

Peer Review Article

The Vitality Triangle:

Navigating Just and Regenerative Transitions with Ecosystem Awareness

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Abstract

How can we navigate complex power dynamics in our every-day interactions, while sourcing our collective powers for just transitions to equitable, regenerative economies? When in the course of planetary crises, how do we harness the powers of the earth and find our way forward through conditions of precarity, under the pressure of necessity, into a future in which we can all flourish? How can we expand our toolkits with guidance born of ancient wisdom, intersectional social movements, and personal praxis?

This article explores how an inner-compass, the “Vitality Triangle,” can help us cultivate ecosystem awareness as we navigate from the life-threatening conditions characterizing our current geological epoch towards just and flourishing futures. Informed by diverse lineages of thought and action and

shaped by the authors' experiences navigating just transitions, the Vitality Triangle is not a new theory. Rather, it is a practical, synthetic framework that directs us to well-established practices, methods and traditions that can help us navigate planetary crises by living our questions while embodying, embedding, and emplacing three principles of regenerative vitality in living systems: liberty, reciprocity, and integrity. Through a review of challenges we face in our planetary moment, stories from practice, and reflections on the origins, practical application, and pragmatic possibilities of the Vitality Triangle, the authors posit that this vital tool can guide us in cultivating the collective awareness and (r)evolutionary power required to repair harm, regenerate well-being, and co-create the world anew.

Keywords

ecological wisdom, (r)evolutionary power, collective healing, collective power, regenerative economics, environmental justice, community development, systemic trauma, climate, resilience

Introduction and Guide Map

Feeling lost is common. Especially in times of change and transition, it is easy to become unmoored, to lose our bearings. When in the course of planetary crises, how do we harness the powers of the earth and find our way forward through conditions of precarity, under the pressure of necessity, into futures in which we can all flourish?

As two kindred sojourners called to the work of building Beloved Community (Andrus, 2021), we are intimately familiar with the disorientation that accompanies devastating social and ecological planetary crises. As a practicing pastor focused on climate justice issues, Rev. Jessica Abell regularly encounters those who feel lost and overwhelmed. As a practicing planner focused on regenerative and collaborative methods, Dr. Elizabeth Walsh regularly encounters communities who feel the same.

Our paths first converged in 2018 when our shared commitments brought us together in Colorado around a Just Transitions Table of environmental organizations, labor unions, community advocacy groups, and the members of the faith community.¹ These diverse partners came together to transcend usual political divides and co-create a set of paradigms, principles and policy priorities all could support. This deep and relational work ultimately generated precedent-

¹ For more about the process, see: <https://ibe.colostate.edu/regenerative-dialogue-for-just-transitions-in-co/>.

setting legislation resulting in a first-of-its-kind Just Transition Office in the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.²

Since then, we've continued to navigate together with (and in search of) various practices of spiritual and community development which nurture liberation and transformation, especially those that support the cultivation and integration of inner wisdom with ecological wisdom and the reciprocal and regenerative processes of democratic writing and dialogue. Currently, we collaborate through the Planning to Thrive Colorado community of practice, an interdisciplinary network of community developers, urban planners, and technical experts seeking to establish equitable and integrated planning statewide in Colorado.³ Our intention in writing this article together is to share a framework and set of tools that have supported our own praxis with others who share similar commitments to the work of just transitions and regenerative community development.

While we write as human beings born and raised on North American soil who hold United States citizenship and dwell in white, cisgendered, female bodies, we also understand ourselves to be members of a global civic culture (Boulding, 1990) who come from lineages of Beloved Community building (Andrus, 2021) and blessed unrest (Hawken, 2007) that weave together inescapable networks of mutuality. We deeply believe that woven into the groundwork of American soil and societies are threads of mutuality and reciprocity that are rarely obvious but will prove essential to us as we work to answer to our better angels and restore the promise of democracy in perilous times.⁴ It is upon these threads that we pull and seek just transitions from our economies of extraction toward economics of abundance, from our politics of trauma (Haines, 2019) toward politics of flourishing.

We know that we have been given “the master’s tools” (Lorde, 2007) to address “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) like climate change and intersectional oppression; yet we have also witnessed the traumatic effects of divide and conquer politics endemic to use of these tools. As Lorde admonished, “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house,” nor will they transform our differences into strengths or help us co-create just and flourishing futures. We are committed to expanding our toolkits with guidance born of ancient wisdom, intersectional social movements, and personal praxis.

² For more information about results produced through the facilitated process, see: <https://inthesetimes.com/article/colorado-just-transition-labor-coal-mine-workers-peoples-climate-movement>.

³ For more about Planning to Thrive Colorado, please see <https://www.planningtothrivecolorado.com/>.

⁴ We particularly point to the roots of the longest enduring participatory democracy in North America, that of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, upon which the U.S. Constitution was modelled. This democracy continues to be governed under the Great Law of Peace, Law of Regeneration, and Seventh Generation planning practice (Awkwesane Notes, 2005).

We offer the Vitality Triangle (see Figure 1) as one tool to support individual and collective navigation of just transitions from extractive to regenerative economies. The Vitality Triangle emerged through immersion in liberatory literatures and lineages,⁵ experiences in community development, and lessons of integration and thriving that we learn from nature—the dynamic living systems of which we are part.



Figure 1. The Vitality Triangle.

The Vitality Triangle is anchored by a dynamic relationship among *reciprocity*, *integrity* and *liberty*, which we posit to be three key principles of vitality in living systems. When used as an inner compass, this heuristic calls us into dynamic guidance from powerful questions rather than directional arrows.

We both have found the Vitality Triangle to be a helpful wayfinding tool as we navigate the uncertainty of disruptive change and the complexity of power dynamics in a world shaped by intersectional structures of oppression. To introduce readers to the Vitality Triangle as an inner compass and a community tool, we move through four guiding questions:

⁵ We particularly ground ourselves in Indigenous scholarship (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; Goodchild, 2021; Harjo, 2019; Kimmerer, 2015; Lyons & Mohawk, 1998; Nelson & Shilling, 2018; Simpson, 2011, 2013, 2017), Black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 2017; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 2013; Suarez, 2018), regenerative design and development literature (Center for Living Environments and Regeneration, 2017; Fuller, 1983; Hes & Plessis, 2014; Regenesis et al., 2016; Sieden, 2000), awareness-based social change (Cunningham, 2021; Hanh, 2008; King, 2010; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013; Thurman, 1989; Williams et al., 2016; Wink, 1999) and social movements for environmental, climate, and racial justice (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012; brown, 2017; Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991; Haines, 2019; Lewis, 2012; Movement Generation, 2016; United Frontline Table, 2020).

- Where are we on the clock of the world and what challenges do we face together?
- What gives life, and how can the Vitality Triangle guide us toward life-giving future(s)?
- How does the Vitality Triangle work in practice as we navigate what is ours to do?
- How might we bring the Vitality Triangle into future work?

In exploring these questions, we begin writing in a collective voice, drawing from a review of literature to situate ourselves in the world and the collective navigation challenges we face. We then shift from a descriptive and collective voice into Elizabeth's first-person narrative introducing the origins of the Vitality Triangle and sharing examples of its use in practice. Following this practical case study, we return to our collective voice, reflecting upon lessons learned from West Denver and presenting opportunities for the Vitality Triangle to support just transitions in Colorado and beyond.

