Housing for a Lonely Generation: Co-Living Platforms and the Real-Estate-Media Complex

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The new way of living is inhabiting time, space and place that stirs inspiration inside of us.
Join the global living movement.
Find your people.
Join us.

Imagine a place where you enter as an 'I' but leave as a 'we'.
Connect in spaces designed to bring incredible people together.
Meet neighbours and make new friends.
Be more together.

We are:
Allergic to the unoriginal.
Unbound by convention.
Opposed to the 9 to 5.
Inspired by independence.
Open to adventure.
And firm believers that we're only as good as the people with whom we surround ourselves.

Network with freelancers.
Brainstorm with entrepreneurs.
Share skills and find solutions.
Our community might just contain your next friend, lover, or mentor.
#wecommunity.

Grab a coffee fix to kickstart your day.
Perfect your presentation in the co-working space.
Now book the boardroom and nail that pitch.
Live it up.
Stress less.

Gather. Stretch. Steam.
Caffeinate. Co-work. Present.
Meet. Mingle. Collaborate.
Watch. Learn. Create.
Chop. Chat. Unwind.

It feels like home. Maybe even better.
This is home.
It's your home, your workplace, and your playground.
A home to share with friends, teachers, chefs, engineers, artists, and yourself.
Stay or live.

Take a break and connect with those around you over lunch.
Join the wine society in the restaurant for a tasting, then prepare a feast with friends in one of the shared kitchens.
Living with passionate, inspiring, positive people who are excited and open to discovering the world.
Game-changing convenience in one all-inclusive bill.

Hello. We are co-living.
We're the world's largest co-living provider.
Yes, that's big.
Building real-estate of the future.
Property and software under one roof.
The Good Life.[1]

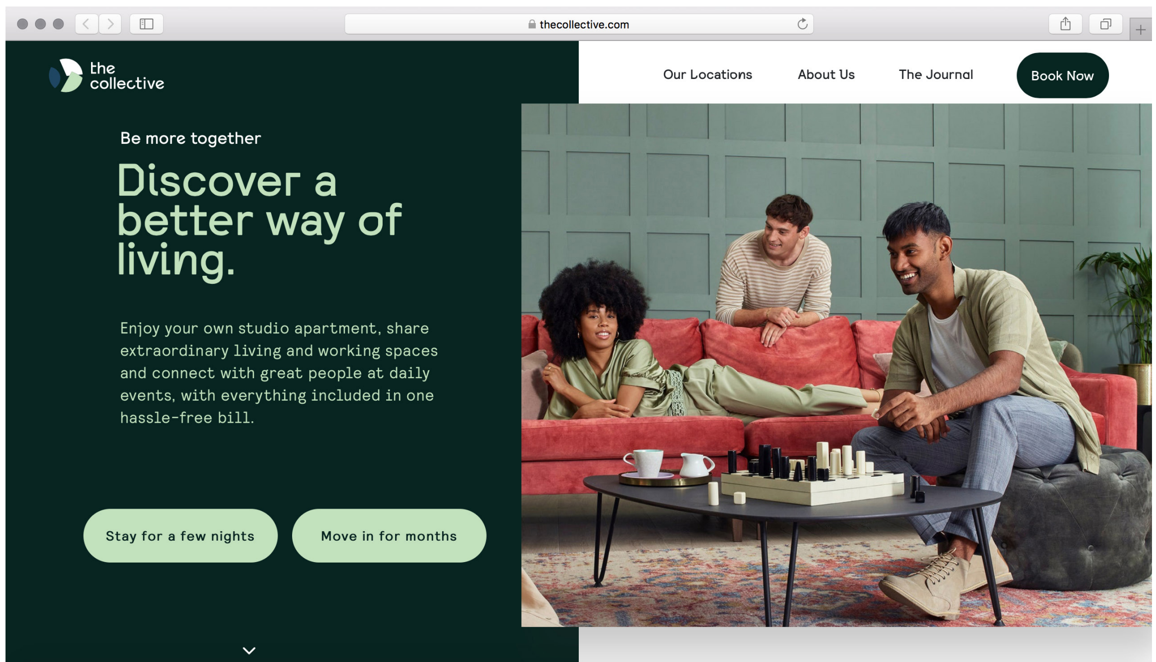

Fig. 1: The Collective (project's website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

