Bypassing Developers:
An Interview with Plan Común
on Self-Commissioned Housing
Jolanda Devalle, Constantinos Marcou

Exterior view of the Greenhouse, Maison Commune.
Photograph by Javier Agustín Rojas.

Founded in Chile in 2012, the now Paris-based practice Plan Común has become one of the most interesting practices working in the field of housing today. For years Plan Común has channeled its efforts into finding commissions and opportunities within an increasingly hostile market for truly affordable housing. In 2023, the practice completed the Maison Commune, a multi-unit residential building characterized by an abundance of collective spaces, located next to the Parisian Cemetery of Pantin. Our interview with Plan Común members Kim Courrèges and Felipe De Ferrari focuses on the details of the Maison Commune's financial scheme. Devised as a "prototype," this self-commissioned project was an opportunity for Plan Común to conceive a project without traditional intermediaries. By bypassing developers, the architects were able to redirect those costs to build less private and more collective areas—"non-profitable" square meters—that would otherwise not find space in a balance sheet. By adapting a system of financing used in real estate, Plan Común found the margins to make something meaningful.

Interviewers: Jolanda Devalle; Constantinos Marcou (BF)

Interviewees: Felipe De Ferrari (FF); Kim Courrèges (KM).

BF: Can you tell us about how you came together as practice?

FF: Perhaps it's good to go back to the very beginning. We founded Plan Común in Chile—a neoliberal laboratory implemented during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet—in 2012, a year after the 2011 student move-

ment in Chile, which was the biggest citizen movement since the return of democracy in 1990. It was already part of a longer process addressing concerns about the disengagement and privatization of the Chilean education system and, more broadly, the quite exhaustive commodification of the commons.

Plan Común's team portrait. From left to right: Felipe
De Ferrari, Kim Courrèges and Nissim Haguenauer.
Photograph by Javier Agustin Rojas

Although we were not students anymore at that time, the subjects raised by the movement challenged us as young professionals. The question was clear: Is it possible to take a stand in this debate from an architectural point of view?

It took us around three months to decide on the name of our practice. From the outset, we knew we didn't want to use our own names, even though in Chile, our names could be associated with privilege or a certain elite (perhaps making it easier for us to get commissions). We thought this was too opportunistic and also less interesting as compared to establishing a specific frame for our agency. The name "Plan Común" was broad enough to relate to different issues: the claiming of commons, seeking to reinforce collective space, but also the claiming of a common ground, of a more banal and less refined architecture for all, not only for the elites. It is also a flexible name, it allows to survive change, like the people who are part of it: since the foundation of the practice, we've been two partners, then four, then three, then two again, then four, then five—now we're four. This adaptability has been essential for the history of our practice considering that we have been operating in different countries.

When dealing with architecture from within Chile, we asked ourselves how to fight fragmentation. How could we embrace the collective—not just in terms of space, but also through critical discourse? At that moment, our critique was mainly focused on challenging neoliberalism, the

competitive culture of architecture or unfair labor conditions. We were quite critical then, and we still are. It has been always important to understand the conditions behind projects. Chile can clearly be seen as a neoliberal system. This created an interesting opportunity to take on the neoliberalization of the world. It made no sense for us to have a critical view of the political situation and at the same time to develop a 'neutral' architectural practice. What is interesting about the frame is that you gain both constraints and freedom, the last being extremely crucial for navigating competitions, challenging commissions, and self-initiated projects. For example, we always try to challenge the briefs, to see the hidden potentials and to identify gaps where collective space could be maximized and where in-between conditions could be emphasized. To be under the umbrella of Plan Común allows us some efficiency in defining our position on specific briefs and sites. It also gives us some confidence in the attitude we take towards briefs, commissions, and clients. The aim is not only to design a beautiful facade or a nice plan in one way or another, but to use strategic and effective means to foster collectivity.

Exterior views of Maison Commune. Photographs by Javier Agustín Rojas.

