

3 URBAN INTERVENTIONS



**Community Role in the Creation of Neighborhoods
and Open Space Politics**

Prepared for the 2004 HWS Cleveland Symposium in
Landscape Architecture - *Public Space, Public Good?*

Frank X. Moya, AIA

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INTRODUCTION

The development of strategies that shape open space opportunities owes much to the politics of community participation as well as to the conscious design initiatives of the professionals involved. The following is a cautionary tale of three communities and the degree of their involvement in shaping their identity and future development, the physical manifestation of their vision, and the degree of success to which these initiatives were carried through.

All three share a common determinant factor. In every instance, they all look to the street as the basic stage of human interaction and the eminent public space which defines the community's sense of place. The street is the generator of their urban form and locus of their social life.



Cerra Street developed as a gateway corridor to the city of San Juan. It became the spine for an emerging cultural and commercial community. Its decline precipitated once its transportation based economic engine was no longer bound by the requirements of geography. To the remaining stakeholders, the urgency of re-establishing an inherent economic sense for the street required their initiative to affect action from disinterested public officials.

Meanwhile, the somewhat medieval, urban fabric of Barriada Morales which had developed as a squatter community laid out by the unconscious manifestation of an ingrained pattern of human habitation, represented a growing threat to the surrounding city of Caguas. A veritable no-man's-land, it was a community that existed outside the law sustained by an illegal infrastructure built on half-hearted attempts at political assimilation and the economic gains of illegal drug trafficking. The plan



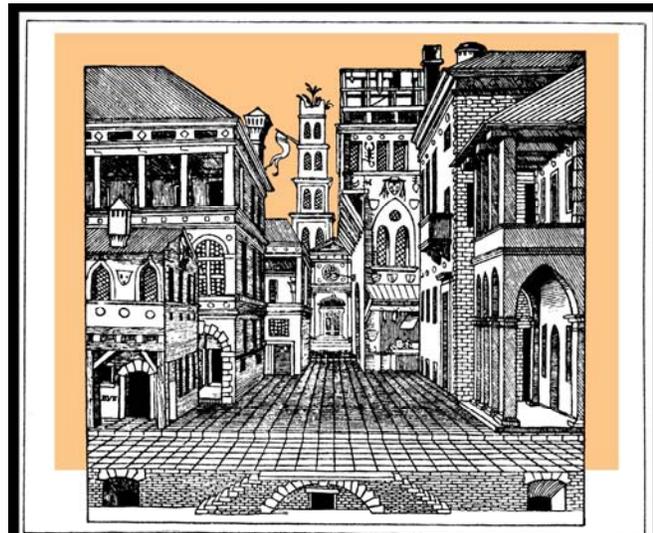


envisioned strategic surgical incisions that would help establish a sense of order and by its own nature create enough of a disruption and inconvenience to the drug trade.

On the other hand, Trenton's Canal Banks Home Ownership Zone was layered over the historical infrastructure of provincial roads laid out by British settlers and crisscrossed by the railroads and canals of the Industrial Revolution. Once a

battlefield during the crucial Revolutionary War victory of the Battle of Trenton, it had become a battlefield once again during the race riots and social upheaval of the early 1970's. Thereafter mostly abandoned and finally cleared by the Great Society's urban renewal programs, the area had lost its sense of community and the physical infrastructure to maintain one. The vision shared by all in the remaining civic leadership was for housing and affordable home ownership opportunities to become the foundation of a thriving urban community integrated into the historical and environmental assets of the area. This joint effort of civic and governmental entities sought to turn around existing brownfield liabilities into opportunities for development. The resulting plan established the street and closely related "green" corridors as the basic structure of a successful re-urbanization effort.

These projects are high density communities. As such cooperation and consensus are not only desirable, but necessary for the success of any plan. Buy-in by community stakeholders, more than a catchy phrase, implies tacit approval and committed adherence to a plan. Joseph Ryckwert once referred to the street as a path followed by others, "...because the road and the street are social institutions and it is their acceptance by the community that gives them the name...". "For the street is human movement institutionalized."



Streets are also theater. In Sebastiano Serlio's adaptation of Vitruvian stage making, the street forms the backdrop of the classical theater types. The streetscape set for comedy, for daily life, is not focused on any particular building, nor is it set in any formal manner. Instead, it is surrounded by



an array of multistory residential structures with commercial establishments on the ground level. It ends in a non-descript church, characteristically un-hierarchical, waiting for the actors to bring the stage to life.

