HANMIN LIU



A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINING THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

wildflowers institute 2021

A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINING THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

by Hanmin Liu, Wildflowers Institute



A BRIEF REVIEW

THE WILDFLOWERS FELLOWS

SEEING THE STRUCTURES OF THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

1. The Family and Clan: A System of Stability
2. The Community: A System for a Way of Knowing
3. The Neighborhood: An Adaptive System

MAKING VISIBLE THE MATRIX: WILDFLOWERS' TOOLBOX

PIECING TOGETHER THE MATRIX: HIDDEN GEMS PROJECT

BRINGING TO LIGHT THE FUNCTIONS OF THE MATRIX

EPILOGUE: SEEING THROUGH THE UNSEEN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A BRIEF REVIEW

All living beings organize themselves with purpose, and they communicate and interrelate in their habitat but not always consciously. Hummingbirds build nests for their offspring in the safest place of a tree. Bees construct hives to protect the queen and larvae. Dragonflies lay eggs in clear ponds, rivers, and lakes. Wildflowers provide nectar to pollinators, which in turn transfer the pollen of wildflowers so they can grow throughout the meadow. And the complex root systems of wildflowers stabilize the soil and cultivate growth of other life-forms. The sustainability of these and other biological systems and related microorganisms hinges on their interactions and interdependencies with one another.

We describe in this paper what we have learned going beneath the surface of marginalized populations in the grassroots and in multicultural, multiracial, pluralistic, and diverse neighborhoods. We have come to see how families naturally strive to be a protective and stable force. We have gained an understanding of how a community of people who have a common language, tradition, and history gravitate toward cultural and spiritual endeavors. And we have observed how residents of a neighborhood work through their differences and adapt and grow. We believe these three social structures—the family, the community, and the neighborhood—function to advance stability, meaning and shared purpose, and adaptability.[1]

We highlight the importance of a cultural environment—the matrix—that cultivates beneficial relationships within and among the structures of the social ecosystem. The matrix is the operative code—the common beliefs and moral values that foster social connectedness, collective identity, and character development.[2] Making conscious the social formations and their functions and harnessing the combined energy within and among the three social systems offer a locally integrated way of social and cultural development.[3]

---

1. Professor Emeritus George Foster, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, served on the Wildflowers board for over a decade and helped guide the staff in our building a U.S.–China exchange program with the following paper, *Statement on the Concept of Premises Underlying Our Efforts to Develop Personal Networks*: "Half a century ago the Chinese anthropologists Hsiao-Tung Fei and Chih-I-Chang in their book *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan*, wrote that 'Human behavior is always motivated by certain purposes, and these purposes grow out of sets of assumptions which are not usually recognized by those who hold them. The basic premises of a particular culture are unconsciously accepted by the individual through his constant and exclusive participation in that culture. It is these assumptions—the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles—which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity. This, unfortunately, is the most elusive aspect of culture. Since it is taken for granted by the people, the student will not find it formulated verbally. On the contrary, it must usually be inferred from concrete behavior, a process which requires a certain insight on the part of the observer' (1945:81–82)." You can read Foster's paper at https://wildflowers.org/research-papers/.

2. Laurence G. Liu, former professor and head of Architectural Design and Graduate Programs at Southeast University, Nanjing, People's Republic of China, noted that the design principle of traditional environments in China as "engender[ing] harmonious relationships between people … environments conform to the physical and spiritual needs of the people who use them … a feeling of belonging, eliminating discord among people, heightening spiritual life and making people proud of the place they live in." Laurence G. Liu, *Chinese Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1989), p. 274.

3. See Daniel Kim, "Systems Thinking," Learning for Sustainability, https://learningforsustainability.net/systems-thinking/. He describes "an approach to integration that is based on the belief that the component parts of a system will act differently when isolated from the system's environment or other parts of the system."

