

Design for Micro-Utopias

Making the Unthinkable Possible

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Introduction

'In Utopia, where every man has a right to everything, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full, no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, none in necessity; and though no man has anything, yet they are all rich; for what can make a man so rich as to lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties.'

Thomas More, *Utopia*

Books come and go. Indeed, one of the problems of writing about contemporary issues is that the world changes rapidly. It is good to remind oneself that, to a humble mayfly, a lifetime lasts a day. For a politician, a week can seem like a lifetime. At the time of writing (2007) society is pondering its own extinction, and it is comforting to know that some people have been paying attention. Species are disappearing at between 100 and 1,000 times the 'background' levels found in fossils. The earth's atmosphere has the largest hole in the ozone layer ever recorded, and a carbon dioxide level that has not been so high for 650,000 years or more. It is possible, although not certain, that humans have caused most of the problem. The good news is that the sun should last for up to 5 billion years. One would hope, therefore, that very long-term thinking would be the main priority for governments and educators. Until now, this has been far from the case. Governments have remained more reactive than visionary. Despite the recent fashion for solar panels and bicycles, politics remains stubbornly humanistic, individual-centred, competitive, growth-orientated, and out of touch with the eco-system that supports our existence. Many of our most noble endeavours are therefore doomed by ignorance, short-sightedness, and a woeful lack of imagination. Every so often we have a moment of brilliant collective insight, but this seldom lasts long. The current panic over environmental issues is reminiscent of the oil crisis of 1973. In the UK, with political uncertainty caused by rising fuel prices we suddenly became acutely aware of our environmental predicament. This was an unusual moment that soon ended with a new agreement with the main oil producing countries,

and it was 'business as usual'. Recently, the UK government agreed to create a bill on climate change. Many well-informed citizens feel that this decision is seriously overdue. After all, meteorologists and ecologists have long been warning us that we cannot continue to live in the way we do. The change is welcome, but why has it taken so long to arrive? One recent factor was the government-sponsored *Stern Report*, (31st October, 2006), which had more effect than many previous recommendations by scientists. How did Mr Stern succeed where the experts failed? The short answer is that he is an economist, and therefore speaks in a restricted language that makes sense to governments. In short, political discourse seems to have no grasp of events beyond the short-term logic of economic forces. This is why our leaders find it so difficult to be honest with voters.

The received political discourse has implied that every voter (that is 'consumer') has a natural born right to consume, to waste and to travel. Politics is not wholly to blame. Indeed, those of us who discuss human wellbeing largely in terms of income, rather than land use, climate, or species diversity must share the responsibility. What is needed is a shared understanding of the relationship between ecology and economy. How can we 'make poverty history' if the process of wealth creation causes such ecological disruption that it will undo all our economic efforts? This book does not underestimate the importance of money but it tends to see it as a particular dialect or language, rather than as a resource. This is a design issue. Just as certain concepts encourage certain outcomes, so particular currencies will encourage certain behavioural tendencies. The book asks how we might design a better world. In this respect, although it speaks to everyone it outlines a larger framework for design, or what it will describe as 'metadesign' (Chapter 9). At present, money needs re-designing. This is an important issue that is discussed further in Chapter 5. Perhaps inevitably, much of the book is more philosophical than practical. This is a means to an end. Questions are sometimes more useful than answers, especially if they invite practical outcomes. But if this is the case, why does its title sound so fanciful and unrealistic? This is a good question. The idea of utopias not only courts criticism of being 'unrealistic' or 'idealised', it also has a whiff of revolutionary fervour. In the 21st century, revolutions are seen as being both risky and passé. Unfortunately, this aversion to risk has shortened our depth of field. Rather than adopting a long-term vision, mainstream politics tends to favour a rugged and impatient mode of pragmatism. This is why many prominent leaders claim to be 'realists' rather than dreamers.

