‘COMMONS’

by Nora N. Khan

The block had been shuttered from the ‘30s to the ‘80s, and this building in particular, before it became the Commons innovation space, had been notorious tenement housing. Few people in the Commons had ever done any manual labor themselves, but it was important to honor previous generations that had. Small touches of former squalor were left intact as a reminder of the building’s history: an old, chipped sink, wartime newspaper collages, smoke streaks on a wall from a tenement fire, now reworked into a mural.

These ancient details provided a remarkable contrast to the openness of the Commons now, its glass, its light, its clean blonde wood floors, all its sunlight reflected off the chrome and steel office buildings surrounding them. After a long, hard day earning rest, a tenant could step out onto the wraparound deck, feel the warmth of a fire from a recessed pit, from the heated torches; the tenant could look out onto the city and consider its future. Out there people no longer gathered in school or in church or city squares, but instead in workspaces much like the Commons where they could work in public. Working in public was how people really felt connected to others, to the city, and to themselves.

Designing the Commons’ multivalent interior to reflect the future of work had not been simple. The Drew brothers, David and Jonathan, and their crew of researchers (still in graduate school for urban design), were already skilled at hacking “tragically underutilized” urban spaces to unlock communal potential – the sidewalk, the playground, the parking lot, the bridge underpass, the courtyard, the street mall, the building foyer. They knew that the Commons needed a strict cubicle-free policy; no one wanted to think of themselves as being an office worker anymore, even if they *were* mobile office workers. All work here had to feel as though it were equal, and all work had to have some kind of creative bent to it. People’s careers were modular, so the space needed to be, as well. They wanted tenants to feel at ease in an environment where they could relax, talk organically and naturally with others, and then, invigorated, head back to their workstations to get a few more hours in.

The Drew brothers had a secret habit: they took frequent two-month road trips to see land art and alternative living colonies throughout the West. At several points over the previous decade, they had stopped in

Joshua Tree to do mescaline, and always came back inspired and full to bursting. David had read about Ken Kesey's trip on the *Further* bus, from which the Merry Pranksters had sprinkled LSD to followers. Once, they traced the path of the bus, ending up at the '64 World Fair Unisphere in Queens, New York, in pouring rain. The way they saw it, you had to be willing to go outside the culture to find outsiders with the *really* good ideas. These people didn't have fancy degrees. They made videos with handheld cameras; they lectured on the Internet about economics and burying gold and cryptocurrency, all from the comfort of their living rooms.

The Drew brothers were more practical. They felt these renegade visions could be codified, that the wave lines and figurations of psychedelia were a definite style that could be translated into aesthetic practice. Jonathan admitted he wasn't talented enough to be a star architect, but he could think meaningfully about space, about blurring discrete tactile and visual elements into one whole. What if, he asked, space could be used to change thinking?

They could bring the ethic of the free schools and acid and anarchy to make a more humane lifestyle for the contemporary creative hustler. Psychedelic modernism could be given real *substance*; it could be harnessed to maximize good for communities at scale. There was a revolution happening, one in which rigid boundaries and formalist qualities and little boxes could be exploded into an orgiastic communal space. You didn't have to serve one role for decades with one organisation anymore. The tenant of the Commons worked for herself; she could weld, design, paint, and lead, manage, organise. She could go anywhere.

They tore the brick out and replaced it with coloured glass: reds and greys and light blues, alternating a sense of urgency and intensity with peace. A wayfinding system helped people through the building by orienting them according to colour, with the aim of cognitively rooting the flow of each floor in the mind. Walls were moulded along wide curves to guide a tenant along to the kitchen, then on a private, cool room for digestion time. A small pod was available for meditation and an old-school phone booth allowed for the rare private phone call.

"Find your place in space." The brothers joked that the building could lift off from its foundation, head to the moon, and start a new civilisation with the talent embedded in it. For funding, they settled on describing the Commons as a *place-based social laboratory for the future* over another contender, a *skillshare designed to subvert social*

fictions. Both slogans, really, were too long; they were confident that with enough iteration, they'd find the right expression of their mission.

No matter where you were in the Commons, you could likely see at least one person working. On the deck, tenants could work at tables under awnings, safe from the sun; they even worked through after-hours performances on the deck stage. Inside, one might see tenants Skyping clients in Hong Kong and Singapore, and placing their heads down on the white open tables to take micro-naps. David was known to move his ergonomic chair about his office several times per day, not because he disliked the total lack of privacy, but because he was uncomfortable with not having a continually inspiring perspective. He finally settled on long stretches staring at abandoned warehouses and condemned office buildings, imagining more generative structures in their place.

There were unavoidable conflicts. Some controversy bubbled briefly when their community manager and diversity advocate vocalised what he perceived as transphobia, along with racism, sexism, and classism in Commons chat. Some of the tenants were newly wealthy - and newly conservative - and had different ideas about how a community should run smoothly. They felt the community manager was creating problems that weren't there; they said he just didn't understand banter. There was a problematic tenant, Robin, a programmer, who assumed anyone stopping through didn't know how to use Arduino; worse yet, he ranked careers, training, and skills. He told a painter that though their worlds never intersected, he *suspected he might one day need her energy and perspective* in order to be a well-rounded person. "I might always have something to learn," he told her. "Another hat to wear."

The Commons had only ever had to ask one tenant to leave after she had said, in an interview, that she still was not sure what the Commons accomplished. She said the tenants mostly got tipsy nightly to talk vaguely about their plans, their creative collisions, their abstract coding projects, their Makerbot tinkering, their 3-D printed critiques, their ruthless neoliberal networking, their newest one-person startup. Everyone, if you dug, had a safety net or some kind of extreme privilege, and she said this made her feel the whole hippie-dippy ethic of the place was bullshit.

"She forgot to mention how her career was built in Commons," David said bitterly, deleting her profile. If he had the chance, he wanted to tell her, what we have here is rare. We design elegant tools and solutions to make the world better. We get to work in a space that has a positive impact on our health, our wellness, our relationships, our personal

goals. It is an immense privilege to even be here. We are blessed, and you were, too, if you'd only been open enough to see.

Commons *is a fictional text by Nora N. Khan commissioned in response to Yuri Pattison's exhibition. Nora N. Khan is a writer and a contributing editor at* Rhizome. *She is a 2016 Thoma Foundation Arts Writing Fellow in Digital Art. She writes fiction and criticism about digital art, artificial intelligence, literature, games, and electronic music. She has published in* Rhizome, Art in America *and* DIS *amongst others. In 2015, she was a contributing critic for Åzone Futures Market, the Guggenheim's first digital exhibition.*