

Time After Time: Community-Led Participation in Urban Development Practices in Rotterdam

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Abstract

Community-led initiatives are increasingly recognised as contributors to sustainable and socially just urban transitions, but their capacity to shape formal urban development processes remains insufficiently understood. This article examines a grassroots case in Rotterdam, TheSpace_Coolhaven (2021–2024), and its nomadic successor, the Coolhaven Beating Heart Participatory Quest (2025), to explore how temporary commoning can configure city-making over time. Grounded in theoretical work on urban commons, temporary urbanism, and participatory governance, the study applies the access, membership, and ownership (AMO) framework within a longitudinal action-research methodology, drawing on participatory observation, internal documentation, workshop outputs, communication material, and six semi-structured interviews with community and institutional actors. Findings indicate that temporary access to vacant social housing enabled urban commons to be prefigurative, characterised by intensive socio-cultural programming, shared stewardship, and informal knowledge infrastructures. This temporary commons fostered collective learning and proximity-based governance. Yet, it also demonstrated fragility under property-led redevelopment, facing a nomadic condition in between institutional time frames. The article argues that community-led initiatives should be recognised as urban commons infrastructure with the potential to inform more inclusive, collaborative, and reflexive approaches to urban development in the Netherlands and comparable contexts.

Keywords

Rotterdam; temporary urbanism; urban commons; urban development practices; value creation

1. Introduction

The value of community-led initiatives (CLIs) has been recognised at the niche level by Seyfang and Smith (2007) and at the public administrative level by Bovaird (2007). Their value has increasingly led to the recognition of the role of CLIs in urban sustainable transitions (Raj et al., 2022). In fact, CLIs' value production role has been increasingly integrated into European policies, and the European Commission's recognition is made evident with the New European Bauhaus programme (Krabbendam et al., 2025).

From everyday urban hyper-local practices and appearances (Mehrotra, 2005), value production emerges over scales (Brenner, 2019). Citizen cultural initiatives characterise various urban neighbourhoods. However, in the context of the ongoing housing crisis and gentrification drive (Janssen et al., 2024), it is unclear how a CLI can integrate with urban and real estate development processes (Hofstra & Edelenbos, 2025).

Under the banner of “making people take part,” the Dutch state-supported “community-building work” (*Opbouwwerk*) system between the 1970s and 1990s proved to be effective at inclusion and at linking residents and governmental bodies (Baillergeau, 2002). Today, the Dutch national government (*Rijksoverheid*) recognises participation and cooperation with society as parts of national spatial planning. However, formulations remain vague in the long-term vision for 2030–2100 defined by 8 of the 15 Dutch ministries (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening et al., 2025). The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving) highlighted the need for the processes of planning and implementation to shift and become more flexible and integrative (Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2025). In contrast, in December 2023, the practice advisory report by the Advisory Board for Environment and Infrastructure (Raad voor de Leefomgeving en Infrastructuur) emphasises how urban development faces challenges of complexity and new sustainability imperatives (Raad voor de Leefomgeving en Infrastructuur, 2023).

To seek answers to these challenges, the questions guiding this study are: How can CLIs be integrated into urban development processes time after time? What are the conditions for a CLI to thrive? What are the contemporary challenges related to resource management in urban commons?

This article is written from the perspective of a group of practitioners, activists, and researchers who, over five years, have developed field experience and community engagement practice in Rotterdam. It takes a qualitative research stance towards two successive CLIs. The article draws on the results of what began as a bottom-up process at TheSpace_Coolhaven (2021–2024; hereafter TheSpace) and later evolved into the nomadic Coolhaven Beating Heart Participatory Quest (2025; hereafter The Quest) in the Delfshaven neighbourhood in Rotterdam.

1.1. Participation and CLIs in Rotterdam

In 2025, a study of 102 municipal audit chamber reports, published by the Dutch Association of Audit Offices (van Stipdonk & van den Berg, 2025), highlights that civic participation in urban development since 2009 has remained a formality initiated by a municipal trajectory or process logic—in information and participation meetings, planned urban development projects are presented to the public. At the start of 2024, the Environment and Planning Act of the Netherlands (*Omgevingswet*) enforced participation as a

municipal requirement (Informatiepunt Leefomgeving, 2024). Recent research on the first experiences shows that legal requirements still do not regulate the content and output of the participatory process, thereby maintaining the risk that participation becomes a formal box-ticking exercise (Hollemaans et al., 2025).

Considering the value of CLIs and overall sustainability transition requirements, bottom-up co-creation could improve urban development processes. Prieto-Viertel et al. (2025) criticise Rotterdam's "balanced neighbourhoods" municipal approach, claiming that social resilience cannot be engineered merely through property-value balancing. Instead, genuine resilience stems from fostering social cohesion and informal support networks—core outcomes of strong CLIs. The city's ongoing densification, driven by housing shortages, has reshaped certain neighbourhoods, where residents perceive increased attractiveness but declining social cohesion, diversity of facilities, and mental well-being due to insufficient involvement in planning (Barsties et al., 2025). Longitudinal analyses by Nelson et al. (2024) show persistent spatial inequalities, with wealthier areas reaping more benefits from homeownership policies, reinforcing the importance of bottom-up action in less advantaged districts.

