Walking by the Commons: Developing Design Patterns for Future Cultures of Consumption and Production in Exhibition Interview Walks

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This paper introduces the experimental method of the exhibition interview walk and explains how it was used to create "Design Patterns for Future Commons." Methodologically, the exhibition interview walk references the focused interview, thinking aloud and object elicitation within a mobile research situation. The key argument is that through a thematic confrontation in the form of visual/material artifacts within an exhibition, complex or conflict-laden topics are more easily discussed, even with "newbies" to the research field. The aim of our first use of the exhibition interview walk was to study the social perception of commons good principles from different positions of economic and political thinking. In response to the preconception of commons as being avant-garde or counter-cultural, we focused on their potential to change the dominant capitalist system. From an overarching perspective our findings suggest that commons gain acceptance when their initiatives are considered to be of high societal relevance.

1 Introduction

Situations frame how we perceive the world and how we encounter subjects and objects. According to Erving Goffman's frame analysis (1974), situations – marked by verbal but also territorial indications or requisites – build organizational principles for social events that help us to understand what is happening at the moment. "Walking by the Commons" is a research situation located within an exhibition that we created for the joint exploration of commons good principles in dialogue with participants from the fields of economy and industry. The aim of this paper is to introduce the experimental method of the exhibition interview walk and to offer insights into its first findings, "Design Patterns for Future Commons."

Both the method of the exhibition interview walk and the design patterns are results of the research project "Commons as Mindset and Innovation Strategy in Design: From the Avant-Garde to a New Industrial Paradigm?", funded by the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development. The project was conceived and conducted by a group of researchers (Martina Fineder, Harald Gruendl, Luise Reitstätter, Ulrike Haele, Viktoria Heinrich) from the Institute of Design Research Vienna (IDRV). It grew out of our observing that a growing number of young designers and inventors worldwide are realizing their ideas in the form of knowledge and production communities, and that their design principles are considered avant-garde or even counter-cultural in many areas of conventionally market-oriented sectors of society.

Commons – or better commoning – is a centuries-old concept ranging from rural communities that shared land or fishing grounds to so-called "new commons" (Hess, 2011) such as urban gardening or wikipedias. Although the latter common-good strategies are increasingly studied in design contexts concerned with public spaces, neighborly activities and knowledge commons (c.f. Dellenbaugh, Kip, Bieniok, Müller, & Schwegmann, 2015; Meroni, 2007; Unteidig, Domínguez Cobreros, Calderon-Lüning, & Joost, 2017), they remain suspect to many in the traditional industrial context. Even in the context of Industry 4.0 it is often overlooked that on a broad conceptual and ideological level the key concepts of the commons – such as the democratization of design and manufacturing processes (e.g. Bollier & Helfrich, 2012, 2015, 2019; Linebaugh, 2009) – are also found in open design, which has its roots in the open source software and open source hardware movements (Boisseau, Omhover, & Bouchard, 2018; Newman, Tarasiewicz, Wagner, & Wuschitz, 2016; van Abel, Klaassen, Evers, & Troxler, 2011). Irrespective of different self-attributions to one movement or another, a more democratic access to our material and immaterial worlds through participation and collective government is the overriding goal of all.

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Against this background, we investigated small-structured and decentralized (but internationally connected) communities that use new digital technologies to collaboratively develop, design and manufacture objects or provide platforms. Our six case studies (fig. 1a–f) were: 1) the *MakerNurse* platform, part of *MakerHealth*, which provides doctors and nursing staff with tools and resources to realize their own medical-technological inventions; 2) the *Bionicohand*, an open source hand prosthesis that can be produced with a 3-D printer at a relatively affordable price; 3) the *WikiHouse*, a modular building system of standardized parts that allows rapid assembly and affordable housing; 4) the *AXIOM* open source film camera by apertus° Association, a durable modular camera that users can upgrade and repair by themselves; 5) the *Faircap Open Water Filter*, a low-cost water filter that can be screwed on to any plastic bottle to make contaminated water potable; and 6) the *Air Quality Egg* by Wicked Device, that allows users to collect and share high-quality air data worldwide.

