Inhabitation as Prefigurative Politics and Source of Political Transformations

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Abstract This chapter examines how increasing bureaucratic domination of inhabitation reduces the possibilities of prefigurative politics and political transformation, using Christiania in Copenhagen as a case study. Christiania still exemplifies prefigurative politics, enacting alternative political, economic, and social relations rather than waiting for systemic change. It has functioned as an experimental space where governance, housing, and social organisation operate outside traditional capitalist and state-imposed norms. However, Christiania's shift from radical squat to bureaucratic assimilation is increasingly evident. The new planning paradigm introduced after its 2012 legalisation is reflected in construction practices over the past decade. Christiania's culture of building – as a concrete, aesthetic, and democratic participation in public space, or political prefiguration – has been progressively shaped by bureaucratic domination through the requirement of formal planning permissions. Lefebvre's distinction between representations of space – which organise, codify, and control urban life – and differential space offers a perspective for understanding contemporary eco-socio-political crises. Differential space conceptualises the urban as a continuously socially produced space, where everyday embodied practices generate radical democratic participation. This chapter investigates how formal planning frameworks threaten to normalise and reduce Christiania's prefigurative political agency and argues that embodied inhabitation remains crucial for nurturing political transformation.

Keywords: Bureaucratic domination, Prefigurative politics, Differential space, Inhabitation practices, Spatial representation

1 Introduction: Christiania, Inhabitation, and the Bureaucratic Turn

In the field of alternative urban experiments, Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen stands as a unique example of political prefiguration enacted through inhabitation. Established in 1971 through the occupation of abandoned military barracks, Christiania has long challenged dominant models of urban development and governance. For decades, its inhabitants practiced a form of politics rooted in the direct, collective shaping of their living environment—embodying the principle that political transformation must begin in the present, through lived, spatial practices. This chapter examines how Christiania's tradition of self-managed inhabitation functioned as

political prefiguration, and how the imposition of bureaucratic planning procedures—particularly building permit requirements introduced after the 2012 legalisation agreement—has substantially reduced this prefigurative potential.

Importantly, Christiania has addressed the threat of market-driven dominance through a unique model of collective land ownership. In 2012, as part of its negotiated legalisation, Christiania established a community land trust structure—formally acquiring most of the land through the Christiania Foundation. This move effectively removed the land from the speculative real estate market, safeguarding it as a commons and ensuring that property could not be individually owned or sold for profit. In doing so, Christiania responded to what Lefebvre (1991) describes as **capitalist domination** of space: the transformation of land into a commodity governed by exchange value. By securing collective tenure, the community resisted one axis of domination—market-based dispossession—through institutional innovation rooted in common ownership.

However, while market forces have been countered through this collective land trust, **bureaucratic domination** has grown more entrenched. Applying Boggs' (1977) foundational critique, this chapter shows how prefigurative spatial practices become constrained when absorbed into formal institutional frameworks. As Boggs warned, revolutionary movements risk reproducing the very hierarchies and administrative structures they seek to overcome. In Christiania, the transition from informal, consensus-based building practices to externally regulated planning procedures exemplifies this shift. What was once a living, iterative process of building through collective negotiation has been replaced by codes, permits, and compliance mechanisms administered by professionals and municipal authorities.

This analysis also responds to Yates and De Moor's (2022) observation that the concept of prefigurative politics has been applied in divergent and sometimes imprecise ways across contexts, making it difficult to assess its transformative potential. By examining the concrete mechanisms—legal, spatial, and procedural—through which bureaucratic rationality has reshaped inhabitation in Christiania, this chapter offers a focused case study that contributes conceptual clarity. It shows how prefiguration can endure through specific institutional forms (such as the community land trust), while also being constrained or reoriented by others (such as formalised regulatory frameworks).

Inhabitation—understood as the situated, material practice through which people dwell in and co-produce space—was central to Christiania's founding ethos. Building homes and common facilities was not simply a matter of shelter; it was an embodied expression of autonomy, creativity, and mutual responsibility. As a resident, recalls: "Yes yes, so you just built and maybe also changed it a bit along the way." This adaptive, participatory

approach made inhabitation an active and political mode of commoning—a counterpoint to the rigid, top-down planning models prevalent in the surrounding city.

