

## 7

**Showing what you mean (not just talking about it)**

Tony Gibson

**• Introduction**

This article is about a *set of community-building tools* which has been developed over the last 20 years, first in the UK, then in various parts of Europe and the US, currently on trial in parts of Africa, India, South-East Asia and Latin America. The tools and techniques have been used in rural as well as urban areas, but I shall deal here with their application in cities and on urban fringe estates. In particular, those places where people keep themselves to themselves for fear of each other; where they have lost, or perhaps have never had, the sense of community which turns an anonymous dwelling area into a neighbourhood that works.

Before I describe the tool-kit, let's look at the problems it is designed to tackle, and how they have arisen. Way back in the 1950s and 1960s, as Britain repaired the damage left by World War II, the housing experts were having a field day. Architects, planners and Housing Committees put everything they had into meeting the housing targets set by governments. Homes came off the production line, system-built, in a few standard sizes, ranging from maisonettes to tower blocks, beautifully equipped with kitchen units, picture windows and baths with showers. At first, everyone who climbed out of the housing queue was happy. Later on, things changed.

**Estates with problems**

There weren't enough resources to keep the housing stock in good repair. It needed quite a lot of attention, because system-building tended to be a 'botcher's charter'. When some tower blocks began to fall apart, they revealed the rubbish which had been shovelled into the cavity walls in the rush to meet contractors' deadlines and make a fast buck. The people

who had moved onto the new estates still retained the community spirit they had shown during the war, but during the 1970s and 1980s, something began to happen to that, too. Here's how things seemed on one stress estate in the north-east, where I have been working:

*"I was born and bred on this estate. As a young child in the sixties, there was a great sense of community spirit. People came out into the streets and played with the children, and talked about their gardens - because we all had gardens then, and trees in the streets, and we had garden competitions... Then one day, we got up and there was the workmen pulling everything up, knocking down the fencing, and it was just all flattened out, nice and neat and open plan, so that the Council could just roll across with their lawnmowers."*

Then the economy began to fall apart, and with it the people.

*"I would say it was ten or maybe fifteen years ago that it started to deteriorate. The docks and the factories were closing down, I started seeing the rot set in amongst the kids. It happened gradually. They were good kids and they used to go on the street and play football, but then they were beginning to do odd things. Then the mentally ill were getting shoved out of the hospitals, the cuts started in the Social Security... People were using any means to be able to live to get their daily bread. There was nothing for the children."*

*And then it started. At one time, you could leave your door open, people wouldn't venture to go in and steal, but now whether your door's open or shut,*

*they need money to survive, and it's the same with the children. Shoplifting, the aggression, the anger. I've never seen anything like it, how kids get depressed, they see ... no future ahead, so they vandalise. But what people don't realise is that when kids put graffiti on the wall, they're giving you a message".*

The experts in local and central government couldn't understand what the message meant. One of them told me, "*We are throwing housing solutions at criminal problems*".

### **People at odds with each other**

All sorts of official intervention was taking place, but with less and less effect, as the authorities began to conclude that the people on the estate were just a load of rubbish. Even teachers thought so, and their attitudes rubbed off on the children.

Within the estate, there were factions, family quarrels, bitter feelings. The place seethed with fears and petty squabbles. In fact, most people had come onto the estate almost starry-eyed, saying goodbye to slum surroundings, full of hope for a good future. But as their physical surroundings suffered, and they lost control of their livelihoods with the encroaching recession, they became increasingly frustrated. They felt that the rest of society had let them down.

Given the opportunity, people moved out. For those who couldn't get out, drugs might be the answer - £100,000 a week is spent on drugs on one estate, according to the youth workers. Just how widespread, it was difficult to estimate. There were plenty of people who managed without and kept going because they remembered better days and wanted to do something positive. Because they remembered a long way back, they were better placed to see a long way ahead, how things *might* be.

The problem has been the yawning gap between the residents and the officials. Officials come and go, and are themselves baffled by the delays and uncertainties that official procedures impose on them. They set up training schemes which are often for non-existent jobs. Residents felt that the information they needed most was withheld.

### **A communication gap**

Officials have been increasingly cautious about showing their faces on such stress estates. They were always having to apologise for delays and cutbacks, mostly imposed by central government. They had less and less knowledge of the capacities of the residents themselves, their local knowledge, their intuitive understanding of the way things actually work on the ground. They tended to stay in their offices, with occasional forays to a public meeting at which they said "*Leave it to us.*" The public meetings themselves were often a disaster. In the fog of words, everyone lost their way. People shouted, or mumbled - when they got a chance, which was comparatively rare, because the platform party, the fluent speakers, tended to hog the proceedings.

To sum it all up: central and local government are stuck with deteriorating estates, for which public resources are being steadily cut back. Residents who could make those resources stretch further by contributing their own knowledge, commitment and 'sweat equity' have become increasingly alienated. They distrust outsiders, and they are often at odds amongst themselves. There is a massive mutual ignorance. The authorities can't understand what the residents are at; the residents cannot penetrate the bureaucratic maze. In all this, words are an obstacle, not a through-route. Residents have lost confidence in themselves, and in the authorities; and they fail to inspire confidence from outside bodies, public and private. So the whole process is a downward spiral.

### **Untapped resources**

How to arrest the process?

We have to bring about situations in which each side in the 'Them and Us' equation begins to discover what the other is about. For the residents, it's a question of learning the system, and perhaps altering it in the process. For the officials and the politicians, it has to be a recognition of the fact that they do not know what they do not know. They have all sorts of facts at their fingertips, but not the knowledge which the residents possess - the intuitive understanding of local relationships, and how things really work on the ground; the ability to

see things whole, without departmental blinkers. Neither side is fully aware of the extent and depth of residents' potential contribution.

### • The tool-kit

*Planning for Real* is the label people give nowadays to a cluster of techniques and materials which we have developed over the past 20 years<sup>1</sup>. In one sense, they are simply a tool-kit that allows people to explore possibilities, sort out options, rank priorities, share out responsibilities, set out a Plan of Action - all without having to endure talking shops which drive everyone up the wall, and eventually out of the door. In another, they are a strategy designed to establish common ground between 'Us and Them' as a basis for a combined operation to create a working neighbourhood.

This common ground is the neighbourhood which everyone knows.

### Stage I: the model

The first step is to use this common knowledge to make a 3D model of the neighbourhood which shows it for what it is, here and now; reminds the old hands of what it used to be; and begins to tickle people's fancy about what it could become.

The model is made in sections each about a metre square, so that it can be taken around to attract attention. It's put together by a handful of people who haven't yet given up hope for their neighbourhood. They are the 'moving spirits' - not necessarily the committee-mongers or the orators, just people who have put down their roots long ago or quite recently, and don't intend to be uprooted. They are the 'natural good neighbours', to whom others sometimes turn - when there's a miscarriage, or the spouse flits with the housekeeping money, or you can't understand a government form.

They make quite a thing of making the model, using a kit of parts that the Neighbourhood

Initiatives Foundation provides, but embellishing it with all sorts of additions of their own, some contributed by children joining in. The model is quite unlike the architect's pet exhibit, displayed under a Perspex dome in the foyer of the Town Hall, with a little notice saying 'Please do not touch'. It's rough and ready, transportable to wherever people gather - outside the bus stop; in the school playground or the foyer when parents come to collect the infants; on trestles in the street market.

It's there to be interfered with. Because of its size - anything up to 60 one-metre squares - it's an eye-catcher. So plenty of curious people gather round. The first thing they do is get their bearings, spot landmarks: "my front door", or "the window of my tenth floor flat" "the place where I work, or used to work until they closed it down". Then the problems: "Pity about that disused building, it's attracting vandals", "The traffic at that intersection, it's got really dangerous", "And this site where the cuts put paid to the building plans - it's just a no-man's land now, for junkies and muggers". Finally - the opportunities: "That building's still structurally sound, you could make something of it", "There ought to be a way of calming the traffic", "That open space, it's just waiting to be used".

It need not wait long. Part of the tool-kit is a range of suggestion cut-outs, visual representations, roughly to scale, of what could be done sooner or later to turn this anonymous dwelling area into a working neighbourhood. Scores of possibilities for improvement - pedestrian crossings, play areas, workshops, trees, bus routes, improved housing. As many as you like; and if what you have in mind is not there in the kit, there is blank card, a pair of scissors and a pen for you to put in your very own idea along with the others. Anyone can put any item anywhere, so long as they move no-one else's suggestion.

*"The method is simple, and I think it gets over many of the barriers that people have, feeling threatened with having to write things down, feeling threatened with flip-charts and pieces of paper. They're able to pick up a cut-out and put it somewhere... And if they feel that it isn't quite right, then they pick it up again and put it somewhere else. The*

<sup>1</sup> Details of the *Planning for Real* packs can be obtained from the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, The Poplars, Lightmoor, Telford TF4 3QN. Tel: 0952 590777; Fax: 0952 591771.

*layout is so simple that you don't feel like you are destroying something that's already been pre-set. It's genuinely there for you to move around."*

One of the great advantages is that youngsters are involved alongside their elders, with a sometimes unexpected shrewdness and staying power.

Once you've placed a cut-out on the model, it's no longer exclusively your idea. It could be anyone's, because unlike a verbal suggestion, it's *anonymous*. There's no name or face attached to it. Everyone is far too busy putting their own suggestions down to take much heed of anyone else's until it is time for everyone to stand back and take a bird's-eye view. Then, because the cut-outs are roughly classified in different colours, it is possible to see what are people's major preoccupations - how many red items show pedestrian crossings or traffic lights, how much greenery there is, how many yellow play facilities there are.

At first sight, it all looks pretty chaotic - but we are going to follow the good precedent of the Book of Genesis, and produce order from the universal flux, an order which everyone has helped to create, and for which everyone can take the credit.

### • **Involving the professionals**

Residents are not the only people involved. At the very first *Planning for Real*, in Dalmarnock, east Glasgow, residents had at first decided that they were going to plan everything entirely on their own. Recent public meetings with officials and politicians had been punctuated by punch-ups. Neither side had anything good to say of the other. What would happen if any of 'Them' were invited along? At the very least, they would be cold-shouldered, and maybe get a bloody nose or two.

In the event, the residents decided to give officialdom one last chance. And officialdom was persuaded to accept. About fifteen visitors turned up - regional planners, district planners, housing officers, the police superintendent, the ward councillor, the secretary of the Citizens' Advice Bureau. On arrival, each was given a name and job label, and a cup of tea. And someone discreetly indicated that the rule of the house was that anyone wearing a label was

requested to keep their mouths shut until spoken to.

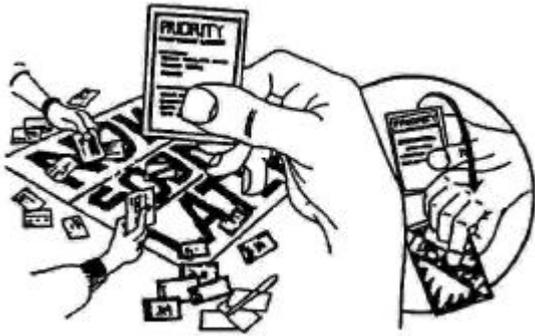
So the visitors clustered near the doorway, and looked on, with thoughts of making a getaway before too long. No hope. Within five minutes, they were being sucked into the proceedings by residents seeking relevant advice. "*Suppose we wanted a toddlers' play area here on this derelict patch? ... You say there's a sewer running across there? Well, if we moved the playscheme to the other side of the site, how would that be?*" And so on. The professionals kindle to the situation, feeling almost for the first time that they are wanted and valued.

Two things are happening. Residents' proposals are being checked against official knowledge. How much would it cost? How long would it take? Who might provide money? materials? What are the legal or the technical constraints? Secondly, the process of consultation is being turned upside down. Instead of the professionals graciously presenting their own plans for residents' comment, the residents are consulting the professionals, to establish the range of options, the limitations, the possibilities - so that they can reach their own informed conclusions. *The experts are on tap, not on top.*

In the light of this pooling of advice and experience, residents can then begin to sort and sift the moveable cut-outs on the model; removing duplications (I once saw 16 adventure playground cut-outs on the same model in the first 20 minutes); having second thoughts about proposals that on reflection don't look so good after all. The great thing about such reflections, of course, is that nobody else needs to know whose proposal it was that got dropped. So no-one feels humiliated.

### **Stage II: priorities**

The next step is to make out cards corresponding to all the items on the model. Each card has a note of the location and the subject. Everyone then transfers to another table where the cards are all laid out beside a giant chart separated into three horizontal sections, *NOW, SOON, LATER*.



With the same freedom of manoeuvre, and the same anonymity if they choose, people can then transfer the cards to what seem the most realistic priorities for action. Once someone has moved a card onto the chart, it stays in that position; but anyone disagreeing with the placing has only to turn the card face down to reveal the word 'Disagree' on the back. And that can also be done unobtrusively. Neither the proposer nor the opposer need know the other's identity. At once it becomes obvious, usually to people's considerable surprise, that there are comparatively few disagreements, and those there are can often be resolved by experiment on the model, an informal conversation which leads to an acceptable compromise. In practice, it seldom comes to the vote.

People's common sense, reinforced from what they've gleaned from the experts, makes it pretty obvious what is likely to be immediately practicable, what may need some time to gather further information, or to organise resources, and what is best left until later, but not left out of sight entirely. The *NOW SOON LATER* chart

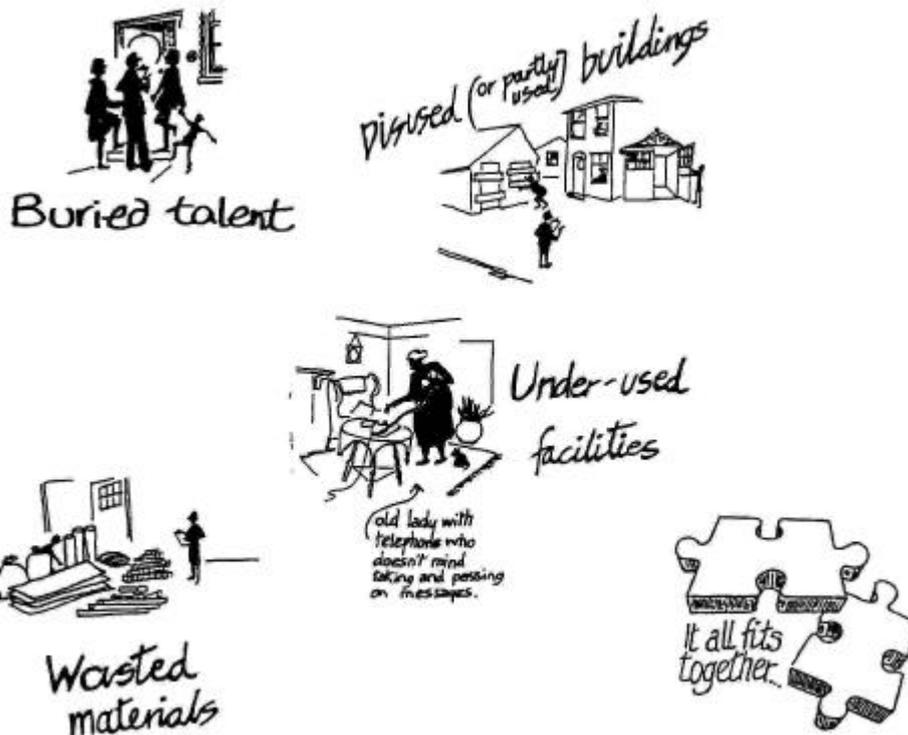
allows for long-term vision, without that getting in the way of what could and should be tackled here and now.

### Stage III: resource surveys

The handful of residents who promoted the model go round, house-to-house, face-to-face, with a cartoon questionnaire (looking as unlike a government form as possible) to find out in each family who is good at what. Back they come, and even the first sample of 50 households reveals a treasure trove of talent - hobby skills and work skills - which no-one, outsiders or insiders, realised was there. So the 'moving spirits' reinforced perhaps by those they have contacted, embark on a talent survey of every other household on the estate. The results are displayed where everyone can see them, and perhaps circulated in a newsletter. This helps create a ripple effect showing the extent of the resources to hand. Officials notice a change in people's self-regard:

*"I think it made people realise just how much they themselves have got to offer, and that nobody is actually ordinary."*

In parallel with this, some of the 'moving spirits' amongst officials and politicians are digging out resource information from within the local authority and other outside bodies - tracking down people who could help with advice, materials and equipment which might become available, loans or grants that might grease the wheels of local effort.



Use of the model shows roughly *Where* innovations might take shape. The resource surveys begin to show *Who* might become involved. The giant *NOW SOON LATER* chart sets out the *When*. This knowledge fuels real decision-making to produce an immediately practicable *Action Plan*.

It's an incremental process. At first, there's just a ripple effect, as people see a few small things beginning to happen, discover the range and strength of the talent available, glimpse and begin to assess possibilities shown up on the model. It builds confidence within the community, and begins to earn respect from outside. The working relationships that gradually form make it easier for different interests and backgrounds to be understood. The experience of working things out together, non-committally at first, gets people used to each other, wise to each other's strengths and constraints, prepared for some give and take, so that conflicts, if they arise, can be contained, not evaded, whilst everyone concerned gets down to what they find they can agree on.

So the ripples begin to make waves. People not previously used to taking the initiative, suddenly become self-propelled.

*"We are no longer in the baby-walker...  
We began to function well as a strong  
group..."*

To some officials, this seemed at first a threat. The first *Planning for Real* in Nottingham attracted a memorandum sent from on-high to every department in the local authority, saying no-one should accept the residents' invitation to attend. In fact, a goodly selection sneaked out and came along. In the next year, however, when a neighbouring community decided to have a go, the authority was all smiles, and joined in, all smiles. The public success of the previous scheme made it no longer prudent to stay out.

In Sheffield, the Council backed the process from the start, and the Leader summed up the first of several *Planning for Real* schemes as *"an example of residents changing the Council's mind and thereby saving their area from demolition."* Up on North Tyneside, the success of the *Planning for Real* (in spite of riots), and the Community Development Trust which resulted, sparked off a satellite scheme, almost unnoticed, in a nearby fringe estate and the council official who had gingerly introduced the idea reported *"The success has exceeded my wildest expectations. Not only are*

*things happening in the village, the council departments are working together and producing what the community wants.*" Maybe not all that the community wants, but something to be going on with.

### • Working relationships

The test of the process is that it brings 'Us and Them' together to explore their common ground in an atmosphere which is at first non-committal, and therefore non-threatening on either side.

Success depends on both sides gradually getting used to each other. Outside bodies have to be coaxed into explaining themselves, their procedures, and their resources with minimum humbug and in terms that everyone can understand. Insiders have to come clean about what they are prepared to do in order to make available outside resources stretch further. Cards on the table, face up. But this is not a game. It gradually becomes a decision-making process, setting targets, agreeing deadlines, sharing out responsibilities.

The great temptation, particularly for the professionals, is to hijack the process. The model brings together a wide cross-section of the community, with a rich mixture of ideas and objectives. The temptation is to cut things short at that point, so that the professionals can go away saying, "*Thank you so much for all the ideas you've contributed. Now we shall be able to sort things out for you.*" And on the strength of that, they claim a mandate from the community to do what they, the professionals, happen to think best. They may come out with a reasonable, even acceptable, prescription. But it is not one that residents feel they can own for themselves.

On one estate on Merseyside, the architects and planners produced their plan, based on a conventional 'public enquiry' and proudly presented it to a public meeting for approval. No way. It was shouted down. So, chagrined, the professionals started all over again, and this time they took the trouble to get residents, at first in small groups, to tease out how to achieve what was wanted, and finally to set it all down as an Action Plan which pleased everyone. When the site work was completed, the local contractor commented that it was the

first time in his experience that there had been no pilfering of the construction materials.

The twist in the tale is that the first plan which was shot down in flames was almost identical with the one that the residents, tapping professional advice, had worked out for themselves. The difference was that they owned it. It was their creation, so they made sure that there was no sabotage.

In our experience, residents soon learn the tricks of the trade, and are able to add substantially to what the professionals can offer. Many of them have lived a long time in the place, and thought a lot about what needs to be done with it, and they can reach conclusions a good deal faster than traditional officialdom. For both sides, the interaction is an invigorating process. If either side tries to go it alone, the end-product will suffer. This requires an unexpected change of role, and a new kind of relationship. The point of *Planning for Real* and the strategies that underlie it, is that it allows people to test things out in practical terms, hands-on, without the big mouths getting in the way; and to enrich their own ideas by contact with the others. It involves people who would never come to conventional meetings, or if they came, would never take an active part. It creates publicity which helps to persuade the authorities to take heed. So in these respects, it attracts attention, and maintains it. *Seeing is believing.*

It's also an unobtrusive process. It lets people in as active participants, without exposing them if they choose to stay anonymous. That's particularly important for those in the community who get brushed aside because they're too young or too old, or the wrong colour, or the wrong gender. It allows people with different backgrounds and attitudes to size each other up, and discover common concerns without having to make a meal of the process, and leave everyone with the indigestion that comes of interminable talk.

So don't just take my word for it, try it.

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