



# the GATEWAY

PEOPLE PLACE CONNECTION

Legacy  
Edition

Reconnecting  
Neighbourhoods  
and Development



RETHINK URBAN

## Introductory Message: 2019 and Beyond

The written work comprising the main text of this booklet was the first of six educational modules created in 2003 by Rethink Urban founder, Lorne Daniel. Entitled *Changes in the Neighbourhood: Development Processes that Work*, this series sought to bring together learning that had taken place in property development, with a primary focus on addressing how organizations and communities can enable affordable housing. The project aspired to foster collaboration amongst citizen leaders, developers, planning officials and others.

In spite of having been written over 15 years ago, this legacy content from *Changes in the Neighbourhood* resonates more than ever with those who feel powerless in how urban development continues to polarize community voices nationwide. Unfortunately, those who hold the levers of power in built development have had very limited success helping communities manage the destabilizing uncertainties of urban change.

Rethink Urban has transformed *Changes in the Neighbourhood* into *The Gateway*, a transdisciplinary knowledge paradigm that confronts the power imbalances that continue to cultivate disconnection in communities. *The Gateway* initiates a shift in momentum within development processes themselves, signifying a groundswell in community potential and power.

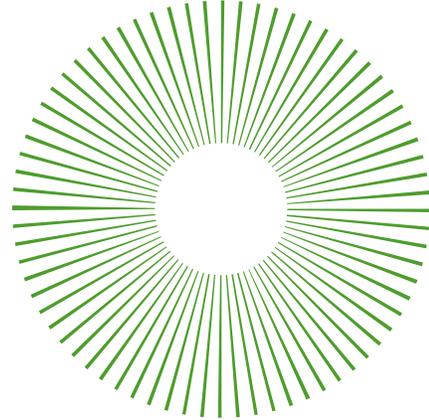
Core *Gateway* topics include civic participation and engagement, economic development, health and wellness, public safety, civic use of data, land use and reconciliation. As a transdisciplinary paradigm, foundational development principles will inform all core topics, including compassionate inquiry, social wellness, health impact, restorative practice, participatory planning and asset-based development. While our immediate intent involves reconstructing this written work in the form of guidebooks, our vision includes creative video media, workshops, an online learning platform and engagement space, as well as targeted, commissioned projects such as rural safety, homelessness, mental health and addictions, multi-modal transportation, environmental sustainability, and trauma-informed practice. We see incredible opportunity for exploratory inquiry and further development.

At its heart, *The Gateway* creates the space to discover shared values, capitalize on our collective wisdom, and improve our community relationships. Yet in the spirit of such collaborative change *The Gateway* envisions, we require partners.

The 2003 project this initiative is based on was produced under contract to the Red Deer Housing Committee for the Housing Research and Action Project, jointly funded by the City of Red Deer, Alberta Real Estate Foundation, and Human Resources Development Canada. If upon reviewing this legacy edition you are interested in participating in the new knowledge paradigm, please invite us into a conversation.

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## Legacy Edition

# Reconnecting Neighbourhoods and Development

Too often, the participants in a development proposal come out of the experience feeling battered and abused. Proponents often wonder what they did to bring the wrath of angry citizens down upon the well-meaning initiative they had intended to improve the community. Citizens are often left with a sense that ‘they didn’t listen to us’ or ‘it was a done deal – the so-called consultation was just for show.’

While there will always be differences in people’s priorities and preferences, there is much that can be done to turn ‘the last of the blood sports’ into a more productive and positive experience for all concerned. In doing so, we can find ways to build and strengthen our communities rather than tearing them apart.

Let’s start by looking at a number of myths that still influence development processes. Among the most prominent:

- Thinking the playing field is level.
- Assuming that every decision should be arrived at by consensus.
- Believing that being persuasive means being logical.
- ‘You can’t fight City Hall.’

### **The reality?**

Today’s development processes are slanted towards opponents, consensus is often unnecessary, persuasion is more about emotion than logic, and today it is easier than ever to fight City Hall.

Development proposals fail for a variety of reasons, but the majority fall into two categories:

- they are wrong for the place where they are proposed;
- or they involve the public too late, then try to use “PR” to sell a predetermined, completed plan.

In the first case, proposals deserve to fail. In the second case, proponents believe they have done their homework, but fall into ‘the DAD trap’ (Connor, 2001) – Decide / Announce / Defend. This booklet and the others in this series are intended to help proponents develop a deeper, richer, understanding of the dynamics of development scenarios. With that understanding, proponents can find more creative and effective ways to engage people in planning and promoting developments that strengthen their neighbourhoods, towns and cities.

