

Lecture Report:

## Planning for liveable and resilient cities: Lessons from New York City

MND Function Room  
1 March 2017



### “Social Resilience is as Important as Physical Resilience”

Alexandros Washburn, a former chief urban designer for New York City and author of *The Nature of Urban Design: A New York Perspective on Resilience*, showed how a standard diagram of resilience would typically measure resilience as a “percentage of recovery over a unit of time.”

But *real* resilience, he said, should instead be measured by how we recover “and come back *stronger*.” As an example, he described his own neighbourhood of Red Hook in Brooklyn, New York.

Badly hit by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Red Hook’s catastrophic damage had a silver lining: the community came together to plan its own flood control system.

He described how Red Hook residents, “are not waiting for the government to act anymore.” Members hold regular meetings to plan the system, featuring a small offshore island to act as a catchment area, as well as map the city blocks to it.

“We would like to follow the Dutch model, using a polder instead of an ugly wall ... this way, we can get stormwater out, filter the water and discharge it into the sea,” said Professor Washburn. Today, the hydrodynamic modelling is well underway, and approval pathways are being figured out. The plan will also indirectly improve the local habitat and create biodiversity, he added.



Creating this offshore island-polder costs money, but Professor Washburn expects the resulting land and building rights to attract enough investment to finance it.

Furthermore, these planning meetings are open to everyone. “Anyone could walk in from the street,” he said. “And it is approaching planning in a *finer grain* than we were ever able to do.”

Professor Washburn also shared the importance of *social* resilience. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, neighbours came out to help those affected by the storm, even if they were badly hit themselves — from cooking for one another to housing those who had lost their homes.

“People gave without asking for anything. Social resilience is as important as physical resilience,” said Professor Washburn.

Today, residents of Red Hook are doing several things for themselves that boosts its overall social resilience. These include a community justice centre to treat minor offences “right here in the community” and keep people out of the court system. Children are learning to fly drones to help create and map 3D images of the city. Another group is working on a project that provides public wifi networks, to “give ourselves the resilient backbone” in case of another storm, he said.

On the challenges of gentrification, Professor Washburn said that since there is no “legal definition of community,” part of the success of urban transformation is really in the bonds created between neighbours. “Character is only revealed if tested — it’s not seen in cute cafes.”

Henk Ovink, who was on the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, cited the example of the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Here, the fear of gentrification and economic competition “is almost paralysing the community,” he said. There is no subway system and after the community went through Hurricane Sandy, residents were afraid that by improving the area, it would be further developed and lower-income housing would be edged out.



With a “sensitive, careful process,” this can be avoided, said Mr Ovink. He added that the capacity to understand all levels of the system is critical. “Once you grasp the political system, complexity of rules and regulation, finance, interest, etc., then you can come up with an [effective] approach.”

Summing up this idea, Professor Washburn added that “this is a new way of developing. This is a new experiment. You’d say, ‘Since when can a community planner or a private citizen make change like this?’ Well ... big things now can come from small groups of people.

“So I’d say don’t plan, but experiment. Urban design is about transformation. An urban design is not a masterplan. An urban design is a project that changes the life around it.”

# About the Speakers

*Speaker:*



*Professor Alexandros WASHBURN*

Founding Director  
Center for Coastal Resilience and Urban Xcellence  
Stevens Institute of Technology  
Former Chief Urban Designer, New York City

Alexandros Washburn is an urban designer and community builder in Red Hook, Brooklyn. He is the author of *The Nature of Urban Design: A New York Perspective on Resilience*. He is the founder of Brooklyn Capital Partners LLC and is a visiting professor at the Stevens Institute of Technology. His career combines equal parts politics, finance and design, the three forces that must be brought into alignment to change a city for the better. Previous roles include staff, US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works; Partner, W Architecture and Landscape Architecture LLC; and President, Pennsylvania Station Redevelopment Corporation. His research is supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Autodesk Foundation and focuses on building social and physical resilience in communities.

*Moderator:*



*Mr Michael KOH*

Fellow  
Centre for Liveable Cities

Michael has 25 years of experience in the public service, and served as CEO of the National Heritage Board and concurrently as CEO of the National Art Gallery. As the Director of Urban Planning & Design at the Urban Redevelopment Authority he spearheaded the planning and urban design of the new mixed use Downtown at Marina Bay, revitalisation of Orchard Road and the creation of an arts and entertainment district at Bras Basah Bugis.

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*About CLC*

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans three main areas - Research, Capability Development, and Knowledge Platforms. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit: <http://www.clc.gov.sg>