

## SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

# 38. TEN WAYS OUR WORLD IS BECOMING MORE SHARABLE<sup>1</sup>

Neal Gorenflo, Jeremy Adam Smith<sup>©</sup>

*“Sharing is a big deal these days. Sharing is a growth industry, a new field of study and of practice; it presents a realm of career opportunities, a new way of life, and a concept around which we are restructuring our world. Sharing is the answer to some of today’s biggest questions: How will we meet the needs of the world’s enormous population? How do we reduce our impact on the planet and cope with the destruction already inflicted? How can we each be healthy, enjoy life, and create thriving communities?”<sup>2</sup>*

Our world is inherently shareable, though it’s easy to take that for granted. We are already historically connected by climate, roads, fisheries, language, forests, culture, and social networks, all of which are part of the commons.<sup>3</sup> But in recent decades, the rules of access and ownership have started to shift in new directions, making sharing more convenient, necessary, fulfilling, and even profitable. Here are ten ways that our world is becoming more shareable.

- (1) **Sharing as a Lifestyle.** The ways to share in everyday life seem to be multiplying like rabbits, but maybe the Great Recession is just forcing all of us to pay more attention these days. There’s carsharing, ridesharing, bikesharing, yardsharing, coworking, cohousing, tool libraries, all kinds of cooperatives—it goes on, trust us. And ways to share power, dialogue, and knowledge, such as workplace democracy, citizens’ deliberative councils, unconferences, open space, and world café, are getting more attention these days, aided by innovative Web 2.0 tools.

There are also scores of new websites—like Divvy, Neighborgoods, ShareSomeSugar, Relay Rides, Rentalic, hyperlocavore, and many more—designed to help us share real stuff. Taking all of these into account, it’s entirely possible to create a complete lifestyle based on sharing. You can live in a cohousing community, work in a co-op, grow food in your neighbor’s yard, and get to the open space town council meeting via your carshare. Want to know about the nuts and bolts of how to build a Shareable life? Check out *The Sharing Solution* by Janelle Orsi and Emily Duskow.

- (2) **Shareable Cities.** A revolution is underway in our understanding of cities. The revolution couldn’t come any sooner, considering that 2007 was the first year in human history that the majority of human beings lived in cities. Perhaps as a result, cities are becoming the focal point for our collective hopes and dreams, as well as all kinds of innovation needed to avert a worsening climate crisis. In the past, we tended to see cities as dirty, unnatural, and isolating places; today, citizens and urban planners alike are starting to see their potential for generating widespread well-being at low financial and environmental cost.

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<sup>1</sup> Yes! Magazine, June 22, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Janelle Orsi, “Four Degrees of Sharing.” Shareable: Life & Art, September 16, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Rowe, The Hidden Commons, Yes! Magazine, June 30, 2001

There's increasing appreciation for the benefits of public transit, urban agriculture, making room on the streets for pedestrians and bicyclists, and for civic engagement. The very thing that defines a city—its population density—makes sharing easier, from cars to bikes to homes. Perhaps in response, there seems to be a boomlet in technology that helps First World urbanites understand their environment, share, and use resources more effectively; IBM has based their massive Smarter Cities advertising campaign around this theme. But it may be that the most successful innovations will spring from the megacities of the developing world. In the absence of vast financial resources, these cities may do as Bogotá, Colombia did and prioritize human well being over economic growth. Can a city become a happiness commons? Former Bogotá mayor Enrique Penalosa knows from experience that it's possible.

- (3) **Social Enterprise & Cooperatives.** Definitions vary, but in general social enterprises, whether nonprofit or for-profit, offer a product or service in order to advance a social or environmental mission with benefits for all. The industry is small relative to the overall economy, but growing extremely fast in some sectors:
- Nonprofit earned income grew over 200 percent to \$251 billion between 1982 and 2002.
  - Investment in clean tech ventures nearly trebled to \$5.2 billion between 2004 and 2008 (though it has declined recently thanks to the Great Recession).
  - Fair trade good sales doubled between 2004 and 2007 to around \$4 billion.
  - Over 11,000 worker cooperatives have emerged in just the last 30 years, many them embracing prosocial missions in addition to being managed, governed, and owned by the people who work at them.
  - Social investing could grow to \$500 billion in assets under management in 5-10 years, according to the Monitor Institute.
- (4) **The Nonprofit Sector.** Nonprofits are an increasingly important way for people to share their wealth and labor. Nicola Goren, former acting CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, said in a speech last year that we're in a midst of "a bona fide compassion boom." The Obama administration is encouraging the trend toward mutual aid with the United We Serve program. With engagement and social entrepreneurship growing, Bill Drayton may be right: We may yet evolve into a world where everyone is a change-maker.
- In the U.S. alone, donations to nonprofits more than doubled between 1987 and 2007, to \$303 billion.
  - About 75 percent of all donations come from private individuals like you and me.
  - The number of nonprofits doubled between 1991 and 2006, to 1.9 million.
  - In 2005, nonprofits employed 12.9 million people, or 9.7 percent of the US workforce.
  - In 2008, 61.8 million volunteers dedicated more than 8 billion hours of service, worth an estimated \$162 billion.
- (5) **Microfinance** is a powerful innovation that extends small loans and financial services to help the world's poorest rise out of poverty, serving customers traditional banks ignore. The growth of Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus' Grameen Bank, and its success in alleviating poverty in Bangladesh, helped trigger an almost unmanageable surge of money into the sector—currently about \$25 billion, and growing fast. Grameen has low-interest loan programs for a variety of poor borrowers, including no-interest loans, and is owned by the rural poor it serves. Kiva, a U.S. nonprofit peer-to-peer

microfinance sensation, facilitates around \$5 million in no-interest loans a month to entrepreneurs in developing nations through its website. At one point, Kiva had to limit loans through their platform because the demand to give out loans was so high. Microfinance is yet another way the world is learning to share its wealth.

