

Exploring how we break with heritage and revive core human values

- In his reflections, Jean-Paul Close, founder of the STIR Foundation and AiREAS, tries to show how human progress is based on breaking points from our cultural heritage, turning old, mainstream behaviour into new patterns.
- This is also key to tackling today's environmental and social challenges where humans and their organisations will need to learn to make more ethical choices based on key existential sustainability issues.
- Close recently published a paper exploring the intricate process of breaking with heritage and reviving core human values.
- This work explores two examples of this process: his personal experience and the gradual transformation of Eindhoven, a city in the Netherlands.



After many decades, and even centuries, of focusing on economic growth at the expense of natural environments and core human values, humanity has hit a brick wall and is being forced to make important changes geared towards its own sustainable existence. Yet, human evolution is a gradual and non-linear process, typically marked by personal and societal disruptions that prompt us to part from our heritage.

The actions of humans are typically influenced by societal norms and mainstream trends that are passed down from generation to generation, shaping our life choices and behavioural patterns. Thus, breaking with such heritage and changing behavioural patterns in a voluntary way is far from an easy process, and often entails going through periods of crisis, recessions, wars, and other societal disruptions first.

Jean-Paul Close, founder of the STIR Foundation and AiREAS ('air' and 'areas'), experienced the breaking of heritage and the revival

of core human values first-hand, after he chose to resign from an international executive job at a multinational company to stay close to his children. In his recent publications, he reflects on the voluntary shift towards ethical choices and sustainable development, using his personal experience and the transformation of a European city as examples.

A journey towards authenticity

In 1996, when he was 38 years old and working as an expat executive at a large multinational company in Spain, Close was forced to make a life-changing decision. His company asked him to move to the Far East to advance his career, but he had recently become the father of a girl child and split up with his partner at the time.

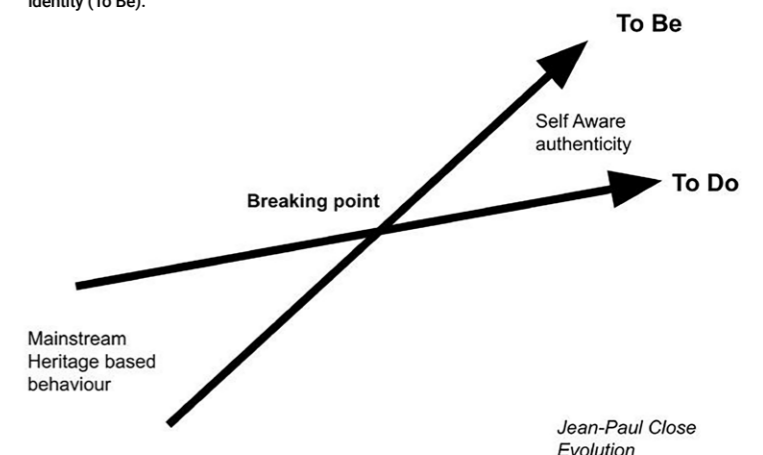
This forced him to decide whether to move away from his child to pursue further professional advancement in his field or leave his job entirely, stay in Spain, and prioritise his fatherhood. Son of an

executive who often travelled for work, Close had so far lived his life following his father's example and societal expectations at the time.

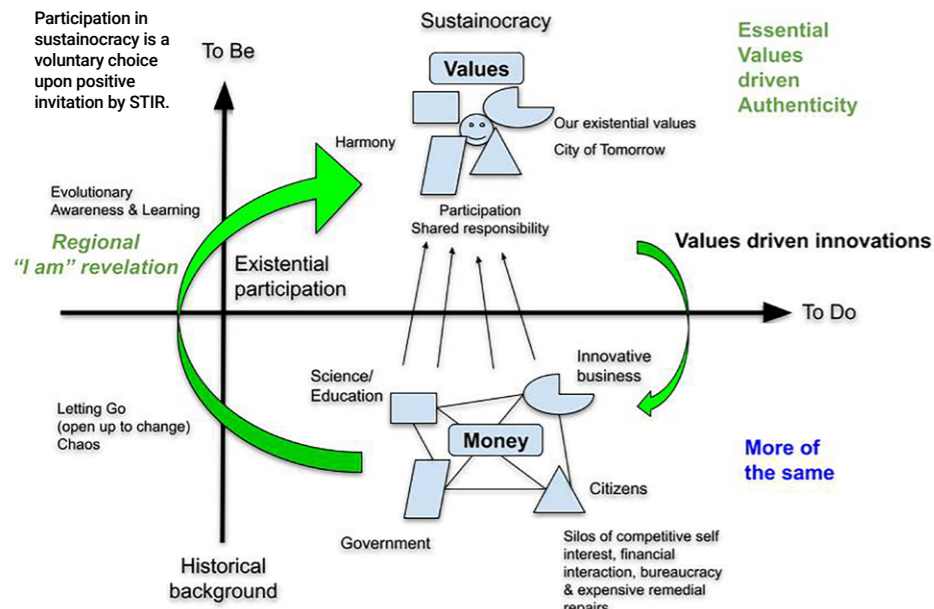
Yet, this time, he decided to remain close to his daughter and quit his job, a decision that deeply impacted his life and prompted him to re-assess his choices thus far. This shift in priorities was the first step on his journey towards discovering his authentic self, reaching beyond the dogmas, beliefs, and implicit rules that he had been following.

