

## Staircase Stories

### Accessibility, Ageing and Collective Futures in Mass Housing

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#### Structure

1. Voices from the Landing
2. Geographies of Dis/connection: Home, Staircase, Street

Interlude: A Note on Method

3. The Myth of the Autonomous Body: The Walk-up Legacy of Mass Housing
4. Towards Transformation: Between Radical Informality and Hyper-regulation
5. Building a Collective Infrastructure of Connection

#### 1. Voices from the Landing

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16... 67 steps: that is what Dolores (93) must descend every time she wants to leave her home. She has lived in the same walk-up building since 1957, on the periphery of Barcelona. Every morning, she gets ready to go downstairs, closes the door, holds onto the handrail for balance, and begins the countdown. Each landing becomes a pause. Counting is not just a game; it is a way of measuring effort.

Nearby, *Isabel* (71) has lived in the same apartment since the late 1960s. Five floors, no lift. For decades, the stairs were simply part of daily life: a place to greet neighbours, to come and go without thinking. Now her husband can no longer use them. So she does it for both of them: the shopping, the errands, the everyday movements that keep life going. She has spent years trying to get a lift installed. Meetings, votes, paperwork, mazes of bureaucracy, unreachable subsidies. More and more often, she has been thinking about leaving. But where?

**Figure 1**

Isabel (71) pulls her shopping trolley up the stairs of her postwar housing block in Barcelona.



*Note.* Photograph by N. Gradolí Giner, 2023. From the research project and audiovisual piece *67 Steps*, co-directed with A. Núñez Alfaro.

A few blocks away, *Lidia* (60) recently moved to a ground-floor apartment. She used to live on the second floor, but after she began using a wheelchair, the stairs became a barrier. Once she moved downstairs, the only obstacle left was the single step to the street. Together with her husband, they found a solution: he built a small wooden ramp to bridge it.

**Figure 2**

The handmade ramp built by Lidia's husband to overcome the last vertical barrier between her ground-floor apartment and the street.



*Note.* Photograph by N. Gradolí Giner, 2023. From the research project and audiovisual piece *67 Steps*, co-directed with A. Núñez Alfaro.

On the second floor of another building, *Rosita* (89) still manages the stairs with grace. She feels strong, and going up and down keeps her active. She goes to the neighbourhood choir, meets her friends in the park for a chat and some sun, does the shopping, and moves through her daily routines with autonomy. Her neighbour on the third floor, *Rosa* (94) rarely comes out anymore. After their husbands died, the two women grew very close. For years, they shared everyday life: hanging out, doing errands, spending time in the street together. They both miss that shared routine. Rosita visits Rosa every day.

**Figure 3**

The hands of Rosita and Rosa gripping the handrail of a postwar walk-up block in Verdum, Barcelona.



*Note.* Photograph by N. Gradolí Giner, 2023. From the research project and audiovisual piece *67 Steps*, co-directed with A. Núñez Alfaro.

Not far from there, *Ana* (90) lives on the fourth floor. She has not used the stairs in weeks. Today is the day she has to go to the doctor. She is waiting for a volunteer to help her downstairs using a stair-climbing wheelchair. Speaking through the window, half joking/half serious, she says she lives in a state of “permanent confinement.” She says she will soon move in with her daughter. Her daughter plans to rent out the apartment room by room.

Thousands of kilometers away, in Tbilisi, *Dodo* (87) lives on the fifth floor of a Khrushchovka from the Soviet era. In the 1990s, she was the one who led the extension. She managed to bring the neighbours together so they could all expand their apartments by building a shared framework of beams and pillars, transforming the building from within. They couldn’t afford a lift. Now she uses a rope and pulley to lift groceries from the street to her balcony.



These stories echo across our cities.

They are quiet, hidden, slow – easily overlooked. Lived through the body and through routine, they are deeply physical. They are stories of bodies that were once agile, of bodies and buildings that no longer fit one another. They unfold in the tension between fear and hope: the fear of falling, of losing the ability to move freely between home and street; and a hope sustained through small gestures – a wooden ramp, a rope and pulley, a neighbour's visit, or the long-awaited arrival of a lift. These are intimate narratives that rarely travel beyond the landing, yet they resonate across thousands of parallel lives.

Do they feel familiar?

Gathered through fieldwork in Barcelona (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2022, 2024) and Tbilisi (Gradolí Giner & Kizanishvili, 2025), these testimonies reveal a shared and often hidden geography. While such conditions can also be found in historic centres, they become especially visible across the vast landscapes of mid-twentieth-century mass housing. Here, millions of dwellings share the same structural constraints: two, three, four, or five storeys without a lift. Limited accessibility intersects with ageing populations and fragmented ownership, making adaptation difficult.

We tend to take for granted that our homes are plugged into the city: water, electricity, and data flow through their walls almost without friction. But what about mobility? Does our access to the city begin only at the threshold of the street?

Drawing on visual ethnography, documentary film, and architectural research developed in Barcelona and Tbilisi, this essay traces the dimensions of a mismatch between bodies and buildings ageing together. Through these stories and spatial conditions, it asks how inherited housing might be transformed, and how broken connections might be repaired. These pages are an attempt to imagine how we might reclaim a city able to move with the people who inhabit it.

## **2. Geographies of Dis/connection: Home, Staircase, Street**

Building upon the stories presented in the previous chapter, this section moves toward a more explicit theoretical framework. It dissects the scenarios where these experiences unfold, framing them not as individual struggles, but as a systemic mismatch between evolving bodies and rigid environments. In walk-up mass housing blocks, the lack of a lift is not an isolated fact, but a systemic condition.

