

## **Infrastructures for Grace: Meditations on regenerative design praxis in gentrifying urban landscapes**

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**Abstract:** In consideration of the possibilities for place-based learning and resilience, this article offers reflections from the author's praxis in regenerative neighborhood development in Austin, Texas from 2006 to 2015. Consistent with the themes of the Winter 2015 issue, the article considers psychological, social, political, and economic dimensions of place-based engagement, citizen action, and stewardship within the particular context of gentrifying urban landscapes and contested visions of sustainable cities. Although the author shares a particular situated experience, the themes explored are pertinent to others in the field who share a desire to advance environmental justice in fast-growing cities. The article presents a model for regenerative praxis drawn primarily from the Theory U framework for collaborative action research and the LENSES framework for regenerative design that helped the author contribute more positively to the social and ecological resilience of her neighborhood in the face of gentrification and social tension. Drawing from examples from two neighborhood-based projects, the article offers a call to the field to integrate unprecedented curiosity, compassion and courage into sustainability research and praxis in the contested landscapes we call home. As we consider the prospect of place-making and learning, the article offers a call to engage in un-learning and un-making so that we might co-create new patterns of inhabitation. The article offers some general propositions about priorities for future place-based action research.

**Keywords:** environmental justice; social learning; resilience; racism; regenerative design; gentrification

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Dear Fellow Sustainability Practitioners and Pedagogues,

As we embark on a new year and reflect on the themes of place, learning, and resilience, I offer my personal reflections on the psychological, social, political, and economic dimensions of place-based engagement, citizen action, and stewardship within the particular context of gentrifying landscapes and contested visions of sustainable cities. Like many of you, at the close of 2015, I have been reflecting personally on the implications and opportunities of our nation's acute awareness of the effects of structural racism on the differential experience of place in American communities. What does it look like to create places of belonging and ecological resilience in environments shaped by structural injustices? How can we re-inhabit our cities with new habits of mutual care for one another and our ecosystems? How can we learn from the legacies of courageous souls we lost in 2015, including Grace Lee Boggs in Detroit, Michigan and the Reverend Clementa Pickney and his circle of brothers and sisters at Mother Emanuel American Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina? How are the legacies of these leaders related to the challenges of social and ecological resilience? How can we learn from the past to collectively create a more just and flourishing future for our planet?

In the hope of opening a larger conversation among leaders in sustainability education about the possibilities for resilience in the context of urban gentrification, I offer reflections from my own praxis in regenerative neighborhood development in Austin, Texas from 2006 to 2015. As such, I share my situated perspective as a white, female urban planner, academic, and community organizer who engaged with the particular set of challenges facing my predominantly working-class, Hispanic neighborhood in one of the fastest gentrifying zipcodes in the country, 78702 (Hawkins & Novak, 2014; Petrilli, 2012). Although my experience is particular, I anticipate that the themes I encountered have general value to others in the field who share a desire to advance environmental justice – the possibility of all people to inhabit and steward flourishing social and ecological living systems. Ultimately, I offer a call to the field to integrate unprecedented curiosity, compassion and courage into our sustainability research and praxis in the contested landscapes we call home. As we consider the prospect of place-making and learning, I offer a call to engage in un-learning and un-making so that we might co-create new patterns of inhabitation. In sharing my situated experiences, I also offer some general propositions about methodologies that supported my regenerative design praxis and priorities for future place-based action research.

### **Beginnings: The Paradox of Environmental Justice and Gentrification**

My move to Austin in August 2006 was precipitated by a perplexing paradox I encountered during my tenure as an urban forester at the Urban Ecology Institute (UEI) at Boston College. Our UEI team included lawyers, landscape architects, and ecologists who collaborated with community groups as they worked to reclaim a vacant lot, restore a brownfield, or tackle other challenges to the social and ecological health of their neighborhoods. This was the kind of environmental justice work I'd always wanted to be part of - it was amazing to see the transformations that took place as local and expert knowledge was integrated and translated into collective action. Yet, as Boston's housing prices continued to escalate, I could not escape the

nagging sense that as our community partners transformed their neighborhoods, they were also sowing the seeds of their own economic displacement. Although hedonic pricing models showing that park amenities are tied to higher property values and tax revenues are useful in convincing public officials to invest in park improvements,<sup>1</sup> the same logic threatened the long-term tenancy of renters and low-income homeowners.

Perplexed by this paradox of environmental gentrification (Banzhaf & McCormick, 2006), I moved from Boston to Austin to study environmental justice and sustainable development as a graduate student in Community and Regional Planning at the University of Texas. Seeking to understand these complex challenges through lived experience as well as traditional research and analysis, I moved to the Holly Neighborhood in East Austin. Located just east of IH-35, the historic line of demarcation established by Austin's first comprehensive plan in 1928 which relegated industrial uses and people of color to the east while protecting white residential living to the west, this neighborhood had a long history of environmental racism. Located less than a 10 minute bike ride east of downtown in the targeted development zone of the city's smart growth plan established in the 1990s, gentrification pressure had become a growing public concern by 2000. By the time I purchased a home in the neighborhood a few blocks away from the Holly Street Power Plant (built in 1960), plans were underway to decommission the plant and turn the property into lake-front public parkland. Would this opportunity for regeneration of the landscape enhance ecological *and* social resilience, or would the new environmental amenities accelerate processes of displacement? Aware of my own complicity in the forces of gentrification as my partner and I renovated our 1907 home, I still hoped to find a way to use my professional skills and academic expertise to contribute positively to my neighborhood. Since the City of Austin had embraced a neighborhood planning approach, I assumed this would be a natural place for me to serve.

