

CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF “CULTURAL SENSITIVITY” AND “CULTURAL SINCERITY” IN LOCAL GROWTH POLITICS

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the role of culture in the local urban development process through a case study of recent proposals in Davis, California. The author argues that community cultural expectations—of environmental leadership and the preservation of local character—had an important impact on project proposals and the political campaigns that followed, including the ability of an unlikely corporate developer to win public approval from this town with a vocal and usually powerful anti-corporate character. While on the surface the local growth coalition came together as expected in the literature, this study demonstrates that development organizations operate within cultural contexts that are more complex than the existing discourse has accounted for. Factors that the author calls “cultural sensitivity” and “cultural sincerity” both play a role. As concerns with environmental sustainability and preservation of local character gain prominence in development politics, the insights drawn from these cases are of particular value.*

Keywords: urban politics, culture, urban development, community identity

Urban development does not take place in a vacuum. To be sure, established assumptions about the process are manifestly accurate: property developers usually have their way, large corporations do homogenize the American landscape with indistinguishable retail outlets, and entrepreneurs, landowners, mainstream media, and local governments alike tend to support growth more often than not. In other words, what Logan and Molotch ([1987] 2007) famously termed the growth machine model is a fundamentally accurate way of understanding the urban development process. However, like other socioeconomic interactions, from gift-giving to hiring practices to market exchange, the politics of urban development are also

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highly socially, culturally, and historically determined. It is a mistake to overlook the complexities of local social norms and cultural contexts, which, I argue, play a far more nuanced role than the growth machine and other models account for. Through a case study of two recent development proposals and the campaigns that followed them in Davis, California, this article explores the role of culture—in the form of distinctive socially, emotionally, and historically influenced community expectations—in the politics of urban development. I argue that idiosyncratic local factors do shape the decision making and even proposal designs of development organizations, and demonstrate how a developer's willingness and ability to adapt to cultural expectations can affect the relative ability of the growth machine to succeed even in an "anti-growth" community.

In a suburban town in America today, the fact that a "big-box" corporate retailer won public approval while a large housing development was turned down at the ballot box is not particularly noteworthy. That it happened where it did, and how it did, is considerably more so. The town in question, Davis, California, is a university-oriented city of 65,622 people known for its liberal politics, high levels of community involvement, and quirky landmarks to environmentalism, bicycling, and an intentionally "unique" local character. The first project—the primary case to be considered here—was a 136,842-square-foot Target store and surrounding shopping center that many expected to have a scale, attitude, and feel quite foreign to Davis. It was presented to the City Council by corporate representatives in 2005. The other was a 1,884-unit residential subdivision with commercial and civic components called Covell Village, brought forward by a local development consortium in 2004. The two proposals were quite different, and a number of factors outside the scope of this study certainly help explain their different rates of success.¹ However, both were the type of development that a growth-wary community with prominent "anti-corporate" voices could be expected to turn down if given the opportunity (see Baldassare 1998). As we will see below, the citizens of Davis have shown time and again their willingness to flex political muscle in opposing developments that do not fit with their normative ideals of environmental leadership and the preservation of a unique, small-town character—including the previous large-scale commercial developments in which they have had a say.

The Target Corporation's ability to win over the community in a popular referendum (the first ever such challenge for the retail giant) presents an opportunity to analyze (1) how developers and other components of the growth machine may adapt their own organizational cultures to meet local expectations and (2) how such efforts are *in turn* received and understood by the community. This dialogical process can be understood through two analytical concepts that I develop further in the next section: a developer's efforts at *cultural sensitivity* to a community's expectations, and the community's corresponding perception of *cultural sincerity* in the developer. In what follows, I first propose a place for local culture in research on urban development politics and then analyze the Davis cases in these terms. The Target case is the primary focus and provides the bulk of the evidence of the role of cultural sensitivity (and sincerity) when effectively employed. This is followed by the counterexample of the housing development to further demonstrate that attempts at cultural sensitivity are only helpful if perceived as sincere. I

conclude by describing the importance of these findings for broader urban theory and practice.

