**Held in Common: Science Fiction and Collective Space**

**Presented at ‘Un/Building the Future: *The Country and The City* in the Anthropocene’, Warwick University, 16th June 2023**

**Common space:**

*there came a time when they couldn’t distinguish between themselves and the walls…. they were the walls. they became the projected image the walls sent out to earn their right to exist… so when everything imploded it was not the breaking bones and the lost flesh that shocked them. everyone knows the human body is fragile. what shocked them was how fast a wall can fall.*

I am responsible for more than my share of walls. I have dreamed them, drawn them, overseen their construction in concrete and sweat. It is often hard to untangle the practice of architecture from the building of walls. As a profession, we are dependent upon them. But the world is on fire, and our walls do not shelter us.

As an architect, the title for this conference ‘Un/building the future’ is both a challenge to all I have learnt and made, and a necessity for continued professional and personal survival. For me, un-building is not demolition, which is a reprehensible waste of the materials and labour already embedded within each laid brick. But neither can it be simply an alternative form of building, still dependant on new construction. So, as ever when I am struggling to articulate or even imagine the scope of possibility, I turn to the worlds of speculative fiction. Here, in the words of Alexis Pauline Gumbs in M-Archive I find expression of my deep held fear, a depiction of the ways that architecture walls us in. But I also find certainty that these walls are more fragile than I could hope, that having been made they can be unmade. Through this fiction I am called to imagine what architecture might be after these walls have fallen. Perhaps it can be what it always was, or always could have been, the practice of imagining, making, constructing without enclosure.

In the introduction to M-Archive, Gumbs calls to the reader to “let this text be alive, as you are alive,” which is to say always in progress. I am a work in progress, and the work of unbuilding requires me to unlearn my own education which focused on a canon of white European male architects and framed them as the makers of the built world, I must unpick the patterns of thinking which allowed that to be taught as true. In this I am indebted to the works of queer theory and Black feminist scholarship and art practice which appear throughout this talk, which have taught me to look beyond canon and beyond architecture. These works allow me to unlearn myself.

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From the question of un-building I find myself looking for places through which I might unlearn, spaces which trouble and deny categorisation, which resist the enclosure of our collective futures. As a conference, we are gathered here to address the constructed dichotomy of country and city as ingrained by the spatial practices of capitalism. In response I am drawn to the commons, as sites which trouble distinctions between the urban and rural, which offer something outside of bounded definitions of public and private. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe, these boundary walls of ownership and control, of distinction and definition, have been built as a defence against the common, which exists “beyond and beneath—before and before—enclosure.” It is here that I hope to find works of un-building, models for these all too urgent acts of revolution.

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In place of walls, Stavros Stavrides imagines common space as a threshold, a porch, a doorway, a window. He argues that common spaces must be resolute challenges to the boundaries of exclusion, breaks in the delineating edges which might hold us apart. And so, I am driven to unbuild the walls which have become the projected image of my right to exist as an architect, to hold open spaces of possibility.

**Acts of commoning:**

*the space is woven. multicoloured bright patterns lovingly threaded together. When you touch them, you know that each piece was woven by someone who believed in this quilted moment. this soft vibrant welcoming space… you can feel their presence as you put the fabric on your hands. as you begin weaving now.*

M-Archive is a work which has opened me to issues of commoning, not in depictions of common spaces, but in the ways it compels me to recognise inter-relation, the indivisibility of all that constitutes our world, the relationships which persist, and the realities we are already in the process of making possible. Through this I am inspired to understand the commons as more than a physical space, to see it as a practice.

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In his work Massimo de Angelis identifies three key features of a commons; “a community of commoners willing to provide labour and services for each other, a commonwealth which is the source of material and immaterial resources upon which such labour bears fruit,” and most critically, “the process of commoning”. Commoning is the act which continually establishes and enacts the commons, “(re)producing resources and commoners, and in turn (re)producing the commons at new levels and in new forms.” It is an act of mutual constitution and recognition, continually remade, a coming together and inter-relation between individuals, human and non-human, animate and inanimate.

