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"Clubs! More clubs! And as fast as possible!"¹

With four million members in the early 1970s, the Working Men's Clubs of Great Britain were one of the biggest voluntary organisations in the world.² Since then many factors - a radical change in leisure-culture, higher mobility, the disintegration of communities and legal changes like the ban on smoking - have contributed to a steady decline in membership. The advent of social media has not helped the situation, exacerbated by the reluctance of traditional members, who cling to past images of club culture and are unwilling to adapt. The great demand for club-houses, with their often unchanged interiors of the 1970s and 1980s, as a location for events, fashion-shoots and film is indicative of a commercial potential, that some clubs like Bethnal Green have used to their financial advantage. This also reveals, however, the problems that come with mixing a hedonistic, profit-oriented youth-culture with the communal attitude of the social club.

A club contains the potential for commons or control simultaneously. As in mid 19th century Britain it became visible that the hardship of workers - especially the lack of common goods as sheltered space, education and leisure-activities - could seriously endanger the new capitalist order, the social model of the gentlemen's club was handed down to the working classes. Thus, the working men's club originated as a tool of control and reform or, in the words of their bourgeoisie initiators, to halt "(...) moral decline in society."³ They were conceived as an alternative to the pubs because the alcohol abuse there was viewed as socially destructive. As a built manifestation of communal functions and representation, the principal concept can be traced back to older models of cooperation and community in Europe, like the medieval guilds and their houses, with the significant difference that the crafts integrated production and reproduction, expressed in the ownership of the workers of their means of production. During early industrialisation, the expropriation of the workers of their tools combined with the loss of demand for skills and knowledge had led to initiatives for compensation through the provision of education and culture, e.g. the People's Houses in Europe and Russia.

The increasing division of labour and specialisation of professions in medieval towns alone had not yet brought about a spatial separation of working and living. Both the artisan and the merchant still conducted their businesses in buildings that were home and workshop/office in one. It was the Industrial Revolution, based on a proletarian workforce that through the enclosure of the commons had been expelled from their countryside cottages to live as tenants in the city, that broke apart that spatial unity. Marx was one of the first to point out that capitalism not only created a new type of economy, but also separated production and reproduction. To reproduce society and economy, both capitalist and worker have to use part of their output to keep the production-process going. This means retaining money for the capitalist and sustaining his labour power for the

¹ 'Rabochie Klubi' [Workers' Clubs], *Izvestiya*, No. 10 (9th May, 1917); quoted in: *Iz Istorii Sovetskoy Architekturi 1917–1925. Documenti i Materiali* [From the History of Soviet Architecture 1917–1925. Documents and Materials], K. Afanas'ev, V. Khazanova (eds), Moscow, 1963, p. X. [Translation by Anna Bokov], quoted after: Anna Bokov, Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 22, 2017 - Issue 3, Pages 403-436, p.403

² see: Ruth Cherrington, *Not Just Beer and Bingo! A Social History of Working Men's Clubs*, AuthorHouse, Bloomington 2012, p.ix

³ op.cit., p. 1

worker. As Marx did not include the unwaged work of e.g. education of children and care for the sick, the notion of reproduction today is expanded to those activities which traditionally were provided by women through unpaid work, but are essential to sustain a society. For Massimo De Angelis this labour is done through "commoning" and thus beyond the reach of profit-oriented motives: "(...) capital does not necessarily control (or controls only in part through the state and the education system) the labour of reproduction which is fundamental to the commons."⁴

Clubs ideally are self-organised, commonly operated communities which are co-owned by their members and ruled through participation. "If, instead of the neoclassical utility and profit-maximising functions, we assume that people in different contexts find their optimal way to share goods, whatever their degrees of rivalry and exclusion, using criteria and measurements that are based not only on self-interest but also on valuing mutual aid, solidarity and affects in diverse contexts, then this idea of club goods - goods shared by a group of people of diverse number - is pretty much evoking that of common goods or commonwealth, which I understand as one constituent element of commons systems."⁵

