



ESSAY

Creating Socially Conscious Cities

Flexible Planning for Inclusive Neighbourhoods

To deal with the increasingly complex needs of diverse communities, urban renewal projects should be socially inclusive in order to be successful, argue **Professor Susan Fainstein, Professor Norman Fainstein** and **Gurubaran Subramaniam**. In this essay, they share examples of cities that have not just transformed physical spaces, but also strengthened communities in the process, through socially inclusive planning and design approaches.

Cities are regularly confronted with the necessity of urban regeneration. However, such efforts no longer entail simply revitalising ageing infrastructure or stale urban environments to enhance land value. With increasingly diverse societies and deepening societal fault lines across ethnicity, religion and socio-

economic status, it is imperative for urban regeneration projects to also encourage social inclusion. However, not many cities have enjoyed success with this, given the incredible political finesse required to simultaneously achieve economic, environmental and social goals through regeneration.



Professor Susan Fainstein is a Senior Research Fellow in the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Professor Norman Fainstein is President Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of Social and Urban Studies at Connecticut College.

Gurubaran Subramaniam is a researcher at the Centre for Liveable Cities.





Residents of all backgrounds frequent the Rockefeller Park at Battery Park City, New York.

From our studies of urban redevelopment projects in various cities, projects that have achieved the seemingly elusive feat of fulfilling all three objectives often do not focus on a single, dominant use. Instead they favour the infusion of mixed uses in a socially inclusive manner, through the following principles:

1. Flexible long-term plans that allow developers to incorporate relevant suggestions from the community.
2. Community engagement to ensure project stays viable and relevant to the people's needs in the long run.
3. Provision of mixed-income housing to diversify the residential population and create a vibrant and inclusive community.

This essay shows how these principles underpinned the success of inclusive mixed-use projects in New York, Amsterdam and Singapore.

Battery Park City: Evolving to Meet Needs

With a mix of residential and commercial developments as well as public spaces, Battery Park City (BPC) in New York City's Manhattan was developed using a flexible model that could adapt to community input. Its original plans in the 1960s called for a development that would include a large, modernist housing complex with equal numbers of low-,

middle- and upper-income units and some adjacent office towers, all located on super blocks. Unfortunately, only one middle-income apartment building was completed and the project stalled during the 1970s fiscal crisis.

