Re-forming the Suburban Field: (Sub)urban Public Space in the Flattening City

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INTRODUCTION

During the suburban explosion of the mid-20th century, the typical American city and its suburbs reflected distinctly different cultural, demographic and spatial conditions. The central city was conventionally understood as the locus of high culture and employment, demographic diversity, density, and verticality, while the periphery was stereotyped as residential enclaves of cultural vacuity, homogeneity, dispersion, and horizontality, a polarization that has proven stubbornly resistant to revision. Currently, however, there is an on-going "flattening" of that stereotypical urban/suburban divide, as many suburbs are becoming more similar to their central cities through significant demographic and cultural change, as well as subsequent changes in spatial practice.[1] In short, many suburbs are *urbanizing*.

This urbanization is evident spatially in the emergence of a new, symbiotic civic infrastructure of government buildings and (sub)urban public spaces. At first glance, this new civic infrastructure reads as a traditional practice not typically associated with the privatized landscape of suburbia. However, the new (sub)urban public space that anchors this realm is in actuality a hybrid practice, one informed by aspects of both the traditionally urban and the stereotypically suburban; in particular it is characterized to varying degrees by public/private partnerships, intense spatial and/or event programming, and progressive parking strategies. Initiated by local governments, and designed by architects and landscape architects, this burgeoning (sub)urban public space begins to *re-form the suburban field* through micro-nucleation, producing a new, inclusive public realm for diversifying suburban constituencies.

FLATTENING

The middle landscape of American suburbia has historically embodied a powerful pastoral preference for an anti-urban way of life, which J.B. Jackson argues can be traced in part to Thomas Jefferson's dislike of the "corrupt" city and his advocacy for agrarian life.[2] For Jefferson, the "cultivated garden"[3] of the small landowner, epitomized by the farmer, provided the ideal synthesis between civilization and wilderness. More importantly, however, it was the basis for a decentralized democratic society, where individual property ownership and self-governance were firmly rooted in Enlightenment ideals of individualism, self-sufficiency, freedom, and equality.[4] While suburbia is certainly not the locus of farming and an agrarian life, the suburban ideal of the single-family house on the individual plot of land embodies a mutated version of those Enlightenment and Jeffersonian ideas; for many it is the American Dream!

This once compelling conceptual paradigm of the "cultivated garden", which is the foundation for the highly individuated landscape of conventional suburbia, is increasing at odds with continuing American urbanization,[5] particularly in urbanizing suburbs. Instead, a new metropolitan paradigm is emerging, one no longer premised on an anti-urban preference for cultivated nature, but instead on a privileging of mobility.

Mobility is of particular significance to American culture, and therefore to its urbanism. Individual

physical mobility is most clearly expressed in the American landscape through extensive highway and parking systems. However, mobility is also about economic and social status, as well as political freedom, ideas that are fundamental to Jefferson's small landowner and are embodied by the single-family house and lot. And while the rise and spread of suburbia makes vivid the American desire for individualism, space, and status, mobility also requires proximity, networks, opportunities, and access, conditions more typically ascribed to the city. The American desire to access and maximize physical, economic, and social mobility – whether urban or suburban - drives the flattening city.

The "flattening" of the American metropolis is a conceptual operation defined by an increasing similarity - a leveling - between urban and suburban attitudes, ideas, and ways of life. An on-going, often asymmetrical process that emerged in the 1950s but accelerated in the 1990s, flattening is manifested most vividly in the spatial and formal practices, as well as in the demographic and cultural trajectories, of urbanizing suburbs and suburbanizing cities. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the increasing similarity that characterizes the flattening city does not ultimately produce a fully level physical condition, nor does it equate to an automatic and insistent homogeneity.[6] Rather, it produces a contemporary metropolitan landscape that becomes *thicker* – denser, more vertical, and more "urban" - in some places, and *thinner* - less dense, more horizontal, and more "suburban" - in other places. In so doing, flattening produces not only greater levels of difference, particularly in urbanizing suburbs, but also opportunities for innovation in new spatial practices that re-configure traditional understandings of urban and suburban.