Before diving in, I want to clarify a point. While ageing and disability are distinct experiences, both can involve forms of reduced mobility that encounter similar barriers in the built environment. My intention is not to equate them, but to examine how bodily change – linked to mobility, perception, or endurance – comes into conflict with architectures that still presume an autonomous inhabitant. The discussion that follows focuses on people whose relation to stairs is altered and on the question of vertical access in collective housing. In this friction between changing bodies and rigid spaces appears what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011) defines as a misfit: not a bodily deficiency, but a mismatch between bodily variation and the built environment.

Three closely connected scenarios define the primary sequence of urban dis/connection: the home, the staircase, and the street. The home concentrates the intimacy of everyday life; the staircase acts as a filter – or a barrier – between the dwelling and the outside; and the street serves as the setting for ordinary social contact and access to the wider services of urban life. Together, they reorganize the relationship between the body, domestic space, and collective participation.

## **2.1 The Home**

Figure 5

*The Home*: The living room of a resident's apartment in Verdum, Barcelona.



*Note.* Still from the unreleased documentary film *67 Steps*, directed by N. Gradolí Giner and A. Núñez Alfaro. Camera by Pol Subirà and Júlia Llançana.

The first scenario of dis/connection is the home: the refuge, the personal space, the space of intimacy that forms part of one's identity.

In aging studies and policy frameworks, aging in place is usually presented as a desirable goal, associated with continuity, identity, and autonomy (Wiles et al. 2012). Yet, as Rogers, Ramadhani, and Harris argue, it is not a fixed state but a condition shaped by the intersection of space, person, and time (2020). Lewis and Buffel likewise show that the places in which people grow old may themselves become hostile, complicating the normative promise of ageing at home (2020).

In elevator-free housing, this ideal often drifts toward its opposite: what Kvæl (2025) defines as being "stuck in place". When a fourth- or fifth-floor apartment lacks a lift, remaining at home is no longer an expression of choice, but a form of forced permanence produced by the built environment. Under such conditions, the dwelling contracts. Many of these apartments are reduced in square metres, lack balconies or terraces, and suffer from poor ventilation and limited energetic comfort. The window then becomes the primary mediator with the outside

world. The home, conventionally imagined as a space of shelter, thus transforms into a space of involuntary enclosure.

This enclosure often leads to isolation, where loneliness is only mitigated if one can afford or access a strong care network. Before becoming fully “stuck,” those who can pay it may decide to move. In this process, the dwelling usually enters the market as a technologically obsolete unit. The absence of an elevator frequently results in a devalued pricing that facilitates investor absorption or conversion into tourist rentals. This process reinforces what Rubio and Nieto (2021) describe in *Arquitectura de la soledad* [Architecture of Loneliness]: a spatial condition where the built environment fails to foster belonging, contributing to the structural exclusion of the existing housing stock.

There is a telling silence in strategic responses like the *Barcelona Strategy Against Loneliness 2020–2030* regarding the staircase as a physical driver of isolation. By overlooking this vertical barrier, the home remains a space of involuntary confinement, regardless of the reach of social programs. In this sense, inaccessible housing should not be understood solely as a technical or architectural problem, but as a condition with direct consequences for mental health, emotional well-being, and social participation.

The scope of this reality may be overwhelming, but it demands a structural rethink of the city's housing fabric.

## 2.2 The Staircase

Figure 6

*The Staircase*: Corridor leading to the walk-up staircase in a postwar housing block in La Prosperitat, Barcelona.



*Note.* Still from the unreleased documentary film *67 Steps*, directed by N. Gradolí Giner and A. Núñez Alfaro. Camera by Pol Subirà and Júlia Llançana.

The second scenario of dis/connection is the staircase. Typically, to overcome the height of a single floor in mass housing blocks – roughly 2.5 metres of height – between 16 and 18 steps are required.

1, 2, 3, 4... up to the 67 steps that Dolores must count to reach her door on the fourth floor. This number is not just a measurement of height; it is the material scale where the dis/connection becomes a physical toll on the body. Here, the "misfit" is measured in effort and time. For a mobile body – a teenager, for instance – the staircase is a transparent background for circulation, a transition that lasts seconds. For Dolores, time *e x p a n d s*.

As Susan Leigh Star (1999) suggests, infrastructure remains invisible as long as it functions without friction; it is only when the body slows down that the staircase "breaks" and reveals itself as a site of struggle.

This failure is not anecdotal; it is a structural exclusion embedded in the built and legal organization of walk-up housing. In neighborhoods like La Prosperitat or Verdum in Barcelona, 57.87% of the 513 mapped buildings lack a lift (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2022), proving that the lack of vertical mobility is not an isolated issue but a condition entangled with property and governance. This is why the perspectives of Stacy Clifford Simplican and David Gissen are especially useful here. Simplican's concept of the *capacity contract* helps explain how citizenship and belonging are often organized around assumptions of bodily competence (Simplican, 2015). Gissen extends this argument through a critique of property, tracing how liberal traditions have linked physical capacity to the making and maintenance of ownership (Gissen, 2024). Read in this light, the staircase becomes more than an architectural element: it is a device that normalizes certain bodies while exposing others to delay, dependence, and confinement. The resulting isolation should therefore not be understood as a personal misfortune, but as a structural exclusion embedded in the built and legal organization of walk-up housing.

For Gissen, this is also why "access" alone is not enough. Access may allow entry, but it does not necessarily challenge the property structures that produce exclusion in the first place (Gissen, 2024). In this sense, the question is no longer only how to adapt the stair, but how to reorganize the relation between property, mobility, and care so that the route between home and street becomes a communal responsibility rather than an individual burden.

## 2.3 The Street

Figure 7

*The Street*: The housing block fabric of the Verdum district, Barcelona.



