

# Sharing Revolution

*The essential economics of the commons*

Jessica Conrad and  
On the Commons

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# Deep Sharing

How the commons amplifies the sharing economy

By Jessica Conrad

On a bitingly cold and rainy November evening last year, I was in a pickle: I'd taken a city bus to CoCo, the coworking space where I office in downtown Minneapolis, and was seemingly stuck without an efficient option for getting to Birchwood Café, where I would meet friends for dinner, three miles away. That is until I remembered my new membership with car2go, a car-share service that had recently won a contract with the city of Minneapolis. I quickly located a vehicle using car2go's mobile app and, my despair vanishing, dashed out of the building in search of the blue and white smart car parked only a few blocks away.

car2go's operating program—"take it, drive it, park it"—allows users to drive vehicles and leave them on the street anywhere within the designated home area. What I love about it, beyond the fact that it's incredibly cost effective compared to owning a car, is that the community of drivers stewards the system. Users are encouraged to keep the cars' gas tanks full and tidy their tiny interiors before ending a trip. What's more, the drivers I know agree that it actually feels good to leave a car in a new location because, in doing so, you increase access to the shared resource.

That's the appeal, along with saving money and the planet, of the sharing economy—the emerging economic revolution where access has become more important than ownership.

But what struck me during that first trip in November was this: Not only was I participating in the sharing economy, but my use of the car-share system was utterly dependent on city streets, a commons belonging to all of us. Not to mention the airwaves that transmitted information to my smartphone, which we technically share together.

This simple scenario reminded me that without the commons, there would be no sharing economy, no

market, and—at the risk of sounding overly dramatic—there would be no future.

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Sharing has always been essential to human life, but "What's new," says Neal Gorenflo, founder of *Shareable Magazine*, "is our blindness to it." Through our individualized pursuit of happiness—a lifestyle ushered in during the Industrial Revolution—many of us have forgotten that for centuries the most promising source of security came from our ability to build and maintain strong social connections and respect the commons.

From water and forests to public transportation systems and public health to human knowledge and the Internet, the commons includes all that we share. But it's not just stuff, it's also the ways we work together—a whole new economic and political paradigm. Elizabeth Royte, author of *Bottlemania: How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It*, aptly notes, "In a world of hyper-individualization...sharing our stuff with friends or strangers can be a political act."

Putting the ideals of the commons into practice in our everyday lives means engaging in community activities, for example, and sharing with our neighbors. "We act under the assumption that we will take care of each other and make decisions that increase our collective self-reliance," says Julie Risatu, co-director of On the Commons.

The good news, says Jennifer Bradley, a fellow at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, is that we're starting to witness more and more people taking life into their own hands. People are starting to ask, "What can we do together that we can't do by ourselves?"

This cultural shift seems capable of both strengthening community in a profound way and creating

new opportunities for sharing on a scale we've arguably never witnessed before. Through the sharing economy, we can now use online social networks to share and swap goods and services with peers (people we may or may not know) in a safe and efficient way. While some of these exchanges fuel the market economy—for example, 3 to 5 percent of any contribution you make through Kickstarter, the popular crowdfunding platform, goes to Amazon—more familiar, tried-and-true models of sharing—such as libraries, cooperatives, and credit unions—offer an alternative to private ownership.

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With the global population skyrocketing and our supply of natural resources decreasing, the cultural shift toward sharing seems timely. But the question is will it actually help us protect our commons and break the status quo of modern consumerism?

To Leland Maschmeyer, a creative director and author of *The Triumph of the Commons*, the sharing economy succeeds as a first step toward a commons-based economy because it helps people understand that “private ownership does not have a monopoly on happiness, health, and freedom.” Owning things doesn't necessarily make us feel good, but [sharing certainly does](#). And the more people become comfortable with the idea of sharing, says Maschmeyer, the more they become comfortable with other kinds of sharing, the true spirit of community, and the commons.

Another boon of the sharing economy is its ability to help us “use our existing physical resources and systems more effectively,” says David Mahfouda, founder of the taxi-share system Bandwagon. In an effort to make sharing more appealing, Mahfouda offers passengers an incentive to share their cab with others headed in a similar direction. In doing so, Bandwagon takes advantage of underutilized capacity in the current cab system, a strategy that will likely amount to significant environmental advantages over time.

Sharing is not only good for the planet, but also serves as an “antidote to social isolation,” says Royte, adding: “That is, unless you orchestrate all your collaborative consumption [another term for the sharing economy coined by Rachel Botsman, author of *What's Mine is Yours*] online, through the thousands of websites that facilitate this new economy.” Does sharing make us happy when there's no person-to-person interaction? Probably not.

Of course, [as I've said before](#), the looming question is how services within the sharing economy can become more effective in reaching across lines of class and geography. Some people are starting to address the question of equity in thoughtful ways, and I especially appreciate Jennifer Bradley's recent [Techonomy interview](#) where she suggests how the sharing economy could address needs for a larger swath of society. With a few tweaks, an Uber-like system, for instance, could help low-income people get to work.

Despite these possible shortcomings, this I know to be true: When we own less, share more, and use resources only when we need them, we will be on a path toward what Maschmeyer calls “redesigning society to promote the commons.”

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The recent rise of both the sharing economy and the commons seems to suggest a growing recognition of the fact that our health, happiness, and security depend greatly on the planet and people around us. This book highlights the many ways, new and old, that people connect and collaborate to advance the common good and explores how we can work together to extend opportunities for sharing to even more people. For when we operate as though we are all in this together—because we are—we will discover a tremendous abundance of goodwill, imagination, and the drive to create the kind of future we want to live in.



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[Matthew Foster](#) is the designer of this ebook.

Cover, photo: Sharing umbrellas outside a library on the Penn State campus. (Photo by [Penn State](#) under a CC license.) Cover, painting: "Frazetta Moon" by [Dholms](#). Used under Resugere license.



Bike share programs such as Nice Ride in Minneapolis expand transportation options for anyone who can ride a bike. (Photo by [Chris](#) under a CC license.)

# The Next New Economy

How a global phenomenon takes off in one city

At half past three in the morning, Alec Johnson rolls out of bed, puts on his uniform, and walks a block to one of Nice Ride's bike sharing stations in the Seward neighborhood of Minneapolis. He unlocks a neon green bike and pedals down the Midtown Greenway, a former railroad corridor that now features biking and walking paths, to his job as a bus driver for the Metro Transit system. After docking the bike at another Nice Ride station, he starts his first shift.

"I was never really that into biking," admits the thirty-two-year-old Twin Cities native, "but I find Nice Ride appealing because I can ride somewhere, leave the bike, and plan an alternate way of getting home. It's not uncommon for me to use Nice Ride a few

times a day, mixed in with a bus ride or two." Getting around is a juggling act for a one-car family with two kids in daycare, but Johnson credits the green bikes for making the daily grind that much easier. "Bike sharing has revolutionized my life. I don't know how I lived without it."

Alec is not alone. The bike share system sports 1,550 bikes in circulation at 170 stations across the Twin Cities, and people took 308,000 rides between April and November last year. "Nice Ride is growing much more quickly than I think any of us would have anticipated," says Mitch Vars, the program's I.T. director.

Nice Ride is just one example of a newfound interest in sharing that is fueling the emergence of the sharing economy.

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The sharing economy leverages the power of online social networks and smartphones to provide a new way for old business models to thrive. No longer just the stuff of pioneer villages and hippie communes, everyday people are sharing, lending, trading, bartering, and swapping goods via peer-to-peer exchanges instead of owning them—and disrupting outdated patterns of consumer behavior at the same time, whether they know it or not.

It's a cultural shift that builds trust between strangers. And it's an economic revolution where access has become more important, and more fashionable, than ownership. The sharing phenomenon is turning the traditional business model on its head across sectors from transportation to hotels and tourism, and everything in between.

This 'new old' way of doing business allows us to live more efficiently by cutting out all the stuff we don't need, or seldom use. Why own something that often sits idle when you can rent it for brief periods of time instead?

When the rental car company Avis Budget Group announced it would acquire the car-sharing service Zipcar for \$500 million in January 2013, it became clear to many that the idea is not just a passing fad.

Big companies like Zipcar and Netflix are transforming industries, but on a smaller, yet no less forceful scale, the sharing economy is empowering a new class of micro-preneurs to create more wealth using assets they already own. In California, drivers can easily fill their cars with paying passengers through Lyft's on-demand ridesharing app. An unused driveway or garage in the U.K. suddenly produces income via ParkatmyHouse. Homeowners bring in extra cash on Airbnb by allowing travelers to crash in bedrooms worldwide. And Lending Club's peer-to-peer platform helps borrowers pay lower rates and investors receive better returns, a concept that earned the company a spot on Forbes' list of "America's Most Promising Companies" three years in a row.

In the past, a traditional sharing arrangement might only take place between friends or neighbors who already know one another. Today, these new sharing-based services formalize relatively safe and efficient exchanges between strangers, where online connectivity leads to enhanced offline interaction. As a result, the value of trust is skyrocketing.

In her recent TED Talk, Rachel Botsman, the social innovator and author who popularized the idea of collaborative consumption in her book *What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, suggests that trust is the currency of the sharing economy and that our online reputations will become a tool for measuring trustability.

But not all activity in the sharing economy depends on high-tech tools or online social networks. Neighborhood clothing swaps, land sharing, shared tool sheds, and coworking spaces are also experiencing a resurgence fueled by the triple drivers of a tough economy, a more ecologically minded population, and a desire for stronger community connections. Take CoCo, for example, a coworking community with three offices in the Twin Cities that offer a home to about 550 coworkers.

"When I first heard about coworking, I was instantly drawn to it," says Don Ball, CoCo's founding partner. "It was the cultural aspect that I found so appealing, the idea of a 'mutual-aid' society. Everybody was boosting each other's projects, which was really unusual."

Coworking is not the only form of space sharing on the rise. The Starling Project, founded by a group of graduate students, aims to match owners of partially vacant buildings with people looking for short-term nesting spaces.

It's easy to think of something like the sharing economy as a flash in the pan or a niche that only services the well-to-do, but it's proving to be capable of growing a community in a profound way while also creating wealth. Fast Company actually estimates that the industry is now worth \$2 billion. In today's scrappy, post-recession atmosphere, these projections signal that the capacity for this movement to generate new economic opportunities is only just beginning.

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With the global population expected to reach nine billion by mid-century and our supply of natural resources decreasing, it seems more important now than ever to find new solutions for curbing the waste inherent in modern consumerism. When we commit to owning less, sharing more, and capitalizing on the unused capacity of goods already in circulation, it's better for all of us, and for the planet.

For a product or service to function in the sharing economy, it must have various essential qualities: durability, adjustability, "share-ability," and a classic design. Rental systems and redistribution markets both require products that are made to last, will fit a variety of users, and won't go out of style.

Bike share bikes are a perfect example: sturdy and adjustable, they can fit all sorts of body types, and while they may not have the same trendy appeal as a custom fixie, their design surely goes a long way in keeping riders safe. Not only that, but at their core, bike share programs have been designed to keep a valuable resource from being underutilized. "Bike sharing has a pricing model to get people to keep the bike in their possession only when they're riding it," Mitch Vars of Nice Ride says. "We don't want people to check out a bike, go to work, and leave the bike leaning against an office wall all day. We want the bikes to be available for other users anytime they're not being ridden."

Similarly, car-share services serve people who forgo car ownership; when a bus or bike ride doesn't meet someone's transit needs for the day, he or she can turn to car sharing.

A nationwide survey of 6,200 car-sharing members by the UC Berkeley Transportation Sustainability Research Center found that car sharing does decrease the number of privately owned cars: For every vehicle in a car-share fleet, between nine and thirteen private vehicles are taken off the street. The researchers also noted that 80 percent of this shift results from single-car households opting to go car-free.

Reducing the number of privately owned cars in cities is not only an environmental boon, but also offers

significant advantages to local economies. A study by the National Building Museum found that reduction in car ownership by 15,000 cars could lead to a reinvestment of \$127 million in the local economy. Without a car, the study suggests people tend to do business closer to home, proving that some benefits of sharing-based businesses extend beyond individual users themselves.

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Clearly the sharing economy will provide new opportunities for cities, but whether they will be able to capitalize on those opportunities is a separate question. In some cases, outdated regulatory frameworks hold back innovation, and in others, new government policy may need to be developed.

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), for example, collided with Lyft, the ride-sharing service, when it issued cease-and-desist letters and fines of \$20,000 in November 2012, accusing the company of operating as an unlicensed "charter-party" carrier. Lyft argued that it is a social network where drivers and riders connect—not a taxi service. In January 2013, Lyft finally struck a deal with the CPUC, which agreed to lift the fines and allow the company to move forward with its expansion from San Francisco to L.A.

More recently, a consortium of cabbies and drivers sued the city of Chicago for allowing an "unlawful taxi caste system" to emerge, and the peer-to-peer car rental marketplace RelayRides had to suspend service in New York due to compliance issues with the state's insurance law.

Airbnb has also been fighting for legality in major world cities, including San Francisco, New York, London, and Paris, where Airbnb hosts face possible violations for breaking rules related to illegal transient hotels.

Local sharing efforts are ramping up, and if cities want to remain relevant in the economy of the next century, investing in new business models and creating policy to support them is essential.

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Still, some critics argue that the sharing economy is merely a trend for slow economic times. Others point

out many possible pitfalls for new sharing-based businesses, including legality, safety, quality, value, and customer service. And of course the looming question is how these services can become more effective in reaching across lines of class and geography.

But whether the sharing economy is here to stay does not depend on the businesses alone. Political

leaders have an opportunity to take their investment in the sharing economy a step further, supporting local efforts with policy and funding options that will build on the momentum we already have. Meanwhile, it's encouraging to see entrepreneurs embrace the new model and drive innovation because they, like so many of us, believe that we can't afford not to try.

**—Jessica Conrad**

*This story originally appeared in [thirty two](#).*



Almost anything can be shared, including a culinary blow torch for creating the perfect crème brûlée. (Photo by [Sweet Dolce](#) under a CC license.)

# Hey, Wanna Borrow My Blow Torch?

A revolution in our relationship to stuff

Years ago, perhaps after I served them a rustic-looking crème brûlée, my in-laws gave me a miniature blow torch, the better to caramelize future desserts. It's a neat tool—efficient and exciting to use—but I can't say I've precision-melted sugar more than four times in the last twelve years (crème brûlée leaves behind too many egg whites for a household that doesn't love angel food cake). And so the gadget sits above my refrigerator, a slight risk for explosion but mostly just taking up space.

If you live nearby, I'll happily loan you my blow torch. Or my shiny red pipe wrench—a full 24 inches long—or my shop vac, none of which get nearly enough exercise. Take me up on my offer, and we'll be part of a growing national trend. It's called sharing.

Think about it: Many urbanites have given up owning private automobiles in favor of sharing Zip Cars, which quickly and efficiently get us on the road without the hassle and expense of car ownership. We've got city bike-share programs, ride-share programs, which match commuters to car pools, and services

like Airbnb, which match empty beds with traveling bodies. Yes, people have always shared, but what's new is that so many more people are sharing so many more things. To what do we owe the pleasure? The weak economy, real-time social-networking technologies that make swapping, trading, sharing and peer-to-peer renting easier than ever before, and a growing awareness that our consumptive appetites are taking a serious toll on the environment.

Sharing—also known as collaborative consumption—makes economic sense because it gives us access to stuff we couldn't otherwise afford. It's also far better for the environment than buying something new. For every lawn mower you don't buy, metals, plastics, water, and energy aren't consumed, and pollution isn't generated. Products that aren't created aren't packaged and shipped, and they aren't landfilled or burned at the end of their useful lives (or recycled—which, despite its virtues, takes its own environmental toll).

Tool libraries are an early, shining example of the sharing economy. The first in the nation opened in Columbus, Ohio, in 1976, and now offers more than 4,500 individual tools for homeowners and nonprofits to check out, including a joint glover, post hole digger, lineman's pliers, and a wallpaper steamer. The West Seattle Tool Library, with more than 1,500 tools shared by 780 members, reports that its favorite loaner, by far, is the wood chipper. Today, there are more than 49 tool libraries across the nation, many of which offer instructions and workshops on how to use their offerings. (Inspired to start one in your own community? Go [here](#) to find out how.)

But collaborative consumption has another, critical, dimension: Sharing tools or bikes or the fruits of a backyard tree (yes, you can harvest free fruit through [CityFruit.org](#)), forces us to co-operate with—and hold ourselves accountable to—other people. In other words, it helps to build community, an engine of activism and social change.

Sharing is sociable, it's empowering, and it's also an antidote to increasing social isolation. (That is, unless you orchestrate all your collaborative consumption online, through the thousands of websites that facilitate this new economy.) Thanks to longer work hours

and longer commutes in single-occupancy cars, social scientists say, Americans have fewer friends than their parents' generation did, spend more time alone, and don't know their neighbors' names. We might have more stuff than ever before (one in ten Americans had a storage locker in 2011), but it's not making us any happier.

Sharing meals, tools, outdoor spaces, and childcare duties, Annie Leonard of *The Story of Stuff* told me, can not only help us to resist the siren call of mindless consumption, it can also reconnect us to our neighbors and communities. As the Berkeley Tool Library's Peter McElligot notes, the library truly is a pleasant place to hang out. "A lot of people just come and talk," he says. "And any time you can help someone solve some kind of a problem, they are always grateful."

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In a world of hyper-individualization—in which we each have our own phone, musical play lists, privately bottled water, and cars—sharing our stuff with friends or strangers can be a political act. It's also a potential legal minefield, as one advances from the relatively simple [sharing of gardening space](#) to sharing a commercial kitchen, art studio, Maker Space, car, or vacation home. And so, inevitably, a new breed of lawyers has evolved to surmount the legal barriers to collaborative consumption.

According to attorneys Janelle Orsi and Emily Doskow, authors of [The Sharing Solution: How to Save Money, Simplify Your Life and Build Community](#), participants need to set clear expectations, anticipate obstacles (for example, who's going to pay if something breaks), and agree on ways to resolve conflicts. And when laws confound your sharing impulse, you can turn to the groundbreaking [Sustainable Economies Law Center](#), which offers education, research, advice, and advocacy on the possibilities and limits of sharing and other "creative economic structures."

