home. Having the open workshop is not just about having machines, but also about having a space which allows for loud and messy work. This might be the carpentry workshop, with machines and wood dust and chips. Metal working is also loud, and it makes sparks which do not go well with wood dust (fire risk). Thus, even within the category, loud and messy activities cannot be combined in all fashions.

Axel (WA4), a board member of an open workshop association, spontaneously thinks of a Fablab when I ask him how is dream workshop would be like:<sup>60</sup>

A fully equipped Fablab, because it is thought through. What machines you need and material and which machines are good. Robust machines that even work when members are not that careful. We have even discussed this with the municipality. It would be our vision for the future.

What makes the Fablab ideal in his eyes is its machine park. What Axel highlights about the Fablab is not just the machines, but the fact that there is a plan behind

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<sup>60</sup> See chapter six for a short explanation of what a Fablab is.

which machines a workshop should have. However, as the quote also shows, it is not just the type of machines, but also the quality of the machines that he is highlighting. Fablab machines are supposed to be robust. They do not break, even if people might use them in a way that is not the best for the machine. I come back to the robust machine, or rather the broken machine, as it shows the importance of a range of other aspects such as the need for routines (7.2) for maintenance, or the need for courses on how to use machines. By extension, it also points to questions of skill for maintenance, repair and use and the question of who can make repairs and when (chapter nine).

Noah (WA11) rather than talking about specific tools or machines, formulates what the perfect open workshop should enable.

The perfect makerspace will be somewhere that people will not have any difficulties to create what they dream. And there are some, these kinds of makerspace around the world. For example, in Boston, I think the artists, I don't remember, I've seen a YouTube video about the place. [...] they have all kinds of tools. People help each other about how to use the tools. And people, well, it's somewhere that people have no difficulties when they want to create something. Yeah. This will be the dream makerspace.

Further on, I also ask him if skill is important for whether someone is able to make something. He stands by his point that the equipment is the most important, because skill you can always acquire yourself. I want to connect this idea back to some of the quotes earlier in this subchapter, those which are, in different ways, about creating a complete workshop, with a complete machines park. Noah here gives a reason for why a complete machine park is the basis for his idea of the perfect open workshop: It can be the foundation to expand anybody's creativity. When all tools and machines are available, the only thing needed is to learn how to use them. Turning this around suggests that the access to machines, tools and the space to use them – the infrastructure of production – is a limiting factor. To connect back to the beginning of the chapter, for many it is this productive infrastructure that makes them start an open workshop or become a member of one.

However, taking a second look at what Noah said, I want to highlight that he also says “[p]eople help each other about how to use the tools”. It is not just the

physical infrastructure, but also the community around it that he liked so much about that open workshop he saw on YouTube.

In the examples I share on the pages above, interviewees talk about the productive infrastructure of their associations and how important it is for the workshop. There is a wish for bigger, and better, or more robust machines, a wish to have more and better-suited space, in order to create a complete workshop. The physical infrastructure of production is the foundation and starting point for these open workshops; however, even in those quotes about the physical infrastructure there are also always other aspects. Noah mentions people at the workshop helping each other; Pär describes how the limitation of the space keeps them from developing certain areas in the workshop and that a combination of different workshop areas and available techniques is important; Axel identifies the need for robust machines when skill levels vary; Karl and Maria highlight the need for clean and dirty spaces to facilitate different needs.

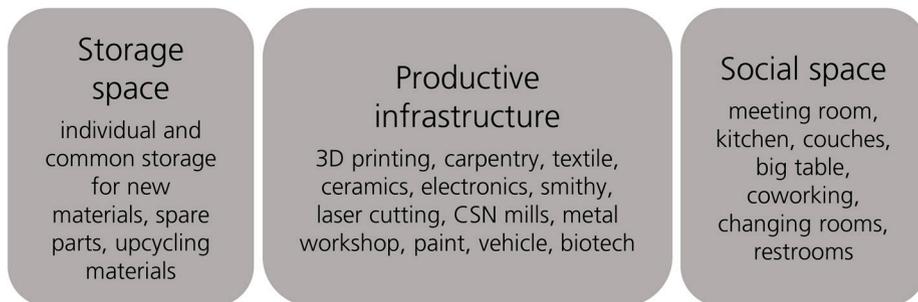
Requirements that go beyond the productive infrastructure are the focus of the remaining parts of the chapter. First, I focus on the need to dedicate some of the available space to activities other than actual fabrication: storage and social or reproductive space.

### **Not just space for making**

This section is focused on other areas an open workshop needs to have. An open workshop in Gothenburg, *Mikrofabriken*, has dedicated one page on their homepage to showcase their different workshop areas. Here they list workshops for metal, wood, and many other materials and techniques. At the end of the page there is a section for “other areas”. Besides different storage solutions, they list common spaces with, for example, mobile tables and speakers. They have changing rooms, a kitchen and lunchroom with some food for sale, a meeting room, and an area dedicated to exhibit member projects (Mikrofabriken, n.d.).

Not all associations have organised their workshop as explicitly as *Mikrofabriken* does. Some do not have any space that is used solely for social activities, and many are limited when it comes to storage. In figure 7.2 (below), I have added two boxes to figure 7.1 (see p. 193). Now the productive infrastructure is accompanied by a box for storage space and one for social space. On the pages that follow, I share excerpts from the interviews that show how associations negotiate their allocation

of space within the rooms they have at their disposal. The section shows how important those spaces are for the smooth running of the workshop and how difficult it can be to accommodate all needs.



**Figure 7.2 Social and storage space**

Illustration of different spaces of an open workshop. See also figure 7.1 in the previous section.

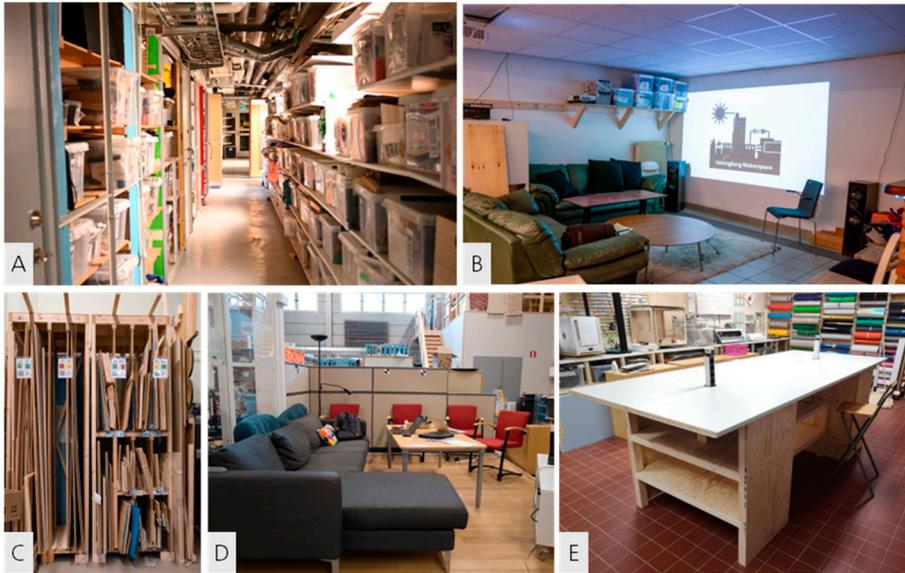
In the following quote, Maria (WA2) comes back to the problem of noise, now in the context of the need for a cosy area.

A little cosy corner where you don't hear that noise. [...] Somewhere where you can take a coffee, a break. I don't dare to use the cups, I always bring my own cup, cutlery. You never know. [...] Well, there is a coffee machine and a kettle, but you don't really want to take them, it's so dirty. [...] and [there is] nowhere to be together, where you could talk about ideas or collaboration. That's missing a bit.

In this case, the workshop has no kitchen except for a little station in one of the rooms. The available kitchen items are often dirty, and it is not clear if they are used for food only. She here mentions both the need for an area to just hang out and maybe eat, and for a quiet area to be able to talk with people and exchange ideas, inspire each other, help each other.

Other workshops I visited have rooms or areas dedicated to social activities. In figure 7.3 (below), I share pictures from social and storage spaces. One workshop I visited had about half of the small workshop (a total of approx. 80 sqm) dedicated to social space. I asked one of their board members about that prioritisation, and while highlighting the importance of social space, Karl (WA8) says that there is a balance to keep, and that allocation of space is a question for

future discussions. Right now, their workshop works like this, but they might make other decisions later.



**Figure 7.3** examples for social space and storage space

(A) Storage space for members in a corridor, *Stockholm Makerspace* (Stockholm Makerspace, n.d.-c), (B) Social space at *Helsingborg Makerspace* (Helsingborg Makerspace, n.d.), (C) Wood storage *Makerslink*, Linköping (Makerslink, n.d.-d) (D) Social space *Makerslink*, Linköping (Makerslink, n.d.-e) (E) Working table and socialising area *Stockholm Makerspace* (Stockholm Makerspace, 2020, February 3).

At another bigger open workshop, I did not see any dedicated social space when I was shown around, and asked about whether I had missed it.

David: No, right. I should say that we have had that before. Downstairs, a little room which I didn't show, but it's turning into a storage space. Almost no one used it as a social space, it was too much out of the way. But now when we reorganise, we plan for something new [new area to hang out, more central]

C: Is this something that is needed?

David: No, most hang out by the 3D printers. Around the big table. That's where it is usually most social, so we will place the couch somewhere around there. (WA7)

This example shows how a social area might find its own location and how this is accounted for in the reorganisation of the workshop. It is not enough to put a sofa somewhere and call it a socialising area. It matters where that area is and that there is a habit of socialising in that space. Here people are being social in one of the workshops instead – around a big table and in a room with machines that do not make a lot of noise or dirt. This example shows that there is need for a social space, but that it might not need to be a space solely dedicated to social activities, if it allows for talking and for a few people to stand or sit together. It is also worth noting, that the former room with the couch turned into a storage. It shows that there is a need to put things away until they can be of further use.

In the same interview, we later talk about the association's search for a bigger space, which, due to recent expansions, is no longer urgent. They were able to procure fifty extra square meters on a different floor in the same building and decided to repurpose another thirty square meters. Those thirty square meters had been a meeting room, which they used for courses. Now they can use meeting rooms in other parts of the same building and decided to not have their own meeting room anymore. With their lack of space, they decided that they could no longer leave thirty square meters unused in between courses. The example shows how the use of the limited space is a constant negotiation and optimisation to meet diverse needs and interests. I am amazed at how much moving and reconstruction the association puts into optimising their workshop. The day I visited the workshop, members of the association were preparing to take down a wall. It should also be said that moving professional machines and relocating workshop areas is not done simply by moving some furniture from one room to another, but involves, for example, building structures (ventilation, etc.) to accommodate for specific machines.

Another need for space comes with the wish to have materials for sale at the workshop. Especially members without access to a car are interested in purchasing, for example, wood from the association. Some associations would also like to offer some drinks and snacks (WA5). Offering services like this would require some space to be dedicated to the storage of a variety of materials. It would also require some logistics for purchasing, transporting and selling materials.

Lars (WA1) would like to restructure their local workshop completely.

So, to put it bluntly, you could take the whole building, so we would have the whole length of the building, so you could have much, much larger workshops, you would have more space. And at least 1/3 of everything would be storage and that's the big shortage. There is no space for our materials. There are things everywhere. And the offices on the second floor could be private studios.

In his mind, Lars has replanned the whole building they are in to improve what they have, allow more space for storage and working and add a new function – individual studios. The idea to have studios that can be rented came up in another interview, and one association does in fact have such an option for their members.

Robert: When we moved to the building we are in now, it was five times bigger than what we had before. And we were like how should we get the budget to work? So, then we came up with that studio idea, that you can rent square meters. And it started like a temporary thing to manage economically. Some members rented lots of square meters, which they didn't really need, just to support the association after the move. But now, since about two years

Philip: nothing left

Robert: no more square meters that can be rented (WA3)

What at the beginning was an idea to create additional income for the association became a permanent and popular feature of their workshop. In practice some members have only two square meters, which they fill with shelves as high as two and a half meters, while others rent more square meters and have built their own workspace. When I visited the workshop, all available square meters were rented out and there was a queue of waiting. They even describe how not having such an individual storage and workspace is a reason for members to leave the association.<sup>61</sup>

What I have shown in this subchapter is that the productive infrastructure is the core of the open workshop; however, even if it is the main reason for open workshops to appear, it is not enough to have a workshop or even a well-equipped workshop for it to be a “perfect open workshop”. There needs to be space for other activities (see also Smit et al., 2024). The subchapter also shows that space

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<sup>61</sup> The case points to a tension between the need of the association to survive economically and the related costs for members and possible exclusion of groups with less economic resources. I discuss this tension in relation to openness later in this chapter (7.3).

can be limited, and it can be unsuitable for specific kinds of activities or crafts. It further shows how storage space and the organisation of it is easily underestimated as an issue.

The examples of clutter and conflicts as well as the examples of (re)organisation, further indicate the importance of a caring community for the sustaining of the workshop. A takeaway from this subchapter is that sharing workshop infrastructure with others is a pragmatic choice, access to machines and expert knowledge about using the machines is what motivates joining or creating workshops.

Workshops do not start out of a motivation to create commons and to sustain them by practices of commoning (see also Zapata Campos et al., 2020). The need to co-organise and care for the infrastructure and community comes after the fact. The next subchapter is about how associations learn and organise the needed care.

## 7.2 Organisation through rules, routines and practices

This subchapter is focused on how rules, routines and practices shape the day-to-day running of the open workshops. I distinguish between rules, routines and practices. *Rules* are the written or unwritten dos and don'ts that apply in the workshop. These can be abstract and broad, such as putting safety first, or concrete and specific, such as a limit on how many people can work in one room at the same time. *Routines* are agreed-upon procedures for regularly occurring situations; for example, when somebody wants to join the association or when something needs to be cleaned or repaired. *Practices* are the everyday doings at the workshop, the enacting of rules and routines as well as activities that are not organised through rules and routines. These could be greeting others in the workshop or practices of informal sharing which I describe in chapter five.

I begin this subchapter by showing how rules and routines are established – how they come from the members and are often established in response to needs, and open to change. I have observed that it is not enough to say or write down how something is supposed to be done, but that there needs to be a practice for the rule or routine to be followed. This observation motivated me to look closer at

what rules and routines the different associations had established and how. Focusing on routines, I find them in a lot of moments in the open workshops.

Routines help to organise and structure the given space. They help creating the community that in turn needs to be there for the routines to be upheld or developed, a dynamic also observed in other commoning cases (Huron, 2015; Samanani, 2024; see also 2.2). Routines are tightly linked to the active member base, as well as to belonging and ownership or care (chapter nine). I show examples for how routines organise the space and what aspects they are aimed at. The examples are those where routines are in place and do what they are supposed to, and examples where board members have identified problems and imagine that different rules and routines could help, but where there are no working practices enacting those rules and routines.

The organisation of the workshop and the members carrying the organisation are what makes the productive infrastructure into an open workshop. The following analysis shows how setting up a space with machines and calling it an open workshop is not making that space into a welcoming, dynamic, and smoothly working open workshop. My focus is here on the day-to-day maintaining of the commons and its community, with the aim to contribute to better understand of everyday commoning (e.g., Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Huron, 2015; Samanani, 2024; Williams, 2018).

The next section shows how rules and routines are established. Subsequently, subchapter 7.3 deals with routines that aim specifically at creating and sustaining the workshop community.

## **Establishing routines**

In chapter 6.2, I describe basic organisational tools used by open workshop associations. One tool I describe is that associations have volunteers who keep the workshops open for members (hosts) and others who are responsible for certain areas of the workshop (area coordinator). Many associations have established this as a useful rule for organising their space. In the interview with Pär, I ask how they established their rules and practices for volunteering. They have not had this setup from the start,

but it has developed. In the beginning [when we started the association] we had the usual roles: head of the board, treasurer, secretary, workshop manager. So there we got one person responsible for all the workshop areas and it was really hard and then it has kind of developed over the years, that, I mean that we need hosts and then we have one on the board who is responsible for all the hosts and coordinates with them and tries to recruit new hosts and get them to engage. And then we realised that it's not enough with the hosts who keep the workshop open we also need someone who can [...] We need someone who knows the carpentry workshop and so on and we added the area coordinator [as a role]. And I'd say that since I've been on the board this has become even more structured with the different areas. Because before, carpentry has always had one who is responsible. But some areas, metal for example we didn't have anybody and that was strange in a way. Like, when there are conflicts between two areas, and one doesn't have a coordinator. Like whom should you talk to then? So now there is one coordinator for every workshop area. (Pär, WA5)

The quote shows how the role of the host, and the role of the area coordinator, were established over time and in response to needs. Things were not running smoothly. What the quote further shows is how it is not just the establishment of a rule that matters – e.g., that there needs to be one person or a group of people responsible for each area in the workshop, but that there also needs to be a practice around it. Pär describes how not having coordinators for all areas was problematic, for example, in cases of conflict. It needed more structure and somebody from the board to see that they really got those coordinators in place.

At another workshop, we also talked about rules and practices and how they change over time. Philip, Walter and Robert (WA3) describe how their association needed a phase of testing before they landed on what has become current practice. We discussed how members can make changes in the workshop. I had read their manual for newcomers to the workshop, and was curious about one section containing rules and a process for how members can make improvements to common parts of the workshop. The process description, with help of a flowchart, is elaborate and I was curious how it had come about.<sup>62</sup> It turned out it was based on experiences from how such situations had worked and not worked before. In that context, Robert shares some reflections on their organisation:

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<sup>62</sup> For reasons of pseudonymity, I do not share the flowchart or a reference to the manual here.

There we come into another balance that has developed over time. You can imagine a spectrum where you got two extreme ends, one is “you do, you decide” and the other one is 100% bureaucracy, like everything is prepared, processed and when we started the association it was natural to start with “you do, you decide”. And then it reluctantly moved to the bureaucratic side, bounced a little, was a bit too close, too bureaucratic for a while. And then landed somewhere in between, which builds on the balance between freedom to do something and still structured in a way that protects all members.

This example is interesting in several ways. First, the association needed to find the right balance between an approach where everybody would do their own thing, potentially without taking others’ needs or interests into account, and another extreme where everything would be organised, decided, and regulated more centrally.

Second, the very way Robert describes the process of finding a good practice. He illustrates it with the help of a spectrum that goes between do-ocracy (you do, you decide) to full bureaucracy, a tension that comes up in questions regarding the organisation within the workshop. The do-ocracy approach is frequently referred to as belonging to a maker identity (Davies, 2017); however, here this idea encounters a reality where things end up getting only half done, or a situation in which nobody takes initiative at all, as Philp shared at another point in the interview. That improvement projects get started but do not get done was one reason why the board saw a need to establish a procedure for how improvement projects ought to be done.

Third, there is the fact that they have a manual for how the workshop is organised. The manual is not something they had from the beginning, but something that came with time. We talked more about that manual at other points during the interview, and I learned that these rules are not set in stone, but help to build a common reference and orientation for new members. In the next subchapter (7.3), I go into more detail about how clear rules can be a way to create openness to (new) members.

Finally, Robert mentions that there needs to be a balance between individual freedom and a respect towards all members, so everybody can be comfortable; be creative, but be it with your community. Tensions between individualism and collaboration have also been identified as problems for open workshops in other

research (e.g., Á. M. Einarsson & Hertzum, 2021; Smit et al., 2024) and are part of the discussion in chapter nine and ten.

Experiences and practices from other workshops show that associations have different approaches concerning rules. One newly formed association did not want to have a lot of rules or a rulebook right from the start (WA10). While they do not have a rulebook, they still have a practice of running their space with volunteers and booking systems for certain tools. They have, however, not seen any need to formalise those practices or to write them down as rules. In this case, not having a rulebook is meant as a signal to others to get involved and shape the association. In the previous example (WA3), their experience was that some established rules and guidelines work best for them to integrate and involve members.

In another case, the newly established association (WA6) was so busy with organising insurance, a bank account, and public outreach that they established rules after needs arose. Situations were dealt with when they came up. Conversely, another association (WA8) had some basic rules written down before they opened for more members to join. Karl argued:

I think basically every makerspace has such rules. I have heard from other makerspaces that rules are super important. And that you need to have something to point to, something that is decided. Because we who are makers, the only thing we have in common is that we are creative and that we want to create things. But otherwise, we are very different in our interests.

This approach sticks out from what other interviewees told me as being more cautious. Rules are, for example, about what to do when something breaks, how to donate materials, conditions for commercial projects or how common storage space is to be used. Besides referring to experiences from other associations, Karl highlights the fact that the association members are very diverse in their interests, which makes rules even more important. The idea is that if there is no common interest as such, they need to at least have common ground created through some basic rules. WA8 builds on the experience of established associations, where rules are in place to guarantee comfort for all members (e.g., WA3).

The question of how associations establish rules, routines and practices is an entry point to discuss co-organisation and the act of commoning. The associations are in a learning process. The material illustrates how “commoners constantly devise

internal forms of organisation to maintain trust, conflict resolution, information flows, participation and solidarity” (Savini, 2023, p. 1236). They need to figure out what works for them to keep their workshop welcoming and well maintained. Board members at different associations look for guidance and help (WA4, 6, 8, 10). They ask other associations and are in touch with the umbrella organisation (MoS). There is, however, not a lot of time resources on the side of those asking (open workshop associations) and those who are asked (MoS and other open workshop associations). Consequently, exchange of information is limited as capacity to engage in the exchange of experience and best practice is low. This creates a situation where many struggle with the same problems but are unable to join efforts and lower the burden for everyone. I pick up this discussion about exchange between associations in chapter nine.

Rules and routines are sometimes unwritten and in other cases very explicit. In the next subchapter, I show with concrete cases from the empirical material how rules, routines and practices interlink in the everyday running of the workshops.

### 7.3 Community routines

While 7.1 was about the workshop itself, the productive part and the reproductive part, 7.2 and 7.3 are about how the space is organised. In 7.2, I showed how routines, rules and practices come about. The negotiations I describe are what Williams frames as “ongoing collective decisions” (2018, p. 24). Rules set clear boundaries for how things are supposed to be; however, without routines and practices, rules might only be on paper or ideas of how things ought to be, and not actually shape the workshop – they need to be “performed into being” (ibid.). The negotiation can be understood as a negotiation through practice, meaning that it is carried out over extended periods of time through trying out what works for the association’s running of the workshop. This also brings problems if there are no integrated strategies for implementing changes that are negotiated otherwise.

Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) see the use of a commons as managed by a community and the responsibility over a commons as assumed by a community (see table 2.1, p. 69). This subchapter is about such a community, how they

organise themselves with such routines. How do they manage the use of their commons and how to they assume responsibility?

In order to frame this discussion about the open workshop community, I want to introduce three different moments within the community process: (1) an entry moment, when somebody new joins the association, (2) a community care moment, which is the constant work needed to keep the community alive, and (3) a moment of giving back, when members become integrated deeper, take responsibility and start caring for the workshop more substantially.

I have observed that associations cater to these three moments through routines and practices concerning openness, by creating regular common content and by caring for the workshop together. *Openness* is about transparency regarding the organisation and integration into the community. The *creation of common content* is about moments happening at the workshop that are beyond individual projects.<sup>63</sup> Such common content or activities create a shared understanding and opportunities to see co-members, beyond whatever they are making. Creating common content is also an organised way to disseminate knowledge about the organisation, machines, and practical knowledge for maintenance, repair, and creation. *Caring together* are activities aimed at maintaining and improving the workshop facilities. Getting to know the workshop, how it is organised, and the other people who use it can in turn create more of an identification with the association and the workshop and lead to the third moment I introduce above, the moment of giving back. Samanani (2024) suggests that such taking of responsibility happens through participation and is not there from the start. The need to learn commoning, how commoning needs to be reproduced, and how it can be hindered by previous experiences relates to the concept of commoning subjectivities (see 2.2). How these dynamics play out in open workshop associations in Sweden is the focus of chapter nine.

The subchapter is divided into three sections organised after the themes of openness, common content creation, and caring together. I share quotes from

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<sup>63</sup> The word “content” can be misunderstood as referring to social media content. I have considered using a formulation like “common activities” as that which is meant by “content” often refers to events or other activities. However, content as it is used by some interviewees entails more than the organizing of common activities. Calling it content highlights how such moments of being and doing together also form the identity of the association. The workshop is filled with meaning.

interviews and fieldnotes. While distinguishing between openness, common content and care, I also discuss how specific routines cater to the three different moments: entry, community care and giving back. In the empirical detail, the moments and themes I distinguish above are not always as clear cut, but they help to make the extensive practices and routines more comprehensive.

## Openness

Essential for the entry moment is that associations have routines and practices that cater for openness. Before sharing details of how open workshop associations care for openness and how they understand openness, I want to point to a few dynamics at play.

Even if all open workshops I visited have an objective to be open for others to join, they have different understandings of how they can create a workshop that is *open*. Besides there being different ways to create openness, there are also different ideas of what it means to be open. There is a risk that openness is reduced to meaning that there are no formal restrictions for who can become a member of the association. In this case, the membership fee tends to be seen as the only barrier for people to join. While concern for a possible financial barrier is an important precondition, openness does not end there. Here, issues of integration into a workshop community or barriers created through lack of information, knowledge, or skill are left out of the picture.

Further openness does not only concern new members and the moment of entry but is also about how open the workshop association is internally, towards, and among members. What culture of sharing and caring is there? How open is it for people to engage and become active members who shape the workshop together?

Thinking about what routines open workshop associations have created to work on integrating new members and creating an open organisational culture, I observed two strategies. One is how many open workshop associations take care to have routines to welcome new members, and public, or attract a broader group of people. The other is how the existence of routines and a clear communication about them creates openness, as it allows members to easily navigate the organisational structure; or, how a lack of such clear communication can be a threshold for members to integrate. Smit et al. (2024) note in their study that a creative chaos can be inspiring for experienced makers who confidently use the

open workshop, while it can be a barrier for newcomers. Smith et al. are concerned mainly with the possible limit for newcomers to develop their creativity, and frame the tension as a design challenge. I want to add that (1) some structure is also necessary so that newcomers can engage in workshop and community care, and (2) that more than the workshop design, it is the workshop community with its routines and practices that make a difference.

Above I referred to the interview with Philip, Walter and Robert (WA3) and their manual. At another point in the interview, we talk about why they decided to have a manual in the first place. The quote shows how they communicate their routines, why that communication is important, and what it does.

Walter: I wrote the manual so that there are clear – so that there is information about how things work here. [...]

C: Was there a lot of misunderstanding about that?

Walter: No, it was more like, how do you call that? Everything was so unofficial, and I noticed that the more members we were, the more variation we got in all information going around. Like, you would take on 80% of what you were told and then the next one 80% of that and then [information] mutated along the way,

C: So now you have a reference in case there is disagreement?

Walter: Yes, I'd say this is more like a basic guideline that everything else builds on. Nothing is set in stone except for the statutes

Philip: And it was also interesting when I joined the association. I had read the manual at least twice and very thorough and I wasn't the only one. And it's also when you ask [people interested in joining], what do you know about the association and the say, well I have read the manual and have been at the open house. So it works very well.

Walter: I mean I just wanted there to be some sort of reference. Like, where do you throw rubbish, and well it's written there [in the manual]. You do like this.

Robert: And then, we, people write in Slack as well. And we have the leaflet. I usually make sure that people who come to the open house get one of those. [...] And then we complement with these laminated notes everywhere. It's a bit of a message fatigue after a while.

The quote gives an impression of the effort the association does to create openness, for new members to inform themselves about the workings of the association and

for existing members to know how things work or how to get involved. Earlier in the chapter (p. 204), I shared a quote from the same interview, also in context of the manual. Communicating clear procedures provides an opportunity for people to do projects they imagine would improve the workshop. The manual further contains information on what mandates the board has, what volunteer positions there are, or how storage is organised.<sup>64</sup> Having such a basic agreement on how the workshop is organised allows newcomers to integrate and it also protects some practices that have been established over time. While there is an emphasis on flexibility for improvements, long-time members do not need to worry that the workshop will change or break apart anytime a new person joins, something that Smit et al. (2024) found was a worry for makers in their case study.

Hearing the board members talk about the manual, another interpretation could be that the motivation for writing it is that they are tired of misunderstandings and of having to answer questions, rather than about creating an open association. However, I want to highlight that even if this might have been a motivator, the board decided to have an extensive manual which in practice provides a chance for others to get engaged. Another alternative could have been to create a more centrally organised association or even a development towards external management or the hiring of staff for organisation and maintenance. This is something I discuss further in chapter nine.

Beyond the available information, the association organises open nights. Here non-members can come to the workshop to inform themselves, but also to use it before they become official members. Open nights are once a week, and workshop members are there to help visitors.

Besides documented information through manuals, as well as availability of hosts or other members, I learned how communication tools play an important role in facilitating openness. Apart from one exception – the workshop where I conducted participant observation – all associations I visited use Slack and/or Discord for their internal communication. Slack and Discord are online communication platforms for groups. They offer messaging, file sharing and call functions. What the associations use most is the group chat functions, often with various subgroups for specific workshop areas or organisational questions.

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<sup>64</sup> I purposely do not refer to the manual with a link for reasons of anonymity.

In the following interview quote, we talk about how skill sharing works at the workshop and move on to talk about communication more generally.

I would say that since all members are never here at the same time, not even at the general assembly, it's Slack that we use. Both for sharing and if we [the board] want to inform about something. And then there is all those chat forums. Those who like bicycles, or the chat for carpentry. Every workshop area has one. And many join, while of course not everybody is active everywhere. We even do the board meetings there. (Philip, WA3)

Besides a Slack with many chat groups, they also have an internal wiki, but they have stopped using email for internal communication. I have been invited to their open slack channel and there is lost-and-found information, discussions about cleaning days, information about for free materials, questions about where things are in the workshop, etc. At another association, which invited me to their slack, I can see all discussions, with anything from internal organisation and maintenance to events and members who share or seek advice for their projects. Other associations use discord in similar ways and experience an improvement in communication (WA10).

To compare these steps and structures for openness, I describe my process of integration when doing participant observation. For several months, I was using the textile workshop without talking to anybody much at all. There was nobody for me to ask about how things work or where things are when they had disappeared. The only rule I knew about was that one should leave the space tidied. My field diary form that time is full of comments how I find the space messy, dirty, and a few times with parts broken or missing. I also write how I do not know anybody and feel like an outsider. The notes show how after a while I accept this state and do not note much about it anymore. Later, I become better integrated, but there are still occasions when I visit the workshop and barely talk to anybody. There are many people who I do not know and where I do not know what they work with. I also learned that socialising is not always easy in an environment where people are focused on their projects and often are in a hurry to get things done during limited opening hours. The often loud environment and wearing of ear protection does not help either. These preconditions make organised community care and integration even more important. I discuss this further in relation to the community care moment.

One of the open workshops I visited (WA7) has a wiki open to the public.<sup>65</sup> It is accessible for people interested in joining the association or who are active and need to check how something works. The wiki is extensive, and I ask about it in the interview.

David: Anybody can make changes. It rather good. Sometimes a bit outdated

C: Are there many who contribute?

David: I don't know. I think a lot of it is rather old. Sometimes we have had an evening where we sit together and write a bit. But it's more important for some machines. For the laser it's really useful.

C: Yes, and there is also that more general information

David: Yes, exactly. This of course reduces the number of questions and such. It's like when we on the board get a lot of questions about something, then we put some information up on the wiki.

C: Is this a way to be more open to newcomers? To provide detailed information?

David: Yes, that becomes easier. You can find information on how to use the different machines and there is also maintenance stuff [...] But this has been built up over time.

In the quote, I ask how they work with the wiki. The wiki is not always up to date, but it works as their reference for how things are done at the workshop. Especially questions about internal organisation are rather complete. David further describes that one way for the board to avoid being asked the same question repeatedly is by sharing that information in the wiki. This relates to another issue, which I call the *explainer's burden*. The ability to fix machines and experience with the workings of the associations can be limited among members, which creates a situation where those with the skills in question risk being fatigued if asked the same thing repeatedly. What David says in the quote also relates back to what I discuss in the previous section about the establishment of rules and routines. The wiki develops over time and in response to need. The wiki and the practice of updating are ways to create openness, as they allow people to understand the workings of the association, and the extensive knowledge and

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<sup>65</sup> To have a wiki is not uncommon among open workshop associations. Often those are however only accessible to members as they contain sensitive information, like passwords.

guidance regarding specific machines lowers the threshold for people with little knowledge to join and make use of the workshop. The same workshop has regular courses for specific crafts as well as days dedicated to improving the workshop together. I share more about these when discussing activities of caring together further below.

While the first two quotes in this section are about how information helps to create openness, another way to create openness is to make more experienced members available to answer questions and assist other members – old or new – when they have questions. I mentioned above the *explainer's burden*, a situation where a few members repeatedly have to explain how the workshop or specific machines work. Often this group does not only need to answer all of these questions, but also carries a disproportionate maintenance and administrative burden. Again, this relates to the need to actively work towards the moments of *giving back*.

WA5 has 40 members who work as hosts and take on the task of helping new and existing members with learning new techniques, or welcome and guide new members. By having so many taking on that role, they avoid overburdening a smaller group. Pär shares that “except for the occasional grumpy old men”, these 40 hosts “like what they do. They want to share their skills.” Pär also adds that the board “tries in a nice way, to like, manage [hosts and area coordinators], so that they do a good job and are decent people.”

Pär emphasises in the interview that the board has a facilitating role regarding the hosts and that social skills and motivation are important for these tasks. When hosts are on duty keeping the workshop open for others, that is their sole task, and they do not work on their own projects, unless nobody needs their help. Through the many hosts and area coordinators, knowledge and organisational practice are disseminated widely. By having so many hosts, the workshop further manages to be open on several occasions every week.

WA10 is much smaller and newly opened. They have a similar practice, with hosts keeping the workshop open and helping with questions, here even for non-members. Here too, hosts do not work on their own projects in order to be available for others. A different example is the workshop I visited regularly for participant observation. Here, volunteers “opened” the workshop by unlocking the main doors. Otherwise, they kept to their own projects if not very explicitly

asked for help. The common practice at that workshop was that volunteers should not need to help but were encouraged to work on their own projects when keeping the workshop open. It was, however, a debated practice, one of several practices that the board was divided about.

The openness I try to characterise through these quotes is not only an openness towards possible new members, but an openness that is directed towards anybody who comes to the workshop, even if they have been there many times. It is an openness to share the workshop with its equipment, to share time and skills. Openness means a local culture of sharing and caring, and a welcoming community. This openness makes it possible for new people to join, become part of the community, and make the space their own. However, the openness is also part of the community care, which I call the second moment. As the empirical material I shared so far shows, openness is created through the sharing of information about the organisation and the sharing of skill for using and maintaining the workshop. Before moving to common content creation, I want to dwell a little more on the idea of openness as an atmosphere which is built through the willingness to share information, time, and skill.

Julian (WA11), the founder of an open workshop, talked about his original ideas for the workshop and how he discussed those with the local municipality. At the time of the interview, he is no longer active in that open workshop. He is a workshop manager at a university workshop run for students and staff. He describes his idea for the open workshop he founded as based on openness: openness in the sense of accessibility, information, skill, and quality of the physical environment.

Julian: The municipality gave me a free hand. I shared my ideas, and they had heard about open workshops from other municipalities. They didn't have any requirements really, it should be open for anybody, accessible, there should be information, skill sharing and so on. But that came from my ideas really and they agreed. [...] I had seen some other open workshops, and I wanted us to do a bit different.

C: What was it you wanted to do differently?

Julian: I wanted to have it more – again, it's the vibes that are important. That it is clean, high quality machines, high level of expertise [among the hosts] and in that way a very low threshold to come in and start working.

Julian directly connects openness with information, accessibility of skill, the quality of the equipment, and the quality of how the workshop is organised.

