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Collective Resources of Social Reproduction and Care? Potentialities and Limitations of Urban Initiatives of Commensality

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Abstract

Urban initiatives of commensality (UICs) form micro-public spaces where people meet, cook together, and share a meal. UICs thereby address both social needs for encounter, care, and community as well as material needs for (free) food. As lived examples of caring-with, UICs resist neoliberal individualisation, privatisation, and marketisation and experiment with alternative ways of being and relating in common. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a neighbourhood centre in the city of Graz, Austria, this article explores the practices and social relations of a weekly communal lunch and asks about the potentialities and limitations of UICs as collective resources of social reproduction and care in the city. The analysis is guided by feminist care ethics and social reproduction theory and emphasises, first, the organisational structure and the central role of the employees as curators of this commensal context, second, the caring-with relations that are established by being and doing in common, and, third, the ambiguous socio-spatial divisions of labour, both within the UIC and beyond. This contribution extends existing debates of commensality with a feminist analysis of micro-public curated commensal contexts.

Keywords

commensality; community; cooking; curated encounter; eating; feminist care ethics; reproductive labour

1. Introduction

The air shifts as we step inside, escaping the heavy rain and biting cold outside. Instantly, our glasses fog up in the warmth of the room. The sound of lively chatter and soft clinking of utensils greets us before we can see clearly. Around 10 people are already busy—chopping vegetables, sipping coffee, or lounging on a well-worn, forest-green sofa that exudes cosiness. A warm chorus of greetings meets

our entry, the kind that carries a touch of recognition. This is our third visit, and we feel very welcome and a part of these communal lunches. Some people glance up briefly, nodding as if to say, "Ah, it's them again," before resuming their tasks. The room, spacious and bathed in natural light from large windows, feels alive. A long wooden table dominates the centre. It's not just for cooking; people linger comfortably around it. On one end, an elderly man chops mushrooms with practised ease, occasionally sneaking pieces of carrot and leek into his mouth. His little corner is personalised—a travel magazine, a bowl of cashews, and a neatly placed comb sit within arm's reach, a quiet declaration of belonging. Nearby, a bookcase stands tall, crammed with a delightful mismatch of books and trinkets. Next to it, the coffee machine hums as a woman declares her favourite brew, sparking a lively debate about coffee brands. At the far end of the table, three women sit in the midst of what looks like a coffee klatch. They've brought a cake nestled in a container and flipped open magazines, the crinkling pages mingling with their soft laughter. Along the windows, crutches and walkers lean against the wall, creating an impromptu row of quiet observers. A dog sits calmly among them, its gaze serene and watchful. Above, the walls are alive with colour—a patchwork of paintings hangs like an art gallery, interspersed with a poster outlining rules for respectful interaction and communication. (Field vignette, 2024)

Across many cities, a growing number of initiatives create spaces for social interaction through collective meal preparation and shared dining experiences. By inviting "everyone" to contribute, whether by preparing food, setting the table, or washing dishes, these initiatives reimagine commensality (literally eating at the same table; Fischler, 2011) as a shared urban practice. In doing so, they address multiple needs: In addition to providing affordable meals, they tackle loneliness, foster community, and promote sustainable and nutritious diets. Cooking and eating are performed as communal, relational practices through which micro-public commensal contexts unfold. Here, strangers meet and get acquainted, preparing and enjoying a commensal meal. Ranging from community kitchens and neighbourhood food-sharing events to pop-up dinners in public spaces, these initiatives take different forms, appeal to different people, and require different levels of participation. To capture this diversity and provide a common conceptual framework, we introduce the term "urban initiatives of commensality" (UICs) to refer to a wide range of urban practices that use food and shared meals as a means of gathering people around a table (and a kitchen) to build and strengthen (local) communities.

UICs serve as the starting point for this article's effort to generate a situated understanding of micro-public commensal contexts and to reflect on the potentials and limitations of collective and collectivised forms of social reproduction and care in the city. Using the example of a neighbourhood centre in Graz that we call Centre COMPANE (CC) in this article and drawing on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork, we explore how this UIC operates as a space for experimenting with alternative ways of living, relating, and reproducing in common. We thus shift the focus from individualised struggles of/for commensality and care in families and/or private households to collective forms of social reproduction and care, seeking to unravel the complex social relations of urban public forms of commensality. In doing so, we critically engage with the broader structural dynamics that shape this particular commensal context, highlighting the inherent ambivalences and contradictions and pointing to UICs' potential to both subvert and reinforce existing dominant patterns of social reproduction and care.

We understand UICs against the backdrop of the ongoing crises of social reproduction and care that have led to increasing precarisation (Dowling, 2021; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). To interrogate the socio-spatial

entanglements of commensality, care, and labour, we draw on feminist theories that radically question capitalism's spatial and gendered division of labour and the feminisation and privatisation of social reproduction and care. Accordingly, our analysis brings together, and at times contrasts, conceptual debates from feminist care ethics (FCE), which foregrounds the relational and embodied dimensions of care, and social reproduction theory (SRT), which situates these initiatives and the corresponding labour within the broader crisis of reproduction in neoliberal capitalism. With this focus, we critically examine the social relations enacted within and through the UIC and foreground what has often been absent from broader debates on commensality: the reproductive labour and care relations that are fundamental to any commensal activity, yet highly embedded in uneven relations of power. We ask what it takes to organise and mediate—curate—commensal events and how spatial-material conditions shape these practices.

In what follows, we will first refer to debates of commensality, followed by a brief discussion on public and micro-public commensal contexts and their potential to disrupt the persistent gendered socio-spatial order, before turning to the conceptual debates of SRT and FCE. Then, we will introduce the weekly lunch at the CC and our methodological approach. Finally, we proceed with a feminist analysis of our empirical findings in this commensal context. Our analysis focuses on three core dimensions: first, the organisational and curatorial efforts required to establish and sustain a UIC; second, the emergence of care relationships through collaborative practices; and third, the gendered and spatial distribution of reproductive labour. We conclude with a discussion on the possibilities and limitations of UICs as collective resources for navigating and resisting the pressures of precarised social reproduction and care.

