There is a growing body of evidence to support the fact that exercise, fresh air, and contact with nature are important to one’s health and well-being. Those of us who have experienced the joys of playing in streams, hiking forest trails and collecting fireflies need no statistics to understand the benefits of spending time outdoors. Yet these experiences are foreign concepts for many people in urban neighborhoods, where green space is scarce and the world beyond their walls is riddled with real and perceived dangers.

On redevelopment projects we are all familiar with the all-too-common “band-aid solution”: a plastic playground thrown up on a barren lot, a few scrawny trees hastily installed in small holes chinked into hardpan clay. The real solution is far more complex – and yet so very attainable. It requires a fundamental shift in the way we approach community redevelopment. A much broader understanding of “sustainability” must be adopted from the outset; it must not only encompass the physical realm of site design but also provide for financial and social stability. The success of such a comprehensive endeavor depends upon the collaboration of all the stakeholders: residents, community leaders, local governments, developers and design team members.

The first step, then, is to assemble a team that covers all three aspects of sustainability. In addition to the design disciplines, the developer, financial institutions and resident leaders, the general contractor and property management staff should be included so design decisions, budgets, and day-to-day operations remain aligned. The Integrated Design Process provides a framework for the discussion throughout the project to ensure that the design evolves as a coordinated entity.

The challenges to sustainable site design in urban neighborhoods are especially daunting. Budgets are tight, the sites bleak and broken. The spaces rarely fit neatly into the clear-cut examples in planning textbooks; each project demands a creative application of the standard design process. Fortunately, there are affordable ways to effect dramatic change to reclaim these community spaces and create healthy, inviting environments. An inventory of valuable natural resources can yield surprising results; existing mature trees, rich soils, stream beds and promising view sheds can often be found even in some of the harshest conditions. The preservation and restoration of these crucial elements provide a virtually cost-free foundation for a viable new environment, yet astonishingly, traditional methods often wipe these assets from the site to start from scratch. Careful grading plans can protect existing trees, minimize earthwork disruption and costs, and visually integrate new built elements into the landscape. A gentle sculpting of the land preserves effective drainage patterns, corrects problematic routes, and puts stormwater to use in raingardens and revived riparian habitats. Strategic placement of new shade trees can reduce building energy costs, an important factor on properties with low operating budgets. Improved indoor-outdoor relationships are created through thoughtful planning and collaboration between the architect and landscape architect, resulting in more “eyes on the space”, increased pedestrian circulation, and safe, appealing sequences of semi-private and public spaces.

The involvement of the community is a vital part of neighborhood redevelopment. By building strong relationships, the project team can develop a clear understanding of longstanding fears, wishes, traditions and lifestyles, and is far more likely to create vibrant communities. Music venues, picnic areas and public transportation hubs encourage interaction and strengthen bonds among neighbors. Grant programs and partnerships with local and national non-profit organizations galvanize neighborhoods by creating community-supported endeavors like urban farms, markets, and arts centers – all of which offer entrepreneurial opportunities and the potential for economic growth and stability. This kind of
direct involvement and personal investment engenders a sense of stewardship and greatly improves the likelihood that the transformation is a meaningful and lasting one.

This comprehensive approach to redevelopment not only creates beautiful and healthy spaces, it invites the residents into them, empowers them, and inspires a new way of living.