REGENERATIVE URBANISM: ENRICHING PLACES FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

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ABSTRACT

Regenerative urbanism enriches places for people and the planet by building upon existing strengths through meaningful community engagement. This article describes the process for achieving regenerative urbanism. This process may be applied to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and complements the methods described in Goal 17 – building global partnerships that mobilize and direct resources – for effectively realizing all the other goals.
Keywords: regenerative urbanism, sustainability, prosperity, co-creation, regenerative urbanism, lateral urbanism, appreciative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

We have been undergoing a global paradigm shift toward "regenerative urbanism" that is enriching places for people and the planet. Learning from ancient and vernacular wisdom traditions, while simultaneously embracing new communication, transportation, building, and digital technologies, regenerative urbanism is contributing to *sustain* life in all its forms, rather than *strain* it.

By forging and enabling connections – with ourselves, others, nature, the sacred, the past, and the future – regenerative urbanism offers places that are not only livable, but also lovable, providing both a sense of security and interest. Key to achieving regenerative urbanism is a process that begins with appreciative inquiry and engages in meaningful co-creation to envision best possibilities and rally resources to realize them.

The United Nations's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 with a 2030 horizon, aim to "protect the planet" and "ensure all people enjoy peace and prosperity." While the first 16 SDGs focus on outcomes, Goal 17 explores the means to achieve these outcomes through building global partnerships.

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The regenerative process described here can be applied specifically to Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, and complements the toolkit provided in Goal 17.

Aligned with the SDGs, regenerative urbanism aims to enrich places, contributing to peaceful and prosperous lives for all. To accomplish this, it engages a regenerative process of six steps: Prospect, Polish, Propose, Prototype, Promote, and Present (fig. 1). This process is an economy of gifts, beginning with gifts and ending with them.
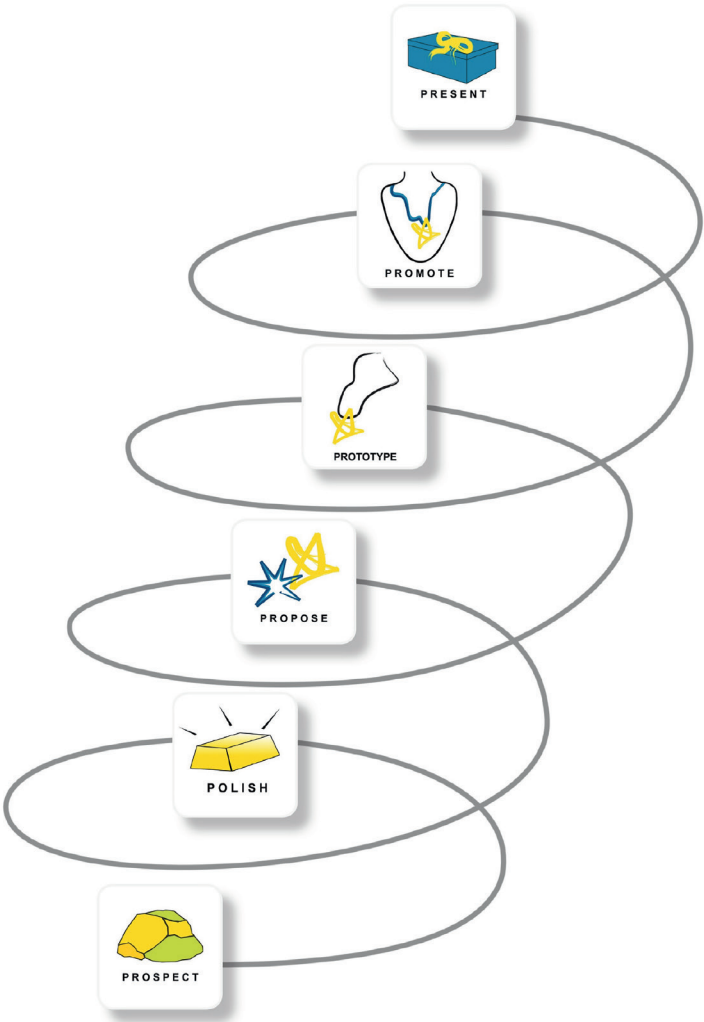

