African American Youth as Actors in Community Change

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Relatively little is known about the importance of the physical environment in comparison to the wealth of research on the social context of children's development. Yet, social experiences are inseparable from their space/time dimensions, whether they occur in cyberspace or in specific geographic locales. Logically, some places are more or less accommodating of the human purposes for which they are intended. The physical environment—in partnership with the social environment—can either sustain and support children's development or threaten and diminish it. For example, the degree of privacy available in a home influences the solitude children have for studying, the degree of safety in a neighborhood influences the freedom they have for exploration, and the type of transportation available influences their capacity to venture into places outside the neighborhood.

Children's relationship to their immediate surroundings is practically always defined by their socioeconomic status. These surroundings provide direct sensory feedback about who a child is and how that child is expected to behave. Thus, places not only sustain individuals in a tangible way by providing shelter for varied private and public activities, they provide a context for socialization, while communicating a way of life—to themselves and to others. Large gabled homes set back on lushly landscaped lawns symbolically encode an existence quite unlike that presumed to occur in the sleek terraced apartments of New York City's Trump Towers, a rural

farmhouse surrounded by fields of wheat, or in an impoverished urban neighborhood with its check-cashing outlets, burned-out buildings, and broken-down cars.

The physical quality of a neighborhood determines its real estate value; those lacking basic amenities will be the ones of last resort for those families with the fewest choices. Children growing up in such neighborhoods are disadvantaged by inadequate housing, poor schooling, and isolation from the personal contacts that lead to good employment, as well as by a myriad of other problems associated with poverty. Given that impoverished African American youth tend to live in the least accommodating physical conditions, they are more likely to experience these negative conditions. Since children are keenly observant of spatial details, it seems reasonable to believe that their segregation in dilapidated urban areas serves to intensify their disadvantaged socioeconomic position, both substantively and symbolically. At the same time, impoverished African American youth, particularly males, are often seen as culprits who contribute to the unsavoryness of their communities through their delinquent behavior. Thus, they have been simultaneously characterized as victims and villains.

Yet, many impoverished African American youth and their families have demonstrated their capacity to be victors, rising above their circumstances through all sorts of creative endeavors, from political and environmental activism to entrepreneurship and cultural and artistic expression. So while these youth can potentially be disadvantaged by their surroundings, they also have the capacity to use those surroundings as the subject matter for creative change. This paper investigates the physical environment as a context that sustains the conditions of poverty and racism, while also serving as a stage upon which to resist those conditions. In particular, I

am interested in providing insights into how African American youth can be involved as actors in community redevelopment processes.

The paper, which focuses primarily on black children's experiences in—and capacity to influence—the "brick and mortar" of poor neighborhoods, requires that I weave together numerous intellectual networks that do not fit together comfortably. In Part I, urban planning literature is used to provide an overview of the geography and physical circumstances of African American poverty.[1] In Part II, I draw from three theoretical perspectives in an attempt to articulate a holistic perspective on black children's experience of poor neighborhoods. First, environmental psychology theories are used to define the term *environment* and to describe the role of place in child development. A second section brings together spatial, psychological, and biological theories to describe the negative effect of urban poverty on African American children and adolescents. A third section utilizes urban planning and social psychology literature to describe the strengths of black youth and their families in resisting urban poverty. Part III attempts to synthesize these disparate perspectives and identify missing links. Part IV proposes a new approach to youth, drawing from small literature in urban planning, social work, and public health that focuses on the reasons for, and approaches to, giving youth a voice in the community development process.

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[1] It is not my intention in this first section to discuss African American poverty as a social pathology; this subject is most likely dealt with in other papers by authors who are expert in that area. Rather I focus on how the spatial segregation contributes to poverty.

In developing this paper I have relied on valuable input from a former and a current doctoral student, both from the University of Michigan. I drew heavily from a Ph.D. dissertation in architecture by Olusegun Obasanjo, completed in 1998, to describe the socio-psychological and biological affects on urban poverty on youth, particularly adolescents. Yve A. Susskind, who is currently completing a dissertation in urban planning, not only reviewed literature for this paper as my research assistant, but also contributed her own work on poverty and its effects on African American children and on youth participation in the planning process.

PART I

THE GEOGRAPHY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POVERTY

Concentration of African Americans in Inner Cities

Of the 13 percent of Americans who are poor, a disproportionate number are black. African Americans living in poverty number 33.1 percent as compared to 9.9 percent of whites (Taeber, 1996, p.145). Seventy-one percent of poor blacks live in racially segregated, densely settled, and geographically restricted urban enclaves that lack jobs, banking investment, and a sufficient tax base for essential services. Even in smaller cities, the poor are racially and economically segregated, spatially cut off from opportunities for socioeconomic advancement. The burdens of poverty are most disproportionate for single black women with children who comprise 20 percent of all African American families.

Forty-five years ago, most poor people lived in rural areas; now the bulk of the poor are concentrated in the nation's largest cities, especially ones with large minority populations. Further, they are concentrated in particular neighborhoods within these larger cities. "In 1989, for example, although the metropolitan poverty rate stood at 12 percent, close to the national average, more than 37 percent of those living in poverty areas were poor" (Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992, p. 47). And the depth of poverty in urban areas has continued to increase since the 1970s. For example between 1989 and 1993, the poverty areas of cities with populations in excess of one million showed a 12 percent drop in income—an amount larger than for any other type of community.

The current geography of African American poverty and the "peculiar postwar pattern of uneven urban development is by now a familiar story in the United States" (Darden, et al., 1987, p. 11). It began taking shape after World War II as an industrial economy attracted poor rural blacks into cities and white middle-class families and industries began moving to the suburbs. The relocation that took place regionally as manufacturing shifted into the suburbs also took place nationally. In 1950, more than 70 percent of all manufacturing jobs were located in older industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest (Kasarda, 1988). However beginning in the 1970s, employment in manufacturing began to shift to the South and West, as jobs in older cities rapidly declined. This continuing suburban and ex-urban growth is often fueled when businesses leave urban areas and even older suburbs in search of cheaper land, lower construction costs, lower taxes, and fewer regulations, as well as the ease of building on virgin land. It is also fueled by individuals seeking the socioeconomic homogeneity offered in many

newer developments. Because of heavy public investments in suburban housing, the national

highway system, and fuel, businesses are able to attract skilled employees who are in search of

less expensive, more commodious housing and schools. Meanwhile private disinvestment in

older areas results in "jobs lost, schools impoverished, houses dilapidated, stores abandoned,

crimes committed, taxes increased, services reduced" (Darden, et al., 1987, p. 11).

