Building the community sector
Urban folks caught in an era of rapid social and environmental change

Jeffrey Betcher, Quesada Gardens Initiative

> *A socially strong community is a resilient community.*
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> *Rapid change breeds conflict.*
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> *An externally conceived community change strategy is less likely to succeed than one that emerges from the community's own vision for itself.*
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> *Members of urban communities have a responsibility to grapple with rapid changes in their social and physical environments.*

As a community organizer living and working in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood, I have come to accept these *truisms*. I believe in the problem-solving wisdom of communities. I have seen consensus outpace conflict. I have been part of participatory processes that have produced surprisingly effective, economical and equitable responses to problems in our physical and social environment.

I am optimistic about our collective potential to address the social and environmental imperatives facing urban communities everywhere.

Bayview Hunters Point's body of experience, as it turns out, represents a peek into the future for leaders across the country as they face challenges new to them. That body of experience encompasses decades of friction at the interface of an existing low income multicultural population and the growing power of external interests. It includes urban planners awakening to the need for balance between the divergent needs of residents and a metropolitan region at large. It is steeped in environmental crisis, health disparities, and structural injustice.

While the challenges remain urgent in Bayview Hunters Point, assessing what has and has not worked here could prove important to anyone concerned with global climate change, social justice, and the changing face of urban communities.

Urban communities: *Welcome to your future*

Bayview Hunters Point, as is true with many poorer neighborhoods and towns, is located in a place that puts it at disproportionate risk with regard to rising sea levels and other environmental challenges. It has been living with massive industrial and radioactive toxicity for decades. It encompasses the largest area of urban redevelopment in the country. Its economically disadvantaged populace faces displacement. Its cultural fabric threatens to unravel.

Yet, despite all of that, the community and its people consistently find consensus, address daunting challenges, and insist on self-leadership and self-definition against all the odds.

Background

For over twenty years, Bayview Hunters Point's transformation has been fueled by the development of rare urban open space and waterfront, and redevelopment of existing but environmentally hazardous infrastructure. Vulnerable groups are losing ground while policy makers and investors re-carve the neighborhood's physical and social landscape in ways that will forever change the built environment and double the size of the population.

The attention has been both overdue and ironic. This is a neighborhood that had fallen off-the-radar in the 1970s, if it had ever hit the radar at all. Commerce had atrophied, crack cocaine had flooded the streets, and the importance of Bayview Hunters Point to outside interests had narrowed to the neighborhood's role as a place to process waste and centralize the polluting service operations that other neighborhoods had the power to reject. While other segments of San Francisco waterfront suffered significant pollution, the Hunters Point section of that waterfront was placed on the federal "Superfund List" of the country's most toxic places.

Countless other urban centers have experienced similar problems. While the timelines vary from place to place, and the challenges come with a big pinch of local flavor, some trends are broadly shared: increasing population density and overall racial and ethnic diversity, a decreasing African American population, decreasing economic and class diversity as community assets in traditionally poorer places attract the affluent, and increasing urgency associated with the response to climate change.

Unlike Bayview Hunters Point, many urban centers across the country have been in such steep decline for so long that they are empty of people, and emblematic of the end of an era for the surrounding metropolitan area. This is true in the Great Lakes "Rust Belt," where I grew up and where block after block of Industrial Age structures sit silent. In these places, green policymakers and urban planners can credibly exert great latitude, and re-imagine these areas from their downtown conference rooms and virtual meeting spaces.

Bayview Hunters Point represents a different situation. Here, many people with deep roots have been able to hold on. They monitor the storm of change through front doors and windows in hopes that, when the clouds lift, they still recognize their neighborhood.

Some urban planners and policymakers see an existing population in an urban center like Bayview Hunters Point as an advantage, while others see it as a barrier to the sweeping change they feel is urgently needed if our cities and the planet are to survive.

Promising pathways

If my neighbors and I still recognize what is outside our Bayview Hunters Point front doors, after years of redevelopment and the detritus of economic peaks and valleys, it is because that which we see was defined by us. Throughout the neighborhood there are examples of environmental modifications made by our own hands through grassroots projects and the community-based programs of outside

institutions. Some hyper-local projects thrive on the kind of grassroots consensus and public participation that externally generated projects will never enjoy.

