

The Great Neighborhood Book

A Do-it-Yourself Guide
to Placemaking

Chapter 1

Feeling Right at Home

How to foster a sense of community



**Smile. Wave.
Greet everyone.**



**Spark a revival of
old-fashioned
neighborliness**



Give yourself a break



Go for a stroll



**Look at familiar places
with fresh eyes**



Don't bowl alone



**Be bold in introducing
yourself**



**Let your neighborhood
go to the dogs**



Sing along



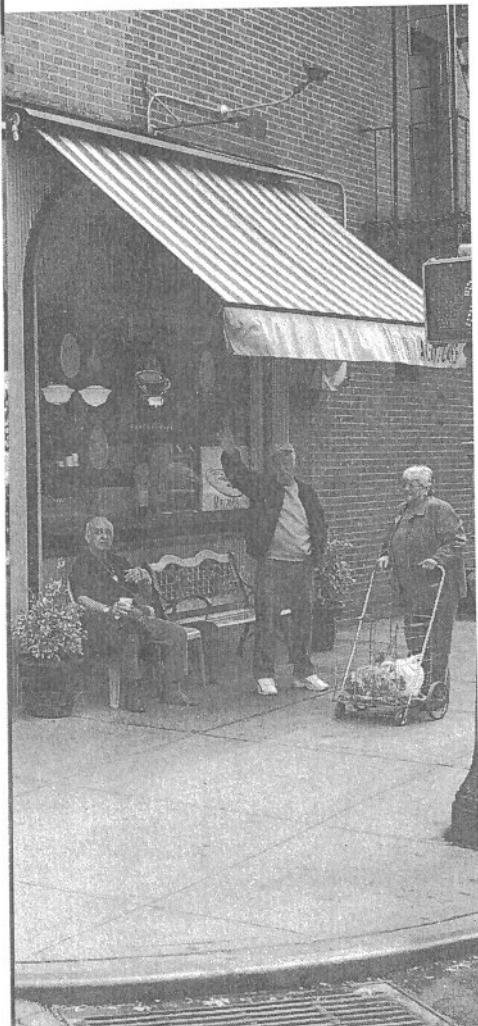
Organize your block



**Get your daily dose
of vitamin T**

Smile. Wave. Greet Everyone.

It's more important
than you could
ever imagine



It couldn't be more simple: Great neighborhoods are friendly neighborhoods. A smiling face, laughter in the air, a hearty hello can make all the difference between a good day and a dull, disappointing day. Humans evolved as social creatures, and the chance to exchange greetings with acquaintances, or even strangers, makes us feel happy and safe.

David Burwell, a long-time environmental lawyer and PPS senior associate in Washington, DC, has been tracking recent research from the field of evolutionary biology. He believes that, as a species, we are hardwired to seek convivial public settings where we can comfortably connect with one another. In fact, these kinds of places are essential to the future of the human species because they're where boys and girls have always gone to meet one another, flirt, and, eventually, mate.

David Engwicht, an Australian activist and a leading spokesman for traffic calming, takes this idea even further. Human civilization developed, he says, from an endless series of spontaneous exchanges between people. The

more opportunities there are for exchanges, he theorizes, the more rich and satisfying life is for people in that society.

Many wonder today if we're in danger of losing these primal, civilizing instincts. The harried, isolating nature of modern life appears to be minimizing our capacity for human contact. D. Jean Hester created an art project in which she greeted everyone she met in the Central Square neighborhood of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the results were alarming — most people responded with icy stares or nasty looks. Student journalist Mani O'Brien offers a bit more hope. She conducted a similar experiment around Tempe, Arizona, and found that she elicited positive reactions with a laid-back and cheerful "hi" but not with a cool "hello."

So make it your mission to spread a little cheer all around. You may improve more than your neighborhood; you might help save human civilization.

RESOURCES

D. Jean Hester: "Hello"
www.glowlab.com

David Engwicht:
www.lesstraffic.com

A great neighborhood is a friendly neighborhood.



DAVE MARCUCCI

The bench that built a community

Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

It doesn't take much to start a public space renaissance in your neighborhood. In fact, as Dave Marcucci discovered, a simple bench can do the trick. After attending a PPS training course in 2005, Marcucci came away inspired by the idea that every neighborhood should have ten great places. He returned home to Mississauga, Ontario, determined to make his house, which occupies a prime corner lot, one of the great places in his neighborhood.

Marcucci started by tearing out the fence at the corner of his front yard. As he got to work landscaping the area and constructing a bench, he received a lot of quizzical comments. "Why don't you build a bench for yourself in the backyard?" He would answer, "The bench is for you."

When the bench was finished, Marcucci threw a street party. Soon, everyone in the neighborhood was coming by to sit on the bench. Older people stop to rest on it during their

evening strolls. Kids sit there as they wait for the school bus in the morning. Families out for a walk use it to take a breather.

The complications that Marcucci first anticipated have not come to pass. The bench has not been vandalized, nor has it attracted negative uses. It was installed without approval from the city, but no one has demanded to see a permit.

"There have been no problems!" he exclaims. "It's worked out really well. I've met my neighbors and other people I'd never met before. It's added a really friendly atmosphere to the neighborhood. You sit on the bench, and as people walk by, they stop and talk to you!"