Just as American cultural attitudes towards the city and suburbs are changing, so too is the demographic composition, particularly in the suburbs. The conventional stereotype of the American suburbs as overwhelmingly white, middle class, residential areas – places of tremendous homogeneity – is largely a remnant construct of the mid 20th century suburban landscape. However, these stereotypes belie the emerging reality that many suburbs are undergoing significant demographic change, evidenced in the 2000 Census. In particular, many suburbs are becoming more like their central cities in myriad ways, examples of which are found in the suburbs whose projects are highlighted in this paper.

Many suburbs are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, such as in the Houston exurb of Sugar Land, Texas, where 38.4% of the population is minority, and 30.8% is foreign born. Similarly, in the Washington, D.C. beltway suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland, the population is 53% minority, while 35.8% are foreign born, and 42.9% speak a language other than English at home. Many suburbs are also seeing significant changes in household composition, with fewer families and fewer children, as well as more singles and more seniors. In the inner-ring Denver suburb of Englewood, Colorado, only 10.4% of households are comprised of the stereotypical suburban married couple with children under 18; instead, at 44.7%, the largest segment of households is single people.[7]

Some suburbs have emerged as significant employment centers that are no longer reliant on their once central cities, such as in Bellevue, Washington, outside of Seattle, which has more jobs (approx. 140,000) than residents (approx. 120,000), and is now the fifth largest city in the State of Washington.[8] Other suburbs have entered periods of decline and are experiencing many of the results of disinvestment that center cities have been grappling with for many years. As a result, they are not the locus of affluence as is commonly thought; from 2005-2007, Englewood, Colorado's median household income was $40,685 per year, while Denver's median household income was $43,748 during the same time period.

As suburbs change culturally and demographically, their spatial and formal conditions evolve as well, as evidenced in the emergence of a new (sub)urban public realm.

THE NEW (SUB)URBAN PUBLIC REALM

Historically, the city was understood as the locus of a strong, collective public realm, and its most significant public spaces were physical manifestations of political ideas about democracy; thus traditional American public space, understood as open, plural and free, is often associated with government buildings, such as City Hall Plaza in Boston, Massachusetts, or Daley Plaza in Chicago, Illinois. Conversely, the suburbs were stereotyped as being absent of a public realm. The primary "public" space of suburbia was that of the mall, conventionally understood as a privatized social space with a

facade of openness and community, and a reality of closure, exclusivity, and surveillance.[9] The so-called suburban town center that evolved from this context was essentially an outdoor mall.

But recent shifts in cultural values and demographics in both the city and suburbs are generating a new, hybrid public space that seeks to catalyze both public life and economic development by incorporating aspects of both the traditionally urban and the stereotypically suburban. At its core, this emerging model affirms the importance of collective urban life and space; however, it also reflects the impact and lessons of a suburban lifestyle. In particular, hybrid public space – which is found in both urban and suburban conditions - is characterized to varying degrees by public/private partnerships, intense spatial and/or event programming, and progressive parking strategies. Urban examples of this phenomenon include Millennium Park in downtown Chicago, IL., and Discovery Green in downtown Houston, TX. Although initiated by local governments, these urban projects do not typically engage public buildings, as those facilities often already exist. Instead, they contribute to existing systems of civic infrastructure.

In the suburbs, however, a variation of this hybrid model has emerged that seeks to engage and represent its broader, more diverse constituencies through a public realm catalyzed by a *new* civic infrastructure comprised of public building adjacent to a significant public space. Examples include the Englewood Civic Center and Public Plaza (2000), located in a once declining inner-ring suburb of Denver, Colorado; the Sugar Land City Hall and Town Square (2005), which centers an exurb of Houston, Texas; the Bellevue City Hall and City Hall Plaza (2006), which anchors an employment rich "edge city"[10] outside of Seattle, Washington; and the Silver Spring (Maryland) Civic Building and Veteran's Plaza (under construction 2009), which houses a regional center of Montgomery County government in a beltway suburb outside of Washington D.C. That such a broad range of suburbs is developing public space cannot be understated.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

While urban public space is traditionally publicly owned and developed,[11] and suburban "public" space is conventionally wholly private, many new public space projects – both urban and suburban - are now commonly produced as public/private partnerships, although they vary in kind and degree. New urban public spaces such as Chicago's Millennium Park or Houston's Discovery Green are publicly owned and publicly developed, and private participation occurs largely through the sale of naming rights, as well as extensive private donations by individuals and businesses. New suburban public spaces such as the Sugar Land Town Square and the Englewood Public Plaza are also publicly owned. However, both were developed in partnership with private developers who built the spaces as part of larger, for-profit development.