Where are We in (R)evolutionary Time?

Where are we on the clock of the world? North American (r)evolutionary and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs made a practice of opening community meetings with this powerful question. She found that by expanding our awareness to the long arc of co-evolutionary and (r)evolutionary movements, this question opens a liberatory space for fellow human beings to ground ourselves in the present moment, with an openness to possibilities for co-creating the future.

How we think of ourselves, our histories, and the living systems we inhabit affects our behavior, and we assert that gaining insight into the degenerative characteristics of this age equips us to identify the tools we can use to counter them. The first step in breaking free from inherited systems of oppression is to name them, and so we begin with a description of our contexts.

Situating Ourselves in Time: the Capitalocene, an Era of Scarcity

In response to Dr. Boggs' powerful question, we begin by naming that we find ourselves today in a geological epoch widely known as the Anthropocene. For the purposes of this discussion, we make the distinction between an inherent human effect and the impacts of entrenched patterns of extraction, exploitation, exclusion, and trauma by referring to this era as the "Capitalocene."⁶ Recognizing

⁶ The Holocene began roughly 11,700 years ago and contains all recorded human history. In 2016, an international team of geologists found that there was enough evidence in the geological record of profound anthropogenic change to declare a new geologic epoch had begun; they named it the Anthropocene (Carrington, 2016). Environmental historians coined the term "Capitalocene" in

that form follows attention in living systems (Scharmer, 2009), we review how this era is characterized by (1) the emergence of changes in geological form, (2) the acceleration of a distinct set of economic relationships, and (3) the dominant focus of human consciousness, all arising rapidly and globally by the mid-19th century with capitalism.

Ecological Form: Degenerative Planetary Outcomes

Environmental historians generally agree that emergence of global, degenerative ecological change (including dramatic increases in planetary CO₂ levels) accelerated sharply after 1850, and especially after 1947.⁷ This period coincided with modern capitalism, a global phenomenon that emerged as a social system in western Europe in the first half of the 19th century (Sachs, 1999). The Great Acceleration of anthropogenic change in earth systems following 1947 coincides with the advent and global proliferation of neoliberalism, a belief that government interference in economics is an unmitigated evil and individuals are the only legitimate economic actors (Lovins et al., 2018).

Economic Relationships: Degenerative Socio-Ecological Interactions

At its etymological roots, an economy is simply a set of norms (*nomos*) about how people manage collective resources through their interactions in a common home (*oikos*, eco). Human beings have successfully cultivated regenerative economic relations in the past and have the potential to do so going forward (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; June, 2022; LaDuke, 2009; Lovins et al., 2018; Mohawk, 2010; Thackara, 2017; United Frontline Table, 2020). The use of “Capitalocene” draws attention to the degenerative economic relations that have been amplified through capitalism: relationships characterized by extraction, exploitation, and exclusion maintained through cycles of violence and intersectional systems of oppression (Moore, 2017).

Focus of Attention: Scarcity Assumptions and Capital Accrual

Degenerative economic relationships have also been maintained through the field of modern economics and its institutions. By the early 20th century, scarcity became the central assumption of modern economics, a field of study focused on “how society chooses to allocate scarce resources to the production of goods and services in order to satisfy unlimited wants” (Tucker, 1995).

recognition that the presence of humanity itself is not to blame for planetary harm, but rather a specific approach to economic development (Altwater et al., 2016; Moore, 2017).

⁷ For helpful diagrams and discussion, see <https://humanorigins.si.edu/research/age-humans-evolutionary-perspectives-anthropocene> and <https://www.anthropocene.info/great-acceleration.php>.

Once scarcity is assumed as the nature of life on earth, by definition, there is not enough for everyone to meet their needs. As a result, to meet one's personal needs, one will eventually need to extract natural resources, exploit labor, and exclude others from access to accrued capital. As modern democracy co-evolved with modern economics, nations established political economies focused on capital accumulation, using police powers to protect exclusive property rights and propel economic growth. Within this context, scarcity assumptions coupled with a growth fetish⁸ drive oppressive economic relations of extraction, exploitation, and exclusion that deplete regenerative capacities of living systems, thereby increasing scarcity and reinforcing scarcity assumptions.

Scarcity as a Self-Fulfilling Belief: Vicious Cycles and Systemic Trauma

Engaging under the influence of scarcity assumptions, we easily succumb to what Cyndi Suarez calls “scarcity consciousness,” defined as the “belief that the world holds limited supplies of the things we want—love, power, recognition”(Suarez, 2018, p. 13). When we engage the world via scarcity consciousness, we know that *other* living beings pose a survival threat to us; they, too, are competing for scarce resources. We close our minds and hearts to these *other* beings, justifying our right to survival over theirs. Entrapped in fear and isolated by our egos, we find ourselves in a vicious cycle of degenerative economic relationships reified by intersectional structures of oppression that perpetuate collective, systemic trauma (Haines, 2019; Moore, 2017).

This trap of scarcity may be one of the most insidious aspects of our era, for it is easy to see *not enough* everywhere. We assert that the dominant patterns of consciousness, relationships, and emergent outcomes of the Capitalocene era reinforce a false sense of scarcity, when in fact nature regenerates abundance itself.

The Politics of Trauma: Shapes and States of Entrapment

To understand the pernicious persistence of these patterns of degenerative economic relationships despite decades of clarion calls for paradigmatic shifts (Daly, 1973; Meadows et al., 1972; WCED, 1987), it is helpful to explore the way systemic trauma shapes living systems and states of being in the Capitalocene.

⁸ We use “growth fetish” in keeping with Clive Hamilton’s (2004) eponymous book in which he argues that the obsessive (and even successful) pursuit of economic growth and increased incomes has not only failed to increase happiness, but also harmed the planet. This use maintains a distinction between the psychological development concept of “growth mindset” which is arguably necessary to shift our mental models.

The abusive relational patterns of exploitative, extractive, and exclusive economies perpetuate through cycles of violence and systemic trauma. Systemic trauma persists intergenerationally by shaping the body politic, as well as individual bodies. In *The Politics of Trauma*, Haines (2019) articulates:

Like individual trauma, systemic trauma overwhelms and breaks down safety, connection, and dignity in the minds, bodies, and spirits of individuals and communities. Collective survival strategies can ‘shape’ whole communities across generations. Certain survival strategies become embodied in cultural practices; some cultural practices may develop out of trauma rather than resilience (pp. 80–81).

Trauma is a survival strategy that can shape our bodies, communities, and body politic across generations. In discussing climate change, Haines also observes that systemic trauma extends to the living systems of which we are part. As Dr. George Washington Carver found in the 19th century and many advocates of regenerative agriculture observe today, systemic abuse is deeply rooted in our soil, society and dominant institutions (Embery, 2018; Montgomery, 2012; Penniman & Washington, 2018).

In review, downward spirals of degenerative economic relationships create states of entrapment. Breaking free of these states of entrapment is essential for navigating our way from cycles of trauma into cycles of resilience. We can employ vital tools to disrupt systemic trauma and support regenerative patterns of consciousness, relational dynamics, and emergent outcomes in dynamic living systems. We need not be trapped.