Our observation of and work with communities have surfaced a host of personal and social interdependencies that make up the cultural environment—the matrix. When the matrix is made explicit, as for example with the Lao Iu Mien community described below, it becomes a blueprint for bringing diverse groups of people and institutions together in a common direction and in familiar social formations. Since 1999, Wildflowers has been documenting the social and cultural practices of the Lao Iu Mien people, an Indigenous Laotian tribe now residing in Northern California. The Iu Mien are composed of twelve clans with a common ancestor, King Pan. What the institute has witnessed is the elders and informal leaders, who are off the radar, initiating a kinship and community governance system that formed the matrix of their community. The Iu Mien tribes assisted the United States in the secret war in Laos (1962–1975). One of the major strengths throughout Iu Mien history is their capacity to organize and work together as a unit. When the United States lost the wars in Vietnam and Laos, the Iu Mien lost their homeland in the highlands of Laos. After Iu Mien families, clans, and villages arrived in the United States, many of them were located in the San Francisco Bay Area. Social service agencies separated individual family members into available low-income housing throughout the Bay Area. Thousands of Iu Mien who had no command of English or understanding of the American culture were isolated from their loved ones and from one another. The 1980s for the Iu Mien people in America were fraught with fear and desperation.

But a few clan elders, the grand priest, and community leaders of the Lao Iu Mien Culture Association whose ancestors were village chiefs stepped up and organized a social formation for their people in Northern California. They decided that the healing of their people would come about by their being reconnected with one another. They drew on their village structure and developed eight districts in the Bay Area. In each district, there are district leaders to help families solve problems and resolve conflicts. The Iu Mien leaders organized a central council to provide overall governance of the districts. This model mobilized over 8,000 Iu Mien in the Bay Area. It motivated hundreds of people to volunteer to build a community center and then their temple, the King Pan Buddha Light Palace. They initiated a cultural center to preserve the history and traditional practices.[4] And they now offer a college scholarship program to support students who are actively contributing to the community. The wisdom of the Iu Mien leaders is their ability to see their invisible code and to apply their way of knowing to organizing their community.

The conventional approaches to helping immigrants and refugees by federal, state, and local governments and nonprofits did not work. The shared learning between Wildflowers staff and local community members helped us realize that the matrix healed this community of Southeast Asian refugees from their trauma. The matrix enabled them to resettle in a new country.

4. Wildflowers Institute, "Iu Mien Profile," *Studies 2000: Discovering the Cultural Formations of Asian and Pacific Island Communities*, 2000.

THE WILDFLOWERS FELLOWS

Our approach to learning about how a social ecosystem functions is to invite a small group of people in a community to become fellows of the institute. We set up a culture lab where they live and work. We view the local environment as a laboratory for understanding how their people are progressing and reconciling different pathways toward personal and social development. The fellows and the members of their community guide us on a journey to learn about the range of formal and informal resources. Our fellows are family elders, village leaders in their home country, grand priests and shamans, Indigenous spiritual healers, teachers, resident artists, community leaders, and other individuals who have spent most of their lives giving from their heart and helping others. They voluntarily support their community and build relationships between and among groups. They are the ones to whom others gravitate for advice and who resolve conflicts. They help the younger generation develop sensibility and character. They build social circles, nourishing and nurturing them spiritually and through traditional pathways. They create artworks mirroring the reality they and others face. They unveil symbols that reflect the virtues of life.

The institute has invited over a hundred individuals to become fellows since 1998. A dozen of them have continued to collaborate with Wildflowers since then. This smaller group is motivated to stay engaged with the institute because of what the fellows learn from one another and from our tools and processes. Almost all of them have a full-time job to cover personal and family expenses, and they are actively involved in helping and guiding their community. But they are committed to the fellowship and dedicate their time and energy to stay involved with institute activities. The deep knowledge that our fellows have and the clarity and insights that they have gained from their Wildflowers experience are sources of energy for us all. There are no stipends or public recognition that incentivizes them to volunteer their time and energy on our projects. But from time to time, the institute helps them obtain small amounts of funding to support their activities. Their willingness to collaborate with Wildflowers is primarily based on their experience with us. The quality of the experience, albeit unpredictable, is what advances collaboration.

