Visioning Our Community: Using Urban Design to Move From "Don't Want" to "Want"

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ABSTRACT

Communities often find difficulty in organizing against the siting of locally unwanted land uses. While residents find ease in expressing what they do not want, they often fail to express what they do want, causing their ultimate exclusion from land use decision. This thesis examines how communities can use urban design as a process and a product to move from reactive organizing to proactive organizing in order to build more complete and effective campaigns for land use and community visions.

To detail how communities can use urban design for proactive organizing, this thesis outlines several case studies. The major case, the Mystic View planning and design effort, is outlined in detail. As comparison I used brief descriptions of five other cases where community organization used urban design for proactive organizing.

Urban design as a process and a product has flaws as a community-organizing tool. This thesis points out these flaws and shortcomings and explores ways that community organization can better make use of urban design to impact land use decisions.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Last spring it all made sense to me. At the annual conference of Alternatives for Community and Environment - *Environmental Justice in the Hood*, health care organizer, Attiano Davis, the keynote speaker, stood up and declared that in order to succeed as environmental organizers we must study urban design. Two years of my life and over $80,000 finally made sense to me. I thought it interesting at first that a health care organizer spoke on urban design at an environmental conference. Yet looking back, I understand it perfectly. Ms. Davis works in Roxbury, Massachusetts, where asthma rates are the highest in Boston. Epidemiologists tell us that disproportional siting of hazardous waste facilities cause disproportional rates of respiratory illness.

Most organizers would stop there. The solution would be to prevent unwanted land uses whenever one is sited, bringing to bear evidence of risks involved to an already overburdened community. However, given her experience, Ms. Davis did not stop there. She made the implicit suggestion that communities need to articulate what they want from their neighborhoods and work towards that vision through the use of urban design. She declared that simply reacting is no longer a viable option with burdened communities that repetitively react every few years, winning short term victories but never gaining control of their destiny.

This paper argues that communities can use the urban design process and product, as a means and a tool, to move from reactive to pro-active organizing. In effect this paper argues that community residents locked in land use struggles should in essence *become* the urban designer to more successfully advocate for their development vision. In other words, communities caught in repetitive land use struggles can take control of the urban design process to more effectively advocate for their vision. In the world of planning and urban design this is not necessarily a fresh idea. In fact history provides us with many examples of successful community design processes. So why is this new?

First, this paper makes a statement about environmental advocacy. While advocacy design centers flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, the environmental movement was in the forests and in the courts. Not until recently did the environmental movement concern itself with urban issues. Environmental organizers who emphasize urban issues rarely embrace urban design as a
means to further land-use goals. Methods employed largely come from a reactive organizing tradition.

Second, this paper examines design initiatives that come entirely from the community and regard residents as the urban designers. Advocacy planners who have long worked towards community involvement generally sought a process initiated by the planner. "How can we involve the community in our process". Many were advocates who searched for ways to bring their expertise to communities in order to shape public action in line with their interests and values. I am specifically focusing on something slightly different. Instead of examining how we as planners and design professionals can bring our expertise to communities to influence the design process in a positive way, this paper examines how communities can bring their expertise and knowledge to become the designers of their community — albeit with the assistance of urban design professionals. Planning should feed into and enhance organizing strategies - it should not replace organizing, which was often the case in advocacy planning.

**Current Thought on Organizing in Opposition to Unwanted Land Uses**

Much literature exists on organizing against locally unwanted land uses (LULUs). Most of this comes out of or reacts to the current environmental movement. However by the very nature of discussing unwanted land uses observers examine organizing around these land use struggles primarily in a reactive fashion — "how do we defeat this development, or what tool/strategies can we use to defeat this proposed land use".

Al Norman, a journalist by trade, turned anti-Wal-Mart advocate, recently wrote a manual for defeating proposed big box developments — *Slam Dunking Wal-Mart: How You Can Stop Superstore Sprawl in Your Hometown*. With his national resource organization “Sprawl Busters”, Al Norman, takes credit for stopping over 30 Wal-Marts and several other big box developments in the last six years. In over 200 pages of narrative this manual details the stealth development tactics of “big box” retail and how communities can successfully organize against this. In two hundred pages the closest Mr. Norman comes to anything other than reacting to developments that a community does not want, is through detailing how a community can use zoning, in its most Euclidean sense, to keep out this unwanted land use. Al Norman, like many other land use advocates falls short of suggesting that communities should deal with these issues
before they happen – get ahead of the curve and react by promoting positive development.³

The environmental movement discusses land-use debates mostly in the context of risk and public health. Current environmental organizing strategy suggests two primary mechanisms available for the community when trying to defeat a LULU. First, communities can look for scientific proof that the proposed development will negatively impact public health or cause undue risk to the community, and then build a compelling argument with political leaders and surrounding communities. Second, an affected party can try to fight the proposed development in court. Often community organizers use both strategies concurrently.

The hallmark of the environmental movement in the last 30 years has been the use of litigation as a means for land use protection. Sue the Bastards, a phrase that is all too common in the United States became the focus of the movement starting with the Environmental Defense Fund in 1967.⁴ Many land use struggles that come out of this tradition likewise have adopted a litigation strategy of resistance. Litigating zoning represents the manifestation of this in an urban context. However, according to activist lawyer Bill Shutkin, “Legal advocacy is often about using the law to defend against unjust actions. In the United States the government takes a position of non-involvement in private affairs. Therefore the law is set up to say ‘Here’s what you can’t do’ There is nothing in our legal system that says ‘Here’s what you can do or should do’.”⁵

Mark Dowie in his book, Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century – a critique of the history of the environmental movement, heralds NIMBY (not in my back yard) movements as a positive step in the right direction. From his perspective they are a welcomed change from Washington-based advocacy to local grassroots movements. However, since environmental struggles have been localized into land-use battles, critics from within and outside of the movement have characterized them as inherently re-active, only concentrating on the negative, never looking towards a positive future, and without a grasp of overall economic development. The main question people ask is, “If not here, where?” As Mark Dowie points out, the environmental movement has matured over the last 20 years and NIMBY movements have started to network into national and international coalitions. In effect the NIMBY movements have come up with an answer – “not here and not anywhere”.⁶

From a land-use planning perspective and even a more matured environmental activist’s view,
“not here, not there” is still not good enough. As Randolph Hester, Jr. points out in Places Magazine, “‘Not in my backyard!’ is a common rallying cry, but it often speaks of our inability to take positive steps in shaping our communities and landscapes.” The question we need to start asking is: “If not this, what?”

Proactive Organizing Vs. Reactive Organizing – What is the Difference?

I approach this discussion of proactive vs. reactive organizing with two assumptions or axioms on organizing. First, organizing one campaign right the first time is easier than organizing several successful campaigns repeatedly over a period of time. In other words, a community that merely successfully blocks a development with no government or developer buy-in to a final land use objective, will have an increasingly difficult time re-organizing the community around subsequent LULU developments on that particular site. Communities should do whatever possible to aim for one land-use struggle rather than multiple land use struggles. Second, achieving municipal government and/or developer buy-in to community visions becomes easier when decision markers are presented with a clear alternative.

Asphalt Plant, Boston, MA

The problem of reactive organizing is common and examples are abundant. Recall Boston’s South Bay area in 1992 when the Todesca Company proposed to build an asphalt plant. The surrounding neighborhoods protested through a mix of legal actions and community organizing. Eight years later this campaign is nationally hailed as a major success. However, how much of a success was it?

Beginning in 1992 a coalition of residents and organizations banded together explicitly to oppose the construction of the asphalt plant on a site that was formerly an auto-parts junkyard and remains on the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection’s list of hazardous waste sites. The opposing coalition, coordinated by South End resident Lloyd Fillion, appropriately named itself the Coalition Against the Asphalt Plant (CAAP).

The central issues of concern to the surrounding neighborhoods paralleled most land use disputes. First, residents worried about traffic and auto emissions, especially that of asphalt trucks
going to and from the Todesca facility. Second, trucks driving near and through residential neighborhoods raised concerns about environmental health and safety for pedestrians. Likewise the odor and noise generated by the plant concerned many residents. Third, the Todesca plant did not represent the type of job creating development that residents hoped for. Many worried that an asphalt plant would in fact further discourage job development. Finally, residents felt unfairly burdened with hazardous contaminants. Already they faced disproportionately high rates of respiratory illness from air pollution. 

To nearby residents, an asphalt plant represented something outside their community. Neighborhood roads remain under-serviced by the city, littered with potholes and in desperate need of repair. Most residents do not have or use cars and do not travel to the suburban communities that will make use of this asphalt. Asphalt is a product that is simply not widely used in their neighborhood.

For many reasons the effort to stop the Asphalt plant became of central concern to the entire environmental community in Boston. 

*Five years ago when this case emerged as an important local environmental issue, there really had yet to be, in the city of Boston, a case or an event or a circumstance that raised the profile of these environmental justice kinds of issues, that raised the awareness about the problem of bad land use decisions, poor air quality, brownfields, and dis-investment in neighborhoods of color in Boston. And so the asphalt plant became a platform to raise these issues, in a very general level, to say that lower-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color in and around Boston have too many asphalt plants, too many trash transfer stations, too many hazardous waste sites, too much air pollution, not enough good jobs, not enough parks, et cetera et cetera. So this case became sort of a catalyst for building awareness and understanding of the problem of environmental harm and disfranchised communities.* Recalled Bill Shutkin. 

I would be incorrect to suggest that all those involved simply viewed this land use struggle as reactive. Among others Bill Shutkin, at the time Executive Director of Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) and legal council for CAAP saw this as an opportunity to raise the
issue of macro economic development.

*It also became a very important opportunity to make the connection between environmental harm and economic development, to explain that to the extent neighborhoods continue to see dis-investment, that a vacuum is created which will be filled really only by more asphalt plants and incinerators, by more crime, by more drug abuse. And that if we really want to improve environmental conditions, we’ve got to start looking at economic development that’s going to bring jobs, going to bring benefits in the way of, say, health care, to residents of these neighborhoods so they can pay for and afford the services that will mitigate some of those environmental effects, be it a vacation or a trip to the doctor.*

However Shutkin’s analysis never became central to a struggle that was inherently *against* a land use. Thus, several years later Shutkin left ACE to form New Ecology, Inc., precisely to examine how communities can become more proactive in their land use struggles. Others who have written about the asphalt plant note that, “*Through the six-year struggle to prevent the siting of the asphalt plant, residents have built an extensive network of information and social capital and have gained confidence, knowledge and momentum necessary to assist them in their efforts to revitalize their neighborhoods.*” However, now after eight years the community has still not looked into a planning process for the area, nor have they put forth any real proposals as to what they would like on that site or for the community – there have merely been some unsuccessful discussions with developers. The land still sits, undeveloped and still owned by Todesca. While Todesca continues the battle to site their asphalt plant on this land, there still remains the possibility that they may sell the property to another developer interested in building another different type of LULU that fits within the current zoning of light industrial. Even so, Lloyd Fillion contends that he would have no trouble reorganizing a now defunct CAAP if another LULU were to be sited. Conventional organizing wisdom would disagree. Reorganizing after declaring victory is almost always more difficult that organizing the first time.

CAAP, though largely successful as both an educational campaign and an effort that built social capital for environmental justice work, fell short of achieving the best possible land-use outcome that could lead to a revitalized neighborhood economy. In fact the jury is still out (liter-
ally) as to whether they have achieved anything at all in terms of land use. Like almost all of the environmental movement, CAAP failed to make a transition from reactive to proactive organizing to achieve the best possible outcome for the neighborhood.

Is Reactive Organizing Bad?

I do not mean to imply that the use of litigation in response to LULU siting, or the use of reactive organizing is bad. Nor do I wish to give the impression that the campaign against the asphalt plant in Boston failed. In fact as an educational campaign CAAP was an unprecedented success. It marked the start of the environmental justice movement in Boston. Furthermore CAAP did the correct thing to react initially – they had no other choice. My critique of reactive organizing in this paper is in its incompleteness. Simply reacting often does not lead to the final success communities’ aim for in land use struggles.

Urban Design

For the purpose of this thesis I will use Michael Southworth’s definition of urban design - the branch of city planning which focuses on the analysis, design and management of environments with particular attention to the experiential qualities of space. Urban design addresses the environmental needs of various groups of users in terms of how they perceive, value and use places.¹⁵

Therefore as Lawrence Halprin suggests, “Design, particularly urban design has a profound responsibility. It is in a sense the bearer of the cultural value system of the community. For that reason environmental design goes way beyond the visual; it is much more pervasive. It deals with cultural issues, with context, with life style, with social and economic issues; it has profound ecological ramifications and influences on the future of the planet; it deals with the whole community as well as the individual; it is contributing to a human ecology and, in that sense, it must be multi-sensory and holistic. And, I think, holistic is the operative word.¹⁶”

Community organizer Attiano Davis, in her keynote address possessed a profound ability to highlight connections in issues where others fail to see them. It is now obvious to me that all
schools of Public Health should teach at least one course in urban design! Unfortunately, much to the surprise of urban design professionals, the environmental community fighting unwanted land uses has limited experience with using urban design. Many communities work for years to keep out a LULU some successful, some not. Those who succeed, often have to reorganize a few years later against a similarly unwanted land use proposed, because they failed to address the fundamental issue at stake – "if not this, what?". This thesis looks for a solution to the problems that reactive organizing confronts community organizers with. If communities can become more effective in land use struggles, we can look forward to a day when neighborhoods represent the types of place that people want to live, work and play in.

Notes

2 ibid.
5 Interview with Bill Shutkin 3/14/00
7 Randolph Hester Jr., Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Sustainable Happiness; Places; Vol. 9, No. 3; Winter 1995; P. 4-17
8 Tammy Jezic, unpublished case study on the CAAP, 1998
9 Interview with Bill Shutkin 3/14/00
10 Tammy Jezic, unpublished case study on the CAAP, 1998
11 ibid.
12 William Shutkin; *The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*; MIT Press; Cambridge, MA; 2000

13 ibid.

14 Conversation with Lloyd Fillion, 2/9/00


16 Lawrence Halprin; *Design as a Value System*; *Places*; Vol. 6, No. 1; Fall 1989, P.60-67
Chapter 2: Case Study: Mystic View

"We want to think about where our city is going and expect our city to be proactive in the kind of development it cultivates. Otherwise we get stealth development — no one knows its coming and we are left to react." John Rossi (Boston Globe June 6th 1999).

On August 25, 1999 over 30 community members spoke in protest at a public meeting against a plan to build more big box development along the Mystic River in Somerville. Without knowing, one would think that Somerville was a community with a long tradition in participatory planning. The comments were eloquent. “I remember watching it and thinking even if we lose this struggle, the growth and education that has occurred in this community is a major victory. From now on development in Somerville will be heavily scrutinized to achieve the best possible outcomes for local residents” Anne Tate recalled. She watched the proceedings on a cable station while in Miami.

There are those that have categorized the Mystic View Task Force (MVTF) as a story of the passion and charisma of John Rossi, architect and planner from Brunner and Cott. Others have characterized MVTF as a story of the savvy real estate developer graduate of MIT, turned community-advocate, Wig Zamore. However no one single person can take credit for an effort that is truly the work of a very extraordinary group. The Mystic View Task Force came into being from the inspiration of a talk given by architect Anne Tate, but developed because of the yearning desire of a community too long forgotten by planners and designers. This desire for change and justice drove this community into action and success.

