

# Imagining the (R)Urban Commons in 2040<sup>1</sup>

**Silke Helfrich**

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In 2040, one generation from now, I will be more than 70 years old and hopefully surrounded by my first great-grandchildren. What I'd like to share with you here is how I imagine the Urban Commons will be by then – and how I'd like *my grand- and great-grandchildren* and me to enjoy them and care for. While pondering this topic, I realized that it might more appropriately be called the "Rurban Commons." This seems to be one of the most important patterns and pathways for us to understand – how to interconnect urban and rural spaces. The projects of so-called *urban agriculture* and *rural maker-spaces* like the OTELOs throughout Austria are pioneering examples of this growing interconnection.

So, to share how I imagine the future of the rurban commons, I'd like to invite you to take a collective walk with me – a walk through an environment that we can co-create, that in fact can only be co-created. Step by step and in each detail adapted to the local circumstances. Designing such an environment doesn't automatically ensure or guarantee „r/urban commons“, but it can provide *the conditions and infrastructures for* commoning.

This is crucial for the insight that historian [Peter Linebaugh](#) brought to my attention: There is no commons without commoning, he noted, drawing upon medieval history. This is evident when we look at the idea of commons itself. It is impossible to think about the commons without wondering who is creating, managing and reproducing them. To come into existence commons need to be "enacted." This is why, when thinking about the commons, we also need to think about community, understood here in a broad and modern sense, ranging from local communities to global networks and to loosely connected networks of communities.<sup>2</sup> That is, communities as federations.

I believe that the most challenging and indispensable factors needed to enact commons are to (learn how to) *think like a commoner* and to practice "how to common" at the same time. This, in turn, requires a specific attitude -- an attitude based on the recognition of a simple truth: We are all related to each other!

"I am because you are", one might say. Or "I am through others." This idea is also known as [ubuntu, which not coincidentally, is the name of a prominent version of](#)

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<sup>2</sup> From "Commons: A frame to think beyond growth," an interview with Silke Helfrich published on the P2PFundation Blog on October 10, 2016. The full text is available at <https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/commons-frame-thinking-beyond-growth/2016/10/10>

[the Linux open source computer operating system](#). Just have a closer look at the word "I." This does not really refer to an isolated entity; it is a relational term. Saying "I" doesn't make sense if there is no "You." This idea of relationality is at the very core of the paradigm shift that the commons debate contributes to. To put it differently: Human beings are *free in relatedness but never free from relationships*. That is the ontological bottom line. Relations *precede* the things that interrelate, i.e., the actual facts, objects, people, situations and circumstances. Just as physics and biology are coming to see that the more critical factors in their fields are relationships, not things, so it is with commons.

From this insight, we can then see that commoning can be conceived as a way of living. It is a lifeform that has the potential to enact freedom-in-relatedness – a sometimes hurtful, mostly bumpy and always complex social process. The process requires us to constantly swim upstream, against all odds, because in a capitalist society we are systematically discouraged from developing the capacities and skills we need for commoning.

In short, *commoning means, take collective action to enact the Commons*. The more consciously and self-consciously this happens, the better.

The modern commons debate differs from earlier discussions about the commons several decades ago, and certainly more than 150 years ago, in wanting to explore and understand how free cooperation (commoning) works among strangers, and how it can be made stable and durable. People also want to understand how commoning might work in nontraditional communities, such as in networks, in the digital world, in multiethnic contexts, and among "nomadic citizens" such as hackers and migrants. Contemporary commoners believe that commoning is perfectly possible even in these societal contexts if they have the space, infrastructures and support to self-govern themselves. They can thrive if..

- The *Patterns of Commoning* are as well understood as the famous "[design principles for commons institutions](#)" identified by the late Professor [Elinor Ostrom](#);
- If they are cultivated and become an embodied experience; and
- If we have access to (free) communication tools to enable our coordination and cooperation.

Commoning is much more than just "being together" (more than *Geselligkeit*, as we would say in German). In

fact, it may be the only way in which we can systemically confront the dysfunctions and corruptions of the *market/state* system that now governs us.

Earlier I said that I tried to imagine the Rurban Commons in the year 2040. Let's beam into that year and start our walk around the city.