All the statements above, as well as my own experience of integrating into a workshop, are described from a workshop perspective. In one interview with a municipal employee (Mai, M3), the importance of openness also came up. Mai has been active in an open workshop herself. At the time of our interview, she was working within the municipality's cultural department. She was temporarily in charge of the cultural centre, which is supporting the local open workshop association, and it was her role to decide about the funding for the workshop association and other projects. Mai highlights that from the perspective of the municipality, it is important that the workshop is open and welcoming for people to use it. By open she means "offering workshops, stuff like that so people can come" and that there is someone "in charge of welcoming new people. Answering questions and stuff like that" (M3).

Mai further shares how she sees a problem at the local workshop, as it is not as open and welcoming as the municipality would like it to be. She would like to see more courses or regular open evenings where people can access help – like they did when she was active in an open workshop. She has also introduced a new event at the municipal space that is hosting the local open workshop and hopes this might help. This is the workshop I conducted participant observation at, and Mai confirms my experience of it not always being open and welcoming.

Later in the interview, we talk about the lack of a welcoming routine, and compare it to an upcycling workshop that we both are familiar with.

So, I think this is perfect. You know you have a concept. You come there, you do something, you fix your trousers, and automatically you will start talking with the other people. Yeah, but it's an arranged thing. Here you don't have that. You come and you hopefully will find someone that helps you or you just look around. Then you go and find your own way, you know, and do your thing. And so that I think is the main problem because that doesn't happen here automatically. (M3)

Upcycling workshops have a different concept and are not as much directed toward people wanting to do their own projects, but more about getting access to tools and help for repair: it is, however, relevant to make a comparison, as the upcycling workshops I have visited in this study are welcoming and open. Mai here says that if you do not have that concept and an arranged setting, newcomers easily do not

get integrated, but need to find their own way and do their own thing – which requires a certain level of skill and confidence for using the workshop.

During the interview, Mai often compared her previous experiences with open workshops to what she observed in the local open workshop that she now works with as a municipal official. She is disappointed with that local workshop, but also with open workshops in general. At other points in the interview, she criticises the way in which associations become private clubs if there are no routines and constant engagement for openness. She also highlighted the workload that would be implied for volunteers and seems to have lost faith in the idea of self-organised non-profit open workshops. Her observations lead her to the conclusion that open workshops need to be profitable or at least economically self-sustaining (without state funding) to function. She sees a need to generate income to be able to have paid staff responsible for maintenance and member care. I pick up this thread again in chapter nine and develop it further. While I have observed much of the same problems, I discuss the idea of professionalisation by pointing to structural problems that make professionalisation logical, but also problematic.

In the very beginning of this section about openness and how associations work towards creating an open and welcoming workshop, I mention that there are different understandings of what openness means and requires. What I have discussed so far are routines around information and access to help, as well as internal communication. An important aspect of openness that I have so far not touched upon is the question of how open the association is for people to join. In the interviews and observations, this question comes up in relation to how people can become a member of the association and how much people need to pay to be a member.

I start the discussion of these issues with a series of excerpts which show that there are different takes on this question and different routines around it. In one of the municipalities where I visited a workshop, there had been two associations working towards opening an open workshop. One never opened. When planning my fieldtrip, I had found both organisations and was wondering if they were working together.

No, they are a bit more, how should I say, closed as an association. So, I contacted them early on and asked like, can I join? And they were like; we can talk about it. [...] For us here it is more like, you write us an email and say you are interested,

and we send a link to our discord channel, you are welcome. We really try to attract people. (Albin, WA6)

The other association had a different approach to membership. Not just anybody could sign up and be a member the next day. The association Albin is involved in, and most other open workshop associations, have a policy that allows anybody to sign up and be a member. There is no application process. Associations are generally open and happy to welcome new members unconditionally. The association I conducted participant observation at had a similar approach, where anybody can become a member via a simple webform and by paying the member fee.

WA3 has another approach. Here, members need to be voted in. When I asked about this process it turns out that the requirements for being voted in are not very strict and that it is more about finding out if people are seriously interested and can use the space without being a danger to themselves or others.

Robert: We want to be among friends. Or a community. And I guess it makes sense that we then have a, how to say, a 'suitability process'. It's about three things I'd say. First and most importantly security thinking, then how does the person work in a group. Can the person be part of a group.

Walter: can you be near that person

Robert: And then, but I'd say less important, will the person engage in the association. And that hasn't worked that well, but

Philip: I think, and I became a member under those conditions, it has made that – we are very generous with access, anybody can come here on Mondays and there are no requirements, you can just come, but there is other people here. But when you are a member, you get 24/7 access and if you see that people aren't careful. Or that they are a danger for themselves or others or the machines, because it's expensive machines. I'd say people come here maybe six to seven times before they get offered a membership and it's usually that there is an existing member who feels like, okay, this can work.

Robert: Exactly. And this is something that has come with time. [...] being voted in is more a formal thing.

Philip: with very, very little requirements.

Looking closer at the process, it is a way to get to know a new member. In the beginning, the association was a group of friends and they wanted to remain a community. Therefore, they came up with their suitability process. In practice it is about safety, trust, and commitment. In this case, membership allows 24/7 access to potentially dangerous machines, which makes a process like this appear not exclusionary but a matter of safety. I also want to add that, of those workshops I visited, this is the workshop with by far the biggest machine park and the most professional machines. Later in the interview, I also asked if there are people who never become members and only use the workshop at the open nights; and at first the answer was a no, but thinking twice there was maybe one or two who did that. Williams (2018) frames necessary safekeeping of the internal culture of caring as a practice of being critically exclusive.

That trustworthiness is important for safety comes through also in other interviews. With Axel, I discuss insurance and how uncertainty about insurance and a fear of injuries has forced them to close their carpentry workshop. The idea behind the open workshop is to make a productive infrastructure available for anyone interested. However, the problem of insurance, the risk for accidents and possible economic and legal consequences keeps them from doing so. Axel answers that “Yes, that’s what we want [open the carpentry workshop]. That’s the whole point.” However, he also underlines that users “need to show that they can be trusted” (WA4).

Besides the question of how one becomes a member, there is also a question about how much membership costs. The open workshop I participated in has a fee below average (see chapter six for fees). The fee has provoked discussions at annual meetings. It is kept low to make the workshop accessible for as many as possible. At one annual meeting some comments were made, questioning whether a low fee really guarantees accessibility, but discussion did not lead to any changes in the fee or how the workshop could be more open and welcoming.

The idea that a low fee makes an open workshop accessible seems to be the consensus among the associations I have been in contact with. Axel (WA4) says, for example that thanks to the support from the municipality they “are not private and our goal is to be as accessible for everybody as possible”. He also doubts that there would be many members remaining if they raised the fee; his expectation is that nobody would want to pay just to hang out or do crafts that do not require a

lot of machines, “accessible and cheap, this has always been our priorities and we won’t back on them” (WA4).

Lars (WA1), also active in a workshop with a low fee stated that the low fee might be part of the problems they are experiencing, primarily that people are not caring enough for the equipment. Trying to find explanations, he suggests that users might not value something so cheap, and therefore do not care for the workshop. I talked with Axel (WA4) about this idea. He had never thought in these terms before but recognises that there might be something to it.

For me, this remains an open question. I have seen expensive open workshops that work well, and I have seen workshops with low fees that work well. There is also the question of whether the associations need more money to sustain themselves. Judging from my analysis the answer is – it depends. Questions of funding and to what extent or in what regards funding can be a bottleneck for open workshop associations is discussed in chapter eight.

Adding these ideas and examples for how openness and accessibility play out in the different open workshops, I want to prepare for a discussion pulling together questions of openness, anonymity, commitment, trust, ownership and responsibility.

The examples I discuss here show how openness is created through sharing of information about the association and the available infrastructure. Openness is further nurtured by providing online communication tools that enable members to engage with each other, as not everybody meets regularly at the workshop. Further, there are examples of how occasions for members to ask questions on-site are helping integration. The last point from this section concerned how workshop associations balance their desire to be inclusive and open and the need to ensure trustworthiness or commitment among their members. The potentially dangerous and non-robust shared infrastructure in open workshops sheds light on the importance of care and responsibility in urban commons, which I problematise in chapter 2.2. While inclusiveness and openness are the aim, the material reality and everyday care involved in sustaining the workshop highlight the need for urban commons to be exclusive to exploitative capitalist practices and relations.

## Creating common content

Above I state that it is not only information sharing that creates openness, but also the creation of common content. Content in form of courses or events creates a context that people can integrate into. Routines for content and what they can do is the focus of this section.

Lars (WA1), an – at the time of the interview, resigned – board member, refers to a report and conference about open workshops in Sweden from 2015/2016 that I mentioned in chapter six, and highlights one result of the report:

That was the importance of content. That the workshop exists doesn't help people to get started, but you need introduction courses. You need continuation courses. This is how you use that machine. This is what you can make with that machine.

Lars explains that many who become members of an open workshop might have ambitions or ideas to make things but lack the skills to use the available equipment. Having access to machines and tools does not mean members can make things with them; that access to skill is what is lacking. Having courses is one way for associations to share skills, and as I argue in the preceding paragraphs, it does even more for the association.

One reason for why Lars and I discuss this topic is that the workshop we talk about does not offer many courses, nor other events that could serve the same purpose. Other workshops I visited have working routines to organise common content. What unites both the first interviewee and those I quote on the following pages is that they all agree on the importance of such common content for the smooth running of their workshop. Next, I want to share some examples of how workshops organise and reason about common content.

Associations that had just opened or were about to open have – or have plans to hold – regular events to attract people and boost membership. It is a shared idea among the associations that courses can attract new members and that it is a way to offer a smooth entrance to the open workshop association. Albin and Gunnar (WA6) tell me about a couple of workshops they want to organise around specific machines they have in the workshop. Their idea is that a member who is familiar with a machine shows other members how to use it. In the past they have also invited someone to share a specific skill and invited him for pizza in return.

When I met them, they had just moved and were still organising their workshop. They had concrete ideas what kind of courses they would organise, based on the skills, interests, and equipment in their group. Their courses are so far planned to be for members of the association. They see some potential for more basic courses with the machines they have but, would also like to expand with more equipment and skill.

Karl (WA8) shares similar plans. They had not opened their workshop when I visited, but had a plan to have an introduction to one of their machines every open evening they have, “on Sunday you write: ‘on Tuesday we are open as usual. It’s me who is there and I’ll show the 3D printer.’” That way they hope to attract new members. Furthermore, they are planning to build on the competences they already have among their members.

One of the more established associations (WA7), has done an internal survey including a question concerning the high fluctuation in members they experience. Many are only there for a few months to do a project and then leave again. I ask if this makes it difficult to build a community at the workshop.

Yes, partly. It’s difficult, but we don’t really know why [...] we have had a survey. The biggest reason [for discontinuing membership] was lack of time and lack of ideas [...]. But courses are also a big problem. They are very popular and get booked very fast. And there isn’t many who run them [courses]. (David, WA7)

Besides a lack of time and inspiration, a lack of opportunities to learn new skills is a problem. The big demand for courses cannot be met as there are not enough people who are willing or able to give courses. This observation highlights the problem that the workshop by itself does not necessarily enable people to make things if they lack the skills. It is also important to note that at this open workshop the membership is organised so that members only have access to the space if they pay an extra fee and get their own key, or if they take part in a course. They do not organise open evenings like many other spaces do. Furthermore, David indicates here – and confirms later in the interview – that there are not enough members who are ready to teach others. Teaching others would be what I frame as the moment of giving back. The example shows the difficulty associations experience with integrating enough members enough for them to be ready to take on that responsibility.

With Pär (WA5), I also talk about courses and other events they organise. They do not experience a shortage in those willing to share their skills and have a more stable member base.

Pär: Now it has worked well, we have introduction workshops. I think next week is an introduction to 3D printing and last week we had the mill. And then we have some more advanced ones. And sometimes themed workshops, like Christmas crafts or Easter eggs for Easter. So, it's lots of events and we invite the public as well. [...] Non-members. Now we had International Repair Day. Then we had bikes here, and bike kitchen. That was also public. We put posters around town and people come and many become members. It's a way of promoting ourselves.

C: And those who run the events, is that members who do that out of their own initiative?

Pär: Yes, no one gets paid. Sometimes it's a member who says, I want to do this event, like for the repair day. [...] Sometimes it's the board who says, now we should have a Christmas workshop and then we ask around. It's not that we send an email to everyone, but we ask someone directly, if they are up for it, some crafts, carve something, sew something Christmasy, and usually someone is up for it. And if there is no one who wants to do it, well then, it's not happening. We can't force anyone, but we try to nudge someone to do it. So sometimes it's bottom-up and sometimes from the board down.

What Pär describes is an example of how an association can go about holding regular events. They have a practice of bottom-up organising of regular workshops and events at their workshop. When there are no initiatives coming from members, they have a routine where the board nudges members into doing an event. Having regular courses and events shows other members how such are organised, and how skills can be shared within the community.

With Axel (WA4), I talk about their approach to common content in form of events. In the past they have had a successful routine around events – it is also how their association started, as a group who organised regular educational events about making. After having organised a couple of these events, they formed their association with the wish to have an open workshop to do the things they learned about. However, due to lost momentum from the pandemic and an upcoming need to move out of their current building, they have had troubles continuing with the event routine. Axel says that their “goal was to have a lecture or something one Tuesday every month”. They have, however, not been able to keep up with

the goal. The idea is that members share some of their skills. However, Axel notes that they

would wish that members would just come and say, “Can I do a Tuesday?”, but it’s not really like that, but we have to push for it. Ask people if they would be willing to be in charge

I want to point to one issue here, and that is how Axel describes the uncertainty around the upcoming need to move out as one reason for them to have a hard time maintaining momentum. Even with encouragement from the board and a plan to have events they have not been able to create that practice. Insecurity or inability to access suitable space and the problems that follow for the associations is what I discuss in chapter eight.

Another example that shows a need for coordination regarding events is an observation I made at a general assembly during my participant observation. The wish for courses and social events had made it on the agenda of the meeting. Two points under “other questions”, the last point on the agenda, concerned the desire to have events at the workshop. General assemblies in Swedish non-profit organisations are dominated by information from the board to the association members, something I problematise in chapter three. Information concerns, for example, the budget and activities both for the year that passed and the year to come. It is also where the board is elected. It is less of a moment for discussions. Only items that are on the agenda are discussed. The annual meeting is mainly a time for the members of an association to make majority decisions, where options have been prepared by the board.

The following quote comes from the agenda and official minutes of the meeting. The quote is combined. First the point from the agenda, then the official minutes in italics.

1. Wishes for a beginners’ evening to encourage and learn from each other – interest survey and working groups.

*The board informs and reminds the annual meeting of the possibility for members to convene courses, workshops or other events.*

2. Workshops, activities and the issue of conflict of interest. We see a desire among our members and a need for activities and workshops [...]. Some board members offer such activities in their professional role. Thus, a conflict-of-interest situation

arises if the board hires itself to organise things in the name of the association. What is the annual meeting's view on this? Are there others who are interested in running courses or workshops for the association's members?

*The discussion leads to the conclusion that the annual meeting sees no problem if the board, or other members, organise workshops or courses for members at a cost. The annual meeting also highlights that it would be appropriate to investigate what members want to learn and focus on those skills. Further to investigate what level of knowledge members have about different workshops or techniques. (my own translation)*

The first point captures the desire for organised occasions for socialising, especially for new members. The answer from the board is that any member is free to organise any event. This part of the quote needs further contextualisation. On other occasions, board members have shared with me that they see a problem in members expecting the board to organise everything for them, and that it should be a co-organised space. The board should only oversee the general administration. Consequently, the creation of content does not belong to the responsibilities of the board. It further needs to be noted that the annual meeting had low attendance. It was attended by the board members, the election committee and not more than a handful of regular members (the workshop at that point had more than 150 paying members, about 50 of them using the workshop actively). In the three years following that meeting, there have not been any events that would meet the desire formulated in point one.

The second point is directly related to the first, as it is about the creation of common content. It comes from the board. There are board members who work professionally with practical education and who could run courses at the workshops. However, they would want to be paid, and see an ethical problem in hiring themselves. They ask the annual meeting for opinions and whether there are others who would want to offer courses. The minutes reveal that the annual meeting allows board members to offer courses against a fee. However, here too there has not been any development in the three years after the meeting; no practice of running introductory courses has been established.

Regarding both of these points, the annual meeting – the highest decision-making body of the association – is positive. The board is also positive. There is nobody who is against socialising events or courses. Still, neither is happening. The board points out that any member can organise such events or courses. Still, there is nothing happening. From conversations with board members, I learned that the

board wants to see more engagement from regular members and has no capacity to organise events. However, when the board aimed to implement structures that could help create more engagement, such as creating groups for different workshop areas, the board has at the same time not been able to agree on a strategy and to go forward with it.

Looking at this situation and trying to understand co-organisation, I want to note several things. The board is frustrated that regular members do not engage with the association. Very few come to the annual meeting, and regular members repeatedly ask the board to do things instead of taking initiative themselves. The board approaches the dynamic as a matter of lack of information about rules and informs those at the annual meeting, which is poorly attended, that any member can organise activities. During the annual meeting they also highlight that one does not have to be on the board to take initiative and change things at the workshop. However, no regular member organises any event or course. There is also no further information from the board to the members about how they could go about initiating events or changes. There is no routine in place for how members can organise events and no practice of organising common events that could inspire more members to engage. Furthermore, the workshop has no communication platform like other workshops have, which could ease communication and organisation between members.

All other workshops I visited had some routines for courses and socializing. Still this extreme example is valuable as it in combination with the other cases helps to understand some key aspects around the creation of common content. To conclude this section, I highlight some key points from the preceding pages.

There are a few straightforward observations, such as that content in form of courses and events helps to attract new members and helps to keep existing members. Occasions for learning together are also occasions to learn from each other and about each other, and therefore reduces anonymity in the association. Another takeaway is that courses and events are popular. There is a need for such occasions both from within the associations, but also from the broader public.

What the examples also show is that common content does not happen by itself. Creating common content needs time and skill and either can be a hinder, and cause situations where demand for courses is higher than what the association manages to organise. The examples also show that the organisation of content is

easier and more likely with some coordination. This does not mean that a board needs to take a major role in organising, but if the board is keeping an overview and a goal of regular events it can nudge members to organise such.

Thinking about the last example I shared, it also becomes tangible how openness, as I discuss in this subchapter about community routines, is tightly linked to content creation. Regular members do not even know that they could organise events and are not attending the annual meeting. I see this as indication that regular members are not integrated or are not understanding themselves as part of a community that is organising a workshop together. In chapter nine, I discuss how this is not just a local problem of communication or unlucky composition of the association board, but how it can be understood as part of a struggle to do and learn co-organisation in a context where this is unusual. In chapter three, I show the important role associations play in Swedish civil society, but argue that their organisation, and expectations towards their way of organising, has changed together with the willingness and ability of members to carry their association.

Before concluding this empirical chapter on workshop organising, one more set of routines needs to be discussed. The next section is about routines that involve caring together.

## **Caring together**

Caring together describes routines and practices that involve different moments of care for the workshop, such as maintenance and cleaning, as well as workshop improvements. Other care routines concern safety. They ensure that individuals using machines do not hurt themselves, others, or the equipment. Lastly, there are routines and practices that build and sustain community. This starts with things like greeting each other at the workshop, to practices of socialising or building things together for fun or for the workshop. Those routines of community care are closely linked to much of what I have discussed in previous sections. Socialising events and courses, as well as openness and communication, are all routines that do build a caring community. Furthermore, the routines for maintenance and cleaning or improvement are occasions where workshop members do things together, reduce anonymity and build community.

I start this section with a set of routines that, in my observations, are not questioned or deprioritised. Those are routines and rules that associations have

established for safety – routines that are upheld without doubt or discussion even if they require time and effort. Examples from interviews and observations show that safety courses might happen less frequently if there is nobody to hold them or that workshop areas are closed if they are not safe, but the rule that certain machines or workshop areas require safety instructions are not negotiable. While other care, such as cleaning or welcoming new members, might not be prioritised, I have not encountered any real sloppiness or deprioritising around safety routines. Safety routines appear to be handled different as there are severe consequences if they are not followed: physical damage for involved individuals, but also potential legal and monetary consequences for board members and the association. To not have courses might be boring and make the workshop more anonymous, broken machines create frustrations and delays in projects, but major accidents caused by a lack of safety routines would potentially result in a need to close the workshop.

Some examples for routines around safety are that workshops organise safety training for specific workshop areas or even for specific machines; members are then only allowed to use a machine if they have taken part in such a training. Additionally, workshops provide safety equipment such as ear or eye protection and have signs to remind people to use them. Another rule and routine can be that there is a limitation as to how many are allowed to work in, for example, the carpentry or metal workshop area to prevent accidents.

In many of the interviews, board members shared how happy they are about there being so very few and only minor accidents in their space, which points to well working safety rules and routines. While safety is something anybody who uses the more dangerous areas of the workshop is concerned with, maintenance, repair and cleaning is, in my observation, something that risks to be neglected by too many.

The following quote is an example of when routines for maintenance and repair do not work well enough.

And then you can never be sure that things [tools and machines] will work [when you arrive at the workshop]. I'd wish that everything always worked and that it would be clean and tidy. At times it has been very messy. People who leave their things. [...] I'd like it to be clean and not broken. It would be nice with someone employed who could fix everything and take care of spare parts. (Maria, WA2)

Maria's description points to a lack of cleaning and maintenance, as well as a lack of communication and agreement about rules for how materials and the space are to be treated. Some of the problems are further connected to a lack of skill – machines tend to break more often if people do not know how to use them, and then there are not many who have the skill to repair the machines. My own experience and other voices from the same workshop confirm the impression of a lack of care for the machines and the space. I do not suggest that workshop members are purposely careless, but rather that they do not know better. The workshop has no manual or wiki where newer members could inform themselves, nor is there a stable routine for guiding new members in how to work in the workshop so that it can work for everyone. Furthermore, there seems to be a need to give more room for learning to reduce mishaps.

Lars (WA1), another volunteer and previous board member from the same workshop, tells me how he needs to spend most of his time at the workshop on repairing machines and tools. In the interview, we talk about an experience I had at the workshop where I helped someone find a better tool than a chisel to remove a nail from repurposed wood.

And I can tell you that I have sharpened it (the chisel) three times and I don't do it anymore, it's like – it's also one of my personal reasons why I'm working a lot less at the open workshop than I did previously, because every time I'm there and want to work on something I have to start by searching for things, fixing things and then I might be able to start working. But than three hours have passed and I'm tired.

This case shows two aspects of the problem. On the one hand, there are members who for various reasons do not know how to use tools, and thus break them. In this case I was able to help someone, but by that time the chisel was already blunt, and while I know how to use a chisel and what not to do with it, I do not know how to sharpen it. Lars is one of those who do know. Sharpening a chisel three times does not sound that bad; the problem is, however, that this is about sharpening a chisel that was used for things that it is not intended for, and it will need a lot more care than a chisel that needs sharpening after frequent, but correct, use. What Lars shares here is one example where he or others with the required skills need to give their time to repair tools and machines. Even if people enjoy repair and tinkering and this is what made them want to be part of the workshop, nobody wants to spend extended times repairing something to then see it breaking

again. In the case of this workshop this happens so often that it becomes a burden. I take this up again in chapter nine.

Later in the interview, Lars shares how he has started to bring his own tools when he comes to the workshop, since he says he can never be sure that he will find the tools he needs in a useable state when he comes to the workshop.

So those things I do at the open workshop are things that do not require high quality tools and such. And I bring my own things to work with and then take them home again. This is how it has become. And I think many others feel like that. I don't have the energy anymore. And if you make your way to the open workshop, you like need to plan well, for you don't want to go there and then need to go home again to get something [a tool] and then go there again. I think we plan our work in much more detail, like if I want to drill a hole with 4 mm, I go and buy a drill bit that is 4 mm, so that everything I need is there.

I find this quote particularly interesting, as the situation Lars describes is very odd when you consider the purpose of the open workshop. The idea is that you do not need your own tools. That tools are shared, and that the workshop provides access to tools you do not have at home. Instead, Lars describes that he needs to bring tools or parts to be able to work and that he is not the only one with that experience. Here, it is also important to remark that Lars is trained in crafts and has access to a professional workshop at his work. He has high expectations towards the tools and his work.

I describe on p. 169 that I bring my own scissors or bobbins to sew with as I experienced that things go missing or are broken. This is the same workshop. In interviews and in wikis, I can see that similar problems also exist at other workshops, but not at all workshops and not to the same extend.

What Lars, Maria and I experienced points to a problem with routines regarding machine use, maintenance and repair, as well as routines regarding skill sharing. Things break and are not repaired or not reported broken. This can be due to other members not even noticing that they broke something, their lack of skill, or a lack of responsibility.

Lars shares some of his own interpretation of the problem with me.

Lars: I think this is a lot about relationships, if you build relationships and trust to each other, about the machines and everything, it works much better. It's like

people come here, do their stuff, leave. You don't own, you aren't responsible. Someone else will fix it. You don't need to be so serious, don't need to be so thorough, maybe don't need to clean up after myself

C: But this would mean there is a problem with the whole concept of open workshops?

Lars: Yes, it is. It's like a big experiment and the solution is to build co-ownership, that you have to actively work on engaging all members. And I believe that our open workshop was better at this in the beginning. There were events, member nights, BBQs, people did stuff together, but when we have arranged things the last years, none of the regular members come, but it's people who are curious about the workshop who come.

C: and hosts?

Lars: and not always hosts. I think you need to actively build a community, something you need to work on continually for years.

Lars describes how anonymity in the workshop and a lack of integration or identification with the association and workshop make people care less for it. To create more of a community through organised activities would help workshop members to feel responsible for the workshop, to feel some sort of ownership.

*Stockholm makerspace* uses a wiki to share rules, guidelines and advice for how to use their workshop (Stockholm Makerspace, n.d.). Next to some basic rules for how to behave in the carpentry workshop there is a page with "a wall of shame" (Stockholm Makerspace, n.d.-b). Here they have turned mistakes or carelessness that happen regularly in the carpentry workshop into the mistakes of a fictional member of the open workshop association. They call him Kevin. One entry is about the sander and goes like this:

#### **Another One Bits [sic] The Dust**

Today, Kevin spent a lot of time sanding a lot of wood. It took him all day and a lot of sanding discs. But he now has a nice a smooth piece of wood. Unfortunately Kevin didn't spend his last 2 minutes cleaning and putting back the orbital sander in his box.

Don't be like Kevin and spend 2 minutes vacuuming the tool. It's also worth opening the filter box to empty it.

Also Kevin uses 115mm discs on this 125mm pad and press down like crazy. It just destroys the sides of the pads and discs won't stick.

(ibid.)

The example of the wall of shame shows a humorous way that an association tries to inform about and make their members follow best practice. The information is very easily available. There are several mistakes showcased here, all in the style of the one I shared above (see also figure 7.4, B, below). The example shows that these things do happen and that they happen so regularly that it is worth the effort of composing this “wall of shame”. People do not take the time to clean after themselves, even if it does not take much time and they make mistakes, like using a wrong disc on the sander, which result in a need for repair. In the introduction text to the wall of shame, the author of the wiki entry hints at some dynamics that can lead to the carelessness.

Kevin might have different profiles [sic]. He can be a new excited member that didn't take the time to read the wiki, he can be an [sic] relatively advanced user that believes he knows everything (but actually doesn't), he can also be an [sic] long-term makerspace member that believes rules do not apply to him anymore. Kevin also has little time to spend on his project, thus neglect [sic] the time he should invest in cleaning after himself. (ibid.)

In contrast to Lars' interpretation that people do not care because they do not feel responsible, here it is a more friendly interpretation of people being too confident or too absorbed in their projects and therefore do not take as much care as they should in the shared workshop.

The previous examples are about situations where machines are broken, or work areas are cared for so badly that they become unusable, and which therefore need emergency repair and care. Now I share some examples of proactive care routines some associations have put in place. One is to have dedicated cleaning or maintenance days or hours, where regular members or volunteers meet to care for the workshop. One example of such regular events would be cleaning or improvement days. Figure 7.4 A (below), shows a poster at *Stockholm Makerspace* advertising their regular improvement days.



A



B

Don't be like Kevin, empty the trash when it's full!

### Figure 7.4 Caring together

(A) A poster on a door at *Stockholm Makerspace*, advertising for common workdays to make improvements to the workshop (*Stockholm Makerspace*, n.d.-d); (B) A screenshot from the wall of shame in *Stockholm Makerspace*'s wiki (*Stockholm Makerspace*, n.d.-e).

To have such occasions dedicated to cleaning or improving or reorganising the workshop is something I have observed at several associations. On the day I met David (WA7) for an interview, the association had scheduled a day to work on improvements. We had walked around the building before sitting down for the interview. During the tour, David had explained some changes that they wanted to make. When sitting down for the interview I asked him about some further details, and learned that it is not about moving a few things, but that they will need to tear down a wall and relocate several workshop areas. They will contract professional help for the wall, but everything else will be done by members during what they call *working Saturdays*.

This Saturday we are doing mostly preparations, but next weekend we'll be able to do some more. But it's usually between 10 and 15 people, maybe. Depends a bit. Sometimes it's more, a few times we have had up to like 30 people. [...] that was a lot, but that was before the pandemic. Since the pandemic it has been harder.

The association has recently obtained access to more rooms in the same house. They have planned for how they want to use those new rooms and now need to execute the plan. When I ask about how they plan to reallocate the space, it also becomes visible that it is a long process, as they do it together and one Saturday at the time. At the same time, there is a community that has decided together how to use the space, and they get together a small group of people for these working Saturdays.

At another association I visited (WA5) such working days are binding for volunteers to take part in. However, Sven describes that engagement has been low and that they have not had a maintenance day for a while. We also talk about engagement around continuous improvement projects, and Sven said that there he would like to see more enthusiasm, but that people are often very absorbed in their own projects and, therefore, not more engaged in helping with common projects.

These examples of care or lack of care for machines and the workshop more generally show how essential care is for maintaining a functioning workshop. Machines brake and they break, even more if they are not taken care of or used properly. Here, the sharing of the workload becomes important; something that I want to discuss further in relation to engagement (chapter nine).

Caring for the space connects the productive infrastructure that I describe as the basis or the starting point of the workshop with the people who use it. It becomes tangible how the most crucial might not be using the infrastructure, but how the association manages to organise and maintain it. How they care together for their open workshop.

Lars (WA1) mentions in the quote I share on page 229 and 230 that he thinks it all depends on relations; that if members build relationships with each other, to the association and to the infrastructure, they will identify as part of the workshop and take care of it. He says that there needs to be a community and that building a community is hard work. In the interview, I then ask him: how you do that, build a community? Above, I discuss routines that create openness and content, which in turn help create a community and integrate members into the workshop association. I have also discussed safety and maintenance routines as ways in which workshop members care for themselves, each other and the infrastructure. This quote is focused on caring about each other and more purposed community care.

I mean the ceramics workshop has a community to a much larger extent, because they keep on meeting the same people. They are a smaller group of people. And I think if we want all of the workshop to work like that, we have to be stubborn. One needs a social event, two times a month. One needs to do that continuously and then after four, five years one can see the result. At another open workshop I have been a member in, we have had open evenings, and anybody could come and try things and see. Two times a month we had coffee and cake and talked and maybe had a show and tell and that created a sense of community. Because then one saw each other, not only, like now I want to make a bowl, but one saw the person behind and I believe that is what we need here too. But it's a full-time job for three years and that is why it's not happening. Because people, if someone invites for a BBQ seven times and no one shows up. You give up, so one needs to be stubborn and actually continue. I think this is the only solution.

Lars even continues here and describes that there are other open workshop associations in Sweden, where they just build stuff together, for fun.

Once they build a flamethrower, because they could. [...] And that is missing here, because here I do my project, and you do your project [...] that culture [of building things together] is something that needs to be introduced and nourished. You need to force people into it a bit. The only thing that has become a bit better are our cleaning days, because now people come and help. But it's a lot of work, and if you don't do anything it won't get better.

Lars has many years of experience with open workshops and has been active in two different ones. It sounds obvious, but anonymity is a hinder at the workshop we talk about. A precondition for a functioning community is that people know each other. The workshop in general is rather anonymous, but less so for a subgroup, of those using the ceramics workshop. It is a smaller group which makes getting to know each other easier.

Reflecting on what we talked about, I want to make one more comment regarding the ceramics group. Lars says that the ceramics workshop has a community and that it is because there are fewer people using it. That group also has its own Facebook group to communicate among themselves. I want to add, that in contrast to the other workshop areas in the open workshop, ceramics also has one moment in their work where the potters need to organise together and communicate. That is the firing moment. In, for example, textiles or woodworking, you will literally not need to talk to anybody when doing your

project, even if you use the same room or the same tools. Ceramics, however, has that moment where all projects need to go in the oven, and nobody will fire up the oven just for their own project. Using the oven requires a higher degree of coordination than sharing most other parts of the workshop. Here, the creative activity that has brought the individuals to the workshop forces them to work together. While the co-operation might be pragmatic at first, it results in a closer community and better working care.

Besides set events and planned activities, community building happens also in less formalised ways. When talking to Philip, Walter and Robert (WA3), I was amazed at how much they knew about what other people at the workshop were working on. Here they also build things together; there is the example of the flamethrower Lars told me about and another example is a CNC plasma machine that I was shown when I visited their space; this came up again in the interview as an example of when a group builds a machine together.<sup>66</sup>

What I have shown with the examples in this section is the importance and possible strategies for community care at an open workshop. Getting to know each other and the workshop through regular encounters, available written information and direct communication between members is essential to create and sustain a community that can care for the workshop.

Taking part in introduction courses creates occasions for members to get to know the workshop and to learn new skills that enable them to “own” more of the workshop. Knowing more of the workshop and each other’s skills and interests can help creating a community that is confident to repair and to report problems and skilled people who feel motivated to do the repairs.

Having regular socialising events helps seeing other members as co-caretakers. Caring together for the workshop and developing it further can create a shared understanding and give the workshop an identity and a local culture that people can integrate into.

Ending this subchapter, I want to share another quote from Philip (WA3). He joined the workshop association when it had already found into its current form.

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<sup>66</sup> A CNC plasma machine is used to cut through metal.

I have not been around for all rounds of changes, but I find that we work really well. Overall, I want to say that this is more than 70 people who together have a big mechanical workshop with tons of administration around it and it works really well. There will always be room for improvements, there always is. But we have seen a lot worse working both companies and organisations in the past.

In this quote, he shares how impressed he is with what the association has built and is organising. He reminds himself, me and the other two board members who are present at the interview that they can be proud of what they do and that they do an impressive job – they co-organise a shared and open workshop.

## 7.4 Discussion: Community as practice

The empirical analysis and following discussion answer the first research question: How are open workshops established and organised in the Swedish context? The analysis in this chapter shows that to answer the question, other questions need to be discussed: What is it that makes an open workshop enabling, and accessible? What makes it an open workshop in its given context?

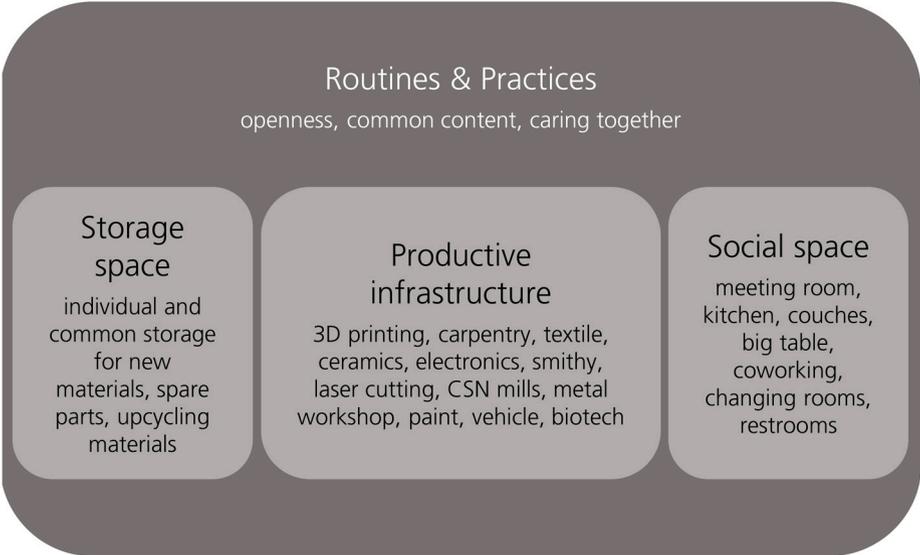
The above analysis shows the crucial work needed to create an open and welcoming co-organised workshop. Routines catering for openness, the creation of common content and community care make the open workshop into a living enabling space. Openness, common content, and community are floating into each other, depend on each other and grow from each other.

