

Making the Middle:

Planning to Create Socially and Economically Vibrant Middle-Class Communities

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ABSTRACT

Making the Middle acknowledges trends toward greater inequality within the United States (US) and makes a case for expanding middle-class communities through the tactics available to planners. Equity, deliberative, and actuarial planning theory advocates for operational frameworks planners can employ to help foster and expand socially and economically vibrant middle-class communities. Growing class stratification within the US provides a rationale for the importance of a socially and economically vibrant middle class. Social and economic vibrancy, and the ability of middle-class communities to create such environments, is defined through the incisive lens of Jane Jacobs. By connecting theoretical frames of equity, deliberative, and actuarial planning, planners can foster and grow middle-class communities.

Since the 1970s, class stratification in the US has grown.¹ Wages for the upper class have grown sharply, whereas middle- and lower-class wages have stagnated.² The class stratification has resulted in a disproportionate increase in the size of the lower class compared to the upper class, and a subsequent squeezing of the middle class. As the lower class grows, fewer citizens can access the services and opportunities that enable them to achieve better lives for themselves and their families. As Michael Lens and Paavo Monkkonen state, “These facts contribute to several social problems, including fractured politics and the concentration of negative outcomes in health, employment, education, and public safety.”³ Given the importance of access to services for promoting positive life outcomes, urban planners should focus on creating a broader middle class that can provide positive outcomes for as many Americans as possible.⁴

Many planners have wrangled with urban issues, attempting to create a more perfect world. Though the primary intention of these planners has not always been to strengthen the middle class, their

solutions often seek to reduce disparities between social classes and increase access to opportunity. Early city designs, like Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City, were rooted in the effort to create not only livable, healthy cities connected to local environments, but also communities that provided residents access to economic and social opportunity. These designs may not have always proved successful, but they emerged from an egalitarian social spirit. To address the problem of growing class stratification as it affects opportunity, planners should combine ideas from several theoretical frameworks to create vibrant communities that are economically and socially accessible for the many.

In this article, I focus particularly on the ideas of Jane Jacobs to define what makes socially and economically vibrant communities. I demonstrate how middle-class communities are able to create economic and social vibrancy by drawing on relevant economic theory and social studies. Then I borrow from Patsy Healey, Norman Krumholz, and Ash Amin to inform planners how to create communities that are equitable and promote social and economic vibrancy. By linking these ideas,

I contend that in order to grow socially and economically vibrant middle-class communities, planners should engage in equity, deliberative, and actuarial planning.

WHAT ARE SOCIALLY VIBRANT MIDDLE-CLASS COMMUNITIES?

Social vibrancy is more easily felt than described, but it is embodied by communities who have robust social interaction through the everyday movement of people, goods, and services. Vibrancy is crucial in creating broad middle-class communities. It attracts middle-class people to join communities, thereby increasing their overall size and share of the population. Jane Jacobs' catalogue of social interactions shows that vibrant communities provide each other constant mutual support through a diversity of human-driven social uses. Socially, Jacobs saw this vibrancy manifest itself as a "sidewalk ballet" in which a necessary mix of uses creates an active life on the street. This sidewalk ballet provides opportunities for interaction, trust-building, and many "eyes on the street" at one time, ultimately creating a sense of safety and liveliness in communities. Similarly, Jacobs asserts that this vibrancy does not exist to the same degree in economically and socially stressed communities because continuous tenant turnover prevents residents from getting to know one another and build trust. Conversely, upper-class neighborhoods lack needed community surveillance, which discourages use of the street.⁵

Eyes on the street provide the community security necessary for street life to thrive in middle-class areas and "unslumming"

neighborhoods, which are economically and socially stressed communities moving toward the middle class. In middle-class and unslumming neighborhoods, this vibrancy exists through the diverse arrays of social and economic uses within these communities.⁶ Reinforcing this vibrancy and diverse use, middle-class and unslumming neighborhoods are also hotbeds for "community provincialism," which Jacobs defines as the positive effects neighborhood diversification has on education, skills, interests, activities, and relationships.⁷

Though Jacobs is notably silent on racial diversity, a diversity of racial and ethnic communities within middle-class neighborhoods increases vibrancy as well. With a diversity of backgrounds within a place, communities better attract an array of residents because people tend to move to areas containing communities similar to their own.⁸ Middle- and burgeoning middle-class neighborhoods are places where "people are accommodated and assimilated, not in undigestible floods, but as gradual additions, in neighborhoods capable of accepting and handling strangers in a civilized fashion."⁹ Racial and ethnic diversity also encourages a greater mix of uses for the street, adding to the street ballet. Middle-class communities create these opportunities because there are fewer economic barriers to entry. As Harrison Salisbury notes, "Segregation is imposed . . . by the sharp knife of income or lack of income. What this does to the social fabric of the community must be witnessed to be appreciated."¹⁰ Reducing barriers to entry and incorporating diverse communities promotes greater economic and social diversity of community use, increasing vibrancy.

WHAT ARE ECONOMICALLY VIBRANT MIDDLE-CLASS COMMUNITIES?