In this case I use the term “community” almost interchangeably with the Mystic View Task Force. Although MVTF technically represents only a couple hundred people, the views that they are voicing have resonated throughout the City of Somerville. In the many meetings I have attended, and interviews I have conducted - with those as part of the Mystic View Task Force, and residents, government officials and developers outside of MVTF, I have come to two conclusions. First, many political officials and the developers believe that the Mystic View Task Force does not representative the entire community, and in fact are a relatively small group of people with little ultimate power.
Second, this view is all but entirely incorrect. At meetings and in private conversations, residents who do not associate with the Mystic View Task Force seem to agree with their views on development. At community meetings, many or most of the strongest critics are often not associated with the Mystic View Task Force. As one resident, who was not with the Task Force, stated, “The Mystic View Task Force is almost like the community’s voice, they truly know what we want and speak on our behalf.”

I have so far seen or heard of few residents that support a big box proposal or the idea to allow developers to conduct business without community influence. There certainly are those counter voices and people who do not think that the government can or should infringe on the right of a property owner to develop their land as they please. At one Advisory Committee meeting Sandra McGoldrick, President of the Winter Hill Federal Savings Bank, expressed much skepticism towards non-big box development. However, even the Somerville Chamber of Commerce, who initially opposed government intervention on this site, gave an award to MVTF leader Wig Zamore last year for his efforts to develop business in Somerville. I have no doubt that there exists a minority in Somerville that does not support the mission of the Mystic View Task Force, but through my (very unscientific study) I am convinced that MVTF holds the view of enough of a cross section of the population to be considered representative.

This community effort to design Assembly Square is interesting for many reasons. In so many instances where communities organize in opposition to unwanted land uses they lack resources and are ill prepared to deal with the complexities of planning and development. The Mystic View Task Force has some of the best resources in the country in this regard. This fact alone would make their model difficult to replicate. However, it is precisely because of these resources that they have created such an exciting method of advocacy. Despite their anomalous character the Mystic View Task Force developed into something that communities working against unwanted land uses should try to emulate.

The story of Mystic View is less about people and personalities than it is about a process for community involvement. However without certain personalities the Task Force would never have obtained the degree of success it now has. MVTF was able to transform a community that had little interest in urban environmental design and neighborhood planning into a community that will no longer tolerate short term visioning and marginalization.
Site Description

The Mystic View Site refers to the 150 acres of land in East Somerville along the Mystic River. The Ten Hills neighborhood (and Medford beyond that) borders the site to the north while Boston borders the site to the south, and route I-93 creates a physical barrier to the west. The Mystic View site, as I define it here, includes what others commonly refer to as Assemble Square.

Mystic View has historically served as an important area for Somerville as a convergence point of many modes of transportation. Route I-93 is the major automobile route from northern New England into Boston. Running to the west of the site is the McGrath Highway and the Fellsway, also a major roadway stretching through Cambridge and Somerville. Before the road systems, canals flowed through the site, linking Boston to Lowell and later rail lines ran north to Maine.

Currently the MBTA provides only remote transit access to the site. The Sullivan Square T stop on the Orange line is located slightly less than a half mile south of the site. Although both the commuter rail and the Orange Line pass directly through Mystic View, at grade level, the MBTA
currently has no plans to create an additional stop. The MBTA provides limited bus service to the site, however long range planning for the future Urban Ring include a stop on Mystic View’s northwest edge.

\[ \text{Above: Aerial photo of the Mystic View Site facing south towards Boston} \]

**History of the Site**

At the February 22, 2000 meeting of the Mystic View Task Force, Joe Dorerty stepped in front of the room to express his fears about the development of Assembly Square and the larger Mystic View Site. He spoke for nearly fifteen minutes about the history of Somerville and the importance of the Mystic View site. “I have worked here in the fire department for 26 years. All I want to say is that no matter what you do, make it special in order to match the historical character of this site.”

Mystic View is indeed rich in history. It is the site of several historic shipyards including the one that build the Blessing of the Bay, Massachusetts’s first sea-going vessel, and the site of First National, at its height the nation’s largest food warehouse. Most importantly however,
local residents feel attached to this history and embrace it.

The history of Mystic View dates back to 1673 when Governor John Winthrop located his farm at Ten Hills directly north of Assembly Square. At that time, the current Mystic View site consisted of wetlands and river. It was on this property that Winthrop constructed the Blessing of the Bay. In the nineteenth century Ten Hills changed from a farm area to an economy based on brick making. The extraction of clay lowered the elevation of the land. Ploughed Hill was used to fill the marshlands on Mystic View.

In 1900 the Metropolitan Parks Commission acquired the land along the Mystic River at Ten Hills and constructed a beach. The City of Somerville built a bathhouse in 1906 and another around 1925. This popular beach area existed side-by-side with industrial waterfront use into the 1950s until the pollution became unbearable and the beach was closed down. Currently the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), the successor to the Metropolitan Parks Commission, owns all the land along the Mystic View waterfront.

In 1925 the state built the McGrath Highway. This project destroyed many houses and severed East Somerville from what is now Assembly Square. However, the McGrath Highway also brought strong transportation access and led to the establishment of the Ford Motor Plant in 1926 and the location of the First National
Warehouses. During this time, Mystic View was accessible by mass transit, highway, railroad and water channels. The site centered on the Ford Motor Plant, which employed thousands of people both within and outside Somerville. In 1957 when the plant closed down, the site went into economic depression with many buildings left vacant.

In 1980 the East Bay Development Corporation constructed a large 26-acre mall, using the name “Assembly Square” in memory of the Ford Motor Plant. Despite the hopes expressed in several planning studies and development efforts dating back to the early 1970s, the area never became the retail center that the city aimed for. In the early 1990s the mall started to lose money. In 1996, Aetna Insurance Co., the mortgager of the mall foreclosed on the property, for approximately one third of the sale value, an enormous loss. ⁷

**Development of the Mystic View Task Force**

Because of the site’s historic importance, its location along waterfront and proximity to transportation centers it has become the focal point for Somerville’s residents to gain back some of the ground lost from poor planning decisions that have traditionally not worked for community. Unlike many community struggles against sprawl, big box development, or other unwanted land uses, the Mystic View Task Force was founded as a proactive local volunteer group to advocate for what type of development to bring to Somerville, not what type of development to keep out. MVTF did not originally form to fight off big box, but rather to plan what organizers envisioned as the city’s “last frontier”, based upon broad based informed citizen involvement.

The development of MVTF is a story of personal struggles to reclaim a city with deteriorating job opportunities, tax base, school system, and to claim a vision that they feel is owed to them, as a basic right. In this case “vision” and “leadership” are two words that describe the process. Both can be used to describe State Representative Patricia Jehlen – a visionary leader. Representative Jehlen came to Somerville 30 years ago as a Masters student at Harvard’s School of Education. “When I graduated, I read an article written by SDS (Student for a Democratic Society) and wanted to live, work and bring skills to a working class community.” ⁸ She became a Vista Volunteer, then a teacher and eventually joined the School Committee. On her office wall she boasts a plaque awarded to her for a 100% labor voting record. However, by the spring of 1998 Representative Pat Jehlen had barely started to think about the built environment
and its relation to the many social issues she cares about.

Fellow State Representative John Stasik, then very active in the legislature on urban planning issues, organized a lecture at the State House by Anne Tate, of the Boston Society of Architects. BSA had recently initiated a campaign to educate decision-makers and the general public about development through the BSA Task Force on Growth Management. Anne, together with Missy Stitler created a slide show on growth management, sprawl and New Urbanism to highlight and explain good and bad outcomes of urban design. They based the slide show on the idea that pictures work best when explaining good and bad results in urban design.

“When John [Stasik] asked me to go to this event I really had little interest. I only went because he asked me to and I just happened to have nothing to do at that particular time on that day. However I was just amazed. The lecture was just so interesting. I had never thought that cul-de-sacs were not good... and suburbs. I just did not think about it. This lecture truly changed my life.”

recalled Representative Jehlen.

On the suggestion of her assistant Maggie Carfield, Pat Jehlen then decided to see if Anne Tate would speak in Somerville. Anne, also a resident of Somerville, eagerly agreed to do so. With the help of a loose network of residents called SomerVision, Representative Jehlen organized the event for May 13, 1998. Around 150 people attended. At the time there was no concerted
effort to look specifically at Mystic View. However, this lecture followed a proposal by Somerville Alderman at-large Bill White for a moratorium on development on the Mystic View Site. Alderman White’s proposal attracted much public and political concern to this area.

There were two issues raised in Anne’s talk. First, several train lines pass through Somerville but currently the MBTA provides no train stops. Second, Mystic View contains huge opportunities for development. At the time, there were some rumblings that redevelopment would take place on the old Assembly Square Mall site, but no real development proposals had yet emerged. However, several new articles in the Somerville Journal earlier that year suggested that the business community and elected officials were already looking at the site for potential redevelopment.

“While National Development of New England plans to purchase the struggling Assembly Square Mall, the firm is undecided what it wants to do with the area that one alderman has called the ‘last frontier’” stated a news article in the spring of 1998.10

In August 1998 the Somerville Journal reported that, “Taurus Investments bought the complex where Good Time Emporium is housed for $8.2 million, Ikea a national chain furniture store, is considering purchasing a 16-acre plot behind the site: and Tage Inn is in the process of getting permits to build a hotel on two acres of land along Cummings Street.”11

In part a reaction to the moratorium proposal earlier in the year, community residents such as John Rossi, stepped up to create and lead a planning process for Mystic View. On June 1, 1998 Pat Jehlen and John Rossi met with Alderman White to discuss the feasibility of a community led planning process for Mystic View. For all intents and purposes this initiated the Mystic View Task Force. In other words the Mystic View Task Force was formed as a proactive effort for development before developers even proposed an unwanted land use.

According the Steve Post, The Director of the Office of Housing and Commercial Development, the Mystic View Task Force represents the first real effort for community residents to make an impact on urban design. SomerVision was founded with a similar intend, but as a loose network with no organizing goals. Commonly known as “Slummerville” residents were excluded from development decisions and made little effort to become involved. Previous efforts to develop the Mystic View site centered on elected municipal officials negotiating with developers,
without the input of residents\textsuperscript{12}.

At the start of the process the small group that assembled after Anne Tate's SomerVision talk could have gone several ways, including nowhere. Over the summer there were a few meetings that consisted of, in Anne Tate's words, "just talk". Anne Tate did not think much would come out of this effort.\textsuperscript{13} By fall however, the group drafted an organizing plan and decided to prepare a community design charrette. The group chose the name \textit{Mystic View (Site) Task Force} deliberately to emphasize the site's attachment to the water, and to inform Somerville that 150 acres was much more than the 26 acre mall site.

By the fall Anne Tate felt a sense of urgency, there were now more press reports of development about to take place on the Mystic View site. In mid October the Somerville Journal reported that Assembly Square Mall had been bought for $18.8 million by Taurus Investments and National Development, and that they aimed to start construction by summer 1999 with occupancy by summer 2000. Anne Tate wanted to gather a few design professionals and draft design proposals right away.

The majority of the rapidly growing Mystic View Task Force, wanted to slow the process down, engage the community for their opinions and have the designs come from a large cross-section of residents. Therefore the idea to organize a charrette was a natural next step for the people involved. Anne Tate, a professor of urban design at the Rhode Island School of Design had much experience in organizing community design charrettes. A design charrette is a one-day event that brings together various groups of people, that often otherwise would not interact, to draft development ideas and proposals for a site. It was something concrete that Anne felt she could do while not taking a lead as an organizer (Anne had just had a baby). Over the next year the MVTF set up a series of meetings to solicit community ideas. During this time, MVTF built support for their planning process through the use of presentations to elected officials, the public, landowners and through use of the print, TV and radio media.

By November of 1998 MTVF organized a committee of urban design professionals to prepare for the public design charrette. Through John Rossi and Anne Tate's professional connections the MVTF Design Committee organized an extremely talented group of architects and planners, many of whom live in Somerville, to design pre-charrette "idea starters". The organizers thought it would be more useful and educational for participants to have several already pre-
pared design suggestions for the community to react to and work with as a start, than to ask the community to come up with their own plans from scratch. Over three meetings the design committee drafted six concepts for discussion. Through design meetings several key issues emerged for site development: 1) open space, 2) tax income, 3) jobs, 4) access to the site and, most importantly, 5) a strong connection and use of the Mystic River, the only waterfront site in the City of Somerville.

Above: Two designs drafted by the Design Committee. Below: Axonometric renderings of the designs.
The Issues

Many residents expressed the feeling that Somerville is greatly under-served with regard to open space. In the four square miles there are only 150 acres of open space – including cemeteries and paved schoolyards – for over 75,000 residents. For the Mystic View Task Force, open space is not only important, but the accessible waterfront park ranks among the top priorities.

As in communities all over the US, tax base and city services are of top concern. In Somerville residents have expressed a feeling that the school system has deteriorated recently due to lack of funding, and a concern that the city fails to provide other necessary services, such as affordable housing, trees, clean streets, etc. The Mystic View site represents perhaps the best area, with its waterfront location, existing infrastructure and potential transportation access, to provide a significant tax income increase for the city.

Finally, since the closing of the Ford Motor plant in 1957, jobs have been moving out of Somerville into neighboring areas. “Our economy once imported labor; now 80 percent of us leave the city each day to work. This trend has a corresponding impact on taxes. While residential properties are taxed at a lower rate than business properties, they require more costly city services. Over time we must raise taxes or reduce services,” Writes Bill Shelton in an editorial to the Somerville Journal.

According to Stephen Mackey, President of the Somerville Chamber of Commerce, “manufacturing, office and research and development provide more tax revenue, jobs and spin off businesses than do the retail uses proposed for Assembly Square.” Currently there are no net surplus commercial and industrial real estate tax revenues and a large residential tax deficit. In 1997 the commercial and industrial real estate taxes totaled $15 million. This amount was entirely offset by the cost of municipal services to those properties. In 1997 the city earned $30 million in tax revenues from residential property and spent nearly $95 million to provide residential services.

With this in mind John Rossi and Anne Tate using their professional contacts, and Wig Zamarre through gathering information and materials, organized three after-hours design sessions to put
together the idea starters. Among those that attended were Anne Tate, Ellen Dunham-Jones (a Professor of Architecture at MIT), Gina Foglia (a resident and landscape designer), Dan Raih (Bruner Cott), Gabriel Feld (a RISD department Head), and Larry Bluestone (Bluestone Group). Altogether the design committee created six different proposals to demonstrate that not only could the Mystic View site attract higher and better uses, but there also exists an economic incentive for the city to reestablish the site for better uses.

Until May the 22nd community design charrette, the design committee avoided focusing on a single plan or theme. The design group aimed to start ideas, not create proposals. Many of the idea starters were purposefully impractical as they concentrated heavily on open space or housing, thus creating substantial additional tax losses for the City.

Financial Benefits

MVTF recognized that they needed to both educate Somerville residents and then educate and expand the vision for political leaders and developers. Largely with the assistance of Wig Zamore, a graduate of the MIT Center for Real Estate and a Boston development consultant for the last 15 years, MVTF analyzed a series of extreme scenarios, the development feasibility and their corresponding municipal tax benefits. The maps to the right highlight the strategic location of the Mystic View site.

After suggesting that the Mystic View site is in fact in a strategic location, and not some back water area that no one will ever commute to, MVTF listed various
development options, including open space, and expected tax and job opportunity implications for each.

The Design Charrette

In the months leading up to the Charrette, MVTF spokesperson, John Rossi and other members of the task force presented the design ideas to elected officials, the media and in public forums. The mission was to explain that with long term detailed planning, Somerville could improve upon their tradition of piecemeal development. The presentations received mixed reactions.

“We’re like the children who just get the scraps. I think we can fight for something better than that. It’s taking a long-range approach. Historically this is not something the city has done.” Alderman Bill White

However another alderman expressed their doubts by adding that “The city does not own that land. I loved the presentation but it’s not real.”18

According to Steve Post, the new Director of the city’s Office of Housing and Commercial Development (OHCD), in essence what the MVTF did was to almost compete with the Somerville Planning Department and the Economic Development Department – which should have themselves been thinking about better uses for the site. This created positive competitive pressure on the city government to do its job – plan for the best long-term outcome for its residents.