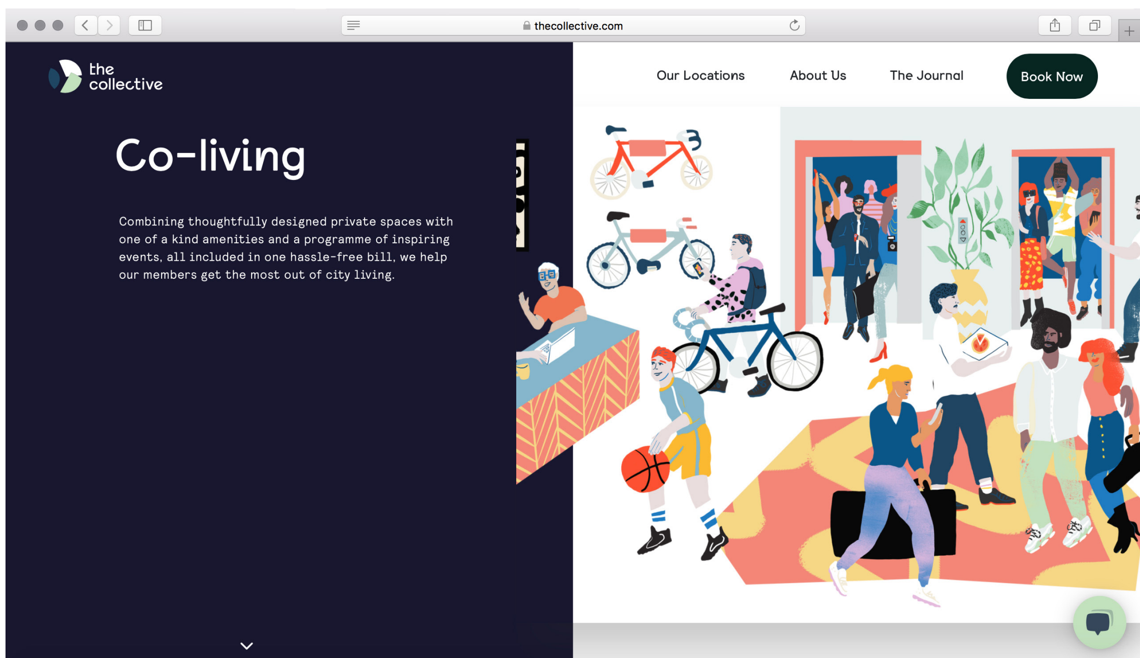

Fig. 2: The Collective (project's website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

Organised around the advertising language for three co-living platforms – WeLive, Quarters (now Habyt), and The Collective – this essay frames the corporate housing model as inseparable from the digital media infrastructures transmit its messages. The media-specificity of co-living real estate advertisements, as ephemeral, anonymous texts, written in English and distributed online, points to the very condition of the 'spatial products' they are selling – fast circulation, far-reaching dispersion, and universalist tendencies. As such, co-living projects could be seen as a genuine product and manifestation of what could be described as a real-estate-media complex, referring to the close entanglements of speculative property markets, media infrastructures and digital technologies in the commodification of housing. Understanding the digital as 'materially grounded in everyday life and inseparable from the power relations therein', this essay outlines corporate co-living platforms, as both real estate and media projects, which serve as a powerful tool for the shaping of our individual and collective subjectivities.[2]

This essay builds upon the 'feminist real estate theory', framed by Hélène Frichot and Helen Runting as a theoretical framework grounded in feminist critique, used for unpacking the ways in which capitalist real estate markets produce not only housing inequalities, but also vulnerable subjectivities.[3] Following the 'critique (of) the innovative and community conscious approaches to real estate … marketed under the banner of "co-living"', which, in the words of Frichot and Runting, 'relies on a disavowal of dependencies, vulnerabilities, and intimacies, of bodies, and of politics' – one could ask: could the performative language of co-living real estate projects be seen as a site where this disavowal takes place?[4]

Narrating corporate housing 'utopias'

