

Maintenance in Autonomy: Christiania's Self-Managed Infrastructures

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My broader research interest is to look at prefigurative politics¹ as repertoires of political action that present a distinct relation with materiality. The processes of materiality, in which participants in these movements are involved, include extensive acts of maintenance and affective labor, characterized in political economic terms as social reproduction. In this presentation, I will examine social reproduction in prefigurative communities that choose to operate beyond the state, such as Christiania Freetown in Copenhagen. Community members of Christiania, but also participants in other prefigurative projects such as protest camps, undertake an intense social reproduction and maintenance load while denying some of their entitlements as citizens, especially concerning the provision of infrastructure in their area of operation by the state.

Within the process of setting up and maintaining infrastructure (collecting garbage, installing water pipes, cleaning up open spaces, self-organizing daycare centers), feminist material politics acquire a prominent role. This is not only because of the leading role that specific women play in some of these groups, but also because of the emergence of qualities such as those of collaboration, embodiment, and commensality (Bargu) that show a shifting recognition of the social as a key conduit of political change. In the practices of maintenance that take place in such locales (protest camps, occupied spaces, municipalist cities), the work of social reproduction is recognized, distributed equally, and brought to the fore in emphatic ways. Here, the work ethos of the caretaker merges with that of the radical materialist, as it is being restructured across domains of the everyday. This working hypothesis is complicated when looking closely at Christiania Freetown. First, this case study allows us to do a historical analysis of the changing relationship between prefigurative politics and the state in the last fifty years. Secondly, it gives us a unique perspective that helps us to assess the changing notion of care during the transition from state-managed capitalism to the neoliberal state.

Christiania's transformations from 1971 to the present

Proclaimed as the "biggest opportunity to build up a society from scratch," Christiania Free Town is an autonomous district of approximately 1,000 residents, established in 1971 in a former military area of Copenhagen. This was an era of housing crisis in Copenhagen, and Christiania's first inhabitants were a group of young people who broke in and squatted in order to find residence and create open space for children in the neighborhood. Christiania occupies 84 acres and is sub-divided into 14 residential areas. As an autonomous community, Christiania operates through processes of collective self-government and direct democracy. While Christiania is known to some as an anarchist community or an eco-village, to most it is known for Pusher Street, a cannabis market near the entrance of its precincts, and its frequent clashes with the police and municipal and state authorities. But Christiania is also a place where both locals and visitors gather to listen to music and spend time in a natural almost idyllic setting of an expansive green area away from cars and city noise. It is estimated that 1 million tourists visit Christiania per year.

Christiania includes both houses and communal spaces that are open to its residents, affiliated members and visitors. These include a variety of spaces, from several day-care centers and a bath house to

¹ In theorizing the practices of the New Left in the 1970s, Wini Breines saw prefigurative political action (sit-ins, etc) as processes of "participatory democracy" that were different from the more hierarchical organization of "strategic politics" which were determined to achieve structural political, economic, and social change. Prefigurative politics are forging communities that merge public and private spheres of action, and together with this abolish the division of labor that characterizes modern life.

membership-based workshops, restaurants and music venues. While most Christianites see their community as operating beyond the purview of the Danish state, Christiania would not be possible if it were not for particular agreements they have signed with Denmark. In 1973, the 'Christiania Law' passed, in exchange for Christiania's residents agreeing to pay for electricity and water, and thus the commune was given the legal status of "social experiment." After numerous legal battles between Christiania and the state, in 2011 Denmark made Christiania an offer to buy buildings and land in an area it designated as the "city area," buy buildings and rent land in the "suburbs" and rent buildings and land in "the countryside."² Christiania decided to accept the offer, and in 2012 the Christiania Foundation was created and proceeded to buy Christiania for 17 million Euros. Approximately one third was deducted from the price because Christiania agreed to renovate and maintain water, sewage, electricity, streets and green areas. An additional 35% will be deducted from the mortgage if Christiania renovates listed buildings of historical importance, such as the Arc of Peace.³ Christiania entering into this new period of "normalization" signaled a transition from "insurgent to regulated autonomy" (Coppola and Vanolo).