Within our search for design patterns we follow authors who have made efforts to disseminate commons logics through the formulation of patterns for joint action (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015; Leitner, 2015) or "rules of engagement" (Thackara, 2015, p.147). These authors make clear that commons emerge from active social practices (commoning) and involve many forms of sharing determined by their respective group or community. To a large extent, these formulations are grounded in Elinor Ostrom's economic principles for successful commoning (Ostrom, 1990). For decades, Ostrom's aim was to counter the assumption that communities without regulation from the state or the private market economy could not administer common goods without destroying them. In order to overcome such prejudices, we focused on questions of connectivity between the commons and the dominant capitalist market system by promoting the possibilities that common-good strategies offer for the development of more socially and ecologically compatible cultures of consumption and production. With the plural "cultures" we imply the necessity of increased diversity in design as proposed by Arturo Escobar in his book *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018).

Fig. 1: *MakerHealth, DIY infant eye-mask for protection during phototherapy, Nicaragua (Anna Young); video still from Bionicohand - Open Source Prothesis for Residual Limbs (Nicholas Huchet & Makea Industries); WikiHouse, Farmhouse, Warwickshire, UK (Architecture 00); presentation brochure for the apertus° AXIOM project; video still from The Fair Cap (Mauricio Cordova); advertising image for the Air Quality Egg (Wicked Device).*

2 The Exhibition Interview Walk as Research Method

In this section we share the methodological background and the first application of the exhibition interview walk in our research project. By offering concrete descriptions of all of our procedures, we aim to make the method's use in the commons research project both easily comprehensible and applicable to further cultural and design studies.

2.1 Methodological References and Aims

By walking through and collectively exploring an exhibition, the exhibition interview walk combines the methods of the focused interview, thinking aloud and object elicitation in a mobile research situation (Reitstätter & Fineder, 2021). The focused interview is referenced in so far as it makes use of a specific stimulus to explore participants' reactions, an exhibition in our case. While its hypothesis-led procedure is less in line with the explorative research style of the exhibition interview walk, its experience-based criteria provide valuable guidelines. This includes the least possible influence on the interviewee through a minimum of guidance and the documentation of a broad range of meanings of the stimulus (Merton & Kendall, 1946). These criteria are also met in the method of thinking aloud, wherein interviewees are asked to immediately share their thoughts and reactions regarding given stimuli. By keeping participants continuously talking, the aim is to access short-term memory and immediate affect instead of highlighting rationalizations and justifications (Ericsson & Simon, 1996). In human computer interaction research, the main focus of thinking aloud is placed on an individual's handling of products and services in order to identify patterns of use (Boren & Ramey, 2000). This approach – followed in the exhibition interview walk too – allows questions to be asked in order to clarify participants' verbal and sensory reactions.

The stimulus of the exhibition, used to make people think out loud, is further taken up in the method of object elicitation. As a semi-structured interview method, object elicitation works with source materials such as photographs, videos, models or products bearing a narrative effect (e.g. Harper, 2002; Holzwarth & Niesyto, 2008; Willig, 2017). Objects help to focus and relax the conversation at the same time: Instead of asking questions directly, that gesture

is transferred to the objects. In addition, interviews conducted with the help of objects can be expected to intensify emotional reactions (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008) or to establish a shared base of understanding, even if the participants are skeptical about the topic (Kuehne, 2013). This was both decisive in the commons exhibition interview walks with their aim of investigating the acceptance or rejection of the commons logics shaped by participants' personal and professional biographies. In general, walking, looking and talking in the exhibition establishes a common ground between the interview partners sharing movement, sight and thoughts.

2.2 The Exhibition as a Research Setting

Traditionally, exhibitions are spaces where visitors encounter certain objects and issues within a leisure-time activity. An exhibition's natural characteristics of being a walkable environment that can be perceived physically and explored in social encounters onsite (Reitstätter, 2015, 2020) can, however, also be used for empirical investigations. In our digital age, exhibitions in contrast can strongly rely on their auratic spatial qualities, which allow for conscious sensory experiences (Kohle, 2017). In addition, exhibitions are noted for their specific sociability as they are often visited in pairs or groups and examined in joint discussions (e.g. Debenedetti, 2003; Jafari, Taheri, & vom Lehn, 2013; Reitstätter, 2018).

