SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND URBAN DESIGN

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Summary

Sustainability as a concept has excited many scholars in the last two decades. However, relatively little attention has been cast on the prospect of sustainable urban design. The article seeks to define sustainable urban design, drawing from the experiences of a Los Angeles neighborhood in its attempt for revitalization. Poor and neglected by planners and public officials, the neighborhood was nevertheless, able to form a coalition of residents, merchants, neighborhood institutions, and university faculty and students, and promote a strategy for sustainability. The article details the victories won and the challenges and setbacks faced by this neighborhood.

This neighborhood initiative deviated from traditional approaches to sustainable development that tend to focus on macro-scales and privilege physical and environmental issues over community development. It instead focused on the micro-scale, trying to revitalize the settings of everyday life: the lot, the block, the alley, the sidewalk, and the park. To promote sustainability, the initiative merged community development with physical design, vesting the power of decision-making on the

neighborhood stakeholders. The article concludes by outlining lessons applicable to different contexts and circumstances for forging sustainable urban design.

1. Introduction

Few concepts in the last decade have attracted as wide attention and debate in different fields, as the concept of sustainability. Used by urban planners, landscape architects, environmentalists, environmental economists, biologists, and politicians, the term often acquires different meanings and expectations. This essay will seek to define sustainability in the context of urban design. It will use an example from a neighborhood revitalization initiative in Los Angeles to ultimately argue that sustainable urban design cannot be seen separately from community development. The intricate link between communities and space breaks down artificial dichotomies between the physical and the social, the natural and the urban, the aesthetic and the political.

The sustainability literature is full of brilliant arguments about the necessity to preserve the resources of our planet for the benefit of future generations, to maintain at least a minimum environmental 'capital' stock, by reducing waste, conserving energy and natural resources, and preserving habitats and bio-regions. Attention often concentrates on the macro-scale—the planet, the region, the metropolitan area, and focus usually tilts towards the environmental and ecological aspects of sustainable development, not the participatory and social. Interpretations of such development run along a spectrum from 'light green' to 'deep green,' giving more emphasis on issues of preservation and conservation of natural resources, and much less thought on how to empower communities to participate in the decision making process for sustainable urban forms.

Yet, the practice of urban design is embedded in both physical and social space. Physical space comprises of lots, blocks, streets, and neighborhoods. Social space consists of people and their dreams; their needs and values about the physical space that surrounds them. To reach an indeed sustainable urban form we need to give physical expressions to social aspirations; in other words to combine community development and urban design.

Few would argue against the noble intentions of environmental stewardship for our planet—the need to reduce the negative external impacts generated by urban environments, to deal with pollution, to reduce the depletion of the Earth's natural resources, and to work with instead of against nature. However, by addressing sustainability issues only at a macro scale we often fail to examine the sustainability and livability of the lot, the block, and the neighborhood. At the same time, we seem to exclude the main stakeholders of urban environments—the people that live, work, or play in them—from the decision making arena; we are taking away from them their right to decide what is "sustainable design" for their communities.

The following sections describe a neighborhood revitalization process that tried to privilege people and their choices in making their neighborhood livable and their initiative sustainable. Far from being a perfect blueprint for sustainability, this neighborhood initiative was, nevertheless, able to mobilize community members to improve their physical, environmental, and social conditions.

2. Search for Sustainability in the Inner City

Inner city neighborhoods in the U.S. can often be described as the polar opposites of a sustainable urban form. This is true for many poor neighborhoods around the world, in developed and developing nations alike. Indeed, issues of sustainability have left these neighborhoods behind, as they are plagued by an abundance of brownfield sites, lack of green and open spaces, and air polluted by exhaust fumes and incompatible land uses. Community initiatives in such neighborhoods have rarely managed to influence official planning processes or outcomes. In American inner cities, community mobilization, if existent, is often in opposition to a proposed action. The intrusion of a freeway, the building of a prison, the proliferation of liquor stores have been issues that have forced neighborhoods to react, resist, oppose. But only on few occasions have poor communities come together proactively, to envision, plan, and implement positive changes. Planning in the North American context remains guarded in the distant and insular offices of city planning and redevelopment agencies. Of course there are public hearings and Environmental Impact Reports of proposed projects, where the public is allowed to listen, read or comment. But these are venues of participation that are usually utilized by a very limited segment of the public. For the most part, residents of American inner city neighborhoods have no participation in decisions affecting their everyday environment, and they are unable to control, shape or change the public spaces of their everyday lives.

But there are also exceptions. This account summarizes the experiences of a Los Angeles inner city neighborhood in its attempt for revitalization and sustainability. It describes a collaborative community process that stands in stark opposition to the hierarchical notion of top-down planning. A core community group composed of residents, merchants and representatives of local institutions with the help of a university student team, initiated a revitalization process that was able to engage the larger community. Neighborhood watch groups, church groups, parent-teacher associations, local merchants, and neighborhood children were given the opportunity to voice their concerns, debate the issues and participate in a series of revitalization projects. At the core of the revitalization effort was the reclaiming of the neighborhood's small urban spaces from the condition of neglect, disrepair, and crime, and the forging of a sense of identity. This account details the victories won and the challenges faced by the group as it attempted to create a sustainable community in Los Angeles' inner city.

The city of everyday life is composed of the multiple meanings with which we invest the built environment. These meanings rarely transcend official planning documents, urban design schemes and comprehensive plans. They remain largely invisible to planners, who do not know how to discover them, or how to translate them into policies and action. They are outside the focus of environmentalists, who are pursuing grand strategies for saving our planet. They are "swept aside" by powerbrokers, city politicians and redevelopment czars as irrelevant to the grand purposes of city building.

This story is about some neighborhood residents, who mobilized by the power of their dreams, vowed to make their meanings visible to planners, city agencies, and politicians, and to indeed develop a sustainable urban design for their neighborhood.

Their goal was to revitalize their neighborhood, a poor and neglected 62-block stretch in Los Angeles inner city. The account will highlight the planning process, as it deviates significantly from the traditional rationalistic approach, followed by planning agencies. It will also talk about the products of this effort, and how they have tried to encapsulate and represent diverse and multiple social meanings.

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Biographical Sketch

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