

**Quality of Life as a City Building Strategy: Reflections on Niagara Falls,
New York**

By

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Quality of life has become an increasingly important concept in urban studies and planning because it represents a framework for viewing the urban milieu and observing the patterns of everyday life and culture that occur in cities. It has become a method that scholars can use to examine the nature and character of our lives and to gage the extent to extent which economic development actually bolsters personal well-being and social welfare. Moreover, I believe that *quality of life* is potentially a powerful tool that planners, policymakers, and urban leaders can use to guide the city building and community development process. The reason is that the *quality of life* framework not only makes it possible to evaluate the existing state of social well-being, but also to formulate and implement strategies for improving it

The purpose of my presentation is to discuss the role of *quality of life* issues in the planning, building and development of urban centers, with particular emphasis on Niagara Falls. My presentation is going to be divided into three parts. In the first part, I am going to discuss the importance of using a quality of life approach to the city building and community development process. In the second part, I am going to focus on the application of a quality of life approach to city building and community development in Niagara Falls, while in the final section, I will offer some parting words about the interplay between quality of life and city building and community development.

What is Quality of Life?

What do we mean by *quality of life*? *Quality of life* is one of those elusive and shadowy concepts that require careful definition. A review of the literature suggests that, while some minor differences exist, for the most part, scholars nevertheless agree that *quality of life* generally refers to a person's sense of well-being, his or her satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life, along with their ability to engage in leisure time activities that promote relaxation, enjoyment, and stress reduction.

These issues are related to the degree to which a person is healthy, enjoys the possibilities of their life, feels a sense of belonging, or connections to family, friends, significant others, and/or community. The concept also has an economic dimension. Here, quality of life relates to having the resources necessary to survive the city, along with the ability to experience some degree of success in achieving one's goals and aspirations. Most scholars would also agree that there is both an objective and subjective dimension to *quality of life*. One's perception of the world and the quality of their lives is also connected to the physical environment in which they live, work, and play. Against this backdrop, for planners and community builders, the really big issue is the extent to which the city or built environment contributes to and reinforces a person's sense of well-being. Put another way, does the city bolster or diminish the *quality of life* of its residents?

Measuring Quality of Life

To answer this question, scholars developed various methods to measure social well-being or *the quality of life*. There have been some minor differences in the components used to measure quality of life. For example, in his major study of quality of life indicators in 243 standard metropolitan regions, Ben-Chieh Liu used five components: (1) economic (2) political (3) environmental (4) social and (5) health and education, while More recently, *City Mayors*, an international network of professions that work to promote good government and strong cities, used ten components in their study of urban quality of life worldwide. As in the case of

definitions, there are really only minor differences in the type of components that scholars are using to measure quality of life.

City Building and Community Development and the Quality of Life Issue

Much of the discussion on *quality of life* is driven by social scientists and not urban planners. From a city building and community development perspective, we have a task that differs from that of the social scientist. Our goal is to translate our definition of *quality of life* into a set of components that we can use to drive the city building and community development process. In this conversation, the emphasis shifts from people's perception of their well-being, to ways in which we can construct physical environments that support and reinforce well-being.

Planners working in the area of sustainable or livable communities have define these communities as places where people want to live and work and that meet the needs of existing and future residents, that are sensitive to their environment, and that contribute to social well-being. Sustainable communities, they argue, offer a sense of community identity and belonging, tolerance, neighborliness, social inclusion, opportunities for culture and leisure time, and low levels of crime and anti-social behavior. The principles informing sustainable communities, smart growth, new urbanism, as well as the healthy cities movement and the slow cities movement, have all deepened our understanding of *quality of life* and how to build communities that support this concept.

Problems to overcome or Challenges to Meet

Although we have made great progress, there are still problems that must be overcome before *quality of life* becomes the engine that drives the city building and the community development process. I want to outline three key problems that must be resolved in order to achieve this goal. Hopefully, by gaining insight into these challenges, we will be able to find effective means of overcoming them.

The first problem relates to the political culture that drives the city building and community development process in the United States. Why hasn't *quality of life* become the

engine that drives city building and community development in the United States? The reason is that most leaders believe that increased urban wealth will automatically bolster the *quality of life* of the city's residents. As a consequence, these leaders are not only preoccupied with economic development issues, but "economics" is the engine that drives the city building and community development process. The rationale of these leaders is simple: if we create jobs and opportunities that make it possible for people to buy consumer goods and products, their quality of life will be improved. The assumption is that greater wealth will automatically produce a higher quality of life.

