

Settlement Conceptual Vocabulary

I think it is worth defining words that will eventually become the **conceptual vocabulary of the project**. If someone spends an hour with our work, there should be a relatively small set of ideas they remember afterward.

We should avoid generic development language like *sustainable*, *green*, *innovative*, and *eco-friendly* as our defining vocabulary. These terms have become **so ubiquitous that much of their meaning has been diluted**. They may describe aspects of the work, but they no longer distinguish one philosophy of development from another.

The words I think should become associated with the project are:

- **Flourishing** — the ultimate human objective; development should improve the conditions in which people can flourish.
- **Capability** — perhaps one of our most important words. People and communities should become more capable, not increasingly helpless or dependent.
- **Agency** — people should retain meaningful ability to understand and shape their own lives.
- **Resilience** — not isolation or self-sufficiency, but the ability to absorb disruption, adapt, and continue functioning.
- **Liberation** — particularly through education: liberation of human capacity, thought, curiosity, creativity, and possibility. I like this word, but I would generally pair it with something: **liberation of human potential** rather than political-sounding “liberation” alone.
- **Intentional** — development should be deliberate about the conditions it creates rather than simply following conventional patterns.
- **Connection** — to people, place, food, water, work, nature, community, and the systems sustaining life.
- **Autonomy** — belonging without surrendering individuality; the ability to participate in shaping one's own life.
- **Coherence** — systems of life should reinforce rather than continually contradict one another. This will separate us from the majority of concepts.
- **Interdependence** — especially **informed interdependence**: connection without helpless dependency. This is what I attribute to the rampant anxiety in people today.
- **Productive** — communities should not merely consume; they should grow, make, repair, teach, create, trade, and contribute.
- **Human-scale** — systems and places should remain sufficiently comprehensible and accessible to meaningful human participation.
- **Stewardship** — ownership and development create obligations extending beyond the present transaction.
- **Responsibility** — the necessary counterpart to freedom and agency.



- **Meaning** — work, contribution, relationships, and participation should connect people to something beyond consumption.
- **Belonging** — genuine human connection without conformity.
- **Unfolding** — one of the more distinctive ideas: **we create conditions**; human potential and community unfold.
- **Becoming** — people and communities are never finished. **We design for becoming.**
- **Anliegen** — a deeply held shared concern or aspiration that gives direction, a trajectory to our actions without prescribing a final destination.
- **Adaptation** — observe, learn, question, change, improve.
- **Participation** — people should be participants in the systems around them, not merely passive consumers of them.
- **Understanding** — food, water, energy, economy, technology, governance, and ecology should not become unnecessarily abstract from everyday life.
- **Place** — development should emerge from the particular ecology, culture, people, climate, economy, and possibilities of where it occurs.
- **Beauty** — not decoration, but part of dignity, attachment, care, and quality of life.
- **Generative** — I particularly like this word for our work: systems should create more capability, relationship, knowledge, ecological health, opportunity, and possibility over time.

We shouldn't try to make all of those equally prominent. **There should be a hierarchy.**

The words I would want people to remember

If someone heard a presentation and could remember only **eight concepts**, I would want these:

Human Flourishing

Capability

Agency

Resilience

Connection

Coherence

Intentionality

Anliegen/Trajectory

Those eight almost tell the story by themselves.

And underneath them I see three especially important pairings that distinguish our philosophy:

Connection + Autonomy

We need one another without surrendering ourselves.

Capability + Interdependence

We participate in larger systems without becoming helplessly dependent upon them.



Direction + Openness

We know the trajectory without pretending to know the destination.

There may be an even simpler vocabulary

If we're thinking about what someone should **feel** when they encounter the project rather than the technical concepts they should remember, we could use:

Capable. Connected. Resilient. Free. Productive. Meaningful. Beautiful. Alive.

That is powerful because it describes the *kind of life* we're trying to make more possible.

And there is one word that I would elevate further: **intentional**.

The original provocation was essentially about **indiscriminate development**. The natural opposite is not merely *sustainable development*.

It is **intentional development**.

That creates a compelling contrast:

From indiscriminate development to intentional human settlement.

And then the question becomes:

Intentional toward what?

Our answer:

Human flourishing through capable places.

That pairing may eventually become one of the simplest ways to explain the whole body of work:

Intentional Development.

Capable People.

Connected Communities.

Resilient Places.

Human Flourishing.

Those five ideas are probably what I would want someone to take away after their first encounter with the project.