Our commons research project was linked to the exhibition "CityFactory: New Work. New Design" at the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, within the larger context of the Vienna Biennale 2017 (Fineder, Gruendl, & Haele, 2017). Content-wise, this provided an excellent framework within which to embed our commons research project as the exhibition dealt with topics such as the circular economy, co-creation and alternative income strategies. Practically, we could easily integrate the commons case studies in the exhibition as the team of curators was also part of the research project. As a consequence, the exhibition worked first as a planned public show and secondarily as a research setting. Approximately one-third of the 1,400 m² exhibition hall hosted the six commons case studies on four "exhibition islands" (fig. 2). Their presentation resulted from a collaborative process between the curatorial team and the projects' protagonists aiming to showcase objects as working materials (rather than in a representational manner). In addition to the case studies, we further included an introductory text as well as two large banners opposing the logics of commons with the logics of the market, based on the model of Silke Helfrich (see www.commons-institut.org).

Fig. 2: *Installation shot of the exhibition "CityFactory: New Work. New Design" (photo: Peter Kainz/MAK).*

Instead of curating one's own show, using a pre-existing exhibition also works for an exhibition interview walk. The establishment of an exhibition as a research setting first requires the selection of adequate objects; these can be combined with additional materials if needed. A second step is the development of a spatial guide that will give structure to the exhibition interview walks. Practically speaking, a floor plan with marked areas serves as a location-based substitute for the verbal interview guide. In our case, we marked the entrance area with the commons introductory text, the four exhibition islands with the six selected case studies, as well as the text banners as areas to be passed and objects to be discussed (fig.3).

In general, a spatial guide guarantees that all participants are confronted with the same artifacts during the exhibition interview walks. It is, however, important that participants feel invited to individually engage with the objects, looking at and discussing them as they wish or not at all. In contrast to ethnographic research projects with their self-chosen routes (e.g. Leder Mackley & Pink, 2017; Lee & Ingold, 2006; Pink, 2008), here less the routes but the encounters with the objects invite the participants to bring their personal memories, experiences and knowledge into the research setting of the exhibition.

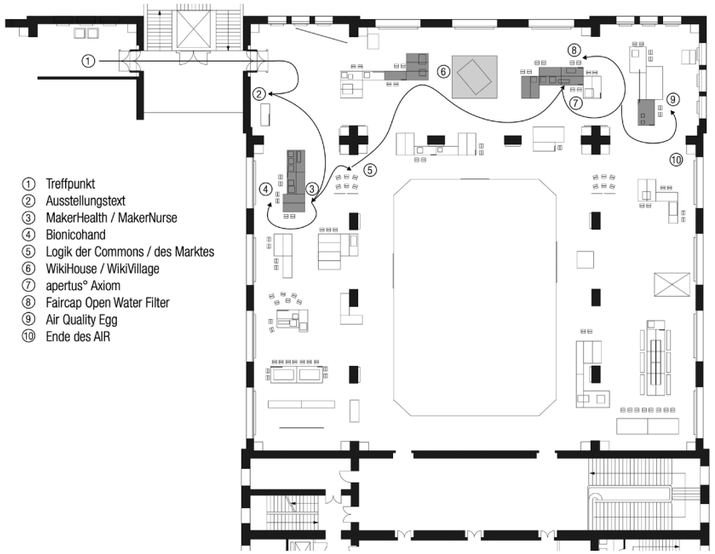

Fig. 3: *Spatial guide (visualization: EOOS).*

Fig. 4: *Installation shot showing MakerHealth/MakerNurse and the Refugee Nation flag in the background (photo: Peter Kainz/MAK).*

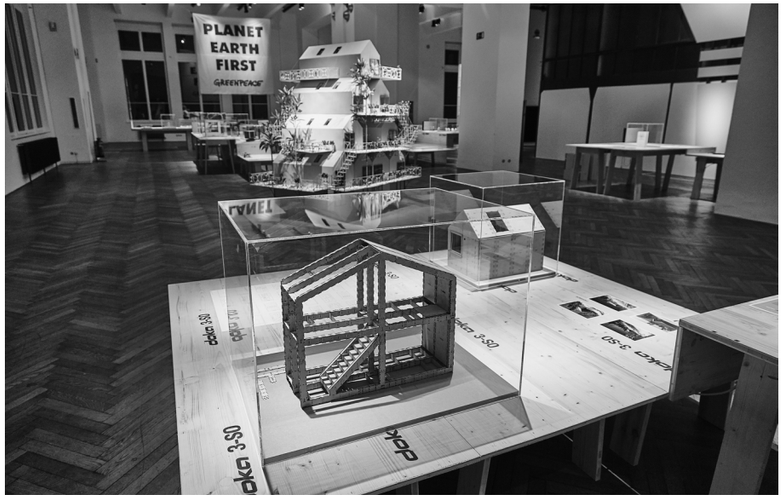

Fig. 5: *Installation shot showing the WikiHouse and WikiVillage (photo: Peter Kainz/MAK).*