Growth Machines, Local Context, and Cultural Expectations

The urban sociology discourse has long acknowledged the importance of culture for understanding the built environment (e.g., Firey 1945), and studies of community life, organization, or identity certainly address such questions (Borer 2006; Hummon 1990; Small 2004; Suttles 1984, among many others). Yet studies of urban development and political economy have paid surprisingly little attention to the complexities of local culture. Structural or Marxist theories leave little room for individual agency, and the more prominent growth machine models still tend to undervalue the community sentiments, norms, and expectations that produce the unique cultural contexts in which development politics actually take place. Before introducing Davis and the cases themselves in greater detail, this section builds on the relevant literature to demonstrate the link between local culture and the urban development process.

The concept of the urban growth machine, as introduced by Harvey Molotch (1976) and expanded by Logan and Molotch ([1987] 2007) in their landmark work on "the political economy of place," takes the basic Marxian structural conditions of capital and the power assumptions of critical elite theory and applies them to physical space and the human actors and institutions that utilize it. By presenting the structural economic argument through a humanist perspective, Logan and Molotch offer the growth machine as a theoretical tool for better understanding local growth, development politics, and the commodification of urban space. The growth machine, "an apparatus of interlocking progrowth associations and governmental units," is composed of local elites, from landowners and businessmen to city government and the press, all united in pursuit of exchange values (Logan and Molotch [1987] 2007:32). Local politics and cityspace itself become battlegrounds between those for whom the city provides use values and those for whom it is an "asset in money-making projects" (Molotch and Logan 1990:87). The pursuit of exchange values can be so unrelenting that the growth ethic overwhelms any localities where political or social capital are not strong enough to deflect it, leading to uneven growth and insensitive development. In many cases communities do resist "value-free development," but this is a resistance that growth machines, in turn, often have methods for overcoming (see Warner and Molotch 1995).

Simply put, the production and accumulation of capital is an extremely powerful force in urban space. But while it may often win out over demands for greater use-value or otherwise triumph in the face of resistance, *it does not do so regardless of socio-cultural factors*. The urban political economy discourse has only acknowledged this in a general sense. Individuals, organizations, and institutions are given important agency in the growth machine model, and Logan (1978) and Logan and Schneider (1981) also note stratification between communities of different statuses and their respective abilities to resist unfavorable development, while Baldassare and Protash (1982) demonstrate that some "community variables" (e.g., homogeneity, percentage white collar) are correlated with local growth policies.

Yet none examine any communities closely enough to divine local cultural conditions. Even Schneider's (1992) study of "disaffection" with the growth machine and his accompanying analysis of the rise of slow-growth or anti-growth politics is couched in exclusively economic, rational-choice terms. Research on neighborhood associations and collective action in the 1990s (e.g., Calavita 1992; Logan and Rabrenovic 1990; Mesch and Schwirian 1996; Molotch and Logan 1990), and more recent work on social capital and local organization (e.g., Swaroop and Morenoff 2006; Temkin and Rohe 1998) do a better job of incorporating local culture, but have still tended to limit their analyses to organizational and structural conditions or to take large-*n* survey approaches that preclude detailed ethnography (with a few notable exceptions²).

A more nuanced approach to local culture is needed in urban political economy to better understand the dynamics of growth in places where local identity and concerns with culturally compatible development affect that process. This study demonstrates one way of doing so. While it is focused on a single community, I argue that my findings and their broader implications are not unique to Davis. As elaborated upon in the conclusion, the impacts of local expectations on urban development in the ways described here can be seen at work in a variety of contexts.

I will now sketch the crucial connection between local culture and growth politics. To begin with, the basic proposition of shared cultural identity in shared space is well established: whether in terms of Suttles' (1972) "cognitive maps," Castells' (1983) "collective consumption," or Small's (2004) "neighborhood narrative frames," people in the same community can often be seen to have similar sentiments, histories, and experiences. It follows then that these people will have shared expectations of how their communities (and therefore, to some degree, they themselves) are defined, projected, and understood. Indeed, these sentiments of place attachment constitute not only normative understandings of how things are done, but the sorts of "moral values" that inspire strong emotional response and action to protect when endangered (Jasper 1997).³ Urban development projects matter because changes to a place's built environment, consumption opportunities, or public image can pose real challenges to existing cultural identity. In this context then, there may be socio-historically determined (if also imprecise and evolving) standards, outside of any written law, that new projects must meet in order to gain acceptance—and, in the case of a politically powerful citizenry, to win city approval.⁴ For this reason, accounting for these expectations can be as relevant to a proposal as formal building codes.