The aim of this final part of the chapter is to first sum up the main points that can be taken from the empirical analysis and to then discuss the establishing and organisation of an open workshop with help of ideas on commoning practices. Finally, I highlight takeaways from the chapter that lead to the discussion in chapter eight.

The empirical excerpts in chapter seven, starting with what infrastructure makes a perfect workshop and moving to how the workshop can be organised show that it entails enormous commitment, engagement, time, and skill. It is not enough to acquire machines, obtain access to a suitable space, and call the workshop an open workshop. The continuous work with administration, internal organisation,

maintenance, and repair as well as community care is what makes the open workshop.

Throughout chapter seven, I show the role of routines as a practice of self-made rules in the internal organisation. In the first part of the chapter, which deals with the productive infrastructure and other space needed for the workshop, I introduce a figure which I want to extend here. I started with the productive infrastructure, the starting point for many open workshop associations. I then added social space and storage space, which tend to be deprioritised when space is limited, but are vital for the smooth running of the workshop. Now I am adding routines and practices to the picture, as the organisational instrument that holds the space together and makes it into the open, welcoming, and enabling workshop. Routines and practices for openness, for common content, and for caring together.



**Figure 7.5 The workshop with routines and practices**

Illustration of different spaces of an open workshop, the space is held together by routines and practices creating openness, common content and caring together. See also figures 7.1 and 7.2.

Gibson-Graham et al. suggest that commoning “involves establishing rules or protocols for access and use, taking caring of and accepting responsibility for a resource, and distributing the benefits in ways that take into account the well-being

of others” (2016, p. 195). I argue that this is what associations do to create their open workshops by means I discuss throughout the chapter. They establish rules for how to access the workshop and for how to use it, they take care and accept responsibility. The benefit of this commons is the access to a well-maintained shared workshop, which is shared among association members and in some cases with the wider public. What is visible in the empirical material is that this process of establishing and organising the workshop does not go without tensions. While core groups of engaged individuals establish rules, take care and accept responsibility, the broader member base does not necessarily follow the rules or engage in care or act responsibly. Through those tensions and a lack of accounting for the well-being of others, the commons, which is the well-maintained shared workshop, is at risk. In chapter nine I discuss these tensions further.

Table 7.1 below shows an overview of the routines and practices that associations use to organise their workshop. The table is summary of what I describe in detail as community routines throughout chapter 7.3.

**Table 7.1 Overview of routines and practices**

<b>Openness</b>	<b>Common content</b>	<b>Caring together</b>
Welcoming (new) members	Fika & socializing events	Responsible use of workshop
Skill sharing culture	Courses	Respectful to co-members
Transparency about rules, routines, practices	Machine introductions	Cleaning after yourself & together
Communication platform	Public events	Safety routines
Information sharing about organisation, roles & responsibilities, machines	Building together projects	Maintenance & improvement events

One explicit aim of chapter seven is to understand day-to-day practices of commoning. I do so by providing empirical detail about how the organisation and negotiation of such a practice can take shape. I argue that it is the everyday routines and practices summarised in the table that make the open workshop into a commons (Williams, 2018). To further the discussion on the practice of commoning, I want to highlight and discuss three points in particular: (1) the integral connection between commoning and a community of commoners, while I argue that the community is also a practice; (2) community as practice can be understood as consisting of three moments, entry, community care and giving back, while all moments imply a lot of effort and are potential points of conflict;

(3) the tension between intended openness and a need for critical exclusiveness. I discuss the three points in turn.

The case of open workshops co-organised in associations provides a valuable case to see how integrated commoning and community are. As I discuss in chapter 2.2, sustaining and maintaining commons depends on sustaining good working relations between commoners (Huron, 2015) or a healthy commoning community. Gibson-Graham et al. see the intimate connection of commons and its community as a central characteristic of the commons: “So what is it that characterizes a commons? Commons and community go hand in hand. And it is because of this intimate interconnection that rules and protocols can be developed to manage the commons” (2013, p. 131). The last sentence of the quote in particular points to something crucial for the case of open workshop associations. Seeing the intimate connection of commons and community as basis for the negotiation and management of the commons, its absence implies trouble for the commons. My discussion through chapter seven shows that caring for the workshop is equally a task of maintaining machines as it is of nurturing human relationships. Instead of talking about “the community” that is commoning, that community is not stable and needs to be built and cared for. Beyond showing how integrated commons and community are, the case also shows how community needs care and more important that it, just like commons, is not a thing but a practice.

Upon entering the commoning practice, in this case beginning to use the workshop or becoming a member of the association, one is not integrated into the community, nor has the new member become a commoner. The process of entering and the integration as member and commoner need facilitation (see also García-Lamarca, 2017; Huron, 2015; Ruiz Cayuela, 2021). In the cases I show above, this integration is facilitated through the sharing of information in written or oral format, information about how the association practices commoning and care. Another way to integrate is events which allow for new members to interact with other members and the workshop. As Huron (2015) develops in her work, integrating new members can be a challenge and a threat to the commons. Her observations show that with insufficient integration, the original ideas and values of the community might disappear, which can lead to commons being sold back to the market for short-term gains. Huron states that communities that manage to “cultivate a sense of ‘family’” (ibid., p. 976) manage to better sustain their

commons; unfortunately, she does not expand on how those communities go about cultivating that sense of family.

My discussion throughout chapter seven suggests that cultivating a sense of community is crucial, needs to be done actively and implies a lot of effort. Huron (2015) shares that *explaining* commoning is not always easy for the housing commoners she works with. Samanani (2024) suggests that taking up responsibility for the commons and identifying with its values comes over time; furthermore, Singh (2017) describes the process of becoming a commoner as something that happens with experience and engagement. This would imply that to *explain* the idea of the commons or how it works is not enough, but that experience and emergence into the practice of commoning are needed (Samanani, 2024; Singh, 2017). Such experiencing would happen through the constant care for the workshop and the community, which would be the second moment (community care) of community as practice.

The third moment, the moment of giving back, is when new members identify with the cause of the association or commons. As I discuss in chapter two, Samanani describes “a sort of chicken-and-egg situation, where valuing the commons often requires engaging with the commons, but engaging with the commons often requires already valuing the commons” (2024, p. 5). In the case I discuss, the engagement starts with an interest in that which is commoned – the workshop – without an interest in commoning. Ideally members will take on more responsibilities and carry the workshop once they are more integrated. This is, however, a primary struggle for most of the associations I have visited. Far from all members engage more profoundly – take up responsibility beyond following the established routines for, e.g., cleaning. This struggle for engagement is what I discuss in chapter nine in relation to the specific Swedish neoliberal welfare state context. New members enter with other-than-commoner subjectivities and potentially develop commoner subjectivities over time.

The last point I want to pick up concerns tensions around the idea of openness. Calling something open does not mean it is open; equally, calling something a commons does not make it a commons; finally, owning something collectively does not make it a commons. Whether something is open or a commons depends on how it is used, and how benefits, responsibility, and care for it are negotiated and carried out.

Williams uses the term *critically exclusive* (2018, p. 20) to describe the fact that commons are not always unconditionally open to all, but that access can be regulated if necessary. In Williams' case, commoners exclude certain practices from their library to ensure its quality as a safe space. The case of open workshop associations shows that openness without integration that sustains the commoning culture harms both the physical infrastructure as well as the commoning community as it likely leads to frustration. The case makes an interesting example to think about critical exclusiveness, as it highlights that it is certain practices that need to be excluded (lack of care or responsibility) or to put it differently, that openness only works well if new members are integrated in the necessary culture of caring for the workshop.

Including new members, which in open workshops happens constantly and, in many cases, in an uncontrolled manner, is a challenge for the workshop associations and implies a vulnerability in the commoning practice. Workshop associations need to balance their desire to be inclusive and open and the need to ensure trustworthiness or commitment among their members. In their work on open workshops, Smit et al. (2024) discuss that it is equally important for new members to be able to integrate as it is for existing members to feel that their workshop does not risk breaking apart with every new member joining.

To close this section, I recall Williams' formulation that it is "the practices of commoning that help us understand how this organisation becomes a commons in the city" (Williams, 2018, p. 24). To this I add that it is the practice of openness and community care that helps us understand how an open workshop becomes and stands true to its name.

This chapter shows how open workshops in Sweden are organised, and how engaged association members would like them to be. I focus on how they organise to work towards the perfect open workshop they imagine. While not a focus of the chapter, some struggles become apparent. There is a struggle to fit all the desired equipment in the given space, and further, there is a struggle to keep equipment working and a community alive and caring. For association members, their struggles appear to be local and urgent problems. The aim of the next two chapters is to show these challenges more explicitly, and to argue that they are related to structural issues that go beyond the local workshop association.

To do this, I distinguish the struggles as part of two moments in commoning that Huron (2015) notes: the moment of (re)claiming the commons and the moment of maintaining the commons. In the case of open workshops in Sweden, the moment of (re)claiming is mainly a struggle over access to suitable space, which is directly related to access to funding. Struggles over space and funding are the focus in chapter eight. The moment of maintaining hangs on the level of engagement of association members. In chapter nine, I discuss this struggle for engagement as a discrepancy between perceived available roles and assumed roles, as tensions between the Swedish association heritage and the neoliberal present.

The moments of (re)claiming and maintaining could be understood as temporally distinct; however, the discussion below shows that while the moments can be happening after one another, they also happen in parallel for the same commons. While the workshops need to be sustained through day-to-day practices of commoning, they also need to constantly be claimed against insecure funding and uncertain access to space.

## 8 (Re)claiming

David: Many [open workshop associations] have difficulties to get started. Often, they rely on temporary municipal funding. But that is difficult. Keeping machines running and serving them requires a lot of time and skill. And you don't have the money to pay someone to do it. I think this is what makes it difficult.

C: How do you mean?

David: I'm not an expert on this [...], but I know that some started something in a different part of town a few years back. And I think it was difficult for them because they had lost their funding. It's a typical thing happening with many associations. There is municipal funding to start things, but non to continue with things. They somehow believe that things will just survive. But that's ridiculous. You start a lot of things but never help them grow and survive [...] And then there are some who get access to a municipal building and then suddenly [when their municipal support in form of access to their premises runs out] they have to pay a lot of rent which is not anywhere near what they can afford. It's difficult. [...] You can't get far with funding for starting something. You need more to cover the rent. That's by far the biggest cost. And it's difficult to have people stay on who have the knowledge to maintain the machines, it takes a lot of time to just keep things going.

C: And then it is difficult to keep things going when you don't know if you can stay more than two years

David: Yes, exactly. This is why we didn't move. That was only a three-year contract. It's too short. (WA7)

This opening quote highlights three core and interconnected issues open workshop associations encounter when establishing and organising their workshop. The issues are insecure funding and insecure access to premises suitable for the workshop as well as the high demand on time and skill for establishing and sustaining a workshop.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> In Swedish it is access to *lokaler* that associations are in need of. *Lokal* does not have an equivalent in English. *Lokal* refers to a room or several rooms in a building or even to a whole

Thinking around struggles for commoning, as discussed in chapter 2.2, the moments of (re)claiming and maintaining (Huron, 2015) become distinguishable in David's description. On the one hand, there is the struggle to find a space for the workshop and to secure funding for it, which is a process of (re)claiming. On the other hand, there is the continuous care as the maintenance of the commons.

In this chapter, I focus on the moment of (re)claiming. I argue, however, that it is not necessarily something that happens temporally before the perpetual process of maintaining. Before sharing empirical detail from those acts of (re)claiming, I want to make one more comment on the act of (re)claiming. Hearing the term "reclaiming the commons" might suggest a process of protest, maybe of squatting or other forms of activism. What I discuss in this chapter is a quieter (re)claiming: an often lengthy search and form of bureaucratic parkour on the way to suitable, affordable and accessible premises to house an open workshop.

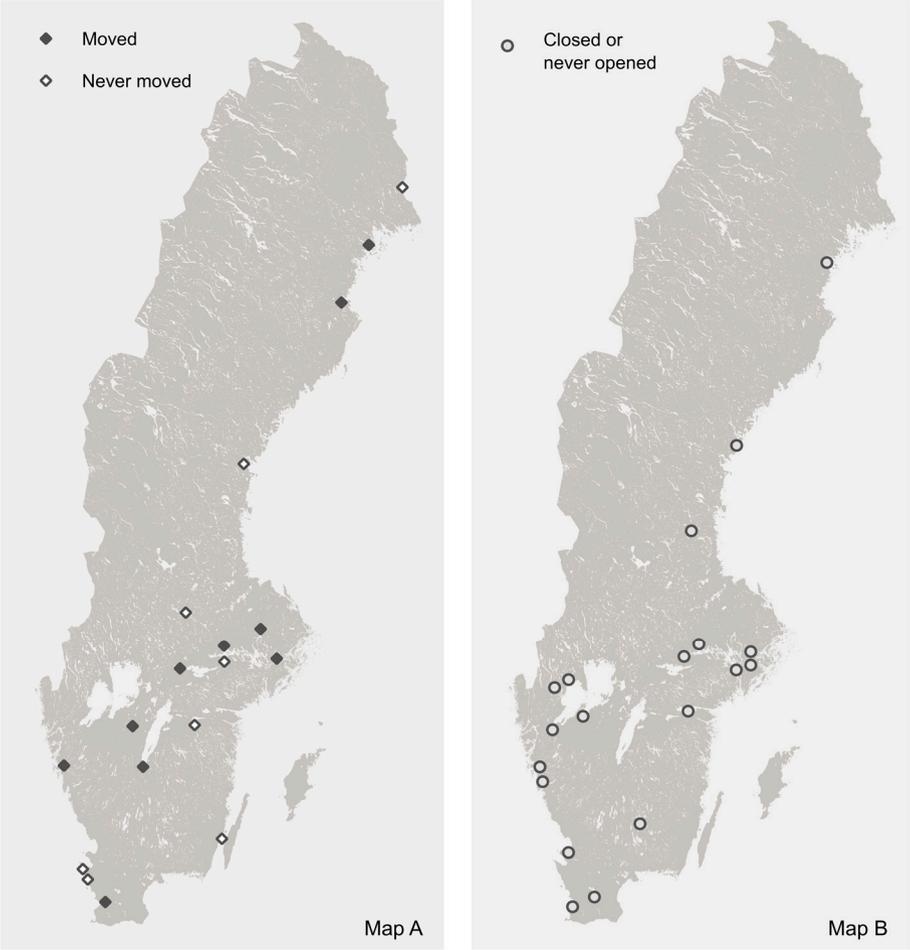
In this chapter introduction, I show that (re)claiming access to a space to start an open workshop is an issue associations struggle with. In the first subchapter (8.1), I show what makes a building or rooms in a building suitable for an open workshop association to use. In the second subchapter (8.2), I discuss how associations gain access and how they compromise. The third subchapter (8.3) shows examples of four workshops in relation to urban planning, in order to contextualise the workshop perspective presented in the first two subchapters. In the last subchapter (8.4), I discuss the struggle for suitable premises in the context of urban renewal and how it affects associations, especially associations with activities that have become unusual in the urban context. The chapter is one empirical answer to the second research question, which asks about key challenges for claiming and sustaining open workshops as commons in the Swedish context. In chapter nine, I portray another key challenge as an answer to the question, while I discuss the question on a more abstract level in chapter ten.

In chapter six, I gave a general overview of open workshops in Sweden. Without discussing it further at that point, I described a situation where many associations move their workshops between locations in their local municipality, or close temporarily or permanently after having run for some years, or sometimes, a shorter

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building. The room(s) are such that are not for residential purposes, but purposed for offices, retail, restaurants, meetings or gatherings (Svenska Akademiens ordbok, n.d.). I use different terms to translate *lokal*, depending on what captures the meaning best in the given context. Words I use to translate *lokal* are: space, premises, facilities, property, building or rooms.

span of time. In chapter seven, I described how associations negotiate the allocation of space within their workshop. These dynamics are related to three issues associations face in respect to the spaces they use: it needs to suit their activities, it needs to be available to them for an extended period, and it needs to be affordable.



**Figure 8.1 Maps showing fluctuations of open workshops**

Map A shows if associations with an active workshop have moved their workshop (four associations excluded due to data available). Map B shows open workshop associations that have closed or never opened their workshop. (July 2025, see appendix C for details). Map layout by author. Data source: Survey, see 4.1. Base map: © Lantmätariet, 2021.

This struggle to find suitable spaces is revealed in the open workshop landscape, and is a recurring issue in the interview material. Figure 8.1 above shows two maps that illustrate the fluctuation of the presence of open workshops in Sweden. Map A shows open workshops that were up and running in summer 2025 and whether they have had to move between premises. Ten of 18 have moved, while six of the workshops that needed to move did so more than once. Map B shows open workshop associations that have closed their workshop or never opened one.

That an open workshop association closes or exists without running an actual open workshop can have other reasons than a problem with accessing suitable premises. However, discussions in interviews show that access to suitable premises is a recurring issue for many workshop associations and a frequent reason for them to pause their activities or close. In the next few paragraphs, I share four examples of associations that have moved or closed during the time of this thesis project: *Malmö Makerspace*, *MakeOne* (Södertälje), *Makers of Västerås*, and *Makers of Jönköping*.

After running for eleven years, *Malmö Makerspace* (previously called *Fabriken*) has been without a workshop since their cooperation with *STPLN*, a creative hub, ended in 2023” (Gillberg, 2022). *STPLN* had to move to premises unsuitable for loud and dirty activities. *MakeOne* in Södertälje is closed since 2022. In 2023, the association decided to keep operating as they still see a need for an open workshop in Södertälje. Reasons for closure are lack of access to suitable premises (Pär, WA5), lack of time and the COVID-19 pandemic (Make One, 2022).<sup>68</sup> Makers of Västerås operated at four different premises within five years. Before gaining access to their most recent workshop rooms, they had to pause their activities (see also appendix C). Makers of Jönköping had to leave the municipality-owned and run cultural hub *Kvarteret Ödlan* in 2023 as the building was to be demolished. They then used a temporary location where some activities are “temporarily suspended due to unsuitable premises: Welding container, Wood workshop, CNC machines” (Makers Jönköping, n.d.-a). They had to leave their loud and dirty machines in storage and can only do “clean” activities at their temporary facilities.

These four examples give an impression of the reality these associations act within. Before moving on to discussing characteristics that make suitable spaces to run an

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<sup>68</sup> While lack of time among motivated individuals can be a reason for why projects are dormant, it remains important to note that if it had been easy for those individuals to get access to suitable premises, more time had been left to enliven the association.

open workshop, I share perspectives from interviews that contextualise the four examples from above.

Pär, who is on the board of MoS, reflects on frequent questions workshop associations ask the umbrella organisation.

So usually, [...] the space question first. What's a good way to you get access to a space and then member administration and practical things and then insurance. (WA5)

The first question many associations have is the question of how to gain access to premises for their activities. What I have been told in interviews and visits to workshops reflects the picture Pär shares with me. I would, however, argue that questions about administration and insurance are questions most pressing for newly founded associations who are also most in touch with MoS, which explains why they are frequently posed to MoS. The struggle to find suitable premises is a recurring one also for established associations.

One of the associations with an established and smoothly running open workshop (WA3) had to move their workshops several times. In the following excerpt Philip, Walter and Robert share some of their experiences with the moves. At the time of the interview, they had a move coming up.

Philip: Maybe this is interesting from your research perspective. It's going to be the fourth time, fourth time we move.

Walter: Third, it's the fourth location, but third move

Robert: And a few things, every move has been a challenge in itself. For one thing, we have grown every time. But we have moved from buildings which we have had to leave. Here, just like the first building, this is a demolishing contract.

C: so you can be here until

Robert: it's going to be demolished. And that is now and generally demolishing contracts are a lot cheaper, but you don't have tenants' rights. So you don't really have any room to manoeuvre. But on the other hand, it's an opportunity. They are often in poor conditions and there is no maintenance [...] For a leisure or for a makerspace of our kind, this has been a very easy place to be in, cause

Philip: We need uneven space.

They have had so-called “demolishing contracts” (*rivningskontrakt*). In the excerpt they explain what these imply. Demolishing contracts are issued by landlords for buildings they know will be demolished. Rent is cheaper than market prices as the contract is temporary, and the buildings or rooms are of an older standard. The advantage for the association is that the rent becomes affordable. Furthermore, there are no responsibilities for maintenance on the side of the landlord, nor on the side of the tenant, which implies a large amount of freedom regarding how the building can be altered. They offer “uneven surfaces”, as one of the board members says. However, tenants have no tenant rights (*besittningsrätt*), so landlords can terminate contracts easily. The building is suitable – it allows for all activities and can be altered and it is affordable – but more problematic is the unsecure contract.

Another association (WA4) had a move upcoming when I visited. Here too, the building was to be demolished. In this case, the association had obtained access via the municipality. Through providing access to this location, the municipality has supported various culture and leisure associations. The closing of the building had come sooner than anticipated, and the board of the association was looking for new premises at the time of the interview. We talked about what options they had, and one was to move to the local science park.<sup>69</sup> In that context, I ask if moving there might risk members doing traditional crafts not feeling as welcome as they do in the municipal context.

Yes, I actually never even thought about that. We are rather desperate. We must find something. (Axel, WA4)

At other points of the interview Axel highlighted the diversity of activities happening at their association and how much they appreciate that diversity. They have members working with digital fabrication and others who do manual crafts.

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<sup>69</sup> Science Park is an innovation orientated “park” with buildings and infrastructure for companies working with innovation and development. The business association *Swedish Incubators & Science Parks* describes science parks like this: “Sciences parks are stimulating environments that offer infrastructure, networks and business development for growing companies in the knowledge-economy. A science park can be described as a meeting place for people, ideas, knowledge and creativity, and often serves as a platform for larger innovation and development projects. Science parks often have close ties to a nearby university or college” (Swedish Incubators & Science Parks, n.d., my own translation).

The situation of finding new facilities is so desperate that this diversity of activities is deprioritised.

In the interview with David (WA7), we repeatedly come back to talking about their premises. Even though the association is stable and has not have to move in the last few years, looking for alternative premises keeps their board busy even though there is no immediate emergency. They have had a temporary contract as the building they use was to be demolished. Due to the temporary contract, they have been looking for suitable premises, but without success. With a prolongation of their contract, the problem was diverted into the future. They still have a temporary contract, and would like to have more space, but finding anything suitable remains difficult.

At one point in the interview, David expands on how intertwined the problems of finding of suitable, available and affordable premises are, and that finding a space is difficult even for established open workshop associations. Even if an association has successfully obtained access to a building or rooms (claimed a commons), it might need to start all over again.

I think it's very difficult to start. Once you are established (as open workshop) it goes well. That is except you get problems with your space. [...] And this is also the problem here, because if they should demolish the building it would be rather difficult to move. [...] Because rent is so high. If there comes a crisis [the rental contract gets terminated] we can afford something similar [in size] with paying market rent [...]. But it is also difficult to find something that meets all our requirements. When we were supposed to move, we made a list and it's a long list [...] and was difficult to meet requirements. As it needs to be a rather good location. It should be an industrial building that is close to public transport. And there aren't that many. Because lots of that is being torn down. But because it makes noise it's difficult. We can't be under a housing association. Offices are okay, but you can hear us all the way up here apparently [we sit in a meeting room above the open workshop]. (David, WA7)

David illustrates the problems he sees with help of their local open workshop. There are not many industrial buildings left within the reach of good public transport; most have been demolished. They cannot be in housing areas due to the noise and beyond that, market rents are so high that they cannot afford a space big enough for their activities. To not pay market rent is one way for associations

to get around the problem of affordability. Not paying market rent often comes, however, with conditions or requirements.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss these tensions further: from an association perspective, asking what options associations have (8.2), and from a broader perspective connecting individual association's struggles to urban renewal and the saturated character of urban space (8.3 and 8.4). First, however, I explore the specific requirements open workshops have towards their spaces to better understand their difficulty in finding suitable spaces (8.1).

## 8.1 Suitable spaces

In this subchapter I illustrate two specific requirements workshop associations have for buildings and rooms, which are perhaps not more important than other requirements, but which result in the greatest difficulties for finding a suitable premise. The first is that many of the activities conducted in open workshops are loud and make different kinds of dirt. Many buildings that could otherwise be available and affordable do not allow for such activities. The second characteristic is the desire of the associations for a certain degree of autonomy in their management and use of the workshop, which rules out some otherwise suitable buildings.

### **Loud and dirty**<sup>70</sup>

I start this section with another excerpt from the interview with David (WA7). Their association had been contacted by a real estate developer, who was planning a new residential area. The developer had the idea to include an open workshop in one of the buildings.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> What is considered dirty and how the perception is changing is a question that I would have liked to discuss in depth, but which is beyond the scope of the thesis. By dirty I refer to activities at open workshops that create, e.g., dust (sawdust) or fumes (laser) and which make them unsuitable in domestic contexts. I would, however, also argue that it would be valuable to discuss further how “dirt” (toxic and non-toxic) connected to production is increasingly outsourced and hidden from sight and what consequences this has.

<sup>71</sup> David did not specify whether this was a municipal or a private actor.

We got contacted. Someone who wanted to plan something. We answered some questions and then we never heard of them again. They seemed to really underestimate the difficulty. That was kind of what we said to them. You just drew a room in a residential building. You need to think about electricity, noise and ventilation. They hadn't thought about that. [...] There needs to be different fireproof cells. For welding you need your own fire cell. But it's ventilation that is most difficult. The laser needs its own ventilation. The welder needs its own ventilation. Some things you can circulate, but not the laser apparently.

The quote highlights the complexity of the needs open workshop associations have with regard to the building and rooms and how they are easily overlooked.

Albin and Gunnar (WA6) are happy that they, after a recent move, can now finally use loud and dirty machines. In the excerpt that follows, Albin explains the situation at the building they were previously using.

There the university has a building a bit like this one. There they have project activities, like students that do their final projects. So, they said we could be there. No problem. But it wasn't ideal. It was like, we couldn't have carpentry, machines, saws, and such. So not much happened there, because nobody wanted to be there. [...] 3D printers they have there. We took the laser there, but that was it.

While using the university building was administratively easy, the workshop was hardly used, due to the limit on what machines they were able to use. The association had access to carpentry equipment which they could not use. That carpentry equipment belonged to an educational centre that could not use it either, due to similar limitations at their premises. This previous space was far from ideal but better than nothing. In this context, I also want to return of Axel, who shared that their association is "rather desperate" (WA4) and ready to sacrifice almost any of their requirements towards a space.

With these examples, connected to the discussion in 7.1, I want to show first that open workshop associations have specific needs with respect to the premise they use. As the ideal workshop for many of the associations is a diverse workshop, they need rooms that allow for many different activities, activities which are loud and dirty, but in different ways which can not necessarily be combined. Dirt can be fumes that need to be ventilated away or can be dust or wood chips that do not combine well with the oil and sparks involved in metal works. Ceramics make another kind of mess, with water and mud. Other projects at the open workshop

are cleaner and require cleaner environments, such as electronics, 3D printing or textiles.

Open workshop associations find ways to adapt buildings and rooms to their needs. In chapter 7.1, I describe one example where an association obtained access to two new rooms within the building they were in, and worked on reorganising them. That involved moving walls and was going to be a long-term project. I visited the open workshop in fall 2022, when they had just started their reorganisation. As I am writing this, I could observe via their social media that they in spring 2024 had redone the carpentry workshop, still embarked on the process started in 2022.

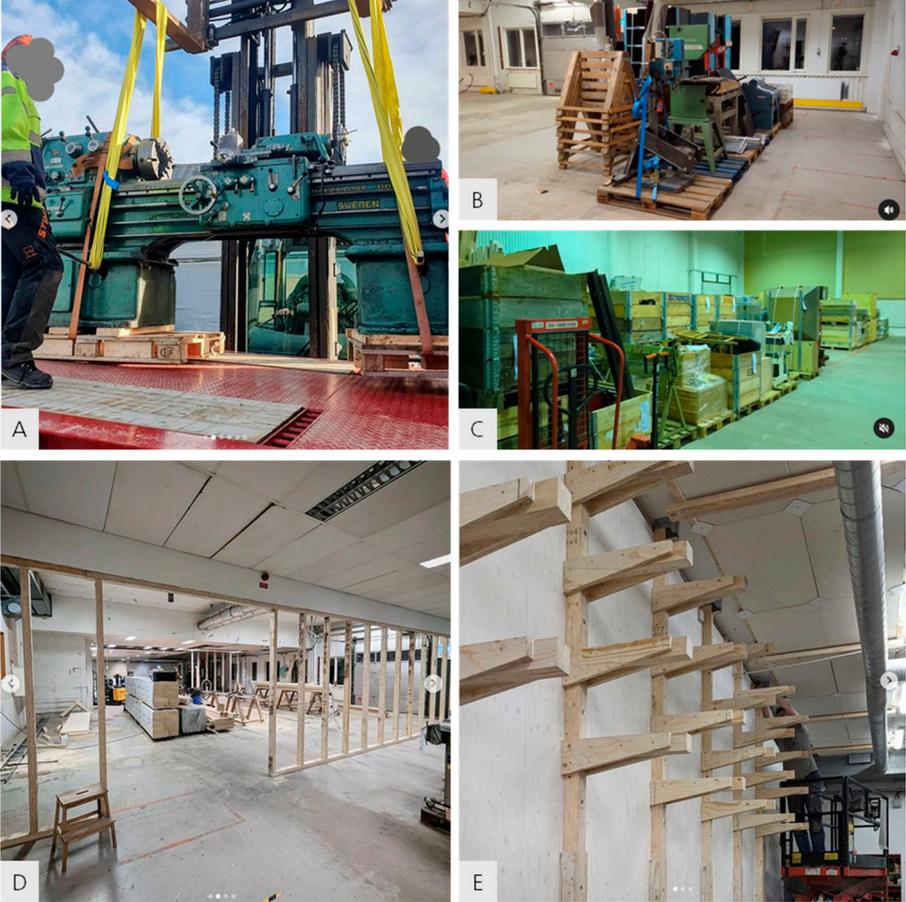
This example shows several things. As finding suitable premises is difficult, associations adapt spaces that might not be well-suited to their specific needs, and they have the will and competence to do so. The example also shows that adapting a space is time intensive.

In the beginning of 2023, the open workshop *Mikrofabriken* in Gothenburg relocated. On their Instagram account, they document their move and the adaptation of their new premises. *Mikrofabriken* identifies as the biggest open workshop in Sweden and works independently from the local municipality.

The pictures I selected (see figure 8.2 below) show not only the adaptation of the new building, but also some impressions from the move. Something that has not come up explicitly in the interviews and in the discussions is that moving an open workshop requires elaborate logistics, coordination, and many hours of work. In the case of *Mikrofabriken*, the association moved not only machines and materials but also sections of the building such as windows and doors. The social media communication conveys a positive attitude to the move even if it brought extra work and meant that the workshops were closed until everything was up and running again.

*Mikrofabriken* is an example where the open workshop association does manage to find suitable premises they can afford. They do have to move, but manage to do that without longer periods of closure. On the association's homepage, *Mikrofabriken* is described as space "full of tools that you cannot have at home" (Mikrofabriken, n.d.-a). Being a space for activities that do not easily fit into other everyday spaces is part of the definition of an open workshop. It is for those building, craft, or engineering projects that cannot be done anywhere else.

Providing a space where loud and dirty work is possible to do safely and without disturbing others is at the core of the open workshop idea, and as I have showed in the preceding pages, it is also what makes it difficult for associations to find spaces to use.



**Figure 8.2: Pictures from Mikrofabriken's Instagram account, documenting their move and adaptation of the new site**

(A) Moving heavy machinery (Mikrofabriken 2023, February 19); (B & C) Screenshots from a video showing some of the 185 pallets ready to be moved to the new site (Mikrofabriken, 2023, February, 5); (C) Walls are being built in the new location, creating more rooms (Mikrofabriken 2023, February, 8); (D) A few month later the carpentry workshop gets custom made storage solution for long wood material (Mikrofabriken 2023, May, 13)

Those associations that do not find suitable premises take different routes when adapting to the situation. Some pause their loud and dirty activities until they find new suitable premises. Examples for this I mentioned earlier are *Makers Jönköping* or *Makers of Västerås*. Other associations close their workshop until they find a suitable space (Malmö, Södertälje, Norrköping). In these cases, it is unclear when or if they will open again. Other associations take many years until they find suitable premises to even start their open workshop (Eskilstuna). Other associations do not have their own workshops but use other organisations' workshops (Eskilstuna and Örebro). In 8.2, I show different strategies associations use to obtain access to premises, such as cooperating with municipalities or other actors or changing their administrative form to get access to other rental conditions. Before doing so, I show how suitability is not only about physical infrastructure and characteristics, but also about the terms of use.

### **Access and terms of use**

Next to the physical characteristics of a building, the terms for using it are another aspect that determines how suitable it is for the association. Issues around access and terms of usage can concern (1) opening hours, (2) how members can access the rooms or building, (3) whether other associations or groups have access to the workshop and (4) how much freedom associations have over how the use or alter existing structures.

Karl (WA8) points out that independent access is a key characteristic for an open workshop. In the interview we talk about the local association's relationship with the municipality. Karl shares that the municipality is interested in having an open workshop. However, the open workshop association has decided against working with the municipality.

But I am fully convinced that the municipality will start their own municipal run open workshop at some point. But what they don't understand, it's like that a makerspace – actually it's access. To be able to come and go whenever you want. And then responsibility, that I can do it. [I can use the workshop and care for it, there is no need for municipal oversight]

Karl is sceptical about the municipality's understanding of what an open workshop is. According to Karl, being able to decide about the workshop, and being able to access it individually, motivates members to act responsibly.

Having individual access can imply 24/7 access, but in most cases key tags allow members to access their workshop during daytime (see chapter six). One of the associations had just moved to a space that allowed access from 6am to 10pm. Before that they had been able to use workshop facilities belonging to an educational actor. There, access had been limited to one evening a week. According to Gunnar (WA6), to be able to be at the workshop whenever he wants is a crucial improvement.

The interviews show that suitable space is not just a question of the physical characteristics, but that the terms of usage are important. Not all associations have access to a workshop that they alone can decide over. When access is organised through a municipality or other public institution, such as universities, hours are usually limited to daytime. Furthermore, some associations witness how non-members get access to their workshop. This can be in cooperation with the association, or in other cases without any explicit agreement. To share workshop facilities or rooms with others can work well or create problems. Some problems interviewees talk about are not being able to leave projects, problems with tools breaking or disappearing and worries about accidents.

Karl (WA8), who highlighted access and responsibility above, shares later in the interview that their association had been offered the use of a municipal workshop but declined.

The municipality has actually a small open workshop [...] They have some of those workbenches. It's a lot of wood, but I think a 3D printer as well. It's very clean and pretty. But it's not being used. It's for the municipality, school and classroom and that kind of thing. It's a really nice place. [...] The manager there said that we could get access, during evenings and weekends, you are welcome. But it doesn't work like that. If we have something we want to do, you can't do it in one day. [...] Here you have a box, to store projects.

Here it is not the limited access that Karl problematises, but that the workshop would not allow them to leave ongoing projects on site. Highlighting how nice, neat, and clean it is and mentioning the manager also marks a contrast with how

he has described their ideal version of an open workshop at other points of the interview: free access, clean *and* dirty areas and self-organised.

