CREATIVE COMMUNITY PLANNING

CHAPTER 4
COMMUNITY VISIONING AS ENGAGEMENT:
WHY A CONVERSATION IS MERITED

> We look back and analyze the events
> of our lives, but there is another way
> of seeing, a backward-and-forward-at-once
> vision that is not rationally understandable.
>
> Rumi[1]

Invitation: Come see what all the visioning confusion is about with Wendy's apology to the Mayor of Antwerp, a discussion on definitions and background to the practice of community visioning in planning and a few gems from *Theory U* to guide us in future practice.

Introduction: Why do we need community visioning as a community engagement method?

The world will never be the same again. We know now that the future will be very different from the present. Further, future thinking is now an established part of planning processes and this applies to planning education as well as planning practice. Global factors and forces such as climate change, the financial meltdown, pandemics, storms, floods and drought are contributing to community anxiety about the future.[2] Particularly in hard times, we can use creative and innovative approaches to help local communities imagine and come to grips with their futures. *Community visioning* as a community engagement method has been used in a number of ways to infuse hope and palpable action. But as with the word 'sustainability', the widespread use of 'visioning' has resulted in unclear meanings that are sometimes confusing and may not lead to 'solutions' to planning or other community problems. Beginning with an apology to the Mayor of Antwerp, this chapter explores some definitional problems associated with the term visioning and then presents a brief history of where visioning came from and where it is headed.

Wendy's Apology to the Mayor of Antwerp

In September 2007, I inadvertently offended a distinguished European politician over the meaning of the term 'community visioning'. This is my formal apology to the Mayor of Antwerp, Patrick Janssens, and an explanation of what happened. And my guess at why it happened.

In a panel discussion at the annual ISOCARP (International Society of City and Regional Planners) conference, held that year in Belgium, I was listening to Janssens explain his approach to citizenship and citizen engagement.

To a large audience of planners from around the world, Janssens, a powerful player in complex Belgian politics, explained that strategic planning projects are the City's key development motivators and triggers. It was important to focus on a vision because quality of life in an urban environment is often difficult to realize. Involvement of the private sector and different levels of government is essential. Further, it's essential to create a community of interest between all the different players. Thus, Antwerp's logo: 'The City that belongs to Everyone'. Janssens had taken a principled stand against gated communities.

So far, so good. I'm on the stage as part of the panel, awaiting my turn, fascinated by this charismatic politician, regretting that I'd missed his morning presentation. Janssens explained that communication, consultation and participation were an integral part of the process. Of his total City budget, he explained, fully three percent was allocated for community engagement.

Then a question arises from the floor and a participant asks Janssens what he hopes to gain from participation, given that he has been elected with a clear vision and policy mandate.

Janssens responds with several strong explanations of the value of participation.

> 'I think … that most people are unhappy with the actual situation that they are in but they don't want change. They are against change. They are afraid of it.
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> So what I expect from participation is, first of all, the best possible understanding of why they are unhappy. And secondly… as politicians and planners … when we listen well, when we understand well why people are unhappy in a certain situation, we should be able, through our professionalism, to come up with a solution which is partially able to create a better world for them.
>
> And you need conviction.
>
> But then to be able to realize the vision you will need support…. If we don't start to build participation early enough in the process, you will lose an enormous amount of time in the execution… I really believe very much in participation…. I think that is what leadership is about…. You keep on being legitimated if you have proven, first of all, that you have a vision.
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> And you sell hope in the beginning; hope that with a team of people you are able to make the world better through a number of policies.
>
> And then you have to prove that you aren't only selling hope but that you can change something in reality'.

The Mayor's focus on a vision led another participant to ask how a long-term vision and the time required for genuine participation processes could possibly be compatible with the short periods of elected terms. The Mayor re-iterated that a long-term vision was needed to be effective. He did not believe in being held 'hostage' to elections.

