GUIDE

WELCOME

Growing your community space by making it easy to get involved

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PEOPLE MAKE SPACES BEAUTIFUL

Community spaces include gardens, libraries, or pop-up events – anywhere you can find people collaborating to raise chickens, host workshops, paint murals, and bring a shared vision to life.

Community spaces become beautiful, because people show up trying to help.

But for all of the passion, welcoming new people is where things most often breaks down. When a volunteer asks, "How can I help?" the organizer might say "Well, what are you interested in?" and start a back-and-forth – or cut conversation short by pointing them to a list of tasks. A vague or cold response makes it difficult for even the most enthusiastic volunteer to join. Without help, organizers end up doing everything themselves, which means even less time to get others involved. This is why many organizers continue struggling to keep spaces open, or simply burn out.

By welcoming people in a way that makes it easy to see what's going on, organizers can help their community space overcome struggles and thrive.
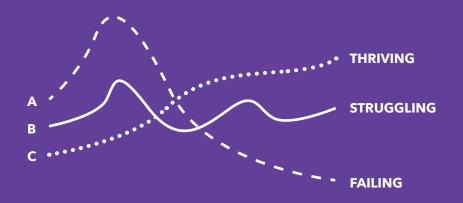
This guide shows you how.

If your community space has semi-regular gatherings, but is failing or struggling to, using this guide (and worksheet) can help.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE SHOWS UP

Welcoming new people is the first step for new people getting involved - their first impression.

The next steps after welcoming can lead to three different outcomes: failing, struggling, or thriving.

A
B
C

THRIVING
STRUGGLING
FAILING

A) Failing

In this case, the community space is a one-time stunt.

At first, it enjoys waves of excited visitors – a grand opening party, friends inviting friends, free puppies, and more.

Without organizers showing the work behind the scenes or asking people to get involved, only a few people offer to help and far fewer end up helping. Sooner or later, the space closes.

B) Struggling

This case shows a group managing to keep their space open.

Organizers spread the word about activities and projects and make decision-making meetings open to the public. Once in awhile, someone "gets it" and takes initiative. They might do neighborhood outreach or balance the books.

But without defined roles and responsibilities, even for the core group of organizers, participation is unpredictable and limited. Stewarding the space is unsteady.

C) Thriving

This case looks like the healthy, sustainable growth in participation most groups hope for.

A critical mass of volunteers show up to help at the community space one day, thanks to word-of-mouth, an article with a call to action, or good timing.

After a positive experience, many volunteers come back. Some become active organizers, taking on defined roles and responsibilities. The space grows organically.

In all three cases, a wide range of practices might lead to better outcomes.

WELCOMING PEOPLE MAKES IT ALL POSSIBLE

This guide began in April 2016. A group of activists and academics, funded by the European Commision, were completing a study of how communities self-organize, especially around shared platforms and resources. They asked me to design a digital tool that might help. Instead of looking at productive col-laboration online, which has too many tools already, I spent several months getting to know what works in physical spaces.

I focused mainly on six spaces in Oakland, California, including a meditation center committed to collec-tive liberation, an urban garden focused on bees and resilience, and a monthly morning meetup about creativity. The groups stewarding these spaces work mainly in-person, are mostly volunteer-run, and cost almost nothing to join.

Through visits, interviews, and participatory work-shops that brought a dozen individuals together, a group of volunteers and organizers and myself all learned from one another.

The core lesson our group came away with was this:

Organizers can improve their commu-nity space simply by looking at where things break down in welcoming new people.

Context shapes how one practice works better than another.

During my research, organizers asked if I'd synthe-size a set of best practices for a thriving space – for example, clear priorities, meaningful participation, or regular celebrations. Yet I found that "best" practices depend on the unique strategy (what we do) and culture (who we are) of each community space.

To help you develop your own set of practices, this guide focuses on two main principles for welcoming people and walks through three ways to apply them.

PRINCIPLES FOR WELCOMING PEOPLE

Imagine the challenges facing a community space in a rapidly changing neighborhood. While organizers are vocal and direct about their plan, they also believe in recruiting allies and accomplices to achieve their goals. But when talking with new people, organizers easily forget that they may not "get it" right away, even if they are genuinely open to learning (or unlearning) whatever it takes to get involved.

How can organizers lift up the vision and values of their community space, without shutting down volunteers who bring new perspectives and capacity?

Two core principles – alignment and affirmation – can turn frustrating questions into productive conversations.

This helps bridge the gap from a visitor to a volunteer, even as the space evolves.

HONEY

1. Find alignment

The principle of alignment is about people working towards a common goal by integrating diverse opinions, more than rejecting them.

