

Disputes like this are not uncommon—the Atlanta Beltline withstood early questions about its utility as a bypass for freight around downtown. Also, solutions are not always mutually exclusive—in Paris, the debate about transit versus nature along the Petite Ceinture continues. A group called L'Association Sauvegarde Petite Ceinture that has been advocating for its adaptation for transit is also trying to foster a dialog around creative solutions that can build consensus and accomplish *la mixité des usages* for the corridor as much as possible.

My point is that the need to negotiate the politics of urban planning is common with these linear infrastructure projects. On the one hand, the residents of adjacent communities should be able to determine their own fate. This is especially true where the obsolete corridor in question has been a primary contributor to physical separation, pollution, blight, and economically depressed conditions, and conversely, where its adaptation as a more life-affirming infrastructure holds the best opportunity for community transformation. On the other hand, infrastructure corridors like railroads, roadways, power lines, or waterways often serve a much larger regional purpose and once they are transformed for local uses, their utility in that regard can become far more difficult to restore. Project visionaries and advocates for change cannot ignore the pragmatic realities of these corridors for regional infrastructure networks, and sometimes they may even need to adapt their visions in order to survive.

## 7. EMPHASIZE PEOPLE.

Big, transformative infrastructure projects are not built by grassroots coalitions alone, but the most successful ones do find ways to capture and leverage the energy of the people who made them possible in the first place. Beyond that initial effort, citizens and advocacy organizations can remain critical partners in planning, design, and construction. Throughout the process, when we make people our priority and when people know we are implementing their vision, they will fortify our efforts with ideas, fundraising, data collection, and political support.

The most fascinating catalyst projects are often driven by people with a naïve understanding of the effort that success will require. “Our lack of experience was a key to the High Line’s success,” recalls Robert Hammond in a remarkably familiar sounding memoir he and Joshua David published years later. “We were so naively optimistic: we thought we could just get the ball rolling and it would happen.”<sup>13</sup> It did happen, of course, but it took a Herculean effort. A decade passed by the time the first half-mile section opened and became the climax of their much-celebrated story. By the end, two ordinary citizens had created a powerful grassroots organization that was fueled by a generous and celebrity-studded fundraising effort and a smart campaign of political and technical support.

Friends of the High Line was able to maintain a direct and vital role in the implementation of the physical project. In Atlanta, we had been eager to learn from them, the Midtown Greenway Coalition, and other like-minded efforts. This new generation of people-focused infrastructure, it seemed, was also being delivered by a new kind of coalition of advocates. Other groups emerging at the same time included the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago. Now renamed the 606, early advocates there also envisioned a renewed conduit for community revitalization and have been able to remain a partner in the project’s implementation.

Friends of the Belt Line did not survive fully intact as we had hoped, and I sometimes see where the role of organized community advocacy is missing in our progress. My last trip to Salt Lake City, however, inspired me to consider its resurrection. While I was there, I took some time to see the S-Line, which is a physically shorter but otherwise similar project to ours. Implementation had been led primarily by the transit authority and they had recently begun transit operations. It was the first time I could experience what it will one day feel like to ride the train past my neighbors on their bikes, or to experience the Atlanta Beltline’s trail while a streetcar is passing.

It was a real thrill, but the real inspiration from that trip was Friends of the S-Line, a fledgling organization that has grown in response to the project’s construction. A grassroots effort was born after the fact to ensure that the community is able to take full advantage of the project’s potential



*The S-Line, Salt Lake City. (Ryan Gravel, 2014)*

by supporting appropriate development, improving connectivity, expanding the arts, and working on related initiatives. It's early yet to see their impact, but I was nonetheless impressed that people there were organizing in response to new infrastructure. I hadn't seen that before, and it made me hopeful that we might reclaim such a role in the future.

From my research, I'm more convinced than ever that project-based, organized, funded, nonprofit community advocates bring a lot of value to the implementation of catalyst projects. They push for critical concepts and unheard voices, and while they don't always bring funding, technical expertise, or political connections to the table, they do bring an intense understanding of local conditions, persistent political motivation, lots of noise, and exuberant celebration. They also have the ability and willingness to say things that government agencies cannot. Their demonstration of a diverse and enthusiastic base helps support the broad goals of philanthropy. Their commitment to principles other than the bottom line allows businesses to focus on theirs. And they provide a deep well of

citizen advocates who can be relied on to support the ongoing and long-term needs of the agencies that will implement and operate these projects. Certainly there are occasions when their passion gets in the way. On the whole, however, organized groups of citizen advocates that remain accountable to project momentum are essential partners in any effort that claims the improved lives of people as its primary goal.

