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Why Share?

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WHY SHARE?

A strategy for living that cuts materials waste and pollution turns out to offer some important social benefits as well.

by Gary Gardner

In 1998, the Kellogg Company introduced a clever new product. "Breakfast Mates" brought together a single serving of cereal, a disposable bowl, a small carton of milk, and a plastic spoon, all in one package. Hand the kit to a child, and voila—breakfast is served. "It's for today's busy family," Kellogg spokesman Anthony Hebron told a *New York Times* reporter. "A breakfast with virtually no preparation, and, if you think about it, no cleanup." Hebron was speaking, of course, about the cleanup required of the consumer, not of the community in which the consumer lives. If all Americans ate breakfast this way for a year, they would generate 5.6 million tons of packaging waste—equal to 8 percent of the nation's current flow of municipal packaging waste.

Even for the consumer, of course, the convenience of Breakfast Mates comes at a price. At $1.39, the kit costs nearly five times as much as the same cereal served in a more traditional way—that is, with Mom or Dad pulling a cereal box from the cabinet, a carton of milk from the fridge, and a spoon from the drawer. And the out-of-pocket cost pales in comparison to the social toll. TV ads for Breakfast Mates assure Mom and Dad that they can sleep while their child eats breakfast alone in front of the TV. Gone, it seems, is another piece of traditional family life (cooking and eating together was once a daily family ritual), in a society where families are fraying on every front.

Envision this Brave New Breakfast kind of thinking spreading throughout whole economies, and you can sense a troubling global trend: increased emphasis on privatized, individualized goods and services, often at the expense of personal finances, social cohesiveness, and the environment. It's happening in a world that can hardly endure further weakening of families and communities, and that has little capacity to absorb more pollution and waste or to turn still more of its forests into pulp. But as the natural world degrades and social disintegration accelerates, many people seem to be resorting more fiercely than ever to privatized, individualistic solutions: they buy bottled water, for example, because they don't trust the public supply; or they move to a private gated community because they feel insecure in a public one. These are the latest steps in a shift that began decades ago, when city dwellers moved out of apartments into suburban houses, and gave up riding public buses or trolleys in favor of cars. All of this to protect prized attributes—convenience, individual ownership—whose advantages are increasingly questionable. What good, for example, is the convenience of private mobility, if added up across society it produces public congestion? What good is the luxury of a private breakfast, if it impoverishes family life and fosters loneliness and disconnection?

If the zealous pursuit of private goods often erodes public well-being, a growing number of experiments suggest that the reverse is also true: emphasizing shared goods and services at the personal level can prove highly enriching to family and community life—and to the environment on which that life depends. Most societies already share many things, of course—from books in libraries to open space in parks. But sharing could be expanded greatly, to cover everything from household goods to trans-

portation systems—while still respecting much of the privacy that people understandably desire. Communities that appreciate this opportunity are reaping some surprising benefits.

Sharing: A Long Human Tradition

The impulse to share has deep roots in human history. For most of our life as a species—the hundreds of millennia we spent as hunters and gatherers—nearly all goods were shared. Private property hardly existed for early humans, beyond the clothes they wore or the few tools or weapons they carried. Before the invention of farming, most societies were itinerant—they moved from place to place, following the seasonal ripenings of plants and the migrations of animals. With such a lifestyle, goods quickly became burdensome loads, and accumulating possessions made little sense.

There was even less reason to regard natural resources such as air and water as anything other than common property—if indeed "property" had any conscious meaning at all. More likely, things like rivers and forests were regarded as parts of a natural domain that belonged to no one, or belonged only to the gods. And because so much of life was community-centered, from finding food to eating, playing, and praying, personal property was largely unnecessary in any case, and could actually separate one from the community. That remains true today, though in the fervor to acquire wealth, it is often not taken into account.

Once humans began to practice agriculture around 10,000 years ago, reliable food supplies made settled life possible, and ownership of property became more common. Along with ownership came the temptation for individuals to sequester property for their own or their families' exclusive use—a temptation that was to become a divisive force in subsequent human civilizations. Still, most societies made efforts to ensure that the interests of the greater community were protected: Rome collected taxes to pay for its aqueducts, for example, and Medieval Europeans established common grazing areas.