A beginner at collaborative consumption, I'm not about to hire a lawyer to codify how I share (or even monetize) my under-utilized assets. For now, that

crème brûlée torch is available for the asking. All I ask in return is a serving of custard-based dessert.

**—Elizabeth Royte**

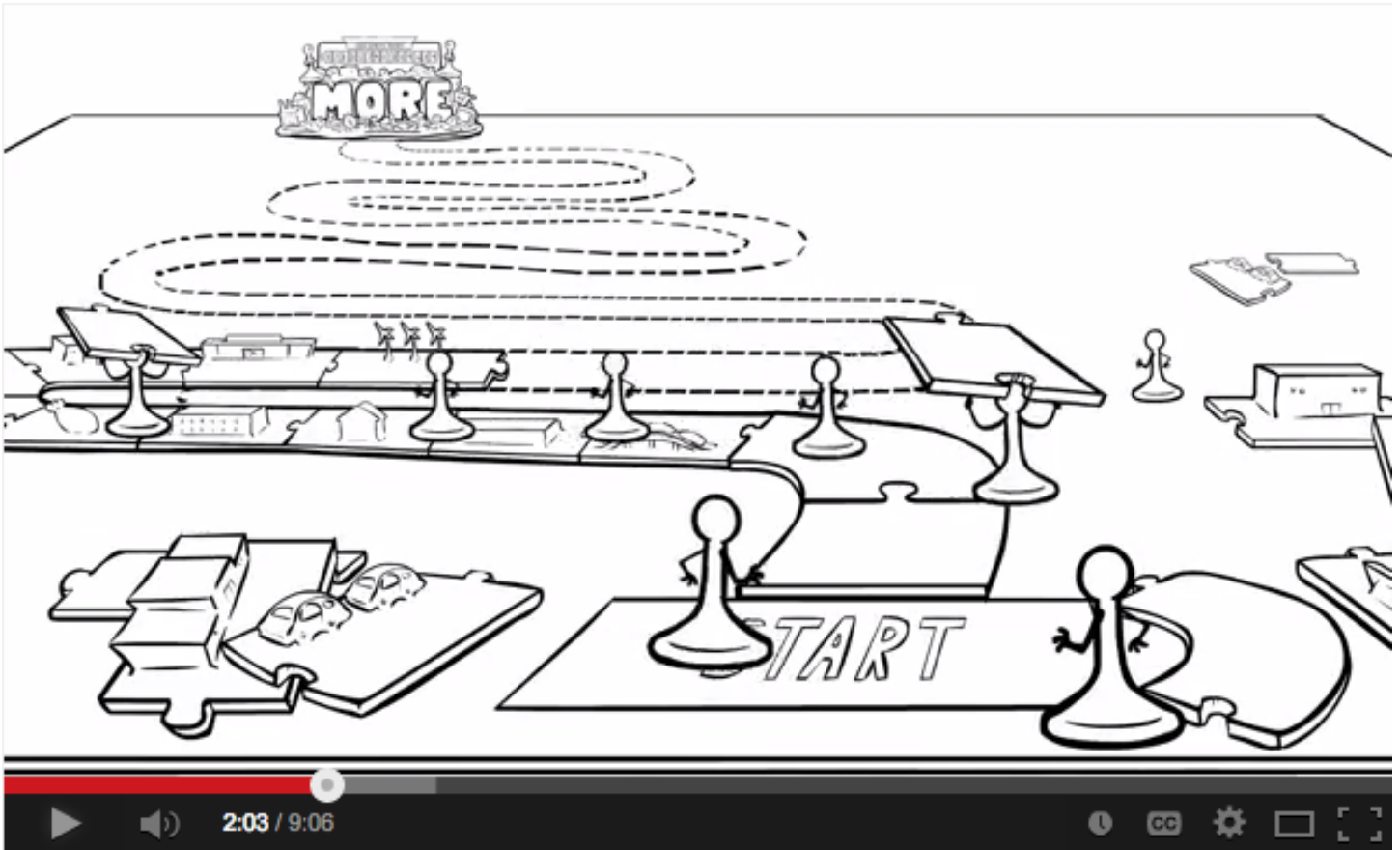
*Elizabeth Royte is American science and nature writer best known for her books [Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash](#), [The Tapir's Morning Bath: Solving the Mysteries of the Tropical Rain Forest](#), and [Bottlemania: How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It](#).*

*This story originally appeared at [OnEarth.org](#).*

# The Story of Solutions

A new webfilm shows that a sustainable and just economy is possible

[The Story of Solutions](#)—a webfilm created by Annie Leonard, filmmaker and founder of [The Story of Stuff Project](#), and [Free Range Studios](#)—explores how we can move our economy in a more sustainable and just direction. It drives home the powerful message that we need to start with orienting ourselves toward a new goal.





At Bandwagon's HOP Lane at LaGuardia, passengers can save money by sharing rides. (Photo provided by [Bandwagon](#).)

# Taxi Rides Go Communal

## Bandwagon expands cab sharing in NYC

With a palpable enthusiasm for collaboration, David Mahfouda is plotting a new future for taxi transportation in New York City—one that's more cost-effective, more efficient, and more sociable. [Bandwagon](#), Mahfouda's ride-share service that launched at LaGuardia Airport in July 2013, fills underutilized capacity in taxis by matching passengers who have complementary destinations and getting them into the same cab. Drivers make a better fare, passengers pay less for the same distance they would travel alone, and the idea, if it catches on, will likely amount to enormous environmental advantages over time. Here he answers a few questions about his project.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** What inspired you to start Bandwagon?

**DAVID MAHFOUDA:** When I was studying architecture and design, I became fascinated with cities, a paradigm of collaboration, and read a lot of Christopher Alexander, the folk architect who focuses on how people used to build and rebuild an environment. One of his driving design tenets is repair. When you empower people to have design authority, they can create really beautiful, intricate, and sensitive spaces over time through revision.

Bandwagon emerged partly out of that ethic: Rather than create an entirely new taxi system, we could simply make the existing system more efficient and more social. The service also provides an answer to questions of space and mobility, which are inextricably intertwined in the U.S. If we can make the car

more social, my hope is that we can make our public spaces and cities more social as well.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** Can you walk me through a typical user experience?

**DAVID MAHFOUDA:** There are two typical user experiences. The service is slightly different for someone leaving the airport versus someone headed there.

Using Bandwagon to leave the airport, you would first need to get into a taxi line called the HOP lane, or high-occupancy passenger lane, which gives priority to people who are willing to reduce wait times for everyone else by sharing their ride. If you didn't already have the Bandwagon app, you would download it and register your destination address, or, if you didn't have a smartphone, you would give your destination address to the line manager.

We have a board near the HOP lane where passengers can see every destination registered in the Bandwagon system. When we find you a match—someone with a complementary destination—your name will appear next to the other passenger's name on the board. We also send an alert to your phone saying, "Jessica, we've found you a match. You can hop up the HOP lane." At that point you would move to the front of the line where you would meet the other passenger and get into a taxi together.

Right now faring is very informal—you split the fare as you would with a friend, the first passenger paying cash to the passenger who closes the tab with credit—but we're working with the TLC to formalize the faring process. That way each passenger will be able to pay the driver directly for his or her portion of the ride. This improvement will be great for taxi drivers too, because the individual fares will be slightly higher than half. We think the drivers should be rewarded for reducing wait times for passengers and doing something good for the city and environment.

The customer experience from the city to the airport is really straightforward. All you do to book a trip on Bandwagon is enter your itinerary and preferred pickup time via our website or mobile app, and we take care of the rest. If we have a match for you at the time of your booking, we tell you your expected

pickup time, give or take 15 to 20 minutes to accommodate other passengers. If we don't have a match for you, we book your ride anyway, and you receive a discount on your fare for your willingness to share. If someone joins your ride, we follow up, but if not, your ride is still booked either way. You get picked up as you normally would for a trip to the airport, except that there might already be a passenger in the vehicle or you might have to pick one up on the way. It's that simple.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** What sets Bandwagon apart from other ride-share services, such as Lyft and Sidecar?

**DAVID MAHFOUDA:** I love Lyft and Sidecar, they're both great companies. What they do is deputize people with cars to be taxi drivers. And while I think there's a need for their services, the more important and forward-thinking question to me is about how to use our existing physical resources and systems more effectively. In order to do that on the road, you need to use vehicles at capacity. That's what we're doing. We're working with the industry to put multiple passengers in legal taxi and car services. It not only brings the price of these services down, but also increases the availability of these services. Plus, it's better for the environment. Instead of putting additional taxi drivers on the road, we're allowing existing resources to be more effective at serving the city.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** As far as I understand it, the New York taxi system is highly regulated. How were you able to work into that system as a startup, especially given that so many other ride-share services have failed to do so?

**DAVID MAHFOUDA:** We launched the service at LaGuardia Airport because we're using Bandwagon to facilitate an existing sharing program of the NYC Taxi & Limousine Commission (TLC). They created shared taxi and limousine rates from LaGuardia to various parts of the city, but they didn't build infrastructure to facilitate passenger matching. So we came to TLC with a product that would basically facilitate the policy they were already pursuing. As a result, we've been able to align ourselves with the industry.

The other good thing is that we're not really in conflict with anyone. When we put multiple passengers

in car services, drivers make more money and passengers spend less money. With Bandwagon we're opening up the market to more people, and, in doing so, we're making the system more efficient. We've made a conscious effort to bring all the parties together around this new practice because we think it will be beneficial for everybody.

JESSICA CONRAD: What has been your greatest challenge?

DAVID MAHFOUDA: Everything has been a challenge. The logistical problem is similar to the political problem, which is similar to both the business problem and the financial problem. Everything is related. We have to try to get all the stakeholders on the same page and all the passengers where they want to go on time. On top of that, we're trying to educate people about a new behavior. And while that's challenging, it's so valuable. Once people try taxi sharing, they really like it.

—Jessica Conrad



A survey by The Sharing Project finds that more people share in old-school ways than online. (Photo by [Andriy Baranskyy](#) under a CC license.)

# Vancouver Values Sharing

## 85 percent of residents share with one another

Eager for the sharing economy to bloom in Vancouver, Chris Diplock, co-founder of the [Vancouver Tool Library](#), designed the first research project to measure and report on people's interest in the sharing economy at a municipal scale. He called it [The Sharing Project](#). Diplock's primary goals were to understand Vancouverites' attitudes toward sharing, to measure the demand for shared assets in the city, and to highlight opportunities for growth within the sharing economy.

Through interviews, focus groups, and a survey of over five hundred individuals, The Sharing Project focused on the lending and borrowing of physical goods in the following categories: transportation, recreation, event and entertainment equipment, tools, household appliances, clothing, physical media, and

space. Other forms of sharing, including skill sharing, were not assessed.

The Sharing Project found that a large majority of Vancouverites share. Seventy-three percent of respondents said that they currently share through a community organization and 85 percent report sharing with peers. Over the next three to five years, more than 50 percent of Vancouverites say they expect to share more. Surprisingly, people's age and type of residence did not significantly influence their attitude toward sharing.

With such high levels of sharing in Vancouver, it would be easy to assume that people are familiar with new models of sharing, such as coworking or peer-to-peer car sharing. But that doesn't appear to be the case. For over 60 percent of survey respondents, the word

“sharing” brought to mind long-established communal resources, such as libraries and public parks—only some associated the word with bike sharing, car sharing, or other new sharing models. In fact, less than 10 percent of respondents use an online service, such as Airbnb, to facilitate sharing with peers.

Our intuition might lead us to believe that trust, convenience, and access have an impact on people’s willingness to share, and The Sharing Project’s research confirms that those three factors have the greatest influence on people’s willingness to both lend and borrow. Peers are usually cited as the most trustworthy, convenient, and accessible source for shared goods. Yet when respondents chose to borrow from a community organization or company, 44 percent of them made that choice because they didn’t want to bother their friends or neighbors.

Another strong influence on respondents’ willingness to lend was the prospect of building social relationships. Over half of all respondents preferred to

lend or rent directly from another person; less than 43 percent of respondents preferred to use an online service to facilitate the transaction.

Vancouverites seem poised to participate in the burgeoning sharing economy, even though the trend is not yet widely recognized.

One opportunity identified by The Sharing Project is for new sharing-based services to collaborate with established sharing organizations, such as libraries, to help grow the movement and build awareness and trust.

Entrepreneurs and grassroots organizers can use The Sharing Project report to develop additional insight as sharing becomes a necessity for the social, financial, and environmental well-being of Vancouver. Other cities can follow Vancouver’s lead in researching the opportunities to share as a starting point to grow local sharing economies.

**—Jessica Conrad**

*This story originally appeared at [Shareable](#).*



New York creative director Leland Maschmeyer wrote *The Triumph of the Commons: 55 Theses on Our Future* to encourage us to see the whole world as a commons.

# You Don't Have to Own Everything

Leland Maschmeyer on creativity, commons, and the 21st century economy

Most people don't have time to sit around and contemplate the commons, says Leland Maschmeyer—an award-winning creative director and author of *The Triumph of the Commons*—because they're busy with the “practical and pressing” stuff of life. Can we fault them? No, of course not. The commons as a worldview and set of practices is fairly abstract and can quickly turn “interest into disinterest.”

The good news, however, is that Maschmeyer thinks the emerging sharing economy—a “new old” way of doing business that emphasizes access to goods and services as an alternative to individual ownership—provides a timely and easy entry point to the commons. Not only does the sharing economy teach us that shared ownership can be a good thing, but it also “teaches that when we consciously and carefully share resources, we collectively do better than if we enclose and abuse them,” says Maschmeyer. This idea is fundamental to the commons.

Maschmeyer strives to infuse his work in the fields of design and business innovation with a commons ethic and has developed a unique and insightful perspective on how the commons applies to everyday life as a result. I recently had an opportunity to ask Maschmeyer to elaborate on how the sharing economy promotes the commons and what he sees as the greatest opportunities for the commons today.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** If this century will be about redesigning society to promote the commons as you suggest, what role, if any, might the burgeoning sharing economy play in the effort?

**LELAND MASCHMEYER:** One challenge with the commons-based worldview is socializing it in the abstract. Leaving it at the level of philosophy, models, and theory can quickly turn interest into disinterest. People are busy with more practical and pressing stuff: picking up the kids, cooking dinner, cleaning the house, getting this work done. Most people aren't academics. They don't have time to sit around and contemplate the commons.

This is where the sharing economy becomes valuable. It starts to make tangible—even desirable—the notion that shared ownership can be a good thing. It can be a sustainable thing. More broadly, it teaches that when we consciously and carefully share resources, we collectively do better than if we enclose and abuse them.

The classic example is car ownership. If you own a car, it just sits there 90% of the time. It's such a waste of \$20,000 dollars, not to mention an inefficient use of gas, metal, and physical space. Yet we do it because we're told car ownership grants us freedom. Have you ever tried to park a car downtown? Or drive home at rush hour? Or looked at how much you have to shell out for gas or insurance? There's no freedom in that. For many people, cars feel like a burden. Sharing a car surfaces an alternate point of view. But it's not only about cars. It's about clothes, about food, about homes, about lawnmowers, about every form of property that we have.

Certainly there are limits to what can and should be shared, but the sharing model isn't meant to be universally applied. The value of the sharing econ-

omy isn't in its ubiquity of application. Rather it's in the embedded learning opportunity it offers through only a few experiences. Once people understand that private ownership does not have a monopoly on happiness, health, and freedom, they begin to ask, "What else gives me happiness, health, and freedom?" This question awakens the proverbial fish to the water. It lets him be open to the possibility that there is something other than water.

Michel Bauwens has written several excellent pieces on that other-than-water stuff. Namely, the idea of peer property. He divides property into three types: private property, public property, and peer property.

With private property, I own the product and I maintain sovereignty over it. With public property, a public body, for example a state government, owns the property and maintains sovereignty over it but also gives limited access to the public. Think of a public park. A park is a public piece of property owned by a municipality, and the municipality lets people visit the park. But many municipalities put conditions on that usage. For example, some parks close at 10pm. That limits access.

Peer property sits in between these two types. With peer property, I own the property but choose to share my sovereignty over it with others. It's liberating to think that there exists a third mode of property that has been ignored or unknown but offers us a new, healthier world of possibilities, models, and social ideals. This newfound openness to a third way is so critical. The more people grow comfortable with this idea of sharing, the more they become comfortable with other kinds of sharing and the true spirit of community, which gets us closer to living the commons.

One oft cited and relevant criticism of the sharing economy is that it's not really a sharing economy but a renting economy. In many cases, that is true. But that's okay. Just because the first NASA rocket blew up didn't mean that the whole idea of reaching space was a pipe dream. We still got there. But we had to try. We had to fail. We had to rethink. And we had to try again with new ideas. It's no different in creating a commons-based economy that subverts competition, power, oppression, and subjugation of nature in favor of collaboration, shared strength, cultivation

and protection of nature. Many call this a pipe dream. But it's only pipe dream until it isn't. Change happens so slowly, we don't know it's happening until it does. The sharing economy isn't the answer. It's a baby step. But like all baby steps, it's hugely important because small steps are the way we make big leaps in learning how to run.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** What do you see as the greatest opportunity for the commons today?

**LELAND MASCHMEYER:** I come from a knowledge, culture, and digital orientation, so I feel the U.S. just squandered the greatest opportunity with net neutrality. So I guess the greatest opportunity now is to reinstate some form of net neutrality. With the recent court ruling, if Verizon doesn't like OntheCommons.org they can throttle the hell out of your website until the site pays a hefty tax to Verizon. A free and open channel of communication is the mother of change. That's why the Romans prevented the congregation of political and religious dissidents in public spaces. That's why dictators shut down Twitter. That's also why the freedom of the press is so important. But when you shutdown the systems that enable that free speech, the free conversation of ideas, then you pull the plug on change. I say all this because the ideas and ideals of the commons are antithetical to business as usual—especially among the monopolies and oligopolies that own and service the communication infrastructures on which the promotion of the commons depends. In my opinion, the Internet is the greatest knowledge commons ever created. And like the sharing economy, it embodies and imbues its users with many of the ideals of the commons. But it can't once the hands circling the chokepoints of the Internet start squeezing.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** If you had to give your vision for a commons-based future in three minutes, what story would you tell?

