



*A Virginia Main Street* discussion series for  
community & neighborhood revitalization teams

Dar Williams'  
**What I Found in a Thousand Towns**  
Basic Books (2017)

*Think in bridges.*

## CHAPTER 4: HISTORY

**POSITIVE PROXIMITY** *summary*: A community can use proximity to its advantage to integrate the talents and skills of residents. Successful revitalization programs use physical **spaces** to foster positive interaction. They take on **projects** that shape the community identity. Critically, they **engage** the spectrum of the community in making these a reality. (Williams calls this *translation*, the act of a town opening up to itself.)

“...There are PROJECTS that build a town’s **IDENTITY**—socially, culturally, and /or historically—helping them become...themselves. These projects bring out the advantages of proximity by attracting the passions and skill sets of people who are like-minded in some ways but very different in others, cross-pollinating abilities and personalities. Citizens tend to see past their partisanship and biases when they’re trying to accomplish something they can’t do alone...”

### HISTORY: Questions for Discussion

1. Phoenixville had *The Blob*. What quirky, fun aspect of your history do you celebrate?
2. What does your history, and the way you share it, say about your community today?
  - a. What values or character of your community tie back to historic events?
  - b. How can you “read” those values or character in the physical space of downtown?
3. Watch **Finding Main Street Video #4** featuring the historically African American commercial district in Danville, Virginia.
  - a. What’s the next area ready for revitalization in your community?
  - b. Does your community have a strategy similar to Danville’s?
  - c. What history might you be overlooking in your community?
  - d. Are there people and places in your community that can be connected in a new way?
4. How do independent stores in your community support your local identity?
5. American towns can be very self-segregating. In the book, there were several examples of strategies that countered these long term conditions, including putting senior housing in the heart of town, the Philly Fadez Barber shop opening at the main intersection, and Dover’s stumble-upon history interpretations.
  - a. What bridge-building strategies have you taken on?
  - b. Does everyone feel welcome in your downtown?
  - c. How can you very overtly welcome different kinds of people?