The book invites 'realists' to relax their grip. Dreaming is not as scary or unhelpful as we are led to believe. Utopia, *Sir Thomas More's* famous novel of

1516, describes an ideal or perfect place. However, whether he was sketching out a serious design for society or whether he was being ironic is still in doubt. Nevertheless, most people would agree that the idea of utopia still awakens a sense of fascination and longing within each of us. Plato's Republic is a famous description of an ideal society. After the death of his mentor Socrates (circa 470–399 BC), he also wrote of a lost civilisation called *Atlantis*. Although his text still inspires explorers, dreamers, artists and inventors it is not clear whether the island of *Atlantis* really existed. Some see it as a template for urban and social planning. Others suggest that it was merely a satirical critique or idealised description of the prevailing culture in Athens. It is possible that stories of 'utopia' stir up *dim* memories of a golden age before the invention of large-scale cities, agriculture, weapons and industry. The idea of 'paradise' – for example – is derived from an ancient Iranian word for 'garden'. This may remind us of stories of Shangri-Lah, the Fields of Elysium, The Garden of Eden, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and so on. Although these names probably depict places that really existed, today they have become images that are no longer seen as attainable. Our culture has appropriated them to stand for a kind of non-reality. Our rather 'hard-hat' world has tended to declare words such as 'love', 'wisdom' or 'miracle' as no-go areas.

Utopia is therefore a particularly provocative idea. It is usually assumed to mean a permanent state of perfection. In a fast-moving, cynical world of plenty it sounds naïve and over-optimistic. This may remind us that naivety and idealism have come, for many, to be synonymous with one another. In today's increasingly pragmatic culture, the idea of a 'perfect space' or a 'perfect time' is dangerously 'new age'. Also, we distrust perfection because it has become tarnished by the false claims of the less scrupulous advertising agencies, travel agents or property developers. In the current climate we might just as well say 'miraculous', and that is just the kind of language that has fallen from favour. One reason that visionary, optimistic projects are out of fashion is that they are associated with a Marxist utopia that was discredited decades ago. Few would be bold enough to claim that they have tried 'dreaming' and found that it does not work, but that is the implication. Nonetheless, at a time when we face so many dangers – both natural and self-imposed – it is vital to dream of alternative futures, even if they seem unrealisable or impossible. This is why this book is proud to promote utopianism, even if what we mean by utopia is a more tentative, temporary, pluralised or truncated version than the ones we may find in the picture books. In short, the book will discuss 'micro-utopias' rather than 'Utopia'.

There are many ways in which we might attain realistic ‘micro-utopias’. One of them is by developing a new kind of democratic system that depends less on representation and more on a distributed mode of actions and responses. Our ‘democratic’ society has become so accustomed to monarchies and hierarchies that the word ‘holarchy’ (c.f Koestler, 1969) – a network of equal parts, each responsible for the whole – is seldom used in everyday conversation. One of the problems of mainstream democracy is that it depends heavily on choice and delegation, rather than on shared imagination, local involvement, and emerging consensus. This is not to say that mainstream politics is impervious to new inflections or directions, but that bureaucrats and politicians are risk-averse. Many decisions taken by political leaders are top-down, rather than bottom-up. This has led to a situation in which citizens get discouraged from visualising new possibilities that are outside the political cannon. Admittedly, if an average voter is passionate about a given issue, but finds that all of the major parties ignore this issue, he or she has the chance to start a new political movement, and to compete with the other political parties. Of course, if the idea in question is always dismissed as eccentric, misguided or unimportant it is more likely that he or she will lose interest. In a world of political spin, voters become apathetic when the truth is massaged for ballot box success. When this happens, only interests with a strong chance of success are adopted. Similarly, when events are presented in a way that maintains the rhetorical momentum of the party line, dreams get crushed or ignored.

In order to explore a more genuinely bottom-up approach, we need to acknowledge the role of positive feedback within a given trend. The idea of positive feedback came out of systems science, or cybernetics. It describes the process by which a given tendency appears to reinforce itself by virtue of its own impetus. For example, within an epidemic the rise in the number of infected patients works on this principle. The more individuals who are infected, the greater the chances you have of contracting it. When you catch the disease, you make it even more likely that others around you will also catch it. In such a situation, positive feedback may lead to saturation or pandemic, but only when the process reaches a critical level. There is often an uncertain boundary between an outbreak that will fail, and a full-blown epidemic. This boundary is what we may call the ‘tipping point’ (see Gladwell, 2002). In seeking a more creative, heterarchical society, the transition between competing ideas will become crucially important. This may even mean that the sharing and development of these ideas will therefore take over some of the present duties of our professional politicians. How can we know the difference between a good idea that will ‘catch on’ and one that will fail? Chapter 7 will argue that a transformation of society can take place once we can create visions, ideals and proven methods that are desirable, attainable, reproducible and maintainable.

