



# Neighborhood change and neighborhood action: The struggle to create neighborhoods that serve urban needs

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## BOOK REVIEW

***Neighborhood change and neighborhood action: The struggle to create neighborhoods that serve urban needs***, by R. Allen Hays, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2017

*Neighborhood Change and Neighborhood Action* by R. Allen Hays is a unique multidisciplinary study of the importance and effectiveness of community engagement in creating positive change on a neighborhood level. With eight essays by various authors, Hays balances the intersection of theory and practice in participatory community development through examples big and small: from lessons derived from the demolition of Cabrini Green in Chicago (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOPE VI program), to changing engagement activities to accommodate for English-as-a-second-language residents. Though the examples of participatory engagement vary, *Neighborhood Change and Neighborhood Action* shows that positive neighborhood transformation is most likely to occur when local residents are included in decision-making roles and the balance of power is shifted from a top-down approach to grassroots efforts. Furthermore, practitioners would be well served to have a greater understanding of local residents' histories and current circumstances, as well as a true intent to coproduce (regardless of their field of expertise) in order to affect true neighborhood change.

In their chapter, Eccleston, Gupta, and Perkins discuss the importance of understanding social, political, and economic systems at play in order to recalibrate the balance of power in the local residents' favor. Their recommendation: do not assume that engagement for engagement's sake will automatically result in positive change for the local community. "Rather than accept participation and engagement as intrinsically positive, projects that deploy participatory or neighborhood-engagement models can advance social justice by explicitly positioning local residents in decision-making roles by addressing power differentials" (p. 22). This statement rings true in many community planning processes that I have witnessed by a variety of entities. Community engagement has become a perfunctory task, or a box to check off, rather than a true deep dive with the interests of the residents first in mind. On the other hand, where I have seen positive neighborhood transformation occur, residents are included in the decision-making process, given equal authority with stakeholders, and use that authority to implement positive change; I am referring, for example, to the creation of the Local School Decision Making Committee (the governing body located at each Cincinnati Public School) during the Cincinnati Public School Master Facilities Plan planning process.

Hays narrows in on this theme in his chapter, "Neighborhood Networks, Collective Action, and Public Safety." He argues that community engagement does not contribute to a greater sense of safety unless participants believe that actions taken were effective in said issues. Again, this rings true in the planning field, as many communities have expressed "planning fatigue," because governing bodies are continually asking residents to engage in the planning of their neighborhood but implementation is discouragingly rare.

A thought-provoking twist to participatory action is included in Jose Melendez's chapter. In this case, a Chicago neighborhood is given the task of deciding which project(s) to spend \$1 million on. The city of Cincinnati replicates this, albeit with a much smaller budget, as each neighborhood community council and business association is given a set number of funds and can allocate as they wish in order to support the overall organization and/or neighborhood. Again, putting the power of the purse strings in the hands of the residents has proven an effective strategy to create engaged citizens.

Though the majority of the chapters focus on research and academia, Brisson and Lechuga-Pena's essay, "Your Family, Your Neighborhood: An Intervention to Develop Social Cohesion," stands out.

They argue, correctly, that little has been written about interventions that seek to help practitioners develop effective community engagement tools. “Your Family, Your Neighborhood was created as a 12-week, manualized, skills based curriculum ... and has early evidence that participating families increase their perceived neighborhood social cohesion” (p. 149). As a practitioner in the field, I whole-heartedly agree that more accessible tools need to be created for various stakeholders with the goal of encouraging more engaged residents, and I applaud the authors for this effort. However, I am doubtful that a 12-week course would be enticing to a broad-based audience, whether low-income or otherwise. I encourage Brisson and Lechuga-Pena to continue to refine their research on effective tools and ask other scholars and practitioners to join in the effort.

The last theme that I found to be of particular relevance, and touched on throughout the book, is that of co-production. In today’s urban landscape of declining city budgets and burgeoning need, public/private partnerships have buoyed many developments throughout the nation. In the case of Cincinnati, 3CDC (a well-funded private nonprofit) stands out as one of the most recognized entities because of its role in the revitalization of the historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. However, there are many smaller (and perhaps less controversial) examples throughout the city, whereby public-private partnerships have proven a great success. One example is the creation of Community Learning Centers in all Cincinnati public schools. Partners co-located inside the schools receive no public funds but operate through funding from companies and philanthropies. As an example, Mercy Health has a co-located clinic inside Saylor Park Elementary School and sustains itself by opening its doors to the school and community alike and simply bills insurance, as it would at a stand-alone location.

In her chapter, “Citizens’ Roles in Public Service Delivery: Reconceptualizing Coproduction,” Kelechi Uzochukwu argues, “Citizen coproduction occurs when there is a conjoint, voluntary, active, and constructive effort between government and citizens toward the provision of public services or, more generally, the creation of public and private value” (p. 178). Furthermore, she goes on to state that joint participation in public service delivery is not only the most effective strategy for participatory action and neighborhood change but is the only way to effectively produce and deliver services to the public. I am in complete agreement, as are Hays and the contributing authors.

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