**LELAND MASCHMEYER:** I would love to see a future where our creative and economic energies are more attuned to nature. Where we view and treat nature less as a resource and more as a source.

We've been misled to think that nature is "out there." That somehow, nature is another thing separate from us, our homes, our cities. We've purposefully forgotten that nature is everything and creates everything. At a fundamental level, the same materials and processes that define "out there" define us.

I was reading something recently that said a lot of the existential ills of our society are caused by this fissure between nature and us. That our relationship with the matrix of life has been broken. Because of that, we're angry. We're lost. We feel abandoned. Even threatened. To attain a sense of control, we try to dominate everything around us.

A bit like the battered prodigal son returning, we need to humbly reestablish our relationship with the source. We need to weave ourselves into the biological rhythms and models for creativity, production, and economy in nature. In many ways, this is happening. Conversations about biomimicry, networks, swarm behaviors, sustainability, closed-loop systems, cradle-to-cradle design, permaculture, biological computation, and more speak to a slow shift toward not only recognizing the genius of nature, but also recognizing ourselves in it. I, like many other people, believe biology will become the predominant science and philosophical bedrock of the 21st century, just like physics was for the 19th and 20th centuries. And its affect will be a slow reconciliation with nature, which, I hope, will lead us closer to a commons-based existence.

—Jessica Conrad



Protesters at a rally in Kuwait keep tabs on what's happening in the rest of the world. (Photo by [Zamanalsamt](#) under a CC license.)

# How the Sharing Economy Can Improve Everyday Life in the Arab World

Tackling the problems of poverty, unemployment, hunger, and pollution

The sharing economy may have led to several multi-million dollar successes like Airbnb and Kickstarter, and many wonder whether the sharing economy makes sense for the Arab world.

Here are four ways the sharing economy could tackle some of the region's, and the world's, biggest challenges.

## Poverty

"Accelerating poverty reduction and sustaining human development improvement are important challenges for the region in the future," according to a recent World Bank report.

**SHARING SOLUTION:** Sharing initiatives, like tool libraries for example, can reduce costs for families by lowering the rates of household consumption. Each of these tools is available either for free or for a small fee, in-

creasing the efficiency of each tool and helping users save money.

The sharing economy goes further than just helping you save money; it can help you actually make money as well by providing avenues for renting unused or underused items. Think putting your car in a car-sharing service, renting out unused rooms on Airbnb-like services, or sharing less-tangible assets such as time and skills.

### Unemployment

Around thirty percent of youth in the Arab world want to start their own projects, a desire mainly driven by high youth unemployment rates which stand at around twenty-five percent.

**SHARING SOLUTION:** The sharing economy lowers the barriers for anyone to run a small business; initiatives that support innovations, like coworking or hackerspaces, offer entrepreneurs a suitable environment to create and launch projects. People can also to fund their companies and ideas more easily in the sharing economy thanks to initiatives like community-owned commercial centers, crowdfunding, and crowdfunding.

The sharing economy also makes it easier for people in the Arab world to work with clients across the globe, such as with the success of oDesk, or to even get a quality education for free thanks to MOOC classes like these.

### Hunger

Countries in the Arab world are highly dependent on food imports. Although fifty percent of the Arab population is rural, agriculture, which is their primary economic activity, makes up less than fifteen percent of GDP in the region.

**SHARING SOLUTION:** Land sharing allows a better use of arable land as it connects people who have unused acres with people who need land for cultivation purposes. Other initiatives help build local food economies that increase food security and cut prices, including urban farms or community-supported food projects.

### Traffic and pollution

Five of the world's ten most polluted cities are in the Middle East. In Cairo, for instance, air pollution is more than twenty times the acceptable level according to the World Health Organization.

**SHARING SOLUTION:** Car sharing reduces the number of cars emitting fumes on the road. It is different from traditional car rentals—users borrow cars by the hour and only pay for the usage—because users have to pay every time they need a car; they think twice before choosing a private vehicle over public transportation. Ride sharing, or carpooling, has the same effect, as it enables people going to the same destination to use the same car. The question now is: are people ready for the sharing economy in the Arab world? And who's ready to get into the game? As I've previously discussed, the list of collaborative startups is already longer than you would expect.

**—Ahmad Sufian Bayram**

*Ahmad Sufian Bayram is a OuiShare core team member and Arab Countries Connector, Global Curator for CollaborativeConsumption.com.*

*This story originally appeared at [Wamada](#).*



New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Columbus, and Fort Worth all opened bike share systems last year. (Photo by [Planetgordon.com](https://www.planetgordon.com) under a CC license.)

# The Power of Sharing Hits the Streets

Bike sharing makes a difference, even for folks who already own bikes

When bike-sharing systems started popping up across North America, I got excited.

I knew bike sharing had improved life in European cities by offering people a convenient way to get around town on short trips. “It’s like a whole new kind of transit system on two wheels,” explained a friend who’d used the system in Paris.

But I never imagined myself renting bicycles from automated stations. They’re for people who don’t own bikes, right? Especially poor people who can’t afford

the cost or upkeep of their own bike. But why would I pay for bike sharing when I have several bikes of my own in the garage?

Well, I was wrong. The power of sharing, it turns out, is greater than I even imagined.

In the four years since bike sharing hit the streets here in Minneapolis, I’ve discovered many reasons why it’s nice to have instant access to a bike wherever you are. For those times when you arrive somewhere by foot, on transit, or in some one else’s car and then

want to pedal back home. Those times when the folks you drove with want to leave earlier—or later—than you. Or they are headed in a different direction afterward. Bike sharing is also handy when you ride your bike and then want to go somewhere else with a friend who didn't.

And for many people who are not inclined to pedal to work due to distance, poor biking conditions or fear of a disheveled appearance, bike sharing offers an opportunity to hop on a bike for lunch or short trips around town. I've heard of numerous people who started taking transit to work because with ready access to a bike, they don't need their car for meetings or errands during the workday. So bike sharing reduces traffic in the streets, and all the attendant pollution and frustration.

But, most of all, I appreciate bike sharing when I'm traveling. The sheer wonder of being able to hop on a bike anywhere I happen to be first dawned on me last year in Ottawa, Ontario. I had just a few hours before leaving town and wanted to see the sights. I quickly realized that I wasn't going to cover much ground on foot. As I was weighing the cost and hassle of renting a car, I suddenly spotted a bike sharing station. Hurrah!

With a quick swipe of my credit card, I was cruising through downtown, around Parliament Hill, along the Rideau Canal, visiting the historic market, touring Notre Dame cathedral, stopping by Chinatown for lunch, crossing over the river to explore Quebec.

Since then, bike sharing has boosted my fun on trips to Washington, D.C.; Brookline, Mass.; Boulder; Des Moines; and Kansas City. I've also saved time and money by biking to business meetings.

Pedaling a bike around a new town, I feel a part of the place not merely an observer behind glass inside a car or a bus.

So the [upsurge](#) in bike-sharing systems across the U.S. is good news for us all. New bike sharing systems opened in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Fort Worth, Columbus, and Aspen, Colorado in 2013 while existing systems expanded in Minneapolis, Washington D.C., and other cities. This year Phoenix, Philadelphia, San Diego, Milwaukee, Tampa, Cincinnati, Seattle, Portland, and Ann Arbor are all opening bike sharing systems.

**—Jay Walljasper**

*This story originally appeared at [People for Bikes](#).*



Nothing connects us better than a meal: Last year the organization Peers hosted community dinners in 92 cities throughout 32 countries. (Photo by [Daniel Cukier](#) under a CC license.)

# The Global Sharing Movement Ramps Up

People around the globe discover the pleasure of collaboration

Around the world, people are getting hip to the idea that we need to create our own solutions to pressing global issues; that there's no time to wait around because there's no help coming. We are the help. We are the solution.

Through sharing resources, harnessing our collaborative potential, connecting people from all walks of life and incubating innovative ideas, we can create the world we want to live in. This is an about-face from the past notion that government will take care of us and move us, and the economy, forward.

Last October was a particularly fruitful month. The [New Economy Coalition](#) hosted [New Economy Week](#); [Peers](#) took a first step toward building its community with its [Dinner with Peers](#) project; Shareable launched our worldwide [Map Jam](#) to map all the sharing services in cities around the world; [OuiShare](#) hit the road with its [OuiShare Europe Tour](#), visiting thirty cities in two months; and Annie Leonard, creator of [The Story of Stuff](#), released her latest video, a call to create a solutions movement, called [The Story of Solutions](#).

In true sharing style, there was a good deal of synergy between these sharing initiatives. The [Center for New American Dream](#), Peers, [Freelancers Union](#) and many other organizations, for instance, helped promote Shareable's map jams. This mutual support across organizations is key to involving people from different backgrounds, as well as strengthening the decentralized, grassroots sharing movement that flies under no banner.

Shareable talked with some of the people behind the October events to find out how they went and what's next for the sharing movement. Here's what we found:

### [New Economy Week](#)

The New Economy Coalition wanted to shine a spotlight on "the thousands of things people are doing right now to build a new kind of economy." New Economy Week highlighted people, organizations, actions, events, art projects and more that are creating an economy that puts people, place and planet first.

[Eli Feghali](#), manager of communications and online organizing for the [New Economics Institute](#), calls the economy a social force that encompasses the intersection of multiple systems, like food, energy, commerce, transportation, and more. The transformation of it requires a collaborative, focused approach. "To transform the economy," he says, "we have to build a movement of movements that is ready to address the root causes of problems, meaning we have to get serious about the need for system change."

### [OuiShare Europe Tour](#)

OuiShare, a global network that started as a small group in Paris and has grown into an international force for sharing and connecting, hosted thirty sharing events in thirty cities over two months as part of its OuiShare Europe Tour. Events ranged from happy hour with twenty second project pitches to guest speakers, workshops, and map jams.

One of OuiShare's most important values, according to [Francesca Pick](#), a OuiShare connector and coordinator of the Europe Tour, is MPRL: meeting people in real life. She says that this, along with connecting digitally, is key to building the movement.

"People need to connect regularly face-to-face on a local level and be able to discuss how the sharing economy is impacting them personally and the city they live in," she says. "Otherwise, it's very hard to develop a sustainable community. On the other hand, online discussions and working together digitally plays an important role in connecting people across countries and making them feel part of a larger movement."

### [Dinner With Peers](#)

Peers, an organization created to support the sharing economy movement, invited people all around the world to connect over dinner. The project, which was dubbed Dinner With Peers, brought together sharing advocates in ninety-two cities across thirty-two countries.

"We were blown away by the turn out," says [Milicent Johnson](#), director of partnerships and community building for Peers. "From Nairobi to Istanbul, to Budapest, to Ann Arbor, the outpouring of interest and generosity globally was a wonderful surprise, and speaks to the fact that this is a movement, and it's being built by people all over the world."

"When people meet face-to-face, they open up, barriers break down and they realize uncanny and surprising commonalities," says Johnson. "When a ridesharer, meets a co-housing member, meets a food sharer, sparks fly. They start to see this as not just a one-off action, but as a lifestyle and a movement that they're building."

Johnson says that these connections are key for Peers, with its goal of serving the people who power the sharing economy, and for the movement in general.

### [Shareable's Worldwide Map Jam](#)

For two weeks in October, people in fifty-five cities around the world gathered to create maps of the collaborative, open, and sharing services in their cities. The first project of Shareable's newly-launched [Sharing Cities Network](#), the Map Jam connected people around sharing and provide an at-a-glance picture of local sharing initiatives.

The resulting maps are both inspiring, as they illustrate the vast number of people, places, and services

that are centered on people and planet rather than profit, and helpful as they are a way for residents to find local sharing services. [Mira Luna](#), Shareable's Organizing Director and the project lead, says that for the last decade people all over the world have been mapping the solidarity economy, as well as different sharing projects like community gardens, housing coops, coworking spaces or bike sharing organizations. An experienced mapper who has created maps for the Bay Area, Detroit, Ann Arbor and Chicago, Luna calls the maps "incredibly powerful tools for inspiring people to take action." She says that once people see there is already a lot of momentum in their own communities, they begin to mobilize.

Luna stresses that it's essential we don't put sharing in a quarantined box in our lives. "We need to integrate it into everything we do," she says, "to change the DNA of our culture and economy."

### [The Story of Solutions](#)

When Annie Leonard made [The Story of Stuff](#) in 2007, there was no way of knowing what a widespread impact it would have. By illustrating the destructive nature of our consumption-based culture in a thoughtful and entertaining style, Leonard planted a seed in millions of minds that there has to be a better way.

For her latest video Leonard pivoted to give the people what they want: a story of solutions. The video paints a big-vision picture of what it means to rethink, not just what we do with an empty water bottle, but what we can do to move away from an entire culture of overconsumption. The video inspires viewers to think about the types of solutions that will make a real difference.

"The thing is," Leonard [told Alternet](#), "I began to see that the kind of solutions work that many folks were doing was too often addressing the symptom rather than the drivers of the problem. And even if folks were advancing really good, deep, transformational solutions, there were some common, consistent barriers in their way."

Rather than trying to raise awareness about pressing issues one at a time, Leonard encourages us to consider ways we can move outside of our endless-growth economy altogether. By shifting from an awareness-building approach to a solutions-based approach, Leonard signals that the time to act is now. It's up to us to create the world we want to live in. Because remember? We are the help. We are the solution.

### —Cat Johnson

*Cat Johnson is a freelance writer focused on community, the commons, sharing, collaboration, and music. Publications include Utne Reader, GOOD, Yes! Magazine, Shareable, Triple Pundit, and Lifehacker.*

*This story originally appeared at [Shareable](#).*



A community furniture restoration workshop in Ann Arbor. (Photo by [Ann Arbor Free Skool](#) under a CC license.)

# How Urban Design Helps (or Hinders) Our Ability to Share

The road from isolated individualism to connected communities

Centuries before someone first uttered the words “sharing economy,” the steady rise of cities embodied both the principles and promise of that phrase.

The reason more than half the people on earth now live in urban areas is the advantages that come from sharing resources, infrastructure, and lives with other people. Essential commons belonging to all of us, ranging from transportation systems to public health

safeguards to plentiful social connections, are easier to create and maintain in a populated area.

Think about typical urban dwellers. They are more likely to reside in an apartment building, shared household, or compact living unit (saving on heating, utilities, original construction costs, and other expenses), walk or take transit (saving the environment as well as money), know a wide range of people (expanding their circle of friends and colleagues), and

encounter new experiences (increasing their knowledge and skills). Access to these opportunities for sharing offers economic, social, environmental, and educational rewards.

But living in a populated area does not automatically mean more sharing. Indeed the classic suburban lifestyle—a big single-family house and a big yard isolated from everything else and reachable only by automobile—makes sharing extremely difficult. Minimizing opportunities for sharing was a major consequence of America's post-World War II suburbs, says Tom Fisher, Dean of the University of Minnesota College of Design.

"Scholars have gone into the archives of major companies during that period, and found the same concern expressed over and over by business leaders: 'How do we as a society keep operating at the level of consumption we did during the World War II?' That fear reached far beyond big business. Much of the public also worried that we would plunge back into a depression as soon as the massive industrial production of the war halted. The solution was converting factories that fueled the war effort into large-scale producers of consumer goods.

"The suburbs were designed as a landscape to maximize consumption," Fisher explains. "It worked against sharing of any kind. People had all this stuff in their houses and garages, which was going unused most of the time."

Autos replaced streetcars. Kids rode school buses instead of walking to school. Everyone bought their own lawn mower, shovels, tools, sports equipment, and grills. Even the proverbial cup of sugar borrowed from a neighbor disappeared in favor of the 10-pound bag bought at the supermarket. As our spending

grew, our need for social connections shrank. "Mass consumption was good for the economy, but bad for our well-being," Fisher notes.

He now sees changes ahead for our communities as the economy evolves. "The new economy is all about innovation, which depends on maximizing interaction, not consumption." This means redesigning our communities to bring people together by giving everyone more opportunities to "walk, live close together, and share."

This shift can already be seen in farmer's markets, co-working spaces, tool libraries, bike sharing systems, co-ops, credit unions, public spaces, and other sharing projects everywhere.

"Creative people in cities around the world are rising up..." declares Neal Gorenflo, co-founder of [Shareable](#) magazine. "We are not protesting, and we are not asking for permission and we are not waiting—we are building a people-powered economy right under everyone's noses."

Excited by this emerging grassroots movement, [Shareable](#) recently launched the [Sharing Cities Network](#) to be an independent resource "for sharing innovators to discover together how to create as many sharing cities around the world as fast as possible." The aim is to help empower and connect local initiatives around the world through online forums, peer learning, and other ways to boost collaboration, share best practices, and catalyze new projects.

"How we build is just as important as what we build," Gorenflo says in a fund-raising appeal for the network. "We build for maximum fun. We do it in style. And we include everyone."