Kourtiti et al. (2024) introduce the concept of "neighbourhood love," framing Rotterdam as an "archipelago of urban villages" in which emotional and social attachment to place emerges from access to amenities and community vitality—conditions that CLIs often nurture. Comparatively, the Tweebosbuurt case exemplifies how resistance movements form part of a broader gentrification–resistance nexus, showing that civic mobilisation and local solidarity could mediate top-down urban change (Knieriem et al., 2025). The same processes need to be formulated, integrated, and defined to better define the role of CLIs in urban development. A study by J. E. de Jong and Berkers (2024) highlights that "districts of ease" in Rotterdam—diverse, mixed-income areas like Delfshaven—are those where inclusion and social navigation are most successful.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. (Temporary) Urban Development Practices

Temporary urbanism is a prominent topic in urban research such as Urban Catalyst (Oswalt et al., 2013); T-FACTOR in 2020–2024 (Martelloni et al., 2023); and NOMAD in 2023–2025 (European Commission, 2025). These studies have shown that community practices are valuable for the regeneration of places and the economy (Mazzarella et al., 2025), but they also generate contradictions and sometimes risk being manipulated in urban development processes (Ferrerri, 2015).

Recognising the balance between either the maintenance, or emergence of such processes, Calzati et al. (2022) suggest a cycle of disclosure for urban commons. This cycle can be ignited by making urban commons components explicit, as categorised by Feinberg et al. (2021) as associated mechanisms and processes, binding institutions, users, and resources. This cyclic process can be reignited through the disclosure (or enclosure) of such components of the commons. In parallel, the expansion of economic and urban homogeneity also increases the risk of obsolescence. The diversification of the city's economic function stands for the work of (un)prosperous citizens and their chances for participation in real, changing urban development (Jacobs, 1969).

From a social-ecological perspective, Bookchin (1974) affirms that “modern city planning offers us functional urban designs without human values and rationally organised space without civic content,” as detracted. In the urge to steer the environment in (re)development, urban professionals neglect the transformative potential of participation and proximity as drivers of cohesive and vibrant economies for our cities (Yank, 2015). In failing to do so, urban experiments die, are marginalised, or assimilated (Savini & Bertolini, 2019). Community buildings are planned to be demolished, and space(s) for transformation are alienated from the city’s community practice.

A place-shaping continuum enables more coherent integration of project stakeholders. Carmona (2013) illustrates this as a continuum which spans architects, urban designers, planners, developers, managing agents, regeneration bodies, community groups, investors, and politicians. As Dombroski et al. (2019) argue, the collective process needs to be reconsidered as an integrated whole. When treated as isolated contributions, they become counter-cyclical, separated from the potential to sustain ecological urban processes.

2.2. Continual CLIs and Urban Commons

De Moor (2023) stated that for building a community economy in Rotterdam it is important to have spaces that make CLIs tangible and enable them to play a central role in creating and sustaining urban commons. CLIs represent a transformative paradigm in urban governance and spatial practice, reconceptualising cities as shared resources collectively managed by communities, rather than solely by the market or the state (Manthey, 2024). Albeit not without controversy, the mechanisms of (formal) participation better serve citizenry accustomed to administrative terminology (W. de Jong & Verkuyten, 1996) or procedural formats (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011) that enclose control over the results.

Despite innovative propositions, urban commons stand as transformative practices only in their ability to challenge, alter, or replace dominant institutions in a specific social and material context (Pel et al., 2020). As temporarily configured, the given affordance to prefigure common spaces through everyday ground practice is discarded by yesterday’s planning. The persistence of tomorrow’s social reproduction (Lefebvre, 1992) of a common space and practice is conditionally exchanged for the resources presently demanded (Botha et al., 2025). Research by van der Zwaard et al. (2018) and Lengkeek and Specht (2022) also addresses the challenge of not only initiating but sustaining citizen initiatives “beyond the pioneering phase”, including “social real estate and the right to the city” (translated titles) as central for the reconfiguration of current urban logic through Rotterdam’s citizen initiatives.

Thus, access to the commons is multidimensional: It includes spatial access to land and buildings, institutional permission, access to resources and information, social inclusion, and security of use over time. The process of commoning (Linebaugh, 2008; Stavrides, 2016) emphasises the dynamic nature of membership. It involves participatory governance, place-based programming, inclusive and exclusionary dynamics, capacity-building, and the development of communicative infrastructures. Furthermore, debates around enclosure and counter-enclosure (De Angelis, 2017a, 2017b) and urban political economy (Harvey, 2012) underscore this ownership dimension. Ownership includes formal tenure and stewardship models such as community land trusts (Huron, 2015), alongside collective decision-making rights, control over design and use, authorship of narratives, and equitable distribution of value. In this sense, urban commons

can be best understood as collectively governed infrastructures in which *access*, *membership*, and *ownership* interlock to support more just, resilient, and adaptive urban futures.

2.3. Access, Membership, and Ownership: A Framework for CLIs

In 2023, the peer_protocol foundation defined the access, membership, and ownership (AMO) framework (Table 1) for the replication of its processes and methods (peer_protocol foundation, 2023; Santos, 2024) together with other collectives and communities within and around the development of TheSpace in Rotterdam. Based on the theories of urban commons and participation, this study further defines the criteria of the conceptual framework in accordance with the literature.

Table 1. The AMO framework.