In his book *City Branding: The Ghostly Politics of Representation in Globalising Cities,* Alberto Vanolo observes how branding industries recognised the crisis of the industrial city during the 1970s as potential setting for transforming entire urban imaginaries into marketable products. As he points out, the representations of industrial cities as 'icons of modernity, prosperity, and progress' have shifted to 'being explicitly stigmatised and associated with ghosts of crisis, structural decline, and physical decay.'[5] With the rise of the technopoles during the 1980s, the model of 'techno-urbanism', referring to techno-parks and science campuses combined with free economic zones, appeared as one such 'urban product' and a formula to be replicated and applied to cities around the world. After the techno-city imaginaries waned during the 1990s, as Vanolo further notes, 'many city managers tried to get something more from branding', creating a context in which new designations to brand urban spaces into marketable products such as the 'creative city', 'sustainable city', 'resilient city', and recently also the 'smart city', started populating urban discourse.[6] What all of these urban narratives had in common, however, was their reliance on the language of crisis. Thus, for instance, if the idea of the 'creative city' capitalised on the precarity of the emerging global creative working class, the 'sustainable city' appeared commonly as a label for the real estate market's response to the collective fear of environmental collapse.

Although still lacking its '-city' trope, corporate co-living platforms have emerged during the last decade as a real estate response to the housing crisis of young digital nomads, usually members of the so-called Generations Y and Z, often described as 'the loneliest generations'.[7] Appearing in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, reaching a peak and finally a decline during (and after) the Covid-crisis – co-living platforms were born in the broader technological and media turn the property markets experienced at the time. On the one hand, the period saw technological innovation organised around managing post-crisis traumas and uncertainties, such is the automation of rent collecting and the emergence of large property rental platforms like AirBnB.[8] As Desiree Fields observes,

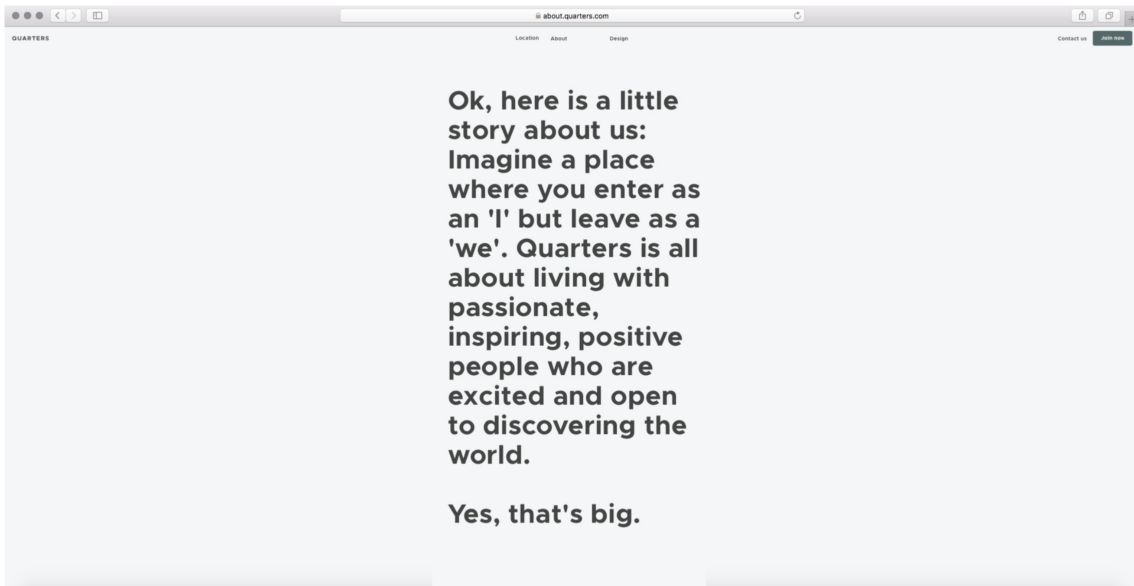

Fig. 3: Quarters (project’s website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

post-crisis digital technologies appeared as a way to 'reshape the operation of power within housing markets, modify relationships among real estate stakeholders, and bear upon the political economy of housing.'[9]

Simultaneously, this period also saw a change in the mediation and advertising techniques used to launch real estate products to the market, which has largely lost credibility and social trust. The turn towards storytelling – essentially a turn from (architectural) objects to subjects as central protagonists of the real estate advertising discourse – positioned language, narrative, and media representation at the very forefront of the entire property industry.[10] With housing becoming increasingly unaffordable, and with 'human attention (becoming) a scarce and hence valuable commodity', co-living projects appeared as a 'different solution' – a housing 'formula' consisting of cell-like apartments for (often involuntarily) mobile, young professionals, digital nomads who require a good Internet connection for their community needs.[11] The frantic need to differentiate co-living platforms from the rest of the property markets' repertoire, however, has created an internal paradox, as they all started to seem different in the same way.

