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Theme - City Repair

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City Repair— DESIGNING NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

Portland's colourful street intersections are redefining village life.

Are cities in the United States of America designed to isolate people and prevent them from building bonds of community? City Repair of Portland, Oregon, thinks this is the case, but they have a plan to change this by re-creating a sense of community one intersection at a time.

Text by Steve Jarvis Photographs by City Repair

Portland, Oregon is home to City Repair, an organisation dedicated to helping build local communities through the process of designing, funding and building shared spaces. Best known for its Intersection Repair activities, which bring neighbours together to paint a large mural on a shared street intersection, City Repair's scope goes beyond just that. Their goal is to resurrect the age-old role of crossroads as meeting places by creating "sharing nodes" such as benches, rain shelters, community gardens and book exchange shelves. Starting from a small group of neighbours ignoring the law to paint a single intersection 23 years ago, the organisation's

impact on Portland has been profound over the years. It has helped transform over 700 residential intersections into hives of community.

City Repair's community building message is simple: "You don't just need a sense of place; you need an actual place!" And their mission is to make this happen. Placemaking is about creating a sense of belonging, and it is an important antidote to many of the isolating norms defining city life. Coming together to plan and then build something is a reminder that people share common interests and have the power to manifest them. The power

of placemaking, however, resides as much in the sense of psychological ownership and reclamation of space as it does with physically building a place. Something as simple as neighbours coming together to paint an intersection can dramatically change the relationship between all the people sharing that space, help reduce crime, and even raise property values. Evidence for the power of placemaking in Portland is compelling, and City Repair's message is spreading throughout North America as dozens of cities seek to replicate this virtuous circle of civic engagement.

Interview with City Repair Co-founder Mark Lakeman

Creating places to make communities



As an activist designer, Mark Lakeman spends his time devising ways to help people to get out of their houses and be active participants in their society. Formally trained as an urban designer, he is the third generation in a storied family of architects heavily engaged in people-centred design and urban planning in Portland. Following his instincts, Mark resolved to put his architectural training to use in an area that would actively build community rather than put people into segmented boxes isolating one from the other. So, together with some neighbours, he set about building places for people to come together and create human connections. The result is City Repair.

It is no accident the organisation Mark co-founded with his neighbours is called City Repair, because he, and his

now extensive network of collaborators, are convinced that cities are designed for profit, not people, and this needs to be fixed. Mark's overseas travels, including living in a Mexican village and engagement with native Indian culture, helped him realise the city he grew up in lacked shared spaces for people to gather and actually create and perform the act of community. "Fundamentally most American cities have been designed using the same grid street and neighbourhood formation as the Romans used when building their empire. Having no village squares in the places that we as villagers actually lived, it's no surprise that we don't know each other, or have the chance to actually speak to each other, and as a nation that we suffer from intense feelings of isolation."

As Mark delves deeper into the work of City Repair, time and time again he comes back to the notion of a village. What he is referring to is "A place that is human in scale, place based and participatory, somewhere that you know your voice will be heard and you know something more about your neighbours than what they look like, and maybe their names. By knowing who you live with it is possible to understand the diversity that exists in neighbourhoods and the different skills and professions of people. When viewed from this perspective, it is possible to see your neighbourhood as a village with the diversity necessary to make things operate well on a much smaller scale than the extended boundaries of a

larger city."

Starting Intersection Repair

"The intersection is an often overlooked part of everyday life, but its importance can be traced back to ancient times. The crossroads have traditionally been a place of meeting, but in modern design this fades into the background because so much emphasis is put on movement and flows of people, especially in larger cities. Fast-moving cars and village squares are not compatible. Even in city centres, characterised by the typical American main street, the emphasis is on flows of people, there are few places for people to gather in informal and casual ways in the middle. The fact that intersections are public space, but not used by the public, goes to the heart of what is wrong in American neighbourhoods." For Mark and his collaborators, it was the obvious place to start their placemaking work.

When Mark and his neighbours first came together to paint their intersection in 1996, it was considered an illegal activity and they were fined for their transgression. When given the opportunity to plead their case before the city council, they put the serious flaws of city design into stark perspective. Mark recounts, "We told them that the United States has the lowest number of outdoor gathering places of all First World nations, and the highest incidences of violence related



3.

to people not being able to even know who they live with." It was a compelling argument, and the city council has transformed into an active supporter of the community-building activities run by City Repair.

Building a new normal for the city

Well aware that cooperative governing bodies can smooth the path to progress, City Repair always intended to affect the political culture of Portland. Mark puts it succinctly, "The goals of City Repair only become possible if we don't fight with the authorities. Instead, we treat them as villagers." A goal achieved. In 1997, Portland City introduced the Intersection Repair Ordinance, which permits every residential intersection to be recreated into any form of public square that local residents agree upon; opening up the city's 96 neighbourhoods, with their thousands of street intersections, for community development. Continued progressive action by the government and the rise of community building organisations such as City Repair, has helped make Portland one of the country's most inclusive and livable cities.



4.