What would be required to introduce such a system for change? Answers to this question are already beginning to emerge. For the first time in history, 'Open Source' design and reciprocal pledge-based actions (for example, The BBC's Action Network and the Pledgebank website) make it possible to move from the representation-based politics of Utilitarian compromise (that is, voting) to one in which decisions can be based on a more local, positive, spontaneous, co-creative and emergent process. Now that anyone with access to the Internet can quickly and easily set up alliances with like-minded individuals, the horizon of the 'thinkable' has broadened immensely. Ideas that once may have seemed incomprehensible, ridiculous, or eccentric can now be shared with a sufficient number of 'virtual neighbours' to make them, at least, thinkable. Once they are thinkable, they can be quickly developed into opportunities for beneficial change. This means that citizens can now dare to dream what, hitherto, was deemed either impossible or unthinkable. In order to understand what is possible we need to consider the way human beings think. An aspect of this question relates to the way we perceive the relationship between probabilities and likelihoods. Most of us can accept that, while some diseases are exceptionally rare, we might eventually contract one. We are also accustomed to hearing about an individual who wins the Lottery against almost astronomical odds.

In a probabilistic sense, both of the above events may be seen as miracles, even though we tend to put unpleasant experiences into a different category from the happier variety. Hence we may speak of a patient's 'miracle recovery' but are less likely to use the word to describe the good fortune of a serial killer who evades justice by a series of 'flukes'. Sometimes, events we put into the miracle category can become displaced and redefined. This is often true where miracles are the outcome of design. This is what happens to technological miracles. What are the chances of getting a rocket to land safely on Mars? The answer depends on when and where you ask the question. A thousand years ago the question would have made little sense. In Sir Isaac Newton's day it would have seemed miraculous, or, in practical terms, impossible. Today, with digital systems of self-steering, stellar navigation, and a thousand other clever tricks, we can now accomplish this task as a matter of routine. What is the difference between the first aircraft passenger flight and the most recent? One important difference is the sense of awe, delight, and disbelief that attended the first, but not the latest. The retrieval of wonderment is therefore an important issue within our quest for micro-utopias. However, the book's aim is to not find fault with actual people or actualities, but to probe below the surface. In seeking to design micro-utopias that are desirable and attainable, it looks for positive insight at a deeper intellectual level. In this sense, it takes both a holistic and a homespun approach.

In the pragmatic world of political 'reality', utopia is a 'once upon a time' land that is non-existent. At best, it subsists, rather than exists. This is because political pragmatism evolved as a process of management that deals with events on a week-by-week basis.

Within this belief system it may seem too risky or self-indulgent to dream of utopia. It invokes the dark, superstitious side of our histories and how we choose to remember them. One danger of remembering is that it might become a precedent for the future. In so doing it conceals the path to a way of living that is better than we have ever imagined. There is an old saying that 'history only repeats itself because nobody was listening the first time'. In our Once-upon-a-Time memory, adversity and struggle are almost always present. In fairy tales, life was often cruel, and 'real' people lived in palaces. Before we had glass cities and industrialised deserts, Utopian dreamers lived in non-descript 'lands'. Almost invariably, these were feudal territories ruled by godlike emperors, kings and queens with sacrosanct rights and privileges. And it was they who owned and controlled the lands, and it was they who set the boundaries between rich and poor. Designers were commissioned to make coins bearing an image of the monarch, and the common people had no choice but to pay their taxes by long hours of hard work. *Times* were dangerous. Many lived in fear for their safety. Some of the wiser citizens had tales of better times when people lived in beautiful gardens rather than in noisy, dirty streets.