*Note.* Still from the unreleased documentary film *67 Steps*, directed by N. Gradolí Giner and A. Núñez Alfaro. Camera by Pol Subirà and Júlia Llançana.

The third scenario of dis/connection is the street. Here, the street matters not as an abstract public space, but as the realm of ordinary participation: buying bread, disposing of waste, or going to the pharmacy. Jan Gehl's (2011) work demonstrates that urban life depends on the balance between three types of outdoor activities: *necessary activities*, such as those that are compulsory like going to the pharmacy or grocery shopping; *optional activities*, which occur if there is a wish to do so and if the place makes it possible, such as taking a walk; and *social activities*, which result from the presence of others in public spaces, including greetings or meeting people. Gehl argues that while necessary activities occur regardless of the quality of the environment, optional and social activities only flourish when conditions are favourable.

However, for residents like Rosa, this distinction collapses. When the staircase is inaccessible, even "necessary" activities require a physical effort that often results in their reduction or total cessation. This condition erases the possibility of optional or social life, turning daily routines into isolated tasks and shrinking the network of social ties. In doing so, it also undermines forms of everyday contact that are essential not only to social participation, but to emotional stability

and mental well-being. Within this framework, the staircase functions as a border and the street as a space to be observed from a height rather than experienced.

This physical rupture reveals a deeper conceptual gap: we take for granted that the city's mobility infrastructure – the sidewalks, the bus lines, and the metro network – stops at the street, at the building's threshold. Yet, for those living in walk-up blocks, the staircase is the first link to that system. When this connection is compromised, the home becomes gradually disconnected from the collective flow, transforming the climb into an isolated struggle that often remains invisible to the rest of the urban network.

## **2.4 Collective Access and The Right to Accessible Housing**

*“Adequate housing must be accessible to those entitled to it. Disadvantaged groups must be accorded full and sustainable access to adequate housing resources.”*

CESCR General Comment No. 4 (1991)

To move beyond isolation, it is helpful to look at what Aimi Hamraie (2013) calls "collective access." This concept shifts the focus from individual struggle toward the ways we support one another through informal networks. When the building's physical structure fails, access is often maintained through an "infrastructure of care" – such as the ramp built by Lidia's husband or the rope and pulley used by Dodo. These acts of daily resilience are what keep the building functioning; they represent a form of access that is practiced and shared when the architecture itself has become obsolete.

However, moving from these informal "hacks" to structural change requires what David Gissen (2024) proposes as "disabled communalism." While collective access describes how residents survive within a broken environment, disabled communalism suggests a new way to inhabit it: a model where access emerges from transgressing the rigid boundaries of private property. It suggests that vertical mobility should not be a private burden of one neighbor or one staircase, but a communal right that flows across and through the urban fabric.

*“Personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.”*

Carol Hanisch (1970/2006)

This shift from private struggle to collective right is backed by international standards; under Article 9 of the CRPD (2014), accessibility is the mandatory precondition for all other rights. Therefore, an inaccessible walk-up block should not be seen as a fixed failure, but as a site for urgent transformation. Following the principle of *'never demolish, always transform'* stated by Lacaton & Vassal, we find an opportunity to rethink the very typology of walk-up mass housing through the lens of accessibility.

## Interlude: A Note on Method

*You might have noticed that the voices gathered here belong exclusively to women. Dodo, Dolores, Rosa, Ana, and the rest are the women I met through fieldwork in Barcelona and Tbilisi. I met them in the street, at the casal de barri, in the park, or standing at the door of their buildings. While they are not the only ones navigating these stairs, they are often the ones supporting neighbours, managing households, and, not infrequently, growing old alone within these buildings.*

*This gendered dimension is not coincidental. The lack of architectural accessibility not only restricts mobility; it also feminizes and chronicizes dependency. Because women so often sustain informal networks of care, and because they are also more likely to grow old alone, they are frequently the ones forced to become the “human infrastructure” that compensates for the building’s rigidity. In these walk-up buildings, the seemingly personal struggle of climbing 67 steps is deeply political: it reveals how the absence of a lift places a structural burden on women’s shoulders, transforming the domestic work of care into a permanent and largely invisible form of labour.*

*My encounter with these realities began in 2021, together with my colleague Adriana Núñez, through our Master’s Thesis, *67 graons i un pati d’illa*. It was a process of intense fieldwork, navigating domestic realities that are not easy to access. While we used mapping and technical drawing to identify renovation strategies, we soon realized that a static plan cannot capture the dimension of effort. There are realities deeply embedded in the body that architectural drawings simply miss. Turning toward the video camera and adopting the tools of Visual Ethnography (Pink, 2021), filmmaking became a way of entering into dialogue with these experiences. This same search led me to Tbilisi, Georgia. I was looking for places where the rigid housing typologies of the 1960s had been forced to adapt, and Tbilisi offered a radical informal case of this transformation. Through the project *mi / SHENEBA* (developed with Dea Khizanishvili), I found a counterpoint to the architectural paralysis of Barcelona.*

*Moving between cartographies of inaccessible buildings, informal acts of adaptation, films, stories, literature, and archival materials, this research unfolds between architecture and visual ethnography, between spatial analysis and lived experience. From that situated position, I now turn back to the broader structures behind these stories: the myth of the autonomous body, and the walk-up legacy we have inherited.*

Figure 8

*Domestic Rituals: A resident cuts their fingernails on a balcony in the Saburtalo district, Tbilisi.*



Note. Still from footage filmed by N. Gradolí Giner, March–May 2025. From the fieldwork for the *mi / SHENEBA* research project.

