

ABCD'S of Urban Renewal

Introduction

After more than a half century of existence urban renewal is yet being discussed. As an example of mega project development with a focus on physical structures, urban renewal has been quite successful. Examples can be found in large scale road projects in the United States and other countries making it possible to travel from coast to coast with relative ease. Airports and other transportation systems have reduced travel time between countries and blighted areas have also been cleared and replaced by cultural centers, sports arenas, business centers and other projects. When urban renewal is viewed in terms of its impact on the lives of city dwellers, the jury has also spoken, but the verdict is not as favorable.

In too many cases governments partnered with businessmen to move middle class residents from cities via the highways they built. Mega projects like transportation systems produce needed jobs too far from the inner city for poor urban dwellers to benefit. Blighted neighborhoods have indeed been cleared but gentrification has too often resulted. Cities like Chicago and St. Louis to cite two examples, built large scale high rise housing projects for the poor, only to see them turn into vertical ghettos. Urban planners, developers and politicians have historically valued exclusion over inclusion. Their exclusionary approach to urban renewal was both myopic and callous in nature.

In this paper, renewal focuses on people renewing themselves. Renewal, while internal and individualistic in nature, is also inclusive in outlook. The value, inclusion, undergirds the renewal process. As we have indicated above, exclusion has been valued in failed urban renewal projects of the past. Exclusion leads to division not unity. A society needs to be unified in order to live up to its potential. When any group is excluded from the benefits of society, thereby causing marginalization, the whole society loses its potential to greatness; its productivity is reduced; and its creativity is damped.

Integrity, accountability and openness, while not discussed systematically in the paper, are core values we embrace. These values are tied to a method of service characterized by genuine caring, sharing and loving principles. This approach, while behaviorally directed is rooted in an inward disposition of the heart where inclusive service is held to be not only good, right and proper but make for good business.

In cases where people lack the right attitude for renewal, a mentor is needed. When they see their prized possessions destroyed and loved ones lost, they give up hope. In other words, they lack the will to renew themselves. Renewal is yet possible for those who have lost hope, but a mentor is needed to intercede on their behalf. The role of the mentor is crucial in the renewal process as the mentor sets the right example and encourages others to begin to believe that not only is renewal possible but that it is something that is desirable. The mentor is a person already renewed and has the

wherewithal to guide others in the process, a process we call the ABCD's of urban renewal.

“A” is for Attitude

The starting point is the inward disposition of the heart where a positive Attitude is needed. Without the positive attitude toward renewal, it is not possible to renew. Therefore the critical aspect of renewal is not the outward relationships but the inward disposition of the heart. As “A” is the first letter in the ABCD's, attitude is the primary focus of the inward renewal process. After we have discussed the right attitude needed for renewal, we then take up the discussion of the remaining letters: BCD where “B” stands for Behavior, “C” for Communicate and “D” for Discipline. This is done in the context of urban renewal as an outward experience.

Though infrastructures are necessary for an urban society to exist, urban at its heart is the people living in a densely populated area. People must be taught the proper ways of behaving toward their neighbors. They must learn wholesome values to guide their daily living, but they have to be convinced that urban renewal is both desirable and doable. How does one renew him/her self when they are disaster prone? Renewal certainly does not begin with the person buying a new house or a new car or even a new suit of clothing. While these items maybe important in the renewal process, in many cases they are not available. This is especially true when a major disaster occurs like a hurricane. To understand how to renew the urban area, one needs to work from the individual to the group, from the internal to the external. Renewal begins with a right spirit or attitude.

We take the position that people don't naturally know how to renew themselves. Through socialization too many have learned a divisive approach to relationship building where others are seen as animals and the city is viewed as a jungle. Needed is socialization that embraces inclusive community building values where caring, sharing and loving relationships predominate. As pointed out in the introduction, communities have been built with exclusion in mind. This has led to division and discard among the people where the dominate group imposes their will and marginalizes others. Too many government officials, businessmen and civic leaders who should be mentors in inclusive community building or urban renewal have been part of the problem. The attitudes of those sworn to serve and those they serve must be examined to see if they stand in need of renewal themselves. The mentor, having been renewed, is able to empathize with those in need of renewal. He or she is as the skilled guide who safely brings his followers through a dangerous jungle venture.