Crime—and fear of crime—has also contributed to the decline of middle-income

residents and businesses. High crime in poverty areas is associated with major thoroughfares

and industrial or commercial areas, especially where there is vacant land (Greenberg et al.,

1981, reviewed in Taylor, 1982). It is also associated with block size, block population, and

the proportion of multi-family buildings (Roncek, 1981a, reviewed in Taylor, 1982). However,

fear of crime may be more related to the incivilities that result from social disorder. Physical

incivilities include vacant and abandoned housing and lots, vandalism, litter, lack of upkeep, and

dilapidation. Social incivilities include street hassles, loitering, and public drinking and drug use

(Hunter 1978a, reviewed in Taylor, 1982). Physical incivilities have been found to contribute

substantially to fear of crime (Lewis and Maxfield, 1980, reviewed in Taylor, 1982), with

residents concern about crime being associated with features such as dirtiness of facades, length

of streets, and lack of trees (Craik and Appleyard, 1980, reviewed in Taylor, 1982). One

might ask whether race is a feature that compounds the fear of crime in neighborhoods that have

other incivilities. Given the higher proportion of black youth in the criminal justice system, it

seems likely that physical and social incivilities would only compound the stereotype of the

violent black male.

The post-industrial global economy has further exacerbated conditions in poverty areas. The headquarters of multi-division industrial corporations are located in just a few cities, often called "global cities," where well-paying, professional jobs are concentrated; their assembly and unskilled operations are located in the Third World, where low-wage, low-technology jobs proliferate, resulting in fewer unskilled jobs for poor persons, even in the most prosperous cities. Top ranked US cities, like New York and Chicago, that "have high concentrations of investment banking, corporate law, management consulting, information processing, and other advanced business services" (Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992, p. 102) also have increasing poverty. In these cities, "large, poor, segregated ghettos and barrios sit side by side with booming financial centers" (ibid. p. 103).

While it is a natural tendency for persons with greater choice to move into better neighborhoods, clearly the shift outward from urban areas has predominately been among middle-class whites. For example although blacks made up 12.4 percent of the population in 1990, they comprised 18.6 percent of the populous of the nation's 25 largest cities (*The Statistical Abstract of the USA*, 1994). Spatial segregation is enabled not only by differences in income for blacks and whites but also by overt and covert mechanisms intended to protect property values. For example, large-lot zoning keeps out persons with lower incomes as do zoning restrictions against rental housing. At the same time, minority home buyers may be steered toward less desirable, more risky properties by real estate agents, and they continue to be redlined by banks and insurance companies. Both of these exclusionary tactics make it difficult for African Americans to get the same financing and insurance coverage as whites. As

evidence of the persistence of such racial bias in home ownership, recently several multi-million

dollar lawsuits against major insurance companies have been won. The largest award came

after the federal government provided 1.5 million dollars for research on housing discrimination

that helped the claimant build its case (Treaster, 1998).

Given the high correlation of race with income, it should come as no surprise that

African American families have lower geographic mobility as compared to whites. In many

metropolitan areas, the white population has dispersed as the African American population has

become more concentrated. At the same time, persons living in poor urban neighborhoods face

the threat of displacement due to urban redevelopment projects or higher rents, if real estate

values escalate. The threat of displacement is likely to escalate as highway congestion increases

and in-town locations are marketed as a desirable walk-to-work lifestyle, especially since the

spatial characteristics of older urban neighborhoods—houses with porches fronting onto the

street, sidewalks that promote pedestrian traffic, small streets that connect one place to another,

small lots that conserve land—are the very ones that comprise the *new urbanism*. As this

fashionable urban design alternative to suburban sprawl takes hold, inner-city residents could be

at even greater risk for displacement. In the new move backed to the city—referred to as

urban surge—poor urban areas may be deliberately left in decline since, in addition to having

disempowered residents, their lowered real estate value assures a location where sites can be

amassed for large redevelopment projects.[2]

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[2]   As an example of how market interests influence neighborhood decline and gentrification, in Detroit

extensive land banking—by the city, as well as by absentee individual owners—has occurred over the

Contributing to the geographic isolation of impoverished urban areas is a decrease in public transit serving suburban areas as the number of persons owning cars increases. Just as race is a predictor of residential location, so is it a predictor of car ownership. While almost 40 percent of black urban households lacked access to a car with African American women being the most transit dependent, less than 20 percent of white urban households were in this situation, and essentially no suburban household was without a car (Rabin, 1988). The disposition of car ownership may contribute to the slowed emigration of African Americans from urban areas since suburban living without a car is virtually impossible. On the other hand, a number of studies show that simply improving transportation to suburban workplaces does little to improve racially-based poverty, which can only be understood through the lens of discrimination. The geographic concentration of African American poverty in urban areas is evidence of the institutional racism that restricts opportunities for blacks to advance on a multitude of levels. It is both the cause and effect of isolation from social networks, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and restricted residential mobility.

The Physical Realities of Urban Poverty

last several decades, as middle-class residents moved out and property values plummeted. Now these vacant lots (along with extensive tax breaks) are attracting developers who are paying exorbitant prices to amass large redevelopment sites. Ultimately, the costs will be passed onto middle- and upper-income occupants of the new facilities that are being built, while displaced low-come persons will move on to even less desirable circumstances.

Because poor urban blacks tend to live in neighborhoods with few socioeconomic resources, they are more likely to have inadequate housing. For example, the median year of construction of all urban housing is 1965, but the median year of construction for housing occupied by black urban families is 1951. This housing tends to be more renter occupied (63.6 percent as compared to a national total of 35.3 percent), to be more crowded (4.3 percent as compared to a national total of 2.5 percent), and to have a higher proportion of children between the ages of three and eighteen (11.3 percent as compared to a national total of 7.9 percent).[3] Indeed, the socioeconomic conditions of the central city are the most pressing for black youth, 46.1 percent of whom lived in poverty in 1993 as compared to 21 percent for all youth. One in four black youth under eighteen live with never-married mothers and in households whose incomes are less than half the poverty threshold (*Income, Poverty, and Noncash Benefits*).

Thus, poor urban black families tend to be larger and to live in rental housing in which there are inadequate spatial resources relative to the dominant culture's norms. Overcrowding occurs when there are too many people occupying a room or dwelling unit, or when there are too many dwelling units per building or block. Though culturally defined in vastly differing ways, overcrowding results in a lack of privacy, defined as an inability to control one's social and interpersonal environment. Galle, Gove, and McPherson (1972) found that, of the types of overcrowding, the number of persons per room contributed most strongly to social pathology as measured by rates of mortality, juvenile delinquency, and public assistance (reported in

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[3]   These figures were taken from the *American Housing Survey*, 1993.

