

Learning From A Small Town; Community Participation As The Foundation For A 21st Century Design Process¹

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Abstract

Globalization has given rise to problems that planners and designers struggle with. It has not only changed the way people do business, but it has affected the very concept of community, altering its identity and separating people and the natural environment from each other. Technology has been used to replace direct experience and stewardship of our land. The traditional design methodologies we have inherited from the modernists are inadequate. In order to fully understand and address these new challenges it is necessary to envision a design process that can alter people's values and beliefs, encouraging them to reconnect to the communities in which they live. Community design is able to provide some of the tools to achieve this ambitious goal.

The participatory design process for a Community Center in the small town of Westport, California proves the effectiveness of community design in dealing with concerns over economic development, loss of identity and social capital formation and may offer insights and lessons for designers worldwide. These include the importance of native wisdom over expert knowledge; the value of careful listening and accurate storytelling; the need for increased interaction between people and nature as a way to strengthen people's sense of self; and the importance of a design process that is holistic, rather than piecemeal.

Keywords

community design, globalization, design process, place-identity

1. Introduction: Global Challenges For 21st Century Design

Deterritorialization and social capital

Globalization has helped disconnect us from the places in which we live by *deterritorializing* many of the activities that were once physically situated in everyone's neighborhood (Kearny, 1995). The rise of what Manuel Castells calls "information age" (1996) has contributed to the simultaneous dispersion and concentration of activities that were historically bound to specific urban places. While highly specialized districts of our cities are part of a global network (think for instance of the fashion districts of New York or Milan) – detached from any local references – other neighborhoods are at the periphery of such network, providing labor and functional support to the system but with limited access to information. As François Ascher (2001) points out, this "third modernity" gives some the ability to choose whether they want to be global or local, social or individualistic. However, not everyone has choices; for those unable to access information, new forms of segregation arise (Ascher, 29).

The ability to choose to be either global or local has also affected our public lives. We can be highly social during the day and secure ourselves in gated communities at night. Most of all we may chose to socialize and associate only with people similar to us or to protect ourselves from attacks to the homogeneity of our neighborhoods. Rather than construct social capital across cultural and income divides, we increase segregation and selfishness (McNally, 1998). In his recent book on the creation of social networks in the United States Robert Putnam (2003) distinguishes between the concepts *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital is the glue that keeps together socially and ethically similar individuals. Bridging social capital, on the

¹ In this paper, I use community design, participatory design and community participation interchangeably. The emphasis is on user-based design where local communities and designers are jointly involved in environmental planning projects.

other hand, connects people of different interests, and it is harder to achieve (Putnam, 3). The first leads to NIMBYism (not in my backyard), while the second lays the foundations for true participation. However, the majority of social activities are of the bonding type—generating more fractures between people—rather than true community building.

Deterritorialization and identity

Deterritorialization has brought about people's physical detachment from the places in which they live. In the United States, globalization has strengthened the role of metropolitan areas like San Francisco as economic magnets leading to enormous pressures to provide housing. Gentrification and rising real estate values in cities force the poor to look for more affordable housing elsewhere. Much residential development is occurring at the fringes of our cities, where land is cheaper. In the case of the Bay Area, the once productive Central Valley, Solano and Mendocino counties are losing prime agricultural land to residential neighborhoods (Urban Ecology, 12). At 5 am, on a weekday the highway that connects the valley to San Francisco is jammed with commuters.

Associated with the loss of land is the loss of regional identity; people no longer depend on the land to survive, therefore their ecological knowledge is lost (Hough, 35). Urban expansion and consumption of agricultural land have interrupted the interactive exchange by which identity between people and nature was established. In the past people were deeply rooted in their locales through active engagement—they knew their places like the palm of their hand. Today, people take little or no time to discover nature; they spend more time driving than walking or running. The severance of people from their surroundings has major impacts on their personal identities and ultimately affects their role in society. Living in fragmented and disconnected landscapes has made us more individualistic (Ibid. 91). Recent literature has found that the level of involvement with nature affects our personal, social and political behaviors. Being one with nature makes people aware of their belonging to a larger system and ultimately shapes better citizens (Clayton and Opatow, 2003).

