The Mice in the Ceiling: Musings on the Limits of Privatization

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Abstract: Commons are often portrayed as sprawling natural or intellectual resources whose vastness defies ownership. However, the urban built environment contains many shared spaces – courtyards, hallways, or even the gaps between floors and ceilings – that function as very small commons. In this essay I turn privatized, Soviet-era apartment blocks inside out to examine the shared spaces within them. I conclude that rather than merely working as buffers between neatly delineated chunks of 'the private,' small commons serve as the glue that ensures the structural and social cohesion of the building, and the value of individual apartments. This essay provides a mouse-sized counterpoint to the larger and more expansive commons discussed in literature on enclosure and access. 'Thinking small' forces us to reimagine what a 'common might look like, and focus on how people interact in or with commons, rather than merely take from them.

March 1 is, officially, the start of spring in Ukraine; in mild Odessa, where I am based, this seems only slightly optimistic. Here, the warm currents of the Black Sea generally keep the winter temperatures dangling just above freezing, such that an icy mist, broken only rarely by significant snowfall, hangs over the city in the colder months. By late February 2013, no one was wearing hats, and a few cautious buds had appeared on trees. But winter struck back. The blizzard that blasted Ukraine the third week in March, burying railways and turning Kyiv's steepest streets into ski slopes, made its way to Odessa in more limited, yet still frozen form. For my friend Nadia, however, what was most frustrating about this plunge in temperatures wasn't spending another ankle-twisting week leaping over giant slush-puddles. No, Nadia was concerned about the mice.

The critters had arrived around New Years, taking up residence in the ceiling above the kitchen of her privatized apartment, scurrying, scratching, and chattering, but thankfully, never entering the living space. Nadia and her boyfriend, Ruslan, decided that provided the mice stayed in the ceiling, they wouldn't worry too much. As the temperatures rose, they figured, the mice would naturally move on. And indeed, during the brief bout of balmy weather before the blizzard, there was a notable decrease in audible mouse activity. But when winter returned, the shuffling in the ceiling grew louder than before, culminating one day in the buzz and zap of an overhead light. The mice, it seemed, were gnawing on the electrical wiring. It was time for action.

How do you solve the problem of mice in your ceiling? This is a tricky (and icky) question under any circumstances, but in a former Soviet apartment block that has been carved up into apartments owned by individuals with no real governing association, it poses special challenges. Your ceiling is at once your neighbor's floor, as well as one border of the gap between the two. And that gap is a no-man's land: a tangle of pipes, insulation, and electrical wiring, navigable only by experts and mice. Moreover, no one person really owns or is obviously responsible for these spaces; they are shared. In the absence of 'homeowners associations' and well-functioning, responsive municipal housing authorities – Odessa's ZHEK (Rus. *zhitlovo-ekspluatatsijna kontora;* roughly, communal housing offices) is notoriously apathetic – it is up to neighbors to resolve problems that manifest themselves in and between their units. Troubles like mice in the ceiling, broken windows in the stairwell, or busted locks on exterior doors provoke interactions between neighbors (both human and non-human) that draw

attention to the necessity of small commons, including those we almost never access, and for which we rarely consider ourselves responsible.

In this essay, I turn apartment blocks inside out to examine the shared spaces within them. I conclude that rather than merely working as buffers between neatly delineated chunks of 'the private,' small commons serve as the glue that ensures the structural and social cohesion of the building, and the value of individual apartments. To clarify, by 'shared spaces,' I mean those spaces that cannot be claimed solely by the occupants of a single apartment building. These are spaces that building residents pass through on a regular basis – entryways, staircases, courtyards, etc. – as well as hidden spaces, such as the gaps between walls, ceilings, and floors, that they are less apt to think about unless problems arise. By 'social cohesion,' I mean mutual understandings of the rights to and value of co-habitants' property, as well as the social interactions that forge and re-forge those understandings.