It is striking, for instance, how all three of the platforms I analysed consistently position themselves as initiators of a 'new movement', precisely framing their own project of co-living as a radical rupture from the existing housing system. Ambitiously promising a 'new way of living' that will 'transform the rigid and isolating housing model of yesterday', co-living platforms claim the capacity to change 'the way people live together and share their lives around the globe', enabling them 'to lead more fulfilling lives.'[12] Carefully targeting its prospective users, co-living real estate language employs various storytelling techniques to construct the ideal co-inhabitant: a networked, economically and socially productive entrepreneur, member of a global creative working class. In 'creating a home for our generation' and 'a new living experience that connects you with people on similar journey across the planet', these narratives make it clear: 'whether you're a modern-day nomad who is just stopping by or dipping your toes in the city before taking the big leap … all you have to do is show up with your suitcase.'[13]

Generous promises of belonging, home-making, new friendships and communal life go hand-in-hand with a less generous offer of actual square metres of individual rooms or apartments in the co-living housing projects.[14] In their unpacking of the co-living 'cell', Hélène Frichot and Helen Runting ask about the conditions of confinement:

> What kind of production and reproduction do these spaces make possible? … What about sex or private discussion, relations that one wishes to limit to a given circle, relations one cannot, or simply does not wish to, extend to all members of the co-living community? The cell provides privacy to a prone body glued to a laptop or asleep, but it cannot physically accommodate more than one body, the infrastructure as a whole cannot support intimacy.[15]

To complement the spatial bare minimum, the real work of construction is contained in the advertising of the shared spaces. One could thus note the overlapping of narrative elements with physical spaces in the common use of the terms like the 'neighbourhood', 'street', or 'city' to describe the room clusters, hallways and buildings of co-living projects. Similarly, the branding of shared spaces such is The Collective's *The Exchange* (lobby) or *The Secret Garden* (work station decorated with pot plants) could be seen as an attempt to create added value to the project and justify the cost of the sub-minimal dwellings.[16] The '"unbundling" of the elements of a home, such that one could pay only for the amenities they really need', as Claire Flurin, the co-founder of one such platform based in New York explains, goes hand in hand with the (re)construction of spaces through narratives that exceed their physical scale.[17]

