

**DESIGNING THE URBAN COMMONS  
COMPETITION BRIEF**



**Deadline:** 5pm, 1 May 2015

**Contact:** [info@theatrum-mundi.org](mailto:info@theatrum-mundi.org)

**Website:** [designingtheurbancommons.org](http://designingtheurbancommons.org)

*“Urban commoning neither simply “happens” in urban space, nor does it simply produce urban space as a commodity to be distributed. Urban commoning treats and establishes urban space as a medium through which institutions of commoning take shape”*

Stavros Stavrides, On Urban Commoning, in Make\_Shift City:  
Renegotiating the Urban Commons

## INTRODUCTION

The city itself should arguably be treated as a common: a collective physical and cultural creation by and for its inhabitants. However the range of activities permitted in urban spaces is becoming increasingly narrow. Many streets and squares are now managed by private owners and those held by the state are too often sanitised by public space designs that serve to enhance local property values and business rates. This leaves little possibility for the urban public to be used productively by its communities to sustain themselves materially or culturally. Where today is there space in public for people to work together to produce the city and its resources outside of market demands?

Commoning, the collective ownership and management of resources, is currently being reimagined across social, political and economic debates as a response to this challenge facing all cities today. With Britain’s rich history of common rights, London is the perfect place to test commons out as a vital approach to urban design.

This competition asks for existing land, architecture, or infrastructures in neighbourhoods across London to be re-imagined as common spaces, or for new urban commons to be carved out in the city or online. Commons are not static pieces of architecture. We are seeking designs through which the social act of commoning could take shape, by enabling citizens to co-produce urban resources from culture & knowledge to housing, energy or democratic processes. The design itself though is not the final product. It should be the medium through which community relationships and organisations are built.

**THEATRUM  
MUNDI**

## **DESIGN STRATEGY**

Identify a public space, a physical asset or a resource in London that could benefit its users better through being collectively managed or occupied. For example, buildings, utilities or open spaces that don't produce value for their communities or are threatened with privatisation. Describe or show its current condition and context, such as its ownership, and the deficiencies of the way it is currently utilised.

Design plans for an architectural, urban, performative or organisational intervention that enables people to enact common rights to use this space, asset or resource productively and collaboratively. The intervention may be temporary or may not have a physical manifestation in the space itself at all. It may, for example, be an online platform that enables commoning to take place. However the design must show or describe both the intervention itself and the resource that it allows to be collectively produced and used, plus (if relevant) the way the resource or value it creates is distributed to its users.

Give a written rationale referring to three main issues.

- What is the social process of commoning that would take place through the design? For example, the people that would use it, the way they would collaborate or work together and what kind of relationships might be created that could go on to enrich public life.
- How would the design be sustained? Does it require financial input or significant amounts of unpaid labour? How might it be self-subsisting? How would it keep its

community of commoners engaged and involved in its upkeep? Who, if anyone, would have legal ownership of it?

- What kind of social, cultural or material value would it create for the commoners that use it and how would it be ensured that the value it creates stays in their hands and is not capitalised upon?

## **SUBMISSION**

In order to be considered each submission must include:

- 1 A0 board in landscape format (we will not be able to display or exhibit submissions in portrait) presenting the design in full (we advise that this would benefit from being visually led, though the format within the board is entirely open)
- 300 words rationale
- 1 headline image (900px wide)
- 50 words maximum bio and statement of involvement for each team member, up to a maximum of 6 members
- 1 maximum video up to 3 minutes in length expanding on the design and rationale (optional)

## **TEAMS AND ELIGIBILITY**

Entry to the competition is free, online and open to anyone, enabling intellectually and socially diverse teams to work together. Architects, community organisers, performers, artists and activists for example, and active citizens of all kinds, are all encouraged to take part.

We strongly encourage multi-disciplinary teams, and ones that draw on local knowledge about the needs and workings of specific places addressed in the design.

Submissions must include a short paragraph detailing the role of each team member in the creation of the intervention and how his or her point of view contributed to the collaboration.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

Commons are an exciting possibility for the city but come with challenges of definition and execution. We offer the following questions as provocations that should be taken into consideration when developing your design:

### **What is the role of design?**

By setting a challenge to design the urban commons, we are partly looking to explore the role that designers could have in enabling communities to work together, or to work as part of communities themselves. How much of the design should be concerned with the space itself and how much should it be the organisational structure that allows commoning to take place? How does commoning expand the definition of what design is, and where design happens?

### **Who is it for?**

If spaces are owned or legislated by the state on behalf of their constituents then they are termed 'public', but this state ownership often comes with its own limitations on access and usage. For example, the rural right to roam guarantees access for walking on private land but forbids camping, lighting fires or holding festivals, and urban parks and streetscapes are even more rigidly controlled. Common, therefore, is something different to public and could arguably mean that alliances of commoners have direct ownership of space or at least rights to decide the way it should be used. However, the common is also, by definition, exclusionary. Can a common be open to everyone and still retain these rights? Or might there need to be limitations on who can become a 'commoner' with right to benefit from a particular common space.

### **Where is it based?**

Definitions of what can be considered commons range from specific areas of land in a city, like community gardens, co-housing or infrastructure, to cultural goods like language or forms of art, to ecological matter like air and water, to digital platforms. Each of these commons operates at a very different scale, from the hyper-local nostalgia of the village common, to the metropolitan scale of transport infrastructure, to the global flows of music or air currents. How does the scale at which commoning occur change its relationship to forms of social organisation and the question of value? Does the idea of the commons pose challenges to our traditional conceptions of administrative boundaries like borough, town, city, region and nation?

### **Who does it benefit?**

Commoning and the creation of common spaces both have the potential to create all sorts of value: cultural vitality, an animated public realm, aesthetically improved places and financially valuable resources like food, energy and housing. Commons throughout history though have always been threatened with enclosure as private interests attempt to capitalise upon the value they produce. Local authorities and property developers for example may attempt to use the existence of commons to market places as commodities, which in turns threatens the very existence of commons. Perhaps this is inevitable and the social process of commoning can adapt and relocate, or perhaps there are specific ways this commodification can be resisted.

### **What are resources?**

Commoning is the collective production and management of resources for and by their users. But what is an urban resource? Some may appear to be finite, such as space and water. Others may actually benefit from being used up to a point, such as libraries and cultural institutions. Others still may only become a resource when they are framed as such by a certain kind of user, such as waste. Finally, some, such as the intangible urban “atmosphere” that animates public life in the city, are produced by consumption of the city and come into being with urban density. How does your design contribute to new or existing urban resources through the creation of ways to do commoning?

### **ENTRY OPPORTUNITY**

Submissions will be accepted until 5pm on 1st May 2015.

### **AWARDS & EXHIBITION**

Ten selected proposals will be awarded £300 toward the implementation of their proposal. These ten proposals will be featured at the ‘Designing the Urban Commons’ exhibition at LSE’s Atrium Gallery as part of the London Festival of Architecture.

Of these ten featured proposals, eight will be selected by the jury, and two will be selected via an ongoing online web vote by the public.

All submitted proposals that meet the criteria will be able to be viewed on a screen at the exhibition.