

Book Review: Neighborhood as Refuge: Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environment Justice in the City by Isabelle Anguelovski

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Michael Bassey is currently embroiled in a community fight with a developer trying to open a massive gravel and sand quarry within a kilometre of his home village in Nottinghamshire. He ruefully admits that concern about dust, noise and traffic affecting an English village is embarrassingly trivial compared to the immense problems of the urban communities described in **Isabelle Anguelovski's** book. But the common ground is community solidarity – perhaps the most powerful of all weapons against oppression of any sort.

Neighborhood as Refuge: Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environment Justice in the City. Isabelle Anguelovski. MIT Press. 2014.

Find this book: 

Isabelle Anguelovski shows that academics can make a powerful contribution to the work of environmental activists who are struggling in areas of extreme poverty and civic neglect. From three in-depth case studies she constructs a significant theory of environmental justice for deprived urban neighbourhoods. Using the familiar social science fieldwork tools of interview, observation, participant observation and analysis of documents, she studied the ways in which activists in three urban centres, over a couple of decades, slowly revitalized their communities and enhanced their environments, remaking them as worthwhile places to live in for all including minority and low-income residents.

It's an 'across the Atlantic' study: the three sites being the Casc Antic neighbourhood in Barcelona, the Dudley neighbourhood in Boston, Massachusetts, and the Cayo Hueso neighbourhood in Havana. They had the common features of being at the centre of their cities, with similar infrastructures, histories and proximity to decision makers and economic players. Although set in very different political systems of government their residents all had a strong commitment to their neighbourhoods which led to long-lasting improvements not found in some of the other sites that she initially considered for her research.

In her own words:

“There is much to learn about how historically excluded groups frame a larger political vision as they understand, resist, and challenge their marginality, especially when they do so as part of long-term environmental revitalization. They challenge public officials and planners who prioritize developments in the neighbourhood and decide the neighbourhood's significance ... They also fight existing racist and classist stigmas and stereotypes about low-income and minority residents – especially that they live in worthless neighbourhoods and do not care about the long-term well-being and environmental quality of their place. Most activists [in these three sites] note that they could have left and moved to different communities but decided to stay” (p.27).



Anguelovski goes beyond earlier views of environmental justice as about pollution and then about broader human-rights and gender issues. She declares that the meaning of environmental justice today is that “every person, regardless of race, income, culture, and gender has the right to a decent quality of life” in an environment which is “a safe place to live, work, learn, and play” (p35). This is the theme underpinning the way in which the activists in all three communities worked.

First they worked with the local authorities to clean up the land, removing contaminants and illegal rubbish dumps and then transforming vacant lots into productive spaces such as community gardens and small urban farms. Moving the neighbourhoods from “pollution to production” began to provide healthy and affordable foods for the residents. This was followed by encouraging young people to play sports by creating sports fields and developing local gyms. Children’s right to recreation and play was seen by the activists as essential to personal development and mental health and creating safe parks as leisure places replaced the dangers of playing in urban streets. Next came moves towards healthy and affordable housing. Upgrades in sanitation and water supply were slowly achieved and renovation of properties rather than demolition and rebuild was argued for. “In sum, revitalization projects in Cayo Hueso, Dudley, and Casc Antic have transformed neighbourhood conditions and habitat and increased residents’ quality of life. Activists have linked environment and health and brought in tangible changes that triggered snowball effects over time. ... Eventually, environmental justice became intertwined with community development” (p.107).

Anguelovski concludes by arguing for a theory of environmental justice for urban neighbourhoods. This embraces improvements in physical and mental health (due to clean air, non-toxic soil, healthy and affordable food supplies – some grown locally, safe play and recreation areas, sports and other physical exercise opportunities, and healthy and affordable homes). It also entails processes such as addressing stigmas about low-income and minority residents, establishing borders to the neighbourhood, and promoting participation in spontaneous planning. “Under these conditions” she says, “we can create a healthy environment where all people live, work, play, and learn” (p.219).

What she is asking for is really a path from environmental justice to worthwhile community development. Drawing her evidence for this from her three case studies she demonstrates that bottom-to-bottom networks of activists (ie residents pulling together on specific self-chosen tasks), coupled with supportive local authorities and a few public-spirited funders, can – over several years of endeavour – transform neighbourhoods from run-down places of no hope to lively, happy, self-confident communities.

What Anguelovski has not been able to explain, as she recognises, is why other neighbourhoods with similar problems and seemingly willing activists, have not managed to climb out of urban misery. The strength of her “theory” (I would prefer to call it a “model”) is that it gives a valuable framework for the much needed research into why other places have not succeeded in transforming themselves.

Michael Bassey is an emeritus professor of Nottingham Trent University and an academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. His methodological text *Case Study Research in Educational Settings* has sold over 5000 copies. [Read more reviews by Michael.](#)

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