**Headline:** Why Humanity Should Look to Its Roots as We Revillage Our Towns and Cities

**Teaser:** The movement to revillage our modern world seeks to combat mental illness, housing and climate disasters.

By April M. Short

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**[Article Body:]**

Our current ways of living are [life-threatening](https://www.axios.com/mental-health-depression-suicide-epidemic-51ed2696-4153-49a9-8fba-e3f6958259c9.html) and unsustainable. Our increasingly [individualized](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797617700622) society is contributing to [epidemic levels of loneliness](https://www.hrsa.gov/enews/past-issues/2019/january-17/loneliness-epidemic)and isolation, [depression](https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/depression/epidemic-depression), [anxiety](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4610617/) and other [mental health crises](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-20/latest-suicide-data-show-the-depth-of-u-s-mental-health-crisis). There is a serious need for people to reconnect with community—and also with the planet as there is [perhaps an inextricable](https://www.tikkun.org/extinction-illness-grave-affliction-and-possibility) link between our anxiety and depression epidemics, and the existential threat of climate change (which has very real physical, mental and emotional [impacts](https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/climate-change-and-mental-health-connections/affects-on-mental-health)). Faced with this dire need for something to change, there is a growing movement of communities and individuals looking to new ways of living—and old ones.

The potential solution to all of the above issues could be as simple as looking back in time at the structures and cultural dynamics of our villager ancestors, explains Mark Lakeman, an urban architect, permaculture pioneer and national leader in the development of sustainable communities and public spaces.

“For the majority of our history, or herstory, people have been living at a human scale, and it’s been multigenerational,” says Lakeman. “It was always a cooperative or collaborative structure.”

Since the ’90s, Lakeman has been at the forefront of what is often referred to as the revillaging movement. Revillaging seeks to rehash the way people live and interact in our society from the ground up, by reconstructing urban spaces and the way we relate within them. One key piece of revillaging means making sure all of the needs of a given resident can be met within a walkable distance, by redesigning the grid to operate at a “human scale.”

Lakeman’s work with revillaging has gradually reshaped his home city of Portland, Oregon, over the decades, working to alter (and at times [break](https://tinyurl.com/u734uqq)) city zoning laws to carve out public squares and work-live gathering spaces, art projects like Portland’s iconic [intersection street paintings](https://cityrepair.org/street-painting-examples), and other elements of permaculture design. Lakeman continues to inspire change in city structures around the world via lectures, education and groundbreaking urban design projects.

Lakeman says the grid street pattern, which was generally adopted throughout America after the passage of the [Northwest Land Ordinance of 1785](https://www.britannica.com/event/Northwest-Ordinances), created a culture that places commodification and the private parceling out of land above community gathering. He says the intersections that separate the grid of land plots are designed in a way that keeps neighbors separate from each other. And, in his point of view, this design was not happenstance or convenience, but an intentional separation.

“Nobody ever chooses to live in grids; grids only happen when people live within conquered land,” he says. “The United States of America has the lowest number of community gathering places of all first world nations because of the way our landscape and our economy and everything is a contrivance.”

In the U.S., most major cities are [strapped](https://theconversation.com/are-we-in-the-midst-of-a-public-space-crisis-56124) for space, and parks and public squares are lacking, as a 2015 City Park Facts database [shows](https://www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/files_upload/2015-City-Park-Facts-Report.pdf). Many cities continue to slash their budgets for parks and recreational spaces, and cities with high urban densities, such as New York and Chicago, have 4.6 acres per 1,000 residents, as an article in the *Conversation* [details](https://theconversation.com/are-we-in-the-midst-of-a-public-space-crisis-56124).

Lakeman recalls an epiphany that marked the start of his revillaging work, about three decades ago. It took place in the middle of an intersection in Portland, where he stood and gazed out at the grid that spanned all directions and thought about the indigenous society that was decimated and paved over in order for the intersection—and the country at large—to exist. And then he thought of his own Celtic ancestors who were once conquered by the Roman Empire.

“I stood in that intersection and I was like, ‘My ancestors were visited by an untenable, incomprehensible scale of violence, and I’m alive. … Here I am, in this time, and what I want to know is: where’s my public square?’” he says, shouting for emphasis.

Lakeman’s intersection realization happened not long after he’d returned home from a perspective-shattering journey for seven years around the world, living with and learning from various indigenous cultures in Africa, North America and elsewhere. He’d left a corporate career to travel in search of evidence of his own lifelong conviction that humans are, at the core, interdependent and full of empathy. He wanted to find ways he might help to reintegrate those values back home.

What he found were communities living in ways that were “mind-blowing.”

“In a Mayan community I visited, I saw social architecture I’d never even seen before that showed what it’s like to grow up in a place where everyone knows they’re going to be interdependent for generations,” he said. “They talked about the future and the past sort of interchangeably.”

He says he witnessed androgynous cultures with social setups that were completely free of gender roles, and experienced living in places where everyone grew up knowing their actions were all on behalf of the whole.

He also witnessed the way every one of the indigenous cultures he visited was centered around public squares and gathering spaces.

