Democracy, Storytelling, and the Sustainable City

Robert A. Beauregard

Throughout history, scholars have cast the city as the site of a robust, even if at times threatening, democracy. Examples range from the Greek agora where citizens debated common concerns to Thomas Jefferson’s warnings about the tendency for cities to embolden mobs to the current academic fascination with flaneurs, public spaces, and urban citizenship. In all cases the issue is the nature and desirability of an active public.

A democracy requires engaged citizens. Open and frequent elections, a vigilant media, and knowledgeable citizens stand in opposition to bureaucratic indifference and the tyranny of minorities. An active public also plays a central role in addressing public ills. Widespread deliberations connect civil society and the state at multiple points and provide the state with the support and legitimacy it needs to act in times of crisis and address societal problems. Only with such broad legitimacy can the state resist the forces of injustice and inequality (Bellah et al. 1991; Putnam, 2000).

In such deliberations, public storytelling is essential. Storytelling enables people of all backgrounds and abilities to frame a sense of what is, reflect on what needs to be done, and then engage with others about the sensibility of their stories. “Stories organize knowledge around [both] our need to act and our moral concerns” (Marris, 1997, p. 53). A democracy without such storytelling is one in which technocrats rule and bureaucracy is unaccountable to citizens. Political leaders lose touch with their constituents and citizens are turned into either clients, passive voters, or both.

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on democracy and storytelling in the context of a sustainable city, a city that renews its resources and capacities for present and future generations. In the absence of a robust
democracy, economic growth and prosperity are likely to become parasitic, degrading the environment and retarding social equity. Sustainability is one of the victims. Elites might live well, but many others will bear the costs of the inattention to shared needs. A sustainable city must be a democratic city.

Discursive Democracy

Back in the mythic 1960s, the city witnessed a participatory democracy in which residents joined together to wrest power from government and resist corporate indifference and greed. The city was viewed as a site of struggle against poverty, racism, and institutional arrogance. The goal was to gain power, and participation meant being there: in the streets, on the steps of city hall; and in welfare offices in order to complain, disrupt, protest, and demand (Chafe, 1986; Gale, 1996).

More recently, participatory democracy as an ideal has been joined by discursive democracy (Bohman, 1996; Calhoun, 1993; Habermas, 1996b; Young, 1996). Instead of offering their bodies for the cause, residents of the city offer their voices. They speak out about their marginalization, about daily injustices, and about the failure of institutions to acknowledge their identities and give them respect. The city is no longer solely a site for contesting power. The struggles are different; they are less about control over institutions and support of interests than about recognition. Earlier concerns with poverty, slums, and institutional discrimination are less prominent than movements organized around issues of identity and rights (Castells, 1997; Fraser, 1995; Garber, 2000; Holston, 1999; Katznelson, 1996; Schudson, 1998).

Compare participatory and discursive democracy with the representative democracy out of which the modern planned city was conceived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Street protests around planning issues were few and citizen involvement in policy making mainly involved enabling economic and social elites to influence political leaders. A representative democracy combined institutional capacity and singularity of purpose to enable large-scale projects to go forward relatively unhindered.

By contrast, a discursive democracy threatens the prerogatives of elected officials, economic and cultural elites, and technocrats. The views of these groups are countered by a variety of alternative perspectives. Public deliberations reveal differences of opinion and compel policymakers and their advisors to give up their claims to privileged knowledge.

Clearly, the three forms of democracy—representative, participatory, and discursive—are not mutually exclusive. The representative democracy of the early twentieth century was not simply displaced in the tumultuous 1960s. Nor was the participatory democracy of the 1960s dissolved by the discursive democracy of the 1980s and 1990s. The 1960s expanded the pathways of participation by institutionalizing citizen involvement in a multitude of government programs. The government’s regulatory sphere was extended and a variety of public interest voluntary associations, such as the Welfare Rights Organization and the National Organization for Women, came into existence. By providing more access for citizens, representative democracy was enhanced. In turn, discursive democracy builds on participatory democracy. It gives publicity to marginalized groups and makes issues of identity more salient. More broadly, a discursive democracy encourages recognition of the importance of language and narrative in how we understand the city and our place in it (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Throgmorton, 1996).

