Context and How It Matters: Mobilizing Spaces for Organizational-Community Sustainable Change

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Abstract:	There are growing expectations that organizations should contribute to the sustainability of our planet. These have increased recognition of relationships between organizations and their external communities and what they might accomplish together. However, such recognition does not extend to appreciation of the contextual dynamics inherent in organization-community relationships that affect their ability to reach common ground in their joint efforts. In this essay we explore how interpretive, relational, and spatial contextual features previously addressed within organizations play roles in joint organization-community sustainability efforts. We present an example of the multi-decade development of a local foods economy in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, that has been spearheaded by multiple communities and organizations. We show how an Appreciative Inquiry Summit, one of a set of large group interventions developed by Organization Development consultants, made use of the contextual characteristics we discuss to foster shared overarching logics that enabled collaboration. We conclude with a research agenda designed to explore how relational, interpretative and spatial contexts affect organization-community initiatives to accomplish sustainability, how planned change interventions might affect these contexts, and how such initiatives and their contexts unfold over time.

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Context and How It Matters: Expanding Spaces for Organizational-Community

Sustainable Change

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Sustainable Change

Abstract

There are increasing expectations that organizations contribute to the sustainability of our planet. These have increased recognition of relationships between organizations and their external communities and what they might accomplish together. However, such recognition does not extend to appreciation of the interpretive, relational, and spatial contextual dynamics inherent in such relationships that affect the success of their joint efforts. In this essay we explore how interpretive, relational, and spatial contextual features previously explored primarily within organizations play roles in joint organization-community sustainability efforts. We present an example of the development of a local foods economy in Cleveland, Ohio that was spearheaded by multiple communities and organizations and that to date has been somewhat successful, but still faces challenges. We show how an Appreciative Inquiry Summit, one of a set of Large Group Interventions developed by Organization Development consultants, made use of the contextual characteristics we discuss to foster collaboration.

Keywords

Sustainability, organizational communities, collaboration, green strategies, interorganizational coordination, organizational change, design and boundaries, social movements

Context and How It Matters: Expanding Spaces for Organizational-Community Sustainable Change

The last two decades have been quite eventful for the organizations the scholarly papers published by *Strategic Organization* address. In particular, there have been increasing, and appropriate, pressures on and invitations to organizations and institutions in the private, public and third sectors to develop sustainability credentials, agreeing to and delivering on initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, being concerned about how issues such as climate change and threats to biodiversity affect our planet and acting with these in mind (e.g. https://unglobalcompact.org/, Bartunek, 2022; Gibson, 2022; Young and Gerard, 2022).   As the British Academy asks (see https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/future-of-the-corporation/), how can (businesses) shift from "an ecosystem of policies and practices driven almost entirely by financial goals to one focused on purposes that solve problems"?

For much of its existence, *Strategic Organization* has taken a leadership role in addressing issues such as these.   For example, in 2011 Ansari, Gray and Wijen addressed the importance of scholarship addressing climate change. Vaara and Durand (2012) stressed the value of strategy research on topics of global relevance. Bansal and DesJardine (2014) emphasized the importance of sustainability. Recently, in a So!apbox Forum in *SO* dealing with "strategy and organizational scholarship from a radical sustainability lens", Jarzabkowski, Dowell and Berchicci. (2021) issued a "call to arms" to organizational scholars to "open our thinking about the broader, interdependent systems within which organizations operate".

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Relatedly, there have been been calls for organizations to pay more attention to the external

communities in which they are embedded (e.g. Marquis & Battilana, 2009; Rocheville, Keys &

Bartunek, 2021; Subramony, 2017). These are important, because organizations' work affects

their communities and because accomplishing major sustainability objectives requires joint

efforts. The ongoing development of hybrid working due to the pandemic has led to employees

being even more embedded in local communities (https://www.ft.com/content/abcb36c9-9099-

44f9-bcca-7cc723e53d20), adding to expectations of community engagement.

However, community engagement is difficult, and not always successful (e.g. Maher, 2019).

While multiple reasons for this are given, we will suggest one that is not adequately recognized.

That is *context*.

In this essay we explore the roles contextual features play in organization – community

interactions for accomplishing sustainability. We also highlight ways developed by Organization

Development (OD) practitioners more than a quarter century ago that can help organizations

more effectively work with their communities for needed changes in their shared environment.

In this way, consistent with the aim of this anniversary issue of *Strategic Organization*, we are

looking backwards to inform future approaches to organizational and strategic change, including

ways that OD initiatives may contribute to strategy (Bartunek, Balogun & Do, 2011).

We focus on three types of contexts -- *interpretive*, *relational*, and *spatial* – that help unpack

how organization - community engagement may work. We demonstrate their saliency through

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the example of a multi-community and organizational initiative in which a skillful use of contextual features facilitated cross-group interactions.

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The importance of context

"Context" has long been a focus of social science research, especially from interpretivist perspectives. Actions and interpretations are situated contextually, and meanings are not understandable without appreciation of the contexts from which they arise (Shalin, 2015). Explicit attention to the *interpretive* and *relational* contexts in which organizational actions and conversations take place is crucial to understanding how organizational members act (Balogun, Bartunek and Do 2015), as are dimensions of the spatial context (e.g., Kellogg, 2009).

Our prior empirical work has addressed relational and interpretive contexts and serves as a backdrop to this essay (e.g. Balogun et al 2015; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). In particular, we, with Boram Do (2015), studied how a how the UK senior management team of a multinational subsidiary responded to a European strategic change initiated by the company's top management with the help of an external consulting firm.   We showed there how the UK senior management team members became a distinct *relational and interpretive community*, making sense together of the change. We also showed how the shared experiences of the UK team were impacted by the local nature of its interpretive and relational contexts. We recognized (p. 961) that:

"The *relational context* includes whom, because of colocation and frequent

personal interaction, the senior management team sensemakes with to interpret

the implications of the change. It also incorporates other key change actors whom

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the management team sensemakes about because of physical separation and more

limited interaction, …. The *interpretive context* refers to both local, team specific

frames of reference and more general organizational frames of reference, which

the team members draw on to make sense of their change experiences and which

influence the meanings they construct."

In our study, colocation and distant location reflected the spatial context. That is, the colocated

UK senior management team made sense together, using shared frames of reference, about the

change project and the distant others (located on the European continent) initiating the change.

This led us to recognize that there are likely to be crucial differences between those who are

sensemaking *together* versus those *being made sense about.*

As has been the case with most organizational scholarship, our research focused on relational

and interpretive contexts only *within* the organization we were studying, albeit across locales.

Research in multinational organizations provides a model for us, since it recognizes the existence

of a multitude of interpretive, relational and spatial contexts in an organization due to the

embeddedness of different units in different locales (e.g. Meyer, Mudambi and Narula, 2011).

Yet there has not been equal attention paid to interpretive and relational contexts of organizations

and the communities in which they may be in relationship.

Organizational spaces

In recent years there has been growing attention to organizational spaces (e.g. Taylor and Spicer,

2007; Weinfurtner and Seidl, 2019). Spaces are "bounded social settings" (Bucher and Langley

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2016: 594) that bring together groups of people and enable particular patterns of social

interaction among work teams and groups.

Recently Weinfurtner and Seidl (2019) identified "three conceptual building blocks of space,

boundaries, distance and movement" that they considered "constitutive for the definition of

space" (p. 1). Briefly, boundaries "demarcate distinct organisational spaces and can thus

determine the inclusion or exclusion of actions" (p. 4). Distance refers to the separation between

particular positions within a particular space or between different spaces. *Movement* refers to

trajectories within and between spaces, enabling change in relationships and interpretations. All

spatial configurations have each of these characteristics to varying degrees.

As these conceptual building blocks suggest, spaces are in their essence relational. Their

boundaries enable sets of interactions among certain groups of people and exclude others,

determining who those in them interact with and who they don't interact with, and who are more

or less distant. Thus, spaces also foster interpretive contexts that arise from the on-going sets of

interactions in them, and may facilitate or impede change in interpretations and relationships

across groups.

