

The Role of Community in Urban Regeneration: Mixed Use Areas Approach in USA

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1 ABSTRACT

The paper intends to investigate how the community involvement in decision planning process could led to successful urban regeneration initiatives.

Starting from the American experience of “smart growth” and going toward the increase of the demand of mixité in urban settlements, we argue that the involvement of the community could define a mixed approach in decision planning process to support urban regeneration toward more sustainable “supply”. Analyzing what meaning the mixed use has acquired, still ambiguous particularly in the US context, where it still represents "the exception, not the rule" (Grant, 2002:79), the core of the paper is to investigate if the community role within the decision making process is a basic and essential factor to assure the quality enhancement of urban regeneration activities.

More in particular, the paper intends to understand the following issues:

- physical interaction vs balance in space and through time of urban transformations
- planning process community-led vs the key factors for successful urban regeneration initiatives
- planning choices vs. functional integration
- the attitudes of local communities officials vs mixed use

Based on some insights coming from the CLUDs project under 7FP Irises 2010, the paper aim at highlighting two USA case studies, Fort Point District in South Boston area (MA), and Jacobs Market Street Village located in Southeastern San Diego (CA). Both of them emblematic case studies on community involvement.

2 INTRODUCTION

The paper drawing from case studies analysis conducted in USA under the CLUDs project – Marie Curie IRSES, intends to demonstrate the connection occurring between successful urban regeneration initiatives and community involvement toward a mixed use of the spatial environment. Particularly, the aim is to investigate if the community role within the decision making process is a basic factor to assure quality enhancement of urban regeneration activities. Urban regeneration has been a concept much discussed in the last years. In particular come authors define urban regeneration as “comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental of an area that has been subject to change” (Roberts & Sykes, 2000:17). Moreover, according to Turok (2004:111) “urban regeneration process means to change the nature of a place by involving residents and other stakeholders, embracing multiple objectives and activities, with partnership working among different stakeholders”.

So that participation and places are linked issues considered part of the process that assumes urban transformations: talking about “community involvement”, “civic engagement” or “participatory urban process”, here means to investigate how community-led developments drive toward a suitable urban environment. The paper will go through the analysis of community involvement approaches, starting from a general overview of participatory approaches within the policy making process, investigating what community added value is in raising quality standards of urban transformations. Then the community participation in urban regeneration initiatives will be declined through two case studies analyzed in USA, highlighting the trend toward a mixed use of space under the general umbrella of Smart Growth principles.

3 COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT OVERVIEW

It is widely recognized the increasing importance of community involvement within planning processes. Participatory urban planning, charette meetings, workshops, laboratories de quartier: more or less cities have

been moving toward this direction since few decades. Then, “current trend toward multi-level governance has created important opportunities for increased community involvement and enhancing local democratic processes” (Bailey, 2010:6) through a wide range of methods used to make people involved within the planning and policy making processes. The reason is that local involvement should be guaranty of efficacy and sustainable initiatives, a chance of being able to create a built environment that satisfy community demands. Nevertheless, the “broad context of community involvement is highly contested” (Bailey, 2010: 13) according to different contexts and belonging to different scales. Arguing that the building of urban identities claim for well-structured civic contents (Talen, 2008 quoted by Vall Casas- Koschinsky- Mendoza, 2011:172), the importance of local community awareness about urban transformation objectives is expected to play a central role. “The results of local visioning/planning efforts are determined by both the preferences of residents and community needs” (Walzer–Hamm, 2010: 154). Moreover, Healey claims for a process of “inclusionary argumentation” in which “participants come together, build understanding and trust among themselves, and develop ownership of the strategy” (Healey, 1997:249).

