# Planning in Real Time
# Lessons from Trinidad & Tobago

## Introduction

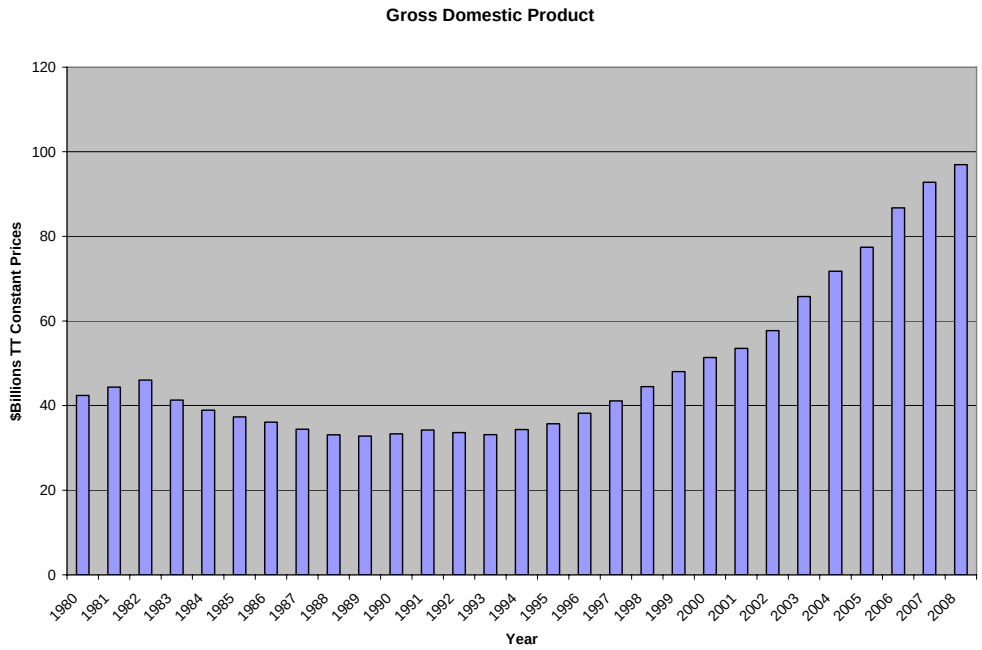
The need for a 'trialogue' combining vision, concrete projects and co-production to achieve meaningful change is readily apparent in the history of planning initiatives in Trinidad and Tobago since 1962 when the country became independent. In fact, having dealt with an extremely volatile national economy, social unrest that culminated in an insurrection in 1990, and ongoing severe housing and environmental issues, this post-colonial society has many lessons to offer to other countries in both the developed and developing world.

In 1962 Trinidad and Tobago inherited a planning system from the British that had been designed for colonial times. While this system offered rigorous control over formal development applications and in good times served the country well, the centralized, top-down approach that it embraced was simply not resilient enough to handle the range of challenges that were encountered over the years. To the credit of Trinidadians, the failure of the formal planning institution, the Town and Country Planning Department (TCPD), to deal with the severe challenges thrust upon it led to the establishment of parallel institutions and mechanisms that supplemented the formal approach and provided a means of achieving a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to community development.

The boom-bust-boom turbulence of the national economy since independence has been a major contributor to the challenges faced by Trinidad and Tobago. The national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose steadily from 1966 to 1976 and then sharply from 1977 to 1982 along with the international price of oil, a commodity that has driven the economy in recent years. When the price of oil fell in 1982, however, excessive dependence on this commodity led to an absolute decline in the country's GDP (IMF, 2007). This was accompanied by a decline in the employment rate, a rise in crime, inflation, and a massive increase in the number of squatters as people who had been attracted to urban areas during the boom found that they could no longer afford formal housing and set up shacks on the hillsides surrounding the capital, Port-of-Spain. By 1990 it was estimated that some 25% of the households in the capital region were living in informal settlements (Mooleedhar 1992). The consequences of the depression, including the failure of formal planning to deal with the situation, are evident in Figures 2 and 3. While formal plans for Port-of-Spain and other sections of the country were prepared over the 1980s the development proposals and requirements were well beyond the capacity of most residents and government resources with the result that building approvals declined dramatically and it is estimated that 78% of projects were developed without any form of approval (Brown, 1997: 66).