Unfortunately, this was easier said than done. The Holly Neighborhood was the only neighborhood in the city that had a neighborhood plan, but which lacked a Neighborhood Plan Contact Team (NPCT) to hold developers accountable to it. When the original plan was created in 2001, competing factions could not come to a consensus about by-laws for a city-sanctioned contact team. Some longtime activists were concerned at the time that the plan would accelerate gentrification rather than strengthen self-determination. After a seven year hiatus and changing neighborhood dynamics, the City of Austin initiated an open public process with Holly neighbors to establish a NPCT in September 2008.

Eager to collaborate with neighbors and use our collective voice to guide future development to advance environmental justice, I jumped into the process. The possibility of discovering collective vision was thwarted by palpable social tensions between well-established (mostly Mexican American) neighborhood activists, newer (mostly Caucasian) residents, and (mostly Caucasian) city officials. When the City convened a public meeting in June 2009 for a final vote on new by-laws proposed by a working group of neighbors, the tension reached a climax. Five minutes after the official start of the meeting, a few angry, long-term neighborhood

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are exceptions to the rule, proximity to desirable parks tends to contribute to higher housing prices (Crompton, 2005; McConnell & Walls, 2005).

activists stood up and drowned out attempts by others to speak with shouts of "No bylaws!" Yelling, "Eastside! Eastside!," they commanded newcomers to go back to where they came from. Fear escalated and police were called in. The bylaws were defeated in an 81-52 ballot vote by those in attendance (King, 2009).

As I walked back to my home with my partner, a tall white man, two brown-skinned, pre-teen boys bouncing a basketball together along the street called to us.

"Did you go to the meeting?" the older one asked.

"Yeah," I replied, encouraged by the friendly gesture. "Did you?" I asked.

"No," he said, "but my Aunt did. . . . You guys lost, didn't you."

My heart sank as his words and his grin hit me. These playful kids knew nothing about the specifics of the meeting, but they knew that the neighborhood was set up in a game of winners and losers with clearly divided teams. That night, they experienced an underdog victory on their home turf. I, however, experienced a sharp reality check and a visceral sense of loss.

Blinded by my own white privilege (McIntosh, 1989), part of me had believed I could simply show up with my good intentions, join forces with diverse neighbors in a color-blind, post-racial society, and harmoniously co-create a more socially just and ecologically resilient neighborhood. As an urban ecologist, I believed that the social and cultural diversity of the neighborhood would be a great asset for community resilience just as genetic diversity contributes to the resilience of ecosystems. Surely, we could unite, take on larger market forces together, and create an inclusive, resilient neighborhood. Unfortunately, as I romanticized diversity, I hadn't considered how it can also foment fragmentation, competing claims, and contested landscapes. I had neglected to consider how one person's sense of belonging might contribute to another's sense of exclusion. More fundamentally, I had neglected to understand how deeply entrenched racism was in our society. Even though I intellectually understood that racism had structured the landscape of Austin and other U.S. cities (Silver, 1997) and that I was born into a position of privilege in an uneven playing field, I significantly underestimated the challenge that posed to forging trusting relationships conducive to learning and resilience with my diverse neighbors.

After that public meeting and the encounter with the children, however, I could no longer assume that we were beyond racism. A seed of awareness was planted in my consciousness: if I were committed to social and ecological resilience and a vision of environmental justice, I would have to confront the stubborn resilience of the co-evolving, coupled, degenerative systems of racism and capitalism. By design, racism supports capitalism by dehumanizing people, perpetuating scarcity, and justifying unjust distributions of power and wealth. It also degrades ecological systems, especially when environmental burdens can be moved "away" and dumped on "lesser" people. My neighbors and I were born into these structural systems, over 400 years in the making and remaking. I began to realize that if I cared about environmental justice and the flourishing of living systems, it was time for me to consider some more fundamental questions. If, as David Harvey (2008) has asserted, "the freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is . . . one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights," how best could I exercise that right with my neighbors, locally and beyond?