Of the two potential strategies for funding working men's clubs - through wealthy supporters as an extension of feudal or ecclesiastic patriarchy, or through self-organisation - the latter proved difficult due to the lack of capital and, as there is a short distance between patron and patronising, the club movement had a slow start. First attempts with a Christian background did not work, as the workers resented religious indoctrination. The Reverend Henry Solly, a pioneer in the organisation of the working men's clubs, recognised that the workers simply wanted a place with a relaxed atmosphere to be with friends after work and not to be reformed.⁶ But even he initially saw clubs mainly as bastions against the consumption of alcohol, which was offered to the working classes in ever bigger and more profitable establishments. As social drinking had always been part of their culture - not least because water was heavily polluted - temperance kept workers from joining and in 1865 alcohol was allowed by the Club and Institute Union (CIU), the umbrella-organisation Solly had founded. Through a special legal construct, alcoholic drinks in the bars of clubs were and are not sold, but supplied, and due to lower taxation can be cheaper than in pubs. Paradoxically, the sale of alcohol thus proved vital for the working men's clubs' success and for their emancipation from patrons to become truly proletarian. The most distinctive element of the clubs is their shared ownership, qualifying club goods as common goods. In the case of dispossessed workers, this does not only provide access to property and participation, but adds a sense of empowerment: "The prospect of ownership and self-management were attractive to working men who had scant control over other areas of their lives (...)."⁷ But in recent years in London there are applicants that merely seek membership to push for the sale of a club's premises, the returns of which would have to be evenly spread amongst its members. As the sometimes large club-houses and

⁴ Massimo De Angelis: *Omnia Sunt Communia*, ZED-Books, London, 2017, p.105f

⁵ *op. cit.*, p.41

⁶ see: George Tremlett, *Clubmen - A History of the Working Men's Club and Institute Union*, Secker and Warburg, London 1987, p.6

⁷ Ruth Cherrington, *Not Just Beer and Bingo! A Social History of Working Men's Clubs*, AuthorHouse, Bloomington 2012, p.15

plots are now located in increasingly gentrified areas, their value sometimes exceeds millions of pounds.

London

Prominent among the early clubs in London was "The International Working Men's Educational Club", founded in 1885 by Jewish Polish Workers and favoured by social democrats as well as immigrant anarchists. John Henry Mackay provided a vivid impression of its atmosphere: "Plain benches without backs stretched through it crosswise and along the walls. Everywhere extreme poverty, but everywhere also the endeavour to overcome poverty. (...) Breathless, anxious not to lose a single word, they hung on the lips of the speaker. An electric thrill passed through these young people, hardly out of their teens; those women tired and crushed by the burden of their ceaseless toil; those men who, torn away from their native soil, had found each other here doubly and trebly disappointed."⁸ It was here where William Morris, one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement and devoted socialist, regularly spoke and his friend Eleanor Marx, Karl's youngest and politically most active daughter, gave lectures to the members. "I am the only one who felt drawn to Jewish people, and particularly to those who are socialistically inclined. My happiest moments are when I am in the East End amidst Jewish workpeople."⁹

Due to the difficulties of raising funding, most clubs went through a metamorphosis from rented rooms above a shop or a small residential house to, eventually, a purpose-built club-house. Often self-organised, this new typology emerged almost without the influence of academically trained architects. The clubs started socially and architecturally as an extension of the classical terraced house, which is open to addition and flexible use. Once a club reached financial stability, it could hire staff, mainly a steward(ess) to manage the facilities and tend the bar. To enable their continuous presence, some clubs added accommodation to their houses. The Mildmay-Club in London, for example, still has three vacant flats in its building, which it is now considering letting again because of the high rents achievable. Today all clubs allow both genders to become members and participate in every part of club-life, but initially women were restricted to keeping operations going, be it as barmaids, cleaners or entertainers.

As workers rarely had access to information, be it through newspapers or books, libraries were a vital part of the programme of many clubs and the CIU in 1863 established a "circulating library", which in 1912 consisted of 888 boxes with 110,000 volumes. Another activity was the collection of money for convalescent homes, which anticipated institutions of the welfare-state and are testimony of the considerable contribution of workingmen's clubs to social reproduction. This is confirmed by the fact that in times of social crisis, as during and after the Depression and the World Wars, the clubs thrived rather than declined. In the 1960s and 70s, though, they transformed from education- and leisure- into entertainment venues: "Many would say the movement in the 1970s – complete with strippers and Bernard Manning – summed up everything that was wrong with the country. Fast forward to the largely threadbare existence of many Working Men's

