



# Place, Localism, Relationality, Proximity & Systems Change....

DRAFT Reflection Paper - April 2025

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The following is an itch that wanted to be scratched..

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We instinctively reach for shorthand—**place, localism, proximity**—whenever we sense that a web of relationships is unusually vivid or alive. Yet these words are only proxies for something deeper: the relationality that allow a system to “do” itself—to maintain, repair its parts, and reinvent its own choreography.

Put more precisely:

- **Place = density of entanglements:** Not a dot on a map, but the felt thickness of reciprocal ties that bind actors, artefacts, and ecologies into a coherent “somewhere.”
- **Localism = a preference for cultivating entanglement within a delimited geography:** A wager that spatial closeness shortens feedback loops, aligns incentives, and deepens mutual accountability.
- **Relationality = the qualitative tenor of those ties:** How strong, symmetrical, intelligent, and adaptive is the weave? Do the links convey care, power, information, or all three in balanced measure
- **Proximity = a bias for amplifying relational quality through nearness:** An intuition that reduced spatial, temporal, or cultural distance will enrich sensing, trust-building, and collaborative agility.

These colloquial cues are helpful starting points, but they can mask what actually determines a system’s vitality: the fine-grained

relational dynamics that drive autopoiesis—the ability to detect disturbances, reinterpret meaning, and reorganize patterns from within. By swapping the poetry of place for the precision of metrics such as feedback latency, agency distribution, sensing bandwidth, contextual intelligence, adaptive plasticity, and norm alignment, we gain an actionable lens for diagnosing, comparing, and ultimately tuning the living systems we hope to steward.

A system is not ultimately a spot on a map or a static network diagram; it is a functional, qualitative act—an ongoing choreography in which parts sense, decide, adapt, and continuously remake the stage on which they move.

To see systems on their own terms rather than through colloquial stand-ins, we need a meta-category—a calibrated lens that measures how the dance actually unfolds. The expanded table that follows seeks to offer that lens. Each row—feedback latency, agency distribution, contextual intelligence, adaptive capacity, norm plasticity, and more—acts like a dial on the system’s autopoietic engine:

- Dial feedback speed and contextual intelligence upward and the network becomes a conversational organism; dial them down and it ossifies.
- Expand agency while holding mutual dependency constant and the ensemble co-evolves; dampen agency and the same dependency descends into lock-in.
- Raise adaptive capacity or norm plasticity and shocks turn into learning moments; let them flatline and shocks become existential threats.

Using this compass you can:

- Diagnose vitality – Identify which relational dials are throttling self-renewal.
- Design interventions – Target leverage points—say, richer channels or clearer goal-coherence—to amplify regenerative loops.
- Compare systems – Explain why two assemblages with similar parts diverge dramatically in resilience: one’s relational mix sustains systeming, the other’s does not.

In short, by moving beyond the comforting proxies of place and proximity to the underlying relational metrics, we gain a way of seeing and shaping systems that is precise enough for stewardship yet broad enough to span ecological, organizational, digital, and social domains.

<i>Dimension (core question)</i>	<i>Typical continuum</i>	<i>What to pay attention to</i>
<b>Temporal proximity</b> – How quickly do actions reverberate?	Instantaneous ↔ Lagged	Latency of feedback, synchronic vs asynchronous exchange, cumulative delays.
<b>Frequency / rhythm</b> – How often do contacts occur?	Continuous ↔ Episodic	Regular cadence, bursts, ritual cycles.
<b>Duration / stability</b> – How long is the tie expected to last?	Ephemeral ↔ Enduring	Exit costs, renewal rituals, legacy debt.
<b>Spatial proximity</b> – How co-located are the parties?	Co-present ↔ Remote	Distance, "presence tech," travel friction.
<b>Tie strength / intensity</b> – How much attention and affect circulate?	Weak ↔ Strong	Emotional energy, obligation, shared history.
<b>Symmetry / power balance</b> – How equal is influence and voice?	Highly asymmetrical ↔ Reciprocal	Agenda-setting power, dialogic space, veto rights.
<b>Dependency / interdependence</b> – What happens if one node withdraws?	Autonomous ↔ Mutually dependent	Substitutability, redundancy, systemic fragility.
<b>Agency / freedom of movement</b> – How much initiative can a node exercise?	Constrained ↔ Fully autonomous	Reconfigurability of links, mobility barriers (technical, legal, social).
<b>Sensing capacity / perceptual richness</b> – How accurately and widely can the system detect signals?	Narrow / noisy ↔ Wideband / high-fidelity	Sensor coverage, granularity, signal-to-noise ratio, real-time accessibility, distributed vs central sensing.
<b>Contextual intelligence / sense-making</b> – How well can the system interpret what it senses?	Reactive ↔ Reflexive / anticipatory	Data fusion, model-updating speed, shared mental models, collective learning loops.
<b>Adaptive capacity (plasticity)</b> – How readily can relational patterns change?	Rigid ↔ Highly plastic	Learning loops, path-dependence, institutional memory.
<b>Modality / channel richness</b> – Through which media does relating occur?	Single ↔ Multimodal	Text, voice, haptic, data streams, immersive media.