In the past three centuries, with the exaltation of the individual that emerged from the Enlightenment (recall the French philosopher Rene Descarte's emblematic dictum "I think, therefore I am"), private property became the foundation of modern, market-oriented economies. Today, property rights continue to expand with the spread of free-market economics, not just to more and more real estate, but also to realms never before conceived as private. Water, drawn from springs that underlie communities, is increasingly bottled and sold by entrepreneurs for private gain—and even traded by the tankerful between nations. A mathematical formula was ruled patentable in 1998 by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Washington—allowing the formula to be privately owned, and leading some commentators to wonder if Einstein could have cornered the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROLF LAUB

market on applied uses of $E=mc^2$. Even life itself is becoming property: the U.S. government has sought to patent genetic material from indigenous people in Panama and the Solomon Islands, and actually succeeded in patenting the human cell line of a man in Papua New Guinea (the patent was later "disclaimed").

As private ownership becomes more widely accepted, and as the public sector loses influence in many societies, more of the world's wealth is now found in private hands. The flip-side—that less of the world's wealth is shared—is also true, because private wealth tends to be tucked away for private use. To anyone concerned about the pervasive inequities that have resulted—the world's richest 20 percent are now 60 times wealthier than the poorest 20 percent, a gap twice as great as in the mid-1960s—this has been a discouraging and seemingly unstoppable trend.

With this worsening distribution of wealth comes an increasingly unhealthy environment, as consumer-driven economies foster more intensive use of materials and energy. This intensive use may also be exacerbated by patterns of private, individualized consumption, which in many cases require far larger amounts of materials and energy than sharing does. What's true of Kellogg's breakfast cereal is true of the timber and land used to build housing, or the steel, plastic, concrete, and land used to build transportation systems.

Researchers at the Wuppertal Institute in Germany and the Factor 10 Institute in France, among others, have analyzed the extent to which current consumption is outstripping global limits, and have estimated that the world as a whole will need to reduce its consumption of materials to about half of current levels to achieve a steady-state economy. The largest cuts will have to come in industrial countries, where consumption is heaviest: some analysts believe these countries could cut materials use to just ten percent of current levels without significantly reducing the quality of life. They have proposed a range of creative strategies to help achieve this ambitious goal, including recycling basic materials like paper and metal, redesigning products, and substituting less-wasteful processes (as, for example, in substituting telecommuting for commuting by car).

A less-familiar strategy, in this era of increasing privatization, is to revive the old practice of communal sharing. While the primary motive for sharing may be social, the ecological benefits are substantial. Moreover, these benefits are not merely theoretical, but have been well demonstrated in three primary areas of human activity: in the use of cars, of living space, and of the energies given to volunteer work. In the following sections, we look at how this strategy has been put to work in real places, in each of these three areas.

CARS In the early 1990s, analysts at the Netherlands Ministry of Transport noted, with some alarm, that the number of private cars in the country was surging. Car ownership had tripled from 2 million in the 1970s to more than 6 million, and was projected to reach 8 million by 2010. Fearing the kind of nightmarish congestion and pollution that has engulfed such places as Mexico City and Bangkok, the Dutch planners sought to discourage growth in the private fleet by restricting parking, promoting the use of buses and bicycles, and creating other incentives to reduce car use. They also backed car sharing, a new idea that was spreading rapidly across Europe.

In Amsterdam, for example, residents can sign up with the Autodelen car sharing program by paying a deposit of $250, 95 percent of which is refundable when they leave the program. The agency places cars at special parking spaces—reserved and marked for car sharing—around the city. A member can either reserve a car in advance or pick one up on the spot, if available. The member walks or bikes to the car, which is usually parked within a few blocks, and uses an electronic card to open the key box, which is mounted on a pole in front of the parking spot. In addition to the car's keys, the box often contains a plug-in stereo. At the end of the month, the member receives a bill for a monthly fee, plus usage charges based on hours of use and distance driven.

Car sharing is not designed for those who need a car as their primary means of transportation. It is too expensive for regular daily car-users, such as suburban commuters who have no other options. But for people who drive less than 10,000 miles per year, and can rely on public transport, biking, or walking, car-sharing increases mobility by adding a flexible and economical alternative to their transportation mix—which may make it possible to forego owning their own cars.