Picture the city you live in or a city you know well. Focus on a certain neighbourhood and remember the bustle in the streets. Remember how this place sounds and smells like, and what people are doing there.

A city is fluid, which means that such a neighbourhood is changing constantly. People move in and out. Buildings are bought and sold, shops close down and others open up. Infrastructures change sometimes more quickly than we wish them to do. Once there was a factory. Now there is a cultural center. People disconnect from traditional workplaces; they work at their home office or in the co-working space next door. Each change of these kind of changes is also an opportunity to "commonify" the city.

If you find this an odd statement, have a closer look. First and foremost: The main focus is on rethinking use. Because there is often underuse of available buildings and spaces, a commons approach can make new constructions unnecessary. Everywhere. "Zwischennutzung" is a widespread concept in Germany – is only one of them.

Or apartments can be converted into *co-housing projects* (real co-housing, not just Airbnb-style *micro-rentals*). Co-housing means sharing basic housing infrastructures according to people's needs in a self-determined and ongoing way – not just making a flat available for rentals every now and then. This has two major effects: it helps people to become more independent from the (often expensive) housing market. And this in turn helps to "free up" the houses or apartments from concentrated market control, speculation and artificially high prices.

Of course, there is an endless number of legal forms from housing cooperatives to *community land trusts*. But the crucial point here is to make sure that once something is placed in the commons, it must remain in the commons and not fall back into the market. In Germany, there is a robust and growing institution called *Mietshäusersyndikat* (loosely translated, the Federation of Housing Commons). It has more than 25 years of experience in *co-facilitating the self-organization* of hundreds of housing units all over the country. It has co-created a solidarity and co-financing network among housing projects.

What makes these projects really special is the clever legal tweak that enables them to protect the buildings and houses themselves as shared resources. It has been done in such a way that it is very difficult to resell a co-housing project back into the market. What the federation of housing commons is basically doing is to elevate and protect the freedoms of commoners at

the expense of market-oriented investors, speculators and often, governments. The legal provision protects the freedoms that money can't buy – the capacity to have access to secure, lower-cost housing. To me: *Mietshäusersyndikat* is a kind of the *copyleft* for housing projects.

Why is this important? Because doing this means widening the sphere of the commons with a long-term perspective. And widening the sphere of the commons is helpful in this case because it shrinks the sphere of extractive markets. So, remember: *Each Commons needs protection!*

Let's walk on.

Everybody needs not only shelter but also something to eat. And a decisive part of the reintegration of rural and urban functions is certainly greater food production in the city. In my great-grandchildren's Rurban Commons, there will be spaces for experimental gardening and "herb commons." You might already know the concept of an *edible city*.

There would be a bee and wild bird yard, the already-famous community gardens and *intercultural gardens*. There would be flower fields, fruit tree zones ... you name it. And, of course, CSAs as one of the most important ways of food provisioning. CSA means *Community Supported Agriculture*. This is crucial, because – as in the co-housing case – the functioning of many CSAs successfully disconnects food-production from the imperatives of the market and instead initiates a kind of "pool & share" approach. Pool & Share as opposed to Pool & Dividend as the only approach is an important pattern in the commons.

As you might have noticed, for me, the commons is much more than a concept of togetherness. It also describes a new mode of production of potentially everything – housing and food, software and hardware, furniture and machines, healthcare and education. The commons could truly stimulate a radical shift in production modes that focuses on the idea of predistribution instead of redistribution. It would produce more commons and fewer commodities.

To give you an example, in a commons framework agricultural production – as in a CSA – is not mainly about the production of "goods" or "products" to be sold on the market. Instead it produces "shares" which are distributed according to pre-established rules determined by the participating community. This brings the community members to share not only the products but, most importantly, the risks of production, meaning that the burden of a bad harvest is shared by all members!<sup>1</sup> Nobody is left alone. Risks and costs are mutualized.

The commons framework requires us to also think about frameworks, infrastructures and production schemes at larger and even global levels. In general, the basic rule that we should apply is "What is heavy is local, what is

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

light is global.”<sup>2</sup> This formula guides communities to produce and consume locally what they need for sustenance and for their everyday life (from food to clothes and machinery) while at the same time sharing globally what is “light,” such as knowledge, data, codes and designs needed for production.