Figure 1. The path toward prosperity

REGENERATIVE URBANISM IS:

Strength-Based

Regenerative urbanism respects and values the unique experiences, traditions, and perspectives of each person, community, and place. It prospects for what is integral to people and locales – their *prima materia* or DNA—and builds upon this foundation of strengths. These strengths include everything that is valued and appreciated, including natural landscapes, buildings, neighborhoods, businesses, cultural institutions, history and cultural traditions, as well as the talents, ideas, and skills of community members. Rather than focus on deficits and problems, regenerative urbanism enhances places by revealing and celebrating these existing gifts, thereby potentially transmuting problems into opportunities, revealing blessings that may be disguised, and making virtue of necessity.

By tapping into the inherent gifts of places and communities, regenerative urbanism begins with a *tabula plena* (full slate/table, Ellin 2012), rather than a *tabula rasa* (erased slate or empty table), supplanting Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" (fig. 2) with a "hierarchy of gifts/assets" (fig. 3). With **Fuels** at the base (sun, water, food, wind, fossil fuels, and other energy sources), and **Tools** above (knowledge, intuition, and skills; construction, machine, and digital tools; and communication, transportation, and building technologies), we generate **Jewels**.

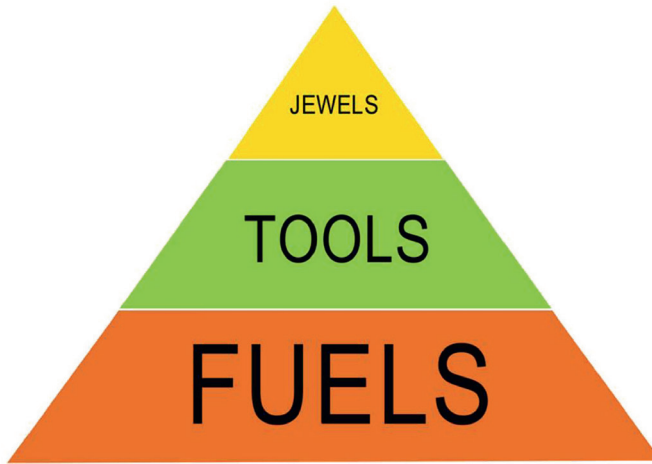**Figure 2.** Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943)

Figure 3. Hierarchy of gifts/assets (Ellin, 2012)

Transformative and Evolutionary

By focusing first on what we value in our places, as well as what we desire for the future, the regenerative approach establishes a bedrock of strength and hope, that carries over into addressing what we wish to improve. In this way, the regenerative approach *nests critical thinking inside appreciative thinking.*

This contrasts with the conventional approach that drills directly into problems, ultimately generating a deficit/lack mentality, that in turn elicits a sense of deprivation, perhaps even desperation and fear. Such critical inquiry, associated with the "scientific method," ironically proves irrational and ultimately unscientific because the threat to our safety and wellbeing activates the "sympathetic" nervous system, triggering freeze, flight, fight, or fawn reactions.

In other words, critical thinking alone renders us primarily motivated by survival, fear, and ego. Individually, this tends to engender demoralization, disengagement, and despair. We have witnessed its collective manifestation throughout history in the form of identifying an enemy or bogeyman, who is emotionally and irrationally demonized and targeted for elimination ("mobbed"), providing the perpetrators a false sense of purpose and meaning. Neither the individual nor the collective response ultimately succeeds in addressing the issue at hand, and usually only renders the situation worse.

By contrast, the appreciative approach – that individually and collectively explores what we value and desire – builds community and inspires pro-action by revisiting the "problem" via the "parasympathetic" nervous system, that enables

us to connect the head with the heart. From this place of deeper wisdom and insight, emerge the highest and best outcomes for all.

Complementary

Just as complementary medicine looks at the whole person including the physical environment, a complementary perspective on urbanism encompasses the whole environment, including people.

