
Breakthrough Communities

Sustainability and Justice in the Next American
Metropolis

edited by M. Paloma Pavel

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Foreword

The way we live in cities is at the crux of many environmental, economic, and social challenges. The deteriorating quality of life for poor people who live in the inner city and who are trapped in neighborhoods without the necessary services and resources is connected to the concentration of wealth in affluent urban and suburban neighborhoods, the extraordinary waste in consumer society, and the destruction of the natural resources that surround our cities. How do we find a new way?

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) proposed a working framework for sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Conventional models of economic development had brought devastating consequences to the global environment while failing to meet the challenge of global poverty. As a result, worldwide concern for the environment, economy, and equity emerged as the “three *Es*” of sustainable development. Despite this historic perspective, the popular conception of sustainable development in the United States remains focused primarily on protecting the biophysical environment—land, air, water, energy, fauna and flora—as resources that exist apart from human society. A dominant ecological narrative that disregards cities has thus obscured the environmental consequences of urban transformation.

Too often we think that the sole forces shaping our cities and suburbs are impersonal market factors or technical expertise, forgetting that the most important aspects of our lives are often the outcome of other social, political, psychological, or spiritual dynamics. As people have worked through the years to escape poverty, to overcome disadvantage, or to establish and defend boundaries of community territory, the results of their efforts have shaped our neighborhoods and enclaves. Stories of these

events include forced and voluntary migrations, responses to natural and human disasters, racial discrimination and conflict, heroic efforts to build religious communities, and struggles to resist exploitation.

Today, narratives of people of color and working-class communities and their social movements can help us understand ourselves and others, bring meaning to chaotic events, and evolve a shared moral purpose at a metropolitan regional scale. Once you have a shared story, you can build the will to sustain efforts for change such as re-envisioning abandoned places and designing healthy and effective communities. The personal and community-based narratives of social-justice advocates offer vital sources of sustenance as we move forward to address issues of race and class. Such stories are at the heart of our quest for sustainable communities and build the foundation of this book.

To illustrate the importance of such narratives, I'd like to share a personal story. My interest in the environment and city-building goes back to my third-grade class in an integrated school in West Philadelphia. In 1947, I was one of the few African-American students in a school attended mostly by children and grandchildren of working-class European immigrants. My favorite teacher, Mrs. Aikens, taught us about the constellations in the night sky, the dinosaurs that once roamed the hills and valleys where we lived, and the fossil record in the rocks found along the banks of the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers. We learned to identify the trees in the city by the shape of their leaves and the texture of their bark.

One day, Mrs. Aikens took our class on a trip to see the Better Philadelphia Exhibition on display at a prestigious downtown department store. The expressed purpose of the exhibition—attended by almost 400,000 people in the two months it was open—was to provide a visual image of what the future of Philadelphia would look like based on the new urban design principles that were in vogue following World War II. The exhibition included a huge aerial map of the city, motion pictures illustrating new design concepts, and a full-scale model reproducing an actual street corner in a run-down neighborhood in South Philadelphia. The model was designed to show what was wrong with the city and what could be done about it.

This class trip occurred at that mysterious moment in my childhood when I was considering what I wanted to be when I grew up. My imagination was stirred at seeing streets, houses, trees, and parks in

miniature—as if I were larger than life—while also being able to see into the future. The exhibition awakened my aspiration to plan for a future in which my family, my community, and I would feel at home in the world.

In my childhood innocence, I had no way of knowing how much the Better Philadelphia Exhibition’s urban renewal plans—either consciously or unconsciously—were bound up with assumptions, attitudes, and strategies to deal with race and class in the city. I learned only much later that the exhibition was in fact the first stage in a public relations campaign designed to dismantle African-American and other working-class neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

At our racially integrated school, we read about the city’s founder, William Penn, and his innovations in designing “The City of Brotherly Love.” In this narrative, William Penn was presented as a social reformer whose nonviolent ideas and egalitarian commitments gave shape to the early city. We learned about the Vikings, Peter Stuyvesant, and the religious persecution of the Mennonites. Yet, we learned nothing about the Irish, Italian, Polish, Greek, and Russian immigrants from whom the kids in my classroom were immediate descendants. Presumably this information was not in the elementary school teaching syllabus.

Perhaps most problematic for me, we learned nothing about African-Americans. Blacks had been a significant presence in Philadelphia since colonial days. In 1682, when William Penn arrived in the region, he found black people, brought by the Dutch and Scandinavians, already living there. Penn himself had slaves. From the early days, African-Americans owned property, agitated against slavery, and established churches, schools, and businesses. A second wave of African-Americans migrated to Philadelphia between the beginning of the twentieth century and the outbreak of World War II. My own ancestors arrived in the city as a part of these first two waves. In the years following World War II, the influx of the third wave of African-American migrants began to arrive, which would forever change the character of the city’s neighborhoods. What effect would this invisible legacy have on my life chances? I learned about none of this in elementary school, or in my later education.

My early experiences in Mrs. Aikens’s class instilled in me a rudimentary understanding of the place of human beings in the larger order of the universe and a respect for the nonhuman living community. I was also inspired by William Penn’s story and by the Better Philadelphia

Exhibition. Such formative experiences influenced my decision to study architecture and urban planning, through which I believed I could make an impact on the social issues of our time.

