

Livable Communities

By Carl Anthony

Imagine cities as places where working people can afford to live and raise their families, where there is concern for clean air, water, and land. Imagine vital exchanges across generations and beautiful places where people gather. Urban life is at its most vibrant when people from various parts of the world bring together their music, food, cultural systems, and religious expressions. All of these make for cities that manifest the strength and brilliance of the human garden.

Moving the Environmental Movement

For the better part of the last century, the conservation movement and its offspring, the environmental movement, have had a negative view of cities. It started with John Muir's celebration of nature in reaction to the ugliness of industrial development, urban pollution, congestion, and noise. But this bias against cities is changing. Environmental groups now acknowledge that the way we live in cities is at the nexus of many environmental challenges.

Key to this shift has been the movement for environmental justice that exploded on the scene during the 1980s, as communities of color all across the United States fought to protect themselves against the unequal distribution of environmental hazards undermining the health of people forced to live in neighborhoods with locally unwanted land uses. This movement quickly expanded to confront a wide variety of hazards: pesticides, air pollution, lead poisoning, toxic waste production and disposal, and garbage dumps; and also occupational hazards.

In the early 1990s, beginning from an entirely different foundation, the Congress for New Urbanism formed to re-establish the relationship between the art of city building and the conservation of the natural environment. According to its founding charter, new urbanists view "the divestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands, and the erosion of

society's built heritage as one inter-related community-building challenge."

The pursuit of metropolitan, regional, and neighborhood equity is, in many ways, a fusion of these two social currents. It is a mobilization led by social justice advocates, civil rights organizations, and labor unions concerned with issues of fairness in the way metropolitan regions grow. It seeks to address not only what communities are against but also what they are for: healthy neighborhoods with convenient access to good schools, affordable housing, parks, and grocery stores; equitable public investments; and access to opportunity.

This new movement responds to two challenges that poor and marginalized communities and neighborhoods face as they seek to improve their quality of life. The first is that the larger patterns of metropolitan development have undermined past neighborhood-based efforts to remedy concentrated urban poverty, socioeconomic issues, and racial isolation. The second challenge is to find systemic ways to link poverty alleviation to the larger, society-wide patterns of social, economic, and environmental development.

Moving the Smart Growth Movement

The advocates of regional and neighborhood equity recognize that public debate about smart growth and the new metropolitan agenda provides a political context to build new allies in the effort to address the unmet needs of poor people, working people, and



people of color in ways that improve the quality of life for everyone.

The way we build and live in cities has a profound impact on society's use and misuse of natural resources. It also profoundly affects social, economic, and racial justice outcomes. It is important to realize that in a globalizing world, the real city is the whole metropolitan region, made up of many jurisdictions, including the central city, its suburbs, and the rural and wilderness areas under its influence. Private developers focus on the shape of individual projects within a particular jurisdiction. But the public sector must fairly represent the interests of populations both positively and negatively impacted by a given development. This is an especially critical responsibility when public subsidies are involved. Decisions made by one jurisdiction have spillover effects on neighborhoods and ecosystems throughout a region. Public actions that define land use must incorporate civic engagement for all affected residents, including communities of color throughout a whole region, in ways that shape the behavior of private market forces to achieve fair outcomes for all. Contrary to much dis-

cussion of the so-called free market, the forms, patterns, and potential benefits or burdens of a particular development are shaped as much by public policy as they are by the private sector.

Creating Working Neighborhoods

Many long-time residents of isolated, poorer neighborhoods welcome middle-income families to their neighborhoods as they become popular again due to new urban trends. They see the newcomers as making the neighborhood more attractive for grocery stores, banks, safe public parks, better schools, and inviting spaces. However, neighborhood organizers, housing advocates, and tenant groups worry that newcomers will displace older residents, driving up taxes and housing prices, making it impossible for poorer residents to remain. Such groups, organized to protect traditional constituencies, are joining the regional equity movement, to develop new strategies to capture some of the wealth from changing neighborhoods to benefit poor people.

Every community should have housing for the people who work there. A suburban neighborhood

Photo:

A temporary commons organized by the People's Convention in the South Bronx during the Democratic Party Convention in New York City, 1980.