In the fall of 2018 I was researcher in residence in Christiania and stayed in the CRIR home, a XXXX where I experienced firsthand some aspects of life in Christiania, such as living in a home that emerged from a track that was expanded and converted to a house. I also had the opportunity to look at archival collections and speak with some residents and affiliated people. These included Emmerik Warburg, Christiania's caretaker, Ole Lykke, Irma Klausen an anthropologist who lived in Christiania for more than 20 years, Britta Lillesøe, an actress and member of the guerrilla theatre group Solvognen (The Sun Wagon), Stoffer, a member of Christiania's Lopen workshop and mastermind of Nabovarme, an independent, modern pellet heating system with open-source software and hardware.

In terms of my research, I am interested to study Christiania as an assemblage of social and material practices that satisfy a dual requirement: the right to the city on the one hand, and autonomy from the state on the other. This is accomplished through a commitment to self-management that includes both decision-making and material production processes, both of which build communal and individual capacities and sets of expertise.

After 1973, when the aforementioned Christiania law passed and the commune was given the status of 'social experiment' in exchange for agreeing to pay for electricity and water, many legal battles between C and the state ensued. In 2011 the state made Christiania an offer to buy buildings and land in the 'city area', buying buildings and *renting* land in the 'suburbs' and *renting* buildings and land in 'the country side'. Christiania decided to accept the offer and in 2012 a Foundation was created to buy Christiania. The price was 17 mill. Euros. Of this amount, approximately one third was deducted from the price because Christiania agreed to renovate and maintain water, sewages, electricity, streets and green areas. An additional amount would be deducted, if Ca maintains and renovates listed buildings that are falling apart (such as the Arc of Peace).

For urban sociologists Alessandro Coppola and Alberto Vanolo, who have studied Christiania's trajectory from its establishment to these latest legal battles, this recent change signified a shift from an era of "insurgent autonomy" to one of "regulated autonomy."⁴ My interest in this paper is to understand the role of material self-management and maintenance work during Christiania's transition from the era of insurgent autonomy to the era of regulated autonomy.

² <https://www.christiania.org/info/christiania-2013/>

³ the overall sale price was 125 mill. Danish kr. (= 16.8 mill. Euros). 40 mill. Danish kr. (32% or Euro 5,354,000) were deducted for the infrastructural work, and 30 mill. Danish kr. for the renovation. <https://www.christiania.org/info/christiania-2013/>

Self-management and maintenance work during Christiania's insurgent autonomy

My conversations with Irma Klausen, along with her book *Life in the Shed, Christiania in the 1980s*, convey the living experience as a Christianite before the transition to regulated autonomy.

"Christiania had room for everyone and everything – from the ugliest to the most beautiful. From Pusher Street to pure poetry...Most people were not used to living in a mobile home where you had to fetch water and coal or even chop firewood; The result was that we saved a lot of water and we learned how to administrate just the right amount of water for a quick wash and brushing our teeth, for kitchen purposes and food preparation and even for watering our flowers. We reused old doors and windows; of course it took a long time to repair and adjust them, but there was no waste and a lot of money was saved for the good of society and on the personal level."⁵ "

"There were many women involved in our project and we held seminars and workshops just about anything...I was one of the organizers of the women's meetings and the "Thursday Army", which worked on the infrastructure, digging sewers and drains. [In 1989] the migrating carpenters from Germany had arrived and...had the good idea to install running water in our mobile homes instead, which they did with our help. The only bad thing about it was that now we all had our own kitchens; the common dinners and all the social life we had had were spoiled. No more discussions about the food and whether to eat meatballs or go on a vegetarian diet for the next two weeks. Therefore we retreated more and more to our private homes."

In my earlier research of infrastructures in prefigurative spaces such as protest camps, I identified the notion of "embodied infrastructures" that emerge from the collective action of the participants, and their collectivity with things. Central here is the idea that it is through a new radical intrasomatic engagement with things, that the character of groups and individuals is being galvanized (Traganou, 2016, 321). In the Standing Rock these embodied infrastructures were exemplified by the "water protectors." The protection of the water is not and cannot be delegated to machines, it requires the vigilance of the human. These human/engine assemblages embodied the spirit of the Standing Rock fight and the new collective subjectivity that emerged out of this gathering. The acceptance and understanding of vulnerability was at the source of their assemblages. We find similar types of infrastructures of embodiment in Irma Klausen's descriptions of Christiania's early days.

