



More in
Common

The Endless Sea

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

Antoine de Saint Exupery

The Endless Sea is a new narrative project by More in Common inspired by Antoine de Saint Exupery's words. Over the course of our navigation we will explore a broad array of topics with the aim of shaping a bold new body of thought and practice in favor of social and environmental transformation.

JOURNAL DE BORD 03

According to Renzo Piano, sandcastles are a serious business. In the book of memories that he just published with his son, the great architect offers detailed instructions for building one:

"The first thing you do is stand on the shoreline and observe the rise and fall of the surf. The relationship between the sandcastle and the sea is more important than it appears. Study the waves closely, one by one, then decide where to build the castle. But be careful: too close and the water will immediately destroy it, too far and the castle won't compete with the waves".

Having established these general principles, Piano moves on to more technical instructions: how to dig a moat, which must not be deeper than thirty centimeters, nor wider than forty-five; how to lay the foundations ("the mound should sit at a forty-five degrees slope") and build the actual castle, which should be sixty centimeters tall; how to dig an opening in the moat to let the water in.

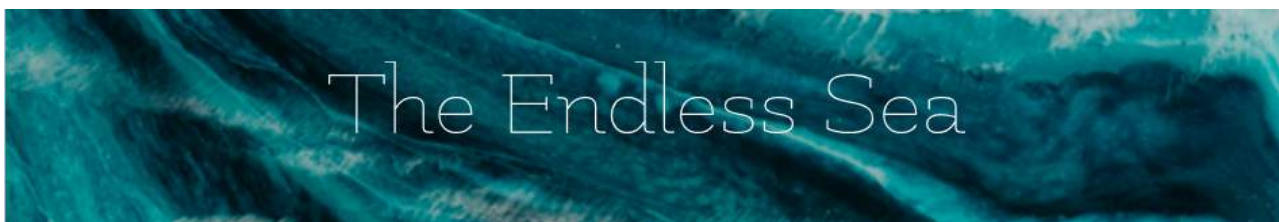
According to the architect: "The moment the waves first enter and float the moat is magical. If the castle is in a good spot, you can watch the water run its course. Then, to store the image in your memory, close your eyes as the water rushes in, quickly, before it slips away. You have to freeze the moment: your retina snaps a photograph".

Then, Piano concludes, "top the castle with a flag, or whatever is lying around the beach, so that it will be visible to people walking by. Turn around, go home and don't look back¹".

These instructions will come in handy the next time we land on a beach in the course of our navigation.

Play is a serious matter. When Shackleton's expedition was stranded in Antarctica, its members managed to endure by keeping up their morale - and survive - thanks to collective activities that took their mind off the harshness of their situation and allowed them to interact freely and positively, such as games. American sociologist Nicholas Christakis believes that a shared sense of play is one of the decisive factors that allow an intentional community to thrive.

¹ Carlo & Renzo Piano, *Atlantis: A Journey in Search of Beauty*, London, Europa Editions, 2020, pp.18-19.



Without necessarily being aware of the latest anthropological findings, national-populist leaders are well aware of the importance of the fun factor in bringing people together. While their propaganda is usually based on negative emotions, which guarantee the greatest involvement, it also tends to have a cheerful, liberating face, too often misunderstood by those who emphasize only the dark side of the populist carnival.

Mockery has always been the most effective tool to subvert hierarchies. During carnival, a liberating laugh buries the pomp of power, its rules and its pretensions. Nothing is more devastating, for authority, than the impertinence that turns it into an object of ridicule. Faced with the programmatic seriousness of the technocrat in power, the boredom and arrogance that emanate from each of his gestures, the transgressive buffoon, *à la* Trump, *à la* Bolsonaro or *à la* Grillo, brings a rush of energy. Taboos, hypocrisies, linguistic conventions collapse amidst the acclamations of the cheering crowd.