An April 2007 ranking of the cities in the world, which offer the best quality of life, cast serious doubts on this assumption. According to *City Mayors*, among the top 20 cities in the world, with the *highest quality of life*, there was not a single U.S. city, and only three U.S. cities—Honolulu, San Francisco, and Boston—made it into the top forty. On the flip side, using a variety of economic variables, *City Mayors* also developed a ranking of the richest cities in the world. The United States dominated this list. Five of the ten richest cities in the world came from the United States and sixteen of the top forty were from the U.S.

Without quibbling over the list of indices employed by *City Mayors*, or their methodology, one conclusion that we can draw from this ranking of cities with the best *quality of life* is that no linear relationship exists between the wealth of a city and the quality of life found there. Consequently, I hypothesize, that urban wealth will not automatically lead to a better *quality of life*. Put another way, *no money* does not necessarily mean that urban residents will live *no better*.

Another conclusion to be drawn from a study of these rankings is that cities desiring a higher *quality of life* will have to engage in a strategic planning process that focuses specifically on this theme. *Quality of life* does not just happen; it must be a deliberate and purposeful process. Thus, if you want to transform Niagara Falls into a city with a *high quality of life*, then you will have to develop a city building and community development process in which it is the central focus. This means that civic leaders will have to raise public consciousness, and develop

a constituency influential enough to persuade urban leaders to pursue this path of city building and community development.

As an aside, I want to stress that *quality of life* is not in opposition to economic development. Not only this, but I maintain that a city with a high quality of life will also be prosperous. The only point that I am making at this junction is that creating an economically viable city will not necessarily produce a better quality of life for the residents of that locale.

A second problem relating to the application of *quality of life* issues to the city building and community development process concerns racial and social equity. *Quality of life* initiatives should be initiated at a citywide and neighborhood scale. Urban centers will not encounter problems developing *quality of life* initiatives at the citywide scale, but in all probability, they will run into difficulty when initiating them at the neighborhood level. The conditions of life in Niagara Falls and other urban centers vary across neighborhoods and communities. Therefore, we cannot assume that a generalized *quality of life* approach to planning and development will impact all neighborhoods within the region. The reason is that raising the *quality of life* in some neighborhoods will be more expensive and challenging than in others. Nonetheless, I believe that all neighborhoods within the city are interconnected and a low *quality of life* index in one neighborhood will ultimately diminish the *quality of life* in all neighborhoods. Therefore, when considering *quality of life* initiatives, the entire city, in all its racial and class dimensions, must be taken into account.

Operationalizing the Quality of Life Approach

To make advancements on the *quality of life* front, urban centers must formulate developmental strategies specifically focusing *quality of life* issues. In this sense, *quality of life* must be the engine driving the developmental process. The most critical step is to select the components that will guide the planning and development process. Based on the general definition, discussed earlier, I have structured a quality of life framework based on six, highly interactive components. They are (1) health (2) community and family (3) leisure time, recreation, and tranquility (4) knowledge acquisition and learning (5) safety and security and (6) jobs and

economic development. These six components should be anchored by a theme that concretize them and that helps to frame the city building process.

I am not offering these components as the definitive, final statement on the question. My goal here is simply demonstrate the type of quality of life framework needed to guide city building and development in Niagara Falls. Also, I want to reiterate that the quality of life framework forces us to rethink the city building process and provides an opportunity to view new vistas of urban and regional development. Moreover, I want to emphasize that development this *quality of life* framework it is not a matter of just listing components. The key issue is not the component itself, but our definition or conceptualization of the each of the components. It is these definitions that tell us how the component is related to the quality of one's life. Because of the limits of time, I am only going to discuss three or four of these components. Again, my goal is to give you examples of the way in which these components can be used to guide the city building and community development process.

Health

In many ways, I believe that health is the single most important quality of life index in Niagara Falls or any other community for that matter. Since 1948 the World Health Organization defined health as being not only the absence of disease and infirmity, but also the presence of physical, mental, and social well-being. This means that health from a *quality of life* consists of more than hospitals, outpatient clinics, and the availability of health care. While this aspect of health care is important, we want to focus on the creation of a physical environment and cultural framework that supports and reinforces the development of a healthy, active living environment. From a quality of life perspective, the goal is to construct a world that supports prevention.

