



Translocal Mobilization of Housing Commons. The Example of the German Mietshäuser Syndikat

Corinna Hözl*

Applied Geography and Spatial Planning Working Group, Geography Department, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

We are currently observing an international trend toward the establishment of non-profit-oriented, collaborative, and self-managed housing models. In this respect, knowledge concerning commoning has been circulating globally with initiatives mutually interacting. This is also true for the Mietshäuser Syndikat, which by now comprises some 171 permanently decommodified houses in Germany and has been transferred to the legal spaces of several neighboring states (Austria, France, Netherlands, and Czech Republic). Against this background, this paper addresses the question of how housing commons such as the Syndikat circulate translocally and what role spatial learning processes and network dynamics play in that regard. Conceptually, the study refers to the spatialities of social movements. Participatory observations at (inter-)national meetings as well as network graph-assisted interviews with key actors of the Syndikat model represent the central methods of the study. The findings illustrate that (1) solidary knowledge transfers via key actors who take on advisory and network functions, (2) open physical, and (3) virtual meeting points facilitate a moderate diffusion and permanent adaptations of the housing commons model. A process of “assembling, dis-assembling, re-assembling along the way” (McCann and Ward, 2012) thus unfolds. However, the findings illustrate that these mechanisms are not strong enough to compensate unequal relations of power and resources—among other in view of local pre-conditions.

Keywords: housing commons, Mietshäuser Syndikat, translocal circulation, networks, learning assemblages, spatialities

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*Correspondence:

Corinna Hözl
corinna.hoelzl@hu-berlin.de

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of the globally and increasingly volatile housing issue, a trend is becoming apparent toward non-profit-oriented and collectivized housing and property models that are organized bottom-up, including new cooperatives, the Mietshäuser Syndikat, limited-equity cooperatives and community land trusts (CLTs) (Horlitz, 2012; Rost, 2014; Balmer and Bernet, 2015; Huron, 2015; Thompson, 2015; Bunce, 2016; Cabré and Andrés, 2017). In part, these housing models have expanded internationally and shown mutual connections (Moore and McKee, 2012; Moore and Mullins, 2013; Lang, 2015). The CLT model has experienced the strongest international expansion (cf. Interreg, 2021). Furthermore, the housing commoners increasingly act on housing policy programs, be it temporarily or in the longer term (Aernouts and Ryckewaert, 2018; Ferreri and Vidal, 2021). The Mietshäuser Syndikat in Germany is a solidarity

network of currently 170 socialized, self-managed housing projects. Since its inception in 1992, it has not only grown continuously but has also been involved in housing policy debates, while achieving high-level mass media presence (Vey, 2016) and attracting growing international interest.

Against the background of emerging from a niche existence and establishing an affordable alternative for many, studies on housing commons no longer attend only to the specifics and challenges of individual housing models. Rather, they increasingly focus on collaborations with political decision makers, public institutions, builders, and promotional instruments (Lang, 2015; Mullins, 2018; Mullins and Moore, 2018). The number of empirical studies on (trans-)local mobilization in the field of housing movements, particularly relating to multiscale networks of civil-society actors, is relatively small (Lang et al., 2018, p. 20; Thompson, 2018, p. 85). For example, Moore and Mullins (2013) investigated applied forms of support to facilitate the diffusion of CLTs and self-help housing in the UK, and Moore and McKee (2012) compared variants of the CLT model in various countries. Thompson (2018) explored the historical development of CLTs in Liverpool through mobile urbanism, amongst others. Raynor (2018) investigated the process of assembling an innovative social housing project, and how such innovations may be scaled up or scaled out. And Herrle et al. (2016) addressed the role and complex global networks of community-based organizations in processes of housing for the urban poor. However, with the exception of McFarlane (2009), who analyzed the translocal assemblages of housing movements, the studies have barely focused on the mobility of housing commons and related spatial conditions.

Here, a research gap presents itself with regard to the mobilization of housing commons (including related local and translocal learning and networking processes). Drawing on the example of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* and its international network, this paper addresses the question as to how housing commons circulate translocally and what role spatial learning processes and network dynamics play in that regard. Precisely, we ask for the mechanisms, i.e., structures and strategies, that facilitate the mobilization of housing commons and the challenges that become visible. Along the lines of a “spatial grammar of urban learning” (McFarlane, 2011, p. 1), we define the assemblage concept as a paradigm in order to examine the processual generation and mobilization of housing models, practices, and transferring actors. Arguments deriving from the theories of spatiality and power are applied to extrapolate the environments that promote or prevent the materialization of housing commons (cf. Künkel, 2015). In this way, we intend to contribute to identifying the role spatial formations play in mobilizing housing commons.

THE MIETSHÄUSER SYNDIKAT—GROWTH IN SPITE OF AGGRAVATED BASIC CONDITIONS

Tracing back to the squatters’ movement in the 1980s and finally established in 1992, the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* is a cooperative-like amalgamation of initiatives which purchase,

self-manage and jointly occupy houses (Balmer and Bernet, 2015). The key premises of the umbrella association include the collectivization of property, affordable rents, life in self-management, and solidarity between ongoing and new projects. Based on these premises, the *Syndikat* sees itself in terms of housing commons, i.e., as decommodified properties characterized by long-term affordability and set up, organized, and managed by an (ideally) heterogeneous group of commoners under the principles of solidarity and participation (cf. *An Architektur*, 2010; Aernouts and Ryckewaert, 2018). Various studies have reflected on this characterization (Rost, 2014; Vey, 2016; Barthel, 2020; Card, 2020).

A specifically developed legal construct, which is based on LLCs in Germany, prevents purchased houses within the *Syndikat* from being recommodified: Every housing project has two legal partners, the house association and the *Mietshäuser Syndikat*. This shared partnership structure warrants a right of veto to the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* against the sell-off of the properties, changes of statutes and appropriation of net income (*Mietshäuser Syndikat*, 2021, p. 10). Besides functioning as supervisory body, the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* is also the connecting piece that links all housing projects. At the same time, the organizational model guarantees extensive autonomy to the individual housing projects.

In terms of financial feasibility, the model relies on direct credits totaling approx. one-third of the given loan amount—mostly from the personal environments of the initiatives—in order to cover the required equity capital shares and take out loans at reduced rates of interest with a bank or a foundation. Thereby, the model is also accessible to users lacking capital resources and affordable rents become possible.

The solidarity principle of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* is based on annually increasing solidarity contributions as a rental component that serves to maintain the stock and support the inception of new projects. Roughly €386,000 of such contributions were accumulated in 2021 (2020: €350,000), most of which merging into capital invested for new projects and increasingly into direct credits for housing projects (*Mietshäuser Syndikat*, 2021). Yet possibly of greater importance to the maintenance and amplification of the association—following the call to expanding commoning (Stavrides, 2014)—is the project members’ solidary transfer of practical knowledge to new initiatives. In most cases, two project consultants, who ideally are in close spatial proximity, mentor new initiatives until the resolution is adopted to participate in the association.

Apart from advisory and coordination tasks, a number of permanent and temporary working committees address specific issues. Many members are involved in political work, including public relations, the organization of and participation in workshops, and similar events. The regional consultings are often active in urban politics. In the course of growing attempts at municipal definancialization (cf. Wijburg, 2020), those structures play a concrete part in local committees in an effort to change the basic conditions, e.g., such that the syndicate model may be considered on equal terms with other building groups and housing cooperatives in concept tendering processes. Such efforts have been successful in various cities.