One should expect these criteria to differ from one place to another and across time and cohorts, and they will likely be difficult to precisely define in any case. In Davis, however, judging from past development history and my own and others' observations of the community, two especially dominant expectations for new development are leadership in environmental sustainability and the preservation of unique local character (discussed in detail below). A local activist and former Davis City Council candidate I interviewed described it in his own words: "There are people that have a philosophy of Davis, want it to be progressive and have

cutting edge, environmentally conscious things, and [developers] understand that they have to throw something their way." Or as the *Sacramento News and Review* (2006) poignantly editorialized:

People who don't live in Davis find it hard to understand why anyone would make a big deal about opening a Target superstore within city limits. But longtime residents of this greenbelt-lined berg know the reason. For the past 20 years, each Davis City Council in its turn rejected big-box retail in town because it didn't fit with the smart, progressive, university infused zeitgeist that is Davis.

These quotes do not capture the expectations of every member of the community, which has a variety of constituencies, but they represent a prevailing outlook, and match other accounts of the city's general political culture (see, e.g., Fitch 1998 and Lofland 2004, and my discussion below).

The final important connection to draw here then is that the many components of local growth coalitions are themselves operating within this local cultural context. Diane Vaughan (1998:32) writes that "cultural rules" influence all actors from individuals to organizations and states, "defining legitimate goals for them to pursue and therefore affecting action and meaning at the local level." She builds from Granovetter's (1985) concept of the social embeddedness of economic action, arguing that this suggests relative dependence between economic actions and "the institutionalized cultural belief systems within which they are located." Organizations—including developers, corporations, city governments, and the rest of the growth machine—operate under socially embedded "cultures of production," the "institutionalized cultural belief systems that shaped interpretation, meaning and action at the local level" (Vaughan 1998:39). In communities where cultural expectations are well defined and highly institutionalized—and to some degree formalized through the democratic expression of popular sentiment—they will influence the decision making of local growth elites and even outside organizations acting within the local context. These sentiments can be as essential to understanding growth politics as property values, planning guidelines, or rubbing elbows with the right bureaucrats at city hall. This is where cultural expectations and the growth machine model come together.

In analyzing these processes, I make use of two interdependent concepts that capture the ways that cultural considerations manifest themselves in my research (and which can be seen at work in other cases as well): The first, *cultural sensitivity*, is the degree to which developers attempt to be compatible with local expectations through real alterations to their usual standards of operations, from public relations to physical project or product designs and implementation. The second, *cultural sincerity*, is the degree to which these actions are in turn perceived as compatible by the community. While more subjective, it helps describe qualitative differences I observed in how developer efforts are received. I use these analytical categories to help interpret the culturally embedded actions of development organizations and community members.

METHODS

In order to more closely examine the role of cultural expectations on the urban development process, I analyzed recent development politics in Davis, California, and the immediate social and historical context in which they occurred. These processes were highly visible in the community. For one thing, Davis is a relatively blank slate, having long been spared the scale of outside development many cities its size have seen—due in part perhaps to its strongly projected identity as a place ready to resist value-free development and growth—despite otherwise being a prime market for it in terms of available land and relatively wealthy residents. Political circumstances also facilitated empirical study, as it is common in Davis for decisions on large or controversial changes to the community to be made by popular vote. Local cultural expectations and attitudes are thus highly visible and have in many cases been formally enacted at the ballot box, following long and often heated periods of campaigning and public debate. An attentive local and regional press, thorough public records (especially from the Yolo County Clerk's office and the special collections archives at the University of California at Davis), and preserved websites and campaign materials all offered a wealth of detailed data on the cases.