## Developing a Methodology for Regenerative Praxis

This question opened a powerful inquiry for me as I pursued my doctoral studies and engaged in community life. Seeking to develop myself as an instrument of positive change, I encountered helpful frameworks, fields of study, and opportunities for collective action with local collaborators. Instead of focusing on “place-making,” I turned my attention to identifying my own place and power in existing systems, and listening with a more deliberately open mind, heart, and will for clues about how I might contribute. I started to shift my focus from “sustainable” development focused largely on reducing harm to people and supporting ecosystems to “regenerative” development focused on identifying opportunities for humans to contribute to the living systems of which we are part (Cole, 2012b). Beyond this helpful paradigmatic shift in mindset and normative goals, regenerative design also embraces methodological approaches grounded in dynamic, multi-scalar systems analysis that complemented the place-based, community-engaged, comprehensive systems-thinking approaches of urban planning. Yet, instead of a comprehensive top-down approach to planning, regenerative design focuses more on identifying high potential leverage points through which positive change can be catalyzed. It also employs a strengths-based approach that builds on existing assets and vital relationships in living systems, and seeks to understand how particular places evolved over time. (Browning, 2012; Cole, 2012a; N. S. Mang, 2009; P. Mang & Reed, 2012; Plaut, Dunbar, Wackerman, & Hodgkin, 2012; E. A. Walsh & Moore, 2015)

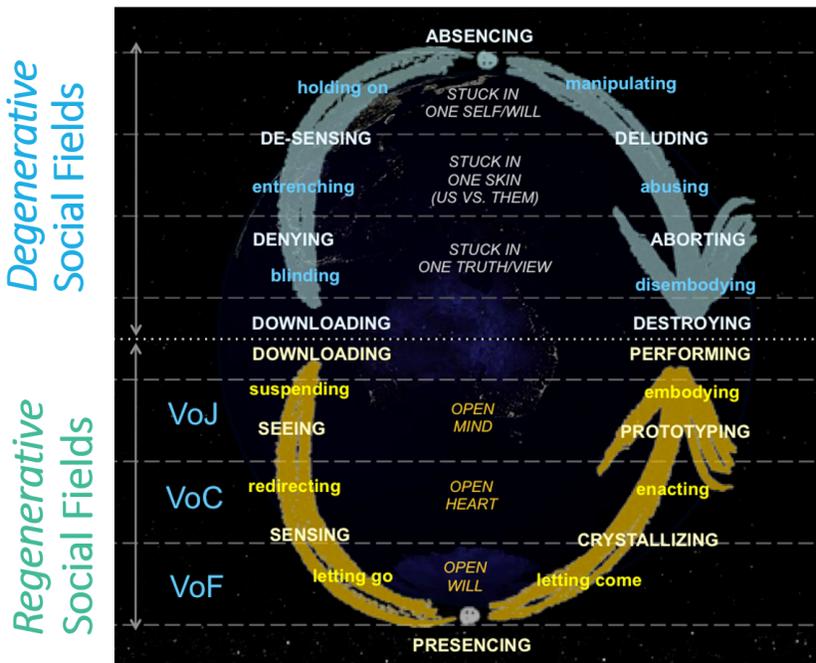
As I developed my own approach to regenerative design praxis that would allow me to better learn and adapt with my neighbors, I also drew from academic literature in sustainability science, environmental justice, and social learning, which all share a commitment to integrating expert and local knowledge for place-based transformational action research (E. Walsh, 2015). The work of Otto Scharmer and colleagues at MIT’s Presencing Institute was also very helpful in framing my approach to engaged, integrative action research. Supported by their “Theory U” framework (Scharmer, 2009; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), my reflective practice started to reveal a blind spot in planning research and practice. Although we excelled as a field in third person analysis of urban systems (e.g., accurately describing existing conditions and identifying past trends and probable future scenarios) and were increasingly proficient in second person analysis (e.g., understanding existing conditions empathetically through advances in participatory methods and stakeholder network analysis), I started to see that there were other largely unexplored areas related to first person perspectives that still had an influence on our results.

Planners and designers tend to study what we *have* and strategize about what to *do* and *say*. When our actions fail to produce desired circumstances, we repeat the process. Yet, operating beneath the surface there are often unexamined assumptions, entrenched patterns of inhabitation, and fixed ways of *being* that profoundly shape what (and how) we say and do and the results we produce.<sup>2</sup> Theory U assumes that the quality of our attention and attunement to the highest potential in ourselves, one another, and our ecosystems influences our capacity to produce desired results. It holds that the more we observe, listen, and engage with an open mind, heart, and will, the more likely we are to be able to generate life enhancing relationships in our social and ecological environments. This approach to listening is challenging and necessarily

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction builds upon theories of single-, double- and triple loop learning developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon’s work on reflective practice and organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1995). Theory U builds on this foundation.

vulnerable. It requires practiced suspension of one’s automatic internal voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear (e.g., VOJ, VOC, VOF). It fosters awareness of past habits that have outlived their value and enables moments of letting go of past identities and structures and letting new possibilities emerge. When, in the space of deep presence, awareness, and attunement, a new possibility emerges, the practice of Theory U encourages “acting in an instant” and learning through doing, enacting the emerging future through iterative prototyping. This regenerative learning process of deepening presence and awareness runs counter to degenerative process of engagement that typify much of mainstream politics, through which actors get caught in a trap of defending their ideas, identities, and habits. Stuck in one truth, an “us v. them” mentality, and habitual action, the possibilities for learning and adaptation in diverse communities are quashed. These regenerative and degenerative processes of engagement are summarized by Figure 1 from Theory U below. The “U” shape of the regenerative processes of engagement is the basis of the name “Theory U.” (Scharmer, 2009; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1. Regenerative and Degenerative Processes of Engagement from Theory U**

While these ideas about reflective practice, deep dialogue and engagement are not new to scholarship,<sup>4</sup> Theory U helped integrate well-established social learning theory with newer advances in neuroscience and mindfulness into an elegant framework for reflective praxis that complements the whole-systems thinking of regenerative design. Both of these frameworks

<sup>3</sup> It may be worth noting that although I categorize these sets of social fields as regenerative and degenerative, Scharmer uses “social emergence” and “social pathology.”

