

# Utility/Collectivity

The cards

## Designing collectivity in digital platforms for the urban commons

Research  
Project



Charging  
the Commons

## **Urban commons** (*noun*)

Resources in the city which are managed by the users in a non-profit and prosocial way.

Urban Commons can include any number of resource types, from housing to Wi-Fi, but the main thing that makes urban commons different from public goods and consumer goods is that they are managed by the users through a prosocial, participatory process called commoning. (Dellenbaugh-Losse, Zimmermann & De Vries, The Urban Commons Cookbook).

**Be-commoning** (*verb*) The process through which a new (urban) commons is established.

Whether a Wi-Fi network or a housing cooperative, before people can start using and managing a collective resource, it needs to be conceived, set up and put in place. This is a complex process that includes the design of the resource itself, its governance structure and rules of engagement, the building or strengthening of a community of commoners that will collaboratively manage the resource, and often also negotiations with external actors such as local governments, financial institutions or future neighbours.

**The past two decades** have seen a resurgence in interest in the (urban) commons. Examples include initiatives such as energy cooperatives, neighbourhood gardens, local transportation schemes (e.g. car-sharing), collective housing, open-source software, community-run libraries, and organizations managing care for neighbours.

These commons – sometimes called resource communities – are presented as collective modes of economic and social organization that could function as alternatives or complements to the market and the state. Their goal is not profit or mere efficiency. Rather they aim to contribute to the collective well-being of the community, strengthen social relations, and give members collective ownership and sovereignty over their resources. They also aim for the prolonged sustainability of local and global social-natural ecosystems, contributing to a more just, socially inclusive, and sustainable society.

Managing these commons is complex and they do not manifest out of thin air. Before they are up and running, many things must be put in place. A community of prospective members needs to come together to discuss their motives and values. These need to be translated into the architecture of the resource (e.g. a shared apartment building) and a formal governance structure, including rules about members' rights and duties. In turn, these need to comply with (local) regulations and be integrated into existing social and economic contexts.

We have coined the term *be-commoning* for this process: the various tasks that must be thought through and carried out to develop a new commons. This process often involves professionals with expertise in law, architecture, construction, finance, and technology. It also requires skills in project management and orchestration to guide a community through the various steps needed for them to become a commons.

