

Urban Innovation

Civic Entrepreneurship and Community Transformation

Prepared for the Kauffman Foundation

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WHY

American cities—like all of America and the entire world—face swirling issues of immense magnitude and complexity as we move forward into the 21st century. Our communities are going to have to function more effectively than they ever have in the past. Our citizens are going to have to become more engaged. Our democracy is going to have to be more dynamic. The stakes are too high to allow us any other option.

Great work is already taking place: organizations, neighborhoods, universities, foundations, and communities are all trying to find effective ways to bring citizens together to dialogue about common concerns. As a society, we are in a period of real learning about how to create new social compacts and new forms of social intelligence to address our challenges. Forums of all types and sizes are being experimented with, producing varying results. They have been focused in many ways: economic reform and development, citizen issues (i.e. health care), community visioning, creating public space, building social capital, increasing regional citizenship, and in some cases, simply convening citizens to dialogue together with no fixed content.

There are pros and cons in every case. Many citizens are weary of issue focused conversations, worn down by the endless effort to solve complex community problems. Others have tired of community visioning processes that paint a fine picture of an ideal future, but seem not to result in tangible change. Some feel that citizen dialogue that does not result in action or community transformation is a waste of time and resources, while others feel that rewarding dialogue itself is a valid outcome for such gatherings, given that perspectives are broadened, connections are made, and networks are expanded. There are those who feel that without a sharp issues focus, the energy of participants will quickly decline. And even when collective action is the stated outcome of a convening, too often the results fall short.

Having discovered all this, and building on the good work of John McKnight and his colleagues at Northwestern University and in Chicago, our idea is to convene a series of gatherings focused on *innovation*. On *civic entrepreneurship*.

In the natural world, as the environment changes rapidly, survival depends entirely upon successful adaptation. We too are in a period of rapid change, and our need for new adaptations—for new innovations of every kind—has never been greater. Often these new innovations have already been developed in one place, and simply need to be transferred elsewhere. The Kauffman Foundation wants to find those innovations, bring them to Kansas City, and then help transfer them to cities all over America.

PROCESS

During the past month, I have spent time interviewing people, researching organizations, and generally pondering how the Kansas City Forums might further develop as an initiative for the Kauffman Foundation. I've learned a great deal, and will offer a recommendation. In considering all of this, my working assumption has been whatever shape the Forums might take in the future, they should achieve three interrelated objectives:

1. Significantly advance the Kauffman Foundation's mission of "self-sufficient people in healthy communities".
2. Represent cutting edge thinking and practice, be unique and distinctive, and be something that could create a "buzz" for both Kansas City and for the Foundation.
3. Manifest exceptional potential to make positive things happen in the greater Kansas City community and even in cities across the nation. Positive means effective action, more dynamic communities, increased citizen engagement, and a stronger sense of regional stewardship.

WHAT I LEARNED

Much of this is obvious, and already known, but in the spirit of building a set of common assumptions, this is essentially what I learned from my research.

- **There are many diverse efforts taking place across America to engage citizens more effectively in the service of stronger communities.**

It is clear that many organizations, neighborhoods, universities, and communities are trying to find effective ways to bring citizens together to dialogue about common concerns. Community problems have been diagnosed by many, and the pressing needs of modern American cities made clear and compelling. David Matthews of the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums, Harry Boyte and the Humphrey Center at the University of Minnesota, Robert Putnam and The Saguro Seminars of Harvard's Kennedy School, the organizing work of John McKnight at Northwestern University and in Chicago, Richard Harwood and the Harwood Institute, and Peter Hille and the Brushy Fork Institute in Central Appalachia are just a few of the better known names and efforts.