Globalization and the loss of regional identity

At the global level, globalization has put nations against each other and has increased competition between urban centers (Friedmann, 2004). Europe is experiencing this phenomenon first hand. With the establishment of the European Community as a global political entity and the introduction of the Euro, some have warned of the weakening of national governments vis-à-vis the largest metropolitan areas (Gospodini, 2002). This competition plays out in the urban design realm. The need to attract business leads to the disastrous political decisions. Cities adapt their physical environment to global needs and tastes by building new infrastructure and landmark buildings that do not speak of local traditions (Hough, 162). Metropolitan areas have poured resources into revitalization projects that might give them an edge over the competition; the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao illustrates advantages and disadvantages of policies that might succeed from a marketing standpoint, but ultimately contribute to the loss of regional identity (Ibid. 67). Michael Hough warns against the dangers of “pedigreed” designs that are indifferent to context. The risk is the creation of environmental anomalies, places that have no relation to their context and are unable to inspire people to take ownership of the places in which they live (Hester, 1990). He proposes instead a process by which urban form is derived directly from the cultural and natural landscape of regions (Hough, 19).

Inadequacy of planning

Traditional planning and design techniques have led to the creation of cities where “one design fit all” because they were envisioned to level all specificity in favor of universal consensus. They deal with the city in terms of its physicality and use physical constraints to growth to guide its future. Today, they have become inadequate to resolve issues that range in scale and involve critical decisions affecting the identity of cultural groups. They are too static and inappropriate to fast-changing global cities (Sandercock, 1998; Friedman, 2004). Planning cities and neighborhoods in the context of a global society requires much more than good physical design. Design needs to address issues of identity, social capital construction and go as far as altering our deeply engrained attitudes toward the natural environment. It must address the local and the regional at the same time. The practice of community design offers a perfect point of departure for this new type of design process. Having successfully helped overcome racial tensions, segregation, gender discrimination, it is well equipped to confront similar issues in our global world.

2. A New Design Process For The 21st Century

Community participation in the United States then and now

Discussion on the direct involvement of citizens in politics goes back to the United States' founding fathers and their utopias. Both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin believed that citizenship could only come from participation in communitarian decision-making. Similarly, Andrew Jackson suggested that local citizens were more capable of running their communities than federal bureaucrats. When Alexis de Toqueville visited the United States, he was impressed by the large number of citizens' groups involved in local government (Hester, 1999; Cuff, 2004). With the industrial revolution and the urbanization that followed participation steadily declined. The United States were no longer the country of small, self-sustaining villages where decisions were made collectively. Urban renewal did little to involve users in the decision making process and certain planners took it upon themselves to help low-income and black communities fight urban renewal's inhuman plans by advocating for a change in the planning process (Hester, 1999, 25).

In the 50s and 60s the advocacy planning movement rediscovered participatory methodologies and used them to create plans that responded to the needs of users and empowered them to take the future into their own hands (Hester 1975, 1999). Today, community participation has become institutionalized. Much of the legislation regarding environmental issues mandates participation, although it uses it mainly to stall projects rather than to inform better decisions (McNally, 1998). While the underlying values have not changed, community designers have become increasingly involved with developers, city managers and banks. Today, the number of people calling themselves community designers has grown exponentially and participation is often required by municipalities and state agencies (Rios, 2005a). Throughout the world there are firms that specialize in community design "techniques" and have developed methods much more sophisticated than those used in the 60s. Most recently, the events associated with 9/11 have led to an increase interest in participatory architecture (Francis, 2003). In academia, community participation is fundamental component of design education in America, Asia and throughout the world (Hou, Francis and Brightbill, 2005).



Figure 1. Globalization has impacted our ability to build social capital (Photo: Randy Hester)

Recurring themes in the work of community designers

A review of the literature and practice of community design reveals a series of underlying values and areas of interest, many of which are relevant to the task of identifying a design process for the 21st century. Some of these values come from the experience of advocacy planning of the 50s and 60s, while others are more recent and inspired by the work of anthropologists, cultural geographers and sociologists. All of these professionals have developed specific methods and techniques that 21st century designers should become familiar with.

a) Multiculturalism and storytelling

Because of its attention to the specificities and idiosyncrasies of each community, participatory design is particularly well fit to address identity and cultural conflicts that emerge from our multicultural cities. The work of Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris (2000) in the Byzantine-Latino Quarter of Los Angeles and Norma Jean