This chapter argues that while Christiania has protected itself from commodification through collective land ownership, it has become increasingly vulnerable to bureaucratic incorporation. The shift toward formalised planning procedures introduces layers of abstraction that distance residents from the act of shaping their environment—turning what was once a direct path from dream to house into a circuit mediated by forms, permits, and external approvals. As one resident put it: “Now it has to go through paper, where someone with a stamp has to say good or bad for it. So, it becomes abstract.” This process illustrates what both Lefebvre and Boggs identified: the substitution of lived spatial engagement with abstract control, where decisions are made at a distance from those who inhabit and transform space.

2 Theoretical Framework: Inhabitation, Space, and Bureaucracy

Henri Lefebvre's distinction between "abstract space" and "differential space" provides a crucial theoretical framework that complements Boggs' analysis of bureaucratic domination. Abstract space, produced by state and capital, seeks to homogenise, quantify, and control territory through planning regulations and standardised designs. It prioritises exchange value and administrative legibility over lived experiences. In contrast, differential space emerges from the bottom-up, through everyday practices and creative appropriations of inhabitants. It is heterogeneous, qualitative, and resistant to complete codification, embodying use value and the "right to the city" – the right of inhabitants to shape their own environment.

Christiania, in its early decades, represented a powerful enactment of differential space. The self-built houses, communal workshops, and collectively managed areas were not merely physical structures but material manifestations of alternative social relations and political values. Building was a concrete, aesthetic, and democratic participation in public space, or political prefiguration. This direct production of space allowed inhabitation itself to function as political prefiguration, where the desired future of autonomy and collective self-management was practiced in the present.

The concept of prefigurative politics, originating in Boggs' (1977) critique of traditional revolutionary strategies, emphasizes creating social relations and institutions in the present that mirror the desired future society. In Christiania, this was deeply intertwined with spatial practice. The physical act of building without permits, using recycled materials, adapting structures organically over time, and negotiating designs collectively was about

prefiguring a society based on direct action, mutual aid, and participatory decision-making. This approach exemplifies what Yates and De Moor (2022) describe as "open-ended prefigurative politics" that remains responsive to changing conditions and collective desires rather than adhering to rigid blueprints.

However, the integration of Christiania into formal administrative frameworks, particularly following the 2012 agreement, represents the encroachment of abstract space upon differential space and illustrates Boggs' warning about how prefigurative projects often fall prey to bureaucratisation when they interact with state institutions. The introduction of building permit requirements, planning regulations, and heritage protection guidelines introduces layers of bureaucratic mediation that fundamentally alter the process of spatial production. As a civil servant details, the authorities initially viewed Christiania through the lens of abstract space: "So there were some shocked case workers who came back and said 'well, it was completely, completely terrible.' It was almost like a destroyed heritage protected rampart because visually it was very different from what we were used to from other heritage protected monuments."

The requirement to translate lived needs and creative visions into formal drawings for approval introduces an abstract detour. The process shifts from direct, embodied engagement with materials and space to a mediated interaction through plans and permits. The resident's experience designing her new house illustrates this shift: the initial playful idea of a "Smiley house" becomes constrained by the perceived complexities of building round windows within the new system and the reliance on standardised dimensions: "What can I say? Then there's someone who draws it and actually I don't think much about a 50 x 50 window. It's actually quite small." This transformation exemplifies Boggs' concern about how bureaucratic procedures impose standardised forms that suppress spontaneity and creativity.

3 Inhabitation as Political Prefiguration in Christiania

To understand the significance of Christiania's inhabitation practices as political prefiguration, we must reconsider what prefiguration means beyond static, programmatic ideals. As Yates (2015) argues, prefigurative politics is often misunderstood as merely creating small-scale models of an ideal society. Instead, he proposes understanding prefiguration as a dynamic, generative process that combines "collective experimentation, the imagining, production and circulation of political meanings, the creation of new and future-oriented social norms or 'conduct', their consolidation in movement infrastructure, and the diffusion and contamination of ideas, tactics and practices" (Yates, 2015: 4).

This understanding of prefiguration as generative praxis rather than static model aligns with what Christiania represented in its early decades. The act of building was not merely about creating physical structures according to a predetermined plan but about engaging in an ongoing, collective process of experimentation and meaning-making. This process-oriented approach allowed inhabitation to function as what Yates and De Moor (2022) call an "open-ended prefigurative politics" as mentioned above.

In early Christiania, the act of building was inseparable from broader political expressions of autonomy, creativity, and collective self-determination. Without formal building codes or permit requirements, residents could directly translate their needs, desires, and political values into physical structures. This direct relationship between political imagination and material creation allowed building to function as a form of what Lefebvre calls "spatial autogestion" or self-management of space (Lefebvre, 1991; Purcell, 2014).