Dimension	Definition	Criteria
Access	Use or benefit of shared resources	A1. Access to space or buildings A2. Institutional access & permissions A3. Resource access (material/funding) A4. Informational access A5. Social access & inclusion A6. Temporal access/duration
Membership	Right to participate in managing, governing, or shaping the urban commons	M1. Roles & governance M2. Participation modes M3. Practices & programming M4. Inclusion or exclusion dynamics M5. Capacity & learning M6. Communication channels
Ownership	Control over the shared resources	O1. Tenure & legal status O2. Stewardship (care & maintenance) O3. Decision rights & agenda-setting O4. Spatial & design control O5. Narrative ownership (story, identity) O6. Value & benefit distribution

The AMO framework provides a critical lens for understanding CLIs' co-creation and their assessment in an urban development process and has guided the analysis of the action research process presented in the next section. Developed to empower local communities, this framework aims at enhancing their capacity to access spaces, resources, and decision-making channels (Boydell & Searle, 2014; Colding et al., 2013; Williams, 2023). The concept of nurturing membership through inclusive participation and shared governance (Foster & Iaione, 2019; Marella, 2017; Park et al., 2020) complements the objective of ensuring forms of ownership—legal, narrative, and functional—that secure long-term stewardship (Caciagli & Milan, 2021; Iaione, 2016).

This approach positions community members as active co-creators of their urban environments. At the same time, these definitions may be interpreted differently by various urban actors. Therefore, the AMO framework is used in this study to analyse the case study experience from multiple perspectives.

3. Materials: TheSpace and The Quest in Coolhaven, Rotterdam

This study analyses experiences of action research starting from TheSpace, a temporary urban commons in Rotterdam, and continuing as The Quest, a nomadic cultural initiative aimed at conducting research and self-organising with the actors directly involved in grassroots urban transformation processes.

The temporary urban commons studied emerged in a small ground-floor apartment of an inner-city block in Rotterdam, in the Coolhaven neighbourhood, which is part of the Delftshaven district. The informally named IJzerblok (Figure 1) had a total of 4–5 floor levels, with ca. 6,000 m² distributed over 42 apartments (previously social housing) and a shared inner garden. After a failed redevelopment permit application, the apartments were made available as studios for students and alumni at the applied sciences art school Willem de Koning Academy in 2020. As agreed with the block's owner, the social housing corporation Woonbron, this anti-squatting arrangement was devised in response to the unfolding vacancy and relocation of IJzerblok's tenants, with an undetermined date for demolition.



Figure 1. A map of the Coolhaven (Rotterdam, the Netherlands) neighbourhood, with the IJzerblok (in red), public green-areas (in light green), and an existing urban gardening route (in dark green). Source: Created by the authors for The Quest's second workshop.

The two floor-level studio (apartment) was found derelict and was collectively refurbished as TheSpace. TheSpace started as a co-working space. The members of TheSpace provided wider access and involvement while enforcing a non-commercial, donation-based practice. Two members responsible for the development of the initiative were previously involved in another (temporary) urban commons.

As TheSpace as a physical place would come to an end, its initiators and collaborators prefigured The Quest (2025). The Quest started in TheSpace and then continued as a parallel nomadic exploration of the possibilities for communal influence and participation over Coolhaven's urban development through topical workshops and cultural moments. Its preparation included four workshops held before the closure of TheSpace in the summer of 2024.

After TheSpace closed, an effort was made to communicate with a significant number of stakeholders. They included participants from TheSpace, as well as residents and various professionals from institutions in the neighbourhood and the city. Later, the project for The Quest was approved as a *bewonersinitiatief* (residents' initiative) by the Delfshaven-Schiemond *Wijkraad* (neighbourhood council) at the end of 2024. Eventually, a new cycle of three workshops and two cultural moments were held in the same neighbourhood in 2025.

4. Methodology: Qualitative Analysis of a CLI Action-Research

This study is the result of a participatory action research process (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Greco & Berti, 2025; McNiff, 2013) and an ex-post qualitative analysis to investigate how this CLI has engaged with and contributed to urban development through evolving forms and practices over time. Members of the research team have been involved at different levels in initiating, planning, organising activities, and participating across both phases (Figure 2). The temporal scope of the study spans from 2021 to 2025, and the data sources include:

- Database of activities of TheSpace (2022–2024), maintained by the peer_protocol foundation;
- Workshop reports and repository of The Quest (2024–2025; peer_protocol foundation, 2025);
- Internal project documentation and meeting notes;
- Field observations and reflective conversations;
- Communications and event materials;
- In-depth interviews with initiative organisers and involved stakeholders ($n = 6$) in 2025;
- Records of funding applications, planning correspondence, and reports.

Reflections on first-phase outcomes were generated through workshop reports, internal documentation, meeting notes, field observations, and reflective conversations conducted during workshop activities and preparatory meetings. The workshops of The Quest were structured as a co-design process, with a collective evaluation applying the SOCRATES (SOcial multi-CRiteria AssessmentT of European policieS) method (Munda, 2023). This method has already been implemented in the co-design of urban strategies both in the context of urban living labs (Mazzarella et al., 2024) and for place-based and community-driven strategies (Grieco et al., 2024).

As the last step of the research process, in-depth interviews were conducted to capture ex-post reflections from organisers and stakeholders. To guide the analysis of how the two phases engaged with urban development processes over time, the study applied the AMO framework defined in Section 2.