The idea got its first major impetus just over a decade ago. In 1988, two German brothers, Carsten and Markus Petersen, took note of the rising public frustration with traffic congestion and high driving costs in Berlin, and seized on a concept that had emerged in Switzerland the year before: why not sell people a transportation *service*, rather than a very expensive transportation *product*? Starting with two Opels and an answering machine to take reservations, their company, Stattauto of Berlin, eventually expanded to 300 cars parked at 56 vehicle stations and serving 5,500 members. As it grew, the idea spread to other congested towns and cities across Europe. Today, some 70,000 members in 300 towns and cities in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Italy and Ireland belong to car-sharing groups. More recently, the concept has even gained a modest footing in North America. Six Canadian cities have or are planning car-sharing

initiatives, Portland has an operating system, and Seattle is just initiating one.

The Petersen brothers grasped what has long escaped society at large: private car use, while convenient, is extremely inefficient. Most cars spend most of their lives parked, taking up space, not taking people where they want to go—*not* doing what they were built to do. The average car in the Netherlands, for example, is used for an hour and 12 minutes per day, so it sits unused for nearly 23 hours. By this reckoning, the price tag for 100 percent convenience—a car that is always available on demand—is that it lie idle for 95 percent of its life. To put this kind of inefficiency in perspective, imagine a printing company running only 1 of its 20 presses at any time. The company would quickly go broke. With cars, a largely idled stock means far more parking capacity has to be built, and more urban space tied up, even if the number of cars actually in use on the streets remains the same. Car-sharing addresses this inefficiency: the average shared car in the U.K. or Ireland is used 30 percent of the time—six times more than the average car in the Netherlands.

In reality, however, the efficiency benefits go beyond the parking capacity eliminated, because car sharing also reduces the number of cars being used at any given time. While efficiency benefits may not significantly reduce the number of cars *manufactured* (a car used six times as many hours may have to be replaced with a new one almost six times as often), sharing reduces the number of people who are car-dependent, which *can* reduce the number of cars manufactured. In fact, most car sharers shift to public transportation, cycling, or walking as their principal mode of transport. Studies by the Swiss Ministry of Energy and the German Ministry of Transport estimate that car sharers drive some 28,000 fewer car-kilometers per year than they did before joining car sharing—not because they can't get a car when they want one, but because their habits and priorities change. Reductions in driving have even been found, somewhat surprisingly, for sharers who have not previously owned a car. A Dutch study documented a 29 percent decrease in their mileage compared with previous use of borrowed or rented cars or taxis. On average, every shared vehicle eliminates an estimated four private cars, as multiple-car owners sell one or more of their vehicles, and as some of the non-owners forego purchases they might otherwise have made.

Because automobiles are such materials-intensive commodities, the resulting shrinkage of national fleets can bring large materials savings. U.S. automobile production, for example, claims two-thirds of the iron, half the rubber, and one-fifth of the aluminum produced in the country each year. This heavy resource consumption exacts heavy environmental costs, ranging from pollution at mining sites to the generation of global-warming gases from burning of fossil fuels for materials processing and transport. A German study of car sharing's potential in Europe estimates that at least 6 million private cars could easily be eliminated without any restriction on personal mobility. At 1.5 tons of material saved per car, this amounts to savings of 9 million tons, including some 5 tons of steel—more than 3 percent of total steel consumption in the EU in 1997.

The question of mobility is critical, of course, because private cars are cherished for their convenience. What's particularly intriguing about car-sharing is that the huge increase in efficiency it brings requires only a small reduction in convenience. A study of a car-share program in Germany, for example, found that members got the car they wanted, when they wanted it, more than 90 percent of the time. Eight percent of the time, members were accommodated if they agreed to a different car or a different reservation time. Only in 1.3 percent of cases could members not be accommodated at all. (And that 1.3 percent may not be any more than the fraction of time that a private car isn't available to its owner—whether because it's disabled, in the shop, or being used by another family member.)

As for the inconvenience of getting to a shared car, it doesn't seem to be a major factor. A study of a Swiss car-share group revealed that 69 percent of the

Operational Costs for a Car Under Different Modes of Ownership

Destination	Hours/Miles	Car Sharing	Ownership	Taxi	Car Rental
Quick Errand	1 hr./11 mi.	$6	$7	$20	
Shopping Trip	3 hr./26 mi.	$15	$26	$38	$48
Trip Out of Town	5 hr./95 mi.	$32	$43		$52

Source: King County Metro (Washington State), Department of Transportation

members live less than 10 minutes from the nearest car. Just as the inconvenience of getting to a bus line or subway station is often minor compared to the advantages of using public transport, walking to a car station is typically regarded as a rather minor inconvenience, for the access it provides.

