MORE THAN BARE-BONES SURVIVAL? FROM THE URBAN MARGINS TO THE URBAN COMMONS

AUTHORS: Geoffrey DeVerteuil, Cardiff University

Reader of Social Geography, School of Geography and Planning

Cardiff University

Cardiff UK CF10 3WA

Email: deverteuilg@cardiff.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0003-3036-9303

Matthew D. Marr

Associate Professor of Sociology

Florida International University

SIPA 323, Modesto A. Maidique Campus

Miami, Florida 33199

mmarr@fiu.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-5184-8170

Johannes Kiener, Saitama University

Associate Professor, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Saitama University

Shimo-Okubo 255, Sakura-ku, Saitama-shi, 338-8570 JAPAN

Email: johannes@mail.saitama-u.ac.jp

ORCID: 0000-0001-7203-8348

ABSTRACT:

We revisit the urban margins by recasting service hubs – conspicuous clusters of helping agencies in inner-city locales, designed to serve vulnerable populations – as both spaces of survival but potentially transformative, emerging as so-called 'cracks' in the city. We undertake this recasting using the concept of the commons. Using case studies in London, Miami and Osaka, we focus on the everyday practices of commoning and the role service hubs play in the city as spaces of sustenance, care and solidarity. The results are mixed – service hubs enabled unfettered survival and operated largely outside of capitalism, ensuring that some spaces in the city remain de-commodified and 'at the margins'. However, the service hubs were also limited in their transformational capacity. These results contribute to a sense of *commons at the margins*, rethinking them more as an edge between capitalism and an existence separate from it, rather than presenting them as exclusively marginal in the sense of subordinated, excluded and bordered.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century city is marked by both the apparent ascendancy of a neoliberal governance model, and an increasing number of unruly "cracks in the city" that directly or indirectly challenge this model (Moyersoen and Swyngedouw, 2013). Neoliberalism never entirely displaces, replaces or appropriates everything in its path; it is always and inherently incomplete, and leaves open the possibility for counter-spaces or spaces-beyond (DeVerteuil 2015). A far-flung literature around these *urban margins* (Lancione 2016; Lancione and McFarlane 2016) has emerged, with a variety of terms: "autonomous geographies" (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006), "counterspaces" (Nicolosi 2020), "everyday urbanism" (McFarlane and Silver 2017) and "makeshift urbanism" (Vasudevan 2017). These terms generally underline one of two key roles of the urban margins: as (1) platforms for "in the meantime" survival, or (2) platforms for anti-capitalist, post-capitalist, or beyond/outside capitalist existence and transformation (Cloke et al. 2017).

In this paper, we undertake a more systematic and joined-up understanding of this two-sided nature of the urban margins. We propose applying the well-rehearsed concept of the commons as a novel way to bridge the more mundane role of the urban margins as survival space to its more transformational aspirations, between an incomplete neoliberal city and real transformation against, alongside or beyond it. The concept of the commons represents the promise and practice of "life beyond marketization, privatization and commercialization" (Jeffrey et al. 2012, 1249), of space that is "both collective and non-commodified – off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations" (Harvey 2012, 73). Our first contribution lies in a distinctive framing of commons that is especially applicable to the conspicuous nature of the (urban) margins, emphasizing the margins as inherently and relationally spaces of sustenance, care, and solidarity. Each of these three aspects map on to different timescales (immediate to long-term), but depending on the

context can also cover the gamut of the survival-transformation continuum (alongside capitalism, beyond, and against).

Our second contribution is to empirically apply this notion of *commons at the margins* to service hubs, which are conspicuous clusters of helping agencies that directly serve vulnerable populations, usually in the inner city and usually provided by the voluntary sector (Dear et al. 1994; DeVerteuil 2015). They provide the only way sometimes for the poor and vulnerable to continue to access and occupy prime urban space, and constitute crucial nodes in their survival geographies (Blomley, 2008). But service hubs as commons at the margins could also constitute *more than bare-bones survival* – they could potentially be considered non-commodified, un-commissioned spaces that suggest a different way of urban living. The case studies are service hubs in London, Miami and Osaka. These service hubs were chosen for their commonalities, especially their role in managing substantial economic and social divisions across each city's polarized social orders and geographies (DeVerteuil 2015). They were also chosen because of important national and local contextual differences that impact dynamics of commoning practices. We want to learn from these three global city-regions by describing the range of service hub/commons relationships during a crucial period of gentrification and revalorization of inner-city space, but also a period of national-scale austerity. A comparative and relational approach is outlined in the methods section, with a focus on the organizational dynamics of commoning and the role commons at the margins play in the city across the aspects of sustenance, care and solidarity. The results are mixed – service hubs enabled unfettered survival and operated largely outside of capitalism, ensuring that some spaces in the city remain 'at the margins' and de-commodified. However, the service hubs also emerged as bridled in their transformational capacity. We conclude by recasting marginal space more as an edge between capitalism and an existence separate from it, rather than subordinated, excluded and bordered.

THE URBAN MARGINS: FROM MUNDANE SPACES OF SURVIVAL TO SOMETHING MORE?