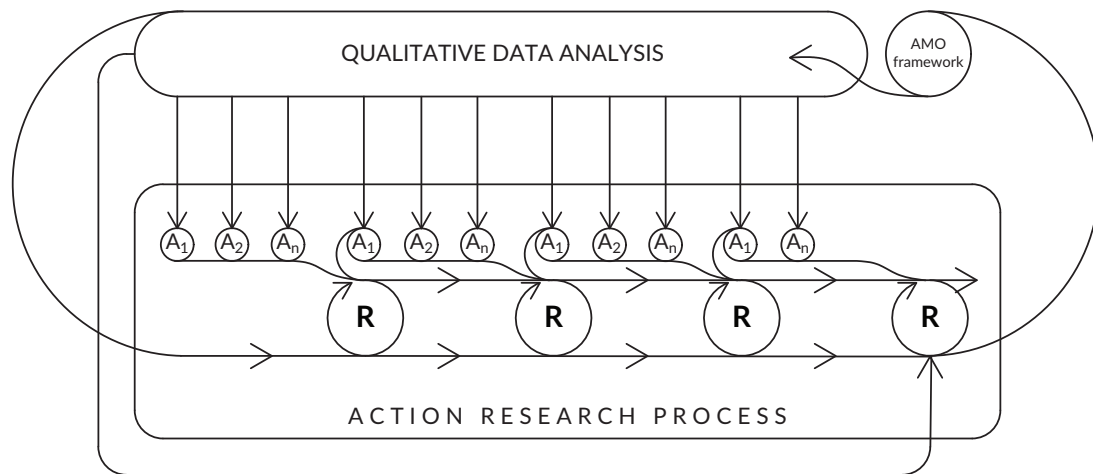


Figure 2. Action-research methodology and qualitative data analysis structured by the AMO framework. Note: A stands for Action and R for Research.

5. Results

5.1. More Than Just a Space: The Making of Rotterdam's Beating Heart

5.1.1. The Enclosure of TheSpace and the Discovery of Urban Development Practices

Between March 2022 and July 2024, TheSpace hosted a diverse program of 283 recorded events, drawing an estimated 1,300 participants. Activities ranged from regular music performances and jam sessions, workshops on creativity, wellbeing, and sustainability, as well as meetings, public presentations, and zero-waste dinners. Collaboration with other organisations was a defining feature of the ecosystem of TheSpace: Approximately 40–45% of the overall activity originated from outside the core team of TheSpace (Figure 3).

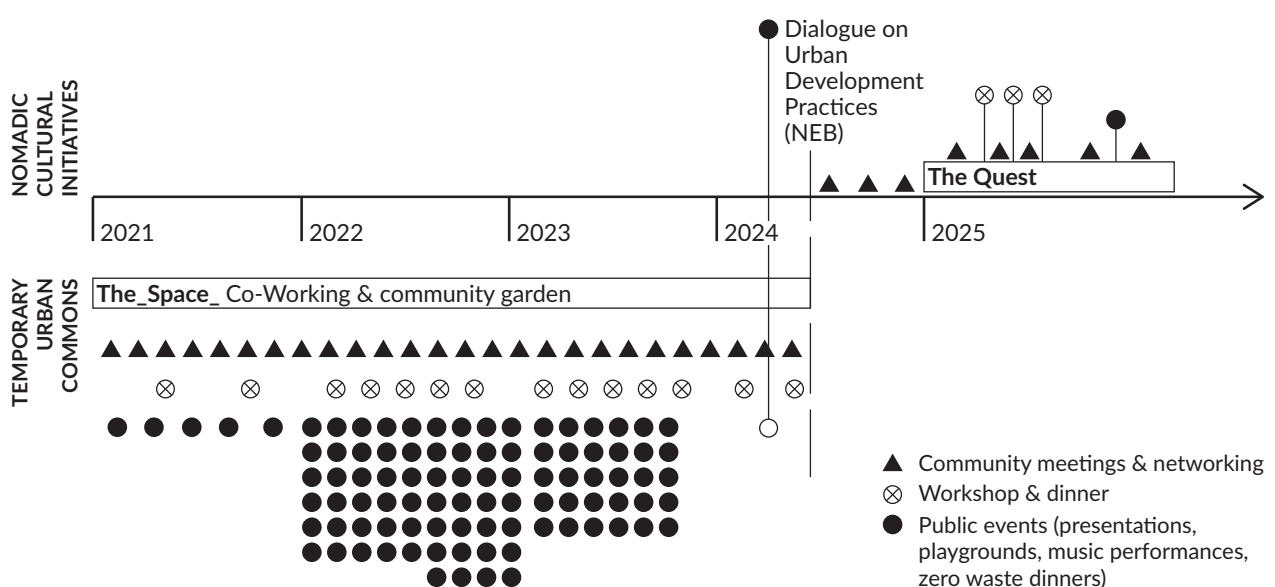


Figure 3. Timeline of the CLI from TheSpace to The Quest. Source: Elaboration by the authors based on data from the peer_protocol archive.