### 3. The Myth of the Autonomous Body: The Walk-up Legacy of Mass Housing

In 1945, during the harsh postwar years in Spain, an eight-year-old girl named Rosa left her village in Jaén, Andalusia. Together with her mother and sisters, she boarded a train to Barcelona, where her father had arrived a year earlier. Like many internal migrants of the period, their first “home” was a shack near the sea. They did not remain there forever, but moved from one precarious dwelling to another. By the late 1950s, Rosa and her husband, ready to start their own family, were finally able to move into a brand-new apartment in a *polígono de vivienda* – a state-subsidized housing estate (*Vivienda de Protección Oficial*) – in Verdum, Barcelona. At that moment, the threshold of the new building seemed to open onto a more dignified future: running water, electric light, and the solidity of brick, a home in which to build a life. It was also a life project: 45 square metres they could pay for little by little, over the course of decades. Rosa, her husband, her parents, and her children all lived there together, inhabiting a space that seemed, at least for a time, to stretch in order to hold a life (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2024).

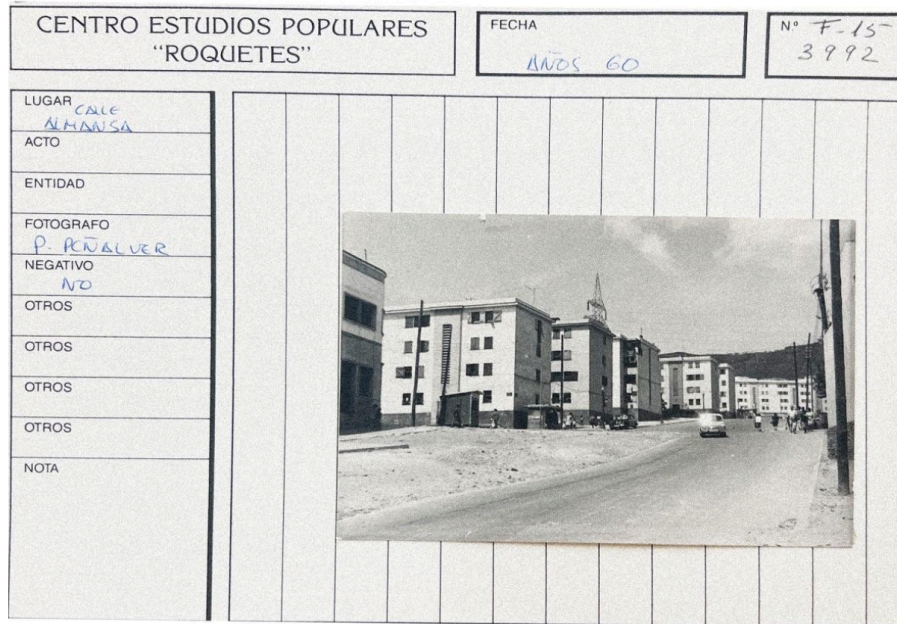
Thousands of kilometres to the east, Dodo’s path followed a different logic of modernization. She grew up in the Georgian countryside, in a village of wooden houses, broad balconies, and low-rise structures – a life lived in close relation to the land. When she arrived in Tbilisi to work, she encountered the housing crisis of the city firsthand, living in a *kommunalka*, a shared apartment where several families were compressed into single rooms and forced to share one kitchen and bathroom. In the early 1960s, she and her husband were allocated their own apartment in the Vazha-Pshavela VI Block, in the district of Saburtalo. It was one of the first *khrushchovkas* – the standardized prefabricated blocks that defined the Soviet housing revolution. For Dodo, this move marked the end of suffocating years of communal life and the beginning of a modern domestic privacy. Yet that privacy came in the form of a compact unit of roughly 40 square metres: a cell of efficiency in which every centimetre was dictated by industrial standards (Gradolí Giner & Kizanishvili, 2025).

The domestic worlds inhabited by Rosa and Dodo were shaped by two distinct ideological contracts, both driven by a postwar urgency to house populations within the smallest possible footprint of space and resources. In Spain, the transition from shack settlement to a 45-square-metre apartment was orchestrated through a Francoist policy of stabilization through homeownership, famously summarized by José Luis Arrese’s declaration: “We do not want a Spain of proletarians, but a Spain of owners” (Guàrdia et al., 2020). Rosa’s unit materialized the standards of *minimum housing* established by the 1956 Land Law, privileging functional density through the BL2 linear block (Díaz, Cornadó, & Vima-Grau, 2023), a typology of repetition and calculated economy. These units also took the form of the dense block fabrics that characterize much of Barcelona’s peripheral urban landscape and that constitute the main focus of *67 graons i un pati d’illa* (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2022). Dodo’s 40-square-metre apartment in Tbilisi was forged under a different mandate: the Soviet social contract. Centrally managed by *Gosstroy* – the State Committee for Construction Affairs responsible for the centralized planning and standardization of all Soviet architecture – the system pursued radical efficiency through prefabricated closed systems that reduced private domestic space to a minimum. Here, the

apartment functioned as a cell within the larger *mikrorayon* (micro-district): the basic unit of Soviet residential planning, designed as a self-contained neighborhood where housing blocks were clustered around shared services like schools, clinics, and parks. This layout was designed for a productive body expected to live primarily in the public sphere (Varga-Harris, 2015). Despite these divergent political paths, both women encountered the same architectural archetype: the walk-up block, typically limited to five storeys. Despite these divergent political paths, both women encountered the same architectural archetype: the walk-up block, typically limited to five storeys. This typology represented a technical “sweet spot”; in Spain, regulations allowed buildings under 14 metres to be constructed without lifts, fixing the staircase as the primary infrastructure for nearly 40% of the postwar housing stock (Díaz et al., 2023).

