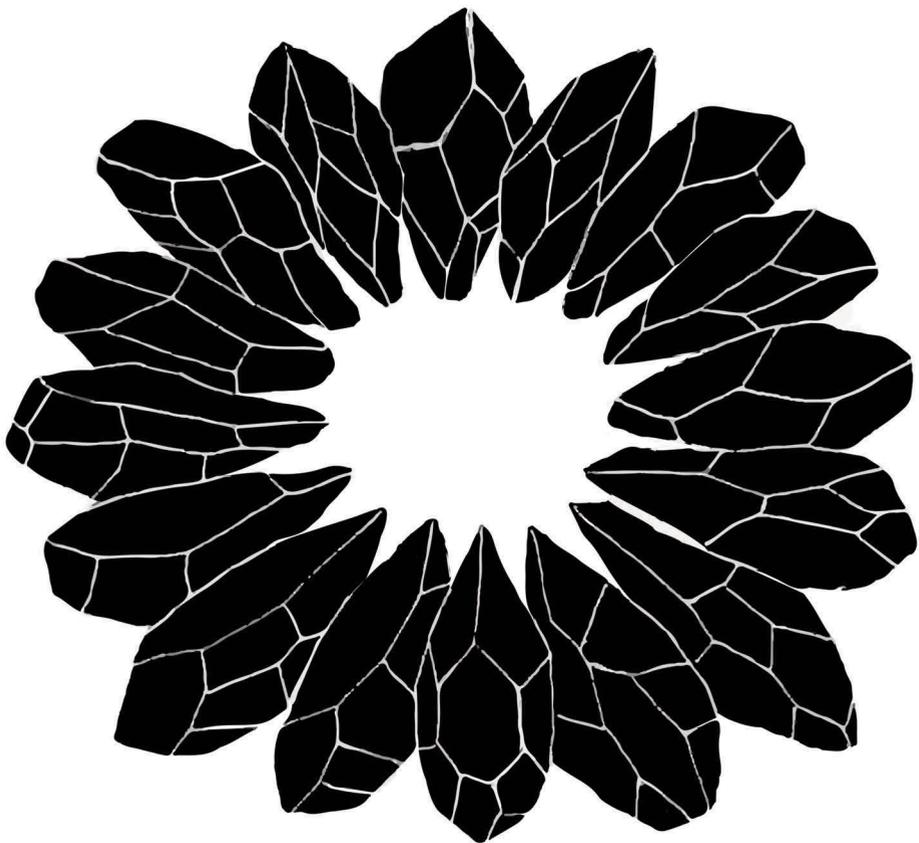


# COMMONS AS THIRD PLACES

MICHELE BEE



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**Dedicated to Philippe Grombeer**

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# COMMONS AS THIRD PLACES

**MICHELE BEE**



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## **A CHANGE OF GLANCE**

What if the grass on the roadside wasn't just weed to weed? Let's call it 'third landscape', and the world changes all of a sudden. To change the world is not necessary to transform it. It might be enough, for a start, to call things by a different name. Or simply to give them a name, and then look at them with new eyes. The gardener Gilles Clément sees urban and rural neglected areas as third landscape. These places, transformed and then abandoned by human beings, are usually seen as both ugly and unsafe. But they are first of all undecided places: no longer subjected to human planning, but also not yet completely reabsorbed by nature. They are no more decided by human beings and not yet by nature: they are third to them. Third landscape is almost everywhere, since every human transformation inevitably generates unforeseen, neglected areas.

## **WHERE THE FUTURE LIES**

Flowers thrill under the bridges, writes the poet Sandro Penna. Under the bridges, here again is the third landscape. The bridge is designed to cross, to pass over. But this transformation of the landscape inevitably produces another one, not necessarily foreseen. It is a space usually unplanned, because what counts is what lies above, not below. But underneath, if we look closely, there is a world. We find the plants

swept away from the edge of the motorway for safety reasons. We find the animals unable to cross the bridge full of speeding cars. In a third landscape, every diversity removed from elsewhere find refuge. And this makes of it a special place for biological invention. It is not just a dirty place, it is the genetic reservoir of the planet, the laboratory of the future. The third landscape is the place where the richness of diversity can generate the new, the unexpected.

