

FOUNDATIONS OF COMMONS BUILDING

For commons building to be successful, several key elements must be present. These mutually reinforcing components have served as foundations in all the types of commons I have helped to build—from small projects to large, sustained ventures.

Start with the People Involved.

The design and building of a 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 is 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, amateurs, 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. These days, even some kinds of plastic are being recycled; 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” building materials, such as worn marble steps and weathered bricks and flagstones, are integral parts of the urban experience and give an air of familiarity to new constructions. They help to integrate newly built commons into the existing fabric of cities and prevent commons from succumbing to a depersonalized aesthetic of mass construction.

Using recycled 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, artistically crafted, yet affordable, spaces. The aesthetic quality of commons, inspired and built by community artists, is rich, vibrant, and colorful.

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 and 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

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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. When individuals become involved in the ongoing greening, crafting, and aesthetic refinement of their habitats, they develop buoyant relationships with the physical surroundings of their homes and neighborhoods.

Three Levels of Commons Building

While the neighborhood commons provides the model for cooperative commons building, in fact commons are needed wherever people gather. The impersonal surroundings of a hotel where they meet for conferences, the institutional lighting of a lecture room, the commercial bustle of a street fair—all can be transformed to create a commons that enhances relaxation and communication. Thus, three levels of commons evolved in our work, according to the needs of the people and the available resources:

Instant Commons

If very limited resources are available and participants will only use the commons for short periods of time, organizers can create an instant commons by adding simple decorations that personalize the surroundings. They can also change lighting and seating arrangements, and animate the space with cultural activities. Such instant transformation enlivens whatever gather-

ing is underway, from a lecture to a conference session. Instant transformations are also lessons in environmental management; they empower and challenge the audience, or inhabitants of spaces, to change their surroundings to suit their needs.

Temporary Commons

With more resources, communities can spend time and energy to change a space. They can create temporary commons with movable stage settings for special occasions, and animate the space with more elaborate cultural and social activities. The temporary commons featured in this book were all created for special events, such as a multiple-day workshop or conference, for which we spent weeks or months in advance, planning and constructing temporary stage settings and programs.

Lasting Commons

When abundant motivation and ample resources exist or can be acquired, a community can create a more lasting neighborhood commons. Such a comprehensive space might consist of such subspaces as a sitting area, a playground, or a performance space. A network of common spaces interspersed in a community garden offers opportunities for gardeners, their families, and friends to socialize. These small-scale commons can become new public amenities that reinforce grassroots neighborhood life, allowing people to come together to share conversation, discussion, food, and activities.

In the early neighborhood commons, where

the focus was on construction and planting was minimal, maintenance of the commons became a burden to neighborhood residents. With the passing of time, my focus with neighborhood commons shifted toward community garden commons, in which individual creative expression blossoms in the midst of cooperative effort.

Building Neighborhood Community

A neighborhood is a place where people converge to realize their lives. Our schools, offices, recreation areas, and places of worship often lie outside our neighborhood; we interact with people there only through the roles they play in those particular contexts. By contrast, in a neighborhood, people get to know each other in the multiple roles they play—as neighbors, parents, and partners. In our neighborhoods, we practice the art of living, and engage in the most essential human activities as we raise children and care for and nurture one another.

In our postindustrial society, as people flock to cities and suburbs, families often find themselves living an isolated and segregated existence without the emotional and physical support once provided by traditional rural extended-family living. To nurture the growth of a new kind of extended family based not on blood relations but on growing friendship, mutual aid, and intergenerational support, neighbors can collaborate in planning and constructing an easily accessible commons.

Community garden commons enable neigh-

borhood residents with no access to land to grow healthy food close to home. Groups also assemble in commons to celebrate special occasions and to debate issues that affect their lives. Such small-scale gathering spaces may combine the functions of a sitting area, playground, neighborhood park, community garden, or sanctuary.

Neighborhood commons are different from the centralized town commons of earlier American life. Such commons are typically located downtown, surrounded by government and commercial buildings. In these more formal public open spaces, people are only visitors; they cannot till the land to grow food, and people of lesser means often feel out of place. Centralized commons are under the control neither of the people who use them nor of residents who live nearby. The events that take place there are usually organized by governmental or business groups and often attract masses eager to shop and be entertained.

Neighborhood commons are also different from public playgrounds or parks, which in underserved inner-city neighborhoods are often not easily accessible to women with small children, to the elderly, and to people with special needs. Unlike more remote open spaces such as ball fields, parks, and nature preserves, which accommodate specialized uses, small-scale neighborhood open spaces need to accommodate a wide variety of functions throughout the day, evening hours, and weekends, amid the cycle of seasons. Consequently, the design of neighborhood commons is complex

and challenging.