2.3 Conduction of the Exhibition Interview Walks

The conduction of the exhibition interview walks is characterized by collective processes of deciphering visual/material stimuli and corresponding verbal and sensory reactions in data collection and analysis.

Collective data collection begins with the selection and invitation of participants whose expertise relates to the thematic focus of the research project and the chosen exhibition. The participants' expertise, however, does not necessarily need to be thematically congruent as the exhibition interview walk offers access to an unfamiliar terrain and allows for the productive discussion of formerly unfamiliar topics. Aiming for a variety of perspectives, we invited experts from different positions of economic and political thinking. The ten participants had little to no contact with commons principles, but were senior management experts in work areas that play a vital role in the shaping of post-industrial work and production cultures. Specifically, they came from the fields of healthcare, medical technology, climate and sustainability research, organization and innovation development, labor market service, design, branding and strategy consulting.

We conducted the exhibition interview walk as a team of two, one taking the role of the interviewer, the other that of the observer. While the interviewer gave only standard introductions to stimulate the participant to think aloud, or asked questions, the observer took notes in the background, capturing the sensory engagement with the exhibits and the interview climate in general. Both roles were performed as discreetly as possible. Instead, the selected objects stimulated and shaped the conversations as their sensual-aesthetic impulses made the participants stop, linger, look

and speak. To a certain extent, sensory perception is limited in exhibitions by the "do not touch" rule; here, however, it is introduced to the conversation by describing what one means to feel.

Following the exhibition interview walks, the recorded audio files need to be transcribed and the observation protocols structured and supplemented with additional notes. In the commons exhibition interview walks (lasting between one and one-and-a-half hours) the transcripts produced an average of twenty-two pages of text, while the handwritten protocols covered about eight pages per walk. During this process of data preparation, however, it became clear how difficult it is to meticulously record a large number of multisensory reactions for each single object. Thus, we suggest video-recording exhibition interview walks as a potential alternative or even in addition to the participant observation. We also propose collectively analyzing the documentation of the walks to interpret the rich multi-modal data set. In the commons project, we undertook the data analysis in collective coding sessions according to the Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The protocols, on the other hand, were evaluated according to the methodology of "sensory ethnography" (Pink, 2015) analyzing facial expressions, gestures and postures. This combined analysis finally resulted in the "Design Patterns for Future Commons."

3 From Empirical Data to Design Patterns

This section explains how the reactions of the participants in the course of the exhibition interview walks resulted in five "Design Patterns for Future Commons." As Bollier and Helfrich outline in *Patterns of Commoning* (2015), there is a great need to grasp the essence of the (social) process of commoning in order to create connectivity between collaborators. According to Christopher Alexander (1977), such patterns are best built on descriptions of cases and elements, including the identification of problems as well as the definition of solutions. We have followed this approach in our open access research report, but will only briefly describe the patterns here in reference to statements and observations from the walks due to the chosen methodological focus of this paper.

In short, the five interlinked patterns are: 1) initiative, 2) relevance, 3) decentralization, 4) modularity, and 5) affordability. Some of these patterns were more expected than others, e.g., modularity, which is an essential principle in sustainable design. In correspondence with existing theoretical and practical strands, our patterns depict the prevailing concepts that we discovered in our empirical data led by the research aim of investigating the perception and possible acceptance of commons principles.