If we are committed to such a vision, we must remember to build our advocacy efforts around everyone, and this is especially important for people at risk of displacement. In many cases the infrastructural assets in question are located at least partly in low-income communities. The social and economic challenges and the land assets found there are also often the things that make the larger effort possible by attracting both public and philanthropic funding alongside private development interests. The Atlanta Beltline's tax allocation district, for example, was feasible only because we could make assumptions about improvement to the "blighted land" in the communities of south and west Atlanta. People there became involved in our movement and supportive of that funding because the project offers the kinds of solutions and opportunities they need. And because they have been such a critical part of our effort from the beginning, our definition of success is also measured by metrics that include them.

In New Orleans, disaster-related funding has uniquely flowed to the Lafitte Greenway in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Envisioned as a catalyst for community revitalization in adjacent neighborhoods like Tremé, this money has allowed for a reasonably quick implementation of the physical greenway itself. Bart Everson, co-founder of Friends of the Lafitte Corridor, described to me how in the aftermath of the storm, people were being forced to talk to one another. He said it brought together "a diverse collection of people who cared, or people who now knew that they should."<sup>14</sup> As their effort matured, this new dialog proved valuable for the greenway. It built trust that allowed advocates to discuss their proposal with people who were different from them.

Together, they envisioned a highly programmed greenway and multi-use trail that connects neighborhoods, new parks, and economic development projects, while also promoting public health and environmental

sustainability. Thankfully, the effort at least began with an inclusive dialog that has paid earnest attention to existing residents, many of whom still fear economic and cultural displacement. This includes a parallel effort focused on the revitalization of adjacent public housing, job training, and other community stabilization initiatives. It operates in partnership with the Sojourner Truth Neighborhood Center, which is located physically in the Lafitte Greenway.

It's too early to say how efforts to emphasize people throughout project execution will play out in Atlanta and New Orleans. Both projects remain organic and evolving conversations that are far from perfect. For now, however, we can at least say for sure that they have become willing venues for an important dialog, and that they are beginning to help us articulate certain needs for community voice and engagement in the implementation of this new kind of infrastructure.

## 8. BAND TOGETHER.

Not all catalyst infrastructure projects begin as grassroots initiatives, but their complex nature always brings multiple agencies and organizations to the table. Ideally, these groups band together as a strategic alliance to hash out compromise, improve project logistics, and explore funding opportunities together. They create partnerships and, where necessary, they cross political boundaries. They find accountability and endurance for the long haul to completion, and where advocates on certain issues may be missing altogether, catalyst projects can even help to establish and nurture new partners.

Because of its sheer size, the Los Angeles River Revitalization has a uniquely organic and multifaceted coalition. My former colleague Leigh Christy described it this way: "The City of Los Angeles is focused on a broad vision, but only three-fifths of the river is within the city limits. Agencies that have jurisdiction and interest over its full length are focused only on certain aspects of the vision. The Army Corps of Engineers, for example, works mainly on flood control and habitat restoration. Absent any one entity being 'in charge' of the entire river or its entire

vision, a two-part strategy has taken hold organically."<sup>15</sup> The first strategy provides a proof of concept through the gradual execution of discrete projects like new parks, trails, or other things like business incubators. The second strategy shapes larger policy by embedding the project in the processes of various governments, including small-area plans, storm-water-management practices, and long-term assumptions about the use of publicly owned land. Both are supported through public, private, and nonprofit efforts.

The most visible partners are the Friends of the Los Angeles River, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation, and LARiverWorks, the coordinator of river efforts at City Hall. Along with other advocacy organizations, partners in other jurisdictions both upstream and downstream, and government agencies at every level, Los Angeles has formed a messy but essential alliance around an exceptionally complex and nationally significant vision.

The diversity of their coalition illustrates how a big vision can get people working toward common goals. By banding together around a physical project, organizations and agencies build trust and relationships that not only deliver that specific set of tasks, but also achieve more comprehensive change over time. Ideally, however, not every good idea would require the 30 years it took advocates in Los Angeles to establish a grassroots movement, build partnerships, and together, eventually achieve such an unexpected and monumental success.

As an alternate approach, the bayou in Houston stands out. Rather than emerging from a grassroots effort, early ideas for Buffalo Bayou were led incrementally by the downtown business association and later accelerated by the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. The Partnership laid out an ambitious vision in 2002 and then essentially willed it into being over a remarkably short time frame through determined leadership, strategic partners, and deep-pocketed donors.

Projects with this "grasstops" approach can miss out on community needs and other opportunities for transformation. Their political stability and funding are also often dependent on the leadership of a headline organization, which is more vulnerable to personalities and politics. To

overcome these challenges, advocates working this way need to be particularly proactive in seeking community input and establishing partnerships to address needs that they themselves are unable to undertake. A greenway project, for example, may need to seek partners for transit integration or affordable housing to make sure they are built in a robust and equitable manner.