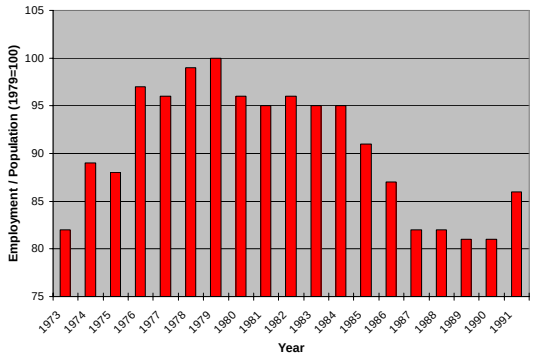
The economic performance of Trinidad and Tobago improved in the 1990s and by 1999 had risen above the high in 1982. As IMF estimates suggest, the national economy is currently in very good shape and the country is now determined to achieve 'developed' status by 2020. The challenge is to allocate the funds that have become available in ways that will create a more robust economy and deal with severe social, environmental and economic disparities among the population (GOTT, 2005).

Figure 1: Trinidad and Tobago Gross Domestic Product 1980-2008



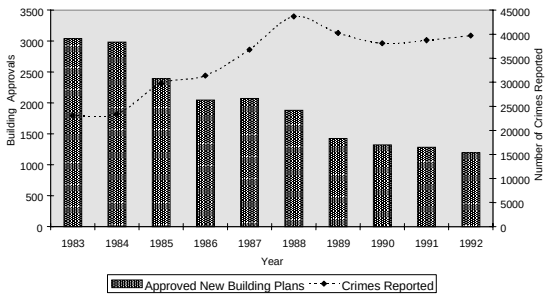

Source: IMF June 2007, constant 2000 values, data for 2006-2008 estimated by IMF

Figure 2: Employment Index




Source: PADCO and Laughlin 1993

Figure 3: Selected Indicators, Crime Rate and Formal Building Approvals.




Source: CSO, 1992

This paper offers three case studies that highlight the ways that planners have tried to 'jump start' the development process in Port-of-Spain. The first focuses on the sequence of community development initiatives in a squatter settlement on the outskirts of the City, the second on attempts to revitalize the Central Business District which has been in decline for decades, and the third on an inner city commercial street where a program involving shop owners, vendors community organizers, planners, and the police has been implemented to balance formal and informal commercial activities to create an agreeable shopping experience and reduce crime.

The analysis and discussion draws on a conceptual framework that is offered in the next section. Finally, conclusions and lessons that may be broadly applicable are suggested.

**Planning as if People Mattered**

The conceptual framework for this paper is grounded in the normative perspective of Kevin Lynch who offered the following goal for planning in his seminal book, *A Theory of Good City Form*:

> *"The good city is one in which the continuity of this complex ecology is maintained while progressive change is permitted. The fundamental good is the continuous development of the individual or the small group and their culture: a process of becoming more complex, more richly connected, more competent, acquiring and realising new powers - intellectual, emotional, social and physical." (Lynch, 1982: 116)*

This value perspective has several implications. First, the focus is clearly placed on individuals and small groups who are considered to be the primary clients of development planning. While other stakeholders, such as lobby groups, private entrepreneurs, professional planners and politicians may merit study, they, and the problems they face, are important only to the extent to which they affect the well-being of individual residents and small groups.

