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Vacant to Vibrant : creating successful green infrastructure networks (book review)

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Vacant to Vibrant: Creating successful green infrastructure networks

Abstract:

Sam Hayes reviews 'Vacant to Vibrant: Creating successful green infrastructure networks' by Dandra L. Albro.

Review:

In this text, Albro sets out to pass on the learning from the project Vacant to Vibrant, a series of pilot projects to convert vacant land into vibrant places through urban greening. With considerable experience in urban agriculture, the Vacant to Vibrant team set out to explore whether other urban greening forms could be used to transform urban landscapes.

The North American context, and specifically the cities of the Great Lakes and 'rust belt America', is placed at the forefront of the discussions; however, this does not negate the potential of the text to be of use to a wider audience. Importantly, Chapter 1 provides the reader with valuable knowledge to understand the Great Lakes Cities' context, the nature of vacant lots and relevant legislation. Indeed, as one reads Chapter 2, which discusses demographically segregated neighbourhoods, deindustrialisation, depopulation, urban blight, large scale demolition, and river pollution, the detail provided makes it possible to relate to more familiar settings. For me, I was thinking of depopulation and demolition in Liverpool (UK), vacant land and urban greening in Berlin (Germany) or deindustrialisation in cities like Lille (France) or Manchester (UK).

There is a tendency for the interpretation of green infrastructure, understandably given the close connection to US practice, to be particularly North American with a focus on water management, a feature of green infrastructure literature from this part of the world noted by other authors (Mell, 2013). This is reflected in some of the earlier chapters with explanations of water legislation driving green infrastructure investment. However, there is also a sense that more multifunctional design was part of the practice. For example, in Chapter 3 we get details of project planning which involved community engagement and revitalisation, as well as biodiversity driven planting.

Chapter 4 offers a good deal of detail on the implementation of the pilot projects, with information provided on each case study (Cleveland, Buffalo and Gary) related to costs, the installation process, design modification, resident complaints, vandalism, availability of specified plants and much else. The chapter concludes with reflections and lessons learned useful for anyone involved with the design and delivery of urban greening projects. This chapter also provides detailed boxes with project descriptions and images of each site to give a better sense of the scale and form of each installation.

Chapter 5 gives insight into the experiences of the Vacant to Vibrant team with regards to maintenance. Again, as with this book in general, we get considerable practical detail. There is discussion of the meaning of low-maintenance, as well as how to establish the 'green workforce' necessary for longer term sustainable management of green infrastructure. Particularly interesting in this chapter is the discussion of different interpretations of green infrastructure interventions held by city planners and residents. For example, connectivity improvements provided by joining vacant lots, typically held to be a core component of any good quality green infrastructure project by practitioners (Wright, 2011), was often viewed as negative by residents who raised concerns about crime. A valuable lesson for anyone assuming urban greening concepts like connectivity can easily move between different contexts.

Finally, Chapter 6 considers the crucial question for any pilot project, scaling up. The author reflects on the need to consider some quite dramatic changes in how cities approach their water management to overcome issues such as fragmented responsibility or indeed the scale of green infrastructure needed to have a significant impact. However, they also provide interesting discussion comparing the cost of green infrastructure to traditional grey infrastructure and alternative financing models.

As noted, the connection to practice is substantial and the annex provides the site layout plans for the various lots which made up the Vacant to Vibrant projects. These will be of particular interest to urban greening practitioners, but also to students and associated professionals who want to see these small-scale green spaces in a more concrete way.

Overall, this text is accessible, readable and well connected to the project experiences from which it stems. This provides the benefit ensuring the text remains relevant to practice. Although it is very much rooted in US practice, and this can at times feel insular, there are lessons and connections possible for a more international readership. When read as part of the growing international literature on green infrastructure, I think this text would be of benefit to anyone to considering how to translate green infrastructure principles into practice.

MELL, I. C. 2013. Can you tell a green field from a cold steel rail? Examining the “green” of Green Infrastructure development. *Local Environment*, 18, 152-166.

WRIGHT, H. 2011. Understanding green infrastructure: the development of a contested concept in England. *Local Environment*, 16, 1003-1019.