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From the squat to the neighbourhood: Popular infrastructures as reproductive urban commons

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ABSTRACT

We are currently experiencing a manifold crisis of social reproduction which has seriously affected the capacity of popular access to basic goods such as housing, particularly in urban environments. This article seeks to contribute to and expand debates around the urban housing commons by looking at decommodified and collectively managed housing alternatives through the lens of the reproductive commons. Through the case of the Bloc La Bordeta squat and the broader commons ecologies in Barcelona's Sants district, we explore how complex networks of emancipatory reproductive commons subsist and expand in urban environments, and investigate the role of popular infrastructures in this process. We highlight the reproductive dimension of housing squats in sustaining radical movements in the city. However, popular support is also crucial in defending the housing commons from enclosure and state repression, which creates a mutual interdependence among reproductive commons and urban commons ecologies. In looking at the particular difficulties of reproductive urban commoning, we explore material and subjective challenges of the reproductive urban commons, and we illustrate the importance of looking into and beyond housing and of grounding housing commons' connections and (dis)continuities within the wider territorial and socio-political context. These challenges create differential forms of commoning in which participation and engagement are unequal but that, nevertheless, are able to support thriving popular infrastructures that become the pillars of the resistance against capitalist urbanisation processes.

1. Introduction

The capitalist accumulation process generates a permanent crisis of reproduction that, in the neoliberal era, has extended to marginalised populations all over the world (Federici 2013). This crisis has very tangible effects on the livelihoods of communities, who see their well-being and even their capacity to survive severely affected. In times of economic crisis, or in the context of socioecological emergency that we are currently witnessing, the crisis of reproduction escalates in reach and intensity, affecting increasing numbers of people. We have several recent examples that range from the retreat of the state from its support for social reproduction in the post-2008 austerity context (Strong 2020) to the failure of the healthcare system during the Covid-19 pandemic (Sparke and Williams 2022). Cities not only exacerbate these dynamics, but also play a key role in their constitution. Urban environments are simultaneously capital sinks where surplus is reinvested, and migration

centers where the rural dispossessed seek opportunities (Dawson 2017). Housing is one of the dimensions of social reproduction where this contradiction plays out more evidently, as the ambitions of speculative real estate developers clash with the needs of impoverished populations in search of a home. However, this tension has been widely contested globally (Gray (ed.) 2018; Vilenica et al. 2019).

In the case of Barcelona, which we will use throughout the paper, a lively and diverse housing movement has been articulated from below, becoming one of the strongholds of the social movements in the city. Neighbourhood unions, local networks, renter's unions, and housing cooperatives are now at the forefront in the struggle against the effects of a housing market that, despite mitigating attempts from local government, reaps significant profits for the financial real-estate complex and increasingly displaces and evicts working class residents (Madden and Marcuse 2016). Within this complex picture, building along the lines of work by Gutierrez Sánchez (2022) who brings together questions around

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care commons and infrastructure, we focus on the rich network of social cooperation and popular infrastructures—the latter being a term we borrow from Catalan grassroots movements that designates community controlled and politically loaded infrastructures that support autonomous projects and social movements—that contribute to the housing movement through diverse strategies and from different positionalities. Social centres and reclaimed spaces, cooperatives of different kinds, popular schools and a wide range of organisations interact and create mutual interdependencies, becoming commons ecologies (De Angelis 2017). Many of the above are not directly connected to housing struggles, but they all offer crucial contributions in reproducing the lives of the people involved, and thus the housing movement. Conversely, self-organised housing structures are also critical in the articulation of other struggles, and the anti-capitalist movement in general (Dadusc 2019; Vasudevan 2014). What we want to emphasise is the centrality of commoning networks of social reproduction in the challenging of neoliberal urbanisation processes and the articulation of post-capitalist alternatives.

The study of social reproduction originally emerged as an extension, even a transformation, of Marxist theory that rejected the separation between productive and reproductive labour, and highlighted the far reaching consequences that these dualism has historically had in anti-capitalist politics (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2017). Social reproduction has been especially helpful to understand the role of patriarchal domination of the body in the colonial expansion of capitalism and subsequent imperial projects (Federici 2004), as well as in developing a critical conceptualisation of the globalisation of capitalist production that digs into the flows of migrant labour to highlight the material consequences of neoliberalism across different scales (Katz 2001). These are very relevant insights, as they frame social reproduction as a central subject of class struggle, and thus redefine the composition of the revolutionary subject (De Angelis 2007). Therefore, social reproduction points towards the invisibilised and devalued labour that is needed to keep the capitalist society running, but also to sustain and expand subversive movements (Federici 2018). We delve deeper into the latter notion of social reproduction as a set of processes, and relations that form the material basis for the emergence of transformative alternatives. In particular, we bring the social reproduction lens into debates around the urban housing commons, specifically in dialogue with literature that has focused on the need for and challenges of decommodifying housing from various angles including squatting, non-profit independent housing associations and public-cooperative policy mechanisms (García-Lamarca, 2015; Huron 2018; Vidal 2019; Ferreri and Vidal 2021). We build on work arguing that housing is a critical dimension of social reproduction that needs to be addressed.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to and expand debates around the urban housing commons by looking at decommodified and collectively managed housing alternatives through the lens of the reproductive commons. We want to understand the role of housing in the difficult task of collectivising reproduction and building commons autonomy in the city. By reflecting on the case of the housing squat Bloc La Bordeta and its development over the years, we ask the question: how can complex networks of emancipatory reproductive commons subsist and expand in urban environments, and what challenges do they face? Beyond the fate of a single commons, we are interested in understanding and strategising commons expansion as a shift in the balance of forces between commons and capital in a given time and place. Therefore, we will focus on the internal practices of everyday commoning that sustain the squat, but also on the interactions and interdependencies that the Bloc has formed with other surrounding projects over the years.