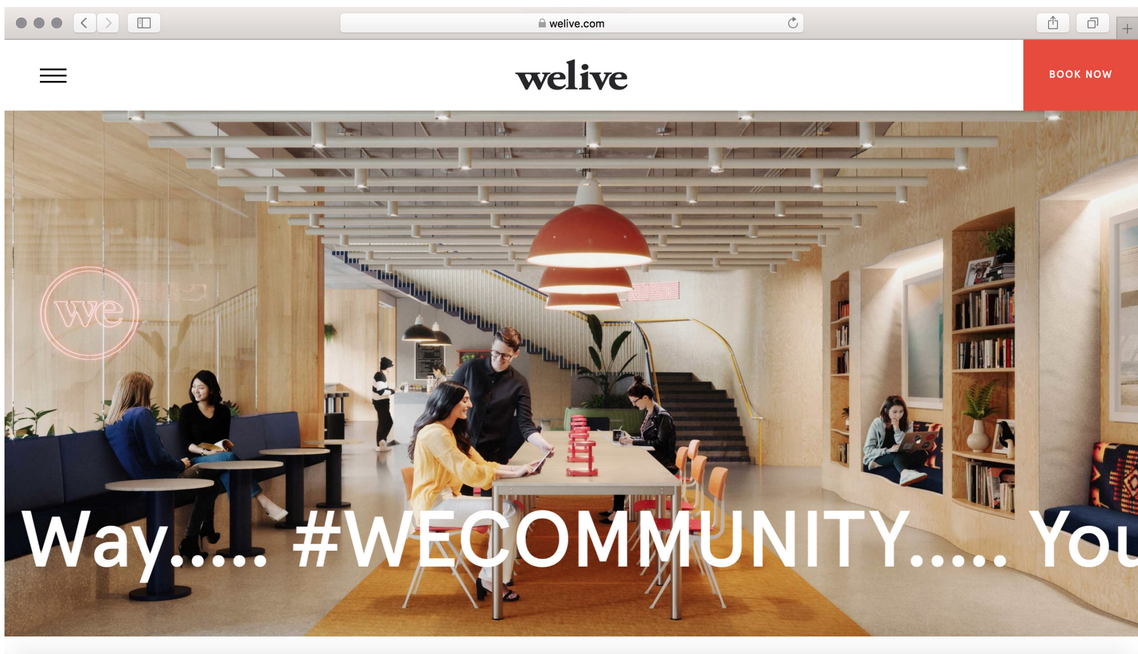

Fig. 4: WeLive (project's website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

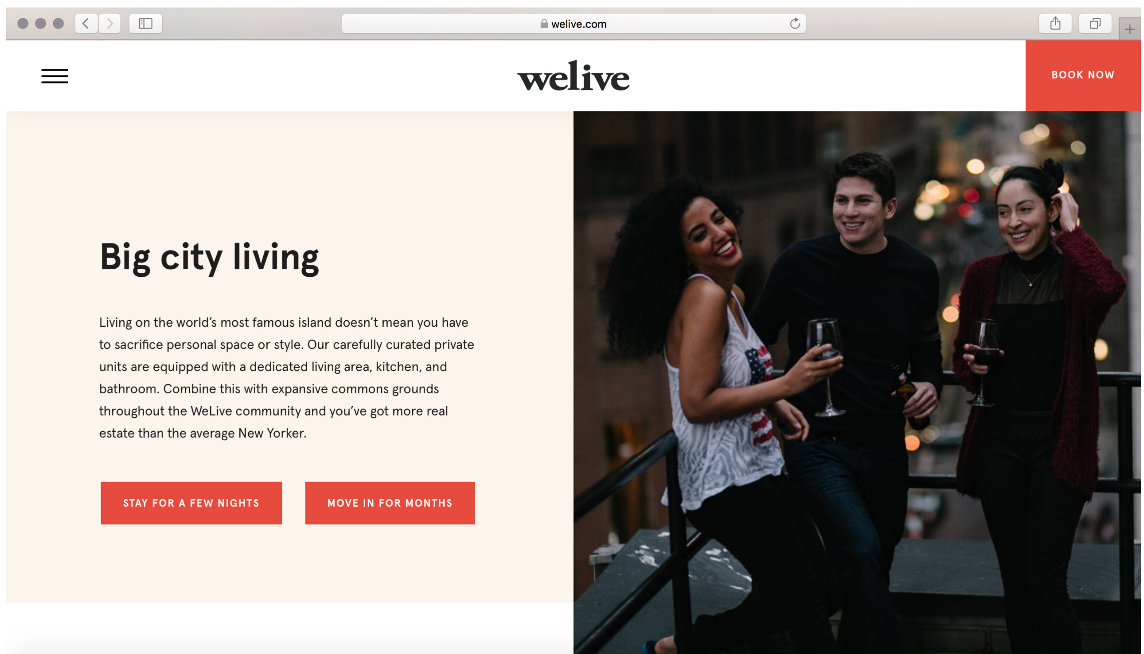

Fig. 5: WeLive (project's website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