Self-management and maintenance work during Christiania's regulated autonomy

Since the 1980s, this makeshift communal making has been transformed into both a more institutionalized structure and one more consciously committed to Christiania's green plan. There are today many structures that characterize Christiania that are not visible in a stroll through Christiania's physical space. One of Christiania's main characteristic is the assemblies in which the community's own decision-making process take place. The assemblies are based on principles of direct democracy and consensus. There are various levels of assemblies. There is an assembly for each local area, a general assembly for the whole Christiania, and financial assemblies that are in charge of Christiania's "purse," that collects charges from residents, while it pays all public consumption expenses and property tax. It is important to note that a Christianite's self-perception is that "Christiania is an economic asset to the State. Christianites pay electricity, water, heating and taxes like everybody else. But we don't get as much for our taxes as everybody else, because we handle tasks like kindergartens, youth clubs, renovation, postal services and green areas, while we maintain our whole infrastructure and much more."⁶

⁵ Irma Klausen

⁶ Christiania Guide, 2004

When I specifically asked about the relation with the state concerning maintenance work, I was told the following by a Christiania spokesperson: “After 2012 there was a strong pressure from the State and the municipality requiring to collect the garbage, but Christiania fought for their right to do it themselves. An agreement was made in 2014 that gave us the right to collect and further distribute the garbage. It is a lot cheaper for Christiania that we take care of the infrastructure ourselves. [I] Have no facts on this, but our wages are far cheaper than outside Christiania.”⁷

Conversations like these made me understand that Christianites are willing to accept a lower wage in return for reducing their mortgage and safeguarding their right to the city. At the same time, Christiania has an internal institutional structure that fulfill its commitments to its residents and to the state. Some (physical) institutions that hold Ca’s invisible infrastructures together are the Machine Hall (*Maskinhallen*) that houses the facility for garbage collection and recycling, and of the various machines acquired for building and renovation work.

The building office (*Byggekontoret*) is another important institution of Christiania, established in its early era. It functions as a technical management office. Its tasks include working for building permissions, maintaining water, sewage and electricity networks, fire prevention, and registration of all Christiania’s buildings. There are various working groups Under its auspices, which in practice are self-governed, such as the Spar2 group. Spar2, established in the early 1990s, is a water saving group that repairs water systems in the homes and public spaces, and takes care of sewage. Their work has resulted to large savings, both financial and ecological, and increased the number of households with individual toilets.⁸

In addition to the institutions and working groups, Christiania’s calendar includes Action Days, days of public works undertaken directly by residents. According to authors of the book *Christiania at Work*, (*Christiania Pa Arbeide*) “On a day of action, all Christiania’s businesses, institutions, cultural sites and even the Pusher Street work together for large tasks. These include the making and maintenance of public works such as entrances, playgrounds, marketplaces, installment of public toilets, pavement of streets, etc. During the day of action, all businesses and institutions are closed and there is shared childcare. At the same time, the eateries, the bakery and the groceries offer food and drinks.”⁹

The importance of the Action Days is noted by the writers of Christiania’s Development Plan: “Residents responsibility and initiative is one pillar of Christiania, which is based on a distribution of competence. It is essential not to ruin this sense of responsibility by centralizing works unilaterally to the Building office.”¹⁰

Questions about the role of maintenance in Christiania’s autonomy and relation with the state

In my preliminary research, as Researcher in Residence in Christiania in 2018, I observed that Christiania’s securing its right to the land came together with an intense course of maintenance work, both the result of the Foundation’s agreements with the state, and a means of securing Christiania’s autonomy away from the state. The self-management of maintenance works by Christiania allows the development of expert knowledge within the community and its internal institutions, while at the same time it only becomes possible due to a significant amount of unpaid labor by Christianites or their lower wages in comparison to the rest of Copenhagen. In addition, my research has indicated that in Christiania’s transition to the era of regulated autonomy, maintenance work is gradually being dissociated from the everyday activities of the residents, and has become more abstract. Today maintenance work takes place

⁷ Interview with Christiania’s spokesperson

⁸ *Christiania Pa Arbeid*, no page numbers

⁹ *Christiania Pa Arbeid*, no page numbers

¹⁰ Christianias Udviklingsplan, Pp. 55-56

by delegating systemic community responsibilities to specific actors and organs, both internal and external to Christiania, such as the Building Office or the Machine Hall, and, in that way, resembling the labor division and abstraction we see in the state's operation.