Precarious Times Require Vital Tools

In this article, we offer the Vitality Triangle as one such vital tool to help us disrupt degenerative economic relationships and transition into a politics of flourishing. Through a more detailed introduction to the origins of the Vitality Triangle and a case study of its application, we reveal how this tool offers choice and voice, direction and guidance. The case study and origin story of the Vitality Triangle are offered in Elizabeth’s first-person narrative voice, reflecting on her personal praxis from 2018-2023. Throughout this period, Jessica Abell served as an invaluable “critical friend” (Forester, 1999) and co-conspirator in just transitions work. We write *together* to honor the truth that we are not meant to walk alone, to make visible the invisible yet critical connections that support us behind the scenes, and to invite others into practice with us, experimenting with the Vitality Triangle as we navigate just transitions.⁹

⁹ In *The Deliberative Practitioner*, John Forrester (1999) defines critical friends as friends who “care enough to listen for more than what has been said, who care enough to wonder about what

The Vitality Triangle is not a *new* theory; it is a heuristic that invites us to bring our attention to well-established practices, methods and traditions contributing to practical ecological wisdom. What if we were to collectively accept that invitation and grow our capacity for ecosystem awareness—could the Capitalocene be but a blip on the clock of the world, and human beings become known by our capacity to holistically regenerate wellbeing in the Holocene?

What Gives Life? Introducing The Vitality Triangle

The Vitality Triangle first emerged for me (Elizabeth) in the apocalyptic year of 2020,¹⁰ in response to persistent questions that arose through (1) personal heartbreak observing the state of democracy and ecological devastation at the time, (2) deep longing for life-giving practices of democratic self-governance informed by nature's principles and ecological wisdom, and (3) personal contemplation about the power of declarations emerging through my reading of *The Politics of Trauma*¹¹ and *Our Declaration: A Close Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* over that summer.

Recognizing the fragmented, polarized state of democracy in the Capitalocene, while also honoring our human capacity to learn from nature and declare new possibilities into existence, these questions surfaced:

What if—in addition to declaring liberty as a principle of natural law—our democratic declarations also included two additional, complementary principles of nature by which we could self-govern?

If so, what principles of vitality in living systems could help us steer clear from mutual annihilation and toward collective flourishing?

As these questions emerged, the specificity of identifying two additional principles felt important. As a student of complexity science, ecology, and social movements, I understood that living systems tend to thrive when they can self-organize around a few simple principles. Murmurations of starlings—one of the

has been missed, who are engaged and collaborative enough to help, yet detached and independent enough to carry forward their own projects." Critical friends play essential yet often invisible roles in navigating just transitions; in offering a loving mirror and holding a gracious, compassionate, and appreciative space, they help us discover blind spots, honor our commitments, and draw upon our strengths. Elizabeth and Jessica have been such critical friends for one another since 2018.

¹⁰ 2020 was apocalyptic in the way its tragic events revealed deep seated social and ecological traumas - from economic upheaval associated with the pandemic and devastating wildfires (Australia and US west coast), an exceptionally divisive presidential election in the United States in which the incumbent never committed to a peaceful transition of power. Widespread protests of racial and climate injustices helped bring collective attention to underlying root causes and opportunities for action.

¹¹ Somatic practitioners often use declarations as a practice to support embodiment of desired possibilities. Chapter 7 of *The Politics of Trauma* explores the articulation of declarations and commitments as powerful speech acts and offers practical exercises.

most beautiful examples of emergence in self-organizing systems—happens when fellows in a flock observe three simple flight principles. With only three rules to keep in mind, they can navigate together with mutual flourishing (brown, 2017). Most often for me, the best remedy for deep soul-ache and persistent questions is to get outside, return home to my body, and move into reconnection with nature. And so it was that I headed off in August 2020 with my partner, stepson, and adventure-pup, Charlie, for a weekend backpacking trip in the Kenosha Pass section of the Colorado Trail.

Reflecting on my experiences as an environmental justice activist, scholar-practitioner of regenerative design and development, and student of urban ecology, enlivening ideas and words flowed through my consciousness for hours, step after step on the trail. A plethora sounded complementary to liberty—diversity, equity, dignity, humility, unity, synchronicity, sovereignty, simplicity, complexity, serendipity, equality, fraternity, sorority.

Later, unable to sleep under the power of a bright, full moon, three principles that powerfully animate life in living systems clicked into formation, gently tugging at each other in a triangle: liberty, reciprocity, and integrity. Suddenly, I felt energy burst through the triangle and ripple throughout my whole body. There was something to this unity of tensions among these distinct, yet interrelated principles!

Reciprocity animated life all around me. The sun freely gave its gifts of light during the day, and the leaves of the aspens and needles of the pine trees gladly received it for their own nourishment and growth. In turn, they passed the gifts on through their shady boughs, protecting many other beings from the sun's alpine intensity, while providing clean, breathable air for animals like me. Moreover, as forest ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014, para 11) explains, reciprocity is the process by which living beings keep the gifts of life in motion:

Reciprocity—returning the gift—is not just good manners; it is how the biophysical world works. Balance in ecological systems arises from negative feedback loops, from cycles of giving and taking. Reciprocity among parts of the living Earth produces equilibrium, in which life as we know it can flourish. When the gift is in motion, it can last forever. Positive feedback loops, in which interactions spur one another away from balance, produce radical change, often to a point of no return.

As we exercise reciprocity—by practicing gratitude and connecting to the living world co-conspiring around us—we cultivate an *appreciative gaze* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Ghaye, 2010; Kimmerer, 2015; Macy & Johnstone, 2012). We begin noticing an abundance of gifts and strengths flowing around and within us, previously hidden from view. We begin recognizing the generous spirit of those who give these gifts and keep them in motion. We begin to remember that rather than being alone, we are in fact deeply connected in kinship with the web-of-life. The myth of scarcity loses its hold upon us.

Integrity speaks to the healthy state of an integral whole—where the whole is greater than the sum of its diverse, essential, individual parts. There are structures (usually born of tension¹²) that animate such life, allowing diverse forms of aliveness to find their niche and play their part without compromising the aliveness of other parts. On the Colorado Trail, ground rules offer essential structure, including “take only photos, leave only footprints.” Visiting human beings abide by these agreements and support the integrity of the trail community and whole ecosystem.

As we exercise integrity—practicing compassion and loving-kindness—we cultivate a *compassionate gaze* (Campt, 2020; Greenberg & Turksma, 2015). We begin noticing all the sensations moving within our body, greeting them, acknowledging them, and allowing all to belong. As we sit with our own suffering and hold it within the spaciousness of our compassionate gaze, we envision and invite wholeness and healing. As we grow our capacity to hold ourselves in awareness that we are but one small part of a larger whole of creation, we grow our capacity to include others in our compassionate gaze; eventually even those who we have been conditioned to see as our enemies. As we grow our capacity to envision the dynamic wholes in which all beings belong, we grow our motivation and capacity to alleviate suffering and enact liberatory structures (Cunningham, 2021).

Liberty honors the innate dignity, vitality, and freedom of expression of the diverse beings who contribute to flourishing ecosystems. Beyond the rights of human beings, liberty speaks to the rights of nature, and the leadership of more-than-human beings in ecosystem governance.¹³ On the trail, human and more-than-human beings alike were all free to breathe, participate, prosper, and realize our unique potential as kin in the web-of-life.

