Interest in social innovation is growing, and that’s great news. Meanwhile, our societies are facing extraordinary challenges: increasing inequality, unstable economies, climate change, and a raft of other issues. But, just as social and environmental concerns are reaching a frightening crescendo, technological advances, activism 2.0, and market transformations are changing the world, mostly for the better.

The challenges may be daunting, but they offer precisely the right conditions for social innovation to emerge and for social entrepreneurs to thrive. No matter what drives innovation—necessity, altruism, or financial reward—the case for social innovation should be clear enough. The more interesting question is how best to catalyze and support social innovation and entrepreneurship.

The Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) accelerates the impact of social enterprises through its powerful theory of change. Our model is entirely focused on catalyzing social innovation, but the lessons we have learned in our work are relevant to entrepreneurship more broadly.

CSI is a coworking space, community, and launchpad for people who intend to change the world, with three locations in Toronto and one in New York City. CSI operates nearly 100,000 square feet of space and supports more than 1,500 members by providing the spaces and tools they need to succeed more quickly and to have a far greater impact.

Coworking refers to working in shared office spaces using economies of scale to give tenants access to amenities and facilities they otherwise would not be able to afford. Coworking spaces connect diverse organizations and individuals, giving them the chance to collaborate, share knowledge, and develop systemic solutions to the issues they are trying to address.

Unlike many other accelerators, CSI is focused on keeping our arms wide open to a broad and diverse range of people working for change. We do not assume that bigger is better. We don’t limit our investments to the projects that seem most likely to succeed. Instead we see ourselves as a platform, as building a community where our members can connect to the people, tools, learning, and resources they need to succeed.

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For us, social innovation means creating new strategies, concepts, ideas, and organizations that address social, environmental, cultural, and economic challenges in order to extend and strengthen civil society. Social innovations come from individuals, groups, or organizations working for the public good in the for-profit, nonprofit, citizen, and public sectors. Increasingly, innovations are happening in the spaces between these sectors as their perspectives collide to spark new ways of thinking.

Intentional innovation is the conscious effort to develop a more systematic approach to innovation. Rather than wait for social innovations to appear, practitioners and organizations around the world are working to understand and establish methods, frameworks, and processes that can stimulate social innovation and improve the chances that it will succeed. This is an important development.

Still, something in the very nature of innovation resists the linearity imposed by many traditional frameworks. It is important to pursue more structured approaches, but innovators should also find ways to embrace the unique and magical quality of emergent innovation.

Many researchers acknowledge that social innovation needs the appropriate conditions, but they rarely tell us what those conditions should be. At CSI, our on-the-ground experience with a diverse range of organizations and companies provides unique insights into how to create the conditions that will enable social innovation to emerge.
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THE CSI THEORY OF CHANGE

As figure 1 shows, CSI’s theory of change is best understood as a pyramid based on three distinct but integrated levels.

• Space is the foundation, and the platform for everything that happens.
• Community develops as people occupy the space and form relationships.
• Innovation emerges from the connections that people form in the space and in the community.

Together, space and community increase the likelihood that social innovation will emerge.

Space

Not all spaces are created equal, and some spaces are more clearly conducive to creativity and innovation than others. A space created to foster social innovation must be designed as a social space, and it must have features that encourage people to generate new ideas and connections.

CSI’s spaces are warm, welcoming, and buzzing with activity. They are carefully designed to foster connections and to increase opportunities for collaboration and conversation. In addition to workspaces, they feature comfy couches, café-style coffee makers, open kitchens, phone booths, whiteboard walls, and even a nap room. Our spaces have plenty of natural light, high ceilings, art, plants, and other features that add vibrancy and joy. The unique character of the space fosters creativity and energy, but it also has to be a fully functioning workspace with all the tools that innovators need: high-speed Internet connections, copiers, meeting rooms, and common spaces. Members can choose to occupy private offices, private desks, or shared desks, depending on the size of their ventures and their budget. We free up some of their capacity by managing the office so they can focus on advancing undertakings that will have an impact. (For more on space design, check out our free books on shared spaces at http://socialinnovation.ca/ssi.)

Community

Communities do not form automatically when people occupy the same space. The notion of community carries important connotations: people in a community share social and emotional bonds, recognize their connectivity, and identify some commonality. A strong community has social capital that its members can leverage to serve their individual and shared interests.

The energy of our spaces comes from the hundreds of exceptional people who visit and work at CSI every day. Our community functions across sectors and disciplines, and includes nonprofits, for-profits, cooperatives, entrepreneurs, artists, and activists. We have always curated our membership to ensure as much diversity as possible in legal forms, missions, sectors, backgrounds, and experiences, but one major commonality remains: every organization at CSI has a social mission and a real commitment to social change.
What begins as a group of people looking for a place to work becomes a community through conscious and careful animation. To this end, we employ community animators who hold the shared workspace together and breathe vitality into the lives of all who move through it. The community animator role incorporates elements of operations, relationship-building, hosting, and knowledge/skill sharing.

Often described as a cross between a triage nurse, a guidance counselor, and a potluck organizer, each community animator builds social capital, makes connections, and looks for ways to support our members. With a foundation in what we call radical hospitality, our goal is to make peoples’ lives happier. In fact, when we conducted a comprehensive survey, 76 percent of our members agreed that being at CSI made them a happier person. An impressive 87 percent felt that CSI had improved the quality of their professional lives.

Our programming in the spaces also accelerates our members’ success as we reveal the assets in the ecosystem and enable members to find each other. Then we add a dose of our own events and programs. Our goal is to increase the community’s social capital by elevating the caliber of our membership through workshops, targeted training, networking, mentorship, shared services, peer circles, and access to capital.

