

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Drafting a Regional Blueprint for Sustainability [Participation with a View]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8v07271g>

Journal

Places, 12(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

McNally, Marcia

Publication Date

1999-01-15

Peer reviewed

A Regional Blueprint for Sustainability

Marcia McNally

Working for fifteen years as a planner with expertise in citizen participation I have become annoyed, troubled and perplexed at how and why the advocacy approach has come to yield such poor results. So I took a break from private practice to pursue more proactive work with Urban Ecology, Inc., a San Francisco Bay Area-based non-profit.

people representing an array of interests. That remarkable effort of collaborative listening, learning and debate, resulted in the *Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area*—a book and vision that have a good chance of steering the region in a sustainable direction.

I began work after Urban Ecology had experienced a false start. Initial efforts to work on the book had stalled in age-old, inertia-inducing debates about population control and carrying capacity. The vision was having a hard time getting off the ground. My first few weeks were spent interviewing the previous participants to learn what went wrong:

- the process had not been much fun,
- the grassroots nature of the organization had resulted in a lot of discussion but not much production of a vision,
- a tremendous amount of work needed to be done in terms of content, and
- the group was nervous about putting its ideas out and being criticized.

Following this assessment I worked with a writer, book designer and researcher to propose a collaborative but product-oriented process. Visual in nature, the process involved the creation of a “thumbnail,” or small-scale sketch of the book, that

My hypothesis was that the non-profit sector, while small, could be a powerful convener of non-traditional partnerships and a successful initiator of change. In the end, I learned that by reshuffling the actors, redefining the unit of analysis and reapplying my tool kit of techniques, I could once again tap the positive side of the human spirit.

For many years Urban Ecology has advocated for sustainable development. Yet the Bay Area faces significant issues of housing, natural resource degradation, traffic gridlock and economic parity. When I signed on in 1995 to direct the *Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area* project, the group had concluded that a vision and action plan were necessary to right the course, and that the region was the only geographic scale at which to stimulate civic discussion.

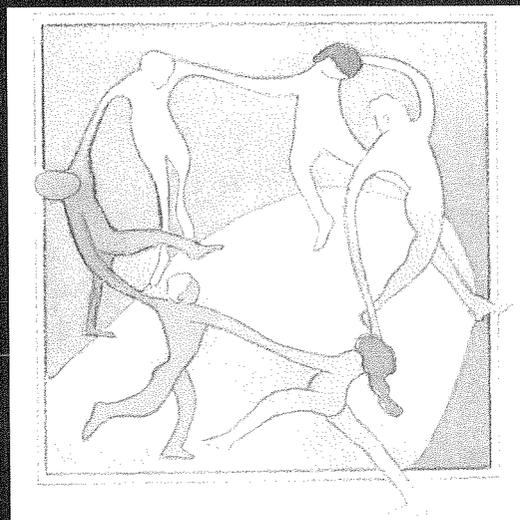
Being participatory in nature, Urban Ecology knew the only acceptable approach was the active involvement of a broad-based community of people in both defining issues and articulating solutions. A small team of us helped the group develop a highly structured process for reaching out to hundreds of