Lancione (2016, 3) identifies three key aspects of marginality in the city, including: (1) the sense that margins are always in (subordinate) relation to the center (or centers); (2) that these centers seek to exclude and expulse margins to "preserve their own authority and standing", and (3) that the margins are enacted via the practice of bordering, of "delineating what is right and what is wrong, what is in and what is out", thereby producing 'misfit' spaces in the city. To Lancione (2016), the urban margins are therefore both a position in social space, but also a subject, usually framed as a condition of sustained territorial stigma and labor market precarity. Yet the margins can also be imagined as something other than subordinated, excluded and bordered, containing unabridged spaces of survival of populations "forced to the economic, cultural, and political edges of urban society, located there because of the inequalities of the urban world they live in, not because of their own actions" (Lancione and McFarlane 2016, 2405). There is a substantial literature on how these precarious populations survive (e.g. Dear et al. 1994; Benjamin 2008; McFarlane and Silver 2017). In the Global North, a sustained focus has been on homeless individuals, who survive in the city through a variety of informal self-provisioning as well as through more formal channels (Dear et al, 1994). These survival strategies are patterned by an uneven geographical supply of resources, including affordable housing, drop-in centers and food banks which are disproportionately located in marginal zones. However, access to prime spaces remains important for begging and scavenging. In the Global South context, Simone (2004) talked about the concept of 'people as infrastructure', where marginal populations benefitted from the 'let go' nature of inner-city space in Johannesburg that breeds innovation, diversity and informality with minimal state oversight. And across both the Global North and South, Sheppard et al (2020, 397) argue that marginal spaces "underwrite the means of subsistence for a monetarily poor

population largely excluded from formal capitalist labour and housing markets. These spaces provide housing often in the absence of clear title, and informal income generating activities such as street tradition, under the table employment…".

These works clearly show how marginal spaces and individuals co-locate and co-constitute to ensure survival in the context of pervasive precarity. But this literature also imagines something more, that urban margins might be contrarian and liberated, even transformational. The most immediate pathway has been the application of Lefebvre's right to the city. Nicolosi (2020, 61) proposes Lefebvrian "counterspaces" in which changing space must precede changing society, including "use over exchange, quality over quantity, heterogeneity over homogeneity, demanding amenities, empty spaces, play encounter, non-specialized, and multifunctional spaces". This aligns with Pickerill and Chatterton's "autonomous geographies" (2006, 730) that capture "those spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian, and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation". To Swyngedouw (2007), marginal space is both constructed by wider societal and capitalist unevenness but also placed outside of society, thereby enabling a certain potential as spaces of hope, freedom, questioning and experimentation. This potential necessarily needs to be grounded in some way; to this end, Vasudevan (2015, 318) talks about occupation "as a *radical politics of infrastructure*…revisions the city as a set of relations that take form as alternative…spaces for political action".

Despite the lofty intentions of this literature on the unruly and possibly transformational nature of the urban margins, it fails to undertake the more difficult task of bringing into conceptual conversation the previous, more mundane notions of everyday survival. Although they do not explicitly use commons, this conversation was begun by Cloke et al. (2017, 704) with regards to the marginal spaces of food banks, "conceptualizing

[them]….as spaces of care that potentially serve to articulate a newly emerging and not yet fully formed ethical and political response to welfare 'in the meantime', introducing values other than those of neoliberal capitalism as a response to the austere conditions of the here and now". This captures both the immediate spaces of everyday survival but also the promise of working towards something more, recognizing "the role of social action in the austere conditions of the here and now, whilst at the same time working towards an anti-capitalist sea change to bring about more structural change" (2017, 707).

In the next section, we conceptually develop three social aspects of the urban commons that emerged from this review of the urban margins: sustenance, care and solidarity. These social aspects map directly on to marginal space in different ways: sustenance maps on to marginal space's generous nature; care maps on to marginal space's unabridged nature; and solidarity maps on to marginal space's transformational potential. We use these social aspects as a way to conceptually braid everyday survival on the one hand with more transformational aspirations on the other. We thereby create a sense of the *commons at the margins*, recasting marginal space more as an edge between capitalism and an existence separate from it, rather than presenting the commons as exclusively marginal in the sense of subordinated, excluded and bordered.

COMMONS AS SUSTENANCE, CARE AND SOLIDARITY

We map three aspects of the commons - sustenance, care and solidarity - building on the distinctive elements of the (urban) margins and its tangled relationship to capitalism, whether alongside it, beyond it or against it. First, and following on from the previous section, commons provide *spaces of everyday and immediate sustenance* through the process of de-commodification. Harvey (2012, 73) argued that "in order to protect the common it is

often vital to protect the flow of public goods that underpin the qualities of the common". At the very least, commons involve subsistence outside of the waged labor system and the property system. By not charging for certain life-sustaining services, commons involve some degree of de-commodification to ensure everyday survival of marginal populations, which in turn is inseparable from the density and openness of the urban, as well as the generosity of marginal spaces (Huron 2015). An example of a sustaining commons can be the emergence of food banks in response to rising hunger at the urban margins.

Second, commons provide *spaces of care*, something more than just survival but something less than system-wide transformation. Defined by Conradson (2003, 507) as "a sociospatial field disclosed through the practices of care that take place between individuals", spaces of care are relational therapeutic environments designed to promote the long-term well-being of (vulnerable) populations (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009). This no-strings "urge to care" runs against the hyper-commodification of everything under capitalism. Care becomes responsibility for specific people and specific places. As Gibson-Graham et al. (2016, 195) noted, "we characterize commoning as a relational process – or more often a struggle – of negotiating access, use, benefit, care, and responsibility. Commoning thus involves establishing rules or protocols of access and use, taking caring of and accepting responsibility for a resource, and distributing the benefits in ways that take into account the well-being of others". In other words, a deeper, longer-term engagement to people and places, of care-giving and place-making, enhancing ontological security and belonging (Marr 2016; 2021). An example of a caring commons could include services for homeless individuals that provide durable exits from homelessness in the form of affordable, supportive housing.

Third, commons enable *solidaristic spaces*. This is the promise of transformation, of beyond and even against the grain of capitalism. Internally, commons involve the idea of self-

governance (McCann 2017) and collective ownership that undermine accumulation, even inadvertently (Hodkinson 2012). This aligns with the sense that commons can be future-oriented and prefigurative, not just a placeholder in the interim before dissolution (Amin and Howell 2016). At the very least, commons offer shared accessibility that helps to sustain groups excluded by enclosure (Chatterton 2010). This is what Vasudevan (2015, 316) called "occupation-based practices" as part of a "geography of dissent". Enclosure refers to the encroachment of capitalism via property, accumulation and appropriation; Harvey (2012, 80) claims that while "capitalist urbanization tends to destroy the city as social, political and livable commons", commons are nevertheless perpetually rebuilt within the interstices of the city. An example of solidaristic commons can involve creating new spaces in the city that actively challenge capitalism, such as squatting or the retaking of private land.