## **Digital platforms for the urban commons**

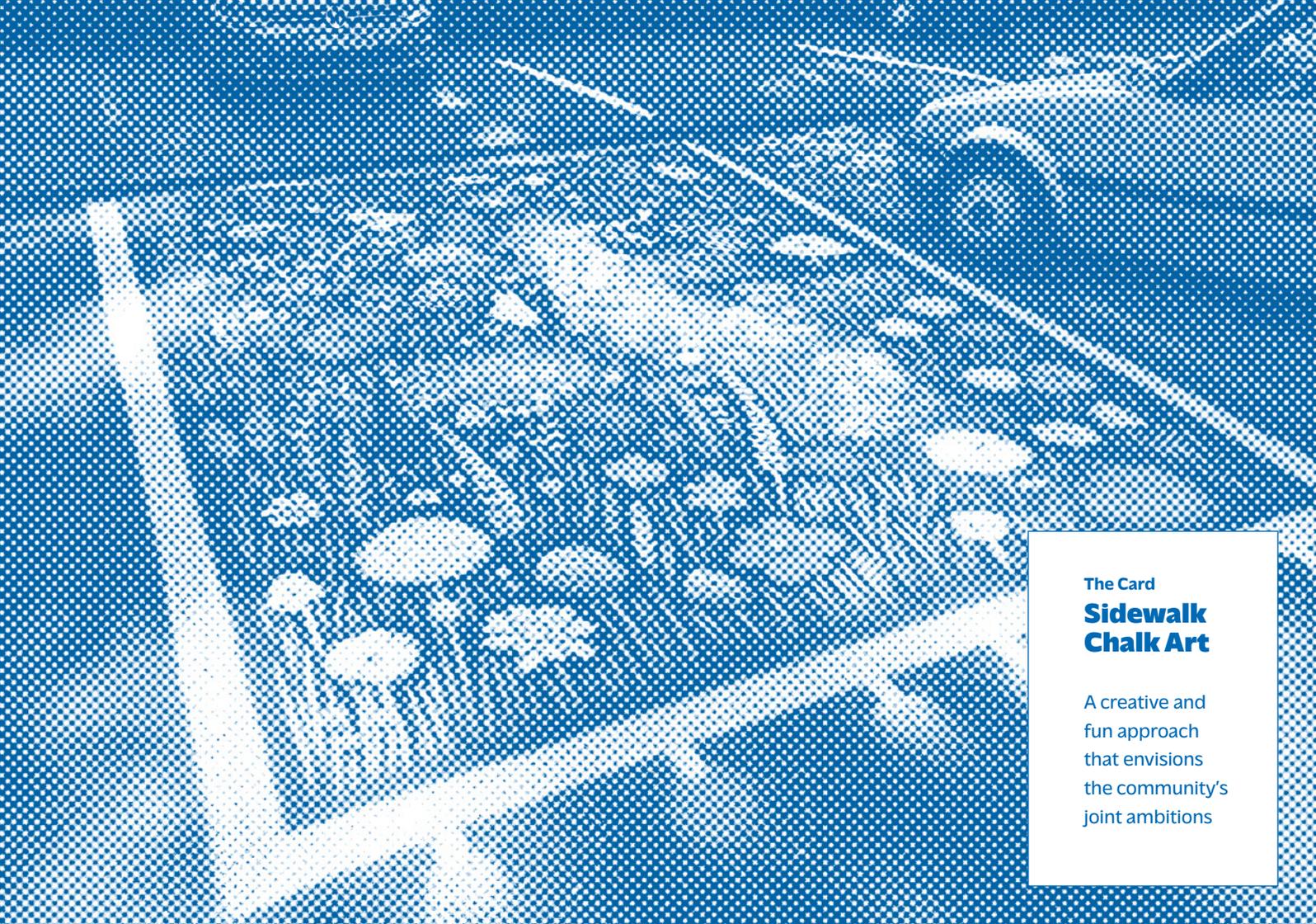
An important and often overlooked aspect of be-commoning is the design of technological infrastructures and platforms that enable communities to share and manage their joint resources, like car sharing. How could the design of these platforms be aligned with the values of the communities involved?

We found that current car sharing platforms only provide a very functional and basic infrastructure, aimed at utility: ensuring the smooth transactional management of daily, practical routines. Commoners sharing resources between them are happy with these functionalities, but they also miss features that strengthen their sense of belonging and collective identity. Community-oriented features and functionalities enhancing community building and supporting collaborative actions are mostly absent from these platforms.

To address that issue, students from the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS) were asked to think about design possibilities to go beyond the utility of these services, and include features that also strengthen the collectivity of a commons community.

They were invited to suggest concrete mechanisms for three distinct collectivity features—community, communication, and cooperation— by either extending currently available practical experiences or by exploring imaginative and speculative scenarios.

This card deck presents the work of the AUAS students. The examples on the cards showcase the possible features and functions they developed to support collectivity.



The Card

## **Sidewalk Chalk Art**

A creative and  
fun approach  
that envisions  
the community's  
joint ambitions

**This card deck aims to inspire designers, commoners and others to explore 'collectivity' as a key functionality for resource sharing platforms. We see 'collectivity' as a desirable affordance of digital platforms for the commons, in addition to 'utility'.**

## **Utility**

Utility concerns the practical, logistic, transactional and efficient organization necessary for any sort of platform-based communal sharing.

## **Collectivity**

Collectivity concerns the interface-elements that enable and catalyze collective experiences, a sense of belonging and actions of community-oriented collaboration.

Collectivity is not meant to replace utility, but to be designed concurrently with it. As there are many guidelines and patterns established for the design of more practical aspects of digital platforms, our focus here is on the inclusion of affordances for collectivity.