In addition to these archival sources, information and opinions from fourteen key-informant interviews conducted with developers, residents, community leaders, and others are used to develop the story, articulate specific understandings of prevailing cultural expectations, and provide insider details on organizational decision making. Most interviewees were chosen for their connection to the specific cases (as policy-makers, developers, or active supporters or opponents of a project), while a handful of others were interviewed for their accounts as everyday community members. The interviews were selected and conducted sequentially (all requests were granted) to gather this supplemental information as needed.⁵ I carried out the ethnographic component of my research during the summers of 2007 and 2008 while living in Davis; interviews, which ranged from 40 minutes to nearly 2 hours, were conducted both by phone and in person. All direct quotes come from these interviews unless otherwise noted.

Davis, Target, and other places and organizations mentioned are not pseudonyms, and real names are used for those central figures with public personae who waived their confidentiality. Interviewees who preferred anonymity in order to speak freely about the events are referred to descriptively or by pseudonyms where appropriate. These interview data, public records, and local press accounts all contribute to an understanding of local culture that is reinforced by my own time in the community and other recent accounts (e.g., Fitch 1998; Francis 2003; Lofland 2004; Lofland and Haig 2000). To better illustrate the specific community expectations at work in Davis development politics, the following section presents a brief history of the city before bringing in the Target case in greater detail.

DAVIS, CALIFORNIA

Davis is a town with a prominent sense of community and local identity. Adjectives like progressive, intellectual, environmentally concerned, and politically

active come up time and again in my field notes when residents are asked to describe their community, and in myriad other accounts that I reviewed. Its logo, emblazoned on every trash and recycling can, is a turn of the century penny-farthing highwheel bicycle—emblematic of a place that boasts of both its “historic” downtown and pretension to be the “bicycle capital of the U.S.” Other distinctions include civic ordinances regulating smoking and light pollution, protecting threatened wildlife from development, and declaring the city *officially* pro-choice and nuclear free (by vote of the City Council). In 1995, a Midwestern newspaper columnist bestowed upon Davis the title of “weirdness center of the world” (Hritz 1995). At the time, residents declared they preferred to think of their town as “quirky.”

Either way, Davis has a local flair that can be traced back to the founding of the University of California’s “state farm” in 1906, initially as an agricultural component for what was then its lone campus at Berkeley, 60 miles away. This move began the process of changing a sleepy, unincorporated railroad crossing into a relative oasis of academe and progressive culture in California’s rural Central Valley (Lofland and Haig 2000). Regular classes began in 1910 and the campus officially became UC Davis in 1959. Among many things, the university and its students were largely responsible for the city’s obsession with the bicycle, in full-swing by the mid-1960s, as well as its environmentalism and perceived exceptionalism. By 1968, writes historian Mike Fitch (1998:ch. 1), “Davis already knew it was somehow special.”

In 1970, a group of private citizens initiated the recycling program that became a city-wide utility by the end of the decade, despite resistance from the beverage industry. In 1973, Davis became the second municipality in California to enact “radical” limits on growth (Lofland 2004:138), with a general plan that was hailed four years later for having changed the city “from sprawling suburbia to a well-managed, compact community” (as quoted in Fitch 1998:ch. 2). In 1975, the City Council also enacted “the first energy conservation building code in the country” (as quoted in Lofland 2004:140). That same year, construction began on what would become a signature landmark for Davis’s identity, Village Homes. Designed by environmentalist developers Mike and Judy Corbett, this neighborhood of more than 200 fence-free solar residences, apartments, and a housing cooperative, all clustered along communal paths and gardens, was fully designed to promote natural living and energy-efficiency. Upon completion in 1981, Village Homes quickly joined the likes of California’s first certified farmers’ market as one of Davis’s biggest tourist attractions, winning international accolades and drawing visits from celebrities, planning and design enthusiasts, ecotourists, and other curious passersby (Fitch 1998; Francis 2003). Through the rest of the 1980s, the city also created groundbreaking land-use initiatives for preventing sprawl, protecting farmland, and expanding the city’s greenbelt of bike paths and wildlife preserves. In a sign of things to come, 1986 saw one of the first citizen-driven ballot initiatives to fight a proposed commercial development. The project, a two-level shopping center of chain retailers, was defeated in favor of expanding the city’s Central Park (Lofland 2004:142).

