

Creating What People Want in Dayton, Ohio, But Don't Think They Can Have

Peter Benkendorf, Re-Imagining America

The Dayton, Ohio Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), including Montgomery, Greene, Miami and Preble Counties, is a microcosm of America and an ideal laboratory for citizen-driven transformation. Across the four counties one can find a hollowed-out urban core, suffering from the loss of good-paying manufacturing jobs, struggling with the effects of systemic racism and generational poverty—both black and white; inner- and outer-ring suburbs, which run the gamut from challenged to thriving; small town America; agriculture; and rural communities. And with a combined population of 850,000 it is small enough to wrap your arms around, yet big enough to get deeply into America's most intractable challenges, including, the Economy and Employment, Education, Health and Wellness, Justice, Housing, Transportation, Environment and Media.

Over the past 12 years, Dayton has received high-profile media attention. In August 2008, Dayton was recognized by Forbes Magazine as one of America's 10 Fastest Dying Cities. As a response, we organized the 10 Living Cities Symposium on the one-year anniversary of the publication of the Forbes list. Fast-forward ten years, to September 2018, when Frontline/ProPublica aired the documentary, "Left Behind America". The documentary featured Dayton as the manifest example of what has happened to too many great American cities and the people who live there as a result of our current socio-economic model... they have been left behind, or in many cases left out.

"Re-Imagining America" is a response to a widespread experience that somehow "America has left itself behind" and is building a platform precisely to take on this Awful Truth, which has recently further been laid bare by the police killings of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others. In addition, the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how many Americans live on an economic edge and the inadequacies of our healthcare system.

Re-Imagining is Not Reform. Buckminster Fuller said, *"You never change something by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete."*

Transformation starts when we let go of everything we know, get to nothing, and ask, “What if?” This is the only way the impossible can become possible; when we declare it can be so.

In Re-Imagining America, we are following certain principles:

- Systems with the Most Available Energy Will Prevail. Lotka’s Principle^[1] states that during self-organization, system-designs develop and prevail that maximize power intake, energy transformation, and those uses that reinforce production and efficiency.
 - Specifically related to self-organizing communities, we define Energy as *Mutuality times the Speed of Curiosity^{2 (squared)}* or $E = MC^2$ following Albert Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity.
 - In this, a community’s ability to thrive is directly related to its ability to unleash the potential (energy) of all its residents.

- What You Measure Defines Your Model. In other words, you have to start by changing what you measure. In America today, we mostly define success in economic terms—stock market, Gross Domestic Product, average household income, unemployment rate, poverty rate, home prices, etc. In Dayton, what if Well-Being were the measure of success? The Gallup Organization, the international research company, makes this possible with their Well-Being Index, made up of five domains:
 1. Purpose: liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals.
 2. Social: having supportive relationships and love in your life.
 3. Financial: managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security.
 4. Community: liking where you live, feeling safe, and having pride in your community.
 5. Physical: having good health and enough energy to get things done daily.

This community self-assessment provides a much better picture of the reality on the ground. Further, the Well-Being Index can get down to the census tract level, providing deep insight into where the gaps and opportunities are. These insights, coupled with qualitative data gathering through deep community conversations, provide the framework for co-creating a new model that will allow a co-imagined future to be realized.

- Everything in Life Happens Because of People and Relationships. The quality of relationships, the way of being together, is the foundation of community. Mutuality, reciprocity, and a “we not me” mindset must be present from the outset or this work and the desired outcomes cannot be realized.

My very first initiative in 1992, Sister Neighborhoods, which brought together residents of the notorious Chicago public housing community Cabrini-Green and the wealthy north shore suburb Winnetka, was predicated on the notion that the futures of Cabrini-Green and Winnetka were inextricably linked. Clearly articulating this core belief helped ensure that the people attracted to the initiative understood the intentions and expectations.

One of the most meaningful outcomes of this approach was the recognition by the founding participant from Cabrini-Green that she had as much to give as she did to get (despite what would appear to be a significant power imbalance of education, wealth, race, and age with the founding participant from Winnetka.) The importance and power of this realization cannot be overstated.

People in Chicago were generally taken aback when I would talk about the Cabrini-Green/Winnetka Sister Neighborhood Project, usually wondering aloud what residents of the two communities had in common. My response was always, “Other than their shared humanity, not much.” But shared humanity is everything.

Two Corollaries to the Importance of People and Relationships:

1. *Labor is more important than capital, i.e. People are more important than money.* While money may not be the root of ALL evil, the objectification of wealth, as a measure of success, as a goal unto itself, as something to be celebrated, stands in the way of creating a community of well-being. When wealth becomes the basis for getting ahead, too often it is done so at someone else’s expense. This mindset does not create the conditions where mutuality can thrive.
 2. *Individuals, not institutions, drive transformation.* As much as we venerate our institutions, their agenda is their agenda, and not necessarily the community’s agenda. Even when we see change coming from our institutions, be they corporate, government, academic, non-profit, religious, etc., it is still people who are behind the innovation, new theories, new models, new methods, new technologies.
- Language Matters. Often standing in the way of re-imagining America is old language to which meaning and/or values has been imposed by those with an agenda. Creating a future desired state

means describing it with words whose definition has been discussed and agreed upon. Otherwise, one ends up right back where we started, arguing over intentions.

- It Starts with a Different Kind of Community Conversation. Conversations that transform start with a framework, a set of principles, and a larger vision, but not an agenda.
 - Let go of everything and be in the moment.
 - Listen fully, with from the head and heart.
 - Get people to share what they deeply care about—declaring what impossibility, when made possible, would make a significant difference.
 - Find commonality and agreement.
 - Turn ideas into action.

By embracing these principles and practices and inviting the community to create and own a shared future, we can realize what people want but don't think they can have. As Margaret Mead so eloquently stated, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has."

Our project is to make these principles real in Dayton, and in so doing, help create what people want but don't think they can have.

⁽¹⁾ The **maximum power principle** or **Lotka's Principle** has been proposed as the fourth [principle of energetics](#) in [open system thermodynamics](#), where an example of an open system is a biological cell. [Energy Systems Language](#) adapted from Odum and Odum 2000, p. 38

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