Mending the commons with the 'Little Mesters'

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abstract

The subjects of this paper are the 'Little Mesters' of Sheffield, UK. The Mesters are self-employed master craftspeople whose day-to-day work is dependent on repairing, recycling, and maintenance, in ways that are intertwined with the urban fabric, flows of goods, and collaborative manufacturing spanning generations. This long-established, yet fragile web of mutuality and reciprocal practices of repair by highly-skilled workers is under threat from enclosure, and yet, I argue, simultaneously offers possibilities for reclaiming the commons. Through collaborative mapping and activist work with a campaign group over eight years, I examine an instance of existential threat to a factory, Portland Works, home to Little Mesters. Through strategies of distributed design prompted by this threat, cultures and practices of repair have been harnessed, and repair has become politicised, dispersed and future-orientated, prefiguring the post-capitalist city. The enclosure of commons is particularly spatial and material, and therefore disruptive of certain more egalitarian forms of relating and organising; politically, economically, pedagogically and ecologically. I argue that practices of repair found in this instance offer possibilities to address such ruptures, through the ethical decisions they prompt, the assemblages they generate, or gestures of care they manifest. Repair is often conceptualised temporally, as an activity that returns something to a former state, yet I wish to assert its spatial and material agencies; as productive of spaces and relations, dependent on them, and potentially restorative of them. In doing so I claim its value to support the reclaiming of 'common failures', the amplification of existing instances of commoning, and the development of heterogeneous networks of commoners.

Introduction

This paper proposes that repair can be understood as a locus of collective agency for transition to a post-capitalist world. In doing so, I argue that certain acts of repair might be understood as prefigurative of and amplifying the production of

the commons. Commoning and commons are understood as offering important areas of contemporary research and action for those who seek to move beyond neoliberalism and remake the world in ways that do not hold competition and financialisation as a defining characteristic (De Angelis, 2017; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Linebaugh, 2008; De Angelis and Harvie, 2014), and indeed refuse the notion of property entirely (Hardt and Negri, 2017; Jeppesen et al., 2014). Such work to redefine our socio-political imaginaries and make new relations must necessarily engage with the question of how capitalism seeks to enclose shared resources in its constant need to generate new markets and consumers (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2010). In exploring this, I wish to begin from a point that understands the enclosure of the commons not just as synonymous with privatisation or commodification, but as spatial (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015; Stavrides, 2016), and material. Enclosure is therefore disruptive of certain more egalitarian forms of relating and organising in the city; politically, economically, pedagogically and ecologically. I contend that certain practices of repair offer possibilities to address such ruptures, through the ethical decisions they prompt, the assemblages they generate or gestures of care and maintenance they manifest. Repair is often conceptualised temporally, as an activity that returns something to a former state, yet I wish to explore its spatial and material agencies (Lepawsky et al., 2017: 56-57), and in doing so, conceptualise it as transformative.

The subject of this consideration are the 'Little Mesters' in Sheffield, UK; self-employed master-craftspeople, whose day-to-day work is dependent on repairing, recycling, and maintenance, in ways that are intertwined with the urban fabric, flow of goods, and collaborative manufacturing that spans generations and transverses the city. This long-established, yet fragile web of reciprocal practices of repair and maintenance by highly-skilled workers is both under threat from prevalent forms of enclosure, and simultaneously offers possibilities for prefiguring the post-capitalist city. I set out the kinds of capabilities, relationships, and understandings developed within such acts of repair, which I propose can contribute to the achievement of commoning agencies, the amplification of community economies and the reproduction of the urban commons. I wish to consider how such ways of working embody, and hold the potential for new forms of affiliation and transformative spatial practices.

Portland Works, a struggle for survival

Portland Works, the site of this study, is a Grade II* listed[1] cutlery factory, where the livelihoods of its metalworking tenants, the Little Mesters were threatened by its potential closure and conversion into residential accommodation. The Works and its immediate neighbours are also home to various bands, recording studios and record labels, including some with global profile. Over its 130-year history it has housed hundreds of makers, some for generations, and two current tenants for over forty-years. The micro-businesses who rent space rely on personal relationships to provide informal training, and repair machinery and tools. Portland Works represents a 'diverse economic' landscape, with wage labour, self-employment, borrowing and lending and in-kind transactions part of its everyday (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016).

Image 1: Portland Works, Sheffield, UK, 2010, Martin Pick

In 2009 the landlord of Portland Works submitted a planning application for a change of Use Class[2] from industrial to residential. If successful, this change in

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1   This is a UK conservation status for buildings of 'more than special interest'; 5.8% of listed buildings in the UK are Grade II*.

2   In the UK 'The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987' categorises different types of land and building according to their uses, such as industrial,

designation would allow him to evict long-standing tenants, many of whom would have had to close their business as a result. Some would not have been able to continue due to the lack of suitable affordable manufacturing space within the city. For others, including the toolmaker who forges using a drop-hammer that had been in place since the building was built in the 1870s, and the cabinet maker who had invested in installing heavy machinery on the first floor, the cost of relocating was prohibitive[3]. Those who could have relocated more easily, often had strong emotional attachments to the site, such as a knifemaker using his cutler parents' workshop and tools, or others, closer to retirement age, for whom there seemed little point in starting again away from friends, collaborators, and workshops they love. For neighbouring businesses, the fear was that the change in planning classification would result in prohibitively high rents, driven by the consequent increase in property values, and restrictive noise and traffic regulations that could be imposed in retrospect.