The compelling urban development issues in the 1950s, however, had to do with race, class, and the environment. The postwar flight of the white working-class populations to segregated first-ring suburbs was beginning, and white elites were moving to affluent gated communities in the most privileged places throughout the region. The inner core of American cities was being redefined as the ghetto, while at the same time the environmental challenges associated with suburban fragmentation and sprawl were beginning to explode across the landscape.

The missing information in my educational experience left me poorly equipped to deal with these challenges. Why, after twelve generations with African-Americans as a significant part of the population in Philadelphia, had such disparities continued to exist in the quality of neighborhoods and living environments between African-Americans and other populations? What had been the pattern of discrimination that had prevented blacks from exercising greater control over their environments? How had blacks resisted exploitation? Were suburban sprawl and inner city abandonment connected?

Over the course of the nine years it took me to gain a professional degree in architecture and the subsequent twenty years of professional practice and teaching at the College of Environmental Design and the College of Natural Resources at the University of California, Berkeley, I came to the conclusion that neither my education nor conventional models of professional practice had adequately prepared me to address these questions.

An authentic approach to urban sustainability incorporates ecological integrity, beauty, economic viability, and social justice as building blocks for increased livability for all communities. Working with these premises in the late 1980s, a group of colleagues and I formed the Urban Habitat Program—the first U.S. environmental justice organization to focus on metropolitan regional equity. The mission of Urban Habitat was to promote multicultural urban environmental leadership for sustainable communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. The idea was to develop a model of organizing that could be replicated in other regions of the country.

The organization was to be multicultural for a variety of reasons. We wanted to create an example of the kind of society we hoped to develop.

We would have to move beyond the black and white model of racial confrontation toward a more inclusive vision that included other populations. Whites were becoming minorities in many parts of California. Much of the energy of the civil rights movement was passing on to other communities of color: Native Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

We focused on cities because communities of color had needs and great organizing strengths related to urban issues, and because this focus was missing within the environmental movement. We saw leadership development as being an important ingredient in our program, in part because there was a leadership void in society as a whole. Yet we also felt that organizers in our communities needed new attitudes, skills, and concepts to be effective in the twenty-first century.

At the time we founded Urban Habitat, most established environmental groups were ignoring cities. Instead, the first thing that the Urban Habitat Program did was to treat the city as the whole region, part of the larger ecosystem or watershed. This meant viewing inner-city neighborhoods, the downtown, the suburbs, the surrounding rural areas, the wilderness, the whole metropolitan region as interconnected—not as fragmented parts. Participants already knew a great deal about housing, transportation, workplaces, schools, and churches in our most vulnerable metropolitan neighborhoods. But we also had to learn about land, air, water, biological resources, the patterns of energy consumption and waste, and the economic drivers for the whole region.

For a long time, the discussion in the U.S. environmental movement was dominated by a focus on larger-scale issues that paid no attention to the economy or racial justice. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a movement emerged in communities of color to address the deteriorating quality of life in inner cities and poor rural communities based on a new concept called environmental justice. Advocates began to argue convincingly that protecting the environment and addressing social and racial justice were intimately connected.

Although mainstream environmental groups were talking about the potential of what might happen if we did not focus on the environment, the environmental justice movement was saying, “The things you are predicting are already happening in our communities.” The concerns of mostly white suburban environmentalists (protecting trees and birds) and the concerns of urban and rural people of color environmentalists (toxic pollution, occupational hazards, unemployment, abandoned lots,

run-down properties, and lack of decent grocery stores) were linked. A social movement that put these ideas together began to emerge. This book builds on the promising work of this emerging movement.

At Urban Habitat, we quickly discovered that our interest in addressing environmental issues facing communities of color was not unique. All over the country, particularly in the South and Southwest, African-Americans and Latinos were beginning to work on the health challenges of toxic pollution and the disproportionate siting of hazardous waste facilities in communities of color.

The popular conception of environmental justice, however, focuses almost exclusively on important issues of toxic pollution and public health, rather than broader issues of land use and community development. While this work of opposing toxics, which we supported, became well recognized, we were convinced that the solutions would need to be much broader. To address the problems at their roots, we would need to have a say in how the region as a whole would develop.

The elements of the built environment, including houses, streets, roads, parks, schools, retail shops, churches, and office buildings, are among the most important common assets of society as a whole. Thus, any strategy for sustainability must include stewardship of these resources as well as stewardship of the natural environment.

In the 1990s, an important breakthrough in our work at Urban Habitat came when we learned about the work of Myron Orfield, then a state senator in Minnesota. Using geographic information systems (GIS), Myron documented the massive disparities growing up within the nation's suburban areas, and showed how and why it was in the self-interest of suburban constituencies to collaborate on a new vision for metropolitan reform. We also discovered the work of Bruce Katz and his colleagues at the Brookings Institution, who were beginning to map out a new metropolitan agenda that could bring together an astonishing range of constituencies, including urban, suburban, and rural communities. Others who influenced our efforts at Urban Habitat were Manuel Pastor at University of California, Santa Cruz; Amy Dean at Working Partnerships USA; and Angela Glover Blackwell and Joe Brooks at a new and dynamic organization called PolicyLink. These advocates, and many others represented in this book, found new ways to talk with working-class, middle-class, and affluent communities about, and act upon, a shared agenda that could expand opportunities for marginalized

populations while improving the quality of life for everyone. We quickly incorporated these insights into our work.