Organizational spaces contain the relational and interpretive contexts that Balogun et al. (2015)

discussed. In our study, while senior level managers in continental Europe were initiating

change, the UK senior managers were very *distant* spatially from the senior level managers with

clear *boundaries* between them. There was little conversation between the groups and almost no

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interpretive or relational *movement* between the positions regarding the change. This lack of

movement reinforced quite distinct relational and interpretive contexts.

As the questions in Table 1 show, what was occurring in our study was one example of a broader

way of categorizing interpretive and relational contexts within the building blocks of space. The

Table suggests that the boundaries, distance and movement dimensions of organizational space

each pose particular questions to the interpretative and relational contexts. This is the case

regardless of whether the contexts are within one organization or encompass one or more

organizations and their communities.

Insert Table 1 here

Organizational spaces and change

Weinfurtner and Seidl (2019) presented an extensive and comprehensive set of types of

organizational spaces. Four that are particularly relevant for purposes of organizational change

are free space, relational space, interstitial space and reflective space. Free space and relational

space separate groups wanting to create change from groups who may prevent it. Interstitial

space and reflective space enable interactions of multiple parties involved in change.

Briefly, the concept of *free space* has been used to describe small-scale settings—"such as the

women-only consciousness-raising groups of the feminist movement or the black churches of the

Civil Rights movement—isolated from the direct observation of defenders of the status quo that

allow for interaction among reformers apart from daily work" (Kellogg, 2009: 659). Free spaces

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act as weapons of the weak, enabling interactions free from the control of elites (Rao and Dutta 2012).

Kellogg (2009) identified relational spaces as sites of interaction for all those, such a middle managers and subordinate employees, who advocate and support change, to create a collective to foster change. They enable isolation from those who may be more powerful and seek to prevent change. Thus, Kellogg saw these spaces as critical to change processes.

Interstitial spaces are sites of "microlevel situations of interaction between individuals" (Furnari 2014: 443) in which actors from different fields interact, often in informal settings. Such spaces enable coordination among diverse actors who then often become catalysts for change. Villani and Philips (2021) illustrate the use of interstitial spaces in technology transfer activities between universities and industries, an example that suggests possibilities for organizational-community interactions.

Finally, Bucher and Langley (2016: 594; 595) described reflective spaces as involving actors who may be dispersed across a routine, sometimes not even involved in it (social boundary). They are enacted in different places from where actors perform the routine (physical boundary), and allow interactions aimed at developing new concepts of the routine. They are marked by temporal boundaries of beginning and end perhaps also marked by symbolic boundaries such as labels (e.g., "orientation workshop").

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Free and relational spaces essentially incorporate distinct boundaries and distances between change agent groups and potential preventers of change in order to facilitate later successful change movement. Interstitial spaces and reflective spaces essentially reduce boundaries and distances between differing groups, and aim to create spatial movement from the interaction.

We will explore the roles of these types of spaces in a change initiative that has involved organizations interacting with community settings in order to accomplish sustainability in their shared geographic context. We will develop from this example how organizational change efforts may use space in a way that has not to this point been identified in scholarly studies in strategy, but that is very helpful for change efforts that extend beyond organizational boundaries (Bartunek et al., 2011).

Change involving organizations and their communities

In the material below, we will summarize Appreciative Inquiry as a type Large Group Intervention (Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011; Bunker and Alban 1997) aimed at fostering change. Then, based in large part on Bartunek and Mohrman (2022) and Mohrman, Parker, Palacpac and Wilk (2016), we will describe the building of a local foods economy in Cleveland, Ohio and northeast Ohio more broadly from the 1990s through the present, a project aimed at moving towards more ecologically and socially viable ways of providing healthy food to the community. We will show the role of a form of appreciative inquiry, AI Summits (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffen 2003), in this change initiative. After presenting the change initiative we will consider its spatial features and interpretive and relational contexts and their implications for organization-community initiatives.

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A brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

AI, which was cocreated by David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) is one of the most popular planned organizational change methods in the world. Unlike many consulting approaches that center around what is wrong, it focuses and builds on the strengths of an organization under the assumption that focusing on strengths is more energy giving than focusing on problems. In addition, like many other large group interventions (Bunker and Alban 1997), change is not recommended or imposed by an outside consultant, but by those involved in dealing with an issue themselves.

Methodologically, AI starts with identifying a particular topic of inquiry (e.g. food sustainability). It then progresses through four phases, *Discovery* of the positive core of a system with regard to the topic, *Dream*, a results-oriented vision based on potential and purpose, *Design*, articulating a design to help achieve the dream, and *Destiny* or *Deploy*, which involves developing capacity actually to carry out the design (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). Though there are multiple ways to implement this philosophy, Ludema et al. (2003) developed a way to implement it in three-day sessions called AI Summits, by focusing in order on each of the four different segments with regard to a particular topic during part-day sessions

Sustainability background for the Local Foods project

Glavas, Senge and Cooperrider (2010) and Watterston, (2013) noted that Cleveland had been a booming industrial city during the early industrial revolution, but by the late 20th century was one of the poorest large cities in the US. Among other things, it had lost more than half of its

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population in the prior seventy years. At the same time, however, the Cleveland area was home

to "some of the most innovative organizations in sustainability" (Glavas et al., 2010: 28) and

multiple efforts were being taken to make it more sustainable as a city. As just one example,

Meyer-Emerick (2012: 53) described the formation of the nonprofit, EcoCity Cleveland, in 1992

(https://gcbl.org/projects/cleveland-ecovillage) that created a large number of sustainability

initiatives, including helping the city of Cleveland hire a sustainability program manager for its

office of sustainability.

Local farming initiatives

Starting in the 1990s there were several attempts to reinvigorate local farming in Cleveland, at

least in part as a way of using vacant lands in the city. Mohrman et al. (2016: 244; 247)

described, for example, initiatives taken by the North Union Farmers' Market association

(http://www.northunionfarmersmarket.org/), which has built "a channel of farmers' markets,

educating and certifying the growers to be local and to use safe growing techniques, and

handling the administrative, marketing, fund-raising, and regulatory tasks involved". Prominent

in this effort was the Cleveland Clinic, which "partnered with the North Union Farmer's market

association to bring markets to their healthcare campuses". As another example, in 1999

Countyside Conservancy, an NGO, helped begin the Countryside Initiative to help Cuyahoga

Valley National Park solve the problem of how to conserve the quickly disappearing rural

character of the Valley – the once vibrant farmsteads had "fallen to the plow of industrialization"

(https://countrysidefoodandfarms.org/history-and-mission/). As yet another example, in 2000 a

New Agrarian Center for traditional forming education was founded at Oberlin College, just east

of Cleveland (https://www.oberlin.edu/news/oberlins-george-jones-memorial-farm-natural-

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campus-resource). The center has developed ways of delivering and selling fresh food to needy

areas of Cleveland. Most of the efforts that have been undertaken have been volunteer efforts on

the part of the people and organizations involved.

Continuing into the early 2000s, as Bartunek and Mohrman (2022, p 45) noted. "a loose network

of civic, business, and city government leaders became involved in championing and providing

resources to support urban farming, removing legal zoning and other barriers and creating the

enabling conditions that allowed a variety of urban farming to begin." Despite these and other

cooperative activities cited in Mohrman et al (2016), there was still concern that the local

agriculture system was not reaching its intended aims, especially in terms of economic self-

sufficiency.

The Appreciative Inquiry Summit and its aftermath

In 2009 the Mayor of Cleveland, Frank Jackson, in conjunction with the Fowler Center for

Business as an Agent of World Benefit at Case Western Reserve University

(https://weatherhead.case.edu/centers/fowler/), convened what became the city's first annual

Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Glavas et al, 2010) as the kick-off to a decade-long project

referred to as Sustainable Cleveland, https://www.sustainablecleveland.org/.   Following an

extensive planning process, the three-day Summit took place from August 12-14, 2009, in the

Cleveland Convention Center.

The Summit had three goals: (1) develop a strategic plan for sustainability in the city; (2) design

tangible ready for market initiatives and prototypes; (3) build an infrastructure, a web of

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relationships and social capital necessary to carry out the work. "More than 700 people

representing all major stakeholder groups took part. Elected officials, CEOs, heads of

foundations and others took part fully for the three days. The mayor was there the entire time

and chaired much of the meeting. Diverse stakeholders were there, such as children, community

representatives, shop-floor workers and engineers" (Glavas et al., 2010: 28).

