Hard times can increase innovation and collaboration

Sustainability becomes more important when times are tight and people are more inclined to work together to achieve it

Kim Davis
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When times are good, we don't need each other, or at least we are more reluctant to be obligated to any one. When times are tough, however, . . .

"Since the downturn I have become far more intentional and deliberate about asking for help, even professional help," reports Doug Makaroff of Living Forest Communities, the Victoria sustainable forestry advocate and property developer.

Kiertstin De West of Ci: Conscientious Innovation expects mutuality and reciprocity will renew their importance in relationships in the years ahead.

"We're going to see a lot more visually apparent incidents and characteristics of social sustainability, because inside that's what people are looking for and craving," the Vancouver sustainability-marketing specialist says.

"It's not a trend, but a deep desire. All of these things people are doing on the surface because they don't have the financial means to go out to the fancy dinners -- sitting around the family dinner table, potlucks, DIY -- underneath, are actually fulfilling what we're all looking for culturally as consumers today."

While hardship, economic or otherwise, is not something most people desire, let alone seek, adversity does have a way of inspiring collaboration, creativity and innovation.

"What's going on now in the economy will foster innovation because you have to be innovative to survive and sustainability is really connected to that," De West says.

"I think we are going to see some interesting categories in the marketplace rise and grow, supporting this desire for community connection."

Makaroff offers similar sentiments when he talks about the current movement to build community by decentralizing and localizing everything from food production to alternative forms of transportation.

"By building far more relational communities we can happily share our contacts and information and resources because we all benefit," he says.

"By community building I mean more than just Web 2.0, or social networking formats. It has to be face-to-face interaction. By building sustainable and relational communities, our lives are richer."

Makaroff describes how he has already experienced the benefits of this approach. "In the month of October, I was able to raise one-third of my second round of investment [for the conservation community of Elkington Forest in the Cowichan Valley].

''I don't know of anyone else who has been able to do that. This money was raised around kitchen tables, not in the boardrooms."

This does not mean that sustainability-minded businesses and developments are immune to present economic woes.

Both De West and Makaroff suggest that authenticity and an understanding of people's desire for personal connection is key.

"We will see some fall-off of that part of the sustainability marketplace," De West says, "that has been hijacked by eco-chic and green luxury: the high price points."

It is the top sustainability issues -- connectedness, to family and friends, for example -- that De West feels are going to foster and inspire great innovation. When Makaroff approached people about his Elkington Forest development he says, "People really had to believe in the story to move beyond their fears of investing at this time."

Springing up on vacant lots, greening gaps in the urban fabric, the growing popularity of food gardens, in many ways, encapsulates people's desire to reconnect with cultural tradition, the land, and community.

When the Onni development company opened the second Pacific and Seymour community garden, nearly four hundred people were waiting in line to get plots. "Urban agriculture has moved in a huge way in the last little while," says Mike Levenston, of City Farmer.

Not sure if you want to specify it here, but Mike is the Founder of City Farmer, and has been an advocate of urban farming since 1978.

Once relegated to small community newsletters, the topic now makes headlines in major publications around the world.

"Today I opened the L.A. Times and there was a story on chickens in the city, he notes. ''In 1978, if we let [chickens into the city] it meant we

were going back to the dark ages. Now everyone wants to bring rural traditions into the city."

De West says it is particularly interesting to look at the demographic embracing this movement: style savvy, conscientious innovators. Food gardening is becoming a hip and cool thing to do.

Reports Makaroff: "When I'm selling Elkington Forest, older people are concerned and excited about views and the quality of the homes. Younger people, however, are concerned about the food production. They want to know where their food is coming from."

Daniel Roehr, a University of B.C. professor of landscape architecture, notes, "food and water are going to be the biggest problems human generations are going to face."

It is his hope that urban agriculture is implemented into city policies and planning. He points to the strategies being discussed for the downtown eastside in an effort to provide the homeless with opportunities to grow their own food. "The community garden is one little area where people can implement awareness for each other," says Roehr. "It is a small remedy, to some of the bigger issues that we have."

From the relief gardens of the ''Dirty '30s' to the Victory Gardens of the Second World War, North Americans have a long history of turning to food gardening for improving the health and spirit of its population.

While there have been different reasons at different times, Levenston says "somehow, as people we want to return to this.'' It is "horticulture therapy, buoying us up and giving us the strength to carry on."

For deeper reads on matters raised here, visit: livingforestcommunities.com conscientiousinnovation.com cityfarmer.org, and greenskinslab.sala.ubc.ca

Kim Davis is a Vancouver sustainable-design consultant.

E-mail: redkimwrites@gmail.com

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