BF: What was the context of affordable housing production in Chile at the time, and how did this inform your own approach to housing?

FF: Before we founded Plan Común, the main debate around social housing in Chile was focused—for better or worse—on Elemental's recent experiments with incremental housing and very specific projects by some NGOs. Over the past few decades, the Chilean State has been more into quantity than quality, dealing with housing as an emergency. There was a consistent affordable housing policy.

KC: What Felipe is mentioning is deeply tied to the neoliberal system in Chile. The model operates as a subsidy for homeownership, and the approach taken by Elemental is designed to make ownership accessible and affordable. The incremental housing model allows families to expand their homes over time, making the initial construction cheaper and more achievable. But the key difference with France, for example, is that Chile lacks institutions that manage social housing over time, including their collective spaces. There is no strong oversight or governance. Instead, each family owns its own home, and collective spaces—if they exist at all—are generally leftover areas that don't serve a meaningful function.

FF: Things are changing now, there are architects doing interesting work in social housing, even though they must navigate very difficult mechanisms. The conversation is shifting, but it's not yet the standard approach.

BF: Let's talk about your project, the Maison Commune. Could you tell us about the commissioning, the financing, and the ownership structure of this project?

KC: This question of self-commission is also related to our previous experience in Chile, where you don't always have the necessary conditions to make a project feasible. So, if those conditions aren't there, you have to find a way to create them. You somehow rely on yourself. We have always had this idea of self-commissioning at Plan Común, and we tried several times to build our own commissions in Chile. This is, let's say, one of the first successful attempts. This concept stems from the understanding of how real estate is financed. Typically, people save money and put it into a bank or invest it in projects they don't fully understand, not knowing where their money goes. We wanted to use that same system but make it something meaningful.We could have also considered a more cooperative or participatory housing process, but the reality is that organizing a group takes a long time. On the one hand, people who want to invest in their homes typically don't want to wait five years to see results, so you start with a group and then some people leave the project and the group is over. On the other hand, there are a lot of people who cannot afford to buy who look for a place to rent, which is very difficult, even more so if they are looking for a place with proper qualities, such as generous common areas. So, we decided to separate the two aspects: we use the savings to create a house, and then we rent it out.