Then it was my turn to speak:

> 'At the risk of saying something provocative, I'm going to suggest that there is an elephant in the room here…. What I've heard so far, not from anybody in particular [is] … that we are using the term "vision" when we actually mean "plan".
>
> I think it's the new buzzword for the plan. What I'm hearing is something that is "social marketing"…. It sounds (this is how I feel)… top-down;… it sounds "promulgated"; it sounds like it has rational and alienating technical language attached to it.
>
> And it doesn't seem to be anything about a dream that was dreamed by the community or parts of the community.
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> Martin Luther King did not say, "I have a strategic vision". He said, "I have a dream".
>
> And then people laid down their bodies in deeply emotive processes that weren't rational, that were non-linear, that were about their lives — to embody and put flesh on the bones of the dream of this leader.
>
> I think what we have here [are] … two conceptually different ways of looking at the world. One is the "Path of Explanation", where the whole focus is to reach clarity, to help the community to get to clarity and then endorse the vision (which I think is the 'plan'). And then let's move forward speedily and efficiently….
>
> …and then there is the "Path of Expression", where the aim is to go deep, to reach a depth of understanding of what is going on…. Communities are asking for depth. And with depth (which is about storytelling, imagination and creativity), you don't go quickly to conclusions.
>
> It is almost like sex without foreplay….'

 A cold silence filled the room as I regained my seat.

Janssens responded:

'Maybe it is not a vision. It is a belief. I would be prepared to buy that. But it is not a plan. I am not prepared to compromise on beliefs or on vision'.

Later I explained to him that I'd missed his morning session and wasn't directing my comments at him. But the damage was done. Scuffing my way down the corridor to my hotel room that night, I heard myself mutter 'culture shock'. Now I realize the problem was more complicated than that. 'Vision shock', more likely.

I sincerely apologize to Patrick Janssens. I believe that I — and all the 2007 ISOCARP participants — to some degree — became entangled in confusion about what a vision is, what a visioning process might involve and what it might be expected to deliver.

Definitions and Definitional Problems

In the past decade, researchers have been critically inquiring into the notion of community visioning, teasing out definitions from a range of concepts and identifying its origins. Canadian academic Robert Shipley has made an extensive study of community visioning, asserting that the abstract conception *visioning* has as many as 20 meanings and that there is virtually no consistency among them. While there is among planners a 'tacit assumption' about the meaning, the terms *vision* and *goal* are often used interchangeably. It's also often confused with the term *mission*.[3] Shipley concludes that the meaning of various vision words is poorly understood[4] and in a later work claims that vision and community visioning are 'part strategic planning, part participation, and part public motivation'. More than that, it's 'old wine in new bottles'.[5]

Where did community visioning come from?

The research into the origins of the concept of visioning explains that it's nothing new. Shipley identifies both the scriptural and classical connections, as well as origins in utopianism and utopian thinking. The use of backcasting and setting a social situation in the future are traced back to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888). At that time, writers wanted to make social commentary speculated about social conditions directly in a story set in the future.[6]

The humanistic psychologists can take some responsibility for the flourishing of visioning in the latter half of the twentieth century, with management and sport taking up the challenge and popularising the notion. Particularly influential was Tom Peters' management text, *In Search of Excellence*.[7] Systems of visioning that had a direct effect on planning began to appear in the early 1990s, with cognitive mapping, Peter Senge's powerful *The Fifth Discipline* and the less well known but thought-provoking notion of Enspirited Envisioning (Warren Ziegler).[8] More 'proprietary' models followed, with consultant Steven Ames's Oregon Model, Visual Preference Analysis (Tony Nelessen), community strategic visioning and community visioning. Only some of these approaches were designed for use in the urban planning context, however.

In planning, community visioning has been a popular planning tool for over a decade. A few models dominate, none of them 'visionary'.[9]

Shipley identifies both inherent weaknesses in some of the theory and an uncritical belief in certain points of 'conventional wisdom' on the part of many planners. Many planners, he claims, were not cognitively aware of the antecedents that they picked up intuitively or second-hand. In fact, many of us have probably forgotten exactly where the ideas originated and believe that we are using a new technique.[10]

With roots in management theory, community visioning has evolved from three local-level activities: futures projects, strategic planning and community architecture and planning.[11] The key features are:

- Extensive participation
- An emphasis on community values
- Wide use of graphics and visual materials
- Exploration of alternative futures
- An emphasis on a shared vision.

Most community visioning processes are undertaken as part of planning processes initiated by government. Frequently proponents seek simple processes that are easy to explain to elected members and can be implementable within their short terms of office (three to four years at most).

