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## Community Design and the New Mind Concept

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**“T**he triple bottom line” is the latest phrase in design and development thinking. It builds on sustainable design’s “double bottom line,” which takes into account not only the standard financial costs of a project but also the hidden costs of its effects on the environment and natural resources. The triple bottom line expands the assessment to include social cost/benefit analysis – how the project affects the human relationships and cultures in and around the project area. Combining these three areas of valuation, the triple bottom line should give you a better understanding of the real worth and expected success of an urban project.

At the outset, the triple bottom line has much to recommend it. The additional levels of value attempt to capture real effects of development on ecologies and communities

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which traditional balance sheets simply don’t cover. The fact that these costs were not called out before does not mean that they didn’t exist or influence the success of projects (including their financial success); these effects could be seen and felt, even if they weren’t quantified. The triple bottom line now incorporates these influences into our existing modes of evaluation.

### Design by the Numbers

Unfortunately, this admirable effort is not quite the right approach. Balance sheets still can’t accurately assess ecological and societal effects – how do you put a price on access to clean air and clean water, wildlife diversity, or the ability to enjoy natural open space? What is the numerical cost of a lost support network, or the demise of a neighborhood celebration that brings different ethnic groups together? These things are not commodities, and cannot be regarded in this quantitative fashion; our systems must find a way to qualitatively address these critical but intangible aspects of community life and natural systems.

A different way to look at a project’s design is through its elements. When we look at a program, whether for a building or for a neighborhood, we typically think of a series of spaces or land uses that focus on the physical. In the case of a neighborhood, the list includes housing, shopping, parking, open space, schools, offices and so on. Success is measured by a series of ratios and percentages to be achieved: a certain number of square feet per person, so many cars per thousand square feet, and so on. These combine with the circulation elements like streets, utilities, water and sewer to make up the body of the community.

But neither a community’s health nor its



Union Station in Washington, D.C.

real success can be measured in these terms. Although these elements are necessary, the urban checklist still works on the balance sheet principle – add up the elements, multiply by capacity, subtract anything that is missing, and out comes the answer. Although the answers are less numerical, they are not able to capture the qualities that make sustainable, successful projects and places.

The traditional measurement systems seem to have difficulty identifying the elements that make healthy and successful communities, but people have little difficulty defining principles of healthy neighborhood life: Cultural diversity is both strength and necessity, combined with empowerment of all, regardless of age, sex, or ethnicity. The way we live must also be compatible with the natural ecology around us, not only to preserve enjoyment of the environment but, more importantly, for our continued health and welfare. Finally, shared values, created through education, play, the arts, and cultural traditions, are key to maintaining and improving quality of life.

The spirit of community that results from the application of such principles is the real place where a community’s ongoing health

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should be evaluated. These things are supported and facilitated by well-designed physical elements, but they are also the glue that keeps the elements working together to build not just a space, but a place. Thus we come to understand that the quantitative, “left-brain” process for creating the physical setting is not capable of creating a healthy neighborhood unless combined with something else from our right brain – the “creative mind.”

What is this creative mind, and how is it developed? Our right brain tends to look at things differently – rather than the linear and rational, it processes connections and intuition. This alternative process allows us to see things that are hard to measure in the left-brain sense, but we know them when we see them: a sense of safety, the quality of our relationships, the pleasure in a well tended civic space. What defines these things is not just a set of physical features, but also the relationships between these features and the people who interact with them.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, tells the story of Bernie Goetz, a white New York City subway rider who shot four black youths in 1984. Gladwell describes a pattern of signals indicating neglect and law-breaking that was a persistent feature of the subway experience, and discusses how those signals combined with Goetz’s personal history and experiences to

trigger this response, even though Goetz himself could not give a rational explanation for his actions. These influences and the people who respond to them form a network of relationships that create the true character of a community and determine its development.

Assessing these kinds of factors requires us to recognize and value our connected mind, and to make a place for it in our evaluation systems, as discussed in detail in Daniel Pink’s book “*A Whole New Mind*.” We often dismiss these things because they are “too subjective”; and yet, when describing the quality of a community, these subjective qualities are easily recognized and described by community members. We can’t add them, but we can talk about them, and find processes beyond the numbers that shape the way we do projects for the future.

### The Participatory Process

Talking, writing and drawing our perceptions – these alternative languages and processes are a common part of community visioning processes. Community design practitioners are experienced at drawing out those “right-brain” observations and bringing people together around them. Drawings, photos, descriptions, discussions, tours, textiles, music and even food can be means of getting into the communal spirit and building the network of relationships to make out neighborhoods thrive. The “left-brain” activ-

ities aren’t left out – community members are equally sensitive to budgets and economics. When we share and value both kinds of information in our design and planning processes, we are able to empower everyone to play their part in the project’s success, not just a limited group of “specialists” and “experts.”

In the end, even the specialists and experts will find that they gain information to enrich, not detract from, their traditional valuation modes. We become better decision-makers because each participant in a community process can leverage the knowledge residing with others. This translates not only into better community, but also into better economic effects, as can be seen in highly successful public projects such as Faneuil Hall Marketplace; Union Station in Washington, D.C. and Grand Central Terminal or Bryant Park in New York City.

Our economic prosperity, our environmental responsibility and our community sensibility are not three categories of lists, but an interrelated web of connections that must be balanced to make our projects and places healthy, viable and beneficial for current and future generations. The leaders who make these successful places will be those with a new mind for creative problem-solving adding a variety of right-brain capabilities such as empathy, play, pattern recognition, meaning and, yes, design in fresh ways. ■

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