The process of building community begins at the earliest stages of shared envisioning planning and design of a commons. Once a design has evolved that satisfies the future users of a commons, self-help construction can begin. In order to accomplish heavy construction tasks, men and teenagers must be involved, working together with women and children. In many instances volunteer work teams, such as Scouts, fraternities, AmeriCorps, and members of faith communities can be recruited to help with the heavier work. By participating in the realization of a shared vision, the members of a community experience their interdependence.

Community building does not stop when the work of constructing the commons is complete. Commons management provides a new challenge to neighborhood residents unaccustomed to taking on shared responsibilities. Usually a core group of people take the initiative to maintain and administer the commons, so it is essential to the success of the commons to discover and nurture potential leaders, both those who have administrative ability and those who can inspire others to participate.

The potential for community growth is particularly promising in community garden commons. As gardeners satisfy their personal needs through cultivating their plots, they are more open to assuming communal responsibilities for the overall maintenance and administration of the garden and its commons. Working together, people learn to listen to one another respectfully while resolving conflicts

and engaging in consensus decision-making. A subtle social fabric of caring relationships emerges as people bond with one another and share events in the commons that mark significant phases in their lives—retirement parties, weddings, healing circles.

In the wake of increasing vulnerability to violence, community garden commons are being challenged more than ever to meet the demand for human contact. Many people are motivated by a deep craving to come together in these spiritually uplifting sanctuaries—to commune with nature and art, relax and meditate or pray, or to use the commons for sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Since the flow of creativity depends on trust, autonomy, and initiative, it is not surprising that many individual planting beds are truly works of art, inspired by the gardeners support and acknowledge one another in their creative expression. In these cared-for community open spaces, which function as an extension of home territory, neighbors meet casually as part of their daily lives, and forge bonds of trust and interdependence.

Strengthening Grassroots Democracy

The inviting settings of neighborhood commons enrich lives, and as in a small village, residents get to know each other well and become tolerant of one another's idiosyncrasies. Workshops, lectures, and information exchanges that take place in neighborhood commons raise political awareness, deepen understanding, and can lead to the establishment of community boards comprised of women, men, and

teenagers, all of whom represent the multicultural and economically diverse constituency of the neighborhood. Active participation of grassroots communities in the political process contributes to a decentralizing of society and strengthens true democracy.

Though small in scale, commons can have a multiplier effect as they permeate the fabric of a city. As grassroots neighborhood communities are empowered by constructing and using their commons, a foundation for true democracy emerges. Community control of these small-scale neighborhood commons gives residents a place where they can take a stand.

As people realize their shared vision by successfully constructing a commons through cooperative efforts, they are empowered to take on larger issues. The emotional and social satisfaction they experience through face-to-face encounters and shared accomplishment makes them feel less discouraged and overwhelmed by the threatening issues they confront in their daily lives.

Unfortunately, any improvement in the physical environment also raises property values, which leads to gentrification of neighborhoods. The cost of consumer goods and services rises along with the real estate and becomes less affordable to longtime residents, who are often forced to relocate. But as property improvements often include the conversion of derelict vacant lots into attractive neighborhood parks and community gardens, the ability of local residents to grow fresh produce close to home mitigates some of the economic pressures caused by

gentrification. Other countergentrification strategies, such as affordable housing and accessible public transportation, can help sustain the stability of multicultural and economically diverse neighborhoods.

Staging celebratory events in decentralized neighborhood commons strengthens the cohesion and vitality of a neighborhood and imprints it with festive expression. Although large-scale, multicultural events and celebrations in the downtown squares of cities encourage citizen participation, talent and resources are usually siphoned out of ethnic neighborhoods, which are not enriched culturally or physically by the event. When citizens are empowered to voice their grievances and hopes collectively in neighborhood rituals and celebrations, downtown commons can become a forum for citywide festivities rooted in grassroots democratic participation.

Reclaiming the Commons

At its heart, commitment to building commons rests on the idea that all members of a community have the right to their shared natural habitats of land, water, and air. From time immemorial, people from indigenous land-based cultures have celebrated their sacred relationship with and free access to nature, which has assured their sustenance and survival. Yet throughout history, and especially in the history of the West, people's relationship with nature has been severed and their access to public land severely curtailed through the encroachment of private property. The increasing enclosure of

common public land has also limited people's ability to interact cooperatively with one another.

More recently, another enclosure has occurred. Increasingly hazardous car traffic has encircled residential neighborhoods, bringing to an end the vibrant social life that once took place in the streets and on sidewalks, stoops, and porches. Neighborhood streets, which residents once experienced as an extension of home—where they hung out casually to share stories, exchange information, and watch their children play—have degenerated into mere thoroughfares for automobiles.

In some neighborhoods, homeowners replaced their stoops and porches with front lawns or gardens that provide a buffer from the noisy, air-polluting traffic. Fences, hedges, and cars parked in driveways now separate houses from one another and isolate residents from contact with their neighbors. In more crowded neighborhoods filled with apartment houses, the only place children have to play is in the streets amid dangerous traffic. The hazard and noise of traffic and the flow of people rushing by inhibit friendliness as neighbors hesitate to stop on the narrow sidewalks to talk.