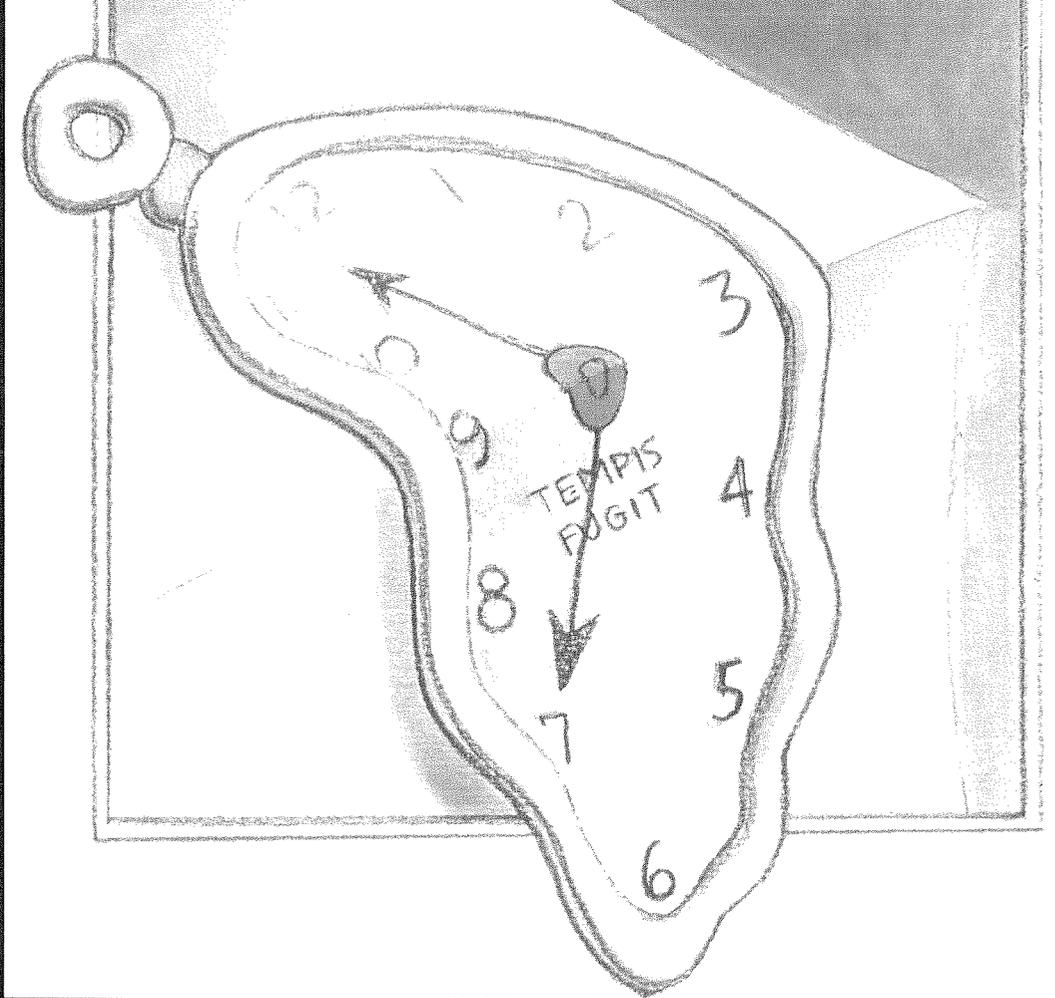


Top: Vision forum walking tour of the Oakland Estuary. Photo: Marcia McNally

Right and below: Icons from the *Blueprint*.

Graphics: Virginia Hobart, © Urban Ecology





would evolve with input and ultimately become a master storyboard or illustrated manuscript.

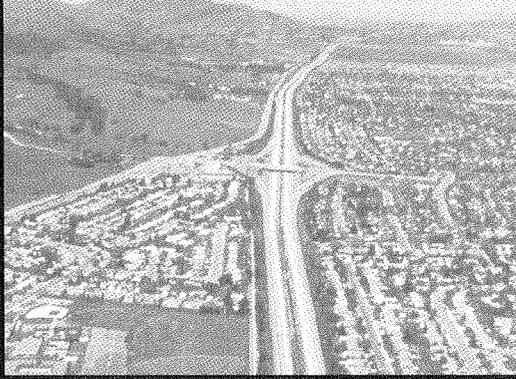
The book-writing process was augmented with a series of ten vision forums, at which Urban Ecology members could put forward ideas and debate them with experts. Morning panels typically included people from sister organizations, university faculties, government agencies and the business community. These advisors, as they came to be known, were chosen for their expertise and because we knew they would be important allies in the future. Afternoon design charrettes, walking tours and facilitated workshops gave participants a chance to test ideas aired that morning.