2. Commensality

2.1. Commensality: In the Debate

The term commensality is generally understood to refer to the practice of eating together (Jönsson et al., 2021) or eating with others (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Beyond this basic definition, commensality has been the focus of extensive interdisciplinary research exploring its social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions (Kerner et al., 2015). This includes debates in psychology, nutrition and health studies (Bernardi & Visioli, 2024; Dunbar, 2017; Marklinder & Nydahl, 2021), anthropology and history (Kerner et al., 2015), sociology (Fischler, 2011; Simmel, 1997), and also contributions from theology (Oberholtzer Lee, 2011), philosophy, and cultural studies (Kok, 2022).

Commensality is fundamentally about food, which is why contributions from food studies have a long tradition of analysing commensality, focusing primarily on what is eaten and shared. This gives us valuable insights into the significance of the food itself (Kerner et al., 2015). While grounded in everyday routines, food and food-related practices are complex, multi-layered, and deeply entwined with physiological, social, and cultural significance. Debates in food studies encompass the interplay between food, food work, and social relations through food, with commensality as just one form or facilitator. However, with this contribution, we shift the attention from food per se to the social relations which emerge in micro-public commensal contexts.

Commensal meals are considered beneficial to psychosocial health and fostering a sense of belonging (Pfeiffer et al., 2015). What is more, shared meals have been shown to play a vital role in processes of social bonding, community formation, and the maintenance—or disruption—of social hierarchies, from common

meals in families and neighbourhoods to spiritual feasts and political movements (Christie, 2004; Mittermaier, 2014; Smith & Harvey, 2021). As such, commensality is not merely a social act but has a structuring role: It determines who eats with whom, under what circumstances, and to what effect. This intersection of food studies and social theory approaches raises crucial questions about who is expected to serve and to clean after a meal, who is (not) welcome, how and where people are seated, and who is excluded. These questions, however, are rarely taken up in the debate but need to be addressed in order to complement the widespread romanticisation of commensality with perspectives that are sensitive to uneven relations of power, processes of exclusion, or modes of (patriarchal) domination and violence.

Commensality and especially the domestic commensal meal are widely idealised and normatively loaded—both in terms of healthy nutrition, social interaction, and bonding (Jönsson et al., 2021). Observed socio-cultural changes in practices of commensality are often framed through a lens of concern, e.g., lamenting the perceived decline of the family meal in Western societies attributed to individualisation and the erosion of fixed mealtime routines (Fischler, 2011; Jönsson et al., 2021; Oren et al., 2024). What is more, such an idealisation of commensality risks concealing that shared meals are not always harmonious; they can be stressful and uncomfortable (Jönsson et al., 2021). As a social practice, shared meals are permeated by relations of inequality and social hierarchies as well as gendered, classed, and racialised stereotypes of food and people (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Cook, 2008; Marovelli, 2019; Véron, 2024; Wise, 2011).

Although the concept of commensality is widely discussed, considerations of how social structures and structural changes (such as shifting gender roles or the digitalisation of work) shape practices of commensality remain relatively underexplored, though not entirely absent (Giacoman, 2016; Marovelli, 2019; Oren et al., 2024; Smith & Harvey, 2021; Spence et al., 2019; Wise, 2011). At the same time, critical scholarship in food studies, human geography, and other disciplines examines forms of shared cooking and eating practices beyond family and friendship relations. These are often addressed under the broader term "food sharing" (Davies et al., 2017). In this context, sharing food is discussed as a central element of both community formation and social exclusion, carrying significant meaning across different historical and geographical contexts (Davies et al., 2017; Fischler, 2011; Giacoman, 2016; Jönsson et al., 2021). *Sharing* is fundamental to commensality, yet what exactly is being shared remains open to debate. As Håkan Jönsson et al. (2021, p. 1) ask: "Does it mean sharing the food? The table? The place? The moment?"

While the social meaning of commensality seems to be undisputed (or even overrated), the research predominantly locates commensality within the (heteronormative) family and in the private household, or focuses on highly ritualised feasts (Dunbar, 2017; for notable exceptions, see Marovelli, 2019; Wise, 2011). Commensality does not necessarily take place in private spaces, but other forms of public and communal eating are rarely referred to as commensality. Despite—and because of—this limited attention in social science and humanities debates on commensality, we choose to study a micro-public commensal context, centring less on the food sharing and more on the social relations it engenders.

2.2. Micro-Public Commensal Contexts: Cooking and Eating Collectively in Urban Initiatives of Commensality

Following Frei and Böhlen (2010, p. 20), we understand micro-publics as "institutions at the intersections of public interests. They rearrange resources of all kinds to generate new services outside of the private

domain." UICs are characterised by the fact that they organise commensal events in micro-public settings and combine the purposes of tackling (food) poverty, addressing health and dietary matters, encouraging social encounters and interactions among strangers, counteracting loneliness, and providing possibilities for learning and participation. Food is but one aspect of the event, distinguishing UICs from food aid or charities, which primarily concentrate on the distribution of food to people in need (Cloke et al., 2017). UICs mobilise commensality as a means through which temporary micro-publics are formed, social difference and needs are negotiated, caring relations are established, and, at times, political and ethical concerns are articulated through the collective act of preparing the meal and/or setting up the space for commensality. In this way, UICs enable active participation—regardless of financial contributions—and provide access to people who are excluded from other forms of commensality and togetherness in public or private spaces, thus counteracting "alimentary exclusion" (Pfeiffer et al., 2015, p. 489).

