An opportunity arose in the author’s work as an animator in a community group to design a socially innovative project to address homelessness in her city. Her retrospective auto/biographical account of the design and implementation process demonstrates how qualitative inquiry can contribute to the efforts of community-based practitioners committed to advancing social justice in their communities. Two inquiry frameworks were used. The first, mindful inquiry, is guided by phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical social theory, and the Eastern knowledge tradition of Buddhism. The second, ALMOLIN (alternative models of local social innovation), explores the dynamics of social exclusion and social innovation. Its ethical social-justice position provides alternative criteria to determine whether a social innovation responds to human deprivation; empowers disenfranchised citizens by building capabilities; and changes social and power relations, transforming exclusionary mechanisms into inclusionary strategies. Drawing on these intersecting frameworks, and thinking through and with relationships and lived experiences in her practice setting, a bold vision emerged of what the author here calls the Whole Community Project. Practical actions of coordination and collaboration with multiple stakeholders brought into being places and spaces in the community that provided material pathways to formal education, employment, affordable housing, and home ownership for citizens who had been left behind due to homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, and unemployment. In joining inquiry with making, this unique project design demonstrated that such citizens can recover, achieve employment that provides a sustainable livelihood, and own their own homes in less than two years. The project met the goals of improving the lives of citizens in the author’s practice. The inquiry also informed the design of inclusive interactive civic spaces to promote broader inclusive participatory inquiry: what had been perceived as individual troubles (e.g., homelessness, addiction) could now be transformed into community issues for public deliberation towards more socially just public policy.

Keywords: mindful inquiry; critical social theory; phenomenology; hermeneutics; Buddhism; social innovation; social justice; storied accounts