As such, commons as solidaristic spaces always involve a pooling of resources, agents and participants, including informal communities, the voluntary sector and the state, but rarely the market. Such a commons is "… not a fixed entity but a political principle on the basis of which we must construct collective goods, defend them and extend them. The common is thus another name for the shared activity of co-responsibility, reciprocity, solidarity and democracy" (Enright and Rossi 2018, 38), a sort of "sharing city" (Foster and Iaione 2016). Huron (2015, 963) advances the argument that "commons calls up a way of collective self-organization outside capitalist logic, and the urban is a compelling site of struggle and desire. Put the 'urban' together with the 'commons', and we have a rich potential for imagining new ways of collective life".

Yet solidaristic spaces are always subject to external influences. In particular, the state's role remains convoluted, as commons are sometimes protected by state interventions, usually after the former become well-established and on the radar, while sometimes commons are the target of state-imposed displacement (Gioielli 2011). Yet others (Gidwani

and Baviskar 2011, 42; Foster and Iaione 2016) note that commons can outflank the state, thriving and surviving by "dancing in and out of the state's gaze, by escaping its notice, because notice invariably brings with it the desire to transform commons into state property or capitalist commodity".

Actually-existing commons invariably deviate from these three idealized aspects. In this respect, Eizenberg (2012) explores urban spaces which function as commons in the neoliberal city, providing an analysis of community gardens in New York City. While never complete, they do offer an alternative to neoliberal ideology, and thus perform an important protective role, as well as reversing the unjust distribution of resources across urban neighborhoods via use over exchange values. However, there is no sense of overturning capitalism, merely providing a collective platform beyond it that presents a certain challenge: commons therefore emerge "as a springboard for critiquing contemporary social relations and as the production of new spatiality, initiating the transformation of some fundamental aspects of everyday life, social practices and organization, and thinking" (779-780).

One space at the urban margins which is expressly designed to ensure the everyday survival of vulnerable populations – but possibly more - is the service hub. Service hubs have yet to be approached as potential commons that bring together elemental survival via helping agencies that provide last-ditch affordable housing, emergency shelters, drop-in centers for health and mental health, and substance abuse treatment, but also the potential for care and transformation, a robust urban infrastructure for the poor (Lix et al. 2007; Benjamin 2008; Blomley 2008; Lowe and DeVerteuil 2020). More specifically, service hubs are conflicted social and spatial constructions. Originally carved out as sites for vulnerable populations from previous enclosures of cheap housing, service hubs are based on a spatial clustering of helping agencies, underpinned mostly (but not exclusively) by the voluntary sector, which consists of formal organizations that interact with but ultimately lie outside of the state, the

market and informal communities and families, usually focused on sustaining the vulnerable (DeVerteuil et al. 2020). This spatial agglomeration of services is advantageous to clients (in terms of sustenance), the agencies themselves (in terms of service provision) but also the wider city, in terms of obscuring and warehousing vulnerable populations while perhaps creating the potential for caring and solidaristic spaces. These conflicted roles speak to the multiple uses and porous nature of service hubs, of being more than just bureaucratic fixes that expediently manage clients.

CONTEXT AND METHODS

We used in-depth interviews with a sample of managers of helping agencies to gain insight into daily practices across three case studies: Brixton in London, Overtown in Miami, and Kamagasaki in Osaka. This comparative approach raises compelling issues of difference and similarity (Nijman 2007; DeVerteuil 2015; Fincher et al. 2019) across the following dimensions: (1) the broader nature of the national welfare state which indirectly underpins the service hub, ranging from threadbare (American) to more robustly interventionist (British, Japanese); (2) the nature of poverty in each city, ranging from heavily racialized and concentrated (Miami) to multi-racial and scattered (London) to increasingly residual (Osaka); and (3) the role helping agencies play in poverty management, from fundamental (Miami) to junior partner of the state (London, Osaka). Our overall approach relies on Nijman's (2007, 1) insights that "comparative urbanism … aims at developing knowledge, understanding, and generalization at a level between what is true of all cities and what is true of one city at a given point in time". Given the fact that every city is necessarily unique, it is crucial to understand why cities can nonetheless display crosscutting similarities, but without the seeking of paradigmatic urbanisms that plagued urban studies for 25 years. There is little

analytical *gravitas* in declaring that all cities are different; rather, it is the additional seeking of similarities, regularities and synthesis that becomes analytically far more interesting, alongside (but never ignoring) the inescapable particularities. Moreover, our approach builds on previous efforts at building up a comparative understanding of marginality, including Thieme et al. (2017), which underlined how the production and persistence of marginality cross-cut different urban locales, state roles, access to urban services, and everyday spaces of survival in the city.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Brixton became a major center for the immigrant Afro-Caribbean population in London, constituting an early case of an 'immigrant-serving' service hub. Brixton featured a sustained cluster of agencies designed to serve the incoming Afro-Caribbean population within South London. Even as subsequent generations moved beyond the Brixton enclave, they would return to use services, and the area's reputation for radicalness and openness also attracted long-term squatters (Mavrommatis 2010; Vasudevan 2017). However, by the 1980s Brixton had become more racialized and stigmatized, prone to unrest (1981, 1985) but also incipient DIY upgrading (Butler and Robson 2001). Gentrification became more pronounced by the early 2000s, and has since accelerated (Jackson and Butler 2015), namely due to Brixton's high accessibility as the southern terminus of the Victoria Line leading straight to Central London. In the Summer and Fall of 2017, a total of ten agencies were interviewed by the first author, ranging from agencies directly focused on the Afro-Caribbean experience to more generalized services around poverty, green space and employment.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