As architects, we are trained to create. We are trained to create order and to instill this order wherever we find chaos. Sometimes, however, it can be said that if one looks close enough, logic can be found in a seemingly chaotic urban landscape – an ingrained pattern of human habitation. And in this case, our job becomes one of interpretation and facilitation.

We also apply our understanding of the urban environment through metaphors. These metaphors are important in that they provide a logical framework for a plan of action and facilitate understanding. For example, we consider cities organisms. They possess an instinctive rational logic. They are, at times, “organic” or seemingly disorganized – obeying some unperceived law of nature which we are seeking to decipher or just ignore. Their pathology is of great importance, requiring occasionally precise incisions, cleaner air and sunlight. We read into the conditions of their streets, as Frederick Engel once did in a written description of Manchester, those conditions of the people who live there. He saw poor Manchester as filthy, hardly ventilated, dark and crime-ridden. Its streets to him were in the words of noted architectural historian Anthony Vidler “a vivid symptom, a complete pathology of the social disease.”

Redevelopment Plan for Calle Cerra San Juan, Puerto Rico

Sponsored by the Association of Property Owners of Calle Cerra, this master plan represents a purely grass roots initiative that sought to shape government action by presenting an alternative master plan for their community.

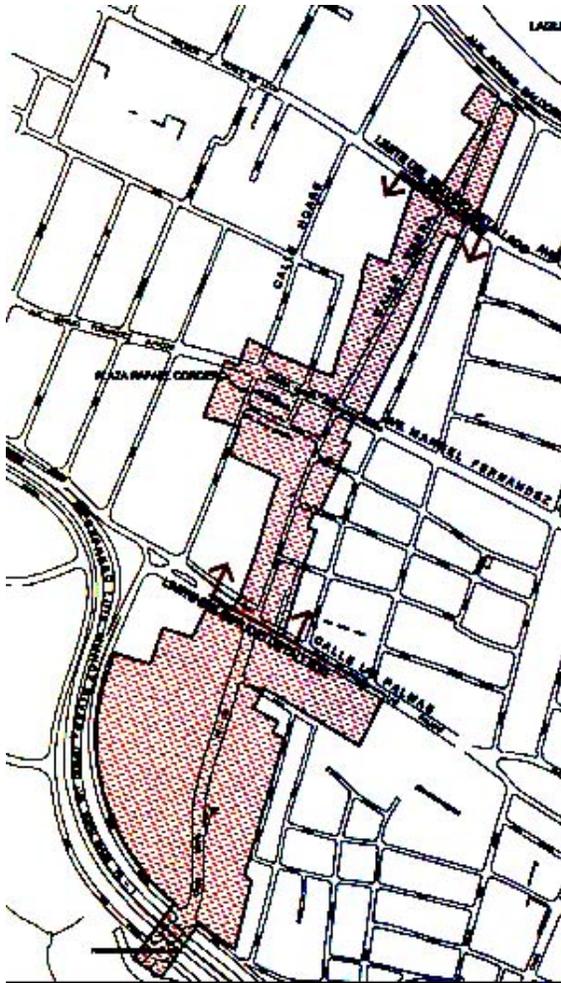


The need for a plan was initiated by the desperation of a group of property owners at the negative valuation of their assets and their ever rising liabilities. This plan, originally envisioned as a modest remedy for a few properties, developed into a comprehensive strategy for a major urban corridor centered on the notion of the street as communal open space and neighborhood identifier.

Calle Cerra, historical gateway into San Juan from the old colonial roads leading to the west of the island which brought to the capital the agricultural goods of far flung costal plantations. Originally a private street on lands belonging to the Cerra family and set at the 15th stop of the old Spanish steam trolley line - and thus its "Parada-15" moniker- it experienced unprecedented growth at the turn of the century with the linkage to the new state highways and the rail yards for the American Railroad Company.