For a discursive democracy to thrive, a wide array of public spaces must exist (Beauregard, 1999; Bender, 2001; Goheen, 1998; Young, 1990). Alone, the offices of constituent services, legislative chambers, and political clubs are insufficient. Spaces of a more public nature are needed. In them, people will encounter strangers, people whom they do not know and whose style of dress, language, and behavior may be foreign. Living together under these circumstances means learning how to be tolerant of others. This provides the basis for empathy and for a willingness to engage with those unlike one’s self. That engagement might be overt or as subtle as adjustments in posture, visual scrutiny, or polite conversation; people register each other’s presence in numerous ways. These are openings for more extended discussion.

The places where people congregate are places where common concerns can be articulated and debated: hearings held by public bodies and city councils, unveilings of proposed private and governmental projects, citizens’ advisory board meetings, neighborhood gatherings, interviews with newspaper and television reporters, chance meetings with neighbors, and encounters at public events. In these places people can protest,
celebrate, listen and watch, and declare their allegiance to a government or a nation, to one another, or to a social movement (Beauregard, 1995). Democratic deliberations flourish. Democracy takes visual and collective form, in contrast to the isolation and individuality of the voting booth, letters to representatives, or political caucuses (Sennett, 1999). In such places, publics are created and act. As the historian Thomas Bender (2001, p. 73) has argued, a public exists only when people "propose[s] to do something together."

The settings and reasons for gathering are numerous and varied. Consequently, deliberations take multiple forms. They include the instrumental and linear presentations of policy analysts and planners, the strategic calculations of elected officials, the commentary of public intellectuals, and the personal stories of common citizens, among others. Discursive democracy is both substantive and contextual and this embeddedness gives public stories a sense of purpose. It makes them intentional and political (Throgmorton, 1991). Told stories are not simply metaphorical, they reflect on material conditions and the possibilities for action (Garber, 2000).

An urban citizenship is inconceivable without an array of such deliberations and public spaces (Beauregard and Bounds, 2000; Dagger, 1997; Holston, 1999; Isin, 1999). The urban citizen is one who is engaged in an ongoing discourse with those who live, work, and frequent the city. This can only be done where people congregate. The publicness of their deliberations establishes the basis for a vibrant democracy in which politics and policies, governments and their representatives are scrutinized.

The ideal urban citizen, then, is an active storyteller who is expressing a view of the world from a personal perspective. She or he is also an active listener to stories told by others. While public spaces might lend themselves to political speeches, harangues, and avant-garde ravings, the basic democratic work is only done when people interact with each other in ways that allow specific experiences to be set against other specific experiences and to be considered, validated, and challenged. Telling and knowing are connected. Stories are told not just to express understandings and intentions to their listeners but also to reshape them.

A discursive democracy has to enable private stories to become public. To do this, it has to encourage storytellers to consider alternative understandings and to differentiate among personal responsibility, private interests, and public concerns. For this to happen, trust and reciprocity must be strong. Deliberations must be nonthreatening. In the absence of such conditions, citizens will remain silent or defensive.

Of course, not all storytellers will be learners and not all stories will be transparent. Some stories will manipulate and deceive; some stories will be crafted (that is, told strategically) to serve interests that are not fully revealed. Stories that emanate from government agencies, corporate actors, and advocacy organizations are particularly suspect. Having been first formulated to achieve institutional ends, they are less likely to be open to modification than those voiced by less organized groups and individuals.

If deliberations are truly public and knowledge widely available, such stories will be exposed. The storyteller's premises, values, and facts will be probed amidst an interplay of opinion and evidence, thereby revealing the story's intentions. Transparency is the goal. Only in this way can trust be created and people maintain the open-endedness of their comments. If democracy is strong and concentrated power constrained, distortion and manipulation will be minimized (Flyvbjerg, 1998).