This year, the institute is looking to expand the range of fellows. We are identifying a national group of individuals who are involved in arts and cultural programs and in philanthropy and who have extensive experience in sustaining change in challenged communities. The goal of the fellowship program is to make conscious the code that weaves the social fabric and helps raise up the cultural infrastructures locally. The new fellows will learn about the Wildflowers framework and strategy for sustaining the social ecosystem. They will learn about the processes we use to uncover what motivates people to be a force for good. The institute will organize site visits and reflection sessions. The fellows will participate in spiritual and cultural ceremonies. Wildflowers will seek their involvement in the design of artwork and/or in organizing projects that amplify what they learned to a community or neighborhood of their choice.

SEEING THE STRUCTURES OF THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

The cultural labs in different communities helped us identify the basic structures that make up a social ecosystem. Each structure operates independently and has its own purpose and pathways toward development. Each has its own strategies and resources to realize its intentions. Only by making the functions of formal and informal structures distinct were we able to develop strategies that tap into existing individual and collective sources of energy and thereby sustain change.

1. The Family and Clan: A System of Stability

The family is a structure essential to being socially connected in protected spaces. It draws on lessons from its history about social formations of love and interdependence. It is a system that reflects traditional and contemporary approaches to being protective. Parents and grandparents organized in a hierarchy strive to build a safe and secure environment for their children and grandchildren to grow. They draw on their ancestral heritage and culture to work together to improve the quality of their life. The younger generations look to elders who have more experience and who offer guidance in resolving conflicts and solving problems. The elders seek the help of grandchildren and children to transact with mainstream society. The entire household works together. Its members depend on one another to complete duties and fulfill financial commitments. Out of a sense of love and fidelity, the young and the old accept and manage responsibility, thus strengthening and sustaining the structure.

Ethnic clan members rely primarily on their relatives when they arrive in America. Members of a clan generally descend from an ancestral group. Kin groups are common in many traditional societies in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, Eurasia, Europe, and Oceania. Kinships are patrilineal or matrilineal and consist of related people with a common surname and, in many cases, an ancestral home. The clan helps to unify different groups by cutting across other forms of social organizations. The clan recalls lessons learned from its past and is a strong link to its ancestors.

We have seen the power of traditional cultures to form social bonds that connect and protect the family and are productive units for generating income. Kinfolk of traditional societies learn from their family about how best to cooperate and support one another. They acquire a keen awareness of others and the social landscape around them. They develop their social intelligence and learn how best to build trust and work together in good and bad times. Through role models and experience, they learn the importance of building personal and communal responsibility. The family draws from traditional teachings about life patterns of all living beings and about the sacred relationship to nature—the land, the water, the air, and the sun (fire)—and from their ancestors. They bring out the spirit of love and joy and of being a part of something meaningfully important.

When the Chinese came to California as a result of the gold rush, they started in San Francisco to organize on the basis of what was most familiar to them: the family and clan system and the region in China where they came from. They developed associations based on the notion of the ancestral hall in a village where generations of family members lived. This sacred space was what all people with the same surname have in common. The criterion for clan membership was descent from a common ancestor. The associations operated with traditional Chinese beliefs,

values, and rituals of that time. The social system was governed by a male-dominated oligarchy, most of which was of the merchant class. The primary motivation for being an association member was the expectation that the association would arrange upon his death to have his bones shipped back for burial in his village in China. Thus, it was in his best interest to keep a good relationship with the clan association.

The clan formation in San Francisco Chinatown developed slowly over some twenty years, but then the process accelerated. Violence erupted between factions within the community and from persecution by mainstream Americans. The associations became a system of defense to protect clan members. But over time the associations established their own cemetery south of San Francisco, and today most of the family associations limit their activities to organizing visits to the local cemetery, maintaining the cemetery grounds, and sponsoring spring banquets. Today the associations remain active social hubs for clan members.[5]

2. The Community: A System for a Way of Knowing

A community is a social structure formed by people who are bonded by their shared purpose(s). They come together to develop a way of knowing that is different from what is taught at home and in the educational system. It advances a cultural and spiritual way of giving meaning to life experiences. Through the visual arts and music, rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling, people celebrate what they have in common. They are socially connected by a common language. They solve problems together, resolve their differences, and cooperate on projects. They help one another gain clarity of purpose and further develop their capacity to work together in different social formations to realize their aspirations.

