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From Survival to Solidarity: Reclaiming Santiago's Streets and Plazas Through Food, Care, and Collective Resistance in *Ollas Comunes*

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Abstract

Lefebvre conceptualises streets as spaces imbued with political meaning, where mobility, everyday life, and resistance dynamically converge. This conceptualisation was vividly manifested during the 2019 social revolt in Santiago, Chile, when citizens appropriated streets and plazas as territories of collective struggle against entrenched inequalities. In this context—and subsequently amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic—*ollas comunes* (community-led survival kitchens) appeared as grassroots responses addressing food insecurity. Historically spearheaded by women from marginalised urban communities, these initiatives embody not only immediate survival strategies but also profound acts of spatial and political resistance. By providing free communal meals, *ollas comunes* actively disrupt the prevailing neoliberal governance of urban space, reclaiming streets as arenas of collective care, mobility, and embodied everyday democracy. Whilst scholarship identifies food struggles within public spaces as integral to asserting the right to the city (Purcell & Tyman, 2015), it has primarily focused on urban agriculture. Conversely, initiatives centred on collective food consumption remain significantly understudied. Framed by Lefebvre's dialectics and drawing on qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, this article examines how *ollas comunes* in Santiago contest the dominant logic of neoliberal governance and ownership within public space. Findings demonstrate that cooking and eating in the street not only transform physical streetscapes and mobility patterns but also produce emergent publics, meanings, and solidarities. By foregrounding these practices, this article enriches scholarly understandings of streets as contested platforms where food solidarity, care, and resistance converge to challenge neoliberal urban imaginaries.

Keywords

food sovereignty; *ollas comunes*; plazas; politics of urban space; right to the city; streets

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1. Introduction

Chile currently ranks among the Latin American countries with the highest income per capita (OECD, 2021). However, this economic performance coexists with deep-rooted social disparities, making Chile the most unequal country in the region (De Rosa et al., 2020). These contradictions came to a head in October 2019, when a social revolt erupted that profoundly disrupted daily life and reconfigured the political meaning of urban space. Unrest was sparked by a metro fare increase of 30 pesos, and protesters quickly broadened their demands to centre on "dignity" as a normative principle, rooting claims in decades of neoliberal policies and inequality (Hiner et al., 2021). The widely repeated slogan "It's Not About 30 Pesos, It's About 30 Years" captured the collective frustration over a post-dictatorship democratic transition, which had deepened the neoliberal model and failed to address structural injustices (Arias-Loyola, 2021).

During this period, Santiago's streets and plazas were transformed into spaces of resistance. Massive demonstrations occupied key streets, filled with *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests), barricades, and acts of civil disobedience, including the burning of buses, metro stations, and critical infrastructure. Amid the upheaval, grassroots initiatives emerged under the slogan "*El Pueblo Ayuda Al Pueblo*" (in English, the people help the people), reclaiming public space as a site of mutual aid and political expression. In neighbourhood plazas and streets, assemblies and *cabildos* (public deliberative gatherings) proliferated, fostering new forms of citizen-led public deliberation (Guerrero Jiménez & Pérez Mora, 2020). Alongside these, *ollas comunes* emerged as social infrastructures of survival and solidarity. While a few were established in epicentres of protest such as Plaza Dignidad (renamed by protesters but formerly Plaza Italia), many more appeared across peripheral neighbourhoods where formal food infrastructure was absent or disrupted (Fuentes et al., 2022).

The global Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 abruptly interrupted Chile's political awakening. Alongside its global public health impacts (Nicola et al., 2020), the pandemic caused significant disruption to food systems (Singh et al., 2021) and exacerbated existing inequalities in cities (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). In Chile's already fragile social context, it deepened a multidimensional crisis, marked by unemployment, a contracting informal economy, and a rising cost of living (Arias-Loyola & Vergara-Perucich, 2021). Food insecurity became a widespread concern, affecting not only the poorest people but also segments of the middle class. According to FAO et al. (2024), approximately 700,000 people (3.8% of the population) experienced severe food insecurity, while around 2.9 million people (15.6% of the population) faced moderate or severe levels.

In response, *ollas comunes* re-emerged on an unprecedented scale, filling the void left by a weak and delayed state response. By mid-2020, more than 1,500 community kitchens were operating across the Santiago Metropolitan Area, collectively serving an estimated 235,000 meals daily—about 150 per *olla* (Valenzuela-Levi et al., 2024). With historical roots in the urban housing movements of the 1960s (Gallardo, 1985) and in the survival strategies of *poblaciones* (low-income settlements) during the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s (Hardy, 2020), these soup kitchens embodied political tools of grassroots resistance and mutual care through food. By providing free communal meals in contested spaces during and after the pandemic, *ollas comunes* challenged the dominant neoliberal logic of urban governance, reclaiming streets and plazas as arenas of collective reproduction, mobility, and everyday democracy. Recent scholarship has highlighted not only the resurgence of *ollas comunes* but also their intersection with long-standing practices such as *mingas* (collective work rooted in mutual aid for planting and harvesting; Hiner et al., 2022).

Within this context, Lefebvre's (1996) concept of the right to the city becomes particularly pertinent. He conceived this right not only as access to urban space but also as a claim to its appropriation, symbolic meaning, and transformation. For Lefebvre, public space is a crucial arena for constructing urbanity. He particularly emphasised the importance of *autogestión* (self-management) in everyday life as a pathway to reclaiming urban spaces (Purcell, 2008). Thus, *autogestión* is central to realising the right to the city, whereby collective practices challenge commodified urban imaginaries and create space for emancipatory alternatives (Purcell & Tyman, 2015).

This article also engages with feminist and decolonial critiques of public space, which challenge idealised notions of universality and foreground the gendered and racialised dimensions of visibility, access, and belonging (Lyra, 2023; Miraftab & Huq, 2024). In doing so, it distinguishes between "streets" (linear public corridors of mobility, commerce, and social interaction), "plazas" (open public squares), and "public space" (the broader category encompassing both). This distinction is central to our analysis of how different urban spaces mediate the political and social functions of *ollas comunes*.

Although community struggles over food in cities are increasingly acknowledged in recent literature (Hammelman et al., 2024; Morrow et al., 2023), most studies have focused on urban agriculture and community gardening to assert the right to the city (Purcell & Tyman, 2015; Tornaghi & Certomà, 2019). In contrast, practices centred on communal food consumption in public spaces, such as *ollas comunes*, remain significantly under-explored. Nevertheless, similar contemporary collective cooking initiatives have emerged across diverse contexts; from soup kitchens in low-income neighbourhoods during the pandemic in Latin America (Leetoy & Gravante, 2021) and Sierra Leone (Osuteye et al., 2020) to more "radical" kitchens operating in the UK (Gennari & Tornaghi, 2020) and Germany (Hübl, 2024).