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I am guided by M-Archive in attending to commoning as practice.

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Gumbs’ describes this novel as a “speculative documentary” written “in collaboration with the survivors, the far-into-the-future witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse.” It centres Black life and Black feminist metaphysics, to offer a possibility of “being beyond the human and an invitation into the blackness of what we cannot know from here.” Each of the short prose-poems is written in response to a quote from ‘Pedagogies of Crossing’ by M. Jaqui Alexander. In Gumbs’ reading Pedagogies of Crossing addresses the transatlantic slave trade as “an act of violence which continues to impact the entire planet, through the indivisibility of the water, wind, earth, and fire that surround and constitute our world.” It is not only the geographic transfer of people but also a movement of energies “into a relationship which persists, a material and conceptual relationship we navigate with the potential and compelled crossings we make in each moment.”

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In recognition each chapter includes a periodic table of further readings, interacting with the text, recognising how it is already a product of these relationships which persist, while transforming what it might become.

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Following this practice, each section of this talk will open with extract from M-Archive, to frame an aspect of commoning, before placing this alongside other fictional works, architectural practice, artwork and theory – to create new opportunities for reflection through co-location, and address how commons might be both imagined and enacted. This is an architectural practice of reading sf, approaching the spaces within sf as if they were architectural projects, to understand the worlds they make possible. But just as I cannot speak of the commons through one discipline, I cannot speak to it alone. Once I had gathered materials for this talk, I decided to run a workshop which placed these materials in the hands of others, to hold this work in common.

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We gathered on Well Street Common in East London, and I invited participants to reflect and discuss extracts of text,

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to add their own experiences and insights, and then recompose these into a patchwork of relations.

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In this way I hoped we could create a new common space between us, constructed from the shared resources of stories, theory and personal reflection. With their permission I draw upon this act of collaborative making here, a collective source of insight I could never have hoped to develop alone. This is a work-in-progress, and to that end you will find squares of patchwork around you, and I would joyfully welcome any reflections you would be willing to contribute, or alternative ways of assembling the pieces we already hold.

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As M-Archive speaks to how space is woven, this act of patchwork attempts to manifest how pieces of this weaving might be held, passed on and remade into new forms.

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Rather than dealing with pristine possibilities of new spools of thread patchwork and quilting as artforms grapple with the frayed edges of the world as it is. They refashion and give new purpose, transforming that which has been cherished and that which has been discarded. I am indebted to the artwork of the Gee’s Bend quilters for this understanding. Their quilts were and continue to be an emancipatory act, they were a way for formerly enslaved women to gain economic independence, and a form of experimental self-expression.

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They are exuberant compositions of parts, each overstitched with patterns of thread that pierce through the layers to consolidate the whole and bind their depths. As a group of quilters their work is connected by networks of kinship and by the sharing of skills and styles. They hold in common these resources of knowledge and time, and through their work continually re-establish themselves as a community, their acts of commoning made tangible in these acts of making.

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These understandings of commons not as place but as practice draws me to reflect on the Power Station project by Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn and the residents of 30 homes in Waltham Forest. They are working to install solar panels on the rooftops of specific streets, networked together so that they operate as a local power station.

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By collectivising the infrastructure of power generation and its distribution they hope to directly address issues of energy inequality, to confront energy poverty and the escalating cost of living amidst a climate emergency. This is a collaboration founded on the premise of mutual need and geographic co-location, which creates tangible relationships through physical networks of connection.

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The panels are purchased as a group with funds raised from community events, so the project creates a group of commoners through the work of its own realisation while the shared commonwealth is the power generated. I would argue that in its co-production of the commonwealth of power, this is a commons which extends to include the intangible and the inanimate, which understands weather systems, sunlight and shade as integral parts of the act of commoning.

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These practices which serve to collectively establish a community, in the making of artworks or the making of infrastructure, lead me to consider works of speculative fiction which address how community is made and remade. Harry Josephine Giles’ *Deep Wheel Orcadia*, is a novel written in the multiple voices of a specific community located on an isolated space station.

