

# **Urbanization and Leisure - What About Me?: Comments on Community Management of Leisure**

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by Lloyd Axworthy  
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**The Institute of Urban Studies**





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**URBANIZATION AND LEISURE - WHAT ABOUT ME?: COMMENTS ON COMMUNITY  
MANAGEMENT OF LEISURE**

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The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

COMMUNITY PLANNING ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

Urbanization and Leisure - What About Me?

(Comments on Community Management of Leisure)

by

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This is intended as a very brief discussion paper,  
designed to present ideas in capsule form, rather  
than an extended analysis.

There are many new voices being heard in the city today. Voices calling for citizen involvement in the planning and implementing of policies in housing, renewal, welfare, urban transportation, downtown development, or any other of a number of enterprises, formerly considered the exclusive preserve of small coteries of planners, consultants, developers, bankers and the odd politician.

This has caused confusion, consternation and increasingly acts of confrontation in the management of urban affairs. The institutional mechanisms, the conventional practices and the intellectual concepts that have determined the way cities are planned have not been designed with citizen participation in mind. It is a new social phenomenon demanding a different set of responses and institutional machinery. To continue planning as before, displaying a disdain for public involvement, which is what many professional planners and government officials still do, is an act of reckless irresponsibility. New social forces cannot be ignored without placing the entire community in peril through the stress and strains that will ensue.

This does not mean that these voices of protest, or the demands of participation will result necessarily in better cities. No immaculate conception of the ideal city is to be discovered just by listening to the new voices of citizen activism. In fact, the multitude of new voices carries dangers and often sounds like the Tower of Babel, resulting in the same inefficiency as that biblical enterprise. But, it is a new force in the urban setting, and if given half a chance could produce elements now missing

in the calculations and concerns of those espousing the cause of better, more humane cities. Most particularly, it offers the chance of enlisting the energies of previously non-involved citizens in a major effort at badly needed urban reconstruction.

This can be plainly seen if one considers planning and policy-making in the field of urban leisure. Of all the new voices now demanding to be heard, one of the most insistent, if not the loudest, is the voice of people who are bored with living in our cities. The rhetoric of urban vitality, diversity, choice, excitement that often begins any list of advantages of the urban citizen ring hollow, when you look at what is really happening to many urban residents.

Look at the older urban residents with few places to go, limited by high costs of getting anywhere, and needing specialized facilities to fit the requirements of their age. Look at the other end of the age scale, where as strange as it may be, the most difficult exercise for many young urban residents is simply finding a place where they can meet the opposite sex and develop a pattern of human relations. For many of these young people, especially those on low incomes, watching television in a small room or apartment is their basic staple of leisure use. Look at the poor, and what the city offers them. For the residents of the inner core of Winnipeg, there are two recreational outlets -- bingo in a church basement and the over-thirty beer parlours that crowd along Main between Portage and the CPR tracks.

Or, look at what school children do who are locked out of their school buildings at noon hour, or the passengers forced to lounge in the airport or bus depot waitingrooms, the office worker with nowhere to go at lunch hour, or the housewife in the suburbs, needing

but often not finding the opportunities for a change of pace. The fact is that the city is a fraud for many of its residents. If you are not rich, if you have limited mobility, if you are forced by circumstance into family patterns or work patterns that offer little stimulation, then the city is a dull place, a frustrating place, not a humane enjoyable place.

One of the many unsettling contradictions of urban life is that there is still so much lacking when so much effort goes into supplying leisure time needs. One can be dazzled by the work of private and public enterprise to satisfy leisure needs. Yet, one can only conclude that there is a good deal of wasted effort and mis-applied resources, if the results seem to by-pass so many people.

There are two systems of supply for leisure needs. The market system of leisure - the network of privately owned movie houses, restaurants, bars, professional athletics, theatres, etc. and the mass media to respond to leisure needs through the basic economic criteria of supply and demand. They will supply only what is profitable for them to supply, and operate with a minimum of co-ordination or planning. No one measures the allocation of resources between baseball and ballet, the criteria is which event attracts the most people. This is an effective system, but because of its economic criteria, supplies only a limited range of needs.