In this way, communities can produce locally things that they cannot produce in the current economic system (because it would be considered “uneconomic.”) This would strongly reduce transportation costs and negative environmental effects. Such a framework envisages production to take place in a *distributed (not decentralized)* way. Decentralization is better than centralization, gradually, but structurally it is still a top-down approach. A distributed scheme of production, however, is different in essence. This is what we can learn from the P2P communities.

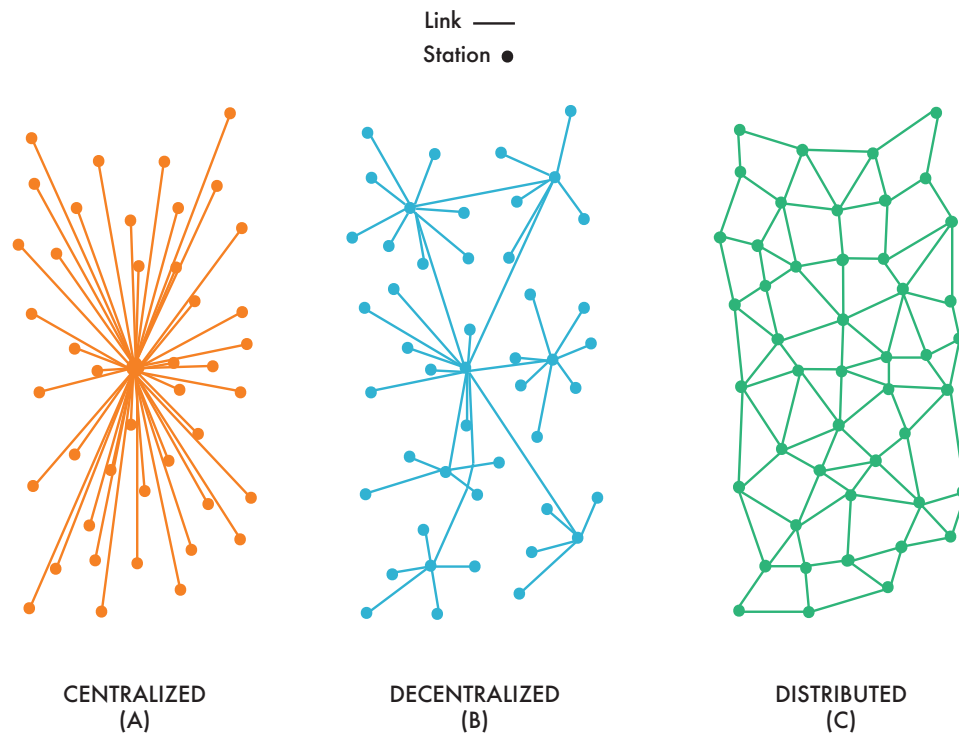


Figure 1 Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Systems (Paul Baran, 1964)

One could say: We are witnessing a worldwide field trial, and an expansion of locally proven models of this new way of production. [Open hardware projects](#) are mushrooming, as CSAs are. However, because these projects often use different concepts and wordings to describe their experiments and practices, the common DNA, the patterns of commoning, often remain invisible.

So, let's make it visible.

In the place I will live in 2040, there will be a repair café, a laundry salon, outdoor workshops for whatever purpose, a tool-lending library, Fablabs a physics workshop, a hackerspace, and a fabric sharing and tailoring space.

The infrastructure will be controllable and controlled by the neighbourhood. There will be (distributed) renewable energy production, a sewage purification plant, open wifi and an open (infra)network. There will be fire brigades, health and first aid associations and much more. And after all, there is a common pattern. (I refer to the idea of “patterns” as used in the [Patterns Theory](#) and Pattern Language approach developed by the philosopher, architect and mathematician [Christopher Alexander](#)). I think of infrastructure [platforms whose use is open to all, without discrimination](#). Such platforms are based on the principle that more money should not be able to command greater use rights. Comparing it to the Internet policy concept of net neutrality, you could call it “[platform neutrality](#).”

