The Value of Collaborative Design: Urban Revitalization Through Community Initiated Events

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, community renewal initiatives have been gaining popularity in many cities across the United States as a means to revitalize both public and private space through civilian involvement. The emergence of an organization called City Repair Project in Portland, Oregon initiated a process of appropriation, invention, fabrication and lasting interaction called the Village Building Convergence (VBC). This paradigm presents a design and execution model for small-scale urban repair projects such as improving pedestrian conditions at high-traffic intersections and installing gardens, public kiosks or pavilions at vacant or underused sites. The appropriation of city and private property has led to opportunities for enhanced civic life and connectedness between community members and the communities themselves.

True of many community initiated programs, the Village Building Convergence was initiated because of a need for something absent from the community, in this case, the need for small-scale, dispersed public spaces. The growing numbers of community-initiated land-use projects in Portland provide opportunities for interaction within the shared spaces. The design of each project addresses several relevant community issues which include

apathy, privatization and/or distribution. The mission of the City Repair Project is to tackle urban deterioration on a physical level as well as on the

essential level of social interaction between local groups. Public projects encourage people to take part in the decision-making process which "shapes the future of their communities."[1]

The process of cooperative design and execution corresponding to the VBC allows for evolving spatial practices and diverse methodologies. The design development process of the VBC program functions through several charettes and collaborative group events. During the building phase of the project, the design method may evolve into an almost ad-hoc or edit-as-you-go approach. The somewhat progressive design approach is fitting due to the nature of the building materials and experience of the participants. The dynamic progression of discovery, which corresponds to programs such as VBC, fosters an atmosphere of connectedness while reinforcing the functionality of the resulting space. This study confirms that community initiated collaborative design has a social as well as material urban value. The design and execution model devised by the *City Repair Project* can be generalized and applied to other cities in the United States to promote social connectedness and urban revitalization.

BACKGROUND: CITY REPAIR PROJECT

Portland, Oregon began to respond to the escalating problem of urban sprawl and the misappropriation of urban space in the late 1950s. The city has carefully regulated downtown development and culti-

vated the growth of several urban renewal agencies throughout the area. In 1979, Portland implemented a controversial response to sprawl in the form of an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB).[2] Because of the boundary limitations, the city developed clearly defined regions each with neighborhood associations and district coalitions.[3] The aim of these neighborhood offices is to "**enhance the quality of Portland's neighborhoods through community participation."**[4] The city's positive attitude toward preserving and enhancing urban space encouraged the formation of many projects directed at urban revitalization. A number of communities in Portland have additionally supported renewal efforts by organizing neighborhood programs.

One of these community renewal initiatives is the *City Repair Project*.   The City Repair Project is one of many organizations that support Portland's ambition of attaining a livable urban environment. The City Repair Project defines itself as an "all volunteer grassroots organization helping people reclaim their urban spaces to create community-oriented spaces."[5] The organization was formed in 1996 by Portland residents who were striving for a more ecologically sensitive and community-oriented society. The City Repair Project functions under the attitude that

> "**localization** (of culture, of economy, of decision-making) is a necessary foundation of sustainability. By reclaiming urban spaces to create community-oriented places, we plant the seeds for greater neighborhood communication, empower our communities and nurture our local culture."[6]

The City Repair Project has taken an active approach to ensuring the steady expansion of urban public spaces in Portland by coordinating biannual events. These activities fall under the general title of *City Riparian*, but specifically include two yearly events: the *Village Building Convergence* (VBC) and the *Village Planting Convergence* (VPC).

A COMMUNITY BUILD EVENT: CITY RIPARIAN

The opening event of City Riparian, the VBC takes place in May and is a larger function, drawing in hundreds of volunteers with the aim of constructing new community spaces as well as adding to and maintaining previous projects. The VBC is technically a strictly building-oriented event. The VPC is a smaller event held each October, which is meant to concentrate on permaculture education,

urban edibles and food preservation as well as the planting and upkeep of neighborhood gardens. However, the mediums of both events overlap, i.e. there is planting within the VBC and construction during the VPC.

