

Tapping Terrain Vague

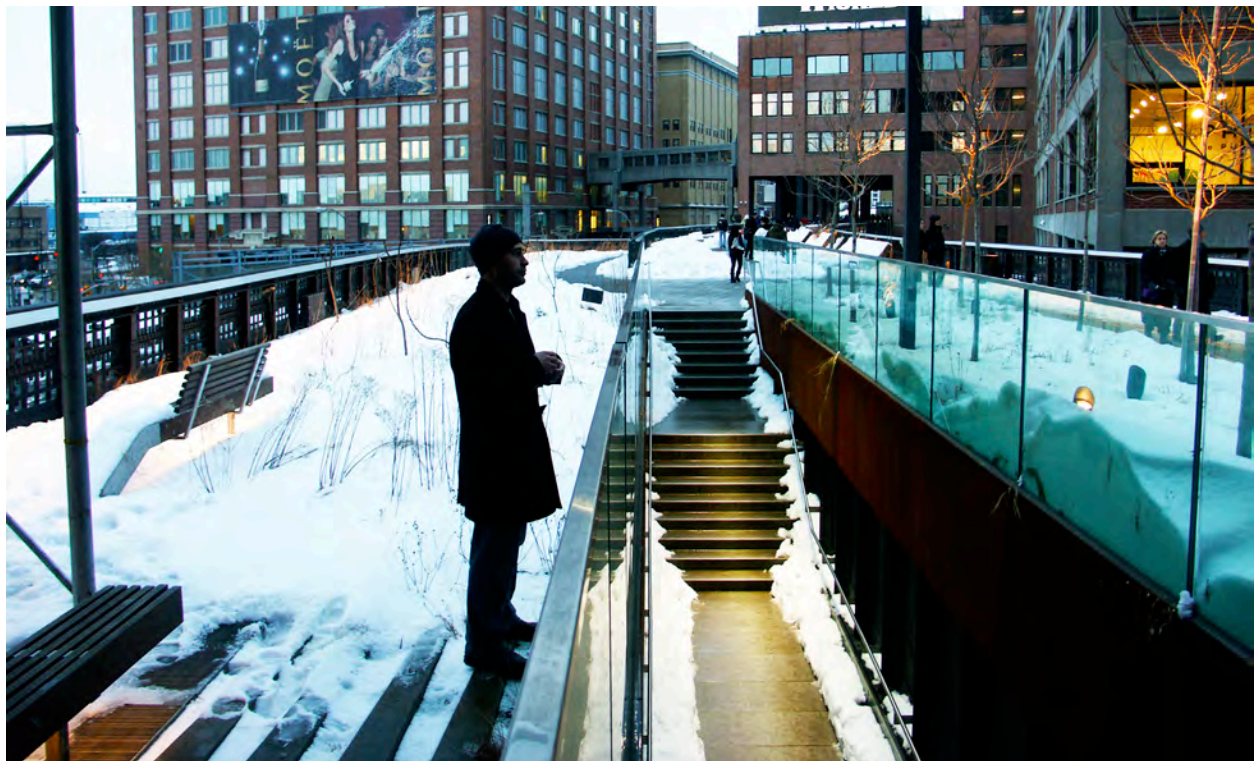
Evaluating Social Equity Issues in Green Open Space Planning for Deprived Neighborhoods

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Historically, impoverished and racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods have been underserved by recreational green open space (Campbell, 2003). This problem is further exacerbated by the growing disparities and fragmentation in cities during the height of Globalization (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000) and is evident in the post-industrial landscapes of our American cities. Landfills, former industrial manufacturing sites, infrastructure corridors, and abandoned or vacant land are all examples of what the late Spanish architect and critic Ignasi de Sola-Morales termed “terrain vague” (Berger, 2006). Terrain vague, or non-descript, in-between spaces are the result of waste in urban America, and only recently are these spaces being reutilized as a positive land use. Massive U.S. Federal Government spending on brownfield reclamation and the rise of rail-to-trails projects are two such examples. More specifically the Fresh Kills Lifescape on Staten Island, New York, designed by James Corner and his firm, Field Operations, is a large scale project that uses landscape as a medium to transform the world’s

largest landfill into an inhabitable green open space that provides natural habitat and recreation while combating environmental concerns. (Corner, 2005). Highlighting projects such as Fresh Kills helps describe recent physical planning and design interventions that seek to reconcile “wastescapes” (Berger, 2006) and the need for green open space that serves both a social and ecological function. However, can projects such as Fresh Kills seek to address the lack of green open space in economically deprived neighborhoods in America’s inner city? More broadly, what are the social equity implications of green open space planning and design and what are some of the possible solutions?

