

NONFICTION

# Building Back Better — One Community at a Time

By Sherry Turkle

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## THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE TOWN

### Reimagining Discarded America

By Michelle Wilde Anderson

I read this book, about the revitalization of dying American cities, as I was researching the tech community's enthusiasm for space travel and life in the metaverse. It felt like stepping through a looking glass: What space travel and virtual reality have in common is escape. In these realms, you don't find hungry or homeless people or anyone without clean water to drink. But such conditions are the daily circumstances for many of the citizens of Michelle Wilde Anderson's actual "discarded" towns. They've lost homes and jobs. They no longer have libraries, parks or police officers.

In "The Fight to Save the Town," Anderson, a professor of law and environmental justice at Stanford University, profiles four starving locations (Stockton, Calif.; Josephine County, Ore.; Lawrence, Mass.; and Detroit) and makes the case that we have prematurely left them for dead. In each place, Anderson tells the story of citizen activists who have devoted their lives to turning things around. These heroes build community centers and homeless shelters. They reopen hospitals. They comfort small children who are frightened and grieving. As I read these stories, the escape plans of technology enthusiasts came to mind. I wondered if they might postpone their departures. Stay with us, I thought. We need you.

Historically, Anderson's locations have been where immigrants, white and of color (some from the South and formerly enslaved), settled and got their first jobs. Anderson calls them gateways — perches where second-generation children could get some education and be positioned for a better life. The system worked, but barely, its successes emerging from a crucible of violence and discrimination. Take Detroit and Lawrence as examples: For generations, they were governed by people who despised the men and women who did the backbreaking work of preindustrial and then industrial America.

This arrangement did not survive the movement of the 1980s to defund the government, a significant shift in how Americans saw their civic responsibilities. All across the country, counties, cities and towns voted away the taxes that supported public services. In wealthy places, the better-off imagined they would buy their way into private schools, water, security and sanitation. In the gateway places, public libraries, police officers, hospitals and parks disappeared.

Anderson's book is an artful mixture of ethnography, narrative history, in-depth interviews and legal scholarship. Using these tools, she shows us what the absence of government looks like on the ground. The hospital closes. Then the jail. A call to 911 gets you a voice on the phone, but there's no one on duty to come to help as your assaulter enters your home. Families wait at the bus stop on the first day of school, but the bus never comes; no one told them that the bus service to their part of town had been canceled.

And yet, in community after community, even the people who suffered most from the cuts did not vote to reinstate the taxes that would bring the services back. Anderson thinks she knows why. Even when money had been available, the poor and unconnected hadn't seen much of it. Sparse services had gone to the privileged. What everyone had seen was the grift and special relationships that had come along with public funding. Now the city is making do with less, and citizens who had little reason to trust the government before refuse to fund it now. It makes a certain sense, but as a result, everyday life is joyless. People stay at home; the sidewalks are dangerous and there are no streetlamps at night.

That rock bottom is the starting point for Anderson's story of heroes who won't let their towns die.

Community activists start organizations that offer legal, medical and educational counseling. When families are evicted because of predatory lending, they help buy back the homes. They form watch groups that patrol until police protection can be rehired. They raise money with bake sales, sports clubs and street fairs. A park reopens. And the children's corner of the public library.

Anderson adds that these active and effective citizens trigger a virtuous circle. When people see civic organizations working for them, they are more open to voting for such services.

“The Fight to Save the Town” situates itself in an active nationwide debate about the nature of what it means to live together. What is the role of government? The individual? Are the best initiatives simply made up of neighbors helping neighbors? Bartering their services?

And if government is needed, should it be at the federal, state or municipal level? Some may conclude from this book that citizen self-help makes government unnecessary, but that would be a misreading. It’s when community groups start to fix things with duct tape and ingenuity that people want more for their communities. Things they will vote for. Things that they want the government to provide.

Others may think that this book offers unwavering support for government intervention. They, too, are wrong: Anderson has seen too much government action that made things worse, and some of the stories are heartbreaking. In Detroit, state and local initiatives took away people’s homes to build shopping centers, hotels and freeways that would benefit everybody — except those who lived in Detroit. “The Fight to Save the Town” advocates for complex solutions that require citizen engagement, in the hope that trusting relationships, built over time, will bring disaffected people back to active civic life.

In fact, renewed trust among neighbors could bring back more than discarded cities. We live in a time of increasing isolation; fewer and fewer Americans know even one other person to call in an emergency. We are suffering from an epidemic of loneliness, even as we live immersed in our technologies of hyperconnection. This loneliness is at the heart of growing rates of depression, drug abuse and suicide. If we learn to save our towns, we will also be learning to save ourselves.

Although Anderson tells stories of urban rebirth, her book does not conclude with any sense of a happy ending because she is describing human processes, not algorithms. In her four examples, laws providing social services have been repealed because people have had their minds changed by conspiracy theories, racism and disinformation. Community-minded candidates are routinely voted out of office — sometimes they commit an ethical lapse or neglect their job because they are doing too much fund-raising, and an inept but charismatic candidate comes around. Good works must contend with human vulnerability. Discarded cities always need new champions.

In the end, Anderson doesn’t find redemption in successes but in the human spirit that propels neighbors to come together. As she puts it, they create “a symphony for a broken orchestra.” At the end of such a symphony, you don’t say it was beautiful. The point of the concert was to make you care about the players and the music. The extraordinary people we meet in “The Fight to Save the Town” score some wins but also suffer many losses. In all cases, they regroup and get on with it. They recruit more players. Their lives and communities are enriched. Here. On earth.

Sherry Turkle is a professor of the social studies of science and technology at M.I.T., and the author of “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age” and, most recently, “The Empathy Diaries: A Memoir.”

#### **THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE TOWN**

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