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# Revolutionizing everyday life through community-centric design

by Jennifer Wegner

Community-centric design transcends traditional architectural and planning practices; it offers a remarkable framework for enriching the quality of life for all residents. By emphasizing inclusivity, collaboration, sustainability, and human-centered infrastructure, this approach fosters cities and neighborhoods that are vibrant, accessible, and equitable. As large-scale development and urban revitalization projects breathe new life into communities, actively engaging local populations in the planning process ensures that the spaces created reflect the needs and aspirations of local residents, leading to a brighter, more connected future for everyone.



East River blends historic industrial character with modern design, creating vibrant public spaces along Buffalo Bayou in Houston, Texas. Photo Photo/ShauLin Hon.

## **Defining community-centric design**

Community-centric design fundamentally prioritizes individuals by designing public spaces, buildings, and infrastructure to serve an array of diverse populations effectively. This approach not only cultivates environments where individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities can thrive but also fosters a strong sense of belonging and community. A key principle of this approach is livability, which refers to the collection of factors that contribute to an enhanced quality of life. For a city to be considered livable, it is essential to provide equitable access to resources, amenities, and opportunities, thereby ensuring that marginalized groups are not overlooked in economic, social, or cultural spheres. Attaining these standards calls for a commitment to inclusivity and equity throughout every phase of the design process.

## Equity and accessibility: The pillars of inclusive design

Inclusive and equitable design considers diverse needs, prioritizes universal accessibility, and ensures the fair distribution of resources. To achieve these goals, urban planners and designers can engage community members in decision-making through public forums, workshops, and surveys. Structuring these outreach efforts to include underrepresented voices, particularly those requiring accessibility assistance, enhances inclusivity.

Beyond planning, universal design principles can be embedded in the built environment. Features such as wheelchair ramps, tactile paving, audio-assisted traffic signals, and well-lit pedestrian pathways ensure that urban spaces accommodate people of all abilities. The same level of inclusivity can be reflected in larger development projects, from mixed-income housing to transit-oriented infrastructure.



Discovery Green in Houston transformed a former parking lot into a vibrant, accessible green space, fostering community and sustainability. Photo/Jim Olive.

The [Discovery Green project](#) in Houston exemplifies how design can foster accessibility while enriching the urban experience. The planning process of this park was mandated to include the public in its design, with citizens' feedback becoming the basis for the park's programming. This 12-acre greenspace transformed a district previously dominated by asphalt parking lots into a vibrant public hub. The park features pedestrian-friendly paths, shaded gathering areas, and LEED Gold-certified architecture, blending sustainable design with accessibility and nature. Discovery Green not only enhanced community engagement but also spurred economic revitalization in the surrounding district to the tune of over a billion dollars.<sup>1</sup>

## Balancing development with cultural and economic inclusion

A key challenge in urban revitalization is preventing new developments from displacing existing communities. Too often, large-scale projects drive up property values, leading to gentrification and the displacement of lower-income residents. Community-centric design offers solutions by encouraging affordable, mixed-use, and mixed-income housing, integrating economic diversity while maximizing real estate potential.



Union Market blends history with

modern amenities, revitalizing Washington, DC's food and trade hub into a vibrant urban destination. Photo/Dan Cunningham.

One example of this approach is [Union Market in Washington, DC](#). For over 200 years, Union Market was a bustling center for food and trade, but as the surrounding area deteriorated, the market fell into disrepair. When redevelopment efforts began, designers worked closely with property owners to preserve its cultural significance while introducing modern amenities. Since reopening in 2012, Union Market has revitalized the area, increased economic activity, and fostered an inclusive urban environment.

## **Human-centered infrastructure: Designing for everyday life**

Cities thrive when infrastructure supports human interaction and movement. Community-centric design incorporates walkable streets, well-maintained sidewalks, safe pedestrian crossings, and accessible public transit to improve mobility. It also considers social spaces, such as plazas, parks, and marketplaces, where residents can gather, interact, and build relationships.



Battery Bluff Park in San Francisco transforms a former transit corridor into a 16-acre green space with trails and gardens. Photo/Gareth Gooch.

One example of this approach is [Battery Bluff Park in San Francisco](#), which was built atop a repurposed transportation corridor. This 16-acre public space integrates walking trails, native gardens, and interpretive signage and restores sensitive coastal habitats through the onsite cultivation of over 75,000 native plants, creating a vibrant, family-friendly environment. Such projects demonstrate how human-centered infrastructure fosters social engagement, safety, and environmental sustainability.



Battery Bluff Park in San Francisco transforms a former transit corridor into a 16-acre green space with trails and gardens. Photo/Gareth Gooch.

## **Sustainability: A cornerstone of community-centric design**

Sustainability is no longer a secondary consideration but necessary for long-term urban resilience. Community-centered design incorporates environmentally responsible strategies, such as green building materials, energy-efficient systems, and climate-resilient landscapes. Sustainable infrastructure not only reduces environmental impact but also improves economic stability by lowering operational costs and increasing property values.



East River in Houston transforms a former industrial site along Buffalo Bayou, integrating green spaces, bike and pedestrian access, and flood-resilient design, setting a model for sustainable urban growth. Photo/ShauLin Hon.

For instance, [East River in Houston](#) exemplifies community-centered sustainability. The redevelopment of a former industrial site along Buffalo Bayou will reopen more than a mile of waterfront, integrating bike and pedestrian access, green spaces, and flood-resilient design. By prioritizing accessibility and sustainability, East River serves as a model for balancing urban growth with environmental stewardship.

## **The role of cultural hubs in strengthening communities**

Cultural institutions play a significant role in community-centric design by providing spaces that celebrate diversity, foster artistic expression, and encourage social interaction. One example is the [Irish Arts Center \(IAC\) in New York City](#), which underwent a major transformation to create a flexible,

multi-purpose space for performances, education, and community events. Incorporating adaptable architecture and gathering spaces, the IAC expansion fosters shared, inclusive cultural engagement.



The Irish Arts Center in NYC blends historic and modern design, creating a vibrant hub for performance, education, and cultural engagement. Photo by Albert Vecerka/Esto.

## **Striking the balance: Financial and social considerations**

The economic benefits of community-centric design are well-documented; however, the challenge of balancing financial interests with social considerations remains significant. Collaboration among developers, architects, and policymakers plays a key role in developing solutions that align profitability with the long-term well-being of communities. Implementing strategies such as mixed-use developments, adaptive reuse of buildings, and public-private partnerships can effectively bridge this

divide.

The future success of urban areas will depend on the capacity to design environments that prioritize equity, sustainability, and human well-being. As cities evolve to respond to contemporary workforce and demographic shifts, community-centric design emerges as a critical foundation for fostering inclusive, vibrant, and resilient communities. Prioritizing these principles is essential to advancing a more equitable future.

References:

[1.](#)

Smith, Tierra. [Discovery Green CEO On The Impact and Future Of Downtown's Iconic Park](#). BisNow. (September 12, 2019.)