Drawing on qualitative research methods—specifically interviews, focus groups, and participant observation—this article examines three case studies of *ollas comunes* in Santiago. It explores how these community kitchens can challenge established systems of ownership, governance, and social reproduction, arguing that cooking and eating in public spaces transform the urban landscape, create new communities, foster solidarity, and generate alternative urban narratives. By doing so, this research places *ollas comunes* in Santiago within a broader transnational context of food solidarity and spatial resistance, thereby contributing to discussions on grassroots urbanism, spatial justice, and the transformative potential of collective care.

2. The Street and Plaza as a Stage: Self-Management, Care, and the Politics of Urban Space

The urban street, in its most conventional sense, is a space of flows. It is a network of thoroughfares designed to guide the movement of people and goods, the primary stage upon which the theatre of urban life unfolds (Dovey, 2024; Mehta, 2013). Prevailing discourse often cloaks the street in a veneer of neutrality, framing it as a common ground that is accessible and open to all, a functional platform for social interaction and economic activity (Carmona, 2003; Mehta, 2024). This framing, however, frequently overlooks the profound extent to which streets are shaped by socio-spatial inequalities and embedded power structures (Stavrides & De Angelis, 2016). The assumption that streets inherently serve a universal public interest fails to reckon with the insidious ways in which neoliberal urbanism has reconfigured public space into a site of commodification, control, and exclusion (Harvey, 2013). In cities governed by speculative

development and privatisation, streets are increasingly managed to prioritise profit and order over inclusivity and democratic expression. This disproportionately affects marginalised groups, who face not only material displacement but also a symbolic erasure from public life (Purcell, 2008; Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2021). The street, far from being a neutral conduit, is thus a deeply contested terrain where rights, visibility, and citizenship are negotiated daily.

Feminist and decolonial critiques have also challenged idealised notions of public space. Kern (2021) discusses how urban spaces are gendered, with their design and infrastructure producing unequal opportunities for engagement. McKittrick (2006) reveals how racialised geographies structure belonging and exclusion, underscoring that urban space actively enforces marginalisation. Recent scholarship builds on these critical insights, emphasising that visibility, access, and participation in public life are shaped by the intersection of gender and race-based exclusions (Lyra, 2023; Miraftab & Huq, 2024). These perspectives are particularly relevant to *ollas comunes*, historically and contemporarily led by women and often emerging in marginalised urban territories (Hiner et al., 2022). Their practices of care and collective provisioning reconfigure the meaning and function of public space, foregrounding reproductive labour as a central dimension of urban life.

The emergence of Santiago's *ollas comunes* within this contested terrain places them in a broader current of grassroots urban initiatives that are fundamentally reconfiguring citizen-state relations across Latin America and beyond. These projects deftly balance autonomy with institutional interaction. In Chile, *ferias libres* (street farmers' markets) function as residual spaces of citizen sovereignty (Salazar, 2004), meeting weekly urban demand for fresh, affordable produce while reinforcing popular self-determination. Similarly, Valparaíso's street vendors assert their presence in public spaces under divergent regimes—some with municipal permits, others without—drawing attention to infrastructure neglect (e.g., toilets, waste bins, etc.) that systematically excludes their needs (Ojeda & Pino, 2019). In Cusco, Peru, street vendors deploy personalised forms of political agency to navigate state regulation in tourism-saturated zones, illustrating why some are better positioned than others to resist repressive policies and benefit from the global tourism economy (Steel, 2012). These practices are not mere reactions to precarity but are, more profoundly, active forms of constructing popular sovereignty from the ground up, challenging a logic of neoliberal governance that so often excludes and fragments citizens. In this sense, they operate as veritable laboratories where citizenship is exercised through daily material practice, reclaiming the right to the city not as an abstract slogan but as a tangible, ongoing achievement.

Recent scholarship documents show how such movements navigate the complex dialectic between autonomy and negotiation with formal institutions. In Mexico City, for instance, housing organisations have forged autonomous management practices that, whilst providing immediate solutions, can also lead to a form of "fragmented citizenship" when interacting with the state apparatus (Rodríguez Cortés, 2017). Conversely, resident-managed housing projects in Brazil have shown a remarkable potential to empower communities and catalyse wider civic participation, transforming local governance from below (Donaghy, 2024). Beyond resource management, these movements often strategically adopt the language of human rights, shifting the arena of claims-making from the nation-state to the municipality in what has been termed a "local turn" that challenges traditional paradigms of rights (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020). Viewed collectively, these experiences reveal how, particularly in contexts of austerity or state withdrawal, citizen-led self-management emerges as a pragmatic alternative that not only claims rights but actively redefines urban citizenship itself.

Within this universe of contestation, collective food practices are particularly significant. When applied to the urban context, food sovereignty transcends the technical goal of food security to become a political framework for a more just and ecological urbanism (Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021). Its full potential, however, is realised when it is articulated with a robust "food democracy" that enables genuine stakeholder deliberation and fosters community efficacy (López Cifuentes & Sonnino, 2024; Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021). This conceptualisation aligns directly with an expansive vision of the right to the city, one that encompasses not just access to services but the fundamental right to participate in the very production and appropriation of urban space (Islar & Irgil, 2018). The *ollas comunes* insert themselves into this conversation, yet they do so by shifting the analytical focus from production to consumption, suggesting that the collective act of cooking and eating together in public is an equally potent and politicised facet of urban food sovereignty.

This politicisation of consumption is anchored in a specific and highly symbolic arena: the street. When the everyday practices of care and social reproduction are deployed in public space, they can radically reconfigure its dominant logic. Conventional urban planning, with its focus on mobility and commerce, typically renders the labour of social reproduction invisible. Yet, as studies on the mobility of low-income women in Colombia demonstrate, the imperatives of care constantly reveal and challenge the priorities of transport planning (Oviedo Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016). Similarly, their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the persistent friction between their care responsibilities and their patterns of mobility (Orjuela & Schwanen, 2023). It is precisely this friction that grassroots initiatives can transform into a political tool. For example, such initiatives have been conceptualised as a "politics of dwelling," a mode of resistance grounded in an ethics of care and the spatial practices of everyday life (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2022). This "politics of dwelling" stands in stark opposition to a model of capitalist urban development that systematically marginalises care work through processes of gentrification and informalisation (Miraftab & Huq, 2024). From this vantage point, care practices cease to be a mere backdrop to urban life and are revealed as a powerful motor of spatial politics, actively reassembling the meaning and function of the street.

The protagonists of this "politics of dwelling" are, overwhelmingly, women. Their labour of care and social reproduction, by spilling out from the domestic sphere and occupying public space, constitutes a direct challenge to the patriarchal division between the public and the private. Capitalist urbanism does not just marginalise care; it does so in gendered ways that reinforce existing inequalities (Miraftab & Huq, 2024). Nonetheless, it is precisely through their reproductive responsibilities that women negotiate and shape their urban experience, a dynamic observed in the mobility and access patterns of Colombia (Oviedo Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016). Collective urban experiments led by women across Latin America have been crucial in asserting that the realisation of the right to the city is inextricable from the recognition and valorisation of reproductive labour (Fisher, 1993; Lyra, 2023). The act of installing a kitchen on a public pavement, therefore, is not merely a survival strategy; it is a profound act of spatial politics, performed by women, that redraws the urban landscape and subverts deeply entrenched boundaries.