—Jay Walljasper

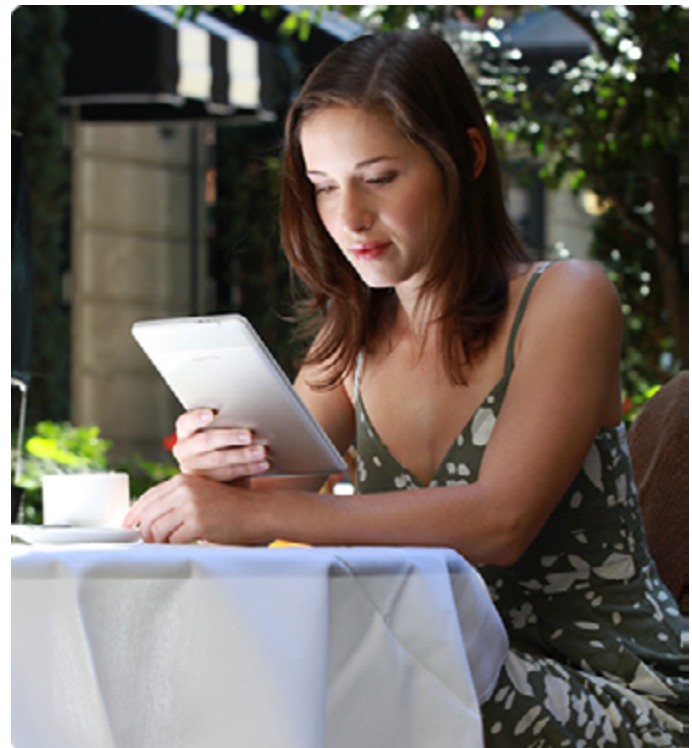


Above: Beyond recycling: [Freecycle](#) offers your unwanted stuff to people who want it. (Photo by [David Silver](#) under a CC license.)

Below: Portlanders trade their jeans and other unneeded apparel at the annual clothing swap. (Photo by [Beth Olson Creative](#) under a CC license.)

Below, left: [Little Free Libraries](#), born in Wisconsin, are now spreading coast-to-coast. (Photo by [Ali Eminov](#) under a CC license.)





Above: [Share Shelf](#), a handy streetside location where you can share leftovers with the homeless, is a new feature of the urban landscape in LA and other cities. (Photo by Share Shelf.)

Right, top: Potlucks, where everybody brings a dish to share, are the great American pastime from Maine to Hawaii. (Photo by [Ryan Ozawa](#) under a CC license.)

Right, center: The [Open Library](#) offers more than 1,000,000 ebooks for free. (Photo by [goXnuReviews](#) under a CC license.)

Right, bottom: Seed sharing—one of humanity's oldest traditions—is now illegal with many genetically-modified crops. Sustainable gardeners keep the custom alive. (Photo by [Eating in Public](#).)





Moira Allan (left) and Jan Hively, co-founders of the Pass It On Network. (Photo provided by the Pass It On Network.)

# We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

Sharing is not just for the young

The Hopi Chief, Dan Evehema, said it for all of us prospective elders before he passed on in 1999 at age 108:

*There is a river flowing now, very fast.  
It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.  
They will try to hold on to the shore.  
They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.  
Know the river has its destination.  
The elders say we must let go of the shore—  
push off into the middle of the river,  
keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.  
See who is in there with you and celebrate.  
At this time in history, we are to take  
nothing personally, least of all, ourselves.  
For when we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.  
The time of the lone wolf is over.  
Gather yourselves;  
Banish the word "struggle" from your attitude and your vocabulary.  
All that we do now must be done  
in a sacred manner and in celebration.  
We are the ones we have been waiting for!*

## Flood of Aging

Longevity is an unprecedented worldwide phenomenon. During the last century, we've gained three extra decades of relatively healthy, active life. In parallel, there has been a decline in fertility rates. Soon, one-third of the global population will be in the category traditionally considered "elderly."

Most of us elderly people around the world are hanging on to the branches on the shore as the flood of aging comes along. We are counting on:

- Government or employer pension funds for future economic support;
- Young workers to pay taxes and contribute what's needed to maintain our pension funds;

- And public services or family members to care for us when we acquire disabilities.

Meanwhile we are filled with anxiety as we see the crest of the flood coming and headlines talk about pension fund shortages, the disappearance of jobs for young people, a dwindling rate of savings, and the erosion of public services. Who will support and care for us? What if we outlast our savings? What's next?

### Pushing Off from the Shore

It's time to dive in—to focus on abundance rather than scarcity—and act like wise elders rather than frail elderly. If we have more healthy, active years ahead, let's make the most of them! Who else is out there? What is working? What can we share together and with people of all ages?

In this time of economic turmoil when so many feel insecure and public services are being cut, it's time for all of us elders to self-organize and share our strengths to help ourselves, each other, and our communities. Fortunately, some innovative programs to guide our efforts have been developed by older adult leaders from around the world. They have created supportive community networks, developed pathways to meaningful work, and expanded learning opportunities.

The [Pass It On Network](#), for example, is a new global exchange where free program guides are available online in multiple languages for people to adapt and use. People are invited to submit descriptions of their own programs and innovations about vital aging. Moira Allan, the Paris-based international coordinator, posts them within three program categories: 1)

mutual support networks, 2) pathways to meaningful work, paid or unpaid, and 3) learning opportunities. Moira also sends people additional information about programs that interest them, and puts them in touch with the appropriate Innovators, who are willing to act as coaches.

We invite you to collaborate with us to spread the word about the website and its programs; post program descriptions; forward program info to prospective users; and help us find funding.

### What's "Shareable"?

Pass It On is all about the magic of connectivity and moving from "me" to "we." Every current Pass It On program starts with some kind of get-together process for bringing people to the table to talk about what they are looking for and how they can contribute. Our programs use varying tools for sharing, from free conference call services and online training to coffee-house meetings.

Reading Jessica Conrad's [primer](#) about the "Shareable Economy" opened my eyes to the huge range of exciting opportunities for expanding sharing through the Pass It On Network. Program Innovators have already suggested ways to meet each other across national boundaries, travel together, try homestays, mentor language learning, and more. There are so many opportunities to brainstorm ways to share resources so that all of the older adults in any community can participate more fully in the sharing economy.

Now is the time for all of the regenerative generations to "Pass it on..." and share the wealth of older adult energy. We ARE the ones!

### —Jan Hively and Moira Allan

*Jan Hively is co-founder of the [Pass It On Network](#) and serves as the group's International Consultant and Country Liaison for the U.S. After a career in city and schools planning and administration, Hively earned her Ph.D. in 2001 at age 69 with a dissertation on "Productive Aging in Rural Minnesota." Since then, she has focused on raising awareness about new opportunities and challenges for older adults based on 21st century trends and research.*

*Moira Allan is co-founder of the [Pass It On Network](#) and serves as the group's International Coordinator. After a career in journalism, public relations, life coaching, training, and managing an occupational health organization, she coordinated the 2Young2Retire network in Europe and its French counterpart Le Cercle des Seniors Actifs—the association that conceived the Pass It On Network with Jan Hively.*

# Why I Call Myself a Commoner

## A day in the life

Each day I walk out of my Minneapolis house into an atmosphere protected from pollution by the Clean Air Act. As I step onto a sidewalk that was built with tax dollars for everyone, my spirits are lifted by the beauty of my neighbors' boulevard gardens. Trees planted by people who would never sit under them shade my walk. I listen to public radio, a nonprofit service broadcast over airwaves belonging to us all, as I stroll around a lake in the park, which was protected from shoreline development by civic-minded citizens in the nineteenth century.

The park, like everything else I have mentioned so far, is a commons for which each of us is responsible.

Frequently I visit the public library, where the intellectual, cultural, scientific, and informational storehouse of the world is opened to me for free—and to anyone who walks through the door. My work requires me to constantly keep up with new knowledge.

My best tool is the Internet. The library and Internet, too, are commons.



Harriet Barlow, an early champion of the commons.  
(Photo by David Morris.)

Returning home I stop at the farmer's market, a public institution created by local producers who want to share their fare. The same spirit prevails at our local food co-op, of which I am the owner (along with thousands of others), and at community-run theaters and civic events. These commons-based institutions provide us with essential services, the most important of which is fun. Living in the commons isn't only about cultural and economic wealth; it's also about joy.

Cândido Grzybowski, the Brazilian sociologist who co-founded the World Social Forum, advises, "If we want to work for justice, we should work for the commons." Protecting and restoring precious gifts from nature and from our foreparents for future generations is one the greatest privileges of a being a commoner.

—Harriet Barlow

*Harriet Barlow is co-founder of On the Commons and founding director of the Blue Mountain Center.*



An American Permanent Fund would give all families a financial cushion for the future. (Photo by [Edo Medicks](#) under a CC license.)

# Economic Security Beyond Jobs

Let's pay dividends to everyone from our common wealth

A cushion of reliable income is a wonderful thing. It can help pay for basic necessities. It can be saved for rainy days or used to pursue happiness on sunny days. It can encourage people to take entrepreneurial risks, care for friends, or volunteer for community service.

Conversely, the absence of reliable income is a terrible thing. It heightens anxiety and fear. It diminishes our ability to cope with crises and transitions. It traps many families on the knife's edge of poverty, and makes it harder for poor people to rise.

There's been much discussion of late about how to save America's declining middle class. The answer politicians of both parties give is always the same: jobs, jobs, jobs. The parties differ on how the jobs will be created—Republicans say the market will do it if we cut taxes and regulation. Democrats say government can help by investing in infrastructure and education. Either way, it still comes down to jobs with decent wages and benefits.

It's understandable that politicians say this: It was America's experience in the past. In the years following World War II, we built a solid middle class on the

foundation of high-paying, mostly unionized jobs in the manufacturing sector. But those days are history. Today, automation and computers have eliminated millions of jobs, and private-sector unions have been crushed. On top of that, in a globalized economy where capital can hire the cheapest labor anywhere, it's no longer credible to believe that America's middle class can prosper from labor income alone.

So why don't we pay everyone some non-labor income—you know, the kind of money that flows disproportionately to the rich? I'm not talking about redistribution here, I'm talking about paying dividends to equity owners in good old capitalist fashion. Except that the equity owners in question aren't owners of private wealth, they're owners of common wealth. Which is to say, all of us.

One state—Alaska—already does this. The [Alaska Permanent Fund](#) uses revenue from state oil leases to invest in stocks, bonds, and similar assets, and from those investments pays equal dividends to every resident. Since 1980, these dividends have ranged from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year per person, including children (meaning that they've reached up to \$8,000 per year for households of four). It's therefore no accident that, compared to other states, Alaska has the third highest median income and the second highest income equality.

Alaska's model can be extended to any state or nation, whether or not they have oil. Imagine an American Permanent Fund that pays dividends to all Americans, one person, one share. A major source of revenue could be clean air, nature's gift to us all. Polluters have been freely dumping ever-increasing amounts of gunk into our air, contributing to ill-health, acid rain, and climate change. But what if we required polluters to bid for and pay for permits to pollute our air, and decreased the number of permits every year? Pollution would decrease, and as it did, pollution prices would rise. Less pollution would yield more revenue. Over time, trillions of dollars would be available for dividends.

And that's not the only common resource an American Permanent Fund could tap. Consider the substantial contribution society makes to publicly traded stock values. When a company like Facebook or

Google goes public, its value rises dramatically. The extra value derives from the vastly enlarged market of investors who can trust a public company's financial statements (filed quarterly with the Securities and Exchange Commission) and buy or sell its shares with the click of a mouse. Experts call this a liquidity premium, and it's generated not by the company but by society.

This socially created wealth now flows mostly to a small number of Americans. But if we wanted to, we could spread it around. We could do that by charging corporations for the extra liquidity that society provides. Let's say we required public companies to deposit 1 percent of their shares in the American Permanent Fund for ten years, up to a total of 10 percent. This would be a modest price not just for public liquidity but for other privileges (limited liability, perpetual life, constitutional protections) we currently grant to corporations for free. In due time, the American Permanent Fund would have a diversified portfolio worth trillions of dollars. As the stock market rose and fell, so would everyone's dividends. A rising tide would truly lift all boats.

There are other potential revenue sources for common wealth dividends. For example, we give free airwaves to media companies and nearly perpetual (and nearly global) copyright protection to entertainment and software companies. These free gifts are worth big bucks. If their recipients were required to pay us for them, we'd all be a little richer.

Regardless of its revenue sources, the mechanics of an American Permanent Fund would be simple. Every U.S. resident with a valid Social Security number would be eligible to open a Shared Wealth Account at a bank or brokerage firm; dividends would then be wired to their accounts monthly. There'd be no means test—and no shame—attached to these earnings, as there are to welfare. Nor would there be any hint of class warfare—Bill Gates would get his dividends along with everyone else. And since the revenue would come from common wealth, there'd be no need to raise taxes or cut government spending. All we'd have to do is charge for private use of common wealth and feed the resulting revenue into an electronic distribution system.

How large should dividends be? The amounts paid would vary from year to year just as corporate dividends do. But the system should be designed so that dividends supplement rather than replace labor income.

The United States isn't broke, as some Republican say; we're a very wealthy and productive country. The

problem is that our wealth and productivity gains flow disproportionately to the rich in the form of dividends, capital gains, rent, and interest. If we want to remain a middle class nation, that needs to change. Jobs alone won't suffice. We need to complement wages with non-labor income from the wealth we all own. That would truly make us an ownership society.

**—Peter Barnes**

*Peter Barnes is co-founder of On the Commons. He is the author of Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons and Climate Solutions: A Citizens Guide. His 2001 book, Who Owns the Sky? presented the cap-and-dividend solution for climate change.*



The first Foundation House, where nonprofit workers will be offered apartments at cost, is located in the Richmond district of San Francisco. (Photo by [Brewster Kahle](#).)

# Creating Affordable Housing for Nonprofit Workers

Foundation House in San Francisco experiments with a commons-based housing model

[Brewster Kahle](#), founder of [Alexa](#) and the [Internet Archive](#), just launched a bold new housing experiment that could substantially decrease housing costs for nonprofit workers in the San Francisco Bay Area and, hopefully, beyond. By placing a covenant, or legal clause, on a recently purchased apartment building in the Richmond district of San Francisco, Kahle will

be able to offer units to the staff of Internet Archive and other partner nonprofits at cost.

If the [Foundation House](#) is successful, Kahle hopes to scale the model and create a “housing class that would be of enduring value to people in the nonprofit sector.” Nonprofit workers rarely see the kind of benefits offered to corporate or government employees,

and Kahle believes a cost reduction in housing would provide a level of stability that those who have dedicated their lives to service deserve.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** What inspired the Foundation House?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** The inspiration for foundation housing came from the challenge nonprofits have in supporting their employees, especially at times when rents are unstable or really high.

At Internet Archive, for example, our biggest expense is people; our employees' salaries make up about 80 percent of the budget. The biggest cost to our employees is housing, and the biggest cost of housing is debt service. If we could find a way to transition housing over a course of decades from being debt burdened to debt free, we could create a housing class that would be of enduring value to people in the nonprofit sector. According to a MacArthur-funded study at Harvard, rent in the U.S. requires 30 to 60 percent of people's gross income, and the poorer you are, the closer to 60 percent you pay for rent.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** How does the Foundation House function as an endowment for Internet Archive and other partner nonprofits?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** I've been trying to describe foundation housing from different stakeholders' points of view. From a donor's perspective, foundation housing is a form of endowment that could help make a nonprofit permanent. From the nonprofit's perspective, foundation housing is a great benefit to its employees. By structuring the Foundation House as a separate nonprofit that can potentially serve multiple organizations, we hope the entity will stay around for decades, work off its debt, and keep it off. It's kind of like a Nature Conservancy for housing.

From an employee's perspective, foundation housing is a solution associated with his or her place of

work. If the employee leaves the nonprofit, however, he or she may also have to leave the house. This is certainly a drawback and does decrease the value to the employee.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** Are there comparable affordable housing options for nonprofit workers in other U.S. cities?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** There are affordable housing options associated with very large organizations, such as universities and hospitals. Churches often have housing for pastors, too.

What I'd like to do is take the good idea that is available to those large, established organizations, and make it available to the smaller, more entrepreneurial nonprofits. The dream is to transition 5 percent of all housing into a new housing class that would be dedicated to supporting the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits are now starting to serve many of the roles that government used to serve. For example, I work in a nonprofit library. Why isn't it part of the government? In another era it might have been, but it isn't anymore. If more and more government services start to decline, I think we're going to need more nonprofit structures. When people dedicate their lives to government service, for example, they can get lifetime pensions, but nonprofit workers can't. The challenge lies in providing a level of stability to people dedicating their lives to service.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** I understand Foundation House just opened its doors. Have any Internet Archive employees moved in?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** No, we just closed on the apartment building this fall. It's nearly full of market-rate renters right now, so we're waiting for them to move out at their own pace. This is a long-term idea; we don't want to pressure or evict anyone.

—Jessica Conrad

*This interview was co-produced with [Shareable](#).*

# One Town's Unexpected Economic Renaissance

Hardwick, Vermont embraces an agrarian vision

Here is a small town that thrives on a kind of agribusiness where scale matters, stakeholders collaborate, and, in most cases, ownership has more to do with stewardship than it does with possession. Local, land-based investment opportunities abound.

Community members know each other by name and value civic engagement. Young people who moved away for bigger and “better” opportunities now flock home in droves, seeking jobs and dedicating themselves to community improvement. This town, Hardwick, Vermont, embodies the spirit of the commons in so many ways—but it wouldn't be that way without the vision and drive of Tom Stearns, an ardent commons advocate and the founder of [High Mowing Organic Seeds](#).

Stearns spent his childhood exploring woods adjacent to his family's property that were conserved by a land trust. “They were my woods,” Stearns used to think, but deep down he knew they were “everybody's woods.” He had learned that collective ownership meant that no one person had permission to trash the place. So he fell for the woods, confident that they would remain wild for years to come. This confidence led to a deep belief in the importance of land stewardship and the commons; a belief that has inspired and influenced his work for the past sixteen years at High Mowing Organic Seeds, a farm-based seed company located just northwest of Hardwick.

Over his years working in the seed business, Stearns has come to understand that, even more so than the land he works, the seeds themselves are a special

kind of commons. The vegetable seeds we have now, he says, are vastly different than the seeds that existed one hundred years ago, and today's seeds will assume new qualities in the future. That's partly why privatization and commodification have become commonplace in the seed industry.

Corporate giants have denied public access to information about our seed resource because “when you control seeds, you control a lot,” says Stearns.

But as Stearns says, “seeds are powerful,” and that power can be harnessed to advance the common good, too. “Right now we have seeds that were developed for high-input chemical systems,” Stearns notes. “We do not have seeds for the type of food system we need to build, nationally or internationally.” But that could soon change. By defining and protecting seeds as a commons, Stearns encourages the kind of information sharing necessary for developing the seed varieties we need today and in the future.

