

Togetherbound : a gathering of the mad

Report of a brainstorming meeting (Sluttgart, 1981) on the possible design of large-scale, high-risk/high-return, creative events for social transformation

Introduction

Why: The time has come for an ambitious large-scale event which calls upon all the personal skills and energies we can collectively bring into focus. The challenge is simple: ourselves together—in the form of a wide range of concerned people of every perspective, whatever the degree of opposition or harmony, rationality or irrationality. The processes will be carefully designed to facilitate the expression and weaving together of these contrasting modes of operation; discovering the subtle pattern which connects what we each consider vital.

We intend to create an empty central space into which the unexpected can be born. But this is essentially a self-organizing event, despite the careful attention which will be given to processes. Much will be left to the responsibility of participants acting in the light of the spontaneous inspiration of the moment. This is a high-risk creative experience for those who believe this to be the price of real collective breakthrough.

The event should be the most exciting and testing you have ever attended: drama work, part fair, with joy and despair, dark and paradox—truly a healing dance of life in its deepest and most ambiguous sense. For those committed to change, it could be the most significant. The event will not only be a catalyst for change, it will be an expression of it. Things will not be the same afterwards—especially for those who participate.

Why not: The past decides have given rise to many collective events quickly forgotten. People have gathered under every banner, in search of solutions to every problem. Achievements have been minimal and essentially cosmetic—little has been learnt from past failures. Proposed conventional gatherings and campaigns are now viewed with weary suspicion—creative people avoid them in despair.

A new approach is required which harnesses and transmutes the very energies which have distorted and undermined the processes and outcomes of past events—bland exercises in cautious rationalism or emotionalism. It is not enough to rely on personal transformation, exercises in group consciousness or on the passive belief that 'all will be well'.

We have roles to play. But our very fear of action prevents us from learning how to rise beyond the polarities by which we are

frustrated, trapped and rendered impotent. The times call for inspired actions of a new kind that bring us face-to-face with all dimensions of our fear of change. In our ignorance, we must be collectively challenged before we can sense the dimensions and rhythms of the unfolding drama in which we can find roles to play.

Unless an event is collectively daring, it cannot avoid the superficial and evoke the energies for significant change and tangible outcomes—it becomes merely another charming celebration of impotence.

Context of the event

1. Background

Society has accumulated many problems and skills. Many projects have been initiated to bring the skills to bear on the problems with the support of adequate resources. Those who have participated in this mode, whether internationally or at the grass-roots level, sense the inadequacy and self-defeating nature of our best efforts. A different type of action is called for.

2. Future

We sense the dimensions of our past failures and the values we want to embody in the future. There are inspirations and visions for the future but they lack clarity and adequate form and are not tempered by the fire of realism. The key to our difficulty is that they are usually in conflict amongst themselves. The vital link to possible action in the present by real people is lacking. This is the bridge which needs to be built.

3. Present

We are stuck in a dangerous behavioural rut, both collectively and individually. We need a special kind of crucible within which to bring our skills, problems, resources and visions into focus in order to embody a viable new approach. The proposed gathering is conceived as such a crucible.

Essential qualities and characteristics of the event

1. The key to the success of the event, through the release of a new level of participant energies, is that the **gathering will not be pre-programmed and pre-packaged**. As has been frequently demonstrated, this blocks vital initia-

tives and forces participants into a passive - consumer - role excused from any action. They are then unable to take responsibility for new action in the here-and-now - a root cause of present societal impotence. Participants need to understand that they are also key resource people.

2. This degree of freedom demands **considerable innovation on the part of the organizing group** if the event is to be of more significance than a fair, however rich the experience. Indeed, if the organizing group cannot demonstrate innovation, it is unlikely that they could facilitate participant innovation.

3. The key to the problem of channelling the participant energies freed by the absence of pre-programming lies in:

(a) **giving participants access to a pattern language** by which any group can quickly restructure part of the event according to the inspiration of the moment. One of the preparatory tasks of the organizing group is to clarify many elements of this pattern language so that participants have a vehicle of communication and a rich range of possibilities to work with, an understanding of the roles they can play, and how they might go about it. The pattern language should continually evolve as a result of participant initiative during the gathering.