Newcomers become organized and give their time, energy, and resources to establish different structures in the community. Africans, Arabs, Asians, Christians, Indigenous groups, Jews,,, Catholics, Muslims, and many others build their sacred spaces, spiritual temples, mosques, churches, and cultural centers to advance their way of knowing. A core leadership group composed of elders, informal leaders, priests and shamans, artists, oral historians, and master storytellers takes responsibility for the realization of projects. The formation of such communities consists of concentric circles around the core.[6] When the rituals and ceremonies motivate and inspire others, the interconnections create a centripetal force of energy.

An Ethiopian diaspora arrived in Santa Clara County in the 1990s and is scattered throughout the county, which is 1,304 square miles. But over the past thirty-one years, Ethiopians have naturally gravitated toward one another around certain activities and at particular locations. Although there is no central Ethiopian neighborhood, we have discovered that a community is present. Ethiopians are drawing on their culture and organizing activities and institutions with their own resources. They report to us that they give most of their time and money to their

---

5. Him Mark Lai was the local historian in San Francisco Chinatown. He was an engineer by profession but spent his entire life studying and writing about the history of how the Chinese got organized in America. Upon his death and in recognition of his intellectual contribution to the community, the Chinatown Library was renamed Chinatown/Him Mark Lai Library. In his 1987 paper *Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/Huiguan System*, he gives one of the best descriptions of the social formation of the Chinese community, https://himmarklai.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Historical-Development-of-the-Chinese-Consolidated-Benevolent-Association.pdf.

6. Wildflowers Institute, *Sustaining Change in a Market Economy: Community, Creativity, and Transformation*, 2018, https://wildflowers.org/research-papers/.

spiritual organizations: Orthodox Tewahedo Christian Church, Evergreen Islamic Center (EIC Mosque), and Seventh-day Adventist Church. They prefer Ethiopian spices in their dishes accompanied by *injera*—a fermented flatbread. The Orthodox Tewahedo Christian Church makes sure that their American-born children learn Amharic and the traditional culture. These endeavors are strengthening the community culture and establishing a system of friendship, kinship networks, and informal association ties.

The Ethiopians in Santa Clara County organize themselves in circles of trust around shared interests. They have formed religious volunteer groups, soccer clubs, informal circles for women and support groups for men, informal business loan groups, informal insurance circles, and coffee gatherings (Bunna ceremonies). Each circle elects a leader to provide direction and uses a time-tested process of mediation and conflict resolution that quietly deals with differences without public attention. When hundreds of Ethiopians engage in cultural, spiritual, and social activities over time, they generate a good deal of networking, information sharing, problem solving, and idea and talent incubating. The cumulative effect of participating in community activities results in a powerful informal support system. Such kinds of support contribute significantly to the emergence of a strong community.

For several decades, Wildflowers has been learning about the spiritual community of Indigenous people organized by the Red Wolf Band, located in South Valley, Albuquerque, New Mexico. The formation of this community is premised on rectifying the trauma that Indigenous people suffered centuries ago. Since 1995, our fellows in the Red Wolf Band and at the Center for Social Sustainable Systems have organized sacred spaces in their backyards and in Diné Country where they hold ceremonies: sweat lodges, vision quests, pipe ceremonies, and Sun Dances. What we have observed is the power of spiritual healing and the ceremonial rites of passage of young men and women who are becoming community leaders. We have experienced some of these ceremonies and have witnessed their power to uplift and transcend. Indigenous people from the Southwest of the United States and from Mexico make journeys to these sacred grounds where history and tradition connect the young and their elders with their ancestors.