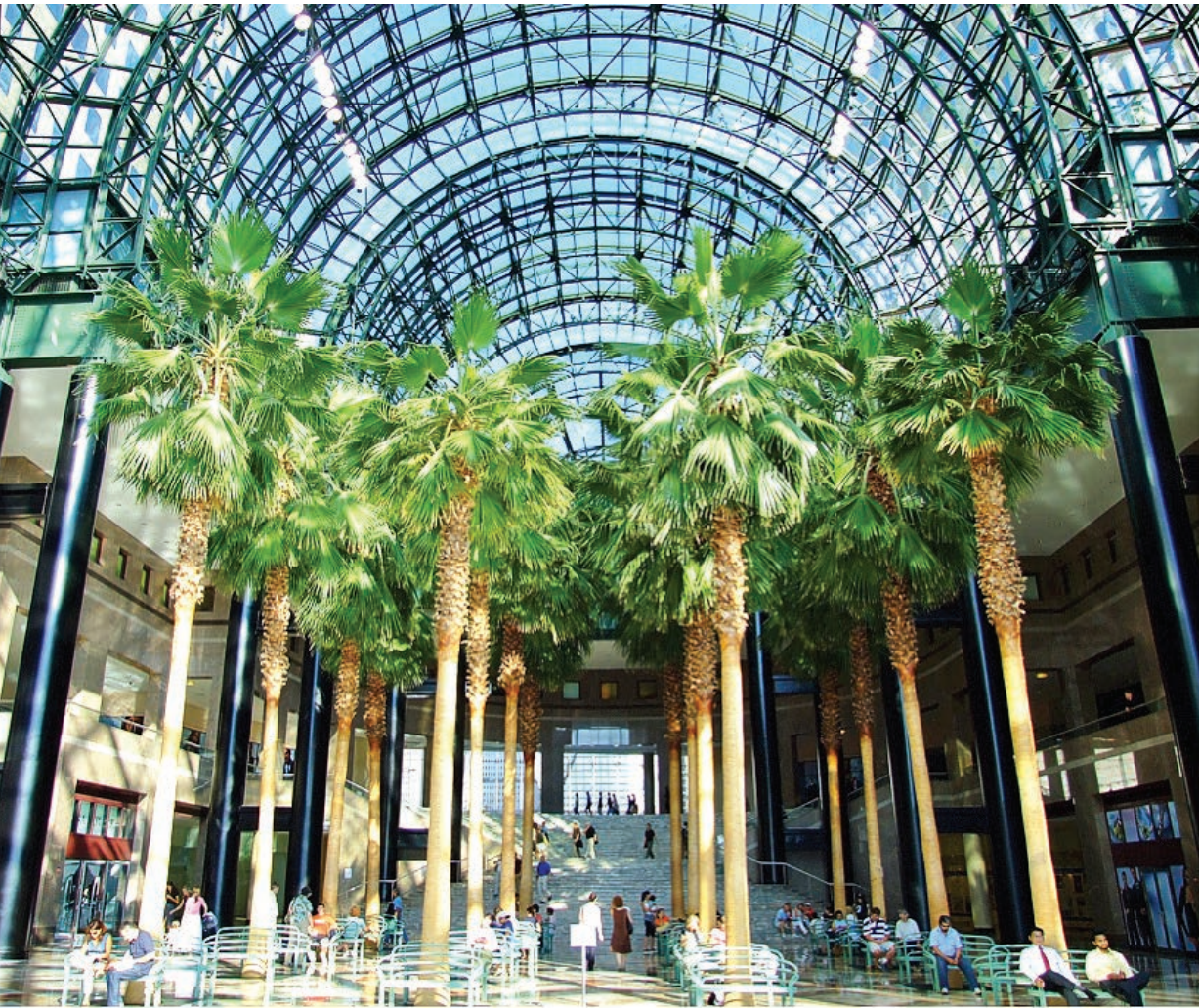
In 1979, the Battery Park City Authority—a New York State agency—took over the site and jettisoned the original housing megaproject. The Authority pursued a mixed-use model that aimed to achieve a balance between residential, commercial, retail and public park space. A third of the area was devoted to public space while 7.2 million square feet (66.9 ha) of residential and 10 million square feet (92.9 ha) of commercial developments were built. A key initial development was the World Financial Center (WFC), a cluster of four office towers ranging from 34 to 51 storeys. This opened in 1985 and attracted the city's most prestigious financial firms.

Public spaces were interspersed within the large developments. For example, the Winter Garden, a 120-foot high (36.5 m) vaulted atrium, was created in between the WFC buildings for public use. Today it hosts regular concerts and other forms of entertainment. A waterfront walkway runs the entire length of BPC, affording stunning views of the harbour and the Statue of Liberty. Parks in the southern section are also the epitome of landscape architecture—one evokes the 18th century shoreline while another features elaborate flower gardens.

01 The Winter Garden Atrium houses special programming and serves as a public space for New Yorkers to gather for a lunch break.

02 Pedestrians enjoy interacting and relaxing at Battery Park City's waterfront, against the backdrop of New York's iconic landmarks.





01



02



01

“The focus on providing affordable housing options... public spaces and facilities, expanded BPC’s community and attracted diverse users to enjoy and liven up the area.”

Later, in response to community input, the Authority devoted the northern parks to recreation by adding facilities such as basketball courts and a large, imaginative playground. A new public high school was also built. The addition of museums, memorials, a movie theatre and hotels further boosted footfall to BPC, attracting visitors from afar, besides the neighbourhood’s residents.