The bench is so popular that a homeowner around the corner from Marcucci has added his own bench for the whole neighborhood to use.

By adding a bench to his front yard, Dave Marcucci gave folks a congenial gathering spot in suburban Toronto.

SUCCESS STORY

Spark a Revival of Old-Fashioned Neighborliness

How busy people can
reach out to those who
need a little help

In our grandparents' time it would have been unthinkable not to take a casserole over to the family down the block coping with an illness, a death, or a colicky baby.

Nowadays that seems the stuff of fairy tales. As nice as it would be, everyone's too busy to take on those sorts of duties. Besides, we're not as close to our neighbors as we were in the 1940s or '50s. One wonders what happened to the tight-knit communities we pine for when watching reruns of *Leave It to Beaver* or *The Honeymooners*. But friendly, nurturing neighborhoods didn't just magically happen in the good old days. They were the result of conscious effort, usually carried out by women.

Even with many women working outside the home today, there's no reason the folks on your block can't do the kind of good deeds that turn folks-next-door into friends. People have less time now, of course, but we can compensate with e-mail, computer programs, and other efficiently modern tools. Chart out how everyone can take turns doing yard work and household errands for older people or strapped single parents. Divvy up who brings dinner to those who need it — and remember it's quite all right to simply pick up something scrumptious at the deli.

Parents in the Kingfield neighborhood of Minneapolis maintain a babysitting co-op that lets them give each other a break from looking after the

kids. For every hour they help out another family, they log an hour that they can redeem for childcare for their own kids. Such arrangements are common in many places throughout the United States and Canada.

In Hyattsville, Maryland, an electronic mailing list (listserv) has become the talk of the town thanks to a group called Hyattsville Organization for a Positive Environment (HOPE). People post messages about everything, from a lost-dog notice to well-researched critiques on development proposals for Route 1 outside town. A couple of hundred people, including public officials, closely monitor the opinions and discussions on-line, which means that things get done. A safety fence between a roaring highway and a nearby shopping area was built as a direct result of conversations on the listserv.

You could easily do the same for your town, neighborhood, or block, getting the word out on everything from a progressive dinner party to crime prevention.

Devoted fans of the old movie *It's a Wonderful Life* will remember the scene in which an immigrant family moving into a new home in Bedford Falls receives a loaf of bread and bottle of wine from George Bailey. That's another old tradition well worth reviving. Set up an ad hoc welcoming committee to formally greet your new neighbors, and fix a date after they've settled in to meet for coffee or drinks with the whole

block. In the Bungalow Heaven neighborhood of Pasadena, California, newcomers are greeted with a packet of information on neighborhood history (including the background on their own house), happenings, and local resources.

These are the kinds of small investments that pay big dividends through the creation of a rich sense of community.

RESOURCES

Babysitting co-ops:

www.todaysparent.com

Hyattsville Organization for a Positive Environment listserv:
groups.yahoo.com/group/HOPE_in_Hyattsville/

A game of dominoes is part of the glue that holds a community together in Havana, Cuba.



Give Yourself a Break

Slow down and enjoy what's most satisfying about your neighborhood

The greatest threat to community life is the frantic, harried, out-of-control, supersonic, unbelievably crazy pace of life that afflicts so many of us today.

You can live in the greatest neighborhood in the universe, but if you can't take the time to stop in the cozy corner coffee shop, wander over to the farmers market on Saturday morning, or chat for a minute with your neighbor in front of the grocery store, then you might as well live on the dark side of the moon. And if too many people in your neighborhood have this same kind of busy schedule, chances are things won't stay great for long.

The basic fact is that it takes time and energy to make a neighborhood lively.

Someone must take on the responsibility to organize the street fair or make sure the local park remains safe and welcoming for kids. That's one of the issues behind gentrification controversies in city neighborhoods and small towns. Not only do long-time residents get priced out of their homes, but the whole spirit of the place can change as concerned citizens involved in local issues are replaced by people who move there for the prestigious address or a good real estate investment rather than the community life. The wealthier newcomers often work demanding jobs, so they've got no energy to invest in civic projects, and they may spend their free time in exotic

travel or at a vacation home rather than hanging out around the neighborhood. While per capita income in the area rises, the richness of civic life declines.

Taking the time to appreciate all that's going on around you each day is one of the best investments you can make. Think twice about signing up for another class across town. You could learn a lot more exploring the streets around your home each evening. Trade the treadmill and stationary bicycle for a stroll or bike ride. Cancel your cable TV service and spend the savings at local diners and taverns, where you'll get more important news, far more interesting stories, and even more opinionated sports coverage. Whole new worlds will open up, and you'll feel more relaxed to boot.

A number of cities across Italy realized the importance a leisurely pace of life played in keeping their communities vital, so they launched a league of Slow Cities in 2000. Associated with the burgeoning Slow Food Movement, more than 100 cities (in Brazil, Norway, Sweden, Japan, Greece, Switzerland, and Great Britain as well as Italy) joined the network, united in the belief that the good life is an unhurried experience. Proudly displaying the Slow Cities logo around their towns, members pledged to:

- Restrain racing traffic by limiting automobiles and

promoting sustainable transportation alternatives such as bikes and pedestrian zones.