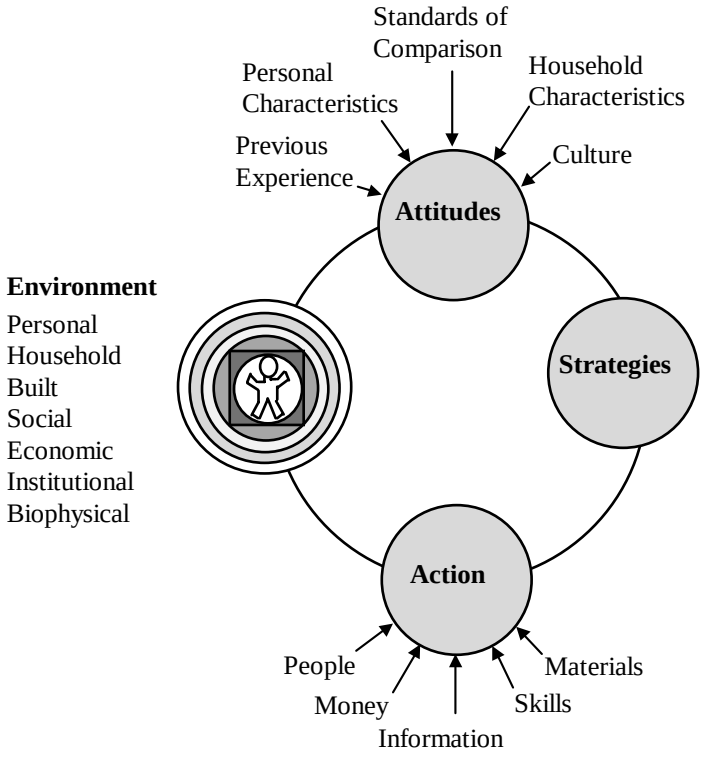
Second, attention is given to the processes by which change occurs rather than any particular set of norms. This suggests that the conventional planning approach that relies on norms to establish present and projected needs is insufficient. While such norms may prove to be useful indicators of progress toward some goal, the primary purpose of development planning is much more direct and proactive. For example, the simplistic notion that the solution to a housing shortage is to build more housing, short-changes the problem as it is experienced in everyday life. The real benefits, opportunities and constraints of alternative housing policies are only apparent when planners familiarise themselves with the processes through which people are trying to meet their own objectives and attempt to facilitate their efforts or offer alternative processes through which legitimate goals may be achieved. For Lynch, people are responsible, active agents.

Third, Lynch suggests that the goal of development is to support a process of becoming. This statement offers a sense of direction that may arguably apply to all societies, not only world-wide, but also throughout history. This is a modest stance. It acknowledges that the objectives that are currently in vogue in a particular society, some of which have become enshrined in a notion of political correctness, are in fact transient. Housing indicators, such as the number of people per room, may be useful measures in devising policy, but they are inherently weak as a measure of development.

The research framework for this study integrates components from transactional models of person-environment relations, decision-making theory, socio-psychological principles and environmental attitudes within a framework for understanding the quality of residential life that is consistent with Lynch's value perspective. This integrative framework might be described as person-environment perspectives that explain, at least to some degree, why people favour particular strategies that may be applied to augment the quality of their residential environment.

These perspectives go beyond simply an expression of attitudes. In effect, they embrace environmental conditions as they are experienced by a respondent, as well as his or her values and attitudes towards environmental issues; assessment of alternative courses of action and the capacity to mobilise resources needed to take action and modify existing conditions. Each of these components - conditions, attitudes, strategies and action - are linked in the community development process that evolves from the actions of individual residents and other stakeholders affiliated with institutions.

**Figure 4: Person - Environment Perspective Research Model**




Source: Brown, 1997

The person-environment perspective model used in this paper is depicted in Figure 4. The basic form of the model reflects a strategic approach. Effectively, individual residents (or professionals working for an institution) assess environmental conditions with respect to personal perspectives that reflect their environmental values. Strategies are then devised and actions implemented that lead to changed environmental conditions and fresh assessments of needs and opportunities. The process is multi-layered with minute temporal cycles operating within medium and longer-term cycles. Feedback throughout the process is used to adjust strategies.

The environment component represents the objective environment. This is represented as a series of veils surrounding an individual resident which highlight personal, household, built, neighbourhood, economical, institutional and biophysical relations.

