



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

The Fight to Save the Town: Reimagining Discarded America

By Michelle Wilde Anderson

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on June 7, 2023 to discuss *The Fight to Save the Town: Reimagining Discarded America* by Michelle Wilde Anderson.

It is a book about how some cities and towns, facing economic decline, unrelenting “border-to-border” poverty, eroding tax bases and collapsing public services, have fought back by drawing on grassroots strengths that outsiders—and even most local people—never knew they had.

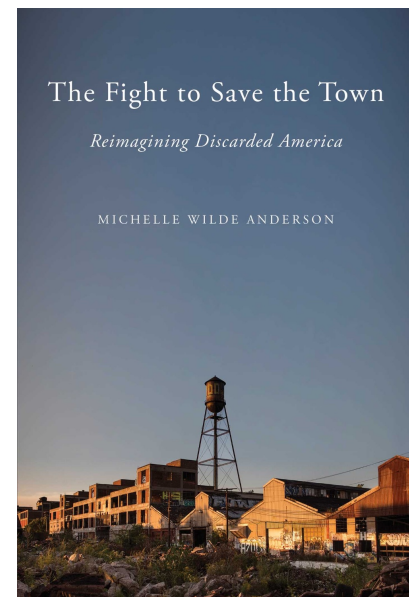
The book profiles four of these places: Stockton, Calif., Josephine County, Ore., Lawrence, Mass. and Detroit.

Urban Atlanta has little in common with these places—there is no municipality in the Atlanta area with the combination of problems of Stockton or the resistance to taxation of Josephine County—but there is one thing we could learn from them. If we could involve people in low-income communities in deciding what their neighborhoods need and want, and then involve residents in making the changes, we would greatly strengthen neighborhoods, our cities and the region.

So that is what we focused on in our discussion: What did these communities learn about awakening and involving their grassroots networks?

What They Had/What We Have

Before we could identify the “big ideas” from *The Fight to Save the Town*, we needed to identify what these places learned about grassroots involvement and look for something similar in Urban Atlanta.



Stockton and Lawrence seemed to offer the clearest examples of grassroots success, so those were the ones we focused on. Here's what we found:

- They did it themselves. For the most part, there were no outside interests helping these communities. Leaders emerged from within. They organized people, identified the starting points for change, learned the resources they could muster, and got to work. Throughout, local people remained in charge.
- One thing that was different about the leaders: They tended to have a larger frame of reference than their neighbors. They had lived or gone to college elsewhere. So while they lived with their community's problems, they had seen how other places worked.
- By comparison to this bottom-up approach, we saw problems with the way we engage neighborhoods in Urban Atlanta. In the city of Atlanta, for instance, we depend too heavily on Neighborhood Planning Units for community involvement. This has not worked well.
- One result is that community engagement tends to be episodic and adversarial. It depends on someone outside the community proposing something—a developer, for instance, or a government—and then asking the community what it thinks of a housing project, park or road change. This, too, often does not work well.
- A better way would be for a neighborhood to identify its assets, needs and desires, then seek expert help in translating these into specific projects that outsiders (governments, developers, etc.) might help with. The sequence then would be Voice (the articulation of a vision), Facilitation (experts working with residents) and Resources (outsiders offering things that might fit the vision).
- There are a few examples in Urban Atlanta of how communities have succeeded using a different approach. The Westside Future Fund, for example, has been largely successful in its efforts to engage the community and bring improvements to the area near Mercedes Benz Stadium. Purpose Built Communities, a national program that came out of the redevelopment of the East Lake Meadows public housing project in the late 1990s, is another example of successful community involvement in planning for changes. On a somewhat larger scale, the Atlanta Regional Commission's Livable Communities Initiative may be a model.
- The problem is, these efforts depend on substantial philanthropic support. Urban Atlanta needs a more sustainable process or model of neighborhood involvement, one that begins with the community identifying its assets, desires and needs, and then seeking outside help. *The Fight to Save the Town* tells us that such efforts are possible.

Three Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are three “big ideas” about fostering grassroots involvement from *The Fight to Save the Town* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from.

1. We need champions for a bottom-up approach to neighborhood development. The best champions are public officials who encourage neighborhood leaders to take charge, connect residents with others who've developed a vision and seen improvements, and regularly point out successes.
2. Leadership must come from within the community—and remain there. The keys for grassroots success are organization, discussion and activities that result in residents knowing what they have and what they need and want. These are all things that must be done by residents themselves.
3. Outside experts and city leaders can play important roles but must resist the temptation to take over. The two most important things outsiders can do is work with residents in organizing improvement efforts and finding resources. But the residents must bring the leadership and neighborhood commitment—and some of the resources.

A handy way of thinking about the work of residents and outsiders is that residents define the “what” parts—the neighborhood assets, the parts they want to keep, the things that need changing. And outsiders work with the residents on the “how” parts—basically creating projects that can improve things.

This does not prevent outsiders from proposing things, like parks or new housing. But a neighborhood vision makes it easier for outsiders to judge if these things will be a good fit and welcomed. Similarly, knowing what they want makes it easier for residents to say yes or no to new ideas.

Why Do These Things?

If neighborhoods, particularly those in low-income communities, became better at grassroots organizing and planning, how would it help Urban Atlanta?