Currently, 170 housing projects with some 4,550 tenants have been implemented, while 16 initiatives are seeking housing space (January 2022). Some houses function according to the principle of conventional apartment buildings, while others share spaces and everyday life, establish collectivized economy, etc. (Vey, 2016, p. 67). Over the past 30 years, the Syndikat has continuously expanded by new housing projects. Interestingly, an average of 12 new projects has annually been incorporated over the past decade in spite of aggravated conditions. Continuous growth requires lasting organizational adaptations. For example, a committee established in 2017 is able to make specific, defined decisions outside the framework of the meetings in an attempt to increase the ability to react. Moreover, the Syndikat is being regionalized to various extents.

The model is also seen to be permanently adapted in view of aggravated initial conditions, changing needs and basic legal conditions, as well as accumulated expertise within the Mietshäuser Syndikat (cf. Barthel, 2020). Thus, the Syndikat policies are “assembled, disassembled, and reassembled along the way” (McCann and Ward, 2012, p. 43). On the one hand, property and land prices have exponentially increased due to financialization and saturated housing markets, thus making it nearly impossible to purchase land or objects on the free market. On the other hand, a self-critical reflection has been taking place in parts of the Syndikat with regard to produced mechanisms of exclusion associated with the self-governing structures and thus to new members’ extended access (Stavrides, 2014; Kip, 2015). Consequently, various modifications, spin-offs, and international subsidiaries have been established. On the national level, these new “parallel structures” include participation in a syndicate for agricultural areas and farms (Ackersyndikat); a foundation established to accept potential endowments and come into inheritances (Syndikatstiftung); and finally regional formats and/or syndicates that try to reduce the requirements in terms of self-organization (Wem gehört die Stadt in Freiburg, Sauriassl Syndikat in Bavaria) (cf. **Figure1**).

In addition, the syndicate model is extending into the neighboring European countries, with concrete arrangements varying according to the applicable legal frameworks. Together with German Syndikat members, the Willy*Fred housing project in Linz, Austria adapted the model to the country’s legal space in 2016 and founded the habiTAT umbrella organization (cf. **Figure1**). In 2021, the habiTAT network consisted of six projects and several other initiatives, in addition to two farm collectives (rural housing and agricultural projects). Following many years of preparation—and triggered by the implementation of an initial housing project, as in Austria—the Vrijcoop association was founded in the Netherlands in 2018, which currently includes three housing projects and other initiatives. Le Clip, the French umbrella organization, currently manages four projects. Sdílené domy (shared houses), a Czech umbrella, is organized as a cooperative and has recently bought its initial housing project in Prague. Furthermore, there are close contacts with young, independent coalitions, e.g., Sotrac (in Barcelona) and the umbrella cooperative Sostre Civic in Spain, and the appeal fund Antidote in France. Activists from these and other countries founded the “Commoning Spaces Network” in 2018, which

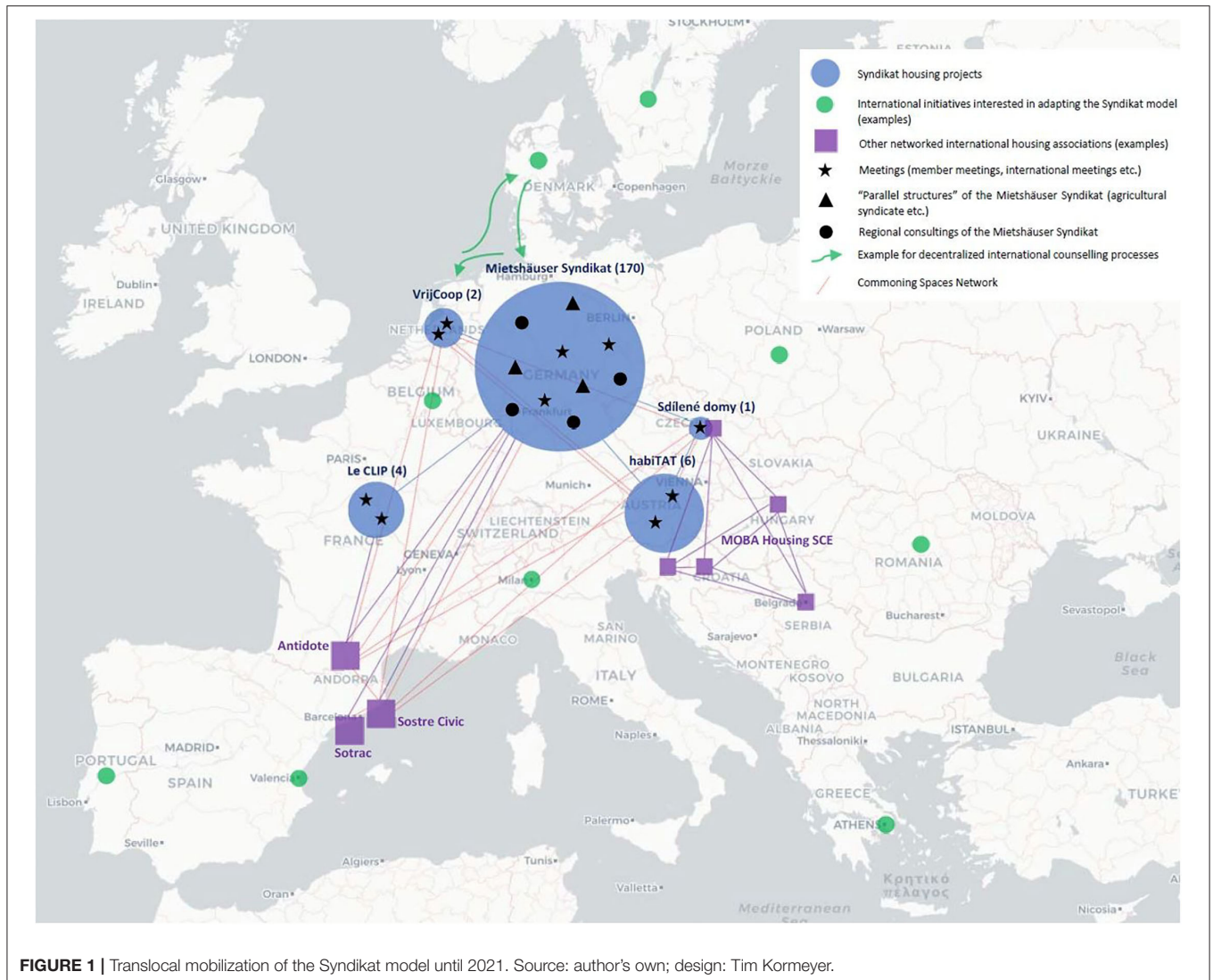
considers itself as an international support network for the promotion of property, self-organization, and solidarity. In addition, the associations are locally and regionally involved in other networks. For example, Sdílené domy, is a member of the young MOBA Housing SCE, which connects young cooperatives in Eastern Europe and is supported by international NGOs such as urbamonde. Various other interested European initiatives, e.g., in Italy, Greece, or Eastern European countries, have not yet succeeded in establishing projects.