- **No single best practice or model exists in the effort to engage a cross-section of citizens across a wide range of issues at the city wide level.**

Many municipalities have conducted community wide forums of various types, with varying results. Forums have been focused in several ways: economic reform and development, citizen issues (i.e. health care), community visioning, building social capital, and in some cases, simply convening citizens to dialogue together with no fixed content. The Utne Reader has popularized a new wave of "salons". Philosophy professor John Wallace to the University of Minnesota is revitalizing the Danish Folk School model in the Twin Cities. The Highlander Center in Tennessee has a long

history of convening citizen activists, having played a key role in the development of the civil rights movement. The Harwood Institute, in partnership with the Mott Foundation, has been engaged in a project called “Growing Community Strength” since 1997 in Flint, Michigan, which has shown promising results, and is tied, as many efforts are, to reversing economic decline in troubled communities.

- **Many citizen forums are now connected to a new regionalism in this country that is very promising.**

Doug Henton and the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, the National Association of Regional Councils, and The Gamaliel Foundation, are among the organizations actively working to broaden citizen perspectives, policy initiatives, and municipal decision making around complex issues that escape urban boundaries. Transportation, economics, and the environment are examples of common concerns that are more regional than local. David Warm and the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City are already considered national leaders in the development of this new regionalism.

- **Convening around the concepts of increasing citizen engagement, building civic skills, or developing regional stewardship alone will not work.**

I heard from a number of individuals that building civic skills, increasing citizen engagement and developing regional stewardship—important as they are—are not compelling enough reasons to bring and hold people together. They are, however, critically important outcomes of any effective process of citizen dialogue, and basic building blocks of our democracy. However, a tension exists in this regard, and there are strong arguments on both sides of this equation. Reasoned voices argue that simply bringing citizens together in real dialogue is outcome enough in these days of declining social capital. Others argue that common action is the only valid outcome of citizen engagement.

- **Citizens are growing weary of even action focused conversations that do not result in substantive, positive change.**

Even when collective action is the stated outcome of a convening, too often the results fall short, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps decision-makers are not included, or conversely, ordinary citizens are excluded. Often the basic skills of convening, organizing, effective meetings, and ongoing communication are limited or absent in participants. Turf and political battles are common. In short, dialogue alone may not be a valid outcome for citizen gatherings, but neither are ineffective efforts at organizing and action that spin wheels, accomplish little, and leave citizens demoralized rather than engaged.

WHAT I CONCLUDED

My conclusion is that the moment is ripe for the Kauffman Foundation to introduce a model of urban convening and citizen engagement that honors and builds on existing efforts, while also creating something new and compelling that could significantly advance the movement towards stronger communities and a stronger America.

THE BASIC IDEA

A conversation with John McKnight at Northwestern University opened up new possibilities in this consideration. McKnight, Jody Kretzman, and their colleagues at the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) organization began experimenting recently with something called the Neighborhood Innovation Forums. ABCD is affiliated with Northwestern University, and serves neighborhoods across Chicago. Of the Forums, McKnight said, “they are the single most effective change instrument I’ve been associated with in my long career”. For the dean of asset based community development, the author of community mapping, and a lifelong organizer and trainer of organizers to make such a comment, was striking indeed.

John McKnight has expressed his willingness to work with us to adapt a workable model for Kauffman and Kansas City. However we might modify his ideas, we stand on the shoulders of giants, and McKnight and Co. deserve credit for the basic strategy.

The Neighborhood Innovation Forum brings together individuals who have want to create an innovative solution to a community problem (i.e. an inner city neighborhood grocery store) with those who have already done so in another neighborhood across the city. McKnight and his colleagues identify the issue, select and invite citizens they believe are interested and capable of action, find other citizens who have already created the same or a similar innovation, and bring them together. The citizen innovators describe their work, and would be innovators ask and probe and learn. “Expert” or academic opinion is absent or judiciously employed. Action oriented citizens simply learn the ropes from other successful action oriented citizens with little fanfare and few intermediaries. It works.

The actual discussions become a living case study, infused with the excitement of innovation and the promise of action, rather than the usual gravity of issues and problems alone. Conversations are lively, networks are enriched, a can-do attitude prevails, and action tends to flow rather naturally out of the Forums. At the end of the 24 hour period, a group of citizens—usually about half the participants—volunteer and commit themselves to a task force. ABCD loans a staff person to the group for one month to help get them up and running—itsself an important innovation. There is much more to say about the pros and cons of various details of this model, but that is the basic idea.