City Riparian volunteers can participate in various ways. Most of the participants of the VBC simply contribute time and effort during the 11 day construction event. An alternative, less hands-on approach is to contribute ideas through a program called *VisionPDX*. *VisionPDX* is a City-supported urban visioning process and community-led initiative "to create a vision for Portland for the next 20 years and beyond"[7]. This process is meant to encourage Portland residents to communicate their hopes and expectations for the future of the city.

This initiative is not directly associated with City Riparian*,* but the City Repair Project organization can access some of these results to reveal neighborhoods which have reoccurring suggestions.[8] Surveying a community in this respect is a short term method for documenting the expectations and, in some cases, the needs of residents. These proposals may eventually lead to future revitalization projects, either developed by City Repair Project*,* another organization, or perhaps even city commission. The most significant and necessary contributors are those who have property they wish to develop into community space. These individuals donate land, labor and facilities to the place-making program.   They are also charged with coming up with an appropriate design proposal and seeking approval from the majority of residents in the community.

The Village Building Convergence and Village Planting Convergence events were founded after a small intervention, the conversion of a traffic-congested residential intersection into a brightly-colored community gathering place, led to overwhelming public support and encouragement. Event installations encompass benefits beyond initial construction. The City Riparian movement not only fosters new designs for community space but also promotes the upkeep of previous project sites. Many project sites are incorporated into the event for several consecutive years for either further expansion or just general maintenance.[9] Although the majority of projects will ultimately be cared for by the property owner, the City Riparian events provide additional upkeep

support from volunteer laborers. From year to year, volunteers will repaint and add-on to existing project sites. In other words, the annual maintenance of urban space during the VBC plays a role in the overall preservation of Portland's public space and contributes to the quality of urban life.

THE PROJECT TYPOLOGIES OF CITY RIPARIAN

The specific typology and scale of each City Riparian project varies substantially, not only from site to site, but from year to year. Generally speaking, there are three categories of projects: ***garden, intersection repair, and permanent structure***. Within some of these categories there are several sub-categories, which are typically phases of evolution within a specific typology.

Intersection Repair

Intersection interventions consist of painting a crossroad with bright geographic designs. The original "intersection repair" at Share-It-Square took place in 1996 as an attempt to "re-claim the public right of way for [community] design and use."[10] Below is a descendent of the initial concept, titled Sunnyside Piazza (*Figure 1*). The piazza's luminous quality is awe-inspiring in the early morning light and generates a positive aesthetic of the community's spirit. This site's powerful image is commonly used to represent the City Riparian Events. The intersection began as a ground level painting but since has expanded to metal and wood pergolas at each corner, as well as a bulletin space to promote community events. During the annual VBC Event, the intersection is reclaimed by the

Fig. 1. Sunnyside Piazza

Fig. 2. A Guerilla Garden on appropriated land in a residential neighborhood of SE Portland.

community and used a public, pedestrian oasis. In 2007, four of the 23 VBC sites were intersection interventions.

Gardens

Other common typologies are the various types of gardens, "guerilla gardens" (*Figure 2*) and permaculture backyards. Permaculture yards are located on private property; however, the "guerilla gardens" are located on vacant city-owned land appropriated by the community and are usually used to grow seasonal edibles.

Many projects, including the guerilla gardens, suggest a somewhat anarchic condition because they are located on city property without authorization or permits. When asked about this direct disregard