Alongside their focus on food and meal sharing, scholars analyse different forms of (micro-)public collective cooking and eating, ranging from self-organised, autonomous to institutionalised initiatives or kitchens for the urban poor (Cloke et al., 2017; Heynen, 2010; Hoinle & Klosterkamp, 2023). However, they seldom engage explicitly with the concept of "commensality," leaving this intersection underexplored. Rather, the debates are often conducted under different terms, commensal practices are also referred to as "communal eating" (Giacoman, 2016) and "social eating" (Marovelli, 2019; Smith & Harvey, 2021) or discussed as "conviviality" (Starck & Matta, 2024) or "hospitality" (Clarebout & Mescoli, 2023), and often the terms are used interchangeably (Jönsson et al., 2021; Oren et al., 2024; for a discussion on "commensality" and "conviviality," see Starck & Matta, 2024).

Recently, self-organised kitchens have drawn particular attention in the debates within urban studies and urban geography and are often analysed through the lenses of radical care, commons, and mutual aid (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2022; Heynen, 2010; Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Hübl, 2024; Ruiz Cayuela, 2021) or conceptualised as "local care infrastructures from below" (Flückiger et al., 2024, p. 30, translation by the authors). While these studies focus primarily on autonomous, grassroots initiatives, less attention has been paid to initiatives of commensality that operate in hybrid forms, situated between self-organisation and institutionalisation. Unlike autonomous, entirely self-organised initiatives, which often rely heavily on participants' resources and time, or fully institutionalised projects, which may prioritise efficiency over participation, these "in-between" constellations offer structured support and inclusive facilitation that can open up opportunities for individuals—particularly reaching out to marginalised (groups of) people—to engage in meaningful and collaborative ways. In doing so, they challenge dualistic notions of the public and the private, the formal and informal, or the top-down and bottom-up, by embedding collective, caring practices within structured yet participatory frameworks. With this contribution, we want to broaden the discussion on micro-public commensal contexts by proposing a feminist analysis of UICs. Through this approach, we seek to bridge to largely separate strands of research: debates on care and social reproduction on the one hand, and (micro-public forms of) commensal practices on the other.

2.3. Feminist Perspectives: Commensality as Social Reproduction and Care?

To expand the debates on commensality and addressing the UIC's social relations, we draw on SRT and FCE. SRT directs our attention to the underlying structural conditions that shape commensal events; to a spatial understanding of sites of reproduction and to the relationship between waged and unwaged labour as well as

the tension between individualised and collectivised social reproductive labour (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012; Ferguson, 2020; Fraser, 2016; Katz, 2001; Rodríguez-Rocha, 2021). Whereas SRT analyses the relations, tensions, and contractions between productive and reproductive labour from a political economic perspective, FCE focuses on the qualitative aspects of care: on the interdependence of social relations and on relational beings and doings (Dowling, 2021; Tronto, 2013). FCE's emphasis on care relations thus serves as an analytical lens to understand the complex social relations within UICs, situating them within wider social relations of power and pointing to alternative and more democratic modes of organising care (Tronto, 2013). Specific tasks, i.e., cooking, can be considered both as care and social reproduction. In line with the theoretical distinction, we use social reproduction as a functional category (Dowling, 2021) to refer primarily to the structural relationship between paid productive and unpaid reproductive labour in capitalism (Barbagallo & Federici, 2012; Srnicek & Hester, 2017) and care in regard to the efforts to "maintain, continue, and repair 'our world'" (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40), emphasising ethical social relationships (Dowling, 2021). Hence, while FCE—we refer primarily to Joan Tronto's understanding of FCE—highlights social interdependencies and the quality of relationships, SRT situates these activities within broader structural and economic contexts.

Cooking, as central to reproductive labour and care work, has historically been framed as a domestic activity. The provision of meals and the associated feminised caring labour (such as nurturing through food and maintaining familial bonds) remain considered as private responsibilities and are often rendered invisible (Brenner & Laslett, 1991; DeVault, 1991; Duma, 2023; Federici, 2019; Srnicek & Hester, 2017). Practices such as preparing family meals and fostering commensality are often romanticised and naturalised as expressions of maternal duty, compassion, and care, thereby obscuring the uneven societal distribution of labour and the systemic devaluation of domestic work within patriarchal capitalist structures. Feminist historical materialist approaches as SRT have long critiqued this dynamic, addressing the underlying structural mechanisms and problematising how capitalism—as an economic system and institutionalised social order (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018)—relies on the exploitation of the un(der)paid reproductive labour of women (Costa & James, 1975; Cox & Federici, 1975). Stressing that reproductive tasks such as domestic housework—including cooking—are essential to capitalist production and economy, they challenge the depiction of social reproduction as the *other* to production and the associated socio-spatial division of labour (Fraser, 2016; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Katz, 2001).

Neoliberal austerity measures such as funding cuts in health care or social services have exacerbated the societal scarcity of resources, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to adequately care for themselves and others and to meet their everyday needs (Dowling, 2021; Hall, 2019). This culminates in what is currently widely discussed and experienced as the crisis of care. Although it manifests on the individual level—and individually differently—the crisis of care is fundamentally rooted in structural inequalities related to social reproduction (Dowling, 2021; Fraser, 2016; Winker, 2015).

FCE is rooted in long-standing feminist critiques of the social arrangement of care in capitalist societies and the underlying structural inequalities that permeate care relationships. These inequalities socially construct and maintain difference as part of relations of domination and are tied to notions of dependencies and hierarchies, often reflected in paternalistic care relationships. This is particularly relevant when the lines between "providers" and "receivers" of care are sharply drawn, ignoring that *all* people are in need of care, as is often the case in (food) charities (Saltiel, 2022). By positioning interdependency as a fundamental aspect of human and more-than-human existence, Tronto (2013) challenges the notion of the autonomous

individual, arguing that this ideal not only devalues dependency but also feminises it, perpetuating structural inequalities. By reframing care as a public issue that demands collective action (Lynch et al., 2021)—as a collective responsibility (rather than a private concern) and a crucial site for political engagement—FCE fundamentally shifts our understanding of care relationships from individual obligations to communal commitments.