FF: We never had the opportunity to work with real estate developers in Chile. This was partly due to the extreme neoliberalism and its attending standardization of life. There is a distorted way of dealing with cities and urban planning, though there are a few exceptions. Our first experiences with French developers were not easy either: architecture is often merely reduced to rigid frames packaged with 'playful' facades onto which 'customers' can project their lifestyles. It is an extremely simplistic way of seeing collective housing: fragmented, not focused on how we inhabit spaces and how we live together as a collective. But again, there are some exceptions, such as the housing we are developing in Strasbourg with the developer REI Habitat.On one hand, you have a very competitive market, with developers looking to maximizing their margins. But on the other hand, there is still a strong social housing system in France, which is unique and specific, providing opportunities to build qualitative and innovative housing, though the process can be lengthy. As Kim mentioned, looking for our own projects has been fundamental since the very beginning of the practice. Since we established ourselves in France, the relationship with our partner Nissim [Haguenauer] has been very important. Back in 2018, he was a bit exhausted with the conditions of our profession and decided to attend a business school to develop projects from the other side.
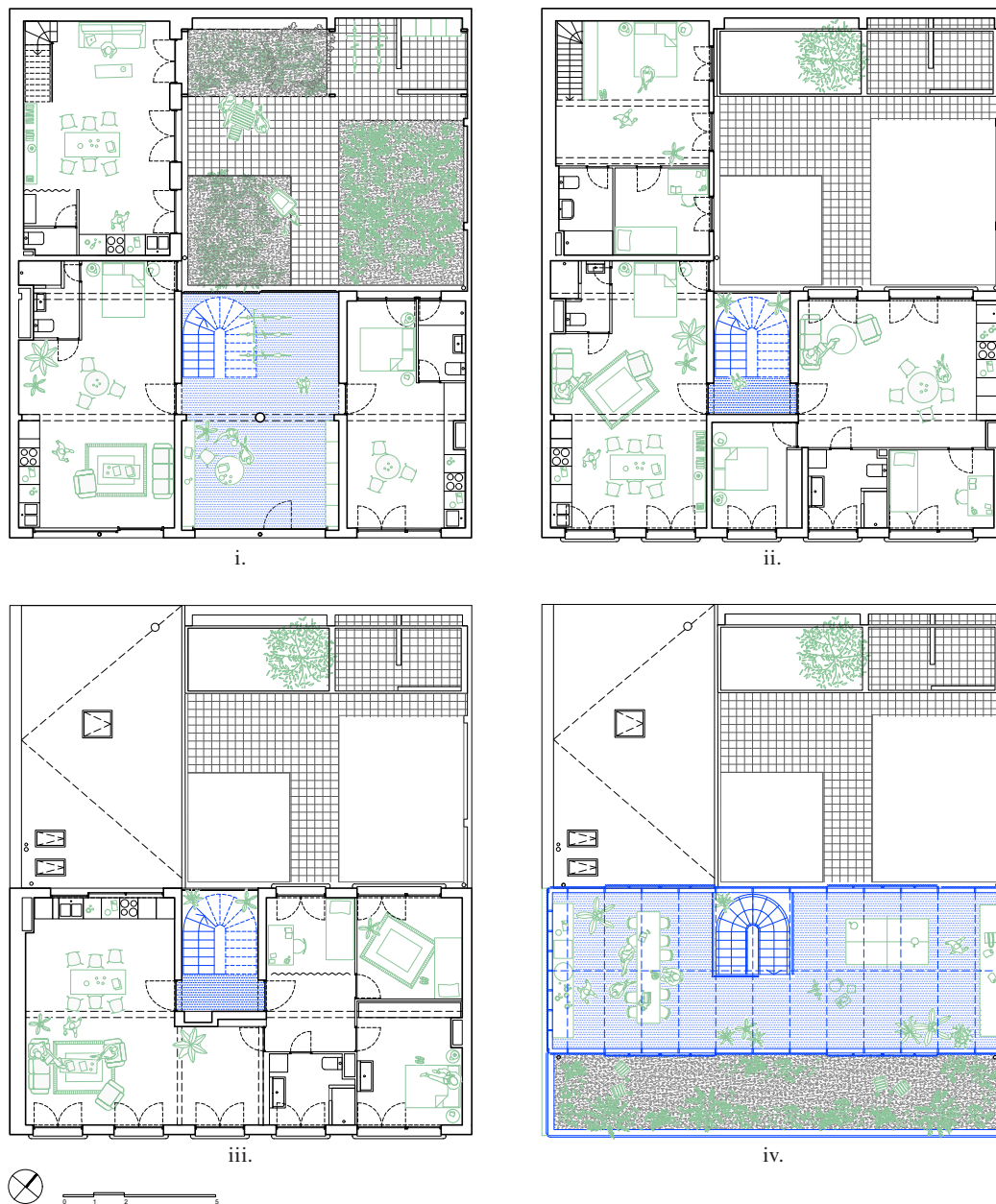
Plans of the Maison Commune. Courtesy of Plan Común.
i. Ground floor plan; ii. First floor plan; iii. Second floor plan; iv. Greenhouse plan

We realized that we could channel part of our efforts and energies into finding our own commissions and possibilities to build housing through our own means. This approach isn't new; many architects buy houses and renovate them or build small housing projects. This is already a tradition in some countries like Argentina. Perhaps what's specific about the Maison Commune is that the type of company (a *société civile immobilière*) is made up of four investors (including two who live there). It is not a cooperative and the investment wasn't by Plan Común: we provided the energy and knowledge to implement it. We have been part of the entire process—leading it, securing funding, and involving interested parties from day one. We made architectural decisions and adapted the project as new conditions or requirements arose, and we are also involved in its management (since we, in fact, live in it).

