

# Thriving Cities

Project Brief

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[ThrivingCities.com](http://ThrivingCities.com)

INSTITUTE for ADVANCED STUDIES in CULTURE

[www.iasc-culture.org](http://www.iasc-culture.org)



*What does it mean to thrive?*

*What does it take to thrive?*

*What social arrangements make genuine thriving possible, equitable, and sustainable?*

# OVERVIEW

## What is Thriving Cities?

Thriving Cities is developing a new paradigm for urban analysis, community assessment, and civic engagement based on a holistic framework of community wealth and well-being. An initiative of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, Thriving Cities is committed to turning research-based insights into action-oriented tools that will empower key stakeholders—including foundations, city officials, city planners, religious leaders, politicians, educators, business people, academics, non-profits, and residents—to ask and answer the question:

*What does it mean and take to thrive in my city, and how can I contribute?*

## Thriving Cities Framework: a Human Ecology Approach

The Thriving Cities paradigm builds upon a “human ecology” framework. Human ecology stresses the fact that cities are neither collections of autonomous individual or discrete problem areas, each hermetically sealed from one another; nor do cities behave like mechanical systems that can be managed and controlled by rational experts from on high. A human ecology approach sees cities as complex, asymmetric, and dynamic social systems that both empower and constrain the ways of life and life chances of their residents. The concept of human ecology encourages us to think about the shape, character, and normative purposes of actual places and people in culturally and historically interactive terms.

## The Six Endowments of Human Ecology

Our framework is based on the concept of human ecology that examines six fundamental areas of community wealth and well-being. They form the most recognizable horizons of human experience and the building blocks of a thriving commonwealth.



### **THE TRUE**

the realm of human knowledge and learning



### **THE PROSPEROUS**

the realm of economic life



### **THE GOOD**

the realm of social mores and ethics



### **THE JUST AND WELL-ORDERED**

the realm of political and civic life



### **THE BEAUTIFUL**

the realm of creativity, aesthetics, and design



### **THE SUSTAINABLE**

the realm of natural and physical health



## **The True:** The Realm of Human Knowledge

**Resources & Practices:** Research, innovation, teaching, transfer of knowledge, cultural and historical preservation, etc.

**Institutions & Places:** Universities, libraries, public schools, public squares, media, public art, job training centers, book stores, community gardens, etc.



## **The Good:** The Realm of Social Mores & Ethics

**Resources & Practices:** Parenting, early childhood development, moral formation, charitable giving, volunteering, community conversation, etc.

**Institutions & Places:** Families, religious organizations, after-school programs, charities, schools, community centers, sports, social services, farmer's markets, etc.



## **The Beautiful:** The Realm of Aesthetics

**Resources & Practices:** Design of the built environment, city planning, public art, festivals, cultural entertainment, creative placemaking, etc.

**Institutions & Places:** Community planning boards, public art/galleries, restaurants, public spaces/promenades/gardens, commemorative sites, innovation districts, etc.



## **The Prosperous:** The Realm of Economic Life

**Resources & Practices:** Work, investment, capital exchange, land development, philanthropy, production/consumption, technology, innovation, etc.

**Institutions & Places:** Industries, businesses, real estate, innovation districts, job training centers, transit oriented development, vendors/farmer's markets, etc.



## **The Just & Well-Ordered:** The Realm of Political & Civic Life

**Resources & Practices:** Political deliberation, civic engagement, law and order, community organizations, protest/demonstration, city planning, zoning, etc.

**Institutions & Places:** Local government, public spaces for democratic processes, city hall, community centers, civic groups, public transportation and housing, etc.



## **The Sustainable:** The Realm of Natural Environment

**Resources & Practices:** Management of energy and land, air quality, public/human health, environmental regulations and advocacy, emission, waste, sanitation, etc.

**Institutions & Places:** Public parks/forests, green infrastructure, hospitals/clinics, bike lanes, sidewalks, restaurants, local food hub, environmental organizations, etc.

## Application of the Six Endowments

Our distinctively cultural approach, with its emphasis on the dimensions of common life in cities, invites us to see these endowments in terms of six interactive & evolving formative contexts in which we routinely see the exercise of moral agency and practical reasoning across human communities.

