

Purple

► 15 mars 2021

architecture

philippe starck



an adept of insular living long before the pandemic, the french design star was based for years on formentera. his love of islands and isolation extends to his work ethic, whether designing self-sustainable, prefabricated houses or the habitable module project for nasa's new space station.

INTERVIEW BY OLIVIER ZAHM

PORTRAIT BY
OLIVIER AMSELLEM

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Purple's* Island issue is an allegory for today's new possibilities. It's obvious that we must change and adapt to today's doomsday times.

PHILIPPE STARCK — I'm in an especially good position to talk about insular life, insofar as it has been — and still is — my life's own structure. I know the pros and cons. I never went to school. I fled from it, in fact. For me, school was society, and I've never understood the slightest thing about society and still don't. I've always lived in almost total isolation, since childhood. I had no friends and would hide in the woods around Paris to avoid going to school, and then, for years, I never left my bedroom.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you took to your heels?

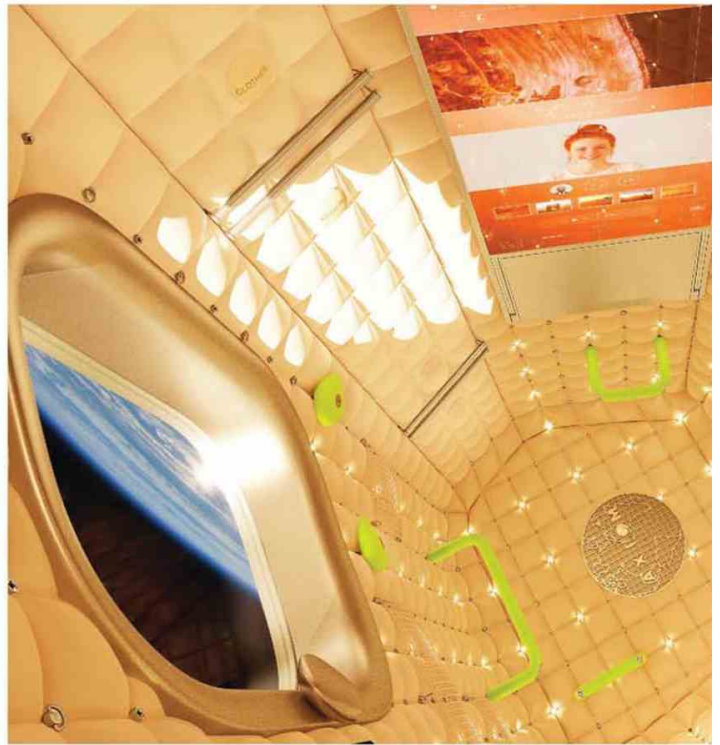
PHILIPPE STARCK — Yes. I've been a runaway since birth. I flee from everything out of total incomprehension but not out of dislike for what I see. Because I'm not one to criticize. I'm more of a doer. But I've always felt right away that things aren't as they should or could be, which is enough for me not to go along completely. I lived in isolation as a child and then as an adolescent. Then

I very quickly went off to the islands. I lived for a long time on Formentera, from the age of 16. I'm selling my house there next week because it's no longer the same — precisely because it's no longer an island. Then I moved to Burano, a small island in the Venetian Lagoon, where I still live. It's an island half-a-mile long. I also have a house on the Île aux Oiseaux in the bay off Cap Ferret. And I also live on a mountain in Portugal, south of Lisbon, another kind of island. Always in total, permanent isolation and quite happy about it, as we leave the house only to take planes, to go to offices, sometimes our own, or to hotel rooms, often ones I've designed. It's a sort of schizophrenic tunnel. These transitory refuges are islands on Earth. I call them my "Nowhere" collection. Everything's the same throughout our "Nowhere" collection, by the way: the same sheets, the same sulfite-free wine, etc. Everything is rigorously identical, so that I can go from place to place without feeling a change. When I change places, it tends to have something to do with the capacity for isolation, with respect to the level of concentration that this or

that project demands. At my office in Paris, for example, the isolation is nonexistent. I don't design in Paris. I design little at Cap Ferret because I have a lot of friends there, a boat, and distractions. I design a little in Venice, a little more, but there, too, I've got the fishermen and the neighbors. I've designed a lot at Formentera, where I'd shut myself in for months. There's been a sign in front of the door for 30 or 40 years that reads: "No visit without an appointment. All appointments canceled." So, no one comes in, no one goes out. And now I've replaced all this with Portugal, atop my sacred mountains.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, for you, isolation was first about running away, a refusal to go along with things, and later it became the condition for creation?