<sup>4</sup> The literature in social learning, organizational development, pragmatism, communicative action, dialogue and deliberation, and participatory democracy all engage these ideas.

significantly supported me in cultivating place-based, collaborative learning to advance resilience in my neighborhood. Personally, as a naturally conflict-averse, perfectionist, academic planner, these practices of opening myself and acting in contested landscapes without complete information or a foolproof plan were threatening. Yet, with *practice* I found that they helped me stay humble and vulnerably receptive, while also tapping into greater courage and confidence in the face of social conflict and personal attacks. Better yet, as I embraced these challenges, other neighbors did the same. The following narratives of my journey reflect this integrated approach, told in two Acts.

### **Stories of Place, Resilience, and Learning: A Performance in Two Acts**

#### **Act I: Emergence of Neighborhood-Based Green Home Renovation Project**

After the debacle of the 2009 public meeting, I largely limited my community engagement to casual one-on-one conversations with neighbors. I focused most of my attention on my doctoral studies in indoor environmental sciences and engineering and environmental justice, specializing in holistic approaches to green and healthy home repair. Recognizing the potential of low-income weatherization programs to create indoor air quality problems by over-sealing homes with indoor toxins and vulnerable populations, I worked with the public utility and other home repair providers in Austin to develop a study of health impacts of weatherization. In the process, I became the Vice Chair of the Austin Housing Repair Coalition and supported a coalition of over a dozen repair organizations and social service providers united around a common vision of green and healthy home repair to support low-income homeowners contending with gentrification pressure in our fast-growing city.

Two years after the highly contentious neighborhood planning meeting, the Catholic priest who led the neighborhood parish convened a series of community conversations and a survey in the spring of 2011. The goal was to identify community priorities and to support neighbors in taking action on areas of common concern. Based on community priorities identified in the surveys, we broke off into working groups at one of the meetings. Given my recent experience with networks of home repair providers and my newer practices of participating with a curious mind, compassionate heart, and courageous will, I joined a small group focused on affordable housing. Accustomed to cynicism and resignation when it came to conversations about gentrification, I was surprised by the openness, kindness, and creativity of those in my group. When I shared my emerging idea about getting neighbors together to complete green and healthy home repairs for neighbors, two other neighbors were particularly excited about it. One neighbor was a white, male developer who had been “flipping” homes in the area and wanted to contribute to the neighborhood fabric by lending his skills in home repair to those in need. Another was a Mexican American man who had grown up in the neighborhood and had started a volunteer organization to bring his peers and neighbors together in local community service. Through our energized brainstorming session, we realized that with our combined skills and connections, we and our neighbors could actually act on our shared desire to help long-time homeowners continue living comfortably in their homes. Despite the loud chattering of voices of fear in my head, I sensed a future possibility that wanted to emerge and I said “yes” to it in that moment. We chose to start working on a pilot project and I volunteered to coordinate. As we reached out to other neighbors we encountered both strong support and the

vehement opposition of one of the neighborhood activists who had been vocal at the 2009 meeting. Yet, we continued to move forward and ultimately secured funding from the City of Austin that allowed us to complete four pilot projects.

Given my commitment to cultivating ecological and social resilience and my background as a planner and regenerative designer, it was important to me that we design the project to build adaptive capacity while reducing our collective ecological footprint at the household and neighborhood levels. Ultimately, we designed the program to reduce utility bills and increase indoor environmental quality for a neighbor in need of support. Additionally, when program leaders approached the design of the home repair interventions, we did so *with* the household, not *for* the household. The energy and health/safety audits were incorporated into a “regenerative dialogue assessment” (E. Walsh, 2015) that engaged household members in a dialogue through which they shared their experiences, needs, preferences, and aspirations related to their home, including their house, yard, and neighborhood.

At the neighborhood-level, we sought to cultivate social relationships and social capital through the collective action of neighborhood volunteers. We also aimed to reduce neighbors’ ecological footprints, decrease utility bills, and support local green builders. As such, we had local green builders lead and train volunteers, equipping them with skills and professional connections to help them take action at home. To cultivate and draw upon the adaptive capacity of the neighborhood participants, we evaluated the program after each the three trials through feedback from volunteers (surveys and interviews) and interviews with homeowners.

In the final analysis of results, it appeared that the innovative approach of regenerative design and dialogue employed in the project helped the HNHN achieve outcomes that went beyond the traditional boundaries of home repair programs.