What is more, FCE also provides a normative framework for imagining caring cities and societies that collectively and democratically negotiate and allocate care resources and responsibilities (Saltiel & Strüver, 2022; Tronto, 2013; Williams, 2017). Tronto foregrounds social interdependencies and conceptualises care as an inherent relational condition of human survival and everyday life, and thus as a public affair. In Tronto's framework of FCE, practices of "caring-with" become vital. Based on the ethical qualities of plurality, trust, respect, and solidarity, caring-with are public practices of care that shift towards democratisation and a more just societal organisation of care (Tronto, 2013). The latter "cannot be left to existing institutions and practices, not to families or households, systems of production and markets for consumption, nor existing government agencies and policies" (Tronto, 2013, p. 140) but can only be a collective practice.

Feminist scholars have long emphasised how neoliberal policies propagating ideals of the autonomous individual obscure fundamental social interdependencies (see, among others, Hall, 2019; The Care Collective, 2020; Tronto, 2013). Against this background, we shift the focus from individualised struggles to collective forms of social reproduction and care outside the private household as a means of disturbing and altering urban space (Pettas & Daskalaki, 2022; Ruin, 2017). Creating commensal contexts in (micro-)public spaces such as neighbourhood centres, and thus performing social reproductive labour in the public sphere, disrupts, challenges, and alters socio-spatial and gendered patterns of social reproduction, as feminist scholars emphasise (Federici, 2019; Kitchen Politics, 2023; Uhlmann, 2023). This potential for rupture politicises collective modes of care and reproduction. It points to the possibility "that things, social conditions, and relationships could be otherwise" (Katz et al., 2015, p. 185). What is more, with "going public," the otherwise individualised and domestic (care) tasks become visible and "tied to a larger collective action" (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 6).

This collective action in community kitchens or cooking initiatives can take very different forms, ranging from civil society organisations distributing foods fighting hunger and food waste (Cloke et al., 2017; Hall, 2015), to initiatives in which cooking is used as a tool for togetherness and learning (Hall et al., 2020), to self-organised kitchens forming temporary (infra)structures for disaster-relief and immediate survival (Heynen, 2010; Li, 2023) or to support protest (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2022; Tognola, 2023). However, also in "'less obvious' politicised space" (Hall, 2020, p. 248) or "seemingly most apolitical spaces" (Mittermaier, 2014, p. 73), practices of cooking and food sharing can echo broader calls for social justice, breaking down hierarchies of helping and promoting mutual care.

Drawing on these diverse and inspiring debates—on commensality (largely situated in private or ritualised contexts), on public forms of shared food provision (ranging from institutionalised to self-organised), and on feminist perspectives that frame cooking and eating together as embedded in both care and social reproduction—this article contributes to an understanding of UICs as a site where everyday relational practices and broader structural dynamics intersect. We aim to extend existing discussions by exploring how shared meals in "in-between" settings generate specific micro-public commensal contexts with particular configurations of care, labour, and interdependence.

3. Researching Urban Initiatives of Commensality

We explore UICs using qualitative ethnographic methods to develop a situated and grounded understanding of the complex social relations they engender. UICs form an interface in our research interests: While the author Anna Verwey researches collectivised social reproduction with a focus on self-organised and activist kitchens, the author Rivka Saltiel approaches UICs through a lens of encounters across difference with an emphasis on caring relations. A start of our joint work on UICs formed the co-teaching of the seminar "Taste the Difference. Urban Initiatives of Commensality Between Survival and Experience." Together with a group of students, we explored a whole range of different offers of non-commercial public communal (cooking and) eating events in the city. Captivated by the richness and diversity of these practices, we decided to delve deeper into the topic. Between July 2023 and September 2024, we (the authors) participated in six UICs in Graz, encompassing a broad spectrum of formats—from food aid initiatives to cultural and political gatherings, each involving varying degrees of participation.

3.1. The Centre COMPANE as an Example of an Urban Initiative of Commensality

For this article, we opted for an in-depth analysis of the lunch in the CC. We chose the CC as it provides a specific commensal context, somehow hybrid between institutionalisation and self-organisation. The CC is one of 22 neighbourhood centres funded by the city of Graz. This institutional link grants municipal funding for food as well as for paid positions, while offering space for voluntary engagement and different levels of participation. Its facilities include a large room for gatherings of all sorts, a small kitchen, restrooms, and offices. Located in a diverse central district with a significant share of migrant and working-class residents, the CC offers a wide range of programmes and services, including weekly social gatherings, cultural events, intergenerational activities, citizen consultations, and a socio-medical program. Among these events, there is a weekly communal lunch, facilitated by a sociologist and a nutritionist, both employed part-time—we will call them Julia and Hannah here (all names are pseudonymised). The centre's budget, though rather tight, covers the costs of the lunch. Donations (into a box that is positioned in a corner) to add to the budget are welcome, though there is no pressure for anyone to contribute. Participants meet at 11 a.m. to socialise and start preparing a meal that is served around 1 p.m. Attendees are encouraged to contribute recipes, help with cooking and cleaning, and stay after lunch is over.