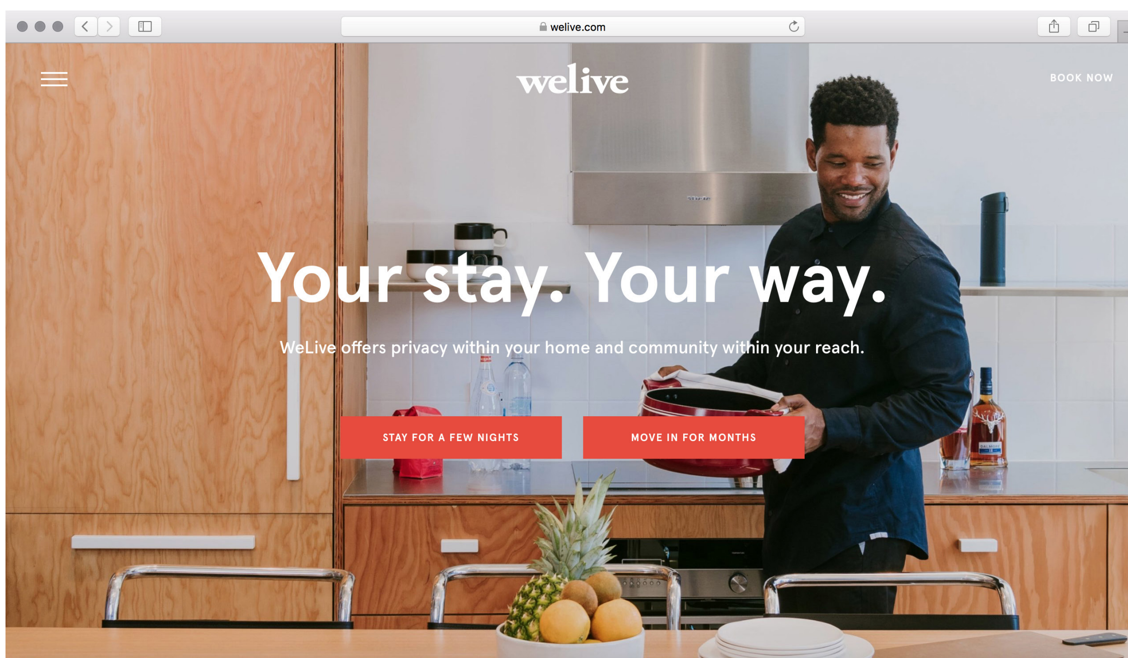

Fig. 6: WeLive (project's website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

Evgeny Morozov and Francesca Bria analysed the financial performativity of the 'smartness' narrative in the construction of smart cities, arguing that real estate developers charge 'a smartness premium' in order to obtain even higher profits. Similarly, the 'community' narrative also operates as an intangible asset in the co-living property markets.[18] These close entanglements of real estate fiction with square metres could be seen in light of what Anna Tsing describes as 'the economy of appearances', referring to the 'self-conscious making of a spectacle' operating as a 'necessary aid to gathering investment funds.'[19] A common practice of start-up companies and venture capitalists, the construction of this 'magical vision', as Tsing further reminds us, points to 'those historical moments when capital seeks creativity rather than stable reproduction.'[20] From the companies' names – 'WeLive', 'The Collective', 'Common' – to the appropriation of the notion of community in creating corporate media products like the hashtag #wecommunity of 'WeCompany', advertising language and digital media could be seen as the actual sites of production of the co-living projects.

With 'privacy within your home and community within your reach', social life becomes part of the convenience package, facilitated by new types of professionals such as a 'community host' or even a 'community curator'.[21] That co-living projects construct their value on the promises of community, also becomes visible in the amenities they offer: In the Quarters co-living project, high-speed Internet and free laundry are advertised hand-in-hand with a promise of 'open-minded people and regular community events.'[22] However, on a second reading of this advertisement, it becomes clear that, after all, community does not come fully free-of-charge. Rather, the users of the co-living platforms – themselves the building blocks of the elusive concept of a community – are required to perform and socialise, thus in fact taking upon the role of (unpaid) workers in producing the added property value. Directed at 'anyone who is ready to embrace a more connected way of living', the platforms 'empower members to co-create their experiences', to 'meet the neighbours and make new friends', 'let loose' and to 'live it up'.[23] Urging its inhabitants to 'be more together', the biopolitical power of the company over its users and the pressure it imposes to perform – whether professionally, socially, emotionally – underlines all aspects of the co-living life. As such, co-living platforms appear as corporate housing 'utopias' (or rather, dystopias, depending which side of the rental contract one stands on) in which life and work blur seamlessly, distinctions between citizens and tourists are negated, and community appears as a hashtag and an amenity one can occasionally consume.