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Each of the prose-poems is written in both in the Orkney dialect of this station, and in an English translation and the slippages between them, the cadence and tone powerfully expresses each character’s own voice of self-narration. They tell the story of this place, a deliberately isolated location selected so that those who live there might “choose a different way of choosing,” to practice ways of being together that might otherwise be lost. We follow as each character refashions their role and relationship to those around them, offering an image of community as continually reconstituted, not an incidental product of geography or culture but the conscious work of individual members. It hints at the possibility that such belonging might be able to extend to include the more-than-human, to address the complex implications of extractive processes, and recognise the agency of the alien and otherworldly other.

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This is fiction which challenges the boundaries that we might draw around community, which asks me who or what might be included in the act of commoning, and what expansive forms these acts might take. As José Esteban Muñoz celebrates, citing Giorgio Agamben, commoning is a “means without end.” Or in Gumbs’ words, the space is woven, and we begin weaving now.

**Common land:**

*no part of anywhere was free. something had to be done, but what could they do when everything had a price… so they stole themselves, which was a break with everything, which was the most illegal act since the law that made them property, and they had to re-rhythm everything, re-tune bass in their chests, and immediately and perpetually they gave themselves away, the selves they had to give, the reclaimed flesh and bones and skin.*

No part of anywhere is free. This is what the logic of landownership tells us, that there is no space outside, no place or person without edges clearly delineated and defined in terms of property control. This extract from M-Archive imagines a future which is already a lived present, where the logics of property encompass all places, and all people, including those who had thought themselves free. It is both extrapolation and description of racial capitalism, wealth based on extraction of ground, of culture, and of lives. No part of anywhere is free. And so, we must re-rhythm everything, we must steal and give away.

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My understanding of the commons is founded on histories of enclosure in the UK, where common land which was available for shared use was transferred into private ownership, and how these practices have extended beyond the UK in the logic of colonisation where land inhabited by indigenous communities was deemed terra nullius, land belonging to no-one, available to be seized and occupied. The pervasive and irredeemable violence of these acts which made places into property overwhelms me in ways which obscure the potency of that which had been there, of that which persists, before and before enclosure. But George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici remind me that when we speak of the commons “we do not speak only of small scale experiments”. This is not unattainable utopianism but the large-scale organisation of communities which spanned continents, and systems of organisation which persist in wilful resistance to the encroachment and attack of capitalism. So, I refocus my attention, to learn from those who have already, in so many ways stolen their place in the world.

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This weaving by Igshaan Adams addresses issues of ownership and spatial control. It is an aerial view of the borderland space between the Bonteheuwel township constructed under apartheid and the industrial neighbourhood of Epping in Cape Town. It is a mapping of ‘desire lines’, not pathways that were designed to be traversed, but those worn into the landscape by the passage of bodies.

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It speaks to the painful expanse of the border, the violence of separation and segregation, and the continual labour of survival. But it is also a celebration of transgression with joy rendered in exquisite beadwork.

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The weaving is accompanied by swirls of wire which represent the dust storms blown across this spatial desolation, but also express the eddies that are kicked up while dancing. This work is testament to lives which transgress the lines of property, the resolution and resistance necessary for survival, and the re-tuning and re-rhythming of movement beyond enclosure, the delight which makes it possible to dance.

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It is not necessary to understand the extents of ownership in order to celebrate in its transgression, but this knowledge helps me attend to the scale of transformation necessary. In the UK The Land Registry holds deeds for every property in England and Wales bought or sold since 1993. It offers the illusion of a mapped terrain, but the map is cut up along boundary lines, and each small fragment must be individually purchased for 3 pounds per search. The ongoing project ‘Who Owns England’ attempts to patch together land records, and it is only through this intensive collectivising of data that I can come to know that 30 land-owners own half of West Berkshire,

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and that 15% of the land in England remains legally unaccounted for as ownership pre-dates the requirements for registration. While in Scotland, an estimated half of private rural land is held by 500 people, but when police come to prosecute landowners for wildlife crimes they find that they are registered to off-shore holdings in systems of ownership which evade collective responsibility.