The landlord's assertion of his property rights over tenants' use rights made visible the violence of property laws and planning regulations in ways that had not been tangible before. The Mesters' seemingly reasonable demands to continue their tenancies begun far before the current landlord took ownership, and retain the value they had built into their businesses, were disregarded. This moment foregrounded the question of who had the right to use and claim this space and how, and in doing so began to alter subjectivities. Those who would not previously have affiliated themselves with left-wing causes or explicitly considered their day-today activities as potentially outside of capitalism, shifted their positions and sought to explore radical ownership approaches for the site. It became clear that the ways the tenants worked and what they valued were incompatible not just with this particular landlord, but ultimately with a marketised valuing of the land. Even if this particular planning application was defeated, another could be successful in the future. Increased rents would compel the businesses to cease trading or to make greater profits that would necessitate fundamental changes to their business model and ways of working.

Massimo de Angelis observes that 'the extent to which we are aware of enclosures is the extent to which they confront us' (De Angelis, 2007: 144). He goes on to argue that such crises do not always lead to a closing down, and a desire to merely look after oneself, but can be productive moments, of a set of

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residential, retail and so on. Generally, planning permission is required from the Local Authority in order to change the use class of a building or land to another use.

3   Toolmaker Andrew Cole calculated in 2009 that it would cost him £250,000 to relocate his business, a sum which was unaffordable given his profit margins and proximity to retirement.

demands (negative or positive), and ultimately of change. This was the case here, where many Mesters, artists and musicians both within the walls of Portland Works and beyond recognised their interdependence and the threat to certain values and ways of working. The result was a campaign that combined a fight against gentrification and the creative development of alternative proposals for the site. In 2013 Portland Works was purchased by over five-hundred tenant and community shareholders along with the implementation of an asset lock[4] (Community Shares, 2018), which would prevent its demutualisation. The site was taken out of the speculative property market, and transformed into a non-commodified community asset. In this paper, I argue that this was possible, in part, because of the existing cultures of repair.

Image 2: Shareholders celebrating the community purchase of Portland Works 2013, Karl McAuley

A design-activist approach to research

This research can be understood as both a creative, critical endeavour, and as activist. It is activist in the sense that it is directed towards overt political goals,

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4   An asset lock is a legal clause that prevents the assets of a company being used for private gain rather than the stated purposes of the organisation. It would require shareholders to dispose of assets with another mutual organisation with similar stated aims.

mutually defined between myself and many others who are directly subject to those conditions which we seek to change (Hale, 2008; Speed, 2008; Gordon-Nembhard, 2008). Entwined with this are practices and concepts drawn from activist design and architectural research projects such as *aaa*'s EcoBOX and R-Urban (Petrescu, 2005, 2012; Petcou and Petrescu, 2014; *aaa*, 2018). To design in such a way is to seek to distribute agency and acknowledge that designers are always operating in interdependent and spatiality configured economic, social, political, technical and cultural networks (Holert, 2011). To design in these conceptualizations means to try to get something transformative done together, and this process reveals resistances, capacities and relations that, when embedded in a research project, also allow for collective critical insights to be formed.

Design-activist research takes time, attention and commitment. My involvement at Portland Works has been over a decade, in changing and often blurred roles, both within and outside of the academy, as an Architecture student, PhD candidate, community architectural researcher, citizen and architectural practitioner. Certain opportunities and constraints were created by having the responsibilities associated with multiple roles, both to myself, the institution which funded my PhD, those tenants and campaigners with whom I am working with, and in a legal capacity once I became a director of the community benefit society[5] that governed Portland Works. I actively chose to adopt and move between these positions, and in doing so I could examine, explore and expand the capacities produced by each. This is a form of reflexivity that, rather than focus on the researchers' identity, seeks to examine the processes and structures that shape the encounter and fieldwork, cognisant that the context for each of the actors is different (Nagar and Geiger, 2007: 270).

This approach gave me insight into many aspects of the day-to-day life, in-depth, over a long duration; the material, spatial and organisational, as well as emotional and motivational. It gave me insight into how change could happen. This breadth and depth of understanding *how* things happen is crucial if we understand the possibility for change through theories of prefiguration (Maecklebergh, 2011; 2016; Yates, 2015; Graziano, 2017). Boggs defines prefiguration as 'the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of the movement, of those forms of social relations, decision making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs, 1977: 100). Rather than

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5   'Community Benefit Societies', formerly called 'Industrial and Provident Societies' are registered societies 'owned and controlled democratically by a variety of stakeholders, and operates primarily for the benefit of a wider stakeholder group' (Cooperatives UK, 2017).

working from an abstract ideal of how the political *should* work, prefigurative approaches valorise politics that emerges within, and as tested by people's realities, capabilities, desires, understandings and situations. In such politics the everyday is understood not as mundane, or trivial background to 'bigger' political decisions, but as offering important insights into power, modes of organising, issues of concern, responsibility and care.

My account of this case as outlined here is drawn from twenty mapping interview sessions with ten key members of the organisation (five of whom are tenants), and through documenting actions, stories and conversations which span over eight-years. In the mapping interviews, participants were invited to describe the tools we collaboratively developed to create 'commoning agencies' (discussed below) and to define and achieve an emerging common project. To enable the accounts to be developed and refined collaboratively, my descriptions and analysis have been 'taken back' through inviting people formally to add to and modify the mappings, through formal and informal conversations, and finally to review drafts of written work (both academic, and in other forms such as mappings, diagrams, drawings and reports), where my interpretations were set out. The aim was not to produce a single defining narrative, but rather to draw out and collectively produce multiple, sometimes contradictory, sometimes overlapping understandings, meanings, visions and approaches, and to understand the site and processes in their complexity. The validity of our findings was tested in part by the usefulness of what was produced in supporting our collective struggles and aims, and contribution to a transformative project (Hale, 2008).

