

A Global Movement of New and More Effective 'Problem Distribution'

Image



The growing hum of citizen-led community building

A bold match-making project in Vancouver peels away the mist on what's possible for creating our preferred future as a society. Pairing universities' capacities with civic needs, City Studio Vancouver unleashes cognitive and creative surplus in students that see their energies making the city better.

"In the past, the problems we have in society have typically been given to some experts or some narrow groups to solve," says City Studio Vancouver co-founder Duane Elverum. "They really are not distributed to the demos or the democracy in very effective ways, other than voting."

But that's changing. A new and more effective way to distribute societal problems might soon be called a global movement.

"In Europe in particular, there is a sense that the state is in retreat or has come to recognize the limits of its usefulness," writes Axiom News founder and CEO Peter Pula. "Additionally, there is the sense that too much of community life is reliant upon institutionalized programs and professional services."

City Studio Vancouver is just one example of what's unfolding. (Watch for a full Axiom News story on the studio soon.)

In Bregenz, Austria, an Office of Future Related Matters exists to answer any call to host a community conversation about something that is important to citizens or elected officials.

Over the years, Axiom News has told the stories of many community-building efforts. Many of the stories share this common element: There is always a convenor or a host. These individuals may or may not be acting from within an institution, but they all seem to be necessary for at least "holding the space" for community building to occur. It is also worth noting that the definition of "community building" is not hardened and dry in these stories; there is large space for ambiguity, interpretation and liberty. Here are the headlines of just a few of the stories we've collected:

A Small Group Builds New Cincinnati

Cincinnati citizen Peter Block started A Small Group, a monthly gathering of citizens who may not otherwise be in relationship with each other. In small groups, participants answer carefully crafted questions that get to the root of accountability, commitment, their gifts and talents, and possibility.

"As soon as people talk to people they've never met before their life starts to change. Especially, if they talk in a certain way, which is about possibilities, about ownership and about gifts," Peter said in an earlier interview, adding these questions lead to action.

"People get mobilized, they begin to become more accountable to what they care about."

“I hope that people keep weaving this social fabric ... and the narrative of our urban centres and our rural centres start to shift and people begin to see them as places where people become alive, and (that) they’re useful, and they’re important.”

— *Peter Block*

“It’s a shift to talking about the possibility as a community, it’s a shift to talk as if we as citizens are creating this community instead of complaining about what they, as leaders, are doing to this community.

“It doesn’t mean there aren’t problems in the community, that there aren’t homicides, and poverty, but if that’s what we choose to focus on, that’s what we get.”

At the time of the story, A Small Group had been running for eight years, and had more than 600 people involved.

Sangudo Community Forms Investment Co-op to Spur Local Business

The Sangudo Opportunity Development Co-operative (SODC) in the hamlet of Sangudo, 99 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, Alberta, was incorporated in May 2010 with the mandate to fund local business projects.

Six local residents — all busy businesspeople who didn’t have time to personally run a business themselves — created the co-op.

“We decided that we could pool our capital into a co-op and we could become a business incubator,” SODC chair at the time, Dan Ohler, told Axiom News. The main thing the group wanted to do was buy economic infrastructure and connect it with entrepreneurs.

The three initial SODC projects were:

1. purchasing a local abattoir that was for sale and leasing it to two community members who wanted to give up their jobs and own the meat shop. The SODC agreed to be the landlord for the Sangudo Custom Meat Packers. The co-op was to receive a percentage of the company's gross sales.
2. purchasing a building that the local legion branch wanted to sell, and leasing it to another two community members who wanted to start a coffee shop and restaurant. The co-op was to receive a percentage of quarterly gross sales in this case as well.
3. providing debt financing to the Sangudo Custom Meat Packers. The company received grants through a federal and provincial program to rebuild part of the shop and kitchen. They needed \$108,000 of their own money, and approached the SODC, which loaned them the money.

A long-term vision for the SODC was to find a way to be engaged in supporting every business in the community.

Salmon Arm Radio Journalist Reinvigorated about Community's Future

Journalist Leah Shaw was only to be reporting on a community gathering in the southern B.C. city of Salmon Arm. The gathering was centred largely on the [six conversations](#) introduced by author and thought leader Peter Block. The conversations aim at building community and are pointedly designed to confront the issue of accountability and commitment.

"Listening to the ideas of how we can all use our gifts to make a better community, that's the part that resonated with me," said Leah, a journalist for more than 20 years.

"It reinvigorated my commitment to radio. After 18 to 20 years of working in the media, this is something I can offer back to my community ... for the good of the community."

As a result of her experience, Leah began working with Shuswap Settlement Services to develop a community radio program that would feature the individual stories of immigrants living in the community. The overarching intent was to provide a more multi-faceted perspective of the community and help people better

understand the “richness of individuals” who live there.

Massive, Main Street Photo Exhibit ‘Shifts Feelings’ in Alberta Community

Image



More than 140 photographs of local residents by portrait artist John Beebe adorned the wall of a Delburne, Alberta school.

Internationally renowned portrait artist [John Beebe](#) collaborated with the Village of Delburne in Alberta to create gigantic photos of local residents. These were then wheat-pasted on multiple exterior building surfaces throughout the village. The village school featured a collection of about 140 portraits.

The art project “shifted the feeling” in the community, according to Delburne Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) community worker Nora Smith.

“There’s something incredibly powerful in tying the art element into the community development piece,” says Nora. “I can’t really put my finger on it, but I know it’s there just by the way I watched the community members stop and appreciate each other.”

The project was part of a larger community building effort championed largely by Nora. The “shift in feeling,” though on one level a seemingly minor outcome, testified to the foundational level of change that Nora and others were investigating through the community engagement process. The work was largely about the biases

and prejudices that shape one's thinking and therefore one's way of being in society.

What's Next?

There is a whole movement of people building community. People such as Peter Block have been saying this for several years now.

"I hope that people keep weaving this social fabric ... and the narrative of our urban centres and our rural centres start to shift and people begin to see them as places where people become alive, and (that) they're useful, and they're important," Peter told Axiom News in 2011.

If citizen-led community building is a vital element in reimagining democracy, then how do we amplify and accelerate that happening?

"Now is not the time for childish positivity. Pollyanna thinking will just not cut it," writes community-building author and facilitator Cormac Russell in his blog, ["Communities are the atomic elements of molecular democracy, Part 4."](#)

"As argued brilliantly by [Oliver Burkeman](#) in *The Antidote: Happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking* (2013), we need to embrace uncertainty, accepting the world as it is, not as it should be. I would add: 'So that we can co-create the world as it should be, not as it is'."

Cormac goes on to write about the compelling need to find a "new lens to discover what's actually there," meaning what's actually in our neighbourhoods, towns and villages.

His blog lists a number of ways to a more citizen-centred democracy, all of which are worth reviewing closely.

To his list we would add "tell the story." Tell the story of unfolding citizen-centred democracy. Tell the story in such a way that the storytelling waters and fertilizes what is emerging into strong and healthy growth.

With files from Camille Jensen, Jennifer Neutel, Peter Pula.

Axiom News is interested in stories of citizen-led community building. To share your story, please contact the newsroom by [e-mailing us](#).

To ensure you don't miss any of this content, sign up for the free Axiom News e-news by clicking [here](#).