On May 17th the Mystic View Task Force organized a meeting for all property owners on the site. The purpose of the meeting was for MVTF to introduce its mission, share with the property owners the agenda for the upcoming design charrette, and begin a dialogue. The MVTF mailed and faxed all property owners, and then followed up with phone calls. Of the 17 landowners on the Mystic View site, most showed up, except for Taurus Investment (Good Time Emporium owner) and National Development (joint owners of the mall with Taurus), and Steve Samuals (owner of the site that Ikea later bought).

Less than a week later, on May 22, 1999 over 150 resident sacrificed an entire Saturday to voice their opinion about the future of Mystic View through the community urban design charrette. MVTF organized the day into three educational presentations each followed by small
group working sessions. Organizers used the first two small group sessions more as a means to initiate the thought-generating process than of soliciting design ideas. Organizers asked participants to name adjectives describing the Mystic View Site and describe their favorite area of Mystic View. Later participants discussed what they would like from the future of the site through the question, “If you went to a reunion on this site in the year 2025, describe what you hope the site will be like then.”

After presenting financial analysis demonstrating to residents that something other than “big box” retail was feasible for this waterfront location, the visual “idea starters” proved effective in freeing up the minds of residents encouraging them to imagine what they would want from the site. This analysis-made-simple empowered lay community residents to better assess what they wanted for the site. Participants again broke into small groups to create their own designs for the Mystic View site. Each group received a base map of the site, tracing paper, drawing utensils, and sample cutout land uses and building types.

“It was an opportunity to interact with designers for many people who had never even met a planner or an architect. The charrette was filled with people learning about what they can and can’t do. It was an incredibly educational event,” recalled Wig Zamore, one of the organizers. “It is hard for people to imagine land transformations without designs. Designs can help people break through and better understand a site. We used the idea starters to free up people’s minds with possibilities.”

“Table 9 imagined a self-contained village complete with an arts magnet school in what is now Assembly Square. ‘There could be dense urban buildings close to the highway, and then residential as you get into the site, and then green space along the river,’ suggested Erna Koich... The aim of the 5-hour meeting was to educate residents on the realities of the site and solicit ideas for what the community wants to see at Somerville’s final frontier... Participants discussed what they want to see at the 130-acre site as if there were no private interests interfering with their planning.”

Reported the Somerville Journal a few days later.
Finally groups came up with their visions for the Mystic View Site.

To the right are two different land use plans that residents came up with. Both have a substantial increase in green space and water flowing onto the site.
MVTF listed the following outcomes that they hoped the charrette would produce. They achieved all of them

1. Participants feel informed about the Mystic View Site.
2. Community visions are brought back to the Mystic View Task Force “Design Subgroup” for refinement and further development.
3. A report is published and disseminated throughout the city, including the media, charrette participants, local, state and federal government elected officials, and various government agencies.
4. Key groups, elected officials and other community associations continue to be informed.
5. An ongoing community process evolves, with participants invited to continue.

The most valuable result of the process was not to design a specific concrete alternative, but to demonstrate that something other than big box was possible for the site; community residents did not want big box development; and the City should embark on a master planning study for the site, thinking carefully about development options before making a mistake on a very valuable area of land.

Resident participants expressed certain land use desires through their designs. Quite noticeably, green space and waterfront access was central to all of the plans. Many plans had water flowing into the site with large green networks throughout the area. The plans all called for varying types of mixed use development. Many of the plans had cultural themes including a visual and performing arts center or a redevelopment of the Assembly Square Mall building into artist space. All of the plans retained the Assembly Square building, presumably because of its historic significance and the opportunity it therefore creates.

However the most telling aspect of the designs is not what went on the participant’s vision plans, but what did not. Not a single plan added “big box” development and all the plans called for a virtual end to “big box” on the site, even though organizers of the charrette specifically included cut out buildings representing “big box” retail to give to participants. The desires and aspirations of the community proved to conflict with both the current developers and what the city government was allowing by their silence.

According to OHCD Director Steve Post and facilitator at the charrette, although most observ-
ers did not see the charrette as producing real designs for serious consideration, the charrette effectively raised expectations as to what could be planned for this site. The visual representation backed up by real numbers of financial return demonstrated that something other than big box could be developed for this site and the city should push for higher use of the land because it was in Somerville’s best interest to do so.

**August 25th meeting**

The developers were never fully bought into the citywide community design process. Three months after the successful design charrette, National Development and Taurus Investment held a public meeting to present their plans for the re-development of the defunct Assembly Square Mall. The August 25th meeting was a watershed (excuse the pun) in MVTF’s development as it pushed the MVTF to use their process and findings as an advocacy tool to now react to a development proposal.

At the August 25th meeting, Taurus and National walked into a well organized, motivated and informed community and shocked 200 residents and elected officials with a development plan that was exactly what the community had already said that they did not want. They further antagonized many residents with an effort to separate it from its history through renaming the site, and ignoring suggestions that the community presented through design proposals following the charrette. Following the presentation over 30 residents commented on the plan. The reactions ranged from very angry disagreement to simply frustrated disagreement. According to Pat Jehlen, the renderings of beautiful Home Depots, Big Ks, and giant entrance archways only served to further insult the community.

National Development of New England and Taurus Investment are joint venture partners in the redevelopment of the Assembly Square Mall. Throughout the night Jack O’Neil from National Development and Peter Merrigan from Taurus Investments explained their constraints. First K-Mart has 75-year lease (with 55 years remaining) in the Assembly Square Mall that calls for only retail development on the mall site. Second, soil pollution precludes many of the ideas that the community had. These constraints almost became excuses to why the site is now and is always destined to be a “big box” retail site.
Initially the MVTF hoped for a strong developer-community partnership. “I had a 40-minute conversation with a guy [from National Development] which I thought was pretty positive. We want to be involved early in the process. I think he was really receptive to that,” said John Rossi back in October 1998. However in the year since that conversation there was little contact with the developers and no warning from property owners that they would propose big-box development. In fact, the developers refused to discuss their plans until the time of the August 25th meeting.

One of the defining moments of the night came towards the end of the night when Cecily Miller, Executive Director of the Somerville Arts Council stepped to the microphone to offer her reaction.

“Your reality is what you make of it. You are defining the possible with the least amount of imagination and effort I can imagine... You don’t have any plans for the waterfront park even though you are going to rename the whole development ‘River-side Square’, but gee you haven’t really, you know, fleshed that out yet [how you can get to the river] (laugh). And to say that you know nothing about Cambridge Side Galleria Mall? I mean you are developers and you know nothing about this award-winning project just down the street (loud applause). I think Somerville has gotten to the point where it will not accept that kind of treatment (applause).

One statement I found really intolerable is that you said you are dealing in reality, not dreams (sign of obvious disgust). Nothing in this world of value has been created by people who deal in the lowest possible outcome and not dreams. One obvious example is Christopher Columbus...”

The reaction throughout the community was similar and summed up by Alderman White in the Boston Globe, “National must not be aware of Somerville’s psyche,” White said. “For years, the city was known as Slumerville and we’ve made great strides in the last few decades. But putting in a Building 19 - the lowest of the low-end retail store - without warning is viewed as a slap in the face.”

However at this point the developers still were not convinced that the community could really stimulate the developers to make any changes to their proposal. “I understand townspeople wanting what’s best for their city and believing they have the best solution,” O’Neil said. “But private companies are unwilling to invest in a citizens group who may have ideas but no authority to make things happen.”
Cecil Group Process

If it was not already apparent, it was clear following this meeting that the City needed to hire an outside consultant to devise a master plan supported by a revised urban revitalization plan. This was still not an easy decision though. Somerville had never really attempted any meaningful planning process nor had they hired an outside consultant to devise a site plan. 28

Residents weighed in on the idea pushing the city to increase its efforts even more. “To be effective the scale of such a plan must match the scale of the site’s potential. From these examples we know that adequate scale would cost $1-2 million, a paltry sum compared to the site’s $30 million per year net-revenue potential. A $125,000 planning investment would yield a corresponding meager sum. 29 Yet the city felt $150,000, the final amount for the planning study, amounted to all they could afford.

The city sent out a request for proposals and organized a selection committee, including Wig Zamore representing the Mystic View Task Force on the selection committee. However, the city realized that they also needed the support of the site owners.

"Mayor Kelly Gay convened a summit in September 1999 that included 15 landlords who own property at Assembly Square. She asked them to delay construction until the city completes a master plan. National Development and Taurus said they never agreed to delay construction for six months. But the mayor and other residents understood that the companies would wait until the planning process was complete before submitting a revised plan, according to Wig Zamore, a Mystic View Task Force member who attended the meeting." 30

Regardless of what people remember from that meeting, Taurus and National Development have since decided to hold off on development as a sign of good will to the City and to respect the planning process. 31

In response to the city's request for proposals in the fall of 1999, nine were sent in. Four proposals stood out, and made a final round for interviews - Goody Clancy, Bluestone Group, Frederic Harris (led by Rebecca Barnes) and the Cecil Group. According to Wig Zamore, Goody Clancy and Bluestone wrote the best proposals and had the most vision. Cecil had the most well organized group with experience working together, and was the only group that
agreed to re-write the urban redevelopment plan. In the end the Cecil Group was selected. “I was concerned with the city’s final decision to trade off vision capability for process and production capability,” recalled Wig Zamore. According to Steve Post, the Cecil Group seemed to have the ability and history of working well together (the group consisted of several firms) and could provide the most for the city’s money.\textsuperscript{32}

The Cecil Group, from the outset appeared to make their job difficult by failing to recognize the extent of the MVTF’s work. Almost disregarding the community participation that already occurred, the Cecil Group started the process entirely from the beginning. Throughout the process they solicited community input (which turned out to be identical to the issues coming out of the design charrette), and set out to educate a very educated community about a site they already knew a lot about. For the first several months it appeared to Somerville residents and activists that the Cecil Group was doing absolutely nothing. By early February they had produced only four “bubble diagrams” (as Anne Tate referred to them) and a perception of community vision that missed the point. The bubble diagrams showed no real connection with the river. Moreover the bubble diagrams only served to

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\textit{Option 1}

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\textit{Option 2}

\textit{Above:} Two of the diagrams the the Cecil Group presented
dis-empower the community. With no sense of scale, no renderings of potential outcomes, no design aspect at all, residents and planners alike had little success trying to assess what these diagram represented.

On February 14th, before the Cecil Group presented its diagrams to the public, Anne Tate looked at the plan in disgust and expressed what was on a lot of residents’ minds. “The Mystic View Task Force generated stuff far more interesting than Cecil Group has yet - and after three months of planning and a lot of money paid by the city. What they offer is not a design; it is a vague land use plan. People can't get a sense of what this really means. There are no pictures, no analogues.”

On February 19th the Boston Globe published an article highly critical of the work produced by the Cecil Group. The Globe quoted community members lamenting the process from both disappointment that the plan did not represent their concerns, and the inability to understand what the diagrams actually represented.

While residents applauded efforts of The Cecil Group Inc., a Boston-based consultant, to create a mixed-use urban design for the 145-acre parcel known as “Mystic View,” some criticized the plan at a recent community meeting, charging it failed to provide jobs, green space and use of the Mystic River. “Where are the high-paying high-tech jobs?” asked Walter Mattos, a longtime resident. “Somerville needs jobs where people can elevate themselves and not spend the rest of their lives as cashiers. We can provide good jobs here, but what I see is minimum-wage jobs and development that will offer nothing but traffic.”

“The Cecil Group finally received a wake-up call” commented one local official. Residents in Somerville were well organized and watching this process very closely. More importantly though, residents had been through a design process already for this site and not only came out of it very well educated and empowered, but with very high expectations of what a land use plan and design should look like.

The next meeting on March 15th was entirely different. The Cecil Group came to the meeting prepared. In all, they presented over ten renderings demonstrating what they were proposing in their land use plan, and potential heights, FAR, parking and traffic implications for various uses. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Lawrence Paolella, Treasurer of the Mystic
View Task Force voice his approval during the meeting by commenting that “Finally we have something that will allow residents to say ‘I am proud to live in Somerville’”.

Above: Cecil Group rendering of a bike path along the river.

**Design as a Form of Advocacy**

The distinguishing aspect of the Mystic View Task Force that sets it apart from many similar struggles is its overt usage of design as an advocacy tool to fight off an unwanted land use—“big box” retail. One representation of this usage appeared in an editorial to the Somerville Journal where a MVTF member explained the group’s plan and asked community to compare it to what the Cecil Group produces.

Chris Proulx listed the following suggested “questions in evaluating the plan”:

1) *How much additional net tax revenue will the plan generate for the city?* The intensive mixed use that we envision would generate $50 million in new taxes and require $10 million in service and $10 million in annual capital financing for an increased net tax revenue of $30 million per year.

2) *How many acres of usable open green space would be created by the plan?* Our vision would set aside an additional 30 acres for a total of 45 acres, close to one-third of the site...
10) *Can you understand the plan? As residents and business owners, you should be able to understand the plan’s language and concepts and be able to participate in shaping the most important Somerville development since the construction of I-93.*

Throughout the Cecil Group process, the residents came prepared to comment through their experience of already participating in a design process or seeing a presentation. Their efforts overall had a large impact on the direction of the Cecil Group’s plan. In fact all of the suggestions that Anne Tate made at the February meeting, such as more pedestrian friendly block sizes, stronger connections to surrounding areas, and more visual representations through analogues or renderings of what is proposed in the plans, were then all incorporated for the March 14th meeting.

The Mystic View Task Force also understood the need for a community organizing strategy to compliment the design process and product. The design charrette would have been simply an academic exercise if not for the work of activist minded individuals. Lawrence Paolella, the Treasurer of the Mystic View Task Force, along with a few other members networked with city and state officials, business leaders, academic institutions, as well as sought out a large cross section of stakeholders to involve in the process. The very basics of nightly phone conversations with members and many community leaders served to enhance the process. The Mystic View Task Force used urban design as a central feature of a very complete organizing strategy.

In the Mystic View Task Force process elected officials, urban design professionals, business leaders and community organizers all work well together combining their very different personalities to create hope for a better land use future for Somerville. Although organizing centered on urban design as a tool, urban design professionals are not controlling the process. This is apparent from the organizing strategy and the fact that the official leadership - the Board of Directors is made up of entirely non-urban design professional residents.

**Effect on Urban Form**

The future development outcome never looked promising for the Mystic View Task Force. The reality that continuously surfaces in the media is that the city does not own this site. While private ownership should not inhibit a city from long term planning it creates a barrier for implementing a vision if that the site owners and developers do not share vision. This is a key point.
The community disagreement with Taurus, National Development and other landowners has not changed. While the city and residents believe that office and R&D will locate to Assembly Square, developers still believe that this site remains merely a market for big box development and big box remains the most profitable use now and in the long term.

According to Steve Post, “In the planning process for the Seaport District, property owners bought into the idea that Seaport will be the next office district. Here owners just can not see that.” As Jack O’Neil, Vice President of National Development reminded the community in news articles, “The ultimate decision will be determined by market forces.” Throughout the process Taurus and National consistently reminded the public that “market forces” would determine what would locate to the site. In other words it appears that the developers are wedded to the idea of “big box” retail development.

However it is inaccurate to suggest that there has been no developer buy-in. In fact Peter Merrigan, the controlling interest in the mall site as well as the Good Time Emporium Building believes the mixed-use development that the Cecil Group now proposes can happen. However, as Peter Merrigan point out, the plan depends on a new T stop. “I think if a T stop is on the site, there is nothing in the plan that can’t be achieved. But without a T stop the city has to deal with present day realities.”