One goal of a healthy city is construct an environment that promotes and encourages physical activity— walking, jogging, biking, rollerblading and other forms of physical activity. One strategy of achieving this healthy living goal is to extend the Niagara Green vision across the entire face of the city. This could be achieved by viewing the theme, “reconnecting the City of Niagara Falls to its waterfront,” as a way of connecting the entire city to

the waterfront, not just the core city. A threefold strategy could be used to reach this goal. First, a series of bike and pedestrian paths and trails could be development throughout the city that connects to the proposed bike and pedestrian trails along the Niagara River Greenway. Then, the main arteries that crisscross the city and connect to the Greenway could be beautified though a series of creative urban, landscape, and streetscape designs. The idea is to drive this “green” theme from the Niagara River across the face of the entire city.

The third prong of this strategy would be to implement the green structure plan that seeks to turn hundreds of acres of old industrial land, disused railway right of way, New York Power Authority lands, and other utility corridors, vacant lots, and otherwise unused urban land into Art Parks, intercity bike and pedestrian trails, jogging paths, and rollerblade rinks, along with other forms of recreational space.

Another strategy should focus on creating pedestrian friendly streets, especially in troubled neighborhoods where the sidewalks and streets need to be repaired and made handicap accessible. Where feasible, neighborhood streets should be reclaimed for pedestrian domination. Traffic on these arteries should be decreased by promoting public transit and alternate modes of transportation, including biking. These residential streets should be turned into spaces that encourage walking, biking, jogging and other forms of street activity. A surprising number of residential streets in Niagara Falls are large and efforts should made to take advantage of this by encourage a wide range of street level activities. A goal in these neighborhoods is to create energetic street life. Every neighborhood should have a vacant lot management program, where unused urban lands are turned into gardens, small playgrounds, and meditative gardens.

Housing rehabilitation should be a fundamental component of a healthy neighborhood development strategy, especially in African American and working class white neighborhoods. In many of these places, houses are unhealthy and contribute to the health problems of the people living in them. Healthy living is the engine that drives housing rehabilitation efforts.

Food security is another extremely important health issue in urban communities. There are several things that can be done in this area. For example, establish farmers markets, including mobile food markets, and food stand programs throughout the city, and especially in

underserved areas. Local food policy should be passed that indicates that all food and snacks purchased with government funds meet good nutritional standards, especially in public schools. The general idea is to promote a variety of ways to ensure that all segments of the population are able to acquire nutritional foods.

The last point that I wish to make on this issue is that the neighborhood built environment has a symbolic dimension. The building, structures, roads, and spaces are also symbols that convey social messages to people, both inside and outside the neighborhood. In dilapidated and rundown neighborhoods, the physical environments tell the residents they are powerless, worthless, and that society has forgotten them. In a world where the symbolic environment tells people that society does not care, there will be those who, in turn, say “if you don’t care about me, then I don’t care about you!” “If my life does not mean anything to you, then your life does not mean anything to me.” We can change this social message by altering the visual appearance of troubled neighborhoods and turning them into pleasant, relaxing and stress reducing environments.

Leisure Time, Recreation, and Tranquility

One of the cornerstones of quality of life is interplay among leisure time, recreation, and tranquility, and it should be integrated into the city building and community development process. By focusing on this trilogy, we seek to reclaim time, and in the process, reframe our lives. A major problem in U.S. society today is the rapid, hectic lives that we lead. In some respects, the popular TV series, 24 captures the pace of life in this country. In twenty-four hours, Jack Bauer saves the world, dethrones a corrupt president, solves major world problems, gets beaten up, become involves in numerous gun fights, resolves office conflicts, thinks about his sweetheart, and we assume he eats at two meals, and occasionally goes to the rest room. I am sure Bauer would like to slow down and relax, but he does not have time.

Everything in our lives is fast. We are all embedded in a fast life—fast food, fast cars, fast conversations, fast families, fast holidays. We don’t take time to linger over food, over friends, over family and so on. We are a restless people; we are always in a hurry to go nowhere.

We are not savoring our lives, and we are starving for the real connections. Therefore, a central feature of creating a high quality of life is to establish a balance between work and play, so that we have more time to savor and enjoy our lives. I want to highlight several ways to connect leisure time, recreation, and tranquility to the city building and community development process.