PHILIPPE STARCK — Creation is just the management of concentration. That's all it is. The only way to concentrate is, of course, to be alone, face-to-face with yourself, naked, at seven in the morning before a blank page, saying as little as possible. Jacques Lacan said, "The spoken kills," and for me, a professional dreamer, the spoken kills my dreams.





If I speak of something, I've got in my head, I kill it. It's like birds when you touch their eggs: they abandon them. If someone touches one of my dreams, the dream ceases to interest me. I'm forced to move on to something else. So, yes, it's important not to speak. And it's especially important not to hear. It can be useful to listen – but not to hear, especially not to hear. Hearing leads you right away – by osmosis because it's natural – to take in the ideas of others or the general idea. But mainstream thought is worthless. You can't do anything with mainstream thought. My wife and kids aside, I live only for my drug, my madness, which is creativity. Creativity practiced like an extreme sport: I'm a machine. I'm not talking about quality, which is for others to judge. I'm talking about quantity. To caricature the situation, you could say I'm the fastest, most creative organic computer in the world because I can manage one big, complex project per day. When it's very, very, very complex, it takes me three days maximum. For example, all the design work for the habitable module project for NASA's new space station was done in a day. According to them, I've revolutionized 20 years' worth of their practices and customs. That's what they explained to me in a touching, three-page letter I adore. Creation is living alone. It's living on an island, like Faust. You have to sell your soul to the devil. Give your life, shut yourself in, set yourself apart to be sure nothing leaks from your dreams or your mind – thought leaks and concentration leaks. I know how this works, and it works extremely well. But, I repeat, it'll cost you the whole of your life. All I have is my wife and daughter, whom I live with – because my other children are now grown up. Nothing else. I have a friend or two I love – in an almost religious way because I hold them sacred. When you isolate yourself, everything becomes sacred, everything becomes vital, everything becomes important.

OLIVIER ZAHM – And what are the negative aspects of islands?

PHILIPPE STARCK – The problem with islands is that they slide into totalitarianism. It's easy to establish a totalitarian state on an island, where you can control everything. And a totalitarian state is the opposite of life.

OLIVIER ZAHM – But isn't it the great continental states that have produced dictatorships? Islands tend, rather, to be points of resistance... PHILIPPE STARCK – We notice them because they're big, they've become aggressive and have sought to invade the other. On small islands, it's an unspoken, almost invisible system, but the rules are very strict. On Formentera a few years ago, a man who wouldn't behave was ejected from the island by the inhabitants. In general, there's a warning. In his case, they burned his moped, which was serious... Then they gently but firmly escorted him to the port. There was a very clear if unspoken authority. The myth of the island is one of the most beautiful snares in existence. We expect to find openness on an island, whereas, in fact, we find it shuts us in. I just happen to like it because I'm the prison type; I'm a monk. But I'm nevertheless perfectly aware of the gangrene that awaits me, which is suffocation. By what miracle can I continue to create under total autarky, as I'm suffocated, getting no news from anywhere? My supply of oxygen will necessarily diminish, and I think it'll happen at the right time, when I'm old enough to die, so I think it'll all go well.

OLIVIER ZAHM – Doesn't the miracle perhaps stem from the odd chance or curse you've had from the start of never really going along with society? From the start you've felt like a stranger, someone set apart or who doesn't belong.

PHILIPPE STARCK – I'm clearly a visitor. That's why, when people ask me my profession, I say, "I'm an explorer." I explore society because I'm not a part of it. I take part in it as little as possible.

OLIVIER ZAHM – The feeling of being a visitor comes with a passion for change. You bring, you propose, you transform.

PHILIPPE STARCK – That's not how it goes. I don't think you should have that sort of passion. I don't think you should be driven by any negative feeling. There's a fundamental rule: you can't build on the negative.

OLIVIER ZAHM – Okay, but this desire for change...

PHILIPPE STARCK – It's not a desire for change; it's a deep awareness that we're nothing but motion. The human being is not a static object. From the start of our conversation to now, we've already evolved, already shifted, already moved in one direction or another. We should never take a still photo, an instant photo. Our photos should all be blurry. I'm not fixed. I'm just passing through, never returning to the same spot. I'm driven by a sense of perpetual evolution. I keep very strict rules: Einsteinian relativity; nothing exists in itself, obviously. Everything is in motion. Only speed exists.