In community spaces, consensus-based decision-making can support healthy growth. A misconception about consensus is that stakeholders must agree 100% on every proposal, which would mean dragging everyone into countless meetings. The reality is that vocal disagreement can make consensus function. When people are in alignment, they listen to and respect one another — any stakeholder can support a decision even when they have concerns.

Finding alignment takes patience and trust, but it helps a community space become resilient.

2. Offer affirmation

The principle of affirmation is about encouraging and supporting people, especially as they try new things and take initiative.

Community spaces require all kinds of labor. Beyond physical work like building and cleaning, organizers do emotional, affective labor of personal involvement. Any labor where people can lead, follow, or pair up is an opportunity for affirmation. For example, organizers can encourage everyone to help – even if they fail at first – by sharing positive stories and recognizing effort. New people can express joy in their first real contribution, and the care and commitment that comes with it. Stewarding a space influences their identity and practices deeply, to the point where small accomplishments can bring immense joy.

Offering affirmation invests in relationships and collaboration, and cures do-it-yourself mania.

The rest of this guide helps you apply these principles.

What about benefits?

Community vision becomes more beautiful and inspiring when it leads to real, materials benefits. The benefits of a community space range from hobbies to means of survival – from gardening to get outdoors, to meditation to heal from trauma.

People who feel grateful for the benefits are more motivated to give back. But as much as the promise of benefits makes people try to help, get involved, and give back, the concept of benefits doesn't serve as a principle for welcoming them.

Connecting benefits to how we welcome new people is full of risks and hazards.

It's essential for organizers to make benefits available and accessible. More labor, resources, and help means more ability to serve community members with the greatest need. But organizers expecting something in exchange for offering benefits create the conditions for commerce. Community spaces share benefits more as gifts than purchases. Similarly, welcoming new people is more about starting a mutually beneficial relationship than coordinating economic transaction.

Several organizers and volunteers who participated in the research agreed that simply discussing the benefits play is sufficient for making them come to life. And while "providing benefits" is not a principle in this guide, the principles of alignment and affirmation help ensure organizers can share the benefits of space, resources, and community.
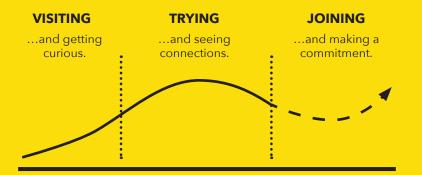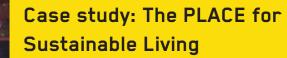
IMPROVING A SPACE BY MAKING IT MORE WELCOMING

One way to explain what happens in welcoming new people at a physical community space is by looking at it in three steps:

1) Visiting

2) Trying

3) Joining

VISITING
…and getting curious.

TRYING
…and seeing connections.

JOINING
…and making a commitment.

Case study: The PLACE for Sustainable Living

PLACE, as it's called by friends and neighbors, is a experiential learning center for community resilience and urban homesteading. Located on a lot at the border of Oakland and Berkeley, California, PLACE has served as a hub for education and celebration since 2011. It supports people-powered projects from murals to mycology. With a large courtyard at the center, PLACE has a common building with kitchen and meeting areas, a bike lab, a makerspace, several tiny homes, and installations including experimental rooftop gardens and greywater systems.

The PLACE is thriving, in large part because of how it welcomes new people.

1) Visiting

On a regular day, PLACE is calm and quiet. It has a lot going on, and its organizers do many thankless jobs, but everyone has plenty of time to make things work. Because PLACE is dedicated to spreading their model, they invest heavily in making visits a positive experience: a monthly action day, where new people can see everything for themselves.

Goal: helping people experience the vision

Action: help people get curious and explore, more than explaining things

Examples of what organizers might do to cut off curiosity:

- Welcome people half-heartedly.

- Make requests for help that are vague or ad-hoc.

- Defer to outdated documentation, a dense wiki, or a messy Facebook group/page.

Examples of how organizers nurture curiosity:

- Do regular outreach to build local relationships. This is basic organizing, a way to explore shared interests with individuals and groups, and not promotion or advertising.

- Host a regular action day. These events open with a tour, revolve around a project, and close with everyone sharing their accomplishments. They offer an accessible way to experience the space at-large, which keeps people from spreading themselves thin.

- Outline a clear path for volunteers to become organizers. Share it at every event, workshop, or general meeting. This can look like a written list, a photo collage, an illustrated diagram or flowchart, and shared on a bulletin board, or online.