Other than the K-Mart lease and pollution clean up costs, Ikea recently bought 17 acres of land along the river to build a large regional retail store, creating further constraints and barriers to implementing the resident’s
vision. Residents believe that the proposed Ikea development would undermine an effective master plan. Developments that would achieve the site’s real potential will not locate next to a big box retail enclave.33

The city can overcome some of these obstacles and the problem of not having a T stop on the site, with some political will. It appears from previous statements and actions that the city has bought into the Mystic View Task Force vision for the site. However it remains to be seen whether or not the new Mayor has the strength and character to push for change. However as Lawrence Paolella stated at the August 25th meeting where the developers presented their plan, “Mayors come and go, the community will always be here. You need to deal with us.”

At minimum future development of this site will be greatly improved by the input and sharp critiques of the citizenry. Already Taurus development proposed a mixed use “compromise” that will open strong connections with the waterfront, but will allow for Home Depot to move from its current location at Mystic View to the mall (see Afterward). Even Peter Merrigan from Taurus Development remarked that, “Overall this process has been helpful in getting people to look at the river more creatively.” Connections to the river remained the driving force behind MVTF’s efforts throughout the process. If the Mystic View Task Force continues to use strong community organizing tactics, then the city will find it unacceptable to allow big box development that will inhibit other higher end uses over the longer term. Current zoning allows for big box retail. However, as the Cecil Group revises the City’s Urban Renewal Plan for the site, they will recommend zoning changes and design guidelines. If MVTF continues to organize well, the city will pass zoning changes that will represent the wishes of the community and promote more dense mixed-use development that creates jobs for the City and allows for increased open space.

For Somerville a precedent has now been set where residents will no longer accept minimal development scenarios. Activists are now galvanizing to change Union Square. A community that was previously excluded from the planning and development process has now taken the process over, claiming it for themselves. The days of stealth development are over.
Notes

1 Interview with Christy Chase, 2/17/00
2 The group of residents that are advising the Somerville government on the planning process
3 A proposal by Alderman White for a moratorium on development in early 1998
4 Mystic View Task Force Meeting, February 22, 2000, Somerville Police Station
5 Mystic View: The Last Frontier, Mystic View Task Force, June 1999
6 Assembly Square Walking Tour Brochure, Mystic View Task Force
7 Mystic View: The Last Frontier, Mystic View Task Force, June 1999
8 Interview with Pat Jehlen, 3/2/2000
9 ibid.
10 Ben Geman; Developing Concerns; Destination Somerville: Somerville Business Outlook 1998; Spring 1998
11 Dorothy Pomerantz; Assembly Square on the Brink; Somerville Journal; City Side; August 6, 1998
12 Interview with Stave Post, Housing and Economic Development Director for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000
13 Interview with Anne Tate, 2/14/2000
14 Mystic View: The Last Frontier, Mystic View Task Force, June 1999
15 Bill Shelton, City Needs Master Plan to Maximize Potential at Assembly Square; Somerville Journal, September 23, 1999
16 Letter to the National Neighborhood Coalition, Wig Zamore, October 31, 1999
17 ibid.
18 Dorothy Pomerantz; Vision Unveiled for Assembly Square: Group Proposes Long-Range Planning for the Site; Somerville Journal, March 18th, 1999
19 Mystic View: The Last Frontier, Mystic View Task Force, June 1999
20 Interview with Wig Zamore, 2/17/2000
21 Dorothy Pomerantz; Assembly Square Vision Grows; Somerville Journal, City Side; 5/27/1999
22 Interview with Steve Post, Director of the Office of Housing and Commercial Development for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000
23 Interview with Pat Jehlen, 3/2/2000
24 Dorothy Pomerantz, National Buys Mall for $18.8m; Somerville Journal, Oct. 15, 1998
25 August 25th Meeting, Video tape
26 Thomas Grillo; Community Group Battles Developer; Big Stores Planned at Somerville Mall Site; The Boston Globe; 8/21/99
27 Sarah Fishman; *Somerville Site is Focus of Debate; 140-Acre site is ripe for Development*; *The Boston Globe*; August 21, 1999

28 Interview with Steve Post, Director of the Office of Housing and Commercial Development for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000

29 Bill Shelton, *City Needs Master Plan to Maximize Potential at Assembly Square*; *Somerville Journal*, September 23, 1999

30 Thomas Grillo; *Future of Somerville Parcel Still in Question*; *The Boston Globe*; December 11, 1999

REAL ESTATE

31 Interview with Peter Merrigan, Vice President of Taurus Investment, 3/21/2000

32 Interview with Steve Post, Director of the Office of Housing and Commercial Development for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000

33 Interview with Anne Tate, 2/14/2000


35 Chris Proulx; *Questions To Ask About Assembly Square*; *Somerville Journal*, February 10, 2000

36 Interview with Pat Jehlen, 3/2/2000

37 Interview with Anne Tate, 2/14/2000

38 Mystic View Task Force Meeting 4/6/00

39 Interview with Peter Merrigan, Vice President of Taurus Investment, 3/21/2000

40 Interview with Steve Post, Director of the Office of Housing and Commercial Development for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000


42 Interview with Peter Merrigan, Vice President of Taurus Investment, 3/21/2000

43 Bill Shelton, *City Needs Master Plan to Maximize Potential at Assembly Square*; *Somerville Journal*, September 23, 1999

44 Interview with Peter Merrigan, Vice President of Taurus Investment, 3/21/2000.
Chapter 3 - Community Design Cases and Literature

The development of the Mystic View Task Force exemplifies an exciting and effective way for organizations to conceive of land use struggles. It also suggests a way for organizations caught in the cycle of reactive organizing to shift toward more proactive long-term efforts. MVTF saw an opportunity to advocate for a new community vision at the Mystic View site and then reacted to an unacceptable development proposal by preparing their own proactive visions. However, the Mystic View Task Force is but one example, and one that is not demographically representative of most community organizations. Their proximity to two of the nation's most prestigious architecture and design schools - Harvard and MIT no doubt made an impact. Much of the leadership of MVTF was trained and/or taught at these schools. Can organizations that are not located in communities with these resources successfully make this transition? Perhaps they can, but as I will discuss, resources for the design process are essential.

West Harlem Environmental Action, Harlem

The Mystic View model is not limited to just neighborhoods with high profile and well educated urban design professionals. The use of urban design as a proactive advocacy tool has been employed in other settings as well. Probably the most demographically different example of this comes in the form of a recent effort by West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT) to advocate for environmental health in their neighborhood.

West Harlem Environmental Action was founded in 1988 by a small group of residents concerned with public health impacts of environmental pollution in their neighborhood. Peggy Sheppard, co-founder and Executive Director first became aware of environmental health issues as a candidate for district leader in the mid 1980s when a campaign volunteer voiced concern about improper government management of the North River Sewage Treatment Plant. "I started to see that the community was being used as a dumping ground. We needed to institutionalize a voice in the community. At the same time the city wanted to site a bus depot in a densely populated and heavily trafficked area that was across from an intermediate school and a large housing development. So we decided to file a lawsuit in opposition to the plan." WE ACT quickly evolved into an environmental justice organization with a mission to empower Harlem...
residents to become more active in shaping local environmental decisions.

Up until 1998 WE ACT used legal advocacy, public education and community organizing as its primary organizing tools for improved public health. Land use struggles simply reacted to proposed development proposals. In 1998 however, the EPA sent out a request for proposals for stakeholders to conduct community-planning processes. At the same time the Department of Energy’s Sustainable Development Program also had a similar grant available. WE ACT decided to apply.

“For the last three years I served as a founder and Steering Committee member of the Hudson Parks Alliance, a group dedicated to creating community parks along the waterfront and better pedestrian access. We had recently advocated for a park below 59th St., so I was very alert to waterfront park facilities and access issues. I thought, why not here in Harlem?” recalled Peggy Sheppard. WE ACT drew upon Peggy Sheppard’s experience on the Steering Committee of the Hudson Parks Alliance for ideas. Both the EPA and DOE initially rejected WE ACT for funding, in 1998, but later DOE assisted WE ACT in developing a proposal for Harlem Piers that received funding the next year.

Harlem Piers is the area along the Hudson River in Manhattan between 130th and 134th streets. Currently the site is occupied by a Fairway Supermarket and mostly parking along the waterfront.
WE ACT used the grant money, all $35,000, to hire planning consultant Mitch Silver in the Spring of 1999, who was formerly in charge of Ruth Messinger’s (Manhattan Borough President) Uptown Office, and who also had recently completed a community planning process. WE ACT then organized a Steering Committee from various stakeholders in the community, businesses as well as activists. Shortly after receiving the grant, the City Economic Development Corporation informed WE ACT that they had put out a request for proposals to develop this site. At first WE ACT was disappointed and not sure if they should move forward with the project. In the end they decided to try and influence any development ideas that came out of the RFP process through the community’s eventual designs.

With a new urgency driving them, WE ACT organized a community wide meeting for March 13, 1999 to give out information on the idea of creating a plan for the waterfront, establish a process and begin planning for a day-long design charrette. To organize the initial community meeting WE ACT used various mailing lists and sent out nearly 4,000 announcements. 200 people responded and 150 attended the initial meeting. WE ACT presented their vision of a new Harbor Piers with a potential waterfront park in order to get residents to start thinking about “what can be done to our waterfront?” At the meeting residents demanded that WE ACT open the steering committee to whom ever wanted to participate. 10 additional slots were added, including representatives from Fairway, the chain supermarket along the river.

The stated goals of the design process were to:

1. Transfer the jurisdiction of the riverfront property to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to create a park along the riverfront for passive recreation;

2. Promote a vibrant wholesale and retail marketplace with family entertainment, art, cultural, and environmental educational uses;

3. Improve traffic and pedestrian circulation to minimize conflict and increase safety as well as increase parking opportunities for businesses in the area;

4. Establish connections to the newly formed bus stop plaza to take advantage of the proposed ferry and alternative transportation services;
5. Preserve natural resources, habitats and view corridors;

6. Use special lighting to highlight the unique character of the area; and

7. Preserve and promote the architectural and historic character of the area.  

The community design charrette was held on April 10, 1999. Similar to the Mystic View charrette, WE ACT organized the day into educational sessions and a small group design activity. Architects and planners, some from the community, some volunteers from outside, led the small design group sessions. A representative from Fairway led one small design group. The plans almost universally called for a waterfront park. No one really called for increased commercial development.

Following the design charrette the steering committee looked at common and unique components of the small group visions and decided by consensus vote on which aspects to include in an integrated plan. Thomas Basley and Associates, a local design firm, drafted sketches and renderings. The Steering Committee then organized a follow up meeting in May to give residents an opportunity to make comments on the compilation plan - to ensure that the Steering Committee included all essential aspects.
The ultimate goal of the process was to have the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation adopt the plan and take control of the land. Currently the City Economic Development Corporation controls the land. With economic development as the City’s sole goal for the site, the City Economic Development Corporation currently has no reason to build and manage a waterfront park.

In the search for a development opportunity Mayor Guiliani of New York proposed a hotel on the site after, following the community design process. WE ACT organized a post card campaign specifically pushing for the adoption of the community plan - which did not include a hotel. “Mayor Guiliani tried to put a hotel on this site and we used the urban design plan to reject it. Guiliani tried to compromise, but there is no compromise, either you build a hotel or you don’t and our plan showed we didn’t want a hotel. Now the Borough President is looking at
how they can use what we have done to start a more thorough planning process for the area. 5

"explained Dennis Derryk, the Co-Chairman of WE ACT and a professor of non-profit management and urban planning at the New School in New York. Three weeks ago the city decided to pull back its request for development proposals for the site.

This model of proactive organizing really comes out of a tradition that can be seen in organizations like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) and Community Development Corporations. Here too, residents concerned with community deterioration, and a desire to move from reactive to proactive organizing, largely through the use of urban design, visioning and planning, started processes that turned into organizations.

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Roxbury

DSNI is one of the most well documented examples of proactive community organizing and planning in the country. Part of what makes DSNI so interesting is that the Dudley neighborhood is one of the poorest in the country and before the establishment of DSNI one of the least empowered. A racist system of local economics and governance thwarted several efforts to organize and create social capital leaving the Roxbury community (predominantly people of color) without any control over the continually deteriorating neighborhood. 6 Local social service agencies could achieve only marginal success in reacting to poverty, displacement and environmental wreckage.

In the early 1980s, just prior to the establishment of DSNI, vacant lots and illegal dumping littered the landscape throughout the community. "Approximately 840 vacant lots covering 177 acres were scattered about the Dudley area. These lots attracted all sorts of unwanted, if not illicit, activities from midnight dumping of hazardous waste to drug dealing, and they served as the breeding ground for rats. The Boston Redevelopment Authority, evaluating neighborhood conditions in the 1970s, warned that 'abandonment, if allowed to proceed unchecked, can spread like cancer, taking whole city blocks'", writes environmental lawyer Bill Shutkin. 7

DSNI is a good example of an organization that successfully moved from reactive to proactive organizing. Although arguably, DSNI started with and always carried a long-term vision of neighborhood planning and community design, their initial campaign reacted to vacant lots used
by the city and state as dumping grounds. DSNI waged a campaign _Don't dump on us_ to stop this, where they policed the area and cleaned up vacant lots. They then moved from stopping illegal dumping, to “what can we now do with these vacant lots.”

According to Peter Mendoff and Holly Sklar, in their book _Streets of Hope_, the MIT studio led by Tunney Lee in 1981 for La Alianza Hispana contributed to this proactive strategy. The studio’s report, _From the Ground Up_, “emphasized the need to build on the strengths of community residents and agencies, organize residents around immediate needs and reclaim the vacant land as a ‘potential asset’ by cleaning it up and putting the open space to use as urban gardens, parks and play areas.”

DSNI followed this strategy. They went from the reactive organizing campaign to a long-term proactive planning and design strategy of land reclamation through expressing what they wanted. “DSNI turned the traditional top-down urban planning process on its head. Instead of struggling to influence a process driven by city government, Dudley residents and agencies became visionaries, creating their own bottom-up “urban village” redevelopment plan and built an unprecedented partnership with the city to implement it.”

In April of 1986, DSNI informed the Public Facilities Department, the municipal agency that helped DSNI stop illegal dumping in Roxbury, that they would create a design and development plan for the area. In June DSNI and the Public Facilities Department reached an agreement for a
moratorium on the disposition of city-owned vacant land. The agreement was a necessary step to prevent private developers from preempting the community design process.

At the time when DSNI started organizing, the Boston Globe started to report on both DSNI’s planning and redevelopment strategy as well as a development plan proposed by the BRA. As a result, the fear of land speculation and further displacement increased. When DSNI started in the 1980s, members often voiced the sentiment, “we don’t want to be another South End”, referring to the fear of gentrification. 

In July 1986, DSNI sent out a request for proposals to conduct a community planning and design process, backed by $123,000 in funding mostly from the Riley Foundation and Hyams Trust. A central aspect of the RFP called for strong community participation in the process. After selecting the Washington Based firm, DAC International, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and DAC International organized a planning retreat to “clarify roles and expectations, review the board’s vision for the future, and identify neighborhood assets and develop opportunities and constraints.”

DSNI set up a planning committee to manage the project. Although committee members had no real experience with planning or design they grew with the process and provided the necessary input. Part of the DAC mission was to educate the community so residents could make more informed development decisions. They organized community meetings to do this. According to
Mendoff and Sklar, “In one particularly effective exchange, the consultants graphically showed how a low income neighborhood of 15,000 people, with a per capita annual income of $4,000 actually translated into an economy of $60 million dollars (1987 dollars). The message: The Dudley Street Neighborhood may be poor, and it may have lots of problems, but it also has enormous assets and resources that have never been tapped.13”

Once the community articulated planning ideas and visions, Stull and Lee, an architecture and design firm based in Boston that DSNI hired, organized a series of design charrettes. “At the charrettes, designers and architects began to sketch out the kind of neighborhood the residents were describing in words. The June Charrettes - two evenings and one all-day Saturday - were held over a one-week period at the Orchard Park Community Center in Roxbury.