The City of Sugar Land, an exurb located twenty miles southwest of Houston in Fort Bend County, consists of approximately 72,000 residents. Sugar was first grown in the area beginning around 1838, and for a while was the dominant crop on a handful of very large sugar plantations; however, once residential lots were offered for sale in 1950,[12] the area quickly became a bedroom community for Houston, itself a highly suburbanized city. As befits its suburban origins, Sugar Land was loosely organized around a major highway intersection, but essentially had no physical "downtown".

In 1996, the City of Sugar Land teamed with Fort Bend County, the Fort Bend County Levee Improvement District #2, and Planned Community Developers, who are the developers of the adjacent First Colony Mall, to devise a new downtown at the crossroads of US Highway 59 and State Highway 6, and

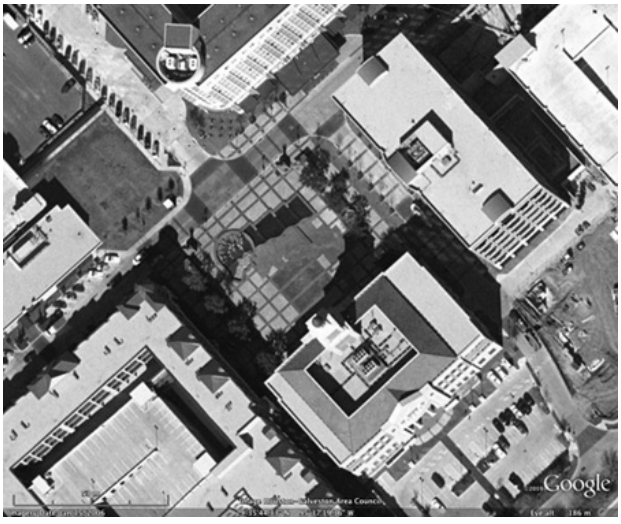

Figure 1: Sugar Land Town Square, Sugar Land, Tx.

adjacent to the First Colony Mall. According to the City of Sugar Land, "(t)he goal was simply to create a sense of place and a source of community pride."[13]

The spatial results of this public/private partnership are centered around a new public space – the Sugar Land Town Square, designed by landscape architects SLA Studio Land – that sits immediately adjacent to the new Sugar Land City Hall. The remainder of the new, walkable downtown includes 204,000 square feet of office space (and 150,000 more under construction), a conference center and 300 room conference hotel, 225,000 square feet of retail, 167 residential condominiums, and plenty of free parking, the majority of which is in structured garages. Although often referred to as a "lifestyle center", it is not; instead of being simply an outdoor mall, Sugar Land Town Square is actually focused around government, jobs, housing, and public space.

Figure 2: Englewood Public Plaza, Englewood, Co.

A similar example is found in the City of Englewood, a lower-income inner-ring suburb of approximately 29,000 residents adjacent to the City of Denver's southern edge. Englewood was once very well known as the site of the Cinderella City Mall, a 1.35 million square foot regional shopping mall built in 1968 that went into decline as suburbanization continued its outward march. By 1997, the mall was essentially empty, its tax revenue was almost zero, and the City of Englewood was in serious economic trouble. Building upon the knowledge that Denver's new RTD Light Rail system would stop in Englewood, the city began a master planning process – led by Peter Calthorpe and Associates with extensive community input - to determine how best to transform itself. The result was a decision to demolish the mall and to build a transit oriented development comprised of an intermodal transit station, 300,000 sf of officing, 380,000 sf of retail and restaurant space (much of it in big boxes), extensive parking (most of it structured), and 440 residential units. Critically, the development is centered around the new Civic Center and Public Plaza, completed in 2000.

Much like the Sugar Land Town Square, CityCenter Englewood is the result of a public/private partnership among the City of Englewood, Miller Weingarten Realty LLC and Trammell Crow Residential, and is intended to both "revitaliz(e) the community spirit as well as the tax base of Englewood."[14] Both projects used a new public realm to anchor a larger development.