3.1 Initiative

The pattern "initiative" signifies that outstanding projects come into being through the pioneering spirit of one or more central personalities who can gather and keep collaborators around them and/or find partners who offer special expertise, equipment or funding. Those personalities have an individual interest in or intrinsic motivation for the solution of a specific problem that directly affects themselves and/or their immediate surroundings. This special kind of initiative was positively highlighted in the exhibition interview walk by various participants, and with two prevailing perspectives: The first especially highlights the nature of innovations that arise from acute situational needs. In the words of the innovation expert, this means: "What I find very exciting is the aspect that where there is an urgent need for improvement the idea is developed and ideally can trigger innovation. One example is the hand prosthesis, because in Austria, where the health system probably pays for a prosthesis with five movable fingers, I tend not to build one." (int07, ll. 780-785). The second concerns the search for a suitable implementation context (followers, partners, supporters etc.). The *Air Quality Egg*, which grew out of an Internet of Things workshop, was carefully looked at by the climate scientist who commented: "This immediately reminds me of a project that I have been carrying around with me for a long time, but for which I just haven't found anyone yet to implement it with." (int08, ll. 470-472). The necessity of professional partners was continually stressed by all interviewees of the health sector as this area is subject to high safety regulations and quality controls.

3.2 Relevance

This pattern is about solving an urgent problem of high social necessity but for which industry, society and politics do not yet offer satisfactory solutions, especially in terms of financial affordability. It focuses on projects with social or ecological relevance for "very, very many people," as one sustainability expert noted (int08, l. 595). During the exhibition interview walk, the *Fair Cap Open Water Filter* was clearly regarded as having the highest relevance: "If anything needs to be democratized, it is water." (int03, ll. 615-616). The water filter is often described as "great" or "totally cool" and perceived as a project with "exclusively positive effects" (int03, l. 609). It is therefore not surprising that the use of public funds for such projects is not questioned. As one design expert stated: "It is nice that there are people who can do something like that [...] nice that there is financing." (int01, ll. 384-386). While projects classified as highly socially relevant were considered for possible new forms of funding (cf. int02), projects having less societal value (e.g., the Axiom camera) were less engaged with or even regarded with some skepticism (int01). From the perspective of the labor market, projects with high social relevance not only serve basic needs but also contribute to the creation of meaningful future work (int06). This view was shared by a sales manager from the medical sector who noted, looking at the text banners, that among the younger generation of employees the "question of meaning arises much more than in a generation before" (int03, ll. 334-335).

3.3 Decentralization

This pattern concerns the decentralization of knowledge and production through worldwide developer communities and local production communities. Both developments have become possible through the increasing availability and affordability of new digital technologies, and are fostered by an ideology of open source. During the exhibition interview walks the participants emphasized the decentralization of knowledge in reaction to the neoliberal countertrend of commercially exploiting knowledge financed with public funds. Discussing basic commons principles, the climate scientist highlighted that even if in climate research public data is still largely available "it becomes critical when the data is very, very new. [...] This is not quite understandable to me because we all pay for this with our tax money." (int08, ll. 46-52) In the context of health care, several interview partners welcomed open knowledge and production cultures in order to bridge shortcomings of medical equipment through DIY workshops, manuals or design for download (int02, int03, int04). In response to the MakerHealth platform, the branding expert even praised "these new developments and technologies and this sharing [for their] truly sustainable benefit for the common good" (int05, ll. 74-76). On a general level, experts from different fields welcomed decentralized, organized developer communities because they offer creative problem-based solutions that might be "ideas to be picked" by others (int06, ll. 212-213). Problems for decentralized product development and their market implementation are seen in public restrictions such as legal (health) standards, safety restrictions and building regulations.

3.4 Modularity

The pattern of modularity is closely linked to decentralization. On the one hand, it is about a general modular thinking where several developers contribute their expertise and work in a co-creative process. On the other, modularity refers to the structural design of products and services that allows for the adaptation of hardware and software within a system or a product range. The participants' reactions in the interview walks proved that modularity is seen as a promising way of dealing with technological leaps through upgrades and retrofits – in contrast to technical devices that soon become obsolete and are substituted by new ones. In particular, experts from different medical sectors agreed that "reprocessable equipment is a huge factor in medicine" (int04, ll. 30-31) because "if you have a device for five years, you can assume that it will be old after that." At the same time, the newest "diagnostic devices are also an argument that hospitals use to advertise." (int02, ll. 475-476). Looking at the models of the *Wikihouse* and *Wikivillage* (fig. 5), interview partners see modularity as a good basis for customization as well as an interesting way to create new and more open forms of private or social housing (int03, int07). However, it is important to note that despite this strong appreciation of modularity, the project with the strongest focus on this pattern, the *Axiom* camera, was the one of the six case studies that was the least noted in the exhibition interview walks. Participants often simply walked by or had little to say about the camera which might also be due to the rather plain proof-of-concept presentation. One participant also expressed skepticism about consumer comfort by recalling experiences attached to other modular products such as the *FairPhone* (int06).