As we exercise liberty—attending to our breath and practicing decolonial mindfulness¹⁴—we cultivate an *open gaze* (Hanh & Khong, 2002; Scharmer,

¹² Dr. Martin Luther King and Buckminster Fuller both emphasized the importance of using techniques to generatively engage tension to support integrity. As Fuller was known to emphasize, “Tension is the great integrity.” The capacity of living systems to engage tension and establish healthy boundaries has been a hallmark of our diverse and abundant co-evolutionary history. As King noted in his Letter from Birmingham, “I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth.” Tension is part of healing.

¹³ For a beautiful expression of liberty practiced by more-than-human beings, see Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2015) chapter “Maple Nation” in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

¹⁴ The word “decolonial” is used to modify “mindfulness” and highlight critical blind spots. Intersectional structures of oppression tied to the history of colonization are often perniciously hidden from view, yet persistently active. We also use “decolonial” to signal the importance of decolonial and Indigenous scholarship in supporting essential shifts of consciousness (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; Santos, 2017; Simpson, 2013; Smith, 1999). We maintain that awareness-based practices are essential to disrupting structural oppression (Cunningham, 2021). Yet, we also

2009). As we practice noticing, allowing, and suspending our automatic voices of judgement, cynicism, and fear, we cultivate our capacity to show up fully present, with our minds, hearts, and will open. With an open gaze, we can connect to our deepest, most authentic desires and the co-creative possibilities that want to emerge through us in the moment, individually and collectively in support of our co-evolution (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

These principles—the essence of vitality—began to settle within me. I sensed them all around me in the aliveness of my environment. I could find them in the patterns of my past community development work. I remembered them in stories from liberatory literatures and lineages. I could feel them gently tug upon each other, in dynamic tension and balance.

As I began to visualize the Vitality Triangle as a compass, I realized its cardinal principles must be guided by question marks rather than arrows. Question marks invite us to embrace uncertainty as a gift and keep ourselves open to adventure, so we may intentionally adapt and co-create together. Moreover, powerful questions catalyze insight, innovation and action by guiding our attention while inviting our curiosity, courage, compassion and creativity (Vogt et al., 2003).

Powerful questions can help us get *unstuck*. As Fran Peavy has said, “questioning breaks open that stagnant, hardened shell of the present, opening up options to be explored” (Vogt et al., 2003, p. 8). Donella Meadows (1997) asserts that this willingness to surrender to “not-knowing” also happens to be the most powerful place to intervene in a system to effect transformative change. The guiding question marks invite us to open our senses to the living world moving within and around us.

When we activate the three principles of vitality in living systems with powerful questions, we can expand our awareness beyond the limits of our personal egos and begin to see patterns connecting us to the larger ecosystems of which we are part; the Vitality Triangle supports shifts from ego-system to ecosystem awareness (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

acknowledge that awareness-based practices can be complicit in maintaining abusive systems by making them more tolerable (Haines, 2019).

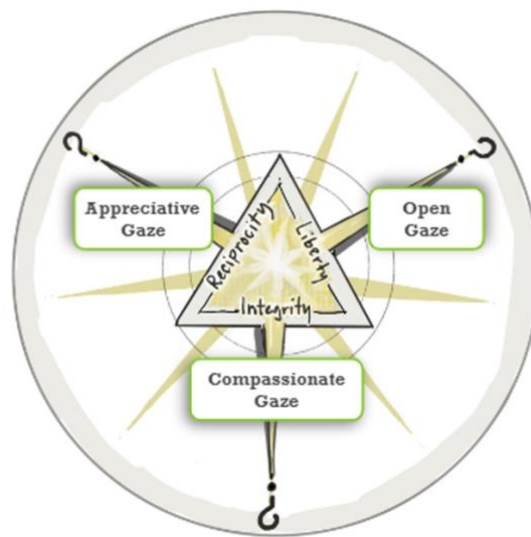


Figure 2. Gazes of Ecosystem Awareness (Walsh and Lane, 2022).

As we cultivate an appreciative gaze, compassionate gaze, and open gaze (Figure 2), we expand ecosystem awareness, increasingly transcend our blindspots, and see new opportunities for emergent strategy¹⁵ to regenerate abundance. We can become part of the greater whole, not set apart and isolated. The Vitality Triangle offers guidance on this path.

What is Mine (and Ours) to Do? Navigating Transitions

What does the Vitality Triangle look like in action? How can one use this inner compass to embody, embed, and emplace regenerative vitality into the living systems of which we're part? In this section, we offer a firsthand account from Elizabeth about her experiences using the Vitality Triangle to navigate change while living as a neighbor in the West Colfax neighborhood of Denver, Colorado, USA and shaping the West Area Plan through the City and County of Denver's Neighborhood Planning Initiative between 2018-2023. Elizabeth primarily used the Vitality Triangle as an inner compass to guide her personal praxis. Over the course of her collaborative work, the Vitality Triangle also supported the collective praxis, both implicitly and explicitly.

¹⁵ In referring to emergent strategy, we center the work of adrienne maree brown and her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*.

Embodying Regenerative Vitality: Showing Up as a Grounded Neighbor

Upon moving to the West Colfax neighborhood in Denver in 2018, I quickly grew to love my neighborhood and neighbors—and also became aware of the immense challenges we faced, including rapid gentrification, persistent food insecurity, and the hazards of a car-dominated environment. Drawing from past experiences working in contested, gentrifying landscapes with histories of environmental injustice, I began to discern *what's mine to do?* through active participation in my new home.¹⁶

In 2019, I represented the West Colfax Association of Neighbors (WeCAN) in a PhotoVoice project initiated by The City and County of Denver's department of Community Planning and Development in collaboration with the University of Denver (DU). This PhotoVoice project launched the planning process for the West Area Plan, a community-guided, 20-year plan for the future of the West Colfax, Sun Valley, Villa Park, Valverde and Barnum neighborhoods. Most of these neighborhoods have a history of environmental injustices related to past patterns of residential and industrial development.¹⁷

Throughout the project, we neighbors gathered to share photos and stories in response to two key prompts: *What is unique about your neighborhood?* and *What should the city invest in for your neighborhood?*¹⁸ These questions reflect an asset-based and desire-based approach to community-engaged research, in keeping with principles of reciprocity and liberty. This process cultivated ecosystem awareness in myself and others. Not only did I learn about nearby neighborhoods, but the story-sharing process also connected me to my neighbors in a way that allowed me to see myself as part of a whole. Months later, I even joined the DU team professionally!

And then, on March 17, 2020, the pandemic struck, quarantine ensued, and all was disrupted.

How does one create trusting relationships and community connection when even knocking on a neighbor's door presents a threat to health and safety? How can we build community and self-organize when we can't even come together around a table? Even if we could overcome logistical challenges and the digital divide, can zoom rooms substitute for in-person connection?

Each project I was part of required relationship building and powerful conversations; mandated physical isolation appeared as a formidable obstacle.¹⁹

¹⁷ For an exploration of the history of this neighborhood's growth, please see <https://valverde-movement-project-dugis.hub.arcgis.com/pages/valverdes-past>.

¹⁸ See <https://campuscitypartnerships-dugis.hub.arcgis.com/pages/west-area-plan-photovoice-project> for further information.

¹⁹ For further exploration of these core challenges, see (Muñoz et al., 2021).

Physical presence aside, embodied presence also became a significant challenge. Fear and anxiety mounted as the pandemic unfolded, making the possibility of cultivating trusting relationships even more difficult, especially across lines of social privilege.²⁰ With the day-to-day emergency survival needs of households facing exacerbated threats of food, housing, and health insecurity, there was little time or capacity to move forward with the long-range, visionary planning or systems-change initiatives my co-conspirators and I had been planning.