The attitude component is essentially the lens that an individual applies to his or her environment that results in it being perceived in a particular way. This perception may be affected by previous experience in handling residential issues; personal characteristics, such as gender and age; household characteristics, such as the number of members and life cycles of unit members; culture, including race and religion; and standards of comparison that reflect the quality of life that has been obtained by significant others.

Alternative courses of action are identified and evaluated in the strategy component. These strategies are developed based on perceived environmental issues and the feasibility of implementation, taking into account the likelihood that it will be possible to mobilise the required resources to complete the intervention. Essentially this is a balancing function, looking back through attitudes to conditions and forward to implementation.

Implementation takes place in the action component. At this point people, including family and friends as well as professionals and contractors are mobilised, money is procured and expended, information concerning house construction or crop rotation is acquired and

processed, materials and equipment for construction assembled; and personal skills, ranging from carpentry to cooking, applied.

The dynamics involved when all four components are in operation constitute a *person-environment perspective*. This concept is essentially an anticipatory belief system expressing what one thinks will happen if alternative courses of action are employed. The system develops progressively over time as people experiment with new patterns of behaviour. At any moment in time, the perspective effectively constrains one's perception of feasible alternatives. The extent to which change is possible varies considerably between individuals. Some have a rigid structure while the perspectives of others are highly permeable and they are able to learn from experience and pursue new strategies. This research framework is inherently person-centred and process-oriented.

In this framework the role of public institutions is to diagnose development processes that are currently underway, imagine alternative futures, and propose policies, programs and projects that may be implemented in collaboration with individual citizens, community groups and other stakeholders. These initiatives may be directed each of the four components. For example, infrastructure projects may change the physical environment of residents, publicity campaigns may influence attitudes, educational programs may make new strategies feasible and public-private partnerships may make it easier to implement these strategies. The success of the initiatives depends on the degree of congruence between the interventions and the objectives, capacity and willingness of residents and community groups who participate in the development process.

**One Step at a Time**

Informal settlements offer a unique and very valuable opportunity for planners to understand how their interventions affect community development in social as well as economic and environmental terms.

> "In most formal settlements the dynamic and iterative quality of community development is hidden behind an institutional facade, and the day-to-day actions of individuals seem insignificant in the face of large-scale interventions by the private sector and government. In contrast, the development of an informal settlement involves a myriad of daily decisions by individual residents that form and reform the physical, social and economic morphology of the community. In these settlements nothing is ever 'finished', yet processes are underway which, over time, may move in the direction of establishing viable communities. The 'go/no-go' decisions and large scale interventions that are an inherent part of the larger scale and more formal development approval process are less in evidence. If it is not possible to do something one way, then perhaps it will be done in some other way, or gradually, over time." (Brown and Jacobs, 1996: 499).

In Trinidad and Tobago, the need to deal with the housing and environmental issues of the poor led to the establishment of a Squatter Regularization Unit (SRU) under the National Housing Authority (NHA) (Glenn and Wolfe, 1996). As the NHA and the Town and Country Planning Department which held formal responsibility for planning throughout the country reported to different Cabinet Ministers, a parallel development authority was effectively set up. While formal approval remained with the TCPD, the SRU emerged as the primary agency for community development in informal settlements. In contrast to the TCPD, their approach was incremental, project oriented, and of necessity, invariably involved considerable 'sweat-equity' on the part of residents who were mobilized to create drainage ditches, run water lines, build footbridges and run community centers.

Figures 5-8 display some of the characteristics of these hillside settlements. While the lower reaches of the hill may be well served by paved roads (Figure 5), the upper areas experience considerable problems with drainage and erosion and may be accessed only by steep footpaths (Figure 6) (Brown and Rinfert, 1992).