At the charrettes, Stull and Lee started with educational presentations and then broke down those present into small groups where they translated verbal visions into land use drawings on the wall. They then used these drawings to create design proposals for the Dudley neighborhood. Out of this process, the idea of an “Urban Village” emerged. The Urban Village was, in effect, a design solution to the combined development visions of the safe community that residents expressed. The Urban Village vision remains the rallying point and focus of DSNI’s efforts today.

After DSNI completed the planning process, the next step was to seek out full government buy-in for the urban design plan - for the city to adopt it as their own. With a strong organizing campaign, DSNI’s plan received the endorsement of Mayor Flynn.

After DSNI’s plan received government endorsement, implementation became the next step. DSNI had an advantage over many other community struggles - the financial backing from the Riley foundation, and by this time many other funders. DSNI, through the use of strong community organizing and legal assistance struggled, and in a landmark decision won the right to take eminent domain over areas of land, under Chapter 121A of the Massachusetts State Statutes.

This decision marked an extremely important victory because it allowed the residents to totally bypass the next step of achieving developer buy-in for the plan. DSNI now became the developer and had the means to implement the plan.

As Mayor Flynn described the city’s decision years later, ‘If you want to build a solid founda-
tion for an organization, or house, you’re better of [starting] from the basement up… and the foundation of this whole effort is really people power. Government, should be on the side of people trying to improve their neighborhoods, not telling people in the neighborhoods what they should do or what they can’t achieve.”14

**West Broadway Development Corporation**15

Sherri Blake, in her article *Inner City Community Development Toward an Effective Community-Government Partnership*, maps out another model for using urban design to move towards more proactive organizing. The West Broadway Development Corporation, a community development corporation in Winnipeg, was born out of this dilemma.

Throughout most of this century the West Broadway area had been a lower middle class residential neighborhood close to the University of Winnipeg. The area carried a family atmosphere until the early 1970s when the government built the Trans-Canada Highway, severing West Broadway from neighboring communities. While commercial activity grew from the highway construction in other areas, West Broadway started to rapidly decline.

One of the largest problems was the city’s refusal to make any policy on rooming houses, leading to a rapid change in the housing stock and demographics. “A private school for girls, located on the river side of the neighborhood, reacted to the perception of a neighborhood in decline by erecting an eight foot fence around its property. This reinforced the separation between the privileged inside and the poor outside. By the mid-1990s, the local press began to characterize the area as ‘Murders Half-Acre’, a term that the neighborhood residents felt was unfair and potentially damaging to their on-going efforts to halt decline.”16

In 1996, residents, with the expressed intent of moving beyond reacting to local government zoning, lack of rooming house policy and unfair perceptions, decided to become more proactive in their organizing. “A few residents following up on a particularly heated battle over a proposal to locate yet another group home in the neighborhood, discussed the need for a more proactive organization that could address real structural change for the existing residents, many of whom were disenfranchised.”17
They established the West Broadway Alliance with the West Broadway Development Corporation as its legal arm. WBA emerged into a coalition of over sixty community organizations. River access and a walkway into the community became a central issue of concern to the West Broadway Alliance.

In 1998 the city decided to build a dock on the edge of West Broadway as part of a plan for a system of docks connecting waterfront neighborhoods. The community resisted the proposal for several reasons. First, the city located the dock close to a public school and on a site where a child had recently drowned. Second, the community residents felt that this location raised a number of neighborhood safety issues because of its isolated setting and total removal from areas of existing activity. Finally, the location, on the edge of the neighborhood, was too far from the West Broadway business district and would not attract people into the community, but would allow boat passengers to bypass the area altogether.

“To assist the community in getting control over this externally imposed project, the [design consultant] provided community design assistance, explaining the consequences of potential choices yet allowing the community to shape the outcome. Ideally this process should have been treated as a mentoring opportunity for building community design skills within the community.” Once the West Broadway Alliance had determined their desired site and had identified their community building goals for the project, they prepared a report and organized a meeting located in the community with municipal planning officials. At the meeting the design consultant presented the results of the community design process then let the community argue their case.

The community led design and planning process resulted in a first time victory for local residents in achieving a change in site location and land use to address the goals identified during the community design process. This process also represented a first for the community in establishing a more equal internal-external partnership in the planning process with city officials, who they traditionally considered their adversaries.

Casper, Wyoming

The 1998 community design charrette organized by citizens in Casper, Wyoming provides an example of residents needing to find a quick solution for a piece of polluted land - a site that
AMOCO decided to vacate on the edge of the city in prime real estate. Environmental clean up of the site became the primary concern of residents. Their concern stemmed from a similar struggle in Casper where a polluted site was litigated for over 15 years and clean up had still not been completed. Residents' concerns centered around the damage that this polluted land in a prime real estate location would have on economic revitalization.

In this case residents organized a two-pronged strategy. First, several people living and working adjacent to the site filed a lawsuit claiming property damage from the pollution. The judge issued a ruling in favor of the residents that AMOCO would have to clean up the site. Second, after a suggestion by the Environmental Protection Agency, the government body in charge of overseeing clean up, local residents organized a design charrette to advocate for what they thought should go on the site.

Time constraints from the EPA process caused severe limitations to the design charrette. Despite this, organizers successfully used the design process to establish a vision to advocate on behalf of. Organizers sought participation through a process of self-nomination. A large group of resident stakeholders selected 21 participants. The participants, calling themselves the “Homework Group” met almost every night for two weeks to hear presentations on land use, pollution and site constraints. They used the process to educate themselves on feasible options and then met for two days to create a vision for the site.

After the “Homework Group” created a verbal vision, a design group, including architects, planners, developers and landscape architects, drafted three visual designs. The Homework Group then opened the designs up for comment for revisions. City and county officials then used the designs as a negotiating starting point with AMOCO. The negotiation process led to an agreement between AMOCO and Casper where AMOCO would provide a compensation package to the city in the form of a rescue plan for their site. Among the uses agreed on for the large parcel were a site for performing arts, a botanical garden, sports fields and an industrial park. The agreement also included additional funds and other assistance specifically geared toward making sure that the new uses would protect the environment and human health. AMOCO then negotiated an agreement with the EPA to streamline the environmental clean up process thereby saving themselves time and money and ensuring a quicker implementation of the residents’ design vision.
Riverside South, Upper West Side, NY

Riverside South represents a process that formed a unique partnership between civic groups and a developer - Donald Trump, after a campaign through civic design advocacy. This case is particularly interesting because it exemplifies how opposition organizations were able to use urban design specifically as an advocacy tool for proactive organizing and capture the support of a wide audience through well done comparative renderings.

The final approved plan for the Riverside South development consisted of 5,700 apartments, a 1.8 million square foot television studio, space for neighborhood shops and cultural groups, and a 21.5-acre, $63 million extension of Riverside Park. The plan was a long time in the making and is currently in the beginning phases of actual development. In 1985, "Trump announced plans for an 18.6 million square foot Television City development. In addition to housing and offices, the design by Chicago architect Helmut Jhan included new studios for NBC and a 150 story skyscraper, the world’s tallest building."

According to Linda Davidoff, at the time, the Director of the Parks Council, "The world’s tallest building as part of a row of high-rises would forever barricade the city from its waterfront, interrupting the green line of riverfront park developed in the past by Fredrick Law Olmsted and Robert Moses."

A neighborhood group, Westpride, hired environmental planner Daniel Gutman to fight what
was then known as Trump City. “He decided the best strategy would be to move from reacting to the proposal to proposing an alternative. Westpride drafted a design calling for the highway to be rebuilt inland, for the west side of the site become a park and developed in the Upper West Side’s traditional block pattern with row houses and low- to mid-rise apartment buildings. From there Gutman and Westpride approached the Parks Council.”

With an impressive rendering to show, other groups, and later the local media, then joined in giving their support for the plan. However meetings with city officials remained unproductive. ‘They couldn’t image moving the highway.” Barwick, president of the Municipal Arts Council says.

According to the development plan, Trump needed a rezoning that would, among other things, allow higher density and a modification of building bulk limits. Without government or developer buy-in to the civic group’s design plan, the opposition organizations, then joined by the Riverside Park Fund and the National Resource Defense Council found a court case to prevent approval of Trump’s plan. The opposition groups sued to stop the state from proceeding with reconstruction of the crum-
bling viaduct on the Trump site - a project that would make it hard to justify moving the highway inland at a later date.27

With years of lawsuits ahead and mounting public pressure, combined with a crash in the real estate market, Trump allowed the civic groups to become the new project designers. “I think he was attracted to the idea of being in a situation where he was not the public enemy number one. He saw instinctively that there was something terrific about this, that a national story would emerge.” Recalled Kent Barwick.28 Trump agreed to adopt the alternative-planning concept and drop the project’s density to 8.3 million square feet and the civic groups agreed to support the project and to drop their lawsuit against the viaduct reconstruction.

Afterwards, due to further community resistance from other groups and residents that were, for one reason or another, left out of the process, additional deals had to be negotiated enhancing the plan for the public’s benefit. The Manhattan Borough President, Ruth Messinger, approved the project only after winning concessions on sewage treatment, transit improvements, park development and maintenance, and affordable housing. In the end the project Trump had to scale down the project to 7.9 million square feet with no office space. 12% of the housing units were reserved for affordable housing and 20% if the project received a federal subsidy for affordable housing. Design guidelines were also further strengthened.29 However, continued community resistance to the plan caused delays in the project and postponing development until very recently.
The Design Process

These cases have much in common. First, most of the cases are based in communities that have traditionally been left out of the planning process. Second, organizers used charrettes, design education, and a mix of reactive and proactive organizing to stop losing and start gaining in land use decisions. These cases suggest that there is something special about the urban design process, separate from other means of community organizing, that forces activists to look at more broad and long term proactive strategies for achieving environmentally sustainable and healthy development.

By adopting a design process of organizing communities will be making the implicit connection to become pro-active organizers. According to John Forester “The challenges of deliberation in the design professions are, most simply, the challenges of learning what to do. That, not so simply, means learning about what we should want in a specific case as well as learning about how to get it, learning about appropriate ends as well as about effective means. Such learning then embraces not only facts and functions, data and capacities, but what is important and valuable in a case, what is to be honored or protected, encouraged or developed. We can see such deliberative work in many settings: in design reviews, neighborhood meetings, meetings with another agency’s staff, even in staff meetings where planners consider what they should do and how they should act. In deliberative work, citizens integrate the words of ‘is’ and ‘ought’, of ‘science and ‘ethics’, as they learn how to get something done and what ought to be done in new and unique cases too.”

Community design in its very essence is a process whereby participants must do something. When placing a building or a model of a development on a table, in a plan, the resident activist declares a want and a desire. The resident who can not envision any development on a site makes the statement that perhaps they want open space. Through the processes I have described, urban design forced communities to answer the question of what they want. In doing this, the urban design professionals and the experience itself, allowed for participants to learn about sustainable alternatives and to listen to each other’s reservations and needs. The process points out inconsistencies in values and actions, and finds new directions to conceive of land use, and not in an incremental way, but as part of a holistic vision of neighborhood and community.
In this way, community residents can focus on their ideal situation. Given where they live and where they want to live, what do they expect from their built environment? Responsible urban design is based on a systematic analysis of the environment and the way it is used and valued. Part of the urban design process is to identify the environmental needs of these diverse groups and then to evaluate how well the environment is working and how it might be improved for them. Not all communities want the same thing for all areas. The Dudley and Harlem neighborhoods feared their design process would cause gentrification and an eventual break up of the current residents and the established community.

In building a community and a sense of space, neighborhoods must have a central location of interaction. A design charrette and an urban design process can create a meeting place or a place of dialogue and shared experience for groups in a community that do not usually associate. "To pursue sustainable design, local communities must take collective and calm action about difficult problems that typically spark emotional knee-jerk reactions. For communities to work in such a way, their citizens - who are often segregated along lines of spatial interest (or worse), rarely interact face to face, and who often act out of fear and mistrust of each other - must have shared experiences. There must be processes that invite hand-on community involvement in projects." With the Charrette model a cross section of the community can consolidate and negotiate visions. As these cases have demonstrated a charrette or a hands-on design process will also promote caring about place, and create community spaces that all stakeholders take interest in utilizing.

Visioning

Similar to design processes, "visioning" processes, which often incorporate design elements, have a long history in communities all over America. Carl Moore (et. al.) maps out a visioning process that contrasts with what he sees as traditional development processes where government solicits opinions of residents for reaction to development plans and designs.

"Visioning is an entirely different approach. Rather than being asked, ‘Do you like this decision?’ citizens in a visioning process are asked, ‘What do you want?’ Rather than sitting anonymously in a crowded auditorium at a public hearing, they are invited to join small group discussions alongside their neighbors. And rather than being asked for their input near the end of a
process they are asked to contribute ideas at the beginning, before experts and policymakers narrow the range of options. Those who participate in such dialogues often end up at the forefront of efforts to realize those goals through projects of various kinds.34 35

In addition to mobilizing citizen participation visioning processes give direction to public and private leaders.35 This is especially important in areas where governments have been unresponsive to community needs. The Mystic View site lacked any sort of government leadership until the community organized its design process. The community’s process, in advocating for a larger planning study gave the Somerville government the direction that it needed.

**Visual Designs as a Means of Communication**

The urban design process is useful in not only pushing participants into phrasing opposition proactively - looking for wants and visions, but also in clarifying those wants as well. The well-known saying, *A picture is worth a thousand words*, really holds true in this sense. A design, sketch, model, computer simulation will all be effective in translating desires into reality to make sure what is being expressed is really representative of what is desired.

Urban design in the form of pictorial art, such as renderings, is very useful for several reasons. The most obvious reason is that the lay public ordinarily finds difficulty in translating diagrams, zoning regulations and design guidelines into built outcomes. Only after most people visualize an outcome can they become empowered to participate. Design put into visual art forms can also inspire the public. Designs can raise the lay population’s aesthetic aspirations and shock them into looking at the world in a new way.36

In trying to solve an urban design problem, communities can use sketches to ask questions like “does this add too much density?”, “will this create the access you are looking for?”, “Does this make use of the waterfront in a way that you would like” etc. - questions that will lead to a consensus on visions. John Forester explains this when he recounted the planning process for the Oslo, Norway waterfront. The attitude used was “never presenting the sketch as *the* sketch.” Always saying that, ‘Look, the sketch is not important, but what I have been trying to find a solution to, through this sketch, is this and that and that and that and that and that.’ In other words it was the intentions and the characteristic with the sketch that was important, not the sketch itself.37
"It was important as a way of asking questions and as a way of controlling questions to the parties: ‘Does that serve your needs?’ ‘Is this something you can live with?’...In one instance we had boat piers sticking out from the shoreline. We found in this one area that as long as those were not longer than, let’s say, thirty meters, it was all right. If they were longer, say forty or fifty meters, then immediately we would have groups objecting to it. Because the way that they understood their ability to maneuver their boats and get around in the area would be basically much more limited if the piers came out that far. So, then, it wasn’t a question of ‘piers or not?’, but the length of the piers.38”

As this example illustrates, drawing urban design is in fact a useful form of communication in articulating visions. Participants in the process can use design to clarify a position. Visuals will also unify the assumptions of the individual parties. In the example above, stakeholders came to a common understanding of what a pier meant. Boaters would not agree to a forty-foot pier because they would now realize that it would hinder their navigation. Nor would they oppose piers because they assume they would invariably be that long. All parties ended up understanding that when they discussed piers it would be thirty feet or less.