It is crucial to analyse the temporal and political horizon of these initiatives that so often erupt in moments of rupture. The literature on social movements explores how grassroots responses to acute crises can evolve into durable platforms for political mobilisation (Blanco & León, 2017; Boonstra et al., 2023). The concept of "fertile soil" is useful here, describing the complex social context—marked by diversity, tension, and contradiction—that enables such initiatives to flourish (Sekulova et al., 2017). Often, it is a *drasis*—an

unexpected event unfolding in a specific time and place, such as the 2019 social revolt or the subsequent pandemic—that acts as a catalyst for transformative organising, generating new assemblages of resistance and socio-spatial solidarity (Daskalaki, 2018). The durability of these movements hinges on a combination of factors, including social capital, organisational resources, and government support (Boonstra et al., 2023). Their most radical potential, however, may lie in their capacity for what has been termed "prefigurative politics" (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020): a mode of action that does not simply oppose the existing order but builds and practises, in the here and now, the social relations and democratic forms it hopes to achieve. The *ollas comunes*, in their articulation of co-presence and contestation, precisely embody this potential, operating as microcosms of a society grounded in solidarity and mutual care—what Ferguson (2021) terms the social obligations emerging from the shared condition of being together.

It is Lefebvre's seminal body of work that offers the foundational grammar for deciphering the profound political and spatial significance of Santiago's *ollas comunes*. Lefebvre's famous declaration that the right to the city is a "cry and a demand" resonates powerfully with the emergence of these kitchens, which represent a tangible enactment of this right not as a gift from the state, but as a practice seized from the street (Lefebvre, 1996). To operationalise this framework, this article employs a tripartite theoretical apparatus drawn directly from Lefebvre's thought. Firstly, the analysis is underpinned by his theory of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). This lens allows us to dissect the street as a product of three interlocking dialectical moments: the spatial practice (perceived space) of the olla's daily routines of procurement, cooking, and distribution; the representations of space (conceived space) of urban planners and authorities, who frame the street as a zone of transit and commerce; and, most crucially, the spaces of representation (lived space), where the street is symbolically re-appropriated and experienced as a site of solidarity, dignity, and resistance. The analysis focuses on the tensions and contradictions between these three moments. Secondly, this is complemented by the more subtle tools of rhythm analysis (Lefebvre, 2004). The article will explore how the *ollas* introduce a new cadence into the urban environment—a choreography of care whose daily and weekly cycles interrupt and overlay the dominant rhythms of the capitalist city. By analysing these intersecting polyrhythms, we can understand how the temporal logic of social reproduction challenges the homogenising pulse of capital. Finally, these concepts are understood within the broader context of the urban revolution (Lefebvre, 2003), which posits a continuous struggle to prioritise the "use value" of the city over its "exchange value." In this view, *ollas comunes* are more than just survival initiatives; they are fleeting but potent microcosms of this revolution, prefiguring an alternative urban life grounded in collective practice and mutual aid.

3. Methodology

To explore the role of *ollas comunes* in contemporary urban food systems, this article follows a qualitative, multi-method design, grounded in a constructivist epistemology and an ontology of relational assemblages. The research proceeds from the assumption that social realities are co-constructed through everyday practices and that material–semiotic relations—encompassing people, spaces, ingredients, infrastructures, and discourses—assemble dynamically to produce collective action (Latour, 2005; Müller, 2015). This investigation, therefore, adopts a constructivist–interpretivist stance in which knowledge is understood to be generated through a dialogic engagement between the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2014). Reality is viewed as contingent, multiple, and processual; *ollas comunes* are consequently treated not as fixed entities but as fluid assemblages whose boundaries, actors, and purposes crystallise only through practice.

This position legitimises the use of thick description, sustained reflexivity, and iterative theorisation, whilst fully acknowledging the politically situated nature of both the fieldwork and its subsequent analysis (Denzin, 2018). The enquiry aims not to derive universal laws, but rather to understand the situated meanings, power asymmetries, and political possibilities that emerge around these community kitchens in post-pandemic Santiago.

This epistemological commitment directly informs the selection of a comparative multiple-case study logic, chosen to capture variation across diverse urban territories whilst permitting analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018). Three specific cases—Comedor Popular Margarita Ancacoy (CPMA; central Santiago), Olla Común La Ruta de la Cuchara (OCRC; Cerro Navia), and Olla Común El Pueblo Ayuda al Pueblo (OCPAP; Cerro Navia)—were selected through maximum variation sampling to represent different trajectories of organisation, resource ecologies, and territorial precarities. Each case constitutes an embedded unit of analysis, comprising a network of organisers, volunteers, eaters, and allied institutions such as municipal officers, NGOs, and local food retailers. The empirical investigation unfolded over a 13-month period from January 2024 to January 2025, following iterative cycles of immersion, provisional coding, and theoretical sampling. Four complementary techniques were employed to generate a rich, multi-perspectival dataset. Firstly, 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, averaging 45 minutes in length, were conducted with organisers (n = 18), regular volunteers (n = 13), and external stakeholders (n = 14). These interviews combined narrative prompts with targeted probes on governance, resource mobilisation, gendered labour, and perceptions of food sovereignty. Secondly, the first author undertook extensive participatory and ethnographic observation, volunteering weekly in procurement, cooking, and distribution shifts. This generated 100 hours of detailed field notes focused on mundane routines, affective atmospheres, and conflict-resolution practices, whilst the shadowing of key actors during supply pickups helped map the socio-material networks extending beyond the kitchen itself. Thirdly, two focus group discussions (with 15–17 participants each) were convened, first to create collective timelines of each *olla*'s evolution and post-pandemic challenges and second to facilitate debate on the research findings and explore further alliances between *ollas*. Finally, to contextualise these micro-level findings, spatial indicators of food accessibility were retrieved from Chile's National Socio-Economic Survey and the Ministry of Health's retail registry, triangulating perceived and measured food insecurity by overlaying GIS data with the *ollas*' catchment areas (Jara Nercasseau, 2021).

The analytical procedures were underpinned by a constructivist grounded-theory protocol (Charmaz, 2014). An initial phase of line-by-line coding remained close to participants' own language, after which a focused coding phase clustered actions and meanings into higher-order conceptual categories, such as "solidarity logistics," "the politics of care," and "infrastructures of improvisation." Through a process of constant comparison across interviews, focus groups, observations, and GIS outputs, abductive insights were generated into how relational food scarcity shapes organisational forms. To ensure the trustworthiness of these interpretations, credibility was enhanced through method triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and member validation workshops where preliminary findings were collectively debated. Transferability was supported by the provision of rich, contextual thick description, while dependability relied on a clear audit trail of coding decisions stored in NVivo. Reflexive journals were maintained throughout to document the researchers' affective responses and potential biases, explicitly acknowledging the intersections of class, gender, and academic privilege that shaped the research encounter. Formal ethics approval was obtained from the University College London (Ref. DPU2022–*004*(02)), and informed consent,

reinforced verbally before each interaction, guaranteeing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw up to six months after the interaction.