I felt lost. Loss, grief, and despair settled into my body. Nothing seemed to work, and I felt powerless to make things better, to reduce suffering. As the apocalyptic year uncovered the underlying systemic structures of social oppression and ecological devastation, each action I took seemed inconsequential within the larger cataclysmic landscape.

It was while I was experiencing this abyss that the Vitality Triangle emerged during the hike on the Colorado Trail in the summer of 2020. Far more than teaching me something new, it became a tool that pointed me back to principles and practices that were already true, or self-evident to me, inviting me to remember. This remembering was beyond just a thought, inviting me to remember my way into connection with my body, my community, our home.

I quickly learned that this kind of remembering takes practice. Inspired by generative somatics practitioners Staci Haines and Prentis Hemphill, I developed a new somatic centering practice to support me in embodying the vitality principles and I began incorporating it into my daily life.²¹ This daily practice grounded me and grew my capacity to show up fully present as a West Area neighbor and academic colleague, in zoom rooms and in person, alike. As I expanded my capacity to be fully present in tumultuous times, I became more adept in engaging conflicts and navigating complex power dynamics. The inner guides the outer, as we embody the world we hope for.

Embedding Regenerative Vitality: Sensing as a Whole

Synergistically, the Valverde Movement Project (VMP) launched in 2021 as a collaboration of the Valverde Neighborhood Association (VNA), city and regional government, university researchers, and non-profit organizations. Through my participation as an engaged neighbor in the West Area Plan, I had cultivated relationships with all these partners. Through my professional role at DU, I helped convene them to form VMP. As such, VMP opened an opportunity for me

²⁰ This personal experience was reflected at a macro-level as well. Natural and climate disaster may awaken what Rebecca Solnit calls “emergency hearts” and bring out the best in people, pandemics do not. They also hit the poor hardest and inflame class divisions, as David Brooks noted (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>).

²¹ To explore these practices, please see [bit.ly/VitalityTrianglePractice](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>.

to use the principles and practices of the Vitality Triangle to help bring new teams to life and guide community-engaged, transdisciplinary action research within the Valverde neighborhood of West Denver.

Related to its history of industrial land use, disinvestment, and other forms of environmental injustice, Valverde was disproportionately affected by the pandemic and experienced the highest COVID19 hospitalization rates in Denver during 2020.²² VMP launched to expand community health and wealth in Valverde through infrastructure investments and land use planning. Recognizing that new investments (e.g., in public transportation and green infrastructure) have triggered involuntary displacement associated with gentrification, VMP partners sought solutions that would support community-rooted health and wealth without displacement.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded a CIVIC Innovation Challenge planning grant to a team of researchers that I helped assemble from the University of Denver and University of Colorado at Denver to support VMP through May 2021.²³ With this support, VMP partners set out to develop and implement an intersectional, asset-based, transdisciplinary, community-rooted approach to mobility system research and design, as part of stage two application for an additional \$1 million to implement community-identified mobility solutions. The Center for Civic Engagement to advance Scholarship and Learning (CCESL), where I worked at DU, was responsible for designing and implementing civic engagement processes.

In this capacity at CCESL, I employed the Vitality Triangle to embed regenerative vitality in VMP's organizational culture in two key ways: (1) cultivating a trusting and high-performing team of VNA leaders, students, and faculty comprising our core engagement team, and (2) guiding VMP's approach to intersectional, community-engaged research and "regenerative mapping."

Cultivating a Trusting, High Performing Ecological Whole

At CCESL, we are committed to moving "at the speed of trust" with our community partners.²⁴ At the same time, our contract required completion of a

²² To explore the data, please see <https://coloradosun.com/2020/08/02/valverde-coronavirus-risk-redlining-denver/> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html> and <https://www.cpr.org/2020/06/23/the-durability-of-redlining-in-denvers-past-is-shaping-coronavirus-hot-spots-now-researchers-say/>.

²³ In the summer of 2020, I helped convene a team of academic, community, and public-sector partners and write the research proposal for VMP through NSF's newly launched CIVIC Innovation program.

²⁴ The term "speed of trust" was first popularized by Steven Covey through the 2006 publication of his eponymous book, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*.

robust community engagement process within a four-month period while under quarantine in the Denver neighborhood hit hardest by the pandemic. The Vitality Triangle then became both an inner and outer framework for action. Navigating with the Vitality Triangle, we were able to move as quickly as necessary by building real trust.

For example, in hiring university students to work on the project, I explicitly used the Vitality Triangle to guide formation of our research team and its specific ethical and organizational structures. From the original interview process through our weekly team meetings, I used guiding questions inspired by the Vitality Triangle to embed these core values into our team culture, discover teammates' personal passions and gifts, and co-create structures to support our workflow. Cultivating reciprocal, integral, and liberatory relational dynamics within the academic team grew our capacity to cultivate such dynamics with our community partners from VNA as well. Embedding vitality takes practice.

Practicing *reciprocity* in the formation of our community-university partnership with VNA leaders, our research team named our core research commitment as the development of mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships with all community partners. We expressed our belief that actionable knowledge emerges *through* these relationships. We and VNA leaders acknowledged that power and privilege dynamics between academic and community partners are often challenging, and we committed ourselves to developing relationships rooted in mutual support, solidarity, and appreciation of partner strengths. Our academic team expressed our own concerns about research practices that come from a deficit-mindset and talked about how our asset-based approach shaped the PhotoVoice project with the West Area Plan, and in other projects. We also shared some of the additional gifts we anticipated being able to bring to the table, including translation support, website development, graphic design, and event support.

Practicing *integrity*, the DU team committed to designing all activities to contribute to the long-term strength of VNA, recognizing that as researchers we would serve as one part of a larger integral, functioning whole. Together with VNA leaders, we co-created a culture of consent with open and honest feedback and communication that we held in confidence within the group container. Early on, we collectively brainstormed ways the DU team could contribute to VNA through our partnership, including organizational capacity building, community building events, and joint flyer development and distribution. While Institutional Review Boards hold academics to a standard of “do no harm,” we committed to

In 2017, adrienne maree brown included this term in her 7th principle of emergent strategy, “Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.” CCESL embraces “emergent strategy” as defined by adrienne maree brown in its organizing work (<https://academicaffairs.du.edu/ccesl/opportunities-students/knowledge-skills-commitments>).

working collaboratively and adaptively to contribute to collective wellbeing as a matter of academic integrity. Together, we also co-created organizational structures to support us in fulfilling our priorities. We agreed upon a weekly meeting time for zoom meetings and created structures for joint agenda-setting and shared file organization.

Practicing *liberty*, we created an open conversational environment where VNA leaders felt free to speak their truths, express their hopes and fears, and relay stories from the past. By holding this open space for authentic communication, we learned about ways in which past academic partners—even from our own institution—had betrayed trust and left messes in their wake. We also learned about VNA’s top aspirational priorities for 2021, including growing their *Hey Neighbor* e-newsletter distribution list, building community, expanding language justice in their multilingual neighborhood, strengthening a sense of identity around “Valverde Strong!”, and supporting COVID-19 relief efforts.