Children still listen to stories like these. We may have been fearful of the mighty and powerful, but these tales usually carry a residual feeling that ethical values were based less on rules and punishments and more on a sense of wholeness, shared pleasure and good feelings. After the end of the story would come the 'happily-ever-after' epoch, in which crime or misery was over. Perhaps this was because the garden villages were just the right size for optimising danger and security. Everyone felt loved and needed. Life was hard, but it was free of wars, agriculture, and automation. Children's stories reminisce about a 'golden age', but historians and archaeologists have a different version. Pre-agricultural life was probably hazardous for the majority, and life was hard. We may surmise that, when you lived this way, your primary duty would only have extended to those on whom you had to trust. In such an unstable world, ethical relations were therefore confined to your tribe. 'Rights' were something for which you would have had to fight, and 'responsibilities' were the conditions that others forced upon you. This led to a refined sense of the citizen's responsibility to the monarch. Now we

may rationalise this by saying that it was a symbolic allegiance to society and to the land.

Around 1705 the Dutchman Bernard de Mandeville wrote a playful satire that, in English, was called *The Fable of the Bees*. His book explored the provocative argument that individual greed and selfishness might lead to benefits for all. This made a deep impression on Adam Smith (1723–90), who was initially troubled by the idea. However, after some pondering, he began to take the joke more seriously. In short, it inspired his famous theories of self-help and the Invisible Hand. These emerged in a now far more famous book, *The Wealth of Nations*, that was published in 1776, the same year that Jefferson drafted the American Declaration of Independence. It also influenced Darwin's theory of evolution a hundred years later (1859), and laid the foundations for many subsequent generations of laissez-faire economists, laissez-faire being a French word that (roughly) means 'letting things take care of themselves'. In part, the book addresses the political problem of government without monarchy. We may remember how this logic evolved during the French Revolution in 1789. It seemed, at the time, that if everyone is equal, they should have the same rights and powers as those of a sovereign ruler. Although the principle was simple and appealing it had important limitations. Those of us who live in 'developed' countries can see what they are.

A hundred years before the French Revolution, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) foresaw that a competitive society of equals might turn into a 'war of all against all'. Perhaps this is what is emerging in the global workplace. In order to avoid this we may need to re-balance the relations between rights and responsibilities. The heady rhetoric of the Revolution had, perhaps understandably, tended to focus on citizen rights. This was not surprising; revolutions usually tend to enforce major changes first and leave the details until later. The idea of 'individual freedom' was a new and thrilling invective for change. Today it remains one of the cornerstones of Western pride. To understand how it works we may choose to watch a few Hollywood westerns or 'maverick cop' movies. In a world of truly individual freedom there should be no rulers to tell us how to live, or how to spend our money. Hard-line supporters of Smithsonian freedom and sovereignty suggest that governments are merely parasites on the hard-earned wealth of individuals. It is why we have an economic order that is smart enough to organise itself. This view has created an implicit agenda for very many governments. It is what enables some politicians to take pride in a 'hands-off' approach to leadership. Their implicit claim is that 'the King is dead, long live the Free Market'.

Our era is therefore one of unprecedented affluence and strident 'consumer rights'. Fortunately, we are beginning to notice that material wellbeing is not always a guarantee of utopian bliss. Thorsten Veblen (1902) was one of the first researchers to explore the effect of disposable income on the *nouveau riche*. It was he who coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' at the end of the 19th century. George Bataille offers a more extreme view of the psychology of consumption. In what he called the 'accursed share' he depicts consumption as a competitive display to see who can afford to waste, or destroy the most. This may be one reason why few people feel ashamed of owning things without ever using them, or using things up without needing to. Indeed, images of profligate waste have proved indispensable to advertisers, because they can elicit patterns of behaviour that lead to higher sales figures. Up to now, orthodox economists tacitly approved of this system, because they assumed that economic growth leads to greater happiness. Yet, at the start of the 21st century, despite an enormous rise in the actual income levels, turnover of goods, and GDP it is clear that we are no happier now than we were in the middle of the 20th century. An increase in disposable income has created new markets and a greater freedom for many individuals, yet this has caused further problems.