In spring 2024, as part of field research and collaboration activities awaiting the closure of TheSpace, the peer_protocol foundation sought to learn from and advocate for other initiatives and programmed the Dialogue of Urban Development Practices (peer_protocol foundation, 2024). The event (Figure 4a) brought together 11 similar practices and one research project and was hosted as part of a partnership with the Rotterdam municipality. Out of the 11 initiatives engaged in the Dialogue of Urban Development Practices (peer_protocol foundation, 2024), three stood out for their capacity to positively impact urban development, each with its own history of enclosure resistance. These three initiatives have involved the municipality and made use of communal self-building, resulting in both social and technical innovations in the development of their sites. An appropriate urban research agenda evolved through these initiatives. Some of the lessons learned from the event include best practices in implementing activities and services in the neighbourhood, the role of participatory planning for project success, addressing gentrification as part of policy that includes social temporary use, the need for flexible budget administration, the potential of Rotterdam's Right to Challenge policy for "organising public services in a socially equitable manner," addressing short-term arrangements and, if possible, buying property, and other policy approaches including long-term leases and loan guarantees.



Figure 4. Selected CLI activities: (a) panel of the Dialogue of Urban Development Practices; (b) the name A tree fest in IJzerblok's garden; (c) The Quest's dinner in the Treasure of Schoonderloo garden. Photos by the peer_protocol foundation.

5.1.2. The Quest

The early ideas for what became The Quest followed the *Hart van Coolhaven* (Heart of Coolhaven) redevelopment project for IJzerblok. The Quest reviewed the work performed by the developer in the neighbourhood, in a process involving both the municipality and local partners, as reported by the municipality in the area development *Ambitieplan* (Ambition Document; 2023). The review process included creating a shared documentation repository containing neighbourhood policies, local urban development projects, and studies of redevelopment alternatives for IJzerblok.

The main aim of The Quest was to continue the socio-cultural work of the TheSpace community in the Coolhaven neighbourhood and to continue the discussion started at the event Dialogue of Urban Development Practices. It was possible with funding provided by the local neighbourhood council, following

various requests and pledges from locally supported initiators. The initiative took the form of a nomadic campaign with an iterative exposition in spring 2025: three co-creation workshop sessions followed by additional meetings and a major zero-waste dinner event. Each session was organised and led by one of the authors of this article, with all four participating. As the process unfolded, the group dynamic strengthened, creating more shared ownership and co-creative engagement.

As part of the co-creation process with different neighbourhood actors, the research mapped the needs of local entrepreneurs, evacuated artists, temporary and permanent residents, ex-residents, and CLIs in particular. It also included interviews with stakeholder representatives and configured different participatory processes. The initiators did not identify any (ex)residents' committee beyond a recently implemented tenant council that was part of the decision-making of the social housing corporation.

As the local council revised the original The Quest's proposal, the scope of the quest for a co-created urban environment included other ongoing neighbourhood (re)developments. These have been included in the shared documentation repository for the project, including reports and documentation on local processes and participation. The Quest initiators have equally participated in events organised by the recognised stakeholders, including social housing corporations and the municipality.

5.1.3. The Tribe

Participants joined The Quest workshops either by invitation or through social media channels of TheSpace and the neighbourhood, bringing together both new and familiar faces and continuing its prefigurative practice as a collective—identified here as “the tribe” (Figure 5). They came from the neighbourhood and other areas of Rotterdam, representing a wide range of ages and socio-cultural backgrounds. Over the course of the workshops, this temporary urban commons gained enough momentum and agency to go beyond the funded scope and organise a collective open dinner with another local gardening initiative in the Coolhaven neighbourhood.



Figure 5. “The tribe” of participants of the Quest workshops at the Rotterdamse Academie Van Bouwkunst, Rotterdam, 2025. Photos by the authors.

In the first workshop, the TheSpace's context was introduced, and participants were invited to develop a strategy for community building that could be integrated into urban development. In the second workshop, an analysis of the top-down projects planned for the neighbourhood was presented, and participants were grouped to co-create ideas for public spaces in the neighbourhood, proposing community events, temporary pavilions, and community gardens connected to the existing social infrastructure in Coolhaven. The participant groups co-created visions to develop temporary strategies for engaging each area. The third session brought these co-designed results together into a broader discussion. In the last session, the SOCRATES multi-criteria analysis method was applied to assess the impact of the strategies and the different preferences, but most of the work focused on discussing shared criteria to fairly assess the co-designed strategies.

5.2. The Enclosure of Prefigurative Space and the Making of The Quest

Interviewees, as outlined in Table 2, represent a spectrum of positions, ranging from initiators and collaborators (P1–P2) to institutional actors, including a housing association representative (P3), municipal project managers (P4–P5), and a long-term resident (P6).

Table 2. In-depth interviews about TheSpace and The Quest with local actors.

Code	Actor Category	Organisational Affiliation/Role	Relation to Case	Perspective Type
P1	Initiative Initiator	Member of peer_protocol foundation	Co-founder of TheSpace and The Quest	Internal/organiser
P2	Initiative Collaborator	Architect and designer	Collaborator of TheSpace and co-leader of The Quest	Internal/reflective practitioner
P3	Social Housing Corporation Representative	Asset manager, Woonbron	Managed IJzerblok's redevelopment	Institutional/property management
P4	Municipal Project Manager	Municipality of Rotterdam	Oversees Coolhaven development	Institutional/policy implementation
P5	Neighbourhood Networker	Municipality of Rotterdam (Delfshaven)	Connects residents and municipal departments	Institutional/intermediary
P6	Local Resident	Coolhaven inhabitant (10+ years)	Observer and occasional participant	External/citizen perspective

The interviews were analysed using the AMO framework to capture how each dimension manifested within Coolhaven's evolving urban conditions. The findings consider the neighbourhood's ongoing transformation, as well as the institutional and urban context. This illustrates how governance structures, redevelopment processes, and resource channels shaped the scope and conditions for community-led co-creation.

