



The City Repair Project



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The City Repair Project is a non-profit organization based in Portland, Oregon, born out of a grassroots initiative that legally converted a street intersection into a neighborhood public square. We involve hundreds of volunteers and activists working on public gatherings and events to make our communities better places to live. City Repair's work is inspired by the idea that localization—of culture, economy, decision-making—is a necessary foundation for a more community-oriented and ecologically sustainable society.

The volunteer executive staff shares responsibilities in a non-hierarchical and consensus decision-making model. City Repair is an excellent example of a chaordic (“chaotically ordered”) organization. A chaordic organization serves to enable the periphery—where people are deeply engaged with hands-on community actions—by providing resources and delegating decision-making. Chaordic processes prevent the accumulation of power and resources in any one part of the organization while maintaining a remarkable level of coherence and creativity. City Repair is a living organism, which in turn reminds the city that it is a confederation of villages, and awakens each village to its role as a living system embedded in broader ecosystems.

PLACEMAKING

City Repair's work is based on the idea of “Placemaking,” which is the creation of a place whose structure and use is determined by the people who inhabit that place. Great urban places serve many functions and are continuously adapted to the local culture and environment. As the process of developing a community place proceeds, people develop deeper relationships with each other and their surroundings, literally creating a common

OUR MISSION: The City Repair Project is an organized group action that educates and inspires communities and individuals to creatively transform the places where they live. We facilitate artistic and ecologically-oriented placemaking through projects that honor the interconnection of human communities and the natural world.

far left top:
Community celebration at
Share-It Square

far left bottom: Sellwood
Moonday T-Howls

ground that empowers people to transcend differences, creatively address civic affairs, and continue building upon their shared public places.

CITY REPAIR PROJECTS:

Sellwood Moonday T-Hows (1996): A semi-permanent gathering environment modeled after ancestral European and indigenous meeting houses. A successful adaptation of function that provided the local community impetus to establish a permanent public gathering place.

T-Horse Mobile Neighborhood Public Square (1996 to present): A mobile teahouse and public gathering place that travels to different Portland neighborhoods providing a comfortable, creative atmosphere where people can meet their neighbors and form community bonds.

T-Horse Mobile
Public Square



Intersection Repair (1996 to present): A community-driven transformation of street intersections into neighborhood public squares. As of January 2004, six Intersection Repair projects are in existence and dozens of new projects are under-way nationwide.

Hands Around Portland (1997-2000): A city-scale human circle of approximately 7,000 people, this project is a gesture of hope, community, and human interconnectedness.

Portland Public Place Master Plan (2000): A five-year plan to help Portland's 96 neighborhoods each create at least one public square.

Earth Day Celebration of Localization (2000 to present): This annual festival of all things local highlights the resources of our interconnected human communities and our environments, and the sheer beauty of public gathering.

Community Visioning (2001 to present): Workshops that assist residents, businesses, and visitors of an inner-city commercial street (SE Division), a neighborhood (Sunnyside), and a coastal Oregon town (Bay City) to envision sustainable placemaking opportunities.

Village Building Convergence (2002 to present): An annual ten-day event that reclaims urban spaces and transforms them into community places. Daytime hands-on workshops and evening events teach, inspire, and bring together thousands of people in local communities.

PLACEMAKING IN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS: INTERSECTION REPAIR

In Portland, as with cities across the nation, many neighborhood streets are desolate and anonymous, torn apart by speeding traffic. There is little to inspire conversation, creativity, democracy, community gatherings, reflections of local culture, a sense of safety, or even local economic vitality. Intersection Repair reclaims the crossing

of pathways—the historical place of gathering—and turns it back to the community. Intersection Repair projects are guided by the direct participation and leadership of a neighborhood to determine a shared vision for a neighborhood gathering place, create the designs and functions, collect the materials needed, and then build, manage, and celebrate each other and the neighborhood.

CONTEXT OF INTERSECTION REPAIR

Town commons have traditionally been the geographical glue that binds a community together. In 1785, the Continental Congress passed the National Land Ordinance, which estab-

lished a continental grid plan over all lands west of the Ohio River and practically guaranteed that public squares would be absent from new American cities. Much of the source and nature of our social isolation and urban tragedies result from this; we have few commons to facilitate collective understanding, vision, or responsibility.

Public gathering places are essential components for building vibrant neighborhood communities. Without these places, where does the daily practice of community happen? Often, throughout the nation, it simply does not. Intersection Repair is a process for reclaiming our identity as neighbors and returning public squares—the heart of community—to our neighborhoods, one by one.