These "Notes from the Field" are primarily a meditation on neighborly relations in the Odessan *dvor*, the courtyard-centered apartment block this city is so known for. However, it also offers some commentary on commons. First and foremost, this essay investigates the gaps between property lines that result when other boundaries are established, and suggests that the value (structural, fiscal, and enjoyment of use) of private property is actually better protected when these 'leftovers' are left common. Second, this essay asks us to 'think small' with regards to commons. In this sense, it offers a mouse-sized counterpoint to the typically much larger and more expansive commons discussed in literature on enclosure and access. Like pastures. And databases. And most importantly in Odessa, the Black Sea shoreline.

Before further exploring the corridors and crevices of privatized apartments, we'll take a trip to the beach. I assume you won't mind, and doing so will allow me to situate my thoughts about commons in a context in which they have been more frequently approached, both in academic literature, as well as in everyday conversation in a contemporary society.

On Vastness and Beach Blankets

If you approach the shore from wooded Shevchenko Park, rather than via the steep staircases that descend from the cliff upon which the city sits, Odessa's beaches seem ghostly. Hundreds of neatly aligned lounge chairs march away from the boardwalk, but almost no one sits in them. Cafes blare pop music, but the tables are mostly empty, or occupied only by the occasional aproned staff member on break. But then you notice the masses near the water: pink-shouldered men, nearly all in tight, black swim shorts, daring each other to swim out to and stand on the algae-covered breakwater wall; glossy-haired, model-slim, young women in sparkling bikinis, standing straight, holding their underarms out to the sun so that they can be golden on all sides; rotund grandmothers, still in two-pieces (American prudery has no place here), calling after toddlers in fat diapers that look itchy with sand; teenagers in wide circle formations, playing a game with volleyballs that I've never quite understood.

Ukrainian beachfronts are public, at least in theory, but that has not prevented enterprising locals from roping off the areas further back from the waves, installing beach chairs, and charging entry to a 'VIP' space. The legality of such practices is frequently contested by citizens, but the reality is that if you pay off the right city official, you can have your little business, no problem. These entrepreneurs do clean these areas well; in a *platnyj*, paid, beach zone, you usually don't have to worry about stepping on broken beer bottles, or lazily running a hand through the less than white sand only to come up with cigarette butts between your fingers.

And the work that they put into cleaning the beachfront is precisely the justification that they use for charging admission. Meanwhile, the masses, unable or unwilling to pay for the tidier zones, crowd more and more tightly into the public area. By the peak of high season, you're lucky to find a space to put a hand towel, much less a beach blanket.

And so, people who have never read Locke, Smith, or even Marx argue over whether cleaning a stretch of sand gives a person property rights to it, how to price and otherwise value that labor, or if the beachfronts can even be owned and exchanged as commodities at all. The filthy state of the public beaches seems a classic case of the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968), but certainly, part of that tragedy is not only lack of regulation, but also the privatization (for all intents and purposes) of parts of the shoreline, which funnels more and more beachgoers into smaller and smaller spaces. Odessans speak regularly of the Soviet days, when beaches were free for all, and cared for by the public. They argue, as many have, including the Ukrainian government itself, that certain spaces are best managed by the citizens. While 'public' can sometimes slide to 'government,' there seems widespread agreement among most Odessans I've spoken to that civic organizations, rather than businesses, are the best managers of the waterfront. Whether they cite customary access, the damage caused to the environment by increased crowding along the water line, or disdain for those capitalists and their 'VIP' 'lifestyle' (Rus. лайфстайль), Odessans take a "comedic" (Rose, 1986), as opposed to "tragic," approach toward free use of their beaches. They argue that the beaches are and always have been for everyone's enjoyment, and that education (and more trash bins, several note) will go further than privatization in keeping them clean. Civic organization, they say – and frequently point back to the Soviet era 'volunteer' brigades – is what's needed. Who is to organize such campaigns is, as always, less clear.

Shorelines, of course, have long been discussed as an example of something that is difficult or damaging to privatize. Other classic examples include forests and grasslands, some roads and many waterways, or other, frequently, topographical features that intersect or abut private properties, separating or providing access to them, depending on one's perspective. More recent scholarship on the 'commons' has focused on human-made spaces and resources. Scholars have pointed to "the tragedy of the anti-commons," (Heller, 1998) situations in which too many rights-holders (as opposed to an absence of property rights, as Hardin discusses) inhibit productive use of a resource. Heller's example, likely familiar to many readers of AEER, was the proliferation of kiosks in post-socialist societies despite the emptiness of many storefronts. While some of the people working out of kiosks may very well have preferred to move indoors, or even had the funds to do so, navigating the web of rights-owners proved too difficult.

