

FUTUREtakes

Transcultural Futurist Magazine

ISSN 1554-7744

Vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 2005)

A whirlwind tour!

Integrated Revitalization: The Dominant Development Trend for the 21st Century

Synopsis of the February 2005 WFS Washington DC Chapter dinner program presented by Storm Cunningham, Executive Director of the Revitalization Institute and CEO of Revitalization Strategies, Inc.; summarized by Dave Stein

In a captivating program that took the audience around the world – to Amsterdam, Lisbon, Milano, Cairo, Seoul, San Jose (Costa Rica), the Middle East, Japanese and Indonesian rainforests, and back to our own Chesapeake Bay in less than an hour – Storm Cunningham of the Revitalization Institute presented several success stories of integrated revitalization, which in his view will be the community development paradigm for the 21st century. Asserted Cunningham, this era of war, terrorism, tsunamis, other natural and anthropogenic disasters, and (in the US), even Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC), makes new paradigms for community revitalization more timely than ever.

THE FORCING FUNCTIONS

Traditionally, economic growth has been synonymous with conquering new land and extracting virgin resources. Under this frontier development paradigm, noted Cunningham, economic growth is accompanied by resource depletion. Quick to point out the example of the Great Plains with its few remaining inches of topsoil as opposed to the original twelve meters, Cunningham indicated that the frontier paradigm is unsustainable in the long term as resources continue to dwindle.

Continued Cunningham, three crises are forcing a paradigm change. One such crisis is constraint, that is, the lack of available land that is not already doing something for someone else. In addition, there is corrosion of infrastructure. The third crisis is contamination or pollution. Taken together, these “three C's” are giving rise to a global shift from the frontier development mindset to restorative development. Indeed, it has sparked a rise – “secret” in Cunningham's view – of a multi-trillion dollar per year global restoration economy, complete with eight sectors of business and investment opportunity.

EIGHT “OPPORTUNITIES TO EXCEL”

Four of these eight growth sectors are on the natural side – ecosystem restoration, agricultural lands restoration, fisheries restoration, and watershed restoration. Together, these sectors focus on lakes, wetlands, prairies, shorelines, rivers, streams, estuaries, aquifers, forests, and reefs, as well as on farms and rural economies.

On the manmade side, there is brownfield remediation and redevelopment, infrastructure restoration (renovation, redesign, and replacement), heritage restoration, and catastrophe recovery. Brownfield remediation and redevelopment involves cleanup of industrial sites and ports as well as military bases that are being closed under BRAC decisions. Infrastructure efforts are targeted toward transportation, power, water, and telecommunications networks as well as toward sewage systems and solid waste disposal. Heritage restoration focuses on preservation of historic sites and structures, whereas catastrophe recovery efforts are cross-cutting, extending beyond urban blight to address crime, unemployment, and education.

SUCCESS STORIES

To start his “world tour” of success stories, Cunningham noted that Arizona and New Mexico weren’t always deserts. Grassy at one time, prior to the arrival of the Europeans (Americans), they became denuded shortgrass prairie. Now, portions are being restored by a technique known as “imprinting,” in which ridges are cut into the soil to create rows of horizontal mounds. The ridges hold grass seeds as well as water from the limited rainfall. They also hold the topsoil so that it does not run off. When it rains, the seeds sprout, and eventually the land reverts to shortgrass prairie. But who pays for this? Says Cunningham, the key is to sell it as restoration of the agricultural economy with prairie (ecosystem) restoration as an added benefit – all at a cost of \$1,000 per acre.

Turning to Europe, Cunningham cited a brownfield area restoration in Amsterdam, followed by an ecology-residential restoration of an old mining site in Portugal in an approach that integrated human and wildlife needs. Next on the whirlwind tour were forest restoration projects in Japan and Indonesia, where efforts to get certain trees to grow were initially unsuccessful with only ½ to 1% of the seeds planted ever growing into trees. Then it was observed that a native bird would eat the seeds surrounded by fruit and then excrete the seeds. Leveraging these birds increased the growth rate to more than 75%!