## **THE PIONEERS**

When a place is abandoned by human activity, plants usually considered as weeds arrive naturally. Usually removed from elsewhere, they find there a welcoming place. These plants arrive the first and colonize the space because they are the most resistant to precarious surroundings. This is also why they are generally considered infesting. Yet, they make hospitable also for other plants and animals a hitherto hostile place for non-human life. Usually they are a bit thorny and take the form of brambles. But those thorns protect other plants that are too fragile to settle in a semi-deserted place. Brambles shelter the youngest shrubs from predators, allowing them to become trees. Then, trees create shade and more favourable conditions also for animal life. In the garden where everything is decided by human beings, whether for ornamental or productive purposes,

these plants are just invaders. Nevertheless, they are pioneer plants, without which life on earth may even cease altogether.

### **WELCOMING HUMAN DIVERSITY**

Like the third landscape, third places are everywhere or nowhere, depending on how we look at them. Third place comprehends third landscape, but differently from the latter it is not really uninhabited by human beings; what is missing is just human planning. Under the bridge, for example, usually we found not only plants and animal dens, but also the alcoves of people who cannot find shelter elsewhere especially in a society compelling to performance and productivity. There are vagabonds, young people seeking intimacy, potheads, street artists and their graffiti. From their presence emerges a third place. A place where diversity is welcomed, where unexpected meetings can happen, where conventional rules are not always effective. These places are usually seen as dangerous and unsafe. But their lack of planning makes them more welcoming places than others, even those specifically designed for reception.

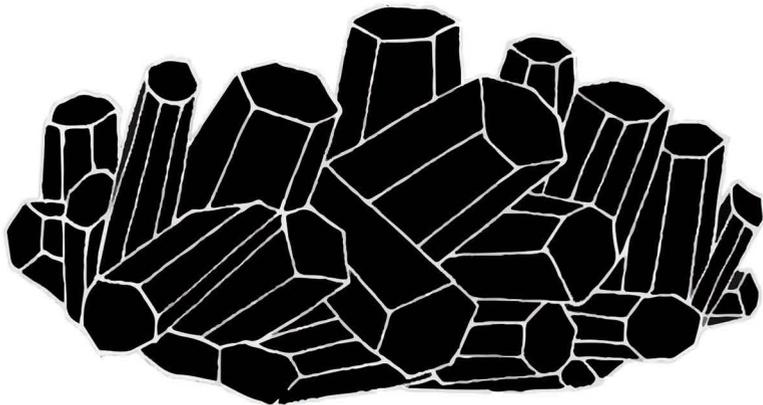
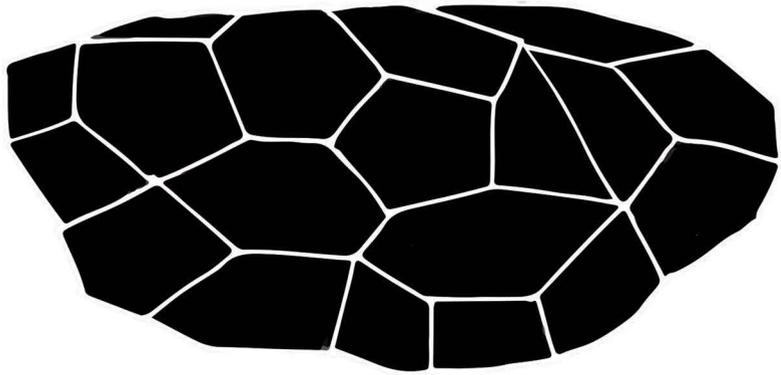
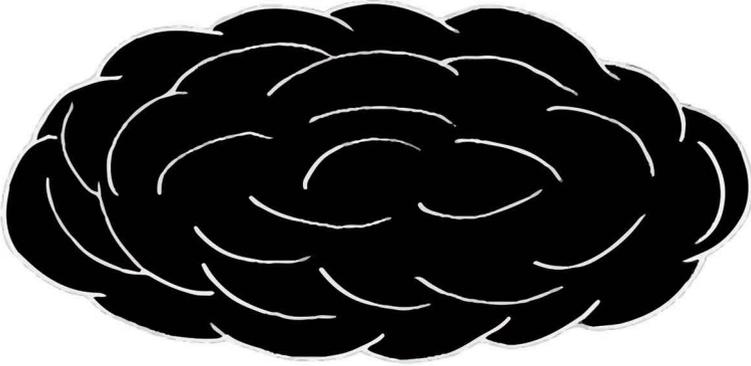
### **IN THE CRACKS OF SOCIETY**