The precise character of the community is, of course, constantly fluctuating and adapting in response to growth and changing demographics (Davis had an

average *annual* population growth rate of 1.36 percent between 1990 and 2007), nor is it monolithic to begin with. Yet the social norms represented by the above examples have largely remained part of the town's culture. Booming income and property values in the 1980s and '90s heralded the arrival of more families without ties to the university, yet the '90s also saw the election of a Green Party mayor and ushered in some of the "quirkiest" moments yet for the city: a protective tunnel for frogs under a new overpass, the aforementioned light pollution ordinance, and an effort by the mayor to preserve "historic potholes." All in all, the ideals of environmental leadership and the preservation of a unique small town character remain visible time and again.

Several additional events are worth discussion before turning to a detailed look at the case of the controversial Target store. The first was another attempt to bring corporate retail to Davis, a Borders bookstore and several other major chain stores proposed in the form of an outdoor shopping center in the city's downtown. The entire development was vocally opposed by many community members and small business owners who accused the corporations of unethical labor practices and feared they would hurt local businesses, particularly the city's beloved independent bookstores. Despite fervent protest and even lawsuits filed on behalf of a couple of bookstores, the development went ahead without public referendum and opened in 1998. In two recent cases where growth issues have gone to referenda, however, as in 1986 the community turned them down. Even then-Councilman Don Saylor, now a county supervisor, conceded that Davis has "had a reputation for being difficult to interact with for business and economic development." A 1997 poll about widening the narrow vehicle underpass that serves as the principal traffic artery from a freeway into the downtown area was rejected by a vote of 56 percent, with opponents arguing that it would destroy the town's "old-fashioned, pedestrian-friendly . . . small town character" (as quoted in Fitch 1998:ch. 8). In 2000, voters addressed local Measure J, a powerful ordinance that said voter approval would be required "before the City would allow development of agricultural, open space, or horse ranch property at the edge of the urban area" (City of Davis 2006). On a ballot the same year that Davis's population passed 60,000, the landmark initiative was approved with 54 percent of the vote, with a remarkable 70 percent voter turnout (Yolo Elections Office 2000). These events, representative of the conflict inspired in Davis by the arrival of corporate retail and of local feelings toward the threat of further growth, provide the context for the campaigns surrounding the development projects proposed five years later.

The "Green" Target Store

In 2005, two members of the Davis City Council informally approached the Minneapolis-based Target Corporation with the prospect of the company bringing one of its department stores to the community. The initiative came out of a survey of Davis residents conducted by the city's Business and Economic Development Commission in 2003, which had found an interest in general merchandise and affordable shopping opportunities, including a "high interest in Target specifically" in the words of one council member I interviewed. In fact, according to

Target Regional Development Manager John Dewes, the Fortune 500 Company had considered a Davis location in the past, but had always opted for neighboring areas, thinking the city and its anti-corporate culture might be too much trouble:

“We were not actively pursuing a site in the city prior to that. [...] We understood that even though two council members had approached us, I don’t think anybody here had any illusions that it was something that, compared to cities that we were interested in, that it was going to be an easy process, just based on what we know about Davis, just in terms of the development history in the town.”

Though there are several other Target stores within 30 miles of Davis—which transaction records proved people from Davis were patronizing—a Target *in* the city would be the first “big-box”-type store there, a prospect that Dewes and his team expected to raise more than a few eyebrows. They conducted a year of research before submitting a preliminary proposal to the city, and even when they did, they knew they would need to “do more” to earn support in the community (St. John 2006). Target’s initial proposal for a 136,842-square-foot store thus included being registered as a “green” building and applying for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, connecting it to the city’s network of bike paths, subsidizing a new bus line, and planting 250 trees.

City commissions were asked for input, and though Budget and Finance approved, Planning reported against the design and land-use. At this point the City Council, a majority of whom favored the project, elected to move forward and braced for the onslaught of public opinion. The Davis Chamber of Commerce came out in strong support, though some local businesses mobilized in opposition, including the owners of an independent nursery and the local Ace Hardware store. A concern of many locals was that the proposed 19-acre development, anchored by the Target store but also involving other retailers (to be selected by the corporation), would draw shoppers away from the city’s cherished downtown (Johnson 2006). Yet records produced by the corporation showed 276,000 non-cash purchases had been made by people from Davis at other area Target stores in 2004 alone (Saylor 2006). A similar, if more vague, opposition to Target commonly found in many public accounts and in my interviews was the fear that it would bring to Davis the generic strip-mall landscape of Anytown, USA. Ironically, a promotional line from Target’s corporate website at the time summed up exactly what these Davisites feared most about having one of its stores in their town: “Step into any Target store in any city in the country, and you know exactly what to expect.” Despite having been invited to submit a proposal to the city as a result of perceived public demand, Target was widely painted by its opposition as an outside corporate giant looking to cover every patch of land with impersonal retail centers. As one Davis resident wrote on his blog, “for me, what makes Davis special is that it is a small college town without a lot of the huge commercial enterprises that blight our countryside across this nation” (Davis 2006).

