

# Desirable futures

## *Our common senses*



*“Your sheep, that you say are of a natural softness and a docile temperament, nevertheless devour men...”*  
- Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516

At the end of the Middle Ages, commerce and urbanization rapidly progressed, common property proliferated in the countryside, and guilds gained a foothold in towns. The State was yet to be centralized, and local community initiative was, out of actual subsidiarity, the most suitable actor to govern exchanges and rights over resources. Through the 16th century, most of Europe, like many other territories at the time, was governed by what we would call local communities today; village communities, for example, had the right of use over noble lands and could take wood, graze livestock, harvest honey, or pick wild fruit and berries on these lands. At the heart of regulation was co-activity and co-participation. “The commons” were, more than anything, a matter of organization, understanding, and preservation.

Forested commons were not the forest taken as a space or resource, and, thus, as an object, but rather a link between this forest and its users: the forest as it is cared for during a certain activity. At the end of the day, the commons are this very activity in itself. The commons are, more than anything, a matter of governance and organization. Indeed, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between resources that are common property and those that are freely available.

Common property implies a well-defined community of users, as well as a set of rules and norms that allow each individual to regulate the behavior of others. Free access implies stricter regulation, driven by an authority acknowledged by all: the State.

In this sense, the commons cover neither objects nor goods, but rather uses, so much as they qualify and arrange users’ relationships with these objects and goods. They therefore take on, beyond customary consumption of an exterior item, a sense of guarding, maintaining, and preserving.

Starting in the 16th century, the use and regulation of natural resources by villagers, but also, in towns, the organization of artisanal trades into guilds, were called into question. In England, the proto-Industrial Revolution took hold, due to the thriving woolen trade. Landowners converted *common* pastures into private enclosures, for sheep grazing. What followed was the impoverishment of populations who made



Walls built following the *Enclosure Act*, United-Kingdom.

their living from the concerted use of the commons, and numerous rebellions were suppressed by the authorities, who, in fact, were becoming increasingly centralized at the time. Kett's Rebellion in 1549 assembled 16,000 people, after major victories, including the taking of England's second-largest town at the time; it was broken up by the massacre of 3500 individuals. In the 18th century, the House of Commons voted the *Enclosure Act*, which brought a decisive end to rights of use and the commons. The same happened in Belgium in 1847, where a Law on the Clearing of Uncultivated Lands was adopted, forcing local authorities to privatize all shared lands. It is indeed the political aspect that is of interest here: the right to commons came into conflict with private property as an absolute and exclusive right. Private property, including over assets that could be considered as shared or common, because they were not produced by any man, became the sole standard, to the point of being held up, a few years later, in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789, as a natural, inalienable right, alongside liberty, safety, and resistance to oppression.

### **The tragedy of the commons**

In an influential article published in 1968, American ecologist Garret Hardin asserted that, when several users have access to the same valuable resource, what emerges is a "tragedy of the commons", which no technological solution can resolve. Drawing on the example of pastures to support his thesis, Hardin contended that each farmer would add an additional animal to their herd, as long as it would maximize their own personal interest, neglecting the cost of this activity for other farmers with whom he shares these common lands. What results is the depletion, and final destruction, of pastures. This tragedy can only be avoided by dividing land into private parcels, or through state-based regulation.