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There are projects like The Atlas of Ownership which document the rights and responsibilities within different property models, to consider where power over place is vested and how. It identifies alternatives to individual or corporate ownership, like community land trusts which allow communities to own property, to buy back the land they live on.

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So, I revel in the actions of groups of residents like those in Granby in Liverpool who established themselves as Community Land Trust to resist iniquitous social cleansing, to access funding and government support,

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going on to work with the architecture practice Assemble, who won the turner prize for the products of this collaboration, gradually gaining ownership of ten homes and

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transforming one into a community winter garden.

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While such actions are immeasurably valuable, they are still predicated on an ability to buy our place in the world. M-Archive demands that I look beyond transaction to find the spaces which have been stolen, where we might give our reclaimed selves away.

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In looking for stories which unpick architecture from land ownership I turn to M.E. O’Brien and Eman Abdelhadi’s *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune 2052-2072*. It is written as a series of fictional oral history interviews with individuals who each recount their place within ongoing revolution.

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It presents a wondrous multiplicity of voices including those involved in sex work, gestational labour, ecological restoration, the ‘liberation of the levant’, and the communization of space. As transcribed interviews, it includes all the inflections, hesitations, and non-linear digressions of these speakers, and similarly reflects the myriad variations in the spaces which they occupy within the world, the reclaiming of educational buildings, the repurposing of factories, the ways homes are restructured and occupied to support extended networks of kinship. These are not stories about design and construction, the setting out of intention and remaking to a fixed plan, or about something that can be quietly accomplished for a lucky few amidst the ongoing violence of capitalism. Rather, these stories repeatedly recount the experiences of those who seize and occupy, who wilfully re-purpose the spaces which already exist to provide what we have always needed. More crucially this work makes evident how these re-makings of space require collective and collaborative effort. The act of making revolution is always in community.

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Through this artwork, fiction and architectural practice I am able to understand common space as an active resistance to property ownership, but also as something more, as an alternative to spatial enclosure. As J.K Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy argue we cannot revert to defining common space as another form of property, a site where freedom has been purchased to create isolated enclaves of hope within pervasive capitalism. Instead, they call for an anti-capitalocentic approach, to acknowledge that “resources can be commoned not by changing ownerships but by changing how access, use, benefit, care and responsibility occur.”

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We need not enter into the logic of landownership in order to transgress it, rather as Caffentzis and Federici describe an anti-capitalist commons should be a wilful act to “counter the processes of enclosure” through “a commitment to the creation of collective subjects, a commitment to fostering common interests in every aspect of our life.” We must “put our lives in common.” We must steal ourselves, and immediately and perpetually give ourselves away.

**Commoners:**

*You have to understand that this is after no one wanted the land. When erstwhile speculators had ceased believing there would be a profitable future… By the end, the ones who stayed were the ones who could not leave. They stayed. With all their genius… Their roots grew even deeper and their knowing branched up…*

As I attempt to understand the commons as more than a question of ownership, I choose to focus on what comes after the desire for land, and what remains is those who stay, those engaged in the act of commoning.

But when I attempt to separate out ideas of the ‘commoner’ and the ‘commonwealth’ – that is between the beings who enact the common and the shared resources which are its subject, there is an implicit division between the human and the more-than-human. It is a division which has haunted my architectural education which was founded on an understanding of the built as the realm of human expression and control. But of course, this was never true.

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In my own teaching I have drawn on the work Stone Coppice by Anthony Goldsworthy to express the reality of inter-relation.

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Here large stones were placed in the forks of trees and as the trees have grown the stones have been lifted up. It is an act of construction in a temporal register beyond human recognition, it will “always be a work in progress, the future of which is not, and probably never will be, resolved.”

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If I were to try and unpick who has made this work, who is commoner and what is resource, I am confronted with the mutual making of place, the resolute and active involvement of the more-than-human in all acts of construction. There is no work which is not co-creation.