- Encourage businesses, schools, and government to improve the quality of life by allowing people to take time off for a long midday meal.
- Promote good food by sponsoring farmers markets and preserving local culinary traditions.
- Curtail noise pollution and visual blight by limiting car alarms, outdoor advertising, and unsightly signs.

"We are not against the modern world," explains Mayor Paolo Saturnini of Greve, a slow city in Tuscany. "We just want to protect what is good in our lives and keep our unique town character."

RESOURCES

Slow Cities:

www.cittaslow.net

[www.citymayors.com/
environment/slow_cities.html](http://www.citymayors.com/environment/slow_cities.html)

*Take the time to truly
appreciate what's best
about your community.*



Go for a Stroll

The Latin custom of an evening walk is good for you — and for the health of your neighborhood

We all know that walking is good for us. It burns calories, tones muscles, and clears our minds. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau once confessed, "I can only meditate when I'm walking. When I stop, my mind ceases to think; my mind only works with my legs."

People living in pedestrian-friendly metropolitan areas are less likely to have chronic health conditions, such as high

Where the action is: Stepping out in Brighton Beach, New York.



blood pressure and respiratory problems, than those living in areas where walking is a less common activity, according to a recent study by the RAND Corporation, a noted research firm in Santa Monica, California. But taking a regular walk is also beneficial for your neighborhood. This basic human instinct — to get out of the house to see what's going on — is the glue that holds most great communities together. The classic examples are in the warm-weather lands, where an after-dinner stroll — the *passeggiata* in Italy, the *paseo* in Spain and Latin America, the *volta* in Greece — is as much a part of the culture as sunshine or siestas. In towns and even large cities, people amble around the same set of streets each evening. The shops are usually closed, so the purpose is not shopping and errands, but to connect with neighbors and enjoy the surroundings.

American writer Adam Goodheart recounts this scene near the main square of the Italian hill town of Eboli. "I realized that I kept seeing the same people, but in different combinations. Here came a blond woman pushing a stroller. Next lap, she was arm in arm with a younger woman and the stroller was nowhere to be seen. Later, they'd been joined by an old lady who was pushing the stroller. Next, they were surrounded by men, jackets draped over their shoulders"

The words *passeggiata* and *paseo* translate into English as

"promenade" — and the idea translates too, according to Christopher Alexander, a former Berkeley architecture professor who has devoted his life to scientifically studying what makes places work. In his classic book *A Pattern Language* he asks, "Is the promenade in fact a purely Latin institution? Our experiments suggest that it is not ... It seems that people, of all cultures, may have a general need for this kind of human mixing which the promenade makes possible."

Two factors define the experience of a promenade, according to Alexander:

- The route should be approximately 1,500 feet, which can easily be walked in ten minutes at a leisurely pace. People may opt for many times around, especially teenagers on the lookout for excitement, but you don't want to make the course too long for kids or elderly people.
- It's important that there are things to see and do along the route, with few empty or dead zones. While the primary purpose of these strolls is social, people also like to have some destination: a sidewalk café, playground, bookstore, bar, ice-cream shop, etc.

Think about what blocks in your neighborhood show promise for strolling and what improvements could be made to encourage more people to go there. Walking up and down main street or any lively commercial

district is probably the most common North American version of the promenade, although a route along a waterfront or interesting residential blocks could work just as well. Public art, welcoming businesses, benches, flowerbeds, even a vending cart could all help solidify this area as the place in your community where people go after dinner to see and be seen.

Providence, Rhode Island, has proven on a grand scale that if you build it, people will stroll. WaterFire, Barnaby Evans' flaming, water-borne sculpture installation, has turned the downtown riverfront into a popular promenade. On nights WaterFire is lit, the human traffic is so plentiful that local authorities advise everyone to walk counterclockwise between the Staples Street bridge and a nearby pedestrian bridge to minimize crowding. The project, which runs May to September thanks to hundreds of volunteers, has been credited with revitalizing downtown Providence.

RESOURCES

A Pattern Language by Christopher Alexander (Oxford University Press, 1977)

WaterFire Providence:
www.waterfire.org

Checking out the excitement in Market Square, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Look at Familiar Places with Fresh Eyes

A simple change of habit lets you see the neighborhood in a new light

The great American poet T.S. Eliot once remarked that the true value of travel is in coming home so we can “arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” A change of scenery is great for reminding us what we like and don’t like about our hometowns, but it’s also possible — and a whole lot cheaper — to get a fresh look at where we live through a simple change of habits.

Break out of your rut, for instance, by taking the train or bus to a place you would usually drive. You’ll see new people and experience your community in unexpected ways. Or when you are running around town, trade your usual seat in the car, bus, or train for a bicycle. A whole new world of side streets will open up, with blooming gardens, kids frolicking on the sidewalks, and curious corners of the neighborhood you never noticed.