In brief, there was approximately one million euros of direct investment. With this funding, we could purchase the plot, pay for studies, and start the process. There are six units in total, including the partial rehabilitation of the existing house. The business model relies on rent, with a more long-term engagement—in principle, seven years—than just to sell the apartments. In this sense, the project is experimental, and we want to see how it develops over time.

BF: The Maison Commune is not as profitable as it could have been. We understand this was by design?

FF: You're right. One fundamental design decision was to build less in order to gain more collective space. We are highly critical of the maximization of profit with the reduction of quality. In a context of environmental and political crisis, this model is totally exhausted.

KC: Let's just say that a classical real estate company would have built the last floor as housing with rentable profitable spaces instead of the shared greenhouse.

The greenhouse as a collective space. Photographs by Javier Agustín Rojas.

BF: One could argue that this amount of common space is a form of luxury.

FF: Maybe it is a coincidence but, in 2016, we were invited to a seminar hosted by the Swiss Architecture Museum entitled "Common Luxury."[1]In What we could say is that we look for straightforward qualities without extravagance. The final character, proportions, dimensions, and percentage of the area devoted to the commons are related to specific conditions.

BF: How do you view homeownership within this housing model you developed?

KC: We don't prohibit inhabitants from becoming owners, but the question is how and when they would acquire ownership. Would they own their own apartments or shares of the collective ownership structure, as in a cooperative? The big question is: What happens to the shared spaces once ownership becomes divided among different owners? For instance, if you say, "I own 10 percent of the building," that might include your 50-square-meter apartment plus 10 percent of the common areas. That's very different from owning 10% of the overall property, where your ownership isn't tied to a specific location within the building. This raises questions about how the governance of these spaces would actually work.

FF: I completely agree with Kim. The good performance of shared spaces cannot be taken for granted, neither by renting nor selling the units. This is a complex question seen from a governance point of view but a more

1　"Common Luxury – less private space, more common space," Future Architecture, accessed December 2, 2024, https://futurearchitectureplatform.org/programme/2/common-luxury-less-private-space-more-common-space/

concrete one if we talk about designing these sequences of collective spaces. We truly believe we can introduce a qualitative sequence—from the city to your apartment—in collective housing (social, private or self-promoted).

BF: You spoke of a "propaganda of collective spaces" in reference to this lighthouse visible from afar, an icon of communal living. How do you protect these spaces from being compromised or appropriated into a profit model by the real estate market?

KC: I would say that before even considering the format in administrative or legal terms, it's really about the architecture—how these spaces connect with private spaces in a way that safeguards them and prevents privatization. Maybe this is even clearer in PETIT Social Housing in Paris (under construction). It's a good example of how communal spaces must be directly linked to circulation routes and the everyday paths of the inhabitants. This not only ensures their use and upkeep but also reinforces their spatial significance. Since these spaces are integrated into the circulation, they cannot easily be privatized—or at least, it becomes much more difficult. It's also about how we interconnect these autonomous elements with the rest of the building, particularly with the housing units.
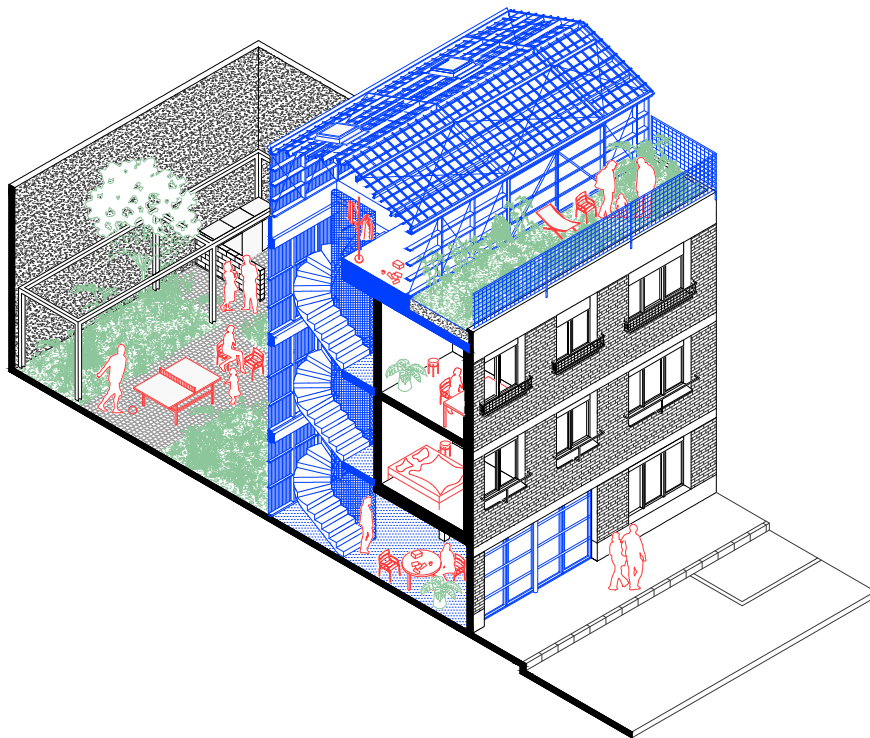
Axonometric drawing of Maison Commune. Courtesy of Plan Común.