In concert with the more technical implementation focus of Atlanta BeltLine Inc., the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership plays a strategic role in this way. It facilitates support in funding, education, and volunteer efforts through a wide range of partners like the PATH Foundation, Trust for Public Land, Trees Atlanta, Park Pride, Hands on Atlanta, and many others. Where there is need but no partner, it has also helped to establish and cultivate new ones, including the Atlanta Land Trust Collaborative and Atlanta BeltLine Health Advisory Group. The idea is to incubate partners where they are needed, but ultimately to hand them the reins.

CONSIDER THESE EIGHT LESSONS a loose first draft on an open-ended proposal for shaping a more life-affirming infrastructure. There are no surefire answers yet, but by the time there are, our movement will be over anyway.

To see what I mean, look back 70 years or so when people were similarly experimenting with ideas for a better future. In a competitive spirit of trials and testing, they developed new and unexpected infrastructure. Alongside advances in automobiles, roadway innovations contributed to a visionary era that was emerging at the close of World War II. The concept of a limited-access interstate highway, for example, did not develop overnight. It evolved in fits and starts with innovators checking in on the progress of others and then building on that success with breakthroughs of their own. Standardization came over time as the kinks were worked out. Along the way, new organizations and agencies at every level of government were molded to support and implement what became a national effort. Businesses in every sector reorganized themselves to cater to changing expectations from consumers. Only decades later were freeways

as ubiquitous as they are today, having already catalyzed a dramatically different way of life by that time.

In other places, or in other eras, similar experimentation led to similarly dramatic changes—America's transcontinental railroad, the subways of London, or the aqueducts of ancient Rome. These examples further illustrate how technology is either enabled or limited by the advancement of infrastructure. Conversely, they show how infrastructure's utility is either maximized or left underutilized by technological exploration. Sometimes the technology is the infrastructure, but in any case, together they push the limits through constant experimentation.

This tension between technology and infrastructure forms the space where we live our lives, and it matters to our health, wealth, and the way we spend our time. When the planning of infrastructure thoughtfully considers our lives as human beings, things get better instantly. When that infrastructure is designed for more than just our basic needs like moving around, drinking safe water, or turning on a light, it becomes a powerful tool for shaping our way of life. When we deliberately leverage the tools we have to accomplish our hopes and dreams, like economic prosperity, professional fulfillment, and a sense of belonging and community, we become innovators in this much larger movement of cultural experimentation.

We may not know where this new era is leading us, but the experiments outlined in this chapter suggest that change is ahead. To prepare, we need to recognize that the decisions we make about infrastructure matter to the way we live, and because we have limited public resources to spend on roads, sewers, parks, and transit, we should make sure that the outcomes of our decisions meet the goals that we have for our lives.

As we begin to articulate those outcomes, we may see the role of infrastructure become more overtly political. We will no doubt engage in those politics, and we should. We can't be afraid to look our neighbors in the eye, across party lines and other divisions, and do the hard work of developing a common vision for our future.

If we do, we'll see that in a collaborative, messy, grassroots, democratic kind of way, these experiments are reinserting the civic role of

infrastructure back into our thinking and challenging us to make better decisions about the places where we live. The real power of these projects, however, comes if we acknowledge their potential as catalysts and then leverage them to achieve a much larger set of improved physical, cultural, and political conditions for everyone. The momentum of our time is already working in our favor. All we need to do is grab hold of it and engage more fully in the politics of change.

## AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

I FOUND MYSELF WALKING DOWN THAT STRETCH OF Santa Monica Boulevard through Hollywood and East Hollywood that feels like a continuously peeling veneer of brokenness, parking lots, fences, and mini-marts. At exactly the same time, I was thinking about those very words as the opening line of this chapter, and I had to laugh because it sounds so ridiculous. It's hardly the kind of street that people walk along if they have a choice—especially at one o'clock in the morning. And yet there I was because when I travel, often the only time I have to explore the city is at night. In Los Angeles, I especially love a long *dérive* around the winding roads and sparkling vistas of the Hollywood Hills. On this particularly epic walk, I had made my way down from the Hills and was heading five miles east for the similarly dynamic but more eclectic streets of Silver Lake.

As I left the vibrant nightlife of West Hollywood behind, I observed that this lonelier stretch of historic Route 66 has all of the same ingredients. Storefront buildings frame short urban blocks to create a street that is neither too wide nor too fast. Buses pass by periodically, and although far from perfect, its assembly of sidewalks, streetlights, occasional