In its stead developed not only markets for the sale of agricultural goods, but also a transportation terminus for railroads, trucks and public transportation. Plaza Rafael Cordero, named after the island's foremost Afro-Antillean



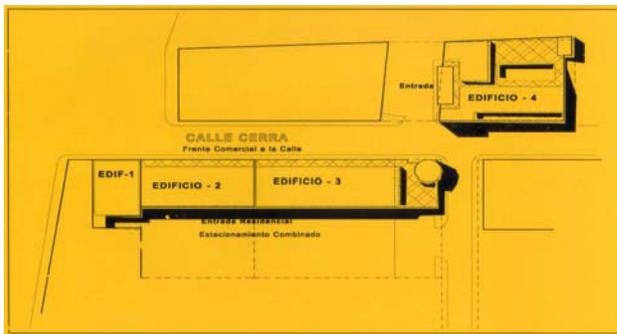


educator of the 18th century, at one time anchored the fleet of cooperatively owned “publicos”, or owner operated transit vehicles, that served travelers to western island towns.

Close to this transportation and market infrastructure, around the stockyards, garages and warehouses, a cultural community developed with a distinct Afro-Antillean flavor that spawned Latin music industry’s “Tin Pan Alley”. Known as the home of some of the major Latin Salsa recording labels and distributors, it was also birthplace and home to some of the music’s legendary composers and performers. On a typical day’s walk, it is not unusual to come across international stars such as Ruben Blades and Ricky Martin.

Calle Cerra abuts the exclusive Miramar neighborhood to the west – just one block away in stark contrast. One also needs to keep in mind the prevalent urban typology of San Juan to understand this juxtaposition: from the Old City, almost 500 years old, to its residential alleyways and luxury highrises.

Set out originally as a modest plan to specifically address disinvestment in a small sector, it attempted to establish a framework of cooperation between property owners. By



streets, disposed of abandoned cars and tidy up neglected lots. Other activities involved a façade improvement program following the clean-up, in which grant money was made available for façade improvements and paint.



Once the initial cosmetic improvements were in place, a campaign to challenge public perception of the area was launched and culminated in a street-wide festival. The festival, sponsored by the Street's record labels, brought widespread public attendance. The public returned again to Calle Cerra once more to seek entertainment and enjoy nights of music and food. It sparked a growing interest in the neighborhood's assets and inventory of historic structures now prominently displayed.

Ironically, as the success of the plan attracted government funding and attention, the ability for members of the community to shape the plan into action dissipated. With control of the project clearly in the hands now of formulaic, disconnected officials, resources were diluted among other neighborhoods in search of similar success. The plan's progress stopped.



Barriada Morales Master Plan Caguas, Puerto Rico

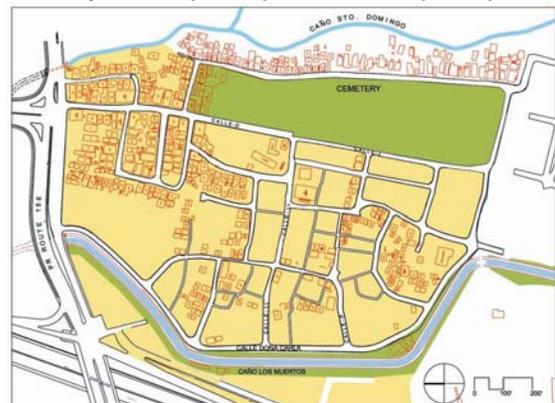
The Barriada Morales Master Plan, on the other hand, illustrates the complete stewardship of a plan by public officials for a community in need. Barriada Morales encompasses a small urban community, one that in essence is a small city with its own sense of identity and function. Its development as an *organic growth community* (without the benefits of any professional planning) underscores the intuitive character of its urban discipline with the unconscious creation of a hierarchy of building types, streets and infrastructure, organized around natural elements.