Probably the biggest attraction of car sharing for most people, however, is the financial savings it yields. For those who drive less than 16,000 kilometers (10,000 miles) per year, car sharing makes economic sense. That may exclude most people who commute from outer suburbs by car and who do not have access to commuter trains or buses, but in an urbanizing world it includes growing numbers of inner-suburban and city dwellers. King County Metro, the transportation authority in the Seattle, Washington area, has demonstrated the financial advantage of car sharing by comparing its costs with those of a private car, a taxi, or a rental (see table at left). Based on these data, a monthly budget of four shopping trips, four quick errand runs, and one out-of-town trek would run $116—compared with the $575 that the American Automobile Association estimates was needed to operate a new car each month in the United States in 1998. At the same time, rates are expensive enough to encourage the use of public transportation.

The environmental and financial benefits of car sharing are their major assets, but car sharing can also strengthen community ties by fostering a sense of shared interests in a more livable community. Sharers evidently feel an obligation to keep the car clean, for example, because the community of users for any particular car is relatively small (and because the user's log reveals who had the car last!).

Car sharing is not a viable option in all cities—it would be a difficult sell in today's Los Angeles, for example, because of that far-flung city's lack of effective public transport, a prerequisite for affordable car-sharing. Where it does work, cities need to reclaim some of the freed-up street and parking space so that the decreased congestion does not simply invite an increase in private cars. Moreover, car-sharing is by no means a substitute for the more sweeping goals of eliminating gasoline-powered engines, and of drastically reducing dependence on solo-driver-dominated personal transport systems. But managed well, car sharing can give the automobile a more rational place in the urban transport mix, scaling back from the 80 to 90 percent of trips currently provided by individual cars in U.S. and European cities.

HOUSING Sociologist David Riesman wrote in the 1950s that city dwellers and suburbanites are a "lonely crowd": we live and work within a few meters of hundreds of people without knowing their names, much less their life stories. It is reasonable to suppose that most city dwellers feel ambivalent about this anonymity, appreciating the privacy it offers but lamenting the loss of human connectedness. Alternative living arrangements that try to re-establish this connectedness—through communal housing, for example—often tip the balance the other way: in exchange for stronger social ties, residents surrender a substantial measure of independence and privacy. Striking a balance between household privacy and community life has proven difficult in modern societies.

In the early 1970s, a group of social pioneers in Denmark began experimenting with a type of community known as cohousing—a form of modern-day village that is now establishing solid footholds in several countries. Designed by residents and intended to build strong community ties, the typical village consists of 10 to 40 clustered households, each with its own house or apartment. Privacy is valued and respected, but the design and culture of the community also encourages interactions and sharing among neighbors. Residents share some of the space—usually a "common house" for meetings, recreation, and periodic group meals, but also workshops and garden or yard areas in some cases. The communities are self-managed, which also encourages interaction, and community-level decisions are made on a consensus basis. In short, cohousing seems to provide the social cohesiveness that many people desire, while leaving each household free to determine its level of involvement.

These villages are catching on. More than 200 of them are in operation in Denmark, where ten percent of all new housing is cohousing. And cohousing has spread to North America somewhat more readily than car sharing has. About 55 cohousing communities now thrive in the United States and Canada—all built since the late 1980s—with 150 more in various stages of planning. The number of residents is still tiny—3,000 in a combined U.S.-Canadian population of well over 300 million—but the surge in interest and the relatively mainstream character of the pioneering communities suggest that the movement carries a measure of broad appeal.

Walk through a cohousing community and you'll likely be struck by what sets it apart from conventional suburban housing. Houses are set close together, often sharing common walls with neighboring homes, and clustered around a courtyard or pedestrian walkway. Cars are typically confined to the perimeter of the community property, and not allowed to dominate the community space. Dwellings are small, but somehow seem quite livable. Perhaps most striking, neighbors clearly know each other. At a village called Greyrock Commons in Colorado, a carpool leaves to take a group of kids to summer school. The community garden is well tended by volunteers, and tables in the common house

are set for the next community supper. Alongside these community features, a conventional suburbanite would find familiar elements as well: homes in most cohousing villages are owned individually, and could easily be mistaken for ordinary townhomes.