Though the lunchtime makes it difficult for people with standard working hours to join, the commensality at the CC is intended as an inclusive space of encounter that invites many people across differences to enter and participate, as was emphasised by the organisers (Julia, interview, September 12, 2024). This corresponds to the purpose of neighbourhood centres to foster community through inclusive and participatory events and to act as point of contact and support for people in need (of language and administrative assistance and social, medical, and/or mental health support) and as a space of encounter for diverse residents, promoting urban togetherness, particularly in diverse neighbourhoods. The communal meal, therefore, fulfils multiple purposes and caters particularly to people who are new in town, lonesome, and/or poor. CC provides barrier-free access, and tables are positioned so that wheelchairs or rollators can easily get through. For planning purposes, registration for lunch is requested two days in advance (there is a phone number on the webpage; further communication takes place in a WhatsApp group). However, it is always possible to join in spontaneously.

Most of the 15 to 20 people attending each time are regulars, creating a sense of familiarity and connection. The attendants differ in terms of age, gender, and class; some bring (grand)children or dogs. The majority of the participants live in precarity and face financial, bodily, and mental health issues that are debated openly among the group. Most of the people are over 40, and many are older. While some have a low level of education, other participants have a university degree. However, despite the efforts to reach different people and appeal to the demographics of the neighbourhood, the group consists mainly of elderly women. While most of the people take an active part in all tasks, some (predominantly male) participants only join at eating time and do not participate in cooking or cleaning. The attendants have different motivations for taking part. While a group of friends come to lunch every week to socialise, drink coffee, and maintain their friendships as they chop vegetables, others bring their own home-cooked food and come to eat it in community, and some rely particularly on the free meal.

3.2. Collaborative Cook-Alongs

We empirically approached the UICs through "cook-and eat-alongs" (Verwey & Bastian, 2025), combining participatory observations with (spontaneous and planned) semi-structured interviews. In repeated participation, we engaged in the preparation of the meals, undertaking tasks in the kitchen, and chatting with other participants. Our research approach was inherently collaborative: We were both simultaneously present at the CC. This allowed for two different embodied experiences, related emotions, and observations. Immediately after the field visits, we sat together and exchanged and reflected on our experiences and impressions of the UIC. These recorded and transcribed conversations took the form of dialogues and served as both data collection and first analysis (Höfner & Saltiel, 2021).

Some of our shared experiences are depicted in the field vignettes in Sections 1 and 4. As "the written output of thick description" (Militz & Schurr, 2016, p. 57), vignettes offer rich, situated accounts that encompass the researchers' embodied experiences (Creutziger, 2018). Thus, we foreground the situatedness of knowledges and emphasise the relational, sensational, affective, and embodied dimensions of research, which are central to critical feminist epistemologies underlying this research (Rose, 1997). In this sense, also the sketches crafted by Anna Verwey after visiting the CC serve as an expression of her experiences and perception of space.

Our positionality—as white researchers in our thirties, read as female—rendered us visible in particular ways within the field. Often, we were assumed to be social workers, artists, or students. We made our role as researchers transparent; however, our research was rarely an issue of debate after initial introductions, and we were wholeheartedly welcomed by the group. Given this openness to new people, access to and participation in this particular UIC were easy.

4. A Feminist Analysis of an Urban Initiative of Commensality

Julia bursts in from the kitchen, her energy contagious as she smiles and greets us. "Good that you're here now! Do you know how to make dumplings?" she asks, her tone both hopeful and urgent. We nod. "Perfect. Ingredients are in the kitchen—let's get started." We quickly shed our wet jackets and backpacks, tossing them into a corner on the floor. On our way to the kitchen, a man, who gives us a particularly friendly welcome, intercepts us with wide-eyed enthusiasm, showing off his latest treasure—a stack of Mickey Mouse comics from the 1980s, scored at a flea market. We promise to

take a closer look later, squeezing past him into the kitchen, where we find ourselves enveloped by warmth and activity. The space is tight, bustling with people moving around each other like a carefully choreographed dance. Ingredients for the dumplings are scattered on the counter—some already prepped, others we have to find ourselves. Julia explains the chaos with an apologetic laugh. "Everything's a bit messy today," she says. "I have too much on my plate, thanks for taking over. No need for measuring—just go with your instincts." With a deep breath, we roll up our sleeves, wash our hands, and dive in. Flour, eggs, and milk merge under our fingers, transforming into a sticky dough. To let everyone participate, as instructed by Julia, we go back into the main room with the mixing bowl in hand. At the large table, people gather to watch and take part. Five women—each with their own method and opinion—surround us, creating a lively, collaborative chaos. Some dive in enthusiastically, hands deep in the dough, while others hang back, offering advice from the sidelines. One elderly woman, her hands stiff with arthritis, struggles to secure rubber bands around the dumplings and asks for help. We exchange recipes and debate the best folding techniques, all learning as we go. Every step is accompanied by commentary, laughter, and, in the end, the dumplings reflect the diverse approaches—different shapes and styles, some meticulously tied, others haphazardly wrapped. (Field vignette, 2024)

To explore what unfolds within the commensal context of the CC, we begin by examining the curating role of the organisers, followed by practices of caring-with and relations of care, before addressing the possibilities and limits of collectivisation and the spatial and gendered dimensions of shared and divided labour.

4.1. Curated Commensality: Organising Urban Initiatives of Commensality

We observed that the organisers take a central role in setting the scene for the encounter and in creating a warm and caring environment at the CC. They hold a particular authority and can quickly intervene and de-escalate tensions and conflicts. As such, the encounters between strangers that occur at the CC are curated in a double sense: They are not arbitrary but arranged, organised, and mediated, and they are initiated as a means to provide care (etymologically deriving from the Latin term *cura/curare*) in response to the needs of people in the city (Saltiel, 2023). As a particular form of organised "purposeful" encounters in micro-publics (Amin, 2002; Wilson, 2017), curated encounters generate new forms of urban togetherness, belonging (Askins, 2015), care, and provision (Saltiel, 2023).