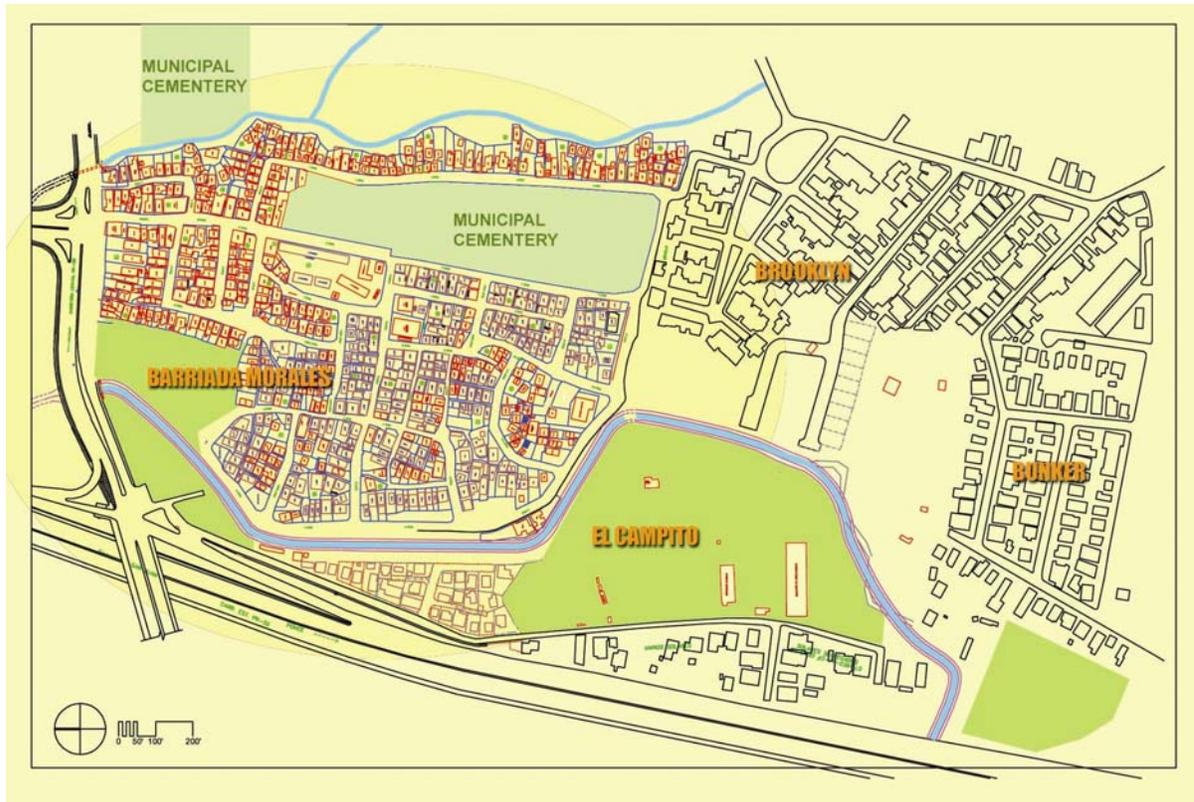
At 160 acres the project area encompassed by a cluster of smaller, older residential neighborhoods is endemic of Latin-American urban trends. Within that tradition, the growth of surrounding “suburbs” is generated by the population shift of needy peasants from the countryside to the cities. Historically, these squatter communities or colonies surrounded wealthier urban cores, usually in abandoned farms close to a water source. These unplanned, improvised communities seem to mimic an ingrained pattern of human habitation in the design of settlements with its street layouts, open space and impromptu plazas.

Settled between two creek canyons, and defined by two

densely populated cemeteries, Barriada Morales developed as an autonomous community on the periphery of the city and valley of Caguas. Its Kasbah-like narrow alleyways reveal its pre-automobile, ox cart settlement by poor rural families.



Barriada Morales was established during the 1930's by families that settled in property abandoned by the Morales family. This process continued well into the 1960's, thus creating a large, organically built community without conscious regard for infrastructure or the planning of streets. The settlement of El Campito occurred in similar fashion after improvements by the Municipality in 1968. The adjacent Bunker community grew out of the more orderly La Granja development of 1936 which was later taken over by the growth of Brooklyn during the 1940's.