THE MIETSHÄUSER SYNDIKAT AS “COMPLEX ASSEMBLAGES”

Recent research on social movements within human geography has emphasized the relevance of all spatialities—including scales, networks, places, territories, and mobilities—as opposed to a focus on individual spatialities and the dichotomy of relational and territorial notions, as exemplified in the pioneering work by Leitner et al. (2008). This applies to both structuralist concepts of spatiality and poststructuralist debates with reference to the assemblage approach (cf. Miller, 2013). For some time, efforts have also been made to redefine the network concept. Instead of seeing networks as single entities, Cumbers et al. (2008) proposed to consider a network as federation of cells (cf. Ettliger and Bosco, 2004). In this sense, networks are produced as (open) interaction processes between actors, events, and actions (cf. Harvey, 1996). In turn, networking spaces are to be less conceived of as closed networks but rather as meeting places where new relations and spatial identities develop (cf. Massey, 1991).

As a young paradigm emerging from the relational turn in geography, the assemblage approach describes the concurrence of various units into loose temporary orders (Legg, 2009). Moreover, assemblage lays the focus on the materiality, emergence, and historical contingency of socio-spatial orders (De Landa, 2016). Thus, this approach emphasizes processes, relations, and development. As opposed to individual concepts of spatiality, the approach makes it possible to embed the external and revoke delimitations between binarities of spatialities. In this way, McFarlane (2009, p. 566) considered “translocal assemblage” in terms of a relational analytic that is open to multiple spatial imaginaries and practices. With this concept, he also referred to the “blurring of scalar distinction” in the production of assemblages in an attempt to avoid the artificial separation of spatialities (McFarlane, 2011, p. 30). The assemblage approach thus assists in dissolving delimitations that involve the risk of blinding out important aspects and in doing justice to the complexity and dynamics of social movements (McFarlane, 2009; see also Davies, 2012). The present paper conceives of assemblage as a paradigm of urban geographies and/or as a “spatial grammar of urban learning” (McFarlane, 2011, p. 9).

For the empirical analysis, we incorporate spatiality-related remarks (Leitner et al., 2008; Nicholls, 2009) as well as the core elements of McFarlane (2011) learning assemblage approach, which links aspects of transfer assemblage thinking with debates about learning and conceives of assemblages as power-guided resources. In so doing, we intend to identify the key mechanisms



and disclose unequal power, resource, and knowledge relations associated with the spatial circulation of housing commons.

Social movement scholars point out to basically four key mechanisms or so-called “grassrooting vectors” in terms of the production of networks (Routledge, 2003; Della Porta, 2005; Nicholls, 2009; Levkoe, 2015). According to Cumbers and colleagues, grassrooting vectors “work to intervene in the work of translation by which networks are formed and developed, acting to further the process of communication, information sharing and interaction within grassroots communities” (Cumbers et al., 2008, 96). First, key actors play an important role for the network production. As mobile activators, brokers, (discursive) strategists, and advocates, they support housing policy matters and the mobility of housing commons on various scales (Nicholls, 2009; Routledge et al., 2013). In the case of global justice networks, Routledge et al. (2013) argued that so-called imagineers are of key importance to the cultural translation of global issues into place-based and lived

everyday experiences. Second, according to various studies, physical meeting places, such as gatherings, social events, project consultations, and workshops, additionally serve as grassrooting vectors (Nicholls, 2009; Routledge et al., 2013). These places invigorate communication and interpersonal relationships and affect collective identities. Third, virtual meeting places, including communication platforms, social media, online gatherings, and e-mail distribution lists, serve to disseminate and obtain information, exchange views, and to maintain relationships marked by fragility. Fourth and finally, materialities, especially toolkits such as financing plans and brochures dispose of different scalar functions (cf. McCann and Ward, 2012; Levkoe, 2015).

These four key mechanisms are not only significant in network relationships, but also as vehicles mobilizing spatial knowledge transfer. Due to its process character, McFarlane’s (2011) learning assemblage approach focuses on learning instead of knowledge. Correspondingly, spatial learning is conceived to

be conditioned by historical actualities and potential possibilities, to be effected by means of action, performance and events, and to be socio-spatially structured, hierarchized and narrativized. “Translocal learning assemblages are structured through various forms of power relation and resource and information control” (McFarlane, 2009, p. 565). In this connection, McFarlane (2009) refers to Allen’s (2003) concept of power, which works with various terms (domination, authority, manipulation, and seduction) that are relevant on various scales and become effective in parallel. For example, these terms codetermine access to the group of key actors (see also Cumbers et al., 2008, p. 188).

McFarlane’s approach further distinguishes between three interwoven dimensions. Referring to Latour (2005), learning (and thus, the mobilization of organizational models such as the Mietshäuser Syndikat) first requires knowledge to be translated. Latour developed the term as an explicitly critical alternative to the “diffusionist storymaking” (Jacobs, 2012, p. 418) of relatively stable things. “Translation brings into view not only the work required for a thing to reach one point from another, but also the multiplicity of add-ons that contribute, often in unpredictable and varying ways, to transportation, arrival, adoption and (something current urban policy mobility studies are entirely blind to) non-arrival and non-adoption” (Jacobs, 2012, p. 418; see also Künkel, 2015). The moment of traveling as the product of actors who operate in and through distributions with spaces and objects is in the focus of this process. Essentially, the circulating formats outlined in the context of the key mechanisms provide the basis. In this way, ideas and implementation tactics, frames, modes of organization, identities and communication strategies are mobilized (Fominaya, 2014). Second, the translations are to be coordinated by means of certain tools in order to manage complexity and facilitate adaptations. According to Latour (1999, cited in McFarlane, 2011, p. 20), the tools assume the function of “centers of calculation” that organize various knowledge domains to facilitate certain modes of thought. This takes place with the aid of constructed functional systems. The production of handbooks for the Austrian or Czech contexts as a joint (and often publicly fundable) step of convergence may serve as an example. In this connection, learning is seen as a comparative process with memories of past experiences. The key coordination tools in the present case include sites, such as housing project inspections or study tours, real estate advertisements, and information exchange for initiatives, e.g., in members’ meetings or counseling sessions. Third, McFarlane (2011) uses Heidegger’s notion of dwelling to describe the process of targeted knowledge perception and composition. Attentiveness is trained in order to direct learning processes to the relevant aspects, to capture key meanings and to make connections. McFarlane (2011) referred to Amin and Roberts (2008) with regard to various types of learning, such as organizational learning (task knowing, professional knowing, creative knowing, virtual knowing). For example, professional knowing, i.e., developing the feeling for a professional habitus, involves the steps toward professionalizing housing project initiatives: appropriate attire for visits to the bank, changes of public appearances, and (adapted) self-presentations in the social media.