OLIVIER ZAHM – This sense of relativity and the perpetual evolution of flows exactly matches the evolution of our society today. You're headed in the direction of this evolution. More than that, you have this transformative ability...

PHILIPPE STARCK – I'm not headed in evolution's direction, I'm *evolving*. Every one of us is the evolution, carries the evolution out, constructs the evolution. It's remarkable because our sole reason for being is to take part in the evolution. In my view, that's why there are useful people and useless people, useful projects and useless projects, those who help our evolution along and the rest. And I'm not talking about people who "devolve." As long as you yourself are in motion, as long as everything is relative and nothing exists, we cling to nothing; we keep right on building as necessity dictates, according to the vision we have of the direction to take. The idea of knowing why we should do it – and this is, I repeat, extremely simple – is simply that we're the sole animal species to have taken control of its evolution, to the detriment of other species.

OLIVIER ZAHM – I was speaking of your transformative power as a designer.

TOP RIGHT: AXIOM SPACE STATION, HABITATION MODULE BY STARCK, 2016, COPYRIGHT AXIOM-STARCK NETWORK

TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM: AXIOM SPACE STATION, 2016, COPYRIGHT AXIOM



PHILIPPE STARCK — It's not a transformative power. At every instant of the evolution, of my evolution, of the world's evolution, I have new questions and new answers. Every creation is my contribution to the evolution. Even if it's a futile creation, there's a coherence and a discourse behind it, an idea of sexuality, of politics.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are you speaking of collapse? The possibility that things will come crashing down?

PHILIPPE STARCK — I have no fear that things will come crashing down. That's just a possible scenario, ever more probable. It's something you handle. I've long been extremely interested by the way civilizations vanish. We now understand perfectly how the Aztecs of South America very quickly disappeared. We might disappear today for exactly the same reasons: a general mismanagement of commodities. We need to keep in mind that, if all goes well, we have three weeks' worth of water in reserve and three days' worth of food in Paris. In other words, everything will go up in smoke with the first lasting strike or conflict. We're sitting on a sublimely fragile time bomb. Everything's in balance. All those atoms in constant motion — it's extremely fragile. Just blow on it, and everything falls into disorder. It's remarkable. It's fascinating.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, what societal model should we adopt under such grave risk?

PHILIPPE STARCK — The island is a dream, a somewhat puerile dream. It can be a creative action, but temporary at best. It's not a model for society. It doesn't work. The only thing that works is sharing, openness. I'm in favor of communism. The sole viable societal model we've had before us is communism. The only problem is that it was instantly perverted by hooligans. Capitalism was also instantly perverted by hooligans, except that we continue to perpetuate capitalism for humanly egotistical and unacceptable reasons — causing the death of millions of people, waging permanent war, reinjecting money we never see again into the pockets of a few who become vastly richer than the rest. We know all

island



STARCK WITH RIKO, PATH
(PREFABRICATED ACCESSIBLE
TECHNOLOGICAL HOMES), 2014,
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too well that we're speeding toward a brick wall. Communism, on the other hand, was perverted politically. We tried it only once and then threw it into the dustbin.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you think we're going to revisit the communist idea?

PHILIPPE STARCK — I think our greatest mistake was to choose capitalism over communism. But I'm certain that we'll come back to it, even if it's done any which way. We'll come back because there are no other solutions. Mind you, I'm talking about communism, not Sovietism: in other words, everybody has more or less the same thing, the distribution of the wealth produced.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, communism in the sense of the common good, the sharing of the common good?

PHILIPPE STARCK — Of course! In fact, the word *property* vanishes. If we'd like to achieve the common good, we must get rid of "property." It seems fairly simple. The only way we'll get over the astronomical number of walls ahead of us is through a collective, economic, and ecological awakening. There'll be no solution coming from the outside that doesn't first come from within ourselves, from within us all. I actually have a few little proposals, notably for ecological problems.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's happening now. Things are already in motion.