The ideal individual story begins as liminal, experiential and expressive, relatively unformed, and inviting. As liminal, stories are sited discursively between personal claims and public significance. To gain legitimacy and support for the story, the storyteller must then transcend personal concerns and connect to a larger number of storytellers. The particular must be made even more meaningful.

Storytellers frequently start by relating their own experiences. This is what they know best and often why they have chosen to speak. In doing so, they unselfconsciously reveal their feelings through their tone of voice and demeanor. The issue is important to them. They are emotionally involved; the issue degrades or enhances their daily life, might influence their future, or violates or supports their values. These are stories about the "city of feeling," not the stories of objective experts relating detached insights about others' problems in a "city of fact" (Rotella, 1998). Expression, though, has its limitations. Sentimentality, moral purity, and raw emotions all weaken the potential for effective collective action.

These stories are often quite spontaneous. They are the stories of people who have not engaged in reflective, calculating revisions of their thoughts before voicing them. What is told is a distillation, sometimes a
fragment, of a larger set of experiences and opinions. The stories are in
the process of becoming and each telling is somewhat different.

This spontaneity also means that the stories are unfocused and because
of this inviting. Storytellers are searching for validation and connection
with others who have had similar experiences or understandings. At that
point, they are open to criticism and dispute and willing to change their
views in the face of stories previously considered irrelevant or unimport­

ant. The intent, as Marris (1997, p. 54) has written, is “to tell stories
which preserve some of the complexity and uniqueness of actual events,
yet at the same time claim to be typical.” Storytellers reach out, trying to
connect.

The function of the public sphere is to take such stories and mold them
into bases for collective action (Young, 2000). In doing so, individual
stories become fewer in number and their commonalities more apparent.
Collective action becomes possible. The diversity and tolerance that the
city engenders are thus enhanced by a democracy that enables people to
engage each other in the city's public spaces. Democracy thrives when
that engagement generates varied, dense, and inclusive public under­
standings. In the public spaces of the city, stories create publics and by
creating publics build democracy.

Sustainability

Why, though, must a sustainable city be a democratic city? And how
does storytelling fit into this equation?

Sustainability is the antidote to Faustian self-destruction on the one
hand and complacency and indifference on the other (Harvey, 1996;
Haughton, 1999; Jacobs, 2000). When progress is pursued in the
absence of any consideration of its human costs, Faustian self-destruc­
tion is the result. The social theorist Marshall Berman claims that it is
endemic to modernization. The “drive to create an homogeneous envi­
noment, a totally modernized space,” Berman (1982, p. 70) has written,
leads inexorably to the tragedy of development. In taking control over
the world in this way, in attempting to impose our intentions imperson­
ally through large institutions and without regard to history or the par­
cularities of places and cultures, we do damage not only to those in the
path of progress but to ourselves.

In the realm of development planning, Faustian self-destruction is
associated with a top-down approach that imposes modernization on so­
called backward or developing nations. Large-scale electrification proj­
ects, industrialization, the mechanization of agriculture in order to
expand crops for export, and rural-to-urban migration policies signal an
indifference to indigenous cultures, political traditions, and social rela­
tions (Scott, 1998). More recently, structural adjustment policies
imposed by international aid organizations that require governments to
privatize public services and deregulate economic activity have risen to
the top of the development policy agenda. These policies have been
equally destructive of societies and their environments. Moreover, the
modernist fascination with measuring development in economic terms
has kept the development community from recognizing the costs associ­
ated with such policies (Sen, 1999).

For residents of the United States, sprawl is the current version of per­
verse development (Rusk, 1999; Wasserman, 2000; Whyte, 1958).
Recently revived as an object of public debate and concern, sprawl
stands for (in all but the most conservative circles) a waste of natural
resources. Sprawl evokes a limitless frontier, a mentality that takes abun­
dant land for granted and assumes that natural resources are infinite.