In Cairo, Azhar Park had been a crime-ridden, run down section of the city. An integrated restoration project, funded by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, restored both the ecosystem (to create green areas) and the Islamic architecture. A similar win-win arrangement was implemented in San Jose, Costa Rica. Whereas the city needed more water, landowners were clearing the forests around the city to plant crops. The win-win solution was to tax the city and then pay the landowners not to clear their land. An added benefit was to their tourist industry, since tourists no longer had to see ugly areas.

Seoul, South Korea, saw the Cheonggyecheon Restoration Project. In the 1950s, the Blue Stream had been buried, after which a highway was constructed over it. This “neighborhood annihilation road” (NAR), as Cunningham referred to it, isolated two parts of Seoul from each other. Now, the highway is being eliminated, and the stream is being “daylighted.” Concurrently, adjacent historic buildings and brownfields are also being restored.

Turning again to the Middle East, Cunningham emphasized the need for socioeconomic revitalization, a preventive measure that helps keep the downtrodden from turning to terrorism. He went on to say that restorative efforts must include the countryside, since an urban-only focus can have disastrous consequences. In Afghanistan for example, the Taliban have been defeated in only three cities and remain alive and moderately well in the countryside. In Iraq, the Marsh Arabs of Iraq had been driven into refugee camps in Iran when the marshes were drained under Saddam Hussein. Now, 40% of

the marshes have been re-flooded. Elsewhere in the Middle East, a joint river restoration effort between Israel and Palestine has restored green areas, with wildlife also coming back. There is even an integrated sewage treatment plant.

BACK TO THE USA

Three years ago, an earthquake knocked down a Seattle viaduct – a “waterfront isolation highway” (WIH) as Cunningham dubbed it. People asked the out-of-the-box question, “What can we do if the viaduct is no longer there?” After the highway was replaced by a tunnel, the waterfront was reconnected with the “mainland.” Cunningham noted that Toronto has a similar problem, with little of its waterfront accessible because of the Gardner expressway.

Boston's \$13 billion “Big Dig” removed another NAR/WIH. Notwithstanding the cost overruns, the water and sewer infrastructures were refurbished, and parks and other green spaces were restored. In Oregon, the classic approach to funding the restoration of an old railroad station in the middle of a wasteland got nowhere. As a result of an integrated restoration effort, the area is now generating tax revenue. Likewise, a historical area of Charleston, South Carolina had become run down and crime-ridden after it lost its industry. A developer, originally offered an opportunity to restore five downtown blocks surrounded by 3,000 acres of wasteland, was subsequently asked to restore a much larger area – whereupon “Noisette” became the largest sustainable urban redevelopment project in the world!

Closer to home, the need for an integrated approach to restoration is highlighted by the Chesapeake Bay Foundations efforts to restore sea grass to clean the water as well as oysters the bay's “kidneys” that filter the water. Past attempts had been unsuccessful because of an old sewer system that had been dumping raw sewage directly into the Anacostia River. Continued Cunningham, restoration of the Mississippi watershed could revitalize almost half of the continental US, as water is the “great integrator.”

The year 2005 will see the largest round of BRAC, predicted Cunningham. While base closures can be socioeconomic catastrophes because of lost jobs, they also create development opportunities, as has already been seen in the San Francisco area with Ft. Mason, the Presidio, Crissy Field, and Hunter's Point. Green spaces once used for military formations and parades can have new lives as parks.

A NEW IDEA, OR NOT?

As Cunningham noted, perhaps the “Plaza of the Restorationists” in Lisbon suggests that integrated restoration is not entirely a new idea. In 1655, Portugal, then the most powerful nation on the Earth, and the wealthiest, was struck by an earthquake followed by three tsunamis, resulting in a total death figure of 60,000. While some wanted to restore the city to the way it had been, the selected plan integrated the best of the past with the best of [their sense of] the future. Now, Lisbon is one of the most beautiful cities on Earth, complete with real wooden trolleys.