This article sets out to address these core questions in three parts. First, it will define social equity through the lens of physical open space planning in deprived neighborhoods. Then it will spell out several significant challenges planners focusing on physical planning and design face in creating appropriate green open space. Third, it will analyze and evaluate Landscape



New York City, New York Photo: Scott Curry

Urbanism, a contemporary landscape/planning paradigm, to see if it has the capacity to address social equity issues in green open space planning through embracing “terrain vague.” Throughout the paper, built project examples that aid in the understanding of the two paradigms will be incorporated. Finally, conclusions will be drawn that will serve two purposes: 1) to clarify the social equity implications and challenges of green open space planning; and 2) to evaluate an approach that couples “terrain vague” with the need for better open space in deprived neighborhoods.

Social Equity in Physical Planning Decision Making

One question at the root of our democracy is, how do we define what is fair? Our public open spaces are often reflective of our answer. (Thompson, 2002). Campbell (2003) views social equity as “striving towards a more equal distribution of resources among social groups across the space of cities and of nations.” He takes an equity of outcomes approach, which means that although outcomes may be unequal, they are not necessarily unfair (Steinmann et. al, 2005). Fainstein shares this viewpoint (2003) in describing her “Just City” model of planning theory. She calls for a model of growth with equity that values the democratic participation of citizens, especially those that possess little power or influence. She postulates that a strong middle-class majority is crucial to forming public policy debate because middle-class aspirations are most likely to persevere in normative democracy decision-making processes. This, she implies, will balance the needs of the poor and the wealthy (2003). Obtaining equity of outcomes is a relevant way to view social equity issues in physical planning decisions because it demands that open space for recreation be accessible and usable to everyone in society.

With specific regard to social equity and physical planning and design, cultural sociologist David Harvey (1996) offers this warning: the challenge to designers and planners is not simply a challenge of spatial form, which both Modernist and New Urbanist paradigms posit, but rather a “more socially just, politically emancipatory mix of spatio-temporal production processes...” Basically, the physical planner must simultaneously factor spatial form, social implications, and political power aspects into her decision making process. In this way, it is difficult for physical planners to balance what they can and cannot achieve in social terms. On one hand, if a physical planner becomes too proscriptive in designing the outcomes of social

objectives she may be accused of “social engineering.” On the other hand, if she fails to acknowledge the impact of her decision on the social objectives she may be accused of being “ignorant” in a way that is analogous to 1960s Urban Renewal planners (Talen, 2002).

Finally, the ethical guidelines in the American Institute of City Planners (AICP) Code of Ethics help delineate the planner’s duty in addressing social equity issues:

We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs (AICP:A,1,f; 2005).

This guideline, which largely stems from the influential work and writing of former City of Cleveland Planning Chief, Norman Krumholtz, urges planners to plan for those who have the least voice in society. Taken together these main equity points form a rubric for evaluating open space decisions in terms of social equity. They suggest equal resource distribution and community empowerment – both of which are apt qualities for tackling green open space inequities in deprived neighborhoods. They also highlight the social limits of physical planning and the ethical demands of the planning profession. How do these challenges manifest themselves in reality? What is the relation between open space planning and gentrification, exclusion, and safety?

Three Tensions in Physical Open Space Planning

Tensions exist between social equity issues and the resulting physical planning efforts that seek to remediate those concerns. Green open space planning, in particular, has three central tensions: gentrification, exclusion, and safety. Parks can infuse life back into a

neighborhood, but they can also be the impetus behind gentrification. They can be designed for one particular type of need or person while excluding others. They can also restrict certain

types of behavior that one group deems “inappropriate,” but that another groups feels is perfectly acceptable such as skateboarding or loud music (Ward -Thompson, 2002). Underlying all three of these tensions is that parks disproportionately exist in higher income areas.