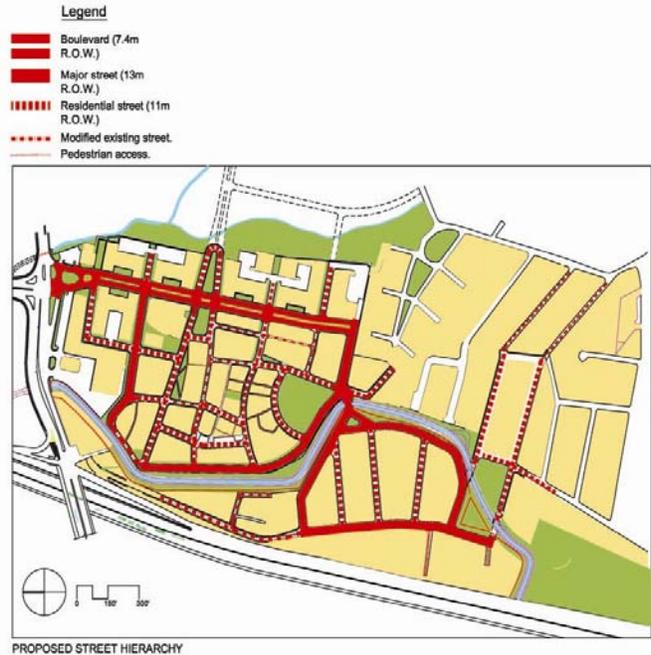


Official action for a plan was spurred by the need of the City to establish and enforce a sense of order and community norms in a situation which had over the years degenerated into a political no-man's land controlled by drug lords and their gangs. The reality of a corrupted community, incapable of working together, managing and building their own assets or being aware of the available opportunities and alternatives to their well being, required officials to circumvent community residents' participation. And more pressing still was the realization that this was still a growing community spilling over its natural boundaries and threatening the adjacent urban core.

The Master Plan study was begun with a close look at the existing conditions in the area. Streets were found to be narrow and inadequate, with access to some of the houses limited to alleyways. This created limited and uncertain traffic patterns with little room for maneuvering let alone parking. Utilities are lacking or deficient throughout. Barriada Morales residents have adopted a "band-aid" approach, borrowing power from existing sources in a haphazard way whenever possible. The drainage is deficient, and there are sections which are prone to flooding. There is open sewer which creates severe unsanitary conditions. The houses themselves are small and inadequate for the present population. The original structures are at times overwhelmed by flimsy additions and repairs done throughout the years.

The framework for new development at Barriada Morales begins with a *new street infrastructure*. The central feature of this new infrastructure is a *boulevard* that provides the primary access through the redesigned Barriada from a guarded entrance point on the highway

. This 70 foot wide passageway will serve to provide easy access to all points in the neighborhood, and will boast a pedestrian walk, shade trees, plants, pavers and ornamental site lighting. Other streets have also been selected for widening, and a new traffic plan developed. These new streets are designed for much needed on-street parking for the residents and improved lighting.



Two new *community nodes* are proposed to serve as focal points for community activity. One is at the heart of Barriada Morales, another serves Brooklyn, Bunker and Campito. The node at Barriada Morales contains facilities for a new Community Center, a Senior Center and other social services. In addition, new school facilities and commercial spaces are planned as part of this node. All these facilities surround a new open passive recreation space modeled on the typical Puerto Rican plaza, with shade trees, benches, and ornamental site lighting and pavers. The new boulevard intersects the new plaza, making it a visual as well as a functional center for the neighborhood. The new community node at

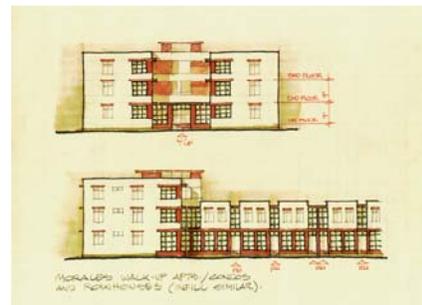


Brooklyn, Bunker and Campito is suburban in nature, and includes new facilities for a Senior Center as well as open space.

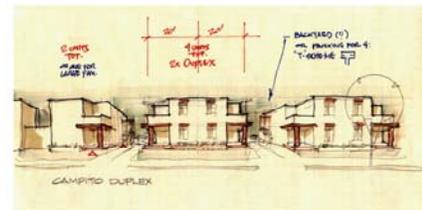
Residential typologies for the **project's total of 479 new homes** were developed with consideration for ideal densities at the different areas. For example, in order to improve the quality of life in the Barriada Morales and to make room for wider streets, many structures will have to be torn down, resulting in a desirable lower population density. The total loss of residential and commercial property due to removal accounts for approximately 50% of the



total structures, a reduction with a significant positive impact to the infrastructure. Indeed, a total of 267 new homes are planned in the Barriada sector alone, a mix of attached properties and two and three-story walk-ups. The construction of new homes creates an opportunity to improve housing standards and to provide much needed senior housing in this area. At Extension El Campito, a mix of 150 attached duplexes and single family houses are planned as new construction. These will be two stories, with yards and parking. The design for Extension Brooklyn calls for 62 new houses with similar characteristics.



