Participation in Brownfields Redevelopment

By Laura Solitare, Rutgers University

What engages people in redeveloping the brownfields located in their neighborhoods? Eight cases studies in Boston and Houston provide some explanation.

Brownfields are problems for many American cities. As abandoned or underutilized properties with real or perceived contamination, brownfields can be eyesores that decrease neighborhood property values. Brownfields can scare off development for both the actual site and the surrounding neighborhood. In many older city neighborhoods, brownfields are often found in conjunction with additional problems including a declining economic base, high unemployment and poverty rates, poor education systems, dilapidated infrastructure, high crime, poor public health rates, and limited open space.

But just as brownfields are problems, they are also opportunities. Their cleanup and reuse have the potential to improve neighborhood residents' overall quality of life by bringing in jobs and tax dollars, repairing dilapidated infrastructure, and reducing environmental and health risks. Depending on the agenda driving the redevelopment process, however, the benefits might be confined just to the site and have minimal advantages for the residents.

Public participation is one way to steer the agenda driving redevelopment. By contributing to the decision-making process, residents and others may feel that the end result is more fair, and that the redevelopment as a whole is more successful. Currently, in hundreds of cities across the United States, brownfields redevelopment projects are going full-steam ahead. As I found in my research, some decision-making about brownfields redevelopment is being done behind closed doors, based upon the opinions and input of technical experts. Public participation is minimal. However, I also found cases of stronger participation. This article explores the dynamics of those cases and tries to understand what factors supported such stronger participation. It also provides some policy recommendations.

At Right: The Modern Electroplating plant operated for 40 years in Roxbury's Dudley Square until it was shut down by the Attorney General's office in 1994. The three-acre brownfield site was supposed to be redeveloped beginning in February 2001, but it continues to sit.

Background

Urban revitalization and brownfields redevelopment have produced failures and successes. For the most part, the successes are marked by a decision-making process that maximizes communication between stakeholders and produces a common vision. My motivation with this project was to find out if and how participation in the brownfields redevelopment process helped or hindered economic development and environmental safety. I wanted to determine what encouraged residents to get involved in the redevelopment processes happening in their neighborhoods.

This article is based on eight case studies of brownfields sites located in residential neighborhoods in Boston, Massachusetts, and Houston, Texas. I conducted numerous interviews with people belonging to various stakeholder groups including state and federal officials, local public officials, residents, local business owners, community nonprofits, and private/big business. In Boston, the four sites were at Amory Street (Jamaica Plain), Bay Street (Dorchester), Boston Center for the Arts (South End), and Modern Electroplating (Roxbury's Dudley Square). Those in Houston include the BFI landfill, Latino Learning Center, Ormandy Street, and Washington Courtyards.

Expectations and One Big Obstacle

It seems reasonable to think that real and perceived contamination would spur participation in the redevelopment process, but in all of the cases, the majority of the stakeholder groups did not view it as a big deal. Many residents believed the contamination talk to be exaggerated, and some developers said that minority groups were used to living in undesirable and often unhealthy

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places. Only residents near Boston's Modern Electroplating site were moderately concerned about health risks from the contamination – but even then the priority issue was not how to clean up the site, but how to develop it appropriately – for example, by not putting a daycare center on the grounds. Other residents viewed the cleanup of a particular site as somewhat futile. As one local businessperson near the Modern Electroplating site said, "How much zeal can you have about cleaning up the immediate site when you realize that 300 to 500 yards outside of that immediate area there is still contamination to the level that it would affect human life?"

The lack of concern people feel about possible contamination is compounded by my finding that most people rank brownfields redevelopment low on the list of neighborhood priorities. It simply is not an urgent issue – and this seems to be the biggest obstacle to strong public participation. While brownfields redevelopment is important, when resident and local business stakeholders put it into the context of other neighborhood issues, it usually does not top the list. As one resident living near the Modern Electroplating site explains, "Modern was not a neighborhood priority, but it was important. At the time we were dealing with other higher priority issues. The neighborhood was deathly afraid of gentrification – we saw developers were eating up the South End, so we fought the encroachment of gentrification. We wanted to keep out private developers so that they wouldn't gentrify the area."