METHODS

Research on the spatialities of social movements frequently uses an ethnographic approach which was also applied in the present study. In the sense of “studying through” (Shore and Wright, 1997, p. 14), the selection of methods was guided by mobile and other techniques: accompanying key activists developing policies and the analysis of relational situations in which strategic knowledge is mobilized (e.g., workshops, site visits)¹. All in all, we conducted 20 problem-centered interviews with key actors of the Mietshäuser Syndikat and its international “subsidiaries” (12/2017–1/2020). Ten of these interviews were network graph-assisted. The open network graphs were designed with reference to contacts/materialities and principles, such as the contents, direction, and strength of social relationships (Haythornthwaite, 1996). Being part of a larger research project, the survey methods also included approx. 40 problem-centered interviews with political and administrative representatives, other housing market actors (from public housing companies, cooperatives), and land foundations and local initiatives in an attempt to take account of vertical interactions and communal contexts; 10 of these were relevant and analyzed for the research presented in this paper. Two expert interviews completed the interview sample which is based on a snowball system (for a detailed description of the sample, cf. **Table 1**). Moreover, approx. 20 participant observations were carried out on the occasion of these (inter)national gatherings and other workshops (cf. **Table 2**). By this means, the groups’ interactions and the backgrounds of their actions became comprehensible and reconstructable from within (Schöne, 2003). The sample was supplemented with an analysis of key documents issued by the Syndikat, especially toolkits like financing plans and brochures. Based on a theoretically oriented and inductively differentiated analytical framework, the transcribed interviews and Text Footnotes of the observations were evaluated with a thematic coding process (Braun and Clarke, 2012). On the basis of the spatial interaction and learning processes relevant to the research question, we identified central subject areas (1), proceeded a detailed comparison of related text passages (2) and developed a systematic coding procedure (3). The analysis of ego-centered networks among key actors on the basis of the designed network graphs served to disclose spatial features as well as the network functions and dynamics associated with the relations between commoners (Hollstein and Pfeffer, 2010; Herz et al., 2015); e.g., strong and weak ties at different scales (Granovetter, 1973), related extent of social capital and (Hennig, 2010), and brokerage between different networks (Della Porta, 2005).

RESULTS: THE MECHANISMS AND CHALLENGES OF CIRCULATION

Relevance of Local Framework Conditions

In general, the establishment of new syndicate projects is described as highly demanding, especially in the event that

¹For reasons of feasibility, we honored the principle of following via recurrent encounters (interviews, members’ meetings, consultation appointments).

TABLE 1 | Sample of interviews (2017–2021).

Interview	Institution	Education	Gender	Actor group	Date
1*	Mietshäuser Syndikat (AG International)	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	21/02/2018
2	Mietshäuser Syndikat; communal network office	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	07/02/2019
3*	habitat	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Austria)	06/05/2018
4*	Mietshäuser Syndikat (regional consulting)	Ph.D.	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	06/11/2018
5 (A+B)	Mietshäuser Syndikat (regional consulting)	University degree	Male; female	Syndikat (Germany)	27/03/2018
6	Mietshäuser Syndikat; urban activist	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	01/02/2019
7*	Mietshäuser Syndikat (regional consulting)	University degree	Female	Syndikat (Germany)	24/11/2018
8 (A*+B*)	Vrijcoop; cooplink	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Netherlands)	28/05/2018
9 (A+B)	Mietshäuser Syndikat (regional consulting)	University degree; Ph.D.	Female; female	Syndikat (Germany)	20/04/2018
10*	Sdílené domy	University degree	Female	Syndikat (Czech Republic)	30/04/2018
21	habiTAT (SchloR)	University degree	Female	Syndikat (Austria)	
12 (A+B)	habiTAT (Bikes and Rails)	University degree	Female; male	Syndikat (Austria)	30/04/2018
13*	Mietshäuser Syndikat (regional consulting)	Ph.D.	Female	Syndikat (Germany)	29/11/2018
14	Mietshäuser Syndikat (AG International)	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	14/04/2018
15	Mietshäuser Syndikat (AG Struktur)	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	27/03/2018
16	Mietshäuser Syndikat (AG International)	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	23/01/2019
17	Le Clip	University Degree	Male	Syndikat (Germany)	19/10/2021
18	Sdílené domy	University degree	Female	Syndikat (Czech Republic)	18/04/2018
19*	habiTAT (SchloR)	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Austria)	
20*	habiTAT (Bikes and Rails)	University degree	Male	Syndikat (Austria)	16/16/2018
11	SoWo Leipzig eG	University degree	Male	Scientific expert	08/05/2018
22	Gabu Heindl Architecture	Ph.D.	Female	Scientific expert	
23	Wohnprojekte-Genossenschaft e.Gen., Vienna	University degree	Male	Housing cooperative	17/05/2018
24	Stiftung Trias	University degree	Male	Land foundation	22/01/2019
25	Edith Maryon Stiftung	University degree	Male	Land foundation	28/01/2019
26	“Stadt Neudenken” Berlin	University Degree	Female	Land/housing initiative	28/01/2019
27	Stadtbodenstiftung Berlin*	Ph.D.	Female	Land/housing initiative	02/11/2018
28	“Initiative für gemeinschaftliches Bauen und Wohnen” Vienna	University Degree	Male	Network organization	08/11/2018
29	Municipal council Berlin-Neukölln	University Degree	Male	Politics/administration	16/01/2019
30	Municipal council Vienna	University Degree	Male	Politics/administration	13/11/2018

*Network graph-assisted.

national structures of association are yet to be created. Correspondingly, the analysis proved how critical the internal capacities of the initiatives are. Here, the interviewees particularly emphasized time resources and self-organizing skills (and thus the ability to mobilize not immediately available resources, especially financial resources, and knowledge) (cf. Lang and Stoeger, 2018). Furthermore, the interviewed international initiators repeatedly highlighted the significance of German language skills that facilitate exchange with the Mietshäuser Syndikat.

For this reason, local and national conditions are to be considered for the mobilization of housing commons (cf. Temenos and McCann, 2013). Many collaborative housing studies have shown that the presence of advisory and networking institutions for initiatives plays a crucial role in establishing new housing projects (cf. Lang and Stoeger, 2018). Various international representatives confirmed this finding and

visualized their function, e.g., as go-betweens for legal contacts, in the network graphs, such as in the case of habiTAT: “So, the KUPF [Upper Austria Cultural Platform] recommended a lawyer who constructed the model, which took ages in Germany until they found a lawyer” (interview 3, 14). In the absence of such public advisory structures in the Czech Republic, the Prague initiative depended on their social capital to solve specific legal affairs; e.g., the statutes for the Czech umbrella association could only be worked out as there was a specialist in cooperative law in the close relationship circle. By contrast, the more strongly upscaled CLTs in Great Britain additionally dispose of a national networking institution (Lang et al., 2020).

Moreover, political support programs including communal tendering procedures prove to be instrumental for new housing projects, especially in the course of increasingly strained housing markets (cf. Ferreri and Vidal, 2021). Since in

TABLE 2 | Sample of participant observations (2017–2021) (selection).

Field note	Event	Place	Date
1	Mietshäuser Syndikat General assembly	Freiburg	15/09/2018
2	HabitAT General assembly	Linz	04/07/2018
3	Mietshäuser Syndikat Workshop Sdílené domy	Potsdam	08/12/2018
4	Mietshäuser Syndikat International Meeting	ZAD, France	07–09/09/2018
5	Mietshäuser Syndikat General assembly	Berlin	18/01/2020
6	Mietshäuser Syndikat Activists meeting	Freiburg	14/09/2018
7	Mietshäuser Syndikat Regional general assembly	Hannover	24/11/2018
8	Mietshäuser Syndikat General assembly and International Meeting	Berlin	08/12/2017
9	Platform 31 Cooperatives are on the rise	Den Haag	26/05/2018
10	Land Property Politics roundtable	Berlin	08/06/2018

the framework of tendering procedures (e.g., in Germany, Austria, Italy, and some Swiss municipalities), which are based on social and environmental sustainability criteria, housing cooperatives can purchase public land at a lower price. In legal terms, however, self-organized communal housing can be defined as an unchartered territory in some countries. For instance, a member of Le Clip explained: “We finance our projects exclusively through direct credits; it’s unthinkable that French banks support such projects” (interview 17, 25). And according to an interviewed expert, in part, a cooperatively self-governed tradition is completely lacking or was abruptly discontinued, such as in most Eastern European countries (interview 11, 40). Correspondingly, the presence of bottom-up projects in the general public and in the perception of political decision makers varies locally and internationally, while relevant governance arrangements differ vehemently as interviews with members from different places illustrated.