'One great workshop', the commons in Sheffield

Sheffield has an industrial, economic and cultural history that is reliant on particular forms of commons that constitute the city and its spatial relations. It is important to understand this history, and the role of repair within it in order to comprehend why the campaign to save Portland Works, and the livelihoods of its Mesters, required moving beyond solutions offered within the market, (the reclaiming of common value by those who produced it) and to reveal the embedded commoning practices that supported such action (commoning agencies). Repair and maintenance are key here in the production of the commons and its sustenance; in exploring this here I set out the different motivations, capacities and subjectivities that prompt and support such acts.

The spatiality of repair in Sheffield: as craft, of tools and machinery, through DIY

The industrialisation of the UK led to the development of its urban landscape, with cottage industries increasingly being replaced by large-scale factories employing semi-skilled or unskilled workers. In contrast to this, Sheffield continues to be known for its self-employed skilled master crafts people; the Little Mesters, and its small scale 'flatted factories', often growing from a single unit into a courtyard building over time (Beauchamp et al., 2002). First documented in the 14th Century, the Little Mesters are cutlers, platers, engravers, knife–makers, forgers, and toolmakers (Hamshere and Pettifer, 2015). In the 19th century, the city of Sheffield was branded as 'one great workshop' because the industry had grown up in small workshops by the rivers that powered the waterwheels, and in houses, with goods carted between sites, and with this forms of sociality upon which production depended:

> We must regard it as *one great workshop* for the production of cutlery and edge-tools – a huge factory which scatters its separate departments in different parts of the town, but still retains them all, like so many links in a chain. (*The Penny Magazine*, 1844, in Wray et al., 2001: 30)

Mesters relied on one-another through necessity, proximity (spatially or familial), and, also because of growing friendships, mediated through apprenticeships, processes of making, and an energy source. The quality of what they made, and the need to be frugal, led to the evolution of sophisticated practices of reuse, repair, and recycling that remain today.

In the mid to late 19th century, the advent of steam power led to the Little Mesters relocating from workshops along the rivers and valleys to the city, into integrated factories developed by wealthy entrepreneurs, who sought to bring the processes of production spatially closer together. The independence (from employers) and interdependence (between craftsmen) of the Mesters largely remained, as Mesters rented their own workshops in the factories organized around a steam engine and shared central courtyard. At this time, Engels remarked 'In Sheffield wages are better, and the external state of the workers, also [...] although certain branches are to be noted here for their extraordinarily injurious influence upon the health' (Engels, 1969 [1892]: n.p.). Mesters would work together for larger or more complex orders with, for example, one Mester forging the blades, another grinding, another yet the handles, and 'buffer girls' finishing the knives. 'The manufacturers were able to respond quickly to a specialist and perhaps short-lived demand without requiring large capital investment, and the craftspeople enjoyed their freedom to work for any employer, and were not at the mercy of a single employer's fortunes.' (Wray et al., 2001: 32-33) This also meant that the

tools were owned and selected by the Mesters, and the repairs to machinery and workshops were their responsibility, rather than employers.

Image 3: Ray, Wigful Tools, 2011, Martin Pick

The goods produced by the Little Mesters were of the finest quality and expected to last generations. Apprenticeships began with learning how to repair an existing item, rather than making something from scratch, with the notion of repair embedded in production. The Mesters expected to be part of their products' maintenance, as an aspect of their often informal contract of sale, which created and relied upon particular forms of sociality between producer and consumer, goods and craftsmanship expertise. Repairs were essential to the functioning of the business, yet hidden behind closed-doors.

Profit margins were tight, and the relative expense of the materials led in the first instance to precise and frugal use and secondly, the reuse and recycling of waste and off-cuts. The workshop, where specific tools, materials and fittings are available to hand, enabled or restricted what could be made or repaired; its

precision, materiality, its scale and complexity. Mesters would be engaged with 'piece work', where on a Friday if they did not deliver to a quality deemed good enough by the commissioner, they would not get paid. Practices of mutual support, such as repairing machinery, ensured that work could continue if a machine broke down, and people could get paid, and afford to eat (Mitchell, 2012). Faced with a precarious situation, this created inter-reliance between micro-businesses and individuals, and material-economic acts that exist on the edge of the wage or market economies, flows of materials and the creation of spaces of repair.

Manufacturing remained a successful industry in the city up until the late 1960s, with the 'Made in Sheffield' brand being known globally as one of high quality. In the 1970s, the combination of the global oil crises, the privatization of a number of key public industries upon which Sheffield depended, alongside competition from Asia, led to the rapid decline of manufacturing in a short space of time, with the city going from virtually full employment to losing 50% of industrial jobs (Power et al., 2010: 13). During this period, many factories were demolished, machinery scrapped and skills lost. This led to a reduction in apprenticeships, an aging skilled cohort, and in many places the production of inferior-quality goods that were cheaper to replace than repair. The ensuing model of production was often reliant on low wages, and poor working conditions for those far removed from their consumers and a model of consumption that requires the continual replacement of goods.

At the same time as manufacturing was diminishing, Sheffield's DIY music and art scene was growing and becoming more prominent; artists and musicians moved in side-by-side with the remaining Mesters, taking advantage of the cheap newly vacated workshops. Over the next two decades the grid of streets surrounding Portland Works was reputed to become the largest concentration of music studios in the north of England. With these new tenants in the Mesters' factories, came the ad-hoc practices of repair, maintenance and adaptation of the buildings, and the DIY organization of events, gigs, parties and exhibitions, often opening studios to the public. Artists and musicians converted workshops into recording studios, venues, and art studios in frugal and creative ways, often through in-kind activities, or informal skill swapping and practices of mutuality.