In this article we have used a militant research approach. Militant research designates situated research that seeks to be a form of political intervention (CCC et al. 2012). It is conducted from militant positionalities, and seeks to produce knowledge from particular struggles that can be useful in advancing social movements (Halvorsen 2015). More specifically, we have based our research on militant ethnography, a

qualitative approach in which the first-hand involvement of the researcher in struggle is emphasised (Juris 2007). The authors of this paper have been active for years in different movement spaces in Barcelona's Sants neighbourhood, the city of Barcelona and the metropolitan area: the Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH), Obra Social Barcelona, neighbourhood housing unions and the Popular Self-Managed University (UPA). One of the authors has been directly involved with the Bloc La Bordeta, located in Sants, Barcelona, since the squatting of the block in 2015, and continues to be during negotiations with the city to convert the building into public housing. This paper draws from her militant experience of countless assemblies, meetings, gatherings and physical and emotional labour, especially between 2014 and 2018 and again in 2022–2023. Moreover, the experience of the other author in the housing movement and in the Sants district has complemented the autoethnographic approach by adding nuance to the context with an external but very close understanding of the commoning processes at play. The insights developed in this paper will be informally shared with the block inhabitants, and we hope that they can be helpful in the critical next steps that the Bloc La Bordeta is facing.

The paper is structured as follows. Our theoretical framework explores the reproductive commons and housing as well as the core challenges and strategies of the urban commons. We introduce our case in the subsequent section, providing the socio-historical context for the emergence of the Bloc La Bordeta in Barcelona's Sants neighbourhood. The discussion then focuses on the subsistence, expansion and challenges of urban reproductive commons, delving into detail specifically on material dimensions of the legal and political repression; the housing, community and territorial elements; and finally the competing subjectivities in conflict amidst processes of differential commoning. Our conclusion summarises the main points and arguments and underlines our contribution to the literature.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Reproductive commons and housing

The concept of social reproduction has been at the centre of materialist feminist debates and has helped to uncover the invisibilised tasks needed to maintain life, both daily and across generations, which are mostly performed by women and racial minorities (Federici 2020; Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2004). Social reproduction scholarship has complemented Marxist theory by highlighting the crucial role of reproductive work in producing the most fundamental element in capitalist production, labour power, and disentangling the gendered division of labour (Dalla Costa and James 1975). The relation between capital and social reproduction, though, is far from being linear. Whereas the process of capital accumulation is sustained by the appropriation of reproductive work, capitalism also erodes the conditions of social reproduction, incurring in a contradiction that is at the root of periodical crises of care (Fraser 2017). Federici (2020) has framed this contradiction as a 'double character' of reproductive work, which in capitalism, simultaneously reproduces life and labour power. This reformulation has an important political connotation, since placed in a different context, social reproduction could potentially contribute to "reconstruct the world as a space of nurturing, creativity, and care" (Federici 2020: xvii). Therefore, the struggle over reproductive work is crucial in creating the conditions for emancipatory forms of social organisation and advancing a post-capitalist transition.

In this context, several authors have recently started speaking of reproductive (or reproduction) commons, which refer to the collectivisation of social reproduction, taking it away from the market and/or private spaces (Federici 2018). In the current situation, reproductive commons are easily co-opted by capital and the state. Since the retreat of the welfare state in Western countries that brought about the neoliberal era (a process that has intensified after every economic crisis) many of the reproductive functions that the state covered have been transferred

back to the private sphere, in what Ezquerro has characterised as a *new enclosure of reproductive commons* (2015). This housewifization process, as Mies (2014) has called it, is not the only possible outcome though. Occasionally, communities have come together and have been able to share the load of these reproductive tasks, reclaiming their own reproduction as a commons. In this way, reproductive commons have been able to undo three of the main impacts of enclosure: “the loss of community bonds, the separation of production and reproduction, and the invisibilisation ... of reproductive work” (di Masso Tarditti et al. 2022: 12, own translation). However, reproductive commons do not aim to revert enclosure in order to recover a romanticised pre-capitalist past. As De Angelis (2017) has demonstrated, reproductive commons form the material basis that can make commoning a viable alternative to the market and the state. Therefore, reproductive commons play a key role in building commons autonomy and are central in igniting and sustaining a social revolution towards emancipatory post-capitalist futures.

Whereas there is a growing interest in reproductive commons, the existing literature addresses them mostly from an abstract conceptual perspective. Among the scarce empirically based publications that we have been able to find, the topics of care work and food prevail (see for example the collection edited by Ezquerro et al. 2022). While these are certainly important, we situate our intervention as one connecting scholarship on social reproduction and housing commons to deepen understandings of reproductive commons. The role housing plays as a critical dimension of social reproduction has been explored from feminist perspectives underlining how mortgage debt under neoliberalism (re)privatises relations of social reproduction (Roberts 2013), or how debt more broadly intertwines the very infrastructure for life, labour, care and housing (Cavallero and Gago 2021). Marxist approaches emphasise tensions between housing as accumulation and housing as a form of social reproduction (Byrne 2020; Madden and Marcuse 2016). The role of social reproduction in housing struggles has more recently taken front and centre stage through analyses of rent strikes (Hughes and Wright 2018; González-Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2023). Considering how housing arrangements affect our common senses and subjectivities, as evidenced by the close connection between the private household model and the hegemony of the nuclear family (Aramburu 2015; Lewis 2022), a growing literature on housing commons has generated very insightful debates. These include the role that squatting has played as a way to (re)appropriate urban space for decommodified social relations rather than speculation, a process embedded in practices of commoning (Di Feliciano 2017; García-Lamarca, 2015), and the contestation of migration governance and border policies (Montagna & Grazioli 2019). A range of publications have considered the production, management, financial and political mechanisms to remove and maintain housing outside market dynamics, as well as the challenges these non-commodified housing processes face (Huron 2015, 2018; Joubert and Hodkinson 2018; Larsen and Lund Hansen 2015; Miralles Buil 2020). Housing commons owned and operated by non-profit, independent housing associations in Denmark, for example, endure due to their engagement with, against and beyond the state (Vidal 2019). Ferreri and Vidal (2021) detail how public-cooperative policy mechanisms for housing commons have unfolded through collaboration and conflict and continuous political and social struggles. What role do critical approaches to reproduction play here? In the next section we turn our attention to the particularities that reproductive commons located in urban environments are facing.