Innovation

The third layer— the pyramid's peak—is innovation. Innovation is what emerges when the space and community layers are functioning and interacting most effectively. It's what can happen when a diverse but connected community occupies a facilitative space. It happens when accountants talk to artists, when web developers talk to youth group coordinators, and when senior executives chat with junior administrative staff. It happens when perspectives collide in a collaborative environment.

Whether they’ve engaged in joint ventures, integrated policy campaigns, or new organizations, or have simply talked about how things fit together, we know that 85 percent of our members have collaborated with one another, and 70 percent have engaged in at least one joint initiative.

We have seen initiatives such as Jane's Walk (www.JanesWalk.org) emerge from the synergies and connections enabled through CSI. Creating the Ontario Nonprofit Network (www.onn.ca) has, among other benefits, led to improved policy work—responding to government at all levels about policy, legislation, and practices that affect how the sector operates. Our programming and access to capital have supported social ventures such as the Toronto Tool Library (www.torontooolibrary.ca). The list is long but the pattern is the same: when the space is inspiring and functional and the community is supportive, diverse, and talented, amazing projects with the potential to change lives take hold.
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THE ORGANIC AND THE INTENTIONAL

It’s important to acknowledge the productive tension that emerges from the balance between the organic and the intentional. Social innovation requires a blend of both organic and intentional elements. By organic we mean developments that happen without deliberate manipulation. That is, we stand back from the conditions we’ve created, and just let things happen. For example, two people standing in our kitchen may naturally strike up a conversation that leads to a formal collaboration. This connection results from our space design and our member selection criteria, but we do not intervene directly.

An intentional or cultivated approach builds on and relates to an organic approach. Sometimes we intervene consciously rather than just letting things happen. For example, we may spot two people who don’t know each other in our kitchen. Rather than simply sit back and see if they make a connection, we may step forward to introduce them and identify some ways their interests or objectives overlap. We also convene regular gatherings called CSI Summits which bring our members together to reveal community assets and make new connections. At each CSI location, we have a weekly Salad Club where members share a communal lunch to meet each other or catch up.

Being intentional means using the experience and skills of the community animator to move an opportunity forward. Sometimes it means being a provocative convener, an enlightened connector, a strategic programmer, or a wise counselor. Sometimes it means strategically adding value and experience to targeted projects to help speed up their process of experimentation and innovation. Sometimes it means offering our leadership, management, and infrastructure to ensure that vital projects take off.

Navigating the balance between organic and intentional is an art rather than a science; it involves experience, intuition, and reflective practice. These two forces impose constant pressure on the pyramid framework, appearing at all three levels and creating a dynamic that is simply part of the magic of the innovation process.

WHAT MAKES A COMMUNITY COME TO LIFE?

The pyramid offers a basic framework for understanding the relationship between space, community, social innovation and entrepreneurship within shared spaces. But, alone, the pyramid doesn’t explain how shared spaces lead to communities that lead to social innovation. To understand this, let’s dive a bit deeper into our work, and explore how elements of healthy communities support social entrepreneurship and innovation.

Curation

Just as CSI offers a conducive physical environment through the design of its spaces, it curates a social environment through its member selection. CSI, unlike
many other coworking spaces, uses a fairly strict set of selection criteria. But before we select our members, they select us.

Our magnetic attractor—the desire to change the world—defines our audience and kickstarts a process of self-selection that helps ensure that we are attracting people who share a certain set of values and interests. All CSI members must have a social mission: they must be trying to make the world a better place. Our goal is not to create an exclusive club; indeed, we explicitly aim for diverse experiences and perspectives. But we do need to guarantee a minimum baseline: all members must generally be amenable to our environment and to our mission so that all members contribute to the community we are building together.

Culture

Once you have the right people in the right space, it is essential to create and maintain a culture of innovation, creativity, permission, fun, and authenticity.

Most of all, our culture celebrates and supports the work of our members. CSI aims to be a happy and healthy place for people to work. We remove barriers by providing access to infrastructure, then we focus on creating happiness, meaning, and connection. Our member survey revealed that 72 percent of our members felt that CSI helped them to live their values. This is a huge step toward innovators living meaningful, happy lives.

Moreover, our community shares a set of values and a desire to bring their skills and talents to the challenge of social impact. This shared quest to positively change the world is a fundamental culture builder. We are all in it together: we work side by side in what may be vastly different fields, but we work together, seeing what connects us, deepening our practice, and seeing opportunities for collaboration and innovation on the peripheries.

Connection

We are all increasingly aware of the power of social networks. For entrepreneurs to succeed, people and organizations must interact with new ideas, perspectives, and energies. They also must be able to gain access to the people, tools, knowledge, and resources they need to get their product to market. Often the innovations emerge in the spaces between the sectors as entrepreneurs learn quickly and see opportunities they can exploit.

CSI builds transparency into our self-help culture as one way to nurture a rich and thriving ecosystem. Our programming focuses primarily on revealing the assets in the community and creating the social capital—the trust—that enables partnerships to be created, deals to be brokered, and support to be provided quickly and efficiently.

IT’S UP TO US!

In practice, navigating the balance between organic and intentional requires awareness, experience, intuition, and strategy. We call this role community anima-
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tion: the art of navigating a complex system that is more like parenting than rocket science. Animators listen, adapt, and nurture reflective practice. Curation, culture, and connections are essential ingredients to bring the community to life.

Coworking fosters an entrepreneurial culture. Community builds social capital and enables innovators and entrepreneurs to access the support they need to succeed. But what really drives the community forward is the shared vision of creating a better world. That’s the magic: we are all in this together. And we all know that it is up to us to make the world a better place.