*“In genuine community there are no sides.”*

-M. Scott Peck.

## The Changing Nature of Community and Neighbourhood

“Community” is one of the most heavily used, and perhaps one of the most misused words in our 21st century vocabulary. We used the word in the opening paragraph of this booklet, and will use it many more times in this series. Yet because of its many popular uses, the word often has little real meaning – it becomes a shell for whatever we want to pour into it. As M. Scott Peck writes,

*We tend to speak of our hometowns as communities. Or of the churches in our towns as communities. Our hometowns may well be geographical collections of human beings with tax and political structures in common, but precious little else relates them to each other. Towns are not, in any meaningful sense of the word, communities. And sight unseen, on the basis of my experience with many Christian churches in this country, I can be fairly confident that each of the churches in your hometown is not likely to be much of a community either.*

*While on the one hand we bandy about the word ‘community’ in such a shallow, meaningless way, many of us simultaneously long for ‘the good old days’ when frontier neighbors gathered together to build one another’s barns. We mourn the loss of community.” (1990, p. i).*

Peck doesn’t want us to discard the concept of community, just to give it its due respect. Community is defined as “a unified body of individuals” and “people with common interests” (Miriam-Webster, 2002). With changes in communications technology, we are increasingly recognizing that participants in a community don’t necessarily have to live or work in the same geographic area. However, the ubiquity of the word tells us that we all wish to feel a sense of community in our lives – of being unified with others who share our interests.

Perhaps our heavy use of the word community is tied to the decline of ‘the real thing.’ American sociologist Robert Putnam presents a rigorously documented portrait of the decline of community in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam shows that Americans (and citizens of at least some other western societies, likely including Canada) have become increasingly disconnected from one another. Our involvement in social organizations has been decreasing since the 1950s. Putnam believes that the bonds created in neighbourhood and community organizations are crucial to our development as a society.

Putnam and others document a decline in our ‘social capital.’

*Social capital refers to the intangible social features of community life – such as trust and co-operation between individuals and within groups, actions and behaviour expected from community members, networks of interaction between community members, and actions taken by community members for reasons other than financial motives or legal obligations – that can potentially contribute to the wellbeing of that community” (Mitchell, 1999).*

## Why are we less engaged?

Think about how five key factors have changed our lives:

1. generational change – the greatest factor – the tendency for lower levels of religious observance, trust, following the news, and voting among younger generations
2. work changes – particularly the pressures of two-income families
3. urban sprawl – our physical separation, the necessity of travel to work, school, and our city centres
4. television – has ‘privatized’ our leisure time
5. the combined effect of generational change and television – the creation of a generation that values individuality more highly than social interaction, in everything from forms of entertainment to concepts of community (Putnam, 2000).

Of course, other forms of interaction have arisen. “The clearest exceptions to the trend toward civic disengagement are:

- the rise in youth volunteering...;
- the growth in telecommunication, particularly the Internet;
- the vigorous growth of grassroots activity among evangelical conservatives; and
- the increase in self-help support groups” (p. 180).

Yet Putnam points out that the nature of these interactions is different. They are essentially more passive and / or more focused on individual rights and individual fulfillment than were the types of social interactions that are fading away.

## Why is this important?

Putnam describes in detail “hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don’t work so well when community bonds slacken” (p. 27).

The nature of political activism has also changed, Putnam notes: “‘cooperative’ forms of behavior, like serving on committees, have declined more rapidly than ‘expressive’ forms of behavior, like writing letters” (p. 45). As Putnam points out, “collaborative forms of political involvement engage broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interests” (p. 45).

In development scenarios, our planning and political processes are therefore heavily influenced by “grievances” – complaints about how the development will adversely affect the individual or small group – rather than a sense of the collective or community good.

Though Putnam’s book is subtitled “The collapse and revival of American community,” the revival he speaks of in the book’s final chapter would more accurately be characterized as a wish.

