Reflections on Two Decades in the Field of Place-Based Environmental and Community Change

An interview with Rick Magder, a freelance consultant working near Philadelphia, and former Executive Director of Groundwork Hudson Valley

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Lindsay Campbell (LC): Could you describe the nature of your work with Groundwork Hudson Valley, as well as the Groundwork USA network, in terms of leading community development and environmental stewardship efforts, in the face of what we would call "slow moving" changes such as economic disinvestment? Do you have any reflections on the work in the context of such change?

Rick Magder (RM): Much of my perspective derives from my experience growing up in the Detroit area, where I witnessed the consequences of a 30-40-year community decline, if not more. At the heart of the work of organizations like Groundwork is recognizing that there are both the immediate efforts that you are working on, and the need to use those efforts to accomplish a long-term change for the people and the community. If it takes 30 or 40 years for things to collapse completely, it might take 60 or 70 years to bring a place back from these kinds of physical and social declines. Patience is always key.

If there was anything I, personally, was able to bring to the work at Groundwork, it is the recognition that the little things you're doing annually need to add up to something bigger in the long run. It is like the old "making soup" metaphor: the ingredients are the little improvements that get made each year. They do not always seem connected to each other, but eventually they need to combine into something that works together and of course tastes great. You might be doing a tree planting on a street corner, but you're also looking at the park that is there, you're thinking about the senior citizens in the neighborhood, and perhaps the tension they might be having with teens in the neighborhood, you're thinking about the schoolyards, you're thinking about the nearby creek, etc., so you have to work with a sense of holistic intention, then collectively, over time you can have an immense impact. The Groundwork model is especially suited to this cross-sector thinking and broad-based impact around a place, or defined geography.

LC: It sounds like you're talking about nested scales—the planting in the context of the park, and the school, and the watershed—and also a long-term timeline. But just to put a finer point on where you were going: why greening? Why this kind of investment where there are so many needs? What role does environmental stewardship have to play in this complex tapestry of cities like Baltimore, Detroit, or Yonkers?

RM: I have a personal and a professional answer to that question.

It is incredibly important that what you're doing for a living is something that resonates with you personally. There are a million issues associated with

social and economic decline of communities—housing, jobs, social safety net; but the beauty of a place, the health of the rivers, parks, watersheds, and the sense of neighborhood—that is what resonated for me. It is what I care about. Like many, I see poetry and beauty in the urban landscape and the incredible on-the-ground "realness" of the families, seniors, youth, parents, teachers, and shop owners who work and live in a specific place. It took me a long time to figure this out, how important places and landscapes are to me, even though issues of education, literacy, jobs, youth, health, etc., are no less important to our communities. You have to do what drives you at deep level, so you have to look deeply within yourself to find it. It cannot be found externally.

From a field-oriented perspective, the most visible, tangible expression of social and economic decline is the physical landscape. When I talk about our work, I show pictures of Detroit—acres and acres of vacant property, or Gary, Indiana, or Buffalo. Blight and built-structure abandonment are the visual expression of social and economic decline—along with trashed rivers and vacant lots. Of course, when people think about better functioning places, they have beautiful rivers, tree-lined streets, gorgeous trails, etc. These places do not have vacant lots, but classic parks like Rittenhouse Square here in Philadelphia. That is the symbolic expression of communities that are highly valued and where investment has been made. People with money will pay for that social expression, and people without money can't—and if they're living around parks with needles, it is equally symbolic in a negative way. There are also nonsymbolic things, too, about disinvestment like actual and serious health risks, increased crime, psychological trauma—so the landscape has real impacts on people's lives, their sense of hope and possibilities, their property values and more.

These deeper impacts of greening work, especially the notion of "renewing what is possible" for people is really important. It has been an uphill climb to get local leadership to understand that, especially in places like Yonkers. When I started in the late 1990s, the urban greening field was mixed up with this notion of beautification, and people thought Groundwork was about "Keeping Yonkers beautiful," which devalued it, and people thought we should just "put a few flowers around things." I think it's been a bit of a struggle with the field in general—not so much in the last decade—but certainly prior to that. People who weren't in the field would certainly ask "why is this important?"

Erika Svendsen (ES): What, changed Rick? And why?