Just so, the High Mowing team engages and interacts with everyone who uses seeds, including farmers and gardeners, plant breeders at universities, other seed companies, and soil scientists. They do this in an effort to bring the seed community's collective wisdom to bear on how to develop new seed varieties, how to make seeds available to consumers, and how to promote them as a critical element in building healthy food systems. By encouraging this knowledge sharing, High Mowing empowers the whole community to engage in a ten thousand-year-old practice of food



Tom Stearns, an avid seed saver, inspired a wide-ranging economic renaissance based on sharing in his hometown.  
(Photo provided by High Mowing Organic Seeds.)

provision that is vital for the future. They are framing seed saving as a commons-based solution.

While this level of commoning may seem out of the ordinary, it is only the beginning. Stearns is also a co-founder of the [Center for an Agricultural Economy](#), a Hardwick-based nonprofit that coordinates regional food system activity. Among many other contributions to the community, the nonprofit just purchased the old town common. Until recently, no one had hope that Hardwick, an aging granite-mining center, would ever recover from the mining industry collapse. The town common had been neglected since the thirties, but members of the Center for an Agricultural Economy saw its potential and purchased the sixteen acres in the heart of Hardwick. Today, Stearns describes all kinds of activity planned for the property, including an educational farm and community garden.

The combined effect of these many assorted commons solutions is a small town renaissance no one could have expected in Hardwick. Stearns describes countless new economic opportunities growing up around healthy food, ecological awareness, and value added agriculture. There are new jobs—good jobs—at High Mowing and elsewhere. The rural “brain drain” is reversing in this area, as smart young people who moved away are coming home. People are once again running for town select boards and school boards. “People are actually competing [for those positions] because they want to have a voice,” Stearns says. “It’s really cool.”

A place like Hardwick, Vermont—where the community has “reached a tipping point, and it’s completely unstoppable”—certainly provides the narrative to inspire commons-based solutions anywhere.

—Jessica Conrad



Visitors enjoy a day at Trebah Gardens in Cornwall, an extraordinary botanical showcase that is held in trust for future generations. (Photo by [Gerd Evermann](#) under a CC license.)

# Trusts: A Uniquely Commons Form of Ownership

Not private, not government, they steward resources for the public good

I believe each generation has an obligation to pass on the great gifts of creation undiminished to those not yet born. If we are to accomplish this, someone must act as trustee of nature's gifts, or at least of the most endangered of them. The question is, who?

Government is one possibility, but not the only one or necessarily the best one. Governments have protected some of our most scenic treasures as national parks and wilderness areas, but governments are continuously subject to political pressure to exploit natural resources for the benefit of the living, and there is

nothing that legally requires them to be loyal to future generations.

The other possibility is trusts. Trusts are centuries-old institutions devised to hold and manage property for beneficiaries. Neither trusts nor their trustees may ever act in their own self-interest; they're legally obligated to act solely on behalf of beneficiaries.

Trusts are bound by numerous rules, including the following:

- Managers must act with undivided loyalty to beneficiaries.
- Unless authorized to act otherwise, managers may spend income from the trust's activities but are not to diminish principal.
- Managers must ensure transparency by making timely financial information available to beneficiaries.

These rules are enforceable. The basic enforcement mechanism is that an aggrieved beneficiary or a state attorney general (in the United States) can bring suit against trustees. When that happens, the trustees must prove they acted prudently; if there's any doubt, they are fined or fired.

Trusts are not a rarity in the modern world. Throughout Britain, the National Trust—a nongovernmental charity founded in 1895—owns over six hundred thousand acres of countryside, six hundred miles of coastline, and two hundred historic buildings and gardens. It has more than 3 million members, who elect half of its fifty-two-person governing council (the other half are appointed by nonprofit organizations that share the trust's goals). In the United States, there are now over 1,500 trusts, protecting over nine million acres. On top of that, the fifty-five-year-old Nature Conservancy protects more than 15 million acres spread across the country.

Another management model is the community land trust, a form of common land ownership focused on preserving land from speculation and unsustainable development. The goal is often to preserve a particular tract of land for open space, agriculture, affordable

housing, scenic value, recreation, or commercial uses important to the community. Leaseholders may own buildings on the land, which they can sell, but not the land itself, which is owned by the trust.

### **Saving the Family Farm in Suburbia**

Another kind of trust can help save family farms and open space around cities. For example, in Marin County, just north of San Francisco, family-owned dairy, sheep, and cattle ranches have survived. A big reason is that ranchers there have an option beyond subdivisions: selling conservation easements to the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT).

### **Saving the Forests—Even Those Privately Owned**

A forest is more than a timber supply or future subdivision: it's an ecosystem bursting with life. About 80 percent of America's forests are privately owned, and many are under threat.

Until recently, there was no one to speak for the trees. Then Connie Best and Laurie Wayburn—like Dr. Seuss's Lorax—decided that it was their job. In 1993, they founded the Pacific Forest Trust, an organization that protects forests by acquiring conservation easements. Under these arrangements, private forest owners sell or give up their rights to subdivide, clear-cut, or develop their forests in any other unsustainable way—restrictions that continue even when the land is sold. Owners can harvest trees sustainably, and they often receive cash or tax benefits, plus the peace of mind that comes from knowing their forests will be managed responsibly forever.

The Pacific Forest Trust has so far protected fifty thousand acres of trees in California, Oregon, and Washington.

### **Other Forms of Trusts**

The trust model is not limited to land. Many types of commons can be managed with trusts to benefit the public as a whole and future generations. Here are some examples.

- Air or sky trusts acknowledge that everyone has a stake in the atmosphere and that those who pollute it are robbing us of something valuable. This is the basis of the cap-and-dividend proposal,

a commons-based solution to global warming that has been introduced in the U.S. Congress.

- Watershed trusts limit the amount of fertilizers and pesticides that can be used within a watershed. This would protect streams and rivers from noxious runoff and boost incentives for organic farming. Such trusts could also hold water and development rights.
- Aquifer trusts would protect underground water sources, which are being depleted faster than rain replenishes them. Millions of people around the world depend on aquifers for their drinking water.

- City street trusts would help curb pollution and congestion by charging drivers for using crowded streets at peak times. The revenue could be used for mass transit and bike paths. Such policies are now used in London, Norway, Stockholm, Singapore, and other places, usually under the name of congestion pricing.
- An airwaves trust would charge commercial broadcasters and telecommunications companies for using the airwaves, which belong to us all. The revenue would support noncommercial broadcasting and the media budgets of political candidates, boosting democracy by curtailing the power of wealthy campaign contributors.

### —Peter Barnes

*Peter Barnes is co-founder of On the Commons. His new book, With Liberty and Dividends for All: How to Save Our Middle Class When Jobs Don't Pay Enough, expands on these ideas (due out in August). He is also the author of Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons and Climate Solutions: A Citizens Guide. His 2001 book, Who Owns the Sky? presented the cap-and-dividend solution for climate change.*

# Brewster Kahle Saves the Internet

...as part of his mission to provide universal access to all knowledge

Have you ever wanted to play an old Apple II game, get instant access to 3 million books, or browse through early iterations of your favorite websites? You can do all of those things and more at [Internet Archive](#), a nonprofit Internet library founded by [Brewster Kahle](#) that exists to “change the content of the Internet from ephemera into enduring artifacts of our political and cultural lives.”

Kahle, who is also the founder of [Alexa Internet](#), has been focused on developing technologies for information discovery since the mid-1980s. In an effort to preserve our digital cultural commons, he has made hundreds of billions of webpages occupying 16 petabytes of data—in other words, a lot of data—accessible to the public for free.

With the ultimate goal of creating universal access to all knowledge, Kahle is a true visionary of the world of open innovation. I recently had a chance to ask him a few questions about when he decided to archive the Internet, how he addresses the challenge of curation, and what the Internet Archive means for the commons.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** At what point did you decide it would be important to catalogue the ephemera of the Internet?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** By 1994, I had helped anchor the new World Wide Web by bringing *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the Encyclopedia Britannica online. That’s when I decided we could start building a digital library. So in 1996 I started an organization

called Alexa Internet with the goal of cataloging the Internet in such a way that it would be easy to navigate. We also built the nonprofit called Internet Archive, which would become the long-term repository, at the same time.



“We think of Internet Archive as a home for the commons.” (Photo by [Joi Ito](#) under a CC license.)

**JESSICA CONRAD:** What do you archive?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** In 1996, we started collecting the World Wide Web with a snapshot every two months. The web now contains 360 billion webpages and it’s growing at a rate of one billion pages a week. Needless to say, it’s huge. Today we work with libraries all over the world to figure out how we should crawl the web and archive it.

By 2000 we started archiving DVD quality television, 24 hours a day, from Russian, Chinese, and Japanese channels, Al Jazeera, and more. In an effort to help people understand the importance of a global perspective, we made one week of television news available on October 11, 2001. At the time, some people believed Palestinians were dancing in the streets in response to the attacks on September 11. But by watching Palestinian television you could tell that people weren’t dancing in the streets; in fact their reaction was quite different. The misunderstanding came from a news channel that had used stock footage from a mid-90s celebration in Palestine.

I think we now know that news comes with a point of view. You can’t just watch one channel; to think critically, you need to be able to quote, compare, and contrast. But that’s challenging with television because it just blows over, and people make stuff up

because nobody can hold them accountable—except for Jon Stewart. At Internet Archive, we want to make everyone into a Jon Stewart research department. So we've made it possible to [search television news](#) since the middle of 2009 using closed captions or program transcriptions. Users can also get short clips on the web, or if they want to borrow a whole program, we'll print it onto a DVD and lend it out.

That's the television piece. Then we started archiving movies, music, and books. We've got a great live music selection, but we don't have the classic commercial releases because we haven't figured out how to make them very accessible. We also have archival footage of movies, but, again, we don't know how to do the classic Hollywood films. Books, however, are a different story. We're now digitizing 1,000 books a day, and we have over three million available for free at [archive.org](#). We also lend over 200,000 newer books through a website called [openlibrary.org](#).

**JESSICA CONRAD:** How do you approach the challenge of curation?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** We try to archive everything, but in some cases we have to be selective. For example, we haven't archived everything on YouTube; instead, we just try to get the important parts of YouTube. This gets into your question of curation. How do we tell what's important? Any YouTube that's linked to from Twitter goes into the archive. That's our way of selecting YouTubes.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** What threats do you see to this kind of information sharing? Commodification? Lack of funding?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** Corporate control poses the biggest threat. Our 2005 study of World Wide Web usage revealed that the top 10 websites receive 20% of all clicks worldwide. That means *10 corporations control 20% of web usage everywhere in the world*. I don't think we've seen that level of concentrated power since the Roman Empire.

Now I'll give you the good news, which is that the web has a long tail distribution. Even though there's a great deal of concentration at the high end, the top 100,000 websites are still getting real attention from

a worldwide population. There isn't the same barrier that there used to be for getting your product onto the shelf or your words into the newspaper. If you write something worth reading, people can find it—no matter where they are. There are lots of ways for people to get information.

Even so, the threat of corporate control is real, and we might need to contend with it in the next decade.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** Do you see any other threats? Could the Internet ever shut down?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** Yes, but I think the way the Internet would "shut down" is by becoming irrelevant. Not to pick on Apple here, but take the iPhone. Apple controls its operating system, and if you try to make any changes—no matter how small—they call it jail breaking. Clearly it's not encouraged. What's more, only Apple-approved applications work on their devices. This ecosystem of closed hardware, closed operating systems, and closed applications is the antithesis of the Internet and World Wide Web. If creative people migrate away from open innovation toward the closed world of corporate control, we will lose something really great.

So we *must* make it more fun and interesting to be part of the open world. We need to enable people to make money and support themselves, which is something we're currently not very good at. Ultimately, we have to evolve the open world so people can choose to stay and avoid ending up in some large corporation with private security, private contracts, and end-user agreements out of necessity. For me, that would be total defeat.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** How do you think about the Internet Archive in the context of the commons?

**BREWSTER KAHLE:** We think of the Internet Archive as a home for the commons. In the United States, if you give something to the public—through a charity, for example—not only can you do it for free, but you also get a tax benefit and a pat on the back. This is true except on the Internet. If you try to make something publicly available on your own website and it gets popular, you end up with a huge bill. We want the Internet Archive to be an alternative for anyone who wants to

make something accessible and as permanent as we know how to make it for the cultural world. Our site may not have all of the commercial bells and whistles,

but we're motivated differently. We want to provide unlimited storage and unlimited bandwidth forever for free.

—**Jessica Conrad**



tive to the importance of language in our commons work. He asserts that language is the “signature” of culture; in other words, how we speak to one another, and how we describe and discuss the world in which we live, determines our success in relating to the world. Indigenous systems of knowledge reflect empirical interaction with the earth, rational discovery, symbolic imagery, and social reinforcement—all of which is directed toward a deep understanding of the local.

What’s more, Indigenous languages tend to use verbs, rather than nouns as we do in English, as the foundation for communication. If we simply want to acquire “things,” then our present English language works fine. But if we want to relate with the world, make appropriate ecological choices, and rebuild collapsing environments, then we need to learn, think, and create in action words.

The word commoning, then, brings to life the essential social element of the commons. The act of commoning draws on a network of relationships made under the expectation that we will each take care of one another and with a shared understanding that some things belong to all of us—which is the essence of the commons itself. The practice of commoning demonstrates a shift in thinking from the prevailing ethic of “you’re on your own” to “we’re in this together.”

There are people at the heart of this trend who have come together to co-create and co-produce the world they want to see. We need not wait for someone else to undertake the work required to solve our problems. More people are beginning to look around their neighborhoods and say “Well, no one is using that vacant lot, we could plant a community garden there,”

or “I think we can solve this neighborhood problem if a bunch of people pitch in to help.”

Commoning represents a new way for everyday citizens to make decisions and take action to shape the future of their communities without being locked into the profit-driven mechanics of the market or being solely dependent on government agencies for funding. However, most folks who make these kinds of decisions probably don’t call their actions “commoning”; instead they may simply think of their actions as “common sense.”

Commoning has always been a way of being, although we seem to notice its importance more readily when the commons are taken away from us. The loss of the commons robs people of their autonomy to meet basic needs for sustenance, economic security, and social connections. Thus, commoning involves taking your life into your own hands, rather than depending solely on outside forces to sell you what you need or to provide a pre-scripted path forward.

It’s a way to resist the dominant paradigm of modern life, which insists that what’s bought and sold in the market economy is the only way to provide fundamental meaning and sustenance in our lives. Commoning is also a way to tap into the hidden chamber within our imaginations, which harbors vivid images of different ways to live. Much of commoning depends on memory when we resurrect forgotten traditions and cultural practices. So it’s true that we are not just discovering the commons—we are inventing it as well. As we rediscover how to interact and take responsibility in ways that are both old and new, and as we discover more elemental ways of interacting and organizing social and economic life, we engage in one of the oldest ways of being—that is, commoning.

**—Julie Ristau**

*Julie Ristau is co-director of On the Commons.*

# Renew the Commons, Recharge Your Life

Take time to hear, see, feel, and share what's all around us

"I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." —American essayist E.B.White.

The fate of the commons appears dire today. The environment is under full-scale assault. Public services are being slashed. Community bonds are fraying. Campaigns to privatize what belongs to all of us are on the march.

What can we do to protect all we share?

While it's critical to support education and activist efforts, it's also crucial to enjoy the many ways the commons enrich our lives—and do it in a very public and jubilant way.

The best way to convince people the commons matters is by showing how much it adds to our lives. Human beings, especially in Western societies, are aspirational in their outlook. They are strongly motivated by visions of a happier, more meaningful future. This means they will rally around the cause of the commons as way to get more out of life.

Let your friends and neighbors see you hanging out at the coffee shop, browsing the at the farmers' market, stopping to chat at the local park or library. Show people how sharing resources and skills—in other words commoning—makes a better community for everyone. Your example as a smiling commoner may be just as important as your work as a tireless advocate and organizer.

Of course, as E.B. White implies in the quote above, it takes time to appreciate and showcase all the commons has to offer, which might feel like a retreat from the essential work of saving the commons. Yet time spent savoring what's wonderful around us will instill you with more energy to preserve the commons in the years to come. And this first-hand experience will make you a more effective and appealing advocate for making a better world.

—Jay Walljasper



Savoring what belongs to all of us: The Brooklyn Bridge Park Kite Festival. (Photo by [Bob Jagendorf](#) under a CC license.)



By adding a bench to his front yard, Dave Marcucci boosted the spirit of his community. (Photo by Dave Marcucci.)

# Create a Commons in Your Own Front Yard

## How a public bench transformed a suburban neighborhood

It's not hard to start sharing in your neighborhood. In fact, as Dave Marcucci discovered, a simple bench can do the trick. After attending a [Project for Public Spaces](#) training course in 2005, Marcucci came away inspired by the idea that every neighborhood needed places for people to gather. He returned home to Mississauga, Ontario determined to make his house, which occupies a prime corner lot, one of the great places within his neighborhood.

Marcucci started by tearing out the fencing at the corner of his front yard. As he got to work landscaping the area and constructing a bench, he received a lot of quizzical comments. "Why don't you build a bench for yourself in the backyard?" He would answer, "The bench is for you."

When the bench was finished, Marcucci and his neighbors threw a street party. The bench soon became a place where everyone in the neighborhood

came to sit. Older people stop to rest on it during their evening strolls. Kids sit there as they wait for the school bus in the morning. Families out for a walk use it to take a breather.

The complications that Marcucci first anticipated have not come to pass. The bench has not been vandalized, nor has it attracted negative uses. It was installed without approval from the city, but no one

has demanded to see a permit. “There have been no problems!” he exclaims. “It’s worked out really well. I’ve met my neighbors, and other people I’d never met before. It’s added a really friendly atmosphere to the neighborhood. You sit on the bench, and as people walk by, they stop and talk to you!” The bench is so popular that later that fall, a homeowner around the corner from Marcucci added his own bench for the whole neighborhood to use.