The public system of leisure - the parks, the evening extension courses, the subsidized cultural performances, the ever-increasing state sponsored extravaganzas such as anniversary celebrations, or highly expensive sports festivals and olympic games, are based on the more abstract

reasoning of what one group of people in positions of influence believes another group of people want. If you examine the basis of leisure and recreation planning that takes place in government, the first observation is the ad hoc superficial nature of research or investigation. Just as public housing was conceived as an answer to low income housing needs - without really testing those assumptions, so is the planning that goes on in the public sphere. With some exceptions, such as a demand by citizens for a public golf course, planning recreation and leisure needs are prompted by calculations often unrelated to a thorough examination of the diversity in needs of urban residents, or inserted as an adjunct to some physical redevelopment plan.

Several basic flaws are apparent in the way these two systems of urban leisure plan and program services and facilities. First, there is little effort made to seek out the specific leisure needs of a diversity of people. What planning takes place is aggregate, looking at urban residents as singular in taste, pocketbook, and available time. The facilities that are planned too often represent assessments based on abstract calculations, rather than in-depth analysis of what the particular needs are, as articulated by the people that have them. The right of self-determination in leisure programs is as important, as similar claims in urban renewal or redevelopment projects. There is no reason why citizen participation should be confined to a restricted area of issues.

The difficulty is how this can be accomplished. Present methods to determine and assess citizen needs for purposes of planning are crude. They reveal little about patterns of behaviour and attitude and thus result in plans that do not match requirements.

We have been experimenting recently at our Institute with a variety of methods that can be employed to better profile community needs. This has involved the combination of three approaches.

1) First, intelligent methods of social science analysis, such as satisfaction surveys, observer analysis, gaming and a potentially useful research tool -- video tape recording -- are being explored as a means of cutting deeper into the different cultures of urban communities to reveal what people want.

2) Secondly, these methods are used in co-operation with community groups themselves, so that they can use such information and through community organization seek the solutions that they determine and for which they are prepared to work.

3) And thirdly, professional advice and guidance is available to these community people for purposes of interpreting the information and giving advice on what to do with it.

This combined approach can correct three distinct deficiencies that now exist in the way that urban policies and programs are decided.

1) It means that better information is available, so that plans are based on calculations of real need, not presumed needs. 2) It means that the information is not retained in the hands of small coterie of influential decision-makers, but in fact can be used by citizens. 3) And, as a result, it means that the citizens groups can establish goals in a knowledgeable fashion, be more equal in their dealings with government and establish priorities and programs that make sense to them.

This is not the only correction that is required, however,



as it doesn't meet the need to co ordinate and complement private market oriented efforts at supplying leisure, with the public community efforts. There must be planning that encourages both systems in an effective, inter-dependent way. Everyone knows of the classic error in urban renewal planning, called "culture palace catalysts". The theory was that large extensive art centers placed amidst deteriorating areas would have the effect of generating secondary growth of restaurants, coffee houses, smaller art centers because the major center would pull in a volume of people to support such enterprises. As our own experience in Winnipeg illustrates, the culture palace erected in a depleted urban area becomes an island of middle class occupancy three or four nights a week, and the surrounding area remains the same. Private development does not follow, there is little secondary growth generated. Interventions by public authorities cannot stand against the natural flow of urban economic and social forces. They must work within a context set by the multitude of decisions made in the urban market and there must be institutional means to integrate private and public urban development activities.

An integration of public and private efforts can and have an enhancing effect - providing leisure time services of greater diversity and economizing in resources. For example, if the placement of new school facilities are planned in partnership with local community merchants, churches, citizens groups, theatre owners, etc., the facilities can be planned so that the community can make full use of gymnasiums, school theatres, and classrooms, while the private resources can be used to help supply student needs for food, social meeting places, and after hour recreation needs. In Winnipeg, there is a large high school right beside a large shopping center. At noon hour, because the students are closed

out of the school, there is a large influx of students into the shopping plaza, where there is again little for them to do except 'hand about' one of the restaurants. Even though the cinema theatre in the shopping centre is unused, and there is all kinds of open space where activities could be planned. Here is an ideal case for co-ordination and yet there is none. The only communication between the merchants and the school is the merchants complaining about the students.