HOW IT WORKS

Intersection Repair projects happen with support and facilitation assistance from City Repair. The initial neighborhood

INTERSECTION REPAIR provides a way for citizens to reclaim the identities of our communities and return public squares to our neighborhoods.

THE PROJECTS:

- Increase communication and interaction between neighbors
- Reinterpret existing public spaces and adapt them to establish a site and a framework for cooperation and local participation in community affairs
 - Provide a focus for neighborhood identity and culture, providing a place for activities such as news sharing, tool lending, celebrations, and spontaneous conversation.
 - Beautify the public environment, can lower crime rates and reduce traffic speed.

“sparks” reach out to their neighbors and invite everyone to learn more about the possibilities of building a neighborhood center. The initial steps are critical and should include: hosting social gatherings, encouraging conversation in a general way about the neighborhood, and simply spending time in public places. These are the moments when individuals feel personally welcomed and engaged to share their talents and opinions in this neighborhood effort. “Social capital” is built, and the neighborhood as a whole takes ownership of the concept of re-building shared public places.

The designs for the public square are created by the neighborhood through a series of

community workshops. The process usually begins with an assessment of the current neighborhood needs and assets, culture and history, common interests, local climate, ecology, and topography. The neighborhood then formulates a vision and a set of strategies to meet their goals. With scores of people involved in the decision-making, it usually requires compromise and creative solutions to find a suitable design. The strongest and most interesting concepts result from the process of addressing each person’s concerns, opinions, and ideas.

While the projects are physical, the essence of an Intersection Repair is unseen to the eye. Behind the community kiosks, benches, and street murals lies an awakened neighborhood that has come together and created conversations. This placemaking is as much about psychological ownership and reclamation of relationships as it is about a place. Placemaking reminds us that we still share common interests and the power to manifest them.

The projects evolve in phases, naturally unfolding from time people spend together in their own neighborhood. Many groups start with something small and do-able so that the community can accomplish it together and engender a common basis for potential next steps. Each phase of the project is punctuated by moments of celebration and reflection.

Each neighbor is encouraged to contribute their ideas, desires and resources and cultivate their own interests in this participatory process. People also develop partnerships with

The City of Portland allows street painting and construction in the right of way, according to City Ordinance #175937 (September 19, 2001). The Portland Department of Transportation (PDOT) has established a precedent for these projects by granting revocable permits for ongoing intersection modifications. A petition of support is required by the city; the petition has signatures from each of the adjacent residents and at least 80% of the residents on the project street frontage(s) within two standard city blocks of the proposed project. The residents have to provide a written description of the proposed changes, including drawings depicting how the intersection will look when completed. With support from PDOT, the residents demonstrate how the project will improve, or at least maintain, traffic safety and the safety of individuals at or in the vicinity of the intersection.

neighborhood associations, government agencies, local businesses, schools, and organizations that are all working toward similar goals of healthy, livable communities. Intersection Repair simply becomes a mechanism for working together.

Funding for these projects comes from a variety of sources. Once people feel that they are part of an exciting neighborhood process, their spirit of resourcefulness and generosity is engaged. Many neighborhoods find ample materials in their backyards or garages, and local businesses are often pleased to donate materials, food, or funds. Neighborhood groups also write grants, host creative fundraising events, and seek resourceful partnerships. Overall, the projects cost a fraction of the value they generate.

The Portland City Council and Department of Transportation support Intersection Repair because it improves neighborhood livability and engages citizens in participatory democracy without spending a single tax dollar. Projects are permitted in communities who prove widespread support for the designs. Therefore, the community has decision-making power over what they want in their neighborhood as long as they work together. The process is continuously evolving as neighborhoods generate new ideas for their public places.

Intersection Repairs touch upon issues that transcend political, cultural, and economic lines. These foundations allow us to determine our own destiny together as a community. Many people find personal meaning in these projects as they are deeply transformational and a lot of fun! Each project plants invaluable seeds for the future.

HISTORY OF INTERSECTION REPAIR: THE SHARE-IT SQUARE

The Intersection Repair concept first developed out of a creative, insurrectionary action by a single neighborhood to reclaim public space at their most local street intersection. Since the initial prototype, “Intersection Repair” has become a household term in Portland, referring to the restoration process of re-engaging people at nodes where historically people’s lives would have intersected.

