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The Sanderistas and a Metamorphosis of Burlington, Vermont

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How casually we often treat our surroundings. Whether from habit or philosophical indoctrination, we tend to consider the land as a given. It seems while we may be aware of a wide variety of land uses, we are usually much less conscious of the relationship between a land use and its social meaning. Even with the advances of urban planning and design, we often discount the identity and intentions of a community. Recently, however, North American urban movements have paid more attention to the environment in terms of social ecology and symbolism. In select cases, these backyard revolutions of urban America have elected progressive or radical candidates to local offices, such as in Montreal, Quebec; Santa Cruz, Berkeley, and Santa Monica, California; Cleveland, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; and Burlington, Vermont, which elected an independent, socialist mayor in 1981. In office, these activists have advanced democratic and decentralized approaches to planning that highlights incumbent upgrading rather than the gentrification of cities. To study the dynamics of one of these animated communities provides new insight into the politics of environmental design and how we structure our thoughts about places.

In early 1981 Bernie Sanders ran for mayor of Burlington as an independent, socialist candidate against Gordon Paquette, a democratic incumbent in his fifth term of office. On March 4, 1981, Bernie Sanders won the election by ten votes and was easily reelected in 1983 and 1985. In many North American communities, the prospect of having a socialist administration may seem tattered, but in Burlington Mayor Sanders has been somewhat candid about his socialist philosophy. A refreshing quality of this political movement has been its ability to maintain a sense of humor in the midst of bitter political conflicts. For example, to identify this new orientation, Mayor Sanders's Council on the Arts began selling T-shirts that touted "The People's Republic of Burlington." Playfully reinforcing such leftist symbolism, both supporters and opponents have referred to the coalition as the Sandertistas. Besides presenting a distinct identity and philosophy of revitalization, this group also provides an alternative perspective on the past and present geography of Burlington, Vermont. A look at the geographies of different political perspectives indicates both the depth and fundamental importance of understanding places.

Geographies of Burlington

A road-atlas view of Burlington's location on the west coast of New England may conjure up images of a town hall, village green, and Yankee settlement. A closer look at the origins and
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 Italian, 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 hilltops 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 kept 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 Sanders's administration. While conservative and liberal groups have tended to gloss over the tensions and conflicts between distinct communities, the Sandersistas 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 1973 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 provided 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 1800 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 L-shaped neighborhoods. On the other hand, developers have proposed 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 policies. 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.11

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 230 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 1973 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' election campaign.

Along with a dramatic demographic shift toward more young, single residents, a new development policy was in the making. Campaigning against the cynicism and social inequities of these Democratic programs, the Sandersistas 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 appointment, a wide variety of cost-saving administrative measures.

2 City Hall Square, Burlington
3 Downtown waterfront with renewed public access
4 The “mailing” 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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As previously outlined, before the rise of this pro-
gressive coalition, environ-
mental design in Burlington
included a bare minimum of
citizen participation. In fact
from 1975 to 1982 the
planning department ear-
maked a meager $450 of
their $58-million seven-
year budget for citizen
participation.

In the fall of 1982 the
Sandefurias 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 neigh-
borhood needs and rank
community development
block grant proposals. In
counter to the previous
downtown preoccupation,
the 230 residents involved
in these meetings identified
five priorities for the city:
housing, streets and cars,
economic development,
youth, and the waterfront.

Since this was the first time
neighborhood planning
assemblies had operated in
Burlington, there had been
many questions and issues
about this active approach
to planning. Despite their
promotional nature, the board
of aldermen has continued
to acknowledge the impor-
tance of assemblies by refe-
rimg 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 comprehen-
sive 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 Bur-
lington’s geopolitics is the
structure of city commissions
and the spatial distribution
of citizen representation.

Under Burlington’s commis-
sion form of government, the
individual commissions,
such as planning, police, fire,
and civil defense, are given
substantial authority to plan
direct services within
the city. Since commissioners
are nominated by the mayor
and confirmed by the coun-
cil, their neighborhood
continuity 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 neigh-
borhoods 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 commissioners
applied for袭击s 2
and 3 and then only 1 was
confirmed by the board after
a grueling 15-hour day.

By continuing to exclude
these neighborhoods, the
anti-Sandefurias hoped to
sandbag the shift toward
neighborhoods and ques-
tions of social equity in city
design. To address the geo-
politics of government
organization, in 1984
a nonpartisan, citywide
committee was appointed
to study and evaluate the
present structure. In Decem-
ber of 1983 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 mayor city
commissions of police, fire,
etc., be elected, not ap-
pointed, 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 repre-
sentation in urban planning.

Somewhat ironically, prob-
ably the most visible San-
derius 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 city may 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

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
surplus in the various finan-
cancial accounts. Since
Burlington's mayoral election
was in March of 1983, the
details of this surplus un-
leashed a barrage of charges
that it was politically
motivated. In the midst of
this fronted 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. Unfortu-
nately, 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 Repub-
licans, and big-business
interests of the city. In
opposition was another
likely coalition: the
conservative Citizens for
America, liberal Democratic
evironmentalists, Vermont
Tenants, Inc., the Burlington
School Board, and the
Northern Vermont Greens. They
opposed the project for a
variety of reasons includ-
ing: its appeal to the rich, its
emphasis on tourism, and
the potential gentrification of
adjacent neighborhoods.
When ballots were com-
pleted 33.4 percent were in
favor, but this was short of
the two-thirds required for a
bond issue. Thus, the water-
front remains basically
unchanged after twenty years
of controversy and numerous
planning proposals.

Finally although some would
argue that it is not appro-
priate for city government to
guess 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 Ca-
tezas in Nicaragua and
passing a resolution op-
posing the reconfirmation 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 the question was out
of order and that instead they
should be discussing the
situation of El Burlington.

Revitalization of Place
How do cities change?
places? In one old stereo-
type, a new high-rise
building replaces 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
eyeore, moves into this
forbidden place and
discovers its social vitality,
the city begins to have new
meaning; it becomes a new
place.5

In Burlington, the parlia-
mentary struggles and
planning controversies have
certainly highlighted the
politics of place. Sometimes
overlooked in this commu-
nication has been the melting
of the large group of
grass-roots groups that have
ever been developing. As in
other postindustrial cities,
food cooperatives, neighbor-
hood groups, holistic health
centers, peace activists,
women's organizations, and
environmental action alli-
ances provide a lively and
diverse foundation for local
action. While some may be
more overtly political than
others, together they pro-
duce 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 addi-
tion 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 man-
agement style of the food
coop, for example, promoted
more active participation
throughout the community;
indeed, one of the full-time
cooperatives is also a member
of the City Council of Burling-
ton. 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. 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, Common-
woman, That Paper, City
Pulse, Summer Cynic, and
NRP Times. This diverse
social ecology provides a
spectrum of liberal, con-
servative, and radical
geographies that is seldom
so visible in cities today.

A special approach of the
Sanderson coalition has been
to mobilize this complex of
popular groups into an in-
dependent political force.
Their success may be seen in
the highest city voter turnout
in decades. Also central to
this phenomenon is the fact
that resident, 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

2 Murray Bookchin, The Ecology of Freedom (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982); and
9 Andre Gora, Farewell to the Working Class (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1983).

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