At the CC, Julia and Hannah act as curators. Employed as professional care workers responsible for creating supportive frameworks and addressing participants' needs through counselling, conflict resolution, and relationship-building, they make sure that people entering the room are greeted (either by other participants or themselves) and that newcomers are introduced to the space, the procedure, and all participants. This involves small talk and might consist of a whole range of personal questions depending on who is doing the introduction. While potentially overwhelming for those needing more time to settle in, the gesture remains welcoming, enabling immediate participation through the explanation and assignment of tasks.

From Julia's perspective, her job during the commensal event is to stay on top of things, monitoring where people sit, checking in on participants, and assessing the emotional atmosphere to anticipate possible responses or actions. Julia and Hannah moderate between the kitchen and the community, ensuring everyone is involved, assigning tasks and coordinating what is happening, while, as Julia puts it, "on the side,

we give a bit of counselling" (Julia, interview, September 12, 2024). Julia emphasises her and Hannah's shared responsibility for the well-being of each participant as well as for a respectful and supportive dynamic within the group of participants. This requires balancing the needs of the group and of individuals. While those seeking counselling are formally referred to designated counselling hours with CC's social workers, Julia notes that in practice, often needs surface during the lunch itself—embedded in small interactions, personal conversations, or subtle changes in atmosphere. Referrals are often insufficient, as support is sought in the immediacy of the moment and within the relational context of shared activities. This is why two employees are present during the lunch; one to carry on with the meal, and one to step in if someone requires immediate support, whether related to personal struggles or mental health concerns (Julia, interview, September 12, 2024).

We observe this reacting and intervening by Julia and Hannah particularly at one visit. The atmosphere is different, and we realise it as soon as we enter. A person who was a regular at the UIC has passed away. The usual routine no longer applies; some of the participants are very upset and do not quite know what to do. Julia is no longer in the kitchen; she comforts the mourners and reassures them that the bereavement is being addressed. Together with other participants, we take on the cooking. When the table is set and everyone has taken a seat, Julia informs the whole group about the loss, says a few words about the person, and calls for a minute's silence before the meal. A candle is lit next to a framed picture of the deceased. What the example illustrates is that the participants of the commensality event are connected beyond food. They form a community that takes part in each other's lives and cares for and with one another. Commensality in the context of CC is not just about food being shared, even if it does play a central role.

The municipal funding and the CC's institutional role as a neighbourhood centre allow for the employment of staff whose work as facilitators enables collective and diverse care practices. These findings highlight how care is not only provided but co-produced through interactions, embedded within (changing) institutional and relational frameworks (for a close reading on the local political context and the priorities of Graz's communist politics, see Saltiel et al., 2024). Building on this, we now turn to emerging forms of caring-with.

4.2. Relational Commensality: Caring-With in Practice

We observed a wide range of caring practices at the CC. Care is provided, knowledge is exchanged, and caring relationships are built and strengthened. By focusing on the relationships and practices of care involved in this commensal context, we look beyond the food(work) and ask what it takes to make public commensal events possible—and pleasant—for a diverse group of people, many of whom are marginalised in their everyday lives in the city and lack social ties and networks. There are numerous opportunities for caring involvement, including sharing of experiences, objects, and labour (of preparing the meal), regardless of individual possibilities. For example, precarious life realities and survival strategies are shared next to recipes. Municipal housing regulations for dog owners and ways to circumvent restrictions are discussed, and tips are exchanged on where to find free food, free sports activities, excursions, or short-term additional income opportunities in the city. Sharing this knowledge and strategies not only represents a meaningful resource for organising one's life in precarity, but can also lead to an understanding of these experiences as shared, counteracting dominant patterns of isolation and individualisation.

Many people bring something to and for the centre (rubbish bags, coffee, cleaning sponges they have bought on offer, or board games). Discount vouchers are distributed among the participants and some to the centre, food from food-sharing programmes is shared, comic books bought at the flea market are given away, home-made pastries are brought for dessert, a former nurse advises a diabetes patient, and friends put food aside for a woman who will be arriving later. While some people engage more in cooking, others are more involved in tidying up or preparing the coffee for all. Still others bring along things prepared at home. Attentive to people's (diverging) possibilities, needs, and moods, Julia allocates tasks. For example, a person with rheumatism is provided with a garlic rocker and sits on a chair for an hour, crushing the garlic, which allows him to participate without experiencing pain. By getting actively involved, all participants become caregivers, be it through cooking or by engaging in caring relations and practices of listening, supporting, and exchanging gifts or tips. Normative attributions of care receivers become blurred, and the "pathologies of dependency" (The Care Collective, 2020, p. 29) on care get disrupted.

The participants give and take and become part of the community that is formed through collective caring. In the UIC, we observed how care is practised collectively and how friendships and micro-communities of care emerge on site through being and doing together at the commensal event. These caring communities represent essential social resources. They respond to structures of social marginalisation and unequal access to care by (self-)organising care provision. In doing so, they have the potential to empower the participants collectively and enable socio-political participation and potentially disrupt and/or shift modes of being and doing in common (Saltiel & Strüver, 2025).

Relationships—both new and existing—extend beyond the commensal event at the UIC. Friends also come to the UIC together, underlining its role as a space where people can eat out in public regardless of financial means. New friendships also emerge among participants, who go on to engage in various activities both within the neighbourhood centre and elsewhere. Feminist scholars emphasise that friendships develop "through, across and between spaces, scales and practices" (Hall, 2019, p. 778). As central informal, everyday relationships of care, friendships help people to navigate life under austerity (Hall, 2019) and can counteract (the effects of) individualisation and precarisation (Bowlby, 2011).