### —Ben Fried

*Ben Fried is the editor of [Streetsblog](#), a leading website covering urban transportation and public space.*

*This story is adapted from the [Great Neighborhood Book: A D-I-Y Guide to Placemaking](#) written in collaboration with [Project for Public Spaces](#) and published by New Society Publishers.*



*Animateur* is the word On the Commons uses to describe people who engage groups and communities to create new visions. (Photo by [Vousnous Design](#) under a CC license.)

# An Introduction to Animating the Commons

Animateurs foster leadership for social change

Many people recognize that we are currently in a “movement moment.” As our social, financial, and ecological systems spiral into crisis, new visions for our future and strategies to achieve them are beginning to emerge.

Here at On the Commons, we believe that ideas and practices inspired by the commons and the sharing economy illuminate our connection to the things we share in common and reveal our deep, human yearning to explore new modes of social connection. The commons can also help us reassert a common human

identity lost to market fundamentalism, which is an important step in giving rise to the new movement. So it follows that “commons work” can also foster a fresh perspective on how we undertake organizing efforts and exercise leadership for social change.

We refer to people engaging with communities to create new visions for the future as commons animateurs. Simply put, an animateur works with community members to see, name, claim, and care for a commons, often by conducting one-on-one or group meetings with people who face similar challenges.

The work of an animateur is multi-faceted and requires a wide range of collaborative teaching and organizing skills in order to encourage others to disrupt systemic, market-based patterns. While animateurs may work in different professional arenas, they all help advance commons solutions through a shared framework by:

- Building a collaborative and participatory **governance** in which power is shared and decisions are made by all who will be affected;
- Fostering **belonging** based on an expanded understanding of “ownership” that imbues a sense of responsibility for what is both physically and non-physically shared, and for future generations and other living beings;
- **Commoning**, which is to develop **relationships** and practices that keep us in touch with our shared abundance and our responsibility to it;
- Encouraging **sustainability** by valuing a balance of ecological well-being and human well-being, while at the same time strengthening

our relationship with the earth and stewarding shared resources for future generations;

- Advancing political, social, and economic **equity** by ensuring that the individuals and communities most harmed by the dominant market system gain leadership roles in the decision-making processes that affect their well-being.

When animation is understood as something more than facilitation—when it’s understood in its full social and political sense—it can become very powerful. The practices of animating the commons are varied and include any activity that imagines new possibilities for the future, emphasizes relationship building, facilitates collaboration around commons principles, shares power and leadership among many co-creators, adapts and evolves based on ever-changing conditions, and embraces the power of play and creative expression.

In essence, commons animateurs are capitalizing on this “movement moment” by exercising leadership for social change within the [commons framework](#).

—Julie Ristau and Ana Micka



(Graphic from [MetroRevolution.org](http://MetroRevolution.org).)

# Cities Learn to Share

Jennifer Bradley, co-author of *The Metropolitan Revolution*, says low-income people may be experts on collaborative economics already

In the face of “federal gridlock, economic stagnation and fiscal turmoil,” cities and metropolitan areas across the country are tackling the pressing problems that Washington won’t, says Jennifer Bradley, a fellow at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. Her new book [\*The Metropolitan Revolution\*](#) (with Brookings colleague Bruce Katz) chronicles this sea change and provides examples of pragmatic urban leaders who are instigating change from the ground up in partnership with nonprofits, foundations, and everyday citizens.

Their practical and oftentimes ad hoc solutions come from what Bradley describes as a profound behavioral change: “People are starting to ask, ‘What can we do together that we can’t do by ourselves?’” Perhaps not surprisingly, it’s the same ethos behind the sharing economy, an economic trend that Bradley believes emerged from the Great Recession. People are beginning to understand that they can rise up together against outdated regulatory frameworks

that stymie sharing. Members of [Peers](#), a grassroots organization that supports the sharing economy, for example, [played no small part](#) in the legalization of ridesharing in California.

Inspired by these trends, I asked Bradley what the metropolitan revolution means for cities, neighborhoods, and low-income Americans.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** Why didn’t cities collaborate in the past?

**JENNIFER BRADLEY:** The original model for cities and suburbs was based on competition and developed by an economic theorist named Charles Tiebout. Called the Pure Theory of Local Expenditures, the idea was that there would be high tax, high service jurisdictions and low tax, low service jurisdictions and whichever ones more people liked would win. People would sort themselves based on their preferences and everybody would get the kind of local government they really wanted. But the theory assumed that people had per-

fect information and perfect mobility and that jurisdictions wouldn't implement things like exclusionary zoning or tax giveaways.

But again, I think we've started to overcome this model at the municipal level to some extent. For example, Washington D.C. and two big suburban counties in Maryland have agreed to raise their minimum wage over the next three years. Previously, local governments would have wanted to compete very aggressively on wages. If a neighboring jurisdiction raised its minimum wage, you'd think *hot dog!* because big companies that thrive on low-wage workforces would flock to your jurisdiction instead. But in this case, all three jurisdictions are saying "No, we aren't going to let big companies pit us against each other."

We're no longer locked in a struggle where one jurisdiction's gain is another jurisdiction's loss. Of course this shift toward collaboration isn't ubiquitous, but there are signs that local governments are beginning to think in new ways.

When the mortgage crisis hit, for example, a group of suburbs in the Chicago metropolitan area decided to identify a shared solution and apply for federal grants together because each tiny jurisdiction didn't meet the criteria to win a federal grant alone. By pooling their resources and populations they were able to clear the federal hurdle. They didn't need the state of Illinois to create a new solution; instead they responded to crisis in an ad hoc way.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** Does the sharing economy play a role in the metropolitan revolution?

**JENNIFER BRADLEY:** My epiphany about the sharing economy came when I was about to deny my own participation in it beyond Zipcar. I thought, "Wait a minute. I take the bus most days of the week! That's sharing. I am participating in the sharing economy." Before we were talking about Uber, Lyft, Sidecar, and Airbnb we had shared book spaces called libraries. We also had

shared recreation spaces called city parks. Cities provide countless opportunities for sharing, and while we don't mention it in our book, it's definitely the next logical place for our thinking to go. If cities and metropolitan areas really are helping us rethink outdated economic models and trying to bring economic security to more people, we can't ignore what's happening with the sharing economy.



Jennifer Bradley, co-author of  
*The Metropolitan Revolution*.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** In your recent [Techonomy video](#), you raise the question of equal opportunity in the sharing economy. Who has to champion the sharing economy before we can enable wider participation?

**JENNIFER BRADLEY:** I don't know who it will be, but I would love to see somebody—maybe a sociologist or someone who works with low-income communities—help those people connect what they're already doing to the mainstream conversation.

Because I'm sure there's already a ton of sharing around food, handymen, and cosmetology services in low-income communities. I bet it's happening left, right, and center. We've always used pejorative phrases like "off the books" or "underground" to describe that activity—phrases that increase the distance between what happens in low-income and middle-class communities. Maybe it's no longer "Some lady braiding hair and keeping her income off the books." Maybe now it's a peer-to-peer beautification service. A new vocabulary will help us invite people who have previously been excluded from the conversation into the conversation. It's not about bringing the idea to them. It's about making a bridge between what they're probably already doing and the ideas around sharing that have gained a lot of energy and attention. That's my hypothesis.

In Houston I interviewed people involved with Neighborhood Centers, a community center that asks area residents what's right, what's good, and what they want to build on instead of asking them what's wrong and terrible. The idea is to invite people to act

as partners in getting what they need because they know what they need.

Too often we develop our own ideas about what low-income people need, and it distorts the system because they have to do extra work to jump through the hoops we create for something that kinda-sorta meets their needs. But if we just sat down and talked to them and trusted them, then we could build a more efficient system that would work better for all of us. That's the idea behind bringing people to the table to describe their own experience.

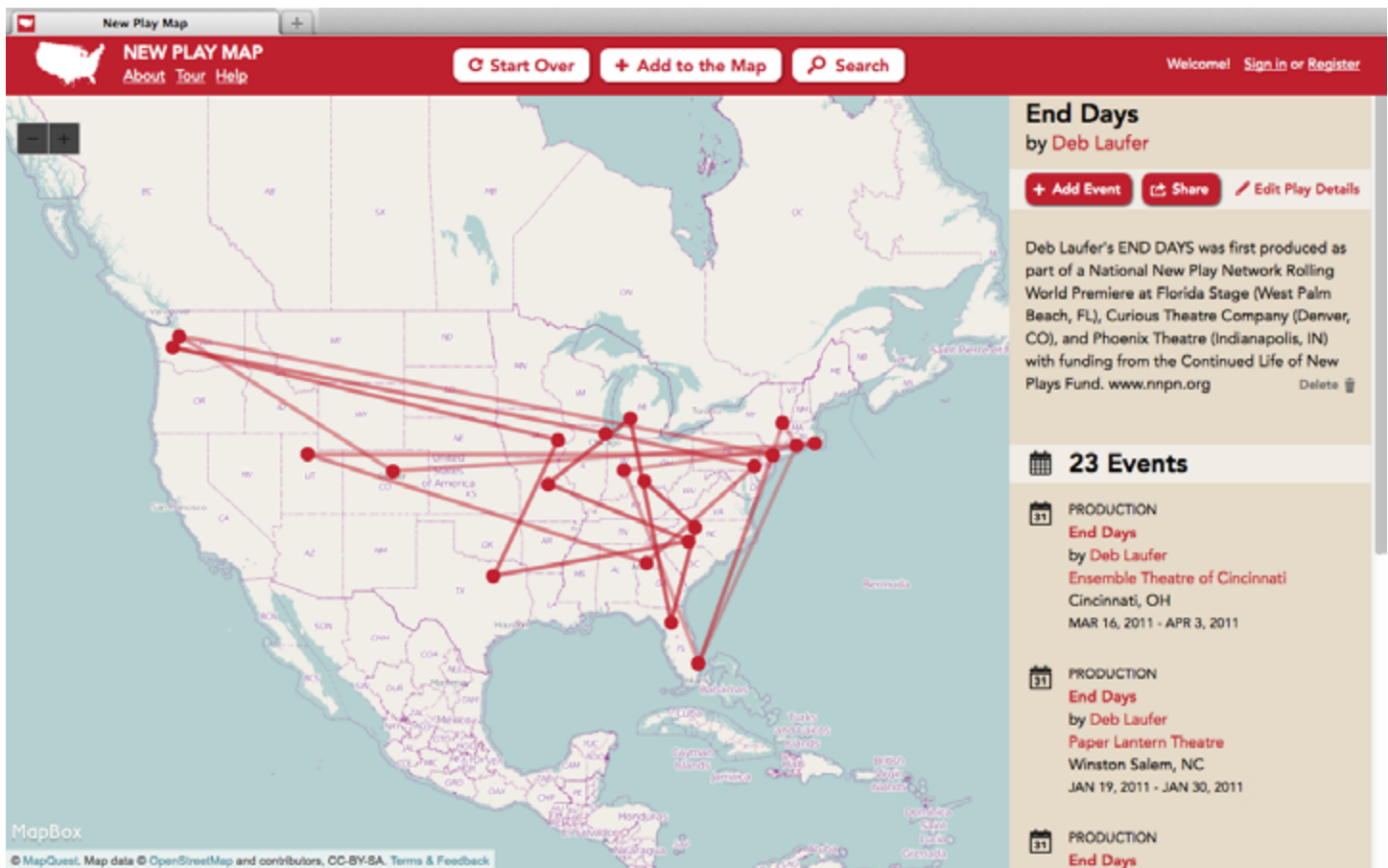
**JESSICA CONRAD:** What do you think is the greatest opportunity for sharing in cities right now?

**JENNIFER BRADLEY:** I think the biggest opportunity lies in discovering how much sharing is already going on. My hunch is that we've either not considered certain forms of sharing or that we've been misdescribing them.

You can download *The Metropolitan Revolution* [iPad app](#) for free for more examples of metropolitan innovation. The app content is also available on [Medium](#).

**—Jessica Conrad**

*This interview was coproduced with [Shareable](#).*



HowlRound's New Play Map allows colleagues around the country to contribute their ideas for "End Days," a play by Deb Laferre. (Graphic from [HowlRound.com](http://HowlRound.com).)

# Peer Production Takes the Stage

Theater artists sharpen their work through HowlRound, an online commons

What happens when you apply the tools of the sharing economy to the mission of an enterprising arts organization? Four American theater enthusiasts create a community of four hundred that quickly explodes into four thousand and, together, they amass a new bank of resources available to all.

This is the story of HowlRound, a center for the theater commons where artists and theater makers promote best practices, share dissonant opinions, and engage in dialogue "with the hope of ensuring a vibrant future" for the field of theater arts.

Vijay Mathew, a co-founder of HowlRound, and his colleagues, David Dower, Polly Carl, and Jamie Gahlon, think of themselves as "infrastructure builders who've enabled a self-selecting group of culture makers to produce a commons." Using insights from both popular sharing-based companies like Airbnb and theories and practices from the commons movement, Mathew and his team have designed online platforms where anyone can share their knowledge, no matter their motive. But above all, HowlRound promotes access, participation, and organizational collaboration in their unique approach to theater practice.

JESSICA CONRAD: How did HowlRound get its start?

VIJAY MATHEW: We started HowlRound in 2009 as a staff of four in Washington D.C. with offices at Arena Stage, one of the original not-for-profit resident theaters outside of New York. Arena's history is interesting and relevant, so I'll mention it: Zelda Fichandler, one of Arena's co-founders, wrote a letter to the US Treasury back in the fifties arguing that certain theaters should have not-for-profit status for the same reason we have public education and public libraries and public parks. Our public assets are government-funded under the belief that they enrich and enhance our communities. Similarly, Fichandler believed that the act of creating art and theater existed completely outside of market logic. Her letter set a precedent for the national movement toward non-commercial theater.

In 2009 we became interested in resurrecting Zelda's idea of theater as an instrument of civilization. The sharing economy, the commons movement, and Occupy Wall Street were emerging, yet at the same time we witnessed not-for-profit theater adopting behaviors from for-profit entities. Many organizations were trying to contract artists at the lowest possible rate while all of their resources floated to the top—a classic 1 percent–99 percent dynamic. We also wanted to leverage the Internet's power to enable peer production. HowlRound emerged and evolved around those themes.

JESSICA CONRAD: HowlRound seems to use the tools of the sharing economy—a movement among businesses clearly focused on profit—to support the theater commons. It sounds like that's intentional?

VIJAY MATHEW: The main idea we took from the commercial sharing economy is that there is incredible value in identifying latent or underutilized resources and putting them into circulation. It's about making the invisible visible. The success of services like Airbnb and Couchsurfing represents a huge shift in perspective about what constitutes a resource. That's such a great contribution of the commercial sharing economy to the emerging commons-based sharing economy.

Of course at HowlRound we also use the Internet to identify and map resources, thereby giving more people better and faster access those resources.

JESSICA CONRAD: Can you describe how the HowlRound community contributes to your online platforms?

VIJAY MATHEW: Early on, we launched the [New Play Map](#), which artists can use to document their work by literally putting it on a map. As with Wikipedia, anyone can edit anything on the New Play Map. Let's say I happen to know something about a play or artist or organization. As a voluntary, self-selecting contributor, I can add my information to the Map even though I may not be associated with the artist, play, or organization. People contribute to the New Play Map all the time in those ways, and for us, those actions are two of the greatest positive behaviors in a knowledge commons.

We also have an online [Journal](#) where we publish blogs and in-depth articles about what's happening with local theater in towns and cities across the US. The Journal is peer produced by a self-selecting, voluntary group of people.

Our third major project is a livestreaming video channel called [HowlRound TV](#). The channel is for anyone who has something to contribute to the wider theater community. We don't curate it at all—it thrives on self-curation.

JESSICA CONRAD: What challenges do you face as a commons-oriented organization in the US nonprofit arts sector?

VIJAY MATHEW: The market dominates media and the arts in the US, but we believe there should be a space outside of the market for stewarding an accessible artistic culture that benefits anyone who wants to engage with it. Participating in a cultural commons—through not-for-profit music, for example, or not-for-profit theater—is still a minority practice. It's a huge challenge just to communicate this, especially since there has never been another arts organization working explicitly to design the necessary infrastructure for creating a cultural commons. There is no precedent. We have no road map.

Here's a question we ask all the time: What's a commons-based approach to fundraising? Do we just act like another 501(c)(3), put donation buttons on our website, and give a NPR-like spiel about what the

money goes toward? We have to create a new way of operating under a commons-based approach, but it's challenging to think about these questions differently when it's so easy to fall back on convention. One idea we've had is to foster a common pool of financial resources. If we claim our role as stewards and remain highly transparent, the community of knowledge producers could become financial contributors too. The pool of money would go back into the community, enabling us to continue producing knowledge for the commons.

**JESSICA CONRAD:** Through early iterations, you came to understand that HowlRound itself is not a commons but that the organization models a commons instead. Can you explain what you mean by “modeling” a commons?

**VIJAY MATHEW:** What we do on a daily basis at HowlRound is to support our community in producing a knowledge commons. It's a commons because the knowledge is accessible, free, and exists for the benefit of an entire community. HowlRound itself stewards the commons by building infrastructure to support and enable people to contribute to our online platforms.

In doing so, we hope to influence our community to think in a commons-based way.

What I personally find interesting is that it's the *design* of the infrastructure we use that enables people to act virtuously under a commons ethos. A few years ago, for example, when we became really active on Twitter using the hashtag #newplay, artists and organizations started promoting other people's activities. That behavior was completely new. Before infrastructure for sharing and peer producing became available, artists and organizations operated primarily under a scarcity paradigm. People thought, “I need to promote only my own stuff because resources like funding, recognition, and social capital are so scarce.” But on Twitter we saw people retweeting and promoting work that had nothing to do with them all the time.

That's a great example of people changing their “stakeholdership.” What we're witnessing now is a shift on these commons-based platforms from people focusing only on themselves to taking a stake in both the overall community and its advancement. I find that to be a beautiful thing.