The affordances for collectivity can be grouped in three categories:

**Community** → The ways in which the community, its members, their relations or common goals become visible on the platform, opening opportunities for identification, and a sense of belonging.

**Communication** → The ways in which members can contact each other, exchange information, keep each other informed, vote, rate, listen, discuss, coordinate etc.

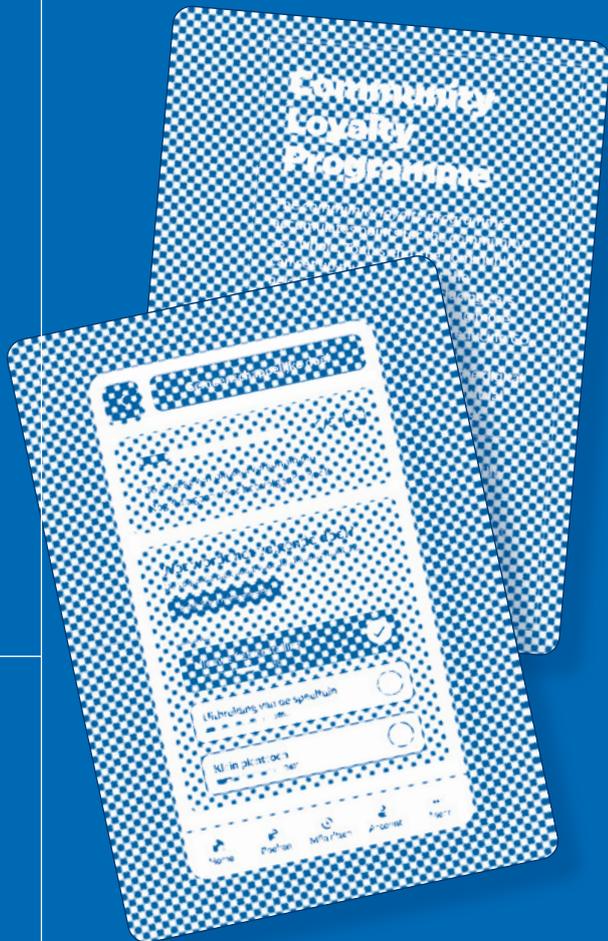
**Cooperation** → The ways in which the platform allows members to collaborate on joint ambitions.

These aspects evidently draw on and are interwoven with each other, however, from a designerly angle they can be discerned as separate functionality features.

## **Conviviality**

The three elements of the 'collectivity' affordance altogether also indicate the potential emergence of members' positive mental condition in the form of conviviality. Convivial artifacts are specifically designed to unite people, in both its production, use and continuous adaptation. They aim at promoting sociality, cooperativity, self-expression, autonomous and creative exchanges among individuals. They therefore stimulate communication and the will to act together for accomplishing joint purposes.

# The cards



## How to use this card deck

The cards are divided into the three categories representing the affordances of collectivity: community, communication, and cooperation.

These categories make it possible to browse, sort, and share the cards easily.

This card deck can guide you as an inspirational tool. The examples on the cards give you insights into possible options for designing collectivity.

The cards can function as a conversation starter for the community you design with. You can have a dialogue about how to design their digital platform by showing the cards.

You can also use them as a starting point to design, discuss, or analyse a commons-enabling digital platform.

We encourage you to add your own cards!

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This card deck is one of the results of the Charging the Commons research-project. Its content is based on the work of students at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and our own research, as reported in:

Tomor, S. and M. de Waal (forthcoming) Designing digital platforms to manage a commons: the case of carsharing communities in The Netherlands

Charging the commons investigates the be-commoning (design)process in which new urban commons are initiated, usually in a collaboration between citizens and professionals. The project is an initiative of the Civic Interaction Design Research Group at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, and carried out in collaboration with the Situated Art & Design Research Group at Avans University of Applied Sciences.

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## Partners



# Kivivisselley / Kiviritu



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