During carnival there is no place for the spectator, everyone participates in the frenzied celebration of the world in reverse and no insult, no joke is too vulgar to contribute to the destruction of the dominant order, to its replacement with a dimension of freedom and brotherhood. The carnival produces in those who take part an intense feeling of fullness, unity, metamorphosis and rebirth, the feeling of being part of a collective body that is constantly renewed. Each spectator becomes an actor, without any discrimination based on income or educational level. The opinion of the first passer-by is as valid as that of the expert, more so. The mask is transferred to the Internet, where anonymity produces the effect of disinhibition that once arose from the act of wearing a costume. The trolls are the new puffins that throw gasoline on the liberating bonfire of the populist carnival.

A [recent paper](#) has highlighted "a need for chaos" in large segments of public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. Analyzing the characteristics and motivations of people who disseminate hostile and inaccurate news on social media, the authors have come to make a distinction between partisan and non-partisan actors who just have a preference for chaos. While the aim of the former is to promote their side, the latter gain satisfaction from anything which may contribute to "tearing down the system". In practice, according to the authors, there is a much higher level of enthusiasm for destruction that might have been expected, since "A substantial minority of individuals are so discontent that they are willing to mobilize against the current political order to see if what emerges from the resulting chaos has something better in stock for them".

In this climate, nothing is more deleterious than playing the role of party pooper. The fact-checker pointing out the error with a blue pencil, the liberal with a raised eyebrow who is outraged by the vulgarity of the new barbarians. "That's why the left is so unhappy," says Milo Yiannopoulos, one of the most transgressive new jesters, "it has no aptitude for comedy or celebration." In the eyes of the populist, the mainstream politician is a pedant with his little finger always raised. His pragmatism has become a synonym for fatalism, when the kings of the carnival promise to blow the existing reality to smithereens.

One of the great strengths of the carnival staged by the likes of Trump and Bolsonaro is that of political voluntarism. Even the appeal of much fake news can be understood in this sense. The leader of a movement that integrates fake news into the construction of his worldview stands out from the rest. He is not a pragmatic, fatalistic bureaucrat like so many, but a man of action, constructing his reality to meet the expectations of his supporters.

Lies are popular because they are part of a political narrative that intercepts the fears and aspirations of a growing share of the electorate, while the facts of those who try to counter them are part of a narrative that is no longer judged credible. In practice, for the followers of the populists, it is not the veracity of the individual facts that counts, because what is true is the overall message, which corresponds to their experience and feelings. And in the face of this, it serves little purpose to accumulate data and corrections, if the overall vision of mainstream politicians continues to be perceived by an increasing number of voters as irrelevant to reality.

On the contrary, a true sense of play, a renewed ability to celebrate being together in a joyful way is an indispensable ingredient for anyone who wants to rebuild any shared vision of the future.



First, because, as we have seen, celebration strengthens social bonds. As Michael Foessel writes, democracy is not only a value, but an experience, a real sensation that must be possible to feel not only in formal situations, but also in the informality of a collective gathering. It is no coincidence that the latest (yet unpublished) research carried out by More in Common among the group of the so-called French “Left Behinds” has revealed a deep longing among them for gatherings and communal events (national festivals, school and village festivals, professional festivals), indicated by all as an opportunity to “get out of one’s daily life and meet different people, from different social and cultural backgrounds”.

Games and parties, however, do not only serve to strengthen the collective bond in the present. They also serve, perhaps above all, from our point of view, to liberate the future. To get out of the sense of inevitability that governs such a large part of our lives, to put imagination and desire back at the center.

Renzo Piano’s sand castles are the first prototypes of the Beaubourg and other iconic buildings that the great architect has disseminated to the four corners of the planet over the last forty years.

As we have seen in the case histories, many of the most successful movements of recent years, from Sunrise in the United States to Operation Libero in Switzerland, are based on the ability to mobilize their adherents in a playful way that releases positive energies. But what interests us here is something more specific: not only the ability to put the energy of the party and the game at the service of a project of change, but also the ability to make visible and tangible, if only for a moment, one’s own vision of the future.

DETOUR 03 - PREFIGURATION : A FUTURE YOU CAN TOUCH

One week after the election of Barack Obama to the White House, on November 4th 2008, New Yorkers exiting the subway found themselves with a strange copy of their favorite newspaper in their hands. [An extraordinary \(and free\) edition of the New York Times, dated July 4, 2009](#), which announced, among other things, the end of the war in Iraq, the establishment of universal healthcare, a cap on CEO’s wages and many other stories.