Key Actors

Initially, the findings demonstrate that the active counselors are to be seen as the motor that stimulates the mobilization of the model. These key actors and, in part, imagineers (cf. Nicholls, 2009; Routledge et al., 2013) have been involved in their volunteer advisory activities in Germany for many years and have acquired specialized practical and professional knowledge. Another typical characteristic is their complementary job profiles, i.e., many counselors are multiply integrated in adjacent fields (e.g., house building, network organizations, activism) on a volunteer and/or wage labor basis. This way, they are able to pool know-how, professional expertise and activist knowledge, combine tasks, or generate remunerated activities as architects. Moreover, they are very well-networked at the local and national levels due to project collaborations, municipalist formats and as a part of an expertized and by now multiply and nationwide interlinked scene of urban activists. This serves to swiftly mobilize essential resources, such as legal expertise and financing options: Based on intercultural interests, some counselors have also acquired gradually growing international relations based on personal contacts (cf. interview 1, 203).

Mentors, Motivators

Similar to their advisory activities within Germany, these actors also assume international counseling, as so-called mentors, for initiatives up to the project-founding stage. As a first step, they do comprehensive translation work and travel in terms of knowledge actors (Larner and Laurie, 2010); they send out invitations to international advisory seminars and are available for questions by email (cf. section Physical Places). The key actors thus contribute to imparting information and foster motivation and the mobilization of forces. Whenever possible, they also mobilize contacts with banks and foundations². Serving as a working basis, the handbook of the Mietshäuser Syndikat contains continuously update information on launching LLCs, financing, public relations, administration, construction measures, accounting, statute templates, etc. In terms of “mediating structures,” the handbook supports translations to set up functional systems and their coordination, and thus the actors’ professionalization (Hutchins, 1995). On the other side of the solidary knowledge transfer, the autonomy-based learning principle has a great effect on mobilization, as emphasized in the following quotation: “The motor is actually this expert factory, the Syndikat. Each group somewhat starts from the scratch and works on all the steps [...] and that’s how each group trains its experts who then can continue to give advice.” (interview 3, 96).

However, there are limits to volunteer consultancy at the international level. Frequently, individual resources do not suffice to become sufficiently familiar with national regulations and to be present on site. Gaps in the necessary transfer of knowledge thus more easily develop: “So, there are questions that are country-specific, and then we can’t even answer because we don’t really know the legal system” (interview 14, 127). As a result, the international initiatives have to rely on themselves and their local networks to legally adapt the model (interview 10, 29; 31; see Text Footnote 6, 127). The advisors’ broker function—intensively used in Germany—is also limited at the international level as neither personal contacts nor the institutions themselves

²For example, in the case of the Amsterdam housing project Nieuwland Soweto, Syndikat members made contact with the GLS Bank after a Dutch bank had refused financing.

are present in the same way³. In view of the necessary transfer of knowledge and motivating face-to-face contacts, professionalized, and remunerated formats are required in order to provide international initiatives in Milan, Athens, and eastern European cities with targeted support: “In Greece, there would have been an initial project at least five years ago if a small professional advisory team had gone down there with seed capital in their luggage and helped out with setting up the structures for one or two years.” (interview 16, 176).

In addition, the counselors in part appear to risk—unknowingly or consciously—excluding initiatives due to divergent ideological notions (see also Cumbers et al., 2008). Uniformity and quality control in advising are only implemented with difficulties. In part, criticism of the counseling structure goes so far as to imply “failure” at international level and to characterize the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* as “a no longer maneuverable ship that wastes its political potential” (interview 16, 7; 9): “Nobody is around to speak for the *Syndikat* and there is no decision whatsoever as to what it should or can actually do and that has to do with the tyranny of consensus democracy that simply doesn’t work anymore in the constantly growing in the *Syndikat*.” (interview 16, 3). By contrast, other interviews with key actors suggest that, with the more strongly internalized principle of self-organization, certain inefficiencies are more easily accepted: “Most often, it just happens that we get inquiries from the countries. And then either something develops or it just doesn’t.” (interview 15, 204).

Coordinators, Brokers, Lobbyists, Imagineers, Gatekeepers

Furthermore, the key actors address themselves to the coordination and thus the preservation and creation of new external prerequisites of the *Syndikat*, including legal and especially capital law coordination. This has also had repercussions on the relationship between members of the *Syndikat* as rooted in the squatters’ movement and representatives of politics and administration. Thus, the roles in the field have shifted, which is increasingly acknowledged by the “professional” side, as illustrated by the following quotation: “Had somebody told me 10 years ago that I’ll be on the phone with the [head of the financial committee of the Social Democratic Party] every now and then. What? That’s completely normal today.” (interview 4, 45). These mobilization practices are accompanied by an ongoing professionalization of the key actors in terms of certain knowledge domains (cf. Amin and Roberts, 2008): “We had a long talk again today with the *Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht* [Federal Financial Supervisory Authority], also because of current problems. That’s somehow,

well, more or less voluntarily or involuntarily become my pet issue.” (interview 5, 140/A)⁴.

Against the background of the growing challenges of implementing a syndicate project, these key actors also increasingly adopt lobbying activities, including the development of new vertical alliances. In accord with the pragmatic stance, Cumbers (2015) recommends to commoners, it has become a key strategy in paving the way for new projects to explore options of cooperation with political-administrative actors, as interviewees from various German cities outlined (e.g., interview 6, 26) (cf. Czischke, 2018; Mullins, 2018). The focus is on central communal instruments including tendering processes and the exercise of the communal right of preemption⁵ as well as attempts to contribute to land policies (such as involvement in the “*Liegenschaftspolitik*” [Land Property Politics] roundtable in Berlin). In concrete terms, the key actors are attempting to influence the possibilities of involvement in tendering processes and their elaborations. For instance, *Syndikat* activists in Munich carved out equality between the *Syndikat* and housing cooperatives such that *Syndikat* projects can also participate in tendering processes. The following statement given by a counselor illustrates how this succeeded by means of tireless persuading and study trips and underlines the impact of these middling actors (Temenos and McCann, 2013): “After years of work at convincing the Greens, a troop of city administrators got into the bus and left for Freiburg to be explained by administration there that that’s a cool thing.” (see Text Footnote 5). In a similar way, the long-active representatives in other countries, especially the Dutch counterpart *Vrijcoop*, have been lobbying for adapted conditions of promotion (interview 8, 268)⁶. On a larger scale, and in part remunerated, *Syndikat* representatives additionally prepare interested initiatives long beforehand to engage in calls for tenders in order to be able to compete with professional builders, as the following interviewee elucidated for the city of Freiburg: “In part, public proceedings require you to act very much in advance in order to have a chance at the right moment.” (interview 5, 22/B). In this way, 15 new initiatives have gotten together in Freiburg since 2018. The public presence of many key actors in Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria, amongst others, who employ the possibilities to provide general housing policy suggestions and to have critical voices be heard on the occasion of events is striking (cf. Barthel, 2020). It is little surprising that reformings of the organizational structure and rethinking of legal forms and/or new establishments in terms of disassembling (e.g., efforts to decentralize) and re-assembling (e.g., the establishment of a syndicate foundation) are concentrated on this circle

³The following quotation made by a *Syndikat* member, who is also an active consultant with a communal network office, underscores the potential, and in part high level of necessary detail attached to this social capital: “I know them, some of them know me [...] at the bank, I can give them a call and talk to them [...] and I know that if I can’t get ahead at one level, well, then I just have to talk to the other person [...] If you want to get ahead, you sometimes have to know how [...] And the next thing: lawyers, that is, a lot of specialist fuss. It’s absolutely worth a lot to have a good lawyer, to be able to ask them questions in between [...] Another area, well, I’d say activism.” (interview 2, 47).