A long-time resident, describes this approach: "In the past, it was such that you could just get started. And then you could build as you wanted. And then you could change it along the way if you found out that it wasn't so smart." This adaptive, iterative approach embodied what Lefebvre calls "lived space"—space as directly experienced and shaped by its inhabitants rather than as conceived by planners and administrators. It also exemplifies the kind of direct participation and spontaneous creativity that Boggs saw as essential to prefigurative politics as a counter to bureaucratic domination.

4 Bureaucratic Domination and the Reduction of Political Transformation

The 2012 legalisation agreement marked a significant turning point in Christiania's development, introducing formal building permit requirements and heritage protection regulations that fundamentally altered the relationship between inhabitation and political prefiguration. This agreement, reached after decades of contested legal status and periodic conflicts with authorities, represented a compromise that granted Christiania's residents collective ownership rights through a foundation structure in exchange for compliance with Danish building regulations, heritage protection laws, and other legal frameworks.

The agreement required Christiania to establish a foundation ("Fonden Fristaden Christiania") that would purchase most of the land from the state at below-market rates, while some areas with historical ramparts remained state property with usage rights granted to the foundation. Residents would pay into the foundation, which would manage the property and ensure compliance with regulations. Crucially, the agreement stipulated that new construction and significant renovations would require building

permits from municipal authorities and, for areas affecting the historic ramparts, approval from heritage conservation officials.

This bureaucratic incorporation exemplifies what Boggs (1977) identified as a key mechanism through which prefigurative alternatives are neutralized: their absorption into dominant institutional frameworks that impose bureaucratic procedures and hierarchies. The resident describes this shift: "Yes, it's a huge difference. I mean, in the past, it was such that you could just build. And then there were of course some rules for how to build, but they were such internal rules. But now it's such that you need to have a building permit. And it's also a huge difference that you need to have a building permit from the municipality plus you often also need to have a building permit from the conservation authorities."

This bureaucratic turn has reduced the political transformative potential of inhabitation in several key ways that directly illustrate Boggs' theory of bureaucratic domination:

First, it has introduced layers of abstraction and mediation that distance inhabitants from direct engagement with their built environment. A resident articulates this loss: "That's what's so unfortunate. That you can no longer have that direct sense of what works. Now everything has to go through paper and approvals, and then it's only afterwards that you find out if it actually works in reality." He describes this as "a form of alienation from the building process itself. You no longer build with your hands and your body, but with paper and ink cartridges." This alienation exemplifies Boggs' concern about how bureaucratic procedures separate people from direct control over their conditions of life.

Second, while it was once possible for technical experts—both from Christiania and, for example, the Copenhagen municipality—to understand each other and create a kind of "nerd-to-nerd" understanding that enabled creative solutions to regulatory challenges, this dynamic has become increasingly rare. It was as if they shared a common language that could, at times, cut through bureaucratic thinking, as seen in the case of the root-based wastewater treatment system, which received approval despite conflicting with existing regulations. However, recent changes in planning frameworks have shifted decision-making power away from collective, participatory processes and toward external authorities and technical professionals. Another resident of Christiania, describes how this shift has transformed the process into a closed loop of technical communication, excluding the very people who inhabit the spaces in question: "It becomes this thing where the architects talk to the heritage people, who talk to the building authorities, and it's all in this technical language that most of us don't understand. That leaves out the people who actually have to live in these spaces."

Third, the shift has reduced the democratic character of spatial production. Prior to the 2012 legalisation agreement with the state, Christiania maintained its own internal process for approving construction. This included discussions within the local area, publication in *Ugespejlet* (Christiania's newspaper), and approval at the community's financial meeting, which also provided support for the construction. Once consensus was reached, a building site was designated and construction could begin. This participatory process embodied what Lefebvre describes as *autogestion*, or self-management—the direct, collective control of space by its inhabitants. Its replacement by external bureaucratic procedures exemplifies Boggs' critique of bureaucratic domination, in which direct participation is supplanted by distant forms of representation.