Today, a growing number of people in the developed nations are acutely aware of their rights but have little or no awareness of any corresponding responsibilities. We therefore need a new model of citizenship that is more realistic than the one developed since the French Revolution. This must happen soon. In the last 5 years or so we have seen a massive global increase in car ownership. At the time of writing, we have virtually reached the Hubbert Peak (or 'halfway mark') for cheaply accessible global oil reserves. Broadly speaking, prices can only get higher. The biological diversity of species is threatened, and climatic changes are now accepted as a more or less imminent threat to our safety. While in some countries, people are becoming poorer, global consumption is accelerating. We are happy to discuss these events as 'problems', and unable to envision them as opportunities. Why are we so reluctant to discuss how we would like to live when fossil fuels have gone? More surprisingly, why do we seem unable to imagine how we would like to live? OK, at the level of cliché this is easy: castles in Spain, a private tropical island, country cottage in Shropshire, or a world cruise. But, in a world created by smart advertisers and clever spin doctors it is hard to be original. How can we decide what we want, when there are so many stock answers and off-the-shelf visions to fall back on? How can we avoid thinking like passive consumers when this is what we have been trained to become?

One of the binding tales of free-market capitalism is the concept of people-owned consensus. We can see part of its origins in the French Revolution at the end of 18th century. This took place when the privilege and power that had been extended to monarchs were abused, and taken for granted. As is well known, the people became angry and took the law into their own hands. Actually, they took much more than this. In a sense, ordinary people reclaimed the spiritual and material rights that had seemed the natural prerogative of rulers. Many still celebrate this moment as a threshold to new utopias in which freedom, equality and brotherhood are prized above everything else. In some ways this was a disastrous moment in world history, because it was another decisive step towards humanism. We needed to share environmental responsibilities more evenly but we forgot to include this in the constitution. It must have been hard to imagine an ecological form of governance when the prevailing values, expectations and beliefs were couched in the language of a selfish and monopolistic state. But the idea of 'private sovereignty' or 'individual human rights' was not without precedent. Indeed, several thousand years earlier, Socrates suggested that everyone is entitled to an opinion that may differ from those of society as a whole. This idea has grown into an obstinate brand of individualism that is still made in US and Europe, and eagerly imported by developing nations around the world. One reason for this is that it is a catalyst for economic growth.

Like individualism, economic growth was not something we really designed or planned. For this reason, the indicators of its success are seriously deficient, if not downright foolish. For example, they are not designed to regulate shared wellbeing. Loosely speaking, economic growth is measured by the increase in the total flow of money, over a given period of time. We achieve economic growth by encouraging more transactions at greater speed between an increasing number of producers and consumers. At present, virtually all of the major currencies in the world are debt-based (Douthwaite, 1992). As consumers, our desire for products and services creates the need for financial credit. The supply of credit induces the need for us to work harder. Working harder causes more goods to be produced. Finally, we assume that if we make enough things we will create wellbeing. This is the implicit argument for having debt-based economies. Ultimately it is to maintain economic growth. Sadly, it will not work. Although more and more experts are warning that it is a dangerous and ineffective recipe for wellbeing, we behave as though this were not the case.

As I have implied, conventional economic thinking makes only partial sense in ecological terms. For example, one person makes money with a new

product but, in so doing, may cause a serious environmental problem because the processes used are highly poisonous, or wasteful. Another person makes money by trying to clean up the mess, or by retrieving the wasted resources. Within the current economic logic this is seen as a welcome process because it makes for higher employment figures and a greater GDP. Where a thoughtful designer might see this as a foolish way to do things, many orthodox economists approve of it because it appears to distribute resources more widely. Hence many people are hailing a carbon credit system as the right path to take. While it has some short-term merit, this approach is patently a compromise because it discourages waste rather than inviting transformation. The more creatively we design the money system the better chance we will have of re-designing the way we live. As it stands, global capitalism is devoted to increasing the rate and quantity of transactions, rather than satisfying our deeper needs. Technology facilitates and exaggerates its effects, thereby making the ultimate outcomes easier to attain. For example, modern digital technology makes consumption easier by facilitating instant auditing and payment over large distances. This is what Microsoft entrepreneur Bill Gates calls 'capitalism without friction' (Gates, 1999). However, in the long term our economy only works when its ecological basis is able to flourish. The eradication of transactional 'friction' is really a promotional illusion that is created to make individual consumers feel better. It is an inducement to make consumers buy more products without noticing the damage and waste that each transaction causes.