As discussed in Section 2.2, the underlying failure of this shared fabric lies in what Simplican (2015) and Gissen (2024) describe through the logic of the *capacity contract*. In Verdum and Saburtalo alike, the staircase was never a neutral architectural element, but a rigid structural mediator. Built according to the standardized metrics of modern architecture, this housing fabric was unable to accommodate the biological realities of aging, disability, and bodily dependency. What had once appeared as a rational and efficient solution, revealed its limits: a typology designed for the autonomous body, and inherited by lives that were never going to remain autonomous forever.

Figure 9  
*Street View of Collective Housing, Verdum, Barcelona (c. 1960s)*



*Note.* Archive document consisting of a catalog card and photograph by P. Peñalver, circa 1960s. Record F-15-3992, "Calle Almansa." Reproduced from the original archival record collected by N. Gradolí Giner (February 2024) for the 67 *Graons* research project. Original is held at Centro de Estudios Populares "Roquetes."

Figure 10  
*Construction Process of the First Khrushchevka Blocks on Vazha-Pshavela Avenue (1964)*



*Note.* Aerial view showing the initial phase of the Saburtalo district. Photograph by Givi Kikvadze, 1964. Reproduced from the National Archives of Georgia.

#### **4. Towards Transformation: Between Radical Informality and Hyper-regulation**

After decades of inhabiting their homes, Rosa and Dodo have witnessed their environments diverge into two radically different trajectories.

For Rosa, time has settled into a kind of functional stillness. After forty years of mortgage payments, the house finally became hers, yet while legal ownership has been secured, the physical structure has remained unchanged. Her building in Verdum has aged within the limits of routine maintenance: cleaned landings, fresh layers of paint. The core, however, is intact. The staircase that once represented independence has become a physical boundary; without neighbourly consensus, the elevator never arrived. The dimensions of the home remain fixed, even as its envelope deteriorates – losing heat in winter and trapping it in summer. Her house stands as an architectural time capsule. (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2024)

Dodo lived a different story. In 1990s Georgia, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the institutional framework that had sustained collective maintenance disappeared almost overnight. In this vacuum, residents were left without associations, without regulation, and without structural oversight. When Dodo's mother could no longer live independently, she began negotiating with her neighbours, exchanging care, labour, and resources to make collective transformation possible. By intervening directly in the building's structure, she expanded her apartment to accommodate new needs. Her story reflects a broader urban condition: the building as an organism that grows through necessity in the absence of institutional support. (Gradolí Giner & Kizanishvili, 2025)

Starting from these two contrasting conditions – the structural stillness of Barcelona and the adaptive mutations of Tbilisi – this chapter moves between two extremes. It first examines the informal mechanisms that emerge in the absence of regulation, learning from both their shadows and their possibilities. It then returns to Barcelona, where the challenge is inverted: not how to act without rules, but how to act despite them. Between these two contexts, the question shifts from necessity to governance, and from individual improvisation to the possibility of collective urban transformation.

##### **4.1 Tbilisi: Mechanisms of Informal Adaptation**

In Tbilisi, the minimal cells of the *khrushchovkas* entered a vacuum in which institutional provision ceased and the rigid rules of Soviet urbanism no longer applied. Residents became, almost inevitably, accidental architects, treating the building not as a finished object but as a material open to transformation. In the absence of structural oversight, and under the pressure of economic precarity, the housing block became a site of continuous negotiation, adaptation, and incremental growth.

The reflections that follow draw on primary fieldwork conducted for the research project *mi / SHENEBA* (2025), combining informal interviews with residents such as Dodo, conversations with experts including architect Levan Kalendarishvili and Ioseb Andrazashvili from Re-City, and the critical framework provided by key references such as *Hybrid Tbilisi* (Kurtishvili y Cachola

Schmal, 2018), the Tbilisi Architecture Biennial catalogue *Buildings Are Not Enough and Communal Hallways of Tbilisi: Thinking Spatially on Everyday Life of Urban Neighbourhoods* (Teona Ivashchenko 2023). Rather than offering a rigid taxonomy, this section outlines a repertoire of recurring spatial operations that help decode the logic of post-Soviet housing transformation. These interventions reveal the building not simply as a physical object, but as a collective structure through which residents negotiate need, time, and available resources. Three terms are especially useful for understanding this process:

***Dasheneba*** / დაშენება

*Vertical upward addition.* Claiming the "air" as new ground. These extensions often add several floors to the original structure, effectively doubling the height and density of the block.

***Misheneba*** / მიშენება

*Lateral extension.* A horizontal "backpack" attached to the facade. These volumes extend the domestic interior outward, often supported by a secondary metal or concrete skeleton.

***Amosheneba*** / ამოსენება

*Enclosure; infill of a void.* The act of closing open balconies to gain indoor square footage. In this process, the "outside" is sacrificed to ensure the survival of the "inside".

These transformations did not unfold uniformly. Some emerged as fragmented individual additions: private responses to urgent domestic needs that often produced precarious "tumorous" volumes, compromising light, ventilation, or the structural coherence of the whole. Others, however, took on a collective form. Particularly revealing are the shared frameworks of pillars and beams constructed by groups of neighbours, creating an empty structural skeleton that each household could fill in over time as circumstances allowed. In this sense, *misheneba* is not only a formal addition, but also a social system for negotiating time, need, and possibility. Architecture has already produced formal examples of this additive logic, most clearly in projects such as those of Lacaton & Vassal, where external structures are used to expand existing housing without demolition. Yet the collective *misheneba* introduces something further: the possibility that such a framework does not need to be completed all at once, but can remain open, unfinished, and progressively inhabited as needs and means change over time.

These additions could also operate as economic devices. Upper-floor residents sometimes built upward to sustain the family economy, while in other cases developers or small construction actors began to treat additional height as a source of profit.

