Chapter 16

THE NORTH END AGORA:  
*Design Conversation at the Neighborhood Level*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sustained and constructive conversation may prove to have its most powerful societal effect if it can be carried out among neighbors in the context of a common goal or challenge. Neighborhood – and its corresponding forms in the small town and village – has the following characteristics that can make it an ideal setting for conversation that adds value to the community and to the lives of its participants: diversity in a small area; familiarity with those who live around you; numbers that can make a difference; shared concerns that pull people together at a basic level; physical proximity, providing easy opportunity for planned and accidental encounters between people on a fairly regular basis; equality, insofar as there are no formal organizations or structures in which certain people hold authority over others; and a dysfunctionality or non-existence as social systems, which makes them “greenfield” opportunities for innovation and broad-based grassroots participation.

It was in the context of the North End neighborhood of Boise, Idaho that a “design conversation” was conducted over a period of one and a half years, the subject of which was the creation of an institution of communication and community-building called the North End Agora. The North End Agora represents what may have been the first attempted application of idealized social systems design on the scale of a neighborhood. The design conversation, carried out by a small group of neighborhood residents, included both generative and strategic forms of dialogue and was a powerful experience for its participants. It also led to the implementation of one aspect of the design, which was a regularly published “viewspaper” called the North End Community Paper.
The North End Agora experiment survived for only eight months after the initial design work was completed, but the lessons learned were invaluable and the design stands as a powerful artifact of what design conversation can produce. This chapter will describe in detail the experience of the North End Agora, with particular focus on the design conversation and the praxiological tension between design, implementation, and sustainability in the neighborhood.

2. THE NORTH END AGORA

The North End Agora was an institution of communication and community-building for the North End neighborhood of Boise, Idaho, designed by residents or other persons who identify with this neighborhood. Its design began in early 1997 and its implementation began in late 1998. Its lifespan after implementation was approximately eight months. The Agora was designed to have three major facets: a Media facet, a Conversation Pathway, and a Services Umbrella, briefly described as follows:

- The **Media** facet was the first to be implemented. It included the North End Community Paper and a web site. The paper was published monthly to semi-monthly and had a circulation of 5,000. It was supported solely by advertising and was delivered door-to-door throughout the neighborhood. Its length ranged from a 4-page flyer format to a 16-page tabloid. The web site was hosted at no charge by a local Internet service provider and was intended to complement the paper. During its existence it displayed only the markers and core definitions of the Agora.

- The **Conversation Pathway** aspect, which was to be developed according to community response, was intended to encourage and support a broad range of conversation activities (meaning any kind of activity in which people communicate richly and intensively), from block parties and pot lucks to study circles and salons to dialogue groups.

- The **Services Umbrella** aspect was to support the development of other services in support of communication and community-building that neighbors may have wished to create. Under consideration were a conflict-resolution service, a skills exchange, and assistance with facilitation of meetings.