McLaren and Leonie Sandercock's storytelling circles in British Columbia's First Nations are good examples of community design efforts across cultural divides. Particularly crucial to the work of designers engaged in cross-cultural planning is the need to build upon and add to—rather than denying—the diversity that exists in today's communities. This means finding opportunities in the process during which differences can surface and be celebrated. At the onset of their community workshops Norma Jean McLaren and Leonie Sandercock use naming/storytelling exercises during which participants are asked to reveal the autobiographical stories hidden behind their names. The ability to allow stories to surface and reveal invisible social struggles behind each person's stories are fundamental aspects of the work of cross-cultural designer. The skills needed to lead this sort of exercises should become part of the training of all future designers (Sandercock, 2003, 39).

b) Local knowledge vs. expert knowledge

A crucial theme in community design has to do with the difference in perspective between insiders and outsiders, an issue which has always been a primary concern for designers. Herbert Gans (1962), Kevin Lynch (1960, 1981), Randy Hester (1982, 1990), Donald Appleyard (1976) and Clare Cooper Marcus (1986) have warned of the dangers of design driven by specialists, suggesting that the solution might be in the involvement of users during different stages in the process. In particular, Appleyard's work in Ciudad Guyana revealed a huge gap between residents' and designers' experience of the Brazilian town of that place. "In perceptual terms, the inhabitants saw the 'figure,' and the planners saw the 'ground'" (Appleyard, 23).

Strictly related to the insider/outsider perspective on place is the discussion on the role that native wisdom and citizen science might play in the advancement of scientific knowledge in environmental studies (Irwin, 1995; Hester, 2005). Albeit limited in number and extent, efforts to involve user in scientific research have proved to be effective; the work of Cornell University's Ornithology lab illustrates their success (Hester, 2005, 188). The task for designers of the 21st century is to establish channels and opportunities within their processes so that users' knowledge may be incorporated, allowing their first-hand perspectives to influence decisions on the future directions of scientific research in all fields of knowledge.

c) Empowering communities through design

An important aspect of community design consists of its incremental approach to problem solving. Contrary to the scale of traditional architectural or planning efforts, community design focuses on small scale, often minimal projects. This often involves great creativity and the ability to make the best use of the limited resources at hand—Hester calls them "fish heads"—to achieve more ambitious goals (Ibid. 181). The underlying idea is that once a community has the tools and motivation to succeed that power can be replicated and employed to trigger future endeavors. Thus the physical act of building a Community Center, a trail, a small garden may become a metaphor for the reconstitution of that community and a statement about its unique identity (Ruggeri, 2005).

d) Holism, multidisciplinary and generalization.

The list of speakers at the recent conference of the Association of Community Designers in NYC showed the range and scope of participatory efforts. It included case studies of urban design projects, health-related research (Rios, 2005b), and efforts centering on the use of new media to enhance the dialogue between designers and communities (Al-Douhri, 2005). The holistic nature of participatory design is one of the characteristics that distinguish it from traditional design practice. Globalization has added to the already broad range of expertise that must be involved. This has made the work of today's designers more complicated. Community designers must be able to analyze problems in all their facets and seek solutions that address more than one aspect at once. In practical terms this means that user-based design processes must be designed so that they may be modified and opened to other professional figures; the "feedback loop" that emerges out of many community design efforts aims at reinforcing this holistic approach (Hester, 1999; Kot and Ruggeri, 2005).

