

Desirable futures

Our use of time

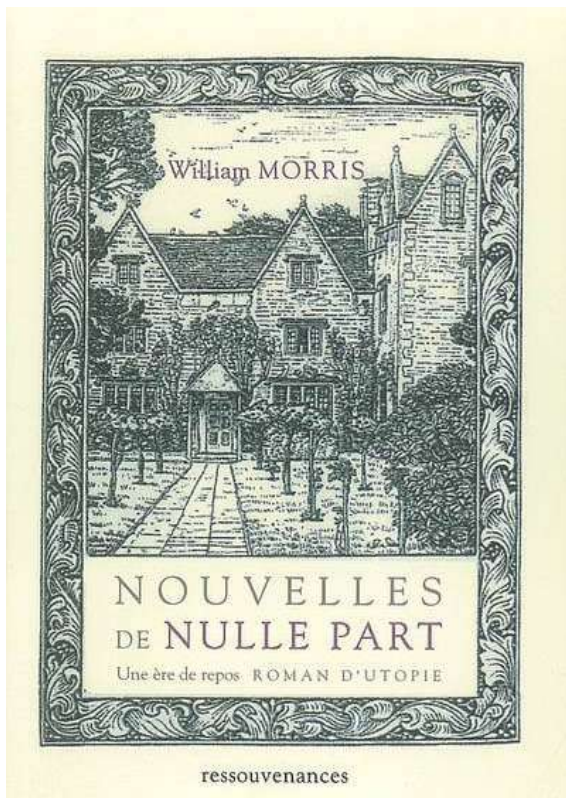


"In ten years, the Universal Robots of Rossum will produce so much corn, so much fabric, so much of everything that things will be virtually priceless. There will be no more poverty. All work will be done by living machines. The entire world will be free from worry and liberated from the degradation of labor. We will live just to perfect ourselves."

- Karel Capek, *The Universal Robots of Rossum*, 1920

Right from the start of the Industrial Revolution, the promise of automation was born, of liberation from labor, for a timetable devoted to recreation and knowledge. Workers were the ones made this promise. Luddites, textile workers from the English Midlands, rebelled between 1811 and 1816 against those who wanted to force machines on them, in this case, mechanical weaving looms, that dehumanized their work and, eliminating all their art, all their expertise, threatened to turn the workers themselves into machines. Erroneously called "machine smashers", they did not break the machines that were destroying their trade and their way of living in the world.

Design emerged as a discipline at the dawn of the 20th century, precisely in reaction to the industrial machine and to this myth of automation and abundance. While the machine allowed for ever-more-efficient production, design came on the scene to provide meaning, just as much practical as ethical or aesthetic, to the usage of these machines. William Morris, one of the founding fathers of design, and the instigator of the Arts and Crafts movement, rose to defend craftwork against standardized products. Indeed, he founded *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co*, which produced and distributed furniture, wallpaper, and textiles with a Pre-Raphaelite inspiration. In defending the decorative arts with all his might, his intent was not a conservative one to return to artisanal work (Morris used industrialization in his firm), but rather so that mankind, both worker and artisan, could regain its dignity by escaping from the instrumentalization that industrialization leads to. He was, in fact, one of the founders of the British Labour Party.



William Morris, *News from nowhere: An Age of Rest*, 1890

"This opinion that, as far as I can perceive, seemed as natural at the time as it seems absurd today, was that, as long as the world's everyday work is done entirely by automatic machines, the energies of the most intelligent part of humanity would be freed to follow higher forms of art, as mature as science and the study of History. It was strange, was it not, that they ignore in this way this aspiration to complete equality, which we now recognize as the common thread that ties together any happy human society?"

This excerpt from his utopian novel *News from Nowhere, or An Age of Rest* remains relevant today in many ways: machines are not the solution, as they will not, through generalized automation, free up the time necessary for every person's fulfillment. Machines are tools like any other, including artificial intelligence; they must be used to serve humanistic values. It is indeed in our rapport with projects, in our ways of extending our being into collective action, in our relationships with others, that we find the key to the transformation of work. Another historical detour illustrates the role of design in this matter. Catharine Beecher, in her treatise on home economics in 1840, brings functionalism - "*Form follows function*"⁽¹⁾ - into the domestic sphere. She advocates the development of automation for certain tasks, foreshadowing household appliances and the fully equipped kitchen, not for the glorification of technology, but for a social good: going without servants and, thus, allowing for the abolition of slavery and the liberation of women.