During the meeting, participants chose one of several working groups that would address

multiple sustainability issues in Cleveland. Issues the groups addressed included, among others,

Social Capital, Transportation, Health, Water, Sustainable Business Incubation, Green Building

and Local Food. These same groups developed initial action steps for the initiatives they were

addressing.

The City hosted annual summits at least through 2019, and starting in 2011 each summit had a

theme. The theme for the 2012 summit was the year of local foods, which gave a considerable

boost to those already working on developing sustainable farming. This theme "spawned

numerous working groups that tackled different aspects of local foods with varying results"

(Mohrman et al., 2016: 251).

During the decade of the 2010s, rural and urban farming initiatives continued, although many

were barely scraping by financially, relying in part on philanthropy, goodwill, and support from

institutions and government and operating on inexpensively leased land. Contrary to early

expectations, the efforts were not self-sustaining, though they had fostered links among those

with common interests.

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In 2015, Brad Masi, an Oberlin-based writer, filmmaker and agricultural development con-

sultant, who had been active in building many elements of the local foods system issued a food

collaboration assessment,

(https://www.neofoodweb.org/sites/default/files/resources/executive_summary_final_v2_9.15.15

_0.pdf) that indicated comparatively "high levels of network connections between communities

around the region."   This assessment accompanied a series of small conferences he helped to

organize in which over 150 participants from the region came together to examine ways to

increase collaboration to grow the viability of the local food chain to help it move toward self-

sufficiency.

Since that time, as Bartunek and Mohrman (2022) reported, a large number of partnerships and

entrepreneurial initiatives have emerged to leverage resources, achieve larger scale, and build out

a fuller, more diverse, and more sustainable local foods chain. For example, the Green City

Growers Cooperative in Cleveland was starting to approach profitability by 2017,

https://www.clevescene.com/food-drink/worker-owned-green-city-growers-is-on-the-path-to-

profits-while-giving-refugees-and-ex-cons-gainful-employment-5740258. However, as an index

of the complexity of this type of work, Green City Growers ran into considerable difficulty due

to COVID, and was sold to Local Roots Cleveland in 2022 (http://www.evgoh.com/gcg/), an

Indiana-based Company.

One organization that has remained particularly invested in the sustainable local foods effort is

the Cleveland Clinic

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(https://my.clevelandclinic.org/about/community/sustainability/sustainability-global-

citizenship/environment/sustainable-procurement#local-sustainable-food-tab). It has continued

its involvement in Farmers Markets, including at its main campus and especially for Cleveland

area residents in "food deserts". It also obtains as many of the ingredients for its foods as

possible from local farms and producers such as Green City Growers that use sustainable

practices.

Groups and outcomes

Although it is not possible in this essay to go into great detail, this is clearly an ongoing

initiative, one in which there are many different groups involved, some over long periods of

time, some for shorter periods of time. Further, the goals of the different groups for the project

have not always been identical. For example, Bartunek and Mohrman (2022) noted that *local*

governments have been interested in using tax money and land to revitalize the region and to

address the needs of the population; they hope that the local food efforts will be economically

sustainable. *Farmers* have been motivated to build a thriving, sustainable farms, while growing

and distributing healthy foods, such as through hydroponic greenhouses (e.g. Great Lakes

Growers (https://www.greatlakesgrowers.com/). Entrepreneurially oriented s*mall businesses*

such as lettuce tree farms (https://www.lettucetreefarms.com/ have worked to create profitable

market niches that bring together growers and consumers of local foods. *Community developers,*

churches and other NGO's have been interested in bringing healthy foods, urban agriculture, and

employment opportunities to underserved populations. Despite somewhat different (though

generally non-contradictory) emphases, groups have collaborated over multiple years.

Focus on locally made foods has become an embedded aspect of Cleveland's food economy

(https://www.freshwatercleveland.com/focusareas/localfoodeconomy.aspx), and some larger

urban farms have increased their size and scope of activities as well as their contribution to the

development of their surrounding neighborhoods. Even so, the system is not fully economically

sustainable as of this writing.

Contextual Lessons for extending organizational community boundaries to achieve change

We have summarized a complex initiative involving multiple organizations, communities, and

government settings over the course of decades. We can extrapolate lessons about interpretive,

relational and special contexts from this example. A summary of this discussion is shown in

Table 2, which responds to the questions posed in Table 1 and adds roles of free, relational,

interstitial and reflective spaces

Interpretive and relational contexts

The interactions necessary for initiatives like developing a local food economy require the

involvement of groups operating out of multiple interpretive contexts, as evidenced by the

illustrations of the different types of settings and aspirations we listed above. Hydroponic

farming requires different skills and thinking than does determining ways to feed underserved

populations, leading to different types of sensemaking.   A government's aspiration to revitalize

a whole region economically, while not inconsistent with serving the needs of food insecure

people, may well lead to very different types of priorities, as well as different sensemaking about

land usage.

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The initiative has involved multiple relational contexts, including farms in Oberlin, government groups in Cleveland, a world class health system and multiple non-profits, among others.   It is reasonable to assume that the groups involved were used to making sense together within their own boundaries, largely isolated from other groups. Yet, contributing together to the local foods initiative requires the groups to collaborate, at least to some degree. This is often not explicitly recognized as a normal dimension of organizations and communities collaborating to accomplish joint social goals, but it is important, and even more so when a collaboration has extensive aims and needs to extend over several years (let alone several decades).

Spatial contexts

The primary spaces occupied by the different groups of collaborators are quite different and distant physically, from farms associated with Oberlin College to vacant lots in poorer areas of Cleveland, to the Cleveland Clinic. However, even though they are separate physically and have different core emphases, their boundaries have had to be permeable in order to enable joint efforts.

Further, there clearly has been movement in frames of reference, especially among the groups that have stayed involved over extended periods of time, such as all those involved with the North Union Farmers market. This market has developed ongoing and evolving relationships with multiple groups, such as the Cleveland Clinic.

The Roles of Free and Relational spaces

From the perspective of the types of spaces involved in change, our description includes several

worthwhile features. Given the fact that groups involved are distant and typically carrying out

different types of activities on a day to day basis, there is actually relatively little available in the

way of free space and relational space for change unless groups operating out of different

interpretive perspectives join together. The challenge is to create free and relational spaces that

involve groups that have different statuses. The Cleveland Clinic collaborating with multiple

farmers' markets illustrates this, but it is evident that relational spaces available when groups are

dispersed both physically and interpretively and much more complex than within single

organizations.

The roles of interstitial and reflective spaces

Venues such as AI Summits are crucial. They provide both interstitial and reflective spaces,

occasions for different groups with some overlapping aims to meet together both informally and

formally. They provide informal (interstitial) opportunities for conversation, but they also

provide formal, structured and bounded reflective spaces (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 594). For

example, the AI summit we described here was enacted at some *physical distance* from where

actors regularly worked (the Cleveland Convention Center). There were *temporal boundaries*

(August 12-14, 2009) and *symbolic boundaries*, the beginnings and endings of the Summits.

Further, the summits fostered attempts to form joint interpretive communities (at least during

bounded time periods) and joint relational communities during these time periods when members

are in close physical proximity to each other. Of course, these conferences also involved very

large groups and ever-evolving settings, so that it was not a consistent group involved over time.

Nevertheless, they played crucial roles in enabling differing organizations and groups to get to

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know each other and work together. Unlike within one organization where some could resist

change, in these settings those not interested in the joint work could simply opt out.

The summits obviously did not accomplish a local foods network; as Mohrman et al. (2016)

indicated, the various groups and organizations involved have had to carry out a good deal of

hard work that involve making their own contributions. However, they played important spatial

roles.

Contexts and Space are typically not discussed as impacts of large group interventions such as

AI; the focus is usually on the substantive outcomes of working through the four phases.

However, interventions such as AI Summits do enable change groups to share contextual

features that can foster relational and interpretive movement across spatial boundaries.

