

HAND MADE

Portraits of emergent new community culture

Edited by Tessy Britton

GENERATING COMMUNITY

Julian Dobson

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You can't do economic regeneration with vegetables, the head of a think tank told me recently. He'd just delivered a lecture about the lessons learned from the economies of cities in the USA, Mexico, Poland, India, Vietnam and Japan, so he should know.

I'd spent that afternoon accompanying a group of council officers around the raised beds and herb gardens of the back end of Calderdale, in the heart of the Pennines. It's true that the courgettes and fennel of Incredible Edible Todmorden have limited potential. Here today, gone tomorrow, you might say. You can't sort out poverty with plum trees or raise children with chard.

Or maybe you can. The think tank chief executive and the community activists in Todmorden have more in common than they might imagine. One talks in terms of economic resilience and governance and city-regions; the others about grabbing land, growing stuff, creating markets for local produce and 'being cheeky' - asking for what the authorities aren't usually inclined to hand over.

While politicians and academics have written tomes about placemaking and cities have spent millions on marketing, a bunch of volunteers with minimal resources have created an image and identity for a former mill town that has captured the imagination of everyone from the Yorkshire Post to the Washington Post - not to mention several hundred local people who now grow their own produce. In marketing terms, that's worth millions.

The Incredible Edible people haven't employed consultants or written glossy bidding documents. Just enthusiasm and an attitude that says 'why not?' rather than 'we can't'. And growing veg gets to grips with hugely significant issues: food and energy

security and climate change, as well as local community development. It's the secret Mohammed Yunus discovered in India with Grameen Bank: start with very local needs and you can create a movement of people, a market and an economy.

The Incredible Edible success, I think, has its roots in that grasp of the pulse of place - what Jane Jacobs described as the choreography of the street, the multiple interactions that can happen as people's shared and individual purposes overlap.

People are often afraid that community activists will do mad, crazy things that the poor bureaucrats will have to clear up. But present communities with an issue and they'll often devise a solution that's more likely to work. To get that pulse of place racing, maybe we need local authorities that behave a bit more like Todmorden's activists.

In my work at New Start magazine, and in training people in creating better places, I spend a lot of time observing people who are building community. I've found five rules of thumb that generally work - and that officials would do well to learn.





PERFECT PIMM'S

Then, out of the darkness might,
forecasts even, the sun's ablaze.
With colour and fragrance light and
speaking faces, it's time, we sense, for
an anatomy of flavor: Figs, poached
and pyroled. Oysters, eaten raw.

Chestnuts and pumpkins and roots and more.

Please, lots more.

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apples an
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"I think of people like Jim Jack, who helped bring Richmond Station in North Yorkshire back to life as a local cinema, restaurant and business centre - always first to offer to help and last to seek the limelight."

First, If you want to change the world, don't try to change the world.

Visions are good. But actions are better and more convincing, and bring others on board. Don't make your big idea the big idea: instead, find out whether anything's already happening that lines up with your concerns and give it your support. You may find that provides fertile ground where your ideas can grow. The City of Sanctuary movement, for example, challenges hostile attitudes to refugees with simple acts of kindness. Telling an asylum seeker they are welcome is a powerful counter to the suspicion fostered by the media.

Second, if you want to be a leader, start by serving.

Creating community, by definition, isn't about ego. There's no room for celebrities. Leaders prove their worth by mucking in and helping out. You win respect by being ready to serve. If you're out to make a name for yourself, why should anyone trust you? I think of people like Jim Jack, who helped bring Richmond Station in North Yorkshire back to life as a local cinema, restaurant and

business centre - always first to offer to help and last to seek the limelight.

Third, if the need is urgent, take your time.

That sounds like a contradiction. But there's no substitute for patience. To get things done and done well you have to win trust, and that comes with listening. You may find your own ideas mature and improve as a result. The work of Longbenton Community Action Team in North Tyneside is a good example: instead of coming in with a grand vision to tackle the estate's ills, they spent time in local people's front rooms, drinking tea and listening to their concerns.

Fourth, if you need help, ask someone who's busy.

The thing about busy people is they're full of ideas, and full of connections. They may not be able to help you directly themselves. But they will almost certainly know someone who can, or have a suggestion that's worth listening to. Don't write community activists off, as some officials sometimes do, as 'the usual suspects' - use their knowledge and experience. But don't ask them to shoulder

the burden for you. If you go to Manningham Mills in Bradford, an amazing landmark now being restored with apartments and community facilities, you'll find a story of busy people - but people who weren't too busy to add to their commitments over a period of many years to bring the centre of their community back to life.

Fifth, if you want more from people, demand less.

It's easy to look at other people and assume they're not doing enough, or that they're not putting in the same effort as you. It happens in the workplace and it happens in voluntary activity. But you don't have the right to demand: you have to inspire. And even then, remember that you never know what else is going on in someone's life. Most people are carrying hurts, responsibilities, and stresses. If you want to build community, you have to constantly help people find confidence and self-worth. Sometimes they'll only be ready to take a small step - but for them it may be heroic.

Written by Julian Dobson

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