What may be bad news for inflexible public and private change agents is good news for more innovative thinkers: the chances for successful change in our urban centers and the diverse populations that use them can be radically improved if the approach prioritizes community strength or, better yet, is generated from within the community.

While creating resilient whole communities in urban places can seem a mysterious process, the mechanics are known. The most undervalued element of the formula for community strength is what I call "community building," and define as an approach that holds as its primary objective the building of social cohesion across demographic and other lines that might otherwise divide and weaken social groups.

The work my neighbors and I have been engaged in for about a decade, known as the Quesada Gardens Initiative, is an example grassroots decision-making and leadership in the service of strengthening social cohesion, diversity, and inclusion. Specific projects vary, and are wholly determined by hyper-local strengths and challenges, and by the people and places that grow them. Some change the physical environment, as is true with resident developed public spaces, community- and backyard-gardens, and grassroots public art. Other projects are less visible, but equally powerful. Preservation of hyper-local social history, networking community building groups through organizing and communications, and asset-mapping community resources are all objectives neighbors have organized themselves around.

Defining our terms

Language matters. Recently, the construction of a new branch public library two blocks from where I live and work was nearly shut down because the project did not seem to include a commitment to local hiring. Public works professionals were confused, believing an existing policy directive would result in choosing a local contractor. Ultimately, it became clear that "local" meant different things to different groups. It meant "citywide" to the government sector, "neighborhood-wide" to the community sector, and "African American" to social justice advocacy groups operating in what historically has been an African American neighborhood.

Similarly, many organizations perceive themselves as "community-based," including some governmental agencies that by definition are not. Some programs generated by interests outside the community are presented as "grassroots" in nature, when they would more accurately be categorized as constituency development and social marketing strategies seated in a target community since they seek to foster participation in something the organization, not the community, has determined should matter.

Even private corporations developing projects they hope will provide a good return for their investors seem to share the goal of strengthening communities. But when creating a stronger community is a happy by-product of the pursuit of another primary goal, we should be careful of calling the effort "community building."

While most confusion can be sorted out by determining who controls the money involved, and who holds final decision-making authority, we would prevent much of that confusion by agreeing to thoughtful language.

The challenges facing urban centers are enormous, and call for the most comprehensive multi-sector response that can be mustered. But *siloed* responses from sectors with narrow agendas, and the careless language we use hold us back. Too often we see the promise of sustainable regional systems stalled because of community-based interest groups. Too often we see development opportunities, that would primarily affect a specific community, defined and implemented by people who have little stake in that community.

Start here: understand and value the community sector

For me, the Bayview Hunters Point experience is illuminating. It suggests that some measure of conflict is inevitable in times of rapid change, and that grassroots community building is a replicable process with an important role to play in preventing and remediating that conflict. It also suggests that the path toward whole, sustainable and just communities in populated urban centers requires more than smart engineering, social marketing, and cookie cutter public engagement strategies.

The next step on that path may be a robust acknowledgement and understanding of the community sector and its importance to sustainable social and environmental change. The community sector is a professional one. It exists alongside volunteer community involvement and the *gift economy*. It includes neighborhood-serving small businesses, home-based entrepreneurs, community- and faith-based organizations, individual community building professionals, and a wide range of informal associations improving the place their members live by doing professional grade work for a fraction of the usual cost.

Some leaders suggest we harness volunteerism through better coordinated public sector civic engagement, and that we might even close budget deficits by doing so. For example, cash-strapped parks could be maintained by volunteer parks stewards and a mobile volunteer corps. They envision people who need no compensation but who can operate at a professional or quasi professional level to achieve goals set by governmental agencies.

That approach has potential, and built-in limitations. Volunteerism is important, of course, both as an ethic and as a way to get important work done. Quesada Gardens Initiative has thrived on it, having generated well over 30,000 hours of volunteer service from residents and community-minded individuals who live elsewhere. But when the occasional volunteer is considered in the same category as high producing community workers, managers with advanced skills, and others who have demonstrated patterns of extraordinary contribution to the community where they live, frustration brews.

The Quesada Gardens experience suggests that policy makers should better differentiate the volunteerism category from the community sector, and redraw the line between unpaid place-based

community members on one side and government workers or private contractors with nebulous investment in a place on the other.

How do we make sense of “volunteers” or “community heroes” whose skills and patterns of contribution go far beyond helping pick up litter a few hours a month? How do we prevent the predictable burnout and abandonment of projects? What do we say to leaders who discover their contributions will never be valued in a way that helps pay the rent?