Axel (WA4), whose association had been able to use a building through the municipality, describes some issues they have had during the years.

We have the problem that we share the whole building with the municipality, so it is not that just our members have access, but sometimes the municipality just comes and is like, hey artist, you can probably just use their carpentry workshop. [...] And there are some members who are very annoyed about this. How to say – “now I have put my soul in this for a month, in renovating a machine and if it gets broken now, then I won’t repair it again after some fool who can’t behave, then I don’t care anymore” and that is a threat to the association, so this is a really difficult question for us.

There are several things I want to highlight from this excerpt. The association has noticed that the municipality, who is coordinating the cultural hub that hosts them, gives other actors access to the association’s workshop. He mentions this in relation to difficulties keeping the workshop tidy. He is not saying that it is those other people making a mess, but that it is difficult to be motivated to keep order with even more using the workshop, including those who are not even members. Another aspect that comes up is a problem with equipment breaking. Axel shares how members are frustrated and irritated when equipment, which they repaired with a lot of effort, breaks again when it is used wrongly. This becomes a threat for their association since a member who has put a month of work in fixing a machine might not do that again next time something breaks. Here issues of use link to engagement and how essential it is for the associations well working (see also chapter nine).

This is not the only workshop where non-members have access without the association knowing. Noah (WA10) shares that tools disappear from the workshop; he says “You cannot lock it, even though it’s locked”. The association does not know who has keys and why. At the time of the interview, they were looking for new premises as the building they were sharing would not be available to them much longer. While the administration and logistics for finding a new

workshop are not easy,<sup>72</sup> Noah is looking forward to “get more control on everything”.

Not being able to control access to the workshop implies a vulnerability for those associations. While there is material damage when machines break and tools disappear, it is the damage to motivation that threatens the associations. In a situation where members feel unable to maintain the workshop due to influences outside their control, they lose the motivation to do so.

Here I want to connect to the idea of “commons negotiations” I introduced with a table by Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) in chapter 2.2. A tension becomes apparent, when a community (the association) takes *responsibility* for the commons (the workshop), but is not able to *manage* its use. Besides the material impact on their commons the tension impacts the community’s ability to *care* for the commons, which again impacts the *benefit* it can be. The *property relation*, where the association is invited to use a building as a form of municipal support, creates an arrangement where negotiations are insufficient and do not always work in favour of the commoning practice. Commoning becomes difficult when it is unclear to the community who cares for the commons and when it is unclear who they need to negotiate with to manage its use. Open workshop associations are not against sharing equipment with other projects or actors – it is part of their identity – but the sharing has to happen in a form which enables them to fulfil their responsibilities and care. This example shows that the negotiations described by the table are interrelated and how negotiation regarding one of the relations can impact how well the other practices can be performed.

With the empirical material presented in this chapter so far, I show that open workshop associations have specific requirements regarding where they can establish their workshop. Getting access to a suitable space is a major challenge even for established associations. In 8.2, I discuss the difficulty of accessing

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<sup>72</sup> In this case the association does not own any of the equipment, which means the association needs to find both suitable premises they can afford and obtain access to machines and tools. I am not discussing how associations obtain access to machines and tools, as associations generally do not struggle in this fashion. Members bring their own machines, associations receive material donations from firms, privately, or from municipal actors, and associations have budgeted for buying machines, new and second hand. They also apply for one-time financial support from municipal or private actors.

suitable spaces as a question of availability and affordability. In the situation where suitable premises are limited, how do associations get access to space?

## 8.2 Availability and affordability

The first excerpt comes from my interview with Axel (WA4). Their association is using a municipality-managed building. In the following excerpt, he shares what he knows about the setup.

Axel: The municipality has its culture and leisure division [...], they have gotten – in quotation marks – this building to run activities they want to promote, so it's typically different associations. So, we have the bike kitchen, our workshop. We have artists who paint over there and then we have, how do you call it, a library, antiquarian kind of thing, here behind that wall. So, it's like a lot of culture stuff, we could call it.

C: Yes, and is it associations who indicate their interest to be here?

Axel: I'd say it is associations that get, or that apply and say we have these activities, could we do that? The majority probably gets a 'no', since there is a limited number of rooms, so that means the municipality needs to prioritise that which they judge has the biggest benefit for the public interest. I do a lot of guessing here, I'm just an association, but I think this is how it works. And one reason for why this was possible to begin with is that the whole area here is going to be torn down and they will build new housing. That implies that this had a limited lifespan. [...] So, it was perfect for the municipality to just say, okay for us to pay some electricity and heating and so and then get this for free. I think this is how it was.

C: You knew from the start that it was temporary?

Axel: We knew and from the start it was seven-ish years [...] now it's maybe four or five.

C: So, it went faster

Axel: Yes, for once. Unfortunately, things went faster.

The association has obtained access to the building as a form of municipal support they had applied for. In this case, the municipality does not own the building in question, but was granted access with favourable conditions through a

municipally-owned real estate developing company. In this case, the culture and leisure division of the municipality could not offer the space for as long as initially expected as the development of the area – from industry to residential – moved ahead faster than planned. Later, Axel also explains how establishing the cultural hub is a conscious choice by the developer and the municipality to make the area more attractive before developing it.

The example shows that the question of availability and affordability is multi-layered. Here, the premises became available as the building was soon to be demolished, and there was an interest from a developer in upgrading the area. The area is an old industrial area; there are no restrictions regarding noise and dirt, as in residential areas or buildings. At the same time, the area is not too far from the city centre, there are other associations around and there are no costs for rent, heat or electricity – all favourable for an association with a limited budget.

While it has been argued that non-profit projects like urban gardening unintentionally increase the value of neighbourhoods and thus intensify the gentrification that in the end results in them having to leave (e.g., Alkon & Cadji, 2020; Anguelovski, 2014; Sax et al., 2023), here it is more a case of associations being intentionally planted into an area under development.<sup>73</sup> In the discussion in the end of this chapter, I consider this dynamic in more detail. First, I give more varied empirical detail.

I share another interview excerpt before pointing to two issues that guide this subchapter. This is from the interview with David (WA7). The association is using a building that was to be demolished, but for the time being will not be touched. They have a temporary rental contract with the owner, which is one of the biggest real estate firms in Sweden.

C: What did you say, who owns the house? Do you pay rent?

Axel: Yes, we pay rent. But it's good, it's quite a good rent. We pay a bit less than 1000 SEK per square meter. On the other hand, it's a basement and the house is in bad shape

C: But it's a good location?

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<sup>73</sup> In order to maintain pseudonymisation, I do not share more details about the development. In 8.3 I share concrete examples to show dynamics between associations, urban renewal, and gentrification.

Axel: Yes, it's quite good. In the beginning they wanted to tear down the building. I think it was – I wasn't a member yet – I think it was four years they had been here. Now I think it has been seven years. When they moved in, [...] the idea was that it would be demolished. Then it didn't come like that and now it looks like they won't demolish it.

C: So it's not one of those demolishing contracts you got?

Axel: Not anymore. We just renewed the contract.

C: Do you need to pay more now?

Axel: No, same as before. [...] I think they have no interest in raising it, they want to have us here. [...] And we have been in contact with other real estate owners who are interested as well, because this is here is a bit small for us. We have been looking, it was close that we would move [...] But there it was uncertain if they would demolish that building, so that contract time was too short.

C: Yes, okay, but if you can stay here...

Axel: Yes, but it's rather small [...] We would like to have double the size.

Here the association has a first-hand, but temporary, rental contract. They pay a low, discounted rent. Axel sees one reason for the low rent in the owner wanting the association to be there. During the interview, I was surprised that they want to move, after having talked to boards where the associations need to use much smaller and less suitable premises, and with worse terms of use. However, the association here sees a need for more space, mainly to have more space around machines, as Axel explains later in the interview.

The two excerpts show two associations that are in need of different premises, one of them urgently. Their budgets do not allow them to rent at market prices, suitable premises are rare, and municipal funding and contracts are unstable. They find different ways to access premises, but both also share at other points during the interview how the space question is occupying the board.

Taking a step back and taking other empirical material into account, the question of availability and affordability centres around two issues, which are also the themes of the two sections in this subchapter. Associations obtain access to spaces through two strategies. One is to find a sponsor, which can be an administration at the municipality, another public actor such as a university, or a private actor. The support happens in the form of free access to the space (first excerpt above)

or through a discount on the rent (second excerpt). How access works as funding is the topic of the first section.

Another way to obtain access to spaces is to make use of other administrative forms that enable participation in a bigger real estate market. Gaining access through shares – that is, by forming a limited company (*Aktiebolag, AB*) – has not come up in the two excerpts above, but has frequently come up in interviews and is what I discuss in the second section.

### **Access as funding: connections, conditions and contingency**

Looking at sponsorship or funding in the form of access to space, there are three characteristics that stick out. First, funding and access to space happens through (personal) connections with real estate firms, municipal or other actors. Second, the use of (in particular municipal owned or managed) buildings comes usually with conditions; these are demanding to various degrees, as some examples show below. Lastly, access is often contingent in the sense that it is time-limited or at least uncertain, as contracts and support need to be renewed and renegotiated frequently.

In the introduction to this chapter, I share a quote from the interview with Pär (WA5), who is a board member of the umbrella organisation MoS. When associations get in touch and ask for advice regarding how to get access to a space, he advises them to talk to people: “politicians, municipal real estate companies [kommunala fastighetsbolaget]”.<sup>74</sup> His answer is not where to look to find a space to rent, but who to talk to.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Municipal real estate companies are owned by municipalities, but act like companies. This is a development from the 1990s. In 1991, the ministry of housing was abolished and with this abolition followed further reforms: “restrictions on profit-making by municipal housing companies were removed; a later housing law no longer allowed them to be non-profit; instead, they had to be managed according to ‘business principles’” (Sernhede et al., 2016, p. 158). There are companies that deal mainly with residential buildings, and others that deal more with other buildings, of greater interest and suitability for associations. Some municipal companies handle both residential and non-residential buildings.

<sup>75</sup> For other associations that work with cultural or educational leisure activities the national study associations (*studieförbund*) are often able to help with access to rooms. Organisations like *ABF* (*Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund*, workers’ educational association) have flexible rooms suitable for study groups, but also dance, handicrafts, or concerts. As I showed earlier in this chapter, open

That open workshop associations try to access spaces through contacts is partly due to necessity, as renting at market price would not be affordable for these often newly started and small associations (see chapter six). Furthermore, there is also a confidence that an open workshop is something municipalities should want to have and that associations should be supported by their municipality.

There are some associations who experience that their local municipality is interested in having an open workshop and are willing to support them. In other cases, the appreciation and willingness to support is experienced as fluctuating and dependent on individual employees' judgment.

A board member of a newly opened open workshop that I did not interview, but met at an annual meeting of MoS, shared their story with me. The following is an excerpt from my notes from the meeting:

He starts by saying that they have a very good cooperation with the municipality and that he thinks that this is key to their success. They have not had access to the building for long, but before they had a permanent space, they have organised events at, e.g., the library and made their association known. Through this visibility and the good publicity and popularity they gained, the municipality got interested and they had very good grounds to argue for more support as they could show that they do great stuff, that is popular with others. In the end the municipality approached them when they made a building available for another association and offered them to share it. They have a discount on the rent in exchange for six activities for children and youth per year and a further discount because "the municipality likes what they do" – that is how he formulated it. They further got funding from a local foundation. They currently have about 100 members, are open two evenings during the week and one day in the weekend. The municipality has also helped them get funding, advised them for where to apply. It's the culture and leisure unit within the municipality that they have the cooperation with. First, they tried the business unit [näringslivet] and they also tried to help with a space, but those were too expensive.

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workshop associations have very specific requirements and the rooms available at those organisations would typically not fit their needs. In the city of Eskilstuna, the local open workshop association is cooperating with *folkhögskolan*, also an adult education actor, and uses one of their workshops when it is not used for classes (Eskilstuna Makerspace, n.d.). While enabling bottom-up education initiatives and in theory a potential partner for open workshop association, national study associations typically cannot help associations with permanent rooms with the special requirements open workshop associations have.

What I want to highlight with this quote is how the board member I talked to is full of enthusiasm about their approach. He is proud to share how starting with offering activities at the library turned out to be successful. What is interesting here is that the municipality was able to make a suitable building available, and with an affordable rent. While not being able to say for certain, it is reasonable to assume that many municipalities have access to suitable buildings which they could make available and affordable. Access becomes then a question of being able to make those connections and of connecting with someone at the municipality who sees the value of an open workshop for the municipality.

Karl (WA8) too shares their story of finding a space. The greatest difficulty for the association at the time of my visit is to get a contract for the rooms they are using. They have already been using them for a while, but cannot officially open until they have obtained a contract and are paying rent. Besides insurance issues, Karl explains that being in this unofficial in-between state does not help their motivation or their organisation. They want to start for real. Being in-between and other uncertainties about the future and how it affects the motivation of association members form part of chapter nine.

On their way to getting access to their current space, they were in contact with several units at the municipality, but decided to not work together with any of them. Karl shares some of his experiences.

And we were in contact with other units. Waste unit wanted to work with us, but we said no. If you work with the municipality, they expect that you are available daytime for example. And you don't know if the meetings with them will lead to anything or if you just talk and in the end, you set up a new date to keep on talking. We have done that before. (WA8)

In Karl's experience, the municipality was interested in cooperating with the association and supporting them. However, it would have required the association to, for example, be available during working hours or do activities during the daytime. Later in the interview, he also mentions that they could have obtained extensive funding through the municipality, but they would have needed to employ two people. This would have turned them into an employer, which nobody on the board wanted for their small volunteer-run association. Consequently, they decided against any more extensive cooperation with the municipality. In the end, they obtained access to their premises via a cooperation

with a municipal cultural actor, which is somewhat independent from the municipality. They worked together for a local fair and obtained access to the space in exchange.

For Karl, there is nevertheless a desire to at some point move to bigger and better premises. In that context, Karl mentions that he has been in touch with the municipal real estate management, and that he has learned that there are buildings that would suit them very well; however, they are too expensive.

And we have good connections with the municipal real estate company. He, Olle who is the boss. He is great. As soon as we talked about how we'd actually like to have it, he says, we have such buildings, in this area even, but it's more expensive.

For the time being, the association is using a basement room, which works, but is not where they would like to be in the long run. The workshop is located in a building that was close to being demolished. The building is more than 5000 sqm with flats, a gymnastics room, and larger rooms that would allow for small-scale industrial activities. The building is turning into a hub for artists, culture, and innovation. Arriving at the building, I had a hard time locating the open workshop and in the end my interviewee found me and guided me into a rather hidden room down several stairs into the basement. I could not help but wonder why they could not get better rooms within these 5000 square meters. Far from all rooms of the immense building seemed occupied at the time. Karl says in the interview that they are happy for the space in any case, and will move to something better later. Here, the association has identified the need to have a good relationship and a contact in the municipal real estate company, and the municipality does have buildings that would be suitable for an open workshop.

With David (WA7), I also discuss municipal funding. They have tried to apply for funding, but have not been able to get any.

David: It's difficult to get municipal funding. We have tried sometimes, but there is no interest from the municipality and so.

C: How could you try to convince them?

David: I don't really know. It's mainly problems with premises they could help with. I have been active in other associations as well, but my experience here [in this municipality] is that – if you aren't a sports club, you aren't interesting. Even if you are a youth association. I've been active in youth associations earlier and it

has been difficult to get access. The municipality is not interested. [...] I think it depends very much on what kind of discounts the municipality gives. And that depends on what one wants to do, an event, or regular things.

Here we discuss municipal funding. What I want to point out with this quote is that a common way for municipalities to fund associations is to make space available and affordable for them. It also shows that associations have difficulties renting on the regular market. They are dependent on municipal discounts.

There are, however, examples where open workshop associations do obtain access to an affordable space through their municipality. In the next few pages, I discuss three associations where the municipality not only gives a discount on rent, but covers both rent and running costs such as heating and electricity, as support for the association.

Pär (WA5), who is on the board of one of these associations, described interest from the municipality and the municipal real estate company to have an open workshop in that building. We talk about how many associations have problems finding a suitable space. Pär highlights that they are lucky. They have not moved since 2015, when they started the association, and have experienced support from the municipality all along. In the following excerpt, he nevertheless describes a degree of uncertainty.

But our contract is only one year at the time, then another year. But we assume that this goes on forever and so far, it has worked [...] but you never know, we have been worried. Inga [their contact in the real estate company] left, but then Lena started, and Lena has been great, and they have gotten a new CEO as well. Their CEO retired and they got a new CEO, but still same good relationship with us.

So far, their temporary contract of one year at a time has always been renewed. When Pär describes the uncertainty, he is rather relaxed. He highlights that they have a good relationship with the managers of the building. His worry that the situation might change with changing staff at the company shows how their favourable conditions might not only depend on political decisions at the municipal level, but also on the staff employed at the company. Pär describes reasons why they get support.

...a municipal owned real estate company that works a lot with business premises and they also have in their mission statement that thing with common interest

[allmännyttan] or like to give back to society and we got connected with their community manager, who works with cooperation between companies and the public.

Later, he describes details of their cooperation.

Since we have such a good deal with the real estate manager, we have no rent, we get this space for free. In exchange we are supposed to let anybody – it's supposed to be open and democratic and especially for the companies that are in the same building and those who live here. It has a community function as well.

In this case, the municipal owned real estate company interprets their role as implying a responsibility to society, both in the sense that there need to be spaces for associations and that they need to care for community needs. In this case, the company is mainly dealing with office and other non-residential buildings and supports the association as part of their work for the common interest. In the second quote, Pär describes that there is only one condition to the support: the workshop must be open for anybody to use, especially companies who work in the same building and residents from the area. Pär, however, says later that none of the companies ever needed to use their workshop.

Other workshop associations need to organise a certain number of events as part of their agreement with the municipality. I ask Pär about this too, but there has not been any explicit demand. Pär adds that they do events regardless, to be more open for the public, and that if they did not do, there might be demands from the municipal real estate company.

The next association I want to discuss is housed in a municipal building that hosts several associations related to leisure and culture. Their funding contract needs to be renewed every year. Conditions for the support are that they are open for the public and take part in open nights that are organised at the building in coordination with the other associations and the municipality.

Throughout the interview with a previous board member, it becomes apparent that the association has had mixed experiences in their contact with the municipality. There have been changes in staff and a lack of clarity around responsibilities on the side of the municipality. Lars (WA1) is tired of the miscommunication and the unclear demands from the municipality.

And it's also like, if we had just had the space or had for example rented it, then we could have done what we want. But since we are given the space and it's our funding, the municipality can make demands.

Lars' perspective is that their dependency on the municipality is problematic and hindering them in forming the workshop after their needs. It is, however, not cooperation with municipal actors as such that he sees as problematic, but the form it has taken in their case. In this context, I ask if the board had ever thought about the option of running the open workshop without municipal funding.

We have talked about – not so much how to not have anything to do with the municipality – but more about how we could do in case they kick us out. Like what opportunities are there, because there is a fear within the association that the municipality decides that, “no, this is not worth it, or it costs too much compared to what we get”. And it feels like many conversations we have had with the head of culture [at the municipality] were a lot like “you get a lot from us. We get nothing back.” At the same time, we are one of few open workshop associations that get support from their municipality. Most others are private or associations that get very little support. It's a bit strange and I believe that the municipality is wondering what the culture department is doing. And in the end, it's a political decision.

The excerpt shows how the association experiences the support they receive from the municipality as uncertain. Lars also suggests that there are potential tensions between different departments at the municipal level, and that their path is ultimately dependent on the cultural politics of the municipality.

The third open workshop with municipal support I want to discuss here is slightly different, as it obtained its support through another association that is supported by the municipality, a so-called creative hub. In the case just above, the municipality directly decides regarding support and who gets to use a space at the creative hub.

However, by the time I did interviews it was clear that the creative hub had to move and could no longer host the open workshop. Apart from talking to a board member of the open workshop, I also interviewed Bror (M2), the manager of the creative hub. One thing we talk about is the upcoming move.

Bror: Yes, straight to the point. We were told in September last year that they were cancelling our lease. That we were homeless, but that they would like to try to co-locate us with other activities for budgetary reasons.

C: And it's the city that owns this? [...] And they want to develop it?

Bror: You know it is the culture department here and the real estate unit there and the one hand does not always know what the other one does and the culture department wanted to get rid of the high rent here. It's big and it's expensive.

Both the new and the current building are owned by the municipality and managed through their real estate department. However, the cultural department has decided that the current location is too expensive and that they therefore need to relocate. The cultural hub still has municipal support; however, it can no longer host the open workshop. Here it becomes visible how municipal internal budget questions can influence whether associations can gain access to suitable premises. More than a year after the workshop had to move out it has still not opened again, and the former premises have, from what is visible from publicly accessible information, remained empty.

In this section I have shown how open workshop associations handle municipal funding, whether they find themselves in a supportive environment or if they decide against municipal funding. There are other examples where funding comes from real estate companies through discounted rents. All examples show how access to suitable spaces becomes a question of relations and connections with municipal or other actors. Access is to different degrees conditional, as associations have deliverables towards their funders, some more explicit and rigid than others. Lastly, there are different levels of contingencies. Some associations need to renew their contract every year, with different degrees of uncertainty regarding whether the renewal will happen. Others find themselves with offers to rent a space but with short timeframes, as buildings are to be demolished, and the evaluations of funders can change. Most workshop associations find themselves in a situation where they do not have any other choice but to work in less-than-suitable buildings and to do so under less-than-ideal conditions. Others search for a space for years, or lose access to facilities they have been using, and need to start searching again.

This struggle over access to suitable spaces happens in a context with high pressure on urban space – a situation that marks the struggle for urban commons (Huron,

2015). While associations are focused on surviving and finding somewhere to conduct their activities, they are faced by this competition over space. They start from a disadvantaged position, as when newly founded they typically have limited networks, a limited budget and are very few people with limited time resources, without a habit or established structure of working together or with others in similar situations. (Re)claiming spaces for open workshops is a political struggle, both at the level of individual workshops working towards convincing their municipalities of their ideas, but, as I discuss further in 8.4, even more a struggle to (re)claim urban space for non-profit and non-curated activities. Before moving to that discussion, the next section discusses another way of accessing spaces for workshop facilities that associations have identified.

### **Access through detours**

The previous section shows that municipalities can help associations in their struggle to access suitable premises. Gaining access to suitable and affordable spaces has in the above material appeared mainly as a matter of tight budgets, but there is also another reason, which is the focus of this section: it is a tax law that prevents associations from renting many properties that could otherwise be suitable. I visited one association (WA3) that has found a way to bypass that tax law. I discuss their case here.

Philip: We have seen a lot of associations that got very dependent on municipal funding and then when they don't get that anymore, they don't manage. We really wanted to stand on our own feet and that is very

Walter: Demanding.

Philip: Yes, it's demanding in some ways, but it's also – for example there are many who are in those kinds of buildings, and share with others, because it is really hard for associations to get access to such a building here. I don't think you can even get any such building [industrial building]

Walter: when you call a landlord and you say “Hey, I'd like to rent one of your properties, we are an association” – “click” kind of, but “we are an AB [limited company]” – “yes, sure”

In this short excerpt, Philip and Walter hint at how they have chosen a different way of organising than most other open workshop associations. They see

disadvantages with municipal funding and want to be independent from it. In their experience the administrative burden that comes with municipal funding is too high in relation to the money they can get. Not wanting to rely on municipal funding in practice also means that they needed to find premises to rent at market price and under market terms. Walter mimes a short phone conversation which suggests that if you are an association, landlords are not interested in renting out their property, while they are if you are a company.

To be able to rent a property the association chose to start a limited company (*Aktiebolag, AB*) which is in turn owned by the non-profit association. This way they are both a non-profit association, but they can also use their company, which can act differently on the real estate market. Robert described their move as “an academic exercise to make it work against reality.” Philip adds that they were forced to go this way since “we needed a space, and we couldn’t get one as an association” (WA3).

In the interview it turns out that owning a private limited company is for them not an important part of their identity, but rather a way to navigate the administrative and legal reality they find themselves in. It developed over time and is not a model they copied from somewhere else (see also chapter 7.2 for a discussion of how internal organisation and administration develops over time and in response to need). Association members can, but do not have to, buy a share of the limited company, while all members pay a monthly fee. Income through the monthly fee covers running costs like rent, while the capital build from the sold shares is used for investments in, for example, equipment.

We talk more about their funding and choice of legal format throughout the interview. They explain that they receive donations from companies, in the form of machines or left over materials. Those donations come to the non-profit association, as Walter says associations are perceived “as often not having a lot of money” and being happy about taking “others’ rubbish”. I share this as it highlights a perception of associations as being in need.

As they are looking for new premises when I visit them, I ask if owning the company has made the search easier, assuming that the answer would be “yes”.

I mean it is very easy to get in touch with landlords and real estate agents and so on. They can check the company and see that we have good liquidity and such.

It's an easy first step. But in the end, I'd say it's not easier or more difficult. The difficulty is to find a suitable space for a reasonable price. (Walter, WA3).

While I had expected that they would experience less troubles to find suitable and affordable premises, Walter still highlights that even though they might have more properties to choose from it does not mean that is easy to find something. When comparing their situation to that of other open workshop associations, I would, however, argue that their struggles are happening on a different level. This is not only due to their legal form, but also to their budget being many times larger than that of other associations. Before discussing why there are not more associations which chose this way, I explain the tax law that makes real estate owners want to rent out to tenants that pay VAT (value-added tax) and not to associations, which do not pay VAT.

In principle, landlords do not need to pay tax on the rent they extract from their tenants. However, in Sweden there is the possibility for real estate owners to voluntarily pay tax on the rent they extract from tenants. This does not apply to residential buildings, but only to real estate for industry, retail or offices. Many landlords do register their property for voluntary VAT.

Now, why would real estate owners want to pay a voluntary tax? Important to note is that they do not in practice pay the tax, as the tax is added on the rent which the tenant pays. The real estate owner remains  $\pm 0$ . Paying voluntary VAT for their real estate allows, however, for real estate owners to also deduct VAT from their expenses for the respective real estate. This could, for example, be costs for renovations. All this is relevant to understand as this voluntary VAT for real estate is only possible when the tenant in turn is conducting activities subject to VAT. Those tenants can then in turn deduct the VAT they pay on the rent. Activities conducted by non-profit associations, however, are not subject to VAT (Hagman, 2019; Skatteverket, n.d.).

What does this brief excursion into Swedish tax law mean for open workshop associations? If they are operating as non-profit organisations, they are not able to rent buildings that are rented out with VAT. In practice, many of the buildings that would be suitable for open workshop associations are those that real estate

owners have chosen to register for voluntary VAT. Non-profit organisations are, therefore, not interesting as tenants.<sup>76</sup>

Being an entity that engages in VAT-required activities is a way to obtain access to those properties. One way to be such an entity is to own a company. It does not need to be a private limited company, but for the open workshop association I met, it was the most straightforward solution.

Owning a company is not the solution to all problems those associations experience when in need of a suitable space. It solves one issue. I ask in the excerpt above if it has become easier to rent a space and the answer is that it is not really the question. It is easier to get in touch with real estate agents and owners. They can, in theory, let property to them and they have an easy way to check the company's financial records. The main challenge is still finding a suitable and affordable space – as a company, there are more properties to choose from.

While the association I use as an example has decided to go this way and has had good experiences with their choice, other open workshop associations have so far decided against this option. The question came up in some interviews in relation to the struggle for suitable and affordable space.

Pär and Sven know that there are associations that have chosen this way and are aware of the option. They highlight, however, that they themselves are “very spoiled” in the sense that they use a municipal property free of charge and highlight that they have not needed to “go that detour” (WA5). This framing as a detour shows that it is considered not a goal and rather something to avoid if possible.

In other interviews, I hear reservations that being a company owner would “require a different kind of engagement” (WA8) or concerns about other administrative requirements, such as a big administrative burden for starting the company, and rules concerning a work environment that might be different (WA7).

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<sup>76</sup> This is a problem that goes beyond the case of this thesis. Other non-profit associations have difficulties renting real estate. It is a question concerning national politics, but not something that has created extended debates. In 2019, the issue was brought to the ministry for finance in form of a written question from a member of parliament to a minister (Hagman, 2019). The minister's answer is that the issue is complex (M. Andersson, 2019).

A view that I also met is that owning a company would require a large budget and high membership fees. For one association which owns a limited company in Sweden this applies; another association that has chosen this strategy has, however, low fees similar to municipally supported associations. High membership fees in my observation are connected to high rental costs more than to administrative forms. One could also turn this around and observe that as long as associations choose to keep low member fees, they are not able to rent at market prices, no matter their administrative form. To rent a property as a company is one part of the puzzle; to be able to pay market rent is another issue.

Having the administrative form of a company grants some degree of freedom for the association as they are less dependent on gaining access to space through conditional municipal funding. Above I discussed one example of an association that has had mixed experiences with their municipal cooperation. In that interview, we also discuss the option of forming a limited company. Lars, however, is sceptical. I understand his scepticism as politically motivated. He holds the values and ideals of non-profit associations and their role and good in society very highly. Later in the interview, when he shares his frustration about the municipal administration, I ask him if it might be better to act through a limited company.

That depends on what is the purpose of the association. The general idea is, I suppose, to enable as many people as possible to be able to use it and then it is actually good to have an open association. Then it's very difficult to run this kind of associations for economic reasons, it's expensive, rents are very high.

Lars' view on the option of running an open workshop with the help of owning a company takes a different perspective on the question. Lars lifts the practical lens that dominates the discussion otherwise. While Robert (WA3) highlights that their way of running an open workshop is an answer to the reality they find themselves in, Lars is dedicated to an ideal that is hard to achieve in practice.

I close this section with a comment and signpost to the discussion in chapter nine. Open workshop associations in Sweden find themselves in a context where what they want to do – provide access to a productive infrastructure – is hindered by lack of funds, or rather, high rental costs, a shortage of suitable spaces and a situation that is being complicated by an administrative jungle. It is possible to navigate that jungle and find ways to run open workshops, as the many examples

show, but much of the energy of those individuals involved in the organisation goes to dealing with that space struggle.

I further want to highlight that the struggle of finding a suitable space and obtaining access to it looks like a local problem of networking and funding to the individual association. It certainly is that, but it is also a symptom of broader dynamics, and a political question. With a different prioritisation on the side of municipalities there could be spaces for open workshops – and other associations – in many more municipalities.

### 8.3 Beyond the workshop

That associations need to move their workshop between premises is a recurring issue in what I describe above. In this subchapter, I show what happened to some of those premises after associations had moved out. I purposely do not connect these cases to the perspectives above, so as to not disclose whether I have visited the examples or interviewed anybody involved. What I share below is based on publicly available information. This subchapter provides a view beyond the workshop, as it shows what happens to properties after associations have left, and by extension, can show why they needed to leave – however, it also shows dynamics around those spaces that go beyond the local case, which I introduce as a broader discussion in 8.4.

In 8.1 (figure 8.2) I share pictures from when *Mikrofabriken* in Gothenburg moved in 2023. They had rented premises at Exportgatan 17 with a demolishing contract (see picture A in figure 8.3, below). In summer 2024 the building was demolished, and a new industrial building is under construction. The new building is advertised as logistic/storage property that can be rented out to one or up to six parties. The new building takes up more space on the plot of land, and is advertised for its good location and facilities (Mileway Sweden AB, n.d.). The area as such is not being renewed but remains a business park (*företagområde*). There is a mix of new and old retail, logistics, and industrial buildings.



**Figure 8.3 Properties previously and currently hosting open workshops**

(A) The previous location of *Mikrofabriken*, which has been demolished (Google, n.d.); (B) The *Ödlan* building, which has been demolished (Kvarteret Ödlan, 2018, July 18); (C) *STPLN*'s entrance in the former industrial location, the ship berth (STPLN 2022, May 3); (D) Ship berth when it was used as a ship berth (STPLN, 2018, September 1); (E) *Mattverkstan*, the building in which *Makerslink* has their workshop (Ebbepark, n.d.-b)

*Kvarteret Ödlan* in Jönköping, where *Makers of Jönköping* had their workshop, closed in Spring 2023. *Kvarteret Ödlan* was also an older industrial building in an industrial area with buildings mainly from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see picture B, figure 8.3 above). On the Facebook page of *Kvarteret Ödlan* it says that it was “a citizen house with focus on nature and culture” (Kvarteret Ödlan, n.d.). The house was from the start meant to be only a temporary project. It was initiated by *Södra Munksjön Utvecklings AB*, a municipal owned company developing the area and co-organised by the municipal culture and leisure department (*Kultur- och Fritidsförvaltningen*) (Södra Munksjön Utvecklings AB, 2023). From the start

of the project it was clear that the building would be demolished in the process of a major redevelopment of the area south of the Lake Munksjö in Jönköping (Kvarteret Ödlan, 2023).

The new neighbourhood is under construction and people have been moving in since 2021. It is a large redevelopment with space for 4300 inhabitants (both rental and with the Swedish co-owner model (*bostadsrätt*)) and 1800 workplaces (Skeppsbron Jönköping, n.d.). The municipality is planning the neighbourhood in direct connection to a possible future train station which is to connect Jönköping to a high-speed railway.<sup>77</sup> Next to apartments, the plan contains retail, offices and services such as schools for different age groups.

The plot where *Kvarteret Ödlan* was located is going to be a park. Only one of the buildings of the *Ödlan* block will remain, as it was judged to be of historical value. That building is to be used for a “cultural programme” (*Kulturellt program I befintligt hus*) (Jönköpings Kommun, 2016b, p. 10).

With the idea in mind that spaces which allow for loud and dirty activities disappear from accessible neighbourhoods, it is noteworthy that sound and other emissions feature extensively in various planning documents for the new development. The biggest concern in the case of noise is traffic from a nearby highway and the possible future high-speed railway.<sup>78</sup> Other noise and dirt are expected from industry, which is going to move during the redevelopment, as well as from a clarification plant which is to remain, but will be adapted to reduce smells (Jönköpings Kommun, 2016b, 2016a).

Most noise is expected to be below existing maximum levels for sound emission, or otherwise buildings are to be planned with recommended features to ameliorate the noise.<sup>79</sup> The need for protection from noise and non-disturbed residential areas are nothing I aim to question. It is, however, noteworthy how noise from traffic is framed as something unavoidable and something that can be met and mitigated through adaptations in the built environment. Noise and pollution

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<sup>77</sup> The possible high-speed train connection would be part of a bigger development of high-speed railway in Sweden and has been on hold since 2022 (Jönköpings Kommun, 2024; Tolf, 2024).

<sup>78</sup> The highway E4 passes Jönköping and is the main link from Skåne to Stockholm. It is also one connection from the North to continental Europe. For railway see previous footnote.

<sup>79</sup> Like flats that have windows to two sides, not only to the traffic intense side

from other activities are not discussed – they are not part of the plan and not supposed to happen in the new area.

One other association that used *Kvarteret Ödlan* is a bike kitchen. The bike kitchen is mentioned in one planning document as one possible actor that could be housed in one of the old buildings that might be preserved. Other possible usage of those buildings that are named in the document are a café, restaurant or an exhibition space (Jönköpings Kommun, 2016b).

In December 2023 the municipal development firm (*Södra Munksjö Utvecklings AB*) announced that *Kvarteret Ödlan* is coming back. There will be another temporary space allocated as a cultural centre similar to the old *Kvarteret Ödlan*. According to the announcement, the development firm is planning to move an abandoned sports hall to a former recycling yard not far from the old *Ödlan* buildings. The move is projected to take one year, and it remains to be seen how the new *Ödlan* will be used and whether there is space for the local open workshop association. The new *Ödlan* will, however, again be there only until the land needs to be cleared, this time to make space for a school (*Södra Munksjön Utvecklings AB*, 2023). Where citizen initiatives will move then is unclear.