The plan's objectives sought to improve an enhanced sense of community by opening linkages through open space with the surrounding communities, diminishing the population density created by natural barriers, increasing the opportunities for decent, affordable housing organized around community focal parks, and proactively designing against the natural and man-made advantages that allowed the drug trade to flourish unabated for years.



Because of its focused attention by City officials and ample federally subsidized resources, the plan is presently being implemented with some measure of success in its elimination of blight and greatly diminished drug trade. Together with new housing, these measures bring optimism and hope to the people who live there.

The Canal Banks Homeownership Zone Master Plan Trenton, New Jersey

Trenton's Canal Banks Homeownership Zone represents a plan that from its conception illustrated a true partnership between different community groups and the municipal authorities in shaping a common vision for the area. Known as the site of Washington's Battle of Trenton victory during the American Revolutionary War, the Battle Monument neighborhood, as it is commonly known, is an area rich in history and opportunity whose potential laid hidden behind a gritty urban reality.

Among the bank's assets is its housing stock of solidly built structures spanning from its pre-revolutionary war settlement to the height of the American Industrial Revolution when the area became the focal terminus of all the state roads and rail lines. Other assets also include the Delaware and Raritan Canal, its rich array of established community institutions and its strong adjacencies to nearby city centers and transportation.



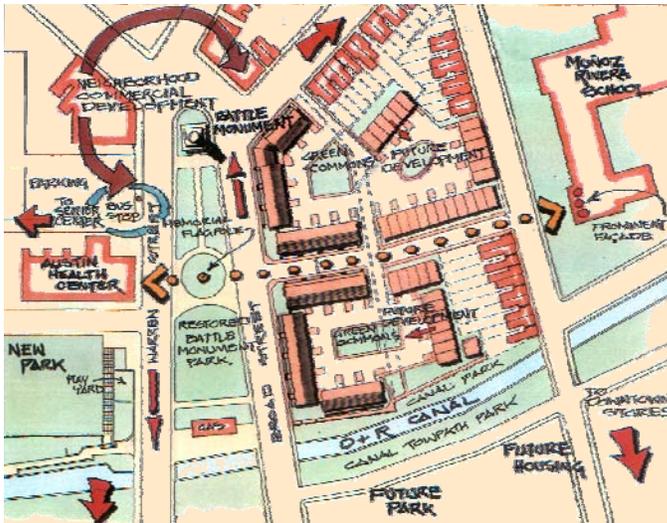
From its inception there was a conscious strategy of building a community which required grassroots participation. Critical to which was the desire and commitment to creating a "Green" infrastructure - elements of which were already scattered all over the tract in abandoned right-of-ways, the canal and empty urban renewal sites. One of its primary goals was for this "Green" infrastructure to become a unifying thread, integrated into the new and existing housing as well as the existing neighborhood institutions, which would eventually come to give character and structure to this collected whole.



This “Green” infrastructure can best be defined as a collection of natural and man-made assets, residuals from abandoned right-of-ways and torn out areas that together with new planned open space opportunities provide a unified network of purposeful boundaries, connectors and focal points that help establish a sense of place.

The housing strategy revolved around the creation of defined neighborhoods: some centered on open areas while others delineated the established pattern of urban streets. In some instances, the desire for strong street identity helped create new thoroughfares cutting to scale the consolidated super-blocks of 1970’s urban renewal planning. These new streets were in turn focused towards the existing institutional assets and open space infrastructure.