Many cities throughout the world have developed speed bumps and curb extensions for slowing down traffic in residential neighborhoods, making the streets safer for bicyclists, pedestrians, and especially for children. Holland and Denmark have created “home zones” in high-density areas that change the function of a street by adding amenities, such as sandpits for small children, basketball hoops, play houses,

hopsotch grids, and colorful plantings.

In the United States, urban community gardens are one of the last remnants of the commons. Within them benches, chairs, picnic tables, barbecues and vine-covered arbors provide comfortable sociability settings. For decades they have infused the fabric of American cities with flourishing vegetation amid sterile buildings and streets, and have provided places where family members, neighbors, and friends cultivate friendship and community.

Unfortunately, today, in neighborhoods across the country, community gardens are threatened. Two dynamic trends in urban development are on a collision course, and the survival of community life on neighborhood blocks is at stake. On one track, a growing number of community gardeners and advocates for healthy and livable cities assert the need for accessible open space in residential neighborhoods. On the other track, city administrators, coping with fiscal crises and eager to take advantage of the demand for land for housing construction, have been selling off city-owned vacant lots once leased to neighborhood residents for community gardens. As these last remnants of public land are sold, neighborhood community is threatened or destroyed.

Creating commons and neighborhood community requires social and political activism to prevent speculative housing, even affordable infill housing, from occupying all available open space in neighborhood blocks. Unless needs for housing and neighborhood open space are balanced, the existence of neighborhood community is in jeopardy. More

affluent neighborhoods and gated communities, with fiscal resources and political weight, do have their commons, but these privately owned commons are restricted to the exclusive use of their members. Neighbors elsewhere can stake their claim and secure land for open spaces by introducing guidelines into their city's general plan directing government to secure publicly owned open space, especially in densely populated low-income neighborhoods.

Animating the Commons

Once a commons has been built, it is brought to life by the presence and activities of the people who come together within it. The life of the commons, like the life of an individual, is animated and reanimated through daily use and care of the space as well as by periodic rituals and celebrations. The root of the word animate is *anima*, or soul. Food, music, flowers, color—sensory delights shared with others—all deepen our connection to the source of life within us and enhance the inner life of our communities.

Celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals focus and intensify our experience of life. When we participate in such events, we acknowledge and confirm the importance of our lives and our relationship to others and the world around us. Many of the customs, traditions, and rituals that once rooted us to our past and gave our lives meaning have disintegrated. People today search for meaning at every level of their existence, in personal, work and spiritual life.

We face the challenge of keeping alive for ourselves and future generations the deep satisfaction created by shared, meaningful events. The word companionship holds within it the key: *com-pan*, “bread with others.” Breaking bread together—sharing food and drink—needs to be a vital part of every gathering.

From the beginning my students, my colleagues, and I envisioned neighborhood commons as “ennobling places of meeting where young and old may gather to engage in spontaneous and staged celebrations of public life.” Events and activities that animate the commons and inspire participants range from simple to elaborate—engaging musicians to play during work parties or an open house; creating welcoming settings for meetings, workshops, and special events; staging festive dedication ceremonies with music, poetry, and food to celebrate the hard work and generosity of the various contributors; celebrating milestones in the lives of individuals and the community; forming healing circles; hosting performances or mounting exhibitions to showcase the work of local artists and craftspeople.

Creative self-expression generates an inspiring ambiance in the commons—thematically related art in a conference commons, the commons as a gallery for local artists, artful plantings in community garden beds, and construction of handcrafted benches, patios, walls, and play equipment. People sense the dynamic energy inherent in the creative process and want to be a part of it.

Ideally every block should have its own neighborhood commons. Margaret Mead wisely suggested

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that one apartment be reserved for common use in densely populated high-rise buildings to help reduce the alienation and enmity suffered by people cooped up in their own small apartments. In a ground-breaking research project on human development based in Chicago neighborhoods, Dr. Felton Earls of Harvard School of Public Health and his colleagues discovered that the most powerful factor in ridding a neighborhood of crime and violence is “collective efficacy”—neighbors working together for the common good.

The conditioning of our competitive culture has thwarted our deep craving for community. We need an awakening of the spirit of the commons to dissolve the blockages that keep us isolated from one another. Common goals and joyous social and cultural events help us bond deeply with one another around a shared vision of living in community. Gradually we become able to reconnect with our instinctive longing for community and bring forth the enthusiasm and commitment required to deal effectively with the inevitable setbacks, disappointments, and conflicts that arise in any cooperative effort. Building and animating commons provides meaning at every level, from personal creativity and social relationships to working with the natural environment. I hope that these stories and images of instant, temporary, and lasting commons will inspire and guide you in your own community-building explorations and efforts.