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The Community Development Corporation as a Nucleus for a Civil Society

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NEW YORK CITY'S DUAL STRUCTURE OF PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation in NYC's planning process has a history of over 30 years. Today it is a formal part of its Charter. Community affairs of 59 community districts, generally drawn around areas of between 100- to 200,000 residents, are governed by a community board each. These boards may have up to 50 members appointed by Borough Presidents, including nominations by local councilpersons. As honorary members, who ideally represent a cross section of community interests, they vote in an advisory capacity on land use matters and monitor the delivery of city services.

Board offices, "little city halls", have small paid staffs headed by District Managers. For area residents they are supposedly the first line of contact with government.

Despite their advisory nature, board influence on land use matters, which are subject to discretionary approvals, has gained substantially over time. The so called Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) governs this process. It involves first them, then the Borough Presidents, followed by the Planning Commission and, in certain instances, the City Council.

Community boards are not the only way citizens participate in the city's planning process. While boards may work well in wealthy neighborhoods where professional expertise may rest in their membership, this is typically not the case in poorer communities. There, generally speaking, self-help groups, organized under the non-for-profit corporations law, have sprung up in great numbers, typically filling in where government left off. In the past they sought to by-pass community boards, which they deemed as too political, contrasting with their orientation on delivering tangible results concerning neighborhood improvement.

Today, after remarkable success in rebuilding devastated communities and the advent of a new generation of self-help groups, the relationship between both is improving as the nature of the issues is changing.

PLANNING DEMOCRACY BY THE GRASS ROOTS

The surge of organized community self-help in inner-city communities, such as in The Bronx during the 1970s and 80s, was a response to a traumatic housing and neighborhood crisis which resulted from government's failure to effectively address profound changes in America's urban landscape. There technological innovations, a massive corporate and middle class exodus, socio-economic and racial segregation and other factors created an urban nightmare so extreme, that the role of the city in the national economy was in serious jeopardy. Official planning capacity, limited by its architectural and engineering orientation, gave up in view of the complexity of the issues. Unable to comprehend the causes and effects of sprawl and the interplay of the collapse of the human and social infrastructure with that of the physical environment, planning rather retreated to attend to Manhattan's development agenda. By concentrating on corporate retention governmental planning made itself an instrument of a fierce, sprawl induced, economic warfare which had erupted in the region.

This housing and neighborhood crisis combined with the breakdown of the civil society gave rise to a spontaneous and innovative planning culture of the grass roots as government abandoned neighborhoods wholesale. Local leadership sprang up against a backdrop of despair, determined to find solutions based on people and places directly affected.

It was a layman's movement in need of help which came from the American philanthropy. Intermediary organizations channeled the emerging local initiatives into structures by developing their professional capacity in organizing, negotiation, development and business skills. They also provided early grant financing for housing development, helping groups to establish a sustained record of accomplishments. Thus the grass roots transitioned from loosely organized groups to well-run not-for-profit community development corporations (CDCs).

CDCs became synonymous with community empowerment. They represented a new "industry", which made community development a private sector enterprise.

In contrast to the focus on the "physical city" of governmental agencies, the CDCs re-invented community development as a holistic

undertaking, whereby both the rebuilding of the physical city as well as the human and social infrastructure go together. Guided by principles such as participation, pragmatism, flexibility, human scale, and tangible results, the CDCs offered something which governmental bureaucracies with their rigid programs could not: responsiveness to local conditions and trust of the client population of which government had none.

Their successes gained them respect and acceptance by government which needed credible partners particularly in the field of affordable housing. The total collapse of the civic culture, unemployment, drug addiction, and social pathologies of all shades, however, soon made it obvious that the additional marshalling of a full complement of social services was required to stabilize neighborhoods and protect capital investment in them. Housing had thus become largely a social issue.

Job training and work force development, day- and health care were the main foci of the social programs developed by the CDCs. Economic development was added later. "Neighborhood" as a concept was reinvented and painstakingly rebuilt as reality from the ground up.

For this to unfold an unusual act of courage was required by the political establishment, i.e. willingness to acknowledge its failure and to risk the loss of control by delegating responsibility to new players in the field of urban development.