PHILIPPE STARCK — It's starting, but the problem is us. It's all the sadder that we're geniuses. We are ingenious animals. We're smart enough to understand the problem, and ingenious enough to have the solution, but we're too juvenile, childish, and ostrich-like to deal with it because we consider that we've got other, more amusing things to do in the meantime. The damage we're incurring is irreversible because we're taking too long to address the problem. Our demise won't come from the problem itself but from our idleness, from our delay in dealing with it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And the solution isn't to go elsewhere? Elon Musk's solution?

PHILIPPE STARCK — We'll go elsewhere in 1.2 billion years,



when the sun implodes, and we explode, but we won't set out in our current form. Don't forget we were once amoebas, and now we no longer look like amoebas. We have another 1.2 billion years to go on Earth, and almost the same amount of time to mutate into something else. So, we'll be leaving Earth in a different form, if we survive in spite of ourselves, if intelligence catches up — because there's a scientifically verifiable decline in intelligence right now.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Maybe that'll be the moment of transfer to artificial intelligence.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Not a transfer, a marriage.

OLIVIER ZAHM — A marriage? PHILIPPE STARCK — I've been talking about the transition to what I call "bionism" for almost 50 years. The time has come because the technologies are ready, and people are unconsciously ready. The only way to pursue our evolution is to realize the dream we have of ourselves, the dream of the new human — the marriage of artificial intelligence and all the services it will provide. We've never seen an increase in intelligence do harm. We've seen harm come from foolishness and lack of intelligence only.

OLIVIER ZAHM — That's your true fundamental optimism. PHILIPPE STARCK — Yet it's enough to look back over history, our history. If intelligence led to harm, we'd have long since vanished. Today we're in danger, but not for excess intelligence. For foolishness.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Foolishness today takes the form of generalized consumerism.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Consumerism in all its forms — that's a known fact. It's not me saying it. Consumerism, greed, immediacy, and the loss of values are leading today to a lack of reflection.

OLIVIER ZAHM — We return to the model of the island or, at any rate, of autonomy, which is what you've developed with your houses. I mention this specifically because I find the idea of a house that maintains its autonomy from all energy flows, all food flows, etc. fascinating.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Today's methods of construction are no longer tenable. Mining stone to grind and mix with glue for the renovation of stone houses, digging grottoes only to move them — is totally idiotic. The future must be industrial. We must create industrial houses. Jean Prouvé already sketched it out, and the Americans, too, back in 1880. Even the old city of Arcachon was built entirely prefab around 1850. We need a lodging program for the future because more and more people need shelter from the rain and the cold. The real revolution in lodgings right now is modules. Factories are starting to build modules in the tractor-trailer container format, with everything already set up inside: wallpaper on the walls, bathroom sink installed. All you need to do once it arrives is plug it in.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Like trailer homes?

PHILIPPE STARCK — That's our old image of the thing. They're boxes, designed in such a way that they end up looking like the kind of building we're familiar with. The spaces are totally normal, except the whole is conceived as a box. The huge advantage is that it costs 40% less than traditional construction and takes 40% less time. These days, we can stack narrow boxes on top of one another, with no structure, and build a 47-story building in less than two months. Interior and exterior. We are in a position — to justify our roles as architects, producers, builders — to say that we can offer up a house for the price of a standard car. And so, everything makes sense again. People nowadays spend all their time paying for their food and shelter. It's a disgrace. It's scandalous.

OLIVIER ZAHM — They'll pay for their house the way they pay for their car.

PHILIPPE STARCK — In the same way, out of a catalogue, with all the options, all the variants. We'll push a button: "Sir, it will be delivered on February 28 at six in the evening. Thank you."

OLIVIER ZAHM — And will these houses perform well energy-wise?

PHILIPPE STARCK — They will, of course, be self-sufficient in groups or in a building. We must be aware of what we're trying to accomplish here. We see a lot of self-sufficient independent houses because that's the easiest photo to understand, but buildings need to be that way as well. It's more or less the same thing multiplied by the number of boxes. With PATH [Prefabricated Accessible Technological Homes by Starck with Riko], for more than 15 years, we've been producing houses that supply more energy than they consume. My little talent is to make all the sensors and solar panels invisible. Cars conceal their mechanics. I'm not in favor of concealment, but I'm not in favor of showing things that are pointless to look at, either. There's no question about it. The future is taking shape. Ecology is not a choice but an obligation. It's pressing. As usual, it's incumbent on us to come to an understanding of this much faster. The future of construction and architecture is not big companies building expensive, low-quality stuff. It's young companies, start-ups, or even individuals using new techniques and technologies. Right now, I'm designing a university of creativity in Qatar. It's a concept I established with them some 15 years ago. The university is built little by little by the students, with nothing but cutting-edge techniques. Since it's a matter of technologies and their own needs, the result has an aesthetic all its own. We're using a lot of 3-D printing; we print and build with hemp; we print in clay, in cork, and in all other materials...

