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Ten Urban Design Strategies for Fostering Equity and Inclusion in Mixed-Income Neighborhoods

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Design for social diversity is challenging because it asks urban dwellers to use place as a connector rather than a divider. Residents of diverse neighborhoods—where diversity is based on income, race, or ethnicity—are being asked to reverse the usual association between place and difference, where attention to one has meant delimiting the other. They are being encouraged to have a heightened sense of place and, at the same time, have a more relaxed attitude about difference. They are being enlisted as active participants in a broader societal objective that seeks equity and inclusion in our neighborhoods—the opposite of what the American pattern of settlement has usually been about.

In highly diverse areas, there are special challenges to forming a unified vision of what the neighborhood should be and how it should grow. Social diversity is often fragile and sensitive to context. This makes public participation even more essential, since the ability to take control of neighborhood change may very well be the best strategy for sustaining diversity. Diverse neighborhoods already have to work through social mix on a daily basis. It seems that planners could, at a minimum, ensure that there is a process in place for dealing with conflicts over issues having to do with the design and use of space.

The Importance of Design

The design of a built environment affects the accessibility, interactions, movements, identity, mix, and security of people who live there. Design is especially important for mixed-income neighborhoods,[1] for several reasons:

- Mixed-income neighborhoods face the added challenge of trying to accommodate residents with varied needs, tastes, and backgrounds. This diversity can accentuate the meaning and implications of physical design: boundaries can take on special significance, connectivity can clash with a heightened need for privacy, and visual coherence can conflict with diverse tastes and styles. The differences among residents may cause some to be suspicious of others, so design needs to be a positive aspect of neighborhood life—not an added stress point. And to the degree that mixed-income

[1] Emily Talen and Sungduck Lee, *Design for Social Diversity*. (London: Routledge, 2018).

neighborhoods also are mixed-race neighborhoods, intentionality about design is needed to ensure neighborhood success.

- Many physical transitions tend to occur in diverse neighborhoods, as different kinds of people do different kinds of things. For example, a single block may include single-family homes, apartments over stores, group homes (e.g., senior housing), and uses that vary from schools to car repair shops. The variation in activities is likely to require variation in building types and styles, as well as the type and quality of spaces and uses. Without some element of design coherence in which the built environment supports rather than degrades the public realm, and where diverse uses and building types are integrated way rather than chaotic, this variation can be a source of stress.
- Because diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods often are subject to targeted policies such as rent control, tax relief, zoning changes, or regulations on new developments, design is needed to ensure that the policies are both positive for neighborhood residents and sensitive to design variation.
- Design can help focus residents' attention on the public realm, which includes not only obvious spaces such as parks and playgrounds but also public land that weaves through every neighborhood, including sidewalks and crosswalks, bus stops, and plazas. In diverse places, high-quality public spaces can serve as the glue that holds a population together, helping residents think about their similarities and connections rather than their differences and conflicts.
- The absence of attention to the design of public and private places can create a stressful, chaotic neighborhood. This is not about instilling extreme order and homogenization—it is about finding the right balance between design quality and random chaos.
- Design affects the quality and means of social connection. For example, a neighborhood that is walkable and pedestrian-oriented tends to include public spaces that support casual or spontaneous interactions, and more social interaction might lead to a greater sense of community, social capital, and collective efficacy—effects that are especially important in mixed-income areas.

Design is not the sole means for balancing the complexities of mixed-income and mixed-race neighborhoods; it would be wrong to expect design to do too much. But in the United States, the strategy of leveraging design to promote social diversity, equity, and inclusion has been underplayed. This caution is no doubt driven by the fact that physical design has been cast as a cure-all throughout planning history. And yet, the failure to articulate the urban design needs and requirements of mixed-income neighborhoods seems like a missed opportunity. To address that gap, this essay highlights 10 specific design strategies, specific to diverse neighborhoods that can be used to foster equity and inclusion in mixed-income (and mixed-race) neighborhoods.