Next Steps and A Research Agenda

The discussion here, even as brief as it is, suggests the importance of linking interpretive,

relational and spatial features much more with planned organizational change attempts such as

large group interventions. The Balogun et al paper essentially uncovered the existence of

interpretive and relational contexts in an attempt to determine why the UK managers responded

to the EU change that they did. However, the work summarized in our essay makes evident that

spatial features – especially features that separate and that link different groups, formally and

informally, inside and beyond their usual boundaries, play crucial, even if underappreciated,

roles in change by influencing interpretive and relational contexts. This is especially the case for

changes that involve links between work organizations and their surrounding communities, and

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despite the fact that context has not been particularly salient to change agents or to strategists in theory or practice.

Therefore, we propose a research agenda building on empirical work such as that of Kellogg (2009), Furnari (2014) and Bucher and Langley (2016) and extending outward to settings that involve organizations and their communities. Investigation should focus on the contexts from which participants come and to which they are returning, and what actually happens during large group interventions, the dynamics that occur among participants, how these may shape participants' relational, interpretive and spatial contexts, and how these affect the work that comes out of the intervention.

There are almost no studies that assess dynamics that occur during and evolve from large group interventions or similar types of change efforts; a paper by Worley, Mohrman and Nevitt (2011) is a very rare exception. Further it is likely that how successful such interventions are depends at least in part on participants' starting contexts and how skillfully intervention processes work with these contexts. Given the importance of the issues many such interventions address (e.g. Janoff, 2022), it is very important to study the roles contextual features play in change.

Conclusion

There is growing consensus that businesses and other organizations need to be much more involved with their communities in dealing with the sustainability of our world. However, there has been inadequate attention to the contextual features likely to foster productive involvement

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of this type. In this paper we have paid attention to some of these features, and shown how

important relational, interpretive and spatial contexts are.

OD consultants and organization scholars have often formed very different relational,

interpretive and spatial communities. However, if organizations are to collaborate with their

communities to foster the sustainability of our world, they will need to do so in practice, and

understanding how particular interventions help foster contexts that enable such collaboration is

very valuable for both scholars and consultants (Jarzabkowski et al (2021).   Just as there are

calls for organizations to move beyond their own boundaries in the service of a more sustainable

world, it makes sense for academics and consultants to move beyond our own boundaries to

learn from each other. This essay represents one step in that direction

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Table 1. Spatial dimensions in relation to interpretive and relational contexts

Spatial dimensions	Questions suggested regarding interpretive contexts	Questions suggested regarding relational contexts
Boundaries:	What are the frames of reference of different groups?	Who is being made sense with? Who is being made sense about?
Distance	How distant and separate are groups' frames of reference from each other?	How distant and separate are groups of sensemakers from each other?
Movement	How (un)changing are distinctions between groups' frames of reference?	How (un)changing are distinctions between who is making sense with whom and about whom are they making sense?

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Table 2 Spatial dimensions in relation to interpretive and relational contexts related to AI and the local foods initiative

Spatial dimensions	Local foods initiative interpretive contexts	Local foods initiative relational contexts	Roles of free and relational spaces	Roles of interstitial and reflective spaces
Boundaries	Different frames of reference held by local governments, farmers, small businesses, etc.	Ordinarily groups involved are in very different relational contexts. Large group meetings enable sharing	At AI meetings those who want to create change meet together	AI meetings provide bounded interstitial and reflective spaces
Distance	On the whole, distance between groups, but with some overlap related to overarching goals	AI meetings fostered the groups coming together; otherwise the default is separate relational contexts	At AI meetings the differing frames of reference are present	AI meetings reduce the psychological and physical distance of groups from each other
Movement	Based on the ongoing collaboration it is likely that groups' frames of reference come to overlap more over time.	Based on ongoing collaboration it is likely that at least some groups moved towards broader relational contexts	It is likely that interpretive and relational distinctions are reduced in AI meetings in which group members can talk with others with similar aspirations	At AI meetings participants have the chance to make sense both formally and informally with new people and groups

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Biographical Sketches

Jean M. Bartunek holds the Robert A., and Evelyn J. Ferris chair and is Professor of

Management and Organization at Boston College. She is a past president of the Academy of

Management, from which she won the career distinguished service award. She is also a past

Dean of the Fellows of the Academy of management, as well as a Fellow of the British Academy

of Management and the Center for Evidence-Based Management. She has served as an associate

editor of the *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Learning and*

Education, and the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Her primary interests center around

academic–practitioner relationships and organizational change. She has won awards for her

scholarship from the *Journal of Management*, *Human Relations*, and the *Journal of Applied*

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Julia Balogun is Dean of the University of Liverpool's Management School since 2015 as well

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School of Management and Associate Dean Postgraduate and Director of the Graduate

Management School at Lancaster University Management School, where she also held the

Professor Sir Roland Smith Chair in Strategic Management and the Directorship of the Centre

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Management Journal, Organization Science, *Journal of International Business*, *Journal of*

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Management Studies and *Organisation Studies*. Her book, *Exploring Strategic Change*, first

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Dear Ann

Thanks very much for your invitation to Julia Balogun and me to revise our paper for the special issue of *Strategic Organization*. In this letter we are describing the responses we have made to your and the reviewers' very helpful comments. Given the clarity of your letter, we will respond (in italics) specifically to the main points you made.

1. Develop the motivation in the light of the Anniversary Issue
I do appreciate the effort you already invested in connecting the argument of your essay to the mission of *Strategic Organization* (e.g., reference in first paragraph), given the positioning of your piece in an Anniversary Issue. Yet I think you might do more to link to the mission of the journal to publish work at the intersection of strategy and organization. For example, there have been several calls in the journal to broaden the focus to societal issues that you might refer to: see for example, the Special So!apbox Forum on Sustainability published in a recent issue: https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/soqa/19/3 that provides a context for this. You might also take a look at essays published in the SO! Social Issues Collection https://journals.sagepub.com/topic/collections-soq/soq-1-socialissuescollections/soq as well as a piece by Durand and Vaara (2012) in the 10th anniversary issue. I think it would help your case to argue that the journal is broadening its focus beyond internal organizational phenomena to societal issues that matter, and the processes that enable this. Your paper fits with that orientation, and this is great. Perhaps you could make more of this, by emphasizing that your paper will focus on the "how" this might be achieved – i.e., through the design of specific types of interorganizational and intersectoral spaces that enable and constrain relations and the interpretations that emerge within them (see also reviewer 1's "Big Picture" comment).

We have done that. We gone through multiple issues of SO and have cited multiple papers. What has been published in SO is actually very impressive. Thank you. On P. 2 we now say:

For much of its existence, Strategic Organization has taken a leadership role in addressing issues such as these. For example, in 2011 Ansari, Gray and Wijen addressed the importance of scholarship addressing climate change. Vaara and Durand (2012) stressed the value of strategy research on topics of global relevance. Bansal and DesJardine (2014) emphasized the importance of sustainability. Recently, in a So!apbox Forum in SO dealing with "strategy and organizational scholarship from a radical sustainability lens", Jarzabkowski, Dowell and Berchicci. (2021) issued a "call to arms" to organizational scholars to "open our thinking about the broader, interdependent systems within which organizations operate". We referenced the Jarzabkowski et al. paper again near the end of our paper.

2. **Do you need the Starbucks/ Aramark case?**
Both reviewers are questioning the value of the Starbucks/ Aramark case for what you want to argue. I must admit that I also struggled to understand what the point was of this case. I like as

does reviewer 2 (point 2) the distinction between spatial contexts that separate and those that bring together and I understand that this may be why you wanted to present the case. Are you trying to say here that separating (i.e. free and relational spaces) is not conducive of change that connects communities?

No, we definitely did NOT need that case. It is gone

3. Develop the analysis of the second case

The reviewers found the second case more interesting and intriguing and would have liked to see a more detailed analysis. Reviewer 1 notes for example, *"*I would clearly skip the first example, which does not say much new, and elaborate the Cleveland example, which is very interesting. However, it needs more depth to illustrate particularly the spatial-relational-interpretive dimensions. If you want to use a type Table 2, it would be much more interesting to see how you would analyze the second example." Reviewer 2 (point 4) similarly comments, "The example of the Appreciative Inquiry Summits is richer and works better for you. I suspect that it can be sufficient on its own, which will also give you more room to develop your argument. Perhaps you can develop a table around this example, instead of the Starbucks one, to explain what you would like scholars to understand from the three contexts and the four spatial types."