The quality of our early conversations and the capacity we and our community partners demonstrated for engaging tension with curiosity, compassion, and courage were essential in establishing a foundation of trust. Consistent follow-through, open communication week-to-week, and flexibility allowed us to intentionally adapt together in a rapidly changing environment.

When an opportunity suddenly arose to support a State-sponsored vaccination clinic, the research team rallied and designed and printed tri-lingual VNA fliers with a QR code to connect to an online form to sign up for the VNA newsletter. VNA leaders and researchers hit the streets to get the word out, while getting to know each other in a COVID-safe manner. Conflicts inevitably came up, and we grew our collective capacity to engage tension and respond with care and intention.

Co-Sensing through Intersectional Action Research and “Regenerative Mapping”

As previously named, a core aim of VMP’s commitment through the NSF CIVIC Innovation Challenge was to develop and implement an intersectional, asset-based, transdisciplinary, community-rooted methodology for mobility system research and design. In pursuing this goal, VMP’s academic and community partners co-created a culturally responsive approach designed to name harm, center joy, and build on collective strengths of numerous individuals and organizations, especially those leading on the frontlines of community resilience.

How we look at the world matters, as we know, and the acts of mapping social realities can not only *reveal* social vulnerabilities but also reinforce power dynamics that generated them to begin with (Wisner, 1993). Decades of social vulnerability mapping have made vulnerability to displacement legible, yet gentrification continues (Chapple & Zuk, 2016; Richardson et al., 2020). Critics observe that vulnerability mapping risks framing marginalized people solely as victims, while methodological constraints generally fail to (1) center community

knowledge and strengths enabling resilience, (2) identify intersectional oppressions and name them as such, and (3) advance community activism (Jacobs, 2019). These constraints limit the potential of vulnerability mapping to cultivate the collective knowledge and power required to address the challenges facing communities on the frontlines of displacement struggles.

To overcome the common pitfalls of social vulnerability mapping, we developed a set of “regenerative mapping” techniques intended to support development without displacement. As revealed through a more detailed case study of the Valverde Movement Project (Walsh et al., 2023) and reflected on the Valverde Movement Project website,²⁵ regenerative mapping techniques can help cultivate community connection, ecosystem awareness, and collective power required to advance systems change. While most of these techniques are not new, per se, regenerative mapping emphasizes that the quality of *awareness* we bring to our application of cartographic techniques shapes the quality of our outcomes. Shifting our cartographic gaze to include awareness-based practices that support ecosystem awareness, these regenerative mapping techniques include:

- Asset mapping, drawing upon awareness-based practices cultivating an *appreciative gaze* and the field of Asset-Based Community Development (Emery & Flora, 2006; Ghaye, 2010; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993);
- Story mapping, drawing upon awareness-based practices cultivating an *open gaze of decolonial gaze* and the field of participatory GIS to disrupt oppressive, limiting narratives and replace them with empowering storylines (Lung-Amam & Dawkins, 2020); and
- Promise mapping, drawing upon awareness-based practices cultivating a *compassionate gaze* and the field of restorative justice to contrast past promises with present conditions, enabling communities to hold officials accountable to well-intentioned plans (McSorley et al., 2021).

²⁵ See <https://valverde-movement-project-dugis.hub.arcgis.com/>

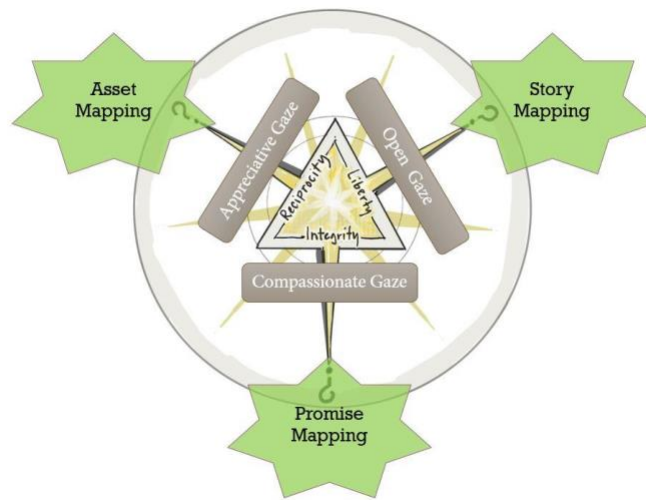


Figure 3: Ecosystem Awareness and Regenerative Mapping (Walsh & DiEnno, 2022).

These techniques (see Figure 3) came to life together at Valverde Movement Fest (VMF), hosted at the end of the four-month planning period. Held April 24, 2021, VMF was a COVID-safe, outdoor, intergenerational, multilingual community celebration attended by more than 100 residents, several nonprofits, and city planners leading the West Area Plan. Folklórico dancers, prizes, and free food from a local food truck set a celebratory tone, while interactive, intergenerational regenerative mapping and story activities engaged neighbors in collaborative efforts to understand shared challenges and opportunities in the neighborhood.

Although the Valverde Movement Fest was the culmination of the NSF planning grant, in other ways it served as catalyst for ongoing systems change, cultivating new relationships and energy for VNA and revealing new priorities. Momentum and insights from VMF also translated into a new collective effort to name a neighborhood park after unsung champions of the Chicano Movement and community-builders in Valverde: Elaine and Fred Ulibarri. Denver City Council adopted the name change on November 7, 2022.²⁶

Emplacing Regenerative Vitality: Enacting Systems Change

VMP's public sector and nonprofit advocacy partners joined neighborhood leaders in Valverde and other West Area neighborhoods in advancing context-specific priorities in ongoing planning and policy initiatives to catalyze place-based, regenerative systems change. This has been most powerfully reflected through the City of Denver's West Area Planning process, both in how the city interacted with the community and how the community has become engaged with the city.

²⁶ <https://www.denverpost.com/2022/12/01/west-denver-valverde-neighborhood-ulibarri-park/>

First, The City and County of Denver requires an inclusive public process for all city plans, but city planners leading the West Area Plan realized that Valverde neighbors were significantly underrepresented in the public meetings, surveys, and other activities in their public process. By participating as VMP partners and incorporating findings from the CIVIC Innovation Challenge planning process into planning recommendations, city planners were able to ensure that the voices of otherwise underrepresented Valverde neighbors were heard along with all other West Area neighborhoods. Inclusive, equitable democratic process is what liberty looks like in practice. The VMP partnerships allowed a healthy, reciprocal flow of feedback.

Second, VNA leaders continued to serve on the West Area Plan Steering Committee throughout the planning process while cultivating cross-neighborhood partnerships for holistic systems change. More specifically, VNA leaders joined forces with other equity-focused neighborhood leaders to organize around an anti-displacement agenda for reparative and regenerative neighborhood planning. By September 2021, we were two years into monthly meetings that were almost completely virtual and rarely in a format that allowed two-way conversation with city staff, let alone deeper dialogue among participants. Community leaders began meeting together outside of city-convened meetings. We engaged in conversations spanning a global pandemic that disproportionately challenged the resilience of West Area communities and revealed underlying systemic structures driving long-existing health disparities. We were increasingly unwilling to “bounce back” to business as usual.