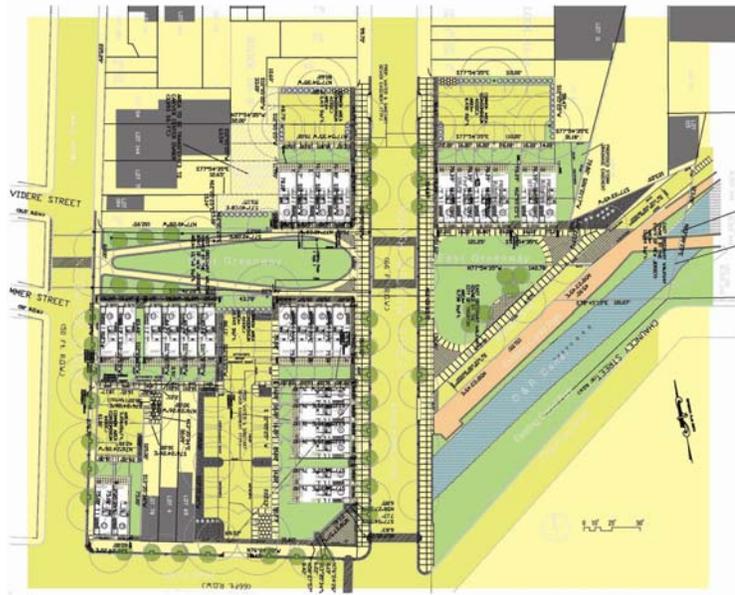


The *Monument Crossing* housing development was one of the first developments of the HOZ master plan to extend the urban grid as its basis of design in creating a neighborhood scaled streetscape anchored by the Battle Monument Park and the Romanesque styled Munoz Rivera School. Urban town homes were designed to delineate neighborhood sized residential blocks. These blocks faced and defined the urban wall surrounding the Battle Monument Park and the D&R Canal banks.



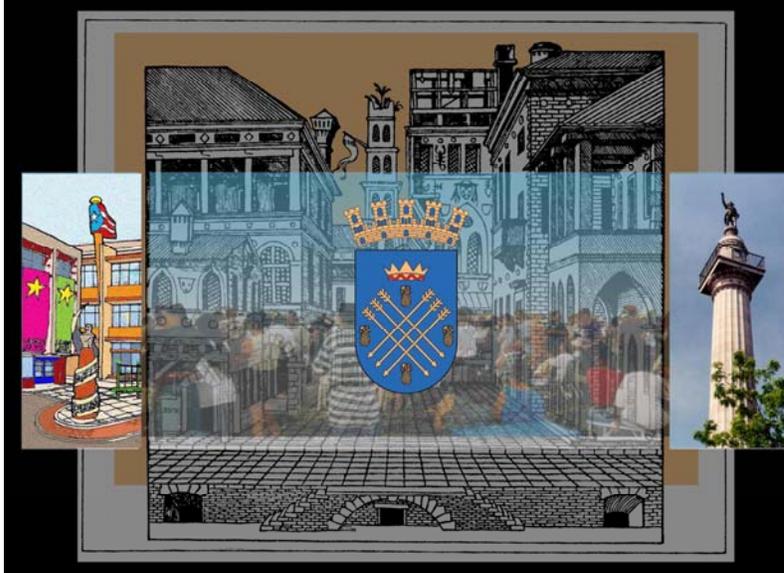
Another housing development, Willow Green Town Homes, was designed to transition the intersection of an abandoned railroad right-of-way, the canal and Willow Street, an important cross connector street to the State Capitol Complex. Again the town home prototype proved useful in defining urban edges and infilling existing urban corridors. Willow Green and its sister development to the north re-established the lost continuity of space along the Willow Street streetscape corridor. They also opened up vistas along the Canal Banks towpath park, integrating these developments within the new “Green” infrastructure.

The creation already of four community neighborhoods, new parks, the restoration of the Battle Monument and thriving community life speak to the ongoing success of this venture.



CONCLUSION

How we set into order the elements that define a particular street environment depends on our understanding of the inherent structure of the street. In all three projects, economic and social disorder precipitated the decline of these neighborhoods. With this type of collapse, followed by the deterioration of the structural elements of the street, its buildings and infrastructure, the social fabric of the community falls into disrepair. To first restore a functioning sense of order requires changing first the destructive social patterns that have developed as a result of neglect and misfortune.



Perception being 90% of reality, events had to be staged in these communities to create signposts of progress and turn around public perception – a bit of theater. Cleaning up Calle Cerra was the first step to the successful implementation of the plan. Structured activities, like a festival, presented an opportunity for acceptable public behavior. In Barriada Morales a compelling image of an idealized community with its boulevard gave hope from oppression. Redefining

linkages, differentiating space by reconstructing the lost urban fabric of Trenton gave the Canal Banks community manageable and distinct neighborhoods as the foundation for their revitalization.

In all three instances, successful intervention required engaging a skeptical public in a common vision. The measure of each different plan's success became evident in the response and motivation of the community being served.