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After a breaking point, all choices (To Do) are led by one's own identity (To Be).



Jean-Paul Close
Evolution



Contributing to societal evolution

A few years after he had left his executive job, Close met his partner, with whom he had his second child. The couple decided to move to the Netherlands, where they encountered significant societal challenges and eventually ended their marriage. Once again taking on the role of a single father, Close was forced to choose, this time between his authenticity and abiding by societal norms that did not align with his personal values.

He had left the Netherlands as a teenager and returned 27 years later to find it changed, fully driven by money and bureaucratic controls, at the expense of its inhabitants and their quality of life. Instead of leaving the country after his second divorce, he decided to stay and develop a new vision of society that prioritised the wellbeing of individuals and society through participation and co-creation of essential values based on shared responsibilities, including the protection of natural environments, as opposed to their use or abuse out of financial dictates.

With this mission, he established the STIR foundation in 2009. One year later, he co-founded AiREAS, a cooperative association that connects citizens, government agencies, entrepreneurs, and scientists, inviting them to collectively work together towards developing and sustaining a set of core essential natural values, such as integral health, at a regional level.

By building and networking societies characterised by essential natural human values, shared responsibility, heightened awareness, and meaningful collaborative efforts, we can aim to contribute to the sustainable evolution of societies and humankind.

Sustainocracy for a healthy city

The STIR foundation and AiREAS introduced numerous initiatives designed to facilitate a much-needed shift towards prioritising sustainable development and the revival of core human values, such as integral human and environmental health. This includes an initiative, called 'Cities of Tomorrow', aimed at enhancing the ability of urban environments to preserve people's engagement into their own wellbeing and authenticity, while also improving the integral quality of local life.

Through experimentation and engagement, Close gradually introduced a new narrative of a healthy society, based on co-creation and group commitment, which he called 'sustainocracy'. This vision entails the establishment of a real-time democracy centred around shared human responsibilities and core human values, which prioritises the social needs, health, and safety of citizens over economic and political interests.

Eindhoven: an example of place-based evolution

In his recent work, Close offers an example of how the breaking of heritage also occurs in urban or regional settings, focusing his arguments on the development of Eindhoven, the fifth-largest city in the Netherlands located in the south-eastern part of the country.

Situated between various financial centres in the Netherlands and Germany, for many

years, Eindhoven served as a crossroad and struggled to retain its historical identity. The rapid industrial development from the 1850s onwards brought significant and uncontrolled growth to Eindhoven. With the relatively sudden disappearance of leading industries from its territories, due to different macro-economic reasons, the city was forced to define its own contextual authentic identity and attractiveness, ultimately culminating in its establishment as a centre for technology, design, and knowledge in the 1990s. As such, in the mid-1990s, the city became known as 'Brainport Eindhoven', a name that highlights its technological and scientific contributions.

Around 2010, influenced by the experimental initiatives of Close, the city started undergoing a further transition, aimed at improving the health of its inhabitants and preserving natural environments. Due to its unique historic breaking point with its heritage, Eindhoven is a great example of how urban settings can gradually evolve and shift towards a more ethical and sustainable development. In the process, the city has to manoeuvre between the complex tension of two mainstream realities that appeared – the old one based on financial growth, and the new one of developing a healthy ecosystem together with all the societal participants (the sustainocracy).