Wohlwill, 1985, p. 20). Lack of privacy due to overcrowding can lead to feelings of loneliness

as people withdraw from too much social contact (Fanning, 1967) or to early sexual

experimentation as children are exposed to the private behavior of adults (Schorr, 1963).

Overcrowding also goes hand in hand with higher levels of noise, which occurs when

too many large families live in close proximity. Noise from conversations and all sorts of

electrical devices are exacerbated in buildings that lack carpeting and other sound insulation

methods. Busy traffic arteries or highways create a continuous stream of unpleasant sounds,

and at practically any hour, the reverberations from garbage trucks, sirens, screeching tires and

air horns can be heard intermingled with boom boxes and loud voices (Obasanjo, 1998).

Older, more crowded, renter-occupied housing typically has less maintenance, fewer

services, and poorer quality equipment and infrastructure. These older, poorly ventilated

buildings are also likely to contain various pollutants. In central poverty areas, 14 percent of the

residents experience moderate to severe housing problems, such as those described by

Kotlowitz (1992):

> *The buildings were conducted on the cheap. There were no lobbies to speak of,*
>
> *only the open breezeways. There was no communication system to the tenants.*
>
> *During the city's harsh winter, elevator cables froze. . . . The trash chutes within*
>
> *each building were too narrow to handle the garbage of all its tenants. The boiler*
>
> *system continually broke down. There were insufficient overhead lighting*
>
> *installations and wall outlets in each unit. And the medicine cabinet in each*

apartment was not only easily removed, but was connected to the medicine chest

in the adjoining apartment (p. 22).

Exaggerating the conditions found in the home are neighborhoods with inadequate schools, recreational facilities, fire and police services, garbage pickup, and public transportation. The size of stores is generally much smaller in poor areas as compared to affluent ones; the quality and choice of goods are lower but prices are higher; and liquor stores and check cashing outlets are in far greater abundance than other types of convenience shops. Inner-city schools are more crowded, less well-equipped, less maintained, noisier, and smellier than schools in affluent areas. Their most distinctive features are dreary outdated classrooms; unwashed windows with broken-down shading devices; dimly lit hallways with fading, peeling paint; dank, disagreeable odors due to old plumbing and leaking roofs; concrete playgrounds that are enclosed by cyclone fences, graffiti covering every available surface; and exit doors that are sometimes chained closed in violation of fire codes due to other more immediate threats to safety (Sutton, 1996).

Because poor neighborhoods are older, they may have existing incompatible uses, such as factories or automotive repair stations, which contribute to noise and the physical incivilities that heighten the fear of crime. Converting these sites to better uses is difficult because they often contain toxic waste that makes their redevelopment unprofitable. In addition, poor communities may be earmarked for new land uses that are undesirable because residents lack the political clout to prevent them. This phenomenon—termed *environmental racism*—results in poorer communities being used as the official and unofficial dumping grounds for all sorts of

undesirable and toxic elements. These communities offer sites of least resistance when an

incinerator or half-way house is needed; their vacant lots are ideal for disposing of old tires and

building construction materials; their untended streets provide storage for broken-down cars;

and their vacant, aging buildings lend themselves to an array of illegal activities, including arson.

Lack of police protection allows polluting, illegal activities to proceed unabated, while poor

garbage removal services means that polluting elements and burned out buildings become

permanent features of the landscape.

In addition to living in overcrowded, noisy, poorly maintained, poorly serviced, toxic,

and crime-ridden environments, persons in poverty areas are isolated from opportunities for

advancement. Isolation is a multidimensional factor that relates not only to the number of people

in a given area, but also to the sense of connectedness. Being connected means being

accessible and having opportunities for communication, interaction, and mobility (Wohlwill,

1985). Impoverished urban neighborhoods—which have overcrowded residential units but

may have low neighborhood densities due to high vacancy rates—experience isolation on both

these levels. Isolation diminishes residents' access to *social capital*. Comprised of both *social*

leverage and *social support*, "social capital is what we draw on when we get others, whether

acquaintances, friends, or kin, to help us solve problems, seize opportunities, and accomplish

other aims that matter to us" (Briggs, 1998, p. 178). Because they are geographically and

psychologically cut off from mainstream society, poverty area residents would likely lack social

leverage, or what would connect them to the clout and influence they need to *get ahead*, and

racial discrimination would only magnify this impediment. In extremely deteriorated

circumstances, residents may also lack social support, which can be a vital survival mechanism that helps the chronically poor *get by*.

What are the ways that living in a bad neighborhood affects children? How does their disproportionate concentration in these areas affect African American children? What is the potential for their self-determination within a bad neighborhood. That is the focus of the next part of the paper, but first I will need to establish to role of the physical environment in child development.

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Part II

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF

URBAN POVERTY

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The Environment as Substance, Symbol, and Stage

The term *environment* is used here to refer to the total impression of a space, which derives from a dynamic interplay between its objective features and the symbolic meaning those features have for various individuals and groups. Objective features include physical structures, people, and activities as well as a range of other sensory inputs. For example, the environment of a poor urban neighborhood might comprise deteriorating homes, colorful gardens adjoining overgrown lots, narrow streets filled with traffic and noise, the smell of outdoor cooking, the sound of conversation among friends and neighbors, as well as the presence of gangs and drug dealers (Sutton, 1996). These are an environment's substantive physical and social dimensions, which attract attention depending on what the occupants of a particular environment are drawn toward. While a burning building or a noisy parade will most likely take precedence over all

other features of a particular setting, its more subtle aspects require interest on the part of the occupants. On the other hand, occupants can also "tune out," or become obsessed with, unpleasant features, and both these mental processes detract from their capacity to perform at a high level (Obasanjo, 1998).

The environment is also a mental map that exists apart from its tangible realities. This mental map—its meaning—results from the viewer's past experiences as well as from those sociocultural values and norms that set up a certain predisposition toward what is being observed. Thus a stranger walking down the street of a poor urban neighborhood might feel a sense of vulnerability that is unrelated to anything concrete. A homeowner might feel much more satisfied than a tenant with the same housing because of the security and stability that property ownership signifies in our culture. Or consider the different meanings a given place has for someone who is a citizen versus a person who is a foreigner (ibid.). These meanings, in turn, influence how people behave in a given environment. For example, a teacher who is an outsider in a low-income neighborhood might demand less of his students because of his predispositions about their families' inability to move out of such a neighborhood. A woman who perceives a park as unsafe might avoid that park, thereby limiting her access to an important source of relaxation, while incrementally increasing the possibility that the park actually will be unsafe. Or consider a child who perceives a vacant lot as an invitation for carrying out delinquent acts versus one who perceives it as a space for imaginative play.