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you build the interiors of the housing units?

PHILIPPE STARCK — The interior is in plywood, and the structures are calculated with artificial intelligence, then cut by laser and slotted together at tolerances of a 10th of a millimeter. I've just designed a 60-page furniture collection just for those housing units. The plywood components are simply slotted together. There are also inflatable elements and taut sails. It's all very lightweight.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What are these taut sails and inflatable elements?

PHILIPPE STARCK — The idea of total flexibility and growth. There's potential for perpetual growth. I was writing this to a partner of mine, with whom I'm developing a project at Cape Canaveral, explaining that the training center for the people who'll be going into space should be in the spirit of the populations who've lived in that spot, notably the pioneers who settled there in 1800.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Like people looking for gold?

PHILIPPE STARCK — It's exactly like that. It's a camp, an agglomeration of all the materials, with no aesthetic preconceptions — only pure logic. I've already done a building in Bilbao that follows a pure economic logic. It's great. A total success. It came in way under budget, and the aesthetic turned out to be new and unique.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you use artificial intelligence?

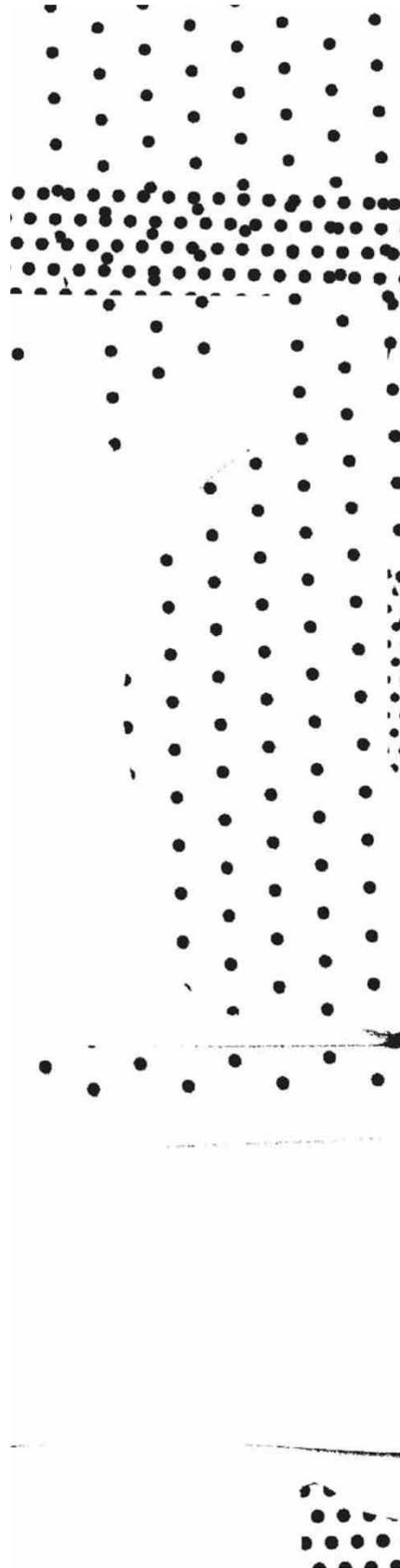
PHILIPPE STARCK — I created a chair with Autodesk, designed entirely by artificial intelligence. I'm a very good designer, and I know how to make very good furniture, but I find in the end that I just make little variations: I make it "a little like this," "a little like that," "a little different," but it's always the same thing. And I find that my colleagues — other good designers — are just like me. I had to get out of my head, had to break free of my culture and nostalgia and memory. To do this, six years ago, I called Autodesk and asked, "Would you permit me to create with your artificial brain?" They replied, "Yes, of course." They're extraordinary people. So, I began with a chair.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And what did they do? Feed hundreds of thousands of chair images into the machine?

PHILIPPE STARCK — Exactly the opposite. That version would be a synthesis of memory. What I wanted was a creation from scratch, with no human intervention.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, zero references?