In this, the following paradox becomes evident: In a climate in which neoliberalism attacks social reproduction and care, which Nancy Fraser and others see at the core of today's capitalist crisis, unlike other political communities that demand the restoration of care from the state, Christiania makes no such demands. It rather holds an opposite position: Christianites undertake themselves the maintenance and care of their own spaces (such as conducting their garbage collection and water treatment, organizing their child-care and restoring their severely aged listed buildings), and reject entitlements they could have as citizens.

Feminist scholars (Fraser, Arruzza and Federici) have turned our attention to how capitalism exploits the gendered labor employed in processes of social reproduction (such as the raising of children) by either rendering this labor invisible or paying low-wages to service providers and laborers, especially women. Focusing on the processes of maintenance in Christiania, one may ask: Is this low-waged or unpaid work of social reproduction that we find in Christiania being exploited by the state? Is Christiania's "differential space" providing us with a model of emancipation from neoliberal dispossession as well as personal fulfillment through a "unity of understanding and action" (Lefebvre)? Or is capitalism and the state benefitting from Christiania's unpaid or low-waged social reproduction labor, and Christiania is one more case of neoliberal exploitation in which the state abandons its welfare services to citizens?

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Photos are by the author unless otherwise stated



CRIR residence









Source: 1830677-01_08_2005-Christiana-LANGKILDE-MORTEN_polfoto



KORT OVER TRISTADEN
CHRISTIANIA
JUNI 2011

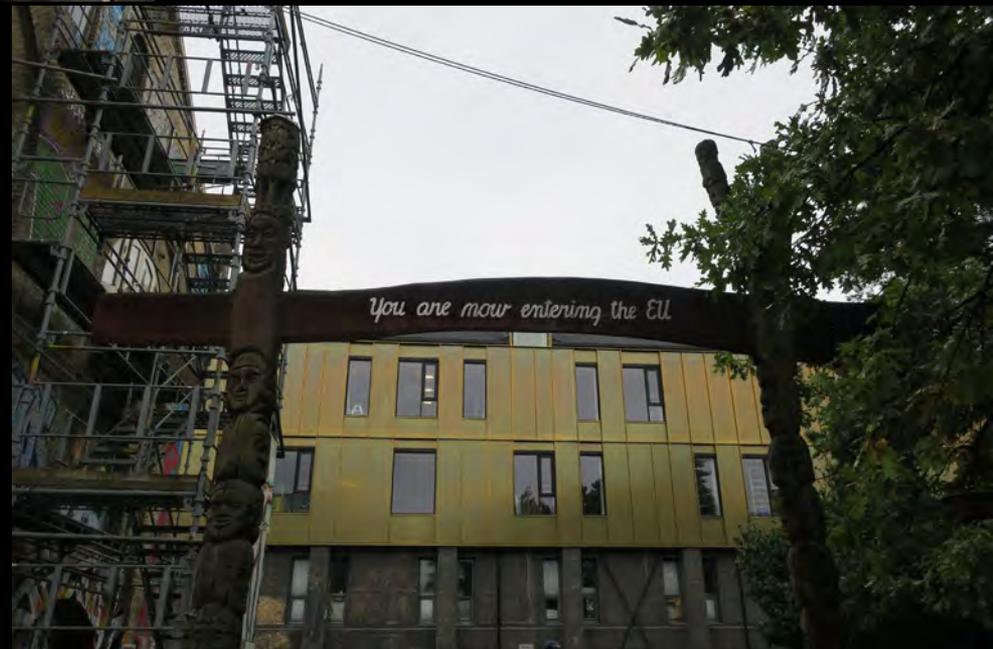


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Christiania Guided Tour
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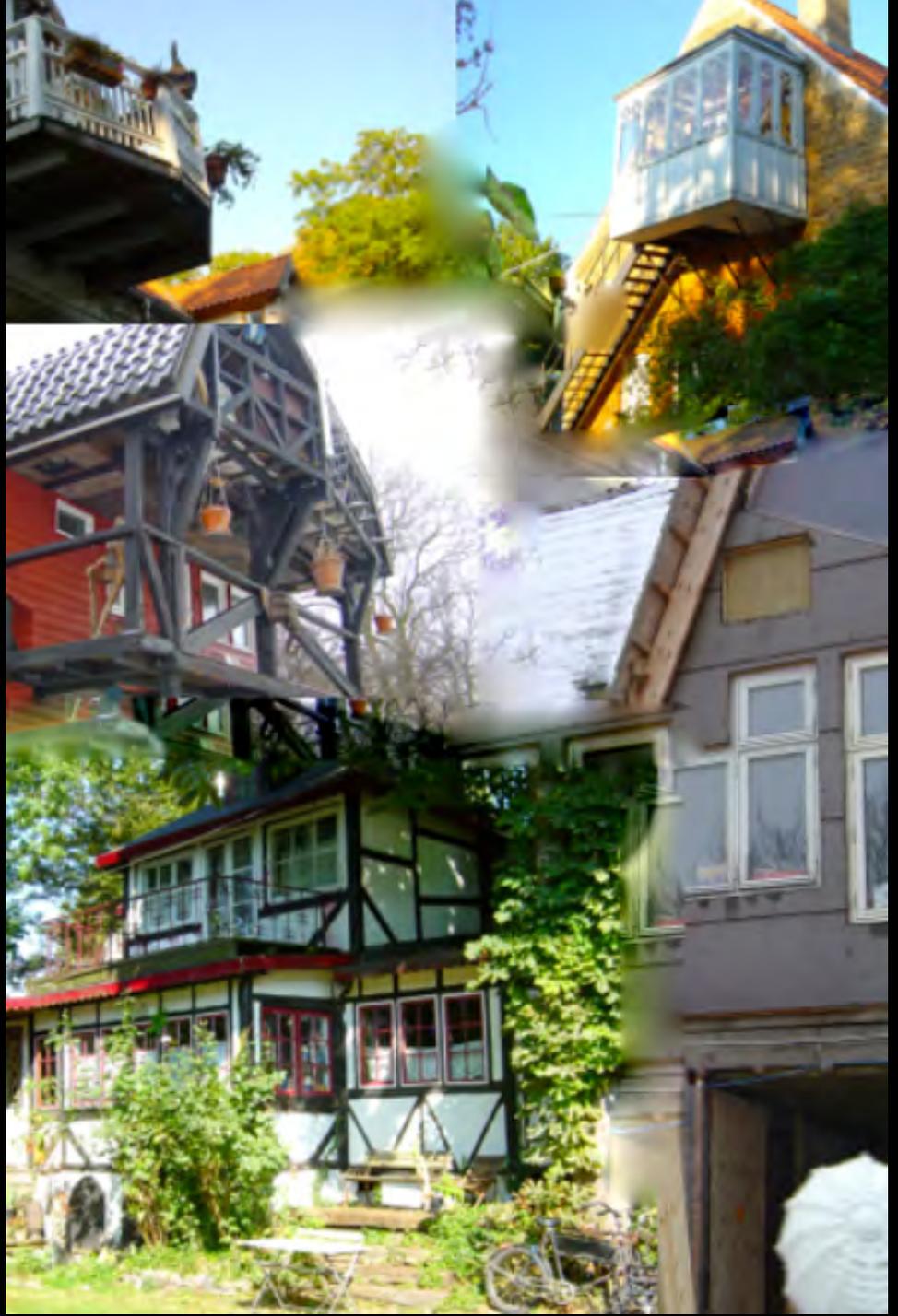
Source: *Livet I Skuret 80'ernes Christiania*,
by Irma Clausen



