

The Urban Planner the Future of Community

Ever wonder who decided how low income housing was built, how levies were created, who designed the idea for our community centers, who defines the needs which creates non-profit organizations and social justice issues? The answer is often complicated and involves contracts, city councils, the federal government and urban planning. Urban planning and development most simply defines how cities are planned but defining it simply as planning would be erroneous. As Marty Nemko, US News author and analyst of careers, puts it “Should a new stadium be built downtown? How can a county reduce sprawl while providing appealing, affordable housing? What should the city demand of a developer who wants to build a new project? To address questions like these, planners analyze trends, population needs and desires, the area's assets and liabilities, and laws and policies. Planners conduct studies, lead meetings with experts, and hold public hearings(Best Careers 2009 Urban Regional Planner).”

In more recent times urban planning and development has taken on new problems about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development. At its highest capacity urban planning and development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This type of ideal urban planning and development takes the challenge that the sum all human activity needs to stay within the ecological carrying capacity of the planet; it needs to not consume resources in excess of the ability of ecosystems (both planet-wide and more locally) to regenerate those same natural resources. Anything else compromises both the ability of the present generation

to meet its wants and needs and the ability of future generations to meet theirs. These sorts of decisions do not happen in a vacuum, planners have to work with everyone to cause such a momentous impact. The specific problem for the urban planner; how does the planner work with the cities, government, and citizens to develop the best possible solution? As Dennis Judd, Professor of Political Science Ph.D. University of Illinois, writes “Regimes came together when politically astute mayors forged a broad coalition of interests to support the cause of urban renewal. These regimes came apart when neighborhood groups were able to stop the urban renewal and highway bulldozer, and when civil rights and community activists organized movements demanding policies to reduce racial and economic inequalities. (Strong Leadership).” Judd goes on to posit that the power in these interactions was initially given to the funding source the federal government but city mayors working in collaboration with the community building and development department, and committees have founded localized power(954). Following this Judd notes that the federal government began to create funding that was for local or smaller groups bringing the power closer to the people in the communities, the constituency for elections (955). Judd also notes this did not last and the areas which received the much needed Urban renewal federal funding were largely for commercial development(956). The dawn of the ghetto low income housing arrived.

The key to successful urban renewal Judd posits is strong leadership and he tempers that with the need for urban liberalism. R.P. Browning and D.R. Marshall define urban liberalism as they write “Urban liberalism springs from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which incorporated blacks, and later Latinos and Asians, into local political structures. Ethnic, racial and gender issues are central to urban liberalism, and the struggles over these issues have had significant policy consequences. Incorporation has generally been followed by attempts to

redistribute public resources more equitably. This has, among other things, transformed the ethnic and racial make-up of public bureaucracies, resulted in preferential procurement and contracting programs, and reformed some police practices (Browning et al., 1984).” As Judd notes these initiatives are largely present in the development of San Francisco and have been measured as successful. I assert that both strong leadership and urban liberalism are critical factors for an Urban Planner to have effective results. Let us define strong leadership.

The word strong invokes a picture for all of us. I will define strong leadership as positive authentic transparency. I will also say that strong leadership is transformational. As Steve Zaffron, CEO of the Vanto Group a global consulting firm, and Dave Logan, former associate dean of the University of Southern California, write “When we talk about creating a crisis of authenticity we aren’t referring to a crisis you have, but a crisis you create, by confronting what really matters to you. If you want to transform who you are –how you occur to yourself- then you need to create a crisis of identity, one in which the only way out is transformation.(The Three Laws of Performance 157-158).” Authenticity begins by finding what is important to you and then using that as a basis to listen for and reliably deliver what will make a difference to others. In this pursuit you must be transparent in your process and inclusive of everyone. The work of an urban planner must be purpose driven. As Raymond T. Sparrowe, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Washington writes “The first step in the journey from authenticity to inauthenticity is described in terms of finding one’s own purpose instead of being buffeted by external pressures or in speaking in one’s own voice rather than echoing the voices of others (Authentic Leadership and the Narrative self 421).” Urban Planners simply must have that self awareness as a first step.

This first step also means being willing to stand for what really matters. Such was the case for Enrique Peñalosa former Mayor of Bogota Columbia. Bogota Columbia was notorious for being a dangerous place to live. In just a few years term he turned the entire city around by listening for what would make a difference for him. As Charles Montgomery, author and contributor to The Globe Magazine writes “Penalosa’s policies may resemble environmentalism, but they are no such thing. Rather, they were driven by his conversion to hedonics, an economic philosophy whose proponents focus on fostering not economic growth but human happiness(Bogota's Urban Happiness).” As the former mayor later states “There are a few things we can agree on about happiness,” he says. “You need to fulfill your potential as a human being. You need to walk. You need to be with other people. Most of all, you need to not feel inferior. When you talk about these things, designing a city can be a very powerful means to generate happiness(Bogota’s Urban Happiness)

Bogota was going to have a huge infrastructure rebuilding the entire city. The mayor decided to put the plan to build a bigger better interstate to the curb. His citizens mostly rode bikes or walked. He focused on creating bike and pedestrian highways and giving equal access to resources. The results are stunning; Mr. Peñalosa was able to boost school enrolment by 30 per cent, build 1,200 parks, revitalize the core of the city and provide running water to hundreds of thousands of poor. The murder rate fell by an astounding 40 per cent during his term and has continued to fall ever since. So have the number of traffic deaths. Traffic moves three times faster now during rush hour. And the changes seem to have transformed how people feel. .” Bogota is now studied heavily by Urban Planners as a way to develop the cities of the future.