Building a human-centred society

Through his personal experiences, Close gathered valuable insight into the intricate underpinnings of human evolution and the shift towards an authentic and deeply fulfilling existence. Over the past decades, he has been infusing his acquired knowledge into initiatives by the STIR Foundation and AiREAS.

His hope is that, by sharing such insights, humanity will gradually let go of the old heritage that emphasises economic growth. Developing regional breaking points by building and networking societies characterised by essential natural human values, shared responsibility, heightened awareness, and meaningful collaborative efforts, we can aim to contribute to the sustainable evolution of societies and humankind.

Personal response

What did your personal experience teach you about the process of breaking with heritage?

Prior to my own breaking point, I lived life as in an automated, orchestrated reality that conditioned and limited my way of thinking and handling, without even being aware of these limitations. After all, everyone is thinking and handling life in the same way. After my own breaking process, many mental shells fell away. New rational and emotional dimensions were revealed to me, making life much more dynamic, interesting, meaningful, and natural. It helped define my own values in life and my corresponding attitude towards myself and my surroundings.

At first, I felt like a confused pariah, an outcast, rejected by my surroundings. As I developed my personal mission, it also became a societal influence through positive invitation to others, including local institutions, to participate in my playing field as a perceived safe and sustainable evolutionary path for humankind. My personal experience taught me how blinded we have become, and how impossible it is for the mainstream of humankind (expressed through behaviour, but also clustered in institutions) to change, even facing vulnerability and danger, if not challenged by our own breaking point or that of others.

What makes the city of Eindhoven a noteworthy example of place-based evolution?

The city of Eindhoven was long plagued by circumstances beyond its own control. When one of the two largest and most demanding industries in Eindhoven decided to abandon the area, and the other went broke, the city was left with huge unemployment, pollution, and empty industrial buildings. It shows regional vulnerability when depending on patterns and choices of others in a competitive, finance-driven world.

Finding its own strength, meaningfulness, and mission as a city or region, by defining its authenticity and identity

helped overcome this vulnerability. This was further enhanced by engaging with 'sustainocracy' as a core human values-driven local ecosystem. With finance as a means and the sustainable quality of life as a shared goal, a new era could be developed. With Eindhoven as an example, other regions in similar vulnerable situations can feel inspired to cross their own breaking point based on their own local demographic situation, challenges, and opportunities.

Based on your personal and professional experience, what steps will humans need to take to best tackle the challenges and demands of our times?

Financial dominance, developed during the industrial era and beyond, has conditioned our minds, decision-making, and behaviour at all levels of society. It has blinded us to the consequences at both the human and ecological level, damaging our evolutionary perspectives up to dangerously unsustainable levels. Breaking with this heritage is essential, as we see with precedents, like my own and that of the city of Eindhoven, positive examples that provide trust and opportunity for many to follow or engage.

Embracing one's own reality, based on defining our personal or regional existential ethical understanding, is key. As a local community, we can learn again to commit to our existential natural human values and basic needs as a shared responsibility. We experienced that new dimensions were revealed to each of the pillars of society, engaging with each other in warm and creative clusters of defining sustainable progress through shared values instead of trade or regulations. Voluntary breaking points, at personal, city, and regional level will avoid crises, war, recessions, suffering, etc, while enhancing social engagement, new age leadership, and developing specialised and facilitating institutions with warm, constructive relationships. With money as one of many means, we gain control again of our own existence, choices, wellness, and the development of our real securities.

Details



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- Province of North Brabant
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- Erasmus+ - European Community