Donald Schon also discusses this idea of drawing in urban design as a means of experimentation and communication. He refers to drawing and talking as parallel ways of designing - the language of design 39. By visualizing the situation on paper observes can more easily reflect on the situation at hand and better understand what works and what does not work.

These case I have outlines demonstrate however, that the communication that design provides can go the next step to be used as an advocacy tool. West Pride and the Parks Council used their specific rendering in the media to help New York residents visualize and compare their plan to Donald Trump’s original proposal. In the end the power of their rendering won the approval of the media, government and civic organizations. WE ACT fought off a hotel development proposal and an RFP process through their images. Just as design professionals can assist the community in translating their development desires into visual reality, communities should educate themselves and go the next advocacy step to educate their elected representatives on better design outcomes. Urban design images make this next step easier.

Before/after photographic views can likewise be particularly compelling and informative.40 Anne Tate inspired state legislators and the Somerville community to react through her visual images of good and bad urban design outcomes. WE ACT used the same tactic in their flyer
soliciting participation in the community design process.

According to Linda Davidoff, “A variety of key elements contributed to the victory [of Riverside South]: Solid community organizing; an elite strategy that facilitated communication with a powerful developer; good site design; and an attractive rendering. If you have an alternative vision that has powerful visual appeal, you can convert doubters and gain powerful friends.41 "

What Is Different About This Process?

In describing how urban design can help communities in land use struggles move from reactive to proactive organizing, the question remains: “What is different about this process, haven’t communities been doing this for a few decades now?” I have two tentative answers to this question.
First, this process marks an organizing strategy that has gone almost totally unnoticed by the environmental movement in the past. For the planning professional or academic who has been exposed to the planning and architecture professions, community visioning and the use of urban design seem like common sense. However grassroots environmental organizations rarely look towards urban design as a tool for advocacy. In response to flaws within movement organizing over the last few decades, organizers now look for ways to move towards more proactive strategies for land use advocacy, yet urban design apparently does not exist as a major option.

In searching literature about environmental organizing and discussing strategy with those currently involved in community and use struggles, finding a way to move from constant reactive organizing to more proactive strategies is a common concern. However, few people even mention the use of urban design or even the design charrette process. In April, I sat in on an Environmental Leadership class, taught by John De Villars at MIT, with three guest speakers all from local community based environmental organizations. This issue of moving from “don’t want” to “want” was a major item of discussion and several students asked questions about this. For over 20 minutes the discussion raged with not a single mention of urban design. While some communities do think to use urban design to organize against unwanted land uses, most communities overlook this option.

Second, I am arguing not only that communities may find it useful to use design, but useful to use design and visioning specifically to move beyond reactive organizing. This question largely brings me back to the still prevailing model of environmental organizing mentioned in Chapter 1. Despite a rich history of proactive design processes, the use of urban design does not represent common intuition of environmental organizations. Bill Shutkin emphasizes this in his book, The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century, where he explores opportunities for environmental and democratic improvements in the coming era. He also uses the Coalition Against the Asphalt Plant as an example.

“Despite the victory, the fate of the site and the asphalt plant still hangs in the balance. CAAP won the battle but stands to lose the war. It is this fact that underscores the ultimate challenge facing CAAP and all other communities that want to take control of their environmental and economic destiny against the tide of historic injustices, social change and often subversive market forces. Unable to reposition itself from an opposition force to a catalyst for acceptable economic development, CAAP can only stand on the sidelines while others determine the future
of the site. CAAP’s campaign like so many other community-led initiatives, has been essentially powerless to implement its own vision for the South Bay.

Randolph Hester more sharply criticizes reactive environmental organizing from design perspective. “Achieving sustainable cities requires active citizen participation. But citizens are generally neither inclined nor prepared to create resilient communities; they often have “not in my back yard” attitudes towards sustainable actions and are accustomed to success in disrupting, protecting and litigating."

Hester further asserts that “our urge to compel must be largely replaced by a need to impel. Impelling form should offer alternatives, be simple enough to comprehend, invite personal involvement, allow incremental incorporation of ecological science and call up our best visionary intentions, not our worst instincts. Therefore it is necessary for environmentally concerned citizens that are now only starting to break away from the “not in my back yard” attitude to organize processes that look toward wants. Urban design can facilitate this process.

Role of the Design Professional

The processes I have described also imply something slightly different from the traditional role of the planner found in most of the planning literature. In these six cases the role of the planner, architect, urban designer is to act as an educator, translator or tool for use by the community. While many community planning efforts and visioning processes look towards the planner as a facilitator or mediator (Susskind and Cruikshank, Breaking the Impasse) others look at the planner as an advocate (Paul Davidoff and the advocacy planning movement). This process looks at the planner as the passive actor contracted by a community that leads, controls and pushes the process. With the help of the urban design professional, the community members in effect become empowered to make and advocate for the urban design solutions that affect their lives.

This model of community led design differs from planner initiated processes in that it concentrates knowledge and control at the community level. Planners (Schon), lawyers (Cole, Lopez) and professionals in other areas as well have criticized the model of professional controlled processes and knowledge.
According to Schon, "In public outcry, in social criticism, and in the complaints of the professionals themselves, the long standing professional claim to a monopoly of knowledge and social control is challenged - first because professionals do not live up to the values and norms which they espouse, and second, because they are ineffective... Even if professional knowledge were to catch up with the new demands of professional practice, the improvements in professional performance would be transitory."46

From a different point of view, Luke Cole criticizes the legal profession for using litigation, which disempowers residents and shifts the emphasis from community organizing to professional efforts. Cole argues that the legal system has traditionally been a tool for the elite in America. The language and actions used all require a trained lawyer. Therefore legal strategies are in effect disempowering. Activists who take a traditional legal strategy have to hand over control to a lawyer who will then represent them. Not only does this disempower communities, but also it shifts their emphasis away from their natural power base. As Cole points out, “in struggles between a polluter and its host community, two types of power exist: the power of money and the power of people. Polluters generally have the money while communities have the people. Thus it is a tactical mistake to take a dispute into court where polluters have the best lawyers, scientists and government officials that money can buy.”47

Similarly, in design struggles, if professionals control the process and the debate becomes an academic argument for professionals on all sides, the community will become disempowered and without their greatest strength - people power. In our democracy, political leaders respond to the opportunity to election or fear of losing re-election. Therefore, the strength of a campaign does not lay in the logic and reasoning power of professional debates, but in the power of community mobilization. Organizers should use legal and urban design tactics to mobilize people and convince decision-makers, but not as a replacement for citizen mobilization.

In this regard, advocacy planning as a model comes up short. In a critique of the advocacy planning movement Marrie Kennedy, Professor of Planning at the University of Massachusetts suggests “Overall we (advocacy planners) failed to effectively frame technical assistance in relationship to people’s movements in such a way as to build those movements.48” In other words, the design processes in the case I have described became empowering for their communities, not dis-empowering like many cases in the traditional advocacy planning model.49
In the processes I have described, cooperation between designer and resident occurs either through the participation of a sample of an area’s population in the design process, or through the articulation by community representatives of a position on the problems. The design professionals in the six cases were able to create proposals by turning the community’s statement of its needs into a design based on the professionals’ own subjective views and/or empirical knowledge.50

In this role the urban designer is like an artist’s brush with the community as the artist. The community will think and say housing while the urban designer, trained in architecture and real estate development will visualize housing densities and heights that will make sense financially for any developer to build in the area. In a sense, this is where in the architects in the Mystic View case perhaps did not go far enough. The community failed to seriously take into account many real constraints or to de-emphasize the incomplete nature of the design charrette. With limited time, the design charrette lacked as a complete accuracy of feasibility. It then became the Cecil Group’s job to bring residents back to reality with what housing and affordable housing would mean on this site with the infrastructure costs associated and the densities to make housing profitable for developers.51

Both residents and urban design professionals need to establish with every project what Paul Davidoff and other advocacy planners ask, “Whom does this benefit? Whom does it harm?” The urban designer can greatly assist a community in not only drawing out those aspects of a urban design plan that are harmful and helpful, but they can assist in articulating the community’s response to this question.

The community must work with urban designers and educate themselves to critically evaluate and take charge of land use decisions. The lay person will find difficulty in grasping the economics of development or the legal outcomes of zoning and design guidelines right away. The community can employ these skills at an initial stage until they have the competence to exercise the skills and knowledge themselves. Designers can offer choices to communities and educate people about the ramifications of those choices and help people chose sustainability.52

Trained urban design professionals will also have a strong theoretical and conceptual base to draw upon in visioning build environments. Without a conception of what a good city is and what changes in urban for are likely to produce what outcomes, it is difficult to do meaningful
urban design. According to Southworth, "Practitioners need theoretical grounding - without such a grounding, practice is blind." The assistance of design professionals will add to the credibility of the process and product, while well-organized campaigns will still succeed in holding municipal governments accountable.

**Role of the Government**

In an ideal world governments would be responsive and know their community's desires and visions. However, as these cases demonstrate, traditional planning and decision-making processes have excluded many neighborhoods and constituencies. "The immediate impetus for visioning is often the perception on the part of ordinary citizens and community leaders that the political system has failed to respond adequately to the real problems facing the community. At this moment, political leaders lose “permission to act.” Exasperated, community members conclude that change will come about only when citizens take greater control of the effort to improve a community’s quality of life." For communities that have traditionally been alienated from the planning process it is often necessary to regain control. Politicians must respond to their constituents and designs will only become more effective with community involvement. Communities should get involved in this process to influence policy.

The fundamental issue raised by Riverside South is who should set the agenda for urban development. “There was a time when government did, either in an enlightened way or not.” Says Kahan, Chairman of the Riverside South project. “By the time this project came along, government had abdicated its responsibility for large scale planning and design. Riverside South stepped into the void and created a bridge between government, the community, and the private sector." Urban design by definition must be seen within the context of competing and allied efforts by individuals to improve their own lives and communal efforts to improve the quality of life for all a settlement’s people. Urban design is also a manifestation of the societal and political issues that a community embraces. Therefore the outcomes should be representative of what a community wants for itself.
I come back to this definition because it leads to the conclusion that municipal government, as the elected representatives of the community must take a central role in urban design. When I refer to urban design it must be clear that I mean “the planned intervention in the market place and in the legal processes of allocating and designing the combination of land and building uses and building configurations that constitute the three dimensional physical nature of human settlements. Such a planned intervention is based on the model of the human being, an image of an ideal world, a model of the environment, and a set of values.” This planned intervention can only happen at the government level. Citizens simply do not have that authority.

Peter Mendoff and Holly Sklar comment on this when referring to the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. “The traditional approach to urban planning calls for the “experts” at City Hall to run the show with strong input from bankers and private developers and lesser input, if any, from community residents. Even a liberal administration which invites neighborhood participation does not want to give up control to low-income residents and community organizations. DSNI won that control.”

Organizers resisted attempts by the government to enlist DSNI in a government led process. Residents, with the help of local agencies and the Riley Foundation, created their own bottom-up plan and then invited the city to participate. In this way residents were able to make sure that their plan would not create an “urban renewal” that would remove them from the neighborhood through gentrification. They did this by becoming the planners. They moved from government control to citizen control with government support.

Most of the cases I described were based in a climate where government officials subscribed to the theory that any development, no matter how bloated or antagonistic to community concerns and impact, should be approved because the city urgently needs construction jobs, and tax revenues. Few elected officials have been able to paint a civic vision supported by the citizens, probably because a sustainable city counters prevailing individual aspirations.

Municipal governments though, have to remain involved. Planners in the public sector must provide the interconnecting links between individual parcels that make up an entire site design plan. Piece meal development has to be controlled through planned intervention and ultimately it is the municipal government with the power for planned intervention. Especially when we
talk about living ecosystems then the shift to caring exclusively for the private domain, rather
than the broader interconnected landscape, has serious implications for sustainability. The
totality of the system, whether river corridor or city, must be kept healthy in order to sustain
even the smallest niche.\textsuperscript{62}

According to Randolph Hester, "Non sustainable aspirations create non-sustainable environ-
ments, which reinforce non-sustainable values, which create more non-sustainable environ-
ments, and so on - accelerating the depletion of the resources upon which healthy cities pre-
vail."\textsuperscript{63}

Ultimately it should be the government’s responsibility to be both visionary and responsive to
community needs. When a plan is adopted the government must continually work with the
community to make sure that the plan becomes implemented. However, at minimum govern-
ments should not find themselves becoming advocates for the developers at the expense of their
constituents. It neither benefits the representative who will face reelection nor will it add
benefit to the city.

Government should not do what Bill Roach, Alderman in Somerville for the Mystic View site,
called for in the April 25th meeting - “We must be patient and allow the plan as presented to
move forward.” Being patient in a case like Mystic View is unequivocally not the role of
government, residents or anyone. Government must become the active agents to make sure the
plan gets implemented. That is what they are elected and appointed to do in our democracy.

Finally, government should not position itself as the barrier to a community’s vision. According
to Raymond Flynn, Mayor of Boston “Government should be on the side of people trying to
improve their neighborhoods, not telling people in the neighborhoods what they should do or
what they can’t achieve.”\textsuperscript{64}

Municipal governments have to find the resources to do what the residents want. That is their
job. It is rarely a question of whether or not they have the resources, it is a question of whether
or not they have the pressure or the political leadership. This point was reiterated in a Advisory
Group meeting for the Cecil Group planning process for the Mystic View Site. One city coun-
cilor commented that argument should not concentrate on the feasibility of getting the T stop,
which will allow a mixed-use plan to move forward. Discussions should concentrate on
whether or not the city has the political will and desire to push for the T stop. Ultimately municipal government support for the plan and the process is essential. It will be local official that will be necessary to make the plan work. The city has a lot of power. It is their responsibility to persuade developers and find the resources. If elected officials stand in the way of a well-organized community process, they will ultimately be replaced with a more responsive government.

Notes

1 Interview with Peggy Sheppard, 4/17/00
2 ibid.
3 ibid.
4 Harlem on the River: Creating a True Community Vision; West Harlem Environmental Action and Manhattan Community Board 9; December 4, 1999
5 Phone conversation with Dennis Derryck, Co-Chair of WE Act and Professor of non-profit Management at the New School.
6 Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar; Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood; South End Press; Boston; 1994
7 William Shutkin; The Land that Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century; MIT Press; Cambridge, MA; 2000
8 Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar; Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood; South End Press; Boston; 1994
9 ibid.
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23 Todd Bressi; New york Holds the Trump Card; Planners Professional Journal
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26 ibid.
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30 John Forester; The Deliberative Practitioner; Challenges of Mediation and Deliberation in the Design Professions; MIT Press; 1999
31 Randolph Hester Jr., Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Sustainable Happiness; Places; Vol. 9, No. 3; Winter 1995; P. 4-17
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37 John Forester; The Deliberative Practitioner; Challenges of Mediation and Deliberation in the Design Professions; MIT Press; 1999
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39 Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action; Basic Books; 1983
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42 William Shutkin; The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century; MIT Press; Cambridge, MA; 2000
43 Randolph Hester Jr., Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Sustainable Happiness; Places; Vol. 9, No. 3; Winter 1995; P. 4-17
44 ibid.
45 Luke Cole in his article Empowerment as the key to Environmental protection: The Need for Environmental Poverty Law (Ecology Law Quarterly, 1992) and Gerald P. Lopez in his book, Rebellious Lawyering: One Chicano's Vision of Progressive Legal Practice (Westview Press, 1992) both discuss the dis-empowering effect of professional legal tactics on community organizing. They both argue for a model of professional support where the knowledge and control stay based within the community.
46 Donald Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action; Basic Books; 1983
47 Cole, Luke W.; Empowerment as the Key to Environmental Protection: The Need for Environmental Poverty Law; Ecology Law Quarterly, 1992; P. 650
49 This was the case in the Riverside South project. Planning largely replaced an organizing process that otherwise could have existed, involving wide community participation. Perhaps because of this faced huge opposition and almost defeat. Ironically this planning process was in-part organized by Linda Davidoff, the wife of the man credited with starting the advocacy planning movement - Paul Davidoff.
50 Jon Lang; Urban Design: The American Experience; Van Norstrand Reinhold; New York; 1994
51 Among other constraints the pollution clean up of this brownfield site would require substantially more clean up costs for housing than any other use. This would have a negative effect on any project's NPV and therefore cause densities to have to be increased. Furthermore residential would have a negative affect on tax income for the city.
52 Randolph Hester Jr., *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Sustainable Happiness*; *Places*; Vol. 9, No. 3; Winter 1995; P. 4-17
55 Randolph Hester Jr., *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Sustainable Happiness*; *Places*; Vol. 9, No. 3; Winter 1995; P. 4-17
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Chapter 4 - Urban Design as Proactive Organizing: Putting it in Perspective

Urban design is inherently a proactive process because it makes the practitioner envision areas of land in terms of what they want sited where. In that urban design has been used successfully in several cases does not however make it a flawless process. In fact, like other models of organizing, the use of urban design has its own pitfalls, limitations and specific instances where it is most likely to be effective.