Fig. 3. The *arbor* in Sunnyside Piazza (bottom left), *teahouse* at Sabin Green Co-Housing (bottom right) and *kiosks* (top) exemplify the varying scales of the permanent projects.
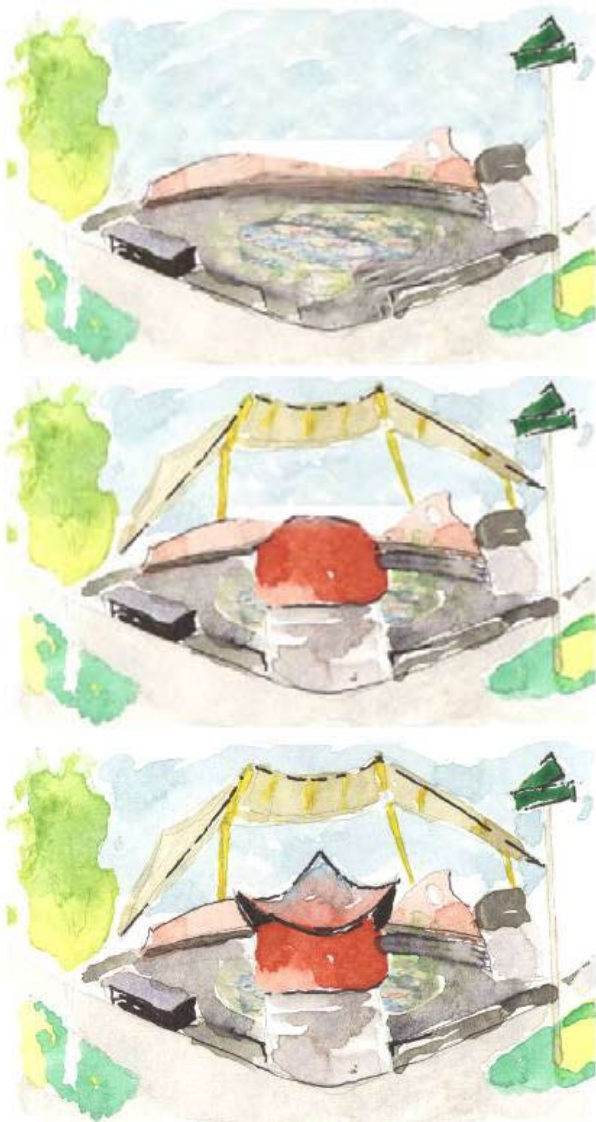
Fig. 4. The Evolution of South Tabor Commons

of city regulations, a participant stated that there are rarely confrontations with the city regarding the annual planting convergence. The temporary nature of the gardens minimizes disputes between the city and initiative volunteers.

Permanent Structure

The final category "permanent structure" is the most complex typology. These are sites which are consistently altered from year to year. These VBC

Projects include benches, benches with awnings, saunas, and tea houses (*Figure 3*). Some projects also include additional amenities or elements, which are added in subsequent years The additive evolution of these permanent structures from year to year may promote a lasting and consistent interest from the community. South Tabor Commons is an instance of an additive evolution of a project (*Figure 4*).

One of its land-owners commented that the corner began as a bench and a mosaic, then the canvas canopy and oven was added, followed by a pizza oven and a community events kiosk.

An interesting condition arises from building community space on private property. As pictured below (*Figure 4 and 5,* page. 6), the awning and oven at South Tabor Commons, a VBC event site, were built on the corner of a privately owned residential property. One can distinctly see the public, community space in the foreground and the private house behind it (*Figure 5*). Would pedestrians be comfortable enough to use this community space without making inquiries with the owner for permission? Blurring the boundaries of public and private provide significant community benefit.

The remainder of this paper will focus on the success of the more permanent Village Building Convergence (VBC) projects as a model for collaborative design and community building.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SMALL, COMMUNITY SPACES

In order to understand the social and urban value of small community spaces, the community space must be further defined and explored. In effect, by defining what community space is, one can justify the somewhat tedious process of appropriation, invention, fabrication and lasting interaction associated with community initiated design. John Chase refers to urban community spaces as "corner pedestrian oases."[11] He advocates the installation of small public spaces in urban areas and even goes as far as to generating a list (found in right column) which outlines their merits in his article, "Making small distinctive public spaces on private land by using commonplace objects." [12]

Fig. 5. South Tabor Commons SE 61st and Clinton, Portland, OR

"Ten Reasons why little tiny spaces on great big boulevards are a good idea"