RM: We have demonstrated success, whether you're looking at the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, or Center City Philadelphia, or the daylighting project on the Saw Mill River in Yonkers (Figure 1), or Spicket River trail in Lawrence, MA—that these kinds of transformations in the physical landscape

have a fairly impressive impact on reversing economic and social decline. Now, you have a generation of millennials that are much more interested in living in urban centers, in part due to the success of all this work, with fewer wanting a house in the suburbs. It is evident now that you can have both—a beautiful environmentally green place and a vibrant, neighborhood centric urban area. It is also more sustainable of course. Fixing the schools is another matter, but if that happened, more and more people would live in the cities.

The big urban centers—including Philadelphia—are redesigning themselves every year to encourage biking, walking, and park improvements, while promoting a more exciting urban life. One problem is that no one has, really, come up with a solution to mitigate the negative impacts of such urban design improvements on low-income neighborhoods. If you look at the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, it is a highly designed and spectacular urban amenity, along with a storm water mitigation project, that has led to all sorts of cool restaurants, new housing, and music venues. However, there are still neighborhoods within just a block or two that are in great need and deterioration. So the question that is constantly asked is, "Who are these improvements for? Who is the urban greening movement serving?" For example, if you paint a wonderful mural on a vacant wall that addresses cultural identity, or history, or social issues, what is it achieving for the overall neighborhood? So there's been some pushback on the success of these things in reversing decline, in that it takes an incredible effort to create a balanced community in the long run and there just isn't the commitment to do that in most places.

LC: Those are really great examples of things that get to a larger scale, when you're trying to shift from, "Oh, is it just beautification?" to really being a community development engine. I think it's a powerful pattern that you've observed in this field.

RM: I would say that Groundwork recognizes these challenges as well as anyone, and it has tried to make its interventions more equitable, especially by engaging youth and young adults in all its projects and creating pathways for them to drive these projects but also to be the next generation of people who would work on them. Not only Groundwork organizations have done this, of course, but recognizing that landscape change needs to bring along with it local jobs, access to work, transit connections, affordable housing and more is one of Groundwork's strengths. In Yonkers, we even led a Community Benefits Agreement Alliance for more than 3 years in the face of major development pressure. People asked why we were leading that process, and we said that our work focused not only on the urban landscape, but on the impact such changes would have on the entire social ecosystem.

Figure 1: Saw Mill River daylighting project waterfall, tidal basin, and fish ladder in the City of Yonkers, Hudson River Valley, NY.

Photo by Donna Davis/Ms. Davis Photography, used with permission.

LC: Yeah, it's like finding this piece of the puzzle. We all know that greening isn't the silver bullet, right? It is an important leverage, but then, who do you have to work with in coalition or in solidarity to make sure you're not displacing the very people you're trying to serve?

ES: It's hard to create a balanced community, as you say. So one thing is to make sure that everyone in that community can stay in their homes, have equity in that community—which is different from just staying in the community, but have some sort of equity, voice, and status in that community. But at the same time, work with these newcomers to have a sense of responsibility. You know, no one wants to be guilted into anything these days or they may feel like, "Wait a second, I've got a right to live here like everyone else." But I wonder if the next step for greening is, not only do we bring people out the door to a tree planting, but how do we use it as a way that people can see their rights and responsibilities to a place in a new way?

RM: Yeah, that's a really good point. One of the organizations in Philly that I have done some work with is the Fairmount Park Conservancy. There are neighborhoods around Fairmount Park that are low-to-moderate income places but Center City is encroaching and there is real concern [about gentrification]. So the organization's staff, with support from local foundations, have been working thoughtfully to try to manage these changes. One strategy has been the creation of the East Fairmount Park Alliance, which is simply a forum, that meets every quarter or so, and includes key stakeholders from the surrounding neighborhood. It tries to at least create a place where conversations can be had about changes that are coming. You can't just ask people in a gentrifying neighborhood to step up and get involved, you have to have a structure that allows people to move into these conversations and find solutions.

LC: Thank you for those reflections. The next question is sort of the flipside of the first two sides of the same coin. The first was about working in the context of disinvestment or disturbance, but can you reflect on how this notion of social resilience or social-ecological resilience resonates for you, in the communities where you work, with your staff, with your various organizations? Do you see your work as working to strengthen resilience?

RM: I didn't initially. I was just trying to make places that were perceived to

Figure 2: Science Barge sustainable farm and science center, near the city of Yonkers, Hudson River Valley, NY.

Photo by Donna Davis/Ms. Davis Photography, used with permission.

be downtrodden look and feel better. It just angered me every day to drive by a vacant lot, or see no trees on a street, or view bottles, trash, and tires on the banks of an otherwise lovely stream. My motivation was just literally, "What can I do to make a difference here?" And to this day, I still get thrilled by the impact of altering those landscapes.