The influx of the new tenants operated as a hidden support system for the Mesters, generating enough rental income to prevent further demolitions or repurposing, enough trade to retain some local pubs, cafes and shops, and the maintenance of the fabric and spaces of the factories which were not maintained by their landlords. 'DIY' work was carried out by people with low wages, and within and against an increasingly controlled and homogenised city landscape.

This political and creative work, associated with punk and post-punk music and artistic subcultures, involved the maintenance and repair of accommodation. This allowed for its affordable use for hosting events and creative production, extending what was possible in these spaces including activity that was not catered for by the market. It developed capacities and relations amongst a small but active community.

The student population at the city's two universities grew rapidly in the years that followed and the sell-off of university student accommodation in the suburbs corresponded with an increase in developer-led student housing in the city centre. During this period, considerable pressure was placed on rents in an area of the city centre which had previously been cheap. Larger commercial developers with little connection to the city began to purchase factories from landlords who were previously owners of metalwork firms and had personal ties to industry and the Mesters. Much greater profit margins were sought from the commercial developers, and achieved through the planning process of changing land use class. The arts and music cultures and the DIY practices were also vulnerable to the property market, both in terms of increasing rental costs, and the tenancy agreements which of increasingly risk averse and hands-off property management companies, as well as zoning and rental policies. Demolition and redevelopment of the city centre forced relocations of many artist and music studios (Rousseau, 2009), Although ostensibly more mobile than the Mesters with their heavy machinery, constant relocation could take its toll, and with each iteration the space available both generally and especially for 'messy' uses was reduced.

The elegant but deteriorating Portland Works became a key target for conversion to residential accommodation. The developer's planning application would close Portland Works as a factory, and aimed to be the catalyst for the transition of the wider area from a flexible-use area (that allowed for the breadth of current industrial and cultural functions) to residential (which would prohibit or inhibit them). Those neighbours who relied on Mesters at Portland Works for support, or through collaborative work would also be under threat. When understood at the scale of a city or region, this was a relatively small number of businesses, with small profit margins and relatively few employees; a loss of something which was portrayed in the planning application as unsustainable. Drawing on ideas of social production and the commons I wish to argue for its value being much greater.

The making, enclosure and remaking of the commons in sites of work

To understand the potential of this site is to begin with the notion of social production (Engels, 1970; Hardt and Negri, 2017: 144). In 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', Engels observed that unlike medieval society where people largely made things for themselves or their families, under capitalism, the process of production of commodities requires social relations, and also shapes them (Engels, 1970). In Sheffield, production did not occur in great factories under the control of the factory owner, but across the city in small workshops of the self-employed Mester, thus also forming material flows and shaping the landscape and architecture. Gentrification poses an immediate threat to these forms of social production because in the process of displacement and erasure it severs networks and relations that must be established over space and time. This is a threat to intertwined cultures of maintenance and repair, and consequently the forms of production which rely on them.

In 'On the Commons' Massimo De Angelis proposes that there has been a failure in many readings of Marx to understand that the process of enclosure was not a one-off occurrence, consigned to a single point in history, but rather a repeating process central to capitalism. He argues that if we can shift our understanding of primitive accumulation, we can also shift our understanding around social production and the common, and move away from an understanding of capitalism as the dominant relation:

> [...] people do reconstitute commons anew, and they do it all the time. These commons help to re-weave the social fabric threatened by previous phases of deep commodification and at the same time provide potential new ground for the next phase of enclosures. *To me, however, it is important to emphasize not only that enclosures happen all the time, but also that there is constant commoning.* People again and again try to create and access the resources in a way that is different from the modalities of the market, which is the standard way for capital to access resources. (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2010, my emphasis)

This is a significant observation which puts the common both as produced by, and as mediating our relations. It prompts us to rethink how we value the commons, understanding it as both essential to keeping the capitalist economy afloat through its role in social reproduction, yet at the same time, offering ways to move beyond market-mediated relations.

In Sheffield, we can understand the persistence of these particular forms of social production over generations, despite processes of gentrification and enclosure, as part of a fragile re-weaving of what has been lost. The later arrival of the artists and musicians, literally and figuratively occupying gaps, in buildings, workshops and social relations also works in this way to rebuild Mesters'

commons that have been threatened, lost or enclosed. Yet rather than conceive this repair work as a way to keep Mesters' businesses going within the capitalist economy, we can understand it as potentially prefiguring a different set of economic and social relations; the commons. As Michael Hardt and Toni Negri suggest, 'Rather than see the common in the form of externalities as "missing markets" or "market failures", [...] we should instead see private property in terms of "missing commons" and "common failures".' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 283). At Portland Works, such a shift seemed to be essential to the community of Mesters, artists and musicians who were faced with an existential threat. Our shared question was how such a transformation could occur.

Commoning at Portland Works: designing with and from cultures of repair

What follows is a description of a selection of the hundreds of designed 'tools'[6] within the campaign to *Save Portland Works* that were produced by campaigners, and enabled people to reclaim the commons and gain commoning agency. (Udall, 2016). They can be understood as drawing upon, or part of the cultures of repair outlined above as present in Sheffield. There were three overlapping stages in the campaign; firstly, the work to oppose the landlord's change of use planning application, secondly, forming a constituency of commoners and common concerns, and finally the reclaiming of non-commodified resources and ongoing processes of commoning.