In *Enspirited Envisioning* (1996), Ziegler says that '*true'* vision is an expression of our spirit and not knowledge, wishes or goals. A vision, he contends, can be empty or crass if the sprit is absent. Thus, he implores us, when undertaking participatory work with communities and organizations, to 'listen to the voice of the spirit'. This is because we need to be fully engaged if a vision is to be enacted. To do that, we need to listen to our own voices in the first place. Ziegler says:

> 'Envisioning the future is not making a wish-list. It is not forecasting the future, or cognitive mapping, or social engineering, or Delphi, or trend extrapolation…. It is also not goal-setting….'[12]

For Ziegler, envisioning is '… a discipline of the spirit that invites serious inner work to tease out, to discern, to generate *compelling images* of the future that leads to transformation through a commitment to new action illumined by that vision'.[13] The components are dialogue, deep imaging (eliciting images of the future), deep listening (listening to yourself or to other people with silence, attention and empathy and without judgement) and deep questioning (listening for whatever questions inside oneself insist on being asked and asking them). The way to undertake this work (both as a practitioner and a participant) is to seek 'paths to interiority' and enter an internal state of listening, emptying, waiting and quieting.[14] We are encouraged to find what lies within us about our future in our hopes, dreams, concern, beliefs, fears and assumptions.

Unlike most practices in planning and development, this practice is all about yielding rather than forcing. Yet here is 'no idle chit-chat' in Ziegler's model. The process begins with focused imaging, described as 'a special way of telling stories about the future you want and intend to bring about'. This is followed by a 'leap into the future' and deep listening, a component that requires us to engage with the future without judgement or preconditions and to share our images *in the present tense*.[15]

A potential source of new thinking: *Theory U*

Another visioning approach that brings the spirit into the equation is the path-breaking work of Otto Scharmer and colleagues with *Theory U*. Scharmer argues that we need to extend our ways of operating to include empathic and generative listening. This means a shift from reactive responses and quick fixes on a symptoms level to *generative* responses that address systemic root issues.[16]

Scharmer identifies four types of listening: *downloading, factual* listening, *empathic* listening and *generative* listening. Basically, we need to *stop downloading and start listening*, going 'to the inner place of stillness where knowing comes to the surface'. The *U* is one process with five movements or steps that allow us to reach a place of inner knowing that emerges from within, followed by bringing forth the new. This entails 'discovering the future by doing'.

Scharmer's five steps are as follows:

1. *Co-initiating*: build commitment. Stop and listen to others and what life calls you to do.
2. *Co-sensing*: observe, observe, observe. Go to the places of most potential and listen with your mind and heart wide open.
3. *Presencing*: Connect to the source of inspirational and common will. Go to the place of silence and allow the inner knowledge to emerge.
4. *Co-creating*: Prototype the new in living examples to explore the future by doing.
5. *Co-evolving*: Embody the new in ecosystems that facilitate seeing and acting from the whole.[17]

As we drop the non-essential aspects of the self ('letting go'), we also open ourselves to new aspects of our highest possible future self ('letting come'). Australian community development specialists, Josh Floyd and Peter Hayward believe that *Theory U* is 'a powerful vision of practice that is ideally suited to attracting and engaging participation with the interior qualities needed for effective social foresight cultivation'.[18]

Scharmer's model connects heart and will: 'While an open heart allows us to see a situation from the whole, an open will enables us to begin to act from the emerging whole'. His intention is the integration of head, heart and hand[19]: '… connecting to one's best future possibility and creating breakthrough ideas requires learning to access the intelligence of the heart and the hand – not just the intelligence of the head'.[20]

Now that we've traced the origins of visioning, what should it be and how should it work in community engagement? That's the topic addressed in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Rumi, 'Emptiness' in Barks, Coleman, trans. (1997) *The Essential Rumi*, Castle Books, Edison, N.J., p27

2. See Sarkissian et al (2008) *Kitchen Table Sustainability: Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability,* Chapter 2

3. Shipley, C. and R. Newkirk (1999) 'Vision and Visioning in Planning: what do these terms really mean?' *Environment and Planning B,* vol 26, pp573–589

4. Shipley, R. (2000) 'The Origin and Development of Vision and Visioning in Planning', *International Planning Studies*, vol 5, no 2, p234

5. Shipley, R. (2002) 'Visioning in Planning: is the practice based on theory?' *Environment and Planning A*, vol 34, p11