When small, growing municipalities such as Sugar Land or Englewood look for ways to catalyze both public life and private development to benefit their residents, they often do not have the personnel, expertise, or desire to develop and implement a large project independently. As a result, they must enter into public/private partnerships with private developers, a model that can generate fear and criticism of the privatization of public space. However, since in the end these spaces remain publicly owned and operated, a less reactive, more instrumental response would include an assessment of how best to leverage the expertise of the private developer in the production of hybrid public space.

INTENSE SPATIAL AND/OR EVENT PROGRAMMING

A significant characteristic of hybrid public space is the intensity of both spatial and event programming. This is a marked change from the conscious indeterminacy of more traditional public spaces, such as New York's Central Park, where large open spaces provided an unprogrammed "field" for all kinds of human interaction; instead, it is strongly influenced by the highly programmed social space of successful shopping malls, pioneered by Victor Gruen. Unlike the mall, the programming in these hybrid public spaces is genuinely intended to enhance the lives of participants and to make their

municipality a better place to live. Like the mall, however, the programming also works to generate economic benefit from the participants, here for the city at large, as at the Sugar Land Town Square, the Englewood Public Plaza, the Silver Spring Veteran's Plaza, and the Bellevue City Hall and City Hall Plaza.

Because of its relatively compact size, the spatial programming at the Sugar Land Town Square occurs primarily through the buildings that frame the Square: City Hall, the residential condominiums, the conference center and hotel, as well as ground level retail on three sides, most of which is (not surprisingly) food related. A very large fountain sits within the square itself, and serves to break up the largely hardscaped space into smaller "rooms", while the broad steps of City Hall double as a stage. In addition, the Square has extensive event programming, including concerts, movies, dance lessons, and special events.

Like the Sugar Land Town Square, the Englewood Public Plaza is carefully programmed, although here the spatial programming occurs both at its perimeter *and* within the plaza. Anchored on one end by a large pedestrian bridge that connects to the parallel light rail tracks, the plaza is limned by residential units, ground level retail including a coffee shop with outdoor seating, and the adjacent Civic Center. The plaza itself is a large hardscaped space, in which sit an oval amphitheater with grass seating whose stage is integrated into the base of the pedestrian bridge; an oval grass "lawn" with a large fountain; and many large public artworks that are part of the Museum of Outdoor Arts Sculpture Garden. Here too, the plaza's event programming is extensive, including concerts, movies, and other special events. Even the adjacent Civic Center - a renovated department store from the otherwise demolished Cinderella City Mall - is heavily programmed. Designed by Tryba Architects of Denver, the new facility includes the City's Administrative facilities, Municipal Court, Public Library, a performance space, and the Museum of Outdoor Arts indoor galleries and offices.

The spatial programming of the Silver Spring Veterans' Plaza also occurs both at its perimeter and within the plaza. Situated at the northeast corner of a busy intersection in downtown Silver Spring, it is surrounded by retail, restaurants, structured parking, and a large movie theater. Designed by architects Machado and Silvetti of Boston, the Civic Building is comprised of a community program center, the Montgomery County Regional Service Center, and the Round House Theater School. It also contains the "Great Hall", a large performance hall whose portico opens directly to the plaza, providing space for outdoor performance. Within the plaza sits an ice rink covered by a glass pavilion, which becomes a shaded seating area in warm weather, as well as a veterans memorial by Toby Mendez. Although currently under construction, with expected completion in 2010, the County government expects the plaza will be heavily programmed with events throughout the year, including movies, festivals, concerts and other events.□

Figure 3: Site of the future Silver Spring Veteran's Plaza, Silver Spring, Md. (under construction)

Designed by architects SRG Partnership of Seattle with landscape architects Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg of Vancouver, Bellevue's new City Hall and City Hall Plaza are located in an extensively renovated existing building in downtown Bellevue so as "to nurture a strong civic presence"□ in the city. The Plaza is situated on a highly visible corner diagonally from the primary bus terminal of the city (and adjacent structured parking), as well as across from a recently completed high rise office tower. The fourth corner is currently under construction with what appears to be another high-rise office tower. Once completed and full, the populations of the office towers are expected to generate high levels of daily foot traffic to the plaza. Equally important, the Plaza is conceived of as an outdoor public space for public events such