Figure 5: Lower Reaches of an Informal Settlement

Figure 6: Environmental Conditions Mayfair Gardens, Trinidad

In attempting to improve the living conditions in these settlements the SRU adopted a process that focused on identifying sites that could be upgraded and in these areas mobilized the community, conducted physical and social surveys, sought planning approval to develop these zones as residential areas, and prepared infrastructure plans that could be implemented on a incremental basis in collaboration with the residents. While the ultimate goal was to grant land title to individual residents, the legal and administrative hurdles that were encountered in transferring ownership proved difficult to surmount and very few titles were awarded (Glenn and Wolfe, 1996). Figure 7 records a site visit by SRU community organizers, surveyors and planners. They are accompanied by a representative of the community and individual residents whose plots would be affected by the plan. The tractor cutting the road in Figure 8 was loaned by the Ministry of Works. Funds to hire the driver were raised by community residents. While the road is following a plan, some adjustments in the alignment occurred in real-time in response to resident concerns.

Figure 7: Site Visit

Figure 8: Cutting a New Road

The community development process applied by the SRU begins with a vision that is developed in consultation with residents and motivates them to contribute their limited resources to the process. The vision must be project oriented as residents in these settlements have been asked to participate in far too many plans that fail to be implemented. Concrete projects that materially improve social and environmental conditions and which may be implemented incrementally through a participatory process must form part of the vision.

The analytic framework that is represented in Figure 4 is directly applicable to the community development approach in informal settlements. The capacity and willingness of individual residents to participate in the development process depends on their environmental situation, their attitudes towards public authorities and environmental conditions, the strategies they

identify and the actions they take. These four components are at play regardless of the role of government and may lead to positive or negative outcomes. The challenge for government is to identify specific interventions that contribute to positive social and environmental outcomes. In effect, planning and implementation must be part of an ongoing learning process.

As the traditional approach to planning and regulation was developed to deal primary with formal settlements, many of the conventional provisions need to be rethought to offer planning guidance in areas where informal or a mixture of formal and informal development is occurring. Most importantly, a balance must be struck between decentralised, bottom-up community development and centralised top-down planning and service provision. At some point both are needed and ideally planners would be able to provide a formal context within which informal community development process can prosper, while ensuring that adequate services are provided when they are needed. Figure 10 presents some of the implications of these differences.

**Figure 10: The Community Development Process**

| | Formal | Informal | Balanced |
|---|---|---|---|
| State of the Environment | Homogenous<br>Normative standards | Heterogeneous<br>Variable standards | Topological<br>Performance Standards |
| Development Process | Formal, top-down<br>Centralised<br>Phased<br>Professional<br>Regulated<br>Institutional | Informal, bottom-up<br>Decentralised<br>Iterative<br>Lay initiated<br>Responsive<br>Individual, family Centred | Mixed<br>Community based<br>Strategic<br>Partnership<br>Progressive<br>Individual, community |
| Citizen Involvement | Verbal<br>Procedure oriented | Verbal and action<br>Product oriented | Verbal and action<br>Process oriented |
| Role of State | Responsible<br>Regulatory | Laissez-faire | Enabling |

Source: Brown and Jacobs, (1996: 502)

As suggested in Figure 10, the processes of plan making and implementation take on a critical role when planning for informal settlements. This is not to say that process is not important in planning for formal settlements. Quite the contrary, it is far more important than anyone would assume based on reading professional plans. Unfortunately, the fact that the development initiatives of individual residents are largely overshadowed by those of government and big business in formal development projects results in many aspects of everyday life being ignored.

### Full Speed Ahead

During the depression in the 1980s the central business district of Port-of-Spain was in decline (Farley, 1995, NIPDEC, 1990). Lack of investment in maintenance by the government and business owners, poor drainage, inadequate infrastructure, congestion and fear of crime contributed to a movement of businesses into well established residential areas north and west of the historic CBD. In turn, rising property values and the increasing congestion and noise coupled with major alternations to buildings that accompanied the intrusion by businesses contributed to an overall decline in the number of residents living in areas adjacent to the CBD. A culture of gated homes and businesses that were linked by private automobile trips began to take hold, a tendency that further contributed to the decline of public space in the historic city centre which had once been occupied by a vibrant mix of residents and merchants.