<sup>2</sup> “Why the P2P and Commons Movement must act translocally and transnationally” by Michel Bawens, published on the P2PFundation blog on June the 16th 2016. The full text is available at the following link: <https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/p2p-commons-movement-must-act-trans-locally-trans-nationally/2016/06/16>

Let's continue strolling around the neighbourhood:

There are the cultural spaces for the unfolding of cultural activities, reading circles, an open theatre, a contemplation area, a library, land for open permaculture, a [commoning school](#) and so on. Many of these opportunities for commoning are simply open spaces for non-determined uses.

Finally, we need to get around within and beyond the neighbourhood. I imagine mobility in a rurban commons being based on the idea of [shared space](#), i.e. a combination of infrastructures that privileges pedestrians and bikes and doubles the space through sharing with [p2p car-sharing](#) and good connectivity to public transportation.

### Is this realistic? Or is it utopia, that is, a “non-place”?

It is probably something that the German philosopher [Ernst Bloch](#) calls: “Concrete Utopia.” We can already grasp such a transformation, because the examples and many experiences are there, still scattered, and named in great many different ways. But they are there. The needs are there as well. And the commons is a needs-based approach more than a rights-based approach. They show that what is now considered “individual property” [and a [tragedy of the anticommons](#), i.e. the fragmentation of property rights, and thus a social and economic paralysis] can be transformed into shared possession and individual use rights within the realm of shared possession, according to people's needs and decisions. Rethinking social organization through a commons lens implies rethinking property, that is, access and use rights. We can do so by remembering that, as stated by Vandana Shiva,<sup>1</sup> “each commons is somebody else's commons,” therefore rethinking property also means rethinking our relationship with these “somebody else's.”<sup>2</sup>

A commons framework for re/production in essence is a way to meet people's needs at all levels through a high degree of self-organization combined with commons-based infrastructures and governance principles at different scales. It's a way of provisioning that doesn't need to be achieved through individual property as default position, nor mediated through the so called „market mechanisms“. (In fact, mechanistic metaphors are very misplaced when we try to understand and address the complexity of social relationships)

### So, how do we get there?

First of all, we need to make all these experiments and examples more visible and connect them to each other, because they are connected. Yet many of these connections are invisible too. [Mapping tools](#),

<sup>1</sup> Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist and anti-globalization author. More information on her ideas and on her works are available at this address: [http://vandanashiva.com/?page\\_id=2](http://vandanashiva.com/?page_id=2)

<sup>2</sup> From “Commons, a frame to think beyond growth”, an interview to Silke Helfrich published on the P2PFundation Blog on October the 10th, 2016. The full text is available at the following address: <https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/commons-frame-thinking-beyond-growth/2016/10/10>

intermapping the commons-transformation are indispensable to that purpose.

We need something like [Omni-Commons](#) everywhere. We need to discover the common patterns of the initiatives that experiment with a rurban commons approach and we need to help to connect them – not necessarily in physical terms, but mentally and politically. Because one thing is for sure: we are not just for dealing with “the leftovers,” or in urban terms with “vacant terrain” – what used to be called “wastelands.” It is not about the peripheral, undefined edges of the city. It's about rethinking and reshaping the rurban environment as a commons. Social and cultural realities are not facts; they are something we co-create.

So: connect commons confederate the hot spots of commoning create commons-neighbourhoods commonify the city.

Widening the space for the commons while shrinking the space of the market is feasible. It needs to be enabled, done and (politically and academically) supported. Of course, such an approach needs a consistent framework, so that people feel mirrored in it, so to speak. This is where commoners on the ground need the help of engaged scholars. Scholars who don't just study what commoners do or don't do, but who co-facilitate the co-creation of a free, fair and sustainable society. As Ezio Manzini has put it:

*“Commons are fluid forms. To enact them we should focus on enabling conditions, not on fixed designs.”*

That was precisely what I was trying to do: Take you on a walk through a non-fixed design that is meant to create the enabling conditions for commons in a rurban environment. A “design” that is open and allows for constant adaptation. This idea is called City of Workshops and was originated with two Austrian students, [Nikolas Kichler](#) and [David Steinwender](#).

There is power in the rurban commons if there is power in the communities, which make, care for and protect them. Therefore: *Keep calm and Keep Commoning.*