At the household level, the three homeowners reported that they were highly satisfied with the results of this program. Especially after having had some negative experiences with contractors from a city-managed neighborhood-focused home repair program, they said they appreciated the respectful and caring relationships they developed with the HNHN leaders and volunteers. Although they did not experience significant reductions in energy bills, they said they were more comfortable and enjoyed maximized use of their living space. The regenerative dialogue approach helped project leaders understand household desires, engage them as partners, and strategically intervene in ways that maximized the well-being of the household. For instance, in one demonstration project, a homeowner expressed sadness about how lonely she and her husband were in their home and how she wished she could have move visitors and overnight guests. Upon immediate inspection, it was clear a broken window in the back of the house precluded a large room from becoming part of the conditioned living space. However, it also became apparent that a practice of filling rooms with boxes made guest housing unrealistic. Ultimately, through the practice of generative listening and cultivation of caring relationships with the elderly couple, we learned that Mrs. Chavez’s loneliness and the presence of the boxes were both tied to the tragic shooting of her son on her doorstep over a decade before, which in turn was tied to a larger pattern of racism and inequality. Having experienced discrimination and unequal opportunity as Mexican Americans, they had little choice but to move to a neighborhood

riddled with violence. Despite their best intentions, their son fell victim to it. They believed that most of their neighbors ostracized them after that event. Although a few neighbors remained close, by the time we met the Chavez, all but one had passed away.

Although there was nothing we could do about the Chavez's loss of their son or a history of racism, the least we could do was listen attentively. As she and her husband connected with us and envisioned a future in line with their hearts' desire, Mrs. Chavez reached a place where she was comfortable letting go of some of these possessions that she no longer used. We then helped her organize a garage sale as part of home repair project. This support in letting go, coupled with insulation and window repair, expanded available living space in the home. Later, one of the neighbors who met the family during the work day donated a bed for her new guest room. In the following year she had visitors from Chicago and San Antonio, and the year after that one of her sons moved back to help her and her husband. This homeowner wanted to create a place of belonging where she could feel connected to others. The process of home repair helped support a larger effort to reinvent her home as a place of connection with neighbors and reunion with family.

The demonstration projects also generated neighborhood level benefits. Volunteers reported meeting new neighbors, strengthening relationships, and developing a strong sense of connection to the neighborhood. Volunteer surveys showed that the majority learned new skills (and those who did particularly enjoyed learning from their neighbors). Some volunteers indicated that they followed through with commitments they made at their work day to complete work on their own homes (e.g., installation of solar screens, installation of rain barrel systems). Five said that they took subsequent actions in their personal lives or in their neighborhood that they would not have done otherwise. Of these, two shared in exit interviews that their participation in the work days led to a significant shift in the way they saw themselves and their neighborhood. Inspired by a new love for her neighbors and new sense of possibility for leadership, one volunteer went on to secure a grant for a park rehabilitation project across the street from a housing project in our neighborhood. This later turned into an annual "It's My Park" clean-up day. The other was a green building professional who grew up in the neighborhood and served as a team leader. He said that in taking the leap of faith to participate as a leader in the project, he began to see himself differently as a professional and a community leader. As he created this new identity and others related to him in these capacities, he had some significant professional breakthroughs in the renewable energy and green building sector related to networking connections made at the event.



Figure 2. HNHN Solar Screen Installation. Source: Julia Robinson

Despite these successes, two important weaknesses emerged over the course of the demonstration projects. First, given that one of the primary intentions of the project was to engage diverse neighbors in service and strengthen the social fabric, the nonprofit partner's requirement to run criminal background checks on all volunteers led to some very uncomfortable social situations un conducive to trust-building or cultivation of social capital in a diverse neighborhood. Given the risk and vulnerability associated with working in the privacy of homes, this is a standard aspect of home repair programs in which interior work is done. However, in a neighborhood that has suffered a history of neglect and racism, past felony convictions pose a barrier to inclusion and even the request for a criminal background check can be off-putting. Second, the success of the behavior change aspect of the project focused on volunteers depended significantly on the tone and style of the leader who introduced the invitation to take future action. One leader's pedantic and overbearing style left volunteers feeling manipulated. In the other two events, volunteers who were new to the project noted that they left inspired.

Thankfully, by incorporating opportunities for volunteer and homeowner feedback and collective problem solving and brainstorming after each event, each iteration became better adapted to the neighborhood context and built neighborhood capacity for collective action. At the same time we discovered the conflict around the background check, we were also learning that diverse neighbors shared an interest in urban farming and gardening. In the second of the three projects requiring background checks, we expanded the work day to include off-site installations of low-water, "wicking" elevated gardening beds in other neighbors' front yards.

Not only did this help us get around the background check restriction, the scalable nature of the garden projects also made it much easier to include a larger number of volunteers and to absorb last minute changes in volunteer numbers. If we had not opened up feedback on the event to all participants after each event, we would not have discovered the idea or the resources to make it happen.



Figure 3. HNHN Wicking Bed Garden Installation. Source: Julia Robinson

## Act II: Emergence of a movement for and edible forest garden

Interestingly, this growing interest among neighbors about growing food together developed roots of its own. When the Holly Power Plant was decommissioned and the park planning process began in 2012 for the 9-acre plant site and the 90-acre shoreline park of which it is part, edible landscaping became the one new idea for the park that was shared both by long-time residents and newcomers of diverse background and ages. These 90-acres were understood to have some of the best soil in the city, situated in the former bottomland forests and alluvial floodplain of the Colorado River. Although no one proposed growing food on the 9 acre site of the power plant due to potential contamination, there was strong interest in edible landscaping being incorporated into other parts of the park.