Opposing the planning application for change of use

To make a successful application for change of use for a Grade II* listed building the landlord had to prove that the existing use was 'no longer viable'. He submitted photographs showing the building as empty, plans omitting all present fixtures and fittings (which legally formed part of the Listing) and a Sustainability Statement arguing that the 'businesses were no longer economically viable due to competition from the Far East' (Sheffield City Council, 2009). To address this, the campaign had to do three things: raise awareness of the application and invite people to oppose it legitimately, prove the 'viability' of the site as industrial and demonstrate its historic and architectural value[7].

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6   Interviewees described over 250 'tools' that operated to transform the situation and grant agency to the commoners.

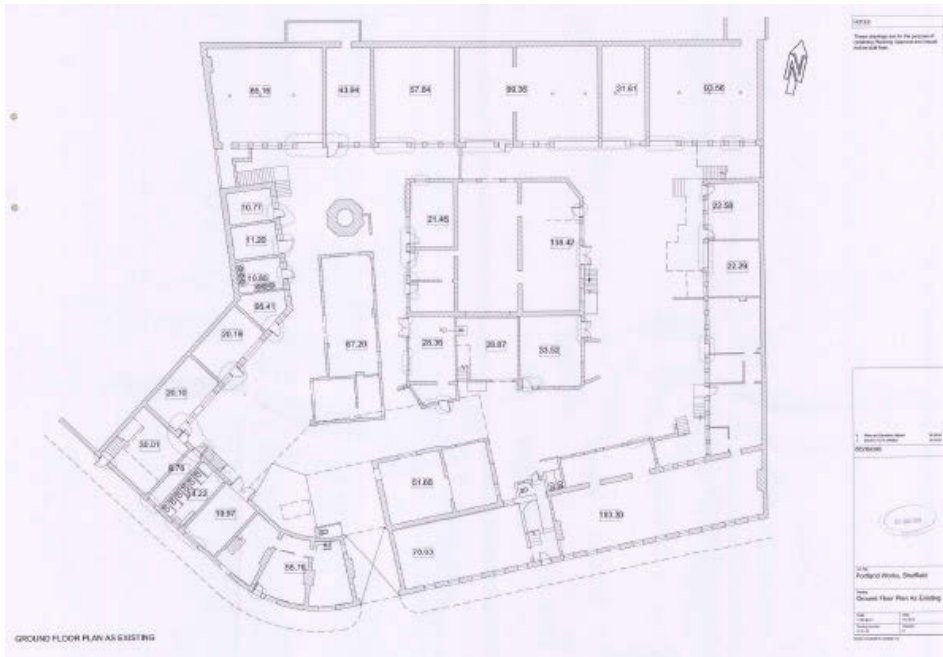7   Establishing the latter two points would compel the retention of an 'Industrial' use class.

Image 4: The initial planning application for change of use, 2009, Sheffield Planning Portal

In direct response to the planning application, an emerging group of local photographers, both amateur and professional, held an exhibition about Portland Works. Hosted at a stall at the city's main market, (a place frequented by people with direct connection to the metal trades), they invited visitors to take photographs of Portland Works, exhibit them, and share stories. Those instigating the exhibition sought to raise awareness of the threat to Portland Works and the incredible skill and diversity on site. This repair activity recognised the spatial and social disconnection between the planning portal[8] as the official site for democratic engagement and the people with good claim to being heard. In opening-up participation in the exhibition, which became a bricolage of images from many authors, the hosts offered the possibility for new narratives and allowed for many interpretations to be placed into dialogue. Images were offered freely by dozens of professional and amateur photographers; open-access digital copies became a shared resource for the campaign over the years ahead. Repair here is a practice of bricolage, exemplified in opportunistic DIY approaches to adapting existing sites for hosting music and art events.

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8   In 2002 the UK government set up a website, the planning portal, through which both planning applications and applications for building control can be made electronically to local authorities.

Image 5: Castle Market Photography Exhibition, 2010, Brian Hodkinson

It was crucial to mobilise opposition to the planning application within the immediate neighbourhood, as voices that formally have greater legitimacy within the planning process. This was hampered by the fact that from the surrounding streets the Works appeared derelict, Mesters no longer lived in adjacent streets, and customers tended to be national and global. Posters were produced featuring photographs of the Mesters, artists and musicians in their studios and workshops with their names, profession, tools and machinery. Large-format

versions were pasted to the front elevation of Portland Works and two-hundred photocopies were distributed to the shops and takeaways on the district high street. The Mesters became recognisable 'faces' of the campaign and a shared web address created a central point of contact. This was crucial in signalling Portland Works as being somewhere that was part of the communal fabric of the neighbourhood. People, tools and machines were foregrounded, showing the site as a place of work. This repair work to the façade sought to address the rupture caused by the developer drawing a 'red line' of ownership around the site, where the space was understood as an 'empty' and abstract commodity, rather than produced by and in relation to those who occupied it.

Image 6: Posters of the Little Mesters, 2010, author

Amplifying relationships between makers and forming a constituency of commoners

Under the current landlord the building had fallen into considerable disrepair and was not safe for public access. The external metal steps leading to the communal artists' studios were dangerous. A toolmaker tenant carried out this repair, making it safe to open their studios to the public. Public access allowed visitors to understand the practices and day-to-day life of the site, meet people who worked there, as well as get greater insight into the threat posed by the redevelopment. In repairing the steps, the toolmaker used his skill, and access to

tools and materials, and in doing so made a relation between the metalworkers and the artists. It was an act of care from one person to the artists borne out of kindness, and a desire to enable a shared goal. Prior to the campaign, many of the tenant artists, musicians and metalworkers did not have personal relationships, working independently within their own fields, studios and workshops. Through a series of open days and exhibitions, held both on and off site, the tenants got to know one another on the basis of their skills. Artists taught metalworkers how to curate exhibitions, and metalworkers offered lessons in how to weld to artists. These exchanges not only expanded the skills of individuals, but also the capacities of the campaign and site for creative activity and production.