Whilst this qualitative design affords considerable depth and contextual nuance, its limitations must be acknowledged. The non-probabilistic sampling strategy necessarily restricts any claims to statistical generalisation. Furthermore, the secondary spatial data on food deserts, though valuable for triangulation, employ administrative units larger than the *ollas*' immediate catchment areas, which may potentially dilute the visibility of neighbourhood-scale disparities. These constraints are, however, consciously mitigated by the study's comparative logic and reflexive epistemology, which privilege the generation of transferable analytical insights over the pursuit of statistical representation.

Figure 1 and Table 1 show that the demographics of the 16 *ollas comunes* mapped across eight districts of Santiago occupy census zones characterised by multiple, overlapping forms of vulnerability. The average population per zone is on average 3,900 inhabitants, yet the socio-economic indicators are more telling. Except for CPMA (13.3% of residents holding postgraduate degrees), every zone records postgraduate attainment below 3%; several, including Maipú's El Ensueño and Renca's Comedor Abierto Hijos de la Calle, register 0%. Using postgraduate presence as a proxy for high income, this confirms that *ollas comunes* anchor themselves outside Santiago's affluent quarters and within districts historically marked by lower household earnings. The demographic mix underscores their strategic role in low-income territories. Migrant concentrations peak in Recoleta (53.6%) and in the centrally located but still precarious Santiago census tract hosting Olla Solo El Pueblo Ayuda Al Pueblo (45.3%), signalling that *ollas comunes* often double as points of cultural as well as nutritional support for recent arrivals. Indigenous self-identification exceeds 14% in seven zones, foregrounding an intersection of ethnic and class marginalisation. Finally, an ageing profile is evident: half the zones show senior-headed households above 35%, reaching 47% in Pedro Aguirre Cerda where Olla Común la Marina is located. Census zone data reveal that *ollas comunes* have value as critical community infrastructures within Santiago's low-income districts, bridging material scarcity for populations simultaneously shaped by advanced age, migrant status, and indigenous heritage.

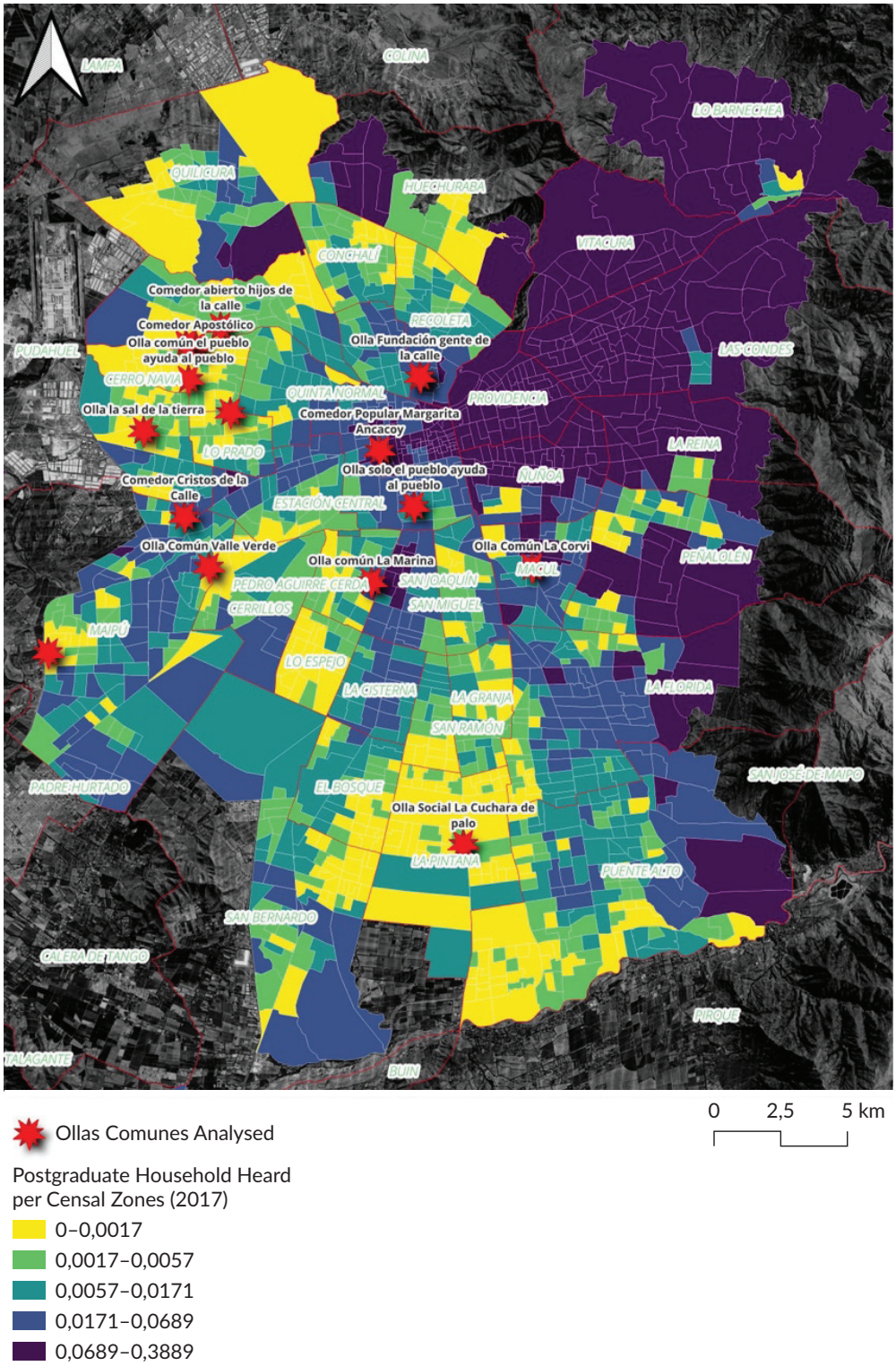

Figure 1. Map of the *ollas comunes* interviewed in the Santiago Metropolitan area. Note: The authors used QGIS to create this figure.

Table 1. Summary of demographics on each census zone (2017) where *ollas comunes* are placed.