Similar to complementary currencies such as travel miles, time banking, and local currencies, therefore, regenerative urbanism complements what is already there, rather than attempting to replace it, or compete with it. Rather than neglect, abandon, or erase our urban heritage, regenerative urbanism is inspired by all that is integral to a place - its DNA - and builds upon these assets.

Asset-based and place-based, regenerative urbanism builds upon strengths rather than focus on deficits and problems, thereby enhancing places by leveraging existing conditions. As we identify gifts, they multiply, as our greatest weaknesses can become our greatest strengths, and our greatest problems can become our greatest solutions. This is partly because valuing what exists and building upon it empowers, while assigning blame and judging undermine our efforts, because they tend to elicit denial, deflection, and distraction, contributing to abnegation of responsibility.

Just as a good manager builds on existing strengths of an organization, so regenerative urbanism builds upon the strengths of a place, as well as exemplary practices from which we can learn. Rather than neglect, abandon, or erase our place heritage, regenerative urbanism *preserves* valuable buildings, neighborhoods, cultural institutions, creative and intellectual capital, and natural landscapes; *rehabilitates, reclaims, restores,* or *renovates* what is underperforming; and *adds* what we do not have yet but would like, as informed by effective community engagement. And it does so in that order. Consequently, the new builds upon existing assets and is deeply influenced by this "DNA" of a place, allowing for unique and meaningful expressions to unfold.

Thus, regenerative urbanism **protects** what is valued first, then **enhances** what may be underperforming, and finally **adds** new elements, all informed by effective community engagement (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Protect, enhance, add (the PEA process)

Beginning with the *tabula plena*, this process allows unique and meaningful expressions to unfold because when people are graciously invited to share what they value, they become authentically empowered. At the same time, this process builds trust and mutual respect, allowing a range of stakeholders to learn and evolve along with facilitators, co-creating proposals that are neither divisive nor lowest common denominators, but larger than the sum of individual parts.

By enlisting a wide array of invested parties, support and resources come forth to realize visions and the basis for an ongoing self-adjusting feedback mechanism is put in place. The PEA process also addresses what is lacking, along with issues from the past, but since these are no longer the point of departure, when they arise, they become opportunities. In Phoenix, for instance, the "problem" of too much sun could be an opportunity to become a global leader in solar energy, while its "problem" of low water supply might offer an opportunity to demonstrate innovative water management strategies, in the tradition of its indigenous communities who built hundreds of miles of canals with stone hoes. The common graffiti "problem" in cities could engage youth in creating ever-changing "art walls," converting "vandals" into budding artists recognized for their work that graces the urban landscape. And so forth.

Conventional urban intervention has proceeded in the reverse order, considering first what is needed, but too often at the expense of what is valued. In many instances over the last century, these interventions have even opted to begin with the *tabula rasa,* or clean slate, by razing what was already there or finding pristine land upon which to build. On this clean slate, conventional urban intervention has attempted to master plan. Regenerative urbanism veers away from the clean slate as well as the master plan that, in its focus on controlling everything, ironically tends to generate fragmented cities without soul or character.

Instead, regenerative urbanism determines where there is energy, both physical and social, in the larger system, and where it is lacking. It can thereby perform "urban acupuncture," skillfully inserting interventions that clear blockages and liberate energy to catalyze additional growth and change[1]. With the self-adjusting feedback mechanism in place, this process activates underutilized resources and *attracts new ones*.

This is the key shift in the regenerative process, impacting everything else thereafter. It is a shift from critical to appreciative thinking, from deficits to assets, and from overly cautious reaction to joyful proaction, enabling positive evolutionary transformation.

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[1] The term "urban acupuncture" has been used by Ignasi de Sola-Morales (1997), Kenneth Frampton (1999), Jaime Lerner (2005), and Nan Ellin (2006).

Lovable as well as Livable

Regenerative urbanism aims to restore the connections that have been severed over the last century between body and soul, people and nature, and among people. It does this through bringing people together to have conversations that make a difference, thereby building community through listening to others, being heard, and collective co-creation.