Three interrelated themes structure the analysis: (a) Context and Access, examining conditions that enabled or constrained participation; (b) Practice and Membership, focusing on everyday collaboration and learning; and (c) Ownership and Legacy, exploring how temporary practices generated enduring forms of value and recognition.

5.2.1. Context and Access

Municipal and housing association representatives describe Coolhaven as “a microcosm of Rotterdam’s social diversity,” where long-term residents, international students, and new professionals coexist yet seldom interact. As P6 observed, “People live side by side but not together—we have diversity without mixing.”

Access to TheSpace was obtained informally through personal networks, reflecting the ambiguous governance of IJzerblok. As P1 recalled, “I got the key through people loosely managing it at the time—it wasn’t official, more like anti-squat without being formal.” For the initiators, this informality represented a rare opening for experimentation and collective use. The housing association, however, viewed temporary use mainly as a risk-management measure to deter squatting and maintain oversight of vacant property. Municipal actors recognised the social value of such initiatives but described their own role as limited to short-term facilitation. The municipality often owns or oversees vacant industrial sites and works with partners to curate creative tenants and manage community use. Local officers, like those based at the *Wijkhub* (municipality’s neighbourhood hub), handle micro-grant schemes that support neighbourhood events and temporary activations, funding small projects with minimal bureaucracy and modest budgets. P5 stated: “We support initiatives through low-threshold micro-grants—really from the neighbourhood, for the neighbourhood—so people can start something themselves.” These programs, however, still remain peripheral to the city’s long-term development agenda.

Following the closure of TheSpace, The Quest operated nomadically through workshops and public events in different parts of Coolhaven, engaging diverse actors around questions of shared urban futures. The attention shifted from property to process: from the right to use a space towards the collective capacity to convene, connect, and articulate local knowledge within institutional settings.

During both phases, community actors relied on informal infrastructures such as personal relationships, social media, and micro-grants to sustain engagement, compensating for the absence of formal inclusion channels. Interviewees frequently noted that channels between community actors and institutions were fragmented, often reduced to digital exchanges that replaced previous face-to-face contact. Local resident (P6) notes: “On paper it all looks wonderful—participation, engagement—but in practice, it doesn’t really happen. It’s almost impossible to reach anyone. Also, there’s just a general email address—everything is digital now.” Within this environment, community actors relied on informal means like personal encounters, social media, and small grants to sustain participation. These improvised strategies compensated for the lack of formal mechanisms of inclusion and the absence of lasting institutional pathways.

Finally, municipal actors expressed a desire for more resident-led proposals rather than participation framed primarily as consultation. One municipal project manager emphasised:

I hope to see more young people taking initiative—coming to us with ideas rather than waiting for us to invite them. We’d love to react to citizen energy instead of driving it ourselves. That’s the future of real participation.

Across these dynamics, access in Coolhaven depended less on formal policy instruments than on temporary alignments of opportunity and trust. TheSpace functioned as a spatial and relational interstice, enabled by

institutional gaps but constrained by the short-term frameworks of temporary urbanism. The Quest extended this logic beyond a fixed location, transforming access into the collective capacity to gather and act within a changing urban landscape.

5.2.2. Practice and Membership

Within TheSpace, participation developed through everyday practice rather than formal organisation. Roles emerged organically as members contributed time, skills, or materials, creating a fluid structure of involvement. Collaborator P2 confirmed this, noting the structure started “very flexibly, without much formal structure,” based on a “mutual sense of experimentation, openness, respect, and a desire to co-create.” The composition of participants was diverse, with P2 noting that it included “some former residents who kept coming and found belonging,” suggesting that TheSpace successfully created a network that transcended the neighbourhood’s social fragmentation.

The Quest’s flexible organisation allowed engagement to adapt to changing circumstances. As P1 recalled from the earlier phase, “We invited others to use the space—concerts, dinners, meetings—anyone could propose something,” a logic that continued into The Quest’s programming even without a physical base. On the other hand, the same openness that once enabled experimentation continued to depend on the voluntary energy of a few core actors.

Across both initiatives, membership relied on shared purpose and recurring encounters rather than formal roles or contracts, reflecting a mode of community governance grounded in practice and learning, rather than regulation.

From an institutional perspective, such self-organised practices were seen as valuable yet difficult to reconcile with formal participation frameworks. Municipal staff described initiatives like TheSpace as socially enriching but hard to sustain within project-based timelines and administrative protocols. Housing representatives noted that while informal engagement created community energy, it rarely translated into recognised partnerships or influence over redevelopment decisions.

5.2.3. Ownership and Legacy

Ownership across TheSpace and The Quest was largely symbolic and procedural rather than legal or material. At TheSpace, there were no contracts or tenure rights—members operated on trust, maintaining the apartment through collective repair, reuse, and care. This stewardship generated a strong sense of belonging, even in the absence of property control. Participants described “doing the maximum with the minimum” as part of the ethos, where care for the space itself became a mode of authorship. Housing association representatives acknowledged this civic energy but stressed that temporary users “must understand the limits of permission,” as demolition schedules and compliance rules ultimately determined duration.