(b) **maintaining at least some well-defined channels of communication to focal groups** which can help to ensure the immediate preparation and implementation of desired patterns.

(c) **ensuring the presence of a highly flexible (computer-supported) information system to guarantee maximum communication between participants at all times.** (This is in contrast with communication at participants).

4. Corresponding to the here-and-now self-organization of the event, it is vital that **skills of any kind represented at the event should in some measure be focused to the benefit of the event as a demonstration of their significance**. The gathering is society in microcosm. If its potential cannot be released in the present, and if its ills cannot be healed in the present, then those skills have little of significance to offer against the

ills of the outside world, now or in the future.

5. The gathering to interweave the wide range of often incompatible participant energies and perspectives - however complementary they may be in principle - **the gathering must itself be comprehensible in very different ways.** Each participant should be able to explore it in his or her own terms, however - fanciful - they may appear to others. One of the tasks of the gathering might well be to evolve far more creative and dynamic images of such a gathering and its interplay of energies. Many participants would then be equipped to perceive society as a whole in an entirely new way - to move beyond (and transmute) the steric images inherited from past decades.
6. The gathering will be significant to the extent that participants are different and succeed in bridging their differences synergistically. **Participants will not only differ in their concerns but in the background or maturity with which**

they approach those concerns. Each has blindspots, including the organizing group. The effects of ignorance on the dynamics of the event will have to be used creatively (in the spirit of eastern martial art responses to the = enemy - who is my shadow).

7. Whilst many will be satisfied by simply encouraging the free interplay of a broad range of participant initiatives, more can be accomplished by **encouraging participant sensitivity to the balance of the event as a whole as it evolves.** What energies are called for to contain and counter-balance the excessive expression of others, or to enhance those inadequately expressed? How can concern for the whole be given form without jeopardizing diversity of expression? These are real-time exercises in strategy, analysis, synthesis, and meta-patterning.
8. The concern for balance can itself become steric, whether sought in + rational - or + aesthetic - terms. The powerful dynamics of the opposing

(preliminary) forces involved call for a **profound shift in perspective** if they are to be reconciled, to interact creatively, and to give birth to some viable new form. The - dance - of those processes can only be comprehended and guided in and through the essential drama of the moment if the gathering has achieved some measure of collective self-awareness. Description at this level becomes a matter of metaphor and poetry.

Number of participants

There are two approaches to the number of participants that could be attracted to this gathering:

1. **Fixed target:** This is the conventional approach and creates the risk of falling below the target figure if marketing is unsuccessful or other factors intervene, or exceeding the figure if marketing is + too successful +. The magic number envisaged by this approach is 50,000, which has the merit of being ambitious and striking the imagination.



The fool: an enigmatic catalyst

The court jester, the clown, the fool or the buffoon, is a mythic figure representing the inversion of the powers of the king (as the possessor of supreme powers) - or as his alter ego: he is therefore often the victim chosen in folklore as the substitute or foil for the king in rites whereby the people respond (fearfully and unconsciously) to such powers.

Court jesters were first recorded in the courts of the Egyptian pharaohs and were in vogue up until the 18th century in European courts, salons and taverns (*). They were often physically misshapen, if not also psychically disturbed. Ideally they were a powerful reminder of the distortion of the human condition - more immediate than the photographs disseminated via the media of today. Additionally, due to the freedom from censure and responsibility for their actions which they were accorded, they were able to mirror, parody and mimic court situations in such a way as to bring out truths which would otherwise be collectively and carefully ignored. They were often masters of song and dance, and could be a dramatic foil to pomp, superficiality and falsehood of any kind. As an ambiguous and often anisotropic figure, the jester could function as a powerful social catalyst - for good or for ill depending upon the response of those by whom he was surrounded.

The fool is an enigmatic symbol of the point of crisis when the normal or conscious appears to become the irrational, the unconscious and the abnormal. As such, the fool is to be found on the fringe of all orders and systems, outside all conventional categories, processes and social rules. He is the bridge between the conscious and the unconscious (and between the attributes of the right and left hemispheres of the brain) - a navigator that, after having failed in our effort to order and understand the universe in the light of our intellect and instinct, there nevertheless remains another way.