- It would help these places become stronger and more prosperous.
- It is the right thing to do.
- Neighborhood improvements would be far more sustainable if they originated from within the community and were supported by residents.
- In their organizing and planning, residents may discover unrecognized assets and strengths.
- It is good for civic leadership. Some who begin as neighborhood leaders may become city and regional leaders.
- It will make local and regional governments more effective, as residents in low-income communities help them see needs they might not have been aware of.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes generate opposition. That's true even for something as desirable as helping neighborhoods take charge of their own development. So our members discussed the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- There is a long history of distrust and resignation in these communities. Finding residents with the time, talent and determination to work through the resistance will be difficult.
- While there are some examples in Urban Atlanta of neighborhood engagement and improvement (see above), there is no clear model for neighborhoods to follow.
- Similarly, we may have trouble finding public officials with faith in or patience for the bottom-up approach to neighborhood improvements. And for the bottom-up approach to take hold, we will need champions in public office.
- Finally, we will need resources. One value of a bottom-up approach to neighborhood development is that it finds unexpected neighborhood resources. But grassroots leaders need some support in their organizing and planning efforts. And once the neighborhood's needs and desires are clear, resources from outside will almost surely be needed. Where will these resources—early and later in the process—come from?

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers:

- Success generates success. What we need is a neighborhood willing to try a new way of planning. If it succeeds, others will follow.
- We do have at least partial models in Urban Atlanta. As cited above, they include the Livable Communities Initiative, Purpose Built Communities, the Westside Future Fund. Park Pride also uses a bottom-up approach to park development and improvement.
- Advocates can spread this new approach. A less adversarial approach to neighborhood improvement, one where the residents are in charge, should appeal to many who care about cities. Organizations like the Georgia Municipal Association and the Atlanta Regional Commission should be interested. Institutions like Georgia State University, Georgia Tech and others may be as well.

A Synopsis of *The Fight to Save the Town*

The Fight to Save the Town is 253 pages, not including prologue, author's note, notes and index. It has five chapters, an introduction and an epilogue.

Anderson is a professor at Stanford Law School who teaches property, local government and environmental justice courses.

This is a book about how some communities have developed grassroots leadership and found surprising success in dealing with overwhelming problems. It focuses on four communities: Stockton, Calif.; Josephine County, Ore.; Lawrence, Mass.; and Detroit.

What distinguishes these places is not the presence of poverty. Almost every city, including those in Urban Atlanta, has low-income neighborhoods. It's that these municipalities have become "border-to-border low income" cities, where middle and upper income neighborhoods have vanished. As a result, the local tax base and government services have collapsed, and police, fire, social services, public works and so on have stopped working in any meaningful way.

What happens then? At least in these communities, something hopeful, Anderson writes: "Residents fight to save their town."

This does not happen easily or quickly. All of these places were once prosperous working-class communities. Stockton was a food-services center and transportation hub. Josephine County was a timber community. Lawrence made textiles and shoes. Detroit was, of course, the center of the American auto industry.

But in the late 20th century, the manufacturing economies of these cities withered and died. At first, city leaders tried to make up for the loss of factory jobs by luring middle-class people to live and work in these places. Stockton, for instance, built a riverwalk, a performing arts center, a minor-league baseball park and brought in a hotel. Lawrence razed nine blocks in its downtown in an effort to build housing for affluent families. Detroit had similar redevelopment efforts. None of these things worked. In fact, the debt incurred only made things worse. Eventually Stockton and Detroit filed for bankruptcy protection.

It was when things reached their lowest ebbs, when public services more or less stopped working, that people tried something new: Instead of trying to attract new people, they started concentrating on the population they had. And instead of focusing on jobs and investments—the traditional objects of economic development—they focused on building residents' skills and improving their quality of life.

For readers in Atlanta, the two communities to pay closest attention to are Stockton and Lawrence. They have the clearest lessons about what happens when, as one Stockton leader put it, when you "shift the language from people's problems to their assets."

In Stockton, this meant addressing public safety in a new and seemingly roundabout way. It involved starting a community health facility in one of the poorest parts of the city and creating programs there to treat intergenerational violence and the trauma it causes. Eventually, the idea spread to the public schools, which hired trauma counselors. What city leaders learned was that mitigating violence through counseling was cheaper and more effective than dealing with it through the police, courts and jails. In time, the police became believers.

Lawrence's efforts have been even more impressive. There, one of the greatest problems was a "skills gap." Basically, the city's large immigrant community did not have the college-level skills needed for most post-industrial jobs—including teaching in the local schools or being a health professional in local hospitals and clinics.

There was a highly regarded community college nearby, which could help with the training. But it had few connections with the mostly Latino population of Lawrence. And this is where the real Lawrence miracle took place. Grassroots leaders began organizing these communities, at first to help gain better representation in government but eventually to learn about neighborhood needs and organize volunteer efforts to improve things.

The aim was to help residents pass the “cell phone test,” which was to have a list of people you could call if you needed child care, help with snow shoveling or assistance reporting a broken streetlight. The book lists the many ways these connections were formed, often among people from different ethnic backgrounds, such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.

And it was these connections that began turning things around in Lawrence: by cleaning up parks, helping people learn how politics works and what governments were supposed to do. And when city leaders decided to tackle the skills gap—by encouraging more city residents to become teachers and nurses—the connections helped spread the word, design the community college programs and help people working full-time jobs with things like babysitting so they could go to school part-time.

What can urbanists learn from *The Fight to Save the Town*? Three things:

- People have a deep reservoir of feeling for places. The communities in this book were not glamorous, but when leaders needed people to work together to save their communities, many responded.
- In building a city’s economy, there are two approaches. One is to seek outside investments or convince outside people to move there. The other is to invest in current residents. When these cities found the “outside” approach didn’t work, they found success with an “inside” one.
- The “inside” approach had a prerequisite: The residents must be organized and connected. As Anderson writes, “Neuroscience and public health research have demonstrated that social connections are ends in themselves, not just means to some other outcome.” Yes, but her book demonstrates that these networks can also be a key to economic advancement, public safety, stronger neighborhoods and more responsive governments.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.