Ten Urban Design Strategies for Mixed-Income Neighborhoods

The following design strategies can be calibrated for use in a variety of neighborhood settings and densities, including in some non-diverse contexts. However, the strategies take on special import—indeed, are imperative— in neighborhoods that are trying to achieve or sustain a diverse, mixed-income population.

1. Housing Type Mix. A mixture of housing types, sizes, and tenures, both single-family and multi-family, ensures that social mobility does not require geographic mobility by providing opportunities for residents to change their housing "in place." (A mix of housing ages is important, too, since older units often are more affordable than new ones.) The concept of housing mix steers us away from the idea that neighborhoods represent monocultural reflections of social standing and toward the idea that diverse neighborhoods need to provide multiple living options.

To support a mixture of housing types, diverse neighborhoods need zoning codes that focus less on buildings' uses than on how buildings fit together to form a coherent streetscape. This orientation, known as "form-based" coding, encapsulates an approach to zoning reform that, although it applies to many of the design strategies discussed below, directly affects the flexibility needed to mix housing types. Such codes go beyond simple floor area ratios (FARs) and unit sizes to regulate factors such as buildings' height, location on a lot, and parking. Focusing on how buildings can be regulated to provide coherency and a well-designed public realm reduces the focus on use singularity and encourages use diversity. Codes should allow a range of options for blocks to accommodate multiple housing types and for buildings to house multiple uses (e.g., residential, lodging, office or retail spaces).

2. Multi-family Units in Single-family blocks. Form-based codes can help ensure that new housing is compatible with existing neighborhood character. Neighborhoods that have been only single-family should allow the addition of multi-family housing, but in a way that is compatible with and respects the character of the single-family housing neighborhood. Numerous examples of successfully integrated housing types exist, often with stately apartment buildings on corner intersections and single-family housing in between. Or, new multi-family housing can easily take on the basic typology of the preexisting single-family housing.

3. Courtyards, Closes, and Other Forgotten Housing Types. Mixed-income neighborhoods should make ample use of innovations in housing type, including multi-family arrangements that accommodate diverse housing needs, such as small housing units that provide options for low- to moderate-income households as well as additional rental income for existing property owners. Small units include accessory apartments, micro-units, or "granny flats." Courtyard housing and closes (i.e., short looped streets with housing around them) are especially appropriate for integrating smaller housing types into an existing neighborhood. (Housing-type integration was important to early 20th century planners, who were skilled at fitting in attached

row houses amongst single-family housing.) And, if small-unit infill is encouraged in neighborhoods near public transit, parking will be less of an issue and existing residents might be less resistant.

4. Linkages between Different Housing Types. Transition spaces, the areas between different housing types, should be designed purposefully for active use and to form a visual link from one type to another. Vacant lots and other under-utilized spaces, or the juxtaposition of different housing types without transitions or a sense of context, can awkwardly accentuate the differences. The appropriate design strategy is to pay attention to the publicly owned land in such areas. For example, transitional open areas can be designed as pocket parks, and streets can be designed as connecting spaces. "Woonerfs"—streets intended to be shared by cars, bicycles, and people—are particularly useful design elements in neighborhoods with mixed housing types.

5. Fitting in Small Businesses. Diverse people need diverse businesses. The business diversity required likely is not in the form of "town centers" or mega-developments but locally owned small businesses which in a mixed-income, mixed-race community would, in turn, encourage business and service diversity. Small, independent businesses in diverse areas need to be protected and nurtured, and new small business growth encouraged. In design terms, this means encouraging building-type and architectural variety, which might require some degree of design control. The key is to find the right balance between design coherence and design variety by aligning building frontages, limiting blank walls, and ensuring building transparency (i.e., windows). Another strategy is to find places to fit in small businesses—for example, adjacent to alleys and near existing commercial buildings. Encouraging live/work units, artists' lofts, and light manufacturing in the underutilized land adjacent to major transportation corridors may help small businesses and entrepreneurs gain a foothold (or retain their presence) in a diverse community. Such places can function as low-rent business incubators. Urban design can play a role in fitting these varied uses together in a coherent way.