Confronted by a city-led park planning process that seemed to sow more fragmentation than resilience<sup>5</sup> and engaged in a practice of opening my mind, heart, and will to possibilities that

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the City of Austin initiated the 90-acre park planning process from the top down and that City Council approved a councilmember initiated proposal to fund the process with \$550,000

could support the social and ecological resilience of my neighborhood, a friend and I recognized the potential of the edible landscaping idea to bring diverse people together in adaptive learning. Called by the potential of this emerging future, I stepped forward with neighbors and colleagues to help facilitate conversations with neighbors and local food justice leaders outside of the city-led process. Initially, these meetings were designed informally drawing on “open space technology” (Owen, 1997) and later they were designed as more focused workshops drawing on the LENSES framework for regenerative design (Plaut et al., 2012).

As we engaged in these satellite meetings and shared developments and invitations at the larger public meetings, the idea for edible landscaping gained momentum. Soon, a grassroots movement emerged to start the first permaculture food forest in a public park in Austin, and one of the first in the country. This movement included long-time environmental justice advocates who were committed to expanding access to healthy food, neighbors in a low-income residential center next to the site who were interested in preserving the tranquility of the site while expanding ADA access and fresh food supply, gardeners at the abutting community garden who felt that the fenceless food forest complemented their fence-lined community garden well, surrounding neighborhood associations who were committed to protecting the parks’ natural beauty and neighborhood character, permaculture designers who wanted to see edible landscaping throughout the city, and others generally interested in urban agriculture and promotion of healthy, sustainable communities.

Although the project had broad support from a diverse group, it also garnered strident opposition from some of the same longtime neighborhood activists who had led the charge against the neighborhood plan in 2009. Some of this concern was anchored in concerns about gentrification. At public meetings about the park plan, they raised important questions about who was behind the food forest and whether it was a project of “gentrifiers” that would negatively impact long-time neighbors. They questioned whether public money would be used for the project derived from neighbors’ property taxes. They raised concerns about whether the people who said they wanted to lead and manage this project would be responsible for it, or whether it would be a fad with short term support that would ultimately be abandoned and left as a messy burden for long-time residents. These questions were charged with an accusatory tone.

Thankfully, instead of reacting defensively when our intentions were called into question, leaders of the food forest effort made an active effort to listen empathetically. Many of us personally shared some of the concerns raised and efforts to address them had already been designed into the strategy. Project leaders sought to create the food forest without using additional funds from the parks department. We trusted that by choosing a site next to a residential center where affordable housing would be preserved into the future that the environmental amenity would continue to address a community need. We worked with an existing nonprofit to create a management contract with the City of Austin. We continued to host open community gatherings to create a positive atmosphere where diverse neighbors could enjoy

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from a home repair program specifically designed for the surrounding neighborhood. None of the neighborhood associations approved this direction. The park planning process was received with skepticism by many.

one another's company, learn about the project, and get involved. Ultimately, the Austin City Council voted to approve the project as part of the park's master plan and later approved permit applications after an extensive review process. Inspired by the possibility of "growing edible forest gardens on public land to nourish, educate and inspire," volunteers continued to join the effort and contribute their diverse talents and passions. Attracted by this energy and momentum, outside nonprofit funders and a crowdsourcing campaign provided resources to enable implementation. The Festival Beach Food Forest was planted on November 7, 2015 to become a "center of growth, connection and celebration" in the heart of a diverse, dynamic neighborhood.



Figure 4. Festival Beach Food Forest (FBFF) Groundbreaking. Source: FNFF Facebook Page

## Conclusions and Propositions

In reflecting on these adventures, a few key lessons emerge about the potential for place-based learning and resilience in contested, gentrifying landscapes.

### 1. Accepting Ownership and Responsibility in Degenerative systems

First, my access to making a positive contribution to my neighborhood depended largely on my willingness to own responsibility for the degenerative impacts I was enacting habitually, without conscious awareness. Most of us who have the privilege of higher education, choice of neighborhood residency, or a semblance of economic well-being have a tendency to take these gifts for granted, while still experiencing a struggle for survival in a highly uneven global political economy. Those of us with white or light skin are typically unaware of how this has systematically advantaged us, even in an era where *de jure* discrimination is no longer blatant. When confronted by my own white privilege by the ball-bouncing kids on the sidewalk, I finally saw that if I wanted to be part of transforming an unjust system, I needed to understand my place within it, for better and for worse. As Grace Lee Boggs admonished, “you cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it.” (Conway, Keefer, & Khan, 2005, p. 29) Slowly, I embarked on the challenge of locating myself within larger systems, identifying my privilege and power, and taking responsibility. Paradoxically, by acknowledging my constraints and culpabilities, I discovered more freedom to engage others powerfully with humility and vulnerability.