This has been the focus of much of our attention in our rewrite. We have given much more information about the local foods initiative as it has evolved over several decades and the role that Appreciative Inquiry played in it. We have also created a new table 2 that summarizes contextual dimensions of this case rather than the other one.

The case is now the focus of discussion from approximately p. 9 – 14, and we have also focused more on the Appreciative Inquiry summits. Thinking in terms of the summits opened up many possibilities for understanding context that we could only begin to explore here but that seem quite valuable to study further.

4. Clarify what spaces are actually doing

In developing your argument for the interest of taking a spatial lens, you could develop further on what shared spaces allow or prevent, and how the three dimensions (interpretive, relational, spatial) are inter-related (see specific points from reviewers 1 and 2).

We have tried a few different ideas here. What we ended up focusing on (p. 16f) more what was an intervention such as AI enables for spaces. This is completely unaddressed (not even thought about) in OD. It has also not been addressed in other types of change settings, but suggests important possible links between OD, strategy and responding to serious global issues. We do not have the data to be able to say with certainty what happened contextually within each group over time, but we have suggested that this would be a fruitful direction for research and suggested ways of approaching it.

5. Nail your message and establish a research agenda

Both reviewers are asking you to pinpoint more clearly your overall message at the end of the essay, and in particular to formulate a clearer future research agenda. For example, reviewer 1 comments, *"*It would be great to make a connection to your starting point, the growing importance of communities and the need for new models of how to enact planned organizational change in a new context for the future." Reviewer 2 adds, "Making more of that second example would provide the basis for you to come up with a stronger research agenda for future research. If you could articulate some questions or general guidelines for future researchers to take your three contexts and four spatial types seriously in developing a research agenda for studying how organizations engage in planned change in response to, or in engagement with, their communities. I'd expect this very thought-provoking essay to be taken forward by others." Please see what you can do to establish this agenda.

We have tried to do this better, including setting an agenda for change research (explicitly in p 19f, implicitly in prior pages). Reflecting on context opens up new ways of thinking about what happens in change interventions, especially those that are addressing significant world concerns. It suggests a lot that can be learned just from group dynamics when there are people from different contexts present. (Also, we're not making a big point of this in the paper, but reflective spaces and large group interventions have a lot they could contribute to each other.)

5. Technical details

For the next version, please also do the following:

- Include biographical notes of the authors at the end of the manuscript (< 150 words ending with your email addresses) *(Done. And we added our ORCID numbers)*
- Ensure that you follow *Strategic Organization's* style guide which is accessible from the *SO!* Web page under submission guidelines: https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/SOQ#ReferenceStyle *(Done as well as we could)*
- Please try not to lengthen the paper beyond the 6000 words maximum. (the Abstract and text take 5987 words)

Thanks very much for your guidance

1

Context and How It Matters: Mobilizing Spaces for Organization-Community Sustainable

Change

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Context and How It Matters: Mobilizing Spaces for Organization-Community Sustainable Change

Abstract

There are growing expectations that organizations should contribute to the sustainability of our planet. These have increased recognition of relationships between organizations and their external communities and what they might accomplish together. However, such recognition does not extend to appreciation of the contextual dynamics inherent in organization-community relationships that affect their ability to reach common ground in their joint efforts.   In this essay we explore how interpretive, relational, and spatial contextual features previously addressed within organizations play roles in joint organization-community sustainability efforts. We present an example of the multi-decade development of a local foods economy in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, that has been spearheaded by multiple communities and organizations. We show how an Appreciative Inquiry Summit, one of a set of large group interventions developed by Organization Development consultants, made use of the contextual characteristics we discuss to foster shared overarching logics that enabled collaboration. We conclude with a research agenda designed to explore how relational, interpretative and spatial contexts affect organization-community initiatives to accomplish sustainability, how planned change interventions might affect these contexts, and how such initiatives and their contexts unfold over time.

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Context and How It Matters: Mobilizing Spaces for Organization-Community Sustainable Change

The last two decades have been quite eventful for the organizations the scholarly papers published by *Strategic Organization* address. In particular, there have been increasing, and appropriate, pressures on and invitations to organizations and institutions in the private, public and third sectors to develop sustainability credentials, agreeing to and delivering on initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, being concerned about how issues such as climate change and threats to biodiversity affect our planet and acting with these in mind (e.g. https://unglobalcompact.org/, Bartunek, 2022; Gibson, 2022; Young and Gerard, 2022).   As the British Academy asks (see https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/future-of-the-corporation/), how can we (businesses) shift from "an ecosystem of policies and practices driven almost entirely by financial goals to one focused on purposes that solve problems"?

For much of its existence, *Strategic Organization* (*SO*) has taken a leadership role in addressing issues such as these.   For example, in 2011 Ansari, Gray and Wijen addressed the importance of scholarship addressing climate change. Vaara and Durand (2012) stressed the value of strategy research on topics of global relevance. Bansal and DesJardine (2014) emphasized the importance of sustainability. Recently, in a So!apbox Forum dealing with "strategy and organizational scholarship from a radical sustainability lens", Jarzabkowski, Dowell and Berchicci. (2021: 449) issued a "call to arms" to organizational scholars to "open our thinking about the broader, interdependent systems within which organizations operate".

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Relatedly, there have been calls for businesses and other organizations to pay more attention to the external communities in which they are embedded (e.g. Marquis and Battilana, 2009; Rocheville, Keys and Bartunek, 2021; Subramony, 2017). Such calls are important, because organizations' activities affect their communities and because accomplishing major sustainability objectives requires joint efforts.

However, community engagement is difficult, and not always successful (e.g. Maher, 2019). While multiple reasons for this are given, we will suggest one that is not adequately recognized. That is *context*.

In this essay we explore the roles contextual features play in organization-community interactions for accomplishing sustainability. We also highlight ways developed by Organization Development (OD) consultants, more than a quarter century ago, that can help organizations more effectively work with their communities for needed changes in their shared environment. In this way, consistent with the aim of this anniversary issue of *SO*, we are looking backwards to inform future approaches to organizational and strategic change, including ways OD initiatives may contribute to strategy (Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011).

We focus on three types of contexts -- *interpretive*, *relational*, and *spatial* – that help unpack how organization-community engagement may work. We demonstrate their saliency through the example of a community and organizational initiative in which a skillful use of contextual features facilitated cross-group interactions. This lead, leading to an overarching shared frame of

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reference regarding the issues being addressed, what some refer to as a commons logic (Ansari, Wijen and Gray, 2013), that fostered collective action to address local foods.

The importance of context

"Context" has long been a focus of social science research, especially from interpretivist perspectives. Actions and interpretations are situated contextually, and meanings are not understandable without appreciation of the contexts from which they arise (Shalin, 2015). Explicit attention to the *interpretive* and *relational* contexts in which organizational actions and conversations take place is crucial to understanding how organizational members act (Balogun, Bartunek and Do 2015), as are dimensions of the spatial context (e.g., Kellogg, 2009).

Our prior empirical work has addressed relational and interpretive contexts and serves as a backdrop to this essay (e.g. Balogun et al 2015; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). In particular, we, with Boram Do (2015), studied how the UK senior management team of a multinational subsidiary responded to a European strategic change initiated by the company's top management with the help of an external consulting firm. We showed how the UK senior management team members became a distinct *relational and interpretive community*, making sense together of the change. We also showed how the shared experiences of the UK team were impacted by the local nature of its interpretive and relational contexts. We recognized (p. 961) that:

"The *relational context* includes whom, because of colocation and frequent

personal interaction, the senior management team sensemakes with to interpret

the implications of the change. It also incorporates other key change actors whom

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the management team sensemakes about because of physical separation and more

limited interaction, …. The *interpretive context* refers to both local, team specific

frames of reference and more general organizational frames of reference, which

the team members draw on to make sense of their change experiences and which

influence the meanings they construct."

