



Want to Change the World (and Not Get Burnt Out)? Start with Your Neighborhood

Starting the process of change in a place you know well makes it more doable and fun.

by Jay Walljasper

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This article originally appeared in the author's book, *How to Design Our World for Happiness*.

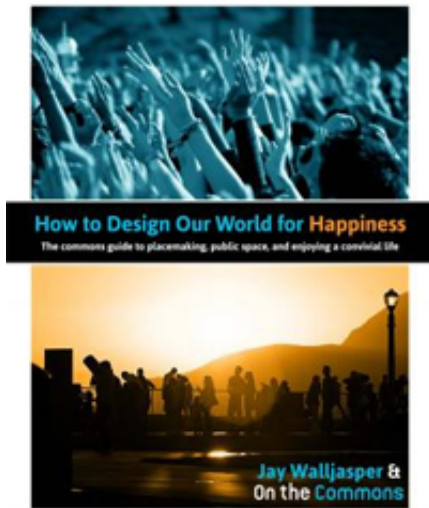


Children from the Dudley Street neighborhood in Boston. Photo by Travis Watson / Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

The neighborhood is the basic building block of human society, and successful efforts to make the world a better place usually start right there.

Neighborhoods offer hope that we can still make a difference.

Neighborhoods—whether in cities, suburbs, or small towns—are the level of social organization at which people interact most regularly and naturally, providing a ready-made forum for tackling serious issues together. Even if the neighbors abhor our political views or artistic tastes, we nonetheless share a bond. When a crisis occurs (a rash of burglaries) or opportunities arise (plans to revitalize the park), these are the people who stand beside us to make improvements for the future.



This article is adapted from Jay Walljasper's book, *How to Design Our World for Happiness*. Download the full pdf for free!

In an era when what's wrong in the world can seem complicated and daunting, neighborhoods offer hope that we can still make a difference. What's overwhelming at the international, national, or even municipal level often can be fixed closer to home, without large sums of money or political connections. And in an era of instantaneous global communications, no great idea stays in one place for long.

The Dudley Street neighborhood in Boston was once dogged by all the usual urban ills: poverty, crime, drugs, unemployment, racial discrimination, inadequate public services, deteriorating housing, and poor schools. These problems—inextricably linked with global economics and national policies—felt insurmountable.

But the residents of Dudley Street, assisted by a small grant from a local foundation, forged a vision for their future and went to work. Organized under the banner of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, they created a town common, built a community center, started youth programs, launched a farmers market, and promoted locally owned businesses.

These efforts sparked a new sense of possibility for the community and brought genuine improvements to the lives of Dudley Street residents.

Jay Walljasper wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Jay is a senior fellow at On the Commons and editor of OnTheCommons.org.

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