It was Elinor Ostrom who would strike a blow against this individualist view of the situation, by updating the conditions of positive cooperation for the sustainable management of local resources<sup>(1)</sup>: clearly defined limits, unambiguous rules, effective monitoring, gradual sanctions for rule-breakers, conflict-resolution mechanisms, wide-scale participation in governance, and relative autonomy from higher authorities. Her approach is theoretically innovative: she challenges the utilitarian theories that predominate in economics through ground-level investigation and collection of data on both micro and macro levels. Over thirty years, she crisscrossed the planet, from Indonesia to Mexico, and the Los Angeles basin to Switzerland, looking for little-known forms of human organization that make up the Commons, studying, for example, both the organization of police divisions in Chicago and the self-governance of Nepali farmers' water system. She thus integrated the observation of human behavior into economic analysis, and enabled the creation of models, but, especially, reported on organizational modes. All resources, or natural commons, thus require management, with a view to protecting and even optimizing them. To this resource is added a non-proprietary system, a system of rights and duties. Inasmuch as it is out of the scope of property, whether public or private, it is indeed the community of individuals who have a direct interest in the protection or development of the resource and who organize themselves to define certain rights (access, collection, consumption, etc.) and duties (not exploiting the resource, maintenance, protection from third parties, etc.); these rights are only rights of use. We can see how this vision of the preeminence of use over property challenges the individualist and owner-based philosophy which the West has been immersed in since the Enlightenment: there is no need for ownership, since cooperation is an alternative to competition, and the allocation of resources can be self-regulated by local communities rather than by an overarching authority or an "invisible hand". What Elinor Ostrom reveals is powerful: she re-situates economics into the social sphere by freeing it from Marxist thinking that leads to a sole, overarching system of regulation.

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1. Governing the commons, 1990







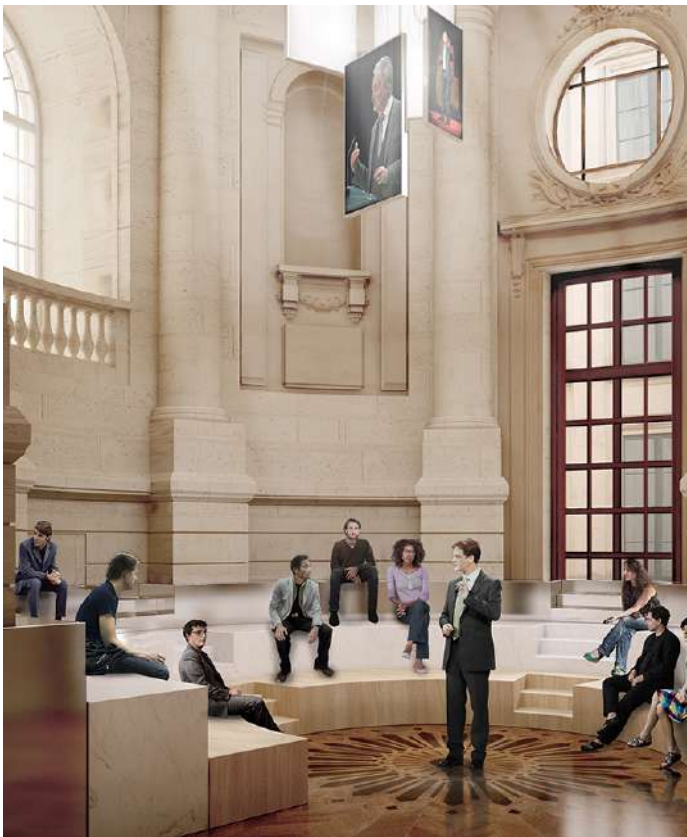
One of the many drivers working for the Uber and Lyft platforms and protesting for their rights.

### **The so-called sharing economy**

The sharing economy is emerging as a model that can integrate this theory of the commons into our daily lives, as part of our habits. Indeed, within this economic model, access predominates over ownership: the use of a good, service, or privilege suffices. There is no need for full ownership, due to the various rental, temporary sale, exchange, or barter systems.

The internet, through disintermediation and peer-to-peer relationships, has made possible the wide-scale encounter of internet users interested in the same types of objects or services, by allowing for and optimizing communications between those who own and those searching for goods, services, skills, money, resources, etc. Behind these trading platforms are reputational systems (references, ratings) from users who incentivize them to “behave well” and which explain the bulk of their stunning success. Trust is in fact the cornerstone of this system; this is where we can find the foundation for building village communities, v. 2.0.