When places elicit a deep sense of connection, we tend to proclaim our "love" for them. We may feel a connection with ourselves, others, nature, the sacred, the past, the future, and more. Conversely, when we feel disconnected in places, we tend to "hate" them, and our ability to improve them is greatly diminished.

When community erodes, an "architecture of fear" occupies the void (Ellin 1997). In contrast, regenerative urbanism practices an "architecture of love" (Ellin 2012) that fosters community by cultivating relationships through a process that builds mutually supportive networks of people, along with a range of other types of connections. Regenerative urbanism is thereby not only livable; it is also lovable.

Inclusive

Regenerative urbanism is inclusive, inviting many to the "table", welcoming them when they participate, and then partnering to bring ideas to life (fig. 5).

This process shifts the emphasis from "diversity", that tends to categorize people into groups and generates divisions among them (as well as stereotypes and tokenism), to "inclusion," regarding each person as diverse from everyone else, while also part of a shared humanity. Ironically, the focus on "diversity" often leads to divisiveness as well as homogenization, while inclusion brings us together in a way that honors and celebrates our unique gifts.

Lateral

Throughout history, until about a half century ago, visionary urbanism was typically top-down. A reaction to this since the 1960s is emphatically bottom-up. Since then, diluted versions of both have characterized most efforts with, for the most part, mixed or underwhelming results.

INVITE   WELCOME   PARTNER

Figure 5. Co-creation: invite, welcome, partner

Neither top-down, nor bottom-up, regenerative urbanism might be described as *lateral,* beginning with an idea hatched by one or more people who quickly invite all stakeholders to participate in refining and realizing the vision. In the process, these practices sometimes establish an entity to oversee and monitor the project, along with enabling policy to facilitate its implementation. Though this approach can be initiated by professional urbanists, it can also be initiated by others – political leaders, planners, architects, urban designers, landscape architects, artists, developers, philanthropic organizations, cultural institutions, or interested community members – all working together toward mutually-beneficial ends.

Combining Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" with the "hierarchy of gifts/assets," this rotated pyramid might look something like this (fig. 6):
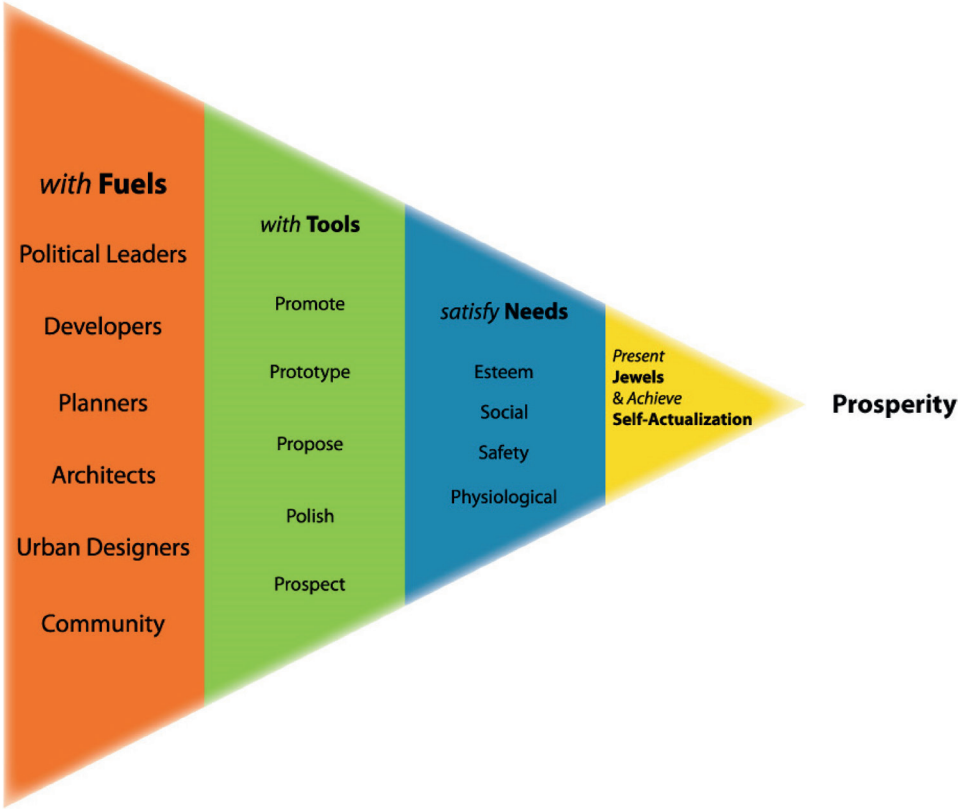