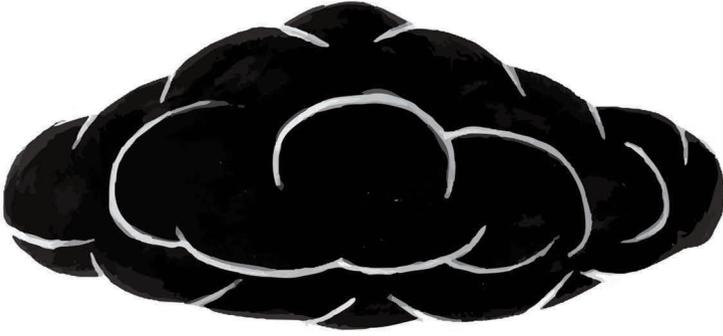
Third places usually emerge from disregard and carelessness. They can be the leftovers of some interventions on the landscape or places that have

lost the use they were designated for. They escape to the planning of public administration as well as to the business plans of private enterprises, since they lacked or never had any economic or political value. Their ownership is often unclear and confused between private subjects, private and public, or different public bodies. None of them generally wants to take responsibility for those places. Or, on the contrary, conflicting interests could lead them to years of deadlock. The impasse characterising these places makes them available for alternative uses, not necessarily productive and lucrative. Areas under the bridges, dead-end streets, semi-abandoned historical centres, unused old railroad tracks, disused buildings, are typical places of this kind; places where fragile people often hole up.

### **CHARMING PLACES**

Migrant communities, poor families, nomads, penniless students, stoners, civic associations, tramps, irregular trade, indie cultural activities, emerging artists often populate semi-abandoned old town centres or the less valuable areas of the cities. Their presence and activities seem to reduce the value of those places, but often the opposite is true: the low economic value of these areas makes them more welcoming for people who, despite everything, keep them alive. Gentrification is usually the consequence of their arrangements





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and transformations. Their mixing and their necessarily creative way of adapting the space makes those places more charming. And so, at some point, it happens that more affluent people are willing to pay to live there. The problem is that, after a certain time, the pioneers are mostly driven out again and forced to restart the process elsewhere. At the same time, however, gentrification shows how much pioneering transformations and diversity make those places more appealing and greeting for all.

### **THE MIXING CLIMAX**

Third places are often the refuge of fragile persons, because disregard opens them up to all kinds of people. Individual backgrounds, origins, connotations, ages, genres are mixed there. Since conventional rules are less effective, everyone can be more freely oneself with the others. In neglected areas often emerge also cultural and social centres freely initiated by citizens and artists as the climax of this mixing and autonomy of spirit. These kind of third places greet social, cultural and artistic diversity driven away from elsewhere, which incubates and generates unexpected possibilities. Municipalities or private developers often see these pioneers as invaders. Yet, they generally open places where the very sense of community can be sought, and often found. They create the good conditions so that the more people

are diverse the more the sense of being with others makes sense. Without this possibility of renewing its sense, human society may even dissolve altogether.

### **SPACES OF INDECISION**

What mainly characterises third places is that they are not totally organised, without being chaotic for this reason. They are spaces of indecision, where not everything is already decided, and new decisions can always be made on the field. Their openness leaves room for something unheard of, which makes them a privileged shelter for all kinds of diversity. What matters is that each new decision does not avoid making other different decisions on the field. When an open process becomes mature, however, its traits of indecision risk being almost inevitably reduced. Over time, every movement tends to stiffen and become institutionalized. However, openness can continue to be guaranteed by those who are in the position of being able to decide almost everything, as often happens for pioneers compared to newcomers. Pioneers could decide not to decide.

### **OPEN MANAGEMENT**

The best government, says Henry David Thoreau, is the one which governs not at all. That doesn't mean that no government is needed; rather, that a government should be there

precisely to prevent everyone from governing, included the government itself. This means to take the place of power and decide not to exercise it. It is a matter for everyone of not exercising power and of not being subjected to it. Management which guarantees openness decides the less as possible. It consists in that minimal care which guarantees openness to the autonomy of all and to their free initiative. This kind of management is based on the idea that those who propose to do something, they do it themselves. They do not need to be authorized by someone to do it, and they do not decide that someone should do it. They just do it.

### **DISEMPOWERING FOR SHARING**

It is not so much a question of extending power to as many as possible, but of taking it away from as many as possible. It is not really a matter of empowering everyone, rather of disempowering everyone. It does not matter if there are many or few people managing, when they manage in order to not govern at all. Shared management does not necessarily imply an open management, while the latter generally grants the fullest possible sharing of common good. Third places are not necessarily spaces owned or managed by communities. They are principally places where the very sense of community can be renewed by real openness to what

has not already been regulated or planned, even if by everyone.