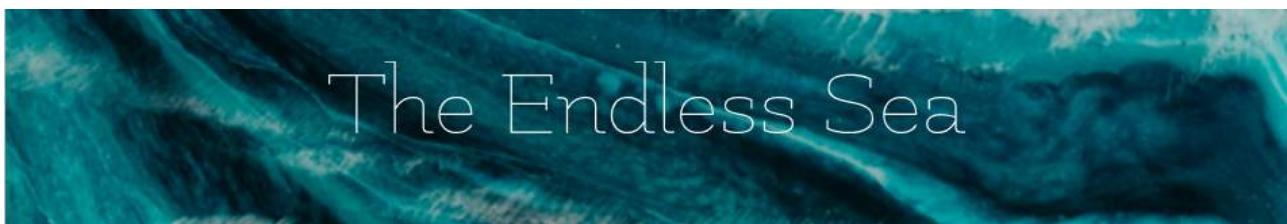
This was not a promotional initiative of the editorial group that publishes the Times, but a very sophisticated prank conceived by a couple of very sophisticated pranksters called “The Yes Men” who brought together dozens of independent writers, artists and activists and asked them to write the paper they wanted to read six months after Obama’s historic election.

Distributed in 100 thousand copies, this collective act of imagination was intended to get people to stop and wonder instead of just registering the bleakness of common reporting. What if things could be different? What if change could be real?

If James Baldwin is right when he says that “The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world”², this means that change requires first of all a considerable effort of imagination, not only to conceive the future, but also to make it tangible.

Conferring a physical dimension to the future, embodying it in collective and concrete objects and experiences, is one of the ways to overcome the loss of energy that accompanies the Big Switch from negative to positive visions of the future with which we have begun to reckon with since the first Journal de bord.

² Quoted in Silas F. Harrebye, *Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p.221.



Having the opportunity to "test-drive" the future, to experience different versions of the future, can help us feel they are possible (or, conversely, that we don't want to go there). And play is central to that. It can bring the future alive, to the extent where we can see it, feel it, taste it, smell it.

One of the fastest growing theme park chains in the world over the last few years is KidZania, a concept that, rather than offering the roller coasters and mirror tunnels of traditional parks, give children between the ages of four and fourteen the chance to enact the roles of grownups in ["a lavishly realized, scaled-down world"](#). At the entrance, each child receives a check for fifty "kids" (the park's currency) and can supplement that with the "salary" they earn from participating in an activity. The most popular of them, like training to be a pilot on a simplified flight simulator, are not as remunerative as the less popular, like being a dentist. Then children can spend their money, renting a small electric car, or in one of the many stores owned by the park's (real-world) brand partners.

Originally conceived in Mexico City, KidZania has won over millions of children, from Lisbon to Tokyo, via Cairo and Kuwait City, where it has become the most visited tourist site. Its appeal lies in the fact that it allows children to move independently in a mock-up adult world, interacting with each other and experiencing different activities. "You go to Disneyland and you see all those kids with their parents, very tired - notes the founder of the park - there are just two minutes of magic - the ride - and that's it, while here most of the time the kids are running, engaged, happy."

But the power of future staging doesn't just apply to children. Over the past few years, a growing number of movements have tried to put into practice Gandhi's motto of "be the change you want to see in this world".

The "Extinction Rebellion" demonstrations held in London in April 2019 created occupied spaces full of trees, conversation, connection, food and song which had a profound effect on those taking part, those passing through, and on the police officers who policed it. Similarly, "Reclaim the Streets" considers that political ends must be embodied in the means you use. For this reason, when protesting against the destruction of a public garden, activists create a garden, when calling for the banning of cars from an area they pedestrianize it, in order to give people a glimpse of a possible future, something that will motivate them to act.

It is not always necessary to build physical examples of the future. Sometimes asking the right questions is enough to capture the imagination and spark a desire for change.

