



PHOTO BY HELEN HILL

Mark Lakeman

Imagination + Creation = Solutions

BY HELEN HILL
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According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2018 report, America is short some 7 million affordable apartments for those living in poverty.

With conventional approaches falling behind the pace, artists and visionaries are stepping up to the plate, creating paradigm-busting solutions that challenge traditional ideas of housing.

Portland has been the wellspring and incubator for some of the most innovative projects for providing shelter in America, beginning with the city-sanctioned Dignity Village, conceived in 1999. Dignity's success directly seeded Right 2 Dream Too (R2DToo), Kenton Women's Village, Hazelnut Grove, and most recently, Veterans Village, a code-compliant housing project developing in Oregon City.

Portland native Mark Lakeman has been in on the ground floor of many of these projects. As a self-described "old man" of the homeless village movement, he has been deep in the trenches for the past two decades, using his pencil and drafting table, and the force of the organizations he's created, including Communitecture, his architecture firm, and City Repair, a nonprofit which fosters inclusive, sustainable communities. Lakeman's passion is to keep alternative housing models paramount in the conversation about

affordable housing, either as stepping stones to traditional housing or as an end in and of themselves.

In 2003 Lakeman was awarded the National Lewis Mumford Award by the international organization Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility for his work with Dignity Village. He received the Governor's Livability Award for place-making in 1999. He is a five-time recipient of awards from the American Institute of Architects. He travels extensively, seeding and supporting innovative, village-building initiatives. He's assisted other village-building efforts in Japan, Canada and across the United States, including projects in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arizona, Michigan, Ohio, Colorado and up and down the West Coast.

Street Roots met with Lakeman at his architectural firm Communitecture in inner Southeast Portland where he was finalizing site plans for Acceptance, a developing intentional community and retreat center for individuals with Asperger's and others on the neuro-diversity spectrum.

Helen Hill: Give us an overview of how your work creating villages for the homeless began.

Mark Lakeman: In 1999, the founding editor of Street Roots, Bryan Pollard, came to a presentation I gave about villages at the

Red Rose School for Activists. I was organizing projects to transform neighborhoods into villages. After my presentation, he said, "I really think you need to come to these organizing meetings with a group of people trying to do something extraordinary." He could have said, but he didn't use these words, that they are regenerating the place where justice begins. That was the start of Dignity Village. I was invited to just come listen, and I was absolutely compelled to return over and over again.

Up until this time, I was all about villages, but I didn't really know what I was doing. With the Dignity initiative, I realized if you were able to help a group of people start creating shelter for themselves, their inherent proclivity would be to create a village, just like a bird makes a nest. And that for me is the most exciting thing in the world, that's what keeps me relentlessly involved with helping houseless people make villages because there are all these ranges of impact up to the biggest one, which is the restoration of essential human habitat for all.

A lot of people who are houseless and who start creating these kinds of projects realize the implications. They are challenging everything and changing the world. We live and work in places where we are mute, isolated and living separate lives – the opposite of a village. Villages are a place where you have a voice, they are about the

integration of living and working so that people have full-spectrum lives and relationships.

H.H.: Dignity was a nationally groundbreaking project that succeeded against many odds. Why did it succeed?

M.L.: Dignity succeeded because it took a stand in terms of a set of benchmarks, goals and language that the region had already adopted relating to livability, sustainability, youth engagement and other pressing concerns, including justice, equity and diversity. We realized if we could articulate Dignity in terms of what the region said it would do, then we could persuade them. Instead of saying we will create a tent city that nobody can relate to, if we say we will create a village that is walkable and eminently talkable, that is modeling sustainability and participatory culture, you've got Portland through the nose at that point, because that is the stuff of the religion of Portland. And I'd say that's what happened.

All kinds of people were stepping in and out of that process; reverends, the Unitarian Church, Street Roots was always there, Sisters Of The Road. I was there to represent City Repair, something just really had me connected.

When all of us were standing with Dignity – including Eli Spevak, which was a big deal because he was a low-income housing developer – there was a huge skill set present and the city couldn't say it was impossible because all these professionals that make it happen all the time were standing there. That was really key.

H.H.: How did the work go forward after Dignity?

M.L.: The first models created the conditions for the next ones to be even better and to thrive. The paradigm changed and became more receptive, places like Dignity and R2DToo started to engage the system and affect bureaucratic cultures and the next ones that happened had status from the beginning because of the work of the innovators.

Because of Dignity, Opportunity Village in Eugene happened, and then Emerald Village, a world changing affordable housing project owned by houseless people. Then Hazelnut Grove and Kenton Women's Village. They were able to start at a much higher level because Dignity had proven it was possible. And now Agape (Village, a project of Portland Central Church of the Nazarene) is starting at an even higher level of receptivity and more flexibility from the system, where (Portland Mayor Ted) Wheeler's office is like; you guys just do it and we won't bother you.

As Dignity was rising and I was learning, my presentations were increasingly enhanced. I went to Seattle back when they were trying to start Nickelsville. I worked with Olympia to get Quixote Village off the ground. Folks in Madison, Wisc., called and wanted a presentation on houseless villages so I went there with technical design support. We learned with Dignity that there is nothing like having a picture. It helps people take you more seriously when you have documents.

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