As already said, a right attitude is the starting point in any successful urban renewal. One does not just happen upon a right attitude. Training is needed because attitude reflects how the person feels or thinks about what is being presented to them. A person's attitude is influenced to no small degree by their perception of whether those seeking to renew them believe in urban renewal. It is therefore critical that the mentor leaves no doubt in the minds of the people that he/she fully endorses urban renewal. This is not done by words alone because people say one thing but do another. Urban renewal must be demonstrated in the personal character of the mentor.

Behavior, Communication and Discipline: Outward Dimensions of Urban Renewal

Right behavior is driven by right attitude. The mentor's behavior is a reflection of this right attitude. There is no place for hypocrisy in the renewal process. Transparency, integrity and accountability characterize the behavior of the mentor. So you can see that while urban renewal begins with the internal it quickly moves to the external where the outward renewal expresses an inward disposition of a servant with caring, sharing and loving attitude toward those they serve. In a word, those in need of renewal need to know whether their mentors are renewed. They therefore watch their mentors for signs of a servant: trust, honor, respect, etc. If the words spoken by mentors are not verified in their deeds (behavior), those needing renewal will act on what they perceive their mentors expect of them. Mixed signals lead to confusion among those in need of renewal, and they are left to their own devices in dealing with life's daily issues.

Hence, effective Communication is a necessary condition in urban renewal. Communication relates to the message the mentor sends to those in need of renewal regarding the sustainability of urban renewal. If those in need of renewal feel the mentor is not serious about sound moral and ethical standards, he/she is not likely to produce the desired results. Those in need of renewal must hear from their mentors the message of inclusion: A positive message that renewal is a good thing and is indeed possible. The message communicated helps to prepare those in need of renewal for the long haul where a discipline lifestyle is needed.

Discipline has to do with patience as those in need of renewal will face many challenges as they transition from the prior renewal status to urban renewal. Challenges they face come from without and within. Discouragement born of negative thoughts is a natural tendency. These are buttressed by discommunity building examples and even ridicule from close associates. Mentors have gone through these same things so they are able to help guide those in renewal training through the mind fields of doubt. Again this done by the mentor demonstrating the character development they want those in need of renewal to mimic. With proper discipline, mentors and those in need of renewal, come to trust each other and time verifies urban renewal as a valued commodity in them, and this makes for greater productivity in renewing the community. Remember, those making use of urban renewal services will be able to distinguish between those who fake renewed behavior from those who actually practice it.

The Urban Renewal Community Center

Key to successful urban renewal is the Community Center. The Community Center is not just a physical structure; it is a “center of life” where people come to be renewed. It is a place for fellowship, training, and development with on-site accommodations for its activities and programs, including a kitchen, meeting/classrooms, and a community gathering area. It is an inclusive community building initiative offering a continual series of workshops on business development and entrepreneurship, conflict resolution, leadership, management, and diversity training toward sustaining the vision of urban renewal. The government assists in bridging the business community with participating residents, where both groups work together to provide training and development opportunities for all residents.

To realize the goal of urban renewal as the center of life, the Inclusive Community Building (ICB) approach based on The Ellison Model is employed. The Ellison Model is an approach to inclusive community building, where people learn to work together in a spirit of unity to achieve individual and community goals. It is an internal renewing conflict resolution model aimed as first renewing the individual and then the community at-large. The community in turn embraces a way of life that demonstrates a caring, sharing, and loving attitude where trust, honor, and respect are demonstrated in daily living and sustained over time. The individual embraces these values and adopts inclusion and equity as a way of life.