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## Places

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The Sanderistas and a Metamorphosis of Burlington, Vermont

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growth of Vermont's Queen City illustrates the illusions of Yankee settlement. From Samuel de Champlain's first French outpost on Lake Champlain in 1609 to the later southern European immigration in the nineteenth century, Burlington has been a diverse ethnic community. During the twentieth century, a mosaic of distinct cultural neighborhoods made Burlington a complex association of Italians, Irish, Greek, Jewish, German, and Yankee settlers. A very detailed study in 1930 indicated the idealized Old Yankee stock actually composed only one-third of Burlington's population. While this misleading Yankee image may have served political ends, knowing about this culturally diverse settlement makes it less surprising that in 1980 Bernie Sanders was elected in Vermont.

During the twentieth century the emphasis on ethnic and religious identity in Burlington has subsided while economic disparities and class distinctions have become increasingly prominent. As in cities across North America, the space economy of urbanism produced an uneven pattern of development in Burlington. The neighborhoods closest to downtown, such as King Street and the Old North End, have steadily deteriorated while construction and incomes have increased in the New North End and surrounding suburbs. Construction also usurped many of the open

fields and hillsides of the Champlain Valley, which city residents had enjoyed for decades. To counter this trend, in the early 1900s the Burlington park department initiated an ambitious plan of park acquisition and improvements. This program was one of the earliest attempts to improve the public environment of Burlington.

In 1925 Burlington started a public approach to urban design by appointing a municipal planning commission, although it was given little authority. Public efforts to guide the physical growth of the city later included a proposal for city zoning, which, though defeated in 1940, was eventually passed in 1947. But the relative dearth of public initiatives before 1965 essentially left planning up to private interests and resulted in many social and spatial inequities within Burlington. Whether past or present, these inequities have been a prominent issue of Sander's administration. While conservative and liberal geographies have tended to gloss over the tensions and conflicts between distinct communities, the Sanderistas have highlighted the social ecology of environmental design in Burlington.

#### **Downtown Redevelopment and the "Malling" of Burlington**

The first major public renewal project in Burlington came with the beginning of

federal urban renewal legislation. As in cities throughout the United States, this renewal defined the central business district as the major element in urban design. From this planning notion, the primary focus in Burlington became the Champlain Street urban renewal project. In overview this downtown commercial redevelopment included the demolition of an older working-class residential area to provide subsidized, empty space for a hotel and office development. While this property acquisition by the city proved beneficial for downtown businesses, progressive critics charged that it was more challenging to identify the benefits for the displaced residents of the area or businesses located nearby on North Street, which subsequently declined as a neighborhood commercial corridor.

Continuing the theme of downtown commercial improvement, from 1975 to 1982 the Burlington Planning Commission initiated three major projects. The first project proposed was an interstate highway connector system. Although on the surface it did not appear to have a downtown focus, it provides downtown with a crucial link to metropolitan consumers. In Chittenden County, Interstate Highway 89 passes directly to the east of Burlington, leaving about one and a half miles between this exit and downtown businesses.

In 1963 construction of two high-speed highways, one to the north and one to the south of downtown, were planned to provide access for middle- and upper-class residents of the county. A major impetus of this effort was the growing income, population, and market potential of IBM employees residing directly to the east. From 400 employees in 1957, IBM now employs 8,000 in the nearby Essex Junction research and development facility. In fact, in 1982 IBM was the largest employer in Vermont, followed by the state government with 6,500 employees, in what is becoming Vermont's silicon valley. In 1983, under the Sanders administration, the construction of the north connector was finally begun.

Recently the companion southern connector has been revived as a hot issue in city politics. On the one hand, Mayor Sanders opposed plans for this four-lane connector, since it poses both an obstacle and hazard to Lakeside neighborhoods. On the other hand, he is attempting to influence and work with developers on a more public-oriented waterfront development. The willingness of developers to cooperate with the mayor has been tied to the construction of this connector. In the fall of 1985 a compromise agreement was signed by Mayor Sanders for the city and the state of Vermont. While increasing

the flow of traffic, the proposed connector will preserve the integrity of the city's neighborhoods. Such political trade-offs between regional and neighborhood interests illustrate the different scales that may structure the politics of place.

Not only did the city's zeal to promote a downtown image overlook the needs of city residents, it extended beyond the city limits to include involvement in statewide land use politics. In March 1976 a new suburban shopping mall was proposed in South Burlington by the Pyramid Corporation of Syracuse, New York. Under provisions of Act 250, Vermont's land use development law, it was necessary for Pyramid to obtain a state permit for such development. In the hearing process, local business interests and the city of Burlington were able to prevent the mall from being built, arguing that it would have a negative impact on the local environment.<sup>4</sup> While the explicit issue in the ensuing court case was the environmental impact, there was an ongoing economic struggle between the state developer and business interests in Vermont. In fact, shortly after the Pyramid Mall permit was denied, a local real estate company proposed a 109-acre commercial/industrial development adjacent to the Pyramid land, and this was quickly given an Act 250 permit.