The open workshop association in Jönköping is one of the associations that obtained access to their space in the first *Ödlan* building and were very happy about the opportunity. They became a small piece in a development “From old industry to a new modern neighbourhood!” (*Lustgården AB*, n.d.), as phrased by the developer.

While in the case of *Ödlan* the *Makers of Jönköping* ended up as an element in one step in a planned redevelopment process, the case of *Malmö Makerspace* is less clear. In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned *Malmö Makerspace* and that they had to move out as their host organisation *STPLN* has moved to a smaller and historical building. In an interview for a newspaper, the manager of *STPLN* explains that their new location “is not within an industrial environment like *STPLN*, so we can’t take the noisy and dirty workshop part with us” (Gillberg, 2022, my own translation). The article is from 2022, and at that point it was not clear what would happen to that industrial environment that *STPLN* had to move away from, and which had allowed for “the noisy and dirty workshop part”. In a vision for the development of the western harbour area in Malmö where the ship berth is located, *STPLN* is included as an existing non-commercial community

space. The vision was updated in 2013 and describes the area in 2031 (Malmö stad, 2013). Newer documents or more information about what is going to happen in the building are not available at the time of writing (see picture C and D in Figure 8.3).

One last example that I share here is different to the other three, as here the open workshop is integrated into a redevelopment, not to make the area temporarily attractive, but as part of the long-term plan for the area. In Linköping, the open workshop association is using a former industrial building that has already been ‘developed’. They moved in a building that is renovated and upgraded. The building *Mattverkstan* is a former carpet factory and part of a bigger development of the area *Ebbepark*, marketed as an area for innovation in sustainable urban development (Ebbepark, n.d.-a). The area is in walking distance of the city centre and has a mix of residential and multipurpose buildings. It is developed by three municipal-owned real estate companies. *Sankt Kors*, one of those companies, mentions the open workshop association as an “outstanding community” (Sankt Kors, n.d.-b, my own translation) one can become a neighbour of when moving to the area. In an advertisement for office and industrial property, the workshop is named as a facility of the area: “There are currently around 90 businesses, a health centre, pharmacy, animal hospital and a makerspace” (Sankt Kors, n.d.-a, my own translation).

This case is different as the open workshop association is part of the new version of the area. In the case of Jönköping, the open workshop is part of the *temporary* version of the area. Also interesting is that the area is working with a mix of both residential buildings and offices, services, retail and industry. In Linköping the open workshop is highlighted as an actor that makes the area attractive in a direct sense. In Jönköping the open workshop and other associations are invited to make the area appear as a place where things happen, a dynamic area, but not as actor that will be there and make the area liveable in the long run. Associations as temporary players become actors that have to say yes to any offer to run their activities, at least for a while, but are not included in the long-term vision for the area.

While in Malmö, *STPLN* is included in a vision for Västrahamn in 2031 as a non-commercialised community space, it was moved from the area in 2024.

Västrahamn in general is an ongoing urban renewal project with a green and sustainable profile.<sup>80</sup>

In Jönköping, the *Makers of Jönköping* were unintentional part of an intentional process of developing an industrial area into a residential neighbourhood, but also to attract other citizens to the area for leisure and recreation. The project of the cultural centre *Kvarteret Ödlan* was initiated by the developer with a supposed interest of increasing the profitability of the development. However, the diverse and vibrant cultural life created by associations is not part of the vision for the area in the future. This is not to say that those developers or city planners are particular in any way, but rather that the developments here reflect the norm of urban developments, where temporary urbanism is a tool to increase profits, to the exclusion of both non-profit activities and manual production in the developed area (Despotović & Thörn, 2016; Jönsson et al., 2024). Again, Linköping is different, enabling a mixed urban area. The case shows that open workshops can co-exist with housing if accommodated in suitable buildings.

Open workshop associations are not the only type of association that need uneven spaces that allow for sounds. The need for urban areas which allow for higher noise levels has gained traction in the public debate in Sweden in recent years. The debate is centred around, on the one hand, actors working with music and entertainment who witness reduced tolerance among urban dwellers for sound that is emitted from clubs and bars, and on the other hand a so-called cultural sound zone (*kulturljudzon*), that has been established in an urban industrial area in Malmö. Gothenburg has established a similar area (Ringön, Gothenburg) while actors in, for example, Stockholm see a need for such zones there also (Elefalk et al., 2025; Johansson, 2025; Nilsson, 2025; Wennerholm, 2025).

In the case of Malmö and Gothenburg the areas are (former) industrial areas with some actors still conducting industrial activities, while other premises have been repurposed by cultural actors and associations. While the public debate about *kulturljudzon* concerns mainly clubs and bars with live music, the area Sofielund in Malmö, which was the first declared a *kulturljudzon*, also hosts other actors. Öрман (2024) describes the area in Sofielund as a diverse area with about 300 companies and associations registered. While with urban renewal, affordable

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<sup>80</sup> To get an idea of the early days of *STPLN* and *Malmö Makerspace*, which was then called *Fabriken*, see Seravalli (2014).

spaces for cultural actors disappear, the *kulturljudzon* creates a “protected area” for associations and other actors (ibid.). Apart from allowing high volumes also at late hours, the *kulturljudzon* implies that no housing is developed, which means that older industrial premises remain and provide affordable “uneven spaces”.

In Malmö, the *kulturljudzon* is not a legal instrument but a branding by the municipality to show an intention to enable certain activities in the area. Furthermore, it is important to note that the continuing active presence of industry in the area of Sofielund would have made residential buildings impossible, due to the required distances from industry. It is open for speculation whether this inability to develop the area into a residential area might be the main reason for the zone (Örman, 2024). A study on cultural associations in the same area also raises concerns about which associations will be able to stay with the city’s new intentions for the area (Foroughanfar, 2022).

The example from Malmö shows one case where a new planning instrument might open or preserve spaces for associations close to the city centre. It also shows a need for such zones, when industrial areas are most often developed into residential quarters.

In the case of Jönköping, I illustrate such a redevelopment process and how it affects the local open workshop association. In close proximity to the *kulturljudzon* in Gothenburg lies an area whose renewal and change has been documented in detail. The area had been home to associations and small companies and was redeveloped to become a showcase for sustainable urban development (Despotović & Thörn, 2016). In the process of renewal, associations were forced to leave, after having suffered from what the authors frame as “permanent-provisional state” (see also Olshammar, 2002). The case shows how this “permanent-provisional state” is created by short-term rental contracts or permits, which removed long-term perspectives and consequently investments. Associations with low financial resources use the premises, while the area deteriorates.

The case shows how open undefined properties or whole areas with uneven spaces disappear – areas that, because of their planning decisions, their infrastructure, their affordability and their proximity to the city centre are interesting for associations, small business or other actors that do not fit within other urban areas reserved for housing, service and curated culture (see also Olshammar, 2020). Seen in light of the above, the struggle of open workshop associations to find and

claim suitable spaces for extended periods of time does not appear to simply be a local struggle to make the right contact, but also as part of a tendency of suitable buildings and areas being planned out of the urban. Uneven spaces that allow for loud and dirty activities are removed from the urban centre.

The case of Linköping, on the other hand, shows that open workshops can coexist with residential buildings; however, there needs to be buildings that are suited to house such activities, and they need to be planned for. If no such integrated options exist, old affordable former industrial areas that are close to the city centre are essential for both open workshop and other associations (Despotović & Thörn, 2016; Foroughanfar, 2022; Olshammar, 2002, 2020; Öрман, 2024).

The observation that various municipalities can provide associations with suitable space under affordable conditions, suggests that other municipalities in Sweden could do the same. Having space for an open workshop association is thus a question of prioritising, budgeting and planning. Municipalities can preserve or create space that is suitable for open workshop and other associations. Öрман (2024) shows that those open and affordable spaces where associations can survive or even flourish need to be planned for.

## 8.4 Discussion: (Re)claiming spaces for making

I start this discussion with four main takeaways from the chapter. First, getting access to premises is a major factor for whether an open workshop association is running an open workshop or not. Second, associations have specific needs and not all buildings, or all areas, will be suitable. Those specific needs, especially the need for premises that allow for loud and dirty work, and the desire for a certain degree of autonomy, make it difficult for open workshop associations to find a suitable space that they can access and afford. Third, the search and negotiation for a space is a task that many association boards need to spend a lot of time and energy on. Both rental contracts and municipal support are often short-term or at least insecure. Lastly, for associations who obtain municipal or other funding, access to a space is their main and crucial form of funding, while for associations who rent a space, rent is their highest expense. Finding suitable premises can require navigating existing legal and administrative systems in creative ways.

For the associations, the struggle to find a space consists of finding the right contacts within the municipality, applying for funding, finding time to navigate administration, and adapting a building to their needs. As I show in the third subchapter (8.3), open workshop associations are at the same time part of a bigger struggle over saturated urban space (see also Huron, 2015). I ended the previous section by discussing the lack of “uneven spaces” for associations in connection to recent debates in Sweden concerning what are called *culture sound zones* (*kulturljudzon*). Here I connect the lack of “uneven spaces” back to what open workshops potentially enable.

The examples from Linköping and Jönköping and the discussion of urban renewal practices and their consequences (8.3) show how neoliberal urbanism is affecting associations organising leisure activities. Without needing to understand the planning processes in these cases in detail, the significance of spatial dimensions in transformation processes becomes tangible. The lack of uneven space and the difficulty of accessing and sustaining them is a barrier for initiatives to go from ideas to practice. While in this thesis I have only looked at open workshop associations, the lack of uneven spaces has been a reason for politically motivated actors to claim space by squatting (Polanska & Weldon, 2020) and creative ways for claiming space within the rules (Hellström & Nasouri, 2019). Historically, both squatting by urban youth (Peterson et al., 2018) and, further back, the People’s House and Parks movement, have claimed spaces for culture, self-organised education, and grassroots organising.

Pries et al. (2020) conclude their discussion on the history of the People’s Park and Houses and their potential today by saying that

[t]he neoliberalization of Sweden would surely have confronted more vigorous opposition had the labor movement sustained the lively tradition of grounded activism that once created the People’s Houses and Parks. Swedish social democracy would today be more dynamic had the movement nurtured its grassroots even as it built the welfare state. Alas, just when we most needed these spaces for the people, they’d been turned into conference centers. (final paragraph)

Similarly to Illich’s observation regarding the enclosure of the commons, by enclosing a resource, perception and practices also change (Illich, 1992). The institutionalisation and closing of the People’s Park and Houses not only mean

that their physical space was closed, but at the same time their practice of grassroots organising was moved to the margins.

Availability of spaces for grassroots projects is one of the factors Sekulova et al. (2017) list as constituting the soil that grassroots need to be able to grow. The difficulties that actors in Sweden experience when claiming spaces to build their commons have effects on their ability to common. In chapter nine, I turn to the maintaining of open workshops, where I discuss practices of co-organising and tensions with individualism in relation to an estrangement to ideas and practices of co-organisation and commoning.

I close this chapter with three points regarding the enabling potential open workshops are said to have. T. S. J. Smith argues that open workshops enable tangible skills in crafts and manufacturing while also widening “experience in grassroots democracy” (2020, p. 607). Two points concern the enabling potential for manual skills, while the last concerns the experience of grassroots democracy, which leads to the final empirical chapter (chapter nine).

First, the fact that the manual aspect of open workshops creates one difficulty for the associations to find suitable premises points to a development that such premises allowing for manual work are disappearing from the urban, which is problematic beyond the case of open workshops. This includes premises allowing for small-scale manufacturing, upcycling, and repair, not just in the form of open workshops, but also as commercial formats (Ferm et al., 2021; Gärtner & Meyer, 2023; Lane & Rappaport, 2020). The lack of such spaces for repair and local manufacturing is not only concerning for radical transformations like degrowth, but should also be crucial for circular economies. Municipalities working with the European waste hierarchy need to prevent more things from going to waste (Naturskyddsforeningen, 2021). If more things are to be prevented from turning into waste they need to be repaired, which requires more than municipalities suggesting to their citizens to repair things (Lunds Kommun, n.d.), but infrastructure to do so or premises that allow others to do so (see also, e.g., Brandellero & Niutta, 2023; Collins, 2018; Landwehr Sydow, 2022; Mazzilli-Daechsel, 2019; Rahman & Best, 2023).

The second observation regarding tangible skills which I want to make relates to what Landwehr Sydow (2022) calls *material literacy* and *machine sensitivity*. She shows how practices in open workshops nurture a *material literacy* and *machine*

*sensitivity*. I suggest that the concepts can be expanded to a *manual literacy* which is facilitated by engagement in open workshops. The concepts of material literacy and machine sensitivity imply that such literacy and sensitivity need to be learned. In chapter two I argue that while open workshops nurture manual literacy, there exists also manual illiteracy which is problematic for everyday practices of repair and upcycling, but also on a broader scale. A less globalised economy as envisioned by degrowth will require more local production, which comes with required skillsets. Even in non-radical future ideas, material and manual literacy remain important, in connection to repair and upcycling in the circular economy, but also within what in Sweden is called *beredskap*, the readiness to locally respond to war or crisis.

Last, I turn to the less tangible skills named by T. S. J. Smith (2020), the ability to common and co-organise. The squatters interviewed by Polanska and Weldon (2020), highlight their experience of commoning as a crucial part of their squatting practice and that such an experience is unusual in the Swedish context. In chapter seven I describe the practice of co-organising as work intensive and a field of tension, but also as something that can be learned and developed through practice and experience. Here I want to highlight that open workshop associations, if they are able to sustain their access to a suitable space, can provide such an experience of commoning. The process of (re)claiming spaces for commoning as discussed in this chapter shows that it is an ongoing process even when workshops are established, and is one of the key challenges for claiming and sustaining open workshops as commons in the Swedish context.

In the next chapter I discuss a second key challenge, which is to motivate enough association members to contribute to the practice of commoning. Integrating enough members well enough and building working commoning relations is directly linked to the enabling potential and the need for spaces of commoning. In chapter ten I discuss both challenges together.

## 9 Maintaining

The focus in this chapter is to understand internal dynamics of maintaining the workshop commons and how those are affected by neoliberal politics. In the welfare state ideal version of a leisure association, which I discuss in chapter three, all association members are active members. An active member's role is multi-dimensional, which means that the member supports financially through membership fees, engages in small tasks, takes on larger responsibilities, represents the association in elected roles. Membership is intrinsically motivated – the member is a member because of what she can do through the association, but with an understanding that this can only be realised together (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012).

The material I present in this chapter suggests that open workshop associations are built after that idea of the multi-dimensional interdependent member, while the everyday reality of the workshop can look different. This chapter frames engagement or the active member base as essential for the smooth working of co-organised open workshops. A lack of such engagement poses another key challenge for open workshop associations' ability to common.

In the first subchapter (9.1), I show the high demand on *ideellt kapital* (volunteer capital), as one interviewee called it, and how the available engagement often is not enough. This is due both to the big number of tasks, and there being too few people willing or able to do those tasks.

In chapter seven, I describe how the workshop associations organise their workshops with the help of rules, routines and practices. What becomes apparent is that establishing and maintaining those routines and practices requires extended

amounts of effort from members. Robert (WA3) referred to those efforts as volunteer capital (*ideelt kapital*).<sup>81</sup> He explains the term like this:

Contribution of our members. We usually say, we have two sorts of capital, direct and indirect or volunteer capital. And it goes a bit in waves; a hockey stick graph. A few enthusiasts [*eldsjäler*, direct translation fire souls] and then you have quite a bit who are relatively active and do stuff and then it drops off quickly.

By direct capital, he refers to the financial and other material resources the association has. Indirect capital is non-material contributions such as time and energy members give to the association. He does not say more about how dependent they are on these forms of capital, but he describes how engagement fluctuates and that it is unevenly distributed among association members. There are a few *fire souls* who burn for the association and give a lot, then there are many who do something and then there are many that do little, very little or nothing. This picture of engagement distribution is similar for all associations I have visited. In some cases, the distribution is more extreme than in others, meaning that there can be very few who do a lot and many who do next to nothing for the association.

The guiding themes for the chapter are maintaining, responsibility and engagement. Maintaining is understood as maintaining the workshop commons and the practice of commoning. The aim of the chapter is to show with empirical material, and in conversation with the literature, how maintenance as a collective process is under strain under neoliberal welfare state conditions. Here I extend the answer to the second question guiding this research. In chapter eight, I discussed a struggle for suitable and affordable space as a key challenge for claiming and sustaining commoning practices. Here I unpack the unevenness of engagement and the structural and cultural factors that affect the distribution of care and responsibility within associations, a key challenge for the maintenance of commons and commoning practices in this neoliberal welfare state context.

In the first subchapter (9.1), I show how engagement and lack of engagement is experienced and handled by associations. In the second subchapter (9.2), I

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<sup>81</sup> Taking the discussion of the term volunteer into account that I presented in chapter three, the term becomes problematic to use. I find however no other English term that could work. It would be something like contribution motivated by meaning.

problematise the observations from 9.1 with help of three questions which board members pose in relation to the uneven distribution of responsibility within their associations. Each question makes a section of the subchapter. First, how could there be fewer tasks? Second, how could more people give more time and energy to the association? Third, would an open workshop function better if it was not dependent on volunteer engagement? In the last subchapter (9.3), I discuss these questions as a struggle of maintaining commoning practices in the Swedish neoliberal welfare state.

## 9.1 Tasks, time and responsibility

In co-organised open workshops, there are many tasks and there is little time. In the following pages, I share some quotes that illustrate what this imbalance implies for the associations and the *fire souls* who do give time and undertake tasks. This first quote comes from the same interview which I quote on the previous page. Philip (WA3) refers to the idea of volunteer capital.

All such associations and sports clubs and so on struggle with the same problems we discuss here with volunteer capital. It's difficult today to get people to engage in their leisure time. I mean we are on the board, [...]. It's not an insignificant amount of time one has to spend. [...] Just to make it work. And you also want to make stuff. It's almost – I sometimes do like that, that I come here and say today I'm only going to work on something [own project] and sometimes you come here and it's no idea to start with anything. [...] You can't do both, woodturning and have a board meeting, not at the same time in any case.

I want to point out several issues from this quote. Philip starts by framing their struggle for volunteer engagement in a context where other associations have similar struggles to find volunteers. The quote highlights the “not dismissible” amount of time that goes into work for the board. Philip ends by stating that you cannot do woodturning and a board meeting at the same time. While this last comment is stating the obvious, it also points to a crucial dilemma the board members face in their dedication to the workshop. Their time to be at the workshop is limited, they want to make stuff and want to care for the workshop. They have to prioritise.

Later in the interview, we talk about another set of tasks that need to be done and takes time: machine repair and service. Maintenance and service are also a topic in chapter seven, but there with a focus on the infrastructure; here, the focus is on engagement.

Walter: This is also a mentality. We try to buy second hand rather than new. Make a bargain, for our big machines, a bargain or find a renovation project. But there too its volunteer capital. It's such a balancing act all the time [...].

Philip: We also have some, part of the time is also just maintenance. And if some machine breaks, we repair it ourselves as much as possible. It's very rarely that we send something off for repairs.

Robert: Very rarely and then there are also enthusiasts [eldsjäler] on some machines.

It is not only the maintenance and repair of the workshop which take time and need committed people; buying new machines is also time intense, especially when there is an ambition to buy older machines for a good price. It takes time and skill to find them and there might be repairs needed from the start. Skill comes into play both in respect of the possible need for repair, but also when judging whether a price for a machine is good or if the machine is worth the effort. Walter points to a constant balancing act, where available volunteer capital needs to be balanced against the variety of tasks entailed in organising an open workshop.

In all interviews, the disproportionate scope of tasks to do compared to people's available time or available people was a topic. David (WA7), for example, puts time, funding, and space as the most crucial factors for associations. "We have a healthy economy. So, it's always time and space."

Maintenance and workshop improvements are among the things David does most at the workshop. He enjoys repair and maintenance, and here I do not get the impression that he experiences fatigue over the need for repair and maintenance, as it was at other workshops I visited (WA1, 2, 4). I am sharing this example to show how members happily give a lot of time to maintaining the workshop, and to highlight that this is so the workshop is running smoothly. Associations rely on members being enthusiastic about the machines and giving their time and skill.

There are two problems which can negatively affect that enthusiasm, both of which were noted in chapter seven and are connected to skill. Since "there is

certain people who know more than others” (David, WA7), there is a risk that repair always ends up with those who know most. At David’s association, they are aware of this problem. He explains that “[i]n most rooms it’s probably only one [who is asked when things break], but we have gotten better. We try to distribute widely.”

The other problem is that machines and tools easily break if they are used in an incorrect manner. In chapter seven, I share quotes from interviews with Maria (WA2) and with Lars (WA1) (pp. 227-229). Both describe problems with broken tools and workshop members who do not clean machines or use them in an irresponsible way. Lars describes that he is tired of all the repair and maintenance and that he does not want to take care of everything all the time anymore (also WA4).

Considering what I shared in the preceding paragraph, it becomes apparent that engagement with the association is highly connected to skill and enthusiasm for the association. Serving machines, buying machines, or building machines require skill and so does administration and community care. Those who have developed those skills easily end up with a high burden: caring for administration, infrastructure and sharing their skills (explainer’s burden, p. 212).

When imbalances become too big, *fire souls* risk burn-out or leaving the association. In 8.1 (p. 256), I share a quote in which Axel (WA4) describes how one member put lots of hours in the repair of one machine, and how he would not be motivated to do that again if someone just comes and breaks it by using it incorrectly. Later, Axel shares their experience of an enthusiast leaving because of other commitments, which resulted in a whole area of the workshop becoming dormant. Axel shares this observation, pointing out three things: first, motivated people can give a lot to the association and make a huge difference; second, there is a risk for them to do too much and give up or burn out; and third, if *fire souls* leave it will impact the association.

The topic of burn-out is also a recurring theme in other interviews. Examples include board members who do not manage to delegate and end up doing too much (WA1), or others who are very busy, with for example their work, but still take on tasks for the associations which they then never get around to doing (WA6). Albin (WA6) further shares that he would imagine himself burning out if he could not work for the association during quiet times at his regular job.

As well as stress due to limited time, there can also be stress about responsibility, when there are only few who carry responsibility and feel pressured from both potential funders and the association members. In the interview with Simon (WA9), he describes the period at the start of their workshop and how it affected him and another member of the association who he shared the main responsibility with.

It got very stressful. Especially for me and Agneta. We feel a sense of ownership over the whole project. But not everything happened so fast. And then it's our fault. While really, it's the funder's fault. The whole thing, it's hard. But we felt responsible for it, and we felt responsible for everything being right and finished. So, we spent enormous amounts of time. [...] There are things that for me aren't done. [...] But we are so tired.

He describes how they felt pressured from others in the association when things did not go as fast as expected due to delays on the side of the foundation who had given them a grant for renovations. They felt responsible towards the rest of the association, since they had also been those most enthusiastic for the workshop project in the beginning. In this case, there is an association with different activities, the workshop being one of them. When meeting Simon and Agneta they are proud of the project, but also aware that they put too much on themselves and need others to step up to carry more of the responsibility.

Board members from other associations also describe pressure and critique from association members.

It's just that people are perhaps a little impatient to realise that things take time. And plus, people who are retired anyway don't realise that we have a job ourselves. We have a family and so on. (Karl, WA8)

Things taking time in this case were administrative tasks to get the association running – finding a suitable space, getting all the formalities in order. Karl also adds that there can be a lack of understanding over how much time board members can give to the association. Albin (WA6) describes a similar situation. Here, someone claimed a seat on the board, after regular members had the impression that the board was not doing enough. Once on the board “they realized that it wasn't that easy. It's not that the board is lazy” (WA6).

What is revealed in these excerpts is a situation where regular members make demands towards the board, but also that administrative tasks can go very slowly due to external circumstances. Associations face long waits for bank account, contracts with landlords, or funding administration.

These last quotes and examples show that the uneven distribution of tasks due to levels of skill, enthusiasm and available time might not be a problem as such, but that problems arise in relation to association members who do not engage as much. Tensions emerge when engaged members need to do more repair and maintenance when others use machines incorrectly or irresponsibly, or do not clean up after themselves. Another tension is a lack of understanding on the side of regular members for the engagement that *fire souls* have for the association.

What is missing when these tensions arise is engagement, in the sense that not enough members are ready to assume larger responsibilities for the association; however, there is also a problem with irresponsible behaviour towards the material basis of the workshop and the work of other members. On the workshop floor, this uneven sense of responsibility surfaces when regular members do not help as much as they could with cleaning, maintenance, and more general care (see also 7.2) and in the struggle to find enough people who want to take a formal role and commit more in their engagement. In subchapter 9.2, I discuss how associations actively try to share responsibility more widely within the association.

Before moving to subchapter 9.2 and what ideas and strategies associations have for working against these imbalances, I note to three observations from the field that can point towards dynamics which help to explain the uneven sense of and distribution of responsibility.

One is a division between board members and regular association members; another is an idea of individual flexibility; and the third is different understandings about the role and working of associations. I argue that all three observations are directly linked to broader societal dynamics. Here I only portray how they manifest in the workshop associations. I then refer to them throughout the second subchapter (9.2) and discuss them in a dialogue with the Swedish context and literature on commoning in the discussion part of the chapter (9.3).

With the interviews I have conducted, I cannot say much about how regular members reason regarding their minimal engagement. I have interviewed board members and others involved in the organisation of open workshops. I have not

interviewed those who use the workshop without engaging in its reproduction. What I can say about this group comes from participant observations and the experiences that board members have shared with me.

Above I share some examples of how regular members make demands towards the board or have expectations about the quality and progress of the board's work. While this is problematic when thinking of the association as co-organised, it also shows that this division between the board and regular members does exist in practice. My observation is that it is difficult for regular members to understand how much administrative work the board is doing. This is both a problem of members not being interested enough, but also of the board not sharing enough information to make regular members more interested. This is connected to the discussion in chapter 7.3, where I suggest that openness catering for engagement and care is related to information about the work of the association. While associations actively work on breaking down this division (9.2), I argue in the last part of this chapter (9.3) that this division is also connected to how associations have changed since the 1990s.

Ideas about individual flexibility, the second observation I highlight here, become apparent in the difficulty of motivating more members to assume responsibility. Maria (WA2), a volunteer who would like to engage more, shares some reflections on why others are not engaging more. Her example shows that one reason is time.

I would have loved to have more time besides my job and really engaged and really committed myself. I would have chosen that, but then I would need to prioritise differently, work less.

While time is certainly an important factor for others also, Maria (WA2) has observed a hesitation on the part of other members to commit themselves in order to preserve their own flexibility.

The desire for and practice of flexibility manifests in a tendency of members to use the workshop only sporadically or only for one project. They might be students moving away after a few years, and some might use the workshop more during a period of part-time employment or unemployment but leave when they start or are back in full employment. David (WA7) shares that while they have a stable number of members, two-thirds of their member base are new members. Only one-third of the individuals remain for more than a year. This is an open

workshop in one of the larger Swedish cities. The association runs with a membership model, where the basic membership is set at a low cost and members can then buy full access for months at the time, which allows for very periodic use and presence in the workshop. While this is a common way of organising membership (see also chapter six), it brings a risk for the community. Someone who is at the workshop only short-term or sporadically will not be able to commit to doing regular tasks for the workshop such as being a board member or a volunteer taking care of a certain area.

With the last observation, I want to connect this flexible use to differences in understanding about open workshops and associations in Sweden more generally. During participant observation, I learned that many members are very focused on their projects when at the workshop. This is one of the goals open workshops have, to provide a place for members to be creative and be able to work on their projects. At the same time, this absorption in private projects can be problematic for the maintenance of the association.

In this context, I share an excerpt from the interview with Pär and Sven (WA5). When at the workshop, Sven is currently busy with building shelves in the entrance area. He is a pensioner, enjoys carpentry, and is dedicated to improving the workshop. Pär is a board member. We talk about what could be better at their workshop.

Per: Some more engagement, so you get help with the entrance would be nice.

Sven: Yes, well, yes, because it has been difficult, so to say [...] I can count on my hands so to say. But, well I like to work on myself, it's easiest. [...] if you think about it, we have a lot of makers here and they come in with their eyes on the station [workshop area they will use] and they work with their things there. [...] Little bit egoistic, they work on theirs, if you ask for help, you will get help, but it's like not many will help spontaneously.

Per: But they might just not want to interfere. Or if you stand there with your carpentry work, one might not want to go and ask if you need help, but it looks like you do your stuff

Sven: Yes, that's true. It's probably more like that people are so concentrated on their projects.

This excerpt shows that it is too easy to say that people do not care or are selfish. There are more dynamics at play. Pär and Sven desire for more spontaneous engagement. One reason they find for why members are not engaging more spontaneously is that members are often very focused on their own projects – and so is Sven, as he notes, but that his project is to improve the entrance. Sven also says that people are willing to help when asked. While this is connected to the focus on one's own project, there is also a mentality of not wanting to interfere or impose on someone else's project.

Pär and Sven find a positive explanation for the problem they observe: that workshop members are at the workshop and focus on their projects connects back to the motivation for many to start a workshop association. They want to make things. This idea resonates with the broader framing of open workshops inspired by the so-called maker movement. It is centred on the individual maker. While creative absorption and the ability to make something are central to the idea of the open workshop, the collective character of maintaining the workshop falls under the workbench.

Going further with his concerns, Lars (WA1) connects a lack of responsibility he has observed in his years of engagement at the workshop with developments in society at large. Due to those concerns, he has started to doubt the model of the volunteer-run shared workshop.

I believe personally that – I really think the open workshop is a great initiative – but I think it will never work because of humanity. It's not that people want to be mean or want to sabotage, but it's about ignorance and misunderstanding. One thinks of oneself and here and now and one doesn't think if the bigger picture. [...] Common good, what is it called?<sup>82</sup> Common good impermanence or – as soon as something is for free it's not worth anything anymore.<sup>83</sup>

Lars has observed a lack of understanding of what it means to share something. His analysis is that there is a broader societal problem of people not acting

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<sup>82</sup> Lars uses the words “Allmännyttans, vad heter det, allmännyttans förgängligheten”; I do think he is referring to the tragedy of the commons which would be “Allmänningens dilemma eller allmänningarnas tragedi” in Swedish. I decide, however, to stick to his formulation in the translation.

<sup>83</sup> There is a fee for the use of that workshop, but it is lower than average. See also chapter six for fees.

responsibly with things that do not cost them. In this framing, the focus on the personal project and lack of concern for the workshop is a symptom of individualism and a lack of understanding of responsibility and interdependency. What becomes apparent is that using the same workshop is not the same as sharing and co-organising it.

Turning back to the tangible problems associations face due to a lack of engagement, the next subchapter shows three approaches with which associations address those problems. The first approach is to reduce responsibility for overloaded *fire souls* by sharing responsibility beyond the workshop association with a broader network of workshop associations. The second is to share responsibility more widely within the association. The third approach is asking, by extension from the quote above, whether a co-organised model of open workshops is realistic in the context or if responsibility needs to be professionalised for the workshop to function.

## 9.2 Three questions concerning responsibility

In this subchapter, I discuss how associations handle the unevenness of engagement in the workshop. While this question is empirically interesting as such, discussing those approaches also sheds light on tensions at the workshop. What those tensions imply for maintaining commoning practices more broadly is what I discuss in the final part of the chapter (9.3).

### **Reinventing the wheel or inter-association sharing**

While there are many things to do, like maintenance and administration, and a fairer distribution of tasks is the most common approach (next section), the idea that a better organisation could reduce the workload is something that also comes up frequently in the interviews. Lars (WA1), whose frustration about intensive maintenance work due to improper usage, I shared above, sees a general problem in the associations' administration and organisation.

The association spends a lot of time putting out fires. They spend a lot of time thinking that now this is broken, we have to fix it, instead of building up knowledge and ensuring that it never breaks.

Active people are busy putting out fires instead of having time to reorganise to prevent fires from happening. While Lars refers to the need to build local knowledge and documentation, the question of building up structures can also be asked beyond the individual workshop association. How the umbrella organisation MoS could help workshop associations with their administrative burden is something that comes up frequently, formulated as a question of how there can be fewer administrative tasks for individual associations.

The final report of a Vinnova project on the state of open workshop associations in Sweden comes to the following conclusion:

The in our eyes most important lesson is that we need to work together, to not reinvent the wheel, to learn, and to share our knowledge. (Svensson et al. 2016, 'Vad vi lärde oss' section, my own translation)

Throughout the empirical material, many struggles with administration and organisation are apparent. I have heard many times that more knowledge exchange between associations would be of help, especially for newer associations. That a network to exchange knowledge on how to run an open workshop in Sweden would be beneficial for open workshops is what the report concluded already in 2016. By including this quote I do not want to say, "look it has been ten years, and they keep on reinventing the wheel", but I want to highlight that even while being aware that there is a need and a lot of potential for sharing knowledge and experience, there are hinders that prevent this exchange from happening. In some cases, situations and needs are too different for exchange to be that helpful, but many open workshop associations in Sweden keep on finding their own individual solutions while cooperation could be meaningful.

The umbrella organisation (MoS) was founded after the conclusion of the previously-mentioned Vinnova project. Two of the three aims of MoS relate to the issue of working together. When I have asked about MoS, their activities, what board members would like them to do, and whether board members could imagine being more active in MoS, a picture of lack of resources emerges. MoS has had very low activity during parts of my study period, gained some momentum in 2022, but has still not developed much beyond the annual meetings. One reason that MoS is not expanding and achieving more of their goals is that engaged members are busy with their local associations and do not have time to give to the umbrella organisation.

MoS's webpage contains an eight-point FAQ that deals with some basic question about how to start and run an open workshop association (Makers of Sweden, n.d.-a). While there is helpful general practical advice, questions which associations would like help with which came up in interviews would require a lot more detail and direct exchange.

Lars (WA1), who was active in MoS when it was newly founded, confirms my impression. While it is a good idea, there is nobody available to do the work that would be needed, as those who feel committed enough already give all their time to the local association. Lars adds that “a national umbrella organisation would have been great, but it requires a lot of work to get everything started.”

Lars (WA1) points out three problems that create a dilemma for the umbrella organisation. As it has no budget that could enable employment of people, all is based on volunteer engagement. That engagement is, however, hard to uphold, as people tend to be busy with their own local associations. As long as MoS does not offer anything to its member associations, many will not prioritise engaging there over engaging locally. However, as long as there is no increase in engagement with MoS, MoS will not be able to do more work to help member associations, which could in turn lead to a broader engagement with MoS.

Pär (WA5), who sits on the board of MoS, shares that they do not manage to do as much as they would like to. We talk about their third task, which he calls lobbying. One aim would be to be more recognised as a relevant actor in civil society and receive state money like, e.g., craft or youth organisations do in Sweden. The money could be used to hire staff to follow up on their goals.

Exchange of experience and help with starting an open workshop is a need that newly started associations express (WA4, 6, 8, 10). They have concrete ideas with which they could use help from MoS, and mention that they did not get as much help as they had hoped. One idea are templates for policies for, e.g., equal opportunities, democracy work, or data protection that associations need to have, so the “small associations don't need to dig into that” (WA6). Another idea that comes up in the interview is that MoS could organise online meetings for open workshop associations where members from different workshops could discuss experiences and questions around issues like insurance, which, as Gunnar suggests, would not require that much work from MoS (WA6).

When I ask Albin (WA6) if he had thought about contributing more to MoS, since he was very clear on the benefits of an umbrella organisation, he confirms what Lars (WA1) had also observed, that he is too busy with the local organisation to think about engaging with the umbrella.

Before leaving this section, I need to point to one more aspect in relation to MoS, and that is an attitude of demand towards MoS from the member associations. When discussing the role of MoS with member associations, they did not only share ideas for what MoS could do but also have an expectation that they should do these things. This was most explicit in the interview with Albin and Gunnar (WA6). Albin notes that they have not seen what they asked for and that they should really remind the MoS board to do what they promised. Later Gunnar explains that

MoS has not existed for a while, and until recently they have not had any formal membership register [...]. It's only now they call us members and take a small fee and so on. So now we can demand something.