Consequences of volunteerism

In neighborhoods that are home to historically disenfranchised populations, whether or not volunteerism is prioritized over building the professional capacity of a community to improve itself, delicate dynamics are exposed. When Quesada Gardens Initiative organizers err on the side of bringing in outside groups of volunteers, we can almost sense the relief of our neighbors’ who go off to make other plans instead of deepening their connection to place they live. When we witness volunteers and paid volunteer managers associated with outside institutions come in to the neighborhood, we see the risk of unintended consequences go higher.

Despite the best of intentions, groups that have not emerged from a community itself may make community members feel patronized when they come to do good work. Those groups want us to hear that they care about us, our environment, health and economic needs. What we often hear is that we need charity, that the sort of personal responsibility that emerges from empowerment is unnecessary, that we need to be educated around some issue the group represents, that we are a laboratory for the group’s program development, or that we should consider advocating for the group’s agenda.

When organizers within the community who see themselves as professionals suggest that their groups be funded to develop local volunteerism structures or that they be paid as individuals to manage volunteers that outside institutions make available, we often sense surprise or even bewilderment. To organizations that have not emerged from the community, that may seem like a rude rejection, or counterproductive obstructionism. In any case, we are politely told that there is no line in the budget for that sort of thing.

Quesada Gardens Initiative organizers have also seen the impact of the economy on place-based volunteerism. Our neighbors balance scarce financial and time resources against the increasing demands of family and community. They weigh requests for involvement against meaningful relationships with churches, schools and other community groups. While bringing in volunteers with little connection to or understanding of the community remains viable for us, we would rather incentivize neighbor involvement by paying key individuals to apply their skills where they live.

The truth is that community workers are already working. On principle and from necessity, most of us work for far less than a public employee or independent contractor who can demand fair compensation. We understand that our activity is cost-beneficial and creates stronger place-based communities. But we regularly scrape against a policy and practice ceiling that confuses the community sector with some under-tapped well of zero cost laborers and managers. Every day, we field requests for more free

contributions, requests that usually come from “professionals” with area or zip codes that suggest what they earn in serving our community will be spent elsewhere.

I believe that it is possible to better incentivize labor and management within the community sector. We can also better engage place-based organizations and residents in creating neighborhoods and the world we all want, without moving place-based leaders and community sector professionals away, or to exhaustion.

The work ahead

While finding ways to finance the work that community members do, work that moves us toward shared goals, we must also find ways to invest in true community building at a far greater level than we do. Direct investment in place-based community sector work is wildly out-of-balance with overall investment in public programming and private enterprise. This is true even though the success and profitability of public and private undertakings is more dependent on community strength and social cohesion than most of us realize.

I believe that one day we will pause and look back to see a path blazed with trust and respect between public, private and community sectors. We will understand the appropriate roles for each, and how to codify those roles in new policy and practice. We will see how our efforts brought into a healthier balance supports for individual self interest and collective social interest.

Evolving social, environmental and economic policy and practice are rife with opportunities to reduce barriers and enhance supports facing those committed to working in and benefiting the place they live and the lives of their neighbors. When it comes to “low hanging fruit” in the urban landscape, the community sector and community building are among the ripest and most promising.

See: *Community Building Road Map* for specific policy and practice recommendations

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San Francisco Chronicle / Eric Luse

Quesada Gardens is what community looks like

What do you do when the block you live on has been so choked with drugs, substance abuse and violent crime that no one seems to remember better days? If you lived on Quesada Avenue in Bayview Hunters Point a few years back, you would pull down the blinds and dread the inevitable dash to the bus stop. But that changed in 2002 when **Annette Smith and Karl Paige** started planting flowers and vegetables here and there around the 1700 block of Quesada. Other residents jumped in to help them, and to create art, share history, organize block events, and commit to working together to strengthen the community where they live. Together, they formed the Quesada Gardens Initiative, changed their world, and inspired all those around them. Their grassroots approach to sustainable social and physical change in the place where they lived, and the consensus processes that they and other residents developed remain the guiding lights for dozens of newer projects that have emerged in the heart of Bayview as part of the Quesada Gardens Initiative network.

Please visit
www.QuesadaGardens.org
and the beautiful projects and people in the heart of Bayview