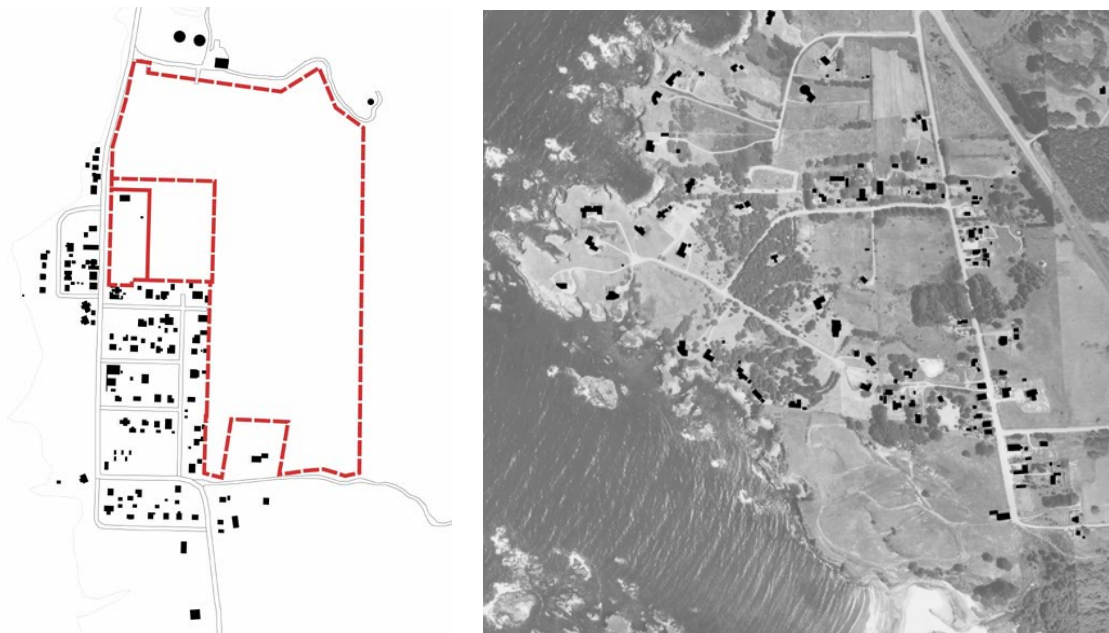
It is difficult to characterize community design as a uniform action (Hester, 1999). While the values underlying community participation are clear and shared by many in the different fields of environmental planning, a commonly accepted methodology for community design does not yet exist. Christopher Alexander (1977), Clare Cooper Marcus and Randy Hester have been among the first to develop methodologies for the involvement of users in the design process. Additional methods have been devised by cultural geographers, anthropologists,

sociologists and other social scientists. Some of these efforts remain unknown outside of each specific field because of the objective difficulty of drawing parallels between fields. Mark Francis (2005) and Michael Rios (2005a) have written about the need to systematically evaluate participatory design in order to generalize and disseminate findings of community design projects to a broader audience. One possibility is to use the “case study,” a methodology that is now commonly accepted by many fields (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In the following pages I attempt to dissect a community participation process in the small town of Westport, California and develop a series of generalization on community based design and on future design processes.

3. Case Study: Death and Life of a Small Coastal Community

Westport’s past, present and future

Westport is located four hours north of San Francisco, a village blessed with views that make it one of the most attractive spots along the northern California coast. When asked to describe their town residents use the word “paradise” (Kot and Ruggeri, 2005). However, paradise has its problems. Westport’s economy has been lagging since the 1910s when only twenty years after it had settled in the area, the lumber industry relocated to Fort Bragg. Remnants of what was once a bustling community of 10000 can still be seen in the flat-front commercial buildings along Main Street and the salt box houses clustered around the town center. The physical structure of the town fits perfectly the simple lives of its residents. This has not been the case for other small villages whose character has been altered. In nearby Caspar dozens of trophy homes have been built to take advantage of views, turning their back to the community (Figures 2, 3).



Figures 2-3 Figure ground maps of Westport (left) and Caspar, CA (right).
(Graphics: Berkeley Design Team and Carey Knecht)

Together with the architectural character, Westport is characterized by beautiful natural features. Despite centuries of human intervention and manipulation, the environment in Westport has maintained its clarity and simplicity. To the west is the rocky coastline and the Pacific Ocean, with its crashing waves and beautiful coves; to the east are steep, densely wooded hills. The landscape embodies Kevin Lynch’s theory of imageability (Kot and Ruggeri, 2005) and possesses many of the characters that make urban places “good”: it fits well within its natural context; it is distinguishable and memorable; its boundaries are clearly legible; it has a clear sense of place, it is accessible and easily walkable and highly democratic (Lynch, 1981).

Westport suffers from chronic problems, many of which are typical of small towns; most residents cannot find jobs within reasonable distance and must commute long hours as far as San Francisco in order to find

employment. As a consequence, public life suffers (Hester et al. 1988). People lament the lack of opportunities for socialization and are often too tired to consider taking an active role in public life. The proximity to the tourist destination of Mendocino makes Westport and other villages of similar uniqueness appealing to Bay Area baby boomers looking for beautiful and inexpensive places for retirement. Tourism and second homes are among the limited sources of income, but people have mixed feelings about them. Many feel that more jobs, affordable housing and a new Community Center may could bring new residents and make its public life livelier.