Even better is leaving the car or bike at home and hoofing it. You’ll be moving at the speed of life, transforming an ordinary trip into an architectural, botanical, cultural, and sociological adventure. (If you live in a spread-out community with long

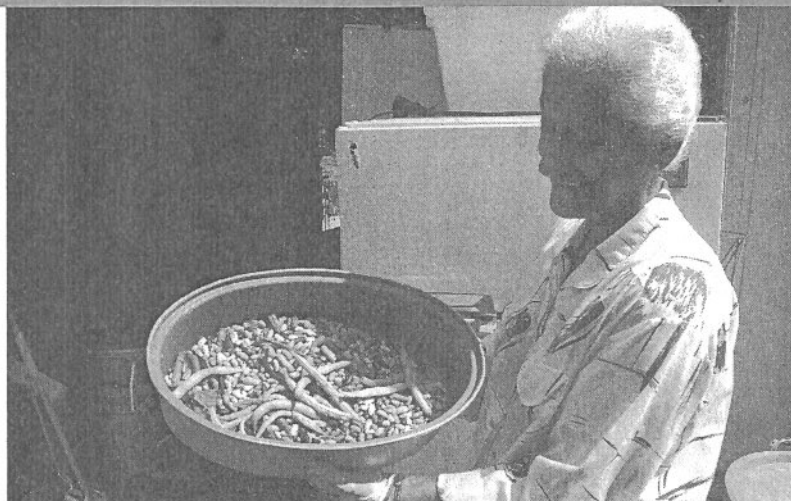
distances to cover, try parking a few blocks from your destination and exploring the new territory in between.) You’ll discover all sorts of wonders that most folks miss, like enterprising seven-year-olds selling lemonade, or religious and artistic shrines tucked away in side yards.

Francine Corcoran, 55, took this idea quite a few steps farther by walking every single block in her hometown of Minneapolis — a 1,071-mile odyssey that took three years. Word of her project spread thanks to a newspaper story, and she heard from people who have done the same thing in New York City, San Francisco, and Christchurch, New Zealand.

The late urban visionary Jane Jacobs stressed that simply observing what goes on around you is the best method of determining what needs to be improved (and what doesn’t) around the neighborhood. So start your research right now.

RESOURCE

The Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs (Random House, 1961)



PHILADELPHIA GREEN

This garden raises hopes as well as vegetables

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Las Parcelas, a group of interconnected vacant lots in the West Kensington neighborhood, was once considered the drug capital of North Philadelphia. Dealers would sell from abandoned cars and hide drugs for pickup in vacant lots, while drug users from throughout the region congregated in the neighborhood park. A group of neighbors who cared deeply for their community started working with the police to push the dealers out. As part of their efforts they envisioned a new and exciting future for Las Parcelas.

The vacant lots became the core of a neighborhood revitalization effort coordinated by the local organization Philadelphia Green. Volunteers turned Las Parcelas into a beautiful community garden. And they didn't stop there. The women in the neighborhood said the garden wasn't enough; they wanted Las Parcelas to have an outdoor community kitchen and to represent the neighborhood's strong Puerto Rican heritage. They

worked with Philadelphia Green to build a *casita*, a one-room house filled with small objects of special significance in Puerto Rican culture. And they painted a mural on a wall beside the garden, full of bright lavenders, yellows, oranges, and blues.

What was once a terrible blight has been transformed into a place that embodies history, tradition, and promise. Today people go to Las Parcelas to cook, play dominoes, drum, and dance. "When people come together to transform a neglected park or vacant parcel, their focus is on the land, but somehow more than just the land is changed," says Joan Reilly of Philadelphia Green. "We all become transformed in the process. Las Parcelas is a wonderful illustration of this truth. That is the power of placemaking."

RESOURCE

Philadelphia Green & Las Parcelas:
www.pennsylvaniahorticultural.org

Growing vegetables has replaced dealing drugs at many vacant lots in North Philadelphia, much to the relief of local residents.

SUCCESS STORY

Don't Bowl Alone

Civic organizations — from church groups to volunteer fire departments — may not be fashionable, but they're the lifeblood of our communities

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam got the shock of his life in Italy. He was studying the quality of public services offered in different regions and assumed, like everyone else, that the richer the region, the better its public services. What he discovered, however, was that it wasn't economic wealth but community wealth that made a difference. The regions of Italy that had the strongest civic organizations — everything from musical societies and soccer clubs to unions and cooperatives — also enjoyed the best government services and social harmony. When people get together for any reason, Putnam concluded, good things happen far beyond the narrow scope of the group.

Shifting his attention to the United States, Putnam grew worried about what he found. Long-standing civic organizations were losing members as people felt too busy to get involved in their communities. For Putnam, bowling became the symbol of all this. More people than ever were going bowling, but they were doing it in atomized groups of two or four. Bowling leagues, where the same people get together on the same night every week, thereby creating strong social bonds, were declining. And the vitality of American communities was declining along with them.

Putnam published a famous article, "Bowling Alone," that was expanded into a book in which he articulated his theory

that communities need social capital (the investments ordinary people make by putting time into local organizations) as much as they need economic capital (the investments banks and businesses make by putting money into neighborhoods).

When you roll up your sleeves to make improvements in your neighborhood or town, look around a moment to make sure you're not reinventing the wheel. Might the energy consumed in your plans for a new project be better spent bringing some new blood and a fresh direction to an existing group — the local PTA or Lions Club, a business improvement association or community education program, a neighborhood organization or network of religious congregations, a youth sports league, a church choir, an emergency food shelf, or the library board? You might be surprised at what's already going on.

In Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, the Olde Hillcrest Neighborhood Association sponsors a community book club where neighbors can, according to the group's website, "get together with fellow book enthusiasts to converse, discuss and debate current bestsellers and classics alike." And, of course, get to know each other better. There is even a special parent/child book club. The organization also sponsors a children's playgroup, a craft club, two different personal finance clubs, a seniors'

activity group, a helping hands group that reaches out to neighbors with special needs, and a women's Bunko club (the club's website explains that Bunko is an "easy to learn" dice game).

Of course, it may turn out that an entirely new organization best suits your purposes. While Veterans of Foreign Wars or Knights of Columbus halls are usually full of lively discussion, they may not be the ideal setting to explore certain subjects, such as how to bring about environmental sustainability in the neighborhood or promote world peace. (Although you never know — in 2006 the Knights of Columbus took out an ad in the *New York Times* asking everyone to pray for peace.)

Tom Sander, executive director of the Saguaro Seminar, a program of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government that promotes civic engagement, says these kinds of civic organizations — both old and new — make community connections that are "crucial to schools working well, neighborhoods being safe, economies working well"

RESOURCES

Robert Putnam:

www.bettertogether.org

Saguaro Seminar at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government:

www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community by Robert D. Putnam (Simon & Schuster, 2000)

Better Together: Restoring the American Community by Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohen (Simon & Schuster, 2003)

Olde Hillcrest Neighborhood Association:
www.oldehillcrest.org

There is power in numbers, as volunteers in Dade City, Florida, proudly show.



DADE CITY GARDEN CLUB

A bright painting of a ladybug in a street in Wallingford, Seattle, has turned an ordinary intersection into a lively destination.

ERIC HIGHER (CITY REPAIR)



How a lowly intersection became a vibrant public square

Portland, Oregon

When is an intersection more than just two streets coming together? In Portland's Sellwood neighborhood, a prominent intersection also serves as a central plaza with a community bulletin board, kids' playhouse, food stand, and 24-hour tea station. The redesigned intersection, which is painted in bright colors, came about because the community wanted to create a place with a "Main Street" feel close to home. Known as "Share-It Square" (a play on Sherrett Street, which intersects with Southeast 9th Avenue to make the plaza), the intersection was improved by neighborhood residents with assistance from a local nonprofit called the City Repair Project.

City Repair calls this process, in which residents work together to generate ideas for turning streets into public squares, "intersection repair." Thanks to a new city ordinance that passed with the help of City Repair, this kind of project can go forward if 80 percent of the people within a two-block radius of an intersection consent. People may choose to do an

intersection repair because they want a place for community interaction and seasonal celebrations, or simply because they want to slow traffic. The only costs are paint and other materials needed, which must be financed by the community.

Intersection repairs vary from neighborhood to neighborhood. One community may decide to paint a giant mural on the intersection and stop there. Another may go through many phases: painting the street, installing a community bulletin board, building a mini-café on a corner, reconstructing the intersection with brick and cobblestones, opening businesses to make it a village center. The results can be dramatic. After installation of Share-It Square, a survey revealed that more than 85 percent of residents felt that crime had decreased, traffic had slowed, and communication between neighbors had improved.

RESOURCE

City Repair Project:
www.cityrepair.org

By complete accident, we at BPPS were reminded of the value of places where everyone knows your name. We offer regular *How to Turn a Place Around* workshops that train policy-makers and neighborhood activists in new strategies to improve their communities. These workshops attract people from all over the world, many of whom are first-time visitors to New York, and some confess a little anxiety about finding their way around such a big city.

At a recent workshop at our office, which is right in the heart of Greenwich Village, we offered attendees the chance to go out and explore one of the world's most fascinating neighborhoods. Several of the more nervous visitors returned with big grins on their faces, remarking on how friendly everyone was. They had forgotten to remove the nametags from their shirts and jackets, and people up and down the avenues greeted them by their first names. Several New Yorkers asked where they were from and happily offered suggestions on what to see and where to eat. One enterprising panhandler even adapted his usual spiel: "Hi, Lisa, how are you? Enjoying your trip to New York? I was wondering if you have any spare change."

That got us thinking about how nametags are a practical tool for communities everywhere. The mayor or community leaders (or even you and a few friends) could pick a date to hand out nametags for everyone in the

neighborhood to wear. You can easily find the usual "Hello I'm _____" tags from the office supply store, or maybe commission handmade tags from kids in the neighborhood or other budding artists.

Imagine wearing your nametag at the grocery store, in the park, while walking down the street. It could launch a dozen conversations with people you often see but don't know. You'll suddenly be on a first-name basis with the guy you always see at the coffee shop (Ivan), the mother who waits every day at the bus stop to pick up her daughter (Vicki and little Lateesha), the young couple who moved onto the next block (Brett and Maria). And names are just the beginning. Soon you'll know their stories, too, and the world will seem a little friendlier.