⁸ John Henry Mackay, *The Anarchists: A Picture of Civilisation of the Close of the 19th Century*, Autonomedia, New York, (1891) 1999, p.113

⁹ Max Beer, *Fifty Years of International Socialism*, Routledge Revivals, London 2015 (1935), p.72, quoted after: Rachel Holmes, Eleanor Marx, Bloomsbury/London/New York, 2015 (2014), p.351

Clubs in 2017 and it's hard to appreciate the movement – less than four decades ago – presided over arguably the biggest live entertainment network of its kind Britain has known."¹⁰ The clubs became crucial to the development of musical culture. Tom Jones, like a lot of pop- and rock-musicians from a working class background, started his career in a Welsh working men's clubs. "Paul Weller of the Jam and fellow musician Steve Brookes were able to indulge their love of pop at the local club, Woking WMC, where Paul's dad John was a member."¹¹

Initially working men's clubs had a catchment area within walking distance, due to being embedded into residential areas and the lack of affordable transportation for most of the workers. Some, such as the Langham Club in North-London, explicitly advertised to all men over the age of eighteen within a one and a half mile radius around its premises. This underlines the local, decentralised character of the clubs, which today suffer from the transformation of their neighbourhoods, especially in London, where gentrification forces old members to move away and the middle-class "creatives" replacing them are not inclined to use the clubs. Especially after World War II, clubs were often linked to the council estates built to ease the post-war housing crisis and its members were tenants rather than home-owners. As a result, Margaret Thatcher's "Right-to-Buy" Policy - which encouraged inhabitants to buy their council-homes - had a negative impact on the club-structure: "Council estates that had once been fairly homogenous began to fragment into those who owned and those who didn't. (...) Thousands of clubs based on these estates felt the change in negative ways with their traditional core membership declining."¹²

Soviet Workers' Club

The point of departure in Russia was completely different from Great Britain, as industrialisation in the Tsarist empire began late. But after the October Revolution of 1917 workers' clubs were very quickly assigned a pivotal role: "Rabochiy klub [a workers' club] was seen as a key element of the new collectivity, as a platform for proletarian culture, even 'as life itself'. (...) The major Bolshevik newspaper Izvestiya proclaimed: 'Comrades, set up clubs! Let these clubs be the tribune for all who seek conscious freedom! Let them be beacons for the masses, seeking meaning, but not knowing the way! Clubs! More clubs! And as fast as possible!'"¹³

Similar to the British situation, the Soviet workers' clubs started in back rooms and through repurposing existing buildings, which in their case were often nationalised former private houses. This, of course, represents a different type of shared ownership, but the collectivisation still amounts to club goods being common goods. When the avantgardist Constructivists embraced the club-design between 1920-1930, they attempted to develop

¹⁰ Neil Anderson, The rise and fall of the working men's club, in: The Irish Times, Nov 29, 2017

¹¹ Ruth Cherrington, Not Just Beer and Bingo! A Social History of Working Men's Clubs, AuthorHouse, Bloomington 2012, p.78

¹² op.cit., p.178, ann.: Harvey sees fragmentation as one of the core products of capitalism, David Harvey, Spaces of Capital, Routledge, New York, 2001, Chapter 7: Capitalism: the factory of fragmentation, p. 121ff

¹³ 'Rabochie Klubi' [Workers' Clubs], Izvestiya, No. 10 (9th May, 1917); quoted in: Iz Istorii Sovetskoy Architekturi 1917–1925. Dokumenty i Materialy ['From the History of Soviet Architecture 1917–1925. Documents and Materials'], K. Afanas'ev, V. Khazanova (eds), Moscow, 1963, p. X. [Translation by Anna Bokov], quoted after: Anna Bokov, Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers, in: The Journal of Architecture, Volume 22, 2017 - Issue 3, Pages 403-436, p.403

new standards for the integration of the whole spectrum of reproductive activities. The clubs were to simultaneously serve as amplifiers for political propaganda and for all forms of new art, especially theatre. Constructivism promoted a functional architectural thinking, with a strong focus on spatial organisation and movement. Technology, writes Ivan Leonidov, should dominate form: "For us, however, form is a result of organisation and functional relations of working and constructive moments. It is necessary to look at it and critique it not as form, but as an approach to cultural organisation."¹⁴ The problem of European architecture, the untouchability of the private nature of spiritual and material property, was to be overcome through the new modes of production in Soviet Russia, which inspired architects to invent new typologies crystallising the new socialist way of life.¹⁵