—**Jessica Conrad**

*This interview was co-produced with [Shareable](#).*



Annie Leonard weaves common sense, hard facts, witty animation, and an engaging “everywoman” narrator role to illuminate complex problems. (Photo by Cornell University.)

# The Trouble with Stuff

Annie Leonard finds that people want to be liberated from overconsumption

Annie Leonard is one of the most articulate, effective champions of the commons today. Her webfilm [The Story of Stuff](#) has been seen more than fifteen million times by viewers.

Drawing on her experience investigating and organizing around environmental health and justice issues in more than 40 countries, Leonard says she’s “made it her life’s calling to blow the whistle on important issues plaguing our world.”

She deploys hard facts, common sense, witty animation, and an engaging “everywoman” role as narrator to probe complex problems such as the high costs of

consumerism, the influence of corporate money in our democracy, and government budget priorities.

In 2008 she founded the [Story of Stuff Project](#) to help people get involved in making the decisions that affect their future and to create new webfilms on critical issues such as [The Story of Citizens United](#) and [The Story of Bottled Water](#). Her most recent film, [The Story of Broke](#), provides a riveting rebuttal to claims that America can no longer afford health and social protections.

Here Leonard answers a few questions from OTC about the importance of the commons in her life, work and the world.

**JAY WALLJASPER:** How did you first learn about the commons?

**ANNIE LEONARD:** I first learned about the commons as a kid using parks and libraries. I didn't assign the label "commons" to them, but I understood early on that some things belong to all of us and these shared assets enhance our lives and rely on our care. I also learned that investments in the commons pay back manyfold: if we organize a litter clean up, we get a super fun park to play in.

Like many other college students, my first introduction to the word "commons" was sadly in conjunction with the words "sheep" and "tragedy." That lousy resource management class tainted the word for me for years, until I heard Ralph Nader address a group of college students. He asked them to yell out a list of everything they own. This being the pre-i-gadget 1980s, the list included "Sony Walkman...boombox...books...bicycle...clothes...bank account." When the lists started to peter out, Ralph asked about national parks and public air waves. A light went off in each of our heads, and a whole new list was shouted out: rivers, libraries, the Smithsonian, monuments. That's when I realized that the commons isn't an overgrazed pasture; it really is all that we share.

**JAY WALLJASPER:** How does the commons influence your work?

**ANNIE LEONARD:** The commons is a key piece of building a sustainable, healthy, and fair society. At the Story of Stuff Project, we're concerned about the hyper-individualization and consumer-mania that has taken over our society. It's a problem because we're consuming more resources than the planet can produce each year and creating more waste than it can assimilate. The Global Footprint Network says we're using 1.5 planets worth of resources a year. Basic physics dictates that we simply can't keep consuming at this rate. In addition to depleting the very planet on which life depends, our consumer culture isn't making us happy. We're working longer hours than in just about any other industrialized country; we're constantly

stressed, tired, and burdened by debt. It's no coincidence that rates of social isolation, loneliness, and depression are also on the rise. A thriving commons helps on all these fronts.

Shared things means we use less resources overall, that we can slow down the frenzied work-watch-spend treadmill, and that we're investing in community rather than clutter and consumer debt. For example, my town has a tool-lending library as part of the public library system. Rather than every household needing to own a power drill and jackhammer, we can just borrow them for the few times a year we need them. This could be extended to include all sorts of things. Shared public resources means less resources consumed overall, less waste generated, less money spent and more time chatting with our neighbors—building community.

For us at The Story of Stuff Project, the commons is also an orientation; it is about how we do things, how we work together as much as the assets that we all share. It is the act of figuring out solutions together and ensuring diverse voices are engaged in planning processes. It is a commitment to collective action, collective wellbeing, and having each other's backs. It is the realization that no one is as smart as everyone. It's the realization that we all do better when we all do better.

**JAY WALLJASPER:** How does the commons affect your life?

**ANNIE LEONARD:** Recognizing and nurturing the commons makes my life sweeter, easier, richer, lighter, happier. I end up with less stuff and more friends.

**JAY WALLJASPER:** What strategies do you recommend for making more people aware of the importance of the commons?

**ANNIE LEONARD:** Talking about the commons is a critical first step. We're so indoctrinated in an individualist-focused approach to stuff and private property that we need to be reminded—like my college class mentioned above—that there's much more that we share and that, for a wide range of things, sharing is better. So, let's introduce the term into public discourse, slip it into conversations, include it in letters to the editor and blog

posts. Talking more about the commons will make it more visible.

It's hard to love what we don't see, so let's bring the commons right out into the spotlight!

I also fear that I am not alone in having associated the "commons" with a sheep-filled pasture for too long. We need to think of more ways to explain what the commons is, to create a new frame for the word, so that the full richness of the commons comes to mind when we hear the term. I love the phrase "all that we share." That's clear, accessible, and makes us feel good thinking about all that we share. That's what we want people to feel when they think of the commons.

**JAY WALLJASPER:** What do you see as the biggest obstacle to creating a commons-based society right now?

**ANNIE LEONARD:** There are so many interrelated aspects of our current economic and social systems which undermine the commons. Some obstacles are structural, like government spending priorities that elevate military spending and oil company subsidies over maintenance of parks and libraries. Others are social, including the erosion in social fabric and community-based lifestyles. Actually, even those have structural drivers; for example, land use planning which eliminates sidewalks and requires long commutes to work contributes to breakdown of social commons by impeding social interactions. It's all so interconnected!

A huge obstacle is the shift towards greater privatization and commodification of physical and social assets. Many things that used to be shared—from open spaces for recreation to support systems to help a neighbor in need—have been privatized and commodified; they've been moved out of the community into the market place. This triggers a downward spiral. Once things become privatized, or un-commoned, we no longer have access to them without paying a fee. We then have to work longer hours to pay for all these things which used to be freely available—everything from safe after-school recreation for kids to clean water to swim in to someone to talk to when you're feeling blue. And since we're working longer hours and spending more time alone, we have less time to contribute to the commons to rebuild these assets: less volunteer hours, less beach-clean-up days, less time

for civic engagement to advocate for policies that protect the commons, less time to invite a neighbor over for tea. And on it goes.

**JAY WALLJASPER:** What is the greatest opportunity to strengthen and expand the commons right now?

**ANNIE LEONARD:** In spite of real obstacles, we have a lot on our side as we advance a commons-based agenda. First, we have no choice. There's a very real ecological imperative weighing down on us. Even if we wanted to continue this overconsumptive, hyper individualistic and vastly unequal way of living, we simply can't. We have to learn to share more and waste less, to find joy and meaning in shared assets and experiences rather than in private accumulation, to work together for a better world, rather than to build bigger walls around those who can. And the good news is that these changes not only will enable us to continue to live on this planet, but they will result in a happier, healthier society overall.

There's another shift emerging which offers some real opportunities for building support for the commons. People in the overconsuming parts of the world are getting fed up with the burden of trying to own everything individually. We used to own our stuff and increasingly our stuff owns us. We work extra hours to buy more stuff, we spend our weekends sorting our stuff. We're constantly needing to upgrade, repair, untangle, recharge, even pay to store our stuff. It's exhausting.

The shift I see emerging is from an acquisition-focused relationship to stuff to an access-focused relationship. In the acquisition framework, the more stuff we had, the better, as captured in the 1990s bumper sticker "He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins." Having spent a couple decades being slaves to our stuff, we are rethinking. Now it is "He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wasted His Life Working to Buy Them and Lived in a Cluttered House When He Could have been Investing in Community with which to Share Toys."

Increasingly people want access to stuff, not all the burden that comes with ownership. Instead of owning a car and dealing with all that comes with it, we get one just when we want through city car share programs. Instead of hiring a plumber, we swap mu-

sic lessons with one through skillsharing networks. Why buy something to own alone, when we can share it with others? Why sign up for an even more crushing mortgage for a house with a big back yard, when we can instead share public parks? From coast to coast, there's a resurgence of sharing, so much that it even

has a fancy new name: collaborative consumption. I'm really excited about this. A whole new generation of people is realizing that access to shared stuff is easier on one's budget and on the planet than individual ownership. Now, that's liberating.

—Jay Walljasper



Hippies do things directly for people—and deserve our gratitude much more than our scorn. (Photo by [SMN](#) under a CC license.)

# In Defense of Hippies and Others Who Live Outside the System

It's the clean-cut Wall Street types who swindled America

More and more we are hearing the word “commoning,” which means putting the ideals of the commons into practice in our everyday lives—sharing with neighbors, tending community gardens, engaging in community activities. The continuing economic crisis is persuading people from all walks of life that the individualized pursuit of happiness and security is a dead end.

But many folks have been practicing commoning all along—working class families in which shar-

ing is essential for survival, religious and political groups in which simple living is embraced, tightly-knit communities in which older patterns of cooperation endure, and non-conformist subcultures in which consumerist values are rejected. The last group still includes large numbers of hippies, punks, straight-edgers and others who since the 1960s have lived a more communal, less materialistic way-of-life. Often scorned by the mainstream media and feared by middle Americans, these

non-conformists have nonetheless been prophets of the emerging commons movement, keeping alive alternatives to the every-man-for-himself market mentality that pervades modern society.

After all, as [Carolyn Elliott](#) points out in this blog from [Shareable](#), “Dirty hippies didn’t get billion dollar bail-outs from the federal government. Who does that? Oh, that’s right—all those squeaky-clean, ultra-respectable bankers, that’s who.” Far from being the lazy bums of media stereotypes, hippies often work very hard on behalf of their communities and the planet.

There’s a lot we can learn from the hippies, even if we don’t want to live in a yurt, eat raw food, and listen to reggae.

—Jay Walljasper

The soul of this country has always been nurtured by people more interested in freedom than in regular baths: revolutionaries, pioneers, cowboys, Henry Thoreau, and Walt Whitman all lived in sweat and dirt.

Yet in mainstream media I see a sentiment expressed time and time again: The Occupy movement and other challengers to economic order would be great if it wasn’t just a bunch of dirty hippies.

The notion that hippies are weird is a perverse remnant of the Protestant-Puritan work ethic ideal. It’s a notion that pretends to defend the dignity of clean, hard-working, upright people who live by the rules and produce the goods. These clean, decent people (we are meant to imagine) are being harassed and put-upon by folks who are so lazy and good-for-nothing that they refuse to even take a bath.

In a bizarre, manipulative twist, people learn to hate and revile those individuals who are doing their best to live outside the oppressive system rather than the oppressive, corrupt system itself.

Here’s something to consider, America: Dirty hippies aren’t stealing your money; dirty hippies aren’t bleeding you dry with debt; dirty hippies didn’t get billion dollar bail-outs from the federal government. Who does that? Oh, that’s right—all those squeaky-clean, ultra-respectable bankers, that’s who. Out-of-control banks and corporations are the real threat to American decency and prosperity, not people who like to listen to Bob Marley and beat on drums.

Also, I’d like to advance a notion which may seem radical. The dirty hippies in my acquaintance are the hardest working people I know. They just don’t work for corporations. Instead they work doing things directly for the people immediately around them: caring for children, cooking donated food for free distribution to big groups, waitressing at small restaurants, building sacred art installations, teaching yoga, organizing community groups, skillfully repairing cars and musical instruments and clothing that others have discarded. All of those things take intense amounts of work.

Work is important. Work is tremendously valuable. Work is labor directed in such a way that the whole community benefits. That’s the kind of work that even the Puritans valued and that kept the village alive and prospering. Labor done in the service of a gigantic corporation is not work in this sense. It doesn’t put value into the community so much as it extracts it. Many people laboring in these kinds of jobs are left feeling depleted, drained, purposeless. Their work has little obvious benefit to their community aside from the paycheck it brings, and that is ever-shrinking. The value of their work floats off into the hands of their corporate overlords rather than extending to their children, their friends, their neighbors.

Hippies and other critics of the system deserve our gratitude much more than our scorn.

—**Carolyn Elliott**

*Carolyn Elliott is author of [Awesome Your Life: The Artist’s Antidote to Suffering Genius](#). She teaches at the University of Pittsburgh.*

*This story originally appeared at [Shareable](#).*



Robert Ogilvie sees that low-income communities can benefit from schools being opened to the whole community.

# Making the Most of Commons All Around Us

Robert Ogilvie champions schools and other underused facilities as public spaces

One of the most familiar commons across North America is, unfortunately, one of the most underused—the school buildings and grounds that exist in every community.

After the school bell rings in the afternoon, on weekends and vacation days, over the summer, these publicly funded facilities are typically off limits to kids, their families, and the rest of the community. (And keep in mind that private and parochial schools are publicly funded too through generous tax deductions bestowed upon their contributors, who then pay less in taxes).

This means we are denied access to gyms, recreational facilities and equipment, theaters, classrooms, libraries, kitchens and other resources we pay for with our tax dollars. (In some places, even outdoor playgrounds are locked up after school.) This represents a huge missed opportunity for local communities, which need more gathering place to hold meetings, stage performances, host events, play sports, get exercise, offer classes and generally have fun together.

It's simple “common sense” to open up schools and other taxpayer-funded buildings more widely to the public, notes Robert Ogilvie, vice-president of [Change-Lab Solutions](#). He believes this sharing would have a

profound effect, especially in low-income neighborhoods. “Everywhere has a school.”

“Many kids are at a loss for safe places to play. Would-be gardeners in apartment buildings are looking for space to grow vegetables and fruit. Libraries have cut back their hours. Food service programs for the elderly and homebound are in need of kitchens,” notes Ogilvie, who is co-author of [Opening School Grounds to the Community After Hours](#).

So what’s stopping us from taking better advantage of schools, libraries, community centers, parks and other public facilities right in our midst?

Fears about liability, vandalism and funding are the biggest obstacles, but in reality they don’t pose the big problems people assume. Many states already protect public institutions in liability cases, Ogilvie says.

As for vandalism, he points out that more people using schools and other public facilities actually deters senseless damage, especially when supervisors are on hand. A place where people are is not the place where vandals operate—they don’t want witnesses.”

And it’s far cheaper to run recreational, educational, and community programs out of an existing building than building a new one—a key advantage, Ogilvie says, in a fiscally-tight era when public institutions face deep budget cuts. Schools, recreation departments and other community services can share overhead and staff costs. “Even conservatives love this idea because it’s a more efficient use of resources.”

“Most states currently have laws that encourage or even require schools to open their facilities to the community...” notes the ChangeLab Solutions website. “Nonetheless, school officials may be reluctant to do so, cautious about the expense in times of increasingly tight budgets.”

That’s why Ogilvie and his colleagues at Oakland-based organization champion Joint Use Agreements as a method to make it easier and less risky for communities to share public facilities with the public. As *Playing Smart*, their recent [Joint Use Toolkit](#) states, “Although many communities informally agree to share facilities, a well-crafted Joint Use agreement

can help things go smoothly—from coordinating scheduling and staffing to handling maintenance and possibility of injury.”

Spokane, Washington first adopted Joint Use agreements in 1932, and Seattle claims to have done it even earlier. In the 1980s San Jose and other cities embarked on successful campaigns to thwart gang activity by opening up public facilities for youth programs.

Ogilvie points to Texas as a surprising leader in the field today, thanks to a handbook on Joint Use for schools and public libraries published by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission. “Combining school and public library resources and facilities can improve student achievement and residents’ quality of life while saving tax dollars at the same time,” he wrote in a recent blog on the [Community Commons](#) website.

Schools, libraries, and other public institutions benefit from these arrangements too, Ogilvie explains. “It makes them into places for everyone, not just for kids and their families. That changes the whole equation in how people view them.”

ChangeLab Solutions—which describes its mission as “law & public innovation for the common good”—began as a campaign to reduce smoking in California and has evolved into a national organization addressing a range of public health issues from childhood obesity to urban design and affordable housing that encourage healthy living.

“We want the healthy choice to be the easy choice for people,” Ogilvie says, which is why the organization partners with the YMCA, United Way, American Planning Association, Project for Public Spaces, Urban Land Institute, and a number of local public health departments.

Their work on sharing public facilities for recreational and community use grew out of efforts to promote physical activity in low- and middle-income communities. Ogilvie notes with alarm that while childhood obesity is declining in some upper income communities, it is still rising among African-Americans and Latinos.

Ogilvie—who was born in Grenada and grew up in Jamaica and Toronto—got involved in community issues while working on a Ph.D. in political science at Columbia University, which led to his first book *Voluntarism, Community Life and the American Ethic*. For twenty years, he's worked to improve low- and mid-

dle-income neighborhoods as Director of Volunteers at the Partnership for the Homeless in New York City, faculty at the University of California-Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning, a consultant and at ChangeLab Solutions.

— Jay Walljasper



Under new legislation, students at Oregon's public universities will pay nothing while in school. (Photo by [Rick Chung](#) under a CC license.)

# An Oregon Trail to End Student Debt

Innovative bill brings equity into student loans and gets banks out

Last year the Oregon legislators unanimously passed and the governor signed a bill paving the way for students to attend public universities without paying tuition or taking out traditional loans at all.

Fueled by the organizing savvy, policy creativity, and relentless effort of the state [Working Families Party](#), and by a classroom of outstanding college students, the new bill offers a progressive victory and a common-sense national model on an issue where Congress has recently been derelict at best. The legislation instructs Oregon's Higher Education Coordination Commission to come up with a "Pay It Forward,

Pay It Back" public university financing model in time for a legislative vote in 2015.

Under such a model, students pay nothing while in school; instead, after graduation, four-year students pay three percent of their income for the next two decades or so to fund the education of future students—without a role for the big banks. (Those who attend for less time would pay a pro-rated amount.) Once start-up costs are addressed (no small matter), the system could pay for itself. It would ask the most money of those graduates best equipped to pay, and it would represent a huge stride in putting an end to

the crushing debt horror stories which Occupy Wall Street helped to place on the national radar.