The final downtown project was the revitalization of the waterfront between the marketplace and Lake Champlain. While this shoreline has tremendous potential, due to its proximity to downtown and its magnificent view of the Adirondack Mountains, present land uses include a power plant, construction offices, railroad yards, and ferry dock. In 1978 Burlington received a \$3-million urban development action grant for this waterfront area. In the four years after this preliminary approval for development, however, a series of political conflicts, new developers, and legal questions about the land title outlived the grant, and no major changes were made on the waterfront.

### Vermont's Sanderista Revolution

From 1975 to 1982 the planning department was involved with the \$11.2-million Church Street marketplace, the \$3.2-million proposed waterfront development, and the \$24.3-million interstate highway connectors. Together these downtown projects represented two-thirds of the total \$58.2 million for the planning department. The widening gap between the focus of million-dollar planning projects for downtown redevelopment and the broader perspective of all Burlington residents was a prominent theme in Bernie Sanders's election campaign.

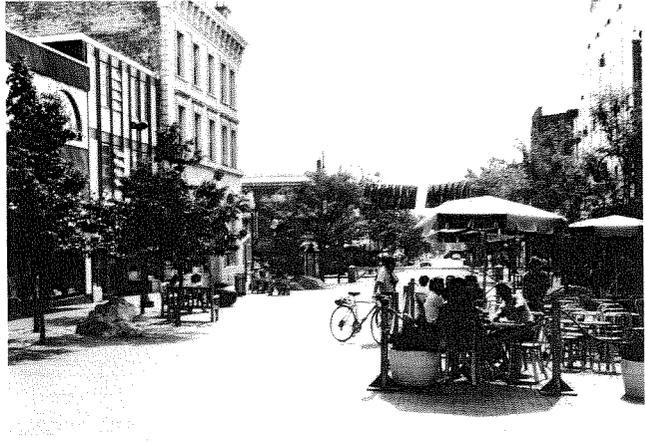
Along with a dramatic demographic shift toward more young, single residents, a new development policy was in the making. Campaigning against the cronyism and social inequities of these Democratic programs, the Sanderistas proposed more public participation and a neighborhood focus. Thus Sanders's platform highlighted the diverse neighborhoods and social ecology within Burlington rather than exclusive, downtown development.

Following the 1981 election victory, Sanders and a very dedicated group of activists quickly proposed progressive alternatives on almost every aspect of administration, besides expanding the notion of what should be an appropriate program for city government. But with only one ally on the board of aldermen, it was impossible to implement new plans or policies. After a year of frustration and bitter political struggles, city voters gave further support to this citizen movement by electing a number of progressive candidates in the midterm council elections. This then made it possible for the coalition to initiate programs that by then included both an arts and youth council, a city ombudsman, neighborhood planning assemblies, and, with the mayor's appointees finally confirmed, a wide variety of cost-saving administrative measures.

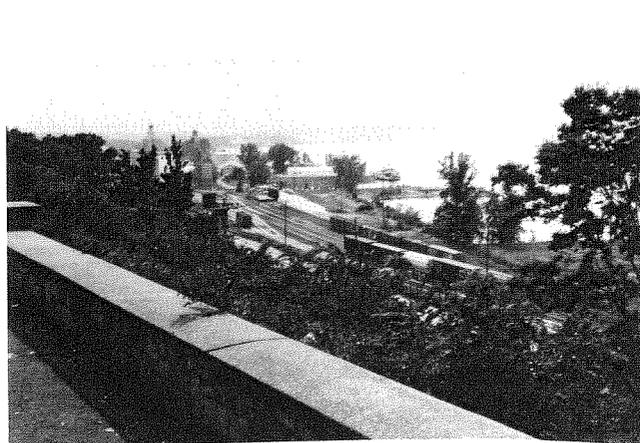
- 2 **City Hall Square**, Burlington
- 3 **Downtown waterfront** with minimal public access
- 4 **The "mall" of downtown Burlington**
- 5 **Church Street marketplace**
- 6 **North Street**, a working-class commercial area
- 7 **Hope Street** in Burlington's New North End