### 2. Employing Practices to Catalyze Regenerative System Dynamics

Second, the integration of Theory U and LENSES in my regenerative design praxis significantly supported me in making a positive contribution to my neighborhood, after a point in time where it seemed that my presence in the neighborhood would only help accelerate degenerative processes of gentrification. In 2009 after the highly contentious public meeting, I would never have predicted that my deepest experiences of community connection and collective creativity would emerge in the same neighborhood. I longed for such connection, but my experience had taught me that it would not be possible. Although my neighborhood was certainly diverse in people and natural, social, physical, and cultural assets, this concentrated diversity was no guarantee of collective creativity and resilience. When viewed through the interpretive lens of Theory U presented in Figure 1, City-convened meetings escalated degenerative tensions rather than regenerative ones conducive to building social and human capital. Yet, when neighbors started creating alternative, safe, and authentic places for community dialogue and engaged with one another openly and courageously, new possibilities for collective action began to emerge. We began prototyping together. We created processes for collective reflection so that we could learn and adapt together.

By engaging in *anticipatory* design drawn from deep dialogue and regenerative, holistic assessment, more than *prescriptive* design based on best practices and standardized assessment, we developed a holistic vision for projects that enabled us to adapt on the fly and invite surprise. We could never have predicted or controlled many of the outcomes – e.g., the Chavez family’s reconnection to family members through a transformation of a cluttered back room, the spinoff project of an annual park restoration project initiated by a newly inspired volunteer, the

breakthroughs in the solar energy and green building career experienced by one of the team leaders, or the genesis of the Festival Beach Food Forest. And yet, these all emerged as more of us engaged with one another openly in dialogue, paid attention to the dynamic flows of assets in our community, and strove to create mutually supportive relationships. Although we encountered conflict, we often found courage in an inclusive vision that spoke to us and helped us listen to the heart of the concerns raised by opponents without falling victim to defensiveness and outward antagonism. Previously, I used to retreat from conflict. Through praxis in these environments, I began to learn to dance with it. As I actively suspended my desire to “look good,” I started to let the tension guide me into connection with my neighbors and create new movement forward. As I opened myself up to connection, I experienced more of my neighbors doing the same.

Through a disciplined praxis of regenerative dialogue, I helped co-create a progressively more inviting, inclusive, and energizing space. My neighbors and I began to reclaim our “Right to the City” by engaging in dialogue around fundamental questions, such as “what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic values we hold.” (Harvey, 2013, p. 4) Although this right to the city is arguably the “most neglected of our human rights,” we began to get a taste of its promise, as articulated by Harvey (2013, p. 4):

The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.

Although our modest efforts have not led to grand-sweeping reforms or curtailed larger market forces driving fast-paced development in Austin, we started exercising our collective heart muscles and grew in courage and connection. Even in a contested landscape with conflicting visions of a desired future, we were able connect around more fundamental values and common ground.

### 3. Laying Foundations for Infrastructures of Grace in Contested Landscapes

The third important lesson for sustainability practitioners is that unless we take deliberate action to create infrastructures of inclusion, we are likely to perpetuate the resilience of racism and capitalism in our efforts to establish green infrastructure and stimulate urban regeneration. Past public investments in transportation and housing infrastructure have been culpable in creating socially and ecologically unsustainable, unjust development patterns. Now, as sustainability professionals work to regenerate our urban centers through transit-oriented development, low-impact development strategies, and green infrastructure we also have the opportunity and responsibility to rebuild our urban infrastructure in ways that more fundamentally engage what Grace Lee Boggs described as our “limitless capacity to love, serve, and create for and with each other.” (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, p. 47) When we think about designing infrastructure for the long-term provision of ecosystem benefits (e.g., healthy food, water, air, shelter and energy), we have the opportunity to more fundamentally consider who will benefit from these improvements over the long-term. What would it look like if the act of constructing this infrastructure were

regenerative and created new relationships of care among diverse inhabitants of our cities with their supporting ecosystems? How can we recognize the value of existing human, social, cultural, built, and natural assets in our urban core and rebuild in ways that support the dignity and capability of citizens and the flourishing of living systems?

We are living at an exciting moment in the United States when more and more people are recognizing the possibility of community vitality in the centers of our cities. Moving beyond the “American Dream” of suburban life, there are more people who are attracted to the diversity and vitality of urban life who want to be part of remaking our cities into more sustainable places.

We are also at a critical moment as our nation grapples with an increasing awareness of the thick injustices (Hayward & Swanstrom, 2010) perpetuated against people of color and working class Americans. The past two years have drawn attention to police brutality against black men, in particular; and people of color, in general, and mass incarceration in America. The emergent Black Lives Matter movement is fundamentally a movement for recognition. It is a call to open our minds, hearts, and wills to relate to each other as human beings, each of us with dignity and capability. It is a call to look honestly at larger systems of oppression and to locate our collective agency in remaking our cities. It is also a call to recognize the tremendous risk posed by gentrification today: the concomitant pattern of the suburbanization of poverty and the further segregation of U.S. cities (Howell & Timberlake, 2014; Squires & Kubrin, 2005).

