Introduction

Dear Mr. Potter,
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on September 1. We await your owl…

Questions exploded inside Harry’s head like fireworks and he couldn’t decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, “What does it mean, they await my owl?”

—J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone

This book represents a psychiatrist’s views on how to fix the American city. When I tell people I am a psychiatrist and I study cities, they look at me intently. “Psychiatry” and “cities” don’t fit neatly into one box.

I agree. This was not my plan. As a black woman, to some extent it was inevitable that I would be outside the box of American psychiatry. But when I started to do research, I wanted only to fit in. I thought I had found an excellent niche in the study of AIDS, an epidemic that has disproportionately affected people of color and that is spread by behaviors dear to the hearts of psychiatrists: sex and drug abuse.

But things happen, and two of those things happened to me. An ecologist, Rodrick Wallace, explained how the AIDS epidemic was linked to neighborhoods. Then an urbanist, Michel Cantal-Dupart, explained that, if I wanted to help neighborhoods, I had to treat the whole city.

“What does it mean, ‘treat the whole city’?” I asked him.
Shortly thereafter, I left behind studies of individual behavior (and my little niche) and started to study the ways in which American cities were the source of jeopardy for AIDS and a long list of other ills. Happily, my master’s degree in nutrition had used a systems approach and my training in psychiatry had included a good deal of family and systems therapy. Those became my starting points.

The thesis of systems therapy is that what are labeled “problems” are often better understood as “symptoms” of disorder in the mechanism of a larger whole. For example, when a toddler is having constant temper tantrums, the parents will bring him to the therapist saying, “We are so worried about his problem.” The family therapist will seek to understand the child, but will also start to examine how the whole family works. In no time at all, a deeper problem, like poor communication in the marriage, will likely surface, and that is what the family therapist will treat. Once that problem is treated, the toddler will stop being a problem and become a normal “terrible two.”

Cantal was applying the same systems logic to neighborhoods and cities. He contended that neighborhoods were seen as the problem, but what we really needed to examine was the organization of the whole city. It was there that we would find the issues that needed to be resolved. The search for the problem in the city was part of the work that I undertook. The other part was finding the interventions that would set the city on a better path. Just as I had ideas for ways to fix communication among couples, I wanted to have ideas for fixing the dysfunction in cities.

My ideas are anchored in many conversations with ecologist Rodrick Wallace. A fundamental lesson, which he has stressed on innumerable occasions, is that ecosystems are resilient. Ecological resilience, however, is not the happy we-bounce-back-from-disaster quality that people tend to think it is. Ecosystem resilience means that, after being disturbed, a system becomes stabilized again, but that stabilization can be achieved at a much worse point than before. Things do not go back to what they were before: they lurch forward from the point of disturbance. Evolution is a one-way street.

For example, a pond, polluted by fertilizer-rich runoff, may become turbid, and the life that was there may die out. This is called eutrophication. Once the pollution is stopped, the pond will remain in that state of
eutrophication unless interventions are made to restore it to a more life-supporting form.

This is hard to accomplish. “Hysteresis,” Rod said when I called to complain to him one day. “It’s a principle of physics that teaches us that the past conditions the future. It is hard work to overcome the past destruction of communities. This applies to human communities, like neighborhoods, in the same manner that it applies to ponds. It is a process that requires that you both stop the source of injury, for example, the run-off of pollution to the pond, and reanimate the life of the community. The upward spiral of recovery is shaped by the downward spiral of destruction.”

In this book, I argue that, for neighborhoods, the equivalent of the run-off of pollution is the sorting-out of the American city by policies that have divided us by race, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, and many other factors. The solution I propose is the restoration of the urban ecosystem’s wholeness. This requires the hard work of both stopping the source of injury and restoring the upward spiral of function, a transformation dragged down by the weight of past injuries.

I have identified nine elements of urban restoration that I believe are the critical tools for repairing our cities and returning our nation to health. These elements are:

1. Keep the whole city in mind
2. Find what you’re FOR
3. Make a mark
4. Unpuzzle the fractured space
5. Unslum all neighborhoods
6. Create meaningful places
7. Strengthen the region
8. Show solidarity with all life
9. Celebrate your accomplishments

These elements of urban restoration are drawn from urban restoration projects I’ve been following for years, some carried out by my research team, the Community Research Group, and some that I’ve learned about from the people who lead them. In order to create this book, I asked Michel Cantal-Dupart and nine other leaders—Terri Baltimore, Ken Doyno, Lourdes Hernández-Cordero, Molly Rose Kaufman, Bonnie
Young Laing, Michael Malbrough, Patrick Morrissy, Carl Redwood, and Dan Rothschild—to be co-storytellers, talking through what had happened and working on drafts of the manuscript with me. This co-storytelling resembles oral history, except that the medium for collaboration was not the transcript of an interview, but the actual chapters for this book. Happily, e-mail and telephone calls could augment face-to-face meetings with my ten collaborators.