In the spring of 1996, people in Portland’s Sellwood neighborhood began holding tea parties in a beautiful, temporary gathering place built by a neighbor in a garden of fruit trees and flowers. This special place, known as the “T-Hows,” was based upon a simple idea: given the opportunity to share time and drink with each other in a comfortable, free place, people will come together and start to build relationships, as their ancestors used to in their own meeting places.



Labyrinth Piazza

It worked. Soon, hundreds of neighbors were coming to the gatherings. Music, dancing, poetry readings and, of course, tea, flowed freely as friendships formed. Neighbors who had lived near each other for years but never met came to know and care about each other.

Because the T-Hows was built without asking permission, the local Bureau of Buildings issued a directive to remove it. However, hundreds of neighbors, architecture and engineering firms across the city, and even the media objected! Momentum began to shift and people found the courage to create an even bolder concept for community self-development. This time it was in the nearby street intersection.

CASE STUDY: The Sunnyside Piazza

When I moved into the Sunnyside neighborhood in Portland, OR in 1999, I was stunned by the magnitude of urban problems including heroin, crack, and alcohol abuse literally in my backyard. The neighborhood was plagued by social disorder, crime, and vandalism. I soon realized that it was particularly excessive on Wednesdays and Fridays when a local soup kitchen served the homeless a warm meal. The soup kitchen had fallen down on its responsibility to monitor crime and substance abuse at its events. Yet, how could anyone argue against a soup kitchen? We decided to tackle these issues by using the same community organizing tool: food. We started having regular brunch meetings with all the neighbors to discuss creative approaches to neighborhood stewardship.

During nine months of meetings, discussions, workshops, design plans, outreach and block parties the community conceived of a plan to paint an intersection. While the benefits to the community of painting the streets seemed obvious to me, others pointed out that the streets exist to be driven on. With a considerable amount of outreach and mediation we were able to appease the concerns of the skeptics. The community painted a large sunflower in the middle of the intersection and we arguably created the most beautiful intersection in town. The pattern resembles two spirals, mirror images of each other, and mathematically represents a Fibonacci series, a pattern found in many natural phenomena, including sunflowers. We inaugurated the Sunnyside Piazza on September 22, 2001, with a big party including residents and homeless alike.

After another nine months of preparations a second phase of community art was realized. A cob art-wall was built with colorful mosaics, shapes, and niches. A cob information kiosk was installed for exchanging messages and notices intended to facilitate social interactions. A solar-powered fountain tiled with

glass mosaics was constructed to invite passersby to pause to the sound of running water and to interact with each other. More structures were soon to follow with large trellises on all corners for hanging gardens.



The Sunnyside Piazza has become a destination for pedestrians and a place for people to meet. We have evidence that this successful example of community organizing has had a beneficial impact on social networks and well-being. Crime data suggest that there has been a significant decrease in reported offenses. These data vindicate the merits of public participation in urban design with cost-effective benefits to the community.

—Jan C. Semenza

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First, a group of neighbors created a plan to claim the street intersection as shared place by painting the asphalt, and approached the Portland Office of Transportation (PDOT) about the project. PDOT refused the idea, some of the neighbors even being told, “That’s public space—so no one can use it!”

At the same time, other individuals within PDOT advised the neighbors that the only way to get the city to even consider such an untried idea was to just initiate it without permission. The neighbors refined the design and decided to practice civil disobedience installing the “Intersection Repair” without city



Memorial to a cyclist killed in a traffic accident

approval. In September 1996, they arranged for a legal block party street closure on all four streets converging at SE 9th and Sherrett. During the community event they installed the first phase of “Share-it Square.”

Share-it Square began as a series of colorful painted concentric circles graphically connecting the four corners of the intersection. It also included permanent structures on each corner representing the kinds of functions that are found in public squares, such as a bulletin board and information kiosk, a 24-hour tea-serving station (the community “watering hole”), and a playhouse. The intention was to mark the intersection as a shared place for the development of neighborhood culture and creative engagement where vehicles and pedestrians would be able to safely share space.

Immediately, PDOT sent notification to remove the installation and threatened to fine the neighbors involved. The

neighborhood group then engaged PDOT and city council members in dialogue about the project, and set out to prove its value by surveying the neighborhood and observing behavior at the intersection. The resulting survey showed that the vast majority of respondents perceived increases in neighborhood communication and safety, decreases in crime activity and in traffic speed.

The project quickly won city support when officials realized that the project was meeting a host of city livability goals without costing tax dollars. The city council began a series of ordinances that granted permits to the project, and set out guidelines for similar projects to be installed throughout Portland.