Despite the long reach of corporate strategy and the surreptitious fiscal regulation by Governments, World Bank and others, the global economy is presented as an autonomous system in its own right. As such it resembles a living creature. We call it 'capital'. It is like a pet that we must look after. When 'capital' grows strong and healthy, politicians and economists are happy. When it stops growing or shrinks we fear that it may die. Politicians may blame 'capital' for poverty or environmental damage, but they are the ones who feed it and watch over it. Although governments do not organise the system directly, they create incentives and subsidies such as trade tariffs and taxes. For example, they allow tax-free aviation fuel in order to make friends with big business, and to stimulate trade across great distances. This sometimes results in the transportation and exchange of virtually identical products between partner nations. Most mainstream politicians assure us that this is the most efficient way to organise the world. This is very hard to swallow. If we make an exceptionally generous reading of economic growth within global capitalism we might say that it ensures the self-regulation of collective wellbeing. This is a big claim. Competitive capitalism creates and shares wealth

by mobilising individual ingenuity and labour. Although it may not be solely responsible for environmental damage, design nevertheless can be understood as a form of rhetoric (Buchanan, 1989) that persuades others to sustain, or to increase, the transactional flow of goods and services (Papanek, 1985). In this regard, designers are but one 'cog in the machine'. Charlie Chaplin used this mechanistic image in his film *Modern Times* (1936), a parody of the centralised factory system.

Marx believed that the idea of production-line manufacture was inspired by the invention of mechanical clocks. Computers embody the mechanical principle of the clock and combine it with the programmatic capabilities of alphabetical writing. The digital computer is therefore a hybrid of the book, the clock, and a self-steering governor, such as the thermostat (Wood, 1998). Where clocks offer a temporality that is regimented and arbitrary, alphabetical codes can disseminate rules that must be followed, as it were, blindly (Wittgenstein, 1921). In many sweatshop industries, employees have to work at the speed and efficiency of a machine. Today, in order to sustain this clock-inspired system we also need complementary processes that are equally mechanical. These processes also reflect the system's vanity, and its deeply bureaucratic and materialistic values. The film *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985) depicts the savage nature of these processes by satirising the mindless pursuit of corporate power and personal extravagance. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of this film is the fact that, after two decades, it looks less like an insane parody and more like everyday life in the early 21st century. Why do we choose to live like this? Metaphorically speaking, where in Revolutionary France the citizen was king, today, the individual consumer is God. This is the belief system that propels the economy. It is as true in Dubai or Shanghai or as it is in Sydney or New York. Consumption drives industrial effort, and we are slaves to this effort. The pain of production is deemed acceptable, because it leads to the comfort of consumption. This trade-off is reminiscent of that which resulted from the early adopters of monocultural farming methods, in Iran 11,000 years ago. Its underlying principle is what many, from Aristotle to Henry Ford, have called the 'economies of scale'. More recently, Toyota evolved the process to include the transportation of products on a 'just-in-time' and a '24-7' basis. In essence, it is the same. In a technologically driven, consumer-centred society, all citizens are tacitly expected to crave, and to experience, 'convenience', 'comfort' and 'mobility' wherever, or whenever they find themselves (Wood, 2000).

It is always easy to be negative about things we do dislike. It is much more difficult to come up with better approaches or more viable solutions. Here, viability means offering solutions that are practicable and operable for all the

active parties. This is a huge creative challenge that will require new methods and approaches. We are not used to a 'joined-up' society in which common sense is used to design the way things work. Despite the best endeavours of far-sighted economists, healthcare professionals, educators and planners we are used to an economic system that sees monetary profits and economic growth as adequate indicators of success. Fortunately, many people are now beginning to notice how fragmented, dysfunctional, alienated, and disconnected our society has become. The book will seek to show how citizens can initiate the kind of reforms that can make our societies more healthy and happy. In 2001, I coined the term 'Attainable Utopias' in order to challenge the pragmatism of mainstream politics, bureaucracy and commerce. It is also the name of our virtual '*Think Tank*' (The Au Net) that I co-founded with Andrew Carmichael (Director of the Creative Lewisham Agency). A year into the new millennium we wondered why humanity had failed to create a new 'vision'. Why, despite unparalleled and increasing access to resources, knowledge, and technology, had we become so pessimistic and cynical? Our conclusion was that while, as voters and consumers, we have become experts at choosing and complaining, we have forgotten how to envisage what we really want. Without new dreams humanity will become extinct.