Considering that environmental safety isn't a huge anxiety, and that brownfields are quiet problems, what gets people to participate in the redevelopment process? The best predictors are if neighborhood organizations exist in the community, if the initiator of the development is an "outsider," and if the future reuse involves potential traffic impacts on the neighborhood.

One Brownfield Story

1. Dorchester's Savin Hill neighborhood is an historic community that was settled before Boston was in 1630.

2. A five-acre piece of property at 65 Bay Street was once home to Boston Insulated Wire and Cable Co. The property was declared a brownfield in 1988. Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation bought the property in 1994, demolished the building and cleaned up the site. Initial plans to lure a noodle factory to the site fell through, however.

3. Dorchester Bay, along with 16 other financers, then worked to develop an 80,000 square foot office and industrial building to serve as the headquarters for Spire, a marketing, graphic design, and printing company (3). The ribbon cutting for the $14.5 million project occurred in October 2002. As Mayor Menino said at the ceremony, "This development project brings this deserted site back into productive use."

1.

Photo courtesy of Laura Solitare.

2.

Photo courtesy of Laura Solitare.

3.

Photo courtesy of Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation.

Predictors of Participation

An Inclusive Environment

Communities with active neighborhood organizations (all four in Boston and two in Houston) had stronger participation than those lacking such organizations. These organizations – including general neighborhood associations, historic preservation groups, environmental groups, and local business associations – have place-based missions that focus on the activities affecting the immediate neighborhood. Faith-based organizations would also fit in this group, but none were involved in any of the eight cases. As one resident near the Bay Street brownfield said, "I think actually we are probably one of the better-organized neighborhoods within the Boston community as far as dealing with development issues. I don't know how the BRA [Boston Redevelopment Authority] feels about us. They probably think that we're the neighborhood that always says no. That's fine with us. At least they know they have to come to us."

Trust

Another influential factor affecting the strength of participation is trust between the stakeholder groups. For cases with active neighborhood organizations, I found that when the stakeholder groups were more trusting of one another, the participation was weaker. When stakeholders trusted each other less, their participation was stronger. This is particularly true for the relationship between the residents and the developer of the site. If residents felt as though the developer was part of the community, an "insider" rather than an "outsider," then they tended to be more likely to trust the developer. This made for minimal participation that mostly focused on reuse and redevelopment issues such as design and traffic. As one Houston resident put it, "We are very supportive of the Latino Learning Center. It has been a good neighbor – it provides services to lots of residents. I trust them to do this right." But when residents felt the developer was an outsider, then the trust was not automatically there and was hard to build. In these cases, residents tended to focus on larger issues such as how the land would be used.

In none of the cases did the residents have full trust in the city as a stakeholder in the process. In particular, distrust of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the lead Boston agency involved with brownfields redevelopment, led to increased participation by residents in one of the cases. In the four Houston-based cases, trust of the city did not appear to be a factor because residents did not appear to have any established, trusting or non-trusting, relationship with the city.

Traffic

When traffic is the topic, it seems people can always find something to say. Accordingly, throughout each of the eight cases, many residents participated in discussions about traffic resulting from redevelopment. They debated many issues – such as an increased number of vehicles, driveway access, pedestrian crosswalks, and changing of street directions – but some of the most intense discussions focused on minimizing any new truck traffic. (Most of the sites were accessed only by narrow streets.) As one resident living near a Boston brownfields site said, "We took real issues with the traffic studies. We just knew from living here that what the traffic consultant was saying wasn't right. He may have studied it for 20 or 30 hours, but we've lived here for 20 to 30 years."

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More general design issues also engaged people, but according to some, this involvement was at the expense of the end result. As one local businessperson in Boston said, "The architecture of the project as originally conceived has been compromised much to the detriment of the project. We do not have nearly as good-looking a project here anymore as was originally proposed. This is directly due to neighborhood input. As long as the building gets built, it is fine from a business perspective; but as a resident I think we have an ugly building on our hands and the beautiful aspects of the building were considered too daring and have been removed."