To build and sustain Miami in the early twentieth-century, White-American developers relied largely on Black-American and Bahamian labor, most of whom were confined to the Jim

Crow ghetto of "Colored Town" or Overtown (Dunn 1997). This situation endured until

Overtown was cut into quarters by interstate highways during urban renewal in the 1960s

(Connoly 2014). Subsequently, Overtown saw disinvestment and persistent

underemployment, as Miami's downtown business district also faded. While there had been a

concentration of older helping agencies around downtown, many new ones created to address

surging homelessness in the 1990s also located in nearby Overtown (Marr 2021). When

Downtown Miami saw a revival in the 2000s, with high-end condos and a new basketball

arena, some of the agencies re-located out of central downtown into nearby Overtown, often

with government pressure and support. In the Winter of 2019, a total of ten agencies were

interviewed by the second author. Our sample consists of both large and small agencies

across religious, secular, and governmental providers.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

As a Japanese case study, Kamagasaki was chosen for its relatively understudied stature

within the Anglosphere (alongside the Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto urban region more generally – see

Kanai et al. 2018). Located to the southwest of the elevated railway loop that encircles

Central Osaka, Kamagasaki originally welcomed day laborers after the Second World War,

drawn in by cheap rents and easy access to work in the booming post-war construction

industry, and the area acquired a reputation as a "liberated zone" (Shiro 2000). The poor

housing and working conditions, however, caused social unrest. What emerged out of this

crucial period was a hodge-podge of DIY, voluntary sector and state interventions that

continue to shape the service hub presently (Haraguchi 2010). The bursting of the 'bubble-

economy' during the 1990s produced unprecedented levels of homelessness, many of whom

flocked to the services in Kamagasaki. By 1998, the Nonprofit Activities Promotion Law

provided the groundwork for increasing the role of the voluntary sector in concert with the

state. In 2002, the national government enacted the Special Law on Temporary Measures to

Support the Self-reliance of Homeless People, which in Osaka took the form of ostensible homeless self-reliance support centers in which clients could stay for up to six months. Supportive housing for more long-term residents was created, based on clients' welfare payments to pay the rent (Kiener et al. 2018). More recently, Kamagasaki has stagnated like many day labor districts (*yoseba*) across urban Japan (Marr 2015). In September 2018, a total of twelve agencies were interviewed by the third author, alongside six client interviews from Organizations 5 and 7.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Three client interviews were done at Organization 5 and Organization 7, both influential and former grassroots agencies in Kamagasaki. The interview instruments were translated from the original English text into Japanese, the language in which all the interviews were conducted. Transcripts were created from audio records, which were translated back into English.

The interview questions map on to the three key aspects on commons developed in the conceptual section. Sustenance was captured through the degree and process of de-commodification, which involves asking agencies about non-excludability which enables immediate survival among clientele, including the degree to which services are free of charge. Care was captured via the degree to which helping agencies approached longer-term needs among clients, and displayed a level of responsibility for them and to the immediate locale. Finally, solidarity was captured through the degree of contestation, which involves asking helping agencies about going beyond day-to-day survival and resilience to transformation, system overhaul, anti-capitalism and social justice, but also external threats from outside, such as gentrification and welfare state interference and co-optation. Alongside this, questions were asked about the governance model (self-governance and user-

managed/owned model or more top-down). For the six client interviews, the focus was on the relationship between survival patterns and the spaces of the service hub. Given our focus on agencies, however, our study could not reveal how services were actually experienced by the clients themselves (especially issues of gender, race and class), nor could it independently assess how the agencies actually applied rules around accessibility and behavior, which would have required a complementary ethnographic approach.

RESULTS: SERVICE HUBS AS ACTUALLY-EXISTING COMMONS

We first investigated how service hubs operate as robust *spaces of survival* for those at the urban margins. Predictably, we found a rich and layered space of largely free and no-strings services designed to enable everyday survival, but sometimes not much more. In Brixton, client survival was always the highest priority. The director of Organization 7, a soup kitchen, summed up the overall safety-net ethos:

> a lot of the people who do come to the soup kitchen are, kind of, collecting benefits, and sometimes some of their benefits might get sanctioned, and so they are forced to come to soup kitchens. You know, we get a lot of people coming in just for a food pack, because they might be sanctioned for a week or two, so the welfare, sometimes doesn't help, and actually puts a strain on our back.

In Overtown, all twelve agencies worked to ensure client survival. While some agencies (2, 6, 9) imposed certain restrictions in terms of specific groups they could take in (i.e. families only), the remaining promoted a high-accessibility model. For instance, none of the agencies asked about immigration status, in an urban region where the majority is foreign-born. Moreover, some agencies made few demands on client behaviour – Organization 7 was a 'low-demand' facility that admitted people still using drugs: "a transitional housing program

combined with drop-in center capacity. People could come, grab a meal, wash their clothes, get a shower, and leave. There is really very little commitment". As a family shelter, Organization 9 ensured accessibility to all, but

> we only have 15 rooms available and we're a motel style. Right now, the most we can do is have a waiting list. When clients call, we ask 'how many in the family, what are the ages?' Then we placed them on a list. As we have vacancies, we go back to our list and call them to see if they have been placed already or they can come in. We do a mini-assessment over the phone to make sure that they fit our eligibility criteria and then they come in for an assessment. We do a background check and sexual offender check to make sure that it's safe in here.