Given these two historic moments – a movement of those with systemic privilege to the urban core coupled with an increasing awareness of systemic injustices –our urban centers offer us an incredible opportunity to reconsider our approach to development and infrastructure construction. Gentrifying urban neighborhoods are, by definition, dynamic ones with social difference. There is *potential* for social contact and recognition of other human beings as neighbors, which is arguably a precondition of just outcomes in urban systems (Honneth, Axel, 1995; Taylor et al., 1994; Young, 2002). Supporting this hypothesis in her response to the racial conflicts in Ferguson, Missouri, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg noted that racism was unlikely to change unless conditions for recognition are created. She explained that “[o]nce [gay] people began to say who they were, you found that it was your next-door neighbor or it could be your child, and we found people we admired” (Coyle, 2014). By contrast, according to Ginsburg, “[t]hat understanding still doesn’t exist with race; you still have separation of neighborhoods, where the races are not mixed. It’s the familiarity with people who are gay that still doesn’t exist for race and will remain that way for a long time as long as where we live remains divided” (Coyle, 2014). In light of Ginsburg’s analysis, if the movement back to the cities by the privileged is coupled with a willingness of urban inhabitants to fully recognize one another and the larger systems of which they are part, we may have an unparalleled opportunity to collectively reclaim our right to the city.

While I argue that this historic moment is pregnant with possibility, it is a precious, improbable, and fleeting opportunity. It will not happen without us. It will not happen unless we actively create spaces and infrastructure for empathetic, inclusive dialogue through which new possibilities for the future emerge. It will not happen unless we have the courage to enact these co-created visions through collective action that confronts existing degenerative patterns

buttressed by powerful interests. As the President of the United States of America asserted on the day the Supreme Court of the United States affirmed the right of those born with the same sex to marry one another, if we want to build a “roadway to a better world,” we need to look to develop an appreciation for history and recognize one another’s humanity. His address was delivered in a eulogy to acknowledge the profound loss of lives in a terrorist act at an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Charleston, South Carolina. Recognizing the AME as vital infrastructure of justice in the United States – from its role in the Underground Railroad and the Civil Rights Movement – President Obama (2015), called on us to build infrastructures of grace. Evoking the voice of the pastor and public servant, Reverend Clementa Pickney, President Obama expressed the following:

Reverend Pinckney once said, “Across the South, we have a deep appreciation of history — we haven’t always had a deep appreciation of each other’s history.” (Applause.) What is true in the South is true for America. Clem understood that justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other. That my liberty depends on you being free, too. (Applause.) That history can’t be a sword to justify injustice, or a shield against progress, but must be a manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past — how to break the cycle. A roadway toward a better world. He knew that the path of grace involves an open mind — but, more importantly, an open heart.

That’s what I’ve felt this week — an open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis, is what’s called upon right now, I think — what a friend of mine, the writer Marilynne Robinson, calls “that reservoir of goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary cause of things.”

That reservoir of goodness. If we can find that grace, anything is possible. (Applause.) If we can tap that grace, everything can change. (Applause.)

As we look back on 2015 and mourn the losses of Reverend Pinkney and his sisters and brothers in Chareston, of Grace Lee Boggs in Detroit, it is important to remember their legacy by honoring our own potential to co-create infrastructures for grace. This is an imperative for those of us who care about social and ecological resiliency and climate justice. Reinvesting and expanding “reservoirs or goodness” in gentrifying neighborhoods where diverse neighbors are living, learning, worshiping, working, and playing in the same place as neighbors is a strategic necessity. As we plan in the face of power, we might also learn to embrace grace as power.

What does this mean pragmatically for those of us engaged in the provision of green infrastructure? For one, it means that we can incorporate recognition into ordinary acts in our ordinarily lived days. Even in the mundane details of helping a neighbor install a gutter or a rain barrel or adding attic insulation, community grace can be found. On a larger scale, it may imply providing public funds for green infrastructure and home renovation projects that provide green collar jobs to those who have often been left outside of economic opportunity, as articulated by Van Jones (2008) in the *Green Collar Economy*. It may also imply integrating practices and processes of restorative justice into our schools, churches, and community spaces as many communities are doing now. Organizations like PUSH Buffalo have been integrating all of these

strategies in holistic, place-based initiatives grounded in the understanding that transformation is local and fundamentally connected. As Grace Lee Boggs reminded us, "We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems: not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously." (Boggs, 2007) Far from a quaint, myopic approach, this is the work of small beginnings that allow us to reconnect our voice to our vocation and transform our economic transactions into relationships of care in our common home. She explained,

Changes in small places affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections." (Boggs, 2007)

With such critical connections and critical consciousness, we can enact change locally and globally. As Grace Lee Boggs urged us in the last years of her life, "Our challenge, as we enter the new millennium, is to deepen the commonalities and the bonds between these tens of millions, while at the same time continuing to address the issues within our local communities by two-sided struggles that not only say 'No' to the existing power structure but also empower our constituencies to embrace the power within each of us to crease the world anew." (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012) From this place, we may rightly claim our capacity to lay the foundations of renewed infrastructures of grace that support new patterns of regenerative development that support and sustain just communities and flourishing living systems, now and in the future.

What might that infrastructure look like in your neighborhoods, cities, and regions? What have you been doing to help integrate environmental justice and social resilience into your professional and pedagogical praxis?

Best regards,

Elizabeth Walsh, PhD

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