



Cup of coffee and one dose of friendship

Nathan Kenison
March 12, 2009
Mapping Urban Ecology
Professor Bonnie Winfield

A healthy city is...Stop right there! *Healthy city?* When I kept getting letters and emails from all my readers asking me to write a piece on what characteristic I thought makes a city healthy, I would shy away from the challenge because of how titanic the question seemed. But the letters kept coming, so I started writing: "A healthy city *is green* because..." This was the subject I started with when I began this project two months ago, but the more and more I wrote, the more and more I realized how artificial this "green" classification was. I had recently taken two trips on business for the magazine, one to Easton, Pennsylvania and one to Philadelphia, and I had loved both cities, each seemed "healthy" to me. Philadelphia was one of the greenest cities I had ever visited; the urban parks and the wide open spaces associated with them were deceptive in that one could have thought he was hiking alone in the middle of nothing on the Appalachian Trail (minus the topography), the chirping birds the only other company, instead of walking along the Ben Franklin Parkway. Easton on the other hand had, maybe, a blade of grass, a tree or two, and the birds were road-kill more often than companions. But both cities left impressions of "health" with me and other people I have talked to have said the same. So "green" must not equate to healthiness after all.

I moved on from there to: "A healthy city *harbors diversity*..." One of my favorite urban thinkers, Jane Jacobs (whose writing has appeared in this publication a time or two), was lauded for the idea that "the more diverse we are...the better" (Makovsky). This idea made sense to me, until I again reflected about my time spent in Easton and Philadelphia. In the downtown of Easton, there was "diversity" among the people, but it avoided intermingling, and segregated diversity is not diversity; the Victorian architecture was beautiful, but it was repetitive; and the variety of shops I had the opportunity to visit did not offer all that much variety. In Philadelphia, flags of every world nation were proudly displayed along city streets; people of different nationalities and ethnicities blended together on the sidewalks; the breathtaking architecture offered new scenery after every block. But both cities still seemed so healthy overall, so "diversity" must not equate to healthiness either.

Next on my list was: "A healthy city celebrates the *artist*..." Both Easton and Philadelphia had breathtaking murals, both incorporated the themes of urban sculpture (Philadelphia especially), and in both

cities people seemed drawn to places where art was found. A publication published by the *Lafayette College Technology Clinic* recently reported that “Increasing the amount of public art in the city ensures that everyone is afforded ample opportunities to experience and enjoy art” (Lafayette Technology Clinic, 27). But I had been to many urban areas back home where visible artwork was negligible, and I had walked away from many of those places with uplifting impressions of health too, so “artwork” must not equate to healthiness.

This trial and error went on and on with “pedestrian friendly,” “attracts outsiders,” “has good public schools,” and “never rains...,” but time and time again I would wander upon a memory of a city that did not have one of these characteristics, but was lovely—or healthy—anyway. Without intending to, I was slowly revealing that health had very little correlation to a city’s aesthetic or any of its physical properties. What could “health” possibly be then?

Perhaps this an injudicious assumption, but it seems as if most of society equates a “healthy” life with a “happy” or a “fulfilled” life. Thus, health is not tied to the physical condition of a person or city, but with the morale or attitude of a person or city. While physical elements such as trees, traffic, sidewalks, green space, art, and architecture do contribute to one’s overall attitude, there are intangible elements—most notably our human relationships—that serve as the foundation for how people feel about themselves and about the places they are in.

Jane Jacobs, while reflecting on the health of her home city of Toronto, emphasized how a superficial understanding of health as being purely physical can blind a community about what it really does possess: “We have got a marvelous city—yet people hardly ever feel they can talk about without emphasizing the problems” (www.robertfulford.com). Personal relationships, for most, have the strongest and most enduring effect on human attitude...and as such, a city that encourages, stimulates, and engages its citizens and visitors most vigorously in personal relationships will be the truly healthy city. To have a healthy city, I finally realized, you must have healthy, and therefore happy, people. While aesthetic, convenient, and environmentally friendly aspects of a city promote “pseudo health,” they really are nothing

more than a temporary fix of illness, used to camouflage the nonexistence of what foundationally makes a city genuinely healthy: people that know one another, talk to one another, help one another, care about one another, and support one another.

Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, has been acclaimed by *The National Wildlife Federation* “for its achievements in developing an environmentally friendly campus” (www.greenerbuildings.com). Students describe the urban environment of Emory as “amazingly dynamic,” “full of history and culture,” “with lots of things to do and see (www4.studentsreview.com). The physical appeal and health of the campus and surrounding city are clear—take a virtual tour of the campus online and you might be inclined to vacation there! But does that alone make it healthy?