⁴The key trigger of these intensified activities was the introduction of a consumer protection article (*Kleinanlegerschutzgesetz*; Small Investor Protection Act), the contemplated elaboration of which would have strongly curtailed the use of the instrument of direct credits which is essential to the *Syndikat*.

⁵In the case of property and real-estate acquisition, communes in Germany have a right of preemption and can exercise this right for the benefit of a third party, e.g., the *Syndikat*. In Berlin, by now several *Syndikat* project have been implemented by ways of exercising the right of preemption.

⁶For the first time, the recent reform of housing legislation is targeted at the promotion of housing cooperatives (including the *Vrijcoop*).

(cf. McCann and Ward, 2012) (cf. section The Mietshäuser Syndikat as “Complex Assemblages”).

As counselors and activists at the interface of prospecting initiatives, political decision makers, the civil society, etc., the key actors continuously encounter challenges and options. This applies, amongst others, to the structural accessibility for new commoners as well as local structures of support and possibilities of intervention. Thus, they are able to merge accumulated expertise, establish new constructs and find themselves in the housing market in new, professionalized roles, as the following quotation elucidates (cf. Amin and Roberts, 2008): “A few years ago, we never would have thought that we would at some time put down three new building projects in Gutleutmatten for 12 million euros. That’s crazy. Now it’s practically become normal.” (interview 4, 46). Based on the network graphs, it is able to state that the key actors’ various actions more strongly depend on individual interests, experiences and capacities (e.g., time) and less strongly reflect a coordinated process. Furthermore, it presumably represents a more or less close circle of imagineers; in a sense, mobilizable time resources control access: “You eventually notice that there’s only a hard core of activists and then there are a lot of people who come in and go out.” (interview 16, 3).

Physical Places

Furthermore, the investigations corroborate the significance of certain meeting places as grassroots vectors for the translocal production of networks and circulation of knowledge (Routledge et al., 2013; Levkoe, 2015). As to the *habiTAT*, *Vrijcoop*, and *Sdílené domy* associations, for example, the idea to adapt the *Syndikat* model came from representatives who had attended members meetings and become aware of the *Syndikat* at local events.

Members Meetings: Creative, Social, Identity-Forming

Convened twice to four times a year, the members meetings with up to 300 attendees serve as an anchor at which the various functions, concerns and actors of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* are merged with participation resolutions, task force meetings, and thematic workshops (cf. **Figure 2**). The openness to interested initiatives and individuals from both at home and abroad is particularly characteristic of these conventions.

First, as a core coordination tool (cf. Latour, 2005), these meetings facilitate fundamental learning processes: the attendees gather personal ideas about the actors, understandings, practices, and—frequently in the framework of overnight stays—*Syndikat* projects. They can correlate impressions and reduce complexities in the sense of “What am I going to take home?” For example, it was particularly relevant to *Vrijcoop* to recognize the association as an influential institutionalized network that not only brokers contacts (e.g., with internationally active cooperative banks and land foundations). Due to scale effects, they have also come to take up a strong position in relation to banks and other partners: “We do know a lot of projects in the Netherlands, but somehow we aren’t that networked. I mean, we know one another

informally, but we aren’t networked formally. And the *Syndikat* seems to have made it somehow [...] It actually laid an important foundation stone: [...] We can realize projects in collaboration.” (interview 8, 5). This served to increase the motivation to establish a similar network in the Netherlands in view of the build-up of both *Vrijcoop* and *cooplink*, a new national network of collectively managed housing projects. Furthermore, these observations make it possible to broaden the scope for local policy discussions (Larner and Laurie, 2010) as the following quote illustrates: “If that wouldn’t work out in Germany, so, that also saves us in these arguments in the Czech Republic.” (interview 10, 90).

Second, with the ongoing development of direct contacts, the foundation is laid for new mobilizable networks that also facilitate further exchange (face-to-face and virtually), as the following statement by a *habiTAT* representative illustrates: “I believe the way it started was when Nina and a friend of hers just went to a members meeting in Altötting in Bavaria and got informed [...] and then they got to know some people and then those people supported us [...] So then, we went to a couple of members meetings. And had some beer in the evening (laughter).” (interview 3, 37–39). With a view on applications for direct credits, these personal contacts are highly important to *Sdílené domy* and other initiatives located in structurally weak regions: “We hope we can also get direct credits from private persons and projects in Germany and/or Austria [...] [I]n the Czech Republic, the generation that is dying now has nothing to hand down.” (interview 10, 79). The practices in the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* make it clear that direct credits are preferably granted to known projects and thus within geographical proximity. However, this restriction is bypassed especially by internally transferring credits with regard to older housing projects (in the form of so-called subordinated loans), e.g., to projects abroad or in structurally weaker regions in Germany (cf. interview 4).

Third, the meetings, as grassroots vectors, foster a common identity to be formed. For example, an interviewee stated that being part of a larger network was a critical factor in successful project implementation: “The feeling that you have the backing of such a gigantic organization, that was certainly crucial.” (interview 8, 12).

Advisory Seminars and Visits to Housing Projects: “Motivational Push”

The international advisory seminars in this connection serve to address basic housing policy conditions and specific issues, such as new constructions vs. redevelopments, conflict management, and direct credits, as well as to visit other *Syndikat* projects. These seminars are the key coordination tool for international initiatives in consolidating learning processes, while generating a decisive motivational push. Here, experiences can be reflected upon and merged (cf. McFarlane, 2011): “When we have our seminar week, about a third or so is always visits to projects [...] that is, taking a look at how it works, talking to the people, motivation, finances, legal forms, problem discussions, many worst-case scenarios and so, and, well, refueling motivation, refueling energy.” (interview 1, 286 et seqq.). This also serves



FIGURE 2 | habiTAT members meeting, 2018. Source: author's own.

to correlate elements of identification. A member of *Sdílené domy* also attested to the motivating significance of experiencing models: “To see that it can function in theory; [...] that you’ve simply got the inspiration. You see a nice large house (laughter) [...] We don’t have any role models here in the Czech Republic, or barely any, and it just helps us tremendously to understand how it works in other countries.” (interview 10, 75). In the absence of paragons and on-site expertise, *Sdílené domy* and other institutions are shown to seek international orientation and undertake fact finding trips (cf. McCann, 2008). For lack of experience, a guest and member from Spain whom I talked to at a members meeting similarly emphasized the crucial importance of exchange with the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* (see Text Footnote 1). At the same time, an interviewee from Prague pointed out the valuable exchange of experiences with habiTAT as an association that likewise was in the start-up phase and confronted with similar challenges in an “absolutely unknown territory.” (interview 10, 36).