Organisation	District	People living in the census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of people with postgraduate studies in the census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of migrants in census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of Aboriginal community descendants in the census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of senior household heads (60 to 100 years old) in the census zone (INE, 2017)
Comité Social y Vecinal El Ensueño	Maipú	5,093	0%	2.30%	14.72%	19.04%
Olla Común Valle Verde	Maipú	4,305	1.14%	3.33%	11.10%	14.79%
Olla Común la Corvi	Macul	3,358	2.84%	5.78%	12.51%	34.76%
Comedor Cristos de la Calle	Maipú	4,308	2.64%	3.44%	9.70%	29.19%
CPMA	Santiago	1,218	13.26%	14.08%	9.16%	14.44%
Comedor Abierto Hijos de la Calle	Renca	2,509	0%	4.77%	16.24%	33.38%
Comedor Apostólico	Cerro Navia	3,622	0.10%	1.51%	14.76%	38.87%
Olla la Sal de la Tierra	Pudahuel	2,801	0%	3.47%	15.61%	34.78%
OCRC	Cerro Navia	3,622	0.10%	1.51%	14.76%	38.87%
OCPAP	Cerro Navia	5,047	0%	9.67%	13.24%	37.91%
Olla Común la Marina	Pedro Aguirre Cerda	2,113	2.49%	3.16%	10.68%	46.98%
Olla Común Social Popular Violeta Parra	Renca	3,417	0.21%	7.93%	11.21%	35.77%
Olla Social la Cuchara de Palo	La Pintana	4,888	0.23%	1.76%	14.98%	37.51%
Olla Solo el Pueblo Ayuda al Pueblo	Santiago	5,562	2.29%	45.26%	8.38%	8.22%
Olla Fundación Gente de la Calle	Recoleta	5,169	1.80%	53.62%	11.26%	14.18%
Olla Coordinadora Nacional de Inmigrantes	Recoleta	5,169	1.80%	53.62%	11.26%	14.18%

Note: Authors' data is based on INE (2017) and Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2022).

4. Results and Findings

4.1. CPMA: Asserting Autonomy and Cultivating Sovereignty

CPMA emerged in the aftermath of Santiago's October 2019 social uprising. Amid spontaneous neighbourhood assemblies that coalesced in public spaces throughout the city, work commissions formed organically. One of CPMA's founders became actively involved in one such commission, which, following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, shifted to an online format. In these virtual exchanges, the intensifying socio-economic crisis became starkly visible, particularly through rising levels of food insecurity. As the organiser recounted: "It was imperative to generate actions of solidarity and mutual aid among neighbours during the pandemic, similar to those seen during the crisis in Chile in the 1980s, which could take the form of *ollas comunes* or *comedores*."

For that purpose, the first challenge faced by CPMA was identifying a suitable location from which to coordinate food donations and support vulnerable neighbours. Initially, given their lack of legal status, the organisers sought to collaborate with the local neighbourhood committee. However, mounting friction over decision-making led them to pursue an autonomous route. Having secured an informal agreement with a university workers' union, CPMA began operating from the union's facilities, which provided access to a warehouse, kitchen, utensils, furniture, and basic utilities such as water and electricity.

Located near La Moneda—the presidential palace—and surrounded by university buildings and daytime commercial activity, the *comedor* was named in honour of Margarita Ancacoy, an indigenous cleaning worker at the University of Chile who was tragically murdered in route to work in the early morning hours. In contrast to dominant representations of *ollas comunes* as initiatives led by urban-poor women, CPMA's organising team was comprised of middle-class, gender-balanced, and university-educated volunteers.

To sustain operations, CPMA employed a diverse repertoire of resource-mobilisation strategies. Flyers soliciting food and monetary donations circulated in local shops and were posted on neighbourhood murals. Businesses placed donation boxes for customer contributions while residents and volunteers redirected portions of their state-issued food aid boxes to the *comedor*. Fundraising efforts also included selling calendars and organising cultural events such as *peñas*. Although sporadic, universities, churches, and the private sector also contributed donations during the height of the pandemic. Digital platforms enabled CPMA to coordinate collective activities such as bingos and raffles, mechanisms that raised funds while simultaneously amplifying public discourse around food injustice. Political actors occasionally donated food during election periods, yet, as one organiser remarked, "politicians came to donate food, but in reality, they were looking for a photo with us for electoral reasons, which we always refused."

In alignment with food sovereignty principles, CPMA launched two initiatives that extended beyond cooking and food distribution. First, they set up a purchasing model that involved buying legumes and grains in bulk directly from rural producers at affordable prices. This also led to the creation of a consumer cooperative, allowing neighbours to pool resources and lower costs. Second, they developed two community gardens, one on university grounds and the other at the Salvador Allende Museum. These actions were encapsulated by the slogan "Cooking and Growing, Another Way to Struggle." Though these gardens contributed symbolically to cooking, their primary purpose was educational. As one organiser reflected:

> My commitment is to connect this task with multiple opportunities in the garden, such as learning and training, as well as maintaining a link with institutions interested in sustainability. It also relaxes us and helps us personally. From my perspective as a mestizo and Mapuche, it involves connection with the land, which I value very much.

Between 2020 and 2023, CPMA prepared approximately 21,000 meals, averaging 200 servings per day, distributed every Thursday and Sunday. Effective operation required a minimum of five kitchen volunteers, four for food distribution and two for door-to-door delivery, totalling roughly 12 volunteers per day. Cooking at scale posed logistical hurdles, as one volunteer shared: "We knew how to cook, but not how to cook for so many people." Menus alternated between vegetarian and meat-based options; however, vegetarian meals often carried an intentional political message. "For a short time, we had the chance to serve meat once a month, but it is usually expensive, so we prioritise more affordable vegetable protein," one volunteer explained. At day's end, volunteers shared the same lunch, exchanging experiences and planning next steps. These moments of conviviality reinforced CPMA's guiding ethos: everyone cooks, everyone eats. During summer and holidays, operations paused, and food boxes were distributed until services temporarily resumed.

Following the pandemic, the informal agreement with the union dissolved and donations decreased markedly, prompting discussions around institutionalising the CPMA. Proposals included registering it as an NGO or corporation to access formal funding streams. Yet the possibility of formalisation remained contested. While some advocated for integration and sustainability, others resisted in favour of retaining autonomy and flexibility. Despite ongoing tensions, CPMA adapted. Volunteers now meet intermittently in the centric plaza Manuel Rodríguez, preparing sandwiches at an organiser's home before transporting food and equipment to the plaza, where meals are shared with neighbours and eaters. Here, banners articulating political views on food justice and the right to food are prominently displayed (Figure 2). Through this spatial

Figure 2. Political canvas created by CPMA in Plaza Manuel Rodríguez, central Santiago, saying: "Food Should Be a Right From Birth."

reappropriation, volunteers reaffirm the plaza not as a passive node of circulation, but as a site of socio-spatial struggle (Stavrides & De Angelis, 2016), where visibility, solidarity, and collective presence redefine urban belonging.

4.2. OCRC: Reclaiming Streets and Enacting Care

The OCRC arose in response to the socio-economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, led by a woman whose personal history is deeply rooted in caregiving. Having first cared for her mother, and later volunteering in a hospital to support older adults, she channelled her commitment to care by establishing an *olla común* outside her home, transforming the pavement into a site of encounter and solidarity for neighbours in need.

