

Design for Regenerative Communities

By Kyle Brown

WITH THE CURRENT FOCUS ON the design of sustainable communities, the emphasis is on ensuring that we meet the needs of the present generation and that future generations are able to meet their own needs. This often-used definition of sustainability first offered by the United Nations' *Brundtland Report*, puts forth a challenge that is really two-fold: 1) in what ways will we ensure the continual regeneration of key resources necessary for survival over multiple generations, such as food, water and energy; and 2) in what ways are we nurturing leadership and capacity in future generations to empower communities to assert control over their futures?

Much has been written within the design and planning literature about the first challenge, as it engages the physical systems of urban form, which often characterize the core competencies of those of us engaged in sustainable design. Strategies for

urban organic agriculture, water resource management, renewable energy and conservation receive much attention. However, far less attention has been paid to the second challenge within the sustainable design discourse, beyond vague and ill-defined references to economic and educational dimensions of sustainability. This is not surprising given the distance of these topics from the domain of traditional design practice, yet it stands to reason that if we are genuinely interested in the sustainable maintenance and operation of the systems we design, we should be interested in nurturing the commitment and capacity to do so within future generations.

The Need for Ecological Sovereignty to Advance Local Sustainability

The empowerment of local communities to assert control over their own sustainable futures can be described as a form of sovereignty, a term which is gaining prevalence, particularly around food issues. Food sovereignty has been defined as the right of people to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments.

While suggestive of self-sustaining local food strategies, the concept is not intended to suggest isolationist practices. Rather, the emphasis is placed on communities making their own decisions about food which nourishes the community, as opposed to having those decisions made for it via trade policies, government subsidies, multinational corporations or other external decision-makers. One may think of communities as existing on a sovereignty continuum, lying somewhere between total dependence on external resources and decisions and absolute independence.

While embracing food sovereignty may be an important step for a community, the community may also be dependent on many other vital resources. A community may be unable to develop a strategy for local food production without ensuring adequate water, land and energy needed for production, distribution and processing. A systems approach to sustainable communities shows us that in order to attain sovereignty in one system, sovereignty must also be exerted over other critical resource systems. Given the interdependence of these



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community systems, a broader goal of ecological sovereignty should be considered whereby communities exert control over all the systems essential for sustainability, including food, water, energy, the built environment and waste, as well as relevant social and cultural systems and local ecological systems.

If we accept the concept of ecological sovereignty as a vital dimension of a sustainable community, what does this require from its citizens? How can interest in and capacity for attaining sovereignty be fostered in future generations? A review of related literature suggests that key strategies include promoting an asset-based culture, nurturing empowerment and continually regenerating leadership from within.

Promoting an Asset-Based Culture

All communities possess strengths or assets, which may include ecological, cultural or economic resources, as well as qualities and capabilities of their citizens. At the same time, all communities also possess problems, or deficits, which detract from the community's capabilities or quality of life. Communities of affluence are often characterized by their assets, which may include high-performing schools, cultural centers, parks and shopping, dining and entertainment options. These assets often become engrained in the identity of the community, reinforced by media and social networks. While these communities undoubtedly face many problems such as pollution, substance abuse or other criminal activity, these



Participant's at the Lyle Center's "Low Impact Eating" community workshop, where participants shared a meal and discussed the environmental impact of food choices.

rarely define the community within our collective imagination, or within the mindset of the community members. Communities with an asset-based perspective often have active and progressive citizenry who mobilize to advance environmental initiatives around issues such as local food or renewable energy. It is easy for such communities to envision movement toward an ecologically sovereign future.

In contrast, many low-income, minority or otherwise marginalized communities are often characterized much more by the problems they face and the needs they have. These may include crime, homelessness, extensive contamination and low-achieving schools. While these communities undoubtedly possess valuable assets in the form of institutions, organizations, cultural resources or gifted individuals, these qualities rarely characterize external perceptions of the community, particularly as filtered through the media, which tend to focus on high-profile problems. While this external perspective can be quite damaging, the deficit perspective of the community's own residents may be even more damaging. Residents begin to believe their community is incapable of improving and unworthy of positive assets. It becomes hard for residents to imagine a future where problems are addressed and assets are a defining element of their identity. For these communities, an ecologically sovereign future may be impossible to envision.

The transformation of a community from one that has a deficit-based perspective to one that has an asset-

based perspective is extremely challenging, however, it is a necessary cultural shift if future generations are going to be able to envision alternative futures, including ecological sovereignty.