Traveling: Reaching Initiatives on Site and Setting Impulses

Furthermore, all interviews elucidated the significance of presentations and the possibilities of exchange “on site”, i.e., the advisors’ trips abroad. Only thus would it be possible to reach a broader mass, to discuss and compare an unknown enterprise and to set a starting point on the occasion of a joint event: “Of course it’s interesting when one or two people know about it, but you want it to be carried by a bigger group, so that more

people are convinced.” (interview 8, 3). Thus, interviewees from the Netherlands and the Czech Republic reported on events (conferences on housing, meetings of Antifa groups, specific information events, etc.) at which the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* presented itself: “We were in touch with a Syndikat [projekt] for another project. And then they hosted events here and I believe, well, for many people, it was like, actually, we want that too.” (interview 8, 3). In the case of *Sdílené domy*, the idea was rather casually born by an “impulse of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat*” and it “stuck” (interview 10, 19). Events may also coincidentally emerge as “key events”⁷. In this connection, the actual motivation and political objective of the groups (e.g., habiTAT und *Sdílené domy*) came to be expressed: The primary issue is not housing or socially acceptable rents but rather political action and setting an example, with establishing housing commons being seen as an appropriate and concrete starting point.

In addition, the total of observable events facilitates recurrent encounters. This way, relationships can consolidate. Thus, the closed meetings of the AG Struktur (Task Force on Structure), which deal with the structures, challenges and future visions of the *Syndikat*, preferably take place abroad, most recently in Linz and Amsterdam. According to one member, this serves to pursue the idea of exploring other projects, sharing mutual

⁷Moreover, the interviewees referred to invitations to guest lectures at international conferences (i.e., of the Goethe-Institut) and meetings organized by housing movements and cohousing clusters (e.g., in Sweden, Italy, and Greece) which altogether contribute to circulating the model.

inspiration and, last but not least, combining essentials with pleasure (gathering new impressions and socializing)⁸.

International Meetings: Exchange of Experience, Identity Formation, Institutionalization

The significance of personal exchange is finally shown in international encounters. For example, the AG International (Task Force on International Affairs) organized its first international meeting in December 2017: “My only aim was to open up a space; to say, okay, independent of email communication, to get together privately, that is, directly in communication, makes more sense and maybe something will develop from that.” (interview 1, 169). The interviewed guests also confirmed the significance of exchange, the connected learning effects and endorsement of given projects. Various interviewees emphasized supply with certain materials in this regard (cf. interview 10, 76; see Text Footnotes 3, 4). In particular, templates for direct credit contracts and finance planning tools can be directly incorporated in applications as comparative tools and become effective as scalar network strategies (cf. Levkoe, 2015). And the interviews show that Syndikat brochures hold an important act of translation due to their adaptability to new projects and/or associations (cf. McFarlane, 2011). This serves to let groups grow together and involve political foundations or network institutions that frequently allocate money to their production. Finally, several participants highlighted the documentation of meetings as attesting to the international existence of such housing models (see Text Footnote 3).

As observed at the meetings, social and intercultural interest is the prerequisite for such exchange. Furthermore, Syndikat members associate the meetings with the objective to accelerate a decentralized international exchange in an attempt to dissolve hierarchies and inefficiencies with the network node of the Syndikat. In this connection, exchanging views on communization, self-administration and other basic principles, along with a common self-conception, has an identity-forming effect. In the long term, the participants also cherish hope for a strategic function: to generate a singular voice as a united network institution at the European level. Correspondingly, in 2018, a “commoning spaces network” was founded on the occasion of a follow-up meeting in France (cf. **Figure 1**). However, international activities have been shown to be add-ons rather than the priority. This is because the activities regarded as essential—and moreover, not reduced to housing commoning—are mainly locally based (see also Mayer, 2013). Accordingly, in the case of the AG International, it was observed that email communication had failed to function sufficiently. Interviewees reported that reactions were missing and that many inquiries had to be called off. As a consequence, knowledge regarding the activities was unequally distributed within the task force (see Text Footnote 7). Overall, the internationalization activities have largely been discontinued since the meeting in France. Without the stimulating face-to-face contacts, the website and formulation

of a common self-understanding, amongst others, are therefore on hold.

Advisors and Activists Meetings: Exchanging Experience Among the Key Actors

Apart from advisory issues, the general coordination tasks of the association are increasingly discussed at the advisors and activists meetings taking place in the framework of the national members meetings in Germany (see above). Whenever necessary, “new expert rounds [...] are recruited” (interview 1, 121) in the presence of internal or external challenges, such as social conflict and changes in the law. With often more than 100 participants, the meetings are thus highly important in terms of aligning and, as appropriate, (re)synchronizing experiences from various activist and advisory practices, as well as creative knowledge mobilization: “New ideas pop up here as to what you could still try out.” (interview 5, 192/B). It is striking that lobbying is mostly local, that experiences are only selectively presented by virtual means, and that common strategies are barely established.

Virtual Places

Virtual meeting places complement the physical venues in the context of various communication media. In the case of the Mietshäuser Syndikat, these places currently include various email distribution lists used for formalities, inquiries, specialist and project exchange, as well as to broker contacts and direct credits, amongst others.

Among the lists, the general Syndikat distribution list is used to send out regular invitations to member meetings and more intensively for queries, in particular, regarding the (international) acquisition of direct credits. The projects also exchange views on aspects of project management (e.g., sustainable restoration, solidarity-based rental models, etc.). In addition, solidarity fees, conflicts and other special topics are discussed here and invitations to festivals etc. issued.

The distribution list of the AG International is to be emphasized. This tool serves to manage inquiries from international initiatives (in Milan, Greece, France, Sweden, Portugal, and Denmark, etc.) which seek membership in the Syndikat, wish to set up their own associations or require advice on project financing. The Syndikat members also use this list to introduce individuals taking international interests (including scientists and journalists) to established contacts in their own countries. Thus, initiatives from other parts of Europe gain knowledge of similar approaches in their home countries through the Syndikat. In this way, the Syndikat functions as a node point to establish contacts on site. Interestingly, a slight tendency of decentralization has become apparent in accord with the intention of the above-mentioned “commoning spaces network”; i.e., it is no longer (only). Syndikat members in Germany who respond to some inquiries, but also European partners in spatial vicinity (cf. green arrows, **Figure 1**).

Furthermore, the advisory and activists list is intensively applied to discuss specialist questions, such as with respect to tendering processes (e.g., interview 15, 168 et seq.). The counselors also post requests regarding ongoing project consultations should they be unable to answer them on their

⁸Coincidental encounters at activist events (e.g., the Recht auf Stadt Forum), housing policy events, solidarity parties, and summer festivals are a further example although they rather take place at the national and local level.

own. Finally, the list warrants access to a broad network of actors contributing to project implementation (lawyers, notaries, banks, foundations, advisory institutions, other projects, funders, and communal actors).

By contrast, housing projects and, in part, new umbrella associations are also present in the social media. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram form an adequate medium for direct credit applications, self-presentations, event postings and participation in urban policy debates. For the Syndikat in its entirety, this is not possible simply because the association lacks a common voice.