The pervasiveness of the internet has turned discussion of the 'commons' increasingly toward intellectual property. "Comedy" arguments have been applied toward open-access resources, such as databases of articles in academic journals. Having a greater number of researchers who don't claim rights to their written work is beneficial because it allows people to pool, draw on, and improve knowledge. The result is beneficial, comedic, the opposite of tragic. As with the shorelines and forests, analyses of the merits of intellectual commons frequently point to a certain 'vastness' that defies ownership. With regard to something like beachfronts, the vastness is imagined as pre-existing. In the case of databases of scientific knowledge, the common aims to pull together the vastness of academic knowledge so that it can be drawn upon, thereby creating even more vastness.

I wish to move against this privileging of the unimaginably large, and 'think small.' Doing so offers at least two major benefits: first, it forces us to reimagine what a 'common'

might look like; second, it invites focused attention to how people *interact in* or *with* commons, rather than merely *take from* them.

Access, Responsibility, and *Remont* for Votes

This brings me to my third and fourth points about commons. Three: commons are as much about shared responsibility as about access; four: commons are not necessarily born of nature, but rather of human design. Hardin's pasture is common precisely because the area around it is not. Even if the common is said to be open to 'all,' those included in 'all' may have a clear sense of who does not enjoy access, and who is not responsible for maintenance. For example, the common courtyard of an Odessan apartment block is not to be a parking lot for just anyone in the city, but only for those who live in the immediate vicinity. The residents of the courtyard may have a shared sense of responsibility for ensuring this rule is followed. In fact, Odessans can be exceptionally protective of their *dvory* (courtyards), which are usually accessible via gates from the main street. Vehicle control and cleanliness are top priorities. Cars must not be parked in inconvenient places. Long-standing trash and scattered building materials are not tolerated. And should you, heaven forbid, not immediately locate a hooked pole with which to pick up the musty blanket that, when airing out, flew off your balcony and landed on your neighbor's rooftop, you will be, I promise, strictly reprimanded.

The *dvor* is policed by windows and cats. Eagle-eyed grandmothers peer down from behind lace curtains. Their felines patrol the tin rooftops, gazing upon newcomers, and without fail, sunning themselves on the hood of whichever car is least familiar. Yet despite this constant monitoring of the outside courtyard, many of the shared areas inside of these privatized apartment buildings are in terrible disrepair: crumbling staircases missing railings spiral by grimy windows missing panes; stinking entryways serve as sporadic toilets for drunken passersby; walls turn moldy or rodent-ridden; old marble floors are so smothered in dust and dirt that you would need a paint scraper to even begin to clean them. There are exceptions, of course, and conditions can change dramatically from floor to floor, depending on whether an ambitious neighbor has implemented a cleaning schedule. And the state of the hallways says nothing about the residences that open off of them. I have been to and lived in perfectly pleasant apartments in buildings with graffiti-covered steel doors, syringes in the entryway, and neighbors who actively encouraged their cat to relieve itself in the stairwell.

Why such a contrast? Odessans are apt to cite local 'mentality,' which, though frequently blamed on the Soviet experience of mass governance, seems to be another iteration of the classic 'bystander effect,' in which everyone waits for someone else to take the lead. (This syndrome seems to have only so much to do with planned economies; certainly, those who put their faith primarily in the market also wait for cues to act.) It can also be instructive to compare the experience of being a guest in an urban apartment with that of visiting a village home. In the city, visitation begins once you enter your host's actual dwelling, which, despite the grubby hallway, may be lavishly decorated. In contrast, in the villages, modest houses are often surrounded by fancy iron-wrought gates and carefully tended flower gardens, which, while not exactly *for* guests, do anticipate visitors. Unlike privatized apartments, village houses tend to be stand-alone, with fewer leftover spaces resulting from privatization, and less uncertainty as to who is responsible for maintaining commons. (Indeed, the commons are more 'classic' examples like pastures and roads.) On former collective farms, where villagers continued to work communally for years after receiving their private land shares, the Soviet *subbotniki*, or

Saturday volunteer brigades, remain well-organized, and ensure trash is picked up and weeds pulled. In the cities, ZHEK, the Soviet-born housing authority, might send a cleaning person every month or two to do basic sweeping and mopping, or perhaps replace a light bulb that has gone out. The rest of the time, no one is obviously in charge.