In many small unincorporated communities, informal organizations often substitute more traditional forms of government. However, they lack the authority and legal status to enforce decisions and are often overruled by county governments and bureaucrats. In Westport the Village Society and the Water Board have played a fundamental public role as the only forms of government. Over the years they have achieved many successes; they have built a cutting-edge water treatment facility and preserved the Headlands—some of the most beautiful land along the coast. However, these groups do not have a shared vision for the future of the community. The challenge for the Design Team was to help the community face its practical issues and at the same time develop a much broader vision for the town's future.

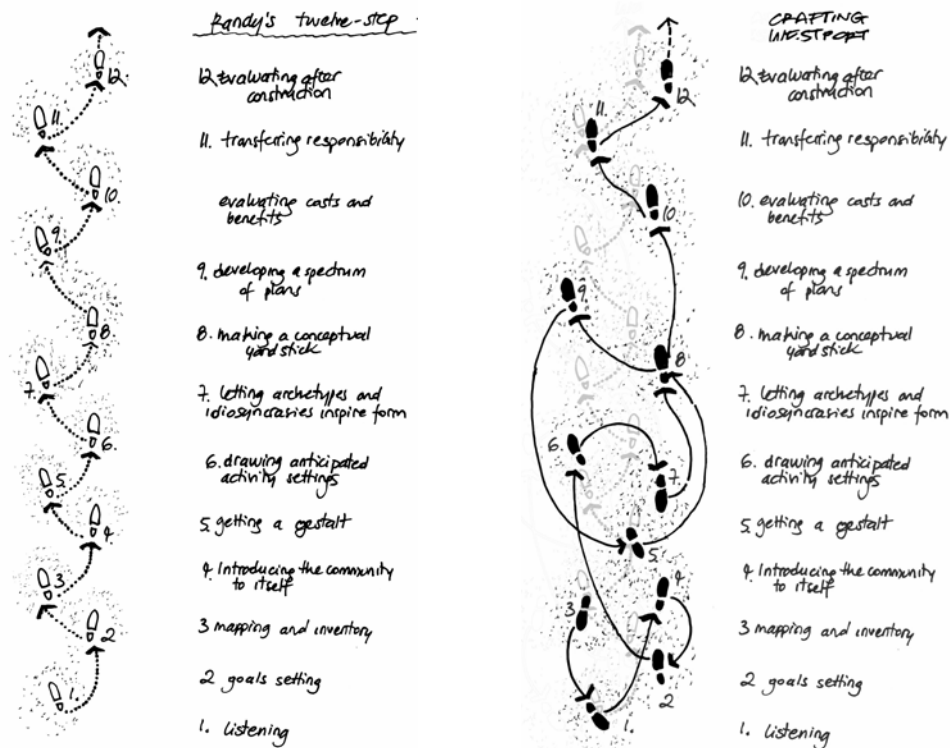
Building a Community Center

The community design process in Westport initiated when two long time residents decided to acquire a large piece of undeveloped land that had been the object of multiple speculative attempts to develop large vacation homes. Their goal was to involve the entire community in a project that while focusing on a master plan for the entire site would offer the community the chance to unite and discuss its future. Like many others they also believed in the need for a Community Center and offered to provide the necessary land for erecting the new facility. Inspired by the success of a similar endeavor in nearby Caspar, Lee Tepper and Dorine Real asked a team from the University of California, Berkeley led by Randy Hester to guide the process.

The process would draw upon the theoretical framework known as the “twelve steps” outlined by Randy Hester in Planning Neighborhood Design for People (1982) and Community Design Primer (1990). It consists of a series of exercises and techniques organized along a spectrum going from broad and visionary to specific and practical. In its original format, the process is linear and time efficient, with each step informing the next; however, in Westport an entirely new process emerged, one that was reiterative and self-adjusting (Figures 4, 5). The first steps aim at understanding the uniqueness of the place and its people. Information about many aspects of a locality is gathered, analyzed and later re-introduced to the community for feedback. This step uses traditional mapping and analysis as well as interviews and group listening during which problems are clarified. The following step is to find consensus on a community-wide vision for the future of the community, a step called “setting goals.” Once goals are clearly outlined, discussed and ranked, participants transform their abstract ideas into form through hands on exercises and visualization techniques. The final result is a plan that the community can call its own, contributing to its sustainability overtime.