In Kamagasaki, Organization 5 ensured that eligibility focused on those over 65 on public assistance, as well as aged workers over 55 years. But these eligibility requirements were only loosely applied: "How can we determine if someone is a day labourer or not? There are no rules…it is enough if someone is living here, came to this area and sleeps here". And to underline the no-strings-attached ethos, "if we would work according to market logics, it would not be possible to survive…. The only people who live in this neighbourhood are those who cannot be included according to market logics. If you try to include these people according to market logics, it would utterly fail". The same open approach to sustenance pervaded Organization 7, whose representative said that "there are no eligibility criteria. When the people move in we do an interview. When I say interview, it's more like we talk for one hour, but we never reject someone". The duty to serve 'people of last resort' also strongly resonated with Organization 4, which runs a day center: "our base is homeless workers here in Kamagasaki. Among others elderly people who hardly work, people who can't find day labor". The six client interviews in Kamagasaki indicated that most agencies were highly accessible, charging only occasionally for rent and food. Their survival patterns

were highly constrained, however, institutionally cycling among local agencies on an everyday basis. The drawback of this service hub model, of course, was the very concentration of services in one place could trap clients in a 'just enough to survive' cycle, or at the very least severely circumscribe their daily geographies to revolve entirely around organizational outlays. For instance, those six clients were essentially place-bound, completely reliant on services for daily survival and unable (or unwilling) to leave the service hub.

By their very provision of life-sustaining benefits, service hubs are necessarily de-commodified: the material needs of everyday life were provided freely and beyond the conditions imposed by the waged labor system. Kamagasaki in particular was once a center for day-labor activity, as well as unionized resistance and radicalism. Since casual work gradually dried up, however, residents became increasingly disconnected from the mainstream economy. Within this unpromising context, all Kamagasaki services collaborated to create a largely de-commodified service hub, with very low barriers to accessibility and a panoply of free services. The director of Organization 3 said that "in the Japanese system the employment of handicapped people cannot be provided by the market. If [they] compete in the market…the company will face difficulties. In this sense, [we] become a mechanism to actively employ handicapped and homeless people". Yet none of the agencies we interviewed explicitly sought to overturn capitalism, only to sustain spaces for vulnerable populations that lay outside of the labor market. This practice of de-commodification began at the very origins of service hubs, when they were seized from (marginal and disinvested) urban areas by grassroots agencies.

Similarly, all Brixton agencies considered themselves as operating in a de-commodified space. For instance, Organization 3 does not charge for its service at all, stating that "I thought that meeting here was a good idea, because you'll notice that with this space

you pay what you feel, you know, so it's open to everyone, people who don't have money can come here, people who do have money". Organization 7 rarely turned anyone away, and in fact tried to move beyond sustenance by integrating clients into the daily operations. Just the same, they had

> zero tolerance, if you come in here with alcohol you can't come in, if you're violent towards any staff, you will not be allowed back, um… you know, how we work is some of our client base are people who we've worked with for quite some time, our thing is about what can we do to help you to get back into society, so we will maybe start off by doing a bit of cleaning, and then maybe go to collect some food donations.

In Overtown, all ten agencies rejected market logics by making almost all services free of charge, thus representing a sustained effort at creating a de-commodified space. Even Organization 1, which was privately funded, was hardly pro-market – by catering to drug users as a clean needle exchange, it actively undermined the local property market and property-based accumulation by making space for a highly stigmatized population, as well as re-directing private funds towards a common purpose. As the director noted, "it's really hard for a politician to criticize when you're not spending any public money to do a public good". As a health provider for the indigent, Organization 3 assiduously eliminated all barriers to access, even calling itself 'lenient': "if you walk in off the street, your mouth is hurting like crazy – there's nothing, no ID, no birth certificate, nothing to identify you, we will still see you". Organization 8 worked to provide affordable housing, which necessarily involved dealing with the private rental market and land market. However, the 'Housing First' model enabled the agency to sidestep market logics: "We're what's called a Housing First model. There's no barrier to entry except you have to be homeless, you have to have a disability, and you can't exceed the income". By providing space for the unemployed and precariously-employed, service hubs constituted barriers to further accumulation as well as enabling social

reproduction and "non-capitalist forms of self-management…(the) co-production of social and spaces" (Chatterton and Pusey 2020, 28). Yet some agencies in Overtown welcomed private donations from local developers, whose unstated aim is to rid prime spaces of homelessness for the purposes of greater property-based accumulation. The campus for Organization 2 is covered with advertisements (sponsorship of programs) and the management board is dominated by corporate CEOs. Their new facility was created in a less-visible corner of Overtown to move poor people out of the redeveloping downtown.

Second, we investigated the extent to which the helping agencies of the service hub act as *spaces of care* for clients. This involved articulating a sense of long-term responsibility for clients' well-being and the service hubs they inhabit. In Kamagasaki, the director of Organization 5 noted that

> it is important that the people who are involved feel comfortable and to create a place in which everybody can express oneself. Because every single person is cherished…everyone can come, but if somebody becomes violent…I tell them that they should think well about what they have done…there are no preconditions…for the guesthouse we have something like a 'sleep-in' system, this means that people who want to stay there but have no money can work here a little bit instead of paying the rent.

As a faith-based facility, the director of Organization 10 let us know that "we accept people who are declined from other places…we accept people with different kinds of issues that would not find a place somewhere else and care for them". Some agencies even helped clients navigate the welfare system, according to the admissions officer of Organization 11:

> The first thing we do when they want to move in is an interview that is also done for the public assistance application. We ask them first what they will ask them as the ward

> office. We copy the questionnaire and being it to the ward office. The reason for doing
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> this is that there are many people who have difficulties expressing themselves. People
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> who cannot answer when they are suddenly asked at the ward office…In the past we
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> could stand by their side during the interview, but today we cannot do this. The people
>
> of this area hate the ward office. I intervene between them...

The director goes on to say that they see themselves as a community safety net, which was a sentiment also heard across all ten agencies in Brixton. Organization 7 had especially deep roots in the neighborhood. The founder was from Brixton, and saw an opportunity to do more than just help – he wanted to take care of the poorest segments of the area, to be responsible for them using local donations and voluntary labor almost entirely from Brixton. The agency felt it must focus on longer-term needs as well as immediate survival:

> Now what we're trying to make people understand about _____, we're not just about
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> giving food…some people see food as the cure…food is not the cure, because you'll
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> feed their belly, they're gonna come back tomorrow, for what? Food. How can we
>
> make you not come back? So our thing is about how can we get you back into work?
>
> How can we get you through education? How can we update your CV? How can we
>
> find out what needs are?