2.2. Challenges and strategies of the urban commons

Urban commons have received a lot of interest in recent years. However, the urban has far too often been used as a label that designates location, rather than a process that delineates particular challenges and potentialities. In this paper, we draw from politicised views of the urban commons that highlight their crucial role in forging socio-spatial relations that can potentially advance a post-capitalist transition

(Chatterton 2016). The city is seen as a site of constant struggle where commons coexist with other forms of social organisation. Urban commons, then, can compensate and even potentially revert uneven urban development processes (Eizenberg 2012). For this transformation to happen, urban commons need to transcend the niche of private spaces and progressive circles. (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021) has conceptualised the expansion of emancipatory commons as happening simultaneously along two lines that reinforce each other: materiality and subjectivity. The former is mostly concerned with building a material basis that allows social reproduction outside the market logic, and thus leads commons to greater autonomy vis a vis capital. The latter dimension refers to the challenging of capitalist common senses and the development of commoning subjectivities through prefiguration and radical openness. An exclusive concern for materiality can lead to the reproduction of unwanted hierarchies within commons which threaten their viability from within. Moreover, it can also give way to isolated commons which are devoid of their emancipatory potential or, in the words of Stavrides (2016), *collectively privatised spaces*. An excessive focus on subjectivity will fail to come up with concrete strategies to disentangle our livelihoods from the rule of capital and/or the state (Ruiz Cayuela, 2023). It is precisely this dual vision that shapes our understanding of successful commons expansion as the simultaneous building of material autonomy and commoning subjectivities.

The urban condition, though, poses distinct obstacles to both dimensions of commons expansion that are particularly relevant for reproductive commons. Huron (2015) has succinctly delineated what she argues are the two main challenges faced by urban commons: social alienation and space saturation. The former has to do with the lack of cohesion typical of urban environments, where inhabitants often do not share a past and do not necessarily expect to share a future. Therefore, they are less inclined to collectively reclaim and manage commons than existing communities with strong social bonds. The latter challenge refers to the densely commodified nature of cities, where property lines have been thoroughly defined and space is a cherished financial asset. Thus, there is a fierce competition for urban space among developers, investors and even institutions, which leaves little possibilities for commons to be reclaimed. These two challenges, though, are not independent from each other. As Egerer and Fairbairn (2018) have argued, the capitalist urbanisation process infiltrates and complicates the internal dynamics of urban commons. Whereas space saturation and social alienation appear as distinct processes that take place at different scales, both challenges pivot around the formation of unequal cityscapes and cannot then be considered separately. In the following lines, we look within the urban commons literature in search of proposals that can help us to overcome the aforementioned challenges.

In order to address the issue of social alienation, it is productive to understand the forging of subjectivities. Material practices, social relations and spatial arrangements that take place in the constant reconfiguration of cities produce individual and collective subjectivities that can either maintain the prevailing order or support the emergence of alternative social orders (Pudup 2008). In exploring the subversive potential of this subjectivation process, Stavrides (2016, 2019) has characterised urban common space as a threshold that can potentially ignite a process of comparability, translation and power sharing between existing and future commoners. He argues that emancipatory commons are always-in-the-making precarious arrangements, and that their main potential lies in producing commoning subjectivities. (García-Lamarca, 2017) challenges Stavrides' Rancierian approach and draws on the anti-eviction movement in Spain to show that the political subjectivation that takes place through grassroots participation can be sustained over time. She recognises that this process is “neither simple nor stable” (Stavrides 2016, 2019: 433), but can nonetheless transform the way that people see the world and act within it on a regular basis. (Ruiz Cayuela and Armiero, 2022) bring the reproductive dimension to the fore in highlighting the potential of material practices of care and solidarity in creating commoning subjectivities. In their opinion, “the labour, the

interaction, and the multiple relations forged” (Stavrides 2016, 2019: 101) during the collectivisation of social reproduction have the potential to challenge hegemonic common senses. It is through commoning, they assert, that commoners are created. As Arbell et al. (2020) have demonstrated, similar patterns can be observed in the dynamics of cooperative houses in the UK. However, they stress that competing subjectivities can coexist within the community, generating a tension between minimalist (pragmatic) and maximalist (transformational) visions of the housing cooperatives. Commoners’ subjectivities and aspirations, they argue, vary over time; partially in response to change in state regulations and developments in the private market. In fact, regardless of the internal logics of any specific commons, they are almost always entangled with the state and the market, since these “influence the subjectivities of commoners reproducing commons” (De Angelis 2017: 102).

To address the challenge of urban space saturation, Williams has downplayed the importance of property regimes while highlighting the relational and performative nature of urban commoning, which “flows throughout the urban and beyond” (2018: 24). We share with her a dynamic conception of the commons and agree that the categories of public and private (and common) are fluid, complex and overlapping (Blomley 2005). However, we believe it is important to emphasise the material basis of all commons, but particularly those that contribute to social reproduction. For reproductive commons to become a viable alternative they need to acquire a certain material autonomy, and not be entirely subject to market dynamics and the cycles of representative politics (De Angelis 2017). The ways for achieving this are very diverse and context dependent. In examining agroecological food provision in urban environments, for example, (Ruiz Cayuela, 2023) has observed how consumer cooperatives are able to knit extensive commoning networks that reterritorialise urban commons beyond city borders. The particular spatial characteristics of housing, though, make delocalisation impossible and city inhabitants have used a variety of strategies to circumvent the scarcity of available land. Squatting is probably the most iconic practice to reclaim and decommodify housing in urban environments, as use value is seized and exchange value rejected (Holm and Kuhn 2011; Huron, 2018; Martínez 2020; Milligan 2016, Squatting Europe Collective, 2013; Vasudevan 2014). Work theorising squatting and urban commons underlines how the latter is created by reclaiming spaces from speculation and how commoning practices emerge from collective living and being as both a means and a goal ((García-Lamarca, 2015); Di Feliciano 2017; Polanska & Weldon 2020). The development of public-common partnerships has recently emerged as another productive approach. Building alliances with the local state has also become a central strategy to alleviate the high pressure on urban space. In the case of Barcelona, there has recently been an upsurge in the number of housing cooperatives that are accessing land (and even existing buildings) through long-term leases with the city council (Ferrer and Vidal 2021). Whereas these commons-public partnerships usually allow commons to assemble material infrastructure, the long-term outcomes are difficult to predict, and can range from enhancement of their political potential to cooptation (Bianchi et al. 2022).