In 2001 the university began *The Piedmont Project*, engaging twenty faculty members from different disciplines in a program designed to teach them about “environmental issues and sustainability” (Barlett, 39). The participants’ responses to the program revealed how important the social networking aspect of the program was in improving the health of the campus beyond what any physical alterations could provide:

The best part was meeting the other faculty. It builds the collegial environment. (Barlett, 44)

[What stood out was] the intense, sustained interaction with colleagues from different departments, ranks, and roles in the university...I really took pleasure in the sustained interaction. (Barlett, 44)

I’m a little isolated, so that was a nice feature for me. (Barlett, 46)

The Piedmont Project illustrated how social networking and its construction of personal relationships is the fundamental element in building a healthy city: “the way in which community was emphasized by nearly all the participants suggests that the context of a supportive group enhances...the meaningfulness of experience” (Barlett, 46). Having discovered this relationship, I could relate to the health of Easton and Philadelphia in a new way. Whereas before, no matter the criteria I chose, both cities seemed to emanate healthiness, now there was a stark contrast...

Take a walk from Love Park, down Ben Franklin Parkway, and up the stairs leading to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and one will be surrounded by green space, burgeoning fountains, and immaculate cleanliness. One will also be left all alone. The people along this stretch of the city are generally tourists and museum goers; they do not care who else is around; their relationships are between the self and the city. People passing by do not smile. The area is expansive, adding to a feeling of isolation. It can be exhilarating to feel so out-of-control for short amounts of time, but one would not want live like this. So retreat back into the city's downtown, explore the social "bee hives" at the *Reading Terminal Market* or *The Shops at Liberty Place*...but here too you will soon find you are alone, just another customer among thousands—invisible. The attitude emanating from this atmosphere is impersonal, catering to global rather than local interests. Jacobs heeded caution against this kind of city structure: "The notion—and I tell you this one even worries me that it extends into New Urbanism—the notion of the shopping center as a valid kind of downtown has taken over" (www.metropolismag.com) Though the city's physical attributes are stunning and inviting, until they are accompanied by places that cultivate personal relationships, this portion of the city will not be healthy.

Easton offers what Center City, Philadelphia neglects in its commitment to the local community. The people here know each other and interact with other, giving each of its members a sense of importance, a sense of fulfillment, and a sense of place. Howard Frumkin's essay *The Health of Places, the Wealth of Evidence* underscores the importance of a sense of place to an individual's health:

The appreciation that place matters for health is not new...many of the best places are...in the public realm: streets and sidewalks, parks and cafes, theaters and sports facilities. Such public places are important venues for...activities...such as social interaction...which have clear health implications (Frumkin, 257, 261)

By talking with members of the Easton community, one quickly discovers the local atmosphere the city celebrates. Mayor Sal Panto was born, raised, and has lived his entire life in Easton. His favorite memories are of the people in the city he has had the opportunity to work with (his most notable favorite is boxer Larry Holmes) He holds weekly town meetings with members of the city's West Ward and enjoys eating out at the local restaurants; among his favorites is *Sette Luna* (Panto). The owner of *Sette Luna*, Josh,

is devoted to working with local farmers so he can put the freshest possible products on his menu, but his interest in the Easton community does not stop at his restaurant. He is excited to work with his children in helping community members establish an Easton area community garden this spring (Sette Luna Community Forum). Several times a week Josh stops in at the *Cosmic Cup Café* on his way to work and chats cordially with other the patrons. Troy, the owner of the *Cosmic Cup*, is constantly debating about the latest sports or political news with his customers. When the Dallas Cowboys released Terrell Owens from their roster on March 4, 2009, the café was turned into an arena for sports fans in disbelief. Sit inside on a quiet morning and you will hear Troy tell his help what the customer crossing the street outside will order once he or she comes inside, it is like magic. Troy knows, and he cares, about his customers. The people here care about each other.

Ideally, as Thomas Friedman noted in his book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, the exceptionally healthy city would offer just as much aesthetic, natural and meta-personal appeal as downtown Philadelphia while maintaining the tightly knit social atmosphere of Easton: "...when you can get localization and globalization into balance, what you end up with is humanization...When you have roots—local—and wings—global—you can be both grounded and aspiring" (Friedman, 169). But striking this balance is difficult and dangerous...

According to Mayor Panto, Easton is striving to reach out to surrounding communities in order to bring their patronage into Easton. The city has begun to move forward in engineering a path system through and around the city that will link Easton to neighboring populations (Panto). It is bringing in more highly regarded restaurants; recently announced was that the city will be welcoming the *Victory Brew Pub* to town. Said Mayo Panto: "It will bring more and more feet onto the street" (www.lehighvalleylive.com). While these plans are fantastic for the local economy and reputation of the city, if Easton reaches out too far and becomes "too enjoyable" for non-locals, the social disposition could be threatened.