“It’s so interdependent, and your relationships are so multigenerational,” he says.

The conversations and revelations he shared with indigenous people during his years of travel reconstructed his entire way of looking at the potential of human community and lifestyle, and inspired him to work to restructure the physical landscape at home.

When he asked people in the indigenous cultures what to do about all of the disconnects and problems he saw happening in the U.S., he was advised to “go home and look around in the place where you live and realize that all this cultural infrastructure is missing and it’s supposed to be there, and it used to be there for your ancestors, until they were conquered,” he says.

Over the last three decades, Lakeman’s work has reconfigured much of the city of Portland—including many of its intersections. He founded the intentional, activist community called the Planet Repair Institute, out of which came [City Repair](https://cityrepair.org/), a nonprofit that supports the creation of permanent community art and gathering spaces throughout the city—and is responsible for mini-parks and hundreds of mandalas and other murals that cover up the asphalt in many of Portland’s street intersections. City Repair also hosts the annual, 20-year-old Village Building Convergence, a festival-esque event highlighting community-built projects. Lakeman also founded the permaculture-oriented architectural design firm Communitecture, Inc.

Lakeman says his work has always been guided by the underlying understanding that the most marginalized people in any community must be the priority in order for any change to happen on a societal level, which is why his projects all work toward affordable models of living, and work with [houseless communities](https://news.streetroots.org/2018/11/09/mark-lakeman-helps-tackle-housing-crisis-creativity-compassion) in Portland and beyond.

**Every Person Is a Village**

“The source of our comfort and of our own growth and our belonging is each other,” says Lakeman. “And if we’re alienated from a larger social organism, which is our larger self, then we’re really easy to control.”

Lakeman says in the absence of interconnected ways of living, people are looking to fill a void, and out of that sense of void, insecurity and disconnection to self are born.

“Capitalism can thrive when people feel so isolated that they can be made to feel inadequate, and their internal compasses can get really confused,” he says. “If we’re alienated from our own species, then it’s really easy to manipulate us.”

He says it’s equally easy—or at least possible—for every one of us to act as a village. After his intersection revelation years ago, Lakeman says he walked right over to the house of an older woman he’d lived near since he was a kid, but never bothered to greet, knocked on her door and offered to paint her house.

“I was just so happy,” he says. “It was like, I’m finally doing something that matters.” Then, he began talking with neighbors and telling them about this neighbor who didn’t have any children or money to paint her house. And immediately the community began to offer painting supplies and offer to chip in—they even ended up installing solar panels for the woman.

“So, I was immediately experiencing that as soon as you begin to scratch the surface of isolation, everybody’s in, all they need is a story.”

After the neighbors had begun to connect around the woman’s home, the trend took off.

“Suddenly the neighborhood is connected, and they were painting their street together,” he says, referencing the beginning of the iconic street murals that color many of Portland’s intersections. When the project began, it was illegal, he says. “But we were all breaking the law together.”

Many of Lakeman’s projects, especially in the early days of City Repair, started out as illegal, largely according to zoning laws, but he says through patient, empathetic conversations with officials over the years, as well as strategic community engagement, they have changed some of the city’s laws along with its public spaces.

“When we self-empower, when we empower ourselves to actually get off the couch and do stuff right where we live—you can actually get to the point where you can break the law and even the police will stand with you against the government,” he says. “That is what happened to us.”

**Houseless Communities Revillaging**

The concept of “village” has a particular life in homeless communities throughout the U.S. When Andrew Heben, an urban planner, professional tiny house builder and author of the book [*Tent City Urbanism*](https://www.villagecollaborative.net/book), visited homeless encampments across the U.S. as a project for his master’s thesis between 2009 and 2011, the media’s portrayal of homeless encampments was one of dismal spaces rampant with drug abuse and crime. But what he actually encountered were uniquely supportive, democratic, often intricately organized and relatively [nonviolent](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/23/homeless-villages-crime-rate-seattle-portland) communities.

Heben now works as project director for SquareOne Villages in Eugene, Oregon, which has been a national model for low-income, tiny home villages since 2012. The organization works to establish both temporary, transitional villages for people who have been houseless, as well as permanent, affordable housing villages. Their permanent villages are set up in an alternative homeownership model that is a hybrid between a community land trust, where the organization owns the land, and limited equity co-ops that allow residents to co-own shares of the village and gain equity over time. The idea is to ensure living in these villages remains affordable for low-income people in perpetuity.

Amanda Dellinger, SquareOne’s community relations director, says houseless communities offer a particularly potent example of how people naturally gravitate toward villages and interdependence in order to survive, which is why the majority of the rules, standards and operations of their villages are all independently run by residents.

SquareOne also sets itself up as a model for anyone interested in forming an affordable tiny house community. On their [website](https://www.squareonevillages.org/toolbox), they offer an extensive toolkit that includes sample tiny home blueprints, models of village setups and extensive instructions on how to start your own tiny home village.

Dellinger says people call and write to SquareOne at overwhelming rates, “constantly,” from around the country and beyond looking for advice to create their own villages. She said people also travel from around the world to take tours of their villages. Villages inspired by SquareOne that she knows of have already been constructed in Albany, Oregon; Salem, Oregon; and Redding, California, and several other locations are currently in the works.