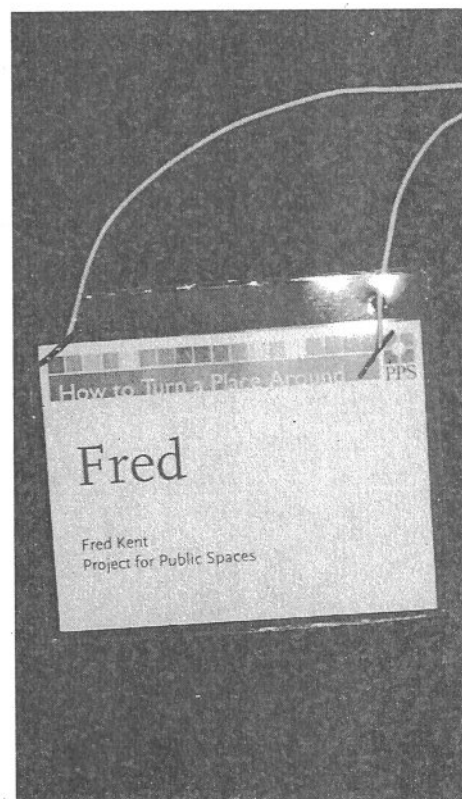
RESOURCE

How to Turn a Place Around workshops: www.pps.org

Be Bold in Introducing Yourself

All you need is a nametag

Hello, my name is ...





When dogs meet on the street, like these Chicago pooches, so do people.

Let Your Neighborhood Go to the Dogs

Anywhere pets thrive, people will thrive too

Even if you don't own a dog or cat, it's in your best interest to make sure the community is congenial to four-legged neighbors. Why? Because places that cater to pets and pet owners are generally safer, stable, and more vital.

Pets need the same things we do in order to thrive: safe and lively streets, parks and open spaces, places to hang out. Dogs, especially, are an indicator species for urban livability. From fancy Afghan hounds to scrappy mutts, all of them look forward to their daily walk with boundless enthusiasm. If there is no hospitable place for a stroll, the dogs in your neighborhood

won't be happy — and neither will most humans. A healthy population of happy dogs, on the other hand, means that you will have dog owners strolling the sidewalks at all hours — the best recipe to prevent crime and promote a sense of community.

Kay Cavagnaro, a community organizer in San Francisco's Golden Gate Heights neighborhood, says walking dogs is the best way for people to get to know one another. A favorite hangout in her part of town, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, is the sidewalk in front of Golden Gate Video at 10th and Noriega, where many dog owners meet up every evening on their walks. The video store owner, Vince Palmini, welcomes them all, saying it's good for business.

Tapping the dog-owner market can be a winning strategy for many local businesses. Many stores and coffee shops offer free

doggie treats, set out water dishes, and provide secure places to tie dogs up. Indeed, a relaxed attitude about bringing pets into the shop or café, which is commonly done in Europe, would be a boost for both business and neighborhood spirit. The health department doesn't have to know. (You could even challenge these sorts of archaic health regulations, as people questioned equally misguided bans on sidewalk cafés a generation ago.)

As North American households shrink in size due to divorce, fewer couples having children, and other social trends, pets play an increasingly significant role as companions in many people's lives. Four out of ten US households now have a dog. If your community doesn't seem friendly to pets, you may find that fewer and fewer people want to live there.

This is especially true in older neighborhoods, which sometimes struggle because parents are wary of living in a place with small yards, busy streets, troubled schools, or few other kids. This makes it doubly important that households without kids feel at home in the community. Many childless couples or singles are devoted to their pets and, just like parents, may reluctantly pull up stakes and move to a newer suburban house because they feel it's best for Rover or Puff, who can roam a big lawn away from busy streets.

The first step to making a place pet-friendly is to tame the

traffic passing through your area. Traffic calming — an increasingly popular set of street improvements, ranging from narrower traffic lanes to more visible crosswalks to speed bumps, which get drivers to slow down — is the best way to keep dogs and cats (and everyone) safe.

For most dogs, the number one priority in life is a place where they can run, jump, and play off-leash with other dogs. Many forward-looking towns from Athens, Georgia, to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Moscow, Idaho, have set aside space for special "dog parks," which are usually fenced-off areas of city parks. Edmonton, Alberta, has eight of them. Prospect Park in Brooklyn even has a dog beach, where pooches can take a dip in the evening and early morning hours. These dog parks often become a lively hub of activity for two-legged neighbors, too.

The truth is that nothing brings people together better than dogs. They provide the perfect excuse to spark a conversation with a total stranger. "Is that a Bernese Mountain Dog?" or "How old is your puppy?" Anywhere people are out walking their dogs will be a place with a good sense of community.

RESOURCES

Dog parks:
www.ecoanimal.com/dogfun/
www.dogpark.com

Sing Along

Community choirs create social harmony

In Victoria, British Columbia, more than 250 people have joined the Gettin' Higher Choir, a proudly amateur outfit that welcomes everyone, no matter how limited their musical abilities. "We shouldn't leave

something as important as music to the professionals," says choir director Shvon Robinsong. The Gettin' Higher Choir has no auditions and no rejections. Everyone is welcome.

Robinsong, who once viewed herself as the only untalented member of a very musical family, points out that in traditional societies, no one is excluded from singing. "Your voice is simply your voice," she tells choir members, "like your nose is your nose. It's nothing to worry over."

Music and dance are strong magnets for community interaction. These young performers drew an enthusiastic audience at Crossroads Mall in Bellevue, Washington.



FRIENDS OF THIRD PLACE COMMONS

The choir, which recently celebrated its tenth anniversary, puts on regular public concerts with the proceeds going to charitable causes, such as Power of Hope, an arts-based workshop for teens, or a program that assists a poor village in Mozambique.