Organization 9 was similarly focused on caring for local clients, and by extension caring about the service hub itself: "All of our members come from within a two mile radius of the club, so geographically they're all based really close to us in Brixton in South London". Caring about the clients involves instilling a "set of values so that they are inspired, nurtured, trusted, respected [while] providing a safe place, a diverse place. So, we encourage those values into everything that we do. So that's sort of holistic, it's not necessarily a set of rules". For Organization 5, its mission was to care for Brixton and make it a caring place, to "create

something with unused urban space, so we really are about providing opportunities for local entrepreneurs, you know…we have a goal for trying to get at least 70% of the businesses on site being locally-owned, and we encourage all of them to employ local people within the borough".

Organization 1 in Overtown saw the sheer concentration of services as making a distinct claim to urban space on behalf of, and caring for, the vulnerable:

A lot of the people are homeless in this area because there are a lot of services here; Organization 2 is right across the street, uh the, um, Organization 4 is up on __ Street, you probably know where that is. Organization 6's over there, the church is right next door to us. The sisters, who feed people, so there are a lot of services, the public hospital's here, this is where most people get most of their healthcare, seen at the hospital. So, a lot of people are in this area, and not a lot else.

On its own, this organization had a specific focus on saving and healing lives plagued by substance disorders and poverty. Here is how a manager described the caring principles and practices that make up their harm reduction approach:

When they test HIV positive or Hepatitis C positive, we do everything we can to get them care. For the people that are HIV positive, we also offer to store their medications here. A lot of the folks are homeless, don't have a place to keep their medications. So, we go find them in community if we have to, go take them their pill bottles. We also do substance abuse treatment linkage for those who want it. We've had a surprising number of people go, considering we're a syringe exchange service. People have come to us because they trust us, and ask us to be the ones to try and link them to a substance abuse care.

This quote shows how this flexible approach to providing long-term holistic care can foster trust in service hub organizations, mobilizing resources to improve long-term wellbeing of residents and the service hub itself.

Third, we investigated how service hubs act as *solidaristic spaces*, not only internally but also in relation to the state and the capitalist system. Examples of transformative potential were already signposted in the discussions of sustenance and especially care. These included service hubs acting as barriers to commodification and re-commodification through the sheer density of like-minded services and clients; service hubs acting as platforms for caring and placing greater demands on the (welfare) state, including client welfare; and service hubs providing low barriers and high access to vulnerable populations within the city. Within the hubs themselves, agencies went beyond de-commodification to actualize the idea of a sharing city, piggy-backing on the resources of the larger service hub. This enabled the service hub to transform itself into a larger, mutualistic commons. All three service hubs had originated in self-help and DIY movements. As such, the origins of the Brixton service hub lay in the DIY strategies of incoming Afro-Caribbean immigrants to London, while the Overtown service hub originated in the self-help movement of African-Americans. Kamagasaki was steeped in day laborers resisting the power of construction companies buttressed by a complicit state. For instance, Organization 3 in Overtown allowed lenient access to its health services by leaning on other nearby agencies when demand exceeded supply. The director stated that "[the service hub] helps a lot because no one institution will be able to survive the demand of this uninsured population [for health care]. No one…so if we are picking up some of the volume from other health institutions, it makes the community as a whole a lot more healthy, as opposed to one institution that serves everybody and is heavily overloaded". The spatial clustering enabled all agencies across the service hubs to spread burdens more evenly. These strategies were learnt in the initial surge of bottom-up solidarity that created the service hubs.

Over time, however, these self-created spaces of solidarity fell increasingly within the state's gaze, with predictably mixed results. Some state tolerance and support is crucial, in terms of welfare provision to clients but also protection of the spatial integrity of the service hub (DeVerteuil 2015) via locked-in land use regulations that guarantee space for helping agencies and affordable housing. Over time, however, this single-minded solidarity yielded to a conflicted brokerage role between the state and vulnerable populations. By the 1990s this role had morphed into a state-managed model, whereby all but three agencies in our entire sample were directly funded by local and national government. If agencies maintained an arm's-length stance from the state, it was mostly through everyday decision-making and governance. For example, interactions with the state involved indirectly relying on clients' public assistance or retirement payments, or renting from the local state on state-owned land. In Kamagasaki, Organization 3's rent was indirectly subsidized by the City of Osaka, as was the rehabilitation of older buildings using a land trust that once recycled city land for local agencies. Organization 6 basically saw itself as an extension of the state, and understood the service hub as a state creation. To them, the "government approved this neighbourhood… [Kamagasaki would] not be possible without the power of the government". Moreover, the voluntary sector organizations used the service hub as a way to focus attention on larger issues of poverty, ageing and welfare state policies across Osaka and Japan.

In Brixton, the state was seen as something decidedly more aloof, given almost ten years of relentless austerity that had cut many services' budgets to the bone, as well as placing them into intense competition for the remaining funding. Organization 10 related to how this shift had hurt their ability to broker between the poor of Brixton and state imperatives:

The pull-back over the last ten years of funding in these areas has meant that they don't support us in the way that I believe they should for a vital service, and it's sporadic and

highly competitive and you find yourself, actually feeling guilty about getting some of
the money because you know it hasn't gone to the dancing and music for six year olds
in a tough area group.

