
The Effective Urbanist by Denys Candy

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In April 2010, I gave the keynote address to the annual place-making conference hosted by the Heart of Orange coalition in New Jersey. The coalition's goal is to restore Orange as "a just and beautiful city." The curiously named town of 33,000 is compact, to the West of New York City, occupying just two square miles. During the 1960's planners and developers bisected the downtown with an eight-lane Interstate highway. The locals adopted questions I posed for Pittsburgh some years ago, among them, "How do we heal places from trauma and renew our sense of community?"

Working with the coalition reminded me that to be an effective urbanist, it is not enough to be interested in cities and towns. The powers that busted Interstate 280 through Orange may have claimed to be creating better hinterland towns outside cities. But the planners and developers destabilized the community. Concrete construction and speedy traffic trumped human connectivity. Commerce was prioritized over community life. We can conclude that these planners and developers were not effective urbanists.

Because commercial real estate or housing development is not the same as community development, an effective urbanist prioritizes nurturing a sense of community equally with physical development. A successful community is built primarily on relationships, on human connectivity. Master plans can deliver value to (or undermine) a community but cannot by themselves create a sense of community. This is because the community is more than the sum of houses, shops and cafes, streets, bike-paths and so on, though how these structures are put together is vital. Our sense of community arises from our routine, our collectively generated experience of a place – from whom and what we encounter and how we feel as we go about gathering our daily bread. It changes and shifts, is something to be engaged in each moment. Paying attention to the sense of community in the DNA of a place is essential for its positive transformation.

And so, an effective urbanist must attend to moments that nourish this sense of community, however marginal they might appear. I was reminded of this the night before the official conference opening. Heart of Orange coalition leaders gathered at a member's home and served a sumptuous buffet made up entirely of dishes donated by local restaurants. I listened to people's stories, observed endearing local characters in full flight, and felt the heart-warming effect of their commitment to their town. More than simply a nice precursor, a gathering such as this is an essential component of place-making, as important and valuable as the planning activities scheduled for the next day because it lifts spirits, reaffirms ties, and enjoyably lures newcomers to get more active.

The next day, I stood with a group at the geographical center of Orange – Tony Galento Plaza – by an elegant old train station near the Interstate as participants began to think about how to make it a more interesting gathering place - a real plaza rather than a paved passenger drop-off point. Nearby, artists painted railway underpasses with temporary murals and tied pieces of cloth like prayer flags with

peoples' aspirations for Orange to fencing above the highway. I heard the constant whoosh of traffic from which exhaust fumes might undermine public health. I could see that the work of the place-making conference was a hopeful beginning, an important act of re-imagining, but clearly just making a more interesting place would not be enough. Recognizing the importance of civic ecology -the interaction of land, landscapes and people – will be crucial for the health of Orange.

The challenge will be to create more interesting public spaces that mitigate negative effects of highway noise and fumes and restore a modicum of ecological balance. One might suggest large scale tree-planting and strategies to reduce storm-water runoff. It will also be important to pay continued attention to the local economy of Orange, a former hat manufacturing centre, because its economic health was compromised by the flight of capital and jobs. One might ask, "What does Orange have the skills and opportunity to produce now?" In this context, to be effective, an urbanist must develop imaginative strategies that address interrelated aspects of community health.

Because equality is good for societal health, the effective urbanist pursues equity and keeps an eye out for local solutions that might address national or global concerns. In Orange, not everyone is happy about an influx of Mexican and Latin American workers but contractors are happy to drive to certain corners to hire the workers they need. I observed two promising local responses to the immigrants. The Heart of Orange wants to develop a day center program where immigrants can learn English, understand their rights and get support for their families. The City, recognizing the benefits of new residents, has passed an ordinance declaring that police on routine business won't inquire about anyone's immigration status. This approach offers the USA an alternative model to Arizona's controversial law requiring local police to enforce flawed federal immigration policy.

I look forward to further dialogue with colleagues on the essential qualities and skills of the effective urbanist.



Denys spray-painting the town!