You'll find similar community choirs popping up all across the continent, from the Syracuse Community Choir in upstate New York to the Eugene Peace Chorus in Oregon.

Val Rogers, director of the Eugene Peace Chorus, told writer Carol Estes of *Yes!* magazine, "These choirs are creating a new paradigm for choral singing. We're motivated by much more than aesthetics alone. We're singing for ... a better society, to reinforce values that are vital to us, and to reclaim some of our cultural commons."

RESOURCES

Shivon Robinsong's community choir leadership training:
www.shivon.com

Yes! magazine article on community choirs:
www.yesmagazine.org

Organize Your Block

It's the best defense against crime, but also an opportunity to make your street come alive

In place after place, block clubs have shown themselves to be one of the most effective strategies to thwart crime. The number of burglaries, assaults, and other problems, large and small, drops significantly when neighbors look out for each other. Criminals go elsewhere to do their dirty work.

But why stop there? Once you've organized the neighbors to fight crime, why not tackle other inspiring goals? Judy Robinson of Sacramento wrote to *Making Places*, the on-line magazine of Project for Public Spaces, about all the fun she has with people on her block.

"I am blessed to live in such a perfect neighborhood," she said about East Sacramento. "We interact and we look after each other. We're a village."

Besides the typical but important neighborly acts, like taking in the mail or looking after pets and plants when others go on vacation, Robinson and her neighbors have initiated a whole round of seasonal festivities.

- At Halloween, several people on the block transform their homes into haunted houses for the delight of trick-or-treaters.
- One particularly artistic neighbor decorates the street-lamps for different seasons throughout the year.
- At Christmas time, many residents set aside a night to go

caroling around the neighborhood and then come back inside to enjoy the warmth of cocoa and a sampling of holiday sweets from kitchens up and down the block. Everyone takes home a plateful of their favorite treats.

- In the spring, folks swap cuttings from their gardens; at harvest time, they share the bounty of backyard vegetable patches.

Along N Street in nearby Davis, California people have come together to create a Common House where everyone on the block can gather for meals, activities, or just to watch the big game on TV.

It's part of the broader vision of N Street residents to become a cohousing community. Cohousing, a modern equivalent of the traditional village where everyone looks out for one another, was invented in Denmark and is now a common housing option in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Germany. It is also beginning to take root in the United States, with 200 communities in more than 30 states.

Cohousing updates the '60s ideal of communal living to include a combination of private and community spaces. Households generally have their own residences, kitchens, and yards, but also enjoy the common house, where community meals and events take place. Other shared facilities can include gardens, fields, workshops, kids'

playrooms, libraries, volleyball courts, and so forth.

Most cohousing communities are new constructions. But N Street is one example of an existing block deciding to become a more closely connected community. It began when two neighbors tore down their backyard fence in 1986 and now includes 17 households. The common house was purchased and remodeled in 1991 and features a community kitchen, dining room, and rec room with a piano, TV, and foosball table.

RESOURCES

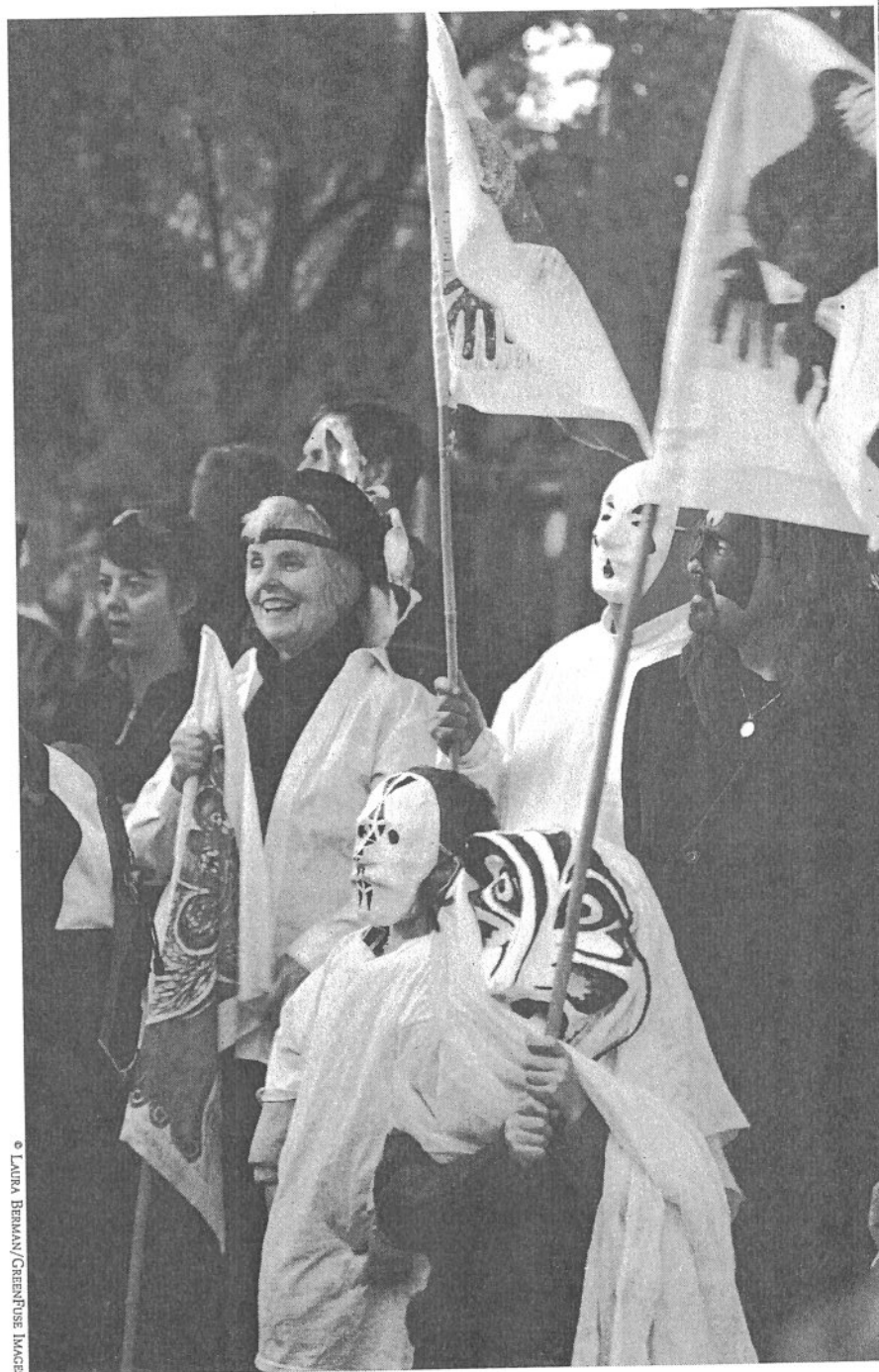
Cohousing Association of the United States:

www.cohousing.org

N Street Cohousing:

www.nstreetcohousing.org

Neighbors mark Halloween and the Latin American Day of the Dead with a spooky parade in Toronto's Dufferin Grove neighborhood.



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Get Your Daily Dose of Vitamin T

Tribalism cures loneliness and alienation. Here are questions to help you see if you are getting enough

Do you miss the days when everything seemed more spirited and spontaneous? Instead of having to phone or e-mail friends to arrange time together three weeks from now (and often feeling in the mood to do something else when that time finally comes), you knew you'd run into them soon — probably that same day, since you all lived in the same area and frequented the same hangouts. Life was wondrously impromptu then and seemed somehow richer and certainly easier.

Nicholas Albery knew how you feel. "In my middle-age isolation," he wrote on his website in 2000, "I truly miss the convivial tradition of just dropping in on a neighbor for a conversation and a cup of coffee." Albery, an English author and social visionary, who died in a car wreck in 2001, was a pioneer in using the Internet to build community. But he was also keenly aware of how modern conveniences like the Internet, jet airplanes, cars, and mobile phones divorce us from our local world. New technologies enable us to expand our horizons by hooking up with far-flung people who share our exact same interests, yet it can still feel like something's missing.

That's only natural, Albery wrote, because "for most of human history we lived in small tribal groups of 50 to 250 people, and at an instinctual level we still crave bonds to people outside our immediate families. It's psy-

chologically nourishing to feel connected to those we live among, not necessarily as close friends but as acquaintances with whom we can enjoy a regular chat We have a built-in, probably biologically rooted, need to live in proximity with a tribe, working and celebrating cooperatively within a geographical neighborhood."

Recognizing the lack of informal connections in his life, Albery advocated reintroducing a tribal bond to neighborhood life as the cure. Vitamin T, he called it. He organized a tea party for his block in northwest London, which has turned into an annual affair. "Even this token event," he noted with pleasure, "is beginning to boost our sense of community and increase our inclination to help each other out."

Further exploring the idea of tribalism as a cure for the isolation of modern life, he and a few friends came up with the following list of questions you can use to monitor the health of your own community.

Here are questions to help you see if you need more vitamin T. (By "local people" he means folks living in your part of town who you are likely to cross paths with on a regular basis, but who are not family members.)

1. Roughly how many local people (neighbors, store clerks, people at the bus stop, etc.) have you chatted with in the last week?

2. Roughly how many familiar people have you said "hi" or nodded to in passing on the street or in a public place during the last week?
3. How many times did you engage in a tribal ritual — for example, a religious service, a meal with neighbors, a drink with others at the local coffee shop or tavern, etc. — in your neighborhood last week?
4. If you were seriously ill, how many people could you count on to visit you or help with meals and other tasks?
5. How many people in the neighborhood would you feel comfortable dropping in on for a conversation without a prior invitation?
6. How many local people do you know with whom you'd feel comfortable discussing personal matters and worries?
7. How many local people understand your own goals and aspirations in life and support you in trying to achieve them?
8. To what extent do you feel that you are part of a connected and caring local community?

RESOURCES

Nicholas Albery's legacy:
www.globalideasbank.org
 (This is an Internet compendium of social inventions — great ideas to improve society — gathered by Albery and colleagues, including many submissions from people around the world.)
The World's Greatest Ideas
 edited by Nicholas Albery and others (New Society Publishers, 2001).

These toddlers in Boston insist their parents take them to the Public Gardens every day so they can meet up with their pals.