Eliminating the jester from the court is as risky as allowing him to play his role. For, if - foolishness - is not given a channel through which to express itself, it seeks its own channel anyway. Parliamentary and international assemblies, particularly those in which each is conscious of the high purpose and seriousness of the role, run a considerable risk of incorporating distortion into their proceedings and results because of an inability to accept what a jester would reveal. (Political cartoons offer a partial remedy, but they lack the significance of being accepted as part of the proceedings and thus have little effect on them.)

It requires greater maturity on the part of all participants, especially the chairperson and principal speakers, to play their parts in the face of such instant feedback. In the absence of children at international assemblies, who can say whether our international emperors wear any clothes?

The fool who was sitting beside the fire, heard these words, leapt to his feet, came before the King, and skipped and danced for glee, saying - Lord King, so God save me, your adventures now begin, but often you will meet them goryllous and hard.

- Perceval, or the Story of the Grail

Jester: messenger from the unconscious

The « Court » Jester and « Foolishness »



The question is at what target number does the risk start to increase significantly without increasing the significance of the event. Also, at what figure does the risk of - significance erosion - start to increase due to the presence of higher percentages of - hangers on - who are not able to contribute positively to the dynamics of the event - or are they part of the challenge ?

2. **Flexible target** : Using this approach the target figure would be treated in probability terms and - hardened - as the event approached and infrastructure commitments had to be made. At this stage a significant event could be envisaged anywhere in the range 500 to 50,000.

Note that these figures are relatively modest in terms of present day - instant - refugee or pilgrim camps (e.g. in India).

Location

Because of the political, infrastructure, travel and other considerations, care must be taken in the choice of location. Ideally a valley is required in which tent or other temporary shelters can be put up and serviced.

An important dilemma is obtaining a magically attractive location (lakeside, etc) without the associated risk of leaving it an ecological disaster. In this connection other alternatives are a desert location (with mountains) or an abandoned military base, provided that travel and services can be organized. Given that the event is designed to respond to the disagreeable conditions of the present, it may be preferable to hold it in an area which can be re-energized by the event if it succeeds. The apparently attractive alternative of profiting from some magical site could well be seen as a further attempt to exploit the beauties of nature and a failure to make creative use of our own psycho-social resources.

Finances

- A. **Sources** : There are a number of sources of financing which can be considered singly or in combination :

1. Participation fee

- useful to select participants who really want to be there and to guarantee the grass-roots nature of the event
- does not respond to fund requirements in advance of the event unless a pre-registration fee scheme is used
- no guarantee that the target numbers will be reached.

2. Concession fees

- useful for catering or related services
- does not respond to early fund requirements
- may be a constraint on flexible target participation
- may be unavailable if the location is too distant from a city base.

3. Corporate donations (in funds or kind)

- may be useful for some material requirements and possibly for advertising the event
 - may respond to early fund requirements
 - may involve constraints or create image problems for the event.
4. **Individual donations**
- most attractive for organizers but most difficult to ensure in sufficient quantity
 - most awkward in the event of financial loss.
5. **Foundations**
- increasingly difficult for innovative large-scale events; except in special cases.
6. **Media and other rights**
- very attractive if the event is a success
 - very unreliable if there is risk involved in organizing the event.
7. **National or local government**
- attractive if possible, although it may affect the image
 - may only be available after the event has acquired momentum.

B. **Marketing** : The key to the success of this operation is defining a sufficiently vital « package » to attract the various sources of funds noted above.

1. « Psychological holiday » (Togetherness.)

The gathering could be very successfully developed and marketed to individuals (and groups) as a holiday of a very different kind (excitement, risk, renewal, sense of mission, festival, « discover the future », etc.). As such the travel industry would do much to make it know as an option. People could consider it under a holiday budget rather than as a special expense. It belongs then in an identifiable category as a (psychological) adventure holiday (cf. Outwardbound courses), but with a highly innovative flavour.