Image 7: Repair to Steps, 2010, author

A collaborative conditional survey of the building was convened to draw on the working knowledge of tenants, such as where the building was damaged, how spaces were used, and what was valued (such as beautifully detailed brickwork, or fixtures such as hammers still used for manufacturing). This work intertwined with establishing courtyard clean-up days, bringing together tenants and volunteers to clear waste, and make the site safe, and publically accessible. One repair was to the toilet in the courtyard, which had been derelict for years, and combined unskilled and semi-skilled labour, including plumbing, roofing and pointing. This work demonstrated the commitment of volunteers to get down-and-dirty in jobs such as cleaning out the sump, and built trust and friendships with the Mesters. This repair work acknowledged the need for places of

interaction between tenants, many of whom did not yet know one another, and also the necessary opening out of Portland Works for cultural events and open days.

Image 8: Chris and Martin cleaning the sump, 2015, Colin Harvard

Developing the site as an urban common, and commoning

The collectively transformative aspect of the project, *where it became common*, was the moment the assets were taken out of the market and placed into the hands of 'the commoners' through the asset lock and the formation of the community benefit company. To take on this responsibility required the development of commoning practices of learning and democracy (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2010), and the development of mechanisms to care for, produce and change the site in line with evolving needs and desires. In 2010 a workshop was held with key campaigners, tenants, funders and stakeholders (Cerulli and Udall, 2011). By

the end of the day there was an agreement to purchase Portland Works through a community share issue. The key advantages of this approach were cash for the purchase and repair of the building, an asset lock that would prevent it being demutualised, the ability to draw on a diverse pool of skilled support for the project, and the formal requirement for democratic structure of governance. Shares were sold at £50 for tenants and £100 for others, on the basis of a one member one vote. The asset lock required any increase in land value derived to be reinvested within the organisation (or one with similar aims) rather than extracted as profit by the shareholders. The Share Issue provided additional funds that were available for communally determined priorities, rather than having to follow a funder or donors' wishes. The resultant five-hundred shareholders provided significant expertise and capacity, and to a great extent those who did the work for the campaign also made the decisions. This was organised through publicly open steering group meetings to develop vision and strategy through a deliberative process. A number of smaller working groups comprised of shareholders, volunteers and a minimum of one director were tasked with developing responsive tactics and day-to-day work, reporting back to the steering group. This formed a framework that facilitated practices of repair working with and from the site.

Image 9: The post-box, 2011, author

To register as a community benefit company, a Portland Works postal address was required. An engraver tenant who had worked on site for 40-years repaired a defunct postbox in the entrance archway and engraved a sign for the organisation, establishing a company address. The care and skill with which, unprompted, the engraver carried out this repair work visibly demonstrated support. Located within the entrance arch, the spatiality of this was also of significance; it gave the campaign a prominent physical presence. Its production could be understood as acknowledging an emerging organisation comprised of both tenants and non-tenants.

A small grant was obtained from the Architectural Heritage Fund by social enterprise architecture practice Studio Polpo on behalf of the campaign. The funding was to carry out architectural design work to address immediate maintenance and renovation work, and to develop future plans. Rather than design a single scheme, or set of deterministic instructions for what should be done in which order, the architects' proposals were instead produced in such a way that would allow tenants, directors and working group members to negotiate emerging priorities. The drawings operated in a way which allowed comparison between the cost of repairing roofing in an existing workshop against adding a new fire stair that would bring a floor of a block into use, and therefore increase rental income. The drawings also set out the level of disruption the proposed work would cause to each business, which was crucial for those that could not afford to be inoperable for any length of time. Frank discussions could be had as to whether improving the spaces for existing tenants or bringing new tenants in should be prioritised, and allowed exploration of how each decision would bear out in terms of the business plan and the financial stability of the organisation.