For those architects and planners who champion multiuse, small-scale,
and villagelike developments in the suburbs—the New Urbanists (Duany,
1998)—sprawl destroys community and damages nature. The inter­
twined quests for privacy, autonomy, open space, and the good life—the
relentless American nostalgia for the small town—result, instead, in pub­
lic problems.

Sprawl has replaced urban renewal as the prime example of the Faust­
ian self-destruction of the city. Under urban renewal, we had to destroy
the city in order to save it. The abandonment of the city by industry and
commerce led to blight and slums. Demolition and site clearance were
then used to set the stage for new construction on land now stripped of
its historical heritage and identity. Today, numerous toxic sites produced
during the country’s rise to world industrial dominance provide a strik­
ing example of industrialization’s lingering costs.

Sustainability is also intended to save us from complacency and indif­
ference—the disinclination to act in defense of our shared fate. The spe­
cific complacency that irks those who embrace sustainability involves
threats to the environment and thus to the ecological relationships that enable animal and plant life, and human society, to provide the conditions for a livable future. To be complacent is to ignore the ever-increasing growth rate of the world’s population, the encroachment of settlements on deserts and forests, the pollution of the seas, acid rain and snow, the destruction of plant and animal communities, the collapse of fish stocks, and the depletion of spaceship Earth’s ozone layer. Instead, those who are self-satisfied place their hopes on the regenerative powers of natural systems or the sensibility of humans not to exceed reasonable limits. Or, they view such destruction as the unavoidable costs of progress. From the perspective of sustainability, this is simply foolish.

To embrace sustainability is to be sensitive to the threatening consequences of action and the disastrous consequences of inaction. Sustainability implores us to act with respect toward nature and to pay close attention to the dangers of inattention. Sustainability addresses our emergent capacity to act together for the common good.

Described in this way, sustainability appears as a defensive practice, a position of resistance to potentially destructive actions. Such a stance can be interpreted as conservative, almost romantic in its wistfulness for a lost natural world. It can also be understood as taking responsibility, a form of stewardship. As stewardship, sustainability encourages people to be responsible for the environment, other living organisms, and future generations.

More than a concern with the natural environment, sustainability is situated at the intersection of environmental protection, economic growth, and social justice (Campbell, 1996). Sustainable development is meant to reconcile these three conflicting interests, a difficult task under most circumstances, but not impossible. In addition, it emphasizes the concerns that people hold in common (such as their shared need for clean water) and the needs of future generations. Sustainability is “organic” in the first sense, seeing the public interest as independent of utilitarian calculation. In the second sense, it urges us to interpret our responsibilities in broad historical, geographical, and ecological terms—responsibilities to future generations, to people and places throughout the world, and to other species (Haughton, 1999; NSF Workshop on Urban Sustainability, 2000).

A sustainable city, then, is one in which environmental quality, economic growth, and social justice coexist and guide public deliberations and actions. In order for these conditions to be realized, the city must be governed in a way that is attentive to the shared concerns of its people and to the future implications of present actions (Harrill, 1999). Initiatives by corporations, governments, nonprofit associations, or individuals that hinder environmental, economic, and social justice or burden future generations must be prohibited. Decisions that improve the welfare of all or of those currently disadvantaged, without violating the welfare of those not yet born, are the essence of social justice (Rawls, 1971). Resource use and economic growth must meet standards of justice and be attentive to the stewardship implicit in the ethos of sustainability.

These goals are both laudable and in conflict with each other (Lake, 2000). Environmental quality and economic growth are often viewed as incompatible, though the relationship is more contingent than necessary. Moreover, sustainability can easily become a politically inclusive way to accommodate growth, discarding environmental limits for a naive belief in the possibility of win-win outcomes (Torgerson, 1999; Wolch, Pincetl, and Pulido, 2002). Growth and justice are in a similar relationship, while the concern for future generations is often displaced by the goal of managing growth.