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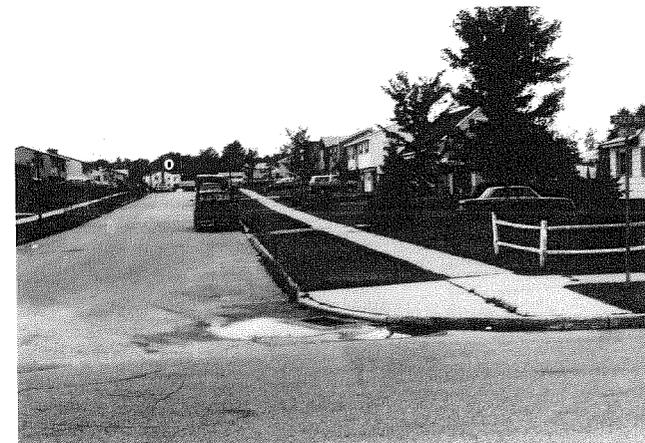
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As previously outlined, before the rise of this progressive coalition, environmental design in Burlington included a bare minimum of citizen participation. In fact from 1975 to 1982 the planning department earmarked a meager \$450 of their \$58-million seven-year budget for citizen participation.

In the fall of 1982 the Sanderistas and a broad-based political movement established neighborhood planning assemblies for each ward in the city. Meetings were subsequently held in each ward to identify neighborhood needs and rank community development block grant proposals. In contrast to the previous downtown preoccupation, the 250 residents involved in these meetings identified five priorities for the city: housing, streets and curbs, economic development, youth, and the waterfront. Since this was the first time neighborhood planning assemblies had operated in Burlington, there have been many questions and issues about this active approach to planning. Despite their provisional nature, the board of aldermen has continued to acknowledge the importance of assemblies by referring controversial issues to them. In addition to serving as an ad hoc citizens advisory body, in the future these assemblies may also provide periodic evaluation of community development block grant proposals and

revision of the comprehensive plan.

Changing the city's approach to environmental design has proved more complex than many activists may like to admit. A bureaucratic realm that vividly illustrates Burlington's geopolitics is the structure of city commissions and the spatial distribution of citizen representation. Under Burlington's commission form of government, the individual commissions, such as planning, police, fire, and civil defense, are given substantial authority to plan and direct services within the city. Since commissioners are nominated by the mayor and confirmed by the council, their neighborhood constituency has increasingly become a political issue. In October of 1982 out of a total of six wards and 104 commissioners, only 4 were from the low-income neighborhoods of Wards 2 and 3. The continuing resistance of the Republican-Democratic council majority to address this politics of place was repeated in 1982, when only 12 of the 72 commissioner applicants were from Wards 2 and 3 and then only 1 was confirmed by the board after a grueling thirteen ballots. By continuing to exclude these neighborhoods, the anti-Sanderistas hoped to sandbag the shift toward neighborhoods and questions of social equity in city design. To address the geopolitics of government organization, in 1984 a nonpartisan, citywide

committee was appointed to study and evaluate the present structure. In December of 1985 their report recommended strengthening the power of the mayor by increasing the number of department heads he or she appoints and by having citizens on the major city commissions of police, fire, etc., be elected, not appointed, by the council. This complex, bureaucratic process illustrates how radical change proceeds rather slowly; at the same time, it also demonstrates the importance of place representation in urban planning.

Somewhat ironically probably the most visible Sanderista reforms have been made in the more placeless world of city management. One of the first was putting city insurance policies out for competitive bidding for the first time in twenty-five years. Although insurance coverage is not a simple service to evaluate, this change has saved between \$200,000 and \$300,000 a year. The Sanderistas also introduced a new cash management system, in which more city funds will earn interest while in local banks, bringing \$70,000 yearly in new revenues to the city. A newly installed phone system provides improved interdepartmental service and is projected to save \$100,000 over the next ten years. When the mayor's city treasurer updated the city accounting system in 1982, he reported a \$1.9-million

**8 Neighborhood youth center**

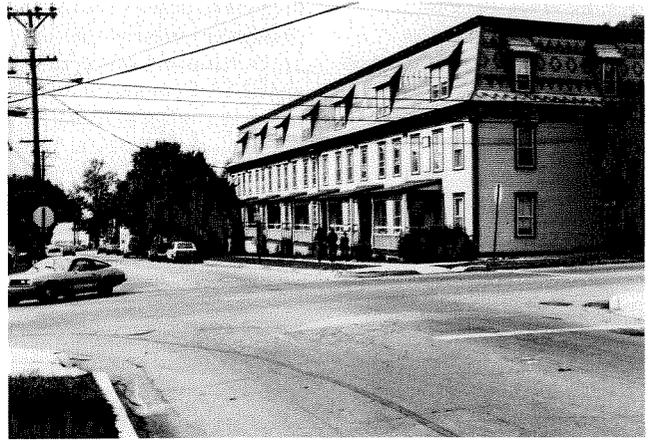
**9 Onion River Food Coop** provides community-based development

**10 Low-income housing rehabilitation** preserving architectural details

**11 Rehabilitation in working-class neighborhood**



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surplus in the various financial accounts. Since Burlington's mayoral election was in March of 1983, the details of this surplus unleashed a barrage of charges that it was politically motivated. In the midst of this frenzied reaction the administration downplayed its significance by saying it was a "nice Christmas present."