And so, I must extend my understanding to recognise the more-than-human as more than land and more than resource, as fellow commoner.

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This runs somewhat counter to prevalent understandings of biodiversity as a resource held in common by all humanity, and projects which attempt to defend us from biodiversity loss. Projects like the Millennium Seed Bank in Sussex which stores the seeds of 40,000 species in flood, bomb, and radiation-proof vaults. But the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the “doomsday vault” sunk into the Norwegian permafrost, has already been breached by meltwater. Walls will not save us.

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Perhaps the most publicly demonstrative of these projects is the Seed Cathedral designed by Thomas Heatherwick,

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which is constructed from 60,000 fibre optic rods with seeds set into them. It speaks to human viewers about the multiplicity and variety of life,

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but it does so by encasing each seed in plastic. They may be held in common, but they cannot grow. Following M-Archive I am called to look instead for those which remain rooted. /

As well as the defensive bunker which seeks again to wall away that which we deem valuable, there are seed banks which maintain their stores through seasonal planting. Those like the Navdanya community seed banks in India, that live to shed colourful revelations every season onto the same ground, a continual act of co-creation between the human and more-than-human.

These seed banks and the designation of biodiversity as a resource held in common by all, are iin part, a response to attempts to patent specific strains of life. In 1997 ‘Rice Tec’ based in Texas successfully patented Basmati rice. It has taken activists and farmers five years to unpick that patent, to argue that this knowledge is not new, that it is not the product of human innovation which can be neatly attributed to one individual or company. But RiceTec still own ‘Texmati’ rice as a derivative, without owing credit to the communities who have cultivated for generations or to the rice itself. Perhaps we should not be able to claim ownership of more-than-human life at all.

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In 2017 the Whanganui River was granted personhood by the New Zealand government, in recognition of its existence as a living being. This was made possible by the knowledge and worldview of the Māori who recognise Te Awa Tupua as “an indivisible whole comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, incorporating its tributaries and all its physical and metaphysical elements.”

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It is a legal act which grants the river the same rights as a person, but its more than human nature makes these rights difficult to uphold. How for example, do we balance the rivers consent when rights already exist to divert water for hydroelectric power? This a powerful attempt to recognise and respect the agency of more than human co-creators, but it also speaks to the failure of legal systems which require us to recognise a river as a person because they see no other way to hold the value of life.

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This question of more than human agency, advocacy and recognition is directly addressed in Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.

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This novel is set on the West coast of the US during ongoing ecological catastrophe. Amidst this, the inhabitants of San Francisco have radically restructured their society. They have abolished private property, and all housing is held in common available to any who might need it. The roads have been dug up and the space used for planting of fruit trees with water running through swales to feed the collective gardens. It is an ecotopia of steadfast non-violence and radical acceptance which offers its potential oppressors a place at the table. The recognition of more-than-human mutual responsibility is made visible in the community discussions, which draw on existing indigenous governance practices. These include spokes-people who advocate and express the needs of specific more than human entities, a speaker for the water, for the soil, for the plants, for the animals and birds. In doing so, it attempts to give these beings voice, albeit mediated by human interpretation and limited by the constraints of human understanding. Here the more-than-human is recognised as fellow commoners who co-create and share in the abundance of the common.

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This expanded understanding is reflected on by Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy who ask that we reframe the idea of resource and commoner, stating that “The commoner, is no longer (and perhaps never was) a person or a category.” For them, more-than human elements have always been an “entangled as part of the community that commons.” Only after we have ceased thinking about land as profit and speculation, can we choose to stay, to let our roots grow even deeper, our knowing branching up.

**Commonwealth:**

*so basement is not a thing we really study like how you study it. or say basement is not a place where we put things we want to keep and ignore. but in some houses, and you only know if you should know, deep in the house is a place of blood and transformation, shells and seeds and knowing...*

What then are the resources we hold in common, the commonwealth which we share with our fellow commoners? As an architect I am inclined to consider the tangible, to look at how we might use the materials we have already made. But this extract from M-Archive requires me to recognise the crucial distinction between that which is kept and ignored, the materials held on to for their own sake, and the deeper labours of attending to that which is already gathered. As architects we can no longer justify the cost - in all the ways that are more than capital - of building new. This basement asks me how we might undertake this act of keeping in ways that are also an act of transformation.