6. Shipley, R. (2000) 'The Origin and Development of Vision and Visioning in Planning', pp227–231

7. Shipley, R. (2000), p233

8. Shipley, R. (2002) 'Visioning in Planning: is the practice based on theory?', p7

9. The chief American proponent of community visioning, Steven Ames, calls community visioning 'an adjunct and an overlay for community planning' (Ding, 2005, p91). Ames's straightforward five-step process has been embraced by local municipalities in many countries. He argues that in undertaking a visioning process, a community can: better understand local strengths, weaknesses and core community values; identify outside forces, trends and issues that are shaping its future; articulate a preferred vision to guide its future directions; and develop the strategic tools to achieve its vision. For Ames, a vision is *the guiding image of what a community would like to be and a vision statement is the formal expression of such a vision*. It depicts in words and images what the community seeks to become — how it would look, how it would function, how it might be different or better. A *vision statement* is the starting point for the development and implementation of a strategic action plan that can help the community mobilize to achieve its vision over time.

Five main stages characterize his updated model, the *New Oregon Model:*

1. *Community profile*: Where are we now?
2. *Trend statement*: Where are we going?
3. *Vision statement*: Where do we want to be?
4. *Action Plan:* How do we get there?

5. *Implementation and monitoring:* Are we getting there? (Ding, 2005, p91).

Ames divides his methods and techniques into *representational* ones (working with groups that are reflective of a given population or subgroup) and 'flat-out participatory techniques' such as public meetings and events (Ding, 2005, p92). He offers no guidance about how to undertake the 'visionary' components of the process, however

10. Shipley, R. (2002), pp8–12

11. Walker, P. (1994). 'Community Visioning: Outline Project Proposal', New Economics Foundation, London, 24 March, p1

12. Ziegler, W (1996a) *Enspirited Envisioning ^{TM}: A guide book to the enspiriting approach for the future.* FIA International LLC, Denver, Colorado, p10

13. Ziegler, W (1996a) *Enspirited Envisioning,* p10

14. Ziegler, W (1996a) p26

See also: Ziegler, Warren (1995) *Ways of Enspiriting: Transformative Practices for the Twenty- First Century,* FIA International LLC, Denver, Colorado

and

Ziegler, Warren (1996b) *Enspirited Envisioning^{TM} for Groups, Organizations, and Communities: A guidebook to the enspiriting approach to the future,* FIA International LLC, Denver, Colorado

15. The emphasis at this stage is on attunement of the vision with the spirit of the person participating. Thus, '… each envisioner [should] discover what is true to her spirit, that to which her spirit calls her *in all of its uniqueness and integrity, prior to looking for common cause, common purpose, common action*'. This means that the participant must *live in the future-present moment* before considering wider social and community issues. This is a sacred place and a generative one, as Ziegler explains: 'In that state, your images come alive to you in all of their specificity and concreteness and *you live in them and with them as if you were in their presence*' (Ziegler [1996a] pp39–45)

Transcription of the visioning process involves recording the compelling image, its indicators, its positive and negative consequences (detailed worksheets are provided to aid this part of the process) and the one central theme. This is a summary of what the vision is about and what concerns it expresses. Following the sharing and visioning teamwork, comprehensive scenarios can be developed with the following components: a vision statement, long-term goal, central theme, indicators of the goal's actualization, positive and negative consequences, assumptions and a futures-matrix

16. Scharmer, C.O. (n.d.) 'Addressing the Bind Spot of Our Time: An Executive Summary of the New Book by Otto Scharmer *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*' (The Social Technology of Presencing). Executive Summary, p5. See www.ottoscharmer.com/publications/summaries.php

See also: Senge, P., Scharmer, C. O., Jaworski, J and Flowers, B.S. (2005) *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society.* Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London

and

Scharmer, C.O. (2007) *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge. MA. See also www.presence.net

17. Scharmer, C.O. (n.d.) Addressing the Blind Spot of Our Time, pp5–8

18. Floyd, J. and Hayward, P. (2008) 'Community Development for Ecological Sustainability: working with interiority in the cultivation of social foresight,' academic paper for the stream, 'Community Development and Building Social Movements', Community Development and Ecology: Engaging Ecological Sustainability, Deakin University, Centre for Citizenship, Development and Human Rights, 26–28 March. See www. http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/cchr/eco-cd-conf08/abstr-wshops.php

19. Scharmer's 'intelligence of the heart' echoes both Goleman's Emotional Intelligence and Gardiner's multiple intelligences

20. Scharmer, C. O. (n.d.) 'Addressing the Blind Spot of Our Time, pp7–11