In these complex and often precarious arrangements, it is obvious that commoning is permanently contested not only by enclosure, but also from within (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). People have differing degrees of dependence and different capacities and motivations to contribute to commons, as well as often deeply rooted subjectivities and ways of understanding the world. A productive articulation of these intricate and sometimes contradictory practices that unevenly contribute to consolidating commoning alternatives of social reproduction is what Noterman (2016) has called differential commoning. Differential commoning recognises that there are diverse sets of communally-oriented practices that occur at different times and places in the community, perhaps shaped by extenuating circumstances and short-lived, but that nonetheless all contribute to its flourishing. In exploring the commoning practices that sustain a manufactured housing

cooperative, the author acknowledges that while all co-op members can access and govern their shared material commons, “competing personal and familial obligations, and health and childcare concerns complicate how individual members understand and engage with these resources” (Noterman 2016: 439). There is no concise answer to the question of how “moments and threads of differential commoning weave together to form an ongoing, flexible means of managing the commons” (Noterman 2016: 446), but opening up considerations of urban commons in this way helps us grasp with the research question driving this paper: how can complex networks of emancipatory reproductive commons subsist and expand in urban environments, and what challenges do they face?

3. Bloc La Bordeta: Emergence and socio-historical context

In 2007, before the sudden demise of Spain’s decade-long building boom, the private real estate developer Nyala 2006 SL began to erect a new residential building in Barcelona’s working-class La Bordeta neighbourhood in the Sants district. The bourgeois Riera-Marsà family who owned Nyala 2006 SL saw a clear profit-making opportunity in building for upper-middle income groups in this strategically located site just a few streets away from Plaça Espanya. But the 2008 financial-real estate crisis hit before the developer could obtain certificates of occupancy and sell the building’s 12 flats. Nyala 2006 SL became a shell company as its debt was repossessed by the Mallorcan-based bank that held its development loan. While the housing block was squatted in late 2011 by activists from the 15M plaza occupations, generating a form of commons to house evicted families, the police evicted them after just a few weeks. The building lay empty for over three years, during which time unemployment, mortgage foreclosure and eviction rose at unprecedented rates. Meanwhile, the Spanish financial system was rescued with over 62 billion euros in public funds, conditioned by the establishment of a bad bank, the public-private asset management company known as the SAREB (Byrne 2015), and accompanied by legal transformations to stimulate a new cycle of residential investment (Gil García and Martínez-López 2023). As the housing block’s debt and physical structure was absorbed into the SAREB, it stood as an example of the ‘new ruins’ of urban vacancy (O’Callaghan & Di Feliciano 2021). Despite demands from housing movements, the SAREB rejected its political agency to use this and the hundreds of thousands of other empty buildings it owned for social housing to alleviate the massive housing crisis plaguing Spain.

In 2014, the Barcelona branch of the Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH) relocated its assembly to the La Bordeta neighbourhood, just one street away from the building. Responding to an upsurge in PAH members needing a home due to rental and squatting evictions, as part of PAH Barcelona’s sixth anniversary festivities the building was targeted precisely because, in the eyes of the movement, it was already public due to its “rescue” by the public purse and location in the SAREB’s portfolio of “assets”. Thus the building was squatted and baptised Bloc La Bordeta in February 2015. Nine adults - largely women - and four children with no other housing alternatives moved in, reflecting the leadership of women in defending urban commons from enclosure (Gillespie et al. 2018). With the support of the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission, whose role is to strategise the approach to squatting and support current and future squats through the movement, a variety of actions were taken. These included revising and agreeing upon a written set of norms about collective living, adapted from other PAHs with occupied housing blocks; informing neighbours and the broader public about political and everyday dimensions of the Bloc La Bordeta; and approaching private and public authorities to turn the building into public housing, where residents would pay a social rent at the European standard of maximum 30% of their income. While the Riera-Marsà family’s development debt was now managed by the SAREB, each used the other as scapegoats to avoid negotiations with PAH Barcelona. Similarly, the Catalan government washed their hands of the issue and sent PAH negotiators to the city government, where in 2016 then again

more intensely in 2021 onwards multiple complex and contradictory meetings took place, challenging largely due to the positionality of former PAH Barcelona members now in the Barcelona en Comú minority government (2015–2023) and political disagreements about strategy. The latter, in 2016, revolved mainly around the PAH's political demand for a *free* right-of-use lease of the building from the SAREB to the city of Barcelona—following the logic that billions of public funds had already been paid into the SAREB, so “the SAREB is ours” as the movement claim states—and the city of Barcelona responding that the PAH needed to be realistic about what could be achieved, since the PAH was not at its peak moment. When negotiations were restarted in 2021, the city continuously stated that Bloc La Bordeta was being incorporated into an agreement with the SAREB and proposed coordinated campaigns to make the news public, despite not having a written agreement with the SAREB. Such maneuverings made many Bloc La Bordeta residents clearer in their idea of continuously grounding the building as and within popular infrastructures in Sants, which we explain shortly, and reinforced the need for self-management, mutual aid and collective struggle.

Thanks to continuous collective support and pressure, backed by Sants's vibrant radical community, in 2015 a precautionary eviction was stopped and in June 2016 a penal court case was dismissed in favour of the accused Bloc La Bordeta residents. These legal processes served to unite residents and build collective practices of struggle and care, both among residents and between residents, other housing movement members and a broader activist support network in Sants and beyond. Bloc La Bordeta's relation with the housing movement has shifted and complexified, as we will describe in subsequent subsections, when it first left PAH Barcelona in early 2017 then became embedded in the Sants housing union (Grup d'Habitatge de Sants, GHAS), which reinforced efforts towards transformational forms of/for inhabitation and social reproduction more broadly.

Bloc La Bordeta can be seen as an emblematic and long standing example of a broader re-energised squatting movement in the context of a housing crisis exacerbated by the 2008 global financial and mortgage repossession crises. Within the PAH, squatting properties that had become empty due to mortgage repossessions and evictions became a widely adopted strategy to solve an immediate need for housing and to seize homes from the financial sector for living rather than speculation. Growing from deeper roots in Barcelona's libertarian squatting practices from the 1990s, this “new wave” of squatting was initiated in Montcada i Reixac, a city in the Barcelona metropolitan region, in 2011 when a family facing eviction decided to squat their own property with support of the PAH (Colau & Alemany 2012). In the decade since, over 60 full housing blocks and hundreds of individual flats have been squatted by PAH members across Spain, a significant proportion of these located in Catalonia. Collective mixed methods research carried out by Obra Social Barcelona (2018) has illustrated the extreme precarity of households who squat in Catalonia, which depicts a picture representative of dynamics in the Bloc La Bordeta. Out of 626 households squatting in Catalonia in 2017, 93% earned less than 1000 euros per month and only 39% held paid employment. Of these 39% who were working, 78% had temporary contracts or worked under the table, while of those that do not have paid work, half earn unemployment payments or a pension while the other half do not receive any government benefits. A highly gendered picture also emerged, with over half of survey respondents being female and children living in 55% of squatted homes. In this context of extreme precarity, the lived neighbourhood dimension is a fundamental element to understand the politics of inhabitation and the process of commoning to move beyond mere survival towards building new networks and practices of urban living.