1. Slow down urban pace
2. Don't charge admission (free)
3. Flexible
4. Cheap
5. Universally beneficial
6. Make neighborhood residents more amenable to commercial development
7. Humanize the street
8. Involve private sector in public good
9. Accommodate equal opportunity aesthetics
10. Encourage diverse social encounters and help attract tourism

Although few of the permanent public spaces associated with City Riparian and the Village Building Convergence are on "great big boulevards," it is fair to say that the majority of these reasons still apply. Chase is suggesting in this case that the private land-owners would be commercial vendors (*reason 6*); however residential property owners in an urban

context can have the same impact on a community. Multiple theories, such as Phoebe Wall Wilson in "A day in the life of a neighborhood place"[13] and Timothy Beatley et al. in *The Ecology of Place*[14], propose this urban, public space to be a "third place,"[15] a zone for the spontaneous and casual interactions which humans crave. The City Repair Project's annual community build events called City Riparian specifically concentrate on the fabrication of such "third places." The idea of a cooperative build event is an avenue to create multiple "third places" in cities across the country.

As mentioned at the outset, City Repair Project's ultimate goal is to empower communities and foster greater neighborhood communication. The Village Building events meet the organization's intentions and provide a model for other cities with the same objectives. While there are several models of community renewal initiative organizations, City Riparian presents a unique design to execute these efforts through community-build events. By breaking down the factors in the community-build event,

a model can be established which may be beneficial to other communities or organizations across the country. Eventually there may be a network of "urban oases" in every city, as in Portland, Oregon, where various models are slightly altered and reproduced at multiple sites.

THE VALUE OF COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

Now that the significance of small urban spaces has been outlined, attention can be turned to the significance of collaborative design.   In order to determine the significance of collaborative design, one must first establish the means of collaboration. In the context of this investigation, a community build event provides the agency of collaboration. So, what is a community event?   Furthermore, what is meant by "community"? Or what makes a community event distinct from any other event? Timothy Beatley cites an eloquent definition of community conceived by Amitai Etzioni[16],

community: a social web

> "the webs that bind individuals, who would otherwise be on their own, into groups of people who care for one another and who help maintain a civic, social, and moral order"[17]

In the case of a community-build urban renewal event, this definition is accurate and relevant because one intends the connections or networks made during the event to persist long after. The word "event" comprises a time frame; an organized, planned occurrence with a specific aim(s) and a social experience. An event should not only introduce the community members to one another but *strengthen* the bonds between people to maintain a livable environment in that community.

As gathered from several sources, including the City Repair Project case study, a successful community-build event contains a number of criteria. A strategy established by James Q. Wilson to stimulate community participation in urban renewal is "the creation of neighborhood organizations which will define 'positive' goals for their areas in collaboration with the relevant city agencies and in accord with the time schedule which binds most renewal efforts."[18] In the case of Portland, these organizations could be represented by the City Repair Project or Neighborhood Associations that advocate on behalf of the community. An additional source also claims

that strong community-based organizations facilitate better and faster renewal in neighborhoods.[19]

As mentioned, City Riparian offers a useful prototype for a functional community-build event. A few aspects of the City Riparian community build event will be discussed below as a tool to further community renewal efforts across the United States. These particular aspects of collaborative design specifically address the material and social extent of urban renewal.   Collaborative design can be an intentional device to foster effective community initiated urban renewal.

The City Repair Project's approach to urban renewal is successful in a number of ways.   The diverse achievements of City Repair Project may be a result of the exceptional awareness of Portland residents, the events are usually shaped within the innovative minds of volunteers, but the organization does a superior job in reinforcing the urban repair movement. The urban value of design in this context lies in the effectiveness of the organization's design. The design of Portland's City Repair Project, is successful for several reasons: 1) The organization has a consistently growing population of volunteers due to their productive reputation and offering of incentives, such as free lectures by community leaders; 2) The projects are at an appropriate scale for the twice-annual build events because the projects can be achieved in the given time and volunteers depart the events with a sense of satisfaction. Larger projects are built with an evolutionary methodology, in other words, the project goals for a single event are clear and the structure can be expanded upon in subsequent years; 3) Maintenance of City Repair projects are addressed by the biannual events and through continuous community engagement.