FF: German architect Jesko Fezer referred to the ongoing radical economization and de-politicization of social space and the capacity of appropriation by capitalism.[2] We agree that the market can use existing models and reproduce them hundreds of times and commodify them as mere architectural features. There's not so much we can do about that. The same spatial device can be packed on in different ways quite easily… And honestly, it would be asking too much of an architectural practice to control this phenomenon, because, again, we are not a cooperative—we design architecture projects. But we are not naive. When we talk about 'propaganda,' we

2   "Jesko Fezer," On Architecture, accessed December 2, 2024, https://www.onarchitecture.com/interviews/jesko-fezer

mean it in a literal sense. The greenhouse on top of the building, for example, is a way of highlighting the commons for the surroundings.

If, after seven or ten years, conditions change and someone buys the top floor (and no one from Plan Común is around anymore to advocate for the project's original vision), they could find a way to add a door and privatize the upper communal space. Of course, we are aware of this risk. That's why we need a centralized administration or a co-ownership agreement to safeguard the shared spaces. We are working to define a simple format that allows some degree of control over what happens in the long term. For now, our focus is on the reproduction of the system. We are on the way toward establishing the specific company (Foncière Común) in charge of the whole process (prospection, funding, administration, etc.).

BF: How do you define the idea of commons? There have been many interpretations over the years—Massimo De Angelis, for example, has written extensively on the subject. But beyond definitions, how does one actually experience the commons, as you refer to them, or the act of commoning in the Maison Commune?

FF: It's important to say that we are not researchers or scholars, but we are deeply interested in the theory and concept of the commons. I would say our approach is rooted in the idea of social space—a place where people can gather beyond their immediate family or individual group. It's about space itself and ensuring it has the precise dimensions and environmental conditions to foster social interactions. This has been a core exercise for Plan Común since the very beginning. In our projects, whether a single house or a second home by the coast, we've always prioritized expanding communal areas. As architects, we see the potential to provide the qualitative conditions that enable social practices in everyday life. That means designing spaces with good light, ventilation, and some sense of generosity that invites interaction.

On the other hand, there's the idea of commoning—which, in the Maison Commune, happens in a very informal, organic, way. For good or bad, over the past two years, we've only held two meetings with all the residents to discuss shared responsibilities, like taking out the trash. We rely a lot on the humanity of neighbors that care for each other. Some are obviously more proactive and engaged than others and allow others to go with the flow. What I really appreciate about this setup is that it's based on mutual respect. If you use the table for a lunch with twenty people, you clean up afterward because you don't know whether someone would want to have coffee there later. If you host a party for fifty people, the first people you consider are those living in the house. So far, we haven't formalized any rules—there's no co-ownership agreement or written guidelines governing these shared spaces. Instead, we're observing and documenting what happens—taking photos and making films—to better understand the dynamics at play.