This new consumption pattern has already revolutionized many of our everyday habits: shared mobility (ridesharing, rental of on-demand mobility solutions), connecting with tourist accommodations, second-hand consumption, real estate (co-working and co-living). These “commons” are thus generating economies around them, which creates regulatory issues, since former extractive methods of ownership are being applied to the commons today, in other words, platform capitalism. Uber, AirBNB, et al: they offer interesting, wide-ranging, and comfortable services that were often previously inaccessible. Their firepower stems from practices that externalize investments and risk toward their users and their workforce, devoid of current regulation in the industries they are “uberizing” - taxi and hospitality services - to the detriment of social rights for these piece workers v. 2.0, who are making a living from this so-called sharing economy. Organizational methods for this new economy, Michel Bauwens tells us, are built on an ideological and regulatory foundation straight out of neoliberal capitalism: *“It is very easy to create a start-up. You’re guided and supported. But it’s much harder to create fairer economic arrangements. In an extractive regime, P2P will create very serious issues of insecurity and precariousness; it therefore requires new regulations that almost don’t exist. The key is that the sharing and “commons” economy is super-productive, but its earnings are financialized without equitable sharing with the producers and generators of this value. So we’re going nowhere without an appropriate regulatory system, without*



Two views illustrating the agoras from the *La Compagnie des Philanthropes (The Philanthropic Company)* project, launched through the “Réinventer Paris” (Reinventing Paris) contest.

*solidarity or how-to mechanisms to strengthen or even replace State social safety nets that are based on a declining salaried base, and they raise fairness issues, in other words, in terms of excessively ‘extractive’ ownership practices”<sup>(2)</sup>.*

### **Collaborative learning**

Many signs are pointing to the fact that the commons are a valid alternative. It is, first of all, the longevity and solidity of certain collective experiments that are breaking out of the fields of culture, knowledge, and free software and entering the domain of consumption, from Le boncoin to Blablacar and the open management of estover rights in certain European forests, water systems in some communities, and even consumer cooperatives. Each of these experiments are gaining market share in a permanent fashion. These are indeed common practices that are taking hold within self-sufficient communities. Maker movements in favor of hardware assembled in fablabs, hackers in digital networks sharing open design and improving open-source software, and consumers united in collaborative supermarkets are all demonstrating that there is a clear endorsement of these habits and of collective, self-regulating organizational modalities, without a trusted third party, public or private.

Sharing, to raise one’s standard, as well as one’s quality of life. Henceforth, the issue at stake for us is to envision ways to disseminate this model based on the permanence of generative resource conditions, accessible to all. Thus, at the very basis of this revolution of the commons lies learning: Socrates taught at the very heart of the city, at the center of economic activity, and not just his students. Within the Agora, Athens’ central square, a free space, as we’d call it today, merchant activity mixed with civic activity, cultural life, and neighborhood living. This competent, modular configuration is undoubtedly better suited to addressing the challenges we face today, at the dawn of the 21st century.

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2. Interview with Michel Bauwens, <https://journals.openedition.org/rsa/1546#tocto1n2/>





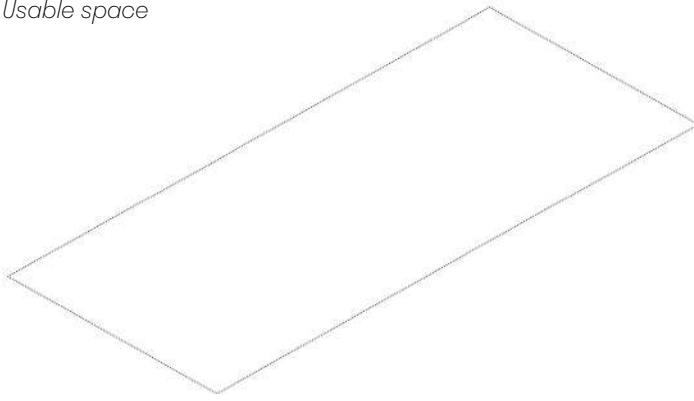
The fictional co-living agora from *Design ça tourne (Design and action!)*, presented at the Maison&Objet fair in January 2020.