Clearly defined goals which are achievable in the given time frame also boost volunteer confidence. If goals are met, the project group will feel a greater sense of accomplishment, and accomplishment may stimulate volunteer turnout in subsequent years and events. The time frame differs with the scale and scope of each project. The permanent structures, such as those generated during the Village Building Convergence (VBC), require permits or city approval at the very least. This process can take anywhere from 5 months to multiple years. Ideally, if proper measures are taken and documentation is begun early, a project conceived for the VBC in ear-

ly January can be constructed during the May event (11 days long). Because this time-frame works for the majority of those projects, it may be used as the model time-frame for general purposes.

More importantly, a continuous effort must be made to promote the community spaces outside the time constraints of the event. In order to generate connectedness between the community and the built spaces, small neighborhood events can be arranged throughout the rest of the year. An interesting point brought up by some property owners associated with VBC was that they continue to engage the community in these small scale events to bond the community with the space, almost as a preventative measure. If community members use and benefit from the space, they will be less likely to complain if it temporarily falls into disrepair or conflicts with building code. Erin Mirrett, a site "host" and active volunteer for *City Repair Project*, requests food donations from neighborhood eateries to hold pizza parties and invites pedestrians and bicyclists (as well as volunteer laborers) as they pass by the community space to join the frequent social gathering.

Projects such as those illustrated by the City Repair Project may have wider positive influence on the community. According to Christopher Reardon, "In Philadelphia, one precinct has seen a 90 percent drop in crime as a result of its volunteer gardening program."[20] To take this a step further, a *consistent* community effort – such as a reoccurring community revitalization event – maintains the concept of ownership and prolongs the positive social effects. A permanent sense of place is an important component to the success and longevity of community spaces because it will "foster a sense of caring for place, promoting stewardship and the assumption of responsibility for others and for ones' surroundings."[21]

There must be a certain level of commitment from the community to not only use the spaces but to preserve them. What is meant by this is that there may be additional minor maintenance, such as removal of leaves or paint touchups to seal the materials, to which the community itself should attend. Fortunately, major maintenance or renovations can be arranged to be carried out during events, with supplementary volunteer labor. The conscientious preservation of project sites indicates community

integration and a genuine sense of ownership. It is important for the community to take ownership of the build sites and keep them in good condition because it reflects back on the event and creates positive reputations for associated organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Neighborhood participation proves to be a valuable component to the accomplishments of a community renewal initiative and thus, the effectiveness of urban repair. Events, such as The Village Building Convergence, sustain neighborhood relationships as well as the community spaces. Developing a reoccurring community-build event will generate interaction and a general *connectedness* within a community.[22] The idea of connectedness functions around generating a bond, the bond between people and their community and between people and their neighborhood spaces. These feelings of connection, in all their various forms, merge to create a permanent sense of place. This cooperation is achieved by altering how the city plans for and supports healthy neighborhoods and communities.[23]

By advocating individuals within the community to take part in the community projects, the City not only hopes to improve streetscapes by eliminating debris filled lots, but also believes these areas will be better maintained for the future if they are designated as community "turf." The term "turf", according to Jane Jacobs, simply refers to the establishment of ownership.[24] Oscar Newman suggests a similar concept as well in his article "Defensible Space: A New Physical Plan Tool for Urban Revitalization" when he states "one could only conclude that residents maintained, controlled, and identified with those areas that were clearly demarcated as their own."[25] In other words an individual in a community is more likely to maintain the efforts of urban renewal if s/he feels responsibility due to previous participation or if there is designated community ownership.

Designing successful collaborative community-build events have the potential to revitalize urban spaces. Community participation in place-making is a vital component to forging a sense of place, and thus will supplement the longevity of neighborhood spaces. Not only for the advantages of establishing of "turf" and the potential for diverse social encounters, but because community involve-

ment has the potential for profound social implications. Community initiative is a primary solution to an ailing urban environment and this cooperative spirit can be channeled into designing collaborative techniques and spaces which generate livable urban environments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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