The drawings were aimed at volunteers, who, having been trained up by a retired builder, were carrying out significant elements of the refurbishment work. This was a carefully considered tool that made the building repairable and reconfigurable in response to changing needs and relations.
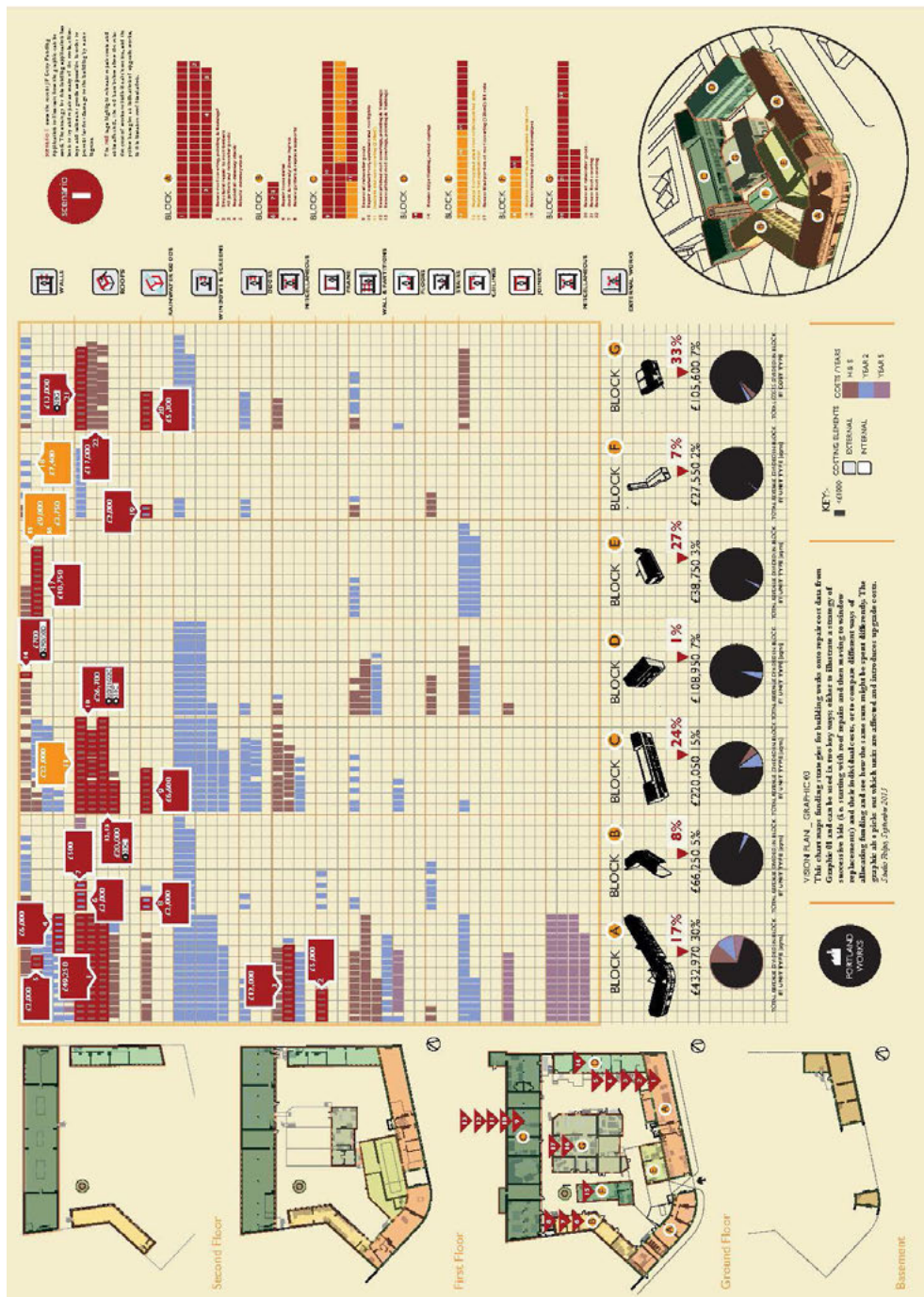
Image 10: Future Plans, Studio Polpo, 2014

Designing with cultures of repair to prefigure the commons

Each of the instances of repair set out are at once productive of spaces and relations, dependent on them, and restorative of them. Whilst some instances are literal moments of repair and others conceptual, each draws on wider cultures, ethics and practices of repair that have evolved over generations, and each has implications in terms of how space and relations are produced and reproduced within the city. Repair activity was threatened by gentrification and enclosure, but, by valorising, mediating and extending these practices, there is the potential to reclaim 'common failures', form constituencies of commoners and amplify existing instances of commoning.

Repair to connect commoners through learning and democracy

An important aspect of commoning is the forming of relations between the commoners, as an evolving, diverse, and porous grouping that engages together in processes of learning and democracy (Stavrides, 2015: 14). Making crafted repair often requires collaboration between people with different specialist skill-sets, and processes of collective problem-finding, and problem-solving. In forming these connections, the relationships are mediated by moments of learning, and there is the opportunity to alter subjectivities, and develop shared desires. The campaign allowed for these existing practices of the Mesters, to be formed outwards with artists, musicians and campaigners, and in doing so, more heterogeneous relations were formed, and new understandings developed. In choosing to do work for one another, and for the emerging group of commoners, skills, understandings and ways of being are not only shared, but co-evolving amongst the members of the group, extending capacities.

Repair can work to address ruptures created by arbitrary boundaries and divisions created in processes of commodification of space, such as the boundary of 'ownership', or the use classes of planning policy. In doing so, it can support the mending of political infrastructures which were spatially and temporally severed from those for whom they are needed. By utilising a DIY approach to repair, working with what is available, and modifying and adapting what exists,[9] to produce spaces of protest and democratic representation, the constituency for an issue are reconnected to the matters of concern, enabling more powerful claims to justice to be made. The production of the photography exhibition, the campaign posters, and the organisation of clean-up days on site stem from DIY undertakings initiated by artists and musicians that are self-organised, creative,

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9   In this case, spaces of commerce, such as the shops on the high street, or the market stall, or the façade of a building.

and politicised, working with what is at hand to support the development of cultural activity within the city. Such activity draws on social networks through the sharing of equipment, space and expertise, and is often focused on events, or creating visibility and connections to potential constituencies. In carrying out DIY, participants define their own educational needs, in relation to their aims and activities (Holtzman, Hughes and Van Meter, 2007; De Roeck et al, 2012; Hemphill and Leskowitz, 2013). DIY work can build new subjectivities, and the skills and capacities to fulfil those new motivations. Spatially DIY practices of maintenance often work responsively to expand the possibilities of what might happen, and create space for the coming together of heterogeneous groups in more meaningful ways.

