

FOUNDATIONS OF COMMONS BUILDING

For commons building to be successful, several key elements must be present.

Start with the People Involved

The design and building of a permanent commons cannot be carried out by outsiders who bring preconceived ideas about what residents want or ought to want. At each stage of the process in brainstorming, in designing, in barnraising, and in animating the finished space—the people who will use the commons must be involved. The community of people eager and willing to contribute to improving the quality of their physical surroundings might include neighborhood residents, women, senior citizens, day care centers, schools, places of worship, settlement houses, and many other grassroots and nonprofit interest groups.

Ask “Who Is Missing?”

Fundamental to the concept of a commons is that no one be left out. At community meetings, it is important to ask: Who is missing? We live in a society that still struggles with racism and discrimination, so we must exert special efforts to assure that we represent a cross-section of the community. If only adults but no youth gather to plan a commons, the community needs to take steps to rectify the situation. Young people are the energy center of a community and can play an essential role in integrating, protecting, and revitalizing neighborhoods. Additionally, in communities where many teenagers have dropped out of school, their engagement in building a neighborhood commons on their own turf can develop their sense of pride and self-worth, as well as marketable career skills.

Recruit Volunteer Professionals

Active citizens eager to participate in construction of public amenities provide a mixed blessing for city governments, as the citizens often lack skill and experience. Volunteer professionals, recruited to work side by side with residents, add rigor to self-help construction projects. Environmental designers, artists, craftspeople, animators, social scientists, lawyers, and many others can be engaged, depending on the needs and complexity of the project.

Enlist Organized Volunteer Work Teams

Groups such as AmeriCorps, Scouts, students, religious groups, and nonprofit groups are motivated by a sense of service to their community. In many communities, high school students are required to participate a certain number of hours per year in community service. Unions will support rather than oppose these volunteer efforts because in the long run the heightened quality of the surroundings stimulates the demand for more jobs.

Partner with Existing Nonprofits

Financial aid and administrative support is often available from nonprofit corporations concerned with environmental and social issues. Such organizations welcome the opportunity to sponsor grassroots efforts, and funding for environmental improvement projects, funneled through nonprofit corporations, can come from private foundations, businesses, and governmental agencies.

Get Help from the City

Especially in larger projects, it is possible to partner with city or other public agencies. These agencies may provide funding or the use of heavy construction equipment, such as bulldozers and trucks, to which grassroots communities otherwise would not have access. Public agencies that make resources available for citizen-led efforts demonstrate government in service to the people.

Storage depots can be established throughout the city to make salvageable material easily available. Such depots can make a significant contribution to municipal recycling efforts and prevent the city dumps from overflowing. Municipalities can also establish tool-lending libraries or support community gardens by providing

fencing, irrigation installation, and wood for planting beds, along with soil and compost. Citizens and governments in collaboration to improve neighborhoods promote dynamic and mutually respectful relationships with one another.

Use Recycled and Salvaged Building Materials

To keep building costs low, incorporate found objects and salvaged building materials. Every city contains many surprisingly untapped sources of supply. These include donations from businesses, industrial surplus, government and military surplus, and salvaged material, to name a few. A survey can reveal the sources of recycled materials in each local community.

A living city needs the presence of elements from its past in its streets, sidewalks, and public places. “Historic” and “repurposed” local building materials are integral parts of the urban experience and give an air of familiarity to new constructions. They prevent commons from succumbing to a depersonalized aesthetic of mass construction.

Using salvaged materials also gives artists in a community free rein to exercise their skills in improvisational design. Hands displaced by labor-saving technologies are reengaged in a labor-intensive creative process, and dedicated volunteers—many of them highly skilled in the arts, crafts, and trades—have the opportunity, through using recycled materials, to create beautiful yet affordable spaces.

Putting It All Together

In response to the drastic curtailment of public funding for social and environmental programs during the early 1970s, and to counter discouragement over diminishing resources, I conducted a feasibility study in Louisville, Kentucky, which explored an all-out mobilization of existing physical and human resources for environmental self-help efforts.

The study brought together public and private agencies and residents eager to improve neighborhood environments. For a year I talked with various groups who needed to make improvements in their surroundings and who were willing to work if resources were made available. I also talked with resource groups, such as designers, lawyers, building and plant material suppliers, and representatives of social service and municipal agencies.

The process culminated in an all-day brainstorming forum, where we gathered in “discover and match” sessions to share needs and resources. A perfect match was discovered when a daycare teacher expressed a need for shade trees. “Some days,” she complained, “it’s too hot to let kids out on that sticky asphalt.” A nurseryman quickly offered some overgrown maples he was about to cut down because they were too costly to dig. After a silence, a newly appointed 4-H Club representative for urban programs said, “I often wonder how I can get the kids doing something with nature in the city. I’d be delighted to bring them to the nursery and teach them how to dig, ball, and burlap trees to prepare them for moving.” Again a silence. The trees, as all realized, were still a long way from the daycare center. After some thought, a man from the Department of Public Works spoke up. “I have no volunteers and no plants, but if a 4-H team will be at the nursery on Thursday afternoon, I’ll have a truck with a winch there to transport the trees to the daycare center.” Faces beamed.

Many such collaborations can be generated, for each community contains a wealth of latent human and physical resources. Bringing together resources from various sectors of a city and creatively using inexpensive salvaged materials ensures that commons projects are affordable and manageable for the people involved. The exchange also forges relationships between public and private sectors and brings government agencies into direct accountability with neighborhood residents. Relationships among people from different sectors of a community can be improved and large projects made feasible.

—Karl Linn, *Building Commons and Community*, pp 198–201

For more information visit www.karllinn.org