ADAPTING IT FOR THE KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION

Many brains need to rally around this consideration, but here is one possible process. In brief:

1. Kauffman itself can identify pressing issues of real concern (perhaps where there is already activity and the ground is ripe for new innovation) and a pool of citizens who are somehow critical to this issue area, or convene groups in greater Kansas City to do so. The pool of citizens should be action-oriented citizens—what John Gardner calls “boundary crossers”. The kind of citizens who are readily able and more than willing to cross social, ethnic, racial, economic, or sectoral boundaries to make good things happen for their community.

2. Simultaneously begin to research and identify outstanding civic innovations from cities and regions all across the country, and those responsible for them. David Warm and the Mid-America Regional Council may have a key role to play here. Many other partners can also help identify innovations taking place all over the country.
3. Convene Kansas City citizens with citizen innovators from around the country. Work and learn and network together at the Foundation conference center. Ask Kansas City participants to join an informal, entrepreneurial task force to integrate the lessons and create a similar innovation in Kansas City. Kauffman can offer staff and administrative support to help the group—if it chooses—organize and sustain itself in the effort.
4. Track group progress while developing new groups of citizens and issues and innovators.
5. Collect information from the process to showcase innovators from around the nation and disseminate lessons to cities across America. Go to national conferences (of mayors and such) and tell the story. Stir citizens up with the notion of rebuilding their communities, reaching across urban and even regional boundaries, and creating new action oriented adaptations. Move from problem orientation to innovation focus.
6. Bring groups of Kansas City innovators together for a yearly two-day conference to network, compare notes, and celebrate.
7. After five years have a national conference with award ceremonies (and a White House keynote) to honor the new innovations and innovators. Publish a lively book. Rebound from 9-11. Invigorate Kansas City. Stimulate the economy. Strengthen America. Rock the nation.

A FEW THOUGHTS

Regarding the name, whatever it is ultimately called, it needs a snappy title—a strong “brand”. One possibility is **Urban Innovation**. This project might also be the occasion to introduce a new term: “**civic entrepreneur**”. Regarding partners, the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, the Mid-America Regional Council, and the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce are obvious possibilities, but also national organizations like the National Civic League (and similar groups), could help in identifying innovations in other cities and disseminating information about them.

CONCLUSION

Given this post 9-11 moment, the state of the economy, and our great American drive to rebound creatively, I believe this would be a great time for the Kauffman Foundation to introduce a new model of urban convening. This initiative would enliven the greater Kansas City area, and could significantly advance the movement towards stronger communities and a stronger America.

Regarding design, tying forums to innovation represents a more “positive organizing principle”, than one focused on problems and issues, or on dialogue and civic engagement alone. There is a lot of talk today about Appreciative Inquiry, and how the rather more positive focus (concentrating on strengths rather than limitations), seems to produce more substantive and far-reaching change. David Cooperrider, AI’s founder, notes that *“successful people, teams and organizations spend time studying success. They know how other people and organizations achieve extraordinary results. Focusing on the root cause of success fosters creativity, builds relationships and informs future actions with positive possibilities.”*

Looking back over the objectives we began with, I believe all three would be well served.

First, this type of initiative would significantly advance the Kauffman Foundation’s mission of “self-sufficient people in healthy communities”. Additionally, since innovation and entrepreneurship are intimately linked, it would build on the Foundation’s ongoing efforts to support entrepreneurship.

Second, it would be unique and distinctive, representing cutting edge thinking and practice, and be something that could create a “buzz” for Kansas City and for the Foundation. (NOTE: I understand and respect Kauffmans commitment not to “grandstand” and call special attention to itself. The kind of buzz I mean is the kind that comes not from talking about yourself but from producing prodigious results in service to the community and the nation.)

Third, and not least, this seems an initiative with tremendous potential to make positive things happen in the greater Kansas City community and even in cities across the nation, resulting in effective action, more dynamic communities, increased citizen engagement, and a stronger sense of regional stewardship.