The environment is, thus, comprised of concrete and interrelated physical and social features; these features engender an array of perceptions that influence the behavior of the occupants of a particular setting, and that behavior, in turn, influences the quality of the setting. Because environmental meanings are derived from the past experiences and values of the occupants, the behaviors that result from an individual or group's perceptions tend to reflect and reinforce societal norms. Emphasizing that psychological development occurs within a multi-

dimensional context, Garbarino (1990) proposes an ecology of human development that

"includes family, friends, neighborhood, church, and school, as well as less immediate forces

that constitute the social geography and climate (e.g., laws, institutions, and values), and the

physical environment" (p. 78). According to Garbarino, a continuum of contexts influence

children's lives, from their immediate families to the broad sociopolitical structures in which

families exist. However, the less immediate forces and in particular the physical environment

have been largely ignored in favor of an emphasis on the individual within a self-sufficient family.

Although it is impossible to disentangle physical and social characteristics, the remainder

of this section will focus primarily on the role of the physical environment in child development.

In so doing, I am not suggesting that the physical environment is the *major* influence in the

developmental process but rather that development can be influenced by physical settings

(David and Weinstein, 1987). In poverty areas, where there are the magnitude of physical

problems described above, the relationship between child development and physical setting

would seem to have particular relevance.

The Physical Environment as a Context for Child Development

> *All environments contain forces that support or undermine the processes of child*
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> *development. These forces may work for or against assurance of the child's basic*
>
> *survival needs; for or against provision of emotional nurturance and continuity;*
>
> *for or against developmentally-appropriate attempts at self-determination—in*
>
> *short, for or against the creation of a positive environment for growth and*

development. Forces that support children represent opportunities for adequate,

or even enhanced, developmental experiences, while the absence of such

characteristics or the presence of threatening forces presents environmental risks

to the developing child (Garbarino, 1985, p. 126).

The physical environment has both a direct and a symbolic affect on children. In a direct way, the many settings where children spend time may or may not be designed to facilitate their normal activities. However, the physical environment is also a text that conveys information about the social, political, economic, and cultural relations of a society (Sutton, 1996). For children, "physical settings communicate symbolic messages about the intentions and values of the adults who control the settings"(Proshansky and Wolfe, 1974). This text exists apart from actual space and can contain perceived threats that heighten stress and pleasure-seeking behavior; alternatively, it can be a source of imaginative activity or pride. "The construction of elaborate open-space schools in ghetto areas was not only to bring about quality education, a direct effect, but also to foster the development of a more positive self-image and to demonstrate to the students that others cared about their future, a symbolic effect" (David and Weinstein, 1987, p. 6-7, reviewing Ittelson, et al., 1974).

Children acquire knowledge and understandings of who they are by virtue of their relationships with others, and also through their experiences with the physical world. Because "there is no social setting that is not also a physical setting . . . spaces and places must necessarily be fundamental considerations in [the] search for understanding the development of human behavior and experience" (Proshansky and Fabian, 1987, p. 23). Children do best in

neighborhoods having a range of opportunities that allow them to observe and practice variety

of social roles (Garbarino, 1985). Ideally, their surroundings foster personal identity,

development of competence, growth, a sense of security and trust, and a combination of social

contact and privacy (David and Weinstein, 1987).

The accumulated cognitions about important settings in childrens' lives helps shape what

has been referred to as their *place identity.* Place identity cognitions are of two types, one type

being the memories, thoughts, values, and preferences that relate to a particular setting, or the

type of setting it represents; the other being the relationships among settings, like the home,

school, and neighborhood. "The child develops particular preferences, skills, and behaviors

within each setting; however, it is the interface between the settings that constitutes daily life and

best captures what we mean by *place identity*" (Proshansky and Fabian, 1987, p. 25).

Children's immediate surroundings "form the most repeated and powerful context for

socialization and development, providing images that personally contribute to the child's sense of

himself or herself" (Rivlin, 1987, p. 10*).* The neighborhood is of greater relevance to children

and even adolescents than it is to adults because, like the elderly, they are minimally mobile and

spend most of their time in the area in which they live (Berg and Medrich, 1980). This is

especially true of youth in poor areas without public transportation.

Children attach social meaning to their surroundings that reflect the orientation of

parents, teachers, and other significant others. "How . . . spaces are to be used, to what extent

they are to be manipulated, and what dangers and taboos are to be recognized in them play a

central role in the development of early place-identity cognitions" (Proshansky and Fabian,

1987, p. 24). Place identity evolves, not merely in response to the physical properties of their

surroundings, but also as a product of the social roles—their own and others—that help them

understand how to behave. "All of this in turn contributes to a place identity in which

competence in and control of the physical world is an emergent aspect of self-identity" (ibid., p.

26).

While the home and the opportunities it offers for stimulation is important to younger

children, the neighborhood takes on increasing importance as children mature; it begins to affect

the development of language skills, social skills, and their sense of self (Wohlwill, 1985).   Social

density is especially important to older children and adolescents because it provides a diverse

choice of peers and a variety of services, settings, and facilities. "The overriding issue is

whether or not the neighborhood contributes to the child's development by providing an

experience that is 'socially dense.' The fragmentary available evidence suggests that some

neighborhoods encourage deep relationships between children and adults (particularly non-

parent adults) and among children, while others discourage such relationships in favor of

superficial, fleeting contact" (Garbarino, 1985. p. 133-134). A socially dense neighborhood,

with many interconnections between the family, school, and various community institutions

enhances the development of social competence (ibid.), which includes communication skills,

patience, moderate goal setting, and ego development (McClelland, 1973).

Physical environments are also associated with our body movements and senses,

because we inhabit and project our personalities and imaginations onto them. Because the

physical environment provides an opportunity for children to discover and invent alternative

futures during play, not infrequently do they claim a space as "my place" in an attempt to

construct meaning in the larger world. These places can have an enduring meaning throughout

an individual's life (Relph, 1976). Places (experienced and remembered) are not only an

essential aspect an individual's cultural and physical identity, they inevitably contain data about

that individual's status in society. In general, people's mental maps of particular communities

are derived from their conceptions of who lives there and what kinds of activities are going on

(Hummons, 1990), and socioeconomic status is an inherent part of those maps.

What is the direct and a symbolic affect of urban poverty areas on children? In what

way do these areas thwart their personal identity, competence, growth, sense of security, and

need for social contact and privacy? What social roles are they able to practice? What is the

particular affect of poverty areas on African American children?