3.5 Affordability

This pattern concerns the affordability of resources, products and services for individually affected persons and larger population groups in areas where the market does not yet provide satisfactory solutions. Different forms of commons-based production set new standards in the availability of health care products, of living and working spaces or technical equipment for artists' production. In the exhibition interview walks, the price of some exhibits prompted gestural and verbal enthusiasm: "That's incredibly cheap!," a manager from the healthcare sector claimed while observing the video of the *Bionicohand* (int02, l. 283). Although the innovation expert joined in the excitement, she noted that calculations do not include the costs of working hours (int07, ll. 218-219). The low price is only possible through much self-initiative (pro bono work) and a funding partnership with an external company. In addition, the interview walks brought to light the fact that financial affordability is often linked to the empowerment of the people involved, as this remark of the job market developer evidenced: "This is of course really great, because apart from the fact that it really makes a big difference for people who otherwise cannot afford such a prosthesis, it is also important that you become active yourself. [...] It is important to find meaningful activities." (int06, ll. 165-173). Almost all of the participants developed a positive stance towards do-it-yourself-strategies in situations of social need or even catastrophe. This changed, however, when these solutions affected participants' professional or personal lives, as when, for instance, one participant pondered on the "spooky" idea of self-built implants (int07, l. 281).

4 Reflections on a New Method and its Findings

The key idea behind the development of the exhibition interview walk was to create a suitable research method that would allow, on the one hand, a gathering of various geographically widespread commons case studies at one site, and on the other hand, an opportunity to interview commons "newbies" – though experts – from relevant fields. We can readily see the method's benefits in providing a framework to collectively study complex or eventually conflict-laden topics in informal, mobile and sensory ways. Conducting experimental exhibition walks however – in contrast to conventional sit-down interviews – also comes with some challenges. The method's implementation in this open research setting requires certain preparatory efforts for the creation or adaptation of an exhibition and demands experience in social science as well as situational competencies on the part of the researchers.

In this sense, participants who prefer talking only about things within their field of expertise might struggle in dealing with previously unknown objects and being asked to suddenly think out loud about them. However, while the spontaneity required in this research situation was perceived as a "personal challenge," it was also credited as being a good method to foster "basic intention" and to "get a good feeling" (int05, ll.642-647). In addition, the dialogical situation of the exhibition interview walk was positively highlighted by a number of experts for its quality to reduce the feeling of being a mere informant and for obtaining new insights and information.

Reflecting on the single objects' power to elicit conversation, we must state that the respective degree of interest correlates with the degree of affect triggered by the different objects. If objects can neither be personally nor emotionally connected to the interviewees' lives, they then remain silent. Accordingly, we were particularly surprised at the intense reactions to the text banners juxtaposing the logic of the commons versus the logic of the market. This schematic comparison provoked unexpected reactions and was criticized for its bold black and white presentation. However, this criticism was ultimately beneficial to our research aims since it not only brought about detailed explanations of personal versus professional perspectives, including the defense of one's own market-economy positions, but also corrections of our own preconceived perceptions.

A major result of our commons exhibition interview walks is to be found in the participants' astonishment at the number of commons projects that already exist but were unknown to them – experts in their respective fields. In order to foster exchange between these avant-garde innovations and the dominant industrial system, the experts recommended that public relations and dissemination strategies of common-good design principles be increased. In this sense, the high level of recognition of the commons projects due to their inspiring initiatives and along with the high valuation attributed to their social relevance suggests that innovations carried out by individuals and their networks can have the power to change the dominant regime. Therefore, in order for common good practices to be translated into guiding principles for the sustainable development of society, they need to change from being mere niche solutions to becoming the everyday business of society.

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Symposium 2021
Conference Proceedings

Edited by
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Sabine Junginger

University of Applied Sciences and Arts
of Southern Switzerland
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Lucerne University of
Applied Sciences and Arts
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