

OPTING OUT

The Grove

Designing Belonging Beyond Mobility

Ameesha Talreja · Final Year Design Management · Prof. Sherline Pimenta

2026



CONTEXT

Why Are People Opting Out Today?

This project emerges from a cultural shift: traditional systems of work, home, and belonging have become increasingly unstable for an entire generation.

52%

of knowledge workers report severe burnout (Gallup 2024)



Burnout Epidemic

Record burnout across knowledge industries. Hustle culture curdling into collective fatigue.



Housing Insecurity

Rent-to-income ratios in global cities have broken the social contract.



Remote Work Surge

Post-pandemic: 30%+ of knowledge workers permanently remote. Location untethered.



Digital Nomad Rise

35+ countries launched nomad visa programs 2020–2024. Mobility as lifestyle.



Loneliness Crisis

Nomadic life: socially rich, emotionally isolated. Depth sacrificed for breadth.



Institutional Distrust

Declining trust in governments, banks, healthcare — exit feels like the sane response.

From Mobility to Meaning

Key Insight: Freedom without infrastructure creates instability. Movement without belonging creates loneliness.



Nomad Visas

35+ countries. Portugal, Estonia, Costa Rica. Infrastructure for mobility — but legally fragile.



Commons Models

Intentional communities, co-housing, co-ops growing across Europe. New governance emerging.



Slow Living

Seasonal eating, repair culture, herbalism, place-knowledge. Counter-movement gaining depth.



Gentrification

Nomad influx prices locals out of Lisbon, Bali, Oaxaca. The host bears the cost of someone else's freedom.



Tech as Background

Future isn't less tech — it's ambient, invisible tech that serves life rather than demanding attention.

The Core Question

How might we redesign life beyond hyper-productivity and isolation — and create the infrastructure for genuine belonging?

Sub-question:

What happens after opting out — when the freedom finally arrives, and you discover the question was always: what are you running toward?

Blind Spot 01 · Exit Without Consequence

Individuals can leave systems without consequence for the infrastructure left behind. Dependency is displaced, not removed.

Blind Spot 02 · Freedom Without Belonging

Mobility without civic contribution is privilege with good lighting. The preferable future must build something, not just pass through.

Research to Speculative World-Building



01

Secondary
Research



02

Systems
Mapping



03

Futures
Thinking



04

Divergence
12+ Ideas



05

Convergence
The Grove



06

Physical
Prototyping



07

Digital
Artefacts

Methods Used

Speculative Design

Systems Thinking

World-Building

Futures Cone (Voros 2003)

Ostrom Commons Theory

Physical Prototyping

Introducing The Grove

2041 · Alentejo, Portugal

A speculative commons community — 14 households, 38 people, 8 nationalities. Legally held under a commons trust on the Atlantic coast of Southern Portugal.

14

Households

38

People

8

Nationalities

2041

Year

"My passport is valid. My membership document says: herbalist, governance facilitator, seed keeper. That second document feels more true."

Community Spaces



Commons Kitchen & Café

Two communal meals daily. Weekend workshops open to the region.



Herb Garden & Seed Library

Hundreds of varieties. Maria's handwriting on the oldest labels.



The Gathering Room

6:30pm every evening. No agenda, no screens. Central fire.



School Barn

Rotating teachers. Real-scale projects. No theory without practice.



Stillness Room

Cork floors, no electronics. Grief, conflict, morning meditation.



Boat Shed & Coast

Two fishing boats. Rui teaches star navigation — because you should know where you are.

A Day in The Grove

February 2041 · Herdade do Tempo · Mira, Age 37



THE PEOPLE



Mira, 37

Herbalist · Seed Keeper · Governance



Tião, 44

Chef · Food Systems · Teaching



Maria, 81

Elder · Land Memory · Stories



Duarte, 51

Carpenter · Builder · Teaching



Rui, 45

Sea Knowledge · Navigation



Arjun, 24

New Arrival · Finding his place

How The Grove Works



ENERGY

Solar Management

Fully automated solar-battery. Monthly digest. Gentle nudges before cloud stretches.