In the Spring of 2022, city staff publicly released a draft plan that appeared to follow a boilerplate template for past neighborhood plans designed to attract developers and private investment. We objected, exercising our liberty to voice collective concern. Speaking in a unified voice, we requested that city staff pause the process and revise the draft to reflect the community’s emphasis on centering equity and quality of life as the core goals of the plan. We observed that the Neighborhood Planning Initiative’s template was outdated, developed at a time when Denver was desperate to attract new development. The City’s new comprehensive plan for 2040 reflects public priorities for addressing intensifying threats of gentrification and climate change but offers no models or templates. An authentic West Area Plan would then not only support our own neighborhoods but would also serve other neighborhood planning efforts across the city going forward into 2040.

Perhaps in part because the planning process had been unusually collaborative, respectful, and trusting—even while engaging in difficult conversations about structural racism, climate change, and other wicked problems against a backdrop of political polarization—city staff responded by convening a Quality of Life Working Group (referred to hereon as “Working Group”). Through a series of eight weekly meetings gracefully facilitated by Senior Planner Valerie Herrera, the Working Group engaged in a deep-dive, co-creative engagement process. The Working Group tackled how the plan could

integrate quality of life priorities to address community-identified concerns related to gentrification and climate change. Harnessing our powers of curiosity, compassion, and courage while expanding our ecological awareness, we had the space to move beyond black and white thinking into nuanced, relational systems-thinking. This enabled us to generate concrete, strategic recommendations for catalyzing equity and ecological vitality in our neighborhoods for inclusion in the plan.

The Working Group also developed a ten-page “West Area Neighbors’ Planning Guide” to guide powerful conversations about the planning and development in our neighborhoods over the next 20 years.²⁷ We co-created the Neighbor’s Planning Guide to share our emerging vision of the solutions we really need—the solutions that make us whole—and of the false solutions typically offered, those solutions that may look good on the surface but fail to effect regenerative change.²⁸

We recognized that we were privileged in having had the opportunity to dive deeply into generative dialogue about complex challenges, moving beyond binary, polarized thinking. We wanted to extend this gift to others through a guide to powerful conversations through which other neighbors could explore root causes underlying interrelated problems. To support this inquiry, we included a page on “Facing History: Recognizing Patterns of Displacement” which explored patterns of displacement from colonization and genocide to foreclosure and gentrification. In exploring root causes, we also wanted to help neighbors explore underlying patterns and principles shaping our economic relationships and collective outcomes. In articulating *what makes us whole*, we declared:

Instead of relationships governed by extraction, exploitation, and exclusion, it’s time to embody the principles of integrity, reciprocity, and liberty, embed them in our organizations, and emplace them in our neighborhoods (p. 3).

Thankfully, city staff responded appreciatively to our efforts. The final West Area Plan includes the principles we identified to guide the plan on page 11 [see Figure 4].

²⁷ See “West Area Neighbor’s Guide: Opportunities for Reparative and Regenerative Development for the Neighborhood Planning Initiative: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ys0LQhicscOG1N7gm8EPTFF0O8Jj751C/view?usp=share_link

²⁸ We used the “Three Circles” tool developed by Gopal Dayaneni, Dave Henson, Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan, Jason Negrón-Gonzales, Mateo Nube, and Carla Perez through Movement Generation’s Justice & Ecology Project. See <https://movementstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Dare-to-Change.pdf>

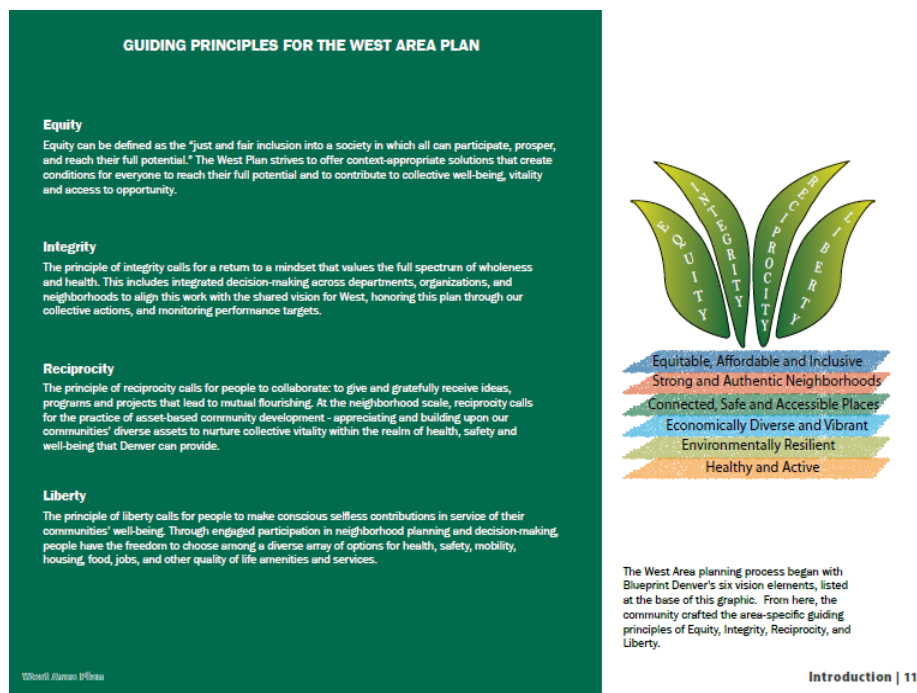


Figure 4. Guiding Principles for the West Area Plan (NPI, 2023, p. 11)

Adoption of the West Area Plan by a unanimous vote of Denver's City Council on March 28, 2023 marked a historic moment and represented the culmination of more than three years of an inclusive, equitable planning process. The West Area Plan became the first area plan in the City of Denver to (1) name past inequities arising from patterns of development responsible for genocide, gentrification and displacement, (2) prioritize strategies that redress harm, and (3) explicitly center quality of life and equity as the central aim of the plan and all its contributing sections. The West Area Plan brings recommendations that address quality of life issues associated with systemic inequality—such as food access, tree canopy, sidewalks and others—to the document's forefront, using them as an overarching guide for the rest of the document.

Recognizing that quality of life hinges upon ecological vitality and integrated planning, this neighborhood plan became the first in Denver to include an entire section devoted specifically to water and watershed planning, including recommendations to restore the South Platte River. Restoring the South Platte River will also ultimately require ecological restoration of industrial areas on the shores of the river in Valverde and Sun Valley, sources of ongoing environmental injustices.

Further emplacing principles of *integrity* and *reciprocity* in the landscape, the WAP recommends future investments in green jobs in a circular economy, as well as consideration of performance zoning to ensure that economic development contributes to community-rooted health and wealth. Moreover, as an emplaced expression of *liberty*, this plan recommends that inclusive, equitable public engagement processes continue through implementation, using practices like

Participatory Budgeting that can be used to strengthen civic infrastructure concurrently with investments in physical infrastructure.²⁹

Through the West Area Neighbor's Planning Guide and West Area Plan, diverse neighbors asserted a collective right to pursue wholeness, above and beyond individual rights to pursue happiness or property. This declaration of possibility is rich in (r)evolutionary potential and, as an officially adopted city plan, establishes a foundation for new beginnings. Despite the effects of a global pandemic, climate change, and a politics of trauma endemic to the Capitalocene epoch, collective power emerged and began to take root.

Reflections on Just and Regenerative Transitions: Denver and Beyond

The hopeful, joyful energies of celebration and culmination overflowed for those present at the adoption of the West Area Plan on March 28, 2023—elected leaders, city planners, and neighborhood representatives alike. Even so, all who gathered in Council Chambers and virtual zoom rooms were clear that after three long years of planning, completion of the West Area Plan does not mark an end. Rather, adoption is just a beginning as we work to repair harm and regenerate well-being.