Effects of Urban Poverty Areas on Children

The effects of living in an impoverished neighborhood are more severe for children and

adolescents than for adults because "adults can select and organize their environments to

neutralize the effects . . . but children and youth in an environment of disadvantage cannot"

(Obasanjo, 1998, p. 30-31). Noise, pollution, and overcrowding within the home are

especially detrimental to young children. Extraneous background noise and activity level can

affect children's attentional skills, resulting in longer response latencies but also making them less

distractible (Heft, 1979, p. 47; Heft, 1979 reviewed in Wohlwill, 1985)   Excessive noise raises

children's auditory threshold and results in a process of *tuning out* that can affect speech,

comprehension, intelligence, and academic achievement (Parke, 1978; Evans and Cohen, 1987).

Pollutants such as formaldehyde, asbestos, and lead in various states of disintegration can cause headaches, disorientation, and fatigue for everyone (Sovierro, 1992), but exposure to lead is especially serious for children. Typically, older buildings have deteriorated walls with lead-based paint; when this paint flakes off the walls, children can ingest the chips. The blood levels of about 56 percent of black children with poverty-level incomes have been shown to have blood levels containing injurious amounts of lead. Such exposure to lead has been associated with brain damage, and at lower concentrations, with reduced IQ, difficulties in paying attention, slower reaction times, and learning and reading difficulties, as well as with delinquency and aggressive behavior. Such difficulties may continue into adolescence and adulthood, even after blood lead levels return to normal (Obasanjo, 1998 reviewing: Needleman, 1994; Needleman et al., 1996; Feldman and White, 1992). In addition, respiratory diseases show dramatic increases among urban poor children (Meucci and Schwab, 1997 reviewing : Weiss, 1992; Centers for Disease Control, 1995), and this condition is most likely to occur among children living near freeways, refineries, and dumps.

Overcrowding in the home and classroom can also have behavioral and social consequences, including stress, competitiveness, and actual discomfort, particularly for males (Aiello et al., 1979; Saegert, 19??). The lack of privacy that results from overcrowding means that children do not have appropriate spaces for studying, exploration, or for claiming a space as "my place." Overcrowding can increase activity levels and the intensity of visual, auditory,

kinesthetic, and olfactory stimulation (Wohlwill, 1995). Too much stimulation is especially

detrimental for younger children, ages one to three, when not being able to escape and be free

from noise, busy-ness, and activity is most likely to impinge on cognitive growth (Wachs, 1979;

Wachs, et al., 1971, reviewed in Wohlwill, 1995).

However, the problem is not simply one of not having enough space; it may be that the

space available is not used out of fear of one sort or another. For example, outdoor

recreational and natural spaces are typically lacking in poverty areas (Trust for Public Land,

1993), and where these spaces exist, they may be overrun by criminal behavior or fenced off to

prevent such behavior. Because outdoor spaces are too unsafe, parents may force their

children to play indoors in small apartments. In addition, teachers in low-income minority

neighborhoods have been observed limiting the space children use in the classroom because of a

perceived need to keep everyone under close supervision (Rivlin and Wolfe, 1985; Sutton,

1996).

Because poor urban black families tend to be larger, children are in competition for the

resources that are needed for social competence, making them even more dependent on the

neighborhood's informal social support networks. However, in some poor neighborhoods,

individuals and families live in isolation from each other, and here "the desolation of social

impoverishment compounds the deprivation of economic impoverishment" (Garbarino, 1985, p.

135). Sparse social networks are also associated with child abuse (ibid.). For example, in a

study of a pair of neighborhoods matched for SES, one being high-risk for child abuse and

neglect, the other at low-risk, Garbarino and Sherman (1980, reviewed in Garbarino, 1985)

found that "families in the high-risk neighborhood . . . report less positive evaluation of the

neighborhood as a context for child and family development . . . [and] reveal a general pattern

of 'social impoverishment' in comparison with families in the low-risk neighborhood" (p. 188).

In a similar study, Garbarino and Crouter (1978, reviewed in Garbarino, 1985) also found that

low income, stresses on mothers, perceptions about the neighborhood, and quality of housing in

the neighborhood predicted child maltreatment.

Living in a bad neighborhood or in public housing offers concrete proof of one's inferior

economic status, which can affect how children and their parents feel about themselves, as well

as how they are treated by others. For example, it is well documented that teachers' negative

stereotypes of, and reactions to, poor and minority children can lead to their being generally

treated as inferior, including lowered expectations, less attention, harsher punishments, fewer

privileges, and less freedom to explore (Irvine, 1990; Rist, 1970; Rivlin and Wolfe, 1985,).

The stigma of poverty can lead to depression and lowered self-esteem among welfare mothers,

which can in turn compromise their parenting behavior. Economic hardship and job loss may

also increase fathers' irritability and pessimism, which can strain marital relations and lead to

more punitive, arbitrary parenting. These economic stresses can result in greater emotional

problems, more deviant behavior, and reduced aspirations among their children (McLoyd, 1989

reviewing: ???), especially among early adolescents (Conger, et al., 1992).

Since black parents, and black women in particular, experience economic hardships

with greater frequency than their white counterparts, the effects of these hardships may be more

enduring (McLoyd, 1989). The geographic concentration of poverty and the stigma of being

isolated from mainstream society would seem to heighten the effects of poverty, especially

during adolescence, when growing up is problematic at best. "The environment of the inner-city

and the tendencies of adolescents seem to converge to exacerbate the problems of inner-city

youth. These youth are prone to stress exposure and distress, they are poorer, and they are

disposed to alienation and drawn to delinquency by the circumstances of their surroundings"

(Obasanjo, 1998, p. 26). Consider the issue of safety, a concern among all adolescents that

has a far-reaching effect on youth in high-crime urban areas. In a poll of 2,000 teenagers, 46

percent said they change their behavior because of crime. One in eight youths and almost two

in five from high-crime neighborhoods reported carrying a weapon for protection. One in nine

and more than one in three in high-crime neighborhoods said they had cut class or stayed away

from school at times because of fear, 25 percent in high-crime areas said they did not always

feel safe in their neighborhood, and almost 30 percent worried about being victims of drive-by

shootings. More than seven in ten in high-crime areas said that gangs played a big part in the

daily life of the neighborhood (Louis Harris and Associates, 1996). Lack of safety, worries

about drive-by shootings and other kinds of violence can affect grades, as well as the capacity

to use the neighborhood for recreation and exploration (Appleton, 1996).