While victories like Oregon's are often the result of decade-long campaigns, this incremental step came to pass with a speed that surprised even its most ardent supporters. And it demonstrates the power of unconventional alliances. The "Pay It Forward" approach has been tried in Australia, but not in the United States. It got legs here when John Burbank, who directs the Seattle-based Economic Opportunity Institute, connected with a college class taught by Barbara Dudley, who co-founded the Working Families Party of Oregon. Students in the Portland State University class, "Student Debt: Economics, Policy and Advocacy," took up a push for "Pay It Forward" as

their group project, and the WFP embraced it as a legislative priority. Together, they seized legislators' attention, and secured their support.

In the process, WFP activists and allies talked to thousands of students, built a coalition ranging from MoveOn.org to the faith group Jubilee USA, and won over university administrators. It was a classic "inside-outside" fight, in which the potency of skillful lobbying and common-sense argument were amplified several times over by grassroots firepower.

"We never imagined that we would actually accomplish something like this, and definitely not in such a short time," student Ariel R. Gruver told *The New York Times*.

**—Katrina vanden Heuvel**

*Katrina vanden Heuvel is editor and publisher of [The Nation](#).*

*This story originally appeared at [TheNation.com](#) and in the [Washington Post](#).*



One in four Americans belongs to at least one cooperative, such as the People's Food Coop in Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Photo by [Robyn Kingsley](#) under a CC license.)

# Biggest Secret in the World Economy

## Cooperatives employ more people than multinational companies

While a great many commons seek to develop alternatives to conventional businesses—and even to bypass markets altogether—the struggle to democratize capital should not be lost in the shuffle. Popular ownership of capital assets and business enterprises is still a great strategy for building the commons and advancing the public good. Fortunately, there's a growing enthusiasm for this approach.

One of the most eloquent advocates for socially friendly forms of capital ownership—the French call it the “social economy”—is Gar Alperovitz, a historian and political economist at the University of Maryland and a founder of the [Democracy Collaborative](#). Alperovitz's book, [America Beyond Capitalism](#), showcased the history and great potential of co-ops, worker-owned companies, and urban land trusts.

Alperovitz also notes the constructive role that is played by municipal utilities, state-owned banks like that in North Dakota and state-chartered trusts such as the Alaska Permanent Fund. There are also dozens of cases in which states use their investment dollars to help communities, use government procurement to help worker-owned businesses, and provide venture capital to startups. (His new book [\*What Then Must We Do? Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution\*](#) takes these ideas even further, drafting plans for a new economy that is neither corporate capitalism or state socialism but an evolution of proven practices to democratize the ownership of wealth and strengthen our communities. “The goal now is not simply worker ownership,” he writes, “but worker ownership linked to a community-building strategy.”)

These alternatives to traditional capitalist models are actually flourishing, Alperovitz notes: “We may be moving toward a hybrid system, something different from both traditional capitalism and socialism, without anyone even noticing. Some 130 million Americans, for example, now participate in the ownership of co-op businesses and credit unions. More than 13 million Americans have become worker-owners of more than 11,000 employee-owned companies, six million more than belong to private-sector unions.”

The great virtue of Alperovitz’s hybrid “wealth building” models is that they “challenge dominant ideologies which hold that private corporate enterprise offers the only possible way forward; and they help open new ways of conceptualizing practical approaches to meaningful larger scale democratization.”

Alperovitz has focused a lot of his energies on Cleveland, where there are a variety of worker-owned businesses. Perhaps the most notable is the [\*Evergreen Coop\*](#), which consists of a “green” institutional laundry, a solar-panel installation coop, and hydroponic agriculture businesses. The details of these and other stories add up to a refreshing approach to economic and community development.

So long as the national debate is locked into the old categories of “capitalism” versus “socialism”—as if they were the only choices, and as if each were a monolithic creature—we will be stuck in a ditch, unable to bring about any systemic change. But if we can begin to see how a diverse array of community-based business models are succeeding, we may just glimpse a productive path forward.

**—David Bollier**

*David Bollier, the founding editor of [On the Commons](#), thinks and writes about the commons at [Bollier.org](#). His most recent book is [Think Like a Commoner](#). Bollier’s commons activism is focused on the [Commons Law Project](#) and the [Commons Strategies Group](#).*



We shouldn't dismiss Zipcar or their ilk out of hand because they aren't pure sharing. (Photo by [WehoCity](#) under a CC license.)

# Who is the True Sell Out?

## Here's the real deal on the sharing economy

Recently Matthew Yglesias of Slate posted "[There Is No 'Sharing Economy'.](#)" His story's punch line, an old one, is basically that the sharing economy isn't sharing, it's renting.

While there's truth in what he and many others before him have said, his post throws the baby out with the bath water. It shows a shallow understanding of the economic transformation underway, and this being Slate, with millions of readers, could turn a lot of people away from an important change.

There is something good going on, and if we redirect our attention away from analyzing memes to what's happening on the ground, we might discover something profound, something worthy of attention because it could be world changing.

So let's look at car sharing, his point of attack. Yes, it's true that car sharing is like car rental in that you pay for the time you use a car, whether it's by the hour or day. However, car sharing is pointed at different

consumers for different purposes with different impacts. Car sharing is most often marketed as an alternative to car ownership for urbanites. It fills in a gap in transportation needs that enables more households to go car free or shed a car.

It works. The positive impacts are significant and point to an economic development path with dramatically less consumption and more equity. Let's look at the stats:

- [A 2010 UC Berkeley survey of 6,281 North American car-sharing members](#) showed that over 50 percent of households joined to get access to a car who didn't already have access to one.
- The same study showed that one shared car replaces up to thirteen owned cars.
- The American Public Transportation Association estimates that [people save an average of \\$9,900 a year for each car eliminated from a household.](#)

- The Intelligent Cities Project estimates that a city could keep [\\$127 million in the local economy annually by reducing the number of cars owned in a city by 15,000](#).

Let's expand on that last bullet point. Say that San Francisco was able to reduce the number of owned cars in the city to 250,000 from around 500,000 today with the help of car sharing. How much would that keep in the local economy? Around \$2 billion.

That's a gigantic local economic stimulus package helped by a sometimes depersonalized form of sharing. Not to mention that less cars in cities means more room for people. So we're going to dismiss car sharing because the leader, Zipcar, isn't the Kumbaya, kindergarten, what your mother taught you version of sharing that Yglesias is referencing?

Let's recognize that there's a spectrum of sharing—some commons based like the Modo car sharing cooperative in Vancouver, some market based like Zipcar, and some in between. Unlike big media, our definition of the sharing economy includes them all, not just the tech darlings.

In any case, we shouldn't dismiss Zipcar or their ilk out of hand because they aren't pure sharing. Every cash-strapped, smog-choked city on the planet—and that's a large and growing number—should be busting ass to help their residents share cars and more ([Shareable](#)'s determined to help them too). Even better if done through coops and nonprofits, the form a large number of car and other sharing enterprises already take.

While Yglesias misses the mark on car sharing, he's basically right. We need more real sharing where we own things together. And we should demand more real sharing from for-profit tech companies that claim

to be leaders of the sharing economy ([how about Airbnb as a coop?](#)).

Yglesias' big miss is that away from the headlines about the latest tech wonder, a real sharing economy is booming. [Member-owned credit unions recently earned record profits](#), member-owned [cooperatives are proliferating](#) modeled off the successes like Mondragon, the White House is [getting behind participatory budgeting](#) for local governments, [twenty states are considering some form of public banking](#), [open source software is eating the software world](#), and grassroots sharing projects like seed banks, tool libraries, coworking and hacker spaces are spreading like kudzu.

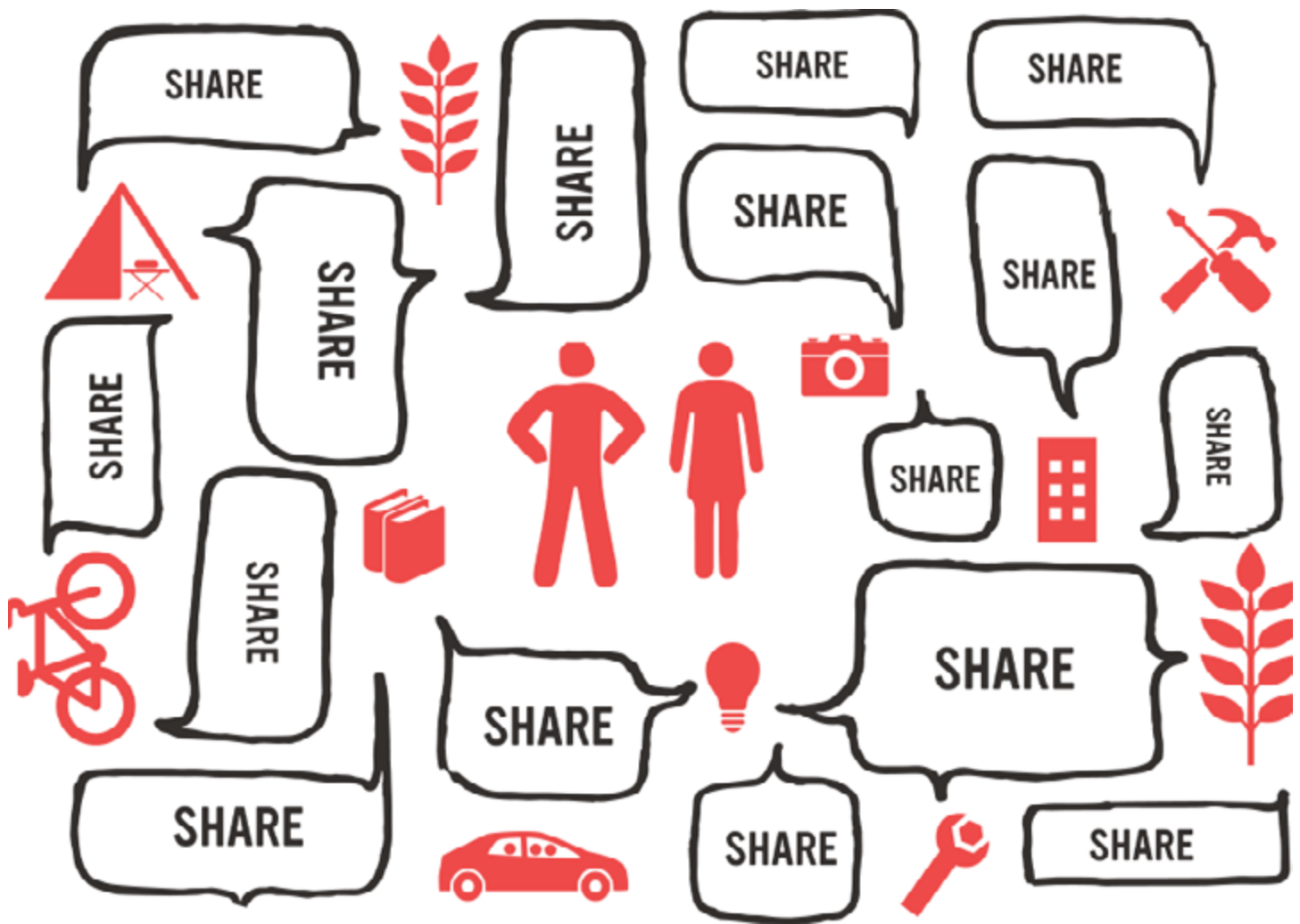
This economy is substantial. Taken together, credit unions make up the fifth largest bank in the US. [Cooperatives employ 100 million people globally \(20 percent more than the Fortune 500\) and have 800 million members](#). Coops span major industries—retail, agriculture, housing, transportation, manufacturing, energy, telecommunications, healthcare, and more. There are over 200,000 open source software projects worth around a half a billion dollars. One study put the value of fair use content at \$4.5 trillion, one sixth of the US economy. I'm just scratching the surface of all that we share. The mutualized part of the sharing economy dwarfs all the tech-based sharing startups put together.

Whatever you want to call this economy, it's the real story. While our civilization approaches economic and environmental collapse, the solutions lay right under our noses. This is arguably the biggest story today as our survival may hinge on how this emerging economy unfolds. The question is whether the mainstream media will bring it to the attention of a public desperate for real solutions. If Yglesias' latest post is any indication, they will pass it up in favor of click bait to boost ad revenues.

**—Neal Gorenflo**

*Neal Gorenflo is the co-founder of Shareable, an award-winning news, action, and connection hub for the sharing transformation.*

*This story was originally published in [Shareable](#).*



(Graphic from [Peers.org](https://peers.org).)

# A Big Picture Vision for Social Change

## A Q&A with Peers Co-Founder Natalie Foster

[Peers](https://peers.org) is a freshly-launched platform designed to support the sharing economy in a variety of ways. Co-founder and Executive Director Natalie Foster shares the big-picture vision for Peers and how sharing can create positive change.

**SHAREABLE:** What personal experiences brought you to the sharing movement?

**NATALIE FOSTER:** My parents live in a small town in central Kansas. Recently, the town lost its one general

store. It was not only a place to buy goods, but also a place for neighbors to catch up and build social ties. So this was a big blow.

But, instead of giving up, the community pulled together and raised the money to open a locally-owned general store. I was blown away when I visited this new store. Not only was the new store already up and running—it was even better than the old one!

What is happening in my hometown is happening in hundreds, maybe thousands of communities across the world—people are turning to one another to build their own economy. They're coming together to share skills, homes, cars, money, and time. There's a movement rising, and I'm inspired by it.

**SHAREABLE:** What is Peers? What will Peers focus on?

**NATALIE FOSTER:** Peers is a grassroots organization to support the sharing economy movement. We believe sharing can be the defining story of the twenty-first century if we come together to build it.



Natalie Foster, founder of Peers.

We started by meeting with small groups of people who share their cars, homes, skills, and time. Within a few months, we had meet-ups and house parties happening in cities across the globe, from Boston to Barcelona and San Francisco to Seoul.

We're launching Peers to provide support and tools for people who want to see the sharing economy thrive. We support the movement in three ways:

- Mainstream the sharing economy: By raising the profile and visibility of sharing.
- Protect the sharing economy: Through policy campaigns for smart regulation.
- Grow the sharing economy: By discovering, joining, and using new peer and sharing services.

There's something powerful when you get car-sharers, bike-sharers, home-sharers, stuff-sharers, peer travel guides, microentrepreneurs and other folks in a room together. Magic happens. The Shareable community know that! We want to make more of that happen around the world.

**SHAREABLE:** As a founder of Peers, tell us how your vision for the organization came about. What inspired your priorities?

**NATALIE FOSTER:** Prior to Peers, I co-founded Rebuild the Dream, a member-driven organization to fix the US economy. We were primarily focused on solutions rooted in US politics. During that time, sharing and peer to peer experiences really began to take hold and I found myself more inspired by the couch surfers and the car sharers than partisan politics. So, I knew it was time to try something new.

In my work with the Sierra Club and Obama's Organizing for America, I've seen the power of grassroots movements. That remains a big inspiration for me as I think about the future of Peers and the sharing economy.

**SHAREABLE:** What role do you see the peer economy playing in reversing our planetary ills?

**NATALIE FOSTER:** The environmental impact of the sharing economy is huge and we're only beginning to understand the extent of it. For example ridesharing participants reduce their individual CO2 emission by 40 percent as compared to owning a car.

Going forward, we're very excited about ideas like working with some of our partners to conduct environmental and economic impact studies on the effects of the overall sharing economy.

**SHAREABLE:** Peers campaigns will mobilize people in three ways: protect sharing, build sharing culture, and grow the movement. Tell us more about your strategy.

**NATALIE FOSTER:** We want to make sharing the defining economic story of the twenty-first century. No big deal, right? We see these three types of campaigns as core to our theory of change. You first need to change culture, behaviors, and policies before changing the economy. It won't happen overnight but it's a big audacious goal that we get fired up about every day.

**SHAREABLE:** Peers will rely on members, partners, ambassadors, and champions to succeed. What are these and how will they work together?

**NATALIE FOSTER:** Our top priority is our membership. We want to be a home for those who believe the sharing economy can shape the twenty-first century.

Champions are foundations and individuals who will support Peers financially or strategically. Ambassadors are thought leaders in the sharing economy like Rachel Botsman, author of *What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, Lisa Gansky, author of *The Mesh: Why the Future of Business is Sharing*, and Neal Gorenflo, founder of *Shareable*, who will provide guidance on how the sharing economy is evolving. Our partners are organizations and businesses that currently serve the sharing community like Airbnb, TaskRabbit, Lyft, Sidecar, and dozens of others. They help promote Peers to their members and partner with us as we work to mainstream, protect and grow the sharing economy.

But, the key to Peers success will be our members—the participants of the sharing economy. Our primary mission is to support them as they continue to define this new economic movement.

**SHAREABLE:** You've been part of some of the best online organizing teams on the planet. What lessons will you apply with Peers, and who is on your team?

**NATALIE FOSTER:** The most important lesson for me is that with the right people you can achieve the impossible. I'm thrilled to be launching this organization with an incredible group of individuals—folks who have elected presidents, launched global online movements, and been pioneers in building community within the sharing economy movement, like *Shareable's* own Milicent Johnson. We'll wake up every day thinking about how we can help grow this movement.

*Peers plans to bring sharing mainstream. The below video is a short introduction to the sharing economy for newcomers, an example of the accessible communication likely to come from them.*

### —Cat Johnson

*Cat Johnson is a freelance writer focused on community, the commons, sharing, collaboration, and music. Publications include Utne Reader, GOOD, Yes! Magazine, Shareable, Triple Pundit, and Lifehacker.*

*This story originally appeared at [Shareable](#).*



# The Commons. Are You In?

Take a moment to recognize the gift of our commons

Can you even imagine life without all we share?

The organizing principle of any community is sharing. It's hard to imagine life without parks and public spaces, libraries, the air we breathe, public water systems and art programs, the Internet, and even the spirit of collaboration. These cherished commons, among many others, bring us health and security, inspire our imaginations, give us hope, and more.

Yet today we are in danger of losing our commons to threats such as pollution, neglect, and privatization of the public sphere for private gain. If we don't rise up to protect our commons, life as we know it will be fundamentally changed.

Thankfully we still have a chance to defend and advance all that we share for today and future generations—and this is where you come in. Watch On the Commons' new minute-and-a-half video to find out how you can

—On the Commons Team