6. Neighborhood Identity Space. To counteract disparate residents' impulse to wall off and separate from each other, mixed-income neighborhoods need a strong, shared neighborhood identity. Public spaces, images, symbols, and landmarks provide a way to bind people together around a shared identity. Often, however, a diverse neighborhood has no centralized, accessible space. In this case, designers should ascertain the places where a diverse cross-section of the population crosses paths—perhaps at the geographic center of the neighborhood—and create a plaza or other public space there to foster neighborhood identity.

7. Streets as Social Seams. Strategies that use streets to enhance neighbors' social connections are based on the observations that: (a) the built environment can constrain or promote passive contact, (b) social interaction may ultimately be tied to the amount of passive contact that occurs, and (c) human interaction at the neighborhood scale is a pedestrian phenomenon. These observations suggest that streets are good social connectors, if designed for

that purpose—and that it is useful to view a streetscape as a habitable space rather than as a conduit simply for moving cars.

Using streets as "social seams" can be as simple as delineating safe places to cross existing streets, calming traffic down on busy streets, or instituting better pedestrian pathways. If streets can be conceptualized as a form of public space, they can act as linkages between otherwise separated places. However, overly busy thoroughfares—streets with six lanes of traffic buzzing through the center of the community—can pose a problem in diverse places. In well-traveled areas, ample sidewalk width and street trees could be used to buffer pedestrians from cars and enhance the area's ability to function as collective space. To better define the public area, buildings could be encouraged to form a distinct, well-demarcated frontage that conveys a sense of the public realm. A "build-to" line can help create a better sense of enclosure on the street, thus helping the street maintain its function as an important connective space.

8. Natural surveillance. In diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods, people need to feel safe and secure as they mix socially and economically and form connections with people of other social groups. The solution is not to support seclusion and withdrawal—that only breeds fear. Instead, design strategies must help counteract the tensions and fear.

One important principle is to enhance natural forms of surveillance, control, and responsibility for public spaces. It should take relatively little effort for people to keep an eye on things as part of their everyday routines. Design can help make it easy for people to focus their "eyes on the street"—to pay attention to and taking responsibility for the neighborhood's security—by ensuring that buildings front and face the public space. People should be able to look out of their windows directly onto the public realm; and public places like parks should not be fronted by garages, parking lots, or the sides of buildings.

9. Activated Dead Space. Another aspect of using design to increase security is to activate "dead" space—empty, unclaimed, or underutilized land for which no one seems to be taking responsibility and from which passersby have little security. Empty space is not simply someone's side yard or an industrial zone; it is space that fronts the public realm but has no connection to it and where decreased areas of activity undermine security.

Dead space often happens in commercial corridors, especially in the form of surface parking lots. Short of having 24-hour police patrols, the best way to increase security in these areas is to line them with active uses. As with all other urban design strategies, this is accomplished via a combination of regulation and incentive. Surface parking lots should be replaced with parking garages lined with commercial space, and traffic calming measures could be instituted to help a commercial street function as a public space rather than a traffic artery. The effect would be a greater sense that the area has public value, thus providing a better sense of security.

10. Softened Strong Edges. Diverse places tend to have strong edges, such as transportation and industrial corridors or large, impermeable districts of various kinds. Some

edges provide legibility and identity. But others—a noisy highway, a barren industrial landscape, a metallic railyard—need to be buffered to protect residences from these harsh conditions. Design solutions include establishing a greenway or adding resilient building types (e.g., offices or light industrial buildings) for startup businesses.

Sustaining Mixed-Income Neighborhoods through the Planning Process

Using urban design strategies to sustain diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods in 21st century America will require an engaged public. Nothing in urban design truly succeeds without community buy-in. And the best way to get buy-in is to engage the public in a way that is truly meaningful— where input is not merely lip service but is considered essential. It will be impossible to leverage design for diversity without adequate attention to the public process. What would a planning process devoted to sustaining social diversity be like? I suggest a four-step approach to sustaining social diversity.