Sants has a long tradition of workers' self-organisation that is fundamental to understanding the historic-geographic roots of the Bloc La Bordeta and wider emancipatory networks of reproductive commons. During the intense class struggle of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, local workers were able to successfully challenge the

overexploitation and relentless disciplining that took place in the factories through mutual aid and self-organisation (Ealham 2005). At first, they developed workers' societies and consumer cooperatives, and eventually they created complex networks of cooperation that were able to support the livelihoods of tens of thousands of families (Dalmau Torvà & Miró Acedo 2010). These emerging popular infrastructures granted affordable access to food, education, housing or cultural activities, and contributed to building workers' autonomy until the fascist takeover of 1939. Collective organisation of social reproduction through cooperatives and beyond was crucial for shifting the balance of forces that culminated in the revolution of 1936 (Camps-Calvet et al. 2022). These historical experiences illustrate very well that commoning and social reproduction trends are closely connected with particular socio-historical contexts. The anarchist revolution was enabled and sustained by a network of reproductive commons that the nearly 40-year Francoist dictatorship actively sought to destroy.

However, the repression was not fully successful, as the radical character of the Sants district re-materialised through new popular infrastructures initiated by neighbourhood struggles in the 1970s. In a period of grassroots action across Barcelona, mobilisations in Sants ensured that spaces earmarked for real estate speculation (e.g. Espanya Industrial park, Vapor Vell) or to be destroyed in the name of transportation infrastructure (plaça de Sants, Cotxeres) were protected for local use (Federació d'Associacions de Veïns i Veïnes de Barcelona 2010). 1973 was also when the decades-long struggle for neighbourhood green space, infrastructure and housing started over the site of Can Batlló, a historic textile factory covering over 10,000 m². Thanks to intensified militancy and neighbourhood support in the late 2000s, including a campaign planning to squat the space if the city didn't take action by 11 June 2011, the Can Batlló community-run entity won a formal land use transfer signed by the city of Barcelona. Since that time, Can Batlló has hosted hundreds of initiatives, making possible what Can Batlló comrades term “a popular and transformative urbanism from below” (Can Batlló 2023). Another key popular infrastructure in Sants is the self-managed social centre Can Vies squatted in 1997 by neighbourhood youth committed to transform and build a more just society through cooperation, solidarity, mutual aid and respect (Alcantarà 2014). Can Vies has been recognised to have triggered the development of Barcelona's rich social and solidarity cooperative movement, with Sants home to over 50 coops, the most in all of Barcelona's neighbourhoods (Mumburu and Blanchar 2014). While more sites can be mentioned, these are the main popular infrastructures alongside and through which the Bloc La Bordeta has subsisted and been sustained.

4. Popular infrastructures as reproductive urban commons

In recent decades urban real estate has become one of the most precious assets for private developers worldwide, which has severely affected the capacity of subversive movements to subsist in the city. Whereas the cooperatives of a hundred years ago were able to purchase properties at market value in central and strategic locations, it is almost unthinkable that something similar could happen today. In the light of these global trends, squatting has emerged as a crucial strategy for reclaiming vacant buildings and lots that have been used for a variety of purposes. The Sants urban landscape is thus dotted with autonomous islands that form a network of reclaimed spaces, commonly referred to as popular infrastructures. This term, which has recently become a central theme of praxis within the Catalan grassroots, designates infrastructures used by social movements that challenge market logic and offer protection from the threats of cooptation and repression usually associated with the figure of the state.

Popular infrastructures are the foundations on which commons ecologies thrive, since they provide alternative spaces where social relations are mediated by value practices such as solidarity and mutual aid instead of market exchange. They are spaces where social reproduction can be subverted and channeled into the formation of emancipatory

alternatives (Federici 2020). Popular infrastructures contribute to sustaining and expanding urban commons in two main ways. First, they fulfill critical material needs of local communities such as space for hosting meetings, assemblies and events, providing food and green spaces, or developing self-organised popular workshops and related educational projects. If we acknowledge that commons have a material basis, popular infrastructures are crucial reproductive spaces that allow urban commons to subsist and eventually expand in the face of enclosure. Second, popular infrastructures are messy spaces where commoning practices coexist with capitalist common senses and domination structures in a performative process that tends towards the prefiguration of emancipatory social relations. Therefore, despite their contested nature, popular infrastructures have the potential, under the right conditions, to spark commoning subjectivation processes.

In the case of Sants, a particularly important type of popular infrastructure have been housing squats, since they have in many cases mitigated gentrification and allowed militants and community members to remain in the neighbourhood. Squatting has not only fulfilled a crucial role in reproducing the livelihoods of squatters, but also in sustaining radical spaces locally and grounding them in the locality. Equally important, though, has been their role in stimulating cross pollination and coordination among movements that have fostered the emergence of particular identities and subjectivities linked to the neighbourhood as a stronghold of the anti-capitalist movement. This constellation of reclaimed spaces has become a *de facto* network of reproductive commons that has allowed the expansion and reinforcement of a radical culture that aims towards post-capitalist emancipation.