At other points in the interview Gunnar and Albin themselves describe how members of their local association have demanded from their local board to do certain things faster, while Gunnar and Albin, who are on the board, describe a situation of them doing as much as they can and as fast as they can. In the context of their own association, Gunnar and Albin problematise how others make demands of a volunteer-run board, and here they make demands themselves of a volunteer-run board.

With this observation I do not want to point finger at them, but show a tendency I have also observed in other situations. Gunnar almost literally says that being a member in an association means you can demand a service from the organisation. In another context, being a member of an organisation could mean that you are contributing to the organisation and take responsibility for it. In 9.3, I discuss this situation in conversation with literature on volunteer associations in Sweden and ask what such an understanding of being a member in an association means for commoning in the Swedish context. The next section is concerned with how associations work towards sharing responsibility more broadly within the association.

## Active or activating members

In this section, the focus is on the association members and the imbalanced distribution of responsibility among them. In all open workshop associations, there are some members who decide to give time and energy to the association and keep it running, while others use the open workshop's infrastructure, without contributing more than the required fees. Open workshop associations offer this option, to use the open workshop against a fee without any further demands on engagement with the association. By *offer* I mean simply that it is a possibility for members to use the workshop without contributing to maintaining it. Associations do not sanction members who use the workshop this way. At the same time, there is the constant struggle to get more members to take responsibility and care for the workshop and association. In this section, I argue that one reason for the unevenness in engagement is that members lack understanding and experience of the collective aspect of the open workshop associations. Instead of contributing to the collective workshop, they use it as a service they pay for. In the subsequent paragraphs, I explain what I mean in more detail.

What I discuss in this section is a tension between workshops being shared within a community and the workshop being an infrastructure that is used by members. At first glance, *shared within a community* and *used by members* might appear to be the same thing. What I claim in this section is, however, that it is not the same. Sharing within a community involves community members being responsible and caring for the shared workshop and association. Using an infrastructure that other people also use does not require any care from the individual member. To illustrate, the workshop would then be like a typical Swedish gym. Members use the gym against a fee; they come and use the infrastructure as they please. There are others – staff – who take care of maintenance and administration. Members use the gym according to the gym's rules and can make demands and complaints towards the administration if things do not work. Being a member of a gym of this nature works like buying access to a service. I argue that many open workshop members treat their association like a service, and that this is part of the problem around low engagement. Here, it is important to clarify that this tendency is not only due to members using the workshop like a service, but also that the association's board can reinforce this tendency through their communication and way of organising.

Looking closer at the dilemma between service and co-organisation, I begin with how associations work to inspire more of their members to engage with the workshop and to not just use the workshop. Already in chapter 7.3, I show strategies the associations develop to encourage engagement. One aspect is openness created by sharing of information and clear rules that help members to find their place in the association. Another is to actively break up the divide that easily happens between elected board members and regular members (see also 9.1).

In the next few paragraphs, I share empirical material to show more about how tensions around uneven engagement surface and are handled in open workshop associations. One aspect is that boards need to find a balance between leaving room for members to take initiative and giving guidance for how to engage. Here Walter (WA3) describes how they try to give room for members to take initiative.

I always say the workshop is never finished, it's constantly evolving all the time [...] It's really about trying to make people feel that there is room and making sure that they are motivated to actually be able to make improvements when they feel it's needed. And it's kind of just this like, we're not done.

The board pushes a general understanding of the workshop as never being finished and always developing, which signals that it is not the board that has a grand vision and everybody follows, but that they make their workshop together. On the other hand, they have experienced the reality that there needs to be some guidance as to how members can get involved.

Walter: There are members who are great at starting projects [...] but then to finish a project, that's more difficult. Then you realise how much work it is. For example, the big wall towards the woodworking area, that got started rather rushed and then those like four wall sections stood there and that big scaffolding, taking a lot of space. Then I had enough, now I organise this, [...] I put up a plan and then it was suddenly very easy to follow instructions and then it became a wall.

C: Is it like if someone takes an initiative, others will join in?

Walter: Well, it's about being able to create enthusiasm. It's not like "you do that!", but more like, this is what needs to be done, who wants to help? And then there are clear instructions and some sort of plan when things should be done and there is not that much creative freedom. I think people are more comfortable to help if they don't need to make independent decisions, but someone has decided. It also depends on who helps with what. If it's just a matter of screwing in some studs

and you get instructed. This screw should go there. And do the same thing 20 times. It's very easy to get help with that. But if it is like, can you get paint for that wall? "What kind of paint? What colour? Base layer first?" that kind of things, people don't know, it's a bit like that's up to the one organising.

The quote illustrates a balance concerning responsibility that Walter has detected for how to engage members in improvement projects. On the one hand, there should be room for members to come with their own ideas to make them feel part of the workshop (previous excerpt); on the other hand, members are more likely to help when they are told exactly what to do, and prefer to do mundane tasks. What becomes apparent is that there is a difference between mundane tasks and one time help with workshop maintenance and motivating members to take initiatives and assume responsibility.

Lars (WA1) shares his experience with involving more members to take more responsibility.

I believe it's partly about structures in organisation, but also willingness. I think many of our hosts would like to do more, when talking to them they say they'd like to, but don't dare. Or they don't know where to start. And there one needs to work with transparency. And this thing with not daring, is a lot about who sits on the board and if it's strong personalities, with strong agenda or not. [...] We would need a strong united board that thinks forward. Now we got a relatively united board that is putting out fires. And then I think it's also about – that you solve a lot by delegating outside the board. To not ask "who wants to take responsibility for woodworking and metal workshop?", but instead "you are responsible for this workshop area. Here is a credit card. You have 5000 kronor in your budget." I think would help. [...] nobody steps up, so therefore I think we need to delegate.

There are several dynamics at play that become visible in this quote. Something that has not come up before is how internal dynamics on the board and the specific personalities of those on the board can impact the overall culture of the workshop. In this case there is at least one board member who works against broader engagement from the members and hosts, as he would like to see the municipality to take more responsibility instead.

What Lars describes relates further to what I discuss in chapter 7.3, how openness about the organisation of the workshop is a way to integrate members and engage them more deeply. Lars confirms this with his observation that vague or even

contradictory information creates a situation where members do not engage, both due to general insecurity over what is allowed or appreciated and a lack of practical guidance. Here I also want to recall the observation from the annual meeting I shared in 7.3 (pp. 223-226). The board says anybody can organise courses or events and it is not the role of the board. However, nobody does organise anything, which I relate to a lack of information about what can be done, how to practically go about it, and the absence of any living practice of co-organising activities at that workshop.

Lars suggests that the board needs to delegate responsibility over, for example, certain workshop areas directly to certain individuals. Here the board has created the role of an area coordinator (like in, for example, WA5) and asked who would like to step up. This strategy was not successful, which is why Lars suggests that appointing people, who the board thinks are suitable could be a better approach.

This last point is at first glance contradictory to what Walter (WA3) describes. Walter says that you cannot say “you do this”, but should ask, “who can?”. In the case Walter describes it is mundane tasks on one-time occasions for workshop improvements. In the situation Lars describes, it is about taking responsibility over an extended period and getting involved in the organisation of the workshop. Being a coordinator for a workshop area requires a certain experience and expertise with that area, and ideally the person has been using the workshop for a while, is there frequently, and knows many of the others who use that workshop area. It is not something anybody could do. Pär (WA5) shared how they have had area coordinators for some, but not all areas. In their case it took some dedication from the board to find somebody for each area (see p. 203).

While in Lars’ case the association board failed in delegating and sharing responsibility between more members, other associations have successfully inspired more members to engage. There is still not more than enough, and some individuals are both board members and hosts or area coordinators, but there is enough commitment from enough individuals to make the workshop run rather smoothly (e.g., WA3, 5, 7).

Axel (WA4) shares some reflections from their process of reorganisation at the association.

And this is what strangled us before. Because before, we probably had problems with trying to centralise too much and then one loses motivation. Where you can’t

feel that yes, but I own it. I can do how I want, with approval of course, but yes, that motivates.

He has observed how sharing widely and including many not only protects individual members from doing too much but also creates a more open association that more feel motivated to engage with.

Adding another nuance to the question of sharing responsibility, Simon (WA9) problematises knowledge hierarchies he has experienced. Many times, when members have ideas for projects within the association, he has to ask for a lot of details that are not thought through. Typically, these are legal aspects or safety as well as questions of long-term maintenance.

If you manage it on the small grassroots level, it's easy to become... an asshole who problematises or... some kind of mini king.

They often have to stop projects that are unfeasible for various reasons. For Simon this creates discomfort as he feels like the one destroying people's ideas and sitting in a position of power he does not want to have. In the end, he and other board members carry the responsibility for what the association does and cannot agree to projects they judge to be dangerous or difficult for them to maintain in the long run. Simon's reflection shows that engagement is not only a question of members being interested, but that there are other dynamics at play such as imbalances in knowledge, experience, and legal responsibility.

Overall, the material shows that it is relatively easy to get members to help with hands-on tasks that do not require any decision-making. Furthermore, there is a need for the board to be open and transparent to make it possible for members to be more active for the association. Members need to feel that they can be part of and make the workshop their own. Helping with easy tasks can be a way for members to build relationships with other members and members of the board. To invite them to do such tasks is one way for the association to be open and to build a community in the workshop. I also want to recall of chapter 7.3, where I show how associations create open and involving practices to create conditions for sharing in community. This requires a lot of effort, and a lack of time can be a hinder for the association to create enough of a community and engagement culture.

What all the examples also show is that if the associations do not actively work against this, there is a risk that the board ends up centralising all administration

and organisation. The board is legally responsible for the association. Members are elected to the board and are delegated to do their task. They agree to the task and take up different roles on the board. This setting encourages a centralised organisation that many associations experience. The divide between board and regular members shows in how tasks are distributed within the association. It also shows in expectations formulated towards the board and from the board.

Earlier, I shared how association members can show a demanding attitude towards the board. Association members feel entitled to demand that the board does certain things and how it does them. This attitude provokes critique from the side of board members who point out that they do as much as they can considering that it is a volunteer position. There is also an implication that the board consists of just normal members who – in contrast to those demanding things – stood up to take responsibility for the association. In the reaction from the board, I see an idea that board and members should be working together and supporting each other; that the board is not at the service of the regular members. In other situations, however, I have observed how the board, through communication, does just that – act as if they are at the service of the regular members.

To give an example, Karl (WA8) shares a concern regarding whether the regular members will accept or understand a specific decision by the board. The board has chosen premises for the workshop that are not ideal but fit their budget.

So, this rent is perfect for us. If one just explains to the members that we won't be here forever. Maybe they will have some understanding. Maybe, I don't know, I hope so.

Karl and the other board members have decided on the premises they use. There is a fear that if association members do not understand that this is not forever, they might leave. The excerpt shows a dynamic whereby the board does the organising and members need to understand and have something explained. The worry is that members might be dissatisfied with what their board does and leave the association. This resembles a company wanting to create a good customer experience, worried that their customers might leave, rather than a community who co-organises. Furthermore, the example suggests that a service attitude or professionalisation of the association is not only due to members' ideas about their role, but something that board members also carry in their roles.

Before closing this section, I list a few things board members describe that impact engagement, but which are out of their control. One is the insecurity about access to space that I discuss in chapter eight.

How much energy do we have for renovating machines if we don't know if we can take them with us? The new place [of which they don't know how it will be like, as they have not made any new contract], and generally uncertainty and concerns make that one loses the necessary dedication and drive. (Axel, WA4)

The excerpt shows that it is hard to find motivation to service machines that might not be used in the near future, and furthermore, how this uncertainty about the future of the association hampers motivation for engagement.

Noah (WA10), board member at another association with an uncertain future, puts those concerns very plainly.

I'm coming every Monday and I'm giving my time. Is it for nothing? [...] These question marks are not motivating you.

He says this in a context where the workshop is used also by others who do not belong to the association. He shares his frustration about being in the dark about issues which are essential for his association. One of those issues is that they do not know whether they can keep the machines they are currently using. He is tired of not getting the full picture about their situation. Not knowing what one is giving time and energy for is inhibiting more serious engagement.

Instability provides one reason why some might not be motivated to engage in their local workshop association, and rather use it as a service while it is there. Nevertheless, I want to ask for more reasons why engaging in open workshop associations is not prioritised by more who do use those workshops. Many of the board members I talked to actively try to improve conditions and make it easier for regular members to engage and integrate into the workshop. What is interesting to note is that those people who do engage, and who talk to me about their engagement, show lots of what in Swedish is called *drivkraft*, a driving force that makes them give lots of time and energy to the association and drives them to make the workshop happen. Reflecting on the engagement I have seen, the workshops depend on individuals with that drive. I have previously introduced the term *eldsjäl*, fire soul, a Swedish term for enthusiast. Without these fire souls,

many of the associations would not survive and would likely never even have started.

Closing this section, I come back to the idea that regular members might misunderstand the workshop for a service they pay for, and that this one explanation for the unevenness of engagement. The analysis of the empirical material shows that understanding associations as service providers is not something that can be mitigated by information-sharing alone. I pick this up again in the discussion part of this chapter (9.3), and argue that the material, when seen in its context, shows how maintaining commons is not just a question of idealism, but of navigating structural, cultural and emotional conditions. Establishing practices of commoning requires the associations to work against embodied practices and experiences and dominant norms.

The next section continues with the tension between service consumption and co-organising. While above I discussed associations' work to move towards more co-organisation and less service, this final section of 9.2 looks at what it would mean to intentionally turn open workshops into a service.

### **Service or co-organisation**

I have discussed ideas about how to share responsibility beyond the individual workshop and how to share responsibility more evenly within associations. This last part of 9.2 explores ideas that imply a professionalisation of responsibility. I discuss how this idea emerges in some interviews and what it means for the concept of the open workshop.

Lars (WA1) left the board he was on partly due to a frustration with the association. He says the following when reflecting on the association.

So, organisationally, I think the association has a lot to deal with, and the association, to say it drastically, would be much better off if it wasn't an association, but maybe a company. Because there you have, an incentive, your salary and you have a hierarchy where someone actually tells you "Do your job!" Because then there is also an incentive to drive the organisation forward. Now, the associations floats, you never get ahead. You might go a little backwards sometimes.

In the quote, Lars reasons why the workshop might work better as a company. He suggests that a company could incentivise management (board) and would mean

staff who could be told what to do could maintain the workshop. To contextualise this quote, Lars is in the interview frustrated with the current situation and has put lots of time and energy in the workshop without seeing his efforts making much of a difference. That is mainly due to conflicts within the board and a resulting standstill. He has at other points in the interview shared his frustration with humanity and how he would like a workshop that is run by a community, open for all. I see his reflections as a way to point to problems he has observed with running the association. His suggestion that a company could work better is an answer to the circumstances formulated as a provocation rather than his ideal scenario.

The reasoning for why a company format might be better is linked to questions of engagement. When too few assume responsibility, a situation where no voluntary engagement is necessary appears to be a solution. In a company as Lars describes it, there would be no need to share responsibility, as it would be the company and its employees who organise and maintain the workshop.

At another point during the interview, Lars shares a somewhat milder version of this idea; here, it is not about the whole workshop being a company, but there being staff that keep the workshop open every day and organises courses and events.

An open workshop, [...] I would have had - staff. Someone who runs activities during the day, daytime activities, courses, training, workshops, both during the day and in the evenings, but also someone who is actually paid to keep it open in the evenings, at weekends and perhaps every day of the week.

What Lars suggests here would answer to the need for both maintenance and community activities. While it would formalise the idea of the association as service provider and be a step towards professionalisation, it is also a suggestion for protecting individuals who engage and risk burning out while caring for the workshop in their free time. Some members could be paid to do some of the work they already do.

Julian (WA11) too speaks about the need to have one responsible person in order to create engagement. In the quote that I share below, Julian does not specify if that person would need to be employed by the workshop, but he hints at this in other occasions during the interview.

That there are the right enthusiasts behind it and who are in charge. Or what should we say? Persons responsible. Then it is easy to create a commitment. If there isn't, it's easy that things fall apart [...] Even if hosts help to keep the workshop open and so on, they can't run the place. There has to be someone who is officially in charge.

What both Lars and Julian share is an idea that there needs to be someone or possibly a team who carries the main responsibility for the workshop and is paid for that task. Julian says this out of his experience working as such a responsible person, and Lars out of his experience where sharing of responsibility did not work well enough.

Mai (M3) is a municipal employee who was temporarily responsible for a municipal cultural hub, hosting and supporting an open workshop association, and who had herself been active in an open workshop previously. She speaks from both her previous experience and her current role.

I think it's very, you know, the idea is very beautiful, but I think and I understand. I mean, if you don't have money, you know if you're not getting paid and why would you do, you know the work? Because it is a lot of work to teach people and to welcome people. [...] It's a free job. It's a lot of work. And you don't get paid, right? So it's only about, like engagement because you like the project.

Here she points out that keeping an open workshop open and inviting – which requires welcoming new people and helping and teaching them – requires a lot of work (see 7.3 and 9.1). From that starting point, she questions why anybody would do all that work without getting paid. She finds a volunteer-run workshop beautiful but unrealistic. According to her, liking a project is not motivation or incentive enough.

If you're paying someone, you can request that they do certain things, but if you're not paying anyone, you cannot request anything.

She takes the idea of employing or paying people for their work for the workshop further. Someone who is paid, she argues, can be requested to do things. From a volunteer, by this logic, you cannot demand anything. A model with one or several (municipal) employed people who keep the workshop open, run courses and maintain equipment could solve problems with cleaning, repair, lack of community events and lack of courses.

In the last two quotes Mai is critical about volunteer-run workshops based on concerns over motivation. She questions whether unpaid people would want to take care of the workshop and open it for others. She also criticises the model from another perspective, that of a non-caring user.

And I think that's the dangerous part here. Like, it's so cheap, you know, like. You don't really care, you don't engage.

Mai considers average membership and access fees for open workshops in Sweden as very low, compared to, for example, what a gym memberships or crafts courses costs (see also chapter six). Mai argues that since it is cheap to use the workshop, members do not engage as they get the feeling that the workshop is not worth anything. She further argues for a need of

ownership that people feel that they own the project and I really want to make it succeed and see it happen.

She talks of economic ownership. Her point is that if a member puts more money into the membership, that person would care about the workshop and contribute to see it survive. She later adds that with a higher membership fee there would be money to pay someone to take care of the site.

Contrary to Mai's line of argument Walter (WA3) suggests another idea about ownership that helps with creating engagement.

I believe that with a non-profit, volunteer format, without municipal support, there will be more of a community around it. People give more of themselves to the project.

In Walter's experience, running an open workshop in a non-profit format without municipal support and without staff is a motivator for members to engage. They own the project in the sense of having autonomy; they manage it themselves. There are, however, also economic elements involved. First, their workshop works with a limited company model (*Aktiebolag, AB*), where many members own a share (see 8.2). This is, however, not what Walter refers to in this context. While owning a share certainly impacts the seriousness with which their members take the whole association, it is also their autonomy that makes them engage.

To come back to the idea of turning the co-organised workshop commons into a service taken care of by staff, I argue that it would solve some problems, but it would also change the character and potential of the open workshop. As a service run by staff, organised privately or publicly, an open workshop can become an infrastructure that enables the public to make stuff, repurpose, upcycle, engage with manual tasks, and potentially address mental health issues. All of these are benefits that are pointed out in the literature on open workshops (see 2.1). In this case, it becomes a space of service provision and service consumption, of some who manage and others (users/members) who consume and demand. When conceiving of the open workshop as a commons, however, an important dimension would be missing. The workshop would not be a prefigurative space to experience co-organisation, autonomy, nor enable non-capitalist subjectivities, as is argued in a particular strand of literature on open workshops (2.1) and for commons in general (2.2).

Upcycling workshops, which I mention as another format of open workshop in Sweden (chapter six), are organised as such services. They have employed staff that maintain the equipment and help visitors with their upcycling or repair projects. These workshops have basic household tool equipment rather than industrial machines. Users do not need to be members or pay, nor can they form the workshop in any way. Those workshops are fully dependent on municipalities or other organisations for their funding and administration. They are valuable in their own way, provided opportunities and inspiration for repair and serving an important community function as they are non-commercial social spaces (Öhgren, 2021; UW1-6).

A service that in Sweden is taken for granted and built on ideas of sharing is the public library; historically co-organised by citizens with an important role in bottom-up education, now in its most dominant form an institutionalised public service. Bror (M2) is active in a self-organised bike repair workshop and manager of one of the creative hubs hosting an open workshop association. In our interview, he repeatedly uses the Swedish library to explain what is special about open workshops and how this makes them valuable.

I think this kind of environment, not just ours, but collaborative environments are absolutely crucial for, they are crucial for societies in general. That there are things that are commons, that are shared. And there are not that many. [...] When you talk about public space, meeting places, many of them are service places. Places

where you get something. I love the Swedish libraries. But they are just service places. I can't do anything in a library except ask someone else to do something for me. There is no space for me to do things. And I think those places are very, very important. For trust in society in general. To meet with other people.

Bror makes a comparison with the Swedish libraries, which are great as they do provide an excellent service. What he says is that we, however, also need other places where there is no service, but where we need to organise things together with others. He highlights mainly that there are not a lot of non-service spaces – but that open workshops are. With the discussion in the previous section and in this section, I argue that the dominance of *service places*, as Bror calls them, also makes us into *service consumers* or *service receivers* and *service producers* who need to (re)learn to organise things together.

Closing this section, I bring in another point from Bror's perspective on open workshops. When discussing engagement and commitment so far, I have discussed it from an association perspective – what it means for the association to have non-engaged members and what associations do to engage more members. Bror also reflects on what the experience of engaging and being active can mean for the individual member and what that, by extension, can mean for society.

I also believe, and it is my own conviction, that it is precisely in the process of making and collaborating, the creative process, that there are many keys to the major problems we face in a post-industrial society. If you talk about sustainability issues, for example. To be able to feel competent, to be able to feel that I can fix something or build something or develop or innovate something. It's a personally very big and satisfying thing. And I think it can be very, very good when transferred to a societal perspective. I don't think that small open workshops like ours or places like that in themselves solve any climate issues. But I think it's part of it, a little bit of a puzzle piece of it that creates people who have the confidence and do things, who have learned to organise and push things forward and also have this feeling that I'm a competent person, I don't need, I'm not a consumer, I'm a producer. I am a participant in society. It sounds very idealistic and so on, but I really believe that it's very important and that we are influenced as human beings by the environments we are in, that are available to us.

Both by making and repairing things, but also through organising and “seeing things through”, Bror argues we become confident and competent persons. Such experiences, he argues, could – if transferred to a societal perspective – create more

engagement and participation in society. Later in the interview we come back to this idea, and he highlights that to be such a competent person is something that we can and need to learn and get better at. Bror has observed that open workshops and other collaborative environments are places where learning this is made possible.

I think above all you can train yourself to be a more capable person, have more self-confidence simply, “I can, and I will, and it is my responsibility to do”.

Here he also adds the idea of responsibility, that being competent might create the desire and ability to take responsibility when initiating or engaging in collaborative processes. Bror’s perspective highlights the role co-organised open workshops can play beyond providing tools and machines for people to make things. They are also platforms for people to learn how to share, how to take responsibility for something beyond themselves and organise a continuous infrastructure together with others. Without using those words, Bror describes how workshop users through their active involvement and co-organisation develop commoning subjectivities (see Singh, 2017). Implied is that using a service is fundamentally different in what it does to the one consuming or producing the service.

Having put some emphasis on the idea of professionalising open workshops to make them work and to meet the problem of unengaged members, I want to highlight that no majority of those I interviewed suggest professionalisation. However, the majority identifies time and engagement as a key challenge. They experience problems with members who do not recognise the need to engage and to act responsibly, and with enthusiasts who engage and risk burning out.

Open workshop associations end up somewhere between service provider and co-organised workshop, and as I argue in 9.3, between a dominant neoliberal approach to organising infrastructure and a strong tradition of co-organisation inherited from the welfare state.

## 9.3 Discussion: Members and strangers

The starting point for this discussion is that maintaining open workshop commons in Sweden is challenging for those who try, and that the reasons behind these difficulties are complex. The challenge is to share responsibility and the tasks of maintaining the culture and practices of commoning in a way that does not overburden anybody. The empirical material shows that associations struggle with sharing these tasks widely among their members, which affects how well they manage to maintain their commoning. Sharing tasks widely among those using the workshop is one way to handle care and maintenance work. This is the strategy that is applied in all workshops: in some successfully, in others less so. Another strategy that is highlighted by many as potentially reducing (mainly administrative) tasks for the individual workshops is to obtain help from an umbrella organisation. That organisation would require that workshop associations join their efforts, which currently proves to be difficult as committed members are busy at their own associations. A last strategy that is named is the professionalisation of open workshops.

In the following discussion of the struggle to maintain open workshop commons in the Swedish context, I follow two connected threads of understanding. First, I look at how shifts in understandings of associations in Sweden, their role, and the role of their members (see chapter three) can help understand unevenness in engagement. Second, drawing on ideas about commoner subjectivities and the need to learn commoning (see chapter 2.2) I argue that workshop users are not only strangers to each other, but also strangers to the practice of commoning, which can help understand the difficulties the associations face. Both threads are entangled with the association's dilemma of being caught between an ambition of co-organisation or commoning and a pulling force of multi-layered neoliberalisation. I discuss each thread individually alongside the overarching question of why not more association members are ready to commit and engage actively in maintaining the open workshop they use.

### Members

In an early draft of the analysis for the thesis, I used various terms to describe those who use open workshops. I wrote about members, users, volunteers and visitors,

and one piece of feedback I received on that early draft was to think about what to call those who are in the workshops. I did so, and realised what a central role these persons, what they are called, and how they understand themselves, play for the workshop. Looking closer, I realised that naming them was not that straightforward.

Open workshop associations in Sweden organise according to an association format, which has three kinds of members: regular members, volunteers, and board members. Board members are elected to take care of administrative tasks and serve as representatives in regional and national umbrella organisations. Then there are volunteers for tasks within the organisation such as hosts and those responsible for workshop areas – in other associations, like sports, this can be other tasks, roles and responsibilities. Everybody else is a regular member.

In chapter three, I show that there is a strong organisational ideal of the non-profit association associated with the social welfare state heritage. I argue that while the ideal is still oriented after social welfare state norms and values, the reality for associations has changed. Having seen this discrepancy, some (e.g., Forslund, 2016) argue that it is high time to do away with inherited democratic ideals and follow an US-inspired professionalisation of the non-profit sector. Not giving up on the ideal of the co-organised grassroots association, I discuss this discrepancy as a cue to understand the crisis of engagement that the case of open workshop associations is just one example of.

The discussion in this section on *members* addresses two questions. First, I discuss the already introduced question about member identity. Second, I ask how the autonomy of the association plays into these dynamics.

In chapter three I describe a development that accelerated with the neoliberalisation of Swedish politics in the 1990s, with associations being affected by both neoliberal policies impacting their administration directly (e.g., funding schemes) and neoliberal ideas of efficiency or professionalisation. Open workshops are relatively new phenomena – at least in their associational form in Sweden – and none of the associations I include in this study existed before the 2010s. They are not examples of how associations have changed with neoliberalisation, but examples of how associations struggle to establish themselves in a form that worked well historically but is difficult to establish within the neoliberal setting.

Open workshop associations are built with the idea of the multi-dimensional interdependent member (see also 3.3), where all members are such multi-dimensional members. The member pays the basic membership fee as well as access fees, which together cover running costs of the association. Furthermore, the member takes different roles, sometimes with larger responsibilities. Generally, the member takes care of the workshop and understands that it is something she is sharing. While the member joins the workshop association with the intrinsic motivation of using equipment for private projects, she understands the dependency on other members and the shared responsibility. While this is the model open workshop associations are built after, the everyday practice can look different. Associations observe that members use the workshop like a service. Members use the workshop, but do not contribute; sometimes they do not even clean after themselves.

T. Einarsson and Hvenmark (2012) describe that non-profit organisations and associations address their members increasingly as customers, donors, fundraisers, volunteers, etc. The role or identity of the association member has been split up. Members who come to workshops as users might not perceive by default the need to also be a caretaker. I argue that the case of open workshop associations suggests that by the 2020s a one-dimensional membership idea has been normalised. While associations do still organise after an older association ideal, members have become used to being service consumers.

Another role in the open workshop is the volunteer, somebody taking responsibility for specific tasks. The role of the volunteer is discussed in the literature in the context of an increase in flexible volunteering, the increase of so-called plug-in volunteers, who work for different organisations, facilitated also by organisations such as *Volontärbyrån*. Tasks are temporary, and the volunteer's role is predefined.

Open workshop associations do not post any roles on such platforms but try to recruit volunteers internally. What is an interesting parallel is that board members have observed that pre-defined one-time help is easy to obtain from members, while inspiring commitment to permanent tasks which require a certain degree of responsibility and initiative is much more difficult. Another point to take from this development is how the jobbification of non-profit engagement might impact the readiness to contribute to an association outside such predefined roles, but as part of a multi-dimensional view on membership.

In a UK context, Ruiz Cayuela (2021) too has identified that a transition from a volunteer identity into a deeper form of engagement is difficult and needs facilitation through core members of the association who have made that transition. Without articulating it in these terms, open workshop board members have identified this need when they, as I show in chapter seven and nine, work on integrating new members and creating an understanding that a deeper engagement is necessary. They are, however, not always successful, which I would mainly attribute to the fact that core groups at the open workshops are small, not evenly dedicated to community care, and already overwhelmed with administrative and maintenance tasks.

The case of open workshop associations and the UK case mentioned just above further suggest that *informing* new members of the collaborative nature of a project is not enough to sustain collaborative practices. Integrating new members into commoning practices requires a facilitated integration and learning process when new members are strangers to commoning (D'Alisa et al., 2015; García-Lamarca, 2017; Huron, 2015). What this need to learning commoning entails in more detail, is what I discuss in the second section of this subchapter.

Up to this point, the discussion has been focused on member identity and relationship between member identities. Now I turn to the autonomy of the association and how autonomy can impact how well members can identify with their association. Literature on commoning suggests that it is crucial that the group caring for their commons can also manage it, in the sense that they have a certain degree of autonomy over who uses the commons and how (e.g., Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Williams, 2018).

In the case of open workshop associations in Sweden, board members describe insecure funding and insecure access to space as a factor that discourages deeper engagement. Funding schemes and evaluation practices that many of the open workshop associations are dependent upon inhibit their ability to act autonomously, which by extension impacts motivation. Ownership in the sense of autonomy is perceived as a motivator.

It would be a different situation if municipalities would (be able to) give associations which provide infrastructure for a community a sum within the running budget, something that has been practice for cultural and leisure associations in Sweden since before the 1990s (from contribution to

compensation) (Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022; Lundström & Wijkström, 2012). Regular funding through, for example, access to space would enable associations to focus their efforts on providing that infrastructure for a broader public. The current funding situation encourages a mode of thinking where individuals figure out the best ways to get access to a workshop while it lasts, while boards focus on deliverables in the form of events, sometimes for predefined audiences, or to reach a certain number of users (e.g., WA1, 2, 8). The situation in the workshop Pär and Sven (WA5) are engaged in, with stable funding and working collaboration with municipal real estate, is an example where engagement is working well and autonomy is high.

Noah (WA10) describes how insecurity and a lack of information is not a good motivator. What is causing trouble is that the members of the open workshop association have limited control over their commons. Noah wants a space that is their own to obtain more control. Owning, in the sense of sovereignty rather than possession, is considered basic for commoning practices to flourish (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). This points to a different level of what it means to be a member of an association. Does membership come with possibilities to take part in forming the association, or is it an association that needs to survive with limited options for changing its own conditions? While associations are responsible for the care of the commons and community, the municipality is partly regulating access (WA4, 10). In the case of WA8, the association declined municipal funding and decided to work with a smaller budget, but with more autonomy over their workshop.

Beyond the direct impact of the frustrations over negotiations with the municipality (WA1) or experience of support (e.g., WA5), the relationship impacts the ability of the association to practice commoning. When access needs to be renegotiated through funding applications, it implies that the commons need to not only be maintained, but also constantly reclaimed.

These observations highlight the importance of autonomy when understanding commoning practices and highlight how conditions for autonomy depend on the local context. This points back to the importance of considering “socio-political processes and contextual conditions that usually underlie the development of commons initiatives” (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021, p. 513 footnote 1) when researching commoning practices.

That autonomy is an important factor for deeper engagement speaks back to the discussion of service or co-organisation in 9.2. The professionalisation of administration and care does not address the underlying problem of a lack of engagement. With professionalisation, the association might be organised more efficiently, but it does not create more engagement among members. A professional running of the workshop would also imply fewer opportunities for members to be part of forming the workshop, while forming the workshop is something interviewees highlight as encouraging engagement (e.g., WA3, 4). Reducing possibilities for democratic involvement through professionalisation is more likely to increase engagement problems. Taking responsibility, doing together, and deciding together go hand in hand. A service is someone else's responsibility to deliver and does not require my engagement. When the option of member involvement in co-organising the workshop is removed, it will by extension further limit members' ability to experience and learn co-organisation and acting responsibly. Estrangement from co-organising and commoning is the focus of the second section of this subchapter. In addition to the relevance for the struggles of open workshops, I aim to also put this forward as a point against technocratic management as suggested by, e.g., Forslund (2016) within sports associations, and to add to concerns about the development of civil society organisations in Sweden (Wijkström, 2012c).

In chapter three, I point out that the literature on associations and engagement is predominantly concerned with associations that are part of bigger umbrella organisations or aim to be so. The case of open workshop associations is different as they try to make their own national umbrella organisation. When looking at what member associations expect from their umbrella there is an interesting parallel to those associations with established umbrella organisations. Kings (2012) describes how local branches receive funding from umbrella organisations, while the democratic relation that has been important historically is diminishing. Similarly, Åberg (2013) shows how efficiency has taken over as guiding principal for the management of local branches, while previously advocacy and democratic representation were of importance. When discussing MoS with member associations, their main interest in the organisation was to obtain help with administration. Democratic involvement in or through MoS is not something that comes up.

Thinking back to the first research question of how open workshops are established and maintained in Sweden (see also chapter 7 and 10.1), this discussion on members in open workshop associations can give some answers. One answer is that small-scale upcycling workshops that have staff responsible for running them can be a way to organise an open workshop. The problem of too little engagement does not occur here, as no user engagement is required. There are, however, two problems with this model: one is that there are very few and funding for them is insecure; the other problem is that the model is not what those who are engaged in open workshop associations imagine for their perfect open workshop. Equipment, access, and autonomy are too limited.

Another answer to the question of how to maintain an open workshop in Sweden connects back to what motivated the discussion of associations in Sweden in chapter three: my surprise over how Sweden and Scandinavia more broadly are put forth as countries with extraordinary high civic engagement. While this study cannot say much about engagement in Sweden generally, it can say something about how engagement looks behind the numbers. While it is easy to start associations, and even easier to be a member in one or more, it is not easy to maintain associations. While the availability of affordable and suitable premises is one reason, the lack of engagement is another. von Essen (2022) writes about *eldsjälar*, who are more engaged than others. In my observations they prove to be crucial for the survival of open workshop associations. von Essen also writes about those who do not engage at all. The big group of those who engage a tiny bit is not discussed. The case of open workshops in Sweden, together with historical developments, can give some clues about that group. I argue that one reason for the low engagement is the ongoing change in understanding regarding what it means to be a member in an association. Membership no longer is perceived as something that implies the responsibility to actively take part in the association, but implies having the right to a service.