Overtown agencies were wary of an alternatively overbearing or neglectful state.
Organization 1 had no relation with state funding, but its harm reduction mission worked
towards the public good. Existing on private donations, but not at the behest of a
commodified version of the city, the agency's controversial mission was based on a "law that
specifically forbids any use of any state or County funding for that…that really this is the
only way to deal with this population and this problem, and with the overdose issue, and
everything else, that we're doing an excellent job of that right now, with no public money
whatsoever". Yet eight of the ten agencies were very much in the orbit of the state through
various conditions imposed by funding schemes. For those agencies reliant on state funding,
much energy was expended on applying and then complying with stringent and highly
structured regulations. Organizations 3, 7 and 8 were as focused on obtaining and
maintaining their state funding as they were in delivering services to their clientele.

So these agencies were perhaps acting more as expedient extensions of the state
(DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009). But even an arm's-length stance among agencies can
nonetheless bolster state aims of expediently managing, containing and obscuring the
marginalized. Willse (2015) argued that voluntary agencies may appear low-barrier and
bottom-up, yet are only too comfortable with just about managing homelessness and poverty
rather than striving to eliminate them, which is at odds with the transformational potential of
the service hub and was certainly the case across several agencies in all three service hubs.
Conversely, and especially in Overtown, helping agencies could be used as platforms for
demands on the state to do more for the vulnerable, a more even-handed manager of poverty.

Solidarity was also threatened by the *re*-commodification of service hubs via gentrification as a form of enclosure. Agencies in Brixton had already been feeling the effects of gentrification for over a decade. Organization 8 stated as much, in terms of the state using gentrification to offset austerity:

> Local authorities have for years, given the difficulties they've experienced with the cuts in central government funding, invested in new-build and benefit from that, so it's all sold off, bits of land sold off, new development built…and nobody really benefits so that form of gentrification…And when you go into Brixton Market which used to be a nice very ethnically diverse and indigenous place, more and more shops have been selling cupcakes and other completely useless items, so it loses that flavour, its loses that whole international flavour that I think is so important in this country.

For Overtown, gentrification was perhaps less immediate but just as ominous in terms of menacing the coherency of the (solidaristic) service hub. Organization 4 had explicitly "cashed-in" on gentrification, selling a few of their properties in nearby Wynwood, and shut down programs for eventual relocation. The agency described it as a strategy to take advantage of increasing land prices in the neighbourhood, using revenues from sale of property to expand services in a less expensive setting. After being ignored for so long by capital, Organization 10 stated that "Overtown is not what Overtown was ten years ago. Quite frankly, ten years ago if you used to live there, it was relatively dangerous to drive through most of Overtown. Nowadays, Overtown changes block by block. You've got luxury lofts literally sitting catty-corner from the largest homeless shelter to the north". Finally, Organization 3 in Kamagasaki said that

> I don't think that it has reached the point we can call it gentrification. But it might become like that. People who own land are already very old. Thus when it is handed

down to the next generation, I think a lot of it will go on the market. This is really

frightening…many owners have only low commitment to the land, and it is easy for

them to sell.

The particular pressure on land in Kamagasaki came from tourist gentrification. Tourist

hotels are rapidly increasing in the neighborhood, and attracting tourists is a specific goal of

the Nishinari Special Ward Project, which aims to redevelop the neighbourhood but preserve

the service hub function.

We have now provided wide-ranging evidence of service hubs acting as both survival-

based and more potentially transformative commons at the margins, although the balance

between them was tilted towards the former. In the next section, we underline the empirical

and conceptual advantages of presenting commons at the margins as sustenance, care and

solidarity, but also of how it can return to an expanded sense of the (spatial) margins.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: COMMONS AT THE MARGINS

The three aspects helped sharpen the focus around commons at the margins, *joining*

bare-bones survival to care and solidarity, of city spaces that offer alternative modes of urban

life alongside, beyond but sometimes against capitalism. Overall, the results suggested that

the actually-existing conditions within service hubs were more than just "soaking up the

evicted and the expelled so that they pose no threat to capital" (Amin and Howell 2016, 6).

Yet the production of commons at the margins was always provisional, unstable and

conflicted. First, the service hubs were de-commodified, their everyday workings largely

alongside capitalism, enabling survival to vulnerable populations who had little recourse to

the mainstream urban economy. Service hubs could be therefore understood as 'metabolic' in

terms of providing basic staples, moving from castoff and cast-aside to something positive

(McFarlane and Desai 2016, 145). Second, service hubs could be seen as caring spaces, taking long-term responsibility for vulnerable populations and places. Third, service hubs acted as solidaristic spaces from their very beginnings, yet increasingly torn between state control, creeping de-funding, and impending enclosure via gentrification, versus hard-won independence that sometimes veered towards an expedient poverty management. The service hub refashions itself as a springboard of (permanent) critique (Eizenberg 2012) – its dissenting practices and conspicuous occupation of prime space is a constant reminder of the inequities and shortfalls of wider society. While perhaps not embodying a purely radical politics of infrastructure, service hubs do ensure alternative spaces (and visions) of collective survival at least partly outside of the gaze of the state and beyond the market, more than just expedient abeyance zones for the vulnerable. As such, our results indicated that service hubs are more than just a "politics of public provision and protections that may well meet popular needs, but does not inaugurate a different way of being in the world" (Amin and Howell 2016, 6), creating instead small instances of Vasudevan's (2017) "world-making" approach, part of Young's (2014) "un-commissioned city".

So, there were constraints to this transformative capacity, driven by a spatially static and compressed footprint, strings-attached state support and the lack of an explicitly anti-capitalist message. Just as there are cracks in the (capitalist) city, so too were there cracks in the commons we investigated. The service hubs were all conflicted brokers between a vulnerable population and an alternatingly overbearing and neglectful state, as well as threats of re-commodification. For instance, philanthropic donations emerged as a crucial source of funding for certain agencies, especially in Overtown. This market penetration arguably diluted the ability of the commons to stop the spread of a property-based accumulation model. These findings accorded with Breshnihan and Byrner (2015), who confirmed that Dublin's independent spaces are considered to have neither an ideological nor counter-

cultural identity, despite common ownership of a resource and an ongoing common production which transforms the relations of production of the city. The authors focused on the limitations of such spaces, namely the difficulties surrounding high rents and evictions. Such pressures are forcing Dublin's independent spaces to either become more like other city spaces, or go underground, both of which are problematic from the view of sustaining the commons. Service hubs as commons in our three case study cities therefore emerge as essentially interstitial, incorporating "various kinds of processes that occur in the spaces and cracks within some dominant social structure of power" (Wright 2010, 229).