The case of the Bloc La Bordeta exemplifies very well this mutual dependence between wider social movements and particular squats, and the reproductive moments that emerge along their interaction. The Bloc was formally affiliated first with PAH Barcelona (2015–2017) and later connected to the Grup d'Habitatge de Sants (GHAS) from 2017 to present. Many of the inhabitants of the block have actively participated in these wider spaces of the housing movement, meaning that they have been involved regularly attending meetings, assemblies, providing mutual aid and putting their bodies on the line to stop evictions. The Bloc also currently hosts assemblies and activities of the GHAS, and its influence extends beyond the housing movement. Aside from GHAS, the Bloc's ground floor is home to a social centre where several self-organised projects thrive. These have included a popular educational space for kids up to twelve years old, a language school for adults, a youth group, a food network, a feminist network against sexual violence and a labour group (García 2022). The daily commoning processes that take place among the squatters, then, are crucial in reproducing the social movements of the neighbourhood in two main ways. First, by offering a household to people who are generally involved in self-organised spaces, and that would not be able to stay in the Sants district if required to access market-priced housing. Second, by reclaiming and maintaining a physical infrastructure that would otherwise be very difficult to access in such a hostile urban environment.

The reproductive process, though, also works the other way around. As we will see in the next sections, social movements and community networks have played a key role in defending the block from enclosure. This mutual interdependence is a key aspect of the reproductive urban commons, and gives way to the formation of urban commons ecologies where people are able to access many aspects of social reproduction outside market logic. Whereas their scale is still limited and they are still far from becoming an alternative for a majority of the Sants population, these networks prefigure a partially post-capitalist society and can potentially spark the formation of commoning subjectivities (Stavrides 2016).

The articulation of popular infrastructures, community groups and social movements into a commons ecology is a very important step towards consolidating the development of emancipatory alternatives in the neighbourhood. It is precisely the recurrent connections and interactions among the different nodes that adds resilience to the common

expansion process, since the network does not rely exclusively on a particular popular infrastructure. If, for instance, the Bloc La Bordeta were to be eventually evicted, it would certainly be a hard blow for the local anti-capitalist movement, who would see one of the neighbourhood's popular infrastructures gone. However, the many autonomous projects that are currently based at the Bloc could resort to other local popular infrastructures to which they are already connected such as Can Batlló or Can Vies. Moreover, the inhabitants of the block would certainly have the support of GHAS to find housing alternatives, either by putting pressure on the city council or by carrying out a new occupation. This conceptualisation of commons ecologies helps us to rethink the outcome of urban commoning processes in Sants. The takeover of reclaimed spaces, some of which become popular infrastructures, is certainly crucial in reproducing the local commons ecology. From a political perspective that aims to shift the balance of forces between commons and capital and foster the expansion of emancipatory alternatives, though, the commons ecology itself is the most important outcome. The myriad commoning processes that are part of the daily lives of local communities are eventually being entangled in forms of mutual interdependence that transcend the importance of any particular space. The Sants-La Bordeta commons ecology, thus, is much more than a bunch of squats, social centres and coops. It is a partially autonomous and self-reproducing network of people, resources, knowledges and affections that prefigure new ways of inhabiting the city.

5. Challenges of urban reproductive commons

As we have underlined, popular reproductive commons attempt to subsist and expand in hostile urban environments. In this section we explore the three main material, territorial and social challenges that the Bloc La Bordeta has faced as a reproductive urban commons embedded in a wider commons ecology.

5.1. Facing the state apparatus: legal and police repression

Due to the densely commodified nature of cities, where property lines have been thoroughly defined and space is a cherished financial asset, the main threat to reproductive popular infrastructures is material. Most urgent is the threat of eviction, which all housing movements across Barcelona, Catalonia and the Spanish state fight daily by putting dozens of bodies in front of doorways of households facing eviction so that the court order can't be delivered by the judicial committee and/or police can't access the property. While housing occupied through movements, be they entire blocks like Bloc La Bordeta or individual flats, have more negotiating power and are often able to stop the first few attempts at eviction, this tends to be a politics of postponement (Roy 2017) where these commoned spaces are often eventually seized back by financial entities with the support of the state. The fact that over half a million evictions have taken place across Spain between 2008 and 2017 (Observatori DESC 2018) illustrate the virulence and impact of this challenge of staying put and just surviving.

The threat of eventual eviction was certainly looming in the horizon when members of the Bloc La Bordeta were on trial in 2016. Whereas the legal process can seem to be very isolating, the successful outcome obtained by the Bloc La Bordeta was grounded in the support of a wider commons ecology. This is mostly visible in two aspects. First, the grassroots legal counseling and advice provided by the PAH. By being part of a wider housing movement, the inhabitants of the Bloc were able to benefit from the expertise forged by other members that had been through similar processes and were familiar with the legal codes relevant for these cases - ultimately lawyers and the formal judicial system provide no help due to the "unlawful" nature of squatting and housing disobedience more broadly. Second, the public support from a wide range of collectives within and beyond Barcelona's housing movement. These included immigrant rights movements, cultural associations, self-organised social centres, indignant firemen, an unemployed persons

assembly, a cooperative bookstore and a range of “waves” (*mareas*) that grew out of the 15M plaza occupations organised around social concerns including pensions, health care and education, among others. With symbolic actions and viral messages of support they sought to show support to the Bloc La Bordeta and build a favourable climate before the 2016 trial took place, trying to influence the final verdict through popular pressure. These actions illustrate the implicit understanding of mutual dependency of many urban commons and social movements in Barcelona that stood up to defend the Bloc.

A second threat to reproductive infrastructures is the repression of housing movements by the state apparatus, manifested through trials of key figures and enormous fines levied on individuals in housing movements through the so-called national Gag Law (Ley Mordaza). The latter was adopted by the conservative Popular Party in 2015 as a law to protect “public safety” in order to crackdown on the freedom of speech and provide police with more power, enabling them to fine people hundreds of euros for subjectively defined actions deemed to show a lack of respect or disobedience (Larios 2022). Housing movements across Catalonia launched a campaign to pressure the government to cancel fines reaching over €206,000 for 351 sanctions and to ban the use of riot police at evictions (García 2021). Thanks to this pressure, in 2022 laxer criteria were introduced to apply the Law and some fines were being dismissed, but movements still demand the removal of the entire law (VilaWeb 2022). In late 2015, the inhabitants of the Bloc received the visit of the judicial delegation that, backed by the local police, tried to enforce the eviction. However, they had to face a crowd formed by PAH members and local supporters from other squats and social movements, who were able to stop it. Since it was the first eviction attempt, the minimal conflict policy of local police forces was crucial in the successful defense of the block. Patrols deployed in evictions tend not to enforce them when faced with potential contestation, especially when it is the first or second eviction attempt, and usually riot police forces are required in the third or fourth eviction attempts to realize expulsions.