Figure 6. A lateral urbanism

Examples of lateral urbanism include the creation of connected "blue" and "green" public spaces such as the High Line in NYC and Canalscape in Phoenix, Arizona[2]. Regenerative urbanism is also apparent in collective efforts to address the impacts of global warming and climate change, including bush fires and floods in Australia,[3] flash fires in California,[4] torrential rains in Central Europe with four-days of floods drenching Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, Czechia, and Austria,[5] and unseasonal temperatures encroaching on people's lives and livelihoods.[6] The experience of "solastalgia,"[7] a longing for the home that has been damaged or destroyed, along with a desire to retain community, contribute to bring people together to reclaim their lost homes, and rebuild.[8]

Slow, Flow, Low, and Local

The urban and environmental challenges of the last century have prompted a reconsideration of values, goals, and means of achieving them. In contrast to the fast-paced more-is-more mentality, there is the appeal of **s**implicity, **s**lowness, **s**pirituality, **s**incerity, and **s**ustainability. Side by side with the persisting reactive tendencies of form to follow **f**iction, **f**inesse, **f**inance, and **f**ear (Ellin 1999), myriad proactive initiatives from a wide range of contributors to shaping the environment have been shifting the paradigm toward regeneration.

Placing a brake on rapid change and the havoc it can wreak, regenerative urbanism embraces **slow**ness, coincident with the Slow City and Slow Food movements.

Beginning with what is integral to places and people, regenerative urbanism finds existing **flows** and goes with them, and/or unblocks them to clear physical as well as social blockages, engaging in urban acupuncture.

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[2] See case studies of both in *Good Urbanism*, Ellin (2012).

[3] Australian towns battle fire and flood back-to-back - BBC News accessed 30 September 2024.

[4] California Fire Map: Latest on wildfires burning across the state (sfchronicle.com) accessed 30 September 2024.

[5] Death toll reaches 16 as 'dramatic' flooding in central Europe continues | Europe | The Guardian accessed 30 September 2024.

[6] Thousands perish in unseasonable heat | PreventionWeb accessed 30 September 2024.

[7] Glenn Albrecht, 2005, "Solastalgia: a new concept in human health and identity," PAN Partners. OCLC 993784860.

[8] Rawsthorne, Margot, and Amanda Howard, Cate Massola & Pam Joseph, Seminar Presentation "Dis-PLACE-ment: Communities affected by climate change disasters."

The most simple, elegant, and efficient solutions are often **low**-tech and **low**-impact, for instance, the use of swales, cisterns, and graywater instead of sewers and municipal water, along with urban agriculture replacing nonproductive right-of-ways, grass lawns and the reliance upon grocery stores for fresh and organic produce.

Reducing our ecological footprint, regenerative urbanism heeds the call to grow, eat, shop, hire, incubate (ideas, technologies, and businesses), and generate (energy) **local (fig. 7)**.

A Virtuous Spiral

Regenerative urbanism envisions best possibilities and rallies resources to realize them. It is not principally tactical, instead combining strategy with serendipity. As both a process and a product, regenerative urbanism describes both an approach and the resulting places.