Through its concern with alleviating poverty as well as with investigating environment and development issues, the Ford Foundation learned of our efforts at Urban Habitat. In 2001, Mil Duncan at Ford invited me to join the foundation staff as a program officer to lead its Sustainable Metropolitan Communities Initiative. The long-term goal of this initiative is to reduce the patterns of concentrated poverty in the United States, while influencing the patterns of metropolitan development to conserve natural resources. For the past fifty years, the Ford Foundation has sought to address both urban and rural poverty in the United States and abroad. In the United States, the foundation has focused increasingly on the ways that patterns of residential segregation and concentrated poverty are exacerbated by metropolitan fragmentation and sprawl.

Alarming, the land areas occupied by our metropolitan regions are growing faster than the populations that live in those regions. For example, between 1970 and 1990, the population in the Los Angeles metropolitan area grew by 45 percent, while during that same period, the actual land area where people were living grew by 300 percent.¹ What this means is that the land is being consumed six times as fast as the population is growing. A more recent study found that people living in more sprawling regions tend to drive greater distances, breathe more polluted air, face a greater risk of traffic fatalities, and walk and use transit less frequently.² Freeways, parking lots, and suburban sprawl gradually spread across the landscape, producing commercial strips that make the quality of life worse and worse for community members, while people spend more hours commuting back and forth.

Organizations participating in the Sustainable Metropolitan Communities Initiative use wide-ranging strategies in their efforts to transform their communities. They are moving beyond the paradigm of organizing within single issues and are coming together across metropolitan regions and lines of race, class, and gender, and coming up with new ways of working together to make our cities healthier, more sustainable, and more livable. They are building institutional capacity for sustainability and regional equity within labor, civil rights, and community development organizations that can play a role in transforming metropolitan regions. Increasingly, social justice and environmental activists are collaborating, acknowledging the importance of regional economic

competitiveness as well as regional self-reliance as integral parts of efforts to achieve sustainability.

Specific land use and public-private investment policies and practices for the metropolitan region as a whole provide useful frameworks for organizing efforts. Such frameworks include efforts to make all neighborhoods livable, to make public investment equitable, and to ensure that all communities have access to regional opportunities. Strategies for particular places within metropolitan regions also play a vital role. Examples of such tailored strategies include reinvestment in weak market cities and neighborhoods, wealth-sharing to reduce poverty in hot market cities and neighborhoods, and workforce housing in job-rich suburban communities. Finally, we need to reconceptualize urban-rural linkages and the role of nature in our cities and suburbs.

Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis is the story of the remarkable efforts of activists and policy makers across the United States to build a new vision of our metropolitan regions. The communities described are coming together across conventional boundaries of race, class, and jurisdiction to achieve a better quality of life for present-day residents of cities, suburbs, and rural places. Perhaps more important, they are working to build the next American metropolis as an inclusive home for our children and grandchildren, and the community of life—the air, the water, the ecological habitats on which our planet depends.

The editor of this book, Paloma Pavel, is the founder and president of Earth House Center, a social justice and strategic communications collaborative located in Oakland, California. Earth House is dedicated to building healthy, just, and sustainable communities through education, research, and multimedia tools. Paloma's diverse background as both an academic and a social and environmental justice activist makes her a remarkably effective communicator and agent of change. Her graduate studies include both Harvard University and the London School of Economics. She is a consulting psychologist and is recognized internationally for her work in leadership and organizational development and large systems change.

Since 2002, Dr. Pavel has brought a spirit of innovation, creativity, and intellectual inquiry to the development of a national learning-action network in regional equity. Her documentation of this growing movement of regional activists, leaders, and policy researchers includes print,

broadcast, and Web media. Her interdisciplinary approach in both research and practice focuses on the transformative possibilities of individual leadership development as well as the structural changes required at the level of policy. All of the contributors in this volume could tell their own remarkable stories of collaboration with Paloma Pavel and the Earth House Center team. *Breakthrough Communities* is both a harvest and a feast of this work.

The book reflects a new way to think about cities. It is about people organizing to improve their quality of life and make their neighborhoods more livable for everybody. It includes the voices of people of color, labor activists, and community organizers, and case studies of communities not often included in the debate about sustainability. It recounts stories of people thinking and acting in innovative ways as they face age-old challenges of race, poverty, and the environment, while charting new frontiers of metropolitan sustainability.

Carl Anthony

Notes

1. H. Diamond and P. Noonan, eds. *Land Use in America*. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), p. 4.
2. D. Chen, R. Ewing, and R. Pendall, *Measuring Sprawl and Its Impact: The Character & Consequences of Metropolitan Expansion*. (Washington, D.C.: Smart Growth America, 2002).