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The possibilities of remaking material legacy are carefully considered by the inhabitants of the Exodan Fleet in Becky Chamber’s *Record of a Spaceborn Few*.

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Within the closed loop of a generation ship the issue of material afterlives, of reuse and repair, which are already present within our own lived existence are given heightened immediacy. There are carefully considered rituals by which the remains of the dead are converted into fertilizer to nourish the collective gardens, and this bodily understanding of mutual care is deeply treasured. Here there is no space for keeping, and no cultural framework within which the broken object might be more valuable than the materials it offers for transformation. And so the oldest parts of the ship which have outlived their utility are melted down without remorse, and all new-made objects contain the legacy of the things they once were. The relic has no place, but everything is an artefact. In this story objects are seen as materials held in common that have taken temporary form, and the common good demands that their use value takes precedent over any individual attachment or collective memory. It is an approach to conservation which considers the non-living as a resource but perhaps also as an integral part of the commons, a malleable part of a continually reconstructed network of mutual interdependence. This a common-wealth in continual transformation, nothing simply kept, nothing allowed to be ignored.

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So, I am driven to look for architectures that do the work of conservation or renovation, not to keep but to transform. Who do not reduce architecture to a historical object devoid of liveness but cherish social intention. Perhaps this could be said of Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal’s work in Bordeaux. They were commissioned to renovate three social housing blocks of 530 dwellings, but were all too aware of the typical trajectories of renovation projects where residents are ‘decanted’ during construction, disrupting fragile networks of community and smoothing the way for privatisation once incumbent inhabitants have been dispersed.

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In order to avoid this, the architects determined that any construction must be done without anyone moving out.

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The whole block has been renovated and each flat extended without disrupting existing spaces by wrapping the block in an inhabited thickness of winter gardens, enclosed balconies that create additional rooms without blocking sunlight and air.

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It is a transformation of that which already is, one which encircles existing spaces of living and knowing, a keeping which holds the heart close.

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These projects which recognise the commonwealth of existing structures, both the materials and the lives within are gaining prominence, but remain distressingly exceptional. In 2005, Southwark Council announced it would demolish the Aylesbury Estate, which was home to 7,500 people. In its place the council proposed 4,200 new homes, of which less than 40% will be social rented, meaning that more than 800 socially rented homes which when demolished will not be replaced. It is a staggering loss, and this stark metric does not even begin to address the loss of materials and labour of any act of demolition and rebuilding, or the incalculable impact of the loss of home, where lives are uprooted and communities dispersed.

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Despite years of protest, legal action and occupations, the blocks are now nearly empty.

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One of the last residents on her floor, Aysen Dennis has documented the ‘Fight4Aylesbury’, transforming her flat into a celebration of resistance.

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Photographs, newspaper articles, posters and flyers are displayed in these intimate spaces, the material impact of the stories they contain, tangibly present in the home that they fought to save. This is a transformative act, a radical opening of private domestic space which is wilfully remade into a resource of collective action and memory. It celebrates and serves those who have lived and fought for these spaces, and all those engaged in similar struggles. This installation asks critical questions about the public nature of social housing, the dismantling of a welfare state and the overt suppression of resident’s agency, by creating a temporary commons which subverts the power of ownership. It a celebration of the many ways these groups have worked in defiant opposition to the forces that move to break them. Home is a place of blood and transformation.

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This imperative, to maintain not only the material of the past but its radical possibility, is powerfully delineated by Max Haiven in his discussion of ‘commoning memory’. He argues that as much as the labours of the past already shape the present, we can “draw on the subdued and subterranean hopes and dreams of the past, of past generations and struggles,” allowing the “utopian flash” of each radical event and its yearning for an impossible future to be a living presence within the present. Haiven asks us to recognise our existing responsibility to the past as a commons, to attend to the common-wealth of memory.