While some participation in delinquent behaviors is normal in adolescence (Moffit,

1993), youth in urban areas were more likely to report engaging in delinquent acts than non-

urban youth in studies conducted during the 1970s. Delinquency is related to such measures of

disadvantage as poverty, unemployment, and welfare dependency (Obasanjo, 1998, reviewing:

Smith, 1995; Farrington, 1995). Deteriorated and overcrowded housing, lack of recreational

facilities, and incompatible commercial and industrial uses are also associated with delinquency

(Obasanjo, 1998, reviewing: Burgess & Bogue, 1967; Taylor, 1987; Bagley, 1984). High

levels of noise and crowding may further promote delinquency by impairing cognitive

development and increasing susceptibility to aggression (Parke, 1978). Noise and

overcrowding, when combined with unemployment, further strains parent/child relationships and

may increase child abuse (Obasanjo, 1998, reviewing: Edwards, et al., 1982; Kasl, et al.,

1982). Indeed, the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder is now applied to youth living in

high-risk environments (Garbarino et al., 1991).

Apart from negative parental responses to children, poverty diminishes the potential for

creative exchanges, as Patricia Graham (1992) noted.

> *The issue is not that these children are loved less . . . . These families generally*
>
> *love their children deeply. But in circumstances of poverty it is extraordinarily*
>
> *difficult to find the additional energy, psychic and physical, to discipline a child*
>
> *lovingly, to work supportively with a child on a project, to spend an afternoon*
>
> *relaxing with a child in the park, to take a child to a museum, to participate in an*
>
> *event at the child's school, or even to read the child a bedtime story or to talk*
>
> *seriously with the child at the child's initiative* (p. 48).

For poor children, the physical environment—its dilapidated housing and crime-ridden

neighborhoods—is imprinted on a mental map that becomes part of their place identity. They

must also manage a continuous bombardment of noise, overcrowding, and behavioral

transgressions, while also being exposed to pollutants. Not surprisingly, higher levels of stress

and reduced cognitive functioning can be an outcome (Obasanjo, 1998). Lacking substantive

and symbolic support in their surroundings, these children face enormous obstacles to the

everyday acts of growing up, and racial discrimination would only compound these obstacles.

However, it would seem to be the conditions of poverty, not race, that contribute to

negative outcomes for children, including lower IQ, delinquency, single parenting, abuse,

increased stress, and increased health problems. For example, while the frequency and severity

of crimes committed by black youth are higher than for white youth (Gibbons and Krohn,

1986), race drops out as a predictor of delinquency when adjusted for poverty (Males, 1996).

Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Duncan (1996) also found that while income level and home

environment (measured as stimulation through materials and parental involvement) were

predictive of children's IQ scores at age five, ethnicity was not. Using longitudinal data,

Duncan, et al. (1994) concluded that "family income and poverty status are powerful correlates

of the cognitive development and behavior of children, even after accounting for other

differences—in particular family structure and maternal schooling—between low- and high-

income families." (p. 296).

While social pathologies affect poor children, it is also worth noting that some are able

to succeed, both socially and academically, as evidenced by the fact that there is a "substantial

upward mobility among young adults from poor families. Only one in five individuals who were

at or near the poverty line as children was at or near the poverty line after leaving home"

(Corcoran, et al., 1985, p. 530). Resiliency in overcoming the stigma and realities of poverty

has been related to the child's personal characteristics, characteristics of their parents and home

environment, availability of mentors, and innovative schools (Garmezy, 1992)—factors that all fall within children's micro-environment. The question is whether a more intense engagement within the broader neighborhood context would heighten resiliency, but what is the particular role of resiliency within African American families and communities?

The Resiliency of African American Families and Communities

> *A valid analysis of African American families requires that one view African Americans within a framework that allows for a consideration of the cultural, historical context of the African American experience in American society. . . . A strength model of the African American community . . . is characteristically holistic, looking at African American families from a historical, cultural and systemic perspective as opposed to a linear, reductive, deficit perspective* (Williams and Finger Wright, 1992, p. 26-27).

Contrary to the stereotypic view of black families as disorganized and dysfunctional, the cultural history of blacks in the US "suggests a community both active and able in working to meet its own needs" (Green, 1982, p. 103, quoted in Williams & Finger Wright, 1992, p. 28). Take for example the diversity of family types which may include people related by blood, marriage, formal and informal adoption, or in other ways so that "on any given day, fully 75 percent of African American people will be found living in families of one kind or another. Contrary to popular belief, this is about the same as the proportion of whites who live in families" (Billingsley, 1990, p. 90-91, quoted in Williams & Finger Wright, 1992, p. 28).

Or consider the inventiveness with which many black tenants, especially women, have

organized to improve not only their personal circumstances but also the conditions of the

neighbors and friends. For example with the help of technical assistants and political allies,

tenants living in neglected and abandoned Harlem buildings achieved varying degrees of success

in reclaiming their buildings through cooperative ownership or rental arrangements (Leavitt and

Saegert, 1990). On Chicago's South Side, tenants were similarly able to organize and create a

much needed community center for youth (Feldman and Stall, 1994). In one predominately

black Detroit neighborhood, described by outsiders as a "hideout for murderers," my

architecture and urban planning students identified many persons who were attempting to, in

Heidegger's terms, "make a place upon the Earth." One family placed hand-made play

equipment in a vacant lot each morning for children to use, then returned it to the safety of their

backyard each evening; another man had fashioned flower pots out of old tires, then dispersed

them replete with colorful annuals all along his block; a group of unemployed carpenters were

fixing up neighbors' porches for the cost of the materials; a woman had put herself in charge of

caring for the trees on her block. Indeed, any tour of impoverished, predominately black

neighborhoods would reveal signs— a well-tended vegetable or flower garden, a house

beautifully hand-painted in coordinated colors, a carefully preserved stained-glass window,

seasonal decorations on a front porch—of persons who are tenaciously resisting the negative

forces of environmental degradation.

Or consider children's attitudes toward their dilapidated neighborhoods and the effect

of those places on their place identity. The concept of place identity is based on social

psychological theories in which *identity* is defined as an awareness of one's group membership

and the expectations, privileges, restraints, and responsibilities that go along with that

membership. It is differentiated from *self-concept*, an awareness of how an individual is both

like and unlike others, and *self-esteem*, the value placed on the attributes that comprise the self.

