

Art: Urban Renewal/Redesign a Community Perspective

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Urban renewal is the state-sponsored destruction of slum neighborhoods with a view to the construction of new housing. *Art* is the human effort to maintain, supplement, alter or counteract the work of nature. In today's climate the combination of these definitions seems to fit a much broader reality –the demolition and rebuilding of rundown sections of a city with an artistic flair. This idea supports to a certain degree that urban renewal is a specific kind of art. However, the artistic nature of urban renewal is usually exclusionary when community perspective is considered. This approach is unacceptable. A new paradigm that benefits, protects and enhances the quality of life for all residents through community participation is essential for the social health of our communities.

The reasons that foster exclusionary practices in urban renewal can take several forms. The most obvious appear to be, at least to community members who have had their lives altered by urban renewal, economic, political, or social. Generally, economic strength has been the decisive factor in determining what the artistic nature, value and focus of urban redesign will entail. This is often done with little regard for input from economically weak urban communities. Political strength is usually wielded by a small number of individuals. Therefore, unless local political leaders are truly in tune to the needs and desires of communities under their jurisdiction urban renewal becomes a political choice devoid of any significant community input. Social status in communities targeted for urban renewal is often weak. These communities historically house poor and disadvantaged individuals. Society generally assigns less concern to communities that are seen as not pulling their own weight; therefore, input is limited. Additionally, urban renewal/redesign projects placed a premium on cost vs. environmental considerations. Thus, urban communities often find themselves in conflict with views very different from their own. Unfortunately, their voices are often drowned by the economic, political, and social strength of their opponents.

Modern construction in urban spaces signifies an effort to improve functionally and visually any streetscape or public or private building. As such, these motivations set the stage for two incipient perspectives that often clash –destruction and construction. In both, urban communities feel the immediate pressure of redesign. The economic, political and social value of urban renewal depends largely on whether an individual resides inside or outside the targeted community. Artistic expressions, cultural aesthetics or regional characteristics, as a means of communal expression have consistently been relegated to the periphery of urban renewal design processes. Art as a primary feature of urban renewal is generally precipitated after functional features that accommodate human activities have been decided upon. Thus, urban renewal can be viewed as an attempt to

render art in its highest functional manifestation; thereby, allowing design to follow function. More importantly, perspective plays an essential role in determining the success or failure of urban redesign outcomes. Humanistic issues often collide in the arena of personal vs. utilitarian dominance.

However, as mentioned earlier economic drivers as the sole motive of urban renewal are exclusionary. Self-regulated political and business activities do not achieve equitable results in terms of capital outlay, responsibility and benefit returned. Considering the myriad of factors that influence urban renewal decisions it is unreasonable to believe that business or the polity will, whenever it can, choose to opt for a holistic approach to urban design. This is particularly true when examining the outcomes of past projects for receptiveness to community input and context sensitive design processes.

The idea that cities seek to renew or revitalize urban communities speaks to maintaining and to developing a sense of pride that improves the functionality these communities within the constraints of public policy. Artistic expression in urban design is often at odds with many current traditions in business, industry and even human freedoms. These conflicts emerge from societies immersed in the trappings of traditional design models that focus on economic expansion as a benchmark of success. Little regard is afforded human needs and environmental integrity.

Many people feel it is better to address such problems through a more collaborative and holistic systems approach because such problems are diffuse, multidisciplinary, multiagency, multistakeholder, and multisector in nature.
Lachman, Beth E., Critical Technologies Institute, "Linking Sustainable Community Activities to Pollution Prevention: A Source book," April 1997.

In recent years there has emerged a growing trend toward incorporating dynamic cultural or natural artistic features as significant components of urban design. This inchoate inclusion is driven by an effort to stem the tide of environmental degradation caused by human activity anywhere urban renewal is proposed. It is also seen as a means to appear sensitive to community concerns. Area residents perceive urban renewal as a threat and as a blessing. Why, because it engenders a psychological as well as a physical footprint. It encompasses functional characteristics, artistic innovation, sustainable environmental considerations, and social equity. Each of these components contains within its scope a plethora of personal meaning for a city's residents that may be viewed as advantageous or disadvantageous in anchoring future generations. Thus the reclamation and beautification of urban areas is becoming the art of improving visually the community landscape while incorporating either cultural, historic, ethnic or natural accents, within the preview of the limitations of public constraint. And it is expected to enhance the economic productiveness of the community –a tenuous relationship at best.

Art as a design tool for urban renewal serves several beneficial purposes. Psychologically art can help to establish a connection to a physical location. Art can soothe through familiarity, invoke curiosity, and inspire creativity. Art contributes to the diversity of community and directs communities and visitors toward ideas that create a sense of place. Art inspires the growth of new ideas and opens the door for imagination, innovation, and

creativity. Art can be an expression of the old and the new intertwined in design that blends ideas across time. Art has the capacity necessary for the inclusion of environmental sustainability, smart growth, environmental justice, and equitable development as full partners in the design process.

Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development.

A utilitarian view of urban design would advocate the greatest good or least harm for the greatest number of individuals. Thus, we must envision the worth of artistic expression rooted in urban renewal as a means that leads to community cohesiveness. Because of the symbiotic nature of business and society we have a duty to engage in urban design practices that support future generations. While we all have a responsibility to their community that responsibility is not now, nor has it been in the past, equally shared. This historical inequity creates the necessity for statutes and the enforcement of those statutes to ensure the minimum level of compliance.

Growth is smart when it gives us great communities, with more choices and personal freedom, good return on public investment, greater opportunity across the community, a thriving natural environment, and a legacy we can be proud to leave our children and grandchildren.
This is Smart Growth, Smart Growth Network and International City/County Management Association, 2006.

A methodology in the development phase should be based on planning that will create tools of empowerment for urban communities and environments. The use of art, equity and sustainable approaches as the framework for creating redesigned communities when developing new housing and businesses to strengthen and fortify the economic environment is paramount. A paradigm based on a strategy of commitment to the concept of community input, artistic vision, sustainable and equitable development in urban renewal/redesign should enable inclusion.