How can we imagine, a century later, this kind of commitment on the part of design to the transformation of our relationship to work? What kinds of fictions should be filled with everyday artifacts, in order to bring an alternative to life? To answer these questions, let us first identify the challenges we face today.

1. Hypothesized by Chicago architect Louis Sullivan in a treatise on architecture for the composition of skyscrapers.

All Work deserves pay

The Industrial Revolution, through the division of labor and the consequent distancing of individuals from the production of a body of work, dispossessed specialized workers of their creative faculties; this is what Simone Weil called oppression, in a different way, but not precluding economic exploitation. The work is not in the task, and work is not employment. Employment is what is endorsed by a salary, which allows us to have purchasing power, to satisfy needs, and, within our society of abundance, keep the capitalist machine and production going. Work is how, through accomplishment and through production of a piece of work, we cultivate a certain presence in the world, a reason for existing. It is an essential means of fulfillment, of gaining knowledge, of personal development. For this reason, certain unpaid activities can still be considered work: gardening to cultivate one's relationship with living beings, reading and writing to develop thought processes, cooking to develop one's palate and knowledge of the *terroir*, etc. All these activities remain essential; they require constant soul-searching, as opposed to alienating employment that calls for repetitive tasks. Alienation is not the sole domain of specialized workers; it is also experienced by executives and office workers. This is what the bestseller *Bullshit jobs* by David Graeber showed us. He demonstrated in this essay that contemporary society is based on the alienation of the vast majority of office workers, who are driven to devote their lives to useless, mundane tasks, while remaining fully aware of the superficiality of their contribution to society.

The fiction that is the job market

For these reasons, “the notion of the job market is thus based on a legal fiction”, according to Alain Supiot⁽²⁾. It is built on the concept of human capital, as if mankind and its capacity for work were a resource like any other. This fiction, where work is equivalent to employment, this manipulation of work, is built through “the cultural hegemony of the absolute marketplace”. Within this structure, employees are more or less efficient representatives of a single standard and are, de facto, in competition with one another. Conversely, in a vision of work that is emancipated from employment, workers are unique individuals who create unique things. One of the COVID crisis' experiments that we've just lived through has been, over a short period, based on this distinction, due to massive partial unemployment. For nearly two months, almost 8 million white-collar workers kept being paid, though not to actually execute tasks. Behaviors, passions, and hobbies developed during this pause, and we would bet that many career changes will have been generated during the Spring of 2020. This period was also one of the expansion of distance working, a positive push into the future, where resistance to the usage of certain technologies was overcome by necessity. The already-porous boundaries between the home and work spheres will become even more so, just as much in terms of scheduling as on a spatial dimension. The role of design is to support this transition, not from a personal point of view by coaching individuals on their life plans, nor from a political stance by allowing for a decoupling of work from income, but rather to provide comfort and practicality within these new usages. It is, in fact, in the design of artifacts, spaces, and services that contribute to the growth of these new work habits that the transformation will occur.

2. *Le travail au XXIème siècle (Work in the 21st century)*, dir. Alain Supiot, Editions de l'Atelier, Paris, 2019.



A robotic platform at Amazon in Bretigny-sur-orge

Automation and essential industries

Incidentally, the myth of automation is still being rolled out today. We continue to hear about the advent of autonomous vehicles and cashiers disappearing from supermarkets; there is a decreasing need for warehouse staff and workers at Amazon, and Teslas are built almost entirely by mechanical hands. These examples, though anecdotal, will increasingly encourage other employers to do the same, since economies of scale are lowering the cost of robots, a ripple effect that will cause an onslaught. Faced with this, a reaction (in the reactionary sense) is forming around *labor value*, which is, in fact, *employment value*; so, there is an attempt to ensure that technological evolutions call for a transformation that is much bigger than just our relationship to work. More recently, reactions to the pandemic may be moving things in this direction, first of all, in terms of value: industries considered “essential” are not always those who were most valued, both in material terms and in terms of vocations. On the other hand, there are the jobs that machines cannot replace, because what matters in them is not necessarily the task, but the relationship. Beyond health care workers, from epidemiologists to nursing assistants, whose usefulness and human-centered approach are clear, it’s not scanning the bar codes of an item at a cash register that is valued by the consumer, who prefers to stand in line for a human cashier, rather than an automatic check-out counter; it’s about the attention they receive. Though the cashier function is easily replaced by a machine, this is not the case for the relationship between a retailer and a consumer. Why visit a dehumanized shop if you can order online and have things delivered in just a few hours? It is telling that the notion of experience is being harnessed to such an extent in this situation. From this point on, one of the key roles of design is to reinvent environments and tools for these industries that make sense in the face of automation and that produce new types of interactions. What kind of shop has an automated check-out system, yet remains a true destination, due to a certain human presence? And also, how is it possible to foster vocations for hands-on fields such as agriculture or craft-making? Multiple job-holding can be the result of a bumpy career path (imposed multi-activity), but it can also emerge out of a search for meaning and self-realization. How, using digital tools but also through the organization of chronotopes and thus, living spaces, can we allow for these practices to coexist? These lockdown periods are also times when methods such as distance working have clearly circulated all over the globe. Design must take into account this transformation in working environments and domestic spaces, and of the emancipatory joy that the diversification of ways of working provides.