3. The Neighborhood: An Adaptive System

The neighborhood is a complex adaptive social structure in a crucible of colliding internal and external energies. It strives to maintain a dynamic balance between sociocultural forces and political and economic forces. It is defined by street geography and ownership of land and resources. It has multiple levels of governance: the city government, the leadership of service organizations, small businesses, and neighborhood associations. The priorities of the authorities are to provide social services, to have a marketplace, and to address local problems. The neighborhood is the incubator for social and business innovations.

Progress is reflected by the level of economic and social development. Ethnic groups serve their community by organizing and starting family businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants, and laundries; language schools; and nonprofit organizations. One-third of the real estate in San Francisco Chinatown is owned by different Chinese family associations. Commercial spaces are found on the ground floor of their buildings while social gathering spaces for clan members occupy the top floor. In between the bottom and top floors are three to five stories of single-room occupancies for elders, couples, and families—many of whom are clan members. Living in Chinatown is affordable, and living in proximity to one another in the neighborhood enhances social connectedness.

The neighborhood is where entrepreneurs, small-business owners, service providers, and community organizers realize their aspirations. They build skills, strengths, and capabilities and learn to compete and "up their game." They continually adapt to internal and external conditions that they face. But this way of working is stressful and can isolate them from others.[7] Although the marketplace has brought many neighborhoods out of poverty, family and small-business endeavors generally require long hours and significant personal sacrifice to sustain their operation.

Nonprofit organizations in San Francisco Chinatown have spent countless hours supporting thousands of elders and children during the pandemic. They organized COVID-19 testing stations in public spaces and marshaled staff and volunteers to help with vaccinating the elders. Recently, they successfully advocated for funding to improve the public park in the neighborhood. For many hundreds of elders and children who live in SROs, the park is their living room. They rely on this social space to be together, to share stories, to play musical instruments, and to sing Chinese opera songs.

Over the past eight years, our work in the Tenderloin neighborhood, San Francisco, has helped us see the existence of an informal adaptive system operating beneath the surface. An informal economy with varying degrees of clarity exists. We have also learned that people are connected within this neighborhood primarily because it is one of the few places where they do not suffer discrimination due to their gender identity, race, ethnicity, or Indigenous background. People from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and other countries of the Middle East; Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese from Southeast Asia; and lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans, and queers all live in some proximity to one another.

The formation of the whole neighborhood is like a constellation of stars, independent of one another but clustered together around a shared culture.

7. In 1922 at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Albert Einstein made this observation on note paper after learning that he had won the Nobel Prize: "A calm and modest life brings more happiness than the pursuit of success combined with constant restlessness."

MAKING VISIBLE THE MATRIX: WILDFLOWERS' TOOLBOX

Wildflowers has been designing processes and tools in order to reveal the cultural environment that intertwines and develops the social ecosystem. One of the most exciting and innovative projects Wildflowers has undertaken is Model-building, located at the institute's office in San Francisco. Model-building helps a community make visible its social systems—their functions and formations—and how these systems interact among one another. We invite groups to build three-dimensional models of where they live and work, showing what is important to them. These models reveal how the family, the community, and the neighborhood are governed and the activities that help these systems adapt and grow.[8] We document and capture what is working. We make illustrated maps of the 3-D models. The maps become a common visual language for all to use in developing strategies for community planning and community building. Our tools enable insiders and outsiders to see what works in traditional and contemporary practices for the sustainability of the whole.

Over the past eight years, we have also developed a community arts and culture program (Hidden Gems Awards Program) in the Tenderloin. It has been nationally recognized for illuminating the true narratives of this neighborhood.[9] Hidden Gems uncovers the local stories about people and place. The program helps everyone see and understand who and what is working in the neighborhood. It reveals the code that works to advance the functioning of the family, the community, and the neighborhood. The local narratives and artwork are readily understood and accepted by locals.

8. Hanmin Liu, "A Walk Through a Model-building Session," *In Search of Informal Capital of Community*, p. 20, Fetzer Institute, 2011, https://fetzer.org/resources/search-informal-capital-community.