Residential units in BPC were made available for either rental or owner occupancy to ensure inclusiveness and encourage diversity in the residential community. Additionally, four of the apartment buildings currently require 20% of units to be offered at below market rate, so that it is affordable for tenants earning less than US\$55,000 (S\$73,000) a year (half of the area’s median income).

The design of BPC has attracted widespread praise and recognition, demonstrated by the awards it received from professional

organisations such as the American Institute of Architects, the American Society of Landscape Architects and the Urban Land Institute. The variety of structures and uses produces a more interesting environment than typical uniform large developments. Although detractors characterise it as Disneyesque—artificially evoking a nostalgic image—it still incorporates many positive characteristics of a vibrant urban neighbourhood, such as having multiple uses, short blocks, buildings along the street line and accessible parks.

Though BPC’s development occurred over decades, the authorities ensured the area stayed relevant by allowing for flexibility in the plans to accommodate citizens’ needs and listening to the community’s concerns. The focus on providing affordable housing options, together with the development of public spaces and facilities, expanded BPC’s community and attracted diverse users to enjoy and liven up the area.



02

Bijlmermeer: Rebuilding a District with the Community

The Bijlmermeer, a social housing project in Amsterdam, demonstrates a range of useful strategies for achieving inclusive outcomes, from flexibility in long-term planning and involving the community in the planning process to providing for mixed-income housing options. Built in the 1960s–1970s, the project’s initial architectural style resembled BPC’s first design. Enormous buildings intended for working class households dominated the landscape. A small and obscure mall provided for daily shopping while a railroad embankment separated the residences from a nearby office district.

In 1985, the complex had a 25% vacancy rate. Dutch families disliked its coldness; immigrants, primarily Surinamese who had larger families and fewer choices, came to dominate the area. The project was also criticised by residents and experts for its homogeneity and inflexibility.

In response to the criticisms, the planners reconceptualised the project in the mid-1980s and the 1990s to encourage a more diverse mix of residents, structures and uses, as well as an active street life. This led to the reconstruction of the entire southeast portion of the city in the late 1980s. A new shopping centre was built to bridge the railroad and connect the residential area to the neighbouring office complexes. Residences above stores, offices for small businesses and artists’ live-work spaces were also added to encourage different uses and stimulate new activities in the area.

In 1992, a public-private partnership began reconstruction of the residential buildings. Some were reduced in size while others were demolished and replaced with new low-rise buildings for owner occupancy. The remaining concrete structures were repainted in bright colours and retrofitted with elevators. Displaced residents either purchased apartments in the new structures or relocated to vacant flats within the area.

-
- 01 Park facilities at West Thames Park have changed thrice in response to the evolving and diverse needs of the BPC community.
 - 02 Integration of housing and retail uses in the same complex encourages interaction among residents.

01



02



03

“While top-down central planning created an unpopular project, the silver lining was the flexibility for plans to be re-drawn to strengthen resonance with the residents.”

The construction of a new stadium for Ajax, Amsterdam’s Premier League football team, further stimulated street activities and the surrounding entertainment offerings. Although more work remains to be done to vanquish traces of dreariness created by some of the remaining large structures, the area is now substantially livelier and more varied than its earlier self.

The redesigned project retained its ethnic mix, with multiculturalism promoted as a selling point for homebuyers. While there was initial scepticism among some planners about the appeal of relatively expensive owner-occupied units, this proved unwarranted. Many of the owner-occupants had lived in the original structures, but still chose to remain in the complex despite improvements in their economic circumstances. In 2006, there were approximately 33% Surinamese, 30% native Dutch, as well as a mix of other nationalities including those from the Antilles, Turkey and Morocco.