Over the next few years, the neighbors refined and added elements to their Intersection Repair: the 24-hour tea station was rebuilt with steel, wood, concrete, and mosaic; the bulletin board was expanded with a plexiglas roof and chalk boards; a produce-sharing station and a sidewalk chalk dispenser appeared. Many more amenities such as benches made from cob (an adobe-like natural building material made of clay, straw, sand, and water), communication stations, and other structures have emerged. The intersection mural has been redesigned and repainted multiple times.

The impact on the neighborhood as a whole has been profound. The concentration of families with children and others with a pronounced community orientation wanting to live together near Share-It Square is evidence of the impact. Social capacity has increased, inspiring many side projects and relationships. Personal benefits include expanded social networks, a stronger sense of local identity, less neighborhood conflict, and innumerable opportunities for creative engagement.

SYNCHRONICITY: THE VILLAGE BUILDING CONVERGENCE

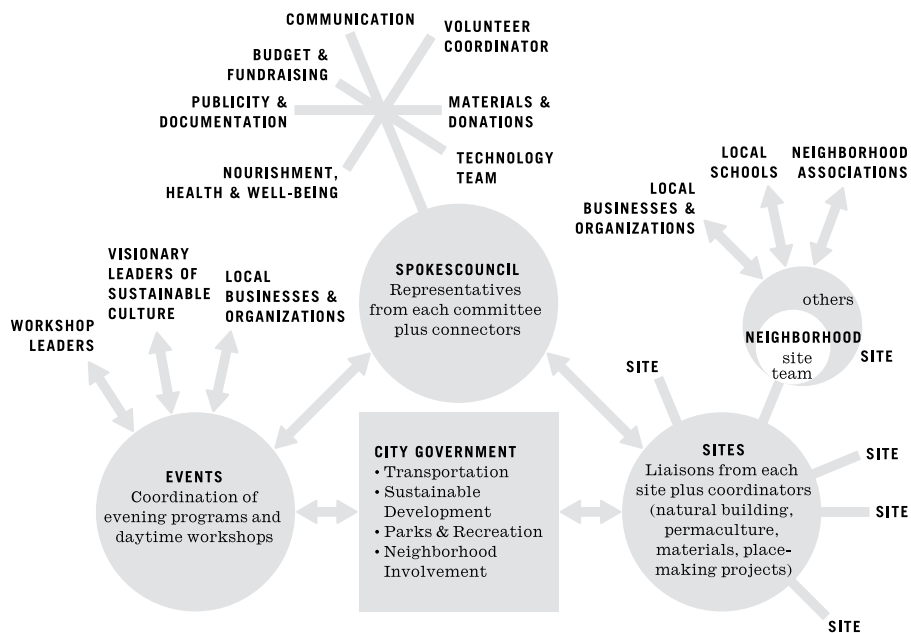
Intersection Repair projects on their own are momentous events, but when a dozen projects are synchronized, the whole city feels the impact. The Village Building Convergence (VBC) is an annual ten-day period of action, education, and celebration grounded by building dozens of new community gathering

places. The combined power of simultaneously transforming spaces into places in neighborhood nodes across the city creates a sense of reclaiming our city as a collection of coordinated village centers.

Because the VBC is a synchronization of multiple projects, the impact is greater than any individual undertaking. The project not only utilizes resources and ideas more efficiently, it also makes a profound statement of the community's collective visions. Thousands of people participate in the ten-day work party. Evening events with visionary innovators and leaders spark dialogue about creating sustainable urban villages within the modern city. Daytime workshops and shared meals become times for conversation and connection.

The overall event trains developing leaders and builds capacity for individuals and communities, while offering us an experience of actually living in an urban village. The VBC becomes ten days of inhabiting a timely vision: working as a community to better ourselves, learn from each other, laugh, reflect, and dance. There is an infectious air of possibility during those ten days.

Village Building Convergence Internal Structure



**LIVING FRACTALS:
COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION**

Beyond any built projects resulting from the Village Building Convergence, an equally historic and innovative organizational structure is created. The VBC can be described as a scaled series of fractals: a repeating form of localized empowerment that is coordinated to take action at many levels. The efficiency of the model is based on consciously negotiating between the community vision and each person or group's interest. People are therefore able to feel in control of their work, have ample resources and support, and contribute to a meaningful combined accomplishment. The VBC is coordinated by hundreds of volunteers: neighbors, activists, professionals, students, and other community organizers, as well as its sponsors: The City Repair Project, Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Coalition, and KBOO Community Radio.