Arguably, this lack of clear ownership and responsibility in the city leaves the door open for exploitation. For example, I've heard of a few instances of renovations in apartment buildings being performed – rather, paid for – by candidates for Ukraine's legislature, the Verkhovna Rada. About a month before the October, 2012 parliamentary elections, Tanya came home to find a couple of repairmen in her entryway. Within days, the previously shabby entryway of her Kyiv apartment building had undergone a full renovation, and apparently all for free. A family member of one of the building residents was running for political office, and was sponsoring the *remont*. Yet in November, a woman came to Tanya's door, demanding money for the renovation services and supplies (the candidate had not won, although it is uncertain if this is what prompted the change of heart). When Tanya and others in the building didn't pay up, the woman drew up a list of the offenders, which she posted on the freshly painted walls of the entryway for all to see. Shortly thereafter, another resident wrote up his account of what had happened, blaming the relatives of the political candidate, and declaring his refusal to pay for a renovation he'd never requested. He then posted this notice next to the first, inviting the other non-paying residents, Tanya included, to add their names in support.

In the case of the not-actually-free renovation described above, the lack of clear ownership of the entryway (and, arguably, its resultant disrepair) made it susceptible to the designs of a vote-seeking, would-be member of parliament. On the one hand, this could be seen as an argument for more complete privatization; if the entryway were the responsibility of one person, that person could invest in maintaining it, and chances are a vote-seeking politician or his supporters would not consider it worthwhile to sponsor an entire renovation in exchange for a single vote. On the other hand, the entryway needs to be open to everyone who lives in their building; obviously, people need guaranteed access to their apartments.

Thus, there is a structural need for this common space that requires it to remain accessible to the residents and their approved visitors. However, it also offers a sort of sociality that ultimately protects the value of each of the private apartments within it. Considered from a different angle, the lack of individual ownership of the entryway actually served as a check *against* corruption. In resisting the organizer's demand for payment, residents reasserted their rights to decide how to manage the spaces they own, both individually and as a group. (This is not to say that Tanya and company are anti-corruption crusaders; they were, initially, quite willing to have the renovations done for free. Whom they voted for in the parliamentary elections, I do not know.)

The City House and The Common Mouse

The question of structure and sociality returns me to the problem of the mice in Nadia and Ruslan's building. The gap between ceiling and floor is a strange sort of common within the apartment block. Like a hallway, it is a space between that is structurally essential. However, it is only rarely accessible, and, depending on its design, may not be at all navigable by an average-sized adult. And yet, there is little doubt that this, too, is a common in the sense that it is not individually owned by any of the residents. Moreover, it provides room for shared resources –

pipes, electrical wiring, insulation – that ensure the comfort and value of the private apartments. It is both buffer and glue.

Situations like the mice in the ceiling – or floor, depending on your perspective – draw attention to the necessary commonality of these spaces, as well as the impossibility of their complete privatization. Moreover, they point to the need for a sense of not only common access to these gaps, but common responsibility for them. Privatizing these liminal spaces isn't an option structurally, but moreover, it would be actually be damaging to the value of the apartments themselves. In the case of Nadia and Ruslan's apartment, it turned out that the mice had been causing more electrical problems for the upstairs neighbors, who had not otherwise been aware of the critters' presence. Indeed, mice do not recognize property boundaries, and trying to rid one's individual apartment of mice hardly solves the problem, as they are apt to simply migrate next door, where they continue their rapid reproduction and gnawing of wires and wood.

And from next door was where Nadia speculated the mice had come from. There had never been mice in the apartment, she explained, until the neighbors had gone and built an addition onto their first floor residence, which required extending the foundation. This, she theorized, had disrupted the existing nests, and as the weather grew colder, the mice had gone scurrying to other parts of the building, most notably, her apartment. Again, thankfully, they didn't enter the living space itself, except if you removed a loose tile from the area below the bathtub (a warm and common nesting area, it seems). The key to keeping the population moderately in check, was, Ruslan explained, to open this pathway, set traps in the bathroom, and then keep the door closed until you heard a trap go off. Many traps went off.