The logic of adaptation extended beyond the apartment itself. At ground level, residents appropriated the areas immediately surrounding the block to construct garages, enclosed gardens, or small commercial spaces. While these interventions can be read as a radical privatization of the commons, they also reveal the insufficiency of the original dwelling. In this vacuum of power, the 'hacking' of the ground floor mirrors – at a domestic scale – the wider post-Soviet transition where state assets were seized by a few. Here, the sum of thousands of individual 'privatizations' of public space results in a collective loss: the erosion of the shared landscape in favor of fragmented survival. The Soviet apartment remained a minimal and rigid

cell; the ground floor was therefore “hacked” to provide the spatial relief the building lacked. Garages became workshops, storage rooms, or semi-private refuges; gardens hosted laundry, food cultivation, or outdoor domestic life; and informal shops turned fragments of public void into extensions of household survival. These spaces operated as expanded thresholds between the density of the home and the wider post-Soviet street.

Other interventions addressed the vertical barrier more directly. External staircases, walkways, and improvised links appeared in response to fragmented ownership patterns and disconnected domestic layouts, especially where larger apartments had been subdivided into *kommunalki*. These prosthetic additions “stitched” separated interiors back together, allowing residents to bypass common portals and reconnect rooms distributed across different levels. In this same landscape, vertical mobility did not become commodified merely as a matter of convenience. Rather, in the absence of homeowners’ associations and regular maintenance fees, residents sought informal ways of keeping the infrastructure running. Paid elevators, operated by coin slots, emerged as a paradoxical mechanism of resilience: a ‘micro-tax’ that ensures the technical survival of the machinery, yet transforms what was once a public Soviet right into a private, transactional hurdle. In the vacuum left by the state’s withdrawal, the elevator ceases to be a shared infrastructure and becomes a threshold mediated by individual liquidity; the act of going home is no longer a right of residency, but a service to be bought. Without the right coin, the ascent stops, and the building’s upper levels remain socially and physically cut off for those in extreme precarity, effectively privatizing the only vertical connection available to the inhabitants.

Alongside these improvised devices, Tbilisi also offers more ambitious precedents for shared vertical infrastructure. The external “backpack elevator,” although uncommon in lower-income Soviet districts, appears in wealthier or gentrified contexts as a façade-mounted solution to the vertical barrier. More significantly, the towers of Nutsubidze Plato point to a different spatial imagination altogether. This was not an informal intervention added from below, but an experiment developed from within the Soviet system itself, at a moment when late socialist architecture was beginning to test more complex collective typologies. Designed by Otar Kalandarishvili and Gizo Potskhishvili between 1974 and 1976, three concrete towers were linked by aerial walkways in order to share a single elevator core. Although the larger network they anticipated was never completed, these bridges became vital social arteries, creating a rare instance in which standardized housing blocks were physically interconnected at height. (Georgia.to, n.d.). Even today, however, access to this elevated realm remains mediated by the logic of the paid elevator, requiring 20 tetri to reach the upper levels.

What emerges from this landscape is not a romantic image of informal growth, but an ambivalent one. This is not to suggest that the Georgian case serves as a safe or replicable model; rather, it stands as a precarious response to institutional abandonment. Driven by necessity, these interventions often produced structural instability, darkness, and chronic humidity. Yet, from this relentless cycle of addition, a vital technical lesson follows: to add space effectively, one must also learn what to subtract. Despite its inherent dangers, Tbilisi’s urban fabric offers a powerful mechanism of change. The collective structures of *misheneba*, gradually filled over time, demonstrate that when residents engage with the building as a negotiable

structure rather than a fixed object, new typological possibilities emerge. This challenges the very idea of the "finished city" – the belief in the regular façade and the closed typology. Against the ideal of formal completion, it is suggested that housing must remain open to irregular rhythms of growth, uneven resources, and shifting domestic needs.

This legacy invites us to question the binary between bureaucratic rigidity and radical informality, exploring the grey zones in which a safe, yet adaptive vertical infrastructure might be imagined.

Figure 11

*Aerial walkways in the towers of Nutsubidze Plato, by architects Otar Kalandarishvili and Gizo Potskhishvili. Saburtalo, Tbilisi.*



*Note.* Still from footage filmed by N. Gradolí Giner, March–May 2025. From the fieldwork for the *mi / SHENEBA* research project.

Figure 12

Collective *misheneba* structure in the Saburtalo district, Tbilisi.



*Note.* Still from footage filmed by N. Gradolí Giner, March–May 2025. From the fieldwork for the *mi / SHENEBA* research project.

Figure 13

*Amosheneba seen from a distance, Tbilisi.*



*Note.* Still from footage filmed by N. Gradolí Giner, March–May 2025. From the fieldwork for the *mi / SHENEBA* research project.

Figure 14

Extreme case of *dasheneba*: a seven-story vertical addition over an original walk-up Soviet *khreshchovka*. Saburtalo, Tbilisi.



*Note.* Still from footage filmed by N. Gradolí Giner, March–May 2025. From the fieldwork for the *mi / SHENEBA* research project.