The Bloc’s response to evictions and the repression of housing movements has a clear common denominator, which is the importance of a wider commoning network in defending urban reproductive commons. When the Bloc La Bordeta was facing critical threats that compromised its subsistence, many popular infrastructures and social movements stepped forward in different ways, recognising the mutual interdependence at play: whereas the anti-capitalist movements rely on reproductive commons such as the Bloc, these rely on wider commoning networks to defend them from enclosure. This relation, though, is not given nor can be taken for granted. Instead, it is always-in-the-making, contested and context-dependent, as we will see subsequently.

5.2. Housing, community and territorial considerations

Perhaps the most significant challenge that housing squats as reproductive commons face are the deep territorial contradictions and tensions between the predominant consideration of a home as a container with four walls versus a home as a node in a wider network of community and reproductive relations. During the time that the Bloc La Bordeta was squatted and officially affiliated with PAH Barcelona, conflicts emerged around the role that squatting should play within PAH Barcelona’s broader strategy, in the context of the sharp increase in rental evictions, squatting evictions and other types of housing emergencies. These conflicts occurred particularly between the Obra Social commission, which oversaw the squatting strategy and process, and a component of PAH Barcelona’s leadership. One part of the root of this conflict came from the original logic behind rehousing people who were squatting bank owned housing. As formulated by PAH Barcelona in 2011, when foreclosed families who squatted bank owned housing negotiated a social rent contract, to be set at no more than 30% of a household’s income, the negotiation was open to rehousing elsewhere and did not involve keeping the home. In other words, ultimately having a roof over one’s head was deemed to be most important, and demands

were not rooted in territorial claims to a neighbourhood.

Yet in the subsequent decade, especially post-2015, the nature of housing struggles changed dramatically, from vast numbers facing mortgage foreclosure and eviction to a more complex configuration of rental and squatting evictions amidst rampant gentrification, expulsions from the city and deepened labour precarity. Reflecting a need for territorial rootedness, neighbourhood housing unions and assemblies emerged across Barcelona in 2017 to address localized housing and social reproduction needs rooted in place (Lira and March 2021). This has also been reflected through the use of language in housing movements, where the term “neighbour”, more specifically *vecina* in its feminine form, became commonly used by housing unions and assemblies across the city, indicating a shift to a focus on local spaces and relations of everyday life (Rivera Blanco et al. 2021). Since the problematics at stake include exorbitant rent levels in general, racism in the rental sector, the impossibility of youth emancipation from family homes, increasing street homelessness and so forth, *vecinas* encapsulates the diversity of grounded neighbourhood-level experiences and the need for a combative yet unified struggle (Rivera Blanco et al. 2021). And demands from neighbourhood housing unions to regularise squatting focus precisely on the right to stay put and combating the logics of expulsion that plague the city, and promote other dimensions of social reproduction grounded in place.

These differences in part have to do with the territorial focus of these strategies within the housing movement. They furthermore reflect tensions between the importance of collectivised social reproduction processes and labour through networks and relations built over time (di Masso Tarditti et al. 2022) and having four walls and a roof to call home despite not necessarily being rooted in existing broader social connections. As the founding PAH, PAH Barcelona has always played a key role regionally in Catalonia and in national PAH coordination across the Spanish territory, and in turn this has been reflected in their focus at the city, regional and national scales. This territorial scope of actuation partly explains the success of the PAH, which spread like wildfire across Catalonia and the Spanish state during the 2011 movement of the squares, with over 250 nodes existing at the end of the decade. On the other hand, the neighbourhood housing unions emerging since 2016 focus sometimes exclusively at the very local level, which enables a weaving of grounded networks, strongly rooted affective relations and new forms of social reproduction. Many of these unions, for instance, have a scope broader than housing and include self-organised educational projects, women’s groups or mutual aid food networks.

Bloc La Bordeta, as well as the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission, found themselves at the crux of this territorial tension, as *vecinas* of the bloc became more and more rooted in local reproductive commons and generated deeper roots to place. Similarly, the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission argued for the importance of not accepting rehousing elsewhere in the city but rather maintaining occupied spaces to ensure working class occupation of gentrifying neighbourhoods, as exemplified in the struggle for Bloc La Janelá in the Gràcia neighbourhood. While this argument of staying put and fighting for the Bloc La Bordeta was eventually supported within PAH Barcelona, the *vecinas* of the Bloc wanted to take the further step of opening the ground floor space of the building, up until that point unused, for autonomous and open neighbourhood use. Despite being discussed in more than one assembly, opening up the ground floor space of the Bloc La Bordeta was not supported by PAH Barcelona. The action ultimately (unilaterally) taken by *vecinas* to open the space in early 2017 constituted a practical and political break with PAH Barcelona’s strategy of occupation, and also spurred internal conflicts. This brings us to the challenge of working with people from different geographic, cultural and political places, what Huron (2015) calls working with strangers.

5.3. Competing subjectivities in conflict: differential commoning

PAH Barcelona’s Obra Social commission, in its active period from

the end of 2014 to 2017, had the task of supporting housing squats of individual flats and entire empty buildings owned by banks through a collective and transparent process. Yet due to different political visions and broader conflicts around the role of squatting in PAH Barcelona these lines of responsibility and power were broken, as a component of PAH Barcelona's leadership claimed decision-making power over who could move into the Bloc La Bordeta in particular. This led to several clashes between the Bloc inhabitants, the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission and PAH Barcelona. In late 2016, for example, a person from a city adjacent to Barcelona was relocated to the Bloc La Bordeta, a unilateral decision made by part of PAH Barcelona and approved in an assembly without consulting the Obra Social commission nor Bloc La Bordeta residents. This person, who did not know the idiosyncrasy of the neighbourhood and the block itself, had several conflicts with inhabitants of the Bloc, who saw the situation as an inference of the PAH in the internal managing of their reproductive commons.