WATER

Smart Water

Borehole pump + soil moisture sensors. Cistern level on one shared screen in the kitchen.



LAND

Soil Intelligence

Sensors tracking moisture, nitrogen, pH. Mira checks once in the morning. Technology surfaces. She decides.



FOOD

Kitchen AI

Tracks harvest and storage. Tião: 'what needs using?' It suggests. He decides. Zero waste.



MEMORY

Knowledge Archive

Maria's voice recordings, annotated maps, video of her hands. Preserved. Not replaced.



HEALTH

Health Monitoring

Optional wearables. Data stays personal. No notifications. You pull. It doesn't push.

RITUALS

Shared breakfast · sunrise herb walk · evening fire circle · weekly governance meetings · compost & kitchen rotations

CREDITS

Residents earn shared credits through cooking, farming, teaching, repair work, composting, and caregiving. Credits support food access, space use, and responsibility.

BELONGING

Grief circles · elder storytelling · shared meals · mentorship across generations · stillness spaces · community gatherings · grounding · sound healing and more for emotional restoration.

The Final Ecosystem



Interactive Websites

Speculative world-building hub

Full Nine Lives narrative, interactive map of The Grove, knowledge chain, technology section, day-in-the-life timeline. Soil intelligence interface, and kitchen inventory interface.



Interactive Map

Herdade do Tempo · 2041

Click-to-explore map of community spaces, natural landscape, nearby towns. Every pin tells a story.



Grove Brochure & Map

Printed · Textured paper

A folded document as if The Grove is already real and open. Part manifesto, part spatial map, part welcome guide.



Object from 2041

Future Artefact : Well Tower

A speculative environmental infrastructure artefact designed to collect rainwater, reduce surrounding heat through passive cooling, and automatically distribute stored water across the Grove based on soil moisture levels, crop needs, and cistern capacity.



Physical Model

Tabletop · Materials Workshop

Artificial grass, red cloth, blue felt, cardboard structures. Built from materials of Alentejo. The spatial argument the screen can't make alone.



Process Journal

Assignment 04 + This Document

Full design process: spark → blind spots → systems → divergence → convergence → AI use → reflection. The methodology made visible.

Who Does This Help?

The Grove is designed for people the system currently fails to hold.



Digital Nomads

People who built freedom on fragile platforms and visa policies — and discovered the cost later. The Grove offers permanence as a chosen act.



Remote Workers

Productive and mobile, but lacking the roots that make work meaningful over a lifetime. The Grove integrates work with community.



Urban Burnout

Knowledge workers priced out of cities and exhausted by acceleration. The Grove models a slower, more grounded economy.



Emotionally Isolated Professionals

High connectivity, low depth. The gathering room, the shared meals, the grief circle — infrastructure for what was lost.



Future Commons Communities

The Grove's governance documents (Selin's work) are already used by 12 other communities. The model scales through example.

Tensions Honestly Named

01 · Who Can Access The Grove?

Requires time, resources, cultural familiarity. Not yet universally accessible.

02 · Technology Is Still There

Solar, mesh networks — manufacturing has its own footprint. Not fully resolved.

03 · Children Don't Choose

A 16-year-old may want a different life. How does the community hold that tension?

04 · Mira Is Idealised

She carries my values. Good speculative design names the designer's hand.

What Changed For Me as a Designer

FROM

Freedom



TOWARD

Belonging

I set out to celebrate nomadic freedom. Research revealed freedom without belonging is loneliness with better weather. The whole project turned on this.

FROM

Product



TOWARD

System

I stopped designing objects and started designing conditions — commons governance, knowledge chains, ritual infrastructure. Design as ecology.

FROM

Object



TOWARD

World

The Grove isn't a product. It's a world — with its own economy, rituals, tensions, and people. The most interesting design work I've done.

*I began by asking
how people escape.*

*I ended by asking
how people stay.*

The preferable future is not about opting out of the world. It's about being rooted enough that when you go out into it, you actually feel it. Belonging turns out to be the most radical infrastructure of all.