The residents, too, might look familiar enough; unlike the counter-cultural groups who formed communes in the 1970s, the cohousers don't seem to represent a sharp break with mainstream culture so much as a wish to make it more socially satisfying and ecologically sound. Most U.S. cohousers are professionals, half have a graduate degree, and many have families. They value privacy, but they appear to be more socially and environmentally aware than many conventional suburbanites, and more interested in engaging the world beyond their four walls. Charles Durrett, who helped launch the cohousing movement in the United States with his wife Katie McCamant in 1988, notes that cohousing is a flexible option. "In co-housing, you feel like you have a choice between privacy and community. With conventional housing, your choice is usually between privacy and privacy. That's why I think co-housing will succeed—Americans like choice."

Although cohousing is still in its infancy in the United States, its environmental and community building advantages have already been documented in a study by Australian researcher Graham Meltzer. In 1996, Meltzer visited 18 communities in the United States, primarily in California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Washington, and surveyed residents to determine how cohousing had changed their lives. The results revealed that most of the residents were willing to make significant tradeoffs for what they regard as a higher overall quality of life.

Probably the biggest sacrifice made by cohousers is the surrender of space. Average living space per household in the studied communities—including each household's share of the average common room area—was about 1400 square feet, just two-thirds the size of the average new home in the United States in 1996. But intelligent sharing of space helps make smaller dwellings easier to live with. Shared basement space for mechanical services and common entryways for adjoining dwellings reduce the square footage of dwellings with little sacrifice of livability. And building in tight clusters allows yard space to be shared—space that can be easy to share without a major loss of privacy. As a result of these features, the average cohousing community in the Meltzer study uses only half as much land, per dwelling, as does a conventional suburban U.S. development.

Residents also surrender some free time in these self-governing communities to ensure that they run smoothly. The average member serves on one committee—the governing board, or the landscape committee, or the common meals coordination group—that meets monthly or bi-weekly to manage community activities.

The return on these investments of time, however, is substantial. In some cases, just a few minutes can make a large difference. Residents of Colorado's Greyrock Commons put colored flags by their doors when they plan a trip to the store, signaling that neighbors are welcome to drop off their shopping lists. Simple assistance—help with fixing a leaky faucet or installing new software—is often handled "in-house" in many communities. And care that was once provided by extended families is sometimes supplied by the community: a woman in the Pioneer Valley community in Amherst, Massachusetts, for example, reported not having to cook for two months after giving birth.

Some of the greatest benefits come from a central institution of cohousing, meal-sharing. Most of the communities in the Meltzer study offer two or more common meals per week, with an average of 58 percent of the residents usually or always attending. The meals, of course, offer regular opportunities for socializing with neighbors. But they are also important time savers. In contrast to Kellogg's answer to our chronic shortage of time—the individualized Breakfast Mates package—cohousing residents turn to a shared effort for meal preparation and cleanup, freeing up hours each month. At the Nomad Cohousing Community in Colorado, which serves two shared meals per week, residents help with cooking and cleanup once every five to six weeks. In return, they simply show up and enjoy the other dozen or so meals that are served in the same period. Each resident's turn at cooking and cleanup requires some two-and-a-half to three hours of work, according to community member Zev Paiss. If a conventional household needs an hour a day to cook a comparable dinner and to wash the dishes, it has to provide about nine hours more work over the six weeks than is required at Nomad. Larger communities have shown even greater savings of time for participating residents.

Residents cite safe and easily arranged child care as another major social advantage of cohousing. The proximity of neighbors who know and trust one another facilitates child care, even when the need arises on the spur of the moment. And knowing that common areas are relatively secure and under the watchful eye of neighbors gives parents peace of mind in letting their children play outside. These community bonds help to address one of the most challenging and expensive issues facing many parents today.

Residents also seem pleased with the easy socialization of their children, who have plenty of playmates, both young and old. In an age of small families, the average cohousing community has 20 children, providing kids with near-sibling relation-

ships they otherwise would not have. Children reportedly relish their playtime, often preferring it even to television viewing. One resident in the Meltzer study reported that "the television watching regime in our household collapsed when we moved into cohousing." Like the adults, children also share goods; in one community they leave their bicycles in the common grounds area, with each child free to use any bicycle there.