Differences in Decision-Making

Decisions about brownfields redevelopment occur on a broad spectrum. On one end, decisions are made by a small group of "experts" through an act of guardianship. This technocratic decision-making works as a means to an end; such decision-making is often fast. Yet it does not guarantee success. Technocratic decisions often come face to face with public resistance and are not implemented.

On the other end, decisions are made through acts of direct democracy. This can increase the public support for a particular solution and make its implementation successful. However, one of direct democracy's main downsides is that it is often a time consuming and lengthy process. These time constraints frequently deter capital, resulting in paper solutions with no financial backing for implementation.

Of course, these two types of decision-making are the extreme ends of the spectrum. Most decisions are made through a process that takes place somewhere in between.

Some Overall Findings

From my observations, stronger participation did not prevent one brownfield from being redeveloped, nor did it seem to have significantly slowed one down. On the flipside, I am not sure if weak participation actually hurts the redevelopment. I could not document any such cases. However, I did find that late-starting participation can delay projects beyond the developer's initial deadline.

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By conducting these interviews, it became clear that the developer, residents, and local business stakeholders think of brownfields redevelopment in two distinct phases: cleanup and reuse. And lack of concern or participation in the cleanup phase does not preclude these groups from having interest in the reuse phase. But for the public official stakeholder group, there are no phases. There is no distinguishing between cleanup and reuse; it is all part of the same redevelopment.

So public officials reason that if there is no interest in the cleanup, then there will be no interest in the reuse. This bodes poorly for residents, who, I found, would participate in brownfields redevelopment when it focuses on the reuse, but, for the most part, not when it focuses on the cleanup. It also could be injurious to the developer and other capital partners because delaying the process of engaging the public can be much more costly than engaging them early.

Repackaging Brownfields

My main recommendation addresses the disconnect between cleanup and redevelopment, which may be a result of bureaucratic misalignment. The brownfields redevelopment program originates at the federal level within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), where its intent is mainly to decontaminate sites. In contrast, local or state governments implement the program with, for the most part, intent to spur economic development. To bridge this gap, I support a new overall approach that promotes brownfields redevelopment as a means for neighborhood revitalization.

Viewing brownfields redevelopment holistically differs from current approaches, which tend to emphasize environmental remediation and/or job creation. (It should be noted though that the jobs created are often not for local people.) The current approach makes it appear as though decision-making is technical, with experts being the most qualified to make the decisions. This discourages layperson participation, and it may marginalize residents and others. In turn, these laypersons may not realize that they actually have a stake in the outcome until the redevelopment process is advanced to the point where they feel as though their participation would be useless.

If brownfields redevelopment is framed from the outset as an opportunity to improve neighborhood quality of life, improve public health, and create local jobs and other opportunities, then local residents and other affected stakeholders may realize the potential impacts on their lives and want to be part of the decision-making. Getting early involvement from residents and others may make the redevelopment process less contentious, which in turn means it may proceed more quickly and be more cost efficient for the developer. Early involvement can also mean that the project will be more representative of what the neighborhood wants.

To redevelop brownfields in a way that benefits all involved and spurs enthusiasm, the EPA and other federal, state, and local government agencies could begin by attempting to redefine how they market brownfields redevelopment. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), an agency that focuses on redevelopment, could become the lead federal agency in brownfields redevelopment. HUD could partner with the EPA to assure that environmental issues are thoroughly addressed; however, HUD would need to continue to assure that redevelopment issues are kept at the forefront of brownfields redevelopment. In addition, HUD and EPA could provide local governments with resources to enable residents and other stakeholders to participate in the redevelopment decision-making.

Regardless of what bureaucratic changes take place, neighborhood groups can be important players in turning the problems of brownfields into opportunities. These neighborhood groups are important in getting people involved in brownfields redevelopment, but they may struggle to get participation because brownfields are not viewed by most people as dreadful problems that require immediate attention. If neighborhood groups desire participation for the sense of empowerment it gives residents, they may have to work hard in cases where the developer is trusted, and traffic problems are minor.

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