In Westport the final design was highly idiosyncratic and representative of the community's traditions, yet it displayed unprecedented sophistication. Residential development (made of 6-8 affordable houses and 2 market rate properties) was clustered around a new field similar to a New England Town Commons and consistent with the development patterns typical of Westport. What was also unique was the decision to locate the Community Center next to existing sacred places in town, the Store and Post Office. Similar to the existing community layout the new plan looked inward rather than outward. Its focus became that of reinforcing the creation of a new community hub, rather than the passive appreciation of Ocean views. By choosing compactness over views residents sent out a clear message about the type of community they envisioned and about the profile of the ideal Westport citizen, one that is actively engaged in public life and neighboring activities.

The final plan incorporated many of the goals established during the listening step. It also showed important changes derived from the feedback loop that had been created between designers and residents. The location of the soccer field in the heart of the community and the siting of the Community Center near the Store and away from the Ocean allowed most of the land to remain undeveloped



Figures 4-5 Twelve step process and Crafting Westport comparison. (Graphic: Berkeley Design Team)

Residents also suggested that a drainage area located behind the School be turned into an outdoor classroom for ecological education, a decision that came directly out of a walking tour during which resident were able to experience the site. The flexibility of a process based on a feedback loop allowed local knowledge to be incorporated whenever it was needed. The result was a physical design but also a statement about residents' shared values. The report summarizing the process was distributed to each family in town. Residents were so proud of the outcome that they suggested turning it into an unofficial guide on "how to be a perfect Westport Citizen" to be distributed to those interested in moving there.

4. Lessons Learned In Westport and Their Relevance to 21st Century Communities

Repetita Juvant. The need for a reiterative, self adjusting process

In light of the failure of master plans, zoning and other planning methods inspired by the modernist idea of the city as a machine (Le Corbusier, 1947), many have concluded that new planning and design paradigms are needed in order to successfully address the complex issues raised by globalization (Sandercock, 1998, 21). Today's cities are much more than a series of objects floating in an undifferentiated landscape of open spaces, as described in Le Corbusier's "Ville Contemporaine" (1922). They are highly dynamic places where multiple identities—homeless, gays, immigrants, day laborers, families, singles, seniors—must be able to coexist and interact freely and without censorship. Community design, because of its focus on users' needs and feelings rather than objects offers a good point of departure for the definition of a new form of design to guide the future of this new type of cities.

The process that unfolded in Westport can offer insights on what this new design and planning model might be. Rather than applying a methodology and expect the community to fully embrace it, the Westport Design Team strategy was to make continuous changes in the process in order to fit the community's idiosyncrasies. We called this new strategy the "Crafting Westport," using a metaphor that talked of a custom-made process that was attentive to details, careful in using the limited resources available and respectful of traditions. The non-linear, incremental and self-adjusting process that came to light in Westport helped the town deal with complex and highly intertwined goals: the construction of a new Community Center; the preservation of the town's

identity; the creation of affordable housing and new job opportunities. All of these objectives needed to be addressed simultaneously. This holistic process taught us important lessons which I have summarized in the following pages.

The importance of listening and the “view from the inside”

Crucial to designing in the age of globalization is the need for designers to achieve a more intimate knowledge of the places and people they work for. Herbert Gans (1962), Donald Appleyard (1976) and Yi Fu Tuan (1990) called this deep knowledge a “the view from the inside,” distinct from an outsider’s view, often based on instinctual and primarily visual reactions to places. In Westport, the view from the inside was achieved through intensive listening. Overall, more than half of the population participated in the process, with over 120 hours spent in interviews and group listening. This gave the Design Team invaluable insights on the things residents valued the most, but most of all it revealed nuances and subtleties that were not been apparent to us at first. It was through the reiterative listening that we understood the real meaning of what the community was telling us.

The literature highlights the importance of careful listening in breaking the insider/outsider barrier so that the traditional “I-You” relationship between expert and client may become a “we” rapport of equal mutuality (Forester, 1989; Burawoy, 1989). In Westport careful listening led to a deeper understanding of people’s feelings; in the words of a team member: “the words of the people never changed, but our understanding of them became more nuanced.” Many of the things that were mentioned as important during the interviews became secondary. The need for a new school was outshined by the need for a multifunctional community space. Similarly, the importance of views of the ocean, which would have required a Community Center located on higher grounds and away from the existing Community Center, was abandoned in favor of a plan that looked inward—rather than outward.