At the core of sustainability is the need to pay attention, negotiate conflicts, and engage the complexity of the sustainable city. Where democracy is stunted, decisions and actions that weaken sustainability are more likely to occur. When political power is concentrated and unaccountable to the citizenry and when businesses and voluntary associations are allowed to pursue their interests unrestrained by either government or the weight of public disapproval, investments and resource use favor elites over the masses. Damage is done because sanctions against or punishment for such decisions is weak or nonexistent. The costs of economic growth and the pursuit of the good life for a minority of citizens are not part of public decision making. Consequently, environmental quality and social justice are devalued.

Under such conditions, elites acting in their own interests can easily isolate themselves from the damage that they do (Caldeira, 1996). If their corporations pollute rivers, they can build vacation homes on the seashore. If they own most of the country’s wealth while others live in poverty, they can avoid the “unfortunate” by traveling in private jets or limousines. If the governments that support their interests use repression to control the masses and crime and disorder are the result, they can...
retreat to gated communities. If the city becomes unsustainable, they can move to rural areas or live in another, less damaged country. Accountable neither to democratic institutions nor to democratized citizens, elites can do more or less as they please. The result has most often been environmental destruction, economic growth that depletes the resources available to future generations, and inequality.

Democracy provides a number of antidotes (Lindblom, 1977). First, it provides for accountability via a government beholden to the electorate and to public opinion as expressed through a free press. Neither corporate nor government actions can proceed unmindful of the responsibility to act in sustainable ways. Any action that can be cast as public becomes a legitimate subject of political deliberations.

Second, a democratic society provides vigilance. A free press, the requirement that government actions be transparent, and the existence of various planning and policy mechanisms that oversee public actions allow those actions to be scrutinized. Active citizens watch over their communities, the public interest, and the nation’s interests. Such scrutiny is essential for accountability. Once they became public, the desirability of the proposed actions can be evaluated and mechanisms of accountability created to prevent or compensate for unacceptable consequences. Accountability, transparency, and vigilance guard against detrimental actions.

Why might citizens concern themselves with public actions or consider the fate of future generations? Democracy can take many forms, and might well appear (as it so often does) as a defensive and begrudging pluralism, with each group mainly protecting and enhancing its own welfare (Weir, 1994).

One answer is a utilitarian calculus that defines the public interest as the outcome of the pursuit of individual interests. That pursuit occurs within a social matrix in which each individual must adapt, more or less, to resource constraints and the needs and desires of others. This mutual adjustment—the political counterpart to the economy’s hidden hand—is what produces the public interest (Taylor, 1998). By definition, the resultant combination of outcomes reflects what citizens hold in common. Future generations are only served, though, when utilitarianism is augmented by altruism; that is, when some people espouse interests that include future generations. Altruism is severely constrained, however, when it is reduced to a particularistic interest. Collective responsibility for sustainability is abandoned. If no individual finds sustainability to be important, the logic suggests, society is free to ignore it.

We could solve this dilemma by simply investing a central body with the responsibility to enforce sustainability. This has two shortcomings. First, it invests that body with powers that detract from democracy; centralized bodies minimize accountability in practice and also discourage participation and discursive involvement with citizens. Second, in a weak democracy, any central body is easily captured or constrained by powerful groups and coalitions. The likely outcome is the undermining of support for sustainability.

What we need is a solution somewhere between these two extremes. This is where a discursive democracy becomes important. Neither a representative nor a participatory democracy has the intrinsic potential to generate groups that are committed to sustainability. An elected representative would either have to be altruistic (pulling us back to the individualism of utilitarianism) or be accountable to a group advocating sustainability. The existence of such a group is not ensured in a representative democracy.

Neither is sustainability an inevitable outcome of a participatory democracy, although participation is certainly important in supporting it. A participatory democracy centers on interests; it is people with shared interests who become involved. Those interests might or might not include empathy for the needs and desires of others and thus might fall short of what is required in a sustainable city. The problem is with the interests themselves. The interests are individualized first and subsequently articulated as a group interest, which is always a problematic sequence (Piore, 1995).