Meltzer's research suggests that cohousing, beyond its social strengths, offers a more environmentally friendly form of living. His survey found that members became moderately "greener" after moving into cohousing: they recycled more, and moderated their use of energy and water more attentively, than they had in their previous residences. The most surprising and encouraging finding was that members drove their cars less. Most residents had moved from areas of moderate or high density to areas of low or moderate density, where dependence on a car might be expected to grow. But members reported driving less after moving into the new communities, and among all the cohousers surveyed, the number of cars owned was found to have fallen by 4 percent.

Whether these gains can be credited to cohousing is not certain: many members were not living in conventional housing before moving, so a clear comparison of the two housing types can't be drawn from Meltzer's data. On the other hand, if cohousing is the reason for the gains, these gains may actually be greater than the study suggests. Most residents were committed environmentalists who had adopted green practices before moving into cohousing. To the extent that the design and dynamics of cohousing fosters greener living, the environmental savings might be larger if most of the residents move in from conventional suburban settings where green practices were not the norm.

In the communities Meltzer studied, the practice of sharing extends well beyond the buildings and land. Thanks largely to the construction of community workshops and other facilities, residents of the 18 communities have achieved a 25 percent reduction in the number of freezers, washing machines, and dryers and a 75 percent reduction in lawnmowers from what they had used in their previous housing. The community workshop of the Doyle Street community in Emeryville, California, for example, houses an electric belt sander, picnic coolers, and a kayak—all of which are available to residents. The Commons of the Alameda in New Mexico takes a different approach, promoting informal exchanges of household items by posting a list of items that may be borrowed from particular households (see table below). And many residents' dwellings find that their clustered housing facilitates cooperation on environmental practices such as composting.

Partial Lending List of Household Items from the Commons of the Alameda Cohousing Community, New Mexico

Gardening	Hand trowel, lawn mower, leaf rake, wheelbarrow
Building and maintenance	Back belt, bucket, carpentry tools, sewing machine, staple gun, toilet plunger, toilet snake
Cleaning	Mini vacuum, rug cleaner
Recreation	Backpack, bicycle tools, car bike rack, snowshoes, tents
Cooking	Coffee pot, cookbooks, wok
Other	Inflatable mattress, futon, folding tables

Source: Meltzer, G. (in press) "Cohousing: Verifying the Importance of Community in the Application of Environmentalism," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research.*

Cohousing communities are not utopias, of course; the close interactions that build community can also generate conflict. The opportunity for safe and easy child care, for example, in addition to providing one of the greatest social benefits of cohousing, also causes some of the greatest community strains, as residents worry about their children's socialization under the influence of other adults. At the same time, many of the U.S. pioneer communities lament their lack of racial and economic diversity. This is partly because start-up costs for architectural planning, permitting and construction require significant out-of-pocket outlays long before members move in—an estimated $28,000 per household, in the case of a community in Washington state. Low income househunters do not have that kind of cash, and housing assistance programs are typically designed just to pay rent, not to help people design and build their home. Such problems are not peculiar to cohousing, however, and as developers take the lead in building cohousing (so far, prospective resi-

dents have spearheaded most efforts), issues of financing and coordination should become simpler.

PERSONAL TIME AND SKILLS

Even if we shared every car and home, every tool and toy—indeed, every material thing around us—we'd still hold a major, private resource: our personal time. But time, like material possessions, can be shared, typically through tutoring, coaching, or some other form of volunteer work. And like the sharing of goods, volunteering of time is a great community-builder, and it can bolster environmental health—as with volunteer efforts to clean up riverside garbage or to save birds endangered by an oil spill. But in a world where parents barely get pre-packaged cereal on the table, who has time for more volunteer work?

