

Creating Livable Communities

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Where is home? What is our relationship with beauty? What is our story? What makes us unique? And where in our community do we feel most connected and alive?

Questions of uniqueness, home, beauty and quality of place need to be in the forefront of our thinking now. Not only are they questions that inspire creative endeavors, these questions also inspire leaders and the communities they lead.

The future will belong to those communities who are attuned to story, empathy, artistry, dialogue, and originality and shared meaning, dimensions that express their unique character and strengths. They will hold a distinct advantage over those communities who through analysis and logic tend to frame their priorities primarily in economic, technical or business terms.

Re-imagining our communities begins by acknowledging that most challenges are not technical but adaptive, that is they are often ambiguous and complex and require a heightened perception to solve them. This means that leaders will need to shift their role from being problem solvers to being problem finders. For communities to engage in problem finding they will need to practice asking evocative questions that stretch their thinking beyond the utilitarian. Second they will need to form communities of inquiry – spaces receptive to listening and reflection - where they can engage these questions for the long-term benefit and well being of the whole.

Asking Evocative Questions

Successful artists understand what it means to live in the question. As an improvisational pianist I have learned that when I am no longer in the question then the music stops as well. So to find their unique voice artists devote as much of their attention to living into the questions as they do to the mechanics of their craft. They realize that there is a holographic quality to the imagination. If they can get the moment right, that is, if they can get a question or an idea or image that feels right, then it heightens their perception for seeing the whole in a vital new way.

For example an artist may ask, “ Is what I am doing leading me to feeling more alive? Does it hold my interest and curiosity? Does it express beauty in a unique and original way? Does it lead me to feeling more nourished and engaged? Does it capture or express the moment in a way that feels right and true? And does connect me in some way to a larger sense of the whole?”

Sculptor Henry Moore said this of questions;

“The secret of life is to have a question or task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day of your whole life and the most important thing is – it must be something you cannot possibly do!”

So creating livable communities begins with asking questions that we can bring everything to, - questions for which we do not have answers, questions that may be larger than our own life.

Forming Communities of Inquiry

The answers to questions do not come to us ready made. We need many eyes and ears and a receptive listening space to organize and make meaning of what we receive. Historically this space was the commons. The commons is not a task force, steering committee or advisory or advocacy group but something quite different and unique. It is a space of ‘impersonal fellowship’ - the collective consciousness of the community to which everyone belongs.

The German –American Philosopher Hannah Arendt writes of the ‘commons’ in Athens;

“ One, if not the chief reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens ... was precisely that from the beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life”

By offering a public space for the expression of ideas, the commons served to magnify the spirit of the other and so offered a public remedy for the futility many felt that their words and sense of self somehow could have no effect. In other words, it provided a forum in which the most essential -and least tangible - aspects of oneself, our authentic presence, our manner of true speaking, and our creativity could be seen and be heard in the full spirit of who we truly were. It also recognized that each idea was donated in humble recognition that assembling these ideas into a coherent form lay beyond the abilities of a single mind.

As a community of inquiry, the commons offers a space for deep listening and the respect and acknowledgement of differences. It also offers a space where we are encouraged to suspend our certainties in order to discover what we don’t know. The opportunity to generate new insight and knowledge as distinct from reporting on what is already known gives the commons a unique role in public life. By offering a space for restoring our connection to the whole it helps breathe new life into the world of shared ideas.

Communities that pattern themselves after industrial economies have a difficult time creating a commons of shared ideas. The push for solutions and right answers, competing interests and ideologies that separate one from another, the drive for efficiencies and scarcity of resources which leads to an ethic of secrecy has transformed our public spaces into private spaces and a fast paced performance culture that does not offer fertile soil for creating a commons space. When ideas become a commodities they

not only lose their generative potential they also lead to pockets of specialists who each claim possession of - and often compete with others - around certain areas of expertise.

Making Beauty Necessary

As we enter a time of increasing uncertainty and profound change the challenge of creating livable communities will become even more vital. The leader's role will shift from being the hero to the host. That is they will need to better understand how to serve as the designers and conveners of social space.

One of the primary roles of these social spaces is to ensure that every community does not look alike. Communities can differentiate themselves through discovering how to live their gifts and make the expression of beauty a necessary aspect of public life. In other words what changes us and our environment is not power but beauty. Beauty is expressive and immediate. Power helps us get there but beauty differentiates us from the other and connects us to what is most unique in our environment and ourselves.

The challenge of creating a living environment is that it cannot be planned out entirely in advance. As the Spanish poet Antonio Machado once said, "Roads are not made for walking; you lay the road as you walk."

By engaging the larger life questions to which we all belong and making the beauty of our social environment necessary again, we may rediscover the deep bonds of trust and connection that have helped communities prosper together over thousands of years.

And we may also make a road to the future to which others would wish to join as well.

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C Michael Jones June 2005