Initially named Fleming por ti, in reference to the street where the organiser resides in Cerro Navia, the initiative was gradually renamed by its eaters as La Ruta de la Cuchara (in English, The Spoon Path). This name evokes the everyday struggle of those living on the streets who traverse the city in search of food. Located in one of Santiago's most socioeconomically vulnerable districts, Cerro Navia is home to over 130,000 residents facing poverty, service deficits, and urban inequality (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2022).

With support from her teenage daughter and husband, the woman organiser began preparing small batches of meals at home, distributing them from a modest table on the pavement. "I started with a small table outside. At first, only a few people came, but then I asked my husband to make me a bigger dining table, and now many people come here to eat," she explained. As participation grew, the initiative expanded onto the street itself, with salvaged materials used to construct dining tables, chairs, and a canopy to shield eaters from sun and rain (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Eating space located over a street occupied by the OCRC in Cerro Navia.

This spatial appropriation unfolded without initial municipal authorisation. "During the pandemic, I cooked on the pavement outside my house so as not to bother any neighbours with traffic," she explained. But as the *olla* grew and began to block vehicle circulation, she formally requested permission to close the street on Saturdays from 9 am to 5 pm. Community responses have been mixed. While some residents donate food and volunteer their time, others view the presence of outsiders with suspicion. The organiser reflected:

> My area is good and quiet, but not very sociable or supportive. Everyone says what I do is nice, but sometimes they call me crazy. It's seen as an interesting act, but the neighbours do not help much, despite how vital it is for the eaters.

OCRC draws on two primary food sources. First, the Cerro Navia Food Bank, established in 2019 as Chile's first municipal initiative of its kind, is central to weekly operations. Rescuing surplus food destined for disposal, the food bank redistributes produce, packaged goods, bread, and hygiene products directly to *ollas comunes*, micro-food banks, and vulnerable families. Deliveries arrive one to two days ahead of cooking, often consisting of aesthetically imperfect yet nutritious items. Second, *ferias libres* (street farmers' markets) serve as key supply channels for many low and middle-income neighbourhoods. With over 400 operating in the metropolitan region, these municipal and informal markets offer affordable access to produce and household goods. The OCRC organiser participates in a community initiative known as Minga—a Quechua and Mapuche term denoting solidarity-based work—where women from Cerro Navia (including caregivers, unemployed women, and household heads) rescue food from *ferias libres* to promote grassroots entrepreneurship. Much of this food is then routed back through the municipal food bank and redistributed to local *ollas*.

Contributions also come directly from eaters. As the organiser shared: "Sometimes they give me bags of legumes and say: 'I'll bring them to you because I live on the street, I don't have anywhere to cook, but I eat with you here on Saturday, so I prefer to bring them to you.'" She also maintains a small community garden in the communal passageway outside her home, with composting as part of the practice. However, this space has recently been reduced due to street closures: "I have grown potatoes, tomatoes, and peppers. But now the municipality has closed the street, and they've taken away part of the garden."

OCRC now prepares around 100 meals per day, distributed in rotating shifts depending on seating availability, typically accommodating 30 eaters at a time. Some eaters bring their own containers to take away leftover food. But the organiser's vision of care extends beyond meals. On Saturdays, donated clothing and shoes are arranged in a designated corner for eaters to browse and take. Moreover, during holidays such as Easter and Christmas, this *olla* hosts special meals that foreground celebration and shared joy. "Many get excited about these activities because they've never been given a chocolate egg before, for example," she shared. These gestures reinforce the *olla*'s role not only as a nutritional lifeline but as a space of recognition, ritual, and collective belonging.

4.3. OCPAP: A Joyful Resistance in the Plaza

The OCPAP was established in Cerro Navia amidst two converging crises: the mass social uprising of October 2019 and the economic collapse triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its name, borrowed from the protesters' cry "El Pueblo Ayuda Al Pueblo" (in English, the people help the people), captures both

neighbourhood autonomy and the state's failure to secure basic rights. "People in the streets needed the basics every human deserves. That's why I decided to join the olla," one volunteer reflected. In claiming this slogan, OCPAP reclaimed public voice and space, asserting food as a fundamental human right.

When lockdown measures stripped many residents of formal and informal work, hunger became a visible crisis on Cerro Navia's streets. The leader of a local neighbourhood committee mobilised her networks, particularly to support the elderly, by pooling small donations for gas, lighters, cookware, and ingredients. Cooking alternated between the committee's kitchen, the adjacent Plaza Yugoslavia, and volunteers' home kitchens. Yet every meal was distributed in the plaza: three times a week, about 150 hot meals were handed out to an ever-growing queue.

Like its sister initiative—OCRC—OCPAP depends on two primary supply channels. First, the Cerro Navia municipal food bank delivers variable but vital donations. "One week we might receive potatoes or onions; the next, sausages or chicken; sometimes nothing at all," admits an organiser. "Still, without those crates, we'd have nothing to cook." And second, *ferias libres* vendors set aside misshapen fruits and vegetables, ensuring a steady influx of fresh produce. When protein donations run low, volunteers chip in pocket money. "Each of us puts in a few pesos so we can buy meat," one organiser confides. "It's not much individually, but together we cover our needs." Two further strategies amplify these grassroots efforts. One organiser uses her local radio show, *Cambalache*, to broadcast live weekly donation appeals. Another organiser, who works in gas sales, supplies cooking gas for free. In both cases, informal social ties and local expertise act as vital infrastructure.

By early 2024, donor fatigue and volunteer burnout forced OCPAP to reconsider its model. Freed from the neighbourhood committee's umbrella, members formalised OCPAP as a *persona jurídica*, which means having legal status, electing its own board to unlock private sponsorships, expanded food-bank quotas, and municipal grants. This legal status carried new administrative duties, including convening assemblies and maintaining financial records.

Under this new governance, an Ecuadorian migrant, OCPAP's elected president, offered his home as the primary kitchen. His modest patio now hosts Wednesday cooking sessions. Despite this shift, women volunteers continue to drive the culinary work: early mornings find them chopping onions, peppers, and herbs for the *sofrito*, while 50-litre pots of water heat on gas burners to cook *porotos con riendas* (beans with noodles). Before distribution, volunteers share the same meal they will later serve. "Cooking and eating together helps me fight my depression," admits one participant. These communal meals become moments of mutual support and reflection, where personal stories intertwine with political analysis.

By noon, Plaza Yugoslavia transforms into a communal eating space (Figure 4). Neighbours and street people arrive carrying pots, containers, or plastic bags to collect extra portions. Volunteers manage the line with care: older residents receive priority, and each person takes only two or three servings plus a piece of fruit to ensure fairness. "We try to be just," explains an organiser. "No one should leave hungry, but we also have to stretch every ingredient." As plates are filled, the president's lorry, used to transport large pots of cooked meals, stands ready to haul away leftovers and empty containers.

