One of the most challenging issues facing communities over the next fifteen years will be the need to deliver more of everything with fewer resources. Achieving success will require imaginative thinking. New creative forms of networking and resource consolidation will have to replace wasteful duplication and siloed thinking. Organizations of all kinds will have to find ways to work together to maximize service delivery and capital investment. A new focus on systemic thinking could become a top priority – in homes, in communities and in the workplace. The old saw about the whole being greater than the sum of its parts could re-emerge as the new slogan for public leadership and community development. Not only do we need models for implementing these new ways of thinking, but one must be clear about what is to be considered in the discussions.

So what is systemic thinking? For a simple example we have only to look at the recent development of the hybrid car. For years it was assumed that economical automotive power could only be generated through the internal combustion engine. In the mean time some creative auto engineers were moving forward with the design of a more environmentally sustainable electric car. It was only when some creative minds joined the two power sources together into a single integrated system that a more practical approach to fuel economy could be realized. Although the initial cost of the two systems may have been higher, the reduction in fossil fuel consumption is now impacting both economic and environmental outcomes over the long haul.

Over the past ten years some public policy agencies have been trying to push policy making in a more synergistic direction. The US Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods initiative leverages non-academic wrap around social services to support student achievement; and the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative, enacted jointly by the Departments of Housing, Transportation and Environmental Protection is addressing similar goals in the planning and development of mixed-income housing. So the search is underway for just the right combination of programs and services that can better support the people, programs and places that reinforce and sustain healthy forms of community life. At play are all of the physical, cultural, social, educational, organizational and economic domains of community programs and place-making. Success will go to interdisciplinary teams that can deliver more integrated public policies, more collaborative models of service delivery, more systemic leveraging of public resources, more efficient use of public (and private) facilities, and a more robust focus on long-term sustainability. To be successful over the long run, these kinds of initiatives will depend upon authentic and effective practices for
community engagement and capacity building.

One emerging model for achieving these kinds of systemic goals is the *community nexus*, where a wide variety of community programs and services are co-located to better leverage funding and services. These are not the neighborhood centers that you often see on lonely street corners, nor are they the new urban “town centers” with retail shops and parking. They are a more expanded and effective combination of community programs and facilities. One example is the Baker Ripley Center, which was developed through a planning process involving hundreds of local residents. Located in a neighborhood in Houston, Texas that has been dubbed “the new Ellis Island”, the center serves a diverse immigrant population. The services that the residents requested include a “Welcoming Center” where residents can learn everything from a new language to what forms to fill out for services. The center also includes a public library, a community health clinic, a K-5 charter school, an arts center, a business incubator, a credit union, a tax preparation center and a community meeting and performance hall. All of these programs and facilities are co-located in a park-like setting that includes additional facilities for weekend flea markets and even a children’s splash park. Since it’s opening in the Fall of 2010 the site has been teeming with neighborhood residents, families and children. All programs and facilities are managed through a cooperative enterprise involving more than ____ community service providers convened by the local non-profit Neighborhood Centers Incorporated.

Examining six core domains of the individual and community needs may help to more fully explore the potential of this systemic *community nexus* model. First is the **physical** domain, which encompasses all of the community's existing or future built and natural resources - like buildings, bridges, highways and electronic communications infrastructure. The physical domain also includes natural resources, like parks and recreation areas. A second category of community needs falls within its **cultural** domain. Included in this category are all programs and artifacts related to individual and collective values, including ethnic, religious and aesthetic diversity. The third domain incorporates a wide range of the community’s **social** needs. This includes all aspects of well-being, including programs related to health, human services and affordable housing. A fourth component of community need encompasses the **economic** domain which includes programs, activities and initiatives that maintain a healthy balance between financial, human and environmental capital. A fifth domain of community needs addresses all of the community’s **organizational** entities, programs and services. These include everything from specialty clubs to city and county school boards and councils, special interest groups and a myriad of political parties and other private and civic entities. The organizational domain also includes the wide variety of mechanisms through which community issues are deliberated and implemented. The sixth domain of the community nexus incorporates all of its **educational** resources and learning assets, including everything from pre-natal to early childhood, primary, secondary, community
college, college, university, adult education and workforce training programs and services. All of these physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational domains of community life incorporate and define the community’s most vital support systems.

Although each of these six domains of community needs may include a different set of assets, it is the interactions between them that can most effectively support the health and well-being of the whole community system. When this nexus of community resources is functioning at its full potential, all community assets will be operating in a synergistic and harmonious mode. Educational assets will connect with social services to improve student achievement and graduation rates. Public green space will be integrated with under-utilized human resources to support programs like micro-gardening and healthy food alternatives. Cultural resources will be integrated with social assets to create innovative workforce opportunities - and on and on – through a living web of relevant and appropriate interactions that combine to reinforce one another in a system that is also driven by open source information and transparent communication. When this community system is operating in full swing – in tune with the heartbeat of its communal rhythms - all of its parts can support the collective whole at the same time that the whole is also strengthening each of its component parts.