LOOKING FORWARD

Asks Cunningham, “Why is the world switching to integrated restoration?” For one thing, it is nonpartisan and is perceived as enhancing the economy, society, and security. This increases political and public support as well as profitability. Conversely, new development is highly partisan and impacts existing areas – as when it involves paving over a family farm to build a new mall, for example. Furthermore, even if certain people or groups are not interested in conservation, they can make money through restoration.

In addition, restoration has integrative power, noted Cunningham, citing the example of the bridge to peace between the Muslims and the Croats. The original bridge, built in 1566 and destroyed during the Bosnian war, is now being rebuilt to restore the fabric of the community. In the interim, a temporary footbridge is in place.

A new restoration methodology has now grown to involve industry, government, non-government organizations (NGOs), and even the academic community. In addition, it encompasses several professions, for example, engineers, architects, lawyers, and experts in forestry and agriculture. Now supported by an Academic Research Network that is expanding to Europe and Asia, the new restoration methodology is receiving increased attention from the Council of Europe and in similar circles, and a Global Revitalization Summit is planned for November 2007.

Envisioned Cunningham, development will henceforth be tri-modal, involving new development, maintenance and conservation, and restorative development – complete with integrated planning and budgeting – and restorative development will play an ever-increasing role. This contrasts profoundly with the traditional approach, in which new development has involved the highest relative portion of the gross domestic product while “conservation” has meant keeping a few samples of what the world used to be like.

Q&A (as best captured)

Q: Did the Europeans become aware of the need for integrated restoration earlier than we did?

A: Yes. Warsaw was a prime example. During WWII, Germany obliterated everything. The Poles had to restore their buildings from photographs. Moreover, the Polish economy had been destroyed. However, after 3-4 years of rebuilding Warsaw, the Poles now had an army of restoration experts to restore other European cities. This restoration effort kick-started the post-WWII Polish economy.

Q: Contaminated sites come in many flavors, including nuclear contamination. How are nuclear-contaminated sites restored under your approach?

A: Radiologically contaminated sites are candidates for superfunds. On the other hand, in the case of brownfields, investors are taking calculated risks when they invest in the restoration projects.

Q: What do you see as the future of the Jordan River?

A: I've not been involved with the Jordan River specifically, but if a large oasis is restored in Jordan, then this may involve the Jordan River. Water is becoming a political issue. In fact, someone at the World Bank once predicted that the wars of the 21st century would be over water.

Q: What is the restorative power of a stadium – such as Camden Yards (Baltimore) or the MCI Stadium (Washington DC)?

A: It is not possible to make a general statement on this. If it is done right, it will work, but it may be the wrong approach for a particular city. Some cities build or restore a stadium, aquarium, etc. on a “me, too” basis, which is sometimes counterproductive.

Q: It seems that success depends on the project manager's viewpoint.

A: Sometimes, project managers are thrown into a restoration project without the proper training. They approach the project as development. However, the real magic starts with the vision. It is here that

restoration is approached in an integrated way, hopefully at the proper level – the city, the county, the watershed, or the region.

Q: Does your organization bring that vision?

A: Yes, our main emphasis is on developing the processes, tools, and supporting visionary exercises.

Storm Cunningham is Executive Director of the Revitalization Institute (www.revitalizationinstitute.org), the non-profit international society for community renewal and natural resource restoration. He is also CEO of Revitalization Strategies, Inc. (www.restorationeconomy.com) the leading-edge firm providing custom integrated revitalization strategies for communities, counties, tribes, regions, and nations. Mr. Cunningham is thus in a unique position to perceive the trends, leaders, and technologies that are restoring our communities, our economies, and our planet...long before most others. He is the author of the seminal book on restorative development, The Restoration Economy.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *Will integrated restoration impact the way people live and work? For example, is there any possible impact on suburban sprawl or on the “sprawl and crawl” commute syndrome?*
- *Can integrated restoration provide poor people with living options other than high risk areas (floodplains, volcano slopes, etc.) in this era of global climate change? Can it help prevent areas from becoming run down in the first place?*
- *Finally, what are other possible benefits – and socioeconomic or other impacts – of integrated restoration?*