Step 1: Decide which neighborhoods should be targeted for a neighborhood planning effort directed at sustaining diversity. This requires stepping outside of usual procedures. Most often, neighborhoods are selected for planning work based on their level of distress or an opportunity to stimulate private investment. Taking a somewhat different approach, planners could identify neighborhoods with high levels of social diversity, defined either by income, race, ethnicity, or in relation to some other diversity criteria. Planners also could consider threats to existing diversity, the potential for instability (e.g., gentrification, displacement, disinvestment), and the likelihood of success (suggested by citizen interest and active, engaged local leadership). Depending on available resources, a number of diverse neighborhoods could be targeted for special planning effort and focus.

Step 2: Assemble a neighborhood planning group composed of local leaders who represent the diversity of the neighborhood. This group would be formally and strategically recruited, something that research has shown is critical for building citizen participation at the neighborhood level. The group would be enlisted to support the diversity-sustaining process being proposed. This is essential, given the reality that effective social organization and neighborhood diversity do not generally correlate. As Wilson and Taub, put it, "strong neighborhoods…work against the notion of intergroup harmony and integration."[2] One way to counteract that tendency is to develop a set of shared goals, around which diverse residents can unite. The citizen planning group would be the catalyst for formulating that shared set of objectives.

Step 3: Have the citizen's planning group look for ways to increase public awareness of neighborhood diversity. Researchers who study diverse neighborhoods have argued that the

[2] William Julius Wilson and Richard P. Taub, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 181.

maintenance of diversity requires a statement of commitment to diversity and inclusiveness.[3] Efforts must be made to increase recognition and understanding of the kinds of diversity present, of which residents may have only a vague notion. The ideas to be communicated need to be simple, straightforward, and visually interesting; presented in a manner that is readily understood; and suitable for publication and exhibition throughout the neighborhood. The information should highlight racial, ethnic, income, age, and household diversity and include some explanation of how the level and type of diversity has changed over time. Graphical output of various kinds can be exhibited in well-traversed public places, including websites.

Step 4: Formulate and implement a neighborhood plan. A neighborhood plan lays out the concept of a shared future in concrete terms and provides a framework for channeling individual ideas toward something tangible: collectively realized, positive outcomes for the diverse neighborhood. Collaborative planning efforts of this type, which often occur in the form of charrettes, are now recognized as indispensable.[4] The trick is to orient them to the specific needs, issues, and constraints of a diverse, mixed-income neighborhood.

Implementation of the neighborhood plan can focus on three things: (a) establishing a process for shared management of the built environment as an ongoing neighborhood-stabilizing strategy; (b) achieving regulatory reforms, including new types of codes that encourage a coherent yet flexible guide for the built environment; and (c) recommending public investments that will stimulate positive changes, giving the neighborhood the kinds of improvements it needs without undermining its diversity.

Implications for Action

Implications for Policy.

- Enact form-based zoning codes that focus less on use restrictions and more on ways to integrate a diverse set of uses and housing types within a neighborhood.
- Allow multi-family housing in neighborhoods that currently have only single-family homes.
- Use form-based codes to ensure that new housing is compatible with existing neighborhood character.

[3] John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).
[4] Bill Lennetz and Aarin Lutzenhiser, *The Charrette Handbook: The Essential Guide to Design-Based Public Involvement*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Illinois; Washington, D.C: APA Planners Press, 2014).

Implications for Development and Investment.

- Innovate with housing type. Make more use of courtyards, closes (short looped streets), micro-units, accessory dwellings, and other creative methods of small-unit integration.

Implications for Research and Evaluation.

- Assess where a city's most economically and racially diverse neighborhoods are located.
- Assess what a city's diverse neighborhoods need for long-term support: How well does their zoning, their public space, and their mix of housing types support the needs of a socially, racially and economically diverse population?

Implications for Residents and Community Members.

- Organize to ensure that policy makers, developers, and civic leaders pay attention to publicly owned land. Collectivize to convert neglected public land into useable space, such as pocket parks.
- Push for zoning reforms that allow housing-type and land-use diversity.
- Be open to fitting in small businesses, live/work units, and non-polluting, low-impact light manufacturing on underutilized land.

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