Large, corporate urban development deserves deep and careful critique. We can look at the experience of large-scale neighborhood development to better understand the intrinsic problems such developments engender. Planning for neighborhoods has always required certain nuances and sensibilities—nuances that large-scale master planning has rarely been able to muster. When mass produced or produced on a large scale, neighborhoods tend to be reduced to single-use, monolithic, and mostly suburban developments. In particular, the principles of mixed housing type oriented around communal space are usually dropped.

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dose of planning, with plenty of flexibility. Planned neighborhoods have definite pluses: institutionalized leadership, clearly defined social and spatial boundaries, and a sense of control. Unplanned neighborhoods are likely to lack these advantages.

Unfortunately, nuancing the plan versus process balance that neighborhoods might benefit from has rarely happened. Neighborhood plans have instead been mostly wholesale, all-at-once, expert driven formulations. Missing has been the transfer of the neighborhood ideal in incremental terms—redeveloping existing places one block at a time. Urban planners never developed a language or methodology that could implement the ideals of neighborhood as a physical and social construct in a way that was not top-down—not about blueprints, but not limited to process, either—plan and process combined.

The complexities of this balancing act come into view in the attempt to rely on incremental change as a way of improving neighborhoods. If there is no understanding of how incremental achievement leads to the gradual building up of something whole, with no ties to neighborhood, small improvements may seem like piecemeal shots in the dark, benefitting one landlord, one property owner, one gentrifier at a time. Would these catalytic efforts be that much more effective if they were contextualized within an identified neighborhood? A top-down plan is not necessarily the answer, but a clearer connection to a defined neighborhood may help broaden and deepen these efforts.

Plan versus process reveals the tension between collective input that requires planning protocols, and the desire for an agile response in the form of pop-up shops, bench bombing, and painted crosswalks. There is a need for spontaneity and there is a need for representation that is fair and democratic. Perhaps, at least, an explicit understanding of neighborhood and its attendant notions of collective enterprise, responsibility, and ownership could help resolve the two extremes of centralized planning versus DIY intervention.

There is always the danger that small-scale efforts combined with a strong sense of neighborhood will be over-played, resulting in an escalation of housing prices and eventual displacement. Neighborhood improvement without disruption and displacement is based on the idea that improvements must be defined by residents themselves.

Narratives surrounding climate change, sustainability, and resiliency could potentially help resolve the dichotomy that pits bottom-up authenticity against neighborhood plans and planning. Neighborhood-scale governance and control is important for environmentalism because neighborhood scale is used as a basis of sustainable practices—e.g., water conservation, groundwater recharge, recycling, energy efficiency, and food production. Individual actions matter too, but many sustainability and resilience goals require local coordination, where the scale of operations is at the neighborhood level.

The processes of neighborhood—tactical, empowering, bottom-up, environmentally-based—requires a defined—to some extent, planned—neighborhood. But it need not be large-scale and corporate. Individual possibility can be maximized, with minimal limits on opportunity and movement, within the context of bounded urban space. The goal of planners should be to derive an individualized urban experience composed of varying and unbounded social worlds, while at the same time recognizing that the form and design of the neighborhood—if it adheres to certain principles—promotes neighborhood identity and, potentially, civic identity and spirit.

This is the balance between process and plan that has to be found, a sense of neighborhood versus the freedom to engage, small-scale intervention that adds up, neighborhood identity that does not impose too much control and too much order.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References


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