Community Vitality

from adaptation to transformation
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In memory of my beloved mother, Catherine Dale
October 8, 1919 – March 26, 2013

Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF 1939-1945), she brought the boys home. Her strength of mind, her courage, her integrity, her sense of humour and most importantly, her love for her family (and her beautiful big blue eyes and smile) have left a lasting legacy to many.
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Introduction

In September 2009, a small research/practitioner team – members of the Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Community Development from Royal Roads University and Sustainability Solutions Group (SSG) – gathered to talk about how to increase public understanding of sustainable community development. We decided to explore what we considered an underlying theme, that of community vitality. Why it is that some communities are resilient, adaptive and innovative in the face of change and others are not? It’s a pressing question for Canadians and their decision-makers. What makes one individual able to transcend a personal tragedy while others collapse? What is the difference between ‘surviving’ and ‘thriving’?

It starts with public understanding. Even though they have very different meanings, the terms sustainable development and sustainability are often used interchangeably,¹ and the concept of sustainable development simply has not resonated with the Canadian public. It has not achieved widespread understanding beyond intellectual elites and some of its early adopters. During our first five years of work, our team has focused on four main themes: place, scale, limits and diversity. Across these themes, what our research has revealed is that communities face an array of social, ecological and economic challenges, and that their response to the implementation of sustainable development is quite mixed. While some communities struggle to survive, others appear to be thriving, with great divides between urban centres and their surrounding suburbs.

If it is true that the human species is biologically driven to sociability,² then the design and redesign of our communities and the built environment is integral to how social we are. Design can make a place welcoming, a natural meeting space, a place for enhanced connectivity. Or it can make a place where people rush through to another destination, experiencing very little in the way of connection to others or to the physical landscape. On top of all that, connectivity is what enables (or hinders) a community’s members to talk about what is important to them as a community.

As our team began to delve deeper into the meaning of vitality in general, and specifically, as it applied to Canadian communities, we got together to develop a picture of what we thought vitality looked like. Debates and laughter permeated these sessions. One of our team, we discovered, took a very dark view, presenting us with numerous pictures of road-kill during his presentation on what vitality was not. Joking aside, the product of those meetings was a framework, outlined in the chapters of this book, that has allowed us to define and begin to measure what we consider to be the main features of community vitality. Ultimately, we came to
understand that each community’s own perceptions of what community is – what neighbours are, and how wide the definition of community stretches – determine what is important to that community to sustain.

This book is the culmination of what we learned from our journey. It is by no means intended to be an exhaustive review of the academic literature, but rather is the story of the pathways we took, what we learned and shared as a team. Like concepts of love, truth and beauty, vitality is difficult to define and measure, and much depends on the eye of the beholder. Indeed, many of the things important to our well-being and that of the planet are difficult to define and measure. As our work progressed we tried to keep in mind Albert Einstein’s observation that “everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted”. Thus, we decided to build a variety of tools that would allow people to begin thinking about their community and, ideally, start asking questions about their community’s approach to sustainable development. We built a pecha kucha slideshow, an index to measure community vitality based on an underlying survey, and now this book. We hope you enjoy reading about what we learned and we encourage you to visit our website, http://crcresearch.org/vitality/vitality.