*DESIGNING SOCIAL SYSTEMS
IN A CHANGING WORLD*

Contemporary Systems Thinking

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To Eva

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another
Man's;
I will not Reason and Compare; my business is to
Create.

—William Blake, *Jerusalem*, pl. 10, 1.20

Preface

What is presented in this work is based on a lifetime involvement in learning and exploring; in research, development, and applications; helping others to learn; and living and working in many organizational settings. An unwavering belief in human betterment has guided me through the decades, as with many others I have joined in creating resources, opportunities, and programs by which people, groups, organizations, and communities are enabled to develop and fulfill their individual and collective potentials and become the best they can.

In the course of the last decade, however, I have become increasingly convinced that even if people fully develop their potential, they cannot give direction to their lives, they cannot forge their destiny, they cannot take charge of their future—unless they also develop competence to take part directly and authentically in the design of the systems in which they live and work, and reclaim their right to do so. This is what true empowerment is about.

This book is about enabling such empowerment. It offers resources and programs by which individuals, groups, and organizations can learn to create a common ground, collectively define values and qualities they seek to realize, envision ideal images of a desired future, and bring those images to life by engaging in the disciplined inquiry of social systems design.

I am also convinced that this kind of empowerment, when learned and exercised by families, groups, organizations, and social and societal systems of all kinds, is the only hope we have to give direction to our evolution, to create a democracy that truly represents the aspiration and will of people, and to create a society about which all of us can feel good.

The ideas, the propositions, and the learning arrangements presented in this work have been influenced by many. What I have learned about systems and design inquiry I have learned with many others, in many ways, over several decades. And I am grateful to them. Nevertheless, I wish to acknowledge the very special help of a few friends who reviewed the manuscript and offered advice and guidance. The help of B. Antal Banathy, Aleco Christakis, Paul Hood, Lynn Jenks, Tad Frantz, and Gordon Rowland is much treasured and appreciated. Following their review, the seven of us spent a week in an intensive conversation at the 1995 International Conference of Social Systems Design,

exploring the implications of the work for the further development of resources and programs in design learning and design applications. I also wish to thank Jean Sims for her editorial help.

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