Thus due to these long-running and deep-seated conflicts, shortly after opening the ground floor space of the building, the active Bloc La Bordeta residents decided to disassociate the building from PAH Barcelona and to become a self-managed housing block. Largely made up of women and children, both immigrant and Spanish, Bloc La Bordeta residents declared themselves to be organised neighbours (*vecinas organizadas*) (Gillespie et al. 2018). Yet we pointedly say that "active residents" decided to disassociate the Bloc from PAH Barcelona because a few months earlier, the unwarranted entrance of new residents created tensions, deep disagreements and visible conflicts among them. This was the root of subsequent unequal participation in the Bloc La Bordeta's day to day activities which was also shaped by individual background and personal contexts in forming dynamics of differential commoning (Noterman 2016). Despite the many asymmetries formed and performed in the process of differential commoning, the reproductive character of the Bloc was maintained, including the Bloc's engagement in a broader housing movement undergoing reconfiguration across Barcelona due to the emergence of neighbourhood unions. In this sense, during this brief period between the disassociation from the PAH and the emergence of housing unions in Sants and beyond, the Bloc La Bordeta provides an example of a complex urban commons somewhat in limbo between what is often characterised as a dichotomy between emancipatory commons and collectively privatised spaces (Stavrídes 2016). Such conflicts, occurring across social relations more broadly, also underline the complexity in practice of commoning at multiple scales.

This process of becoming a more conflictive commoning housing project in contexts of collective struggle against extreme marginalisation and poverty also illustrates the complexity of transformations in subjectivity and materiality, and how they operate in interconnected and non-linear directions. After disassociating the Bloc La Bordeta from PAH Barcelona, many residents who had spent years engaged in the PAH and more recently integrated into the vibrant activist community in Sants clearly saw the need to continue building self-management processes to ensure the collective care of the building and of each other (*autogestión*). On the other hand, the newer residents unilaterally admitted into the Bloc La Bordeta by PAH Barcelona did not have a long-term connection to movements nor vision of housing and social transformation; they just wanted a stable, dignified place to live and didn't feel invested in any broader collective process. Winning the penal court case in 2016 and stopping future threats of evictions—at least for the immediate future—can be considered in a material sense to have consolidated Bloc La Bordeta as an urban commons by keeping it out of the pathways of capitalist circulation and speculation driven by the SAREB. But as this external "threat" was (temporarily) removed, so was the unity it brought to more collective forms of social reproduction to maintain the building and its residents. On the one hand we see competing forms of subjectivities between transformative mindsets and just "getting by" within the status quo, as Arbell et al. (2020) argue. On the other hand, however, we also see changing and non-linear subjectivities that fluctuate as the Bloc faces different material threats.

When material practices of care and solidarity are not so visible and present, as for example during the struggle against eviction, this can have negative consequences for the collectivised social reproduction processes as they are placed on the back burner or even abandoned.

6. Conclusions

The Bloc La Bordeta has engaged in an expansive form of commoning over the years, which is mostly visible in its connection with the housing movement and the opening of a social centre in the ground floor of the building. In this way, the Bloc has become a reproductive urban commons that has contributed greatly to the sustainability and expansion of a wider commons ecology in the neighbourhood and beyond. The Bloc has thus partially challenged social reproduction under capitalism by offering collective responses to the problem of housing. Reproduction is no longer an individual matter hidden in the private sphere and mediated through the market. Conversely, social reproduction is based on mutual interdependence and the constant feeding of community bonds in public (or common) spaces. Thus, despite its conflicts and contradictions, the Bloc La Bordeta has become what local grassroots movements term a popular infrastructure that effectively reverts processes of urban enclosure and hints towards emancipatory forms of social reproduction.

Housing squats driven by organised housing movements fighting for the right to housing for all are thus popular infrastructures that can potentially become reproductive urban commons connected to wider commons ecologies and/or social movements. When this happens, relations of mutuality and interdependence are articulated in which reproductive moments take place in both directions, as in the case of the Bloc La Bordeta. On the one hand, the block provides a group of people who are generally active in the local movements with a dwelling space, and it also allows them to remain in place and keep the longstanding community bonds alive. Moreover, the Bloc offers a partially open common infrastructure that is used by community groups and social movements. On the other hand, the wider network in which the Bloc is embedded is crucial in providing social legitimacy and defending it from processes of enclosure backed by the state. These urban commons ecologies resemble the cracks described by Holloway (2010). They prefigure ways of inhabiting the city partially detached from the logic of capital and, being grounded on reproductive commons, offer viable alternatives to live outside the hegemonic economic spaces (De Angelis 2017).

The challenges posed by Huron (2015) are certainly relevant for sustaining housing commons as popular reproductive infrastructures, and they play out in different forms. The vicious competition for urban space, for example, has very material consequences in that commoners end up facing the legal and police forces deployed by the state to defend the right to private property. The urban alienation typically experienced by many in modern urban environments is also felt in the conflicts and tensions that arise from the interaction of competing subjectivities and diverse vital contexts in a particular space-time. These clashes generate a form of differential commoning (Noterman 2016) that, nevertheless, is able to sustain the Bloc as a reproductive commons. We want to complement Huron's work, though, with a third critical challenge that we have observed the Bloc has faced over the years: its connection with the wider territorial and socio-political context. This challenge originates in wider political trends and aspirations which, grounded in specific socio-historical contexts, articulate different understandings of home and community. Its consequences are very tangible since they directly affect the squatters that populate the Bloc and pose a critical challenge for the sustainability and expansion of reproductive urban commons.

In this paper, we have stressed the need to look beyond housing when conceptualising housing commons. Instead, we call for considering the articulation of particular commons within neighbourhood (and beyond) networks of support, in order to understand their emancipatory potential and their reproductive role in wider commons ecologies.

Territorial and socio-historic contexts also play a key role in understanding the reproductive dimension of the housing commons and their mutual interdependence with other surrounding commons. These insights open several paths for future research, like the need for deeper ethnographic research that can help us understand the fine grain of the reproductive urban commons and delineate the scalar relation among simultaneous commoning processes. Another interesting continuation of our work would focus on observing the gendered patterns in reproductive urban commons, and to what extent these are able to revert hegemonic dualisms that seclude women to the isolation of the home (Barca 2020). Last but not least, we believe that geographical scholarship could benefit from looking deeper at the concept of popular infrastructures, which has recently become very popular in Catalan grassroots movements. We hope that other authors will take the baton and join us in exploring the conceptual and political possibilities of reproductive urban commoning for emancipatory anti-capitalist struggle.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.
Melissa García-Lamarca: Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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