One of the shared spaces in our co-living project, created in collaboration with Accor and architects Hardel-Le Bihan

Co-Living

Our Studio has long been interested in hybrid concepts combining work and personal life. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, work was not a truly distinct activity from the rest of life. One didn't go to work, nor *clock in* at the factory; there was no clear distinction between productive social time and personal time. Harvest time was, for example, both work and a major social event, where people came together, talked, and learned something. The situation has greatly changed, but it's an undeniable fact that new communities are emerging. They're not necessarily tied to a certain territory, but rather, are linked together by areas of interest, values, and shared projects. How can we reconcile work life and personal time? Cohabitation and privacy? Compensation and commitment? We have developed, in collaboration with Accor and architects Hardel and Le Bihan, a fictional vision of a property development that, through spaces, services, and a certain economic model, presents a projected Parisian mixed-used building for work and civic engagement, work life and personal time. What emerged was a base open to all, something like a village square during harvest time, where everyone meets up spontaneously or according to certain events or a schedule. Shared living spaces, envisioned as shared workshops where certain practices can develop and knowledge can be shared: collective kitchens, libraries, and game rooms, intimate spaces in a variety of configurations depending on the wishes of the "co-residents", and, finally, a distinct working space, a coworking zone, that allows each of the "co-livers", as well as other employees, to do business in an adapted environment.

Designing environments and working tools proves that there are alternatives to the runaway alienation prevalent in our capitalist societies. These fictional objects allow us to bet on an evolution in the world of work, which can move toward greater fulfillment; that digital tools are ubiquitous and, as such, they can help us not to work starting at 5 in the morning from our kitchen table, but rather to work from a distance, for example, cultivating a mountain-top garden, and that they will allow us to form new communities, no longer based on subsistence nor need, but on a community of shared values, and in doing so, preserve the individual freedom to contribute.

Some ideas for storytelling

We suggest addressing the use of time by following the journey of a farmer who, in the 2020s, decided to transform the family farm by linking their lands, output, and knowledge to a collective scheme for urbanites who want to escape city life. In this pre- and post-COVID era, coworking and distance working are moving from barely-detectable to truly important trends, and are becoming some of the most common practices in the business world. Every analysis is predicting an expansion of these phenomena. The time recovered during the lockdown has led an increasing number of white-collar workers to question the meaning of their work, which has sometimes excessively distanced them from living beings. The immense need for nature, for life, fresh air, and simplicity is becoming clear, and urban dwellers by the thousands are looking to reconcile their various aspirations. This character, of whatever gender the author chooses, has been part of the agricultural world for several generations, and will seek to combine this unfulfilled desire with his/her own challenges related to making a living from agriculture, as thoughtful and conscious as it may be. Whilst all initiatives for reinventing workspaces are embracing the idea of anchoring people in their city and their homes, the farmer will imagine a concept that will make them come in droves to take part in rural life. This agricultural co-living space will emerge from the combination of a need to come together, temporarily and on the basis of affinity, to work from a distance, with that of satisfying a hunger for well-being and connection with living things. From this approach, a new way to occupy and use land will emerge, along with new, hybrid economies, and large-scale initiatives will follow, orchestrated by international firms looking to attract talent by offering them a new way to live and work.

Our protagonist is the active witness to this shift, which will soon become the norm and change the entire way of connecting cities with the countryside, of envisioning housing according to the seasons, and looking at family life and leisure time. Design, through this testimonial, will embrace the detailing and description of this hybridization between city and countryside in terms of everyday habits, but also the type of place that could combine a farm with a hospitality space for seasonal urban workers, with services, technology, and facilities that would make this practice viable and plausible.