In USA cities the term “livability” is frequent used: according to Bohl (2002) it “operates at the level of the everyday physical environment and focuses on place making”. Particularly, “within the livability arena are both the two-dimensional conceptual aspects emphasized by sustainable development (economy, ecology, and equity) and the three-dimensional aspects of public space, movement systems, and building design. (...) the livability vision expands the sustainability mix to include land use design aspects, ranging down to the micro scale of the block, street, and building, as well as up to the macro scale of the city, metropolis, and region”. (Godschalk, 2004:6). Smart Growth and New Urbanism could be considered the general umbrella to which the livability concept refers, since they advocate for participatory planning design and community involvement. To cope with sprawl indeed “the issue is not density, but design, the quality of place, its scale, mix and connections” (Calthorpe – Fulton, 2001:274), all topics that imply sense of place and people awareness of their neighborhood. In North American car-oriented urban contexts, the Smart Growth approach is particularly focused on bridging the gap between urban density and collective transportation. As a matter of facts, retrofitting inner urban brownfield spaces and declined neighbourhoods contributes to preserve urban density, both in economic and financial sense, as concentration of functions and productive activities, and in social sense as sense of community (Calthorpe, 2001). So that, urban areas lacking in mix use functions are often privileged places for retrofitting actions, assuming that “unsustainable urban form could turn into a sustainable place” (Talen, 2011). That is why community participation means reinforcing the possibility of success in regeneration initiatives since “patterns of everyday life not only are mediated in landscapes but are given new meaning as a result of the spontaneous interactions that occur between different people in these places” (Bachin, 2002: 236). Indeed “one of the recurring themes surrounding sustainable cities is the role of public participation and the broader civil society in helping to shape and implement these programs” (K.P Ortney, 2005:1)

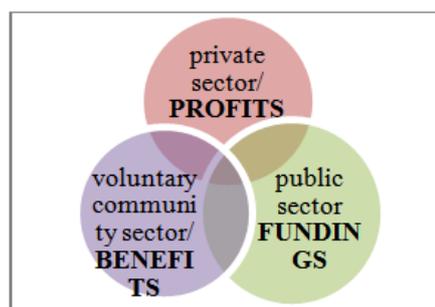


Fig. 1: the specific reasons for participation process in urban regeneration initiatives.

4 URBAN REGENERATION AND COMMUNITY ROLE IN US CITIES

A general trend of “retrofitting suburbia” is strongly pushing forward urban regeneration initiatives that involve people in order to cope with the lack of “sense of place” coming from the sprawl direction of the last decades. The so called “return to center” (Herzog, 2006) implies new way of considering urban space, integrated in functions and meaning to reach that kind of balance that allow to live a sustainable urban landscape. The mixed-use is often the answer, however it’s not just about densification, rather it claims for a compromise of weights that a urban environment should take into account.

