





# Variations on a Theme

## Letter from the Executive Director

Hello, and welcome to the inaugural edition of *The Notebook*.

This collection of art, scholarship, opinion, and insight are presented to you as variations on a theme—community vitality. Community vitality is the holistic state of well-being, including the economic strength, social cohesion, and public safety that impacts both individuals and the collective. This concept serves as the bedrock for fostering a just society in which the strength of communities directly correlates with their safety, health, and prosperity. In the simplest terms, strong communities are safe communities.

*The Notebook* was created to hold a divergent space in a traditional world, existing somewhere between academic journal and popular magazine. We're accustomed to the phrase "ivory tower" because too often the academic elite and their ideas remain inaccessible to the general public. Decades of advocacy, analysis, and thoughtfulness are trapped inside traditional modes of sharing. Our hope is that *The Notebook* will subvert that paradigm. It provides an interdisciplinary set of perspectives all tackling the same idea—because we recognize community vitality as the common thread through all our efforts and we believe in the power of collaboration to create a future where people are intentional and critical about the systems we've built.

While compiling pieces for *The Notebook*, I reflected on existing theory and research around wellness, social cohesion, and collective efficacy. I thought of research The Justice Collaboratory did in New York City where we measured and compared the influence of community members judgments and civic participation on the city's perceptions of safety, legitimacy, and procedural justice. Among the main findings, the study concluded that neighborhoods are an important part of New Yorkers' identities and lives—71% of respondents strongly agreed that community matters. They reported relying heavily on local services and valuing positive relationships with neighbors and a "sense of community." Essentially, in order to feel safe, they needed to experience the components of social cohesion *more* than criminal legal intervention. This metric highlights the importance of addressing communities as a whole in addition to addressing individuals.

Developing the theory, and then a practice, of community vitality means we must confront the profound misunderstanding of the future we are creating by perpetuating outdated norms.

**Rather than reforming what isn't working, we are committed to reframing an approach to justice that strengthens what does work, including increased access to quality education, healthcare, shelter, jobs, and improved legitimacy of the criminal legal system.**

Like most theory, the concept may seem abstract or impossible to implement specially when structural design has served as a generations old barrier to progress—but the following pieces circumvent that assumption and provide tangible examples of employing an approach that works.

Finally, I am most thankful for the contributors' generosity. I am struck by their depth of curiosity and openness for sharing new work in a novel way. It was replenishing to witness the creation of something infused with such promise. From original art and poetry to neuroscience and history, they covered it all with intention and candor. To the contributors, your commitment to putting yourself out there in new spaces is the first step in reaching broad audiences and building an abundance of information to propel us forward.

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