Concurrent with the forums, Urban Ecology staff prepared research papers based on the literature and on dozens of interviews with experts in the field. This thinking was combined with forum data and graphic proposals to produce a preliminary storyboard. Then the Blueprint Team (a work group comprised of staff and board representatives) would meet for dinner and debate content. Once the entire book was outlined in this way, the master storyboard was sent to the advisors and the board for review.

This approach had several benefits. The members' desire to participate was satisfied, we were able to test ideas with our experts and we reached out to many people in the region engaged in sympathetic efforts, which gained recognition for Urban Ecology and created future advocates for the product. Furthermore, a clear process with measurable outcomes and products, deadlines and budget allocations guaranteed forward movement because it forced the Blueprint Team to come to agreement and move on.

Recognizing that building a sustainable Bay Area depends on engaging the region's residents, we knew the book needed to be written in a user-friendly, jargon-free style and we needed to check our ideas with typical residents before we finalized them. So we hired a lay focus group, eight people who represented the geographic, ethnic, age and occupational diversity of the region. The group met with project staff four times, during which members were taken through exercises developed to stimulate thought, focus discussion and gather input.

The reality of the choices faced by our focus group, primarily suburbanites, created empathy and gave the group a powerful role. Often, when haggling over a point, a Blueprint team member would ask, "What would the focus group say?" Probably the



most substantive turnaround was the acknowledgment by the team that if seventy per cent of the region's residents live in suburbs, the book had to say something about these communities if it were to have any impact. (Initially, some board members wanted to call for tearing out the suburbs and replanting them as orchards).

Urban Ecology had known at the outset that many of the threats to the region were neither obvious nor personal. After all, the health of a region's air, water and land is hard to grasp, let alone get your arms around enough to embrace. Through the focus group, we realized that quality of life issues would provide a toe-hold for building a constituency and focusing the vision.

Very early on, focus group members made it clear that our argument had to be non-threatening. As far as they could tell, we were asking them to recycle (which they already did) and "freeze in the dark." We had to provide a compelling alternative to their dream of a single family-detached home in

a car-dependent suburb before they would be willing to act differently, and we had to show how our proposals would effect people's quality of life.

The Sustainable Seattle indicators project provided a good model for portraying the big picture in small windows that were understandable to lay people, because the indicators could be understood as symptoms of distress. Following this lead, the *Blueprint* depicts a region at risk in ways that ring true for most residents:

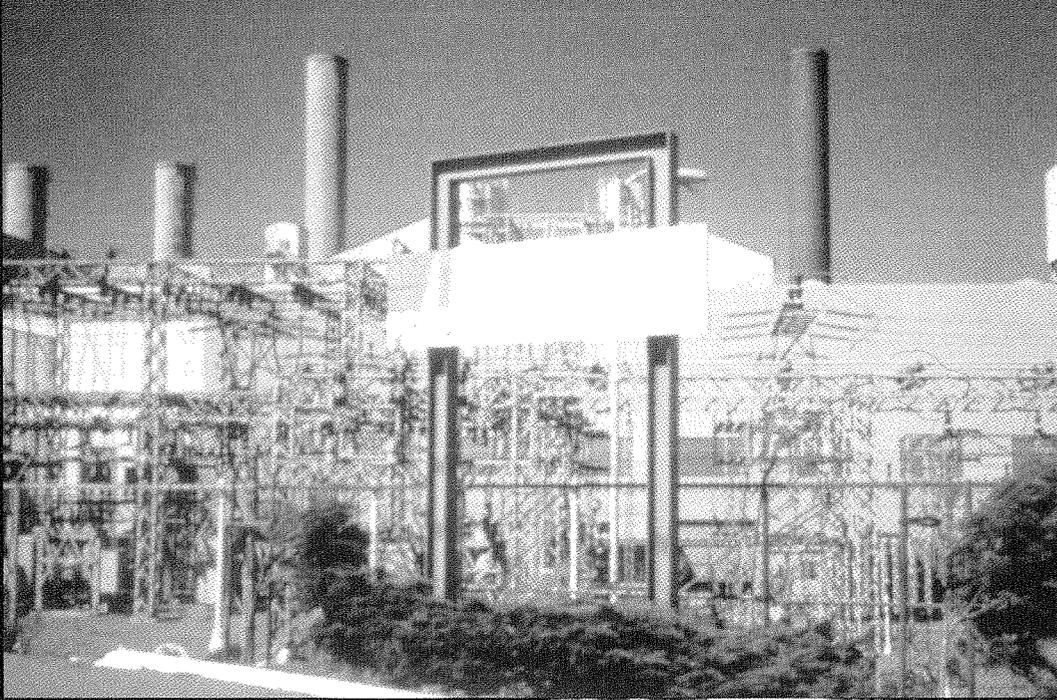
- In 1995 the Bay Area median house cost was the country's highest, and the average-size house cost \$188,107 to build. This makes it difficult for many residents, such as librarians, bank tellers and teachers, to afford decent homes.
- Freeways are near gridlock, with congestion having increased by 200 per cent between 1980 and 1990. By 2010, the average speed in Napa County, a predominantly rural part of the region, is expected to be eighteen miles per hour during peak commute.

In addition to conveying the risks, the *Blueprint* profiled local success stories to help catalyze action. The best cases illustrate how people with different agendas came together, agreed on what they had in common and defined a project that was mutually beneficial. Anticipating that some readers might want to get involved in similar projects, the *Blueprint*

Above: Typical land-use/ transportation pattern in newly developing areas.
Photo: David Early

Below: Volunteers working on the Bay Area Ridge Trail.
Photo: Steve Fiala, East Bay Regional Park District





Vision forum tour of Hunter's Point, San Francisco. Industrial and military uses have contributed to environmental contamination, raising public health concerns. Photos: Marcia McNally

offers action checklists, labeled "What You Can Do," on the same page.

About one year into the project we received a call from an Urban Ecology member requesting a community presentation on sustainability. The process of condensing the book into a 45-minute talk forced us to look ahead and develop an outreach strategy. Before the book was finished, we developed a presentation and field-tested it twenty times, using a feedback form to solicit audience input. From this process came the goal of giving one hundred talks this year (there are 100 cities in the Bay Area) by trained volunteers. Many of the audiences have their origin with people who participated in some way in the book-writing process.

The current challenge is how to respond to and direct the overwhelming enthusiasm for the ideas put forth in the *Blueprint*. Another challenge is to define implementation projects that forge new partnerships to address the larger social, economic and environmental challenges of the region. Urban Ecology has launched a "Progressive Developers Initiative" this fall through which infill developers, bankers, local government planners and affordable housing advocates will join the organization to develop a set of model ordinances to take to Bay Area cities for adoption. The seeds of this project came from a developer attending one of the 100 talks.

In the course of directing the *Blueprint* project, I have been reminded that planners must work hard to exploit hopeful optimism, that we must seek to capture the hearts and spirit of a place and its people. I think that visioning is today's best available form of



advocacy. But visioning must go further than developing a mission statement. It must involve collective identification of issues, broad-based participation in creating the solutions and negotiation of responsibility for implementation.

As advocacy planners, we must force ourselves to meet challenges that that didn't exist in Davidoff's time. We must recognize that the neighborhood is no longer the only important unit and learn to zig zag effectively across jurisdictional lines. My experience with the *Blueprint* gives me confidence that we can adapt our training and tools to this new field of action, but we need to have a strong infrastructure of regional groups like Urban Ecology behind us.

For more information, or to purchase a copy of the *Blueprint*, contact Urban Ecology at 510-251-6330.