

PATRICK HANLON

VIBRANT Communities



Vibrant communities have a brand narrative that is a compilation of origin, creed, context, symbols, and action that attracts people and commerce, and consumes resources. They seem to happen organically but, in fact, are developed through a systemic construct.

“THE TOWN WAS DECIMATED, BUT THE community survived,” declared Greensburg, Kansas, mayor Lonnie McCollum after the town was hit by a tornado in May 2007. His comment goes beyond the resilience of Greensburg’s 1,600 townspeople. The power lies in his sensibility that Greensburg, like all livable communities, is more than mud and sticks thrown together as homes, churches, schools, and strip malls. The strength of community lies in spirit—shared values, trust in one’s neighbors, and a vision filled with hope and dreams.

Some communities become beehives of commerce, culture, and opportunity—vibrant places that fire imaginations and have gravitational pull. They develop a culture, a dignity, and a way of life that is intensely emotional and spiritually gratifying. People feel content and happy: they believe they could never live anywhere else.

Vibrant communities seem to happen organically but, in fact, are developed through a systemic construct. As such, it becomes the challenge of developers, politicians, and civic leaders to imbue cities, villages, towns, and mixed-use projects with a sense of place and meaning.

Vibrant communities have vibrant belief systems. Once a belief system is constructed, it attracts people who share those beliefs. These people, in turn, develop a deep-skin sense of community that mere streets and buildings cannot account for. Belief systems determine how people feel about a place when deciding where to live, work, and play.

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sumes resources. The brand narrative begins with an origin that relates the public saga and gives residents a role in the great continuum of community experience. “I lived in Rome where I was surrounded by history. The Coliseum, the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps—I took it all for granted. Now I miss it.” says Roberta Ronsivalle, managing director at Mucca Design in New York City. Residents of urban meccas like Rome, Paris, and Beijing revel in their meaningful beginnings.

Once the origins are known, next to emerge are the community values. Vibrant communities stand for something. They have ideals and a reason to exist, no matter how self-serving or labored. Paris, for example, stands for elegance and sophistication. Milan is representative of cutting-edge design. Chicago celebrates architecture. New York City never rests as a center for finance, art, theater, food, and fashion. Nashville is synonymous with music.

Vibrant communities possess icons that signify what they are as places. London, for example, has Buckingham Palace. Paris has the Eiffel Tower. Xi’an, China, has its buried terra-cotta army. Chicago will soon have the 150-story Chicago Spire, designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava and currently under construction—taller at 2,000 feet (609.6 meters) than the Sears Tower and destined to be a Chicago icon. Even smaller communities seek out monuments, landmarks, or public figures to differentiate themselves.

Rituals—the repeated positive or negative experiences and rites that residents participate in—are another critical element in designing the social fabric of vibrant communities. Negative rituals can include traffic jams, spring floods, and riotous soccer matches. Positive rituals include voting, celebrations, and festivals that develop resonant societies. For example, New Orleans’s Mardi Gras, Park City, Utah’s Sundance Film Festival, and New York City’s New Year’s Eve in Times Square are cultural rites that not

New York City is one of the most vibrant cities in the world. It is embedded with a constellation of cultural touch points—like Times Square.



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Chicago celebrates architecture—and public art. Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, for example, is an added attraction at Chicago's Millennium Park.

only bring people together, but also bind them as a community.

Vibrant communities have a lexicon that their members understand. New Yorkers know how to measure “door to door” and who constitutes the “bridge-and-tunnel” crowd. Londoners and Melbourneans know what to do on Boxing Day.

All communities have nonbelievers and people who would “never want to live there.” What New York City is to Iowa, Iowa is to New York City.

Finally, vibrant communities have a leader. Sometimes these leaders—whether a mayor, a governor, or a president—are so distinctive that they are celebrated the world over. While not every community can have a personality like New York City's Rudy Giuliani, Chicago's Richard M. Daley, or South Africa's Nelson Mandela, the leader is ultimately responsible for weaving together these strands of civic pride and responsibility.

These seven elements—creation story, creed, icons, rituals, lexicon, nonbelievers, and leaders—are the strands of a community's culture. Woven together, they create a fabric of human community and society. Cities with a rich cultural heritage relish all seven of these elements. Flush with growth and prosperity, sophisticated cultures enjoy rich clusters

of icons, rituals, civic values, and leaders engaged in the civic, corporate, and cultural levels of society.

These touchstones help define the apotheosis of community—a place of security, trust, and belonging: the warm embrace of what the late American author Wallace Stegner succinctly described as “a clean and pleasant town.”

Weaker, less-attractive communities have fewer—if any—of these cultural binding points. Thousands of villages, towns, and cities between New York City and Los Angeles compete for people, jobs, education, and resources. They must continually engage and reexcite their populace and others who might do them good. As Chicago architects Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill recently suggested in defense of their planned billion-dollar Eco-Bridge on the Chicago lakefront, “Chicago must continue to develop and improve—or it will die.” Retaining residents and attracting commerce to sus-



Vibrant communities possess icons that signify what they are as places. London has many such icons, including Trafalgar Square, the largest public square in the city and the site of political demonstrations and gatherings.

tain and propel the local economy is a must for cities, but never a certainty. Communities face anonymity if they fail to piece together a narrative that propels excitement, interest, and opportunity.

How does this all fit together? An example is New York City, which has endured frequent ups and

downs over its 300-year history. Its creation began with the purchase of Manhattan by Peter Minuit from local natives. Its evolution from ragtag seaport to modern economic and cultural center is the stuff of myth. New York's creed as "the city that never sleeps" cites its industrious core. New York City icons include the Statue of Liberty, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, Times Square, Broadway, and Central Park. The New Year's Eve ball drop in Times Square, subway series, riding the New York subway, the Metropolitan Opera season, Broadway openings, the Armory art show, traffic jams, the daily commute, and numerous neighborhood festivals are just some of the rituals that invest New York City living with meaning and anticipation. New York has a lexicon that identifies those who are members of the island community, and those who are not. Locals understand what



taking the A means, where Alphabet City is located, and what a sample sale is. Nonbelievers include people who just do not like New York. Its past and present leaders include mayors Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, Donald Trump, and the many other financiers, politicians, and artists who also have become city icons. As a result of this constellation of cultural touch points, New York City enjoys a vibrant community that draws people from other communities around the world to live, work, and



play—and who could never live anywhere else.

The seven elements that create a belief system are the tools for engineering vibrant communities. Keeping these pieces vibrant is the responsibility of civic and business leaders, and it is where McMansion and strip mall developments fall short. Styled facades trying to mimic vibrant communities end up being Hollywood back lots that assume ideals, but do not deliver them. Constructed as superficial icons, they do not contain the constellation of a belief system that develops communal values and meaning.

As people grapple with organic architectural contours, place making, scarcity of resources, and the other pains of creation, they need to keep in mind the intangible cultural touch points that ignite community spirit, a sense of belonging, and the thing that feels very much like soul. Creating resonant, compelling societies is as important for the continued prosperity of Chicago, Beijing, or New York City as it is for reviving New Orleans, the Bengal coast, and Greensburg.

Community has always been more than mere buildings. There is a sense of place that must be fed and nurtured. Recognizing the construct of community that embodies intangible emotional assets in addition to tangible bricks and steel is not merely a descriptive observation, but rather a prescriptive path for civic leaders and developers, large and small. **UL**

PATRICK HANLON is a global expert on designing branded communities, with bases in New York City, Minneapolis, and Beijing.

Beijing has icons like the Forbidden City, the former Chinese imperial palace—and the world's largest palace complex—located in the middle of the city, north of Tiananmen Square.