9. ArtPlace America, *ArtPlace America: 10 Years*, pp. 86–97, 2020, https://forecast-public-art.foleon.com/artplace/10years/home/. Also see Patti Leigh Brown, "As Wealth Changes in the Tenderloin, a Move to Preserve Artistic 'Gems,'" *New York Times*, January 9, 2015, and Sean Patrick Farrell and Ashley Maas, "Tenderloin Artists Unite," *New York Times*, January 8, 2015.

PIECING TOGETHER THE MATRIX: HIDDEN GEMS PROJECT

The Hidden Gems project amplifies stories and illuminates artwork that reflect what social change is happening locally and who is improving the environment in which the local ecosystem develops. The project holds up a mirror for community members and others to see what values and expectations are driving the change and in which social systems.

This work is vital to self-sustainability because the stories will uncover what good things are happening and the real-time code that guides the family, the community, and the neighborhood in their development. The stories reveal how traditional and contemporary knowledge and practices live side by side to formulate healthy pathways in life. Where these stories exist, we will share them widely.

This year Wildflowers is developing a Hidden Gems training program for our fellows and their community in the following three locations: the Lao Iu Mien families and clans in Northern California; the Chinese community in San Francisco Chinatown; and the people from different Indigenous tribes and from Chicano and Latino backgrounds in the South Valley neighborhood, Albuquerque, New Mexico. The training program has three goals. First, institute staff will guide our fellows in organizing a team and implementing an arts and culture program in their locale. Second, the Hidden Gems project will illuminate the people and their story of how they are advancing their health and well-being. Third, the project will identify activities that strengthen the structures of their ecosystem. The three goals are being achieved with the following activities:

1. A survey: Our fellows will conduct a brief survey in each of the three communities to gain an overview of social systems that are vital to local development. The survey will be conducted online, through door-to-door canvassing and at community events, and by telephone.

2. An awards program: Our fellows will announce an awards program and invite young and old to submit art and a story of the people and places that are important and helpful to them. We use a broad definition of art that includes all people who engage in some form of creative expression. Hidden Gems offers awards to those individuals who focus on what is having a positive impact. The fellows seek to learn from a collection of local stories that highlight how people are building safe spaces, socially connecting, and cultivating direction and purpose in life. The fellows will organize a selection committee to choose the award winners.

3. A ceremony: Our fellows will hold a ceremony to recognize the Hidden Gems award winners. The event should make visible the stories of people with moral standing doing good things for others. It should provide an opportunity for everyone to experience the synergy of storytelling about the cultural life in the vicinity where they live. The fellows will invite local musicians, poets, and visual artists to perform as well as home chefs to offer traditional dishes made from local ingredients.

4. Reflection sessions: Following the awards program, our fellows from all three locations and Wildflowers staff will come together to reflect on lessons learned. We will identify similarities and differences in structures and the codes in the three locales. We will determine which local stories about traditional and contemporary practices of self-sustainability have the potential for being further developed into story books and

other media forms. We will commission local artwork that exemplifies insights, principles, and practices. We will discuss the formation of self-organized support groups in each of the communities to further improve the social structures of the ecosystems. We will also explore a community-driven democratic governance of local natural resources as described by Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom.[10] She shined a light on how the small village addresses inequalities, self-interests, and the overvaluation of profits caused by the market force.[11] Finally, we will discuss how local cultural assets revealed at the Hidden Gems Awards Program might be guided by traditional Indigenous governance systems.

Moreover, we seek to identify and reinforce the moral fibers within and among the structures of the ecosystem. Those with moral standing offer their knowledge and capabilities to help individuals and groups in their own social system and in others. They are motivated because they really care and want to see positive change for its sake and not for monetary or personal gain. They give their time and resources for the good of the other. They are involved in projects that are communally significant rather than of concern to particular individuals or organizations.[12] They seek to know the true intentions that motivate others to act and contribute to decisions that benefit everyone. They help to balance social good and personal gain, traditional and contemporary practices, and internal and external forces. The dynamic balance of these tensions is a function of the matrix and is the essence of being resilient.

---

10. Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize for her research in and discovery of the importance of traditional governance systems of the commons: a structure to own, govern, and manage its natural resources. Nobel Foundation, "Elinor Ostrom—Facts," Nobel Media AB, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2009/ostrom/facts/.