Social Condenser

The clubs were meant to be social condensers, constructive machines programmed by the methods of scientific management, as developed in the assembly lines and offices of the most developed industrial economies. The network of variable spaces, connected by a sophisticated system of circulation, and the merging of building and urban space designed to foster equality, collectivity and collaboration, was the antithesis to the enfilade of the old Tsarist palaces. Architecture, as Ivan Leonidov claimed in parallel with Le Corbusier, was to be turned into engineering. But where to the latter a house was a machine for living in to avoid revolution, to the former it meant the opposite: a house was a machine for revolution.¹⁶ Although obviously inspired by Western modernist architecture, Ginzburg and his colleagues wanted to replace its empty aesthetic formalism by a revolutionary Soviet architecture. For this the Constructivists promoted the transfer of motion-analysis and diagrams, referring to the production-process as their paradigm. They even went so far as incorporating Fordist and Taylorist ideas, which prove that the rationalisation process of modernity transcends capitalism and communism. Therefore it does not seem completely reactionary that within a short period of time parts of the socialist movement heavily criticised Constructivism for its fetishism of technology and bourgeoisie tendencies.

The Soviet workers' club served not only as a place of recreation, but as a place of political production, of discussion, exchange and communal experience for people unified by their position within the economy. It hybridised communal living rooms, performance spaces, adult education, day-care centre, sports facilities, cafeteria/bar and included an exterior which engaged with its urban context. A proletarian culture and a proletarian public were to be activated using participation and the

¹⁴ Ivan Leonidov, 'Organizatsiya raboty kluba novogo sotsial' nogo tipa' ['Organisation of the work of the club of a new social type'], in *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* [Contemporary Architecture], Issue No. 3, Gan Alexey, Moisey Ginzburg, eds (Moscow, 1929), p. 111. [Translation by the Author.], quoted after: Anna Bokov, Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 22, 2017 - Issue 3, Pages 403-436, p. 429f

¹⁵ see: Christiane Post, *Arbeiterklubs als neue Bauaufgabe der sowjetischen Avantgarde*, Reimer Verlag, 2004, p.77

¹⁶ see: Andrew Willimott, *Perestroika of life*, 22 September, 2017 in: *Architectural Review* 1445, October 2017, p. 26

collective.¹⁷ The roles of producer and recipient were meant to coincide through abolishing the spatial and performative boundaries between stage and audience, enforced by participatory and more dynamic, non-hierarchical performances. Extending the traditional relationship of the revolution to the street, the Soviet clubs did not only have occupiable roofs, exterior terraces and included sports fields or playgrounds, but were also part of the city as a place of events. The mass-spectacles, meant to prolong the revolutionary commune, were choreographed to pass through the buildings, which therefore had a celebratory system of circulation. "Of great importance ideologically, these mass processions would weave together performers and spectators, interior and exterior, the stage and the street."¹⁸ The close connection to an ideological programme of the Soviet clubs resulted in a completely different approach to space than that of the British clubs. Where the latter were an extension of the private home, local, with no appeal to the city as a whole, associated with the residential and almost anti-architectural, the Soviet clubs tried to achieve the opposite and aspired advanced spatial expression.

In an attempt to reunify production and reproduction, the workers clubs' aimed to occupy all the worker's free time by creating a closed circle of daily routines. This totalitarian approach was based on the belief that the new man could be constructed according to scientific calculations, based on the theories of Marx's Historical Materialism. Where the British approach was compensatory, a predecessor of aspects of the welfare-state, the Soviet club was an attempt to revolutionise reproduction to shape the new man, "noviy sovetskiy chelovek"¹⁹ Contrary to their precursors in Great Britain, the Soviet clubs from the beginning addressed both genders equally, including nurseries and restaurants to relieve women from their traditional roles. But the two types also shared some problems: where the British clubs initially patronised by their benefactors, the Soviet clubs were over-regulated by the party organisations. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and head of the Main Political Enlightenment Commission, therefore complained: "...in the contemporary club there is too much tutelage and regulation: (...) It's loud, one can easily kill time, but neither recreation, nor satisfaction is being achieved ..."²⁰