Collaborators

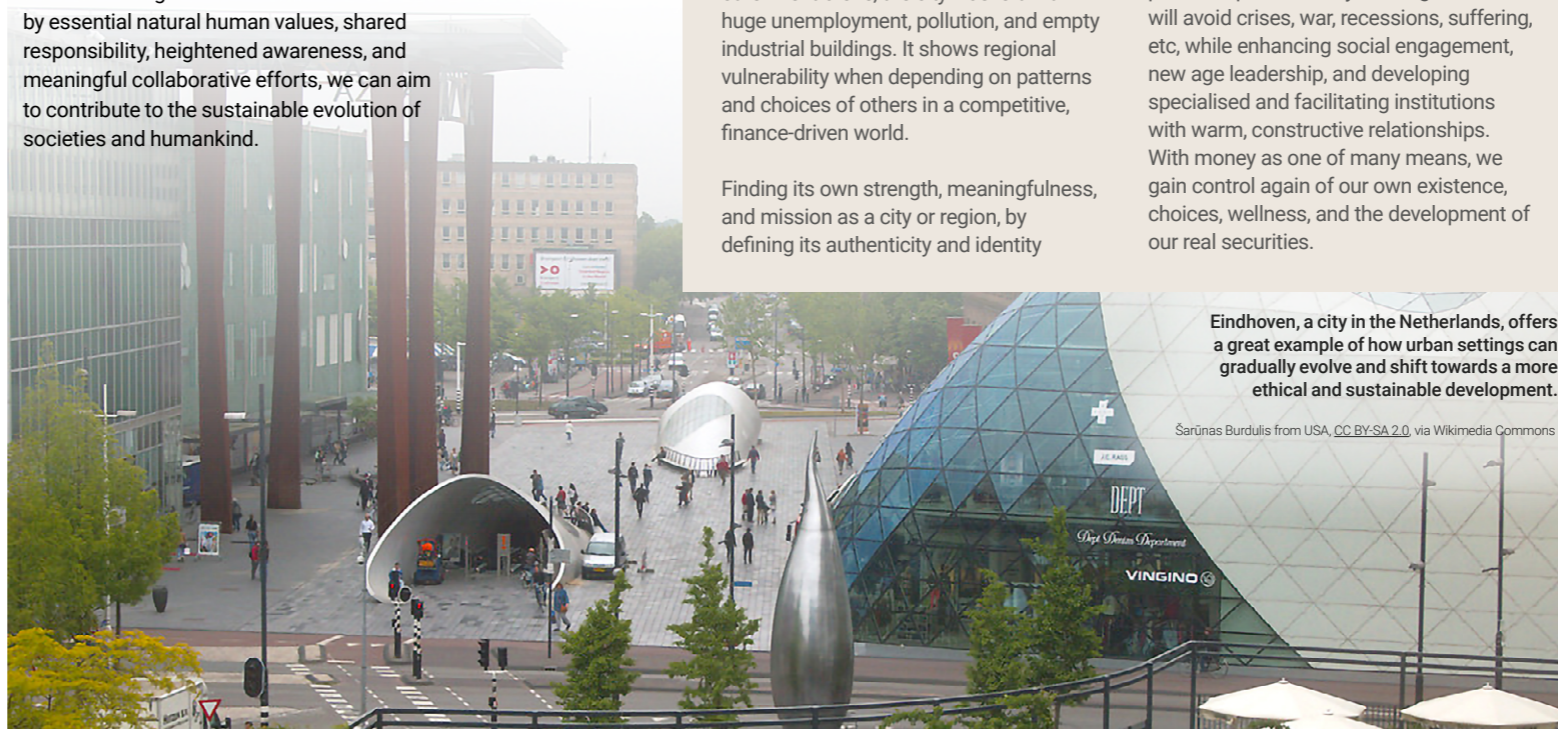
Province of North Brabant, municipality of Eindhoven, Marco van Lochem, GGD Zuidoost Brabant, TNO, University of Twente, Utrecht University (IRAS), Omgevingsdienst Zuidoost Brabant, Citizens of Eindhoven, C.L.O. (Latin American community), RIVM, Intemo, Fontys and Stichting BDT.

Bio

Jean-Paul Close experienced a personal breaking point that changed the narrative of his life. When he experienced another one, it made him experiment with society from a sustainable human essentials point of view. With his direct surroundings as his living lab, people and institutions started to engage. At a societal level, a new narrative emerged.

Further reading

- Close, JP, (2024) *Identity and authenticity: Breaking with our heritage for sustainable regional human development*. In: Del Baldo, M, Baldarelli, MG, Righini, E, (eds) *Place Based Approaches to Sustainability Volume I. Palgrave Studies in Sustainable Business In Association with Future Earth*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 47–82.
- Close, JP, van Lochem, M, Weijtmans, E, et al, (2016) *Early days: From personal awareness to group commitment*. In: Close, JP, (ed) *AiREAS: Sustainocracy for a Healthy City: The Invisible made Visible Phase 1 [Internet]*. Cham: Springer, 13–50.



Eindhoven, a city in the Netherlands, offers a great example of how urban settings can gradually evolve and shift towards a more ethical and sustainable development.

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