

Brownfield Remediation and Community Revitalization Lessons Learned, A Vision for the Future

Abstract:

Brownfield remediation is a complex pressing issue across the United States. Neighborhoods located on or near brownfield sites are often communities of color, low income communities or both. An unintended effect of brownfield redevelopment in urban areas is the displacement of these communities. Urban renewal projects give insight into effective projects that have mitigated the disintegration and displacement of these stressed neighborhoods. Policy changes, economic support and improved participatory design techniques can assist with effective community revitalization.

Introduction:

“No landscape can be more beautiful than it is just.” (Hester 2006)

The remediation of brownfield sites across the country has become a national development priority for urban renewal. Local economies, physical structures and community networks in these areas are significantly impacted by these redevelopments. Brownfield renovation improves the ecological health of the site and thereby increases safety for those in contact with the area. Additionally, like other urban redevelopment projects, brownfield remediation and new development often increases property values, and the local tax base. Unfortunately this renewed ecological and economic health can have adverse effects on the communities located on or near the brownfield sites as gentrification is an inevitable component of the redevelopment process. Gentrification may bring much needed services to a community. It may also create higher costs of living, in turn causing communities to splinter as they can no longer afford to live in the area. This paper explores challenges and opportunities for supporting the communities stressed by economics and environmental health to thrive in their changing neighborhoods.

Methods:

“By their very nature, Brownfields are inseparable from issues of social inequity, racial discrimination and urban decay”. (NEJAC 1996) Issues of displacement and gentrification in urban areas are not new. With the increasing redevelopment of brownfield sites, it is necessary to examine past and emerging development trends in order to address pressing issues of community sustainability faced those

already living in these areas of redevelopment. The papers for this literature review draw on several overlapping areas of study including environmental justice, urban planning / design and policy. Case studies of the HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for Everyone) program and examples effective participatory design for community revitalization are addressed. HOPE VI is a project of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to promote renovation in public housing, relevant here as brownfield sites are located in low income neighborhoods, often with nearby housing projects. From these papers recommendations are drawn for brownfield redevelopment programs that integrate community needs using participatory design, political will and financial support to create more sustainable city revitalization projects.

Results:

Urban Revitalization: The National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) to the EPA differentiates between urban revitalization and urban redevelopment stating that the later is a top down concept while revitalization is a “bottom-up process... that proceeds from a community based vision”. In reference to brownfield remediation, the report states “without meaningful community involvement, urban revitalization simply becomes urban redevelopment.” (NEJAC Report 1996) What local residents may want, is not always in line with what a developer or city government’s priorities. Latin American residents in Perth Amboy, NJ stated strong preferences for educational, recreational and health facilities. They rated these amenities slightly above new housing and significantly above new commercial development promoted by the city. (Greenberg and Lewis 2000) In Atlanta, Georgia’s Centennial Place HOPE VI residents requested support for social infrastructure and the repair of their current housing units rather than a complete renovation of their neighborhoods. (Keating 2000)

Recent Design Trends: Many brownfield revitalization plans are being designed with the New Urbanist tenants of mixed-use, mixed income, walkability and use of local architecture and history. (CNU Charter, 2006) While New Urbanist ideals encourage community participation in the design process, thier focus on physical design may not be the most effective way to address these blighted areas. Public

space and physical structures do not have the same meaning for all residents. They may address physical but not the societal needs of a community. New Urbanists have also been criticized for not effectively addressing diversity in the charrette process. (Day 2003; Greenberg and Lewis 2000) HOPE VI has championed New Urbanist ideals, but this has not necessarily translated into a 1:1 replacement of older low income housing with new units. In Atlanta's, Centennial Place project over 38% of the public housing units were lost when the public housing development was razed and the neighborhood redesigned for mix use. (Keating, 2000)

Participatory Design Challenges: The true democratic and participatory design process is challenging in that while it is a stated desire the process is not always clear. In *Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning*, Paul Davidoff refers to the changing role of the designer, as one who advocates for his clients needs. He states that to encourage true democratic space community members must not only be heard, but they must be informed about effects of suggested plans. (Davidoff, 1965) While new funding sources, like HOPE VI projects require community participation, they do not set guidelines or timelines for this process. Community input is often in reference to social justice needs and is not directly translated to physical design. Designers need to examine their multifaceted role as city or private employees, advocates for communities needs, and design professionals. (Keating 2000 and Day 2003)

Discussion:

Urban brownfields pose a significant opportunity and challenge for equitable, environmentally sound, urban revitalization. Racial and class segregation is evident in the location of many communities of color and/or low income communities found located on or near brownfields. (NEJAC 1996) Environmental clean-up, economic renewal, and new physical designs for these areas are priorities for both city governments and the communities they serve. Referenced studies showed a disconnect between the stated desires of community members and the desires of the city government. The 1998 Conference of Mayors announcement for placing priority on brownfield redevelopment could have potentially supported low income residents needs. But their focus on economic redevelopment through light

commercial areas, and not on housing and community support services, showed a marked difference in city priorities and residents desires. (Greenberg and Lewis 2000) This focus is key to the issue of displacement, without regulation and enforceable policy, gentrification is inevitable as these areas are improved with new amenities – new apartments, green spaces, retail, small scale commercial etc. Neighborhood improvement brings higher property values and often a local economy that is expensive for its low income members. Without policy requirements for equivalent replacement of affordable housing units residents are required to move elsewhere. (Keating 2000)

Beyond the differing goals for renewal, there is a history of tension on site between planners/designers and community members. The more successful projects have immersed designers in community meetings and engaged the public in the design process at various scales. Designers' attitudes towards community member engagement are important as well. In the South Boston Corridor project difficulties arose when community members could not decide on what they wanted, or did not understand the intricacies of large scale planning. Planners thought that the participants suggestions were not aesthetically pleasing or in line with their professional understanding of architectural themes. On the other hand, designers noted that engagement in the design process engendered a sense of ownership that went beyond the planning process. Community members who participated in the design of the greenway showed long term commitment and stewardship to the area's public building and green spaces. (Crewe 2001) While this may not directly affect displacement, it points to long term community vitality and environmental quality.

Conclusion:

With the thousands of brownfields in need of remediation, in cities with priorities for economic revival, guidelines for urban revitalization that address the welfare of the community members most stressed by environmental degradation and physical deterioration need to be set. While there are many references for effective community organizing and some federal support for community engagement in urban redevelopment, there is little enforcement and minimal financial rewards for supporting the

disenfranchised communities located near brownfield sites. Designers need to be trained in outreach and facilitation techniques. Brownfield remediation combined with community revitalization, that addresses both the needs of the greater city and the communities surrounding the contaminated site, can posit both ecological and human sustainability. We have now the opportunity to create cities that expresses fairness in their procedures and form enabling more citizens to participate meaningfully and contribute to a strong ecological democracy. (Hester, 2006)

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