2) Trying

PLACE has a vision of resilience that combines self-sufficiency and mutual aid. People become stronger by supporting one another. Getting a real taste of that experience is key for new people to believe another way of life is possible. It also adds capacity to get work done.

Goal: helping people imagine being part of the community and understand its priorities

Action: create ways for people to connect opportunities and vision, instead of matching skills and tasks

Examples of how organizers might limit trying:

- Recruit only for narrow, predefined roles.

- Use exclusive jargon, rituals, and other "inessential weirdness".

- Set a do-ocracy or do-it-yourself standard that favors familiar and connected people.

Examples of ways organizers can encourage trying:

- Create a buddy system. This creates intimacy through relationships, whether it's used for short-term introductions or long-term accountability.

- Host regular trainings and orientations. This can be done briefly before or after relevant meetings, or as part of action days, and for every major aspect of the community space.

- Showcase projects and the groups behind them. This makes it easier for new people to see what's going on, from general announcements at meals to reading out notes from the suggestion box. It also invites people to propose their own projects.

3) Joining

Stewardship is essential to the way PLACE runs. Its organizers are actually called "stewards" and they take responsibility for everything from facilities and admin to education and events. More broadly, PLACE is organized as a set of groups called "pods" where stewards and others collaborate. Joining the place happens through these pods, where people can propose a project they bring with them (like a pedal-powered pasta maker) or simply work until inspiration strikes.

Goal: grow participation in a healthy way and minimizing growing pains

Action: make it easy for new people to commit and come back

Examples of how organizers fumble with integrating people:

- Offer to send everyone custom-tailored instructions on how to help.

- Assume anyone can take initiative alone, or feel comfortable asking for support.

- Host separate meetings for internal work, and for welcoming visitors or reviewing proposals.

Examples of what organizers can do to

- Conduct specific trainings on how to become an organizer, with supporting resources.

- Support new people in making decisions in working groups, committees, pods, etc., and ask them for clear feedback on steps forward. Eventually, they can lead this effort.

- Practice asking, Who has power and control in our community? Is it us? Why?

- Schedule separate meetings and regular retreats to prevent burnout, heal and build relationships, and reset priorities.
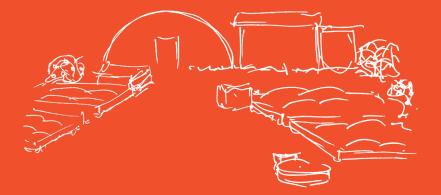
PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS

In community spaces, welcoming people often leads to collaborating on projects.

While using digital tools to support this process works differently for everyone, it helps clarify issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and other difficult aspects of what it means to be welcoming.

For example, consider privacy. Everyone has the right to determine what information they share, and to refuse consent. Taking a photo of an individual in a space and posting it to the Internet can violate rights. Organizers have a responsibility to explain intentions and ask permission. Privacy is also important to community projects. Posting about projects can cause harm, too. For example, if word gets out about struggling to transfer property to a land trust, a hostile real estate developer might exploit the situation for their own gain. Or, for example, a slip of the tongue can ruin a surprise birthday party. Organizes have to balance protecting sensitive information with being accountable to the larger community.

It takes a village to discuss and decide on how to handle privacy. This also applies to how a community approaches diversity, inclusivity, representation, and more.

Some people may never feel welcomed in a space. At the same time, there is always room for improvement.

Progress means returning to these issues time and again – for example, by continually developing community agreements, a statement of solidarity, a set of policies. This is where the principles of alignment and affirmation matter most, because they emphasize the role of practice in bringing intentions to life.

BEYOND WELCOMING

This guide focuses on how organizers can improve a community space by making it more welcoming.

Of course, supporting passion and projects is what really makes a community space thrive. But enthusiasm and activity can still lead to failure if organizers welcome new people on the assumption that they may not become organizers, too.

Many emerging communities become "real" when founding organizers make space for new leadership. These transitions can be downright cathartic. Some spaces are unprepared, because whether the organizers burn out or move on, they often welcoming new people with an us-VS-them, leader-and-follower approach.

In welcoming, everyone can lead, follow, and pair up with as peers.

This works in action days and similar events, where tacit knowledge is shared and used directly. This also helps a space thrive in the long term, as organizers organizing organizers from the first welcome creates a vision that everyone shares.

This guide was researched, illustrated, and produced while creating Teem **(http://teem.works)**, a project hub for the commons. All photos are from the PLACE for Sustainable Living. Special thanks to everyone from the community spaces in Oakland, Madrid, and beyond who collaborated in the process. Learn more at **p2pvalue.eu**

If you use this guide and worksheet, let us know how it goes! Email **hi@teem.works**