



change
begins
with me

how to build community
one structure at a time

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Ours was a textile town. Thousands came here to work in large cotton mills. Mill life included rows of cottages nearby where workers could live and build community.

As the mills closed, the cotton district became a ghost town. And the town it sat in -- Monroe, Georgia -- was not sure what to do with all that vacant space.

Maybe your town has been vacated, too. Maybe by the auto industry, or farming. In so many places, production jobs are just gone. And that may leave your hometown with an identity crisis.

Now what?

Some of these cities have become what are called bedroom communities, towns where people live, but can't work because there are no jobs. Locals commute elsewhere and begin to do their shopping somewhere along their commute. Their kids play sports, but it's somewhere else in the county. Residents become isolated from their neighbors, choosing to come home from work, pull their car in the driveway, and close the garage door. This is suburban sprawl.

The idea of living and working and playing in the same place has been lost. Community no longer happens naturally. It takes work (and a bit of driving) to connect with others.

How do we get *that* back?

When we talk about restoring a town we are really talking about restoring the community. But you start with the buildings. That's the easy part.

A coat of paint

In Monroe, we began by restoring one office building downtown. We found materials locally and brought the place to life, down to period-appropriate baseboards. In the process, locals became more open to the idea of updating downtown.

Now we have 50 tenant spaces, including a block of revived mill houses from the textile years. And in those spaces, we are seeing community come back. Neighbors walking together to downtown events. Shopping available nearby. Jobs returning.

How did we get here?

We didn't do it alone. Though in the beginning, this was pioneer work. If you want to see your own town restored, you'll be alone in the beginning, casting your vision and renewing empty spaces. As your work increases, so will your team. You can't resuscitate a town on your own.

But you can do it. Here's what helped us in the process, and what you can look for in your own town.

We've left you some room to record your thoughts and plans. (Though you may need more paper!) We're giving you some questions to get you thinking. Try to answer everything in bold italics below. Let's start with the basics:

What town do you want to see revitalized? Write what you know about it at this point in your thinking. You can look back on this later and see how much more you've learned.

Timing: research and relationships

If you're thinking about restoring your hometown, begin by listening. Timing is critical on any development project, and for something this far-reaching, you want to make sure you're successful.

You'll be juggling several disciplines at once: cost control, design, market share, pricing. You can study all these demographics and do everything right, yet unveil at the wrong time and you're finished.

But how do you know when the timing is right?

It definitely starts inside, with that internal voice, the one that's nudging you to go forward. The fact that you're reading this says you're already hearing from that voice. ***What are some words or pictures that keep coming to mind when you think about investing in your town's future? What is that voice saying to you?*** Not to be too mystical, but big visions often start that way, with the vaguest hint of an idea. It may be something simple like, "turn the empty auto plant into a community center". Start there.

What does your idea look like right now?

Next start paying attention to the economic conditions of your community and of the nation. ***What changes indicate that the timing could be right for a new direction in your town? What elements refuse to change? How could you approach current obstacles to change?***

Make sure your ear is tuned to each generation around you. If you're older, hear from young voices. That's what I have to do regularly. I am working with my children and they are the ones with new ideas. Their generation is looking for community. They want to live in the community and be able to walk to work and school. Our generation spent our lives taking them places in the car to school, practice and church, all in different directions. They are looking for a central location to do everything. So they caught the vision for a revitalized downtown.

Your town's next generation will be the ones living in the town you plan to restore. They followed us as we were pursuing our dreams, now it's our turn to support theirs. ***What can you learn about the town's future from its future residents? Have them complete this thought: "I want this to be a place where..." Ask what their friends from neighboring towns say. Have them be honest.***

If you're young, you'll have to know what issues older residents have in the community. Unfortunately, the biggest hindrance to restoration can be the people who've been involved with the town for years. They know something is wrong but don't know how to fix it and are resistant to change and new ideas.

At the same time, town elders may know something about the town's identity that they haven't articulated in years, something you may want to use as a guiding principle. So find out –

What do older residents say about your town? (“If I know one thing about this town it's...”) ***What are their fears? What ideas do they think are set in stone? What has kept them living here? What are their hopes for the place?***

No matter your age, you need to know what people elsewhere think. To use a big city example, is Cleveland “The Mistake on the Lake?” Or “The Forest City”? ***What would you like people to say about the place you live? What are they saying now in social media? Who's blogged about your town? What print publications has it been featured in? What issues do people raise when dealing with your town?***

If it seems the key people are in place and it looks like you can get what you need, go for your dream of restoring your town. At some point, it takes a step of faith to just go forward when you feel everything is right. And part of getting everything right is assembling your team.

Team: finding your key people

Change starts with YOU. We'll go into depth on leadership below, but know first that you have to be willing to lead. Even if it's only short term, long enough to find the right long-term leader for your town's renovation.

Whoever your leader is, they will need to put together a team. It will be addition at first, one person then another. Then the team will start multiplying, until you have a good portion of the town on board. In the beginning, though, you need a few key people:

You'll need a builder. Eventually you could have an entire team of builders, but for now you can start with one. Ideally, your initial builder/designer will be someone with the same vision for change as you. They will do quality work. They will see properties as stable investments, rather than cheap flips. Hopefully, it's someone who already has a good team around them. But maybe it's someone who knows how to assemble a building team. Maybe they have non-profit connections and can work with volunteers. You need a builder who can take the practical parts of the renovations forward.

Your builder also needs to understand the human side of restoration. Any builder or developer can come in, catch the material part of the vision, and start building strictly for profit. But if their heart's not in the community, and they have a large team and deep pockets, they could turn your long-term quality vision into a string of quick fixes that don't benefit residents. Be wary of builders with mixed motives.

Who meets your criteria for a builder and designer?

You'll need property owners. Find out who owns the places you want to see renovated. They may be resistant to change. But they are likely eager to get rid of long-vacant, income-draining properties. ***Who are your property connections?***

You'll need a financier. In our case, we self funded in the beginning and as we grew we also used a local bank. Your pace may be faster than ours. You may get financing all at once. Yours may be through a banker, or a grant writer. You can find grants available for city renewal projects on grants.gov, and other sites. But you need someone who can provide funds, or connections to funds. This road you are on is a toll road. There are lots of expenses. So –

Who can research available grants for you? Who can purchase your first property? Is it possible to crowdfund your project and get the entire community involved in funding?

You'll need advocates. These are interested locals who will support your build projects and be your voice in the community. They will talk about your latest renovations online and to their friends. They may help you get funding or secure a connection with local government. They may start a website and chronicle the project in social media. ***Who do you know who can help cast your vision locally?***

You will need city authorities. You can't always look to city hall to take the initiative or have the dream, vision, or passion to get started on a project like this. But once you start restoring one building, you'll find activity breeds activity. Another building owner will catch the vision and do some restoration on their building. Then the hope comes alive and people begin envisioning change.

Once you get the ball rolling, you'll start earning credibility with the city. But it helps to have at least one person on board in the beginning. Someone who knows you are restoring dignity to the town and who can vouch for your professionalism. It also helps to be connected to those who are trying to bring others into town, whether they are in city planning or education or tourism.

We are fortunate to have two women on our tourism board who share our vision. They work to promote the city and create events to bring in people from elsewhere. They know that when you don't have industry in your town, you have to make it a destination, a place for people to come and spend the day (and their money). They have been great connections for us.

Who is responsible for tourism in your town? Who in government is showing an interest in making your town a destination? One way to answer these is to attend council meetings, read local news sites and blogs, or talk to strangers at the coffee shop. Get to know your city officials.

As you are putting together your team, remember these are not jobs or slots to fill, but people who share your vision of building long-term community. You are finding fans of your town, committed advocates and cheerleaders and co-workers. You are gathering like-minded citizens who will likely become friends. It is a lot of work to do what we are talking about. It's best if you have a team that works well together.

In our case, it's been family. My oldest son and I worked together. I had the experience and the knowledge to do the construction and design. He was learning that from me but he had the skills to work with the city to get them on board and give them ideas on what makes a cool city. He was on the downtown development committee and several other boards in town.

He was also good with colors and how to make a space feel comfortable. There are two parts to architecture: form and function. He was good at the form and I was good at function. I could take an old building and make it meet today's needs.

Now I am working with my youngest son. He has learned how to do construction, maintenance, and renovation hands-on, but is also good at marketing and technology. He is helping create our website and this workbook. I am smart enough to see that he knows what he's doing, and I need to trust him to take our company where it needs to be.

But this all started with me.

Leadership: that's YOU

My journey started as I worked through a divorce. I got an idea that I wanted to take a barn I owned and turn it into a home. It was my first restored property. In the process of that project, I began to be restored internally. There's something about bringing new life to an old structure that dusts off your own cobwebs, reshaping your attitudes and priorities. It was humbling to take on something bigger than myself, to bring perspective to what had seemed a hopeless season. I knew if this process could change me so profoundly, it could also change my town.

That sounds like a big dream, but it started simply. In the same way, your town needs a leader with a dream. Someone with the skills and vision to be the pioneer your town needs. Anyone can come in and build after someone else puts down the foundation. Someone has to draw up the plans.

Are you the leader for your town's revitalization project? If not, who is? Do you have connections with them? How can you get a meeting?

Your leader needs to be committed long-term. **This is not a quick fix. It could take a life time to change a community.** So find someone who is here to stay. They should have a love for the history of the town and the historical buildings that are timeless in nature. It comes from a pride in our country and its founding principles and the freedom that we all share. It is about seeing those principles kept alive. This is what real community is all about. It is about knowing your neighbor and having relationship with your tenants in the buildings that you are restoring. It is about their families and their livelihood. It is about faith and family and being an active member in your community. It is about living your lives in community.

Is your leader committed long-term? If not, what's holding them back?

Towns do not restore themselves it takes leadership. If you have a clear vision of everything that needs to be done in your town, then maybe you are the one to start the movement. It takes an entrepreneurial spirit and the vision to step out and get the ball rolling. That is what has made this country great and created our towns in the first place, and it will be that same spirit that will bring those towns restoration.

Properties: what will you restore?

Though you may start with only one property, think long-term. Look for areas where community can thrive, places where people can get to know their neighbors.

We actually operated under the premise “You build it and they will come” It worked. We bought a block of buildings and as one tenant moved out we renovated the space. We put in central heating and air new electrical panels and lighting and refinished the old wood floors. We painted the space and rented it before we finished. We kept doing that until we renovated the last space.

Which properties are forgotten, overlooked, or hopeless? Look beyond what's there to what could be. Where do you see a community coming to life?

Capital: How will you fund your vision?

We already mentioned your need for a financier. But maybe you won't have access to someone like that immediately. You still have capital. You have tools, time, energy, and friends, right? Start with what you have and use what you've got. Activity breeds activity. The funds and people you need will likely be drawn toward your vision as it comes to life. If you don't have all the money in the bank up front, don't worry. Start with what you have. Bankers and community members will see you are serious and the money should follow.

What resources do you have right now? Start a running inventory. How much money will you need?As you consider expenses, divide the project into phases to help keep you focused. What expenses do you foresee for Phase 1?

Partnership: how can we help?

We're laying down our hammers for awhile so we can listen. We want to meet with leaders from other communities to see how we can help.

Which part(s) of the above plan do you need the most assistance with? What parts excite you? Which are the scariest?

We have experience in all of it -- the planning, the team building, the labor. -- and we would be glad to consult with you on your project and help bring life back to your small town. We offer a free initial consultation by Skype, and we can give you a quote on further consultations. Contact us through our website, **JECDevelopment.com**.

Whether you consult with us or not, send us links to your town's renovation story. Tell us how you have chosen properties, or built a team, or restored community. We would love to hear from you!