In order to use an urban design model for advocacy most effectively, community organizations should first decide whether the issue they are facing can be cured with a better design solution or planning process. As Tunney Lee points out, “To a hammer everything looks like a nail."

Lawyers for three decades now have been conceiving environment organizing as an issue of law. Reactive legal advocacy preempted most previous attempts for proactive visioning or organizing models that could have been more affective (Shutkin, Cole, Lopez and others). For the use of community design, organizers must first understand whether or not the issue at hand is an urban design problem, and second evaluate if a community design process is the best way of achieving their goals, by weighing the advantages against the disadvantages. By exploring the limitations of this process we can get a better understanding of when we might expect a design process to succeed and when we might therefore use urban design to move from reactive to proactive organizing.

Limitations

Expectations
In the Mystic View case, the Task Force really put itself in the role of the “visionary.” It adopted the mandate to imagine and explore what ideally could be on the Mystic View Site. They took the responsibility of imagining a new world in Somerville. According to Jon Lang, “[Visionaries] have considerable power to create their own worlds. Such designing presents them with the chance to show what their schemes would be like in a way that the social and economic realities do not allow in existing cities because the proposals would require the type of radical surgery that is politically unfeasible. Visionaries bring possibilities to the attention of the field and sometimes the world, while practitioners bring questions of social reality and
economic and political feasibility to the far-reaching and often dramatic ideas of visionaries. In the Mystic View process, the Task Force became the visionaries while the Cecil Group was hired to be the practitioners. With the financial backing and expanded resources to knowledge the Cecil Group ideally will inject feasibility into the Mystic View Task Force’s visions. However this creates some danger if the visionary mistakes visions for reality or if the practitioner fails to recognize the practical aspects of a vision.

The Mystic View Task Force exponentially raised the level of expectation for the site. They did so however to the point where they failed to fully account for constraints on the site (for instance the remaining 55 years on the K-Mart lease). Early on organizers can create a level of expectation that will block any ability for the community to reach a mutual gains solution with the developer and the city. In negotiation terms the community will have poorly analyzed their best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA), thereby leaving them in a worse short term AND long term situation than otherwise available. Unrealistic expectations can cause both resentment toward elected officials for not being as “visionary” as the community, and can cause rejection of developments that otherwise would have been acceptable. This is not to say that raising the level of expectation is bad, but doing so to unrealistic levels can cause ultimate harm to what land use advocates want to achieve. It is the job of the organizer to be aware of this and balance visions and expectations with reality.

Carl M. Moore notes that, “While visioning has many benefits it can also have many pitfalls. A successful community-wide process that engages the public and produces a useful document will create expectations that the public will be consulted in the same manner in the future. In addition, the vision itself raises the expectation that certain actions will be taken. If a vision remains mere words on a page, citizen skepticism about the value of public participation will only increase.”

According to Jon Lang, The Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) started in 1967, was an example of this. Architects and urban design professionals would work with communities to understand their problems and draft solutions. However, limited time and resources resulted in the promotion of highly simplified design efforts by the experts, which raised communities’ hopes unrealistically.
Likewise, MVTF was under-resourced and limited by time. One MIT student participating in a class that used Mystic View as a project site criticized the financial analysis of MVTF by saying, “there are a lot of assumptions that go into his (Wig Zamore) calculations that are very debatable. It almost seems that he knew just what he wanted the outcome to be, and then geared his assumptions and calculations to achieve that outcome.” Despite a very impressive market analysis of the site by Wig Zamore, many assumptions had to be made and the design plan could not fully be drafted. This is precisely why the MVTF used their designs to advocate for a more formal and in-depth planning process.

Borrowing a phrase from a planning professor of mine, “The only thing we can be sure of for the future is that we don’t know what will happen.” This is not to say that land use advocates should not try and influence the future, rather they should keep their understanding of what will happen in context. In a case like this the MVTF put out their vision for their ideal situation given a lot of assumptions and are advocating for it. However this could become a dangerous and even negative process if they take for granted that the site will achieve the very high financial returns that they purport, yet many other sources including the Cecil Group and the developers disagree with.

**Funding and Resources**
The Mystic View Task Force represents the first time that residents in Somerville banded together to proactively comment on urban design. Why did they organize at this point in time? According to Steve Post, the Director of Housing and Economic Development for Somerville, “the demographics have changed in the last twenty years. Somerville now has more professionals living here and less working class families.” I have no doubt that the emergence of these professionals, their training and education, and their resources allowed residents to organize a planning and design process.

Resources made the difference even in the Harlem and the Dudley neighborhoods. By the time WE ACT received the grant from the Department of Energy they had been organizing for ten years and were pretty well known and established. The Co-Chair of their Board of Directors, Dennis Derryck is a professor of planning and non-profit management at the New School for Social Research in New York and the Executive Director, Peggy Sheppard has very deep political connections with the New York City government. WE ACT has, over the years, built
several partnerships with prestigious institutions such as Columbia, New York University and Cornell. By the time WE ACT received a grant to organize a community design process, they had the resources to implement it.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is a different story with the same conclusion. Before the founding of DSNI other community organizers, such as Paul Bothwell tried to organize community design processes but met with little success. In 1981 Bothwell, managed to enlist the help of U.S. Department of Agriculture. Even so he had an incredibly difficult time organizing any sort of community participation. When finally he managed to organize a community design process and take it to the city, they merely laughed at him and told him the that city would not partner with the residents of Roxbury.

When DSNI was founded the situation had changed only in that the money and prestige of the Riley Foundation now backed the community. Support from the foundation was not only significant because the community could hire whatever expertise they needed to fulfil their revitalization mission, but also the Dudley neighborhood now gained a credibility that they previously lacked. Without these resources it is difficult to imagine DSNI attaining the same level of success, if any at all.

Currently in Boston Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) is working with other Boston based environmental groups to build development capacity in communities where it does not yet exist. ACE envisions a long process to educate the community about design and development. Where organizations prioritize traffic speed as their top issue, an education process must be organized to show the communities how traffic speed results from road and development designs. Therefore a prerequisite for a proactive community design process is a strong resource base and capacity, either financially, with in local expertise, or with both.

Residents as Developers
The Riverside South case brings forth several possible pitfalls to the design process as well. At some point, if the process succeeds, the community organization will move from opposition advocate against a plan that they do not like, to development advocate, for the type of development they envisioned in their design process.
"You have to be aware when you are giving up your objective role and being an advocate. These civic groups did that and they precluded themselves from later stepping back." stated Frank Fish in response to the Riverside South Project. This is very important as the community organization must remain grounded in the community and responsive to changing desires and visions.

This problem pervades many community development corporations that were founded by activists looking to proactively implement alternative visions of development. According to Harry Smith, Organizing Director at the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation, "CDCs are now a mixed bag. It depends now on what base they have in the community. Some no longer advocate on behalf or residents, and merely perpetuate their existence, no longer with an understanding of community wants or needs." This problem became apparent in the struggle over development in Jackson Square. Urban Edge, a community development corporation proposed a plan for a K-Mart and other "big box" development. The JP NDC along with other community activists and concerned residents organized and ultimately stopped the plan.

This leads to my next point: any plan that drafted by the "community" must include all stakeholders in order to escape facing hostile objection during implementation. Any process that is not fully inclusive of all the stakeholders will meet with eventual opposition. This is the basis in negotiation theory of avoiding costly delays and lawsuits.

Representation has further implications in a process where the community that becomes the designer will ultimately become an advocate for the development, in the event that the developer adopts the community's vision. In the case of Riverside South, after Trump adopted the civic group's plan organizations grounded in the Upper West Side and other nearby neighborhoods opposed it. The civic groups promoting the plan did not represent a cross section of the stakeholders that would be affected by the project.

Linda Davidoff reflected on the consequences in her article about the process. "The land use review process was arduous, to put it mildly - hundreds of vehement opponents to the project, organized by the coalition for a Livable West Side, mobilized for three crucial 5pm to midnight marathon community hearings dominated by accusations that anyone who favored the revised plan had been bought and paid for by the evil Donald."
An arduous review process is the result of a community that was not a part of the drafting of the plan. Contrast the Riverside South design process with the Dudley Street, Mystic View, Harlem Piers and Casper processes. In that later four cases, organizers sought participation from anyone who wanted to be involved. There was wide participation of a cross section of the community. In both West Harlem and Mystic View, the land owners/developers contributed or participated alongside residents and design professionals. In the Riverside South case, the civic group, which ultimately proved not to represent the community at large, drafted a design plan and renderings without a wide visioning process. As of 1998 the development still has not started. Only recently has the development begun to take shape.

Outcomes

Urban design is not an outcome. Urban design is a way of influencing the behavior of developers to create specific outcomes, however, outcomes are rarely certain. Good intentions can often lead to unexpectedly bad outcomes. This can often be the case with incentive programs. A frequently sited example is New York City’s use of height bonuses for the creation of public spaces. This seemingly well intentioned policy had an outcome leading to the design of unused spaces that turned into wind tunnels.

Furthermore, renderings can be deceptive. Architects use renderings and models to create examples of what a plan may achieve if certain things are done. However this does not mean that a rendering will come true. One of the earliest examples of this can be found in the Jewish Torah. When the Jews were in the desert, escaping Egypt, God gave them specific instructions to build a tabernacle. The instructions in the torah for the ark, menorah, tabernacle all exceed the level of detail of most zoning regulations and design guidelines. Very specific instructions give the height, width and length down to the cubit, specific specifications for materials, shapes and designs. For centuries however, Jewish scholars and rabbis have been debating design outcomes, despite very precise detail in the instructions.

To the left are three very different interpretations of what the side frames of the arc looked like. To the right are three different interpretations of the menorah base. All vary greatly despite precise rules.
Like these instructions, laws and design guidelines can often produce unintended outcomes. This is an inherent flaw in the design process. The most affective way around this flaw is an organization that has become an institution in the community that monitors the consequences of design laws, zoning and incentive to make sure that outcomes meet intentions.

*Sustaining Effort*

As with all community work, organizers find difficulty in sustaining volunteer (or even non-volunteer) efforts. Victories, defeats and exhaustion all lead to organizations disbanding. In part, it is this reason that environmental activists are now searching for ways to become more proactive in their organizing. Working towards a defined vision becomes a clearer, more focused, and ultimately quicker process than continually reacting to unwanted land use proposals. However urban design is also a long-term strategy.

Rarely do planners see the fruition of their policies and plans in their entirety. In order to be a planner one must accept that implementation can only happen over a long period of time and that plans must also change with changes in community, society and values. Unless an organization prepares to sustain itself over the long term, the adoption of new zoning and a new land use plan will not provide much contribution to what community seeks. Though ideally the government should oversee plans and continually solicit community input, and act as the visionaries for their communities, this rarely happens. In none of the six cases that I described in this paper did a responsive government exist. Therefore communities need long-term organizing strategies to make sure that after stakeholders adopt planning and design regulations; the government actively pursues positive development.
In this regard the structure of the organization becomes central. In the past, similar strategies have led to the creation of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) - such as the Manitoba case illustrates. In these cases the community organization becomes the developer and actually implements its vision, such as with the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. The ownership and management of actual property will no doubt help sustain long term involvement.

However, property ownership is not the only mechanism for sustainability. The Mystic View Task Force in many ways used the design charrette as a way to start an organization. In the fall of 1999, MVTF started the application process for 501(c)(3) tax exempt non-profit status. Overall MVTF has a broader programmatic vision than simply the adoption of a plan. If the adoption of an acceptable plan were the only goal, the organization would lose steam and fade out shortly afterward the charrette, with limited future ability to reorganize the first time the government changed the plan or accepted an unacceptable land use option. Instead MVTF plans to organize educational campaigns about the Mystic River and on urban planning issues. They have started to join with other organizations already, such as the Somerville Arts Council and the Reclamation Artists to organize events that will attract residents to the waterfront and outsiders to Somerville.

At the same time, organizations such as West Harlem Environmental Action had already existed for 10 years before using urban design to promote a community waterfront vision. They currently have several other programs running, including education and political advocacy around environmental health issues and social equity. WE ACT will not disband at the adoption of a plan because they have already set up a strong base for the organization. They will organize over the long term to see the implementation of the plan. However, WE ACT is going one further step. That is, they seek to have the New York City Parks Department adopt the plan and take site control. This will allow for a permanent entity to watchdog the implementation and preservation of the site. Organizations must find ways to make advocate for their visions over the long-term.

For this reason, community organizing becomes the key for the long-term success of design efforts. When DSNI interviewed Peter Mendoff for the job of Director, his success rested in his community organizing experience. Mendoff stressed "the need for DSNI to be guided by a strategy of organizing the community. To create a plan and encourage investment without build-
ing a strong community would only invite the type of speculation and displacement that residents were already worried about.\textsuperscript{17}

Therefore for design processes to ultimately become successful \textit{and} representative of the neighborhoods residents want to live in, organizers should work towards a bottom up planning process that incorporates long-term organizing strategies.

\textit{Proactive to Replace Reactive}

The use of proactive organizing through a design process should not by definition exclude the use of reactive tools. Urban design, in the context that I have laid out represents simply one tool for organizing. In and of itself design is flawed. Therefore in organizing against unwanted land uses, communities must use every tool at their disposal. Organizers can not look at the design or planning process as a complete organizing tool. There is some danger however that this might happen.

In the Mystic View process, organizers have shied away from using more traditional organizing tactics, like legal efforts to change zoning or grassroots campaigns to pressure elected officials. In part because of this, the developers and city officials often make the mistake of assuming that the MVTF does not represent broad-based community opinion.

\textbf{When Can We Expect A Design Process To Be Effective?}

From the discussion of limitations we can assume several prerequisites for a successful community led design process. First, a community has to have evolved to the point where it cares enough about the issues that urban design impacts. A certain level of social capital and motivation must also exist in the community. The urban design process, if done well - with full involvement by an inclusive cross-section of the population, takes time. Communities will not achieve success if they try to use design as a quick fix to a problem. Nor will communities find urban design useful as a tool to quickly react and block an unwanted land use siting. In the case of Casper Wyoming residents used legal advocacy to block unwanted development in order to buy them time to conduct a community design charrette. In the Dudley neighborhood, residents used community organizing to stop illegal dumping and gain a moratorium on development before they attempted a design process.
The optimal time to initiate a design process will not occur when a community is facing an immediate challenge. In such situations, participants tend to invent ideas that address only that challenge. They are less likely to open up their thinking to other issues important to the community’s future.\(^{18}\)

This should not suggest that organizers cannot use design as a proactive tool in quick reaction to an unwanted development. In fact the Riverside South case proves the contrary. Civic groups used their design vision to react to Trump’s proposal and organize against it. However, ultimately the civic organizations had to resort to legal advocacy to block the development. What these cases demonstrate is that in order to use a design process the community must have bought time from either using another organizing tactic to halt a development or have started before a development proposal (Mystic View and Harlem Piers) as a way of thinking ahead. Once a vision and design has been drafted, communities can then use their renderings and plans to react to new developments or city planning proposals.