The planning and design of more integrated and systemic living and learning environments can be accomplished when community stakeholders are authentically engaged in the process. But for issues as narrow as selecting a park site or as broad as community budgeting and fundraising, the method of public participation can often be a topic of intense debate. The options fall into three broad categories. First is the opportunity for stakeholders to participate through proxy. Here elected or appointed officials assume full responsibility for interpreting the wants and needs of their constituents. The second model ratchets up stakeholder engagement to a mode of community participation. Here citizens contribute their ideas and opinions through blue ribbon committees or a specified number of large and small group public hearings. In this scenario, a group of pre-determined options are often presented, with individual comments taken under advisement or adjudicated by the appropriate governing authority. The third option is a robust process of community engagement. Here large groups of participants that represent a cross-section of the community’s constituents assemble at regular intervals to review data, investigate options and make concrete proposals to public and private governing bodies charged with carrying out the collective community will. This model often results in more effective ownership of funding and implementation. The community engagement model is sometimes considered to be more expensive and time consuming, but its integrated format of open dialogue can also lead to issues being resolved without costly delays that often come from in-fighting and protracted debate later in the process.

Whether the community process is by proxy, community participation or community engagement, certain time honored principles of engagement will always apply. Noted jazzman Wynton Marsalis calls the musical equivalent of
these principles “swinging”. In his own words: “Swing demands three things. It requires extreme coordination, because it is a dance with other people who are inventing steps as they go. It requires intelligent decision making, because what’s best for you is not necessarily best for the group or for the moment. And it requires good intentions, because you have to trust that you and the other musicians are equally interested in making great music and are not guided by ego or musical shortcomings that haven’t been addressed.”... “Our current lack of respect for the swing can be likened to the current state of our democracy. Balance is required to maintain something as delicate as democracy, a subtle understanding of how your power can be magnified through joining with and sharing the power of another person. When that is no longer understood, it becomes a battle to see who is the strongest, who is the loudest, who can get the most attention.”

After hurricane Katrina devastated more than eighty percent of New Orleans neighborhoods, the need for “swinging” was on the minds of all involved in the recovery process. Nearly ten thousand of the city’s diverse constituents participated in the development of a Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) for the city’s recovery. At the heart of the plan was a call for schools to serve as centers of community life, where school facilities such as gymnasiums, auditoriums and libraries could be open for community use at nights and on weekends. And because more than thirty percent of New Orleans residents did not have access to private transportation, the school sites were located in a pattern providing walking access for all children and families. And so with more students and parents walking to get to schools, libraries, community gardens, parks, healthy groceries and other vital needs, the health of local residents can improve at the same time that New Orleans is also growing into a more environmentally and socially sustainable city.

At this point our nation is in the middle of an economic crisis that will require massive adjustments in programs and services, especially those designed to serve its oldest and most disadvantaged populations. So now is the time for government agencies and organizations to join forces in an attempt to maximize all financial, human, and environmental resources, and now is the time for governmental and non-profit organizations to work together to eliminate competition and wasteful duplication of services. There is no pretense that this kind of convergence will be easy. But mechanisms for planning and practice that will guide near and long-term growth in ways that respect the limits of our available resources must be developed. The need to take action is more acute now than ever before.

Two current projects could shed some light on how these kinds of outcomes might be accomplished. One is the recently completed Baker Ripley Center in Houston, Texas where a K-5 school, public library, community arts center, business incubator, credit union, health clinic, town hall, indoor/outdoor performance venue, welcoming center (for a predominantly immigrant
a children’s splash park and weekend farmer’s market are co-located in a rich park-like setting. A second example, the Emeryville Center for Community Life in Emeryville, California is currently a work in progress, but promises to join community and educational functions through a joint venture between the City of Emeryville and the Emery Unified School district in a way that could save up to 25% on capital and operating expenses.

So what will it take to support the transformation to more systemic and collaborative planning principles when there is such an urgent need for efficiency and fulfillment? First we will need to identify and embrace the current research and apply the best practices in systems-based planning and design. This research can be best implemented through innovative collaborations across many disciplines and knowledge bases. Then we will need to develop more relational data tools to analyze and manage complex data interactions towards predictable outcomes. We will also need to be thinking about ways to revise local, state and federal policies that support more integrative, collaborative and self-organizing models of planning and governance. For this we will need to engage community stakeholders in creating, documenting and continuously improving the principles and practices of community engagement, not only in the planning phase, but also with implementation. And finally there is the need to develop more collaborative and systemic models of funding and finance, including more effective alignments between all public, private and philanthropic resources.

As we continue to grapple with the challenges of antiquated principles of planning it is clear that transformational change is needed, but transformational change will never be easy. For decades our isolated views of weather patterns have delayed critical action on issues of global warming, but in less than two decades architects and planners worldwide have begun to address the urgent need for more systemic ways of thinking about environmental sustainability. Industries around the globe are reorganizing to produce a new set of the green tools that will be needed to rebuild large segments of our physical and economic infrastructure. It is time now to think more creatively about tools that we can develop to more effectively plan and manage all of our community’s physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational programs and infrastructure. We can no longer afford the costs associated with planning and operating cities and neighborhoods through isolated and inefficient siloed thinking. Urban designers, architects, educational facilities planners and engineers, must learn to work more effectively with educational, cultural, labor and social service providers to organize and deliver community programs and services. Through a more systemic approach to community and economic development, a more collaborative approach to management and governance and a more integrated strategy for developing and implementing public policy, significant progress can be realized in the quality and real world cost-effectiveness of all resources for living and learning.
Endnotes:

i *Moving to Higher Ground*: Wynton Marsalis and Geoffrey C. Ward; 2008; Random House; pages 40 and 38 respectively.

ii *Unified New Orleans Plan*: 2008; organized and coordinated by Concordia LLC for the Greater New Orleans Foundation with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation; Greater New Orleans Foundation; and others.