Understanding commoning as everyday care and negotiation (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Williams, 2018) sheds light on how the division of the commoners' community into the board, volunteers and regular members inhibits collective processes which would constitute the necessary basis of co-organisation. When the democratic process of the association has been reduced to the sharing of information at the annual meeting, there is no room for negotiations among the whole community of members. A democratic process and commoning practice

would require active negotiations in the everyday performing of the workshop. How far online communication platforms that associations are using can facilitate negotiation process would be valuable to investigate further, but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

How members understand themselves, how members are addressed by or integrated in the association and what it means to be a member in other associations impacts how members relate to their associations. The developments towards one-dimensional membership relations (T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012) are reasons for concern, considering the important role that is given to associations for democratic and social developments at large (e.g., Rolf, 2022). At the same time, the developments are not surprising. If associations are increasingly seen as service providers organised after principals of efficiency and productivity, their members will be consumers rather than co-organisers or commoners. While in their imagined ideal version, associations are still admired as democracy schools for all members, in practice they risk developing into management or administration schools for those engaging on the board.

In the above, I have developed that those who are in the open workshop and use the shared infrastructure are members. For the workshop to be maintained as commons, being a member needs to imply being a co-organiser and commoner. In the next section, I discuss how such a member identity is in tension with dominant neoliberal subjectivities.

## **Strangers**

Huron (2015) proposes that urban commoning practices face two challenges that are particular to the urban context. One is saturation and the other is the need to work together with strangers. I discuss saturation as challenge in chapter eight. That working with strangers is a challenge becomes visible throughout the empirical discussion in both chapter seven and nine. How well associations manage to integrate new members, cultivate their sense of community, and sustain care practices with a fluctuating member base is an essential factor for their smooth working. In the coming pages, I argue that the modern urban context, and possibly especially the Swedish neoliberal welfare state context, comes, however, with another challenge for commoning which becomes visible in this

empirical case: those wanting to make things in open workshops are not only strangers to each other, but also stranger to the practice of commoning.

The need to learn to be a commoner and how commoning initiatives address this need is discussed in the literature which I review in chapter 2.2 (García-Lamarca, 2017; Huron, 2015; Ruiz Cayuela, 2021; Samanani, 2024). What the literature shows is that the integration and teaching of new commoners is crucial for sustaining commoning practices.

Huron (2015) describes that having mainly experiences from capitalist structures can be a barrier when understanding commoning, while García-Lamarca (2017) discusses embodied capitalist practices of non-engagement and service consumption as something that needs to be un-learned. These two examples, as well as others (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Ruiz Cayuela, 2021), look at community practices where core groups of activists explicitly work towards ideals of commoning relationships. Others, not familiar with commoning, often join out of a need for housing or food and need to be integrated and learn to common.

I have portrayed the Swedish context as specific with its heritage of the Swedish model. I describe the embodied ideas of individual collectivism (Törnqvist, 2019) and state individualism (J. Andersson, 2009; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2010; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015; Trägårdh, 2006) as well as the social engineering project of the entrepreneur of the self (Pressfeldt, 2024) as context-specific characteristics of neoliberal subjectivities. In addition to this specific non-commoners' set of subjectivities, I have shown how open workshop associations aim at sharing the workshop infrastructure out of pragmatic choices. Commoning is pragmatic rather than idealistic (nowtopian) or desperate (crisis). In the remains of this chapter, I investigate what this specific situation of non-emergency and the group of the non-desperate and non-political commoners implies for their attempt to common.

Individualised collectivism, based on the idea of state individualism, is a form of collectivism that avoids individual responsibility and dependencies (Törnqvist, 2019), while commoning is just that, taking responsibility beyond oneself and acknowledging interdependencies with other humans and beyond. While the idea of state individualism has been criticised for missing the role of associations (Stenius, 2010) it is a dominant idea and part of the embodied neoliberal welfare state identity (J. Andersson, 2009). The empirical analysis presented here shows

how an embodied idea of individualised collectivism is forming associations' organisation and function.

In the case Törnqvist (2019) describes, co-housers enjoy the flexibility of relationships in their collectives compared to what family relations would involve. Individualised collectivism can be a way to understand what I have observed in open workshops, for example, how individuals mainly work on their own projects and do not interfere with others who seek to work on their own projects but only help if directly asked. This becomes problematic or a potential source of conflict if some members work on projects for the workshop and do not get the help they would like or expect. Another observation I highlighted in 9.1 is how long-term commitment and responsibilities that require some initiative and decision-making are what associations struggle most with. For such commitments, individuals would need to give up some of the flexibility and independence described with individualised collectivism.

A more extreme form of individualised collectivism is what Grundström and Lazoroska (2023) describe in their study on a commercialised form of co-living. Here, all community care as well as cleaning and other maintenance is outsourced to professionals, freeing the inhabitants from any such dependence or burden. This recalls very much the idea to have staff in open workshops to take care of maintenance and community care. Here, I want to note that it is precisely the mundane everyday care for community and that which they common that reproduces solidarity, commoning practices and commoning subjectivities (e.g., Williams, 2018). Singh (2017) discusses how the outsourcing of care creates a detachment from that which is shared.

Taking a step back, open workshop associations find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, a workshop run as autonomous commoning practice is hindered by embodied neoliberal practices on the side of regular members as well as board members; on the other hand, a workshop organised as a service, which might work with the neoliberal subjectivities, is far away from the ideal workshop imagined.

Looking more closely at the idea of organising open workshops with employed staff, it builds on ideas of individual gain as main motivator. There is the idea that if you pay more you care more, that people who are paid for the care would do the care as they could be demanded to do so, while those who do not get paid

cannot be told to do anything (pp. 308-309). These ideas follow an efficiency and profit-maximising logic. I do not want to say that the people suggesting them are proponents of such ideas per se, but they see them work in other situations and deem them a possible solution to the problems they experience. These dynamics that are observable at the open workshop associations illustrate how capitalist logics play out in everyday relationships.

Ideas of efficiency and individual gain are at odds with relations between commoners that are described as “equal, non-commodified, and solidaristic” (García-Lamarca, 2017, p. 429). The discrepancy suggests a long way of learning to be commoners. In the preceding subchapter (9.2), I focus on responsibility and how sharing responsibility more widely among workshop users is one of the main challenges for the associations. A lack of responsibility is not only a key challenge for associations but has been framed as a key challenge for individualised societies (Singh, 2017). At the same time, commoning is suggested to both need and produce responsibility among commoners (Singh, 2017; Williams, 2018). Bror (M2), who I quote in 9.2 (pp. 310-312), has observed how experiences of being capable make confident humans who, out of their ability to co-organise and produce rather than consume, might act responsible.

Bror suggests from his experience of working with open workshops that there are few such places of commoning left in Sweden today. Polanska and Weldon (2020) confirm this observation when they show how squatters in Stockholm feel empowered by their co-organising experience, not having been able to make such experiences before. This recalls Illich’s foreshadowing that the enclosure of the commons not only inhibits forms of subsistence but also deprives us of a culture of sharing and co-organising and the ability to reproduce those values and practices (Illich, 1992).

At the same time, both Bror’s observations (M2) and the experience of squatters in Stockholm in 2015 (Polanska & Weldon, 2020) remind us of the potential and empowering experiences of commoning. There are 22 open workshops in Sweden run by associations. Associations manage to establish and maintain commoning practices, if not all of them and not always. Even at the workshop I engaged at, and which had many problems with care and community care, I experienced sharing (chapter five).

Stating that many open workshop associations do find ways to survive and work to integrate new members, to create a community and a culture of sharing I want to highlight that the situation is not as gloomy or black and white as the preceding paragraphs might seem to suggest. Seeing the practices of open workshop associations and their struggles with engagement in the light of ideas of neoliberal subjectivities is a way to understand why the practice of commoning can be hard to establish and sustain, and by extension it shows the importance of focusing on everyday practices of commoning when concerned with social-ecological transformation.

Turning away from the specific case of open workshop associations, I reflect on what the case and the idea of the stranger to the practice of commoning can imply more generally for questions of how to broaden practices favouring equal, non-commodified and solidaristic relations.

The situation in the Swedish neoliberal welfare state context makes both the need and difficulty for commoning practices apparent. While ideas about commoning subjectivities and the need to learn commoning can help us understand why commoning is perhaps especially difficult in this context, these ideas also provide openings in the sense that they entail that commoning can be learned through experiencing it.

Thinking about how commoning practices could be scaled up, Samanani argues that there is “a sort of chicken-and-egg situation, where valuing the commons often requires engaging with the commons, but engaging with the commons often requires already valuing the commons” (2024, p. 5), (see also 2.2). To understand better how commoning practices could flourish, he suggests zooming in on specific cases of commoning and ask how commoning practices emerge in those cases.

Having zoomed in on the case of open workshop associations in Sweden, I argue that one way to get in touch with commoning can come from an interest in getting access to a resource, here the workshop, which for pragmatic reasons is shared with others. While this initial interest can be an entrance point, the case also shows that having understood that sharing something is a pragmatic approach does not mean that commoning practices will be established easily. There is the existing administrative frame (here the form of the association) and all embodied practices surrounding that form of organisation. The administrative frame and norms will

necessarily impact the way a commoning project can be built – even in cases where aspiring commoners decide to explicitly oppose that frame and norm (e.g., autonomous left).

I referred to those wanting to establish a shared workshop as commoners, which I would, however, not take for granted. The discussion of subjectivities, norms and embodied practices shows in the case of open workshop associations that individuals might be drawn to the workshop commons and learn to engage and to common. However, they need to learn the required responsibility and try out ways of co-organising (see 7.2). While sharing as a pragmatic choice can be an opening for commons to emerge, it brings its particular difficulties as there is no ideological commoning framing present and associations need to learn how to share their workshop.

In this chapter, answering the second question guiding this research, I have established engagement as a key challenge for claiming and sustaining open workshops in the Swedish context. I have shown how those challenges can be understood as part of neoliberal developments, impacting both the administrative form of the association and the way members relate to their association, co-members and shared practices.

Chapter nine is the final empirical chapter. What follows is a discussion chapter, where I summarise the empirical analysis through answering research question one and two. By answering research question three, I discuss what the case can say beyond the specific Swedish context.

# 10 Discussion

This chapter undertakes the final discussion, in which I provide a synthesis, bringing together different elements of the empirical analysis and discuss their implications beyond the case presented in the thesis. In the first two sections (10.1 and 10.2), I summarise the analysis from chapters seven to nine by discussing them as answers to the first two research questions. In the third section (10.3), I provide answers to the third research question, which asks what the case can contribute to discussions on degrowth and strategies for transformation.

## 10.1 Associations and commons

The first research question asks how open workshops are established and maintained in Sweden. Giving a short answer to the question, open workshops in Sweden are organised in the administrative format of the association. Their day-to-day running is organised with what can be understood as commoning practices. Open workshop associations are established by motivated (groups of) individuals who wish to use manufacturing equipment that needs a workshop environment. To share with others is a pragmatic choice, as it makes using professional equipment possible and provides an opportunity to learn from others.

The administrative form of the association gives the co-organised workshops a frame with a standard organisational format as well as rules and guidelines about insurance, policies, and economic responsibilities. For their day-to-day running, open workshop associations find their own formats, taking inspiration from other workshop associations and by internal trial-and-error processes. Open workshop associations need to find ways to share responsibility and workload for administrative work, maintenance of the shared infrastructure, and community care.

Associations negotiate their organisation over time and establish rules, routines and practices for their commoning. Rules make a baseline for how the association

wants to common their workshop, while routines and practices structure the everyday commoning and reproduce it. Negotiations concern routines and practices of care, use, sharing of responsibility, access and benefit (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Williams, 2018). I describe the integration into commoning at the workshop association with three moments: (1) the entry moment, which needs to be eased with a culture of openness, (2) a constant community care facilitated with common content and (3) the practice of caring together needed to maintain the workshop (see table 7.1. for a summary of tools to create openness, common content and a culture of caring together).

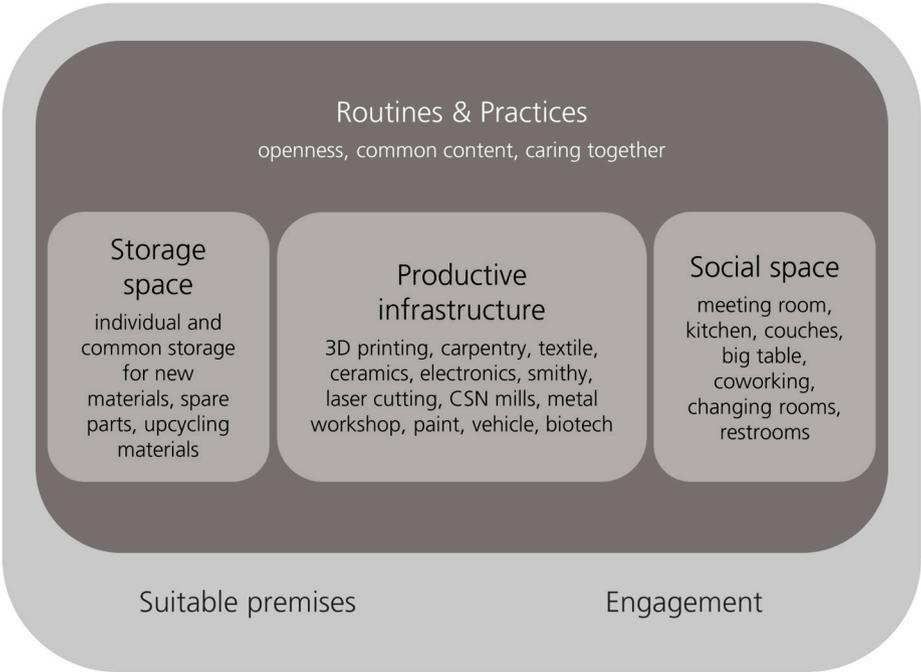
In chapter seven, I show how workshop associations learn and struggle to share responsibility and to common. The importance of community care and integration of new members become tangible when engagement and time are limited, and tensions arise. Some commoning practices, such as spontaneous skill sharing, work better than other practices, which I connect to how much commitment and personal initiative are needed for different practices. One-time tasks and low-effort informal sharing are easier to inspire than long term commitments.

I frame workshop associations' practice of commoning as a pragmatic or almost accidental choice. The associations do not frame their activities as commoning. Organising open workshops in Sweden is not done due to existential need or ideological motivation to common. Most members and initiators join and create the workshop out of an intrinsic motivation to be able to make things. Furthermore, the recognised benefit of learning from each other is part of this intrinsic motivation. Workshops are created for personal leisure interest, not with a charitable motive of making creative practice possible for a broader public, even if that is a welcomed consequence.

Creating or joining an open workshop to gain access to equipment and space to use becomes a pragmatic choice in a context where space for small-scale creative construction, tinkering, craft and other making is limited. Many live in small flats in dense urban areas, and other existing workshops are exclusively used for private business or educational, organised recreation. With high rental costs, building a well-equipped workshop becomes economically feasible through sharing.

In chapter seven, I use a graphic to illustrate elements needed for an open workshop. I start with the core of the workshop, its productive infrastructure, as this is what motivates its existence. The *productive infrastructure* is placed at the

centre in the illustration. Discussing the empirical material, I then develop the idea that spaces for storage and social activities are important for sustaining the workshop, but often less prioritised when the available space is limited. In the illustration, *storage space* and *social space* are placed to the side of the productive infrastructure. In chapter 7.2 and 7.3, I show how the physical space with the productive infrastructure, social areas and storage are organised with rules that are enacted through routines and practices. By maintaining the needed culture, routines and practices make the workshop with its equipment into an open workshop. In the illustration *routines and practices for openness, common content and caring together* bind the material basis of the workshop together and make it into an open workshop. Here, I add another box to the illustration. The box contains the open workshop and is made of access to *suitable premises* and *engagement* from its members. Access to a suitable space and members' engagement are placed below the other elements, as they are the foundation that carries the open workshop.



**Figure 10.1: An open workshop association**  
Illustration of different spaces of an open workshop; the space is hold together by routines and practices creating openness, content and caring together. It is enabled through access to suitable space and sustained by member engagement. See also figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.5.

In summary form, the graphic shows crucial elements for an open workshop. The access to a suitable space and the engagement of enough members are the prerequisites for the workshop, and at the same time its most fragile elements. In the next section, I discuss those two elements and their fragility as key challenges for claiming and sustaining open workshops as commons in the Swedish context.

## 10.2 Commoning in the Swedish context

With the second research question, I ask for key challenges for claiming and sustaining open workshop commons in the Swedish context and how those challenges can be understood. The question puts emphasis on the moments of claiming and maintaining in the practice of commoning (Huron, 2015) and on the Swedish context. In the introduction to the thesis, I frame this context as that of a neoliberal Nordic welfare state. In chapter three, I give further contextual detail regarding volunteer engagement and organisation in Sweden. The discussion portrays associations as an important element of the Swedish civil society infrastructure. While engagement is claimed to be extraordinarily high in Sweden and other Nordic countries, I question the quality of engagement. The literature I discuss in chapter three suggests a qualitative change in engagement in Sweden, especially since the neoliberal turn in the 1990s. The empirical analysis in chapter nine shows how those qualitative changes play out in everyday practices at open workshop associations.

Answering research question two, there are two key challenges for open workshop associations which I identified and discuss with help of the empirical material. First, a struggle to (re)claim suitable premises to run an open workshop, and second, to maintain the workshop as a commons. In the saturated and anonymous urban context, these challenges are not surprising for initiatives built with small budgets, volunteer work, and on co-organisation (see also Huron, 2015).

In chapter eight, I discuss particularities of open workshop associations and of the Swedish context, and how they contribute to the struggles. The special needs regarding premises allowing for loud and dirty work, as well as the desire for a certain level of autonomy, make it difficult for associations to find suitable premises for their activities. The limited budget and difficulty of securing long-term funding can create a situation in which constant reclaiming is necessary. The

number of suitable premises is decreasing when old industrial areas close to the city centres are increasingly gentrified and “uneven spaces” (WA3) disappear. In the case of open workshop associations in Sweden, the (re)claiming is a bureaucratic process that can take years of establishing contacts and finding municipal actors who are willing and able to support the association.

Chapter nine is focused on the process of maintaining the open workshop through everyday practices. I show how there are often more tasks than time and people to do them. Ways to deal with the struggle are to distribute responsibility more equally and broadly within the association and between associations. I show how it is precisely the need to use the shared workshop responsibly and the need to share responsibility for maintaining the workshop and its community which are causing problems for sustaining the workshop commons.

Having discussed these struggles in chapters eight and nine, I here discuss more generally what the empirical analysis can say about commoning practices in Sweden. What I show in chapter seven to nine is that commoning projects are not part of the everyday in Sweden, while there is a strong framework for co-organised grassroots projects which is the administrative form of the association. The association format provides an easy starting point for groups who want to co-organise, and is an integral part of what has been framed as civil society infrastructure (von Essen & Svedberg, 2022b). This infrastructure comes with practices, norms, and expectations as well as administrative requirements. It is said to be so strong that associations will keep on running even if engagement in them changes (Henriksen et al., 2019c; von Essen et al., 2015; von Essen & Svedberg, 2022b). What I have observed is in line with others who argue that while associations’ activities are rolling on, their character is changing and so is the character of engagement (Altermark & Dahlstedt, 2022; Bäckström Olofsson & Mery Karlsson, 2022; T. Einarsson & Hvenmark, 2012; Wijkström, 2012a). In the strong infrastructure, individual associations struggle to establish practices that are different to the changing norm.

Looking at the practices and struggles of workshop associations, much resonates with what I problematise in the contextual chapter (chapter three). On the one hand open workshop associations fit the idea of the association as co-organised platform for leisure activities. On the other hand, the managerial influence on organisational ideas impacts the ability of the association to co-organise their workshop. In a context where associations professionalise and address their

members increasingly as service consumers, those joining open workshop associations to access the workshop expect to buy access to a service and not to join a co-organised association that shares responsibility for their infrastructure and community.

In this context, where co-organisation happens in a format that is increasingly influenced by ideals of efficiency and productivity, commoning practices are not easy to establish or maintain. The case suggests that in a context where transactional ways of relating to associations are embodied, “equal, non-commodified, and solidaristic” (García-Lamarca, 2017, p. 429) relations need to be (re)learned. The case of open workshops in Sweden also confirms how such learning does not happen by informing about the co-organising practice (Samanani, 2024; Williams, 2018), but that a facilitated integration and strong culture of commoning are necessary (García-Lamarca, 2017; Ruiz Cayuela & Armiero, 2021). These observations highlight the understanding of commons as a practice (Linebaugh, 2008) and the need to think of community and commoning together (Gudeman, 2001). Commoning cannot work with isolated individuals using a workshop as a service, but needs a community of people who maintain their workshop together.

Open workshops appear here as a case which makes these contradictions visible. While shared administrative and care work in, for example, housing cooperatives is crucial for the social wellbeing of the housing cooperative, its material infrastructure can function with little shared maintenance compared to what is required in open workshops. In open workshops, a lack of care often leads to tools and machines breaking, which makes the importance of responsible use and sharing of care responsibility even more obvious. While housing cooperatives can support individualised collectivism (Törnqvist, 2019), the material specificities of open workshops make visible how a lack of responsibility towards the commons is at odds with its survival.

On page 204 I share a quote from an interview where Robert describes how they landed on their current organisational model. He describes how they started with an organisational approach which he calls “you do, you decide”. Here every member would use and alter the workshop as she sees fit without necessarily having to coordinate with other members. They then went to a centralised approach with the board deciding most things for the association with little space for members to engage. Robert calls this “100% bureaucracy”. Eventually they

landed somewhere between those two extremes. Here I want to point to the two extremes Robert brings up, individual freedom and bureaucracy. When understanding the shared workshop as a commons, both approaches are at odds with commoning practices and the implied necessity of negotiation and co-organisation. Robert says that it was *obvious* to start with the “you do, you decide” approach. When the approach caused conflicts, they used bureaucracy, organised top-down to facilitate the workshop, which appeared as a go-to solution to manage the shared resource and its users. Neither approach involves “commoning negotiations” (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Williams, 2018); negotiating with co-users was not the obvious starting point, nor was it the obvious go-to solution for the association when “you do, you decide” did not work.

At the time of the interview with Robert and two other board members, the workshop had been running for some years and had established practices and routines. The workshop community had established an approach which Robert describes as a “balance between freedom to do something and still structured in a way that protects all members”. Putting this in other words, the workshop members have negotiated their commoning practices. They have become a community and learned to practice commoning. While the decision to share a workshop and the establishing of the workshop infrastructure were the starting point for the commons, the practice of commoning needed to be “preformed into being” (Williams, 2018, p.24).

In chapter nine, I argue that those becoming members in open workshops to use the infrastructure for their own projects are often strangers to commoning practices. At the same time, the context comes with a strong civil society infrastructure with its norms and embodied practices, carried on historically, but also changed through new dominant forms of organisation (neoliberal, managerial). Sharing and co-organising the infrastructure in a way that “protects all members” is something that needs to be learned and can be learned. Looking at everyday practices of associations building their community, negotiating care, use and responsibility shows how commoning can be learned and established and then needs to be maintained through its own constant reproduction (see also Savini, 2023). In the case of Sweden, there is no commoning ecosystem which would make commoning a visible practice, which makes the effort of sustaining that culture in the everyday use of the workshop even more crucial.

In chapter 2.2, I point to an underdeveloped aspect in the question of how new members in commoning communities can learn to be commoners. Huron (2015) suggests that housing commons that have established a sense of family manage more effectively to integrate new members and convey their commoning values. García-Lamarca (2017) describes the need for a re-education, while D’Alisa et al. (2015) point to the embodied capitalist values as hinders for sustaining commons. Discussions about commoning subjectivities show that active participation in caring together and the integration into the community are crucial for becoming a commoner (Samanani, 2024; Singh, 2017). The empirical work for this thesis shows how workshop associations try, fail and sometimes manage to integrate new members and create those communities. Informing alone is not enough; what is successful are active integration of new members, regular events for sharing skills, and clear structures so new members can orientate themselves. What becomes tangible is how integration and openness are not onetime events but need to be sustained through their perpetual reproduction (Savini, 2023).

What I have so far discussed to answer the second research question are the day-to-day practices that show how commoning practices and values “are produced and contested” (Samanani 2024, p. 8). Samanani suggest doing just that, looking at those day-to-day practices, but also at structural implications. I have discussed how implications coming from the civil society infrastructure are impacting how associations can act or what they have to act against – increasingly neoliberalised understandings of associational work. Savini suggests that is precisely through the reproduction of commoning practices that “allows commoning practices to resist this tension and to mutate their environment” (Savini, 2023, p. 1236).

Open workshop associations are building what Bror, in the very first quote I share in the introduction of the thesis, calls “a culture”, a culture that encourages and reproduces responsible and caring ways of relating. What I turn to in the last paragraphs of this section are the other two elements that Bror names, which make the material infrastructure and need to be there for the workshop to function: a space and equipment. While accessing equipment is not a problem for associations, claiming suitable premises is. Here I discuss how the struggles of accessing a suitable space relate to the question of commoning in Sweden.

In chapter 2.2, I discuss the fact that it is the practices that make a shared resource into a commons, and that the conditions of access in the sense of property agreements impact but do not determine those commoning practices. In the case

of open workshops in Sweden, associations do not own the premises they use for their workshops. They gain access through municipal support or through rental contracts with other landlords, sometimes facilitated or discounted with the help of municipalities. Contracts are precarious as they are short term (some years, or only one year at the time) and in the case of demolishing contracts, without tenant rights. Gaining access can take several years as suitable premises that are at the same time affordable and available for associations (see discussion on VAT, 8.2) are few. The process of claiming and sustaining access impacts the possibilities to common in several ways. One is that the “space question” keeps association boards busy and keeps them from investing time in community care, which in turn impacts their ability to sustain or even establish commoning practices.

The insecure situation around access also creates a situation which inhibits engagement. Not knowing how much longer a workshop will be there, members are less motivated to invest themselves into the project, which would be needed for taking long-term responsibility. The insecurity of access is not unique to the case of open workshop associations. A lack of a shared future is argued to make commoning more difficult when community members do not know whether they share a future (Huron, 2015). The case of this thesis suggests that the insecure future of the commons which the community is trying to sustain is negatively impacting commoning practices.

In chapter eight, I discuss the lack of space for “loud and dirty” activities that is causing troubles for open workshop associations in the context of neoliberal urbanism and gentrification. Former industrial areas relatively close city centres are being turned into housing areas, accommodating retail and services, but not activities outside that norm. The discussion in chapter eight suggests that this is a problem also for other cultural or leisure associations that do not fit into existing municipal support schemes.

In this context, I want to connect back to the People’s House and People’s Park and how the movement, when opening many houses and parks at the turn of the 20th century did often acquire the properties they were using (e.g., Pries & Jönsson, 2025). Buying a property seems unthinkable for the associations I visited and interviewed for this thesis, both due to the involved costs and as it would imply a different form of commitment. To discuss in detail why buying property is not an option for workshop associations in Sweden would require a deeper analysis of associations’ options for buying property and how norms towards

owning as leisure or culture associations might have changed.<sup>84</sup> Investigating this further would, however, go beyond the scope of this thesis.

Besides impacting long-term commitment and motivation, accessing spaces through municipal actors impacts open workshop associations' autonomy and, by extension, can impact their ability to common. When negotiating access, use, care and responsibility, associations are not just negotiating within their association, but also with the municipality which has its own rules and logics. Municipal funding can be tied to activities for certain audiences, or municipalities can require associations to enable uncontrolled public access to their workshop, which impacts the associations' ability to be critically exclusive (Hubbard, 2001, in Williams (2018)). Being critically exclusive could in this case mean to exclude irresponsible use of equipment.

In chapter 2.3, I introduce the autonomous cultural centre *Cyklopen* as an actor in Sweden that manages to balance between autonomy and institutionalisation. While less or no institutionalisation is an aim of autonomous groups, their physical presence risks being short lived (Creasap, 2021). For the co-organised space to survive, some institutionalisation appears necessary in the Swedish context. The idea of the squatters who started *Cyklopen* was to build their own house so they would not be kicked out. They are a registered association and have a permanent permit for their building, while only accepting unconditional funding (Hellström & Nasouri, 2019). The example shows that keeping a balance between autonomy and institutionalisation is possible, but since it is the only house of its kind, it also shows that it is not an easy task.

The desire to be autonomous is, in the case of *Cyklopen*, politically motivated and at the core of the activities. Open workshop associations would like more autonomy, but it is not a priority. They identify as leisure associations not as political projects. Some are frustrated; some decide to make do with fewer resources and others use a capitalist tool – the limited company (*Aktiebolag, AB*) – to be able to create their commons.

The need to balance autonomy and institutionalisation becomes apparent; furthermore, cases I discuss in the literature, with the focus on degrowth and

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<sup>84</sup> Here it is interesting to mention *Folkets Hus* in Kopparberg, where a group of local associations joined to buy their local historical *Folkets Hus* to again open it as a shared house for culture, politics and leisure. It reopened in 2024 (Jönson, 2025).

commoning in Sweden (2.3) show how, for example, urban gardening initiatives have difficulty to maintaining their activities without help from a municipal facilitator. Bonow and Normark (2018) argue for stronger involvement from the municipality to keep urban gardens alive. In this perspective, the access to the infrastructure (the garden) is the main reason for its existence. With increasing municipal facilitation, the gardens risk turning into municipal services.<sup>85</sup> The community and self-organising aspect are here sacrificed for access to the material infrastructure.

With that I want to connect back to the idea that comes up in the empirical discussion in chapter 9.2 – the idea that open workshops might work better if they were professionalised, with staff who organises use and access, and maintains the infrastructure. The workshop would be turned into a municipal service. The element of learning to co-organise, and for members to “become capable humans”, would be taken away. Thinking from a degrowth perspective which wants to see responsible people, able to co-organise and able to common, such a development would be problematic. From a more mainstream sustainability perspective, this might, on the other hand, not be problematic, as the infrastructure would be there to repair, reuse and recycle.

A service-like workshop, which does not require members’ engagement, would reproduce and not be in contradiction with what Törnqvist (2019) calls individualised collectivism. Individualised collectivism implies the idea that individuals stay free of commitments that bind them to other people or responsibilities, while using the same material infrastructure. In chapter three, I discuss that the idea of state individualism, which individualised collectivism builds on, forgets about the crucial role of associations in Swedish civil society. Board members at open workshops want a co-organised workshop, with some degree of autonomy from the municipality (see 8.1). Finding enough individuals who are ready to engage and build a less individualised collectivism is crucial for the associations to sustain their workshop. With the discussion here and throughout the empirical chapters, I show how associations as an administrative form can be used by motivated individuals – fire souls – to initiate commoning practices in the Swedish context. I show also how the form of the association is

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<sup>85</sup> Schemes where citizens can garden on a municipal land are not unusual in Sweden. In Lund such areas exist and there are waiting lists for such plots. However, only in some areas gardeners have formed associations to co-organise activities (Lunds Kommun, 2024).

developing away from its co-organised, grassroots origin. Their role as democracy schools is not guaranteed if they turn into service providers, co-managed by municipalities.

Savini (2023) describes how autonomy in commoning initiatives is reproduced on two levels, internally and externally. External reproduction is here framed as “protection” from external actors. Exploring challenges for commoning practices in Sweden, the case of open workshop suggests that commoning and autonomy need to also be protected internally, against dominant neoliberal and individualistic subjectivities. The practice of commoning needs to be learned and established and then sustained through reproduction, that is, everyday enacting.

### 10.3 Pragmatic practices in degrowth strategies

This last part of the discussion chapter is focused on the third research question, which asks how understanding commoning in open workshops in a Nordic neoliberal welfare state context can contribute to the thinking on strategies for degrowth transformations. Building on the empirical, contextual, and conceptual discussion of the thesis, I argue that the case of open workshop associations in Sweden shows how commoning practices and subjectivities can emerge without political ambitions or existential needs. Identifying an undirected and pragmatic practice of commoning, I suggest understanding it as a form of symbiotic mode of transformation (Chertkovskaya, 2022; Wright, 2019). The transformation in this case does not happen as directed change, but through answering everyday contradictions in capitalism. Further, I argue that the social imaginary as it is used in degrowth theory needs a more fine-grained approach. Rather than thinking of *the* growth imaginary, there are contextual specificities. Understanding these is crucial in a context sensitive approach to degrowth strategy. On the following pages I develop these ideas in detail.

In chapter 2.1, I argue that case studies in degrowth concerned with prefigurative projects or examples of degrowth practices tend to be focused on either activist groups who identify with degrowth or related movements, or they are focused on groups who have been forced into practices such as commoning or other sharing due to, for example, austerity measures. I do not question that studying projects and practices of these groups is valuable for degrowth. I suggest that looking at

how degrowth practices could enter the everyday lives of groups who are not directly affected by crisis and embody the dominant capitalist growth culture is also needed.

I argue, through the empirical material, that those who engage in open workshops in Sweden are doing so with the intrinsic motivation to obtain access to tools and machines and a space to use them. They do not need the workshop for their survival (see also lack of need in Rutt, 2020). Furthermore, sharing the workshop with others is here a pragmatic rather than a political choice. Community care as well as negotiations over co-organisation are something growing in priority over time, but not a main priority from the start. Building a workshop community and commoning practices are by-products while access to the workshop and expertise is motivating initiators and workshop association members.

The associations do not identify as commoning initiatives nor frame their sharing of productive infrastructure as an alternative to capitalism, even if they manage to co-organise their workshop as commons. They do not follow an explicit political commoning agenda. Some allow for (small-scale) commercial activities or actively relate to an innovation-focused discourse integrating their associations in pro-growth networks. Looking at these workshops as *projects*, they do not appear as what could be called an uncivil actor for degrowth or a prefigurative alternative.

Still, I argue that open workshops become places of degrowth *practices* when associations organise as commoning community. In the following I show how the case suggests that a focus on *practices* instead of *projects* can open valuable threads to think along for strategies for degrowth transformations.

In his work on open workshops, T. S. J. Smith (2020) suggests looking at practices open workshops encourage and enable rather than trying to determine whether they are projects geared towards innovation or towards anti-capitalism. He finds that open workshops host many different practices otherwise marginalised in western urbanised contexts. Here he refers to both the hands-on skills practiced at open workshop, “but also the social infrastructure of interdependent action and solidarity” (ibid., p. 607). This approach shifts the focus from the whole project and what it *is* and turns to what *is done there and how*. This view encourages a more fine-grained approach looking at relations enabled in a project as well as specific practices. In the cases I discuss, these would be community building, sharing of infrastructure and skill, negotiating use and care as well as taking

responsibility for a commons. T.S.J. Smith's approach is inspired by Gibson-Graham's diverse economies and the idea to see and name the other-than-capitalist which always exists even when capitalism is dominant (Gibson-Graham, 1996; T. S. J. Smith, 2020).

Projects are considered "degrowth projects" when they are activist-led projects with a clear aim of a post-capitalist pluriverse future (Burkhart et al., 2020a; D'Alisa et al., 2013). The focus is on the means *and* the ends (Schulken et al., 2022). When Schulken et al. suggest separating *means* and *ends* in their definition of strategy, they are careful to clarify that they are not suggesting that any means could be justify by degrowth ends. What is, however, implicit is that the end is always explicitly degrowth. Local initiatives such as urban gardening which are non-capitalist in their means, but do not have an explicit political agenda, are within degrowth thinking attributed less transformative potential. They "often do not involve any political engagement or commitment, they risk remaining focused on their local situation and do not connect to wider struggles, nor do participants necessarily politicise their practices" (Burkhart et al., 2022, p. 137).

The focus on the local and the lack of connection to wider struggles describes what I have observed in open workshop associations in Sweden. In the case I describe, the local struggle is not even framed as antagonism between capitalism and co-organising or commoning. It is a struggle focused on having a workshop to use, with enough members who do something. Connecting those local struggles to broader dynamics, I frame their struggle for engagement as one against embodied growth practices, trying to (re)claim a way of co-organising that builds on a tradition of co-organised leisure activities.

Having established the non-political nature of the commoning practice, the question remains how open workshop associations end up engaging in commoning practices. I argue that it is precisely the contradiction between the aim of sharing a workshop and the embodied growth practices they are up against that inspires the act of commoning.