### **A STEP BACKWARDS**

A garden enjoying open management does not need many rules. A discreet gardener like Gilles Clément could be enough. Rather than imposing a more or less shared design, discreet gardeners take a step backwards to leave room to spontaneous, no ready-planned process. It is a matter of doing the most as possible with and the less as possible against. Discreet gardeners allow a space of indecision to continue to be so, just pruning those plants that would prevent new contaminations. They allow any plant to show itself off in all its beauty, without preventing other plants from doing the same. In shared gardens, instead, everyone decides everything. Participants usually decide through horizontal processes who can do what and when, which however risks reducing the openness to the unforeseen. They are citizens reappropriating common places. But commons are not appropriable.

### **GIVING BACK**

Public property does not make the common good. Commons elude the distinction between private and public, escaping to the juridical principle of property. When legally sanctioned, they cease to be common goods to become public goods managed by more or less local

communities through participatory or representative processes. Rather than re-appropriating neglected areas, citizens can just give them back to everyone making it such that no one could appropriate them. It is a matter of not altering them as third place. Third places are commons because they are of no one rather than of everyone. Commons are third places since their indecision makes them open to everyone. Returning a place to the community means opening it to others without having already decided everything and without willing to decide everything with them. This means maintaining, if not increasing, its indecision traits: the traits that attracted the pioneers and that can continue to attract anyone else.

### **CALLING FOR COMPLETION**

Something completely designed does not leave much room to imagination. Children usually break the games made in this way so that they can reinvent them. Disused places are a bit like those broken games, and often become a privileged playground. Their flawed state stirs the imagination, by calling for completion. This appeal of neglected areas gives rise to a much more spontaneous participation than that of classic participatory processes of urban regeneration. Maintaining the traits of indecision of those areas even after the first spontaneous interventions means opening them up to other new interventions. It means

assuming the inevitable neglect resulting from any intervention and, instead of contrasting it, making it the intervention purpose. In this sense, what makes a good project is not what the project accomplishes, but what it does not accomplish, how much room it leaves to unexpected completions, to others' participation.

### **SOMETHING ALWAYS SLIPS OUT**

It is not necessary to go to the margins of society to run into third places. They are possibly everywhere. Around us, inside each of us. When people talk, walk, or show their emotions, they cannot always govern every movement of their face, any aspects of their voice or body. They inevitably slip out themselves. Similarly, they do not exactly set every single position of the objects in their houses. Nonchalance is unavoidable. Every single place where their steps meet the street in the daily adventure of life are not foreseen by anyone. As these steps inevitably transform the street by consumption, they inevitably transform it by their presence. All these transformations cannot be planned in advance. And even when totally designed, every intervention inevitably generates something unforeseen. Something always slips out. When everything is completely anticipated, there is little chance for freedom of action, unforeseen diversity and the new. Where something unheard of can happen, there it is a third place.

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**1.  
REVOLUTION LIES IN  
A CHANGE OF GLANCE.**

**2.  
FUTURE IS WHERE YOU  
DO NOT EXPECT IT.**

**3.  
UNPRODUCTIVENESS  
SHELTERS DIVERSITY.**

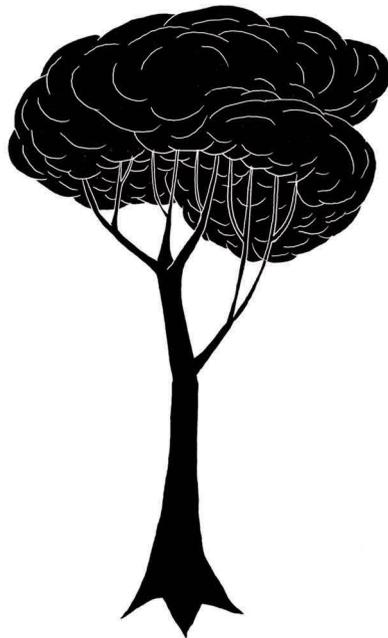
**4.  
OPENNESS MEANS DECIDING  
OF NOT TO DECIDE.**

**5.  
DISEMPOWERING ANYONE FOR BEING  
FREELY ONESELF WITH THE OTHERS.**

**6.  
COMMONS ARE OF NO ONE,  
RATHER THAN OF EVERYONE.**

**7.  
IMPERFECTION ENTAILS  
PARTICIPATION.**

**8.  
SOMETHING ALWAYS  
ESCAPES.**



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