Source: *Livet i Skuret 80'ernes Christiania*,
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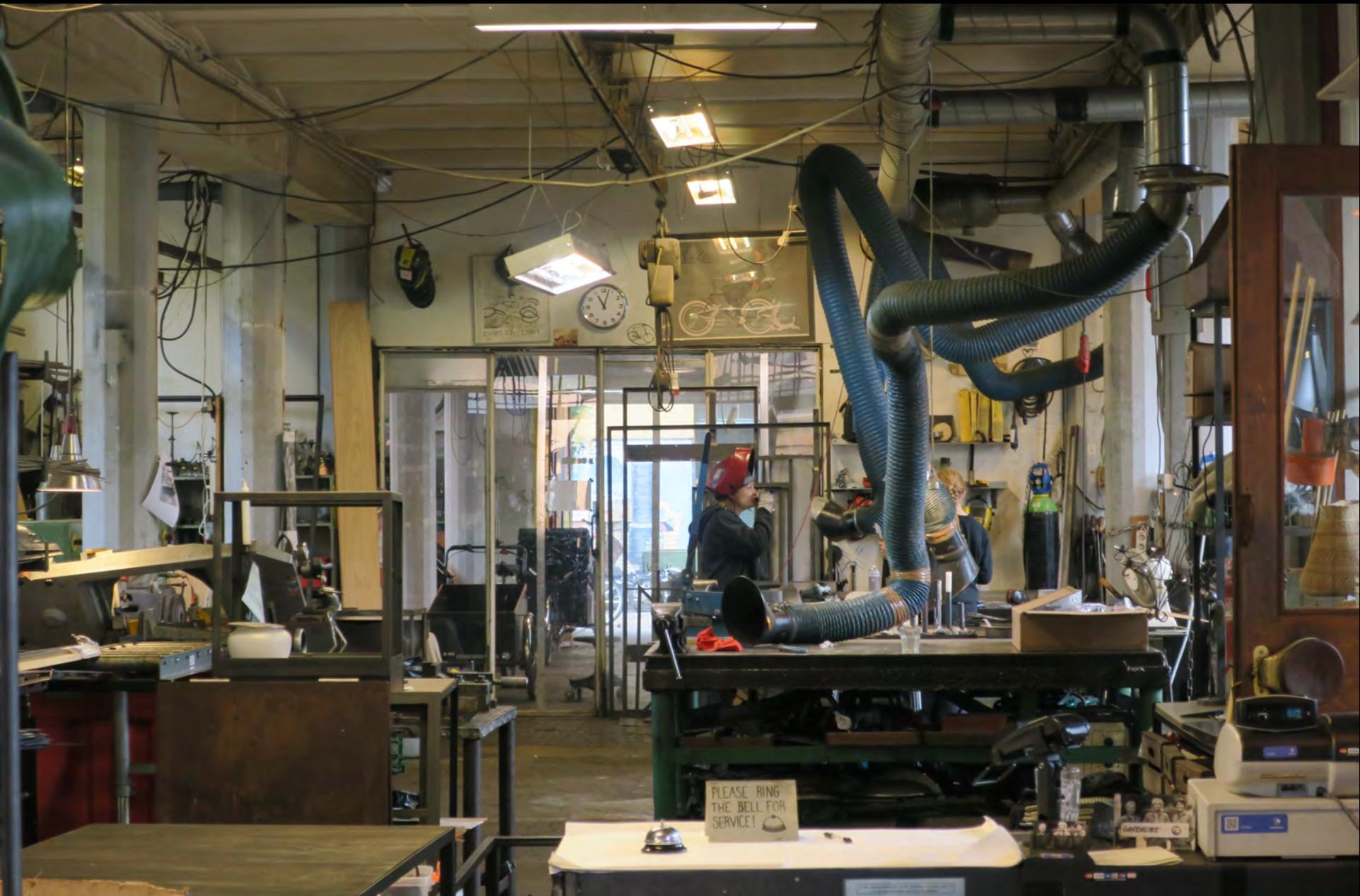


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Source: *Livet I Skuret 80'ernes Christiania*,
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PLEASE RING
THE BELL FOR
SERVICE!





Source: Christiania Aktionsdage (5-6.3.2016)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwxwLGcfjNU>