

BUILDING THE WORLD WE WANT: INTERVIEW WITH MARK LAKEMAN¹

Brooke Jarvis©

“That’s public space. Nobody can use it.” That was one Portland city official’s response when Mark Lakeman and his neighbors first began building unauthorized gathering places in their neighborhood in 1996. To Lakeman, an urban designer, this seemed like a fundamental misunderstanding of public space. Together with his neighbors, he formed the City Repair Project, a volunteer-run nonprofit that set out to change the way Portlanders think about the places where people come together. They started by reclaiming their own intersection, and were eventually organizing neighbors, building benches, and painting streets throughout the city. The goal, as City Repair’s motto puts it, was no longer just to preserve public space, but, by recognizing its character and identity, to transform it into Place: “inhabited, known, and loved by its residents.”

At the end of this month, City Repair will host its eighth annual building convergence, a ten-day festival hosting workshops and neighborhood improvement projects around the city. City Repair’s projects now include Depave Portland, which removes unnecessary asphalt to make way for urban gardens, and Upcycle Market, a monthly event where people get together to swap skills and supplies. Groups around the country are trying out City Repair’s methods in their own neighborhoods.

And Portland itself? The city now sees public space—and neighborhood building projects—quite differently. Not long after City Repair was founded, the city passed an ordinance allowing neighborhoods to build gathering places in street intersections.

Brooke Jarvis: You called your organization City Repair—in what way are cities broken?

Mark Lakeman: For most of the history of humanity, we lived and worked in the same places, integrated, and everything we did would deepen our relationships to each other. The greatest product of that way of life was our cultural cohesion and our stories—we weren’t isolated the way that we are now. But our cities and places are no longer ours. We’re not building our own places; we’re not designing them to fit our own needs. Our lives are zoned like we’re a resource to be managed. We’re housed here, and then this is where we work in order to pay for the housing we barely get to live in. Mixed use here. Monocultural use here. Parking garage. Maybe a waterfront here. Park. Park. It doesn’t add up. None of them are really whole.

So many of our phobias and issues come from separating the pieces of our lives. We’re less connected to the people around us, and we’re less connected to our work: the fruit of our labor goes into a landfill so that someone can buy a boat. It’s the stupidest possible vision, and it plays out in terms of the holocaust of our creativity and of our experience of being alive. It’s unfathomable how inefficient it is, and how painful. Putting the public space back where it’s supposed to be may not sound like a huge change, but it has a profound effect on the social

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culture. studied design, and for a while I was working on these big corporate design projects. They were very typical—in the cultural atmosphere they created, in the way they would impact the people that would work there. They weren't inspiring or creative; they didn't let people come together; they didn't encourage people to do the work that would make them happy and make their communities better. I wanted to live in a world that was an expression of who we are.

Brooke: You started with a place that most of us don't really think of as a place at all: the intersection of two streets. Why not change the places people spend time, like homes, parks, or offices?

Mark: Exactly. Why *don't* we spend time in intersections? When I discovered I didn't want to work on those typical design projects, I decided to look for something else: different patterns, a different perspective on what was possible. While I was traveling, I saw, over and over, that people's gathering places occur where their pathways come together and intersect. The idea of the crossroads is really ancient, of course; it pervades indigenous societies. It's also a fundamental principle of urban design in modern societies, except it's often obscured and denied. You're trying to control modern people, to keep them moving, not to let them gather like they would in a village.

When I came back from all these village-based cultures, I walked into the neighborhood where I grew up—a Roman-grid neighborhood, very typical in America, with straight, imposed lines but no gathering spaces—and I'm like, "The piazza is not here, where it's supposed to be." In America, our great archetype is the main street, which is not really a center. It's just a flow. It's a movement corridor, and you have to yell across the street because there isn't a place in the middle. There isn't a social commons that you can attain and occupy. Putting the public space back where it's supposed to be may not sound like a huge change, but it has a profound effect on the social culture. Everybody needs it even though they don't know it's missing. I knew that from visiting other societies where it was present, where there is cohesion and vitality and integrated families and community structures. We know that Americans are more lonely and isolated than ever before, but we don't realize that the absence of cohesion in American communities is totally related to the absence of places where people can actually build that.

Brooke: But if you can't redesign the whole neighborhood, what do you do to change an intersection built for cars into a place where people can build community?

Mark: At our first project, the neighbors who lived around the intersection came out on the weekend, painted a design in the street, built all these structures around the corners—a bench, a lending library, a 24-hour tea stand, a children's playhouse, a kiosk for sharing neighborhood information—and turned it into an interactive social space. And boom! That was years ago. Share-It Square—that's what we call it—is one of my favorite projects because I live right there, I get to see its evolution. Since then people have built saunas, put in gardens, helped each other paint their houses. Americans move every four to seven years, and that period of time is visibly lengthening right around that intersection because people want to live there. Families are clustering around it, having kids or bringing their kids, so there are more children—and more shared childcare, and more adults interacting with kids on the street.

Sometimes people living there disagree about what they want to do, and they wonder if that's imperfect. I think it's beautiful. People are learning about each other, and working things out. Sometimes it's a bunch of steps forward and a few steps back, and every step back is OK. It's like you're just setting foot a little bit more solidly before you take another step forward. It's wonderful.

Brooke: Did the city, and other authorities, feel the same way?

Mark: At first, everybody was telling us that we had broken the law, but once they saw what we'd actually done, they wanted to figure out how to do it again. The mayor saw it, and she's like, "You need to tell me what you've done, because I can see that it's good, but I don't understand." The city had established all of these goals for livability and sustainability and walkability and safer streets and safer kids, but getting there was another story. You can't achieve those goals unless you do what we did. All the solutions to all those goals can only be generated by people right where they live, finally having power together. The power of what we do is we start with the idea and the belief that we can make it happen. There's so much we need to change, but I really don't think it's going to be all that hard. We just need to say, "There's nowhere to sit around here? Well, we need to create some places to sit. People aren't talking? Then we need gathering places." You look at the problem of a particular place and you address it. People start to get excited; the void starts to get filled. The projects are small, but they keep coming as revelations.

Brooke: So what *did* you say to the mayor? What had you done that was different from what the city did, trying to accomplish the same goals?

Mark: The city has a different method. People generate goals for their neighborhoods, which go into reports and onto shelves. And they sit there long enough that people forget about them. But the needs are still unmet, so they fundraise and they meet and they generate new goals—and those go into a report on another shelf. The power of what we do is we start with the idea and the belief that we can make it happen. If it has a social basis, if your primary goal is to build networks and relationships, then you attract all the other forms of capital that begin with the social. That's the magic. That's the key. After everything you see on TV or in politics, you would think that asking a group of Americans to sit down and work out something like this would be difficult. But it's not. People sit down for a potluck, and maybe that very evening they start talking about what they want to do. This year, we're going to reach a total of over 200 major sites and almost 300 little projects that have been built.

Brooke: Do you have any favorites, among the projects you've worked with?

Mark: Some of them are really simple things. Like, there's this wonderful intersection that has a painting of an oak tree, in honor of a tree that used to stand there. Everyone called it Ruth's tree after their neighbor, who had planted it when she was a little girl. When she was in her 90s, she died. Shortly after, the tree fell over into the intersection. So the community comes out and paints this huge effigy of the tree, right there.

Then there's the T-Horse, which is a mobile tea house—it travels around to different neighborhoods in Portland, and wherever it goes people gather to drink tea, or play Frisbee, or whatever. It's a vehicle with enormous wings, so it really entices people out.

The Memorial Lighthouse is also beautiful. It's a solar-powered pillar of cob that glows at night, decorated with bicycle wheels and mosaic stained glass. It was built in memorial to a bicyclist who was killed there, by a truck. His mother and friends would bring flowers and gifts and leave them in the place where he died, and his mother would come and mourn him, just sitting there on the sidewalk. Finally the neighbors asked if one of the corners of the intersection—a corner of a person's yard—could be turned into a memorial to him and a place for his mother to sit. So this beautiful celebration of his life was created. He was a bicycle activist, so there's a strong bike theme.

And every one of them is as dear as that. When that one was built, a lot of us realized that up to that point there had not been one public memorial to any of the people we lived with in our community—they were all to dead presidents or wealthy people. So that one project not only turned a tragedy into a permanent celebration of someone's life, it helped uncover all of these issues about inequity and political power. I don't know of one project that hasn't done that.

Brooke: As neighborhoods come up with their own projects, what is City Repair's role?

Mark: It's really upending the model I was taught—to be the author of someone else's project, the designer. What we do now is take calls for help. These days we convene dozens of neighborhoods at once—there are maybe three dozen projects happening around Portland right now. Our main role is facilitation, taking people through dialogues about fundraising or outreach or ecological design, teaching skills that communities can use on their own. The focus that we have them constantly keeping in mind is that they're not building stuff. They're building relationships. How they treat each other is the most important thing, and what it looks like doesn't matter at all.

Brooke: It seems kind of telling that even when people recognize what's missing and have great ideas about ways to fix it, we still feel powerless enough that we reach out to groups like City Repair for help. Why do you think we need that catalyst?

Mark: I think it's a confidence issue. We hear so often in the media that we're inadequate: Americans only have 15-second attention spans, or are more polarized than ever, or this is how often we hurt or kill each other. We see this as portraits of who we are and we believe that we're not capable of working together. After what we've done with City Repair, I totally know that it can be very different. But it's not surprising that some people need a little bit of help to confirm their suspicions that we're good, or that we can be. Just to feel good about being human needs a little confirmation. The same is true for our sense of our own power. It's always felt so absurd to read in the paper, "Here's something wrong, here's something wrong, here's something wrong"—and know we all feel helpless to do anything about it because we have to get back to work. *That's* the work. Every American neighborhood is characterized by this absurdity: There are children being victimized or there's domestic violence, but at the beginning of the day we get ourselves all ready and we go off to do something that we often don't even respect or enjoy. And at the end of

the day we haven't addressed these bleeding concerns in our communities. When did we stop believing we had a say in our own reality? What if someone asked you at the start of your life, "Where will your power reside? Will it be in you or someone else?" Given that choice, everyone would say, "Me." And what would you do with that power? "Wow, I would help the world," is what a whole lot of people would say. If that were how we answered that fundamental question, our world would be so different. The beautiful thing happening now is that dozens and dozens and dozens of people saying, "Yes, I have my power," and then creating these physical expressions of what it actually looks like.