A more productive question might address how we can "leverage" the beneficial effect of time *currently* volunteered. One way, conceived by Edgar Cahn of the TimeDollar Institute of Washington, is through the use of a novel tool known as "service credits." They work like this: suppose every hour of a particular person's volunteer effort, whether in a legal aid clinic, a soup kitchen, or a neighbor's home, were recorded as one "service credit" in an electronic database. Suppose, too, that that volunteer—let's call him Victor—is an elderly man on a fixed income, who needs his bathroom painted. He can't afford a painter and he's too proud to ask for help. But he has earned a service credit, and he can, without embarrassment, use this credit to have another volunteer do the painting. In this simple example, the service credit has doubled the size of the "market" for volunteer services: instead of just Victor's hour of work being contributed to the community, his hour plus the painter's hour are contributed. And as more volunteers with a wider variety of abilities join in, the market for volunteerism grows. Service credits essentially tap a latent source of wealth in any community: people's time and energy.

Service credit programs are operating in more than 150 communities in the United States and are now used in Japan and the U.K. as well. One example is the Woman Share program in New York City, whose 100 members use "time dollars," as the credits are often called, to help each other with diverse tasks. Carpentry, cooking, massage, organizing closets and papers, and planning weddings and bat mitzvahs rank among the most requested services. Social bonds are strengthened not only through the service relationships, but also via monthly potluck dinners, which are regularly attended by one-third to one-half of the members. Indeed, Woman Share's success in community building has created a happy dilemma: as the women become close friends, they grow reluctant to accept credit for their services—a development that can unravel the service credit system but leave something even more valuable in its place. "I suppose the ideal would be to have the Time Dollars self-destruct" as the community becomes more cohesive, muses founder Dianna McCourt.

Service credits help restore the informal economy of family, neighborhood, and community services that has been gutted by the breakdown of social ties: many homes have only one parent (or two who aren't home during the day), relatives are scattered across great distances, and neighbors are often strangers. As a result of this breakdown, children are too often unsupervised, the elderly are neglected, and public life is dying in many communities. Tackling these problems through the formal economy, whether via the private sector or via government programs, is often prohibitively expensive—and chronically ineffective. But mobilizing people into relationships of mutual help can begin to re-knit the social net.

Service credits can be used in a variety of forms. In St. Louis, Missouri, Grace Hill Neighborhood Services uses time dollars as a means of stimulating its self-help programs in ten low-income neighborhoods. More than 3,000 volunteers earned nearly 75,000 hours of credit in 1997, for a wide variety of services. In one project, for example, 112 volunteers cleaned up a recreational trail along the Mississippi River, collecting more than seven dump trucks' worth of debris. Another neighborhood established a "time dollar store" which carries clothes, toys, hygienic products and other donated basics that cannot be purchased with food stamps. Time dollars are the standard method of payment there.

Businesses sometimes use service credits to defray costs, while giving senior citizens—who often do have the time to volunteer—access to professional services and goods. Elderplan, a health maintenance organization in New York City, uses volunteers to help elderly patients with activities of daily living, such as shopping or getting a ride to the doctor. This assistance often raises the morale of aging patients, and sometimes avoids the need for them to move into an expensive retirement home. Most of Elderplan's volunteers are in good health, and either save their credit or tap Elderplan's non-medical options for spending credits. The credits can be used for home repairs, for instance, or on luncheon vouchers—a popular option for the volunteers, who are seniors themselves, often live alone, and appreciate the sociability of having meals together. The HMO recently opened a health products shop as well, through which volunteers can exchange service credits for foot massagers, blood pressure monitors, or orthopedic pillows.

While service credits may appear to function like currency, they are different in an important way: most participants see themselves primarily as volunteers rather than paid workers. As Cahn and co-

WHAT'S SHARED, WHAT'S NOT

Things Now Shared

Most societies do not question the sharing of many goods and services, which are viewed as necessary for the development of civilization.

- Libraries
- Museums
- Languages
- Education
- Parks
- The Atmosphere
- Police Protection
- Military Security
- Social Security
- Oceans
- Roads and Bridges

Things traditionally shared, but now increasingly privatized

We see growing numbers of privatized highways, prisons, and schools. The U.S. patent office offers 100 patents per month for medical procedures once freely shared among colleagues. Universities and professors battle over ownership of research grants. Corporations are patenting genetic material from plants. A U.S. court has allowed the patenting of a mathematical formula.

- Roads
- Schools
- Prisons
- Fresh Water
- Clean Air
- Medical Procedures
- Mathematical Formulas
- Human Genes
- Satellites
- Names
- Forests
- Particular Sounds or Fragrances

Privatized things that *could* be shared

Many categories of land, buildings, vehicles, as well as personal property that is underused or infrequently used, could yield greater materials/energy efficiency and social benefit if they were more shared.