As various interviewees confirmed, email distribution lists as a medium imply that communication is at times inefficient, i.e., the topics recur and discussions are not always satisfactory as they are not brought to an end and/or are considered to be confusing (cf. interview 1, 179 et seq.). In contrast, *habiTAT* communicates mainly via an internal, open-source discussion platform (incl. Wikis, fora, etc.), which are still being elaborated at the Syndikat. The communication infrastructure reflects the association's inactive re-orientation for which structural adaptations are in part barely feasible (cf. interview 3, 90).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: TRANSLOCAL ASSEMBLAGES OF CIRCULATING HOUSING COMMONS

The objective of the present study was to explore the mechanisms and challenges associated with the translocal mobilization of housing commons as exemplified by the Syndikat model found especially in Germany. The following major findings were identified:

- An assessable group of activists is the crucial motor driving the circulation of the model: These key actors assume the volunteer transfer of knowledge. In view of the size of the association, they dispose of remarkably extensive horizontal and vertical networks to maintain and advance the prerequisites for new Syndikat projects. At the same time, the principle of volunteerism sets limits to the circulation of the model, such that the key actors prioritize local over international activities in case of uncertainty. Moreover, especially in the context of expansion practices, social and power relationships that are typical of convergence spaces become apparent due to divergent aims, ideologies, and strategies within the association (cf. Routledge, 2003; Juris, 2008).
- Open and direct meeting places: This second key mechanism not only facilitates the exchange of information and learning processes between ongoing projects and initiatives. Due to related social encounters beside official agendas, these places also have an identity-forming and confidence-building effect. This implies the production of bridging social capital. Among others, this social capital finds expression in the mutual financial support of the housing projects—one of the crucial factors in project implementation.
- As a third key mechanism, virtual encounters facilitate continuous knowledge exchange and are put to use in

direct credit acquisition. In view of inefficiencies, dissonances, and responsibility issues, however, email communication as a predominant format has proven to be obstructive, while illustrating the inactivity of restructurings within the association.

- A range of toolkits, which are continuously updated and adapted to specific contexts, accelerate essential learning processes. The findings confirmed their scalar functions, studies on social movement networks strongly point out to (e.g., Levkoe, 2015).
- The mechanisms mentioned do not unfold their efficacy as detached from local prerequisites (cf. Temenos and McCann, 2013). In particular, acquired facilities of self-organization, time resources, the position of bottom-up projects in public discourse, and political support measures account for the establishment of housing commons. These preconditions vary strongly in international comparisons.
- In part, translocal inequalities in the allocation of knowledge and resources can be bridged. This is because raising direct credits, the central tool of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat*, and accessing bank loans and land foundations is effected not only locally (regardless of local ties) but also transnationally owing to creative practices. Moreover, credit institutions are in part internationally active, while making contacts via the Syndikat as a long-standing cooperation partner tends to facilitate access.
- To sum up, the findings illustrate that the identified mechanisms are not strong enough to compensate unequal relationships of power and resources. Thus, the model presents itself to be mobilized in sociospatially selective terms. New associations are only established with sufficient internal and external local resources. By way of contrast, the developments in Catalonia and other regions are different, while the model reaches locations such as Milan and Athens, though in a state of “nonadoption” (Jacobs, 2012, p. 418).

Overall, the findings confirm existing spatial conceptualizations of social movements and allowed to differentiate some components specific to housing commons. Place-bound references can be stated to be dominant in discussing the international mobilization of the Syndikat model, with translocal effects unfolding at the same time and such influences being integrated. The transfer of knowledge and resources is thus effected as “place-based, but not necessarily place-bound” (Cumbers et al., 2008, p. 192).

The generation and utilization of translocal relationships is especially crucial to new initiatives in their start-up phases. These relationships facilitate access to knowledge and essential contacts, and thus to capital, tactics, and strategies. In addition, intensive horizontal exchange with international experts and allies can provide the decisive motivational push. In the course of project implementation, and in the longer term, however, local and regional network relationships are brought into focus. This is where strong ties become localized, with families and friends who serve as creditors, as well as a supportive movement with which further and frequently place-bound concerns may be addressed (cf. Nicholls, 2009).

At the local and partly regional level, furthermore, (partially) loose references are to be established in order to attract the public and supporters, and alliances be formed with politics and administration, as well as collaborations with experts and builders (cf. Czischke, 2018). Thus, new projects are involved in further translocal assemblages by means of multiple points of contact (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Accelerated by the principle of self-organization, the translocal learning processes eventually wear out at some point in time. Correspondingly, it becomes apparent that the direction of the knowledge flows gradually changes in the course of permanent translocal learning processes—the exchange of information then gradually becomes bidirectional, in part even rhizomatic, when *habiTAT*, *Vrijcoop* and other established “subsidiaries” increasingly support other European initiatives.

At once, weak global ties are of permanent importance with a view on certain functions (Nicholls, 2009), e.g., in such cases as the translocal acquisition of direct credits, the involvement of MOBA Housing SCE and other international housing networks, or when references are made to successfully international models in the framework of local political work in an attempt to establish new structures. In the cases of less specific international network functions, such as in the context of the “common spaces network,” the significance of strong grassroots vectors in maintaining and advancing interaction between the communities has been confirmed (Cumbers et al., 2008). Thus, the diverse geographical characteristics of networks have been seen to fulfill various functions, as Nicholls (2009) postulated with regard to Granovetter’s (1973) discussion of “strong and weak ties.” Furthermore, a break with the “bounded, grounded baggage that dwelling connotes” (McFarlane, 2011: p. 668) seems to have become obvious, while an alternative view on housing commons has come to exceed place boundedness. On the one hand, the limits of horizontal organizational principles within the association are becoming manifest as regards growth opportunities. On the other hand, and unlike more strongly upscaled housing commons, all members’ permanent participation and other commoning principles still remain warranted (Moore and Mullins, 2013). Against the background of providing for the broadest possible expansion of urban commons, Harvey appealed to acknowledging the limitations and to being prepared “to go far beyond it when necessary” (Harvey, 2012, p. 70).

In this sense, and with a view on the needs for future research, the question remains as to the extent to which the discussed challenges can be met with alternative horizontal decision formats. Moreover, a focus should be laid on international network institutions. What can these institutions contribute to support housing commons, and what can they not contribute, in considering the backgrounds of non-arrival and non-adoption? In this regard, we also need to point out to the limitations of the qualitative research in this paper which cannot deliver a complete picture of translocal mobilization processes and related networks. Moreover, most

of the inquiries took place before the pandemic, which has also made a mark on the mechanisms of housing commons mobilization. In the context of the interdependencies between urban and housing policy grassroots organizations and housing commoners, which have become apparent in this paper, it would finally be interesting to further pursue the translocal contact points of housing commons. As is the case with other (urban) commons, many housing commons models are unable to provide direct answers to the housing issue and other “large-scale problems” (Harvey, 2012: 69). Therefore, such an endeavor would serve to better pin down the role of the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* and other actors in the housing market, and beyond. Presumably, however, detecting these commoning practices could indirectly contribute to answers to larger societal challenges.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for this study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CH contributed substantially to the conception of the work, acquisition, analysis, interpretation of data for the work, drafted and revised the work critically for important intellectual content, approval for publication of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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