PHILIPPE STARCK — Zero references, zero information.



OLIVIER ZAHM — It's the platonic chair, the idea of the chair.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Yes. But also a real chair because it now exists.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Starting from its function, not from its image.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Exactly. All I asked of the machine was whether it could help me relax my body with minimal expenditure of matter and energy. It churned and churned, the poor thing. This went on for two years. I called Autodesk to say that my project evidently didn't work, that the machine might have a response someday but not at present. They replied that I could continue. The machine searched and found. There's a beautiful film of the machine making an attempt and backing up, trying something else, and backing up again. We see the poor machine sweat and suffer, until the day it found something. We received the chair. We cleaned it because it had some slag residue, and then sent it off directly for injection molding before bringing it to market. It's called AI. It's a great success because it's the best of chairs, more comfortable than the rest. It's lighter in weight, it's made up of less mass, and it expends less energy. Next year, it'll be produced in 100% organic plastic, not derived from petroleum. It's being developed by Kartell and enjoying great success. Because I always try to have as little to do with my creations as I can. My wife and publisher don't believe me; they think I was the one who designed it, but I swear it was the machine. As you observe the chair's lines, you see a plant style emerge, the style of the early 20th century, what we call the "noodle style" or Art Nouveau. The lines are very organic. There's nothing more economical than nature, nothing more economical than a plant born of chance and necessity, as the philosopher-biologist Jacques Monod would say.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The return of Art Nouveau.

PHILIPPE STARCK — No, it's not the return of Art Nouveau. It's a natural structure. It feeds into the same thinking.

OLIVIER ZAHM — By an internal production process and not an aesthetic.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Absolutely. Art Nouveau — people found it pretty. They came up with it out of naturalism. They drew a plant. With the AI chair, we might say it's the laws of physics — the laws that imbue us with life — that designed what was natural.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Excellent. So, artificial intelligence has returned to the source.

PHILIPPE STARCK — Artificial intelligence is part of the source because artificial intelligence is never anything but an extension of our intelligence. We mustn't delude ourselves. We didn't inherit it from the Martians, or else things start to get scary.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Just something a little more concrete on the principle behind your autonomous houses, for people who are not familiar with them. How does the energy circulation work? How does the autonomy work? Is there a way to democratize it? Can it be duplicated? Can it be individualized?

PHILIPPE STARCK — First of all, the principles are known, and they're ultra-simple. The idea is to build a house that requires minimal energy and minimal construction materials. In general, it's very thick plywood.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Does it insulate against noise?

PHILIPPE STARCK — It's actually incredibly effective. There's no need for separate sound insulation: wood is one of the best sound insulators in existence. After insulation, geothermal energy is important for creating temperature differences between the various spaces of the house — wind turbines and solar panels. Today's most solid theory is that it's better to allow for the production of electricity and its sale to a collective network — less expensive than it used to be — than to buy electricity. The idea is to be autonomous, but it's not the most practical thing because we'll end up having too much electricity at one time and maybe not enough at another. We're better off — to invoke the communist system again — feeding into and conversing with the network.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Common property!

PHILIPPE STARCK — Thanks to Tesla-type batteries and other emerging procedures that allow us to store energy and be truly autonomous, and because we can feed electricity into the network and sell our electricity locally, without loss, it all works.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Excellent. And the water circuit in your autonomous houses?

PHILIPPE STARCK — The best ecological solar houses have flat roofs, which can accommodate many, slightly oriented solar panels. Rainwater is collected and filtered for washing, house cleaning, and even drinking. All the windows on the university of creativity I'm developing in Qatar are solar panels, for electricity, and humidity traps, for water. The water is filtered at night thanks to the energy generated, and since there's a lot of sunshine out there, two-thirds of the windows and curtains are aeroponic. In other words, they grow rootless plants, thanks to a spray. That provides shade, keeps things cool when necessary, and allows for vegetable cultivation. This, in turn, provides autonomy with respect to water and food. But you have to understand that this absolutely goes against any manner of survivalism and autonomy of the sort that maniac Americans espouse, saying, "I've got my four-by-four and my gun, and I'll shoot the first trespasser on my perfect, autonomous world."

OLIVIER ZAHM — Hence, again, the idea of common property. PHILIPPE STARCK — Common property comes before individual property. When there's common property, individual property follows. When there's individual property, though, common property doesn't necessarily follow.

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