That was not all. The following external circumstances helped create an favorable environment for the movement: 1. the city's dangerously growing homeless crisis resulted in a massive tax base financed production program for affordable housing, 2. the down-sizing of Washington's bureaucracy by President Reagan which included the revamping of unproductive funding streams in favor of leveraging private risk, created new opportunities for non-for-profits, 3. both the "Community Reinvestment Act" of the 1970s and the 1987 "Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program" reanimated the financial markets for affordable housing, 4. the retail sector rediscovered the profit potential of the buying power of rebuilt neighborhoods and sought neighborhood partners, and 5. an unending stream of new immigrants.

In this environment community development in the full sense of social and physical rebuilding was privatized via the non-for-profit sector. The investments of the CDCs in the communities from which they sprang, where they lived, and which they were part of were clearly made in self-interest. They became an important mechanism whereby "public benefit products and services" would be delivered to the socially marginal.

CHANGING ISSUES OF THE 90s.

Planning is not the strongest suit of NYC's government. In fact, the last city-wide comprehensive planning effort dates back the late 1960s due to Federal mandates. Every mayor after John Lindsay downplayed its relevancy, making the city's bureaucracy a collection of uncoordinated agencies, each with their own mission and agenda, often working at cross purposes. The 1989 Charter amendment weakened the role of the Planning Department further by taking away its budgetary power, its only coordinating instrument. That and budget cuts relegated it mostly to guardian of the zoning law.

Yet Sec. 197-a of the Charter encourages planning on all levels, including the borough presidents and community boards. While the Planning Commission would review and approve those plans, their lack of legally binding force remains much decried, however. Nevertheless, Sec. 197-a should become key to the emergence of a new drive for planning by community based organizations, filling the planning void of government.

The crisis of the 70s, which caused community empowerment through the CDCs, is no longer valid in the 1990s. For the new generation, which grew up in the culture of the 70s, the issues shifted to social and environmental justice. With the consequences of sub-urban sprawl, mostly top-down, compartmentalized government, and often devious agency cultures, they question the racial bias of public policies and plans and their discriminatory environmental impacts on inner-city communities of color.

Political expediency had prompted government to use industrial zones in poor communities to off-load burdensome land uses such as water treatments plants, solid waste facilities and other noxious uses which seemed to be "inappropriate" to wealthier ones. This was clearly a violation of a Charter principle: "the fair and equitable distribution of beneficial and burdensome uses" and thus an issue of social justice relative to public health, barriers to equal opportunity, and quality of life.

On specific facility siting decisions which constituted egregious breaches of the fair share principle the groups took government to court and often prevailed. But by invoking the privileges under Sec. 197-a they engage in the development of pro-active neighborhood plans including plans for sustainable growth in their industrial zones. This is fostering lines of cooperation with their respective community boards.

SEEKING TO STRENGTHEN PLANNING.

City-wide coalitions, supported by planning schools and intermediary organizations such as the Municipal Art Society are pressing for a new planning culture in NYC today. As members of the Civic Alliance they are also carving out a role in the planning process for "ground zero" of the WTC and Lower Manhattan as part of their effort to assure socially equitable development.

During the 2001 mayoral campaign they made participatory and community based planning a forceful issue and continue the call for a stronger role of the Planning Department in government affairs. They seek a city-wide plan, which is informed by community based 197-a plans. It is a call for a profoundly democratic planning process in NYC.

Seattle, Wash. and Rochester, NY are looked upon as the most sophisticated models. The mayors of both cities brought into "bottom up" planning processes and made their governmental structures responsive to new needs. While cumbersome this gives rise to expectations that cities can overcome segregation and inequities so that nobody wins at the expense of others.

BEYOND LOCAL PLANS.

"Top-down" versus "bottom-up" planning is still hotly contested. Particularly in the era of globalization where cities need to be strategically well positioned one would think that top-down visionary planning and intervention by government is the way to go. But there really is no reason why a city's strategic framework cannot be developed in a participatory planning process as well.

If the city's post 9.11. planning effort for Lower Manhattan is an indication, an open process which balances between expedience and prudence is at the verge of unfolding. The vision for a "21st Century City" is of city-wide and regional importance, forcing a broad based process as so many stakeholders and interests have to be satisfied. It is generally acknowledged that inclusion brings out a wealth of creative ideas, an experience widely shared by CDCs.

Some feathers may get ruffled, mostly of those who have won in the past. That may not be a bad thing. Although such a process will be expensive in time and money, the price for plans with built-in social conflicts and political volatility may no longer be worth paying in today's world. While social inequities may rise worldwide through globalization, a democratic planning process may deliver at least a partial answer on the local level and be testimony to accountable development.