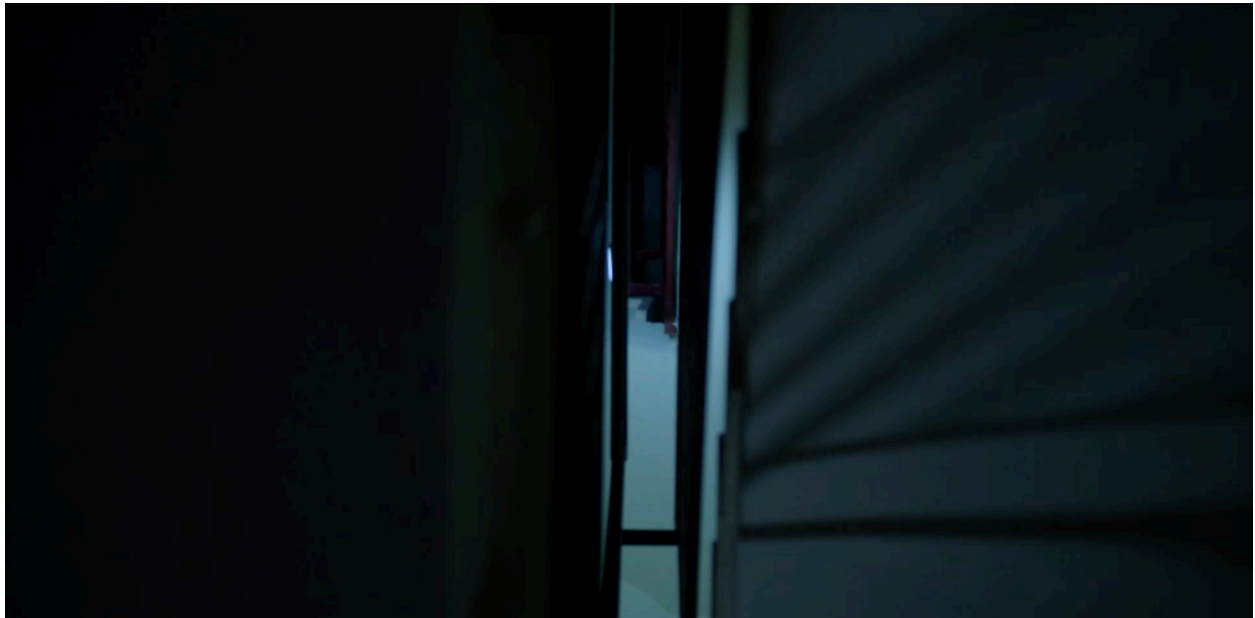
## **4.2 Barcelona. From Hyper-regulation Towards Metabolic Renovation**

In Barcelona, the housing block is defined by a different kind of boundary. If in Tbilisi transformation emerged from the absence of rules, here it is often delayed or blocked by their excess. As in the Georgian case – where the “backpack elevator” remains rare in lower-income Soviet districts because architecture often stops where capital ends – accessibility in Barcelona is also deeply conditioned by economic capacity. Current subsidy schemes frequently require an upfront investment that many residents simply cannot afford, effectively turning vertical access into a privilege of class.

Isabel's story makes this structural paralysis visible. After years of mediation, neighbourly meetings, and paperwork, the installation of a lift in her building remains stalled because a ground-floor owner refuses to cede the required space. This six-year deadlock reveals the true face of bureaucratic time: administrative procedures move at a pace that ignores the urgency of the body. The mismatch is not only architectural, but institutional. Even where the need is obvious, the legal and economic frameworks of private property often prevent timely transformation. (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2024)

Figure 15

*Stairwell Eye, La Prosperitat, Barcelona.*



*Note.* Still from the unreleased documentary film *67 Steps*, directed by N. Gradolí Giner and A. Núñez Alfaro. Camera by Pol Subirà and Júlia Llançana.

And yet, within this constrained landscape of mass housing, important shifts are beginning to emerge. One of them concerns public solvency. In projects such as Carrer Pirineus in Santa Coloma de Gramenet, the City Council has assumed a more active role, operating almost as a “trust bank.” By taking on technical risk and covering the upfront costs of intervention, while

allowing residents to repay the non-subsidized portion through soft instalments adjusted to their pensions, the administration effectively replaces private capital with public commitment. (Román-López et al., 2021). This model does not solve every problem, but it points toward a crucial change: accessibility can no longer depend solely on the liquidity or consensus-building capacity of aging residents.

A second shift concerns scale. If the dominant framework has long treated each building as an isolated rehabilitation unit, more recent approaches suggest the need to operate at the scale of the neighbourhood or urban fabric. This is exemplified by the implementation of Conservation and Rehabilitation Areas (ACR, by its Catalan acronym *Àrees de Conservació i Rehabilitació*) (Ajuntament de Barcelona, n.d.) in the Sant Ildefons district of Cornellà (Celobert, n.d.). This approach is particularly important in dense postwar environments, where the private portal is often too small a unit to absorb the technical, spatial, and political complexity of adaptation. While many interventions still rely on the logic of the “backpack elevator,” preserving existing property divisions, the broader question remains open: what happens when the relevant scale is no longer the single building, but the block as a collective and metabolic structure?

This shift in scale also transforms the meaning of the elevator itself. In cases such as the urban lifts like the one in Passatge de Picapedrers in the city of Girona, vertical mobility begins to move beyond the domestic sphere and toward the public realm (Ajuntament de Girona, n.d.; El Punt Avui, 2016). Here, the elevator is no longer a private appliance hidden behind a key or a code, but an extension of the street: a piece of shared infrastructure that connects previously fragmented topographies. This mutation is conceptually important. It suggests that vertical movement can be understood not only as a domestic amenity, but as part of the city’s wider network of mobility and access.

A further line of experimentation emerges around the management of air as a resource. Private initiatives such as *La Casa por el Tejado* have shown that, in historic fabrics, rooftop additions can help finance the rehabilitation of existing buildings. By selling prefabricated penthouses above, these projects use the air as a financial asset capable of supporting structural improvement below (Arquitectura y Empresa, 2016). Applied to mass housing, this raises a critical question: could growth in height be redirected toward collective accessibility, allowing buildings to generate the resources needed for their own transformation? In this sense, the “air” is no longer simply empty space above the block, but a possible medium through which maintenance, densification, and redistribution might be renegotiated.