This Bijlmermeer example shows that while top-down central planning created an unpopular project, the silver lining was the flexibility for plans to be re-drawn to strengthen resonance with the residents. The redevelopment then proceeded more organically. Planners refrained from imposing a single model on the entire project and instead invited the

local community to play a significant role in developing the final strategy through participation in regular meetings and surveys. Physical improvements were also complemented with large expenditures on social services and programmes such as employment training. This all-rounded approach has been key to the area’s inclusive renewal.

Toa Payoh: Planned for Inclusivity

Toa Payoh New Town is one of the first self-sustainable mixed-use neighbourhoods in Singapore, designed to meet the needs of diverse users. Built on what used to be vast tracts of swampland and squatter settlements in the 1960s, the town was conceptualised according to the Housing & Development Board’s (HDB) “neighbourhood principle”, which plans several smaller neighbourhoods around the focal point of a town centre.

To meet the needs of current and future residents, the town was planned as a self-sufficient entity with a wide range of uses and amenities. These include public and private housing developments, parks, recreational facilities, community centres, various communal spaces, schools and commercial nodes supported by efficient transportation networks. Considerations were also made for industrial land to provide employment for residents.

Toa Payoh has a mix of residents of different ethnicities due to the national Ethnic Integration Policy. This promotes racial integration by ensuring a mix of different ethnic communities in all HDB neighbourhoods and blocks, reflecting Singapore’s multi-cultural make-up. The town’s population is also reflective of different social economic strata in Singapore, thanks to its mix of housing types ranging from public housing to landed properties and condominiums.

- 01 Public spaces are used differently by various groups. Here, it functions as a recreational space for youths.
- 02 The Toa Payoh neighbourhood consists of public and private housing (background of the image), situated near amenities in the Toa Payoh Hub (centre).
- 03 Many festivities, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival, are held at the large public plaza in Toa Payoh Town.



“Conceived with a long-term horizon in mind... Toa Payoh depicts how sound planning can create not just a pleasant environment, but also a multicultural live-in community.”



The community is also given a stake in their estate through the cultivation of leadership at the grassroots level, as well as opportunities to exercise self-management of their neighbourhoods through the Community Centre Management Committees and Residents' Committees. Residents can play a part by organising and participating in community activities such as celebrations for National Day and significant ethnic festivals, and by collecting feedback on issues related to the neighbourhood from other residents.

Toa Payoh's development is also in line with national land use plans, which guide Singapore's development in the long run while ensuring that social, economic and environmental considerations are met. This means that although Toa Payoh was first developed in the 1960s, its neighbourhoods, amenities, public spaces and commercial offerings have been continually upgraded to meet the community's needs. For example, the HDB rejuvenated the town centre from the 1990s—this involved building an integrated mixed-use complex that has become an office, retail and transit hub. HDB's headquarters also shifted to this hub.


To boost street life, an outdoor pedestrian mall was retained and enhanced, and is now lined with independent businesses offering a range of consumer goods at low prices. The result is a lively space frequented not just by residents but also commuters and visitors attracted by the dining and retail offerings. Furthermore, the addition of buildings of various heights, the pedestrian malls, open spaces and recreational areas also softened Toa Payoh's predominantly high-rise landscape.



02

Conceived with a long-term horizon in mind and continuously updated to ensure its relevance to a wide spectrum of people, Toa Payoh depicts how sound planning can create not just a pleasant environment, but also a multicultural live-in community who can make full use of the estate.

Lessons for Other Cities

As these international examples illustrate, focusing on incorporating mixed uses can be a powerful approach for urban renewal to achieve both physical regeneration and social goals. Beyond planning for mixed uses and inclusivity from the start, city leaders need to be flexible enough to adapt their plans and align with changing community needs. Only then can the transformation of spaces truly impact the people that live, work, learn and play there. 

- 01 This outdoor pedestrian street is a major walkway that connects people and encourages activities in Toa Payoh.
- 02 Parks are one of the public spaces for residents to engage in leisure and recreation.