— Development —

Shaping communities through systems thinking

A wise man once noticed that as his cows were grazing, they were getting lost, one blade of grass at a time. Not only did one cow get lost this way, but also, accordingly, the entire herd would follow and end up in far-off pastures distanced from where they were supposed to be.

One might say that we are not much different than the cows. Have we – an industry of planners, developers, lenders and builders – also gotten lost, one blade of grass at a time? Has our industry remained attentive only to the next blade of grass and succumbed to straying into far-off pastures away from where we truly intended to be?

As developers and builders in tandem with our related design and finance partners, we have an outsized impact on our communities. We create a built environment that lasts for decades, but hopefully endures for centuries if we can "get it right."

Our industry has a significant responsibility to create better communities while fostering stewardship of resources. We must both imagine and deliver enduring places of value that enrich peoples' lives and offer opportunities for economic synergy, sustainable growth and social interactions among people.

The next blade of grass seems so benign, and yet it cloaks itself in entropic chaos. It invites us to stray where things are simple and blindly repeat the same formula, because the pattern order implies success, even if only in the short term.

Temptation aside, the insidious lure of simplicity hides the chaos that we create in repeating simple formulaic

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developments that litter our urban fabric. We cross the pasture without even knowing it. We forget to lift our heads and neglect to consider where we are and where we are going. We lose the orchestration of the day and forsake the beauty of all the connecting pieces. As placemakers with squinted eyes, have we failed to recognize the amazing opportunity that faces us each day?

Perhaps embracing the concept, study and discipline of systems thinking might be a restorative first step for our industry. Early systems theorists explored questions relating to psychology, mathematics, game theory, biology and social networks. They connected the dots to form a holistic picture of how things really work. Now, entire fields of systems ecology, systems engineering, systems sociology and system dynamics propagate themselves and, ironically, simplify complex relationships.

It is important to embrace this approach and harness the power of systems thinking to create vibrant, inclusive and activated spaces of enduring value and exemplary environmental standards. At our firm, we are driven by the triple bottom line of stewardship to natural resources and the built environment, building places for gathering and creating community, and delivering on our commitment to financial sustainability to our partners.

Zocalo Community Development

Focusing on the active senior residents living at Vita, the design team created open, communal gathering spaces suited for entertainment and relaxation.

While working on Vita – a 367,000-square-foot, mixed-use, 55-plus active senior community in Littleton – we took a systems-thinking approach and were able to save over $1.5 million in construction costs. From the project start, we facilitated an open dialogue with neighboring homeowners to mitigate concerns about construction-related difficulties and adjusted design plans with the end-user in mind. Subsequently, this increased the quality of design, built trust within the neighborhood and improved the resident experience.

Focusing on the 55-year-old resident seeking an active lifestyle within a vibrant downtown environment, we ensured Vita's accessibility by positioning the property within walking distance to public transportation and Littleton's historic main street. To accommodate the desire for comfort and convenience, the design team conceived a layout featuring open, communal gathering spaces and outdoor areas suited for entertainment and relaxation.

With this and other projects, we have been driven by a singular goal: to develop buildings that make communities better. Challenging trends and embracing complexity has led to better design that adds value to Colorado's communities.

Will our industry continue to be satisfied filling our stomachs, chewing cud, shuffling from one spot of grass to the next and misleading other cows in the herd, or will we comprehensively embrace systems thinking as a better way to build places of enduring value? ▲