My confidence that we can have great cities comes from France. I number among the legions of African Americans who have taken to heart their time in France and used it as a lens for considering how life at home might be improved. To me, sitting in a café in Paris, dipping my fingers in a fountain in Aix-en-Provence, or walking alongside the ocean in Capbreton have been moments of civility, beauty, and humanity that proved that cities could be quite different from the traumatized and underfunded urban centers in which I function in the United States. But it is watching the city of Perpignan grapple with sorting that has really convinced me that urban restoration is possible.

Drawing lessons from events that unfolded in many different places and in many different times requires attention to rhythm and a keen eye for movement. I have tried to supply these, but I am depending on you, dear reader, to complete the task. Indeed, this is a book that requires you to complete it. It is a working book—a book about making the city a better place. I hope you will let it sit on your desk and become worn with time and consultation. I hope you will return to these stories, as I have, and draw ideas and comfort for your own work.

I also hope that you come to see how these nine elements of urban restoration work together. I was going over them with Cantal while working out how to best translate them into his lexicon of urbanism, when suddenly his face lit up.

“You need to get a photograph of the Pittsburgh Steelers football team!” he exclaimed. “They understand the nine elements of urban restoration! Think about it. They have the city in mind—they understand that all the parts of their team have to work together, they understand their fans and their opponents, and they think about the whole city around them and how they will reach it as they play their games. They get it. They think
about having a program—they *know* what they’re *for*—they’re going to win the Super Bowl. They are focused and they achieve their end!

“And what do they do at the end?” He looked me deep in the eyes and nodded knowingly. “They have a party! A million people in the streets of Pittsburgh celebrating the Steelers.”

He pulled out his tablet and began to search for the ideal image to convey the Pittsburgh Steelers as the epitome of the nine elements of urban restoration. He finally found a dense action shot in which a black player had jumped into the air to catch a ball while his teammates pushed the opposition out of the way so he could run to the goal.

“There it is! That’s the nine elements of urban restoration, right there!” he pointed jubilantly.

I was even more surprised when Zoë Levitt, a young urbanist in Oakland, California, told me that I should visit a community garden in Brooklyn. “Community gardens,” she said in an email, “are the ultimate antidote to the sorted-out city, and there we see all the nine elements of urban restoration.

“In New York, where I first spent time in urban community gardens, I felt how transformative these places were. I saw how many of these gardens were the beautiful result of grassroots investment and rebuilding in the face of systemic disinvestment and despair. People had joined together with their neighbors, poured their sweat and love and labor into the earth and reclaimed what was rightfully theirs—true public space that was welcoming, healing, regenerating, and alive. Even as community gardens transcend the concrete jungle of the city, they allow you to have the whole city in mind. They almost make it more possible to understand the whole city because the second you step into a garden, you are met by an undeniable sense of nakedness about what the city means for all of us. In the garden, we confront the humbling reality that we are all living on this same earth with the same need for nourishment and respite and connection despite the false divides that have been imposed around and between us through the construction and demolition of our own relentless yet invigorating skyline.

“Community gardens represent a program of action—it takes a community of people to create and recreate a vacant lot into something positive, beautiful, and green—and they often go hand in hand with other
efforts to reclaim and rebuild urban neighborhoods. They make a mark on an otherwise vacant and deserted space. Gardens literally bring color, music, and life to desolate city blocks. They create a meaningful sense of place—a destination, an oasis, and a community gathering space—where before there was a non-place, or a negative place to avoid because of danger, desolation, or ugliness.

“Community gardens connect and draw people in from different parts of the street and block. I have met neighbors in community gardens whom I would not have otherwise met, as well as people from different blocks or neighborhoods. They literally create new life in cities by facilitating cultural, social, biological, and economic/commercial growth and interaction.

“Working together in the garden, you develop a sense of solidarity with each other and with other parts of the city. Gardens are where I first felt a sense of loyalty to the city of New York, as well as a commitment to work for a more just city. Not to mention, they are amazing sites for parties! Some of the most magical parties I have been to took place in gardens.”

I told Molly Rose Kaufman, my urbanist daughter, about the remarks Cantal and Zoë had made. Molly shook her head to agree. “It’s Ironworks, our own neighborhood settlement house, where you can easily see all the nine elements of urban restoration. We restored the building by listening to youth. We work together with all the people in the neighborhood to make it a meaningful place. We influence the region by inviting youth from all over our area and hosting them in our space. We show solidarity by having an urban farm next door. And at our parties, we build community and have fun.”

Cantal’s book, *Merci La Ville!* (1994), opens with the sentence, “*J’ai vu un pré devenir Auchan.*” I’d translate this as, “I saw a field become a big box store.” It sums up, for me, the dreadful feeling of things done wrong.

I got the idea that it would be lovely to know what the opposite was—how things might be done right and how urban alchemy might be captured in a sentence. Cantal, in one of our conversations, reminded me of some arrows he’d drawn on a plan that had great resonance in Pittsburgh (see Figure 10.2). “Those arrows became gold,” he said, “the transmutation
of the base element to the precious one. Those arrows helped strengthen a collapsing neighborhood.”

_J’ai vu une flèche animer une friche._
I saw an arrow give life to a collapsing neighborhood.
What have you seen?
What will you see?
What will you do?