Figure 7. How local can you go?, Whole Foods, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA
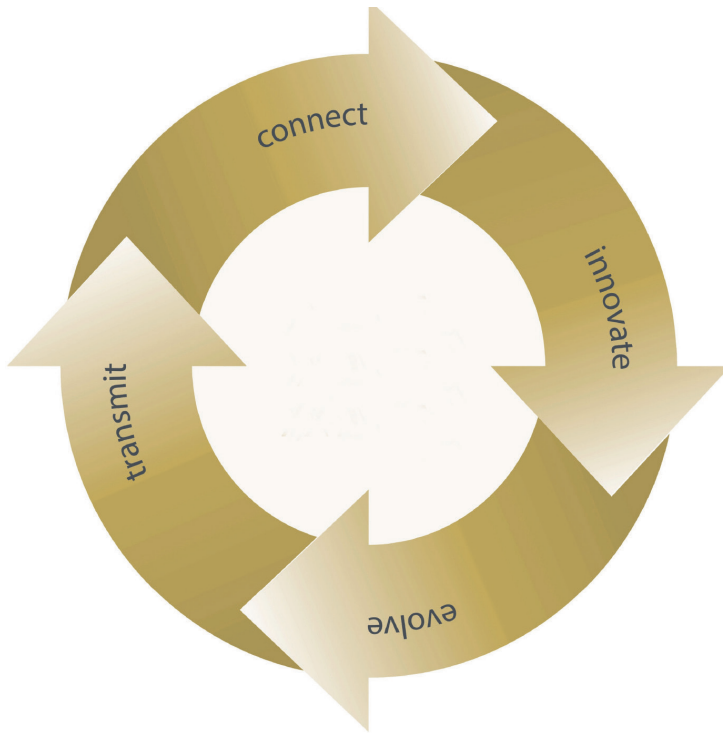
Figure 8. Evolutionary spiral

Regenerative urbanism enables stakeholders to build creatively upon their strengths in an ongoing fashion by realizing synergies and efficiencies. Through applying learned knowledge and skills (*transmit*) and connecting these with our own experience and intuition (*connect*), this approach fuels innovation (*innovate*) that contributes to *evolve* our places and communities, indeed our civilization. These innovations become part of the expertise of the future, upon which others will add new innovations, igniting the upward virtual spiral of enriching places for people and the planet (fig. 8).

Part of a Larger Global Evolution

In 2007, Paul Hawken described a worldwide "movement with no name" that is based on the identification of what is humane, behaving like an immune system (Hawken 2007) to heal social and urban malaise. Today, almost two decades later, we might describe this as a *regenerative futures movement*.

Some keywords and characteristics of this movement/evolution are (fig. 9).

Figure 9. Keywords and characteristics of the regenerative futures movement

Professional and Proactive

Lamenting that urban planning had become a "trivial profession," Thomas Campanella posed the following challenge: "How can we cultivate in planners the kind of visionary thinking that once characterized the profession? How can we ensure that the idealism of our students is not extinguished as they move into practice? How can we transform planners into big-picture thinkers with the courage to imagine alternatives to the status quo, and equipped with the skills and the moxie to lead [us onto] a greener, more sustainable path? … We have become a caretaker profession — reactive rather than proactive, corrective instead of preemptive, rule bound and hamstrung and anything but visionary" (Campanella 2011).

Several years prior, sociologist Nathan Glazer similarly remarked: "Most observers of the city today would agree that the image of the planner in the public mind is not very defined or compelling, indeed rather dim. City planning, large-scale planning in general, is not in high repute these days .... It is clear the dominant element in the image of the planner is no longer that of the reformer, the bringer of hope …. The planner today knows details of many programs and the arguments that support one or another, but larger visions are beyond his responsibility …. And as a corollary, we do not normally think of calling in the professional planner when we consider today what has gone wrong with the city and suburb, and what can be done about it" (Glazer 2005, 270). A decade prior, James Howard Kunstler queried: "Does the modern profession called urban planning have anything to do with making good places anymore?" (1993).