Like a mosaic, the endowments are fragments of a broader picture that help to frame a community or city in a holistic light. The first three build on the classical ideals of “The True,” “The Good,” and “The Beautiful;” the last three are the modern ideals of “The Prosperous,” “The Just and Well-Ordered,” and “The Sustainable.”

Crucial to appropriating the six endowments is understanding that though ever present, they function uniquely within the particular contexts of each place. This is the pragmatic promise of Thriving Cities: by applying our framework, we can generate highly specific insights that are distinct to each city’s signature and each city’s mosaic of thriving. Such insights clearly identify the uniqueness and interconnectedness of each community, concurrent with universal characteristics that support and sustain the human ecology.

## Civic Substructure & The 4-C’s of Thriving

The possibility of thriving in any city starts by securing basic conditions of material well-being for its citizens, and extends through a range of human connections, collaborative projects, and civic commitments. Taken together, these 4-C’s form what we call a community’s *civic substructure*. Whereas most urban projects focus on outcomes—e.g., graduation rates, economic output, etc.—the 4-Cs of the civic substructure illuminate the qualitative and human-centered inputs which are fundamental and generative of a thriving human ecology.

**CONDITIONS:** the basic conditions of material security & social well-being

**CONNECTIONS:** the relationships & public places that bond & bridge communities

**COLLABORATIONS:** the unique & unusual forms of collective action

**COMMITMENTS:** the core identities & values that motivate & sustain care for others

# THRIVING CITIES TOOLKIT

## Thriving Cities Website & Blog — **ThrivingCities.com**

Join the conversation about thriving on Thriving Cities' new interactive website that features original documentary videos, interviews, and research. Also on the website is the Thriving Cities Blog, an online venue dedicated to examining how institutional structures and communal relationships contribute to or detract from the health and well-being of our everyday places.

## City Profiles

Each pilot city has a corresponding profile. By telling the story of a city in terms of the six endowment framework, each profile provides new and fresh insights that can help local stakeholders better assess and invest in the human ecology of their cities.

## Case-Method Series

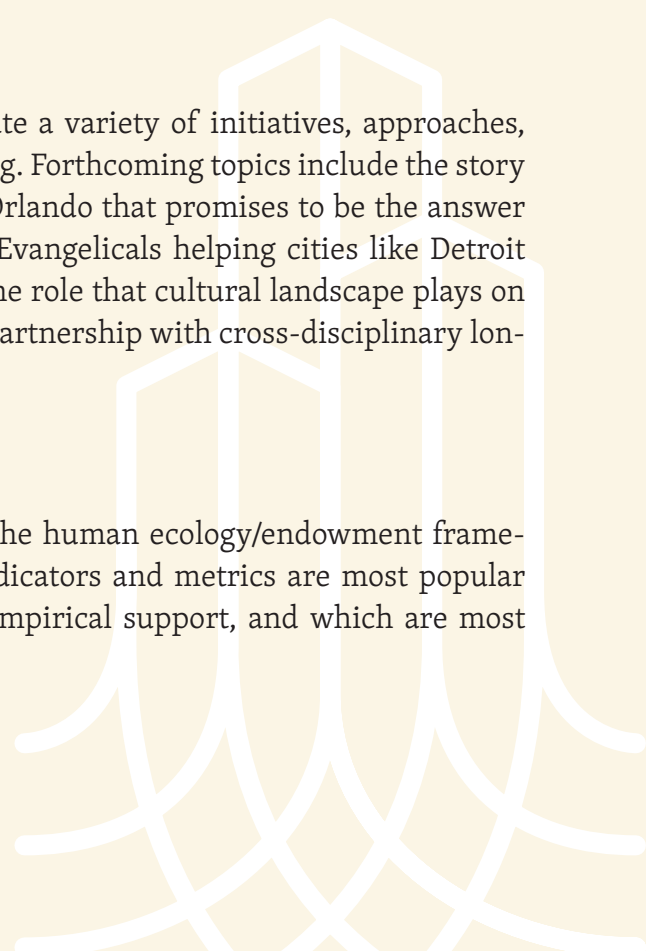
This series will feature examples of community stakeholders working for the thriving of their city in unique and creative ways. The goal is to give concrete illustrations that will instruct various practitioners in understanding and applying the human ecology framework to their sectors—e.g., education, philanthropy, business, religion, journalism, city planning, and others.