5 The Shift from Presentation to Representation

Christiania's spatial practices have undergone a fundamental transformation—from *presentation* to *representation*. Where construction once served as an aesthetic, personal, and political expression of inhabitation, shaped through lived, participatory processes, it is now increasingly subjected to the logic of formal planning permissions and regulatory compliance. This shift is not merely procedural; it signals a deeper reordering of spatial politics. *Presentation* involves the direct embodiment of values, needs, and identities in the built environment—it is situated, experimental, and open-ended. *Representation*, by contrast, abstracts these practices into codified plans and technical documents, distancing spatial production from those who dwell and build. As a result, the capacity for collective self-determination is diminished. Bureaucratic procedures now mediate what was once negotiated face-to-face, replacing commoning with consultation, and self-building with standardization. This transition reflects a broader concern raised by Lefebvre and Boggs: that bureaucratic domination displaces democratic inhabitation by substituting lived experience with administrative representation.

In its early decades, building in Christiania functioned as direct presentation—an immediate, unmediated expression of inhabitants' needs, desires, and political values. As the reference notes, "The concrete expression in the form of self-builds is a personal expression and a unique collectively developed culture around construction." This culture of building as direct presentation allowed inhabitation to serve as a form of political prefiguration, where alternative social relations could be directly enacted through spatial practices.

The bureaucratic turn following the 2012 agreement has transformed this direct presentation into mediated representation. As the reference explains, "The introduction of a new planning paradigm in connection with the agreement on the legalisation of Christiania from 2012 meant that new construction requires a building permit as in the rest of Denmark." This

requirement for formal representation through plans and permits fundamentally alters the relationship between inhabitants and their built environment, introducing layers of abstraction and mediation that distance people from direct engagement with space.

This shift from presentation to representation exemplifies what Yates and De Moor (2022) identify as a key problem in the application of prefigurative politics: the reduction of prefiguration from a dynamic, generative process to a static, formalised model. The bureaucratic requirements imposed by the 2012 agreement have transformed Christiania's open-ended prefigurative politics into a more constrained form that must operate within the parameters of state regulation. This demonstrates how the diversity in applications of prefiguration that Yates and De Moor critique can be understood through the concrete mechanisms of bureaucratic domination that Boggs identified.

6 Lefebvre and the Domination of Space through Representation

This shift from presentation to representation can be understood through Lefebvre's critique of representations of space and their role in maintaining power relations. For Lefebvre (1991), representations of space—the conceptualized space of planners, bureaucrats, and technical experts—impose an abstract, homogenizing logic that serves dominant interests while suppressing the lived, differential space of everyday life. Building permits, technical drawings, and heritage regulations are not neutral tools but instruments of what Lefebvre calls *abstract space*: space that is fragmented, homogenized, and hierarchized according to the imperatives of state power and capital accumulation.

The *domination* exercised by these representations lies in their capacity to reduce the rich, multidimensional reality of lived space to abstract, quantifiable parameters that can be administered from a distance. As the resident's experience with her window placement illustrates, the translation of embodied needs and desires into standardized measurements fundamentally alters the relationship between inhabitants and their environment: “What can I say? Then there's someone who draws it and actually I don't think much about a 50 x 50 window. It's actually quite small.” The consequences of these abstract decisions only become apparent once construction is complete, at which point changes become difficult or impossible: “Yes, I wouldn't be able to look out of it from inside.”

The reference explicitly identifies this problem, stating that the project investigates whether “the abstract representations in the planning process—such as formal plans for use in building permits—have overlooked consequences for the built environment in the form of a reduction in the social

and political complexity." This reduction is precisely what Lefebvre critiques as the *colonisation* of lived space by abstract space: a process through which bureaucratic and technocratic logics displace the plural, contested, and embodied practices that constitute spatial life. In this sense, the domination of representation over presentation is not merely technical—it is political, entailing the substitution of formalized abstractions for concrete, lived relations, as also diagnosed by Boggs in his critique of bureaucratic power.

7 The Mechanisms of Bureaucratic Constraint

The reduction of political transformation through bureaucratic domination operates through multiple mechanisms, each of which can be understood in terms of Lefebvre's analysis of the production of space and Boggs' critique of bureaucratic domination:

First, bureaucratic procedures replace what Lefebvre calls "spatial practice"—the direct, embodied engagement with space—with abstract representations that privilege technical expertise over lived experience. As a resident describes the pre-2012 approach to window placement: "So I think like this: We stood there physically and felt it out. And also very much like - does it make sense - can I look out the window." This embodied spatial practice is replaced by abstract calculations and standardised parameters that distance inhabitants from direct engagement with their environment. This exemplifies Boggs' concern about how bureaucratic domination separates people from direct control over their conditions of life.