Not only have black children and adolescents been found to have equal or higher self-esteem in

comparison to whites (Spencer, 1988), their identity forms in relation to the reality in which they

live. "Although young children may not understand the reasons that underlie [the] ascriptive

meanings [of their personal attributes], these meanings evolve in the context of the specific

culture to which the child belongs" (ibid.). With respect to place identity, poor black children

would learn that they belong in a particular community, especially since they are isolated there,

away from mainstream society, and this is not all bad. My own studies of children's perceptions

of their neighborhoods suggest that some children have a very high—even an idealistic—

commitment to their communities and their social support, though recognizing their problems

(Sutton, 1996). As one typical fourth grader explained:

Numerous studies since the late 1960s document the source of such tenacious

resistance, attesting "to the fact that in spite of pervasive social, political, and economic

inequities, the qualities identified as strengths for African American families have persisted to this

day" (Spencer?, p. 30). For example, pre-1970s studies characterized black families and

communities as ineffective and incapable of protecting black children, albeit without data to

support such assertions. However, studies conducted after the 1970s have documented the

buffering role black parents play in helping their children overcome the Euro-centric orientation

that tends to appear in young children (Spencer, 1988). In 1968, Billingsley (reviewed in

Williams & Finger Wright, 1992, p. 29) "rejected the deficit perspective and presented black

families as strong, resilient systems, able to adapt to the social and economic conditions

confronting them with a tenacity that defied the odds. Another study by Hill (1972) addressed

the biases and stereotypic foundations of previous research. He attempted to demystify the

popular notion of black families as deficit, disintegrating units that lacked tradition, culture, and

structure. The strengths he identified were strong kinship bonds within a variety of household

types, strong work orientation in support of family ties, flexible familial roles, high occupational

and educational aspirations, and a strong commitment to religious values and church life.

Moore (1985) also attempted to understand the historical circumstances within which

black Americans have maintained a distinctive culture and to see how this culture mediates

black children's development. He noted four differences between black and white parenting:

encouragement of a greater *people orientation* than object orientation, the latter being more

characteristic of whites; encouragement of *idiosyncratic behavior* and style in contrast to the

conformity values of white middle-class Americans, which provides an alternative frame of

reference by which black children develop positive self-concept; presence of a *relational*

cognitive style, in contrast to the more analytical style typical of white children and required in

school; and differences between black and white children in *achievement orientation,* which

may account for differences in IQ scores. Although Moore's study showed significant

differences in child-rearing practices that related to the differential achievement of black children

on standardized intelligence tests, he was quick to point out that "it has yet to be documented

that competence is, can, or should be defined in the same way for both groups. . . . We have little information about the attributes and qualities necessary for black children to function competently in this, a racist society" (p. 114).

Perhaps black youth should be encouraged to build on their cultural orientation toward style and idiosyncratic behavior to creatively resist this racist society. "For African American families, maintaining the status quo means maintaining the current structure and infrastructure of a society consisting of political, social, and economic injustices, accepting a position of powerlessness as it is in the order of things, and attempting to integrate into a society dominated by a Euro-centric value system. Empowering African American families requires an aborting of the old world order" (Williams & Finger Wright, 1992, p. 26). In this context, the delinquent behavior of African American adolescents might be seen as an attempt to establish their own world order. Later, I will suggest how their negative energy might be positively harnessed in the community development process.

PART III

CRITIQUE OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

As noted at the outset, providing a comprehensive perspective on black children's experiences in the "brick and mortar" of poor neighborhoods required that I weave together ill-fitting intellectual networks. One theoretical perspective comes out of environmental psychology, a field emerging in the late 1960s to study behavior within specific spaces. Research in this area has attempted to understand both the direct and symbolic import of the

physical environment in human lives—to understand how people shape, and are shaped by, the physical world, depending on their past experiences, values, and present intentions. From this perspective, children's development is best facilitated in places that support individual and social growth, which requires a combination of privacy and social engagement, the latter taking on greater importance as children mature. This rather small literature suggests that children evolve a place identity that, as one aspect of personal identity, informs them of their place and role in society, and of its rules. For the most part, the issue of ethnicity and social class is invisible in this literature, although gender differences have been extensively investigated. Environmental psychologists who are concerned with race and class have become more associated with urban planning, a field that statistically documents the substantive, but not the symbolic, aspects of the physical and social environment. This literature focuses on both the home and neighborhood, but is little concerned with youth apart from their membership within single-headed households.

Thus, another theoretical perspective was needed to explain poor black children's experience of place, which exists primarily in fields dealing with the social context of development. I attempted to sort out those theories that seemed most relevant to the physical conditions of poverty: overcrowding, noise, pollution, crime, stress, geographic isolation from social capital, and the stigma of being segregated in dilapidated conditions. This literature is the most extensive and the most problematic in terms of this thesis since terms like *environment, neighborhood*, and *meso-system* are used interchangeably to primarily describe the social relationships that occur outside the family. To describe the strengths of black youth and their families, I drew from social psychology, environmental psychology-as-urban planning, and my

own experiences. This literature describes, but does not link, the concrete improvements in

urban space that poor blacks have made and the cultural processes through which they survive

poverty and racism. In short, I was not able to explain poor black children's experience of

place via traditional disciplinary theories but rather I needed to weave a multi-discipline theory

out of ill-fitting pieces.

My review of the dominant assumptions in the relevant fields required a dance between

adult and child perspectives, race-sensitive and race-invisible perspectives, social and spatial

perspectives, outcome-oriented and process-oriented perspectives. I have been able to

describe the direct and symbolic effect of the physical environment for white middle-class

children, the direct effect of the physical and social environment for poor black urban youth, and

the outcomes as distinct from the processes of resiliency in the black community. Admittedly

there may be linkages among these theories that I have yet to discover. However, the differing

values, research questions, theory construction methods, and variables of these varied

perspectives make it difficult to confidently devise a seamless trans-disciplinary theory of how

poor black children experience their physical surroundings. The next section, which focuses on

how these children can influence their surroundings requires yet another leap.

PART IV

AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH AS CIVIC ACTORS

The term "participation" is used . . . to refer generally to the process of sharing

decisions that affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It

is the means by which a democracy is built, and it is a standard against which

democracies should be measured. Participation is a fundamental right of

citizenship (Hart, 1992, p. 5).

Given the exclusion of poor black youth and their families from such rights of citizenship

as the right to minimum standards of health, welfare, and safety, does not this fundamental right

to participate—to be engaged in the life of their communities—become even more salient?

Can the involvement of youth as civic actors help change racist stereotypes? Can the skills

learned in collaborative, purposeful efforts translate into educational and economic betterment?