Proof of City Repair's effectiveness goes beyond painted street intersections and shared spaces on street corners, it is making communities more stable, crime is down, people stay resident for longer, and families with children are attracted to the area. City Repair is also a valuable teaching tool, giving participants important interpersonal growth as well as more practical experience in sustainable ecology, natural building techniques, project management and much more, all of which can be applied to their daily lives outside of the neighbourhood. For Mark, "The difference between a thriving neighbourhood and being part of an isolated grid-bound city is the communication that happens between neighbours. The focus that we have participants constantly keeping in mind is that they're not building stuff. They're building relationships."



5.

1. Mark Lakeman — Placemaker
2. Intersections are blocked and become a hive of activity for a day
3. Intersections are fun places to be
4. A design takes shape
5. Everybody has an input into intersection design





The Village Building Convergence

For ten days every June, the entirety of Portland becomes one large showcase for the possibilities and sheer enjoyment of City Repair activities. Starting in 2001, the Village Building Convergence (VBC) draws its inspiration from Barn Raising events of a bygone era, when communities would come together to build something of significance in short order. This ten-day work-festival draws thousands of people into its fold, attracting participants and experts from around the region. Over the duration, there may be as many as 45 projects of various sizes underway during a VBC, and the whole city feels the energy. During the day people can attend hands-on workshops and join in building projects taking place simultaneously at dozens of sites around the city. The evenings are for sharing meals and kicking up heels, building connections and community in the most enjoyable of ways. While the events are organised and based in communities, City Repair plays a central role in facilitating

projects, helping with technical and logistical facets, as well as coordinating events and lectures during the ten days. Organising an event on this scale is time and energy intensive, but the payoff is potentially large. Sharing knowledge and gaining experiences helps to develop capacities in active neighbourhoods, and the festive mood easily catches media attention, bringing evermore people into the City Repair fold.



1. A big effort deserves a celebration
2. Planning community has to be inclusive
3. Share-It Square is a model to follow



How To Do Placemaking

Doing City Repair — The Process is the Goal

Evolving from a collection of neighbours and friends, City Repair became a not-for-profit organisation in 1998 and is governed by a Coordinators Council, while funding comes from private donations and on-the-ground operations are run by hundreds of volunteers. City Repair's role in facilitating the creation of public gathering places starts upon receiving a request for assistance from a budding local community. These neighbourhoods have already reached a consensus amongst affected residents to do a community-building project, and have an idea of what they want to do and what they need from City Repair. With this foundation in place, the main function of City Repair is to act as a conduit of placemaking knowhow, covering design and organisational aspects, as well as the facilitating of funding and negotiations with authorities necessary to carry out community-building activities. City Repair's project facilitation is guided by a number of principles: consensus building at all stages; a focus on community ownership; and prioritising the process over the final product. It is common for City Repair to assist the residents over months of meetings to help them reach a consensus on design. For City Repair, the final design is not what matters; it is the act of cooperating with residents and leading them toward positive changes and future interactions that is of primary importance.

Community building is a process formed by smaller achievable tasks. It usually begins with

an intersectional mural, but as bonds form and a sense of accomplishment grows, so can the scale, complexity and magnitude of projects undertaken. In order to encourage community ownership, City Repair volunteers work only as facilitators and give opinions only when asked. The residents are involved in the funding, design, and maintenance of the project. City Repair volunteers also encourage residents to hold celebrations in between their intermediate steps to help cement the bonds between people as they work toward their goals. In the more advanced City Repair neighbourhoods, such as Share-It Square (p.27) the village mentality is taken even further to include gateways, pathways between properties, nodes of activity such as children's clubhouses, treehouses and playgrounds, and one neighbourhood even has

a community hot tub. Established communities take on a life of their own, determining what they want to do and how to do it, but they can still draw upon City Repair's expertise and connections to acquire skills in ecological landscaping, permaculture and communal gardening, and building with natural materials such as cob (mud and straw), and more. While only a community can build community, the City Repair playbook provides a massive advantage for people in search of a more connected and grounded lifestyle.

1. Many hands are needed to complete a painting in one day
2. Paints are collected from residents or donated by local businesses



Share-It Square Intersection Painting— Share-It Square

A play on words for Sherret Street, one of the intersecting streets, Share-It Square is the original site of activity for City Repair and its prime showcase for the possibilities of community engagement and collective action. Tracing its origins back to a temporary tea house (named T-Hows) located on one of the intersection corners, it became a locus for bringing nearby residents together to share thoughts and aspirations over a cup of tea. Ordered to dismantle the unauthorised structure, the locals responded by getting together to paint their intersection as a symbol of community solidarity. The resulting tussle with bureaucracies gave birth to City Repair, and the square played an important proof-of-concept role as residents' efforts in creating shared places was rewarded with reduced traffic speeds, lower crime rates, and increased tolerance for diversity and goodwill amongst residents. All important goals for the city, this successful test case proved critical in swaying the government to adopt the City Repair agenda. Share-It Square has grown from strength to strength and now has cob structures on every corner, including a 24-hour tea stand, children's playhouse, fresh produce and book sharing spaces and a community bulletin board. The intersection is closed down a few times a year for block parties and, when needed, the repainting of the intersection mural.