The shape of housing unaffordability

In his essay 'Planning as Persuasive Storytelling in the Context of "the Network Society"', James Throgmorton points out that planning should be seen as a form of storytelling.[24] Thinking of planners, as Throgmorton suggests, 'as authors who write texts that may be read in diverse and often conflicting ways', leads to the understanding that 'planners-authors have to build conflict, crisis, and resolution into their narratives, such that key antagonists are somehow changed or moved significantly'.[25] Following from here, it becomes clear not only that planning could be seen as a form of storytelling, but also the other way around: that storytelling could be seen as a form of planning; design by the means of narrative and (real estate) fiction. With communication preceding rather than succeeding architectural and urban design in the era of the global circulation of capital, goods, information and people, the boundaries between built landscapes and their 'mediascapes', homes and screens, start to blur.[26] Co-living projects could be seen as a housing typology existing in this blurry field. In the context in which 'the network is the new electricity', and the living environment becomes 'the house-shaped manifestation of the internet of things', as Justin McGuirk writes to describe the

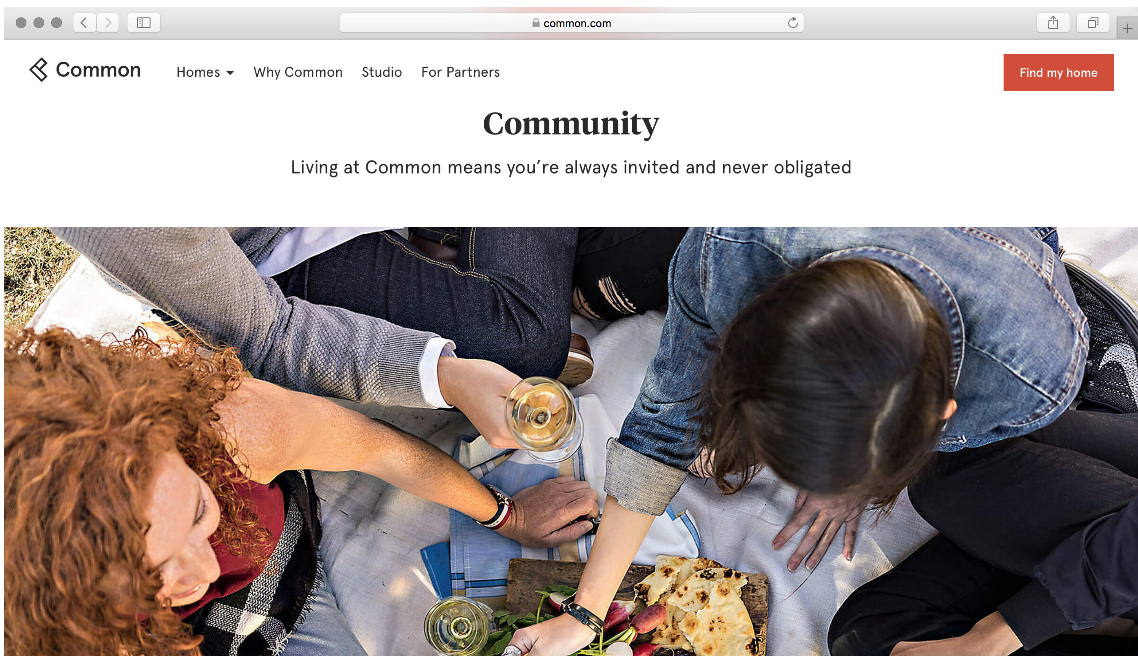

Fig. 7: Common (project's website), screenshot, 18 November 2020.

new domestic landscape of the digital era, we might ask: What are the corporate co-living platforms manifestations of?[27]

Although grounded in the logic of digital media, corporate co-living platforms essentially represent an all-too-familiar formula of rentier capitalism, a predatory real estate project aimed at detecting and extracting from those who are economically, socially and politically vulnerable. The production and circulation of co-living projects, thus point to the current state of the speculative housing market, whose growth has heavily depended on the constant repackaging of the already existing. In this process, the language plays a key role. The question then becomes: How do we study hybrid housing-media typologies like these corporate co-living platforms: by analysing their architectures and spatial arrangements, or by reading their real estate fictions?

