

New Structures that Bring Us Alive



Photo by Steven Brewer

Kristin [recently asked](#), “What are your favorite examples of where collections of individuals and organizations are coming together in new ways to create a better world?”

My answer? [ContactCon](#). Last week I had the privilege of participating in the Contact Conference, hosted by [Douglas Rushkoff](#) and [Venessa Miemis](#). And no, this was not a conference about making contact with ET. Rather it was a conference about making contact with each other here on earth, exploring how this age of connectivity can continue to be a socializing, democratizing force.

The larger goal of this high-energy event was to answer the following question, together:

What concrete step can we take to release a true potential of the networked era?

We discussed “social evolution,” the emergence of networked organizations, social currency, and the rise of peer-to-peer communities. We explored the new structures for organizing that are only possible today thanks to the internet.

A few new projects emerged from this innovation jam, notably an effort to build a cooperative around a new social currency, as well as a peer-to-peer [Food Matching Project](#). Shareable’s Malcolm Harris [covered the event well](#).

What I’d like to emphasize is that while on the surface, you might think this was a technology event, it was extremely human-centered. There was a shared sense that the institutions and structures that thrived under our old communication technology systems did little to bring us together or bring us alive. The web has not only ushered in is a new era of contact and collaboration, it is also helping to bring people, communities, and organizations alive by providing a more human-centered (rather than institutionally driven) mode of connecting and a new structure for participation.

As a facilitator and designer of collaborative experiences, I think a lot about how structure (physical, organizational, urban) dictates our behavior. Just as the networked structure of the Internet is incredibly important for facilitating new contact, so was the structure in which the actual Contact Conference was hosted. We met in the beautiful Angel Orensanz Foundation, the oldest synagogue in Manhattan. As we all shared our wonder at how the structure of this old building seemed to energize our collaboration, one provocateur shared this quote:

New ideas need old buildings.

The source of this quote, [Jane Jacobs](#), was a revolutionary urban planner who advocated for livable cities and decentralized, community-driven planning. She viewed a city as a thriving ecosystem, and she attempted to apply what we know

about resilient, living, biological systems toward building livable structures in urban environments.

What gives me the most hope in unleashing a networked era of organizing is the opportunity to participate in ecosystems that are truly diverse and community-driven. These ecosystems, in turn, will be more innovative, resilient, and livable than the current structures we operate within. It's [biomimicry](#) possible at a whole new scale because of technology innovation.

I'm proud we were able to continue Jane Jacob's quest under a very old roof. And I am confident the contact that was made this weekend was just the beginning of a journey we're all on to help build new structures for participating that will bring our communities and workplaces more alive.