But I think, over time, a couple things happened. Where we combined a lot of projects together, like the daylighting [of the Saw Mill River], and the Science Barge, and the public art, and the farmer's market (Figure 2). All of a sudden, you had this whole array of things that all complemented each other to revitalize a whole district. I started thinking about this amalgamation under the broader notion of resiliency, in terms of how all these things hold each other up and created a higher level of impact on people. All social issues work the same way, in terms of resiliency. It is never just one thing to get done to have a real long-term impact on education, jobs, or communities.

It is not just all about landscape change, we found too. The work in transforming people is really at the heart of it all, especially the work with kids and senior citizens. We interviewed some of our youths and volunteers for a film, and the senior citizens spoke so eloquently about how much the work we did sustained their lives in a deep way. Actually, one of our longest running Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members, well into her 90s, showed up to my party when I was leaving, and told me how important our work was to her having a sense of community. She gave me a gift for our garden outside of Philly. It was so sweet and made me realize how important this

Figure 3: Youth Corps member Wilder Maturana at the South County Trailway, 2017.
Photo by Felipe Ramirez/ Groundwork Hudson Valley, used with permission.

work is in terms of creating a sense of belonging and cohesion for someone who might have been isolated otherwise. To this day, she still walks her rather heavy CSA share down the street and to her home. Maybe the exercise is what sustains her too.

And then, of course, the work with our youth, which took some time to grow and evolve (Figures 3 and 4). It was when we brought Curt Collier into our organization (still the youth director at GWUSA) and we moved gradually to a model where we were working with fewer kids but more intensively with them over many years. The impact on individual lives was amazing. One young woman, who got involved with us as a small kid in a Forest Service-funded project at a public housing site, became one of our very best youth leaders. Her growth over her 4 years of high school with us was iterative, but because we could mentor her along the way, she went on to work at Yellowstone National Park and came back to Groundwork to work on the Science Barge. We all collectively said, "You know we cannot do this work for a year with a kid, you have to build a sustaining relationship if you're really going to build resilience."

And that was true with senior citizens as well, building the relationship over many years really mattered more than anything else. Or in the case of downtown Yonkers, having the impact over many years as well. I was there for a generation, and it took that time to build a relationship with the community and see the impact. You could see the change in the people we were serving. So, if you're talking about resilience it has to be a long-term engagement,

Figure 4: Youth Corps members Kenny Ortega and Erick Rosa at the South County Trailway, 2017.
Photo by Felipe Ramirez/ Groundwork Hudson Valley, used with permission.

long-term strategy, it can't be quick like even 2 or 3 years, it has to be a progressive thing.

One year at Rocky Mountain National Park, at the Groundwork USA youth summit, Curt had the youths do skits for an audience that included a range of federal leaders. One group enacted an experience of what it was like to work in urban greening in their community, with each member of the ensemble taking a different role—youth, parent, teacher, friend, etc. They told a story about how they would be putting a garden in, or planting a tree, or cleaning up a river, and their parents and their friends would laugh at them, saying things like "The work you are doing is so stupid, it is leading nowhere, you're going to be like a gravedigger or something"—and how hard it was for them to be able to, in their lives and their cultures, to legitimize the things they were doing. They had to defend it in a lot of ways, but by building a relationship with the whole family and making a visible difference in their immediate neighborhoods, and giving the kids a real paycheck and a trip to Yellowstone, we were able to demonstrate to the whole extended community that this wasn't just stupid work and that there were jobs and a future for these kids and their communities.

LC: Two things you said just really resonated with recent work. I don't know if you, have you seen the documentary City of Trees? The film follows Parks and People in Washington, D.C., and its

short-term green jobs program that they ran with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act money, stimulus money and the film watches the winding down of the funding. It's a tragic story for a non-profit running out of the grant money and also the jobs ending for these young adults, who you could see are on this pathway for the potential for transformation. When you say, it can't be 6 months, it can't be 9 months, it can't be 2-3 years—it's got me thinking about our own projects working at a public housing site now that the grant is ending. In thinking about stewarding the landscape and building relationships with people—when are you "done?" It feels like we stepped in and tried to intervene in the system and now we're going to be out of there and it's really hard.