2. Social experiment

Even if marketed as a psychological holiday, the nature of the event would also allow it to be « marketed » to foundations and governments as a self-organizing social experiment in instant community building. The degree of innovation is relevant to many research issues and would provide a field day for researchers. Universities might even « buy into the project » in order to conduct and observe experiments in that environment, on the Skylab formula. The experiment could be described as a way of self-organization in the ever present refugee camps. As such it might well be of interest to civil defense agencies or even as an exercise requiring army support (as a simulated refugee camp). It could also be described as an organizational experiment in response to mass unemployment and social alienation - a problem about which governments are increasingly anxious. As such, some governments could well be interested in financing the presence of people from their

own country. It could also be considered as an experiment in conflict resolution within a large community and therefore attract funds from « peace » sources.

3. Hardware/software experiment

The event could be analyzed in terms of the possible use of :

- innovative hardware : low-cost dwellings (domes, etc.), energy systems, sanitation systems, catering, information systems, etc.
- innovative software : especially computer programmes to help people to work together, focus their concerns, and generally empower them to act.

Such possibilities could well attract corporation support or assistance.

4. « Discover the future » campaign

With the three elements described above, a credible campaign could be launched to attract funds from individuals who believe that the experiment is worthwhile and likely to bear fruit, even though they have no intention of participating.

5. Media rights

Given the four elements above, the event could be sold to the media reasonably successfully.

Planning and financial risk management

It is vital that planning and financial arrangements be envisaged in terms of « fail-safe » procedures which minimize financial risk. This means that the budget should not be designed in fixed terms but as a function of the number of participants. Budgetary items should be plotted in terms of different target probabilities. Clearly there will be « fixed costs », but many of these will increase stepwise with increments in the number of participants.

Legal arrangements

Careful thought should be given to legal arrangements, liability, etc. Possibly several different corporate entities should be created to handle different aspects of the event and its preparation :

- a foundation or trust to receive certain funds for disbursement
- an association of participants and interested persons to express and clarify some policies
- a corporation to market the event and its products
- other bodies as required (travel agency, etc.

Towards a Pattern Language for Participants

This section gives a very provisional outline of the « windows » through which any participant might choose to perceive the gathering and the possibilities for action there. In its final form, distributed to participants, each item here would have attached comments and advice as a kind of « how-to-do-it » or « recipe » book, open to subsequent amendment by participants themselves.

A. MEETING PATTERNS (Organization and Services)

- **Pattern** - is a suggestive general term to describe any particular (and usually familiar) way of organizing the flow of energies in a gathering. Patterns can be combined into a network within a « pattern language » - Some of the resulting arrangements are - better - than others, and the challenge is to find arrangements which enhance the hidden quality which makes them - feel right - in a given set of circumstances.

B. PATTERN PARTICIPATION (Roles)

Many of the above patterns are - activated - only by the presence of people playing appropriate roles. People may take up these roles irrespective of the formal reason for their participation in the gathering and their performance may be more significant for the gathering than their concerns (see below). These roles may in fact be considered as sub-patterns in their own right.

C. PATTERN CONCERNS

(Contributions, etc)

People participate in events because of « concerns » about which they wish to give, receive, or share, or which they wish in some way to advance or promote. These concerns colour the energy content of the patterns through which they are expressed.

The term « pattern language » is taken from a recent series of books on this question by designer Christopher Alexander:

- The Timeless Way of Building
- A Pattern Language
- The Oregon Experiment
- (Oxford University Press, 1975-1979)

D. PATTERN PERCEPTION

(Images and strategies)

In a complex gathering people need to have some image through which to make sense of the event as a whole and of where it is going, and to help them to decide on how to participate in it. Whatever the images used they are needed to give a sense of continuity and context. Different people prefer one or more different images:

1. **Structure:** The gathering may be - objectified - in terms of any of the following:
 - Agenda
 - Critical pathway
 - System diagram
 - Programme matrix
 - Event timetable
 - Programme « tracks »
2. **Risk:** Participants may prefer to assess their participation in terms of « risk tracks » - Some may be entirely conventional low-risk lecture/discussion type events. Others may be designed to make the participant take or defend a position as a person. Others

