

THE HUMAN SETTLEMENT FRAMEWORK

Rethinking What Development Is For

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Where This Began

The Human Settlement Model did not begin with a master plan or an attempt to create a new philosophy of development.

It began with a conversation.

During a discussion about development and its consequences, Daniel Foertsch made a simple observation to Stephen Bliss:

“This indiscriminate development has to stop.”

For someone who had spent his professional life in development, the statement was difficult to dismiss.

It prompted a much more personal examination of the work we ourselves were doing.

Stephen Bliss and Sergio Cerceño began looking critically at conventional development practices—not only at what was happening elsewhere, but at the assumptions underlying our own projects and decisions.

We had to acknowledge that we, too, had participated in a development model that often measures success primarily through land value, construction, sales, growth, and financial return, while giving considerably less attention to the larger and longer-term consequences of what is created.

That recognition became important.

We did not want merely to criticize a system in which we ourselves participated.

We wanted to reconsider our own role within it.

Profitability matters. Investment matters. Economic viability matters. Without them, development cannot endure.

But we began questioning whether the quickest path to development or the greatest immediate financial return should determine what gets built.

Because development does not end at the property line.

It changes land.

It changes movement.

It changes agriculture.

It changes infrastructure.

It changes economies.

It changes communities.

And, over time, it changes the conditions within which people live their lives.

That led us to a much larger question:

What is development for?

Looking Beyond the Development

We began examining the consequences of the settlement patterns that have become increasingly normal.

What happens when productive land is continually converted into consumption-based development?

When housing, employment, food, education, commerce, and recreation become increasingly separated from one another?

When those distances require ever more roads, vehicles, fuel, infrastructure, time, and money simply to sustain ordinary life?

What happens when communities become increasingly dependent upon distant and centralized systems for food, water, energy, employment, materials, and other necessities?

And what happens to people when the systems sustaining their lives become increasingly invisible, abstract, and beyond their understanding or influence?

These questions led us into subjects that initially appeared separate but increasingly proved interconnected:

food and water security, energy, transportation, land-to-human relationships, local production, resilience, dependency, education, meaningful work, ecology, human-scale architecture, community, health, and human development.

Architecture itself became part of the inquiry.

Buildings and settlements do more than shelter people.

Their scale, organization, distances, relationship to nature, opportunities for walking, visibility of productive life, public spaces, and patterns of encounter influence how people experience everyday life.

This led to another question:

Could some of the chronic stress, isolation, loss of agency, and disconnection experienced within highly developed societies be influenced, in part, by the physical and systemic environments we have created?

We do not suggest that settlement patterns alone explain these problems. Human well-being is far more complex than that.

But we believe the relationship deserves serious consideration.

And gradually our inquiry moved beyond asking how development could simply become **more sustainable**.

We began asking whether development could become something more.

A Different Understanding of Development

A realization emerged from our work:

Development creates conditions for human life.

That simple idea substantially expands the responsibility of development.

If the places we create influence people's relationship to food, water, nature, work, movement, community, education, production, technology, and one another, then development is doing much more than organizing buildings on land.

It is helping establish the conditions within which life unfolds.

This does **not** mean that we believe people should be designed.

Quite the opposite.

We cannot manufacture community.

We cannot manufacture purpose.

We cannot manufacture wisdom.

We cannot determine what another human being should become.

And we cannot design a perfect society.

But we can ask whether the conditions we create **expand or diminish human possibility**.

Can a place make healthy movement part of ordinary life?

Can it keep food, water, ecology, and productive life visible?

Can it create opportunities for meaningful work and enterprise?

Can it encourage social encounter while preserving privacy and autonomy?

Can education reconnect knowledge with life?

Can technology increase capability rather than unnecessary dependency?

Can local capacity coexist with regional and global connection?

Can economic value and ecological stewardship reinforce one another?

Can architecture contribute to dignity, beauty, belonging, and human connection?

Can communities become more resilient without becoming isolated?

And can the people who inherit these places understand them well enough to question, maintain, adapt, and improve them?

These questions became the basis of a different approach.

What We Are Proposing

Our shared aspiration is:

To continually create better conditions for human flourishing through capable, connected, resilient, responsible, productive, and life-supporting places.

We do not see this as a destination.

We see it as a **trajectory**.

There is no final blueprint for the ideal settlement.

A community in Mexico should not simply reproduce one developed for Costa Rica. Climate, ecology, culture, economy, history, people, materials, agriculture, and opportunity are different.

Principles can travel. Places cannot.

Nor do we propose retreating from modern civilization.

We value science, technology, commerce, investment, entrepreneurship, individual freedom, innovation, and global exchange.

The question is whether these extraordinary capabilities can be organized in ways that also strengthen **human agency, local capability, resilience, meaningful relationship, ecological health, and quality of life.**

The Human Settlement Framework therefore begins not with a predetermined town, but with a process:

Understand the Place

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Establish the Principles

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Integrate the Systems

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Create the Conditions

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Allow Life to Unfold



Observe What Actually Happens



Learn



Adapt



Continue Along the Trajectory

Food, water, energy, education, economy, work, health, ecology, architecture, technology, governance, and community are not treated as isolated components.

They are parts of a living system.

The objective is **coherence**: whenever possible, each part should strengthen several others.

A food system can also support health, education, employment, soil, culture, resilience, and local economic circulation.

A walkable settlement can simultaneously support transportation, health, social encounter, commerce, and relationship to place.

A school can connect education with farms, workshops, businesses, ecology, technology, civic life, and the practical systems surrounding it.

The question changes from:

How do we optimize each component?

to:

How can the different systems of human life increasingly reinforce one another?

An Unfinished Idea by Design

We do not claim to have discovered the final model of human settlement.

In fact, such a claim would contradict the philosophy itself.

Human beings are not finished.

Communities are not finished.

Knowledge is not finished.

And this work should never be finished.

We expect some of our assumptions to be wrong.

We expect experience to reveal things we did not anticipate.

We expect future generations to challenge ideas we currently believe are correct.

They should.

The objective is not to protect our answers.

It is to establish a sufficiently clear **direction** that the work can continue to evolve without losing sight of why it exists.

We create conditions.

People interact with those conditions and with one another.

Something emerges.

We observe.

We learn.

We adapt.

And the trajectory continues.

The Questions Beneath the Model

This short Framework describes where the Human Settlement Model came from and the direction in which we are moving.

It intentionally does not provide all of the answers.

Behind it are deeper questions:

What do we actually mean by human flourishing?

How do we strengthen community without diminishing individuality?

How do we increase resilience without pursuing isolation?

When does interdependence become dependency?

What creates genuine human agency?

What should education ultimately accomplish?

What makes work meaningful?

How should technology relate to human capability?

What responsibility does ownership create toward future generations?

Can competition exist within a fundamentally cooperative culture?

How does architecture influence human behavior and quality of life?

What makes a settlement psychologically and socially coherent?

How do we create economic prosperity without undermining the ecological and social conditions upon which future prosperity depends?

How do we preserve a shared direction without turning it into an ideology?

And perhaps the most important question:

How can the places we create expand people's ability to consciously shape their own lives while contributing meaningfully to the lives of others?

These questions led us to develop **The Principles of Human Settlement**.

That document is the philosophical foundation behind the Human Settlement Model.

It does not present a doctrine to be accepted.

It presents a set of principles to be considered, questioned, tested, and ultimately demonstrated through the places we create.

Because the question that began this work remains open:

What is development for?

Our answer, so far, is simple:

To create better conditions for life.

And our aspiration is larger:

Human flourishing through capable places.