Municipal actors framed ownership differently, emphasising the balance between autonomy and accountability. They support community-led activities when these fit within safety and zoning frameworks but cannot extend that support indefinitely. As one manager explained, the municipality can provide affordable space or short leases but “not permanent subsidies.” This highlights a structural asymmetry: Civic

actors produce social value through care and initiative, but formal ownership and the ability to shape long-term outcomes remains institutional.

In *The Quest*, ownership was redefined through narrative and continuity rather than space. Without a physical base, participants “owned” the process of convening, documenting, and transmitting the methods developed earlier. This included maintaining visibility through social media, partnerships, and public events that extended TheSpace’s legacy into new contexts. Ownership thus shifted from control over property to the capacity to hold and circulate knowledge, networks, and stories. It marked a transition from possessing a place to sustaining prefigurative commons of practice, an ongoing, distributed form of stewardship within Coolhaven’s changing urban fabric, albeit reduced in frequency of activity.

6. Discussion

6.1. AMO in Common

The analysis highlights that membership in this CLI was enacted through practice and proximity rather than formal affiliation, thereby enriching debates on who “counts” as a commoner. Consistent with Foster and Iaione’s (2019) emphasis on civic participation and ongoing engagement, membership at TheSpace and *The Quest* was fluid, layered, and situational: Actors moved between roles as organisers, contributors, collaborators, and guests, while learning-by-doing built shared capacities over time. This practice-based membership enabled the initiative to weave together diverse skills—artistic, organisational, spatial, and technical—into a temporary but powerful collective agency. However, the same informality that fostered openness also produced vulnerabilities already noted in commons literature: reliance on a small core, burnout, uneven responsibility, and limited representation of less confident or less culturally “fluent” residents (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Marella, 2017).

Ownership in the AMO sense—understood as control, authorship, and value distribution rather than only legal title—remained the most constrained dimension, and thus the key frontier for future transformation. TheSpace exemplified “ownership through care” (Iaione, 2016): Participants collectively maintained, programmed, and narrated a place they did not legally own, generating social, cultural, and reputational value for the neighbourhood and institutions involved. Yet, when redevelopment advanced, this *de facto* stewardship did not translate into influence, long-term tenure, or shared decision rights, echoing De Angelis’s (2017b) concerns about enclosure of commoning gains and Harvey’s (2012) critique of urbanisation driven by property value rather than use value. *The Quest* partly reassembled ownership as narrative and methodological continuity, keeping alive a situated knowledge commons.

6.2. Urban Practices Continuum

Across this time, the actor-groups have shaped a place that is best understood as a common space. Within a level planning field, as contextualised in Figure 6, the developing initiatives represent an intermittent practice. With their contributions being contiguous to place-shaping, these four actors relate to different governance and policy arrangements. Their comparable efforts could be part of an integral value formative process for the neighbourhood and of the Hart van Coolhaven project.

Whilst visually expressed as convergence in Figure 6, all actors have developed a vision through alternating forms of assembly, decisions, and documentation. It is noticeable that a residents' committee or council did not emerge. The legal procedure has been loosely followed without agonistic decisions and is concluded in a reduced configuration. As it stands, there is no Hart van Coolhaven building yet for social housing residents to return. With each actor attuned to its own process, their contradictions are tied. Despite The Quest's renewed prefigurative potential, its broader integrative ambition remains unrealised—at least until a wider range of values is acknowledged within urban development practices.