Public Art and Beautification

The first task relates to constructing a tranquil physical environment that encourages relaxation and stress reduction. As previously mentioned, the built environment has a symbolic as well as a practical dimension. The buildings, structures, roads, vacant lots, and houses also convey messages about life, the social order, and the community in which we live. These messages affect how we think and influence our behavior, as well. The reason is that people are able attach meaning to signs and symbols, which makes it possible for them to establish an interactive relationship between themselves and the places in which they live, work, and play. Thus, if a place has a gritty, foreboding, and hostile appearance, it will make us anxious, lower our self-esteem, and perhaps generate feelings of anger and depression. For example, when my sister invites people for the first time to her house in Washington, D.C., she routes them through the most beautiful parts of the city, because she wants them to feel good about her home when they get there.

The point is that beautification and the visual image of the city matters. Therefore, I think that we should make extensive use of public art, streetscaping, and landscaping to change dramatically the visual appearance of Niagara Falls. The idea would be to focus on cultural themes, which reflect the rich history of the Niagara Frontier, including the experiences of Native people, African Americans, white ethnics, and our great industrial heritage.

The entire city, including neighborhoods and major thoroughfares, should be the focus of an array of public art projects—street furniture, including benches, bicycle racks, trash bins, and mini-ArtPark. Murals should be omnipresent, and every vacant house or building should be transformed into a work of art. I would brighten up neighborhoods by encouraging owners to use vivid colors to repaint their homes. One could even have a “Repaint Niagara Falls,” where

anyone willing to work with a *professional community designer* could have their home repainted at a reduced rate. Flower gardens and a wide range of different grasses could be used to create a garden-like effect across the city. Every dilapidated and vacant structure in the city could be turned into a work of art,

The principle is that public art is a cost-effective vehicle for transforming the visual image of a city. It is also a great way to build a sense of community and connect people with each other in meaningful ways. The city is filled with artists. Every school has art classes, and there are probably hundreds of people who view themselves as amateur artists. If these groups were integrated with professionals, who led the movement, a virtual army of artists could be created. If they were mobilized around a wide range of public art projects, the visual image of the community could be changed.

Promoting Local Vacations

Another leisure time activity could focus on getting people to enjoy the region. This is yet another way of getting people to slow down and relax. The goal is to get people to connect to the neighborhood place and to the city and region in which they live. Niagara Falls is anchored by one of the greatest wonders in the world, and is surrounded by a broader region with numerous cultural attractions and natural attractions. Yet, we do not aggressively promote these attractions to local residents. The Niagara Heritage projects and the numerous regional cultural attractions, both planned and existing, should be aggressively promoted to the people living in Niagara Falls and the region. We live in this region, but few of us experienced it intensely.

Residents should be encouraged to explore the Niagara Frontier by bike or on foot—this will also give them opportunities to connect with other people, visitors and residents alike, so that experiences and viewpoints can be shared. Residents should learn more about the region's industrial heritage and explore those sites that tell this story. They should follow the Underground Railroad and learn about that aspect of the region's past. In essence, Niagara Falls residents should be encouraged to slow down by taking vacations at home. When we focus on developing and maintaining connections to the city, we are strengthening attachments to the city and region,

and creating an environment where feel better about themselves and the community in which they live.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to highlight several key points that I made. The most important is my belief that building a wealthy city will not automatically lead to the development of a community with a high quality of life. Not only this, but if you want to develop a city with a high quality of life, then you must make quality of life the lens through which you view the city building and community development process. Those cities that are truly concerned about quality of life, not only use it as the scheme of conceptualization through which to view urban life, but also as the engine that drives the city building and community development process. For the most part, this does not happen in the United States. We are obsessed with economic development and view it as the engine that drives all city building and community development process, including cultural and heritage development.

My comments should not be interpreted as being anti-economic development. I am not. Economic development must be an integral part of any city building and community development scheme. However, my start is this: I believe that economic development is a means to an end and not the end itself. The goal of economic development is to generate the resources that we need in order to build a city with a high quality of life. As a consequence, I believe that a quality of life focus must drive the economic development process. For Niagara Falls this means a focus on green development schemes and building an economy that is environmentally friendly and that creates connections between local residents and business. It means finding creative ways to take advantage of our bi-national location, while at the same time promoting a form of tourism that reflects the type of city we are attempting to build. From my perspective, we are not slaves to the economy. Instead, the economy is our tool, our vehicle for creating a sustainable community with a high quality of life, which is based on racial, social and economic justice.