© 1980 George Cohen
From *Building Commons and Community* by Karl Linn.

that has many stores, for example, should have places where cashiers and janitors can afford to live. And now that the nation has largely transformed to a service economy, and many industrial processes are less polluting, there is less need to separate places where people work and live. Having jobs closer to residential areas reduces over-reliance on automobiles, improves social integration, and reduces the ecological stresses associated with high traffic volumes.

Just, Green, and Beautiful Opportunities

For many urban and rural communities, the scale of abandonment has reached epidemic proportions.

There are 90,000 vacant properties in Detroit, 60,000 in Philadelphia. Once-prosperous cities like St Louis, Baltimore, and Cincinnati, and dozens of smaller cities are shrinking, while we continue to build auto-dependent suburban communities 50 miles away from the downtowns, on what was once farmland.

In recent years, though, cities like Richmond, Flint, and Philadelphia have launched ambitious initiatives to reclaim vacant properties. Others, such as San Diego and Las Vegas, have taken aggressive steps to prevent abandonment in the first place. A National Vacant Properties Campaign is attracting smart growth advocates—who see property reclamation as a way to offset urban sprawl—and affordable housing groups seeking to rehabilitate homes.

Building community gardens, or opening up and restoring creeks and watersheds, provides opportunities to bring people of different jurisdictions, neighborhoods, and social classes together.

The natural world is a resource for aesthetic appreciation, education, and recreation. Cities that are barren of trees suffer from the heat-island effect as pavement and roofs absorb and radiate heat. When soils are displaced with paving, water can't percolate into the aquifers, and this, too, affects the microclimate.



Perhaps easiest to understand, relating directly to issues of economic justice, is the urgent need to reconstruct our food system.

When I was growing up in the 1940s in Philadelphia, much of our food came from nearby farms. When the season changed, the food changed, and people kept track. During World War II, virtually every household in our neighborhood had a victory garden as a way of contributing to the war effort.

Today, our food is grown, harvested, processed, packaged, distributed, shipped, and marketed by a small number of giant corporations. Folks in cities have no idea where their food comes from. The small family farm is no longer economically viable. Rural communities bear the brunt of noxious corporate farming practices. The money that urban populations spend for food increasingly pays for industrial farming monocultures, dependent on toxic pesticides, and transportation costs for shipping our food from countries all over the world to urban supermarkets.

Bringing nature back into the city means finding new ways to link small family farmers with consumers in the cities in a regional food system that provides healthy food to people who live in the city while keeping rural economies vibrant.

The movement toward just, livable cities—the regional equity movement—is working to recapture some of this lost vibrancy, envisioning a new pattern of development that incorporates all the ecological ideas to grow a more equitable society.

An authentic approach to urban sustainability incorporates ecological integrity, beauty—and social justice. ■

the Race, Poverty Environment



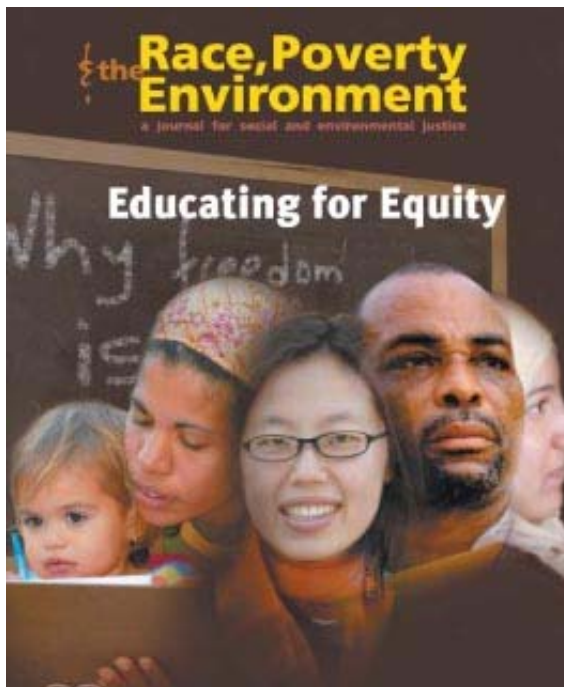
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