This logic finds an important, if extralegal, mirror in the Russian Pavilions of Belgrade. As Sekulić (2012) has shown, roof extensions there often tripled the original floor area, producing what residents described as “a house sitting on top of another house.” Born out of a crisis of shifting property regimes, these additions were not only spatial expansions, but also acts of structural renegotiation: the new construction frequently provided the pillars and stabilization needed to support the building below. Under what conditions can vertical growth become a collective rather than merely speculative resource?

Finally, international cooperative housing models suggest another possible direction. Projects such as La Borda (Lacol, 2018) have demonstrated the transformative potential of treating the building not as a sum of private assets, but as a shared resource. In many ways, this model acts as a contemporary update of early Soviet avant-garde experiments in collective living – such as the Narkomfin building designed by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignaty Milinis (La Casa de la Arquitectura, n.d.) – which balanced minimal private units with generous, diverse communal spaces. In this model, residents do not own a specific apartment as a commodity, but hold a permanent right of use, which allows maintenance, accessibility, and care to be built into the social logic of the project rather than added later as an individual burden.

So far, however, this model has largely been developed by groups who choose from the outset to organize collectively around a shared ideology. The more difficult and politically significant challenge lies elsewhere: in the possible hybridization between cooperative or public housing frameworks and the rigid, fragmented property structures of the 1960s mass housing stock. As our research and master thesis, *67 graons i un pati d'illa* (Gradolí Giner & Núñez Alfaro, 2022), suggests, improving private life by expanding collective infrastructure through hybrid housing models and horizontal and vertical connecting elements is a viable path for the renovation of the postwar block. This implies a reversed trajectory to that of La Borda: while the latter moved from a collective ideology toward a specific architecture, in neighborhoods like Nou Barris, the physical and urban transformation itself could become the catalyst for community empowerment.

Taken together, these emerging directions do not yet constitute a coherent alternative model. But they do suggest a shift away from the isolated, privately burdened building toward a more metabolic understanding of inherited mass housing: one in which access, finance, ownership, and spatial growth are no longer treated separately, but as interdependent dimensions of transformation.

## **5. Building a Collective Infrastructure of Connection**

In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ursula K. Le Guin (1989) asks us to imagine another kind of technology: not the spear, but the bag; not the heroic tool of conquest, but the humble vessel that gathers, holds, and carries life. This shift matters here because inaccessible housing does not call for another heroic object. It calls for shared structures of support.

What this essay has traced is a widening gap between changing bodies and the inherited spatial logics of twentieth-century mass housing. Between home, staircase, and street, access becomes effort, waiting, and dependence. The problem is not the staircase itself, but the moment when it becomes the only possible path. Again and again, care steps in where architecture fails: in ramps, pulleys, neighbourly visits, and acts of improvisation. But can what is now carried privately be transformed into infrastructure?

This is where the future proposed here begins: not at the scale of the isolated building, but at the scale of the block, the courtyard, the cluster, and the neighbourhood. To respond to this condition means not only retrofitting individual buildings, but beginning to transform the walk-up

typology of twentieth-century mass housing itself. If bodies, care, and everyday life already exceed the apartment door, then access must also be reorganized beyond the limits of one portal.

From here emerges the possibility of a vertical public space (Gradolí Giner, 2020): another layer of the city, suspended between buildings and structured through shared access. What takes shape here is not simply a set of technical fixes, but a publicly supported collective infrastructure that sews the home back into the street. Elevators would no longer be understood only as private appliances, but as part of a wider network of vertical mobility. Walkways, bridges, galleries, rooftops, and inner courtyards could connect buildings, enlarge communities, and create spaces not only of circulation, but of encounter. In dense fabrics, the courtyard might become a shared core of lifts and platforms; in more open mass housing estates, neighbouring buildings might group together through new vertical and horizontal connections. The point is not to apply one universal solution, but to intervene strategically, acupuncturally, in specific situations where new forms of access can unlock wider forms of urban life.

Such a horizon also requires another political and economic imagination. If accessibility is part of adequate housing, then it cannot depend only on the savings, energy, or consensus-building capacity of residents. City councils would need to act less as distant administrators and more as public guarantors: advancing transformation, assuming risk, and making long-term rehabilitation viable. The air above buildings may also need to be treated as a collective resource: not for speculation, but to support retrofitting, maintenance, and hybrid housing models based on cooperative, public, or shared forms of management. In this sense, one lesson of collective *misheneba* structures may be worth retaining: its capacity to imagine the house as something unfinished, that can grow, adapt, and be reorganized in phases, by groups of neighbours, over time, and in relation to available resources. To make this possible, regulations must become more flexible and situated, inventing new management mechanisms through which existing mass housing can be sustained socially as well as economically.

What begins to appear here is close to what David Gissen (2024) calls *disabled communalism*: a way of organizing space not around autonomy, but around interdependence and shared support. The point is not to erase the stair, but to place it within a broader carrier bag of shared access, through which movement becomes collective and connection once again becomes a matter of choice.

This may sound almost utopian. But the reality described throughout these pages is already dense enough with weight and fear. If another arrangement feels difficult to picture, that is where hope begins: in the simple act of starting to imagine.

67 steps. Some days, Dolores may still take the stairs, following their familiar rhythm through her body, keeping herself active. Another day, she might choose differently: taking a shared lift, stepping out onto a platform between buildings, and finding Ana, Rosa, Rosita, and the others already there before making their way down together to the street.

Figure 16

*Towards a Collective Infrastructure of Connection. Antennas in La Prosperitat, Barcelona.*



*Note.* Still from the unreleased documentary film *67 Steps*, directed by N. Gradolí Giner and A. Núñez Alfaro. Camera by Pol Subirà and Júlia Llançana.

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