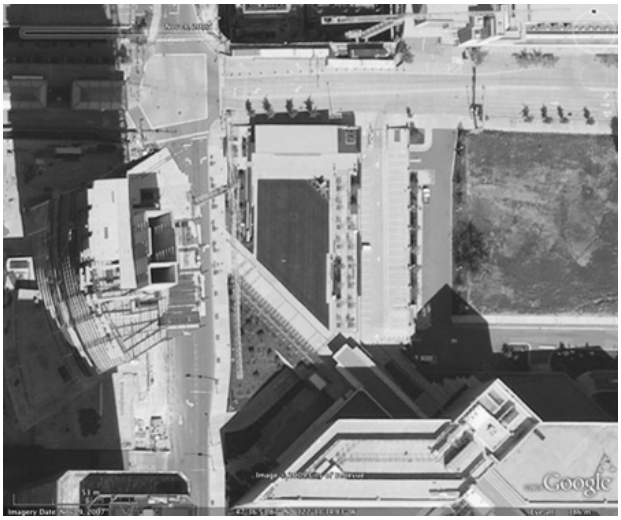

Figure 4: Bellevue City Hall Plaza, Bellevue, Wa.

as concerts, and as a showcase for public sculpture, both permanent through purchase and temporary through the Biennial Sculpture Exhibition.

While indeterminacy was once a primary characteristic of American urban public space, the unmitigated successes of the highly programmed social space of the shopping mall has had a significant influence on new public space projects. Now, many such projects are of a hybrid nature; they are publicly owned, but are characterized by an intensity of both spatial and event programming that was once associated primarily with shopping malls. As a result, they are more heavily used. Here too it become clear that the private sector has important lessons for public space.

PROGRESSIVE PARKING STRATEGIES

A third significant characteristic of hybrid (sub)urban public spaces is the use of parking strategies that promote the density of people and activity that typically characterize a more urban condition. In traditional urban areas, access to public space occurs through a combination of foot traffic, car traffic, and public transportation, while in the suburbs access is essentially entirely vehicular. In both cases, however, the sheer numbers of required parking spaces for almost any use are decidedly suburban.

Most parking requirements in municipal zoning codes are determined by using Parking Generation Surveys from the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE), or by benchmarking other cities that originally based their requirements on ITE's parking generation rates. Planner Donald Shoup argues that ITE's methodology is to survey "…peak parking occupancy observed at suburban sites with ample free parking and no public transit." Additionally, the ITE often does only a small handful of observations, thus the "data" is based on surprisingly small samples; a full 22% of the parking generation rates are based on only one observation session. As a result, the vast majority of "official" parking rates establish excessively high minimum requirements, which are typically spatialized in enormous parking lots, made possible by the low cost of land.

For new (sub)urban public space, parking is as plentiful as ever, but is handled in large structured garages, a more typically urban strategy. At Discovery Green in Houston, as well as at Millennium Park in Chicago, parking is quite literally foundational; copious amounts of structured parking are located underneath the park.

Similarly, at the Bellevue City Hall and City Hall Plaza, architects SRG Partnership of Seattle took advantage of the topographical section of the site to tuck the parking under the primary public space. The Silver Spring Civic Center provides zero on-site parking; rather, it leverages the availability of the large public garage located just across the street. Located adjacent to a multi-nodal bus and rail transit stop, the Englewood Civic Center and Public Plaza appropriates extensive commuter parking facilities. And the Sugar Land Town Square consolidates all required parking for all uses (except residential) into a pair of very large structured garages carefully hidden nearby behind other uses. In all cases, there is plentiful structured parking – usually free - that is easily accessible to the space.

The provision of parking might seem to be of minor consequence to the success of (sub)urban public space. However, successful, active public space requires a density of people, who in turn demand easy access, often by vehicle. Rather than implementing the typical suburban sea of parking lots that separates people and uses, municipalities are developing progressive strategies that provide plentiful, easily accessed, structured parking in ways that support and promote density rather than obliterate it.