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Through these fictions, architectural works and artistic installations I am driven to look past my own inclination towards the tangible, to consider the temporal qualities of the common. Muñoz addresses this in his reflections on queer and temporal commoning, where the radical potential of the common lies not only in the actions of the present, or in the past events which inspire, but as a fragmentary glimpse into a not here, a not yet. As described by Raphael Kabo this understanding of the commons “blurs past and future, transforms and organises bodies, and reveals glimmers of anticipatory utopias.” Here the commons is a set of relations always in the process of becoming, a “means without an end,” an always ongoing act of transformation.

**Held in common:**

*they could not resellout the places where they had internalised freedom…. they needed bigger and bigger spaces, so they started to meet outside, and then they didn’t need classrooms at all because the practices were jumping off everywhere… sometimes they stopped and marvelled about how thoroughly they had replaced the story that was there before, but usually they just stayed in the practice and watched the world transform.*

Throughout this talk I have attempted to find practices, artworks, stories and ways of thinking to help me imagine the processes of unbuilding which feel so vital when architecture remains complicit in structuralised inequality, in systemic injustice, and in climate catastrophe. While the practices I have found demonstrate possibility and grant fresh hope, it is in the worlds of speculative fiction that these glimmers of radical action extend to a world remade. As this extract from M-Archive describes, they offer visions of a time when the scale of transformation surpasses the scope of the built, when our collective re-telling has replaced the story which was there before.

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As Doreen Massey describes, space is simply ‘a simultaneity of stories-so-far.’ And so I wanted to conclude this talk by giving thanks for these stories, both those shared in print and in conversation. As we gathered on Well Street Common, the extracts from these fictions offered us a glimpse into alternative social structures made manifest, a common ground from which we were able to critically question structures of ownership and enclosure. We read through and with these texts, retelling them in relation to personal intimacies of place.

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One person spoke about The Fifth Season in relation to community gardening, to the feel of soil between fingertips and the slowing of seasonal time. These recollections were welcomed as stories amongst stories, valued reflections on the situated and subjective experience of space.

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Fictional worlds were placed next to lived worlds on fragments of cloth, memory and imagination both granted the same potency, equally able to transform the present. As Tom Moylan celebrates, utopian literature finds its importance “in the very act of imagining”, the manifesting of an alternative within the reader’s own lifeworld.

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These flashes of radical imagination prompted longing and joy, and individuals spoke movingly about their unmet desires for intergenerational community, freedom from gender-based violence, or the absence of loneliness.

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Walidah Imarisha describes how “visionary” sf can form an integral part of social justice movements, how writing new worlds into being not only makes visible the activist organising, but also serves to dismantle the limits of possibility and unshackle the imagination.

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By articulating these visionary desires we were compelled to consider the work of bringing them into being, the structural and systemic transformations required to remake the world.

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Finally we assembled memory, imagination and desire, into one patchwork. Each thought still distinct but co-located to be read and understood as part of a complex assemblage. As we pinned these parts together we borrowed, repositioned, and placed them in new combination. So, one person’s memory now led to the voice of another, in a shared space we had made between us. The patchwork is a polyvocal collective voice, a community constructed through the act of commoning this wealth of words.

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Kabo talks about how commons utopias assemble “commons of fellow readers, finessing and shaping their utopian imaginaries.” Science fictiol, in its most wondrous moments, can create communities based on utopian ways of thinking and being together, prefigurative enactments of the texts we choose to hold between us, the stories we choose to tell.

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For those of us working within the spatial disciplines, struggling to envisage possibilities that are not founded on building our way out, but on un-building the iniquities we have already made manifest, we must hold on to the knowledge that architecture is not defined by enclosure. It is a lived practice continually made and remade, re-storied through our collective inhabitation.

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As Gumbs’ writes, ‘We are words made flesh. But we make words. So we can make ourselves anew.’

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I still struggle distinguish between myself and the walls, but I will joyfully practice their unbuilding.