11. In his 2017 book, *The Limits of the Market: The Pendulum Between Government and Market* (New York: Oxford University Press), Paul De Grauwe points out that the market economy has brought many countries out of poverty. But De Grauwe acknowledges that the market force has caused excessive inequalities and a greater degree of self-interest. Garrett Hardin pointed out an economic problem arising from self-interest in which every individual has an incentive to consume a resource but at the expense of every other individual. It's a winners-take-all zero-sum game. See Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162, no. 3859 (December 13, 1968): 1243–48.

12. Wildflowers Institute, *In Search of the Informal Capital of Community*, 2011, https://wildflowers.org/research-papers/; *Sustaining Change in a Market Economy: Community, Creativity, and Transformation*, p. 11, 2018, https://wildflowers.org/research-papers/.

BRINGING TO LIGHT THE FUNCTIONS OF THE MATRIX

When community and neighborhood endeavors are ongoing and sustainable and individuals and groups are working productively and harmoniously together, they reflect the power of the matrix. A closer look reveals that (a) happiness, love, and fidelity among intergenerations are prevailing in stable families; that (b) the ability to work successfully together in different social formations is emerging in purposeful communities; and that (c) self-determination and striving to improve the quality of life for everyone are incubating in dynamic neighborhoods. The codes are in a continual process of self-correction and revision arising from conflicts and tensions.

The matrix of the Tenderloin is emerging from artists and residents as they figure out what they have in common and what works for all of them. On the surface, Tenderloin residents seem to be divided by their differences in age, ethnicity, Indigenous background, race, and gender identity. Arguably, the poorest neighborhood in San Francisco has one of the most diverse demographics in America. But residents came to realize they shared a common experience characterized by having a history of severe pain and suffering over an extended time. Some have been marginalized in the past because of race and gender identity, and others have experienced war in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia. Such hardships percolate deep insights into who they are, shift perceptions of the other's reality, and forge meaningful and beneficial relationships between and among them. The Hidden Gems artists made explicit a code that has formed a nurturing social environment conducive to health and growth.[13] The artists have brought to light the invisible premises required for daily living—being true to oneself, helping one another, and benefiting from being different. This code sets forth the relationships on the street that nurture others; support ethnic, gender, and racial diversity; and are pertinent to a community of differences. It is these beliefs and expectations that guide people to come together in a social order that fosters social connectedness and interdependency.

13. *Stories of the Tenderloin*, by Wildflowers Institute, is a compilation of artworks and narratives that resulted from the 2019 Hidden Gems Awards Program. The collection uncovered a creative force that turns struggle and suffering into healing, innovation, and repair of the community's social fabric.

EPILOGUE: SEEING THROUGH THE UNSEEN[14]

The institute's strategy involves searching for what self-motivates the populace to work together for the good of others. We identify individuals and groups who are recognized for their moral authority. We uncover how interrelated informal systems form the matrix. We support these systems and other assets in the planning and building of the ecosystem.

At Wildflowers, we continue to refine and share our knowledge of how local populations are self-organized and how they function. The institute's staff and fellows thoughtfully piece together the codes that form a healthy matrix and advance the sustainability of the ecosystem. We deepen our understanding of the codes that develop: personal character and loving interpersonal relationships; cultural and spiritual enlightenment; and governance that interconnects formal and informal structures and fosters interdependency and adaptability. We commission artwork and the design of sacred structures and social spaces to heighten the cultural and spiritual life of the people.