What about architects and urban designers? Regarding architects, Glazer declared: "The long history of the relationship of architects to the design of cities seems to have come to an end, or at least a temporary stop. Architects no longer design cities, and they are not being asked to. A relationship between architects and the design of cities that goes back to the Renaissance and perhaps before, and continued through the American City Beautiful movement and through early modernism, is for the moment in suspension" (Glazer 2005, 290). With regards to urban designers, Alex Krieger lamented: "The heroic form-giving tradition may be in decline. After all, the twentieth century witnessed immense urban harm caused by those who offered a singular or universal idea of what a city is, or what urbanization should produce. But our cultural observers remind us that pragmatism and technique cannot be a sufficient substitute, nor can design professionals be mere absorbers of public opinion waiting for consensus to build. One must think and offer ideas as well …. But such deliverers of bold saber strokes (to borrow a phrase from Gideon) are rarer today than they were at the turn of the 20th century, or we heed their visions less often" (Krieger 2004).

Retreating from addressing core issues, these allied professions deflected attention to more narrow pursuits, technological preoccupations, and turf wars (contending urbanisms rather than good urbanism, competing for commissions and notoriety, and so forth). Consequently, the job of planning and designing cities has often defaulted to private developers in negotiation with city councils and development review boards.

When Daniel Burnham sang the praises of big plans over a century ago, it was a period of rapid urban growth and the creation of numerous city plans ensued over the following half century. However, the widely-acknowledged failure of modern urbanism produced a legitimacy crisis, along with confusion about what constitutes good urbanism, considerably diminishing such grand visioning.

The shortcomings of modern urbanism owed to both product and process, both the *what* and the *how*. With regards to product (*what*), modern urbanism's principal banes were the separation of functions, the death of the street, and the reliance upon the automobile. In terms of process (*how*), problems inhered in the imposition of these plans upon places without meaningful community engagement or a sensitivity to the landscape, history, and culture. In the wake of modern urbanism's demise, numerous "open society" and participatory efforts emerged that avoided the heavy hand, yet proved largely unremarkable in improving places.

Happily, regenerative urbanism has been responding to both shortcomings, contributing "to recover the creative dynamic of the planning project," as recommended by Patsy Healy (Healy 2006, 336–7). While thoroughly inclusive ("lateral urbanism" above), regenerative urbanism benefits from the expertise and experience of professionals – urban designers, architects, planners, and landscape architects – usually working in teams. In addition to providing technical and engagement skills, the allied building professionals bring an understanding of which traditions are appropriate for any given situation – the humanist, landscape ecology, systems, and/or form-making avant-garde – typically synthesizing various traditions. This expertise also includes the ability to work at multiple scales simultaneously - seeing "the world in a grain of sand" and vice versa - while also being "situationalists"[9] by distinguishing among mandates to employ appropriate techniques and strategies.

The regenerative urbanist's toolkit also includes collaborating, facilitating, benchmarking, assessing impacts, imagining alternatives, community-building, consensus-building, listening, communicating, storytelling, stewarding, educating, and placemaking. Regenerative urbanists bring constituencies together to have

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[9]   Alex Krieger (2000) identifies nine points that encompass the ideal planner, among them is the ability to be "situationalists" as opposed to ideologues.

conversations that make a difference. Rather than use fear and control, regenerative urbanists build community to collectively envision better futures, and implement these visions. The generative and dynamic self-adjusting feedback mechanism that is set into motion enables communities to leverage continuously their strengths.

As a result, regenerative urbanism builds upon cultural assets, supporting the rich diversity of our communities, including historic buildings and districts, expressive arts and culture, and the diversity of talent, creativity, and skills of any given community. Regenerative urbanism contributes to support existing local businesses and incentivize new creative entrepreneurship while also providing an attractive place for national and global businesses to establish themselves. And it showcases environmental assets, along with our ability to reclaim and enhance them.

Complementing the tools offered in Sustainable Development Goal 17, the regenerative approach facilitates realization of Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and

Figure 10. Beyond sustainability to prosperity

Communities, while contributing significantly to accelerate the implementation of the other SDGs. Moving beyond sustainability to prosperity, the regenerative process holds the potential for envisioning and realizing better futures in a world that needs them now more than ever (fig. 10).

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