

## BOOK REVIEW

REKINDLING DEMOCRACY  
A PROFESSIONAL'S GUIDE TO WORKING  
IN CITIZEN SPACE

**CORMAC RUSSELL**  
PUBLISHED 2020 BY CASCADE BOOKS

This is not the kind of book you'd expect to see reviewed in a health & safety magazine, but bear with me, for it has the potential to add real value for anyone who has realised that trying to impose top-down solutions on workers is rarely sustainable.

As the subtitle suggests, the book is aimed at people working in 'citizen space', which means with neighbourhoods or communities. It has nothing to say about health and safety as such, but it speaks to those practising H&S whose focus is direct engagement with workers, perhaps in the form of learning teams or in seeking to understand work-as-done.

I was inspired to get this book by Steven Shorrock's article 'The ABCD of Communities', which we published in the Jan/Feb 2019 edition. Russell is a leading figure in Asset-Based Community Development, where 'assets' means those skills and connections which each member of a community can bring to the table.

"Communities are all around us, close at hand, awaiting the community building that will make the invisible assets within them visible in all their abundance," he writes. What is a workplace but a group of people and their invisible assets?

Russell notes that when things are done TO communities it means everything is done "to us and without us", while doing things FOR communities means "done for us and without us". Better is doing things WITH communities ("nothing done for us is done without us"), but the aim is that things are done BY communities: done by us for us.

This, surely, is the pinnacle of worker engagement – in H&S, in anything.

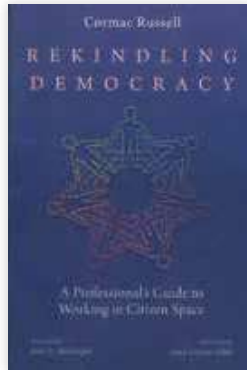
He suggests asking questions to make a community's assets visible, such as: "How do you create safety in this place, and how can we support your efforts?"; or "What would I need to know to be healthy while living here?"

The message to H&S practitioners? Set your own agenda aside and simply get to know what your work community cares about. As Russell says, instead of being helpful, try being curious.

He lists seven principles of community building, including "start by making the invisible visible; don't be helpful, be interested", and "understand that effective community building goes at the speed of trust". And of course, "start with what's strong to address what's wrong and make what's strong stronger".

Readers experimenting in the Safety-II space will be purring with pleasure at this point.

The relevance of the word democracy in the book's title slowly reveals itself. Having criticised the outside expert model, Russell takes care to subvert ABCD itself, saying it isn't a model but



## HISTORY NEVER REPEATS

AN EXTRACT FROM SAFEGUARD  
20 YEARS AGO:

NOV/DEC 2000 – ISSUE 64

"I had done my 12-hour shift. I had started at 2am and knocked off about 3pm and then went over to the Thistle to have a beer ... The supervisor came over from the yard and asked me if I would come back to work.

"I said, 'I have just done 12 hours and I've only drunk half my beer and no, I don't want to come back to work.' The supervisor said to me, 'Well if you don't come, then we won't be able to do the shunt for the ferry and so the freight will not go.'

"I still said that I had just done 12 hours and I didn't want to do any more work, but he kept saying about how if the shunting was not done then the freight would not go on the ferry and in the end I felt I had to say yes, I would do the job.

"I finished my beer and went back and worked another 8 hours."

*[Extract from a story by Rebecca Macfie on the report of the ministerial inquiry into safety at TranzRail.]*



## Pilot programme

Pictured delivering a workshop to students at Massey High School in Auckland is WorkSafe inspector Kieran Cannon. Inspectors delivered this third and final workshop in a pilot programme to students at the school's carpentry, building and construction pre-trade academy. The programme looks at topics such as falls from height, asbestos, and mentally healthy work. WorkSafe has developed the programme to target students before they start their apprenticeships and is now looking to roll it out nationally.



"a description of how a neighbourhood becomes a community".

It's a challenging but rewarding read which will resonate with progressive thinkers in the H&S community. Let's finish with Russell's own words: "Community building is all about discovering, connecting and mobilizing the building blocks that exist in every community ... not so that we can re-create a pre-ordained version of democracy but so that we can enact democracy."

**Reviewed by Peter Bateman**