In our study, colocation and distant location reflected the spatial context. That is, the colocated

UK senior management team made sense together, using their local shared frames of reference,

about the change project and the distant others (located on the European continent) initiating the

change. This led us to recognize that there are likely to be crucial differences between those who

are sensemaking *together* versus those *being made sense about.*

As has been the case with most organizational scholarship, our research focused on relational

and interpretive contexts *within* the organization we were studying, albeit across locales.

Research in multinational organizations provides a model for us, since it recognizes the existence

of a multitude of interpretive, relational and spatial contexts in an organization due to the

embeddedness of different units in different locales (e.g. Meyer, Mudambi and Narula, 2011).

Yet there has not been equal attention paid to interpretive and relational contexts of organizations

and the communities with which they may be in relationship.

Organizational spaces

In recent years there has been growing attention to organizational spaces (e.g. Taylor and Spicer,

2007; Weinfurtner and Seidl, 2019). Spaces are "bounded social settings" (Bucher and Langley

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2016: 594) that bring together (some) groups of people and enable particular patterns of social interaction among work teams and groups.

Recently Weinfurtner and Seidl (2019) identified "three conceptual building blocks of space, boundaries, distance and movement" that they considered "constitutive for the definition of space" (p. 1). Briefly, boundaries "demarcate distinct organizational spaces and can thus determine the inclusion or exclusion of actions" (p. 4). Distance refers to the separation between particular positions within a particular space or between different spaces. *Movement* refers to trajectories within and between spaces, enabling change in relationships and interpretations. All spatial configurations contain each building block to varying degrees.

As these conceptual building blocks suggest, spaces are in their essence relational. Their boundaries enable sets of interactions among certain groups of people and exclude others, determining whom groups interact with and who they do *not* interact with, and who are more or less distant. Thus, spaces also foster interpretive contexts that arise from the ongoing sets of interactions in them, and may facilitate or impede change in interpretations and relationships across groups.

Organizational spaces contain the relational and interpretive contexts that Balogun et al. (2015) discussed. In our study, the UK senior managers were very *distant* spatially from the senior level managers in continental Europe who were initiating change, with clear *boundaries* between them. There was little conversation between the groups and almost no interpretive or relational

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movement between them regarding the change. This lack of movement reinforced quite distinct

relational and interpretive contexts.

As the questions in Table 1 show, what was occurring in our study illustrated a broad way of

categorizing interpretive and relational contexts within the building blocks of space. The Table

suggests that the boundaries, distance and movement dimensions of organizational space each

pose particular questions to the interpretative and relational contexts. This is the case regardless

of whether the contexts are within one organization or encompass one or more organizations and

external communities.

Insert Table 1 here

Organizational spaces and change

Weinfurtner and Seidl (2019) presented an extensive and comprehensive set of types of

organizational spaces.   Four that are particularly relevant for purposes of organization-

community change are free space, relational space, interstitial space and reflective space. Free

space and relational space separate groups wanting to create change from groups who may

prevent it. Interstitial space and reflective space enable interactions of multiple parties involved

in change. Villani and Philips (2021) illustrate the use of interstitial spaces in technology transfer

activities between universities and industries, an example that suggests possibilities for

organizational-community interactions.

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Briefly, the concept of *free space* has been used to describe small-scale settings—"such as the women-only consciousness-raising groups of the feminist movement or the black churches of the Civil Rights movement—isolated from the direct observation of defenders of the status quo that allow for interaction among reformers apart from daily work" (Kellogg, 2009: 659). Free spaces act as "weapons of the weak", enabling interactions free from the control of elites (Rao and Dutta 2012: 628).

Kellogg (2009) identified relational spaces as sites of interaction for those, such a middle managers and subordinate employees who advocate and support change, to create a collective to foster change. They enable separation from those who may be more powerful and seek to prevent change. Thus, Kellogg saw these spaces as critical to change processes, especially those that potentially involved contestation.

Interstitial spaces are sites of "microlevel situations of interaction between individuals" (Furnari 2014: 443) in which actors from different fields interact, often in informal settings. Such spaces enable coordination among diverse actors who then often become catalysts for change.

Finally, Bucher and Langley (2016: 594; 595) described reflective spaces as involving actors who may be dispersed across a routine, sometimes not even involved in it (social boundary). Reflective spaces are enacted in different places from where actors perform the routine (physical boundary), and allow interactions aimed at developing new concepts of the routine. They are marked by temporal boundaries of beginning and end perhaps also marked by symbolic boundaries such as labels (e.g., "orientation workshop").

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Free and relational spaces essentially incorporate distinct boundaries and distances between change agent groups and potential preventers of change in order to facilitate later successful change movement. Interstitial spaces and reflective spaces essentially reduce boundaries and distances between differing groups, and aim to create spatial movement from their interaction.

We will explore the roles of these types of spaces in a change initiative that has involved organizations interacting with communities in order to accomplish sustainability in their shared geographic context. We will develop from this example how organization-community change efforts may use space in a way that has not to this point been identified in scholarly studies in strategy, but that is very helpful for change efforts that extend beyond organizational boundaries (Bartunek et al., 2011).

Change involving organizations and their communities

One means of accomplishing organization-community change has been large group interventions (Bunker & Alban, 1997). Such interventions are often aimed at accomplishing broad changes by getting the "whole system" involved, including external stakeholders. Janoff (2022) gave the example of a particular large group intervention, Future Search, helping IKEA work with multiple sets of external stakeholders to integrate sustainability internally in their business processes and externally in their impacts with customers and suppliers. In the material below, we will summarize Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as another type of large group intervention (Bartunek et al., 2011) aimed at fostering major change.

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Then, based in large part on Bartunek and Mohrman (2022) and Mohrman, Parker, Palacpac and Wilk (2016), we will broadly summarize the building of a local foods economy in Cleveland, Ohio and, more broadly, northeast Ohio, from the 1990s through the present, a project aimed at moving towards more ecologically and socially viable ways of providing healthy food to the community. We will show the role of a form of AI called AI Summits (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin 2003), in this change initiative. After introducing the change initiative, we will consider its spatial features and interpretive and relational contexts and their implications for organization-community initiatives.

A brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

AI, which was cocreated by David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) is one of the most popular planned organizational change methods in the world. Unlike many consulting approaches that center around what is wrong, it focuses and builds on the strengths of an organization under the assumption that focusing on strengths is more energy giving than focusing on problems. In addition, like many other large group interventions (Bunker and Alban 1997), change is not recommended or imposed by an outside consultant, but by those involved in dealing with an issue themselves.

Methodologically, AI starts with identifying a particular topic of inquiry (e.g. food sustainability). It then progresses through four phases, *Discovery* of the positive core of a system with regard to the topic, *Dream*, a results-oriented vision based on potential and purpose, *Design*, articulating a design to help achieve the dream, and *Destiny* or *Deploy*, which involves developing capacity to actually to carry out the design (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

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Though there are multiple ways to implement this philosophy, Ludema et al. (2003) developed a

means to implement it in three-day sessions called AI Summits, by focusing, in order, on each of

the four different phases with regard to a particular topic during part-day sessions

Sustainability background for the Local Foods project

Glavas, Senge and Cooperrider (2010) and Watterston, (2013) noted that Cleveland had been a

booming industrial city during the early industrial revolution, but by the late 20th century was

one of the poorest large cities in the US. Among other things, it had lost more than half of its

population in the prior seventy years. At the same time, however, the Cleveland area was home

to "some of the most innovative organizations in sustainability" (Glavas et al., 2010: 28) and

multiple efforts were being taken to make it more sustainable as a city. As just one example,

Meyer-Emerick (2012: 53) described the formation of the nonprofit, EcoCity Cleveland, in 1992

(https://gcbl.org/projects/cleveland-ecovillage) that created a large number of sustainability

initiatives, including helping the city of Cleveland hire a sustainability program manager.