There is so much more to learn and so much we do not know. We invite you to share your thoughts on this report. We look forward to hearing and learning from you about your experiences. You can reach Hanmin Liu and Jennifer Mei at nectar@wildflowers.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following readers for their feedback and comments on this paper: Gary Arsham, internal medicine physician; Todd Breyfogle, Aspen Institute; Linda Campbell, artist and philanthropist; Jane Delgado, The National Alliance for Hispanic Health; Jim Emerman, Encore.org; Adam Erickson, Vital Little Plans (an artist collective); Jorge Garcia, Center for Socially Sustainable Systems; Martha Gonzales-Cortes, Michigan Donor Alliance, LLC; Camila Martinez, healer; Gail McClure, philanthropy consultant; Jennifer Mei, Wildflowers Institute; Ramón Murguía, Greater Kansas City Hispanic Development Fund; Kouichoy Saechao, Lao Iu Mien Culture Association; Leo Saephan, Lao Iu Mien Culture Association; Bruce Spivey, ophthalmologist; Mary Evelyn Tucker, Yale University School of Forestry and Environment; Alice Warner-Mehlhorn, philanthropy consultant; Richard Watson, University of Georgia's Terry College; and Stephen Yang, Yang Capital LLC. And a special thanks to Wildflowers' copyeditor, David Sweet.

14. This line, "Seeing through the unseen," comes from *The Hundred-Word Eulogy* by the Hongwu Emperor of China (1368–1398). The line connotes the ability to know the true intentions of individual behavior and collective action. The eulogy praises the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). It paid tribute to the golden age of Islam in China where "Muslims grew as a community, not only because existing families thrived, but also because they attracted greater numbers" to them. For additional information on this ode to the Prophet, see https://www.themathesontrust.org/library/hundred-word-eulogy-baizizan. Jingyi Zhao and Juan Acevedo translated the eulogy.

A Strategy for Sustaining the Social Ecosystem provides a framework and an approach to fortifying what is working in marginalized populations and in multicultural, multiracial, pluralistic, and diverse neighborhoods. The paper focuses on families functioning as a stable and protective force; communities helping their members with a cultural and spiritual way of knowing; and neighborhoods serving as a complex adaptive system in a crucible of colliding internal and external forces.

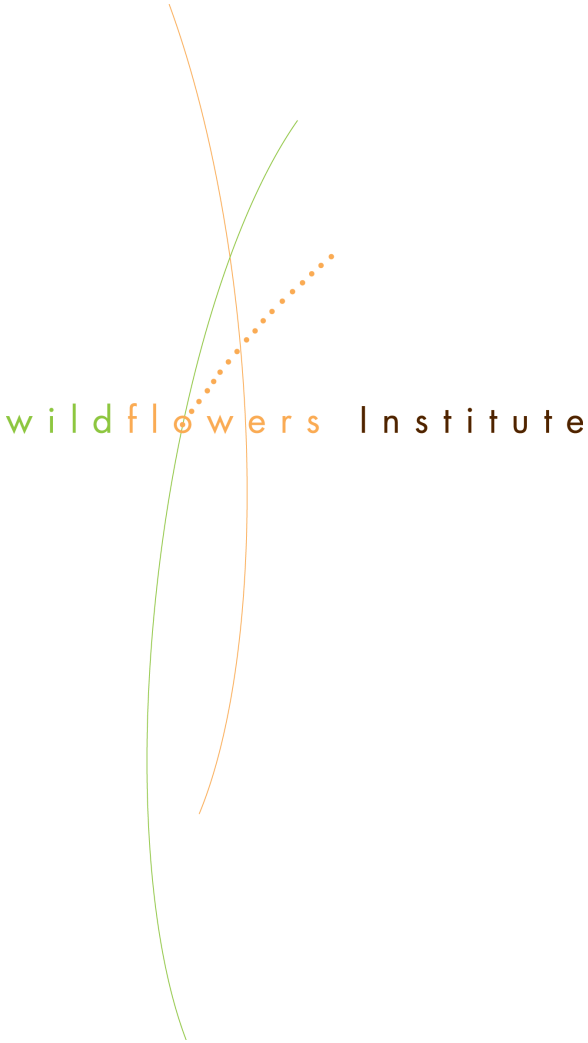
For further information, contact:

Wildflowers Institute
1144 Pacific Avenue
San Francisco
California
94133-7250

415.775.1151

nectar@wildflowers.org

www.wildflowers.org



Entire contents © 2021 Wildflowers Institute, except book excerpts or quotations from other copyrighted materials. All rights reserved. Material in this publication may not be reproduced in any form without express permission.