Extension

"I arrived to find two members waiting outside for the club to open. Upon asking if I could park on the forecourt, they replied 'Yeah, but you better watch your bike, they're lethal round here'. Through the cage and the first set of double doors there was a security door with an intercom. The voice sounded suspicious of me, so i just said I was here to enquire and after a pint. Inside, cabinets full of darts trophies adorned the walls. As I talked to the barman, Bonnie Tyler's 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' played out at

¹⁷ see: Christiane Post, *Arbeiterklubs als neue Bauaufgabe der sowjetischen Avantgarde*, Reimer Verlag, 2004, p.29

¹⁸ Anna Bokov, *Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers*, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 22, 2017 - Issue 3, Pages 403-436, p.412

¹⁹ "new Soviet man", see: Anna Bokov, *Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers*, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 22, 2017 - Issue 3, Pages 403-436, p. 407

²⁰ Nadezhda Krupskaya, 'O klube' ('On Club'), *Pravda* (12th December, 1925), quoted from: *History of Soviet Architecture 1917-1925. Documents and Materials*], K. Afanas'ev, V. Khazanova, eds, Moscow, 1963, p. X. [Translation by the Author], quoted after: Anna Bokov, *Soviet workers' clubs: lessons from the social condensers*, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, Volume 22, 2017 - Issue 3, Pages 403-436, p. 410

considerable volume to the empty club. Behind the stage hung the stereotypical silver glitter curtain, the walls part-clad in fake wood veneer panelling. There was a notice of a recent committee decision, reached by a vote of 11 to 3, that shorts can be worn Sat/Sun night, but 'no football shorts please'.²¹ Working men's clubs in Britain are struggling and although there are faint signs of a comeback, maybe it needs social media to run out of steam before people return to personal interaction. Most of the Soviet clubs do not exist anymore, at least in their original function, and the ones that are renovated demonstrate the doubtful role of architectural heritage in preserving buildings irrelevant to and regardless of their programme.

But another, more resistant typology has derived from the clubs and the tradition of guildhalls and people's houses: the cultural centre. Clearly inspired by the Soviet model, the writer Andre Malraux, minister of culture in the 1960s, introduced a series of "Maison de la Culture" to French regions. What had started as small, local institutions of almost anonymous architecture, culminated 1970 in the competition for the "Centre Pompidou" in Paris with 681 participants from 50 different countries.²² The winning entry by Piano and Rogers, trying to combine cybernetics and situationist practices, was an enormous machine which used circulation to eliminate the boundaries between culture and its audiences. But contrary to the social condenser or the club as commons, the Pompidou was already part of the capitalist enclosure of culture: "Baudrillard's critique of the Pompidou is correct in its claim that the project recuperates the demands of May 68, answering calls for access, participation and informality by turning the museum into a hypermarket for the mass consumption of culture."²³

With the 50th anniversary of the October-Revolution in 1967, Anatole Kopp's book "Town and Revolution" introduced the idea of the social condenser to the Western public. Not least to Henri Lefebvre, a friend of Kopp, who was inspired by the idea of an intersection of social ideas and social spaces, which became central to his book "The Production of Space". At the same time, a young generation of architects, led by Rem Koolhaas, in their search for alternatives to the consumerist escapism of Archigram and the failure of orthodox modernism, discovered Constructivism as a lost strand of social utopia to reconnect to. Today, after the short lived spasm of digital kitsch and the architecture of neoliberalism, young practises like Bruther, Muoto or Urban Think Tank are again eager to fill their projects with programmatic ambition, revitalising the social condenser once again. But to create an alternative to the fragmentary powers of capitalism it might be necessary to combine the self-organisation, participation and shared ownership of the British club-commons with the fearless architectural ambition of the Constructivists.

²¹ Brian Hoy, Visiting South West Ham Labour Club, October 2017, unpublished

²² see: Susan Holden, Possible Pompidous in: AA files 70, Architectural Association, London 2015, p.34

²³ Douglas Spencer: The Architecture of Neoliberalism, London 2016, p.8f