A "spokescouncil" comprised of representatives of each committee guides the overall project and serves as the hub coordinating body. Each committee is empowered to make the majority of their own decisions, but brings significant matters to the spokescouncil.

This structure allows many people to be the decision-makers, dispersing the power and responsibilities among the community. This model also teaches people how to communicate effectively within a complex organism and truly work as a team. With an understanding that everybody has different working styles and interests, people synchronize efforts in order to accomplish great feats beyond individual capability.

**VBC PROCESS FOR COMPLETING
SIMULTANEOUS PROJECTS**

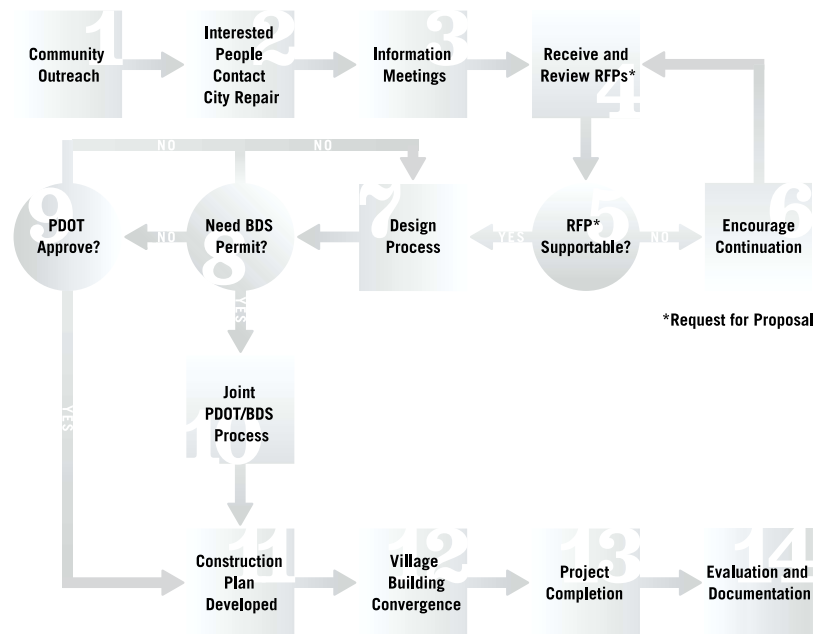
The fractal model of organization can extend beyond the internal structure of the VBC. It allows for multiple partnerships citywide by identifying specific links among many layers of the organization. For example, the VBC 2003 partnered with five city bureaus, dozens of local businesses and organizations, schools, neighborhood associations, and hundreds of volunteers.

City Repair has developed a step-by-step process in order to simultaneously implement several neighborhood en-

hancement projects throughout the city. The neighborhoods are the focus of the process, and the VBC provides coordination, facilitation, process, and technical support. The process begins with VBC organizers announcing via local media the opportunity to support new neighborhood enhancement projects. Interested community members then reach out to their neighborhoods to gauge the potential. If interested, the neighborhood groups follow the Intersection Repair model of community involvement and design. To gain support as a project of the VBC, the neighborhood answers a survey about their motivation, level of neighborhood participation, and vision. The VBC identifies projects to support based on available resources to meet each neighborhood's projected needs.

The VBC organizers assist each neighborhood by working with their neighbors to develop their designs, acquire materials for the projects, and complete the city permitting process. Throughout the process, neighborhood identity and ownership of the projects supersedes that of City Repair and the VBC; City

Flow-diagram of Community Empowerment through Urban Form by the City Repair Project



Repair organizers serve as facilitators and project support only when requested.

During the Village Building Convergence each May, the neighborhoods and VBC participants showcase this model of neighborhood improvement by working together, celebrating and building new places in their streets.

ACTING LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY: COOPERATION

With the VBC and our neighborhood associations, Portland, Oregon, is leading the nation in re-envisioning civic infrastructure. We are learning in Portland that localization of culture, economy, and decision-making is the foundation for a sustainable future. The Village Building Convergence is about actively building community capacity, and realizing the strength and beauty of our power. The VBC is a statement of our collective dedication to create a world of cooperation.

The City Repair Project promotes events and activities that inspire people to take active, direct roles in re-creating their neighborhoods and cities. This model of community involvement in urban design has tangible benefits to both residents and non-residents, and has sparked projects city and nationwide. These projects of localization dynamically connect individuals to plan and implement creative and attractive urban places that enrich their quality of life.