Second, urban design will more likely become a successful process when the community has achieved enough resources and credibility to achieve government, and ultimately developer buy-in. In all of the six cases I detailed, the communities and/or organizers already possessed enough resources to make the design process happen. Some of the most credible and recognized professionals in architecture, planning and real estate development now reside in Somerville, Massachusetts. They were able to bring the resources and credibility to the Mystic View process. WE ACT had been successfully organizing for a decade and had over the years recruited the participation of academics and professionals from all over New York to promote community revitalization in Harlem. DSNI started with benefit of information gathered in an MIT planning studio, and the strong financial and institutional backing of the Riley Foundation. Casper, Wyoming had the assistance of the Environmental Protection Agency. Riverside South, like Mystic View, was led by some of the most well endowed - in terms of credibility - organizations in New York. Without the financial means, activists will find difficulty in hiring or attracting the credibility through professionals (accept if the professionals are already the organizers) and means to organize a design process. Without credibility of both process and expertise, government decision-makers and developers alike will only ignore the designs that are produced.
Communities can use urban design, despite constraints, to address a wide array of issues. Because the field of urban design addresses so many issues, the process of urban design can proactively solve many problems. However, urban design is not substitute for community organizing. There are times when it will not work and times when other methods of organizing, even if reactive, will be more useful. Community organizers must evaluate the situation, time frame and expected outcomes before embarking on the urban design process.

Notes

1 Thesis committee review 4/3/2000

2 Jon Lang; Urban Design: The American Experience; Van Norstrand Reinhold; New York; Chapter 3, P. 68; 1994

3 In 1999, Tunney Lee led a planning studio to create plans and designs for an area along the Chelsea Creek. A few weeks into the process we found out that a large piece of property had just been leased to the MWRA, much to the detriment of our hopes and ideas that we had already laid out. Nevertheless we incorporated this into the proposal and worked under these new sets of constraints. It is unclear whether the city can do anything about the K-Mart Lease, but if they remain for the duration of the contact - another 55 years, this is a huge constraint that the community simply ignored - to their own detriment.

4 Obviously "unrealistic" will vary from person to person and community to community.


6 Jon Lang; Urban Design: The American Experience; Van Norstrand Reinhold; New York; 1994

7 David Paladino - MIT Center for Real Estate, Masters Degree Student

8 Tunney Lee

9 Interview with Steve Post, Director of the Office of Housing and Comercial Development for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000

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Conclusions - Where Do We Go From Here?

Overall organizers will find much more difficulty in articulating what they want than articulating what they do not want. The environmental movement still has trouble defining environmental justice, though they find little difficulty agreeing on an environmental injustice.

When activists refer to proactive organizing they mean different things. Some people have complimented the Coalition Against the Asphalt Plant in Boston’s South Bay for its move to proactive organizing on the basis that they have banded together with NIMBY movements nationally against asphalt plants to stop their construction in urban areas. In fact Mark Dowie refers to initiatives such as this - the national and international coalitions of NIMBY movements as the “fourth wave” of environmentalism - the new era.

However, this “fourth wave” still fails to answer the question of “what do you want?” CAAP’s efforts state “we don’t want an asphalt plant here, we don’t want an asphalt plant anywhere.” This thesis explores how land-use advocates can move from “don’t want” to “want.” I take “proactive organizing” to mean more than just expanding “don’t want” strategies. Ultimately individual communities will have to find a way to articulate what they do want. In addition, like the cases in this thesis show, communities will find greater ease in capturing resident, government and developer buy-in if they have a clearly articulated image of land use options. Therefore I use the term “proactive organizing” to refer to a process that contains the following aspects:

1) A clearly articulated vision of a land-use outcome.
2) A process that is initiated, organized, and controlled throughout by the community.
3) A process open to working with rather than against interested developers.
4) A long-term strategy for both the organization and the community to meet land use goals.

I believe that communities can use urban design to become proactive, and then use the physical design product as a tool for advocacy. Designs are visuals that describe an idea. The purpose of a design is to explain and demonstrate a land use outcome. In this sense communities can find success in using urban design to advocate for community friendly development. Beyond advocacy though, the process of sketching designs provides an educational opportunity that can
better define a community’s mission and enhance their overall analysis of development, making them want, expect, and effectively demand more from their built environment.

However, design as a process for community organizing and as a tool for advocacy is flawed. Advocates need to promote processes grounded in community based organizing that look to incorporate urban design. In all of the cases that I have outlined, local residents used community organizing as the central feature of land use campaigns, while the urban design process was but one tool within the overall strategy. Urban design should not replace community organizing - urban design should complement and add to community organizing. By incorporating urban design, communities, whether working in reaction to an unwanted land use or not, will in essence be forcing themselves to become proactive. From there however, communities must find sustainable processes and organizational structures to maintain involvement.

For the Mystic View Task Force, a group that has already educated the community and completed a design process, organizing is now the key. They must rally around the T stop and push elected officials to not only adopt their vision but find the political will to implement it. Long-term community organizing along proactive visions will ultimately be the only way for residents to ensure the implementation of their vision. The Mystic View Task Force should follow the examples of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and WE ACT to build the capacity to create political pressure and long term organizational sustainability.

Designing a strategy will also depend on the community’s understanding of whom ultimately controls the land use decisions. In Somerville all the stakeholders assume that the market will have some say in what ultimately locates at Mystic View. Therefore the T stop becomes essential. Getting land designated for park space and the ultimate participation and support of the Metropolitan District Commission will also become the focus of community organizing. In Harlem, this issue comes down to whether the Economic Development Corporation or the Parks and Recreation Department will ultimately control the land and development on the site. If the Parks Department controls the land, any development is more likely to closely resemble the community’s vision. The Boston City government gave The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative the right to employ eminent domain and become the controlling interest in land development. DSNI only achieved this through strong organizing tactics. Community organizing goals must follow from an analysis of who or what will ultimately control development on the site.
In communities without concern for the built environment, social capital creation becomes the first step. Residents in Somerville created SomerVision, which led into the creation of the Mystic View Task Force. In Harlem, WE ACT, which had been organizing for ten years, created the necessary social capital. After enough social capital exists, using urban design, communities can clearly articulate visions and organize on their behalf. As the cases in this thesis suggest, communities that want to fend off unwanted land uses may find it useful to enter urban design processes as part of an overall community organizing strategy. In this way communities will empower themselves to have a greater impact on urban form and build neighborhoods that better emphasize community values and concerns.

Ultimately proactive strategies will be more successful than simply reactive to unwanted land uses after they are sited. At minimum the achievements of reactive land use struggles such as the asphalt plant - community education and the creation of social capital - can also be achieved through creating a proactive process. With a proactive process though, community organizers will then have the means to go the next step and achieve a positive land use outcome. As these cases show, proactive organizing through involvement in the urban design and planning process will allow residents to have a voice in development decisions, not, as Bill Shutkin states, become forced to merely “stand on the sidelines while others determine the future of the site.”

Communities that adopt urban design as a form of advocacy can have a profound affect on urban form. There exists much literature supporting the effects of community influence on urban form. Urban design is too powerful of a tool for the environmental movement to continue to overlook.

Notes

1 Lawrence Halprin; Design as a Value System; Places; Vol. 6, No. 1; Fall 1989, P.60-67
2 Conversations with Penn Loh 4/24/00
3 Conversation with Jodi Sugerman-Brozan, Alternatives for Community and Environment, 2/18/2000
5 William Shutkin; The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century; MIT Press; Cambridge, MA; 2000
Afterward

Just days before handing in my thesis to my committee, I went off to the April 25th meeting where the Cecil Group presented its final plan to the community. I was surprised, shocked and confused. After numerous community meetings, the plan called for increased “big box” retail over the next five years and then a phasing into mixed-use development.

Throughout the meeting Steve Cecil showed artist renderings with little connection to the plans - walkable pedestrian village streets with no sight of the gargantuan big box developments and expansive parking lots that the plan suggests. This was the perfect example of how architects and urban designers can use renderings to manipulate public opinion.

The next morning I sent an e-mail to Anne Tate asking what this meant. She responded by saying MVTF already knew that the plan would present “big box” development and expansive parking lots. She said the community was prepared to organize with their own designs and plan.

Above: Axonometric image of Phase 1 shows increased “big box” retail and parking lots.

Above: Rendering shows dense development along the waterfront, with no sign of “big box” or parking lots.
What followed was a different story though. The immediate reaction of the Mystic View Task Force and the community-at-large was a lack of action. Pat Jehlen, in an e-mail, asked the community, “where is the outrage?” The outrage did not arrive until one week later when the Somerville Journal reported on exactly where this plan will lead the city - into a memorandum of understanding with National and Taurus for “big box” development. One long time Somerville resident, who is not a member of the Mystic View Task force, recently told me that this memorandum of understanding with National and Taurus will end his support for the Mayor. Though Taurus proposed their mixed-use compromise, the Assembly Square site remains mostly big box with Home Depot, Borders Bookstore and the Big K. Total
ground area of parking does not decrease. They propose an office building, a McDonalds
(another development that many residents have protested) and a “limited service” hotel, off to
the side. The rendering released to the public views the site from the river - the only view that
would hide the big box retail from site - though not after Ikea’s development according to the
Cecil Group’s plan.

The MVTF failed to react with a proactive vision of their own. Instead they relied on the Cecil
Group plan to criticize National and Taurus. According to the Somerville Journal, “Paolella
[Treasurer of the Mystic View Task Force] said any plan submitted must be compared with
Cecil’s vision, and, if a plan is contrary to that vision, it is not in the best interest of Somerville
and its citizens.” Considering that the Mystic View Task Force does not agree with the Cecil
Group’s plan, Lawrence Paolella’s comment is surprising and dangerous. According to the
Cecil Group’s “Vision”, phase one includes “big box” and expansive parking lots. This weak
response reflects the inability of the Mystic View Task Force to thus far articulate a clear vision
of their own.

Finally, the real protests came through, highlighting the anger among Somerville residents.
Philip Parsons, a resident and planner, broke with the MVTF’s polite, non-confrontational and
failing effort. Mr. Parsons does not hesitate to remind the Mayor of what many have shied away
from doing - residents, not developers, elect Mayors.
"From what I now read and hear, this [the planning process] was a deliberate and cynical effort to mislead taxpayers while you [the mayor] continued to negotiate a short-sighted agreement with business groups who are not Somerville residents and have no concern for the interests of those who elected you."

Mr. Parsons went further and did what the MVTF failed to do following the Cecil group’s presentation - he criticized the plan directly.

"Neither the aldermen present nor any citizen who spoke - and the meeting was well attended as you know - supported the Cecil Group’s plan for the first phase of development, and this phase is, frankly, the only one that matters, as you must realize. The plan takes the prime development area of the entire site and gives it over to a massive and unattractive chain store. While Somerville’s last major undeveloped area continues its current dismal identity as a massive retail warehouse and parking lot, it will provide convenience to its well-heeled and tax-rich neighbors, such as Cambridge. It is difficult to distinguish this plan from the earlier (and failed) plan of 25 years ago."

Then finally Mr. Parsons told the Mayor what elected officials occasionally need to hear, lest they become too complacent in a position they could lose in the next election.

"Why should Somerville continue to be the despised and abused servant of its surrounding communities, providing space for highways, railroads and big box stores while reaping none of the benefits that are indicators and supporters of surrounding prosperity? As Mayor, are you (as it seems you are) committed to Somerville remaining Slummerville? Are you committed to poorly funded schools, to being unable to fund affordable housing or quality open space? Is this how you hope to be remembered?"

"You appear to be choosing to go the old Somerville way - ignoring residents’ concerns, meeting privately, and making deals that have minimal and at best short-term benefit. This is the way that has given Somerville a pitiful tax base, an embarrassing lack of quality jobs and almost no open space. It is the kind of short-sightedness that over generations has lost Somerville the parks and railroad stations and job opportunities it had a hundred years ago."

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Prior to this letter, the Mystic View Task Force seemed hesitant to criticize the developer’s plan. Following Lawrence Paolella’s comment in the Somerville Journal, David Dahlbacka, President of MVTF, in a letter sent out the next day, stopped short of criticizing the development itself, but disagreed with the city’s attempt to enter into a MOU before the end of the Cecil Group planning process. Later the MVTF issued a press release where they criticized the plan directly. At this stage of the process though the MVTF must become more direct and up front with their criticisms. They should think about alternative tools of organizing, other than urban design, editorial writing, press releases, and lobbying municipal officials. The MVTF call for a letter writing campaign is a first step. Perhaps legal strategies like those used in the Casper and the Riverside South cases are necessary.

In effect MVTF needs to do two things. First, they must make a transition partly from proactive organizing to reactive organizing in order to make an impact. The other cases that I outlined in this thesis all had a reactive element. They all reacted first and then used an urban design process to make a transition into proactive organizing. In a sense, MVTF must take a step backward and use reactive tools to make their proactive organizing effective. Then they must present their clearly articulated designs as the alternative.

For the Mayor, it takes bravery to be a leader. No one can predict the future. We do not know what will interest developers on the Mystic View site. The market remains uncertain. It takes real bravery and leadership for a political figure to move into uncharted waters and aim for development that is in fact at a higher level than before. As Phillip Parsons so eloquently states, it is because of this lack of leadership that Somerville has not been able to retain any real tax dollars to meet basic services for its residents.

Bill Shutkin challenged my assumptions recently by asking if I thought urban design and traditional organizing could go hand in hand - MVTF still has not made it clear as to whether they are prepared to become strong organizers. My answer remains yes. What the MVTF lacks is a sense of community organizing. Professionals lobbying government or using their professional credentials to convince elected officials and municipal employees will not guarantee victory. The Mayor feeling that this issue will cost her the next election will.

I too cannot predict the future. I do not know which way this struggle will go. I do know that residents, through strong community organizing, can make political leaders accountable. What
happens next really depends on the resolve of the Mystic View Task Force, the residents and the ability of the Mayor to provide vision and leadership. If the Mayor has no vision for a better Somerville, and the Mystic View Task Force fails to convince her that her job is at stake, then Somerville will lose its “final frontier” to “big box” development.

As I discuss in the Chapter 2 case study of Mystic View, in many ways, organizers have already achieved success. National and Taurus proposed a mixed-use development with waterfront access. Residents have become educated, politicized and understand the connections between urban design, development, environmental quality and the city services that they care about. Residents will now involve themselves in the planning and development process. At minimum, the residents of Somerville refused to stand by helpless as others decided their fate - as in the South Bay with the Asphalt site. Residents became involved, proactively expressing what they wanted, and thereby influencing development outcomes.

Notes

1 Nathanial Cook; Developer Submits Plan for Assembly Square Mall; Somerville Journal; 5/4/2000
2 ibid.
3 Phillip Parsons, Letter to the Mayor, 5/12/00
4 ibid.
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4. Interview with Pat Jehlen, 3/2/2000

5. Interview with Stave Post, Housing and Economic Development Director for the City of Somerville, 3/13/2000

6. Interview with Anne Tate, 2/14/2000

7. Interview with Wig Zamore, 2/17/2000

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9. Interview with Peggy Sheppard, 4/17/00
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11. Conversation with Penn Loh, Executive Director, Alternatives for Community and Environment, 4/24/00

12. Interview with Harry Smith, Organizing Director, JP Neighborhood Development Corporation; 3/9/00

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4. Letter to the National Neighborhood Coalition, Wig Zamore, October 31, 1999

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