At the CC, we observed how these joint efforts and communal experiences foster a particular sense of communality and community. Yet, not everyone's expectations are equally met. One guest, an older woman living alone who participates every week at the commensal event and also joins a range of other activities at the neighbourhood centre, expresses her longing to become a "member of a group." She claims that the lunch community's rather loose connections do not suffice her social needs. On the other side, other guests prefer not to engage or relate too closely with other participants. Thus, not all (diverging) needs for social ties and community are equally met by the particular communality produced by the commensal event. What is more, our observations also point out how acts of care, though often well-intentioned, can be overbearing. During one of the meals, one person asked for only half a portion of pasta, explaining that she could not eat more than that anyway. She is immediately faced with comments from other participants, who pressurise her to eat the whole portion because they consider her too thin. A whole discussion about (under)nutrition ensues, which goes on for quite a while. Thus, it is a constant negotiation of intimacy, closeness, privacy, and difference and of individual and collective needs and belongings.

4.3. Social Commensality: Space, Gender, and the Division of Labour

Finally, we return to the division of labour at the CC, which points us to the question of *what* is actually shared and collectivised and how in this particular commensal context. To this end, it is worth taking a closer look at the spatial-material conditions of UICs as they shape the process and structure the sharing and division of (reproductive) labour. The kitchen at the CC is very small and separate from the large room (see Figure 1) where the table is set. It is not designed for collective cooking. Rather, its set-up is similar to that of common domestic kitchens (four hobs, oven, sink, small fridge) and has space for a maximum of three people—and then it is already crowded. Accordingly, the material conditions clearly predefine the opportunities of collectivising reproductive labour and thus crucially shape the commensal and convivial relations (see also Smith & Harvey, 2021). Recipes are chosen according to the possibilities and limitations in terms of space, time, budget, utensils, and competences. The prerequisite is that they do not take too long (everything has to be ready within two hours), do not need constant stirring, and require little space. As for the limited space, Julia ensures that only people with a "functional role" (Julia, interview, September 12, 2024) stay in the kitchen. Here, functional refers to work steps that involve using immobile kitchen devices and therefore have to take place in the kitchen (i.e., stirring or washing up). Most of these cooking tasks are actually carried out or closely supervised by Julia and Hannah. During most of the event, they are found in the kitchen. All other activities take place in the large room; people peel, chop, knead, mould, chat, drink coffee, etc., at the table (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. The kitchen of the CC and the coffee counter as an extension (drawing by Anna Verwey).

The big table in the middle of the room is central for the commensal activities, which, by definition, are centred around a table (in Latin, *mensa*). It is not only the place where most of the cooking work is carried out, but also where people gather to sit and eat the meal. At our last visit, the tables were rearranged. It was no longer one long table but two separated, smaller tables with space to pass between them. As some of the participants face limited mobility, the room is now more accessible and provides better walkability. The shared table is symbolic as an integral community element, but "tables are another material aspect that can be easily manoeuvred by organisers to fabricate a more inclusive atmosphere" (Marovelli, 2019, p. 197). Social in- and exclusion can

Figure 2. The shared table (drawing by Anna Verwey).

be materialised by moving or not moving a table, and one large table for everyone to gather around does not necessarily guarantee an inclusive space or social situation (Bennewitz, 2013). We also observed that, at the shared long table, little groups have been sitting at rather fixed places, using all the length of the long table but not necessarily sitting all together.

Although the reproductive labour of cooking is relocated to a micro-public setting and subjected to collective negotiation, we observed that the gendered division of labour—both spatially and functionally—persists. From a materialist feminist perspective, this points to the structural entrenchment of gendered labour within capitalist social relations, where even in reflexive, collectively organised settings, the socio-material structures of gendered labour largely continue, albeit in rearticulated forms. This is evident not only in the gendered division of labour at CC, but also in who feels addressed by and drawn to such events; predominantly women, thus reinforcing existing gendered expectations around social reproductive labour. In the kitchen, we observe exclusively women, while the (few) men are in the large common room.

What is more, the supposedly publicised kitchen remains a private and intimate place, not least because of the unavoidable physical closeness in the narrow space (see also Marovelli, 2019). Much of what happens at the stove, including how tasks are distributed, remains invisible to most participants. Knowledge and responsibility are largely concentrated with Julia and Hannah, who oversee the process and carry out most of the kitchen tasks. While Julia arranges the plates to be served in the kitchen, everyone sits in the large room, chatting as they wait for their meal. The table is set, and people wait in their seats to be served. Once a week, this room becomes a dining space with a distinctly public character. Facing the street, it serves as

the entry point to the neighbourhood centre and hosts various public events. Unlike the kitchen, activities here are visible to both participants and passers-by through the windows. While the shared meal is staged and seen, much of the labour that enables it—preparation, cooking, cleaning, and rearranging—remains invisible and unacknowledged.

The UIC relies on the labour of participants, which includes more than the cooking. Without collective efforts, there is no meal to consume and no commensality. However, not all chores can be done simultaneously during the time slot of the weekly lunch, and not all reproductive activities in connection with the lunch event are collectivised. While some tasks, such as chopping, table setting and clearing, serving, and washing the dishes, are performed by the group, others remain unseen and go unrecognised, such as cleaning the floor, arranging the tables, or unloading the dishwasher. Most of them are carried out by Julia and Hannah, typically before or after lunch when the participants are not present, though still within their paid working hours, albeit at low wages, as is common in the social sector. Their employment facilitates approaches to collectivisation without placing excessive pressure on voluntary engagement (and thus unpaid labour). However, the boundary between volunteer and paid labour is not always clear-cut: While much of the work is carried out on a voluntary basis—partly by Julia and Hannah but mainly by participants—there are recurring hopes and aspirations, especially among highly engaged participants, that this labour might be remunerated. This highlights that such arrangements are not "free" from capitalist constraints and cannot be framed as straightforward "alternatives." Rather, they are experimental forms of collective living and caring among urban residents—neither purely voluntary nor fully institutionalised, and often characterised by fluid roles and contributions. Yet, this openness and role ambiguity, while enabling participation, commitment, and responsibility, can also generate tension and conflict, particularly when individuals overextend themselves or when expectations about responsibility remain vague, misaligned, or difficult to meet.