A discursive democracy provides a way to achieve sustainability without having to rely on a utilitarian calculation, altruism, or the availability of representatives who just happen to find sustainability politically advantageous. A discursive democracy is one in which people’s interests are formed through talk and deliberations (Habermas, 1996a). People’s interests are not presocial, but emerge out of social interactions. People reveal their feelings about an issue, listen as others speak, reflect on what they have said and heard, and search for common ground. Out of this interaction arise interests that are intrinsically collective, not
predetermined or the aggregation of individual interests. Storytelling is very much a part of this discourse. It is "often an important bridge . . . between the mute experience of being wronged and political agreements about justice" (Young, 2000, p. 72).

How, though, does sustainability become important in such a democracy? Simply, it emerges from the recognition that many interests depend for their satisfaction on shared conditions. It requires, as James Throgmorton notes, acts of environmental imagination. In the absence of these conditions, few interests can be realized for most people. The existence of a nondiscriminatory labor market or efficient and ecologically sound transportation are but two obvious examples. Once grasped, this point of view encourages people to reflect on their commonalities, their intersecting histories, and the way in which society is organized, or not organized to address their concerns. People begin to see that preserving the environment, managing economic growth, and achieving social justice make for a good society, one that is better equipped to meet their needs, desires, and interests.

Such an understanding also encourages them to consider their collective future. The present is not the totality of their concerns. Most public deliberations have to do with how and when a burden will be lifted and lives will be made better, or how society can cope more effectively and justly with discrimination, injustice, and inequality. It is only a short step from making the future part of deliberations to thinking about future generations.

All of this can emerge from and be supported by storytelling. The process of creating sustainability requires public deliberation; sustainability requires democracy. A healthy democracy, in turn, requires widespread engagement and public deliberations. And public deliberations require storytelling. When people can share their stories and negotiate their understandings and interests, they are more likely to be concerned with the sustainability of their shared world, now and in the future.

Conclusion and Caveats

In a perfect world, a discursive democracy would produce sustainable cities. It would anchor participation and representation and turn attention relentlessly to the need to protect the natural environment, guide economic growth, and pursue social justice. Citizens in a wide variety of settings and from the full array of social positions would tell stories to each other. The result would be a foundational discourse in which issues of sustainability would be unavoidable. United in a shared fate, citizens would demand that their institutions address collective and future needs.

Storytelling is central to all of this. It is essential to a robust democracy and is one of the most hopeful paths to the sustainable city. Storytelling alone, though, is insufficient. The state must be kept democratic and citizens must remain vigilant.

My argument, of course, is highly normative and suffers from all the optimism that hope carries. Because it recognizes the barriers to sustainability and democracy and the problematic link between storytelling and sustainability, though, it falls short of utopianism. In an imperfect world, the forces that threaten sustainability are powerful, and numerous counterstories are mounted to undermine the ability to imagine a sustainable city. That only experts know how to manage the environment and that sustainability will reduce prosperity are two of many examples. Stories are meant to discipline our understandings. Thus it is inevitable that public stories will be used to control others. Yet, even those who enter the public sphere strongly committed to their positions and interests are susceptible to counterarguments. Public ideas have a force, a power, that is itself not easy to control (Kelman, 1988).

While the city might well be the site of public deliberations about its sustainability, sustainability is not only a local process. Sustainability is multiscaled; its consequences pay no heed to political boundaries and its attainment requires action in local, regional, national, and global arenas. Consequently, the discursive democracy that supports a sustainable city must itself be multiscaled. It must be capable of knitting together stories from various locales and mounting actions simultaneously in a variety of arenas.

All of this, and more, constitutes the challenge of the sustainable city. To move closer to that goal, we must nurture a democracy of robust and inclusive storytelling.