This emphasis on the interstitial brings us back to the "at the margins" component of our proposed reframing of the commons. Service hubs are at the margins, in the sense of being at the edge between neoliberal capitalism and something else – alongside, beyond or against capitalism – rather than being marginal *to* capitalism. Returning to Lancione (2016), and as a core contribution, we can confirm and recast the margins more as misfit, unabridged occupations of the cracks in the city. They can be contrarian and even stealthy spaces, no longer exclusively subordinated, excluded or bordered by the neoliberal governance model. In fact, and going against Lancione (2016), commons at the margins can do the bordering, in that they create their own edges, an occupation-based strategy that militates against a purely excluded position. Such an approach contributes to a nuanced understanding of the commons located somewhere between a paranoid capital-centric perspective and overly-celebratory incrementalism that lauds the "let go" nature of inner-city space (Simone 2004). So we should emphasize just how mundane and un-exceptional this relation can be. Rather than focus on exceptional sites of protest and spectacular resistance (e.g. Vradis 2020; Harvey 2012), the case of the service hub reminds us how quiet, unsung, prosaic and necessary actually-existing marginal spaces are. A key message is to therefore avoid over-selling or under-selling the promise and practice of the cracks in the system via marginal spaces.

Empirically, how did the results vary by national and urban context, and what do these variations say about the production and persistence of marginality? First, the more threadbare American welfare state was confirmed in the greater expectations and burdens placed on Overtown agencies, in terms of acting as a sanctuary of first resort for vulnerable populations, as well as their larger overall size when comparing data from Tables 1, 2 and 3 . In his own comparison of Tokyo and Los Angeles, Marr (2015) noted that the US welfare state was leaner than the Japanese one, attested by the steady decline in Japanese homelessness since the early 2000s via subsidized housing and more generous benefits (see also Allison, 2013). Brixton agencies had suffered from ten years of cutbacks, thereby nudging the service hub into more American threadbare territory. Conversely, the Japanese agencies were relatively well-funded by the state, and were increasingly the subject of state oversight, yet were struggling to meet the needs of a younger precarious population looking for services. Second, the service hubs were embedded in larger geographies of poverty, but that this geography varied by city. In both Miami and Osaka, poverty very much surrounded the service hubs, while in London poverty was more patchy in that Brixton was experiencing more advanced forms of gentrification. Third, the role of helping agencies was more fundamental – especially around health care and housing – in Miami than in London and Osaka, where the state was still the main provider. Moreover, the role of philanthropic donations in Overtown was substantially larger than in Kamagasaki or Brixton, thereby diluting the public nature of the commons. Overtown agencies were more at risk of being influenced by market actors, especially developers. Yet these cross-cutting differences did not negate certain cross-cutting similarities: all three service hubs operated alongside, beyond or against capitalism, thereby enabling a largely no-strings-attached survival; all three used the density of services to ensure certain spaces remain 'at the margins' while being threatened

by looming re-commodification via gentrification; and all three faced awkward and conflicted choices in their relationships with the (welfare) state.

We now return full circle to showcase the spatiality of urban marginality, complementing the application of various aspects of the commons to the service hub. The margins make particular claims on, and of, urban space. Huron (2019) argued that commons are especially urban in nature, due to density, diversity and anonymity, as well as the balance between cities as sites of private accumulation and surplus versus sites of state regulation, provision and control. Simply put, by occupying (increasingly) prime urban space, the margins emerge as barriers to its (never inevitable) commodification, an "urban rag picker" that takes discarded people and land uses and puts them to use in the present, generative of change and social cohesion (McFarlane 2018). Spaces at the margins can be tolerated when serving larger purposes - sustaining, caring and solidaristic, but also expedient abeyance.

Future research ought to consider the commons as sites of institutional experimentation and micro-collectives of the poor around shared infrastructure, but also subject to increasingly bold attempts at enclosure by the market. This connects to Baker et al. (2020), who advance the notion that it is now possible to commodify the needs of the poorest citizens yet whose very destitution underpins the notion of service hubs as commons. Future research could also take into the account the radical destabilization brought on by Covid-19, which might tilt the service hub into more transformative territory, at least temporarily. For example in Overtown, a loose network of agencies have implemented mutual aid efforts. They also put more pressure on local government to provide hotel rooms for vulnerable people. Interestingly, the coalition merged these efforts with racial justice organizing in Downtown Miami after the police killing of George Floyd. The connection between survival-focused aid in Overtown and one of the largest protest movements in recent history speaks to a potentially new dynamic in the survival-transformation relationship. Finally, more fine-

grained ethnographic approaches to the service hub, combined with a client-centered focus, could provide a richer understanding of accessibility and de-commodification than was possible via agency-based interviews.

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Table 1: Organizational sample – Brixton

Table 2: Organizational sample – Overtown

Table 3: Organizational sample – Kamagasaki

GEOFFREY DEVERTEUIL is a Reader of Social Geography at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University, Wales CF10 3WA. His research interests include the commons, resilience, social infrastructure, and the management of urban poverty.

MATTHEW MARR is Associate Professor of Sociology at the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies at Florida International University, Miami FL 33199. He is an urban ethnographer whose research covers the experiences of homelessness and poverty in the United States and Japan.

JOHANNES KIENER is Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Saitama University Tokyo. His research covers neighborhood change, gentrification and service hubs in Osaka, Japan.