Just as critical as careful listening is the ability to re-tell stories in ways that make sense are understood and inspire all. In Westport, re-introducing what we had learned during the mapping and inventory step back to the community became a revelatory moment for many residents and raised their awareness of both unresolved issues and community assets (Kot and Ruggeri, 2005). What made the work of the Design Team successful was the ability to tell a convincing story, which helped the community see problems, connections and possibilities. The use of the “crafting” metaphor helped both residents and designers come to accept the complex nature of the issues at hand and the need to take small steps. “Crafting” provided a *gestalt*, a comprehensive narrative making sense of the individual stories (Hester, 1990; Sandercock, 2003).

Deterritorialization and socialization

Fundamental to our success in Westport was the residents’ knowledge of place and their complete fit with the surrounding environment. When asked to make planning and design choices, residents did not hesitate to reject solutions that did not fit the “Westport way.” For instance, residents in Westport are aware of a maximum walking distance that they measure in the distance between the store and the church (Fig 6) thus they cannot think of a Community Center located away from the existing center of town as it would have altered this key pattern. Their knowledge comes from daily interactions with nature. This information was transferred to the Design Team during walking tours of some of the dearest and most controversial sites. Similarly, Westport residents are aware of the need to keep all ecological corridors open and maintain habitats; early on in the process they envisioned the preservation of an existing drainage area and suggested that it would be used for educational purposes so that all residents could become aware of their being one with their ecosystem.

Crafting Westport speaks of the importance of people’s connection to the natural environment as a tool for building stronger identities and engaging people in concrete acts of environmental stewardship and activism (Hou, Francis and Brightbill, 2005). This in return gives them the ability to make decisions that will contribute to the community’s sustainability. Designers have the responsibility to fight globalization by helping people connect back with nature. This can be achieved by improving access to natural areas, lakes and streams, daylighting a culvert, creating trails and running paths to encourage people’s explorations of their surroundings or turning vacant lots into community gardens or through regional planning efforts. In Davis, California Mike and Judy Corbett envisioned Village Homes as a sustainable residential neighborhood where the sense of

community would derive from resident's engagement with nature (www.villagehomesdavis.org). Along the way, they also found that creating edible landscapes, allowing for natural drainage instead of pipes not only increased the beauty of the place but also lowered maintenance and construction costs (Urban Ecology, 1996). Every day, Village's Homes' residents experience first hand that it is possible to fight back globalization in their daily lives.

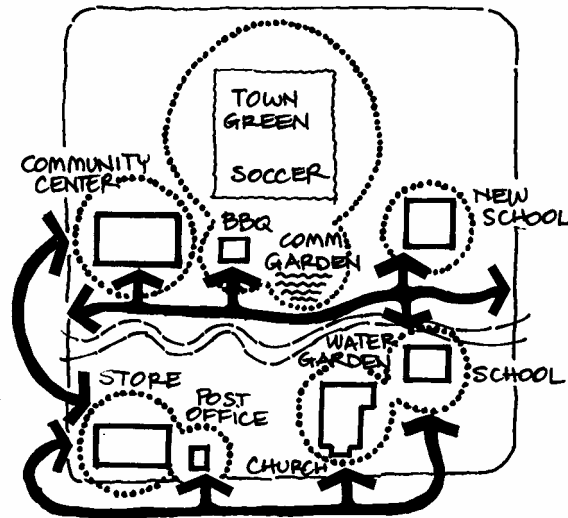


Figure 6 Diagram illustrating the relationship between key elements in the final plan. (Graphic: Berkeley Design Team)

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have pointed out some of the negative consequences of globalization on our rapidly changing multi-cultural communities and suggested that a new design process may be needed to confront the unprecedented issues we are facing. The failure of traditional planning and design is under everyone's eyes. Our cities have become more placeless, unlivable and unable to answer our basic needs. Technology has offered temporary solutions to some problems and caused others. Cars have offered us mobility and the chance to find inexpensive homes out in the suburbs but have increased consumption of land and commuting time, thus decreasing time for social capital creation (Putnam, 1995). As a result NIMBYism has become engrained in our society and we have become more selfish.

The good news is that people have the opportunity to come together and work for their common good at the scale of their community. Like Westport's residents, they can stop and think about what future they want for themselves, their families and their cities. These visions of the future can hardly be sought through traditional plans, mathematical models or zoning regulations. Holistic, comprehensive, sustainable solutions are needed. Community designers can offer the tools to involve people in the task or reconnecting to their places.

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