CONCLUSION

The flattening of the American metropolis reflects changing attitudes towards both the city and the suburbs; in particular, it reveals a desire to embrace and leverage the optimal (and sometimes contradictory) aspects of both urban and suburban life. Although this leveling of cultural attitudes - and demographics - might suggest a similar leveling of spatial conditions, in fact the primary consequence of flattening in the American metropolis is greater levels of difference, particularly in urbanizing suburbs and suburbanizing urban cores.

For the suburbs, flattening through urbanization is an unexpected and optimistic direction, as it suggests a willingness by suburbanites to engage new ways of life, and as a result, new forms of architecture and urbanism. For the city, flattening through suburbanization is not the spatial death sentence it might once have seemed, as new forms emerge to accommodate the influence of suburban lifestyles in dense environments. Rather, flattening challenges designers to transcend often ingrained stereotypes about urban and suburban, and to identify, assess, and appropriate those practices that work, regardless of origin. In particular, flattening produces opportunities for innovation in new spatial practices that re-configure traditional understandings of urban and suburban.

In regards to the public realm, flattening demands a rethinking of normative attitudes and assumptions regarding the supposed impossibility of public life and public space in the suburbs, as well as the dangers of private influence. Instead, flattening not only *affirms* the importance of collective urban life and space, but also leverages the lessons of the private sector and suburban life. Specifically, hybrid (sub)urban public space reforms the privatized suburban field through micro-nucleation, resulting in a new, inclusive public realm for diversifying suburban constituencies.

ENDNOTES

1. This research is funded by a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.
2. J.B. Jackson. "Jefferson, Thoreau and Beyond." *Landscapes,* ed. Ervin H. Zube. (The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, MA.), 1970. pp1-9.
3. Leo Marx. "The Garden." *The Machine in the Garden*. (Oxford University Press: New York, NY.), 1964.
4. Thomas Jefferson. *Notes on the State of Virginia.* (Harper & Row: New York, NY.), p157.
5. The 2000 Census showed that 80% of Americans now live in urban areas, and that almost 33% of Americans live in urban areas of more than five million people. Bruce Katz and Robert E. Lang. "Introduction." *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence from Census 2000.* (Brookings Institution Press: Washington D.C.), 2003, p4.
6. The terms flat, flatness, and flattening are often used pejoratively when not in reference to a literal, physical condition. In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air (1982)*, Marshall Berman uses flattening to indicate a lessening of substance when he laments the "steril(ity)" of modern cities and modern life as "a dismal flattening out of social thought". In *SuburbiaNation (2004),* Robert Bueka uses flattening to describe a lessening of difference and the rise of homogeneity when he says "the suburbs may well be flattening the landscape of America, fostering homogeneity of experience through the 'displacement' of place itself." Perhaps most widely known - but used in a different way – is *The World Is Flat,* where Thomas Friedman uses flatness to articulate a shrinking, globalizing world characterized by equality of power and opportunity: "(T)he simple notion of flatness…describe(s) how more people can plug, play, compete, connect, and collaborate with more equal power than ever before." In each example, regardless of the disciplinary leanings and the tone of the argument, increasing similarity is a primary characteristic of flattening.
7. All demographics from the American Community Survey, 2005-7. http://factfinder.census.gov Accessed December 11, 2008.
8. http://www.ci.bellevue.wa.us/economic-profile.htm Accessed September 23, 2009.
9. This idea has been written about extensively, for example in Margaret Crawford's "The World in A Shopping Mall" from Michael Sorkin, ed. *Variations on a Theme Park*. (Hill and Wang: New York, NY). 1992.
10. Joel Garreau. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. (Anchor Books: New York, NY.), 1992. p436.
11. William Mitchell, in *e-topia: "Urban Life, Jim--But Not As We Know It"* says that three criteria define public space, whether physical or virtual: who owns it, who paid for it, and who pays to maintain it.
12. "History of Fort Bend County." www.sugarlandtownsquare.com/History.aspx. Accessed August 27, 2008.
13. www.sugarlandtownsquare.com/History.aspx. Accessed August 27, 2008.
14. www.englewoodgov.org/Index.aspx?page=468. Accessed April 4, 2009.
15. www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/DGS/DBDC/RegionalProjectPages/SilverSpringProjects/sscivicbldg.asp Accessed July 2, 2009.
16. *Innovations: City of Bellevue Brochure*, p7. Accessed December 7, 2008.