As Carey (1999) has shown, a universal state of Utopia would probably resemble some form of fascism, because it would require a great deal of conformity to one model of wellbeing. However, while utopia may be neither attainable nor desirable, a more interdependent network of 'micro-utopias' (that is, brief, or local utopias) might be both helpful and feasible. But what might this look like? One way to describe 'micro-utopias' is to imagine different

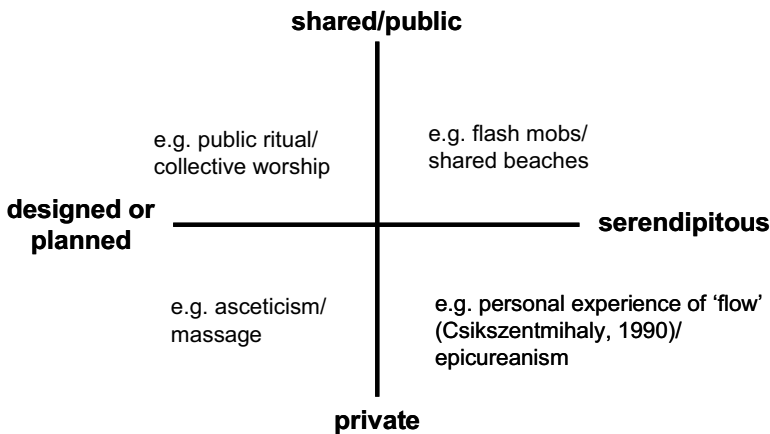


Figure I.1 A rudimentary map of utopias

types of wisdom that are joined together. Hence, we might transcend the idea of an 'information society' or 'knowledge economy', and make it into a 'wisdom economy'. This idea is what the book seeks to explore. Ultimately, it sets out to make a rough map of this new domain. A better aim would be to create a 'wisdom ecology' (Philogene and Wood, 2002). One way to approach this quest is to map existing visions of utopia. Figure 1 shows a very broad starting point with only two axes. Where the vertical axis displays the range that straddles private and shared utopias, the horizontal axis differentiates between serendipitous and designed utopias. Within the private realm there are many examples from attempts to find religious, or personal enlightenment. These might range from asceticism, through to meditative bliss, and personal feelings of love or goodwill. It may even require the voluntary initiation of something akin to 'contagious optimism' within society, and the right balance of 'luck-attracting' approaches will lead to a global pandemic of positive thinking. For many readers, this kind of claim may sound like 'new-age' hogwash. I will try to demonstrate, therefore, that what we have assumed to be unrealistic may, in practice, be attainable.

The first barrier to 'micro-utopias' is neither technological nor political; it is psychological. Ultimately, if we are to be ambitious there is no logical reason why we should not be able to design miracles, assuming we apply a probabilistic definition of miracles. If you search for a miracle you will reduce your chances of success by believing it to be impossible or unreachable. In this way, it is possible to undermine Hume's claim that miracles do not exist (Hume, 1748). Chapter 7 will argue that most of us may find ourselves in close proximity to an extremely low probability event about once or twice a month. However, this kind of event is so trivial or marginal that we might easily overlook it. Mapping the boundaries between the 'thinkable' and the 'unthinkable' will be an important task for 'micro-utopians'. Generally speaking, for human beings, the 'unthinkable' is synonymous with the 'unattainable'. This suggests that, merely by moving some issues from the category of 'unthinkable' to 'thinkable' we could achieve what was hitherto seen as 'impossible'. All of these terms are, to some extent, subject to change, adaptation, and innovation. It is wise to dream beyond what we currently believe to be attainable. Once we have done so, the next step is to co-imagine the dream in a more shareable form. This means exchanging dreams and seeing how they can be conjoined to enhance one another. The third step is to check that we really want what we have dreamed. The fourth step is to see how much of the dream is attainable. The fifth step is to share the task of producing and sharing the dream. If enough people try to connect their 'micro-utopias' together it may be possible to achieve a global 'synergy of synergies' (Fuller, 1975). I will expand this idea in Chapter 8. First I

shall briefly outline some of the dystopian aspects of the world that need to be addressed if the quest for micro-utopias is to be successful.

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