Figure 4. OCPAP's volunteers distributing meals, fruits, and bread in Plaza Yugoslavia, Cerro Navia.

Each Wednesday, this plaza becomes a stage for what a nearby mural calls "joyful resistance," a space where sharing food is both an act of survival and a powerful assertion of community solidarity. In OCPAP, the people truly help the people, turning public space into a living canvas of care.

5. Discussion

The spatial practices of the *ollas comunes* radically reconfigure the street's dominant logic, subverting the paradigm of public space as a neutral conduit for circulation and commerce. They achieve this by strategically interrupting the rhythms of traffic and economic activity to centre on the temporalities of collective care and political solidarity. For instance, OCRC physically appropriates the street, transforming a thoroughfare into a communal dining area, first through informal occupation and later legitimised by a municipal permit to block vehicle circulation. Similarly, but in plazas, OCPAP turns Plaza Yugoslavia into a predictable infrastructure of sustenance, while CPMA repurposes Plaza Manuel Rodriguez into a stage for political expression, displaying banners that articulate food as a fundamental right. These examples highlight the importance of distinguishing between streets and plazas: while both are public spaces, their physical and social characteristics shape the forms of collective action and care that emerge within them.

This spatial contestation transforms the street from a mere conduit into what Lefebvre terms an œuvre—a lived and collectively produced work of urban life. The rhythmic, ritualised practices of cooking, distribution, and communal dining are deliberate claims to visibility by populations—the elderly, migrants, and those in precarious employment—who are often systemically erased from the sanitised, neoliberal urban imaginary. OCRC's renaming as La Ruta de la Cuchara creates a new landmark on a cognitive map of survival, while OCPAP's framing of its work as "joyful resistance" underscores a performative reclamation of dignity. These acts articulate a profound political statement, with CPMA's overt messaging on banners complementing the subtler, yet equally potent, politics of making care work visible in the public realm. Yet, although *ollas comunes* embody solidarity within neighbourhoods, their practices are not always rooted in reciprocal obligations. Instead, the sense of care and belonging seems to arise primarily from the mere fact of being together in a shared space or condition (Ferguson, 2021).

While the physical settings of the case studies vary, their reconfiguring of public space is consistently rooted in an interaction with the urban street network. Plazas do not exist in isolation; they function as critical nodes that draw life from surrounding streets. For CPMA and OCPAP, the street is the essential infrastructure that enables their work: it is the channel through which supplies from *ferias libres* arrive, the path that participants and volunteers travel, and the conduit for public visibility. When CPMA displays banners articulating food as a right, its audience is the public in motion on the streets adjacent to Plaza Manuel Rodriguez. The choice of a plaza is therefore a strategic one that leverages the street's role as a network for access and communication, amplifying the social and political resonance of the *ollas*' actions.

The organisers' narratives expose a dialectical tension between a fiercely guarded autonomy and pragmatic engagement with municipal structures. This dynamic mirrors broader Latin American struggles over urban citizenship, reflecting both the "fragmented citizenship" seen in Mexico City's housing movements (Rodríguez Cortés, 2017) and the empowerment trajectories observed in Brazil (Donaghy, 2024). While all three *ollas* emerged from autonomous grassroots efforts—with CPMA pointedly refusing co-optation by politicians—their sustainability often depends on negotiating with the state. The reliance of both Cerro Navia *ollas* on the municipal food bank is a key example. OCPAP's decision to formalise as a *persona jurídica* (legal entity) is a prime case of this tactical negotiation, consciously trading a degree of informality for access to municipal grants and expanded resources. This pragmatism demonstrates that autonomy and institutional engagement are not mutually exclusive but are strategically intertwined to maximise grassroots agency.

This complex negotiation reveals the insurgent character of the *ollas comunes*. Their practices can be understood as a form of insurgent citizenship (Holston, 2008), operating in the grey areas of regulations—from public-health codes to commercial licensing—that were never designed for such collective, non-commodified actions. This rule-breaking is often born of necessity. OCRC's initial, unpermitted occupation of the street is a clear example: a direct claim on public space that challenges the state's ownership. OCPAP's later decision to formalise is not a capitulation but a strategic manoeuvre to legitimise its insurgent claims from within the system, thereby sustaining its challenge to the established governance of food distribution and social welfare. These actions assert a form of popular sovereignty over the use and meaning of urban space, framing the *ollas* as quiet but powerful laboratories of an alternative urban order.

Furthermore, these initiatives advance a consumption-centred urban food sovereignty agenda (López Cifuentes & Sonnino, 2024; Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021). Rather than focusing on production, the *ollas*

comunes politicise the act of collective consumption. The public communal meal becomes a political act, asserting that food is a right, not a commodity. CPMA's model is the most explicit, integrating food sovereignty principles through direct purchasing from rural producers, consumer cooperatives, and educational community gardens, all under the slogan "Cooking and Growing, Another Way to Struggle." This praxis redefines urban citizenship around collective care rather than individual consumerism.

The deliberative routines within the *ollas* embody elements of food democracy, yet these are perpetually in tension with state regulation. OCPAP's governance through an elected board and assemblies, and its careful management of distribution to ensure fairness, are clear democratic practices. However, these grassroots systems confront a web of regulations that threatens to criminalise their work. The removal of part of OCRC's community garden by municipal authorities is a stark illustration of this friction, representing a form of sanitisation that enforces a normative vision of public space and curtails the *olla*'s spatial footprint.

Central to this transformative potential is the gendered labour of care, performed overwhelmingly by women. By moving domestic work from the private sphere onto public pavements and plazas, participants enact a powerful "politics of dwelling" (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2022). The work of the OCRC leader, a lifelong caregiver, is a testament to how the ethics of care can be scaled up into a tool for community-building and spatial reclamation (Miraftab & Huq, 2024). This act makes reproductive labour hyper-visible, mounting a direct challenge to a patriarchal capitalist urbanism that systematically marginalises it. These findings resonate with feminist and decolonial critiques of public space, which emphasise that access, visibility, and participation are always shaped by intersecting axes of power (Lyra, 2023).

These interventions materially enact Lefebvre's triadic theory of space, creating a direct conflict between different spatial logics. The conceived space—that of urban planners and municipal authorities—frames streets as orderly zones of transit, governed by a neoliberal logic. The daily routines of commuters and consumers, in turn, constitute the perceived space—a set of habitual paths that reinforce this order. The new mobility patterns generated by *ollas comunes* directly disrupt this perceived space. The routes traced for procurement—rescuing food from *ferias libres* or coordinating with municipal food banks—and distribution create logistical choreographies rooted in solidarity, not efficiency. These care-driven mobilities powerfully interrupt the conceived and perceived space by producing a vibrant lived space (or space of representation), which re-appropriates these sites and imbues them with new, symbolic meanings. For OCRC, the street becomes a communal dining room, for OCPAP, the plaza a site of joyful resistance, and for CPMA, a stage for political expression. It is in this lived, experiential dimension that the right to the city ceases to be an abstract demand and becomes a tangible, collectively produced reality. This dynamic is visually summarised in Figure 5.