- Software
- Gardens
- Play Areas
- Cars and Trucks
- Household Equipment
- Yard Equipment
- Recreational Equipment
- Luggage
- Tools
- Occasional Meals
- Personal Time

author Jonathan Rowe explain in their book *Time Dollars*, "Service credits are not simply a substitute for money.…Rather, they seem to tap a different spectrum of motivation and concern—the desire to help or the need to be needed—that market wages either ignore or repulse.…The credits are simply a symbol of that value." In short, credits establish a folksy sort of market in homespun services using a kind of shadow currency. They have the efficiency advantages of currency and offer the dignity of earned benefits, but they are fueled by voluntarism—by a desire to build a better community.

The realization that personal time and energy are important sources of wealth has potentially revolutionary implications for decaying communities. Once people's time is harnessed in a coordinated way, several "truths" of community development become questionable. No longer is community health entirely dependent on the investment decisions of affluent citizens, corporations, or the government (although these remain important), as service credits offer opportunities for communities to address their own problems. Further, the skills of everyone, no matter how limited, become valuable in a service credit system. The homebound can earn credits for telephoning other homebound folks across town to ensure that they are well, for example. And because all work is valued equally—one hour, one credit, whether you dish out soup or legal advice—service credits can help restore a sense of dignity to every member of the community. Each of these challenges to the conventional wisdom about poor communities has surfaced, for example, in the Shaw district of Washington, D.C.—a low-income district near the center of the city. Neighbors who wanted to renovate a local playground and rid the area of drug houses earned more than 1,000 hours of service credits in 1996 through babysitting, tutoring, escorting seniors, and neighborhood cleanups. Meanwhile, a local law firm earned more than 1,300 billable hours of pro-bono legal work on behalf of the community to help residents achieve their goals. A service credit database brought the residents and law firm together, and made legal services worth $235,000 available to residents.

Cahn sees a wide variety of potential uses for service credits. Already, they've been applied to programs for emergency preparedness, neighborhood crime watch patrols, and activities for latch-key children. He proposes that credit for volunteer work be used as the justification for extending welfare benefits for people who cannot find paid employment. Cahn even envisions service credits as a way of facilitating loans: dollar-denominated loans could be converted to loans of time dollars, which the bearer could work off over time.

To the extent that the sharing of personal time and energy carries great potential to activate communities, it also carries some risk of being used inappropriately—as an excuse for society to abandon its obligations to low income people. Service credits are not a viable substitute for government responsibility to provide the skills needed to operate in the monetized community. And they shouldn't become the foundation of a second-class economic system. But within the informal, non-monetized economy, they constitute an important, largely untapped, resource.

Rediscovering the Ties that Bind

Both the public and private sectors, especially in the industrial countries, have begun to recognize the role that organized sharing can play in building more sustainable communities. The cities of Takoma Park, Maryland and Berkeley, California, for example, both run tool libraries that allow residents to check out various power and hand tools, just as they would a book. Copenhagen provides bicycles for free public use downtown, to help meet the need for quick and non-polluting cross-town transportation. And companies in German cities have organized ways to help match drivers with riders who need a lift, or to match apartment dwellers who plan to be away with visitors who need short term housing. All of these forms of sharing increase materials efficiency, thereby reducing environmental impact even as they strengthen social ties.

Sharing, of course, can also be initiated by individuals and neighborhoods. Citizens can take the initiative by assessing how much they use the things they own, and how willing they are to share them. Must every home have its own lawnmower? Its own set of luggage? Its own camping gear or skis? Imagine how neighborhoods might be revitalized if residents followed the lead of the Alameda Cohousing Community and posted a list of things available for borrowing by neighbors. With the spread of the internet and the use of neighborhood home pages, this kind of sharing may now be easier than ever.

Such sharing may seem foreign in modern societies that give more and more emphasis to individualism and private property. But it may be a win-win strategy for those societies—a win for their disconnected communities and a win for their exploited environments. In essence, the Cartesian dictum that opened the modern era of individualism—I think, therefore I am—may need to make room for the wisdom of the Xhosa people of southern Africa: I am because we are. Once we as individuals re-appreciate our rootedness in community, sharing, like thought, will become second-nature.

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