

Think AND act locally. (Thinking “globally” is fine, too.)

Quesada Gardens Initiative symbolizes the trend toward local, comprehensive approaches to sustainable social and environmental change

The origin of the phrase “Think globally, act locally” is disputed, but its appeal to social and environmental change activists is secure. No wonder, since it communicates the inter-relatedness of all things and empowers individual action with elegant economy.

As the pendulum of public attention and systems’ responses to what ails the planet and its people swings wide toward the global frame, new local work may pull it back in balance.

The Quesada Gardens Initiative, for instance, is a local change strategy in an underserved neighborhood of San Francisco created and led by just plain folk who may not have had the global vision and credentials often associated with social and environmental change movements. Through grassroots, collective action, neighbors have built a network of projects from food and floral gardens, to public art projects, events that reflect the community’s interests. They seem to like anything with the potential to bring people together in meaningful ways.

Along the way, the Quesada Gardens Initiative has proven it is possible to make a blighted place safer, healthier, and more inclusive for all kinds of people; and that success can cost a next to nothing compared to expensive top-down and outside-in programs with similar goals but disappointing results.

So much for “thinking globally.” Truth is, the Quesada Gardens neighbors have been so busy *acting locally*, that there hasn’t been much time left over for *thinking city-wide*, let alone

globally. They are also modeling a practical alternative to more dominant approaches.

To see how movements can merge and how the terms of debate can expand, look locally. The Quesada Gardens Initiative is real people in a real place connecting across their differences to define their challenges and strengths, and to redefine the systems that determine their quality of life.

“Addicts and dealers did business there, vagrants urinated on doorsteps, and the median served as a dumping ground...”
Pat Yollin
SF Chronicle, 9.2.03



What do you do when the block you live on has been so choked with drugs, addicts, 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 MUNI or your car. But that changed in 2002 when **Annette Smith and Karl Paige** started planting flowers and vegetables here and there around the block. 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.

The project has grown tendrils beneath the fences that historically have divided environmentalism, social justice advocacy, community and economic development, criminal justice, food security policymaking, and other arenas from one another.

If that makes the Quesada Gardens Initiative difficult to define, it may also account for its effectiveness. Spending relatively no public resources, the grassroots group changed the “dangerous block” of San Francisco’s most notorious neighborhood - a place where residents hid out from violence and one another - into an emblem of health, safety and inclusiveness nestled a couple blocks from less effective million dollar projects.

“What made it work (on Quesada Avenue), it seems, is the underlying capacity of a few residents to take action and to sustain it.”

*Robert Sampson
SF Chronicle, 9.16.04*

The founders call what they do “community-building.” They talk about dog poop, graffiti, weeds, litter, the latest shooting in the neighborhood, how the older lady up the street is feeling, and the best ways to cook collard greens. They would be surprised if you called them environmentalists, food activists, neighborhood watch participants, or most any other imported label. They are neighbors working with neighbors because that’s what neighbors do. Many of them identify more with Quesada Gardens than with the neighborhood in which the project is located, or the city around that neighborhood ... let alone a global movement.

This super-local, community-based approach will be of interest to environmentalists who

understand that people and cultures are part of the environmental picture. And to community developers who recognize that *social* systems are as important as *transit* systems. And to public health and criminal justice experts who believe in life-saving detours on the road to emergency rooms and prisons. And to the average person who carries the wisdom that one’s neighbor’s quality of life directly affects one’s own.

The Quesada Gardens Initiative’s strategy for sustainable social and environmental change is narrow, geographically: a pinhole relative to the world and global issues.

But, through that pinhole, one can see transformative policies and practices more clearly. Through it, environmental policies appear sound if they can be seen to emerge from people building their own capacity to live peacefully, justly, and sustainably in place. Urban planning models inspire investment if they are constructed with honest community-building and engagement instead of principles of good design alone. Public health practices seem all the more healing when developed in partnership with the people who need help the most.

That seems to be the difference between the Quesada Gardens Initiative’s successful community-building work and other programs that start with a narrow strategy, singular vision, or fixed goal. The folks on Quesada didn’t listen when told they should be organic gardeners, crime reporters, health educators, recyclers and the like. They already knew who they were, and how to improve their lives by listening to one another, trusting they possessed wisdom and skill, and deciding the time to wait for outside help had passed.

The Quesada Gardens Initiative's brand of grassroots self-empowerment likely will spread in proportion to the experience of disconnect, weariness and suspicion with regard to government, corporations, and advocacy campaign agendas. People everywhere are starting to connect social and environmental change where they live and in ways that are as unique as they are. Motivated by urgent realities on either side of their own front doors - from toxins, to bullets, to the experience of fear and isolation - regular Jane's and John's are more likely than ever to turn their attention from institutions that have disappointed them, and to talk with one another about what *they themselves* can do. Together. Today.

Jeffrey Betcher, 2010, www.QuesadaGardens.org

The Quesada Gardens Initiative has:

- ✓ **Reduced health disparities** Community and backyard gardens effectively encourage better nutrition and physical activity.
- ✓ **Improved our environment** Local food production reduces the carbon emissions associated with transporting food, and community-defined projects on dump sites stops dumping when other strategies fail.
- ✓ **Prevented violence** Strengthening social cohesion across demographic lines develops visibility for and respect between populations, and empowers residents to take back their urban environments.
- ✓ **Remediated gentrification** While beautification feeds gentrification, community-building involves long-term residents, and encourages their reinvestment.



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"...a public act of hope and faith..."

Joan Ryan, *SF Chronicle* 9.16.04