One example that highlights several of these tensions is the High Line Park, which opened in Manhattan’s trendy Chelsea neighborhood to much popular praise and

“The main promise of the [landscape urbanism] movement is its ability to embrace the post-industrial conditions of inner-city landscapes...”

academic acclaim. In its previous life, the High Line was an elevated railway on Manhattan's Lower Westside that paralleled the Hudson River from Gansevoort Street to 30th Street. The line was abandoned in 1980. In 1999 a grassroots, citizen-led initiative named "Friends of the Highline," envisioned turning the defunct elevated rail line into a post-industrial "midair oasis" featuring a vegetated recreational pedestrian path constructed over the railroad (Ouroussoff, 2009). A decade after the plan's inception, the park is, on one level, a welcomed green space intervention for public use in an area underserved by green space; and, on another level, a major statement about the future of recreational and ecological green space design in post-industrial America.

However, the park raises significant social equity issues regarding gentrification and exclusion. First, it drastically increased surrounding property values, and was the impetus behind a rapid increase in speculative development schemes that, at times, conflicted with the neighborhood's residents (Ouroussoff, 2009). It is important to note that Chelsea was already a gentrifying area of the city, and this project put the process in hyper-drive. Also, the park project demanded a huge amount of time and money from private and public entities (Friends of the High Line, n.d.). The opportunity cost of this new park is the loss of fundraising resources available to green open space planning initiatives in economically deprived.

Another example that highlights the tension within physical open space planning is a personal account of the McKinley Beach Parking Lot in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The lot is bounded by the shoreline of Lake Michigan on one side and the Lakefront bicycle path on the other. On most warm summer nights large groups of African-American teenagers congregate with their cars and listen to very loud hip-hop music. At times, the group of people obstructs the right-of-way on the path causing some legitimate safety concerns. However, for the most part, the teens do not affect the safety of path users. Nevertheless, many evening joggers, cyclists, and walkers, who are mostly white young professionals, have expressed concerns over feeling intimidated, harassed or inconvenienced by the informal group gatherings. While these concerns have stopped people from using the path after dark, there have been very little reports of crime or misconduct by the teenage gathering. This example highlights the tension between what different groups deem as "appropriate" use of space. Since this issue arose in 2006, police now regulate the noise and size of the informal gathering of teenagers, and the adjacent beach (Bradford) has been substantially upgraded to serve sunbathers, beach volleyball players, and rock music fans, which are mainly groups of affluent white people.

These examples are just two instances of many that illustrate the tensions in open space planning. Campbell

(2003) states that these "conflicts" – both the property and development conflict (see Figure One) – need to be addressed by planners with farsighted thinking, effective conflict negotiation, and land-use planning expertise. In his conceptual triangle of conflicting goals for planning, Campbell (2003) posits that sustainable development operates at the center ("the balance") between social equity, environmental protection, and economic development. In this light, he emphasizes that sustainability is hard to reach, and requires planners to "act as a translator" by assisting and reasoning with various entities in order to communicate disparate goals (2003). Campbell views the planner's position as the interdisciplinary linchpin that can build consensus and focus efforts on the big picture. Working within this conceptual framework, there is one contemporary planning and design movement that seeks to bridge the gap between Campbell's three priorities in order to address sustainable development: the emerging Landscape Urbanism Movement.

Figure One
Campbell's Planner's Triangle (2003)

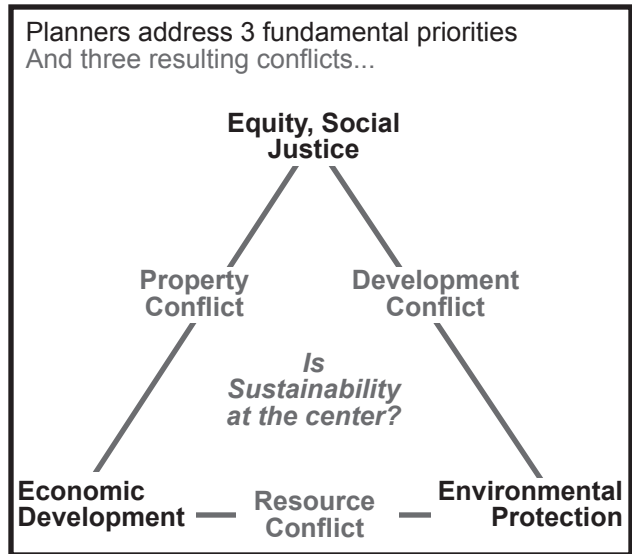


Figure 1 - The triangle of conflicting goals for planning, and the three associated conflicts. Planners define themselves, implicitly, by where they stand on the triangle. The elusive ideal of sustainable development leads one to the center.