## Documentaries

Both short and feature-length films investigate a variety of initiatives, approaches, and places that hold promise for urban thriving. Forthcoming topics include the story of business-led community development in Orlando that promises to be the answer to gentrification, a new social movement of Evangelicals helping cities like Detroit remodel neighborhoods and schools, and to the role that cultural landscape plays on human health and community well-being in partnership with cross-disciplinary longevity research and urban design.

## Indicator Filtering Tool

An interactive on-line application that uses the human ecology/endowment framework to help practitioners identify which indicators and metrics are most popular around the country, which ones have solid empirical support, and which are most critical for thriving in a given area.





## PILOT CITIES



## ABOUT US

We are a group of unconventional and diverse urbanists who believe that thriving will not be found through the usual strategies involving technology, money, and policy alone. We agree it is vital to situate these critical approaches in the context of history, culture, geography, power, and the fundamental public spaces in which we live.

**Josh Yates** | [josh.yates@thrivingcities.com](mailto:josh.yates@thrivingcities.com)

Principal Investigator & Director

Josh is a cultural sociologist at the University of Virginia, as well as the Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Josh specializes in the study of social and cultural change with a special focus on the ways contemporary institutions and communities grapple with the crucial question: *What does it mean and take to thrive?*

**Asa Eslocker** | [asa.eslocker@thrivingcities.com](mailto:asa.eslocker@thrivingcities.com)

Director of Program Development

Asa is an award winning investigative journalist, news producer, and filmmaker who brings a cultural landscape approach to urban design. Asa holds a Masters in Landscape Architecture from the University of Virginia and is an advocate of accessible public space as the vital, grounding element of the Thriving Cities framework.

**Stephen Assink** | [stephen.assink@thrivingcities.com](mailto:stephen.assink@thrivingcities.com)

Director of Operations & Research

Stephen has a Masters in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia where he specialized in religious ethics. Stephen is interested in the modes of political and moral life generated within and by the urban environment. Along with other duties, he oversees the Thriving Cities Blog.



Cramer Photo

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

*With Thriving Cities Project Director Josh Yates*

### Why cities?

Easy. For the first time in human history, more humans live in urban environments than not, and this demographic trend will only increase dramatically in coming decades. This means that both the challenges to and opportunities for human thriving are principally urban in character.

### What is Thriving?

At its most basic: thriving is about realizing our fullest potential as individuals and communities. This starting point has immediate practical implications. Thriving shifts thinking from conventional deficit perspectives to an asset orientation, empowering leaders and citizens to see beyond common problems to collective possibilities. Thriving cannot be accomplished alone. A concern with thriving reminds us of the benefits and obligations that come with belonging to a commonwealth. From cradle to grave, we rely upon countless others—people *and* institutions—in order to flourish. There are no silver bullet formulas for thriving, though quick and narrow fixes are frequently sought. Rather, thriving is a holistic endeavor that is impossible outside relationships of reciprocity, interdependence, shared contexts of opportunity, and impossible without strong sources of moral concern.

### Do we really need more metrics?

No and yes. The marketplace of community assessment is crowded. We have more information at our disposal than ever before clamoring for our attention. The most immediate challenge is to know which of the existing data to use. The deeper challenge is to understand the limits and proper uses of measurement in the first place. What is needed is a coherent framework for discerning among the proliferating lists of metrics and indicators and for putting them into a context for wise civic action.

### Who is this for?

Everyone. Thriving Cities is for all stakeholders working on and for the common good of their cities. We are especially committed to finding points of interconnections that can help bridge the many deep and abiding differences characterizing most urban communities today. Our framework and toolkit are intended to create opportunities for fostering “unusual coalitions” of citizens across religious, racial, and ideological divisions.