Second, bureaucratic requirements enact what Lefebvre critiques as the dominance of *conceived space* over *lived space*—a process in which spatial experience is reduced to abstract representations that serve administrative control. The mandate for formal drawings and technical plans privileges the visual and measurable dimensions of space, sidelining the embodied, tactile, and relational qualities that once defined building practices in Christiania. In doing so, it narrows spatial engagement to what can be seen, mapped, and regulated—replacing sensory richness and collective experimentation with legibility and compliance. This reflects Boggs' concern that bureaucratic procedures impose standardised forms that stifle spontaneity, suppress creativity, and ultimately disconnect people from the spaces they inhabit.

Third, bureaucratic temporality—with its linear sequence of planning, approval, and implementation—replaces what Lefebvre calls the "rhythms" of everyday life, with their cyclical patterns and organic development. The spontaneous, adaptive approach to building that a resident describes—"so you just built and maybe also just changed it a bit along the way"—

becomes impossible when plans must be approved in advance and changes require formal authorisation. This transformation exemplifies Boggs' concern about how bureaucratic domination imposes rigid procedures that constrain spontaneous action and adaptation.

Fourth, bureaucratic procedures fragment space into discrete, specialised domains managed by different authorities and experts. As the 2012 agreement illustrates, obtaining approval now involves multiple agencies and authorities, from Christiania's internal procedures to the State and Cultural Agency, the Copenhagen Municipality, and various other administrative bodies. This fragmentation of space into separate domains contradicts what Lefebvre calls the "unitary theory of space"—the understanding of space as a coherent, interconnected whole produced through social relations. It also exemplifies Boggs' critique of how bureaucratic domination fragments social life into specialized domains managed by experts.

8 Conclusion: The Reduction of Political Transformation Through Bureaucratic Domination

The case of Christiania reveals the profound impact of bureaucratic domination on the potential for inhabitation to generate political transformation. The requirement for building permits and compliance with heritage regulations has significantly constrained the capacity for inhabitation practices to prefigure alternative social arrangements, introducing layers of abstraction and mediation that distance inhabitants from direct engagement with their built environment and from the collective processes through which alternative social relations might be enacted.

This constraint operates through the mechanisms that Lefebvre identifies in his critique of abstract space and that Boggs analyses in his theory of bureaucratic domination: the privileging of representations over practice, the fragmentation and homogenisation of space, the imposition of linear temporality over cyclical rhythms, and the concealment of power relations behind technical procedures. Together, these mechanisms significantly reduce the political transformative potential of inhabitation, integrating practices that once challenged dominant spatial arrangements into the very logic they sought to contest.

The shift from direct presentation to bureaucratic representation captures the essence of this transformation. What was once an immediate, unmediated expression of inhabitants' needs, desires, and political values has become a mediated, abstract process governed by external standards and authorities. This shift fundamentally alters the relationship between inhabitation and political transformation, as the direct, embodied engagement with space that characterised early Christiania gives way to the abstract, technical procedures of formal planning.

As the resident poignantly observes: "It's a completely different way of thinking. I mean, in the past, it was such that you could just get started. And then you could build as you wanted. And then you could change it along the way if you found out that it wasn't so smart." This loss of adaptability and direct engagement represents a significant reduction in the political potential of inhabitation practices.

In the end, the case of Christiania demonstrates that bureaucratic domination, particularly through building permit requirements, does not merely regulate or formalise inhabitation practices but fundamentally alters their political character and transformative potential. By subjecting these practices to the abstract logic of administrative procedures, technical expertise, and standardised parameters, bureaucratic domination significantly reduces their capacity to challenge existing power relations and prefigure alternative social arrangements. The result is a profound reduction in the potential for inhabitation to serve as a source of political transformation—a reduction that reveals the deeply political nature of seemingly technical requirements and the hidden power dynamics embedded in spatial production.

This analysis contributes to Yates and De Moor's (2022) critique of the diversity in applications of prefigurative politics by providing a concrete case study of how prefiguration can be transformed and constrained through bureaucratic incorporation. By applying Boggs' (1977) concept of bureaucratic domination to the specific context of Christiania's spatial practices, it demonstrates how prefigurative politics can be reduced from a dynamic, generative process to a more limited form when absorbed into dominant institutional frameworks. This sharpens our understanding of prefiguration not as a static model but as a contested practice that must constantly negotiate the tension between autonomy and incorporation, between direct action and bureaucratic mediation.

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