Our (design) agency's approach is pragmatic, in this regard: we ask ourselves both about methods of emergence and manifestation of these common needs and about the artifacts that would be useful for their development. The practice of forecasting behaviors and uses at Bureau des usages is based on the intersection of personal journeys plotted on diagrams that include space and time. This allows for an emergence of what is relevant to share. Then, in terms of designing artifacts, we take care to craft spaces, interfaces, and opportunities for communities of shared interests to develop as a basis for these commons. We have notably dealt with the issue of spatial configuration around one specific object: bleachers. While they are generally installed in public spaces so that a large number of people can watch a small number of others (shows, rallies, conferences), we've envisioned bleachers on a smaller scale, so that they may be used as a deliberative space. This is at the very heart of the "Réinventer Paris : La Compagnie des Philanthropes" project (Reinventing Paris: The Philanthropic Enterprise), hosting pitches from project leaders, and offering them a space to be discussed and debated. Bleachers were also at the heart of the imaginary co-living space we set up at Maison&Objet: a place to share, debrief, and establish the rules.

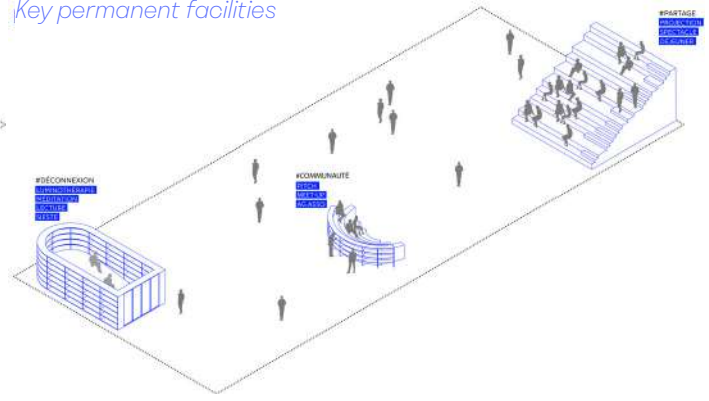
We are also interested in an essential driver for social transformation: education. We developed our vision during two Lyon-based real estate competitions, one of which we won, EM Lyon, and the other that is still in the running, a mixed-use block for higher education and living at La Confluence.

For EM Lyon, alongside developers Altarea Cogedim, architects from PCA, communications specialists from BETC, and sociologists from Eranos, we analyzed EM Lyon Business School's learning concept, and designed an evolving project based on a set of complementary intelligences (artificial, individual, emotional, and collective) that would allow for the development, on different scales and at different intensities, of a certain Commons. The real estate development itself was designed, through generic architecture and a modular, open-design layout, to adapt to learning systems and to their future evolution, as well as to allow for shifting spatial configurations to balance shared moments with times for introspection and free expression. Nothing was "set in stone", and it was all adaptable to rules decided upon in common.