Nurturing Empowerment

In order to assert its right to make decisions about the use of key resources, a community must be empowered to plan and act for itself. This empowerment requires not only an understanding of ecological structure and function, which characterizes these resources, but also conscious recognition of political jurisdictions, power relations, social justice concerns and other cultural constructs which shape community life. Only then can alternative futures be conceived and achievable strategies and tactics developed. The knowledge that is essential for this type of empowerment is characteristic of what the great community organizer Saul Alinsky described as "real education," where individuals make sense out of their relationship to their community and the larger world in order to make informed and intelligent judgments about how to change their situations.

Communities of affluence, and others defined by their assets, may be well-positioned to exhibit empowerment in advancing sustainability, whereas marginalized communities may require greater nurturing. Indeed, recent studies have highlighted the educational disparity between high-income and low-income Americans, noting that the gap between these groups

has grown substantially in recent years. While these disparities reflect performance on standardized testing and other measures which may not effectively assess Alinsky's "real education," some studies have documented the importance of empowerment and other developmental assets in boosting overall academic performance, suggesting a possible relationship.

Regeneration of Leadership

If strategies and practices for sustainability are to persist for multiple generations, the emergence of leadership from within the community is important. Our perceptions of leadership are often influenced by notions of heroic leadership, where the leader is often a charismatic "expert" from outside the community who believes she knows best, that her own cultural values are better, that the communities she is helping are defined only by their problems or needs and that cultural differences can or should be ignored. Described as the "heroic leadership trap" by Paul Schmitz, this approach often yields simple and disconnected solutions which fail to appreciate the unique assets and challenges of the community and offer virtually no hope of the leadership torch being passed to subsequent generations. Recent community organizing efforts, however, have emphasized the multiplication and sharing of leadership from within. Under this approach, the characteristics of leadership are redefined to value local knowledge, value local assets, appreciate difference and mobilize



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TOP
Elementary students in Pomona, California, map assets in their neighborhood, including wildlife sightings.

BELOW
The students filter vegetable oil and use it to power a vehicle.

support. Leadership moves from being heroic to being contagious.

The Role of Design

What is the role of community design in the promotion of asset-based culture, the nurturing of empowerment and the regeneration of leadership? I see two important ways in which community designers can foster these qualities in the interest of advancing sustainable design for future generations.

The first is in the design of environments that promote healthy development in young people. This goes well beyond the design of schools and playgrounds, toward a healthy community approach based on developmental assets. The Search Institute has articulated a framework of such assets, which are positive factors in young people, families and communities that have been found to be important in promoting healthy development. Many of these assets are internal to the young person, including those that promote a commitment to learning, a positive value system, critical social competencies and positive identity. Others are assets which are external to the young person, embodied in either the family unit or community. These include mechanisms of support for the young person, assets to promote empowerment, boundaries and expectations and constructive uses of time. The framework offered by the Search Institute is robust, supported by significant data regarding academic achievement across numerous communities.

While not all of these developmental assets may have obvious connections to design work, many do. For example, the constructive use of time emphasizes creative activities, youth programs and other modes of organized youth engagement.

I see two important ways in which community designers can foster interest in sustainable design for future generations: First, is the design of environments that promote healthy development in young people. Second, is for the community design process itself to embody an asset-based culture, nurture empowerment and regenerate leadership from within.

These have obvious implications for the planning and design of recreational facilities, gathering spaces and public art. Other assets, such as those associated with empowerment, emphasize neighborhood safety and the perception of youth

as a valuable resource within the community. These have implications for the prioritizing of youth spaces within the community, as well as natural surveillance and other design strategies to promote safety.

The second way regenerative communities can be promoted is for the community design process itself to embody the strategies of promoting an asset-based culture, the nurturing of empowerment and the regeneration of leadership from within. This may be a challenging shift for many who view the designer's role as one of providing technical assistance and expertise, as it takes on flavors of community-based education, community organizing and facilitation. Yet it may be a necessary shift if we hope to develop goals and strategies which are truly sustained across multiple generations.

At the Lyle Center for Regenerative Studies at Cal Poly Pomona University, we have embraced this approach, working with elementary-aged children and their families on a variety of environmental projects. While the topic is environmentally-based, the focus is on developing assets which will enable the children to succeed in academics and empower them to articulate alternative futures for themselves as well as for their community. We have found the environment to be a powerful subject because of its complexity, as well as its presence in daily life. We hope that it provides the "real education" described by Saul Alinsky and empowers the youth of the community to take action toward a more sustainable future. **P²**