<b>Multiplexity</b> – How many role strands overlap?	Single-role ↔ Multi-role	Colleague + friend + mentor vs single-purpose contract.
<b>Formality / institutionalization</b> – How scripted is interaction?	Informal ↔ Codified	Tacit norms, contracts, protocols, ritualization.
<b>Affective valence</b> – What emotional tone predominates?	Negative ↔ Positive	Antagonism, indifference, solidarity, care.
<b>Norm alignment / value congruence</b> – Do parties share guiding values?	Low ↔ High	Friction vs effortless coordination, conflict remediation.
<b>Visibility / legibility</b> – Who can see the relationship?	Private ↔ Public	Reputation stakes, surveillance, performativity.
<b>Embeddedness / network context</b> – How many third parties are involved?	Isolated dyad ↔ Dense network	Brokerage, echo-chambers, collective enforcement.
<b>Directionality of benefits</b> – Who gains, and how?	Unidirectional ↔ Bidirectional ↔ Collective	Gift, exchange, commons, platform rent.
<b>Certainty / predictability</b> – How reliable are expectations?	Ambiguous ↔ Clear	Trust, contingency plans, insurance mechanisms.
<b>Scalability</b> – Can the relational pattern extend to many actors?	Idiosyncratic ↔ Highly scalable	Peer-production protocols, standardized APIs, bespoke care relations.
<b>Teleology / goal coherence</b> – Is there a shared purpose steering the tie?	Aimless ↔ Co-oriented	KPI alignment, mission drift, collective intentionality.

## Conclusion – From “Solutions” to a Topology of Capabilities

If we take systems seriously, “change” cannot stay at the level of solutions-in-search-of-problems. A clever portfolio of intervention grafted onto an unready host is absorbed, rejected, or—worse—reinforces the very patterns it hoped to disrupt. What matters is the capability topology that lets a system learn its way into new futures:

1. **Structural capabilities, not isolated fixes:** Real transformation hinges on how the parts talk, decide, and adapt—not on dropping a shiny app, a policy mandate, or a pilot project into the mix. Sensing bandwidth, feedback latency, agency distribution, and norm plasticity are the pipes and circuits of systemic learning.
2. **Learning order precedes learning outcome:** A system that cannot detect weak signals, integrate diverse perspectives, or experiment safely will default to yesterday's logic no matter how noble the vision. Upgrade the order of learning—the loops that convert surprise into insight—and novel outcomes follow organically.
3. **From forcing functions to capability cultivation:** Engineering and managerial mind-sets impose a vector: pick the target, push the system, measure compliance. A capability lens does the opposite: ask what relational muscles need strengthening so the system can generate and select its own trajectories.
4. **Mapping the capability topology:** The expanded table is a first draft of that map. Each metric is a node in the topology; their interactions trace the pathways along which information, power, and care circulate. Illuminate the weak links, and you reveal leverage points more subtle—and more durable—than a top-down mandate.
5. **Stewardship over control:** The role of changemakers shifts from architect to gardener: cultivate the soil (capabilities), prune choke points (rigid norms, asymmetric power), and let the system's autopoietic engine do the recombination work that no blueprint can predict.

By redirecting attention from externally imposed solutions to the inner scaffolding of systemic capabilities, we gain a richer, more ethical, and ultimately more effective theory of change—one that invites systems to self-transform rather than conform to somebody else's design.

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We distribute this document, in order to build shared acknowledgement that the problem analysis, concepts, strategies, ideas and innovations outlined herein are the culmination of years of dedicated investment and understanding. We have crafted this document with the expectation that our partners will appreciate the significance of this groundwork and collaborate with us to not only refine these proposals but also explore their viability and practical implementation together in good faith.

Furthermore, we feel it's important to acknowledge at the outset we are committed to fostering openness and wide accessibility by making these strategies, ideas and innovation for public benefit in due time.

This approach seeks to ensure we can build partnerships necessary for innovation, respecting the work, labour and care invested and that our collective knowledge and experience can be shared widely, allowing others to adopt, adapt, and expand upon our work, thus contributing to broader, community-wide benefits.

We trust that our partners will honour the spirit of respect, endeavour, transparency and cooperation that defines this work, as we all work to achieve viable and impactful outcomes.

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