In 2016, for example, a group of environmentalists advocating for the greening of London urban policies bought advertising space in newspapers and on the streets to ask some questions with the goal of moving from "what is" to "what if."

"What if you could swim safely in all of London's canals? What if all residential streets were play streets? What if every street had public art? What if birdsong drowned out traffic noise? What if there were more trees than people? What if a squirrel could get from one side of London to the other without touching the ground by jumping from tree to tree? What if you could see the Milky Way from every garden? What if we *rewilded* all of London's golf courses? What every park in London were connected to all its neighboring parks by at least one green quiet way suitable for walking, cycling, and gardening too?"³.

On their own, these questions have had a powerful impact on Londoners' imaginations. To the point that the three candidates for mayor of that year had to commit, in case of election, to pursue the aims of the association.

More generally, it is clear that the experiences of local government can become an excellent show case for a political project with a national dimension. An essential component of Florence Mayor Matteo Renzi's project was about turning his hometown into a possible model for a different Italy. In 2010, the contrast between

³ Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If. Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*, London, Chelsea Green, 2019.



Florence and the Late Roman Empire atmosphere of the national government led by Silvio Berlusconi could not have been more distinct. While in Italy public works were blocked by a backlog of bureaucracy and a basic lack of funds, in Florence building-sites remained open throughout the night, as they are in Singapore. While Berlusconi quickly regularized illegal constructions, in Florence, Renzi adopted a development plan to protect the environment and the quality of urban life. While national taxes rose, in Florence they started to fall. While everywhere else cultural sites shut their doors for lack of funds, in Florence, new initiatives popped up throughout the city, with municipal museums and libraries remaining open until midnight.

If well governed, a city or a region can become a powerful tool to showcase a different kind of future. And the people who conduct the experiment can be called upon to extend it on a national level: in 2013 the young mayor of Florence took over the leadership of the Italian government (what happened next is, of course, a completely different story that we'll save for a less optimistic version of our JdBs...).

The most enlightened public administrators know that sometimes the symbolic need to give a tangible form to the future must prevail over functionality. The image of the massive waste-to-energy plant in Copenhagen topped by an artificial ski slope has gone around the world and is a powerful symbol of the city's desire to become the first national capital to achieve carbon neutrality, even though the Danes are so good at recycling that they had to import garbage from other countries to power the plant.

"One of our strengths is that we have been very visible with our climate projects - says city architect Camilla van Deurs - such as Amager Bakke (the plant), but also windmills that you see when you fly into the city and the harbor baths, which are a symbol of the approximately 269 million euros we spent to clean up the water". These kinds of tangible benefits are crucial, she believes. "Saving thousands of tons of carbon dioxide, what does that mean? It's difficult to make abstract choices attractive to people, so the key is making them visible"⁴.

In the past, the future was embodied by objects that made people dream, and that awakened desires. David Djaïz, who is finishing a book on the need to revive a French national narrative that unites citizens rather than divides them (more on that in one of the next editions of our Journal de Bord...), told us about the role played in the past by means of transport such as the Concorde and the TGV bullet train.

Today, through an increasingly popular practice called "Design Fiction" architects and designers explore possible futures by creating speculative, and often provocative, scenarios narrated through designed artifacts. In practice, they give shape to the future by imagining non-existent objects that, as the writer Bruce Sterling says, "suspend disbelief about change".

One of the most striking examples of this kind of operation came from the Near Future Lab in Geneva, which in 2015 put together an [Ikea catalog of the future](#), complete with smart mattresses and gardening drones. My favorite item being the low-network/no-screen activity bed canopy AVKOPPLAD, that "minimizes non-essential networks within a radius of 3 meters" while generating "pulsed Schumann electromagnetic fields at both 1.2 and 2.4 Hz producing therapeutic effects for longer, more lasting and palliative sleep".

I plan on getting myself one of those as soon as I get back from my travels.

Thank you for reading this third installment in our log book as we set sail for an unknown destination. Please get in touch with Giuliano da Empoli giulianodaempoli@usa.net if you want to embark on this journey with us.

⁴ Quoted in "Monocle", n.141, March 2021, pp.51-52.