- (6) **The Internet.** It's easy to take it for granted, but its potential as a sharing platform has arguably just begun to unfold. The Internet itself would not be possible if people did not share labor, code, and infrastructure. No one owns it or runs it. It's built and it operates on free and open source software and open standards. Data travels over networks and is routed through servers owned by private individuals and corporations who share transport and routing duties. Generation Y is a hero generation, coming of age in a time of crisis they're already helping to resolve, largely by applying the tools and mindset of sharing.

This global commons enables the creation of tremendous value. Harvard Business School professor John Quelch estimates that the economic impact of the Internet is \$1.4 trillion annually in the U.S. alone. This year, the Computer and Communications Industry Association calculated that companies and nonprofits relying on "fair use" (such as search engines, web hosts, and social media) employ 17 million people and generate \$4.7 trillion a year, one sixth of our Gross Domestic Product.

All of that value is created on top of what is essentially volunteer sharing on a massive scale. As late as 1992, IBM did not think such a network was possible. Through its runaway success, the Internet has become the model for organizing life in the twenty-first century, as well as the essential infrastructure and distribution channel for commerce, ideas, work, and play.

And its influence reaches far beyond the online world. The Internet is reprogramming culture to the degree that society will likely be remade in its image, so that we have a better chance at thriving like it does. As you'll see by the end of this list, this change is already underway.

- (7) **Free and Open Source Software (FOSS).** FOSS and the Internet have a symbiotic relationship. The Internet would not have been possible without FOSS. And the growth of FOSS relies on the Internet to power its peer production and distribution model. Over 270 million people use the Firefox browser, a shared, freely available tool. Half of the world's Web sites, about 112 million, run on Apache Server, also open source. A quarter of a million websites run on Drupal, a leading open source content management system. That's just scratching the surface: Today, there are over 200,000 open source projects with nearly 5 billion lines of code that would cost an estimated \$387 billion to reproduce. Check out the Infoworld's Open Source Hall of Fame for more on desktop favorites, like Ubuntu, as well as obscure but vital infrastructure projects like BIND. You might also check out the Open Source Census, which tracks business installations of FOSS. Today, millions of people and organizations rely on FOSS for their daily work, as do a growing number of governments. It's a pervasive part of life in the developed world—and because of its low cost, open source may become even more important to developing countries.
- (8) **The Open Way.** Inspired by the success of free and open source software, the values and practices of open source—making information and innovations publicly available—are being applied in a truly dizzying number of ways. In just the last few years, open or peer-to-peer sharing strategies have gained significant traction in science, business, culture, education, and government. Applications of "the open way" range from the obscure, like the open source tractor, to the everyday, like the OpenStreetMaps project. It's a tough

trend to quantify because it is so viral and self-organized. To get a sense of the scope of the movement, check out the P2P Foundation blog or [opensource.com](http://opensource.com). The Obama administration's Open Government Directive is currently one of the most visible of these efforts, at least in the U.S. The directive ordered executive departments and agencies to identify and publish online in an open format at least three high-value data sets; create an open government web page and respond to public input received via that page; and develop and publish an Open Government Plan that will describe how they will improve transparency and integrate public participation and collaboration into its activities.

(9) **Social Media.** Sharing is the currency of social media. And as the author of [Socialnomics](#), Erik Qualman, says, social media are bigger than you think.

- More video was uploaded to YouTube in the last six months than was produced by the three major TV networks in 60 years.
- With over 400 million users, Facebook would be the fourth largest country in the world by population.
- Wikipedia has over 13 million articles, all written by volunteers—and with an accuracy that studies show is comparable to the best commercial encyclopedias.
- In 2008, one in eight newly married couples met through social media.
- Ninety-six percent of Generation Y has joined a social network, where sharing is a way of life.
- Creative Commons has made it easier for creators to share their work. They've licensed over 130 million creative works in 50 countries since 2002.

In these powerful ways, social media have taken sharing mainstream.

(10) **Generation G.** Now that a Shareable world has a serious foothold, all that's needed is a willing population to scale it up. There's a strong argument that Gen Y is the generation that can bring a shareable world to fruition. Roughly 100 million strong in the United States, Gen Y grew up on the Internet and brings its values and practices, including sharing, into the real world. Last year [TrendWatching.com](#) called them [Generation G](#) (for "generous") and said they are accelerating a cultural shift where "giving is already the new taking." They may not reach their full sharing potential until later in life, but there are promising indicators:

- Sixty-one percent of 13-25 year olds [feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world](#).
- Eighty-three percent will trust a company more if it's socially and environmentally responsible.
- Volunteering by college students increased by 20 percent between 2002 and 2005.
- Eighty-three percent volunteered in 2005.

Gary Hamel believes that this massive generational force, which outnumbers baby boomers, promises to transform our world in the image of the Internet, a world where sharing and contributing to the common good are integral to the good life. William Strauss and Neil Howe, authors of [Millennials Rising](#), believes that Gen Y is a hero generation, coming of age in a time of crisis they're already helping to resolve, largely by applying the tools and mindset of sharing.