Case Studies Based On Cluds' Model	Jacobs Market Street Village SAN DIEGO (CALIFORNIA)	Fort Point District BOSTON (MASSACHUSETTS)	Discussions
Brief Description of the case studies	The Jacobs market street village is envisioned as a vibrant community, residential, commercial, and cultural district. The case study is planned and operated by community stakeholders: the goal is to provide residents a direct economic stake in neighborhood change.	Fort Point district historically is a light-industry related area along the Fort Point Channel in South Boston, today it's a mixed use area. It is characterized by a strategic position within the city geography: along the Fort Point Channel, within the Boston Innovation District, a big Economic Development Area attracting enterprises and economies from all the Massachusetts.	The case studies, though located in two different contexts, are linked from Smart Growth Rationale, and balanced by a strong PublicPrivatePartnership with the goal to obtain a more equitable benefits distribution for the whole community.
The mixed use approach in urban regeneration projects	J'sMSV is a mixed use area. It was founded around a transit center, Market Street And Euclid Ave, belonging to the category of Transit Village. The core of the mixed use area is the transit station, redesigned as a public space, which has the important function of being a meeting place for the community, a place for special events. Briefly, JsMSV is a modern version of Greek agora (Bernick-Cervero, 1997:5), and the transit station is also considered the connection with the region.	The planning process is the core of this kind of public-private partnership: public management of private money to rich community advantages. In Fort Point, the urban regeneration is considered in its broad sense, since it involves economic aspects, such as job creations and tax revenues, increasing of property values and advantages location for companies, and also a new urban context vision, with an open spaces system of more than 11 acres pursuing a better quality of life for people who live and work there (affordable housing, sustainable policies).	The main output from case study comparison, is that a strong partnership between public and the private community – led, could generate mixed use of space. Urban contexts assuming a new meaning with the role of catalyst for business and social services, fostering higher quality standards of life.
The role of the communities in urban regeneration initiatives	The community has played a key role in the processes of urban regeneration, indeed the case study could be considered as "pilot case study" for community participation. JsMSV shows the ability of individuals to cooperate with the planning forces for a strategic Joint Action. The participative intention has been crucial for the area, once considered as "food desert": a strong social network, financial resources, adequate planning actions, safe neighborhoods perception, with schools and services, improved development of local resources. Local community in particular represents the real driver of change, under a strong dynamic network that crates a virtual bridge of exchange with other communities. In order to support "community leaders", workshop and <i>charette</i> meetings made people working together on common goals, involving residents under common visions, solving problems, and developping action plans. A shared decision-making process to create new opportunities, following a consensus based approach, made residents critical mass in drawing, implementing, and evaluating works, preserving the community identity.	In Fort Point district the participation process has been strongly pursued since the BRA main goal, with planning implementation, was to reach public benefits through private investments. The participatory planning process is particularly important from the beginning to the end of the master plan drawing: <i>charette</i> and meetings have been regularly done in order to share the urban regeneration attempt of Fort Point District with the local community and all the main stakeholders. The core strategy is the direct involvement of people, companies and landowners of Fort Point District: each of them participated in different ways to realize this initiative. People, cultural and artist associations, through their sensitiveness and their strong sense of belonging; companies through their know-how and financial capability; landowners through their sense of place; public authorities giving the legal framework to which refer, by preserving the existent but encouraging a medium- long term vision of what it could be.	The comparison shows: in urban regeneration projects the involvement of the community has been crucial for the final outcome; two peculiar approaches, in both technical and sociological terms. The technical approach, related with the charrette meeting tool, means to support "community leaders" to work together on common goals, with the challenge to create new opportunities and functions for the master plan implementation; the sociological one consists in to bringing new economic opportunities, improving quality of lifestyle by creating livable neighborhoods, walkable and friendly, with improved health, education and community safety environment.

Table 1: Case studies insights.

In US we can see as this trend is increasingly involving private actors within the planning process, shifting toward a decentralized planning system in which local actors and stakeholders play a crucial role. Frequently, private organizations and planning consultants are hired from public – private coalitions to shape the vision of the future development of cities, or redevelopment, while addressing choices toward a consensus- based approach (McCann, 2001). So that the product is a sort of collaborative planning process

through meetings in which community representatives and local actors have a proactive role in shaping urban development, often institutional places of political struggle to affirm a kind of urban growth instrumental to political choices. As suggested by McCann (2001) the increase in privatization due to the reduced economic resources is improving a sort of lack of accountability of planning services with a wider popular critique of bureaucracy “in favor of a rhetoric in bottom up policy making” so that “urban policy is increasingly left in the hands of corporate-supported organizations” (MacCann, 2001:209) while no profits keep growing. Their role is increasingly gaining the ground in guiding people toward a right lifestyle, since a livable neighborhood is becoming a health related issue. Pedestrian and friendly environments are desirable actions to be pursued in urban regeneration initiatives in most of US cities affected by sprawl phenomenon: community acknowledgement here is a key factor to gain higher standards of urban environment, since the consensus allows to implement those actions easily. In some cases community involvement does not refer to a specific project or master plan, rather it is a mean to sensitize people toward a particular health issue: they are made aware of risks and possibility to be considered with respect to sustainability in urban regeneration initiatives or about gaps to be filled in order to reach higher standards of quality of life.