“SquareOne has really been about reenvisioning the housing model altogether,” she says. “And that’s what it’s going to take. We’ve got to go back to the drawing board because what we’re doing isn’t working. The homelessness issue and the housing crisis is so profound because we don’t have enough housing stock, literally,” she says, adding that the other aspects of villages—the supportive community, the inter-reliance and localized way of life—are also key to the success of their villages.

“Living like this, getting the support from the people who live there with you, is just so powerful,” she says. “We need so much more of that for people in vulnerable situations. But, also, the majority of people—even… [those who] make median area income or above—feel so isolated because we’ve taken such a big step away from living in community, this village mentality. It’s become all about individualism or individual success. It’s very strange, and it’s not going well for people.”

**Cultivating the Elements of Village**

Beth Berry, a writer and online educator known for the parenting [blog](https://revolutionfromhome.com/) Revolution from Home, has been working with the concept of revillaging from the perspective of parenting. After her 2019 article in [*Motherly*](https://www.mother.ly/life/in-the-absence-of-the-village-mothers-struggle-most) on the absence of the village and its impacts on moms in particular went viral, she has doubled down on the concept, offering a recurring online course and private coaching sessions aimed at helping people revillage their own lives.

Berry points to car culture as one key reason the U.S. has grown apart from the village, and recalls her time living in Mexico in an impoverished, but deeply interwoven, community where she experienced a “walking culture.”

“I had like 50 human interactions per day, not necessarily talking to 50 people, but just simple things that helped me feel like, ‘Wow, things are good.’ It was settling and calming for my nervous system.” The difference in the experience of “living at a walking pace versus a car culture,” she says, is “really pretty enormous.”

Other cultural factors she sees as adding up against the village include the propensity for people in the U.S. to move away from their hometowns, a false narrative that families don’t need to depend on each other to help rear their kids, the reliance on technology and screens for entertainment and connection, and a prevailing lack of trust amongst adults.

“It’s sort of an air of fear that’s been conditioned into us by the culture,” she says. “We no longer have a built-in sense of interdependence based on necessity. You know, we don’t need each other to help raise the barn walls.”

While Berry’s work focuses on parenting, and mothers in particular‚ she says in general, people can benefit from getting creative and courageous about their activities.

“Meet your neighbors,” she says. “Take perfectionism off the table and have a potluck, have a neighborhood barbecue. Do the things that help us get to know the people directly around us. But it takes courage, because that muscle is kind of atrophying in a lot of us.”

Another key factor standing in the way of an interconnected lifestyle, she says, is that people’s lives are physically compartmentalized.

“We’re often not living in the same place as we work, and our schools that our kids are going to are not necessarily in the neighborhoods that we live in,” she says.

**Revillaging for Resilience in the Face of Climate Disaster**

Lakeman also points to the compartmentalization of work, school, home and other activities as one of the major problems of the urban grid layout, as it prevents people from living at a “human scale.” And the challenges inherent in living this way are magnified in the face of the current climate disaster.

“This is one of the things that we realized early in City Repair: every neighborhood is filled with the people, the full spectrum of the entirety of the skills and talents, to power of the entire society—at the local level,” he says. “And the emissions related to transportation are slashed almost entirely by letting people activate their talents where they live, with other people. Empire is predicated upon isolating people at the local level so they don’t realize that they’re surrounded by all the help they need.”

Lakeman says he and his team recently worked on a project that implemented revillaging design for the Bay Area city of Vallejo, roughly 30 miles north of San Francisco, which is likely to be vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise due to climate change. Their [design](http://www.communitecture.net/mare-island-regional-resilience-resource.html) was part of the [100 Resilient Cities](https://www.100resilientcities.org/) project, which is funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The project asked designers to [compete](https://tinyurl.com/qlg4yj7) to send in their plans to address climate change.

Lakeman says the people at Rockefeller requested that architects, “design like a force of nature.” He delves into the “force of nature” concept in an [interview](https://soundcloud.com/user-193856180/episode-015-mark-lakeman-riding-the-wave-of-sea-level-rise) with Andrew Millison on Earth Repair Radio about the Vallejo project.

“In Vallejo, we showed the solution of revillaging entire blocks, and then entire neighborhoods of blocks,” Lakeman says. And, block by block, they showed a revillaging of the city’s entire infrastructure to adapt places like schools into community centers, and create various nodes of connection within walking distance.

“The vision for Vallejo, and it really should be everywhere, is to enable the transition of where people are housed into a more dynamic environment,” he says. “We added things called spot zones where living and working becomes legal, allowing people to build right up to their property lines and augment their homes with spaces that allow for live-work functions, so that people don’t have to transit the landscape to go and get their needs met. They can actually just walk to a neighborhood node.”

“Whether it’s Vallejo or anywhere, we’re not going to get on the climate change program without relating it to all these other things which are urgent,” he says, “like equity, social justice and fundamental accessible housing. … All these things are going to come together.”