I argue in chapter seven that associations negotiate their routines and practices in a trial-and-error process, fail, struggle, and sometimes succeed (see also 10.2). While not all associations manage to establish practices of commoning, they recognise contradictions emerging between individualistic approaches to association membership and the needed sharing of responsibility. Those

contradictions, which become visible in conflicts, due to, e.g., irresponsible use of equipment, inspire the associations to find ways to improve the sharing of responsibility and inspire members to care for the workshop and work towards the (re)learning of commoning practices. Open workshops make contradictions in capitalism visible in everyday practices aimed at sustaining the workshop. By making contradictions experienceable, they become potential ground for the development of alternative ways of organising. The word “potential” is important, as those contradictions can also initiate a turn towards more professionalisation and away from co-organisation to address tensions (see 9.2).

Now I have focused on how a group of people (the association) can, through experiencing contradictions in their attempt to co-organise their open workshop, develop commoning practices as an answer to those contradictions. The association’s culture becomes one of commoning. Non-capitalist degrowth practices are negotiated, nurtured, and sustained without the open workshop project being one directed towards a post-capitalist degrowth future.

Another question I want to discuss in this context is how individuals who are not already sharing commoning values can become engaged in commoning. Samanani (2024) refers to a chicken-and-egg situation in the sense that people need to understand the value of commoning to engage in commoning and need to engage in commoning to understand the value of it.

That activists reclaim and maintain, for example, housing commons suggests that it is possible to understand the value of commoning through intellectual and emotional engagement with the contradictions of capitalist relations and to act according to that understanding (e.g., Savini, 2025). Another way into commoning and other degrowth practices has been shown to be the experience of crisis, where commoning provides a way to meet material needs, and a state of liminality can inspire a re-evaluation of embodied norms and values (e.g., García-Lamarca, 2017; Samanani, 2024; Varvarousis, 2019).

In chapter nine, I argue that one difficulty for maintaining open workshops as commons in the Swedish context is that (new) association members are not just strangers to each other, but also strangers to the practice of commoning. They decide to join or start a shared workshop, motivated by gaining access to the productive infrastructure. In the text I quote above, which frames the lack of politicised practices of local sharing projects such as urban gardening as a “risk”,

we also point to one advantage with such “non-politicised” initiatives. Their advantage is their ability to attract individuals who would not join a protest movement, but are drawn to, for example, gardening or building things in a shared workshop (Burkhart et al., 2022). Such initiatives provide an entrance to non-capitalist practices for individuals who would not have been pushed to such practices out of economic need, nor been drawn to degrowth ideologically. Here, people far from degrowth can accidentally or pragmatically find themselves close to commoning practices.

In chapter 2.2, I discuss commoning and commoning subjectivities. The literature I discuss suggests that individuals adopt commoning subjectivities through their engagement with commoning and by sharing responsibility for their commons with others (Samanani, 2024; Singh, 2017). What I show in chapter nine is how individuals entering commoning practices without previous experience of commoning carry non-commoning subjectivities and need to unlearn capitalist ways of relating, and (re)learn commoning forms of relating. The case shows that on the one hand such un- and (re)learning processes need facilitation (see also García-Lamarca, 2017), but also that it is possible to be integrated and adopt commoning subjectivities, if there is an established culture of commoning.

What I show with the literature on commoning in 2.2 is, furthermore, that commoning practices emerge and are sustained through their constant reproduction, not through calling something a commons. Connecting back to the discussion on means and ends above, the ends of the everyday commoning practices at open workshops would be very close to its means. Through everyday commoning (means) the workshop and its commoning practices are sustained (ends). Focusing on the everyday puts an emphasis on the *means* of transformation in a very basic sense, as it asks for how values are reproduced in the everyday.

The non-politicised character implies that there is no *end* involved beyond the reproduction of the workshop. However, by engaging in everyday commoning practices, degrowth values become common sense through practice. Becoming responsible or capable persons as Bror described (M2), with the ability and confidence to take an active role in society, understanding that society is a co-organised project, is then an accidental way into embodying degrowth values.

What I have discussed in the preceding paragraphs concerns subjectivities and practices and the question of how both can possibly transform. I argue that groups

trying to co-organise open workshops in a context dominated by capitalist values can find themselves developing commoning practices as an answer to contradictions they experience when trying to share and co-organise. They establish a local culture of commoning and need to maintain against transactional and individualised relations. New members join to access the productive infrastructure and need to be integrated in the commoning practices. As I show in chapter seven to nine, these processes are not smooth and often incomplete or unsuccessful, but nevertheless starting points for non-capitalist reproduction.

Having established the above, I now connect the findings to the concept of the social imaginary. Varvarousis writes that “[i]n each society it is the social imaginary that determines what is real, worthy, possible, acceptable or desirable.” (2019, p. 499). Perceiving commoning – rather than consuming something as a service – as a meaningful practice is part of a non-capitalist social imaginary, reproduced by open workshops establishing commoning practices. The discussion in chapter seven shows that when dominant or “obvious” practices do not work, other approaches are tried out and filled with meaning (WA3). Other approaches can be inspired by other elements of the dominant social imaginary, such as central management (WA3), professionalisation (WA1, M3), ideas from other geographical contexts (makerculture with doocracy) and past ideals such as a local association culture, or they can be framed as local improvisation (WA3).

I suggest that the case of open workshop associations in Sweden shows how inconsistencies, in this instance a desired practice (sharing of a workshop) that is not possible to sustain within dominant understandings, creates an opening for local change in the social imaginary. Comparing such a change to that provoked by a moment of economic crisis (Varvarousis, 2019), the change is marginal and concerns small groups of people, which points back to the problem of scaling up, which is articulated by degrowth scholars (e.g., Kaika et al., 2023). The change is not very dramatic, but subtle and quiet. It has, however, the potential to be longer lasting, as it is integrated into everyday practices, not connected to a temporary emergency state (Varvarousis, 2019), and built within regular legal frameworks. As the change does not imply a rupture with the status quo, it is also not necessarily an opening allowing for what is framed as “decolonization of the social imaginary” by Latouche (2009), but still a transformation.

In the case of associations in Sweden there is also an historic inconsistency which can provide an opening for reflection. With help of the empirical context, which

I develop in chapter three, and the findings in chapter nine, I show how the historical idea of the co-organised leisure association is still strong. The idea that associations are a basic element of Swedish democracy and how they should be built and maintained by their members is part of the dominant social imaginary in Sweden. At the same time, managerialism and professionalisation have been integrated in the social imaginary due to neoliberalisation. The contradiction between these two elements becomes tangible when associations struggle to sustain their activities due to imbalanced member engagement and unavailability of suitable and affordable spaces for their activities. This historical contradiction is context-specific and becomes visible for those holding on to traditional values of *association life* but realising that others do not (members who use the workshop as a service). The contradiction further becomes visible when municipal practices have changed, forcing associations to adapt.

The case of open workshop associations in Sweden shows, on the one hand, the consequences of “everyday practices and performances that permeate society with the language and rationality of growth” (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020, p. 8), and on the other hand how alternative practices can emerge when rationalities of growth appear meaningless for the project at hand.

I discuss inconsistencies as an opening to question particular elements of a social imaginary (see also Savini, 2025). The case of open workshop associations suggests that when imagined ways of sharing a workshop do not work, in a practical everyday sense of things breaking, other ways are tried out. Through the experience of those contradictions, the understanding of the particular relations involved can change. Such partial changes might not make a workshop user into an anti-capitalist activist, but possibly into a responsible co-organiser and commoner in the workshop, who might carry that experience into other contexts.

The case cannot say much on the question of scaling up practices beyond local prefigurative projects, which is one of the main challenges identified for degrowth (Kaika et al., 2023). It can, however, with the emphasis on practice and the everyday, point to the value of looking for practices and actors that are already there, similarly to what Buch-Hansen and Carstensen (2024) suggest with the concept of the radical bricoleur.

Having discussed contextual elements of the growth imaginary impacting the ability of associations to establish practices of commoning, I want to make a

suggestion that concerns the growth imaginary that is supposed to be decolonised or transformed. The case I discuss here and the emphasis on the historical context of co-organised citizens' initiatives points towards a need to fill the idea of the social imaginary with detail. What ideas are there in the local context that are dominant? How do they impact everyday relations and practices? What could inspire other understandings, practices and relations in the specific context? Instead of thinking of "the growth imaginary", what in the everyday reproduces that imaginary?<sup>86</sup> This points to the need to understand local contexts to be able to understand possible openings and difficulties for transformation.

Individualised collectivism is an interesting example of a context-specific element of a growth imaginary. It has roots in the idea of state individualism and the Nordic welfare state model. The idea of freeing individuals from destructive family dependencies by building a welfare state has here turned into something inspiring an illusion of total individual independence and a legitimate irresponsibility. In this perspective, the responsibility for society participation via associations is no longer present. In this imaginary, paying for a service has become a new method to gain independence, and the need to contribute to a shared infrastructure is perceived as a burden. Growth imaginaries or capitalist social imaginaries are contextual and have developed historically.

Closing the discussion, I ask where the open workshop associations discussed in the thesis would be placed in the strategic canvas for degrowth (Chertkovskaya, 2022). Could commoning practices like those done at open workshops be understood as *halting* capitalist subject formation through non-capitalist forms of organising? In the canvas discussed by Chertkovskaya, halting is a strategic logic within ruptural modes of transformation, which implies a "sharp confrontation or break with existing institutions and social structures" (ibid., p. 62). Does co-organised caring for something that is not my own, nor creates an economic benefit for myself, count as a break with existing institutions and social structures? I am posing these questions as open questions to inspire discussion. I do not want to water down anti-capitalist activism and suggest that well-off "makers", organising a workshop for their own leisure interest, are engaging in the same activity as activists dedicating their lives to civil disobedience. I am posing the

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<sup>86</sup> Other works take a more detailed perspective on social imaginaries. See, for example, Welzer (2011) and Brand and Wissen (2017).

question to inspire thinking about what can and needs to be part of a strategic canvas for degrowth.

It is not the *pragmatic undirected practice of commoning* that I describe in the thesis that needs to fit onto the strategic canvas. What the case points to is that *widening the perspective of what can be considered moving towards degrowth and other convivial worlds* might need a place on the strategic canvas for degrowth. Such a logic could be part of a symbiotic mode of transformation, “aiming at changing existing institutional forms and deepening popular social empowerment within the current system so as to ultimately transform it” (Chertkovskaya, 2022, p. 62). Within degrowth thinking symbiotic transformations are tightly connected to policy as instrument of change (e.g., Burkhart et al., 2022; Chertkovskaya, 2022). With this thesis I show another way to think of symbiotic change of everyday institutionalised relations and subjectivities. Transformation happens here not through top-down policies that need to be fought for by bottom-up movements, but through answering pragmatically to everyday contradictions in capitalism.

Transformation is in this case not inspired through communication of strong arguments and evidence or effective activism but through experiencing inconsistencies and experimenting with different value sets. That values change through experience rather than as cognitive led change is an idea supported by research on commoning (Samanani, 2024; Singh, 2017). This would imply a relational rather than causal process of social change, supporting the idea that an even broader mix of strategies is needed for degrowth transformations.

# 11 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to degrowth thinking, and specifically to the question of how to foster degrowth transformations. To do so I have chosen to explore open workshops which are discussed as enabling degrowth practices (T. S. J. Smith, 2020) and are part of futures envisioned within degrowth thinking (Kuhnhehn et al., 2020). Open workshops are seen as part of future decentralised and autonomous repair, adaption, and production infrastructure (ibid.), while in the present, they enable marginalised activities of repair and upcycling on the local scale and build “social infrastructure of interdependent action and solidarity” (T. S. J. Smith, 2020, p. 607).

With the first research question I ask how such open workshops are established and maintained in Sweden. I answer the question by describing the everyday practices in the workshop, which establish and sustain its material reality and commoning community. The focus on tensions in practices allows us to understand how the workshop needs to constantly be reproduced as commons in the everyday.

With the second research question I ask for challenges that associations need to navigate when claiming and sustaining open workshops as commons in the given context. I further ask how to understand these challenges. Answering the question, I point to two main challenges. One is the difficulty to access suitable premises and the other challenge is to encourage enough engagement from a caring member base. While first discussing the challenges from the perspective of the association, I then connect them to the neoliberal context they exist in.

I contextualise the challenges open workshop associations meet today with the consequences of the neoliberalisation of Swedish politics since the 1990s. The contextualisation shows a saturation of urban space which is affecting associations’ ability to claim suitable spaces for their activities. I further argue that individuals establishing open workshop associations, and those who join associations as

members, are strangers to commoning practices, which implies that commoning needs to be learned and reproduced against embodied capitalist values and practices.

The third research question asks what can be learned from the case for strategies for degrowth transformations. The question aims at contributing to questions of strategies for degrowth, by asking how the case can expand existing strategical considerations. With the review of degrowth literature on alternative building as part of interstitial modes of transformations, I show that the debate is focused on cases of degrowth projects emerging in situations of economic crisis or through deliberate political actions by activists. While such cases can teach about how degrowth projects can be established and how they need to be defended against capitalist forces, they can teach less about a transformation towards degrowth practices in other situations. In the literature review I argue that “asking how a change of common sense can happen requires looking at projects that are *not* fully embracing degrowth values” (see p. 45).

I argue that the practice of commoning which I discuss in the thesis is a case of pragmatic commoning motivated neither by need nor by political ideas. The motivation for commoning is to sustain the workshop in order to be able to access it for leisure interest. Focusing on the practices at the workshops – rather than their stated goals – shows that commoning practices and the formation of commoning subjectivities can emerge without political ambitions or as answer to existential necessity. The transformation is an answer to an experienced tension between a desired practice – sharing the workshop – and dominant capitalist forms of relating.

Degrowth strategy is so far focused on intentional transformation towards degrowth ends. The vision for 2048, which I discuss in the introduction to the thesis, is an attempt to communicate how degrowth futures could be like and to motivate more people to actively work towards such futures. Strategies that work towards convincing more people with good arguments and positive images build on the idea that values and practices change after an intellectual and emotional, but theoretical engagement with a problem and possible solutions. Not opposing but expanding this view on cultural change is the discussion on commoning subjectivities (see 2.2) which suggests that experiencing alternative practices and ways of relating can create an embodiment of alternative practices and values.

With the thesis I show how a change in practices and relations can be motivated out of an experienced contradiction and does not need political intention beyond the local case. Based on the exploration of such unintentional transformation through contradiction I suggest that such transformation could be seen as part of a symbiotic mode of transformation within the strategic canvas for degrowth. Degrowth research tends to focus on projects and actors who have clear political aims working towards social-ecological transformations (Barlow et al., 2022). With the thesis I argue that first it is important to ask how those not directly affected, nor shocked enough by ongoing crises to be propelled “into questioning the imaginary of growth as a panacea for a better life” (Kaika et al., 2023, p. 1205) can nevertheless learn and normalise degrowth practices and values. Second, that a focus on non-capitalist practices present in the everyday, rather than in explicit degrowth projects, opens for seeing, naming, and understanding “sufficiency instead of accumulation, feminism instead of patriarchy, care (of the self and others) instead of exploitation, conviviality instead of competition, (direct) democracy instead of hierarchy, autonomy instead of heteronomy, commoning instead of privatisation, post-humanism instead of anthropocentrism, decolonisation instead of imperialism and money-free versus money fetishism” (Savini, 2025, p. 2), also in depoliticised contexts (see also J. Smith & Jehlička, 2013). Unintentional commoning practices are not as such to be understood as strategic, as they are unintentional. The question for degrowth strategy is rather how unintentional commoning or other unintentionally post-capitalist practices motivated by contradictions in the everyday, can be used strategically for degrowth?

Savini’s list of what needs to be instead of capitalist values, provides a summary of what a degrowth imaginary would be built on. In the discussion of the thesis, I argue that transforming imaginaries requires a more detailed understanding of “the growth imaginary”. Such a fine-grained approach to the social imaginary invites further research asking: Where, when, and why do we act in competition rather than conviviality in a given context? Where, when, and why does exploitation contradict goals, while care helps reaching them? Reading for possible contradictions experienceable in the everyday (see also reading for difference, Gibson-Graham, 1996) can widen understandings of how transformations occur. When a workshop commons fails because of exploiting practices such as irresponsible use of the shared infrastructure, other ways of organising are tried out and co-organised care becomes a pragmatic solution and practice. Understand

possible local contradictions could enable strategic work for post-capitalist practices as answer to those contradictions.

In chapter two I point to a critique that has been levelled at degrowth scholars, for “documenting or celebrating self-contained localised initiatives” (Kaika et al., 2023, p. 1195). One could argue that the approach I take in the thesis is one of scaling down even further, by not just celebrating localised initiatives, but documenting and discussion pragmatic depoliticised practices in affluent contexts. The thesis cannot answer questions of how to scale up localised self-contained projects but does broaden that which is documented and celebrated. It also reemphasises the potential of places that allow for alternative practices – intentional or unintentional alternative – for allowing non-capitalist relations to flourish. Bror, who I cite in the very beginning of the thesis, argues that an open workshop or a similar project in itself will not

solve any climate issues. But I think it’s part of it, a little bit of a puzzle piece of it that creates people who have the confidence and do things, who have learned to organise and push things forward and also have this feeling that I’m a competent person, I don’t need, I’m not a consumer, I’m a producer. I am a participant in society.

Here, I want to connect to the suggestion that it is not climate issues which we should actually be concerned about, but that the climate crisis and attempts to solve it as an isolated problem are symptoms of a much deeper crisis (D. Hine, 2023). What is needed instead are non-exploitative responsible relations, which in systems dominated by capitalism need to be relearned. A question relevant to ask becomes then: How can non-exploitative relations and practices be multiplied and normalised?

Connecting back to the specific Swedish context, questions to ask in further research could be: How can non-capitalist ways of relating be fostered in the absence of immediate crisis or political motivation? Further, and more broadly: To what extent can experiences of interdependency, cooperation, responsibility and caring for a common good contribute to the formation of non-capitalist subjectivities? These are relevant questions to ask when trying to find ways to creating at least passive majorities for degrowth policies and practices (Buch-Hansen, 2018; Hickel et al., 2022) and to better understand how transformations happen.

Besides the consideration for degrowth strategies, there are empirical open questions to take further. The thesis is focused on how open workshop associations are organising. It does discuss who is there to organise – fire souls – and who needs to do more in the association if it is to be maintained as commons – members who use the workshop as service. What I do not discuss is who is not at the workshop at all. Without being able to collect more insights to solve that puzzle, lack of skill and lack of confidence for using the skills, or formulated from a different angle, intimidating environments, show as a barrier for some to use the workshop. How can open workshops be safe spaces for a more diverse user group? The question has been raised in interviewees and is discussed in literature (Capel, 2022; Rahman & Best, 2023; Richterich, 2022b; Smit et al., 2024), but can be explored further.

Another more case specific dynamic that invites further research is the question for more spaces for associations and other co-organised practices in the Swedish neoliberal welfare state. In chapter three I discuss associations and their role in Swedish civil society. I argue that while the ideal of the association as important element of Swedish democracy lives on, the reality looks in many cases different. To fulfil their potentially as democracy schools, their everyday practice needs to be democratic. While association membership is high in Sweden (see chapter three), there is reason to assume that democratic engagement via associations is not equally high.

The empirical material from this project suggests that, that which has been called civil society infrastructure engagement (Henriksen et al., 2019c; von Essen et al., 2015; von Essen & Svedberg, 2022b) needs continuous practice. Strong institutions and ideals are not enough; democratic engagement via co-organised associations needs practicing in the everyday.

Closing the thesis, I come back to the aim formulated in the introduction. The aim is to contribute to degrowth thinking regarding strategy. I do that by arguing to expand the strategic canvas for degrowth by also considering strategies that consider cultural change through experience and practice. Responsible, caring commoners who understand their interdependence with other human and non-human life or pragmatic commoners, experiencing co-organising as meaningful should be able to agree that there are indeed alternatives to capitalism.

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# 13 Appendix

A: Information and consent

B: Interview guides

C: Survey questions, survey results, overview of workshop associations

D: Poster as information about participant observations

## 13.1 A: Information and consent

*The below is a text copy of the information and consent document.*

### **Information and consent**

In this document you find information about the PhD project “Commoning practices in open workshops in Sweden: struggles and opportunities for grassroots organizing in the Nordic welfare state context” and what it means to participate as an interviewee.

The aim of the project is to get a better picture of how open workshops work in Sweden, which difficulties they might have and how they are organized. Furthermore, the project aims to contribute to knowledge about the role of grassroots organisations in transformations towards sustainability.

You are invited to contribute to this project with your specific experience and knowledge by means of an interview.

### **What happens with the information I share?**

With your consent the interview is audio-recorded. The recording is only used for analysis and will not be shared with anyone outside the project. All information will be treated confidentially. Direct quotes might be used in publications resulting from the project (see more on publications in the next point). Your name will not be mentioned in any publications, all names of individuals who contribute with an interview will be replaced with a general identifier. A general identifier can be a fictive name (pseudonym) or a role, like for example “board member, workshop” or “employee, municipality”.

### **How can I get information about results from the project?**

Results of the project are planned to be published in a PhD thesis, which will be available with open access. If you want to be informed of publications from the project or want to receive a copy of the printed thesis you can contact the project responsible (see below). Please be aware that it will take some time until the thesis will be published. Results from the project can also be published in academic articles or other formats.

### **Your participation is voluntary**

Your participation in the interview is voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any time without needing to name any reasons for your withdrawal. If you want to withdraw your participation, please contact the project responsible (see below). Already recorded interviews can however not be withdrawn.

During the interview you are free to choose to not answer individual questions and you can withdraw from the interview at any time.

### **Project responsible**

Corinna Burkhart, PhD candidate, Human Geography

corinna.burkhart@keg.lu.se

The project is financed by the Faculty of Social Science at Lund University.

### **Consent to participate**

I have received oral and written information about the project “Commoning practices in open workshops in Sweden: struggles and opportunities for grassroots organizing in the Nordic welfare state context” and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I can keep the written information.

I agree to participate in the study. I further agree to that information provided by me is being treated as described in the information sheet (Information and consent)

Place and date

Signature

## 13.2 B: Interview guides

### Interview guide basic – Verkstad

#### Kartläggning

- Intern organisation av verkstan och relationer till utsidan
- Relationer - Stöd – Aktörer – Pengar - Ideell Stöd – Kunskapsstöd – Konflikter – Ansvar – skyldigheter

#### Ute

- Beroende av någon (institution), skyldigheter
- Samarbete
- Flöde (pengar, människor, kunskap, material)
- Dynamik, makt
- Relationer som inte finns, men skulle kunna finnas eller borde finnas
- Förväntningar

#### Inne

- Individer som är eller har varit viktig
- Roller
- Dynamik
- Ansvar (maskiner, städ, inköp, säkerhet, ...)
- Konflikter
- Vad skulle du förändra, vilka e.g. relationer borde vara starkare?

Varför är det so här?

#### Frågor till individen

- Roll i verkstan
- Personliga förväntningar, användning, betydelse av verkstan
- Har dit syn på verkstan ändrats med ditt engagemang?

#### Medlemmar

- Engagemang av medlemmar? Hur set det ut? Vilken roll?
- Hur funkar en medlemsbaserad organisation? Hur är det att vara med?
- Ditt intryck: betydelse av verkstan för sina medlemmar?
- Grupper som använder verkstan mest? Vem är inte här? (ålder, kön, utbildning, etc.)

#### Framtiden

- Hur se den perfekta verkstan ut?
- Finns det exempel?
- Vilken roll kan verkstäder ha? Borde ha?

- Behövs flera?
- Varför?

#### Avslutande Frågor

- Vem mer?
- Igen?

### Interview guide basic – municipalities

#### Betydelse av verkstäder för kommunen

- Varför behöver kommunen en verkstad?
- Meningen med verkstan? Vad betyder verkstan för kommunen?
- Vilken stöd och varför?
- Tidsperspektiv? Är det tänkt mer som experiment? Finns det för att stanna?

#### Organisation

- Kommunens roll?
- Ansvar?
- Vad behövs för att ett sådant projekt stanna?
- Vilka andra aktör är eller skulle kunna vara viktig? (Brf, Hyresrättsf., vilka kommun ansvariga/avdelningar? Renhållningsverket?)
- Kooperation med andra projekt? Nu? Framtiden? Är sådant viktig för att få igång återbruk?

#### Syn på verkstan

- Funkar den bra/ Förbättringar/Problem
- Medlemmar? Vem? Vem är inte där? Vem vill kommunen se i verkstan?

#### Framtiden/Samhälle

- Beskriver verkstads landskap som den skulle vara i Kommunens eller dit dröm
- Vilken roll kan skapande, återbruk spelar i en hållbar framtid? (lokal produktion, återskapa, fixa, innovation)

#### Avslutande Frågor

- Vem mer borde jag prata med?
- Är det okay om jag tar kontakt igen?

## 13.3 C: Survey & overview of workshop associations

*The survey was only available online. This is a text copy of the survey with questions and other information that was included in the survey.*

Hej makerspaceföreningar i Sverige,

Jag är doktorand i kulturgeografi vid Lunds Universitet och skriver en doktorsavhandling om makerspaces i Sverige. Jag har hållit på med det här sen 2018 och en del av er har träffat mig. Om drygt sex månader ska avhandlingen vara klar. Den har enkäten syftar till att få en aktuell bild av läget av makerspaceföreningar i Sverige.

Frågorna är enkla och det borde inte ta mer än 5-10 minuter att svara. OBS, svara gärna på så många frågor som möjligt även om din förening för tillfället är utan lokal.

En del av föreningarna skriver informationen jag frågar efter på sin hemsidan och i så fall har jag troligen redan samlat in informationen därifrån. Jag tar ändå gärna emot svar här för att säkerställa att informationen jag har är korrekt. Men om ni vet att informationen finns enkelt tillgängligt på hemsidan så kan ni gärna svara genom en länk till rätt sida.

Svaren från fråga 1-11 kan komma att publiceras i avhandlingen. Svaren till frågorna 1-10 blir inte anonymiserade. Svaren till fråga 11 pseudonymiseras ifall de publiceras. Svaren till fråga 1-10 kommer också delas med Makers of Sweden (MoS) och jag ansvarar inte för hur MoS hanterar svaren. Svaren till fråga 12 blir inte publicerad.

När du skickar in svaren ger du mig samtycke att använda dina svar i min avhandling samt att dela dem med MoS enligt ovan.

Tack så mycket

Corinna

1. Föreningens namn (och kommun om det inte framgår av namnet)
2. Hemsida till föreningen/makerspace
3. När startades föreningen?
4. Har föreningen för tillfället tillgång till en verkstadslokal? (om nej, hoppa över frågan som inte går att svara på)
  - a. Ja
  - b. Nej, har aldrig haft
  - c. Nej, men har haft tidigare (specificera gärna i kommentarsfält)
5. När öppnades verkstaden?

6. Yta av verkstaden i kvm (inkl. sociala ytor som kök, osv)
7. Hur många medlemmar har föreningen?
  - a. Kommentarsfält: Finns det olika kategorier av medlemmar (t.ex. labmedlemmar, nyckelmedlemmar, stödmedlemmar)? Förklara gärna och indikera fördelning.
8. Medlemsavgift (SEK/månad eller år, specificera i svaret).
  - a. Kommentarsfält: Plats för att förklara i fall det finns olika avgifter (t.ex. studentavgift, familjemedlemskap osv.). Lab/access avgift se fråga 9.
9. Finns det möjlighet att få egen tillgång till lokalen? (flerval möjligt)
  - a. Nej
  - b. Alla medlemmar har egen tillgång, det ingår i medlemsavgiften
  - c. Egen tillgång mot en extra avgift (specificera i kommentarsfältet)
  - d. Lokalvärder, styrelsemedlemmar och andra medlemmar med frivilligt insats har egen tillgång
  - e. Egen tillgång är 24/7
  - f. Egen tillgång är 7 dagar i veckan dagtid
  - g. Annat (specificera i kommentarsfält)
10. Har föreningen behövt flytta verkstaden sen den öppnades?
  - a. Ja
  - b. Nej
  - c. Kommentarsfält: Om ja, hur många gånger och när
11. Har du några frågor, funderingar eller kommentarer?
12. Om din förening vill får en kopia av doktorsavhandlingen i bokform, skriv postadress här:

Corinna Burkhart, doktorand i kulturgeografi  
 corinna.burkhart@keg.lu.se

*Commoning practices in open workshops in Sweden: struggles and opportunities for grassroots organizing in the Nordic welfare state context*

Forskningshuvudman för projektet är Lunds universitet. Med forskningshuvudman menas den organisation som är ansvarig för projektet. Projektet är finansierat av Lunds universitet.

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Survey results in table format on the next two pages.

**Table 13.1: Survey results**

The table shows all associations that are represented in the map in figure 6.2 on page 179. These are associations which were active in 2025 and had access to premises to do their activities. For associations which did not fill in the survey, I supplemented with available information from their websites and Facebook pages. The table shows information valid in July 2025. In cases where associations have needed to close for a while and then re-open, the first opening date is in parenthesis. For member numbers, some associations make a difference between regular members and members with lab access; numbers for lab access in parentheses.

Name and homepage	Est.	Opened	Sqm	members	Fee (SEK)	max access/ month (SEK)	individual access	Special fees	24h	Moved
Chalmers Robotics Society, Göteborg chalmersrobotics.se	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Eskestuna Makerspace eskestuna-makerspace.se	2021	2023	200	23	100	258	250/month; volunteers	reduced	no	0
Hantverksladan Riddersvik, Stockholm hantverksladanriddersvik.se	N/A	2022	N/A	N/A	300	525	1000-3000/ 6 months		no	N/A
Helsingborg Makerspace helsingborgmakerspace.se	2019	2023	90	40	200	267	250/month	different	yes	0
Höganäs Makerspace hoganasmakerspace.se	2018	2021	>90	80	600	N/A	no	support	no	0
Luleå Makerspace luleamakerspace.se	2013	2015	200	206	200	38	one time	reduced	no	1
Lunds Öppna Verkstad lundsoppnaverkstad.se	N/A	2015	N/A	N/A	1200	N/A	hosts		no	2
Maker Morr (Makerspace i Övertorneå, Micro Makerspaces i Boden, Umeå, Skellefteå) maker.nu	2015	2015 (2019)	N/A	10	50	N/A	some board members	reduced	no	0
Makers Jönköping makejkgg.se	2016	2025	150	50	150	N/A	extra/month		yes	2
Makerslink, Linköping makerslink.se	2015	2015 (2020)	300	300	300	N/A	hosts	reduced	N/A	0
Makers of Västerås makersvasteras.se	2020	2025	116	19	250	371	350/month		yes	3

<b>Name and homepage</b>	<b>Est.</b>	<b>Opened</b>	<b>Sqrm</b>	<b>members</b>	<b>Fee (SEK)</b>	<b>max access/ month (SEK)</b>	<b>individual access</b>	<b>Special fees</b>	<b>24h</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Moved</b>
Makerspace Göteborg N/A	N/A	2024	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Makerspace och Uppfinnarna Kalmarsund, Kalmår	2015	2018	200	280 (100)	100	158	150/month	reduced	no	no	0
Mikrofabriken, Göteborg	2015	2015	1300	135	N/A	1200	1200/month	reduced	yes	yes	3
Mikrofabriken.se											
Skellefteå Makerspace skemake.se	2015	2016	100	20	200	N/A	hosts	reduced	yes	yes	3
Skövde Makerspace skovdemakerspace.se	2014	2019	N/A	N/A	600	350	300/month		yes	yes	1
Smedjebacken Makerspace smbmakerspace.se	2018	2022	100	15	200	N/A	board members	reduced	no	no	0
Stockholm Makerspace makerspace.se	2012	2013	275	1000 (350)	200	417	400/month		yes	yes	1
Sundsvall Makers sundsvallmakers.se	2017	2016	325	200	300	325	300/month	reduced	no	no	0
Uppfinnare-makerspace Örebro Uppmake.se	1991	2022	300	60	200	N/A	hosts		no	no	>1
Uppsala Makerspace uppsalamakerspace.se	2014	N/A	N/A	N/A	200	150	1600/year	reduced	N/A	N/A	1
Umeå hackerspace umeahackerspace.se	2011	2009	120	N/A	1200	N/A	N/A	reduced	N/A	N/A	N/A

**Table 13.2: Open workshop associations without a workshop facility in July 2025**

Table shows associations that are shown on map B in figure 8.1 on page 245.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Status</b>
Båstad Makerspace	Båstad	closed
Helsinge Makers	Bollnäs	closed
Härno Makerspace	Härnosand	never opened
Kungsbacka Makerspace	Kungsbaka	closed
MakeOne	Södertälje	closed
Makers of Norrköping	Norrköping	closed
Makers Trollhättan	Trollhättan	closed
Makerspace Lidköping	Lidköping	closed
Makerspace Steneby	Stenby	closed
Makerspace Åmål	Åmål	closed
Makerspark	Stockholm	closed
Malmö Makerspace	Malmö	closed
Nattsvartverkstad	Stockholm	closed
Omställningsverkstan	Göteborg	closed
Piteå Makerspace	Piteå	closed
Sakpa	Växjö	never opened
Verkstad i Byn	Askeröd	never opened
Västerås Makerspace	Västerås	never opened
Västra Mälardalen	Kungsör	never opened

## 13.4 D: Poster as information about participant observations

--- Forskningsprojekt om öppna verkstäder ---

Hej alla som skapar i [REDACTED]



Jag – Corinna – är forskare vid Lunds Universitet och forskar om öppna verkstäder. I min forskning fokuserar jag på öppna verkstäder och deras möjliga roll i samhälleliga förändringsprocesser. Jag vill lära mig vad ni som medlemmar tycker och tänker, varför ni skapar saker och varför ni gör så i en öppen verkstad.

För att förstå öppna verkstäder använder jag metoden **deltagande observation**. Det betyder att jag besöker [REDACTED] som en medlem för att se vad som händer där, att jag vill prata med er som skapar här, och att jag senare skriver om detta.

Jag kommer att beskriva situationer som händer i verkstaden. Det betyder att jag kommer att skriva om er och vad ni gör. Jag kommer att använda pseudonymer, men kan inte garantera dig att vara anonym, i alla fall inte för andra medlemmar som känner dig och vet vad du skapar i verkstaden.

När jag är på plats kommer jag att prata med dig och informera att jag är där som forskare, så du kan säga "nej tack". Jag kommer inte att fråga varför, och kommer därefter inte inkludera dig och vad du skapar.

Med det här vill jag informera om min forskning, så att du som medlem

- vet att jag forskar här
- kan kontakta mig ([corinna.burkhart@keg.lu.se](mailto:corinna.burkhart@keg.lu.se)) om du
  - har frågor eller önskemål
  - är besviken på grund av det här
  - vill höra mer
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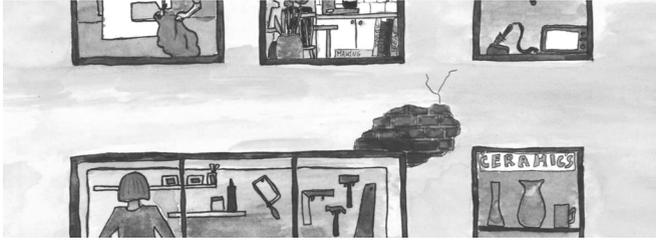
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## Opening workshops

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Associations that organise open workshops in Sweden engage in what I frame as pragmatic commoning. Reclaiming and maintaining small-scale infrastructures of production, such as co-organised workshops, emerge as an answer to experienced contradictions in neoliberal capitalism. Practices of sharing make sense from a pragmatic point of view but are in tension with practices and ideals experienced and internalised in the neoliberal Nordic welfare state context. Unpacking the everyday organising at those workshops I show how commoning practices can be established and need to be maintained through their perpetual reproduction. The thesis concludes with the suggestion for degrowth to ask with what strategies non-exploitative relations and practices can be multiplied and normalised in the everyday, beyond prefigurative projects.



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