Local farming initiatives

Beginning in the 1990s there were several attempts to reinvigorate local farming in Cleveland, in

part as a way of using vacant land in the city. Mohrman et al. (2016: 244; 247) described, for

example, initiatives taken by the North Union Farmers' Market association

(http://www.northunionfarmersmarket.org/), which has built "a channel of farmers' markets,

educating and certifying the growers to be local and to use safe growing techniques, and

handling the administrative, marketing, fund-raising, and regulatory tasks involved". Prominent

in this effort was the Cleveland Clinic, a world-renowned hospital system, which "partnered with

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the North Union Farmer's market association to bring markets to their healthcare campuses". As

another example, in 1999 Countyside Conservancy, an NGO, helped begin the Countryside

Initiative to help Cuyahoga Valley National Park solve the problem of how to conserve the

quickly disappearing rural character of the Valley – the once vibrant farmsteads had "fallen to

the plow of industrialization" (https://countrysidefoodandfarms.org/history-and-mission/). As

yet another example, in 2000 a New Agrarian Center for traditional forming education was

founded at Oberlin College, just east of Cleveland (https://www.oberlin.edu/news/oberlins-

george-jones-memorial-farm-natural-campus-resource). The center has developed ways of

delivering and selling fresh food to needy areas of Cleveland. Most of the efforts that have been

undertaken have been volunteer efforts on the part of the people and organizations involved.

Continuing into the early 2000s, as Bartunek and Mohrman (2022: 45) noted, "a loose network

of civic, business, and city government leaders became involved in championing and providing

resources to support urban farming, removing legal zoning and other barriers and creating the

enabling conditions that allowed a variety of urban farming to begin." Despite these and other

cooperative activities cited in Mohrman et al (2016), there was still concern that the local

agriculture system was not reaching its intended aims, especially in terms of economic self-

sufficiency.

The Appreciative Inquiry Summit and its aftermath

In 2009 the Mayor of Cleveland, Frank Jackson, in conjunction with the Fowler Center for

Business as an Agent of World Benefit at Case Western Reserve University

(https://weatherhead.case.edu/centers/fowler/), convened what became the city's first annual

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Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Glavas et al, 2010) as the kick-off to a decade-long project referred to as Sustainable Cleveland, https://www.sustainablecleveland.org/.   Following an extensive planning process, the three-day Summit took place from August 12-14, 2009, in the Cleveland Convention Center.

The Summit had three goals: (1) develop a strategic plan for sustainability in the city; (2) design tangible ready for market initiatives and prototypes; (3) build an infrastructure, a web of relationships and social capital necessary to carry out the work. "More than 700 people representing all major stakeholder groups took part. Elected officials, CEOs, heads of foundations and others took part fully for the three days. The mayor was there the entire time and chaired much of the meeting. Diverse stakeholders were there, such as children, community representatives, shop-floor workers and engineers" (Glavas et al., 2010: 28).

During the meeting, participants chose one of several working groups that would address multiple sustainability issues in Cleveland. Issues the groups addressed included, among others, Social Capital, Transportation, Health, Water, Sustainable Business Incubation, Green Building and Local Foods. These same groups developed (deployed) initial action steps for the initiatives they would be addressing during the year.

Cleveland hosted annual summits at least through 2019. Further, , and starting in 2011 each summit had a theme. The theme for the 2012 summit was "The Year of Local Foods", which gave a considerable boost to those already working on developing sustainable farming. This

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theme "spawned numerous working groups that tackled different aspects of local foods with varying results" (Mohrman et al., 2016: 251).

During the decade of the 2010s, rural and urban farming initiatives continued, although many were barely scraping by financially, relying in part on philanthropy, goodwill, and support from institutions and government and operating on inexpensively leased land. Contrary to early expectations, the efforts were not economically self-sustaining, though they fostered links among those with common interests.

In 2015, Brad Masi, an Oberlin-based writer, filmmaker and agricultural development consultant, who had been active in building many elements of the local foods system, issued a collaboration assessment (https://www.neofoodweb.org/sites/default/files/resources/executive_summary_final_v2_9.15.15_0.pdf) that indicated comparatively "high levels of network connections between communities around the region." This assessment accompanied a series of small conferences he helped organize in which over 150 participants from Northeast Ohio came together to examine ways to increase collaboration to grow the viability of the local food chain to help it move toward self-sufficiency.

Since that time, as Bartunek and Mohrman (2022) reported, a growing number of partnerships and entrepreneurial initiatives have emerged to leverage resources, achieve larger scale, and build out a fuller, more diverse, and more sustainable local foods chain. For example, the Green City Growers Cooperative in Cleveland was starting to approach profitability by 2017,

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https://www.clevescene.com/food-drink/worker-owned-green-city-growers-is-on-the-path-to-profits-while-giving-refugees-and-ex-cons-gainful-employment-5740258. However, as an index of the complexity of this type of work, Green City Growers ran into considerable difficulty due to COVID, and was sold to Local Roots Cleveland in 2022 (http://www.evgoh.com/gcg/).

The Cleveland Clinic has remained particularly invested in the sustainable local foods effort (https://my.clevelandclinic.org/about/community/sustainability/sustainability-global-citizenship/environment/sustainable-procurement#local-sustainable-food-tab). It has continued its involvement in Farmers Markets, including at its main campus and especially for Cleveland area residents in "food deserts". It also obtains as many of the ingredients for its foods as possible from local farms and producers such as Green City Growers that use sustainable practices.

Groups and outcomes

While it is not possible in this essay to go into great detail, this is an ongoing initiative, one in which there have been multiple organization and community groups involved, some over long periods of time, some for shorter periods. The goals of the different groups for the project differ. For example, Bartunek and Mohrman (2022) noted that *local governments* have been interested in using tax money and land to revitalize the region and to address the needs of the population; they hope that the local food efforts will be economically sustainable. *Farmers* have been motivated to build a thriving, sustainable farms, while growing and distributing healthy foods, such as through hydroponic greenhouses (e.g. Great Lakes Growers (https://www.greatlakesgrowers.com/). Entrepreneurially oriented s*mall businesses* such as

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lettuce tree farms (https://www.lettucetreefarms.com/) have worked to create profitable market

niches that bring together growers and consumers of local foods. *Community developers,*

churches and other NGO's have been interested in bringing healthy foods, urban agriculture, and

employment opportunities to underserved populations. Despite widely varying emphases,

groups have collaborated over multiple years, aided by the annual AI summits. They have

created a large-scale convergence around a shared overarching framework, a type of commons

logic (Ansari et al., 2013) regarding the sustainability of local foods.

In fact, focus on locally made foods has become an embedded aspect of Cleveland's food

economy (https://www.freshwatercleveland.com/focusareas/localfoodeconomy.aspx), and some

larger urban farms have increased their size and scope of activities as well as their contribution to

the development of their surrounding neighborhoods. Even so, the system is not fully

economically sustainable as of this writing.

Contextual Lessons for managing organization- community boundaries to achieve change

We have summarized a complex and ongoing initiative involving organizations, communities,

and government settings over the course of decades. We can extrapolate lessons about

interpretive, relational and spatial contexts from this example. A synopsis of the discussion is

shown in Table 2, which responds to the questions posed in Table 1 and adds roles of free,

relational, interstitial and reflective spaces

Interpretive and relational contexts

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The interactions necessary for initiatives like developing a local food economy require the involvement of groups operating out of multiple interpretive contexts, as evidenced by the illustrations of the different types of settings and aspirations we listed above. Hydroponic farming requires different skills and thinking than does determining ways to feed underserved populations or use vacant land, leading to different types of sensemaking.   A government's aspiration to revitalize a whole region economically, while not inconsistent with serving the needs of food insecure people, may well lead very different types of priorities, as well as different sensemaking about land usage. Thus, creation of a shared commons logic that incorporates different types of activity and goals is crucial, and interpretive and relational and spatial contexts likely affect the extent to which this happens.

The initiative has involved multiple relational contexts, including farms in Oberlin, government groups in Cleveland, a world class health system and multiple non-profits, among others.   In their day to day work the groups involved make sense together within their own boundaries. Yet, creating an overarching commons logic with regard to local foods requires the groups to be in relationship with each other and to share interpretations enough to make complementary contributions fostering this logic. This is often not explicitly recognized as a normal dimension of organizations and communities collaborating to accomplish joint social goals, but it is crucial, especially when a collaboration has extensive aims and needs to extend over several years.

Spatial contexts

The primary spaces occupied by the different groups of collaborators are quite different and distant physically, from farms associated with Oberlin College to vacant lots in poorer areas of

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Cleveland, to multiple campuses of the Cleveland Clinic. However, even though they are separate physically and have different core emphases, their boundaries have had to be permeable in order to enable joint efforts.