Another example exists in a downtown area of the city experiencing extensive alterations in housing use, and population. A large number of university students reside in the area, with little in the way of services, and a good deal of idle time in the evenings. Long time residents are becoming concerned over the changes, feel threatened by the number of young people, and through church initiative have started efforts at organizing. There is an increase in violent crimes, giving the police added problems and resulting in the inevitable cries of alarm from city fathers. Yet, there is no effort to combine efforts to assess the needs of people in the area and plan accordingly. What could, with some imagination, become an interesting urban area of variety and opportunity in leisure time uses, instead presents its residents with frustration and a growing incidence of social problems.

The reason for this kind of neglect is that the mechanisms for effective planning do not exist. We are poorly governed in our cities. The institutions we use simply do not match the tasks that need to be done. The inability to discern leisure time needs of diverse urban residents, and to undertake co-ordinated concerted action to satisfy them stems from the weakness in present means of managing our affairs.

The forms of government we now use were sufficient for providing the caretaker services that were required in simpler days. But, as instruments capable of handling the complex, subtle social and human concerns of modern urban citizens they are failures. They are too distant, too bureaucratic, too simplistic in their approach. What is even more worrisome, they are becoming less and less democratic - immune to the new voices expressing themselves in urban matters.

The answer to the problems of leisure in the cities as it is to other problems is very much one of developing forums of decision-making able to respond and act in ways suitable to the problem. It means centering planning much more on a citizen supported basis, with a full supply for citizens of adequate information and skills. It means finding ways of planning private and public responses in some co-ordinated fashion.

This suggests a form of decentralized neighbourhood government. Neighbourhood governments and councils, small enough in jurisdiction, and shaped to correspond to the natural community divisions, should be granted powers in certain field of urban development such as leisure, education, housing, etc. They would relate to regional planning through/larger metropolitan form of government that handles macro-metropolitan functions, but would be the mechanism for planning on a local level.

The planning followed by such an institution would fit into a larger set of metropolitan development guide lines, but would better reflect the diversity found in the diverse areas of the city. They could organize the activities of local institutions, utilize advanced techniques of community analysis and help co-ordinate public and private efforts that would reflect the character of their own community.

The planning for leisure is one activity that most clearly could be handled by such a new form of local government. In fact, because leisure time planning is one activity given low priority by existing governments, they very well might go along with a delegation of this power on an experimental basis. Thus, the planning and implementation of leisure time use could be used as the starting point for what has to become a major reform of existing institutions.

Consider how such an organization might function in some of the examples of leisure time neglect that were previously cited. In the case of inner city residents they might provide for use of public facilities such as schools for purposes determined by needs of residents. In simple terms, the number of older citizens who live in small rooms with no entertainment, a gathering place, school facilities or church basements could be used to place television sets or to play cards. In the suburban shopping centers, programs could be devised for use of school children at noon hour. In the area of the city where rooming houses predominate, merchants, voluntary associations, churches could combine - through the representative instrument of a neighbourhood council to plan small parks, movie houses and meeting rooms - places where people could meet and become part of the community.

The idea of neighbourhood government, as the basis for managing urban leisure time use has been outlined only in brief. The objective of this exercise is not to detail a program but to present one idea. Whether, one agrees with the prescribed solution or not, one should accept the fact that one of the major deficiencies of present urban management is the way services and programs for leisure are handled. Basic changes in the means of implementation are required, which take cognizant of the

growing demands for greater participation by urban residents. We need to know more about the way people live in our urban areas, and that information can best come from the people themselves. In fact, no better use of leisure time could be planned, than the time and energy taken by people being involved in the management of their own affairs. The answer to the difficult issue of how to respond to human needs in the urban setting is to build the structure and give the power to people to enable them to answer their own needs.