Then, in suburban landscapes these actions assume the role of physical identity restoration by taking into account the importance of the sense of community (Calthorpe 1993, Calthorpe and Fulton 2001). The outcome is twofold: on one hand social and health related organizations give strength to the social component of the planning process, addressing people to consider the city as a place they have to care of; on the other hand the community participation, oriented from private actors, sometimes seems to be politically influenced toward a decision. Otherwise, studies about community participation show how the more a community is represented by people with high level of culture, with a personal perspective about their neighborhood, the less this kind of guide is determinant for the final outcomes. With respect to the issue they want to face, government acts directly by providing grants or incentives for specific health programs in which no profit organizations are mediators between public and private actors (stakeholders) to teach communities which kind of built environment they should pretend to live in. Particularly, these programs are strongly linked with the spatial outcome they look for, mostly oriented toward mixed-use neighborhoods, to cope with urban sprawl for example, less car oriented rather pedestrian and bicycle enhancers. Consequently, although physical solutions do not allow to solve social and economic problems of communities (Leccese&McCormick, 2000) a supportive urban framework could address the right way to cope with those issues. Moreover, Bachin (2002:237) suggests that “the physical spaces of neighborhood may both encourage and impede the formation of community connectedness and also how the process by which neighbors relate to the physical space around them has implications for their ability to transcend economic, racial, ethnic, class, or religious boundaries”. Generally the aim is to create more informed and engaged communities increasing the physical places where people can participate in and lead change following a inclusionary but also proactive approach.

5 CONCLUSION

David Harvey (1989:12) said that cities need to “keep ahead of the game [by] engendering leap-frogging innovations in life-styles, cultural forms, products, and service mixes... if they are to survive.” This was a radical change, since it is about lifestyle, not life referred just to environment or air pollutions.

Assuming that spatial transformations inexorably affect social behaviors and cultural values, drawing from evidences of urban low density area characterized by isolation and lack of sense of place, it could be stated that physical interaction among different functions, enhancing a mix of uses and a compact urban environment, improve the achievement of balance in urban contexts previously characterized by strongly separation of functions. Community involvement is about inclusiveness, as far as procedures, transparency, as far as government transactions, accountability of planners to the citizens they work for: to cope with socio-economic inequality, sharing information, giving accessibility to knowledge. Then, the participation process is a way to strengthen a sense of “belonging to” that has to be preserved and enhanced because “The sense of community is formed and sustained over shared resources” (Perdikogianni , 2007:3).

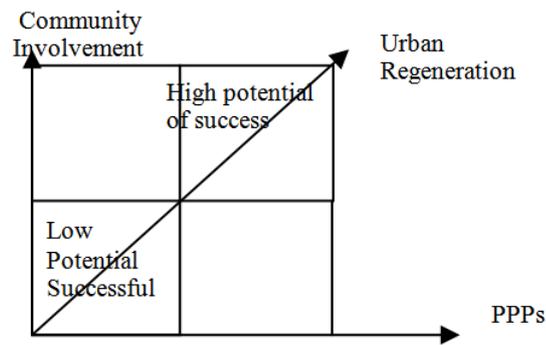


Fig. 2: Community involvement and Public-Private Partnerships relations in implementing successful urban regeneration initiatives.

Drawing from case study evidences we might suggest a strong connection between community planning and urban regeneration initiatives, both fostered by public-private partnerships, in many context the first box of the second one. PPPs act as facilitators for making process decision in urban planning process in general and in urban regeneration initiatives in particular. Within already developed areas, characterized by a blighted built environment, urban regeneration implies community involvement, stakeholders participation, to successful overcome their status of decay; as far as new development areas, community involvement within the policy making process could improve the efficacy of planning implementation, following a consensus based approach. Local experiences of this kind show an empirical relationship between people attachment to place and local economic growth. So that it can be stated that in those particular cases social involvement affects spatial dimension and economic development: urban functions once separated gain a mixing use meaning that allows having healthier urban environments and local economic development. Moreover, the more community are linked each others, under a common network, the more they generate a virtuous circle of positive values and knowledge sharing.

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