Permeability and movement in frames of reference have clearly taken place, especially among the groups that have stayed involved over extended periods of time, such as all those involved with the North Union Farmers market. This market has developed ongoing and evolving relationships not only with the Cleveland Clinic, but also with another hospital system, several small for-profit and not for profit companies, real-estate firms and local government offices (http://www.northunionfarmersmarket.org/about-us/partners-supporters/).

The Roles of Free and Relational spaces

From the perspective of the types of spaces involved in change, our description includes several meaningful features. Given the fact that the groups involved are distant and carrying out different types of activities on a day to day basis, there is actually relatively little available in the way of free space and relational space for change unless groups operating out of different interpretive perspectives are provided chances to meet together. The challenge is to create free and relational spaces that involve groups that have different emphases and are more or less, weak and strong (Rao and Dutta 2012).

The roles of interstitial and reflective spaces and the impact of the AI Summits

Venues such as AI Summits have been crucial in meeting such challenges. They provide both interstitial and reflective spaces, occasions for different groups with some overarching shared

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aims to work together both informally and formally. They provide informal (interstitial)

opportunities for conversation, and they also provide formal, structured and bounded reflective

spaces (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 594).

For example, the AI summit we described here was enacted at some *physical distance* from

where actors regularly worked (the Cleveland Convention Center). There were *temporal*

boundaries (August 12-14) and *symbolic boundaries*, the beginnings and endings of the

Summits. Further, the summits fostered attempts to form joint interpretive communities (at least

during bounded time periods) and joint relational communities during these time periods when

members are in close physical proximity to each other. Of course, these conferences also

involved ever-evolving groups, so that it was not a consistent set of actors involved over time.

Nevertheless, the summits played crucial roles in enabling differing organizations and

community groups to get to know each other and develop ways to work together.

The summits themselves obviously did not accomplish a local foods network. As Mohrman et

al. (2016) indicated, the various groups and organizations involved have been carrying out a

good deal of hard work on their own, over decades, and there is no "ending" to development of

the network in sight. However, the summits have played important spatial roles.

Contexts and space are typically not discussed as impacts of large group interventions such as

AI; the focus is usually on the processes of working through the phases and what is planned at

the conclusion. However, interventions such as AI Summits do enable change groups to share

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contextual features that can foster relational and interpretive movement across spatial

boundaries.

Next Steps and A Research Agenda

Our discussion, even as brief as it is, shows the importance of linking interpretive and relational

features with planned change efforts such as large group interventions that may foster the

capability of disparate groups to create common frames of reference that enable them to act

collectively. It also makes evident that spatial features – especially features that separate and

link different groups, formally and informally, within and beyond their usual boundaries, play

crucial, even if underappreciated, roles in change by influencing interpretive and relational

contexts. This is especially the case for changes that involve links between organizations and

their surrounding communities over extended periods of time, and despite the fact that context

has not been particularly salient to change agents or to strategists.

Therefore, we propose a research agenda building on within-organization empirical work

regarding spatial, relational and interpretive contexts such as that of Balogun et al. (2015),

Kellogg (2009), Furnari (2014) and Bucher and Langley (2016) and extending outward to

settings that involve organizations and their communities attempting to accomplish

sustainability. The questions are: How do relational, interpretative and spatial contexts affect

organization-community initiatives to accomplish and act on commons logics in the service of

sustainability? How might planned change efforts affect the contexts? And how do these

processes unfold over time?

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First, investigation of impacts of context should focus on the interpretive, relational and spatial contexts from which various sets of participants come and to which they are returning, and what kinds of shared vs. separate contexts are they are in as they attempt to develop and carry out joint initiatives. Which groups interact with which, and in what venues? How separate are the interpretations of the intended change, and what kind of movement and breaking down of boundaries are there in the direction of a shared commons logic? These are important, unexplored issues.

Second, investigation of the impacts of planned change should focus on what change processes, such as large group interventions, do to both separate spaces when this is necessary and reduce boundaries and enable shared interpretations and relationships, as well as movement between groups, when this is more appropriate. Are there any attempts during planned change interventions, to recognize and address relational, interpretive and/or spatial contexts? Are there any attempts to foster the development of overarching commons logics with regard to aims of the change efforts? What impacts do these have, especially in relation to the rest of the work aimed at accomplishing sustainability?

Third, investigation of how processes unfold over time is important. Balogun et al (2015) found that initially there were some shared interpretations about the need for change among European change agents and the UK senior management team. However, these shared interpretations disintegrated over time, due in part to the lack of effort on the part of European leaders to create any occasions for shared relationships or interpretations. This type of pattern may be very prevalent in organization-community efforts over time, so it is meaningful that the Cleveland and

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Northeast Ohio efforts have continued over so long. What are the temporal processes involved in complex sustainability-oriented change?

Research addressing the questions posed above would cut across and link three areas of study that have often been (interpretively, relationally, and spatially) distant from each other. One is macro literature that addresses commons logics on a broad, transnational scale (e.g. Ansari et al., 2013), but does not explore dynamics of particular contexts and interventions. A second is studies of relational, interpretive and spatial contexts across settings (Balogun et al., 2015; Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2019). These both reflect and affect change, but study of how they do so is primarily confined within organizations. A third is the types of planned change processes, if any, that may be used in change initiatives (e.g. Bunker & Alban, 1997), and how they affect contexts in ways that foster (or not) shared overarching logics. Such research can help us understand why some joint efforts aimed at accomplishing societal level goals are more successful than others for extended periods of time. Given the importance of many societal level concerns, such research should have both conceptual and practical implications.

Conclusion

There is growing consensus that businesses and other organizations need to be involved with their communities in dealing with the sustainability of our world. However, there has been inadequate attention to the contextual features likely to foster productive involvement of this type. We have shown how important relational, interpretive and spatial contexts are in relation to the possible development and maintenance of shared frames of reference such as commons

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logics, and how planned change interventions may affect them. We hope that this paper spurs important research on these important areas and their interconnections.

Finally, OD consultants and organization scholars have often formed very different relational, interpretive and spatial communities. However, if organizations are to collaborate with their communities to accomplish commons logics that help foster the sustainability of our world, they will need to do so in practice, and in understanding how (or if) particular interventions help foster contexts that enable such collaboration is very important for scholars, consultants and many organizational members (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021).   Just as there are calls for organizations to move beyond their own boundaries in the service of a more sustainable world, it makes sense for academics and consultants to collaborate to understand, in more depth, change processes that may be helpful in sustaining our world.

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Table 1. Spatial dimensions in relation to interpretive and relational contexts

Spatial dimensions	Questions suggested regarding interpretive contexts	Questions suggested regarding relational contexts
Boundaries	What are the frames of reference of different groups?	Who is being made sense with? Who is being made sense about?
Distance	How distant and separate are groups' frames of reference from each other?	How distant and separate are groups of sensemakers from each other?
Movement	How (un)changing are distinctions between groups' frames of reference?	How (un)changing are distinctions between who is making sense with whom and about whom are they making sense?

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Table 2 Spatial dimensions in relation to interpretive and relational contexts related to AI and the local foods initiative

Spatial dimensions	Local foods initiative interpretive contexts	Local foods initiative relational contexts	Roles of free and relational spaces	Roles of interstitial and reflective spaces
Boundaries	Different frames of reference held by local governments, farmers, small businesses, etc.	Ordinarily groups involved are in very different relational contexts. AI meetings enable sharing	At AI meetings those who want to create change meet together	AI meetings provide bounded interstitial and reflective spaces
Distance	On the whole, distance between groups, but with some overlap related to potential overarching shared logics	AI meetings foster groups coming together; otherwise the default is separate relational contexts	At AI meetings the differing frames of reference are present	AI meetings reduce the psychological and physical distance of groups from each other
Movement	Based on groups' ongoing collaboration it is likely that their frames of reference come to converge more over time.	Based on ongoing collaboration it is likely that at least some groups moved towards broader relational contexts	It is likely that interpretive and relational distinctions are reduced in AI meetings in which group members can talk with others with similar aspirations	At AI meetings participants have the chance to make sense both formally and informally with new people and groups

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