While we have experienced collective cooking and observed how the participants engage in the maintenance and in the reproduction of the neighbourhood centre itself to some extent, the ultimate responsibility remains clearly with Julia and Hannah. As paid professionals, they are designated to this role and have the competence to fulfil these demands. However, their tasks are not always clearly delineated, and some exceed their working hours. What is more, Julia identifies with her workplace to the extent that it is compared to a household: "For me, the CC is like a shared flat with my work colleagues, and we often have visitors....There are classic household tasks to do all the time" (Julia, interview, September 12, 2024). Not only are the employees mindful of the neighbourhood centre's budget, looking out for discounts and thinking about the neighbourhood centre in their everyday lives (e.g., buying discounted coffee for the centre while shopping privately or on the way to work), kitchen towels are also taken home for washing, as the CC does not have a washing machine. Thus, wage labour, reproductive labour and care work (both for themselves and the centre), private activities and the associated spatialities between workplace and home, temporalities, and visibilities are entangled and blurry.

5. Urban Initiatives of Commensality as Collective Resources of Social Reproduction and Care?

Against the background of the current care crises, collective modes of care and social reproduction are gaining traction. Across different urban settings and socio-spatial configurations, new forms of caring relations are emerging—ones that emphasise the interdependence of social relations while unsettling the structural devaluation of care and social reproduction. UICs provide lived examples that experiment with

alternative ways of being and doing in common, out of which new relationships emerge and new spatialities are produced.

In this article, we took the neighbourhood centre CC as a starting point to discuss potentialities and pitfalls of UICs with the aim of understanding what it takes to organise and curate such commensal events in a meaningful way. We directed our focus towards one form of UIC and discussed the specificities and potentials of curated settings "in-between" self-organised and institutionalised food provision. The CC invites people to meet their needs collectively, to build new relationships, and to access material resources (space and food) in order to sustain everyday life within a curated setting. The presence of paid staff introduces an enabling (institutional) framework, while also shaping the contours of participation, responsibility, and hierarchies within the initiative.

The shared cooking and eating at CC produce a micro-public commensal context that gestures toward collective forms of care and social reproduction, beyond the privatised and individualised logics in neoliberal capitalism: These events are not "just" about food. The UIC responds to a range of socio-material needs and constitute important resources for care and reproduction. However, despite its inclusive intentions, it can also become a site of tension, ambiguity, and exclusion, as different people—with conflicting needs and expectations—come together.

Although reproductive labour is being relocated into collective, public settings, persistent gendered dynamics remain to a large extent, revealing the structural entrenchment of gendered roles within capitalism. At CC, labour continues to be unequally distributed, often relegated to women, whether as volunteers or paid employees. While the CC's wage labour partially compensates for the limits of collectivisation, it also reproduces normative expectations. Furthermore, infrastructural limitations (i.e., the lack of adequate cooking facilities) limit the scope of collective engagement, shape the spatial distribution of labour and result in partial (re-)privatisation of certain tasks. These contradictions demonstrate that while UICs reconfigure the location and organisation of reproductive labour, they do not automatically dismantle the deeply entrenched gendered logics embedded in capitalist (patriarchal) social relations. As Katz (2001, p. 711) notes, social reproduction is inherently "messy"; boundaries between visible and invisible, formal and informal, collective and non-collectivisable, public and private are constantly blurred and shifting. UICs exemplify this messiness, simultaneously opening up possibilities for alternative modes while remaining shaped by existing socio-economic and spatial constraints. Our example also shows how care work within the CC frequently spills over into the domestic sphere, as in the case of Julia, whose home becomes an extension of the UIC. These ambiguities point to the pitfalls of binary understandings of production (as wage labour) and reproduction (as the unpaid *other*; Gibson-Graham, 2006) and their assignment to public or private spaces.

At the same time, our experiences at CC show that UICs hold potential as spaces of caring-with—that is, as collective and public practices that challenge the dominant individualised and commodified notions of care and unsettle traditional hierarchies between caregivers and care receivers (Tronto, 2013). By fostering relationships and encouraging shared responsibility based on solidarity and trust (Tronto, 2013), UICs generate new caring arrangements enabling (alimentary) participation and inclusion (Pfeiffer et al., 2015). They reframe care not as a deficit to be managed, but as a collective practice of mutual interdependence beyond the domestic sphere. Importantly, the ways of relating and specific modes of caring cultivated in these settings do not remain confined to the UICs themselves; they often extend beyond them, informing

everyday interactions and care practices in other social contexts, fostering new "urban cultures of care" (Breinbauer et al., 2024). In this way, UICs do not merely react to insufficient care provision and exploitative reproductive structures; they actively support and (re-)produce social togetherness beyond capitalist constraints. Still, it is important to recognise that none of these initiatives resolves (food) precarity; instead, they respond to it through offering temporary relief from hunger (Cloke et al., 2017).

A feminist reading of UICs urges us to both learn from and critically engage with these initiatives—not to idealise them, but to better understand how care can be collectively imagined, practised, and shared in urban contexts. Returning to Jönsson et al.'s (2021) provocation about what is shared in commensality, our feminist perspectives broaden the scope of the question by referring to the sharing and dividing of labour and responsibility and shift the focus from the question of *what* to the question of *how* to share and collectivise and by and with *whom*. At UICs, the labour of care, responsibility, and the construction of everyday social relations of care are shared. Moreover, this sharing is situated, negotiated, and shaped by broader structures of gender, class, and institutional frameworks.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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