In 1987 the TCPD produced a plan for Port-of-Spain that addressed these issues (TCPD, 1987b). Its' goals included infrastructure improvements, the reinforcement of the CBD as the

main centre for government and business enterprises, urban design measures to improve the appearance and functionality of public spaces, programs to maintain historic buildings and districts, protection of well-established residential areas from intrusion by businesses and an ambitious goal to increase the population of the CBD and adjacent areas. While many of the planning proposals were excellent, the plan had little effect as it failed to capture the imagination of residents and the government lacked the resources that were required to implement the plan on their own. The residential population of the City and conditions in the CBD continued to decline.

A second plan was prepared by an international consulting firm in 2000 (Halcrow Group, 2000). This plan was developed in consultation with key stakeholders in the City and heartily endorsed by many professionals. The goals and objectives were similar to TCPD's 1987 plan and a number of key proposal were recycled along with substantial additional measures. Unfortunately, however, a change in government effectively aborted the planning effort mid-stream. While a draft document was produced, the process stopped short of finalizing the proposals and conducting public consultation as required by law.

By 2000, however, several factors contributed to a shift in the prospects for the city centre. Key among these were the continuing excellent performance of the national economy (Figure 1), the frustration of middle class workers with long commutes from outlying residential areas, a decline in household size with many young professionals choosing to live separately from their parents, the increasing acceptability of higher density townhouse and condo lifestyles, and the persistence of the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago (UDeCOTT) which had been set up to spur development.

Currently Port-of-Spain is undergoing a transformation that is propelled largely by government investments in infrastructure, a downtown 'government campus', office towers, rehabilitation of historical buildings, and enhancements to public space. UDeCOTT's Waterfront Project which is nearing completion is a key element in the renewal (Figure 10). This multi purpose complex includes a 22 storey hotel with a major new conference centre, as well as two 26 storey office towers that will add 890,000 square feet of office space in a prime location on the seafront adjacent to the Brian Lara Promenade – the primary public space in the CBD. As the plans include the development of a boardwalk along the water's edge, the project will restore public access to the sea, which had been cut off by port activities, and may well serve as a catalyst for further developments along the shore.

Figure 9: View of Port-of-Spain

Figure 10: The Waterfront Project

The number of individual projects in Port-of-Spain are sufficiently diverse and numerous that the general population and professionals alike have expressed concerns that the City is developing on a piece meal basis without an overarching vision of its future. Consequently, a Master Plan for the Greater CBD area, including the adjacent residential areas, has been commissioned and is expected to be completed shortly. In the interim, "Quick Start" projects

have been planned and are ready for implementation. These include the refurbishment of historic Woodford Square and the pedestrianization of three adjacent streets, modifications to the public transportation system including the location of "line taxis" which follow regular routes, a complete overhaul of the infrastructure that serves the CBD and streetscape improvements. While all of these initiatives are long overdue the fact that they are being presented in isolation has resulted in substantial opposition from groups such as the taxi union and downtown merchants. The lack of an overarching vision at this point of time may contribute to this opposition. While change is necessary the situation is such that the new Master Plan will surely be able to identify many new opportunities that may satisfy the nay sayers.

The top-down, project-oriented approach adopted by UDeCOTT has created new development opportunities and significantly re-enforced the historic CBD. Attention is now needed to articulate a clearer vision and to engage residents and special interest groups in the development process.

In terms of the research framework adopted for this paper (Figure 4) it is apparent that the major effort to date has been to modify the physical environment directly. The addition of a Master Plan that offers a coherent vision of the future of the City coupled with opportunities for the general public to be involved is now crucial if citizens are to feel that this a City where they can develop to their full potential.

**Selling, Buying and Liming[i](1)**

An example of what can be accomplished when planners, merchants, street vendors, city officials and the police work in collaboration is in evidence on Charlotte Street in Port-of-Spain. This street which is one of the earliest streets in the CBD has long been one of the City's most vibrant shopping streets. Over the years, as the City expanded westward it developed a niche market offering a bazaar type atmosphere with small and medium shops and street vendors selling everything from CD music, to clothing, household goods and, most especially, fruits and vegetables along the street.