This is exactly what has happened in Philadelphia. Able to rely on the draw of tourism, store owners can afford to sacrifice their personal touches. More people means less time for strong community

relationships to form and people become customers, not friends; a coffee shop is turned from a social forum to a get-in and get-out business. The tradeoffs to this are increased city revenue, out of which a cleaner, more efficient, more aesthetic, and more physically appealing city can grow...this is what many might call a “healthy” city. To maintain the balance of a truly healthy city, to retain a community’s commitment to personal relations, “locally based efforts” must offer themselves as “concrete resistance and action in the face of an overwhelming, alienating, and opaque global economy” where the only concern is being better than everybody else (von Hassel, 102). This disease of the impersonal has overwhelmed Philadelphia, making it a lovely city to visit but a lonely city to live in—a healthy city would be a lovely place for both.

Jane Jacobs noted that “any city at all that’s worth learning from and considering has parts that work and are good and admirable, and parts that don’t...We should study the parts that work and the parts that people use...” (www.activeliving.org). Jacobs’ analysis needs to be pushed one step further though; we should study the parts that people use *together*. People develop their strongest place attachments where they feel are a piece of that place, “the dimensions of place attachment are enhanced by the power of the group” (Barlett, 57). In his essay *Healthy Cities—Healthy Communities*, Joe Flower discussed how a healthy community is “a community that nurtures its members, that makes us all more than we are.” When people move from one city to the next, they may miss their old bike path, they may miss the old tree in the middle of their old neighborhood park, they may miss their old home...but most of all they miss their friends. Cities that build friendships are healthy cities.

So take your pick, where would you rather be: A fabulously efficient and picturesque contemporary city where you are nothing more than just another passer-by, where if you need help you might get it, you might not...or a modestly plain and unimpressive city where you know and care about the people you interact with, and who you know would help you out if you asked them? Where would you be happier? Now you know where I would...

WORKS CITED

- Barlett, Peggy F. "Reconnecting with Place: Faculty and the Piedmont Project at Emory University." Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World. Cambridge: The MIT P, 2005. 39-60.
- Flower, Joe. "The Change Project: Healthy Cities - Healthy Communities." The WELL - Online community is no oxymoron here. The WELL is known as the birthplace of the online community movement. The Change Project. 08 Mar. 2009
<http://www.well.com/~bbear/healthy_communities.html>.
- Friedman, Thomas L. Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need A Green Revolutuion And How It Can Renew America. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Frumkin, Howard. "The Health of Places, the Wealth of Evidence." Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World. Cambridge: The MIT P, 2005. 254-69.
- "Jane Jacobs: Reflections on an afternoon with Jane Jacobs | Active Living Network." Active Living Network | Designing Active Communities. Promoting Healthy Lives. 08 Mar. 2009
<<http://www.activeliving.org/profiles/jacobs>>.
- Josh. Community Forum at Sette Luna. Sette Luna, Easton. 10 Feb. 2009.
- Lafayette College Technology Clinic. Urban Ecology in the West Ward: Final Report. Tech. no. 1. Vol. 1. Easton: Lafayette College, 2008.
- Makovsky, Paul. "Godmother of the American City: Jane Jacobs, Renowned Urbanist, Activist, and Author, Dead at 89." Metropolis Magazine. 25 Apr. 2006. 08 Mar. 2009
<<http://www.metropolismag.com/story/20060425/godmother-of-theamerican-city>>.
- Panto, Jr., Salvatore J. Lecture. Lafayette College, Easton. 17 Feb. 2009.
- "Radical Dreamer: Jane Jacobs on the streets of Toronto." Robert Fulford, Canadian Journalist. 08 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.robertfulford.com/jacobs.html>>.

Snyder, John. "Emory Named a Green-Campus Leader | GreenerBuildings." Greener Buildings – News on Green Buildings, Green Architecture, Green Cities and Facilities Management.

14 Jan. 2002. 08 Mar. 2009

<<http://www.greenerbuildings.com/news/2002/01/14/emory-named-a-green-campus-leader>>.

"Surrounding City at Emory University." College Reviews: StudentsReview: Over 74300 College Reviews! (3,359 schools reviewed). 08 Mar. 2009

<http://www4.studentsreview.com/specific_detail.php3?uid=325&f=SurroundingCity&d_short=EU&d_school=Emory%2520University&d_ads=scholarships,%2520student%2520loans,%2520summer%2520programs,%2520grants>.

"The Top Ten Characteristics of a Healthy City." The New Colonist...for the citizen of the new century. 08 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.newcolonist.com/topten2.html>>.

"Victory Brewing Co. opening restaurant in former Weller Center building" - Easton PA News,

Easton Area Weather, Easton Area Sports & Easton Area Entertainment –

lehighvalleylive.com. " Lehigh Valley PA, Easton, Bethlehem, Allentown and more local news, breaking news, sports & weather - lehighvalleylive.com. 3 Mar. 2009. Lehigh

Valley Live. 08 Mar. 2009

<http://www.lehighvalleylive.com/easton/index.ssf/2009/03/victory_square_brewery_plans_t.html>.

Von Hassell, Malve. "Community Gardens in New York City: Place, Community, and

Individuality." Urban Place: Reconnecting with the Natural World. Cambridge: The MIT P, 2005. 91-116.