That is the true power of positive authentic transparency. As New William L. Gardner, the Howard L. Hawks Chair in Business Ethics and Leadership at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and John R Schermerhorn Jr, the Charles G. O’Bleness Professor of Management at Ohio remind us “directions in positive organizational behavior and authentic leadership help redirect leaders away from negative blame-oriented thinking. They point leaders toward positive and practical action agendas that they can pursue confidently and with real consequence for enhancing individual performance (Unleashing Individual Potential 278).”

As I stated earlier one of the roles of a truly effective urban planner is include everyone. What about the non-profits, ngos, and direct communication with citizens how do we reach everyone? From the authentic standpoint we also need to establish trust. Trust is a big factor in a successful organization. As Anne Schaub, BA, MED, and Leslie Altimier, RN, MSN note “in a Pricewaterhouse- Cooper’s study on corporate innovation in companies listed on the Financial Times 100, trust was the number one differentiator between the top 20% of companies surveyed and the bottom 20%. The top performers’ trust empowered individuals to turn strategic aims into reality(Tenants of Trust 20).” The trust builds empowerment. This is the sort of planning where people are given an opportunity to contribute. They believe so much in what is being built they give their input, time, money and energy to make it happen. The bottom line of Schaub and Altemier research is people have to be involved and they need to both be accountable for results and hold others accountable. Such accountability and far reaching input is possible through technology namely websites. Forms, emails, online petitions and surveys are key in getting the input of others. The web has long been used as a tool for radical social development like the civil rights movement of the sixties. As Kate

Milbury, writer for the Journal of Media and Culture, writes “Applications like Websites, email and Internet Relay Chat have largely facilitated the new movement as a global phenomenon (Bennett; van Aelst & Walgrave). Cyberactivism – political activism on the Internet – is a new mode of contentious action, and new practices such as virtual sit-ins, online petitions and email campaigns have enhanced the repertoire of contention(Reconstructing the Internet).” With the technology also comes the responsibility to create sites that are accessible and easy to use as well as training others to be able to use them to foster positive social input. Ultimately this is another key to reaching the community for an Urban Planner. Give people the tools to have input. Web technologies are not a substitute for holding meetings and polling the community but are supplement to effectively learning what will make a difference and gaining support.

This sort of people powered accountability is present in one of the most recent developments in the non-profit business sector namely social entrepreneurship. As Pritha Sen, author and freelance journalist, writes “social entrepreneurship describes individuals who combine the pragmatic and results-oriented methods of a business entrepreneur with the goals of a social reformer. Sen goes on to note “Over half of Ashoka’s, whose founder coined the term social entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurs have changed national policy within five years of their launch. Roughly, 90 per cent have seen independent organizations replicate their innovations. Launched in 1980 with \$50,000, the organization now has a budget of \$30.5 million to fund Fellows who are at a critical juncture of launching their new idea. These social entrepreneurs are exceptional people who have found ways to provide cheap electricity to Brazilian farmers, created systems to conserve the world’s largest bio diverse habitat in Bolivia or set up India’s first distressed child helpline in Mumbai, which has been replicated in 60 Indian cities and towns and carried to Europe as well. These serial

entrepreneurs take initial failures in their stride and push on relentlessly to find creative ways to reach their goals(Ashoka's Big Idea).” Such innovations on businesses and government organization are necessary component and a powerful tool for an Urban Planner to replicate. The idea would be to empower individuals in the community to build projects and organization that solve the communities most difficult problems themselves. Actually providing the resources and the recommendation based upon localized input is key to Urban Planning.

This drive to build a sustainable future for the planet has never been clearer. Over the last forty years we have seen natural disasters, war, hatred and crime accelerate. From the natural disaster perspective we have had the following events take place ; hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the earthquake in Haiti and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Globally we have seen the impact of the Green Revolution in India, and the impact of the United States imprinting its industrial design on other countries in the Middle East and China. The need for Urban Planning in these situations is great. My intention is to be such an Urban Planner.

So in conclusion I will employ positive authentic transparency, urban liberalism through the use social networking and internet technology to garnish information and critical input, and use the structures and ideas of social entrepreneurs, or people who want to make a difference in communities, in the very design of my planning. I will be graduating in 2011. By mid 2011 I will have found a job with a consulting agency or have started my own.

As a child I grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In my lifetime saw children hurt, and families torn apart. I myself was emancipated when I was sixteen. My grandmother died when I was very young. Life has been torn apart for me and at the age of 33 I have decided to rebuild it again. The coastline where I grew up as a child has been destroyed. I am telling you

the reader all of this as to get a sense of my life. In the past I have been a fighter and now I want to heal the planet and the world through sustainable design. Who I am is the possibility of love and empowerment. I will hold meetings with communities to gather input and include both the political people involved as well as the community. I will setup the initial website to post surveys and gather input globally for what sustainable design means by the end of 2011. I bought the domain I will use this evening. I will seek partnerships with organizations such as Ashoka. I will work with architects who have a similar commitment to sustainability. I will become an Urban Planner for the future of community.

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