Bathtub alley, Ruslan and the exterminator they hired decided, would be ground zero for the mouse elimination effort. Killing mice headquartered in an area as tiny as the gap between ceiling and floor would require using poison that the mice, encountering it, would have to carry back to their nest. The mice would die – those that didn't scatter, that is – and the stench of decay would emanate from the walls for an estimated two weeks. No one was looking forward to this. Now, ideally, the affected upstairs neighbors would allow the exterminator to pull up some of their floorboards, clear out 'debris,' and plug any mouse holes with cement, thus hastening the conclusion of the unpleasant task, and also guarding against future infestations. However, the upstairs neighbors balked at this, and suggested that perhaps waiting for spring really was the best option. Meanwhile, the other neighbors – including the ones who may or may not have started the problem with their construction – were also reluctant to provide financial assistance, leaving Nadia and Ruslan to foot the bill.

It is most convenient to blame ZHEK, the absent housing authority, for not taking action with regards to matters affecting the entire apartment block. Certainly, their leadership and participation could bring about a much more efficient resolution. Yet, ZHEK, too, lacks the funds to make many necessary improvements to infrastructure, perhaps in part because they are perceived as ineffective, which makes people less likely to pay their dues to the organization, which cripples it even further. Public housing authorities are ultimately a remnant of the Soviet era, and their position is awkward in a housing environment in which each owner is acting in his or her own self-interest.

Thus, the ability to problem-solve is dependent upon the actions of individuals and their recognition that the upkeep of common areas in their building directly affects the value of their own apartment. However, neighbors seem to regularly show an unwillingness to cooperate, especially if their own property isn't being noticeably affected. The property lines they see end

at the floor, ceiling, or other boundary-defining wall; they don't consider that what sustains their property is what lies beyond these lines.

Those familiar with homeowners associations might ask why such organizations have failed to take off in Ukraine. As of 2008, they were present in only an estimated 6 percent of all privatized multi-family apartment buildings (Vaughn, 2008, in Lipman, 2012). Is this problem a mistrust of neighbors leftover from the Soviet era? Is it an indifferent individuality brought on by capitalism? The answer, according to a 2012 International Housing Coalition report (Lipman, 2012), is probably more financial than ideological. Many of these privatized apartments, such as Nadia and Ruslan's, were allocated during 1990s privatization, and their current owners have widely varying liquidity. Some people, such as young professionals who purchased their apartments more recently, or were gifted them by family members, might be able to afford to make a contribution toward a project like mouse extermination or fixing broken windows. Others, such as senior pensioners who received their apartments 20 years ago, have no liquidity beyond the tiny stipend the state provides them each month. For them to afford homeowner association fees, they might need to sell their homes. Thus, they are reluctant to enter into agreements with their neighbors, and their neighbors are reluctant to ask them.

This brings me to my fifth and final observation about commons: they often go unacknowledged. Property, Carol Rose writes (1994) is something that is 'seen.' She is primarily concerned with "cultural limitations on imagination" (296), and the ability to understand property regimes different from one's own – certainly a worthy topic of discussion in any critical investigation of the so-called 'transition.' However, I want to point out that Rose's discussion of visibility can also be taken in a more literal sense. If you cannot see the common, you might not recognize it as something you have access to or responsibility for, or that its maintenance benefits you. Such is the case with the 'leftover' space in privatized Soviet apartment blocks. Reasonably, such is the case in many if not most other parts of the world.

At last discussion, Ruslan and Nadia were still fighting with their neighbors over what to do about the mice. As of the first week in April, temperatures were quickly climbing upwards, and all were hoping that the mice would migrate outdoors on their own. Ruslan has been pondering whether to reseal the loose tile below the bathtub, but is leaning against it. If he caulks the mice out (or rather, in), he explains, he will simply hear them and have no way of reaching them. Moreover, he sighs, they will probably be back next winter anyway. Unlike humans, mice seem not to experience the limits of privatization.

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