The streets' proximity to extensive public housing areas and a low income, informal settlement on an adjacent hillside in East Port-of-Spain have contributed to its reputation as a risky area to shop. Indeed, "crime, congestion, uncontrolled street vending, vagrants and garbage" (Thompson, 2007) coupled with deficient facilities and services have deterred all but the most poor and hardy from shopping on the street.

Over the past few years, however, a group of business leaders and professionals worked on a plan to improve the appearance, functionality, social atmosphere and, ultimately, the profitability of the street. The approach involved meeting with street vendors, merchants, police and city officials to discuss project and program options and develop concrete proposals that could be implemented through collective action. A grant from the Ministry of Community Development enabled the organizers to purchase and install banners and lights, repair pot holes and establish a refuse program.

However, it became clear that improvements could not be implemented until the street vendors were on board. This proved to be difficult as their commercial advantage was largely in the flexibility of their operations, something that risked being lost if they were regulated. Further, some vendors worked on a casual basis, as much to fill time in a social environment as to sell products, and were not motivated to pay for a stable spot along the street. Still others were illegal immigrants who did not want their identity known.

Nonetheless the persistence of the organizers paid off and some 250 vendors were registered and agreed to pay a monthly fee for an assigned spot along the street. To ensure that everything worked, block representatives were hired to enforce the rules, garbage was collected several times a day, and the police took up a stronger presence. The operating expenses are about $80,000 TT ($1,300US) per month. This sum is covered by revenues from vendor fees and donations from local banks. To date, the merchants with formal

businesses along the street have been less forthcoming as many are renters and reluctant to contribute financially to the project. Still, while some complain about the presence of vendor carts in from of their store, most see the advantage of fostering a greater sense of order and security along the street.

The process of organizing the vendors was far from easy and, indeed, one of the organizers reported having received death threats from several vendors who did not relish being told where to locate and how to display and sell goods. And, as evidenced during a casual walk along the street in the early evening, there are continuing battles to be fought to tone down the music from push carts, ensure that the space allocated to registered vendors is respected, and maintain effective garbage collection and drainage.

Clearly, this project offers an effective combination of vision, project orientation, and participatory implementation. While it is still in an experimental phase, adjustments are being made on an ongoing basis and it has an excellent chance of success.

The project also addresses each of the components in the research framework. While direct improvements to the physical environment have been implemented, these are complemented by carefully listening to the concerns of users, creating an attractive image that shifts the attitudes of shoppers, merchants and vendors, offers new strategic selling opportunities, and actively supports the efforts of registered vendors to develop their business. The positive experience of many participants has already led to renewed vigor inventiveness and enthusiasm among people at the margin.

## Conclusions

These three case studies from Trinidad and Tobago re-enforce the need to strike a balance between vision, project-orientation, and co-production in the development of our cities. All three approaches are vital to engaging citizens in the development process and creating a sense of ownership, personal effectiveness and pride.

Overall, the planning approach that has been found to be most effective is one that starts with an assessment of the development (or un-development) processes already underway, and assesses strategic ways to influence the environment, attitudes, strategies and actions of citizens. All too often, plans are prepared without sufficient regard to the everyday processes that make and remake the city and thereby miss an opportunity to create positive self-propelling movement toward positive change.

While these examples are from a developing country, they are readily transferable to many communities and cities in the industrialized world where urban support systems have become institutionalized to the point that people no longer are actively aware that they exist – until they malfunction. A basic understanding of and appreciation for the social, environmental and economic systems that support urban life is crucial to the “process of becoming more complex, more richly connected, more competent, acquiring and realizing new powers - intellectual, emotional, social and physical” as advocated by Kevin Lynch and, more generally, to the development of sustainable urban living environments.

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[i i] (1) Note: This section is based on personal communication with one of the organizers of the project, Margaret Thompson and personal observations during a site visit. The author greatly appreciates the willingness of Ms Thompson to share her insights.

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