Social vibrancy does not exist in a vacuum; strong economic support in the form of community investment is essential to help middle- and burgeoning middle-class communities thrive. Communities investing in and taking ownership of themselves is a hallmark of vibrancy, yet markets and governments are not always willing or able to make the neighborhood investments necessary to maintain that vibrancy. As Jacobs observed, vibrant middle-class communities and unslumming neighborhoods invest in themselves. This investment becomes evident as communities decrease in density and population but do not seek new tenants. This process signals that community members can afford increased living space and depend less on new tenants to buoy their economic viability. Community investment is also visible when communities make capital improvements to homes and businesses, showing tangible local reinvestment. This investment brings a greater diversity of residents, businesses, and uses of space that better support vibrant life on the street. Community investment increases the uses of the street through self-diversification and broad patronage of local business. "Self-diversification of a population is reflected in the diversification of commercial and cultural enterprises. Diversification of income alone makes a difference in the range of possible commercial diversification, often in the humblest of ways."¹¹ Community investment brings a greater diversity of residents, businesses, and uses of space that better support vibrant life on the street.

Community investment is most prevalent in middle-class communities because less-wealthy communities lack the capital to invest in themselves and because upwardly mobile residents of poorer communities generally seek to move out of these neighborhoods.¹² Conversely, though upper-class neighborhoods have the funds and do invest in capital improvements, their neighborhoods price out the self-diversification of economic uses within the neighborhood through high land and business operation costs. Increasing the unit price of goods and services accounts for these costs, which, in turn, reduces the number of consumers willing to pay market price for those goods and services. Restricting the consumer base willing to pay high market prices creates the need for those consumers to purchase these services elsewhere, highlighting a flaw in the vibrancy of these neighborhoods. Indeed, wealthier neighborhoods generally have more businesses that primarily sell luxury items. Luxury goods are inherently not for everyday use, nor are they intended to attract a broad consumer base as consumers purchase more of these goods only as their incomes increase.¹³ The lack of diversity in businesses that cater to everyday uses reduces economic diversity and life on the street.

HOW DO MIDDLE-CLASS COMMUNITIES CREATE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL VIBRANCY?

Before discussing how middle-class communities create economic and social vibrancy, it is important to identify some of the forces responsible for creating class separation. Municipalities are incentivized to cater to households with similar tax and

spending preferences. A municipality's ability to provide the lowest-cost, highest-quality public services depends upon its ability to distribute its tax burden among the smallest number of people. Spreading the tax burden that pays for municipal services over a smaller population allows municipalities to ensure that municipal services are lightly used and that service provision costs are met. This reduces the per-person cost of service provision and improves the quality of service each resident receives. To create this equal tax burden, municipalities are incentivized to use the land-use controls available to attract wealthier residents and create residential economic homogeneity.¹⁴ Land-use controls established by local governments, such as zoning and density restrictions, have been shown to concentrate wealth.¹⁵ This wealth concentration impacts poorer communities by creating societal inequity; "spatial concentrations of poverty and wealth lead to unequal access to jobs, schools, and safe neighborhoods, and exacerbate negative life outcomes for low-income households."¹⁶

By existing in the middle of the socioeconomic spectrum, middle-class communities allow for greater market variety, which reinforces community social fabric. This variety allows poorer residents to afford to live in middle-class communities while providing wealthier residents adequate service provision and a wider range of consumer options. Additionally, middle-class communities contribute to the creation of economically vibrant communities by reducing human separation. Economists say that such separation "reinforces differences and prejudices; animosities thus grow, and economies are likely to decline rather than grow. Income inequalities may also reduce

consumption, and therefore effective demand and economic growth."¹⁷ Finally, middle-class communities have been shown to promote democracy, a system that American politicians and community leaders often romanticize as the very idea of what it means to be American.¹⁸ Indeed, the tenets of pure democracy help create socially vibrant communities, where the people determine community norms, standards, and rules regardless of class, creed, or race. It is the economic and social vibrancy created through market productivity and community-scale democracy that transfixed Jane Jacobs, leading her to describe the street ballet on display outside her living room window.

HOW CAN PLANNING STRATEGIES FOSTER MIDDLE-CLASS COMMUNITIES?

In order to create broader middle-class communities, planners should borrow from a variety of strategies that prioritize disenfranchised views, allow for the community to provide input in planning processes, respect the expertise of planners to appropriately assess long-term risk for their communities, and defend these three positions within the political arena.

