

CALL FOR ESSAYS: Common Shares
DEADLINE: Monday, May 12, 2014, 11:59pm EDT

We are pleased to announce the **third annual Urban Omnibus writing competition**, this year on the topic of **common ownership, private property, and the sharing economy**. With this competition, UO invites writers to infuse the discourse around structural economic change with narrative, theory, history, or humor. In so doing, we seek to advance our dedication to redefining the culture of citymaking by questioning how we talk about what is public, private, and shared in the urban realm.

DESCRIPTION

What do you hold in common with your fellow citizens, the strangers with whom you share your city?

What kinds of urban space, property, or merchandise do you choose not to own yet feel you have the right to use? How do you know what those rights are and how to exercise them?

How does living in a city affect what you own versus what you share? How does the city affect your perceptions of the distinctions between goods and services, private and public, material and digital, proprietary and common, ownership and access?

In medieval England, common land meant privately owned land to which other people have certain rights, such as to graze livestock or gather firewood. A more expansive category, the commons, refers to the cultural and natural resources, like air, water, and Earth itself, that are held in common rather than owned privately. Over the second half of the 20th century, the term migrated out of ecology and political philosophy and into everyday life, and gained mainstream prevalence alongside the digital revolution and the environmental crisis. For example, the notion of a digital commons has demanded that information be added to the list of resources to be shared (and modifiable) by all. [Creative Commons licenses](#) have complicated traditional ideas about intellectual property. And [the tragedy of the commons](#) — wherein users exploit a shared resource for individual benefit but collective peril, such as the overgrazing by cattle in the traditional English common — is invoked as an explanation for global climate change and an argument against the free market capitalism that has hastened it. Throughout, the idea of the commons has fuelled theoretical positions calling for a shared politics of mutual accommodation among strangers, particularly in cities, where the density and diversity of those encounters is the greatest.

Today, while the air above our buildings and the oceans between our nations are increasingly bought and sold, contemporary technology has enabled urban dwellers to share more and buy less. Examples like Zipcar, Airbnb, or TaskRabbit, characterized as part of the “Sharing Economy,” work on the model of decoupling goods from services, and they play into a collaborative turn in an economy that increasingly blurs traditional lines between producer and consumer, work and home, private transport and public transit, encyclopedia and Wikipedia.

With this writing competition, *Urban Omnibus* invites writers to infuse the discourse around structural economic change with narrative, theory, history, or humor. For example, recount how a spare air mattress helps you pay your rent, admit a concern that your job might one day become literally immaterial, or relate an amusing encounter with a stranger in a shared space, like an elevator, lobby, park, café, or street corner. The financialization of the built environment — through which terms like shares, futures, securities, or trades destabilize notions of public and private ownership — is fair game too. Essays might speculate on the shifting relationship between architecture and private property, or riff on terms like shareholding, ridesharing, open-sourcing, co-working, co-housing, or land banking.

AWARD

The jury will select one first-prize essay, whose author will receive an award of \$500. Up to two second place winners will receive prizes of \$250 each. Winning submissions will also be published on *Urban Omnibus*.

SELECTION CRITERIA

The criteria for selection include the quality of the prose, the originality of the interpretive position on cities, and the extent to which an essay provokes readers to discover something new or surprising in a familiar urban condition.

ELIGIBILITY AND SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Staff and board members of The Architectural League are not eligible for this competition. All others are encouraged to submit.

Essays should be between 800 and 2000 words, and must be previously unpublished. Prior to publication on *Urban Omnibus*, winning submissions may be copyedited to adhere to house style.

Imagery to support or illustrate the essay is strongly encouraged but not required. If imagery is included, the author must have legal permission to reprint it. If imagery is not included, *Urban Omnibus* editorial staff will source or illustrate as appropriate, in consultation with the author.

Submissions must be emailed as letter-sized PDFs. The applicant's name and essay title must appear at the top of the first page of the PDF. **Email submissions to info@urbanomnibus.net with "Common Shares: Essay Submission" as the subject line.**

Submissions must be received **by 11:59pm EDT on Monday, May 12, 2014**. Late submissions will not be accepted. Questions about this call for essays can be sent to info@urbanomnibus.net. Winners will be announced in June.

JURY

Rosalie Genevro, Executive Director, [The Architectural League of New York](#)

Lucy Ives, Deputy Editor, [Triple Canopy](#), author of two poetry collections, [Anamnesis](#) (2009) and [Orange Roses](#) (2013)

Suketu Mehta, Associate Professor of Journalism, NYU, author of [Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found](#) (2004)

Cassim Shepard, Editor, *Urban Omnibus*

Varick Shute, Digital Editorial Director, [The Architectural League of New York](#)

Caitlin Zaloom, Associate Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, Director of Metropolitan Studies, NYU, author of [Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London](#) (2006)