In 1983 the waterfront again became an issue when another developer, the Alden Corporation, came forward with a new proposal. Unfortunately, their original design required a \$17-million federal grant, which was never awarded. Subsequently a scaled-down version was proposed that called for a luxury hotel, condominiums starting at \$150,000, retail businesses, a museum, pedestrian promenade, bicycle path, marina, boat house, art center, parking, and open space. This version required a \$6-million tax increment bond and was supported by an unusual coalition including Mayor Sanders, prominent Republicans, and big-business interests of the city. In opposition was another unlikely coalition: the conservative Citizens for America, liberal Democratic environmentalists, Vermont Tenants, Inc., the Burlington School Board, and the Northern Vermont Greens. They opposed the project for a variety of reasons including: its appeal to the rich, its emphasis on tourism, and

the potential gentrification of adjacent neighborhoods. When balloting was completed 53.4 percent were in favor, but this was short of the two-thirds required for a bond issue. Thus, the waterfront remains basically unchanged after twenty years of controversy and numerous planning proposals.

Finally although some would argue that it is not appropriate for city government to pass resolutions concerning U.S. foreign policy, the City of Burlington joined a number of other U.S. cities in establishing a sister city project with Puerto Cabezas in Nicaragua and passing a resolution opposing the recertification of El Salvador for federal aid. Although the conservative members of Burlington's council were outvoted, they managed to preserve their sense of humor by arguing that this question was out of order and that instead they should be discussing the situation of El Burlington.

### Revitalization of Place

How do cities change as places? In one old stereotype, a new high-rise building displaces the brownstone walkups of a previous era. Or perhaps a new construction permit system requires approval by a neighborhood assembly, thus dramatically changing the politics of development. Or if an individual who always thought of a low-income neighborhood as an

eyesore, moves into this forbidden place and discovers its social vitality, the city begins to have new meaning; it becomes a new place.<sup>5</sup>

In Burlington, the parliamentary struggles and planning controversies have certainly highlighted the politics of place. Sometimes overlooked in this commotion has been the melange of grass-roots groups that have also been developing. As in other postindustrial cities, food cooperatives, neighborhood groups, holistic health centers, peace activists, women's organizations, and environmental action alliances provide a lively and diverse foundation for local action.<sup>6</sup> While some may be more overtly political than others, together they produce a very animated sense of Burlington.

Each individual association expresses a sense of place in different ways. The Onion River Food Coop, for example, is a natural foods store located within a low-income neighborhood. As one of the few food stores in the area, it provides an important service. In addition it supplies unique organic groceries that enliven the geography of food within the city. In overview, then, a grass-roots group and the diverse ways in which it shapes values, actions, and intentions also embodies a fundamental attitude toward the environment, which revitalizes a place.

The influence of Burlington's popular groups is not only limited to their internal affairs. The collective management style of the food coop, for example, promoted more active participation throughout the community; in fact, one of the full-time grocers is also a member of the City Council of Burlington. The initiative and dedication of other group participants has also produced more activity in the community. The arts explosion and city festivals have not only highlighted a homogenized, middle-class definition of place but have also included gay marches, women's festivals, peace demonstrations, and working-class parades.<sup>7</sup> Such diversity of opinion is visible among newspapers; in 1983 this city of less than 40,000 residents had eight papers: the *Free Press*, *Vanguard Press*, *Citizen*, *Commonwoman*, *That Paper*, *City Pulse*, *Summer Cynic* and *NOW Times*. This diverse social ecology provides a spectrum of liberal, conservative, and radical geographies that is seldom so visible in cities today.

A special approach of the Sanderista coalition has been to mobilize this complex of popular groups into an independent political force. Their success may be seen in the highest city voter turnout in decades. Also central to this phenomenon is the fact that residents of Burlington have had a rare opportunity within the United States to

select from three distinct candidates for mayor and each council seat within the city. Although this progressive movement is not without problems, contradictions, and dissent, it is working toward social equity, neighborhood programs, and a more participatory model of environmental design. As these activists work toward this democratic ideal on a personal and block-by-block basis, urban planning will become the politics of everyday living.

#### NOTES

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