1. Macro-patterns

Conference	Exhibition	Brainstorming	Carnival
Fair	Court	Songfest	Show/Music hall
Market/Bazaar	Festival	Games	Majlis
Agora/Forum	Lecture	Holiday camp	Dance
Symposium	Pilgrimage	Contest	Happening
Workshop	Passion play	Public blessing	Procession
Demonstration	Ceremony/Ritual	Celebration	Retreat
Drama show	Panel session	Discussion	Audio-visual
Reception	Sharing	Group meditation	

2. Micro-patterns

Talking to speaker	Coffee table discussion	Distributing papers
Soeaking to group	Swapping information	Receiving documents
Sharing with another	Lobbying/Persuading	Show and tell
Protesting	Having fun	Meeting new people
Learning	Changing	Non-verbal experience

Speaker	Musician	Organizer	Wise person
Listener	Creative artist	Lobbyist	Networker
Jester	Performer	Caterer	Mediator
Facilitator	« Accompanying person »		Handicapped
Writer	Game organizer	Adviser	Fan
Therapist	Child	Old person	Appreciator
Devil's advocate		Fierc	Maternal arranger
Priest	Ego stroker	Presenter	Discussionist
Symathizer	Agent provocateur		Ritualist
Strategist	Improviser	Animator	Chairperson
Rapporteur	Note-taker	Super-star	Security person
Interpreter	Critic		

1. **Theoretical concerns:** as represented by the intellectual disciplines of which, ungrouped, there are some 1,800.

2. **Substantive concerns:** namely societal problems and conditions, typically including:

Population	Unemployment	Energy	Illiteracy
Inflation	Refugees	Environment	Human rights

3. **Aesthetic concerns:** especially their expression and involving others in that expression:

Music	Poetry	Theatre	Textures
Song	Art	Dance	Perfumes

4. **Intangible experiential concerns:**

Prayer	Power	Risk	Other negative values
Meditation	Humour	Renewal	Other positive values

may involve the participant in some personal/transformation process. And some may be high-risk experiments which may fail as experiments do, providing lessons for the future.

3. **Ceremonial and celebration:** the gathering may be decided as a grouping of sub-ceremonies culminating or constituting some macro-event. This may involve, or be seen as, the high point of a pilgrimage with associated festival activity.

4. **Games:** The gathering may be described as a pattern of interlocking games, whether recreational, therapeutic or « serious » in intent. An underlying objective may be the emer-

gence of qualitatively superior games (e.g. in the style of Hesse's Glass Bead Game).

5. **Topic tracks:** The gathering may also be objectified as a complex set of interweaving topic (« concern ») tracks as is often done in conventional conferences.

6. **Quest:** The gathering may be attractive to some when interpreted as a mystical quest or an exercise in collective alchemical marriage.

7. **Learning pathways:** To those oriented towards education, the gathering may best be understood as a complex set of interweaving learning pathways.

8. **Energy sources and sinks:** Some may choose to see the event in terms of sources of different qualities to be cultivated, energy receptacles to be created and maintained, and energy sinks or traps to be avoided. The whole event may be seen in terms of gathering and using chi energy.
9. **Community:** Some may prefer to experience the event as an experience in a instant community, enriched by the presence of children, old people, the handicapped, etc.
10. **Imagery and dance:** Such a gathering can also lend itself to comprehension as a pattern of aesthetic images, or as a dance of energies.
11. **Group formation:** For some there will be ways of using information which could make of the whole gathering a gigantic experiment in forming and reforming groups until the most mature groups emerge suitably empowered and able to relate appropriately to other groups emphasizing other energies.
12. **Socio-political analysis:** The gathering will lend itself to description and interpretation in terms of power politics and societal dynamics.
13. **Abstract forms:** Some may wish to see the gathering as energies patterned onto more abstract forms:
 - Spiral
 - Hierarchy
 - Network
 - Tensegrity
 - Mandala