Repair and the amplification of commons

Many of the existing acts that could be understood as building the commons were often quiet, modest and perhaps taken-for-granted. Repairs such as those to the post-box, steps, or the teaching of specialist skills required access to particular machinery, tools and materials and involved close relations. It involved a more nuanced understanding of what was needed, and the context in which one operates. Such crafted repair acts were about meticulous, skilled work, embodying an ethics of doing things well for their own sake, and to demonstrate shared desires. We can understand these instances beyond the instrumental sense of carrying out a particular task or responding to an immediate need, but as *constituent* of the new world under construction. To notice, make visible and value such work as useful for informing future actions was an important design strategy because it acknowledges what is required to produce space in this way.

In 'Beyond breakdown, exploring regimes of maintenance', Jerome Denis and David Pontille distinguish between invisible and visible regimes of maintenance and repair in the context of market goods. In the former, both the repair and the repairers are invisible; the aim of such work is to stabilise or return a product to a pre-existing state. In the latter, *everyone is expected to be both responsible for, and skilled in, repair.* In these regimes 'mutations and transformations are commonplace' and an object's 'capacity to remain "the same" are much looser and broader' (Denis and Pontille, 2017: 15). Through the production of architectural plans that opened up the possibility to negotiate priorities, not only created agency and responsibility across a wider group of people, but allowed for a more creative and future–orientated process where repair and maintenance were blurred with design.

Repair and 'common failures'

DIY repairs require ingenuity and resourcefulness (Bardzell, Bardzell and Toombs, 2014), and could be a way to understand creativity beyond discourses of 'innovation' (Russell and Vinsel, 2016). The valorisation of innovation as a good in its own right, by which one can produce 'something from nothing' fails to acknowledge the question of labour, and undervalues maintenance as a hidden, gendered and class-orientated work essential to keeping things going. Feminist discourses on social reproduction emphasise this activity upon which social life is predicated, yet unaccounted for (Federici, 2014). The planning application purported to be able to produce an increase in land value through re-designation of use class, and 'regenerating' and 'near derelict' area (Sheffield City Council, 2009). However, through the deployment of the photo exhibition and posters, it became clear that real value for the city could not be derived from shifting a planning designation, but rather was derived through the labours of the Mesters'.

The asset lock allowed for the value accrued through social production to be retained in common, as part of a shared enterprise. The share issue and organisational structure developed for the community benefit society sought to expand this potential, through inviting many people to take part in processes of repair, maintenance and renovation in ways that operated outside of the market and could be directed towards emerging and shared desires. Looking after the building was not just about managing financial risk and seeking to extract maximum profit, but supporting other kinds of value and values. Setting up a community benefit company required the development of a framework that would allow a diverse range of contributions from commoners (tenants and non-tenants) in ways that fed into emerging shared aims, and day-to-day caring for the site. This was an extension of the kinds of relations that already existed, (such as collaborative making, in-kind work, and mutual support) beyond the existing community and walls of Portland Works, bringing in new skills and capacities. Whilst still under very real threat, Portland Works had unusual depth and strength in terms of tenants, and the concern and effort it elicited from outside. With this came the responsibility to other sites and people within the city, and the opportunity to support the reclamation of missing commons elsewhere. Our actions in this respect included teaching students, talks and tours for others initiating similar projects, the publication and free distribution of documentation of our process, and work to connect with other smaller local partners.

Mending the commons with the Little Mesters

The Little Mesters and their metalwork businesses survive by being able to repair tools, workshops and the goods that they produce. The artists and musicians engage in DIY work to facilitate events, and repair and alter the spaces in which they are tenants to allow for non-commercial activities. It is important not to romanticise this work and to stress from the outset that these labours require considerable time and effort from those who already work long days, in demanding circumstances, and often in poor working conditions for limited financial remuneration. Yet, I argue that these practices of repair can be understood as not only having the pragmatic material benefits of maintaining, restoring or extending the use of a product, space or machine/tool, but also, crucially, as a set of spatially expressed flows of materials and relations that are potentially transformative. We can understand repair beyond being a purely temporal facility, and argue it is productive of particular *spaces of repair*, where objects, materials, practices and repairers are assembled. Yet we can take this further; to engage in the different types of repair outlined here, is to develop certain infrastructures, motivations, forms of organisation and spatial capacities. The production of the particular human-idea-matter-tool assemblages required to carry out the Mesters' activities and the DIY work can be understood as entrepreneurial, developing sophisticated and nuanced capacities for self-organisation in the city.

Repair for the Mesters, artists and musicians is part of a diverse economic landscape, which incorporates formal and informal negotiations about value and values. It can be characterised by being resourceful and frugal, yet social, with in-kind payments, gifts, mutuality at the centre of getting by day-to-day in a precarious situation. This work is not abstracted; it is mediated through and productive of personal and material relationships and spaces. Those who labour are those who make the decisions, and because of this the Mesters, artists and musicians are already skilled in negotiations and practical know-how that allow for the reconstituting individual needs and desires as collective ones, which is essential to commoning.

Through politicisation and distributed design, potentials were harnessed and brought together to support commoning. The notion of 'designing the commons' may seem contradictory as commoning is by its nature an emergent practice. However, if we acknowledge that the ability to do something always comes from the labours of others that went before, and that to take on a common project requires interrelations between humans, and non-humans, design can be conceptualised as never foundational, and always distributed. Design, working from and conceived as repair, was deployed to valorise and enable multiple

contributions of different temporalities, forms, and authorships, and in doing so supported a more plural, democratic and equitable process. Whilst reclaiming the space of Portland Works and rejecting its commodification is an essential political and economic act upon which a common can be predicated, to engage in repair, (understood in an ecological sense), is to acknowledge the ongoing processes of maintenance and reproduction that allow for the careful continuation of the commons.

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