Evaluating An Approach to Open Space Planning for Deprived Neighborhoods

The emerging Landscape Urbanism Movement presents a potential framework for addressing green open space and recreational landscapes in post-industrial contexts within deprived inner cities. The movement works within Campbell's triangle, as it is a multidisciplinary design movement that primarily seeks to address environmental

and economic issues. Guided by two key academic landscape architects, James Corner of the University of Pennsylvania and Charles Waldheim of Harvard, the movement largely stems from the traditional mold of landscape architecture, but also transcends the limits of that profession by refocusing on a broader spectrum of issues facing the built environment. Corner (2006) contends that the movement is a “more promising, more radical, and a more creative form of practice than that defined by rigid disciplinary categorizations.” Constructing an essential list of Landscape Urbanism’s main characteristics is difficult because it consists of a broad spectrum of fields including ecology, engineering, landscape design, urban planning/design, and social policy. However, one guiding rule is supreme: *landscape (not architecture) is the primary element of urban order* (Waldheim, 2006, emphasis added). In this light, the movement is guided by three distinct tenets: the combinations of urban processes, the staging of horizontal surfaces, and the speculative, imaginary vision (Corner, 2006).

The movement is concerned with the merging of landscape and built form. Corner (2006) explains: “... urban infrastructure sows the seeds of future possibility, staging the ground for both uncertainty and promise... emphasizing means over ends and operational logic over compositional design.” In this way, landscape’s potential is fully realized as an open-ended system that can rapidly adapt to change. As people (or other animals) shift from one locale to another, the surface trajectory shifts to record and re-record a variety of cultural and environmental events. This shift demands a withdrawal from permanent object constructs towards “a choreography of elements and materials in time that extend new networks, new linkages, and new opportunities” (Corner, 2006).

Given Landscape Urbanism’s focus on the inter-relation of processes over time, it should consider addressing social equity goals more directly to avoid becoming a one-sided approach to addressing urban issues – as Harvey (1996) warned. The movement exploits “terrain vague,” which exists as a prominent spatial attribute in deprived and fragmented neighborhoods, by tapping the latent energy within abandoned, in-between spaces. The main promise of the movement is its ability to embrace the post-industrial conditions of inner-city landscapes through the creation of a dynamic landscape that is malleable by different systems and user-inputs.

For example, one recent project, which is still in the early stages of planning, is Chicago’s Bloomingdale Line. This project shows the potential Landscape Urbanism has to address social equity concerns in physical open space planning. Similar to the High Line in Manhattan, which is also cited as an example of Landscape Urbanism, the Bloomingdale Line is an abandoned elevated rail line seeking a transformation into a public greenway

(Greenfield, 2009, August 12). However, the Bloomingdale Line illustrates how Landscape Urbanism can operate more soundly within “the balance” of Campbell’s triangle to address issues of social equity (2003). The 2.5 mile elevated rail exists within an ethnic enclave that greatly lacks open space and is politically marginalized (Chicago Planning Commission, 2004). The planning and design vision for this project has the forethought demanded by Campbell (2003). Its implementation, which requires collaborative participation between professionals and local residents, demonstrates the planner’s role in consensus building between different groups — especially those that don’t have a large voice or political clout. In examples such as this, Landscape Urbanism can truly embrace its poly-professional status and reach beyond the knowledge limits of its landscape architecture origins to answer its goal of “offering coherent, competent, and convincing explanations of contemporary urban conditions” (Waldheim 2006).

The Future of Socially Equitable Open Space Planning

This paper establishes a baseline from which to evaluate socially equitable physical open space planning decisions by fusing together Fainstein’s Just City Model with Campbell’s Planner Triangle and AICP’s Code of Ethics. The paper defined social equity as the fair allocation of resource distribution, and it outlined the central challenges in socially equitable open space planning: gentrification, exclusion, and safety. Lastly, it evaluated Landscape Urbanism and identified it as one approach that has potential to balance the tensions that exist between social equity and physical planning and design. Due to its infancy and origin, the movement is still in need of a clear operative strategy to tackle the large, complex projects it seeks to complete (Corner, 2006). As the movement matures, it needs to develop a clear social tenet that addresses Fainstein’s Just City Model and AICP’s ethic rules. Through these means, Landscape Urbanism can truly embrace its poly-professional status and reach beyond the knowledge limits of its landscape architecture origins to answer its goal of “offering coherent, competent, and convincing explanations of contemporary urban conditions” (Waldheim 2006).

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