*While social conditions in Canada have many parallels with those in the United States, a recent study by Statistics Canada suggests we hold our neighbourhoods in high regard. “Leisurely chats over the fence with neighbours are probably much less frequent than they were a generation ago,” the study notes, “yet, in general, respondents view their neighbourhoods in a very positive light.” About 90% of people living in single detached homes felt their neighbours were willing to help each other. (Statistics Canada, 1999)*

***We expect society to protect us but do not see society in need of our protection.***

- A.B. Curtiss

## How Civic Participation has Changed

Democracy is changing. Cynicism about politics and politicians increases annually. Voter turnouts decline. Local, issue-specific activism is on the rise. Broad, social activism ‘for the common good’ is on the decline.

As Putnam notes, the greatest drop-off in participation rates has been in activities that depend on others. So the typical citizen today is less likely to belong to a municipal planning committee, but that same person’s likelihood of writing a letter of opinion is still reasonably strong. Why is this significant? Because it shifts the balance of power from groups of people focused on building (building communities, building services, building relationships) to individuals focused on

preventing and ‘preserving’ (preventing this project, preserving our city block).

At the same time, formal processes for citizen involvement and public consultation are now the norm in most government and private development scenarios. (Booklet 2 in this series provides an overview of the evolution of public participation practices.) There are more opportunities than ever to influence development processes. Citizens have also become more sophisticated about how they analyze development scenarios, how they organize, and how they communicate.

The increased focus on the rights of the individual property owner, voter or citizen has created a society where there is no longer any reticence about criticizing leaders, project proponents, or community initiatives. “We have experienced the death of deference,” public relations specialist Peter Hunt recently noted (George, 2002, p. 36).

## It’s All About Trust

In a recent book *Searching for Certainty: inside the new Canadian mindset*, the authors’ first of 12 ‘rules of the road’ talks about the emerging importance of trust in public relationships.

*The future will be dominated by the competition for public trust. ... We want to be able to judge quickly if the information coming our way — about products to buy, decisions to make, causes to support — is authoritative, credible, and reliable. We aren’t seeking a signal about the quality of the product as much as the trustworthiness of the producer — whether it be a corporation, charity, or political leader. The default position of the new Canadian mindset tends to be set on scepticism rather than trust...Leaders must excel beyond the traditional management skills of finance, strategy, and marketing to master the political skills necessary to forge trusting relationships with the new knowledge consumers. (Bricker & Greenspon, 2001).*

## The result?

Projects are evaluated on the merits of the proponents as much as they are on the merits of the project itself. Do citizens trust and respect those who are proposing this change to their neighbourhood? Do they have positive experiences with this company or this agency upon which to base that trust? In today’s society, the default attitude is scepticism and distrust.

A recent study in Colorado noted that planners need to take the public’s low levels of trust into consideration. Yet there are effective ways of building trust, from “sharing the power over process,” to matching proponents with community members who have similar characteristics, to making contributions to community initiatives. (Raimond, 2001, p.83).

## Nothing Creates a Community Like Controversy

Community thrives in crisis. While we may not have tightly-knit communities on a day-to-day basis, we come together quickly in the face of a threat. This is human nature – to become active, agitated, and energized when we perceive a threat.

Robert Putnam talks about two types of social capital, ‘bonding’ capital and ‘bridging’ capital. Bonding capital is when a group strengthens its internal bonds, often as a way of protecting itself, differentiating itself, or separating itself from an ‘outside’ group or force. In today’s society, both forms of social capital are typically weak, but neighbourhoods can form ‘bonding capital’ very quickly in the face of a development proposal. Neighbours who have never, ever, knocked on one another’s doors will start doing so, and - using fear of the unknown as their main fuel - will soon have ignited a blazing inferno of neighbourhood concern. People bond together against “them” – the little-known outside world of politicians, planners, developers and needy people.

‘Bridging’ capital is more difficult to build. Bridging capital involves groups of people reaching out to other groups or individuals, recognizing common bonds, and finding ways to work together toward common goals. The irony of our society today is that it seems increasingly difficult to ‘bridge,’ but we can form short-term bonds almost instantly when it is expedient.

## How the Playing Field has Tilted

It used to be said that “you can’t beat City Hall.” Like many such truisms, this has not only become part of our lingo, but one of our assumptions. The odd thing is that, today, you can beat City Hall. Opportunities abound for citizens to place a wrench in the works of a development process. What’s more, there are no rules (other than the rule of law, and sometimes that is bent) for those who oppose development. Community development specialist Mark Homan lists seven “reasons things are easier to stop” (1998, p. 63/64):

1. People resist change and reject the unknown.
2. Developments are complex, and complex initiatives have many potential breaking points.
3. Opponents have a clearly defined target.
4. There are always concrete examples of what has gone wrong.
5. People are energized by the emotions of opposition.
6. The news media thrive on controversy.
7. Delays typically work in the favour of opponents, not proponents.