There is ample evidence within impoverished black communities of the capacity to adapt to and

re-create negative circumstances. Would more organized opportunities for collaborative,

purposeful activities among youth and their families help reduce child abuse and increase

creative exchanges among a broader segment of impoverished populations? Would support

from social service agencies that emphasizes the *community* in lieu of the traditional Euro-

centric emphasis on the self-sufficient *family* strengthen the black families' (especially black

womens') natural tendency to use their energies for the good of the community? Would such

support lesson the stresses within the family that sometimes result in impatient parenting and

abuse? Clearly urban poverty areas lack services, employment opportunities, public

transportation, and a sense of security. By filling the public spaces of these areas with visual

evidence of youth activism, can the perception of social density be increased and delinquency

be reduced? Can participatory community improvement activities become cottage industries

that are operated by adolescents in partnership with adults? Can an active community help

thwart the pressures of displacement when redevelopment by outsiders eventually occurs?

The literature on youth participation, which is quite small, provides some answers to

these questions.

Creative Resistance to Impoverished Neighborhoods

"Children's tremendous energy, boldness, and creativity are rarely tapped by adults

with interest and expertise on public health and environmental issues" (Meucci and Schwab,

1997). Indeed, there are strongly divergent opinions about whether youth benefit from having a

voice. While some view children in an overly idealistic manner as the potential saviors of

society, others believe that children's involvement is nonsensical because they lack the legitimate

decision making power of adults. Still others think children should be protected from undue

involvement in and responsibility for societal problems (Hart, 1995). Yet youth have the

capacity to make a difference in their communities. They can identify problems that are salient

to youth, they can interview residents and public officials, they can map existing conditions, they

can formulate strategies to change those conditions, they can rally the support of a broader

constituencies. Their ideas can be presented through written documents, drawings, computer

simulations, poetry, theater, video production, or via the Internet. As an example, take the issue

of safety and the problem crime creates for youth. "We found that the engagement of young

people on this issue was passionate, and their ideas were worth listening to. . . . The fear-driven

discourse and action devoted to "gang prevention" could be usefully informed by the way the

children themselves define their need for safe spaces where friendships, recreation, scholarship, and self-determination will flourish" (Meucci and Schwab, 1997).

Although some children organize themselves without adults, as street gangs in Santiago, Chile and Medellin, Colombia have done, "we should not underestimate the importance of adult involvement, not only for the guidance they can offer, but also for the lessons [youth] need to learn" (Hart, 1993). When properly facilitated by competent, caring adults, the outcomes of youth activism are multi-dimensional. Youth activism as *place-related learning* enhances communication skills, the ability to work in teams, flexibility, ease in managing ambiguity, and ethics awareness—all skills needed in today's workplace. Depending on the particular project, it can also enhance knowledge of construction, history, and culture, among many other subject areas. Recent research suggests that place-related learning "may have the potential to significantly improve K-12 education in America" (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998, p. 1) by heightening performance on standardized measures, reducing disciplinary problems, and increasing motivation and pride in one's accomplishments (ibid.). Youth activism as *participatory action research* yields data on collectively defined problems, and it uses the data to generate realistic solutions. Research findings can be shared with other youth, parents, and city officials. For example in a school in East Harlem in New York City,

> *Children spend the school year preparing a book describing their neighborhood,*
> *developing alternative plans. Important neighborhood sites are selected for study*
> *by the children after interviewing residents of all ages. At the end of the year, this*
> *document can be used as a guide for parents, city planners, and elected officials.*

Regularly throughout the year, the children send their findings to their 'pen pals'

living in a dramatically different community who are also producing a book about

change in their community (Hart, 1992, p. 20).

Participatory action research can also be carried out within community-based

organizations, like the 4-H Club or YWCA. Youth activism as *community design* yields

tangible esthetic improvements, which can also increase property values. For example, a

concrete school yard can be turned into an environmental learning center for the entire

community, vacant lots can be turned into community parks, front porches can be repaired and

enlivened, gateways can be created that provide a sense of identity, and information kiosks can

be installed, among many other small-scale installations. Youth activism as *entrepreneurship*

develops one-time projects into small businesses. These business can perhaps be housed within

a vacant store or factory that has been converted into a communal incubator space, such as the

one developed by Focus Hope in Detroit. Youth might try their hand at music production,

clothes design, compost gardening, jewelry or cabinetry made from trash, and baked goods,

among other enterprises that would tap into black adolescents' gift for style.

All these forms of activism provide an opportunity to combine personal development

with social change. "These dimensions are rarely addressed simultaneously, yet the

development of loving, creative children . . . appeared to us as necessary for the improvement

of our environment, as is the organization of social movements and political constituencies for

better policies" (Meucci and Schwab, 1997, p. 4). Participatory actives allow alienated youth

to act in partnership with adults who are also making a difference; it helps them gain access to

role models; it exposes them to new perspectives and increase their social skills. When youth

are involved as participants in their neighborhoods, bridges can be built across the barriers that

have kept schools apart from community organizations, youth apart from adults, black apart

from brown and white. Examples of such bridge-building include professionals from outside the

school system becoming teachers, local businesses providing resources for student and parent entrepreneurship, students collaborating with planners and designers to revitalize neighborhoods, and young people taking seats on non-profit boards (Susskind, 1996).

The particular activities that I am proposing for African American youth would involve them in an process of researching, envisioning, planning and designing, and creating real change in themselves and in their surroundings. Such activities would not only give them more control over their own lives and experiences, but they would also help them influence and improve the quality of their neighborhoods. Rather than allowing young people's expectations to diminish to accommodate the circumstances in which they find themselves, they would be encouraged to take a socially critical look at their surroundings, then take action to bring about a positive change. For this to occur, whether in a classroom or community context, youth must be allowed to manage the process, from selecting what they want to work on to planning and executing an intervention. The role of adult teachers and facilitators is to broaden young people's perspectives and ensure that their conceptions of a particular issue are not stereotypic or overly simplistic. Their job is to help youth understand which issues are problems that can be solved and which are predicaments that can only be understood. It is their job to provide youth with adequate background on what has already taken place on the issue in the community, on who the key players are, and on what their future plans are. With this information, students can more effectively contribute their concerns to ongoing community-change processes (ibid.).

Projects should also be planned so that many different constituencies in the community are involved. In order for students to understand their role—and for their role to be influential and not just pretense—their community partners must acknowledge and reinforce young people's contributions. Finally, any involvement must be over the long haul. "Successful student involvement is a *process* (not a *project*) of gaining the disciplinary and scientific background to understand issues; building capacity for problem-solving; learning about one's group and what its talents and resources are; learning about the community and how it functions;

developing relationships and networks throughout the community; and strategizing, planning, and engaging in specific action steps" (ibid., p. 6). The process cannot be rushed, even though the particular players may change. And while the actions of youth are necessarily local, the lessons that result have the potential to be applied more broadly—as practical applications and as policy.

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