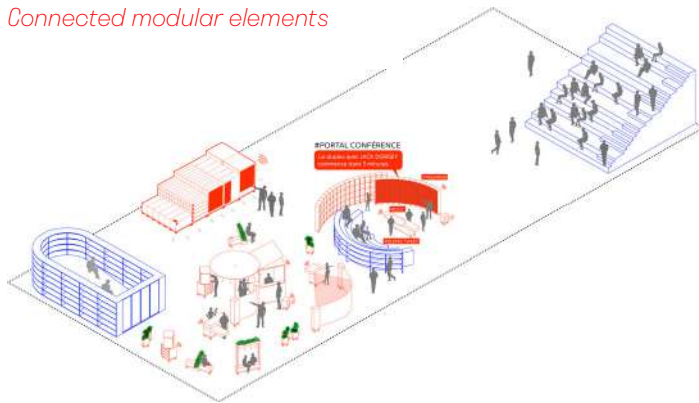
Usable space



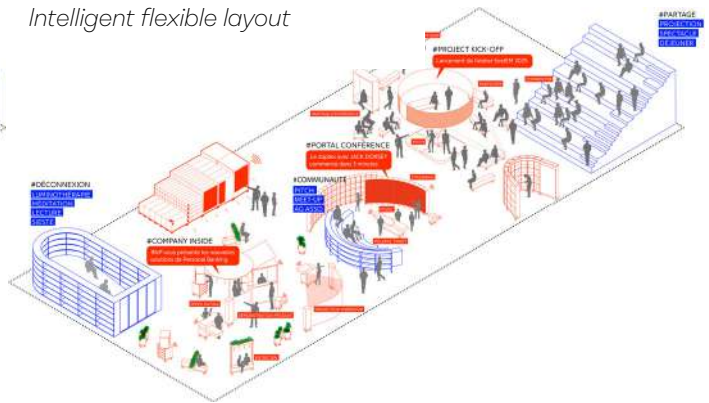
Key permanent facilities



Connected modular elements



Intelligent flexible layout



Explanatory diagram of the system created for EM Lyon.

For the B1C1 block at Confluence, we took advantage of the diverse programming to offer a programmatic system, a “remix-cube”, that would allow for the envisioning of use, and, in the near future, architecture, as a set of spaces, services, and amenities that are modular and scalable. Higher education, living spaces, a walkable city...the boundaries between these programs are fleshed out in our project and host uses made by a variety of communities, who find spaces to meet and practice different activities. At the very core of the learning life, there are material and immaterial resources that we have placed in common, so that a sense of commons is created: a resource center, online courses, a test shop, concierge and barter services, collaborative community life, spaces for various practices and art exhibits, and restaurants.