Many planning agencies, government agencies, and municipal governments have rightly moved toward a model that actively seeks citizen input on development proposals (see booklet 2). A secondary problem has been created because, in moving to this model, systems have been put in place that depend heavily on consensus. Consensus is a valid goal in many decision-making scenarios, but on the broad level of towns, cities, and society it is often not a realistic goal. By

insisting on consensus, we are essentially granting a universal veto – any one citizen in a group or any group in a broader process can veto the proposal. We forget that our society is based on one person – one vote, not one person – one veto.

In fact, many organizations never formally declare how their decisions will be made. People will assume that consensus is the decision-making method unless we declare otherwise. As we stress in booklet 4, it is important to discuss, plan, establish, and communicate a clear decision-making process at the outset. Who will decide? How will they vote or otherwise express their opinion? What will be the required margin or criteria for a proposal to be approved – will 50% plus 1 vote on a development board be enough, or will the proponents only proceed if they get 80% support? These are important questions.

## The Nature of NIMBY

Not In My Back Yard. Who hasn't had that thought at some point?

Or perhaps you're more familiar with NIMBY's cousins, NIMTOO – 'Not In My Term Of Office' and BANANA – 'Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone.'

The NIMBY phenomenon has a curious status: we all practice it, but we almost universally condemn its use by others. We like to characterize other people who resort to NIMBY as being irrational, self-serving, and isolationist. Yet NIMBY is simply a reality. It is a human response that is not going to go away.

NIMBY is based on perceived risk. There are many studies to show that we associate great risks with change and the unknown. Our neighbourhood may not be perfect, but we can live with its imperfections. When that new condo complex or youth home comes into our neighbourhood, we don't know what will happen. That's risky.

NIMBY is also based on distrust or perhaps more frequently lack of trust. There is a subtle difference. When a developer appears in our neighbourhood we don't necessarily distrust the organization, but typically we also have no reason to trust it. Without trust, we believe that we, as citizens, are the only ones who can 'defend' our neighbourhood. NIMBY is based on affinity. We associate with people we like, and people that are similar to us. We therefore suspect people that we don't know, or who appear to be 'different' than us.

The guidebooks in this series take the view that NIMBY is the negative expression of a very positive force. The existence of NIMBY reactions shows that people care – they care about their families, their properties, their neighbourhoods. There's an energy in that caring that can be, should be, tapped for the good of the broader community. The challenge is in finding ways to tap into NIMBY energy and channel it into positive initiatives. To do so, the people who are originating development ideas need to engage those citizens much earlier in the process. How? We know

that citizens are often disinterested until they perceive something as having a direct bearing on them, especially a development that they think will change their world for the worse.

However, there are strategies for building on community strengths, and for diffusing negative reactions to specific proposals. Those strategies are discussed in booklets 4, 5, and 6.

*A system is fluid relationships that we observe as a rigid structure.”*

- Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Jones (1996)

## Exploring Possibilities

As we look for more effective ways to lead development initiatives, we need to consider new ways of thinking about development situations – new paradigms. In recent decades, our focus has been on a mechanistic view of processes, organizations, and neighbourhoods. Would a more organic view serve us better? What if we viewed human systems as natural entities that emerge from our very existence, rather than as rationally planned constructs that we must impose upon people? What if we began to see our initiatives as playing out in a dynamic, swirling, world rather than seeing ourselves as operating a factory conveyor belt? “The world does not stay attached to a particular way of being or to a particular invention,” a recent book on organic organizations notes. “It seeks diversity. It wants to move on to more inventing, more possibilities. The world’s desire for diversity compels us to change” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 27).

An underlying assumption we hold in development scenarios is that there are ‘sides.’ One side promoting (‘pro’) and another side that, because we force people to ‘take sides,’ sees themselves as opposing (‘con’). Typically the ‘pro’ side is heavily weighted with formal organizations (municipalities, corporations, agencies) while the ‘con’ side is heavily weighted with informal action groups (‘the friends of...’), individuals, and what we call ‘the public.’ What if we could replace this bipolar model with a holistic one? What if, from the start of an initiative, we could engage people in collaborating on creating a plan that “we” – all of us – own?

In the other booklets in this series we will explore these possibilities and suggest some new ways of thinking about, and acting upon, development opportunities.

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