- Matrix
 - Torus
 - Polyhedron
 - Knot
14. **Symbol systems:** Some may be attracted by seeing the interweaving energies at the gathering in terms of a particular symbol system such as astrology, the I Ching, any pantheon, etc. These could even be used to identify imbalance in the energies represented, blockages in the evolution of the event, or threshold tests and challenges.
 15. **Catastrophe theory:** The transitions in the event may be best understood by some in the light of the mathematics of catastrophe theory.
 16. **Drama:** The gathering should be dramatic, and some may want to participate in it in such a way as to heighten the dramatic effects and the significance of the event as a whole.
 17. **Psycho-cultural analysis:** The forms and expressions of the gathering can be seen in psychoanalytical terms with necessary archetypal confrontations.
 19. **Group healing exercise:** The gathering may be seen as a body to be healed and rendered whole.
 18. **Ecosystem:** The various perspectives and processes may be best mapped by some onto an image of some environmental system with different spe-

cies interacting, procreating and developing somewhat at the mercy of the elements.

20. **Information processing device:** The whole gathering may be interpreted as a complex bio-mechanical computer processing different types of information, storing it, and forming it into various images of the whole - possibly with some final output.
21. **Taoist group meditation:** The gathering may also be understood as a collective meditation.

Conclusion

Clearly the above points merely help to clarify what we need to know in order to be able to organize such an event. What could it achieve and would it be worth organizing? Given the uninspiring alternatives for collective action at this time, it may be that this event would attract the creatively mad - people whose interaction could break new ground and point the way to a creative response to the world's current condition. Hence the subtitle of this document. Initiatives of this kind are useful social experiments in their own right, especially when compared to the sterility of current intergovernmental conferences. But whether such experiments are actually undertaken or not, the collective exercise of working out what features and processes could usefully be embodied in them can help to sharpen our awareness of the nature of the psychosocial design problem that we face.

MATURING MEETINGS (*)

1. Meetings, and particularly international meetings are a vital feature of society. Considerable efforts have been successfully made to increase the efficiency of meeting organization through the use of management skills, communications technology and specially conceived buildings.
2. Despite the ease with which meetings are held, and the increasing number of - innovative - events, there is rising concern that many of these do not fulfil the expectations of participants and of those whose future depends upon their outcome.
3. The fundamental problem seems to be associated with the fact the apparent success at - processing - agenda items, participants viewpoints and documents results only in an apparent or superficial consensus whose impact if any, is frequently limited to one of short-term public relations. The meeting out-

come is such that the collective empowerment is minimal as is the enablement of the participant. Seen in this light current meeting procedures themselves constitute a principal obstacle to social change at least for those meetings in which this is a preoccupation.

4. The challenge would therefore appear to be to elaborate a new conceptual framework within which a meeting may be perceived. For unless a new attitude to the meeting process can be elaborated it seems highly probable that concealed inherent weaknesses will continue to undermine and erode the value for social change of any meeting outcome. In a very real sense meetings model collective (initially to act) and the (in)effectiveness of collective action.
5. An important question then is how to mature the power of a meeting to:
 - reflect the complexity of the external environment in an ordered manner (representation), to reflect about that environment (conceptual processes), and to reflect about itself (self-reference or self-reflexiveness).
 - focus the variety of perspectives represented, without destroying it in some simplistic formula of superficial consensus.
 - transform the issues presented, and the organizational groups which take responsi-

bility for them) into new configurations of operational significance.

- act or empower those represented to act, in the light of the level of understanding achieved during the meeting.
6. The task is therefore to discover the nature of the - complex meeting - of the future, through which a new order may be brought into being. Such investigations are not concerned with large-group meetings or conferences which are:
 - organized according to procedures considered rationally satisfactory by most of those directly involved, possibly on the basis of experience of previous meetings in the same series.
 - deliberately structured, by the organizers to achieve a certain objective, irrespective of the individual preoccupations of those who choose to participate under such circumstances.
 - conceived around a pre-defined set of topics, irrespective of any other topics which may emerge during the meeting as common to a number of participants present.
 - deliberately unstructured, as an environment for spontaneous exchange between participants, but without any concern that such exchanges should lead to the emergence of some larger pattern.

(*) Extracts from Large-Group Conferences, maturing their reflective, focusing and transformative power especially in conditions of social upheaval (introductory report for Commission IV of the World Forum of Transnational Associations, Brussels 1980).