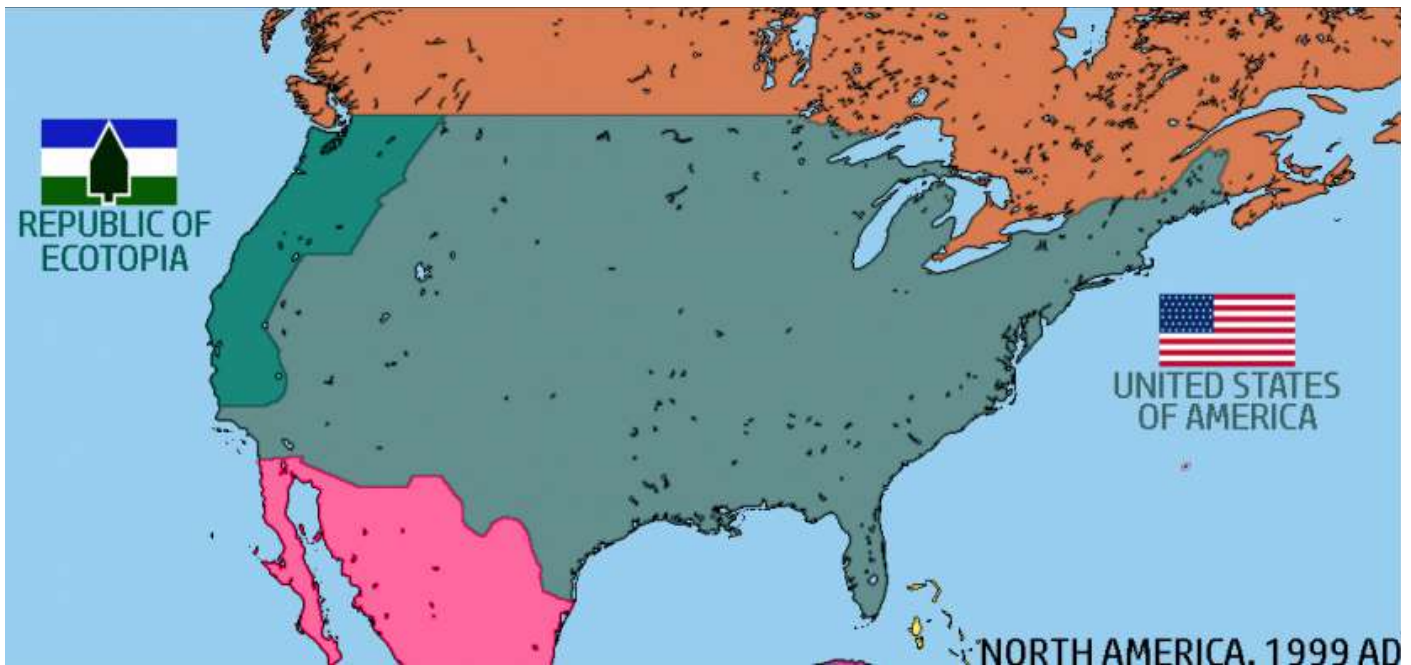
### The secession of the commons

In many fictional visions, the commons are built out of necessity. Following apocalypses (climate crises, atomic war, failed states, etc.), groups of individuals are forced to self-govern for their survival and often for their resistance. This self-government is less frequently constructed by choice by its participants, although this is indeed the case in two futuristic political tales, where groups secede.

*The dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin (United States, 1974), contrasts two planets: the planet Urras, where abundance seems to reign, but in an ultra-materialistic form that preys on natural resources to benefit the ruling, owning class, where corruption and inequalities reign supreme; and its moon Annarres, inhabited two centuries earlier by the Odonians, a libertarian collective that wanted to found a utopia based on cooperative, self-governing principles. The scarcity of resources forces them to use things parsimoniously, in a strict, though democratically accepted manner. This form of organization is particularly decentralized. Its inhabitants live in solidarity in dormitories and divide their professional time between their trades and community work, every ten days (the management of waste, plants, hygiene, etc.). Food is free, and equality of the sexes has been accomplished. The protagonist, Sheveck, a brilliant physicist from Annarres, cannot complete his research on the Theory of Simultaneity, which would make instantaneous communication possible throughout space, because it is too innovative to fit within the







The map of *Ecotopia* and of the United States in 1999, 20 years after the secession.

established principles of old, sclerotic Annarres physics. The ambivalence lies precisely in this: the utopia of secession to another, more egalitarian world closes in upon itself.

Another utopia of the commons is that of *Ecotopia*, published in 1974. Three states in the American West secede from the rest of the United States of America to found an ecological, resilient country. From the organization of communities, which don't surpass a certain size, to education, agriculture, mobility, and the presence of plant life in the city, the entire organization and everyday habits here are based on the aforementioned principles of common rights. The narrator, a journalist from New York, who is sceptical at first, is rapidly convinced by the whole venture, notably once he falls in love. The entire scenario seems marvelous, but, just like on Annarres, this lifestyle model can only exist due to impervious borders, where one has to choose a side and secede.

These fictions seem, moreover, to be finding concrete embodiment today in "ZAD"s, such as Notre-Dame des Landes, for example, and it is conceivable to envisage a political alternative based on sharing by removing oneself from the rest of the world. We are convinced that the theory of the commons applied to everyday life, in other words, "common senses", may be an alternative that is itself shared, notably through education.

### **A possible plotline for a fictional tale**

Because we believe that learning about "common sense" starts with learning about life, we offer the words of a professor from the 21st century who, having lived and participated in the transformation of learning modes within a reinvented university environment, shares their experience and anecdotes. Learning is no longer seen as a fixed set of knowledge provided through years of study during one's youth, but a lifelong, perpetual flow, a place and a community that one returns to, where one is both a contributor and a learner. The journey and commitment of the professor will allow visitors to experience a new idea of the future of learning, or rather, of learning spaces and practices, but especially, this way, to find out about the role of the commons in future behaviors and uses, trades, and economies. Indeed, we consider knowledge and curiosity to be a particularly fertile foundation for communal life. Design, within this fiction, will allow for a view into the future vision for schools which, in an era of dematerialization, artificial intelligence, and privatization, but also of the knowledge economy, can also be reinvented using tools, spaces, services, and interfaces made available to teachers and learners. These new tools will be envisioned more than ever to facilitate these concepts of sharing, pooling, and a networked approach.