Notes

1. 'Housing for a Lonely Generation' is a 'real estate poem' composed solely of phrases taken from the websites and online brochures of the three analysed co-living platforms: WeLive, Quarters, and The Collective (accessed on 14 August 2019). Real Estate Poetry is a long-term publishing project in which I consider the language of real estate advertising as a source of fiction and poetry.
2. Desiree Fields, 'Automated Landlord: Digital Technologies and Post-Crisis Financial Accumulation', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 54, no. 1 (2022): 160–81, 176.
3. Hélène Frichot and Helen Runting, 'The Promise of a Lack: Responding to (Her) Real Estate Career', *The Avery Review* no. 8 (May 2015), http://averyreview.com/issues/2/the-promise-of-alack.
4. Hélène Frichot and Helen Runting, 'In Captivity: The Real Estate of Co-Living', in *Architecture and Feminisms: Ecologies, Economies, Technologies*, ed. Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, and Helen Runting (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 140–49, 140.
5. Alberto Vanolo, *City Branding: The Ghostly Politics of Representation in Globalising Cities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 17.
6. Ibid., 119.
7. Jamie Ballard, 'Millennials Are the Loneliest Generation', YouGov, 30 July 2019, https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2019/07/30/loneliness-friendship-new-friends-poll-survey.
8. To name just a few: Fields, 'Automated Landlord'; Joe Shaw, 'Platform Real Estate: Theory and Practice of New Urban Real Estate Markets', *Urban Geography* 41, no. 8 (2018): 1–27; Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).
9. Desiree Fields and Dallas Rogers, 'Towards a Critical Housing Studies Research Agenda on Platform Real Estate', *Housing, Theory and Society* 38, no. 1 (2019) :72–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2019.1670724.
10. Marija Marić, 'Real Estate Fiction: Branding Industries and the Construction of Global Urban Imaginaries' (doctoral diss., ETH Zurich, 2020).
11. On the attention economy, see Claudio Celis Bueno, *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
12. 'WeLive', real estate advertisement, WeLive website, https://www.welive.com/; 'Quarters', real estate advertisement, Quarters website, https://quarters.com/; 'The Collective', real estate advertisement, The Collective website, https://www.thecollective.com/; all accessed 25 September 2020.
13. Ibid.
14. The room and apartment sizes are rarely included in the advertisement descriptions of co-living products.
15. Frichot and Runting, 'In Captivity', 145.
16. 'The Collective Old Oak' real estate advertisement, The Collective website, https://www.thecollective.com/locations/old-oak.
17. Giovanna Borasi, 'Attention to New Sites for Architecture', in *A Section of Now: Social Norms and Rituals as Sites for Architectural Intervention*, ed. Giovanna Borasi (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2021), 7–36, 27.

18. Evgeny Morozov and Francesca Bria, *Rethinking the Smart City: Democratizing Urban Technology* (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2018).
19. Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 57.
20. Ibid., 57.
21. 'WeLive', real estate advertisement.
22. 'Quarters', real estate advertisement.
23. Ibid. and 'WeLive', Real Estate Advertisement.
24. James A. Throgmorton, 'Planning as Persuasive Storytelling in the Context of "the Network Society"', *Planning Theory* 2, no. 2 (July 2003): 125–51, 2.
25. Ibid, 2.
26. On mediascapes see Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990): 1–24.
27. Justin McGuirk, 'Honeywell, I'm Home! The Internet of Things and the New Domestic Landscape', in *Housing After the Neoliberal Turn*, ed. Stefan Aue et al. (Berlin and Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015), 47–52, 48.

Biography

Marija Marić is an architect, researcher and curator based in Luxembourg. She works as a postdoctoral research associate at the Master in Architecture programme, University of Luxembourg, where she also teaches. In 2023 Marić co-curated the Luxembourg Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale with a project that critically unpacks the question of space mining through the perspective of resources. She obtained her doctoral degree in 2020 from the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich, with research examining the role of media strategists in the communication, design and globalisation of urban projects. Marija's work has been presented and published internationally. Her research is organised around the questions of real estate, media, and the production of the built environment and its imaginaries in the context of global capitalism and the global flow of information.