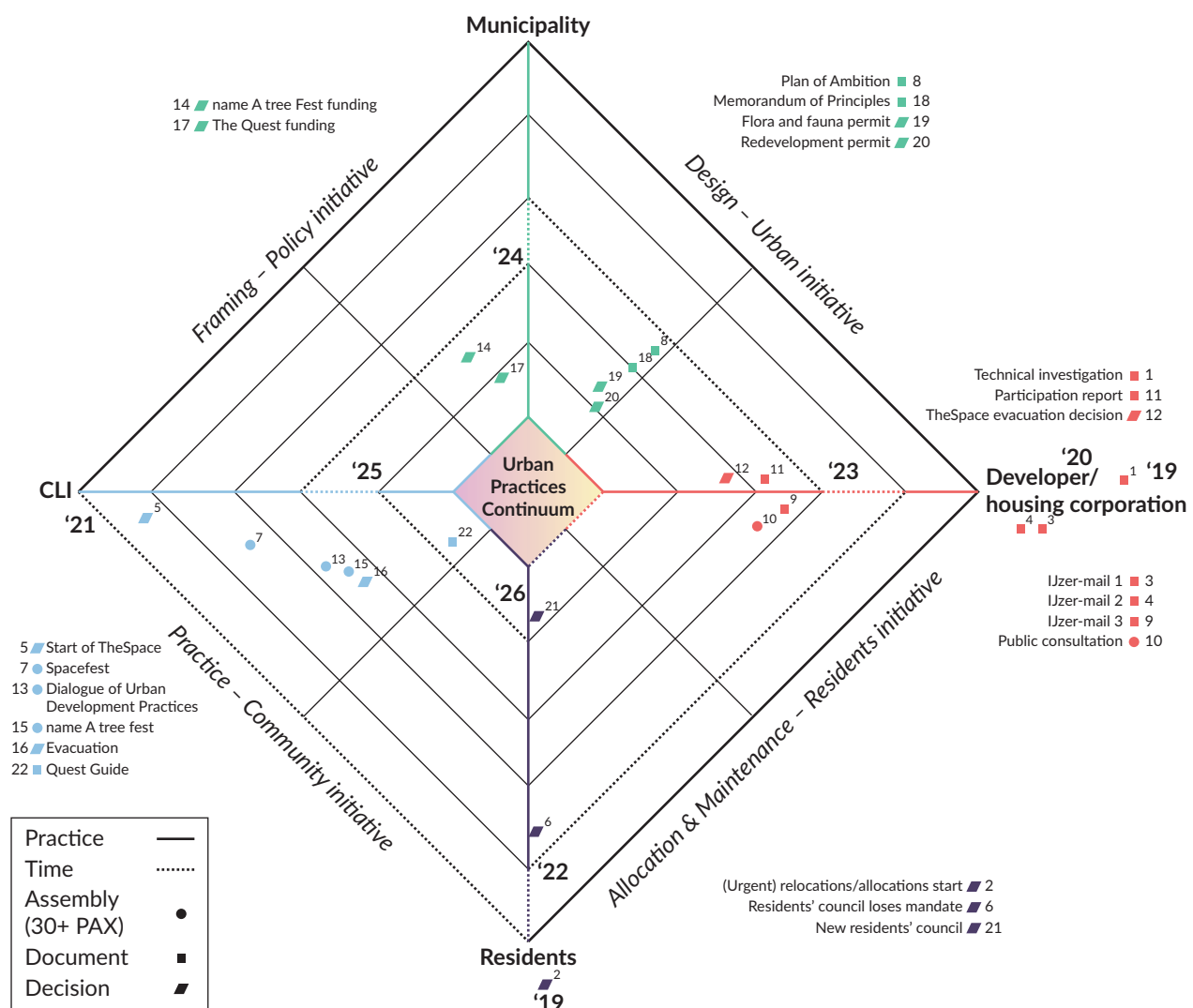


Figure 6. Urban practices continuum: converging practices in time and space. Note: Coloured by actor group and chronologically numbered. Source: Elaboration by the authors based on data from The Quest's repository.

7. Conclusion

CLIs, as found in this article, create their own distinct context, but they are not unique. Making this visible helps position them as credible proposals for transformation. This article has examined how CLIs can contribute to urban development not only as temporary cultural activities, but as evolving infrastructures of access, membership, and ownership.

Through the cases of TheSpace and The Quest, the study demonstrates that CLIs can generate social value, local knowledge, and collective capacity across different spatial and temporal conditions. When a fixed place was available, TheSpace enabled everyday commoning through shared use, care, programming, and encounter. After its closure, The Quest transformed this spatial commons into a nomadic process, sustaining networks, narratives, and participatory practices within the neighbourhood.

Analysing the data by applying the AMO framework highlights that access was enabled through temporary openings and informal trust; membership emerged through practice and recurring participation; and ownership developed as the most fragile dimension. Despite community actors producing social, cultural, and spatial value, they had limited control over long-term decisions, tenure, and redevelopment outcomes. This reveals a persistent gap between the recognised value of CLIs and their actual integration into urban development processes.

The low recognition of continuity mirrors broader critiques of participation in the Dutch context, where legally mandated participation rarely leads to shared authorship of urban development strategies. CLIs contribute to urban development by fostering a culture of proximity. Through their methods of organising a (persistent) practice, they can accumulate shared (access, membership, or ownership) resources over time, such as networks, spaces, objects, etc. The three highlighted examples from the event Dialogue of Urban Development Practices can be said to propose reconfigurations of the urban environment. Their prefigurative practices have, even if only nominally, constituted possibilities. They remain prefigurative practices as long as they maintain a shared culture and enable informal participation in urban development.

The presented cases suggest that for CLIs to thrive over time, they require more than temporary permission or symbolic participation. They need durable channels of institutional recognition, flexible resources, continuity of space or process, and mechanisms through which community-generated value can influence planning decisions. Rather than treating bottom-up initiatives as episodic contributions, urban development must learn to engage them as long-term partners. Time after time, the challenge is not to invite participation, but to create the conditions through which commoning practices can endure, adapt, and spontaneously co-produce urban futures.

TheSpace and The Quest remained prefigurative rather than reconfigurative. No institutional mechanism (e.g., right to challenge, shared purchase, community land trust) was activated to lock in the CLI's contribution in the Coolhaven development process. This points to a crucial implication of the study: If CLIs are to move from temporary enrichment to co-creation, then governance, planning, and housing frameworks must be redesigned to recognise commons-based stewardship as a legitimate basis for negotiating longer-term access, hybrid ownership arrangements, and structured roles in urban development trajectories. This includes shaping participatory alternatives for urban development practices that recognise the benefits of such inclusive and ecological approaches.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Hilde Remøy (TU Delft).

Data Availability

The data collected as part of the Coolhaven Beating Heart Participatory Quest are publicly available in The Quest Repository Zotero group library: https://www.zotero.org/groups/5923933/coolhaven_beating_heart_participatory_quest/library

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 5.1 and Grammarly to improve the clarity of the English writing.

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