BF: How does scale play into the commoning process in your housing projects?

KC: Actually, the key issue is scale. That's also what we are trying to address in PETIT, the large-scale collective housing project we are building now: having inter-twined scales of sharing. You don't share the same things with a small group of direct neighbors—let's say, the ones sharing the same floor—as you would with the neighbors of the whole staircase or the entire building.

It's essential to understand how much you can share with a group of people and the size of that group. Additionally, a key difference is whether it's a chosen sharing situation or not. In the Maison Commune, everyone living here was aware of this dimension and chose it. In contrast, in the social housing project we are currently building, residents may not necessarily choose to be part of this community sharing more than they would

Street view of Maison Commune's entrance. Photograph by Javier Agustín Rojas.

in a typical building.In this case, I think the key lies in the group of people we have worked with during the whole process, who will become the core of the future community. They have become aware of, and are now super invested in, this dimension of sharing. However, it's important to note that each apartment is self-sufficient and can function independently. Residents do not *have to* share with their neighbors, which differentiates this model from a typical co-living situation, where sharing a kitchen or common areas is mandatory. Instead, this model offers opportunities for the inhabitants to choose how they organize their everyday lives.

FF: The emphasis on collective spaces can be applied at any scale, in any commission, and for any type of program. However, in the Maison Commune, the neighbors, including us—as designers, developers, and inhabitants—recognize that we live in a privileged spatial condition. The shared spaces are available, you can freely use the washing machines or enjoy a coffee and sunlight in the greenhouse. However, this does not obligate anyone to engage with the social dynamics necessarily. You can keep your door closed, appear once a week, and nobody will say, "Come on, you're not being participative," or "You're not engaging with what we think of as a community." Essentially, we have become good neighbors or friends through our daily interactions, like having a cigarette or sharing a beer and discussing various topics. It's very informal.

BF: In housing projects, the circulation spaces, entryways, and other communal areas are often the first to register wear and tear if lacking maintenance. How do you plan for this condition, and do you see this as a vulnerability of the commons in your projects?

KC: To me, I would say that the centralized decision-making regarding repairs makes it much easier. For instance, if you have to get fifty different owners to agree on specific repairs, you'll see that it works much less effectively.

Interior views of the apartments. Photographs by Javier Agustín Rojas.

Interior view of the greenhouse. Photograph by Javier Agustín.

In the Paris region, there are many examples of housing estates that used to be social housing and have been sold to different owners over time or that were built with a form of subsidized ownership. Typically, people don't have the money to invest in or contribute to the maintenance of common areas and, as a result, they degrade significantly. This, in turn, significantly affects the quality of life within the building, to the point that they are due for demolition. The fact that we have a centralized and collective ownership structure, with a company in place, allows for easier decision-making about repairs, even if those decisions can be submitted to a vote and, at best, prevents the buildings from falling into unhealthy or dysfunctional conditions.

FF: In the case of the Maison Commune, the most important common space—the greenhouse—is the cheapest and most fragile space, materially speaking. This is because it is an in-between space that follows a strong economy of means. It is indeed vulnerable in time. As Kim said, to have certain control allows a better maintenance. It is also part of the experiment: we are testing in our own bodies.

AUTHOR

Plan Común is an architecture practice founded in Santiago in 2012 and based in Paris since 2018. Working across design, research, and building, the office advances a spatial practice grounded in the idea of collectivity as architecture's primary concern. Their work has been recognized internationally, including the W Awards and the 2024 Moira Gemmill Prize for Emerging Architecture. Recent distinctions include first prize in the "FESTIVAL" competition in Durrës (2023), the "Petit Plot Saint-Vincent-de-Paul" project in Paris (2019), and second prize for the "Grand Garage Haussmann" project (2022).

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