Expanding the middle class within the current US reality of a disproportionately increasing lower class and class stratification will require planners to represent disenfranchised voices within their communities. Norman Krumholz's planning departmental goal, "to provide a wider range of choices for those . . . residents who have few, if any, choices," speaks directly to this need to lift up the values of disenfranchised communities.¹⁹ In Krumholz's view, the job of city planners is

to create opportunity for city residents while finding revenue-increasing opportunities for the city. For example, after reviewing Cleveland's Tower City development proposal, Krumholz's department "concluded that the city had little to gain from Tower City . . . and the developer was not offering any permanent jobs for the city's unemployed."²⁰ In order to strengthen the middle class, the planner must push public decision makers to act on recommendations that create both revenue and new workforce opportunities. This position seeks to create social and economic mobility for the city's most vulnerable residents and continue progress for those unslumming communities described by Jacobs. Krumholz's tactics for equity planning can teach planners how to build robust middle-class communities by addressing poverty, lack of access to city services, and segregation, which he calls "the root causes of crisis in many American cities."²¹ Equity planning aims to reduce inter-class stratification and benefit the most vulnerable residents, while building a broader resident and business tax base, benefitting the city.

Integral to approaches of equity planning are strategies that allow citizens to provide input into the planning process through deliberative planning. Patsy Healey explains a key component of the planning project as "an approach to deliberate place management and development that is infused with a specific orientation or philosophy."²² It is important that this deliberation happen with different community stakeholders because they all have an interest in the development and management of their communities. This interest, involvement, and pressure from community stakeholders mean that planning is inherently a political

exercise.²³ As planning is political and equity planning seeks to represent the city's most vulnerable populations, it is necessary to garner community input and build coalitions to move forward a planning agenda. By building coalitions, planners can mobilize agendas, creating action that improves communities for the greatest proportion of residents, and the lower and middle classes.²⁴

Healey exhibits the power of deliberative planning to improve lower- and middle-class communities in an environmental justice case study from Williamsburg, New York. "What [residents] often lack, especially in poor, ethnically mixed communities, is 'voice,' the capacity to make their concerns heard in the wider world."²⁵ In this case, getting heard was the result of several factors, of which two were coalition building with those diverse, poor communities and linking those coalitions with subject matter experts who could effectively advocate within the existing political hierarchy. By maintaining focus on the city's disenfranchised population and building broad coalitions, planners can better move agendas that create and protect middle-class communities, increasing community vibrancy and city revenue.

In spite of coalition-building efforts, planners may sometimes be at odds with their community. Communities have frequently tried to limit the integration of perceived undesirable groups through racial and economic discrimination. Under these circumstances, deliberative planning methods may hinder a planner's ability to expand the middle class. Instead, advocacy planning provides a strong framework to correct for discriminatory forces, promote the benefits of middle-class communities, and build common

understanding of the costs of maintaining barriers to entry. Important in building common understanding of these benefits and costs will be to recognize and debunk community biases hindering the creation of an inclusive middle-class community.²⁶ Under isolationist circumstances and in discriminatory environments, advocacy planning can also aid planners in building coalitions through value propositions and a uniform understanding of the issues at hand. This, in turn, will help planners return to the deliberative planning position imperative for creating a broad middle class.

Though coalition building through deliberative planning is paramount, planners must also practice risk assessment, or actuarial planning. This planning strategy assesses community risk and maps alternative visions of the future that maintain vibrancy and opportunity. Planners must use their unique expertise, showing community members their intentions and building coalitions around the visions of the future that benefit equitable communities. Actuarial planning thus “requires a particular kind of leadership that knows when expert judgement and deliberative democracy must be combined or traded off.”²⁷ Actuarial planning strategies may seem at odds with deliberative planning strategies, but in order to build vibrant communities, both are needed. Planners have expertise that can benefit their communities through development of broadly beneficial future visions of their community and skill analyzing community costs and benefits from development. The Williamsburg, New York case study shows the power of this expertise on community issues where linking environmental experts with community coalitions strengthened the health and wellbeing of a lower- and

middle-class community.²⁸ Kromholz’s Tower City case shows how planning expertise was integral in uncovering how a seemingly attractive development might not benefit the city or its residents in need of employment.²⁹ By combining equity planning with deliberative and actuarial planning strategies, planners can make their future community visions actionable for legislators, in turn creating the social and economic mobility necessary to create vibrant broad middle-class communities.

If planners are to effectively combine strategies of equity, deliberative, and actuarial planning, they must not shy away from defending these strategies in the political arena. With adequate institutional and expert-driven support, planners have the tools and opportunity to step into public advocacy roles. Krumholz stated that he liked his planners to be political because planning is an inherently political process, and defense of planning strategies within the political arena urges legislators toward action.³⁰ Should planners combine these three strategies with the goal of creating vibrant middle-class communities, the same will hold true; they must be effective advocates for their future visions within the political arena. By doing so, planners will better provide concrete rationales and political support that decision makers can use to implement their plans and create broad, vibrant middle-class communities that benefit the city and its residents.

CONCLUSION

To provide the solutions needed to grow socially and economically vibrant middle-class communities within US cities, planners will need to engage in equity-focused, deliberative, and actuarial planning. Growing class stratification has created

problems in our society that can be eased through the creation of broad middle-class communities. Socially and economically vibrant communities, like those Jane Jacobs describes, have tangible benefits for residents and the cities where these communities lie. To realize these benefits, planners should use the equity, deliberative, and actuarial strategies outlined above to push towards a vibrant vision of the future. ■

ENDNOTES

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