The claim that *ollas comunes* challenge commodified urban imaginaries and established systems of ownership is borne out by their specific practices. For instance, CPMA actively resisted co-optation by refusing to be photographed with politicians, thereby challenging a system where aid is often a tool for political gain. The dominant function of public space as a commercial or passive zone is directly transformed by OCRC, which secured a municipal permit to block vehicle circulation every Saturday. This act introduces a new choreography of care that replaces the dominant rhythm of traffic with the cadence of setting up tables, serving meals, and fostering community. This transformation is also evident in new mobility patterns rooted in solidarity. The dominant pattern of individual commutes is overlaid with collective, care-driven logistics:

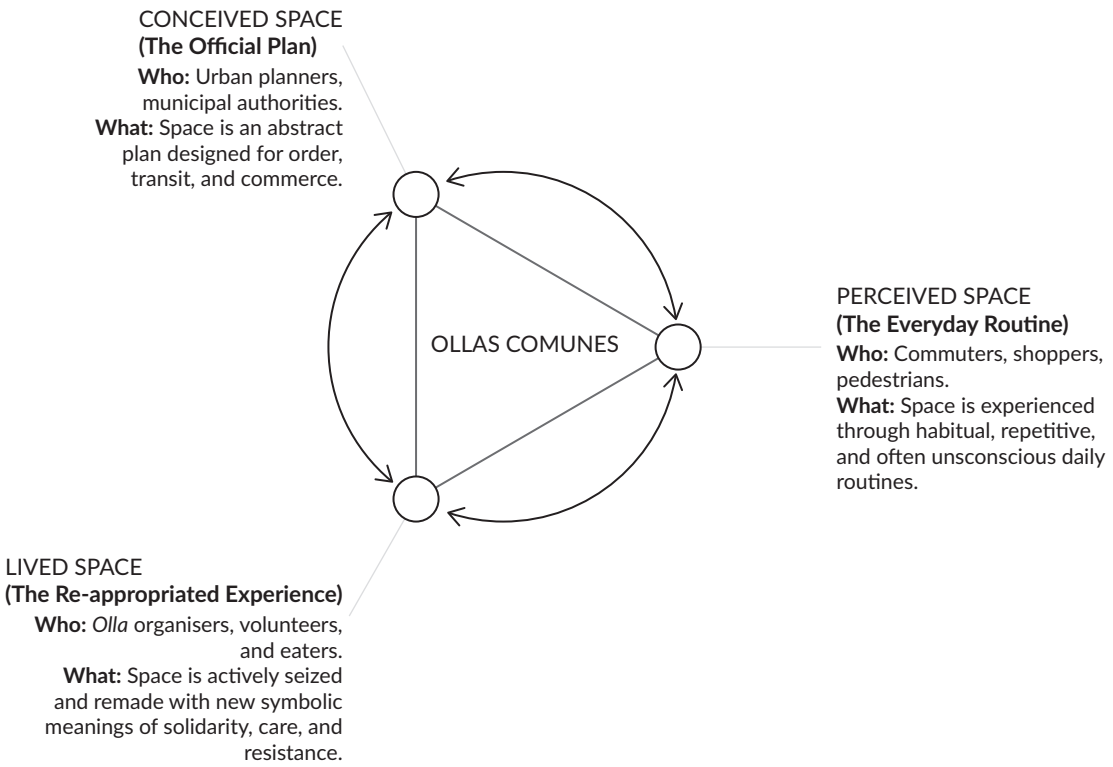

Figure 5. Triad of the production of space by *ollas comunes*.

volunteers travel to *ferias libres* to rescue food, coordinate with municipal food bank, and make door-to-door deliveries to those who cannot travel. The very name La Ruta de la Cuchara illustrates this, creating a new cognitive map of the city oriented around survival and mutual support rather than commercial landmarks. By moving the labour of social reproduction from the private home to the public plaza and pavement, as seen in all three cases, the *ollas* challenge the gendered division of space and make collective care a visible, central feature of urban life.

Finally, the political narrative of the *ollas comunes* is enriched by a strategic oscillation between local claims-making and the mobilisation of national discourses. They engage in the "local turn" by negotiating directly with municipal bodies for resources, while simultaneously invoking the language of national struggles ("It Is Not About 30 Pesos, It Is About 30 Years") and universal human rights. In doing so, they function as laboratories of "prefigurative politics" (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), enacting in the present—through norms of co-presence and mutual aid—the alternative urban futures they hope to achieve.

6. Conclusions

This article contributes to contemporary debates on the right to the city, food sovereignty, and the politics of care by showing how grassroots practices of collective consumption and spatial appropriation can generate new forms of urban belonging and resistance. The case of Santiago's *ollas comunes* illustrates the transformative potential of everyday acts of care, solidarity, and co-presence in reimagining the city as a space of justice.

The resurgence *of ollas comunes* between 2019 and 2024 revives a long Latin-American genealogy of grassroots infrastructures that surface whenever crisis strikes. In Chile, such facilities have re-emerged cyclically, often in the wake of the devastating earthquakes that shake the country roughly every decade. Moments of upheaval prompt networks of mutual aid that carve out alternative urban orders—spaces of solidarity, collective protection, and communal provision that temporarily override normally dominant individualist logics. Crisis, then, becomes fertile ground not only for speculative capital but also for affective ties and communal life.

This article demonstrates that *ollas comunes* are not merely survival strategies but insurgent practices that challenge dominant systems of urban governance and ownership. By emphasising collective care and the re-appropriation of both streets and plazas, these initiatives enact alternative forms of citizenship and spatial justice. These solidarity-based episodes are equally legible through a feminist political ecology lens of the "care commons." Here, *ollas comunes* offer a material counterpoint to the patriarchal underpinnings of capitalism and the profit-driven calculus of neoliberal governance. By foregrounding gendered practices of care, they fortify novel spatialities of citizenship, advancing tangible alternatives to prevailing neoliberal regimes and shifting the emphasis from individual self-interest towards effective and viable collective strategies.

Governance, however, remains a thorny issue. A dense web of regulations—from public-health codes to commercial licensing—threatens to criminalise these kitchens in Chile. Hygiene rules demand industrial standards of food preparation; commercial laws frown upon "free" distribution that undercuts established traders. Such normative frameworks cast *ollas comunes* as insurgent, yet their insurgency is one of survival rather than spectacle. How far can regulatory regimes structure everyday life without stifling organic survival strategies? Can rule-breaking born of urgent need be accommodated without sliding into illegality? Democratic polities must grapple with these tensions, lest initiatives akin to the *ollas comunes* be demonised simply for failing to tick every bureaucratic box.

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