RM: You know I'm sure there were some impacts, but when you're talking about real resilience, I think it's a different timeline and a different level of commitment—and perhaps that signals the need for new types of organizations and mechanisms to support this work. There's a conversation in Philadelphia about "Rebuild," which is an initiative to rebuild parks and rec centers and libraries with revenue from a sweetened beverage tax. It may raise about $500 million for park restoration, and a big part of it is a "civic compact." Fairmount Park Conservancy may play a big role and the question is: "How do you sustain this civic compact after the million-dollar renovation is completed and you move on to the next one. What does it really mean to have this civic compact?" You need to create the social engagement infrastructure, so that once these things are completed, it stays in place. Groundwork was designed as a social enterprise that would promote long-term civic engagement. So, whether it's called Groundwork or something else, if you're really going to have a civic compact and have a real impact over generations, you can't just walk away. You have to have a structure that continues to work on these complex things with the neighborhoods.

ES: Sounds like what you are saying is that we need to invest in capacity building, social organizations, programs and people as we do design, construction and planting.

LC: Yes. Let's move on to the next question. You've already shared so many lessons, but stepping back from your career thus far, could you reflect a little bit about some of your proudest moments or learning moments?

RM: It was interesting when I was leaving Groundwork in 2016, my staff said what they really appreciated about working for me is that I allowed them to

Figure 5: Youth Corps members Renise Wyllie and Kenny Ortega at the daylighting, 2017.
Photo by Groundwork Hudson Valley, used with permission.

flourish, to find their own passions. I kept them focused on the big picture, but did not micro-manage them. I really enjoy helping people find their own passions, because once you do, you almost work for free. It didn't come easy, I couldn't completely figure out what I wanted to do for a long time. You can also expand this idea to helping the community and people in the community find their purpose.

Some of the greening projects I've seen around the country, can seem really surprising that people would have such intense passion about their little piece of a neighborhood that might be up against an industrial park, or a train line, or barely a sliver of grass—but this is their *thing*. Some of them have spent decades working on these small plots, and I might think, "really?" But, I love the drive, the passion, the enthusiasm that makes them so devoted. All work places need to pursue that for their employees, and all people need that in their lives: a sense of ownership, pride, and personal stake in changing things. I am really proud that I was able to make that happen within and outside of an organization. I know it meant so much to me in my own life that I could be equally passionate as well. And sometimes those little projects add up to something big, or surprise you with amazing results.

In terms of community impact, I'm most of proud of the collective impact we had in downtown Yonkers. Over a course of about five blocks, you could tour two phases of the newly opened up Saw Mill River, walk by mosaics

and murals we installed, read the wonderful interpretative signs about local history and watersheds, grab produce at our food co-op and urban farm run by our youths and seniors, watch the fish and turtles in the new habitat we helped create along the river—which is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Urban Wildlife Refuge partnership site, by installing a fish ladder, and see all of the people looking over the edge of the tidal basin, where the salt water hits the fresh water of the Saw Mill (Figure 5). Eventually, 400 yards further, you reach the Science Barge, our sustainable farm and environmental education center floating on the Hudson River. All of that together is amazing to me.

Another great moment was being in Yellowstone with the Groundwork USA National Green Team from around the country and climbing to the top of this mountain at sunset and being kind of amazed that I helped to create such a phenomenal moment for kids every year now. Sometimes you don't know where things are going to lead, you follow your instincts and it's just kind of nuts what you end up in terms of impact and experiences.

LC: When you were talking about these really modest sites, I was just back at this street on the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, where probably 10 years ago Erika and I took our Northern Research Station Director, who is now retired. We were sharing with him a vision that we could see of this place, these organizations, and the possibility for transformation. But we were standing on this dirty street end, along one of the most polluted waterways in the country and talking about how this street end actually connects to our National Forests. We try and tell people on many of our site visits and walking tours, "Don't just look at the bioswale, but think about the people behind this kind of thing. Think about all the organizations and networks that are made up of individuals that it took to make this change to the environment happen."

RM: Right. You can't think of it just as the bioswale at the end of that lot, but what that improvement will lead to next. It's a catalyst, or the spark that leads to something bigger, hopefully. After all, these things are not static or just a moment in time, but part of a bigger story.

LC: Just one final reflection, can you tell us a little bit about some of your future goals? You've obviously made a big change in career and location and so what's next?

RM: I hope to continue to have a direct impact on community landscapes in need of long-term change, here and around the country, and to empower and change the lives of people in the neighborhoods and communities in those places.

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