We (Elizabeth and Jessica) remain well-aware that without ongoing robust collaborative action, business as usual will persist and continue to generate social inequity and ecological degradation. Much of the public testimony in Council Chambers invoked continuation of the positive momentum and rich spirit of collaboration and collective power that characterized the West Area planning process. These voices—diverse yet united—spoke to the potential of the West Area Plan to serve as a foundation for collective vision and action, not only for West Area civic players, but also for leaders throughout the city and region. As a piece of democratic writing, the inclusive, equitable process, big ideas, and long-term vision of the West Area Plan imbue it with potential and possibility. As an organizer of and participant in the statewide Planning to Thrive Colorado community of practice, Jessica sees the West Area Plan as an exemplar of the equity-centered, integrated approaches to planning Colorado greatly needs support just, resilient, thriving communities going forward.³⁰

²⁹ The City of Denver uses Participatory Budgeting to implement concrete infrastructure investments following general guidance from other NPI plans (see <https://risetogetherdenver.org/hub-page/denverPB> for updates).

³⁰ In the summer of 2022, I (Jessica) facilitated the Colorado statewide Planning To Thrive Symposium and presented the final address. I was struck by the many on the ground examples of how planning had *not* been done with an equitable or integrated lens, and was grateful to present this alternative planning model grounded in abundance See <https://www.spiritualitycollective.com/planning-to-thrive>.

As inspiring as the West Area Plan's principles, practices and policies for repair and regeneration may be, does the plan really have potential to free us from despair in the face of global forces driving gentrification, climate change, and other manifestations of contemporary life in the Capitalocene? Do its anti-displacement strategies stand a chance, when the nature of urban development itself stands on entrenched patterns of displacement, dispossession and even extermination endemic to global capitalism, fueled by the legacies of Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery (Altvater et al., 2016; Fullilove, 2004; Fullilove & Wallace, 2011; Harvey, 2009; Hern, 2017; Moore, 2017)? These patterns all co-evolved with modern democracy and its conceptions of sovereignty and property. As Hern asserts in *What A City Is For: Remaking the Politics of Displacement*, "any attempts to ameliorate displacement are doomed if not rooted in an aggressively equitable and decolonized politics of land, ownership and sovereignty" (2017, p. 30).

Although the odds can feel slight against the principalities and powers that be, we remain actively hopeful. In part, we (re)source our hope in the (r)evolutionary principles and powers of regenerative vitality embedded within the text of the West Area Plan and the emergent culture of those who helped write it.

In our direct experience, the principles and practices of the Vitality Triangle have helped us and fellow travelers embrace our individual and collective powers to heal and create the world anew, moment by moment, movement by movement. We have found that as we work to embody, embed, and emplace liberty, reciprocity, and integrity in the living systems we inhabit, we increasingly grow our capacity to disrupt scarcity consciousness, expand ecosystem awareness, and cultivate healthy relationships. In doing so, we participate in upward spirals of regenerative development, growing our collective power in ways that generate abundance (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Upward Spirals of Regenerative Vitality.

Informed by literatures and lineages of living systems and liberation, we posit that the principles, practices, and powerful questions of the Vitality Triangle can support just transitions from the death spirals characterizing the Capitalocene's economies of extraction toward the regenerative cycles of an economics of abundance. We acknowledge that emergent properties in all living systems can be both life-giving and deadly—consider, for example, the death spiral phenomenon by which army ants get trapped in a circular pattern of pheromones and walk in a circle until their death.³¹ The momentum of urban development can feel like this.

In keeping with many Indigenous governance traditions (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; Harjo, 2019; Kimmerer, 2015; LaDuke, 2009; Mihesuah et al., 2019; Nelson & Shilling, 2018; Simpson, 2011, 2017), we assert that we are endowed by our Creator with the capacity and responsibility to consciously choose how we self-organize in ways that care for all of creation. Consistent with living systems literature (Capra, 2005; Hes & Plessis, 2014; Meadows, 2008; Plaut et al., 2012; Regenesis, 2016), the Vitality Triangle offers a set of three principles to support reciprocal, integral, and liberatory relationships of care in self-governing communities. These are regenerative principles and practices that open possible pathways to decolonize our politics of land, ownership and sovereignty.

The principles of abundance over scarcity must be named, and we posit that the guiding principles of the Vitality Triangle can support practicing planners and other agents of systems change in making essential-yet-overlooked shifts in

³¹ See [npr.org/sections/krulwich/2011/02/22/133810924/circling-themselves-to-death](https://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2011/02/22/133810924/circling-themselves-to-death).

consciousness required to cultivate the collective wisdom and power that supports thriving communities. This enables us to move from piecemeal incrementalism to systemic transformation through the individual and collective practices that support shifts in consciousness from scarcity to abundance. The seemingly unstoppable momentum of the status quo can be halted, and new direction from and of community itself can emerge.

Closing Propositions & Invitations

Ultimately, determining whether a diagram is *true* or *not true* is an impossibility and waste of energy. The question is, does the Vitality Triangle prove useful to you and your co-conspirators in your pursuits of wellbeing in the dynamic living systems you call home? As urban planning scholar Scott Campbell (2016) asserts:

One cannot readily ‘test’ a diagram’s validity: Its primary value is to sharpen and change the way we think (and thus design, plan, and implement)... They need to be intuitive enough to connect ideas that were once unrelated, or compelling enough to displace deep-rooted assumptions. (p. 390)

The highest potential function of the Vitality Triangle, then, is to connect us with principles, awareness-based practices, and place-based traditions that can help us cultivate the collective awareness and power required to heal and co-create the world anew. Recognizing that we have arrived in the Capitalocene through proliferation of degenerative economic relations, we see pathways forward through shifts in our attention that support relationships rooted in regenerative vitality, guided by nature’s principles.

We are called to remember that the name *Holocene* was originally given to the geological epoch preceding the Capitalocene to mean “wholly new,” in honor of a new era of relative climatic stability conducive to diverse, thriving, regenerative socio-ecological communities. With awareness that the Holocene epoch holds all recorded human history, it is time for us to remember our way forward, embracing our (r)evolutionary powers to return to wholeness along pathways of holy, blessed unrest. We posit that the Vitality Triangle can help us remember our way forward through just and regenerative transitions, step by embodied step, moment by moment, movement by movement.

Small steps at home can feel futile, yet we posit that our everyday actions and interactions are where true power resides. Wheatley (1999) elucidates this theory of change in living systems, which Grace Lee Boggs has continued to build upon (as cited in Boggs & Kurashige, 2012):

[C]hanges in small places also affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness. Activities in one part of the whole create effects that appear in distant places. Because of these unseen connections, there is potential value in working anywhere

in the system. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness (p. 44-45).

In this spirit of connection, we invite—and challenge you—to experiment with the Vitality Triangle. Does it help you notice when you are entrapped in the politics of trauma or ideological certainty? Does it help you practice a politics of flourishing in your everyday interactions and navigate toward just and flourishing futures? We envision this compass as a navigation technology supporting a community of practice of diverse players seeking to co-create a just transition to equitable, regenerative economies. We invite you to join us, share your experiences, and intentionally adapt together.

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