Critics contended that allowing Target to come could set a dangerous precedent too, opening the door to more big-box stores in Davis. In response, the City and developers were careful to make the Target project appear an exception, creating

an amendment to the General Plan specifically for the 19-acre site in question and nowhere else in town (Davis Enterprise 2006). But to some opponents this was not enough, as Davis was already exhibiting signs of counter-normative “trouble” right in the very area where the Target was proposed. Adjacent to a relatively new residential subdivision in East Davis, the Target site was in line with a recently developed commercial strip just off of Interstate 80 known disparagingly to some long-time residents as “God and Gas” because its principal features include a gas station and what is for Davis an unusually large and visible church. In the words of one Davis resident, the site would become “God, gas and shop now. Of course this is a freeway mall.”

To mitigate opposition, Target and its backers made further concessions to community expectations. According to a Davis city planner, “through the public input and city review process, making the project ‘greener’ than the average Target was something they heard as a priority and responded to.” Among the additional proposals were trees to shade the parking lot, a three-acre wooded greenbelt to provide a “natural buffer” around the project, recharge stations and preferred parking for electric vehicles, and “the use of wood, stone and other design features to make the store unique to Davis”—all at considerable additional costs to Target (Annon-Lovering et al. 2008; Johnson 2006). As the *Davis Enterprise* newspaper noted in its October 2006 endorsement, “Davis’ Target store will be an environmental show-place as well—one of only 10 retail stores worldwide [...] that have achieved LEED certification.”

Lobbying remained fierce on both sides. The prospect of a Target coming to Davis presented the community with a cultural dilemma. Christina, a local attorney, remembered the contradiction:

“The whole theory of let’s save gas, let’s not drive anywhere, that gets thrown out because, you know, ‘Davis can’t have a Target, that would just be embarrassing.’ Everybody, let’s face it, goes to Target, but it didn’t matter that we all have to drive all the way to [the neighboring city of] Woodland to go to Target, but it would have just been too humiliating to actually have a Target in town. ‘OK well wait a minute, this Target is really extra-special so OK maybe we’ll consider it.’”

City Council meetings routinely lasted into the early morning hours as community members spoke about the plan, often loudly. Police were even called to one meeting that was brought to a halt by a group of protesters. Opinion was contentious enough that the City Council moved to put the decision up to a city-wide referendum. “Some number of people clearly believed that this was anathema to the Davis identity, and [there were] lots of good reasons for that,” explained a councilman who supported the proposal. “It was clear that we were dealing with something that was close to the core of what people believed the community should be, so we believed that it was a good idea for it to not be an edict from on high changing the culture of the community.” The result, ballot Measure K, was the first time a Target store had ever appeared on a ballot (Johnson 2006; St. John 2006). “Obviously we did not go into the project with the idea that there was going to be a public referendum,” Dewes explained, but they decided to wage a

campaign. "I think that showed that management felt very strongly in conjunction with our supporters there in the city that we had a project that had come a long way and accommodated a lot of the concerns in the community," he said.

What followed was one of the most expensive political campaigns in Davis history, in which the "Yes on K" side alone spent hundreds of thousands of dollars. Target hired a local design firm to run their publicity campaign, which included neighborhood meetings and information sessions, booths at community events, teams of local supporters going door to door, and in-depth, information-heavy mailers (printed on recycled paper of course) sent to everyone in town and published in the local newspaper. Jen Baker, principal of the firm that Target hired, explained the campaign's strategy: "It's a green store, Davis gets to be cutting edge, leading edge again, and it's convenient—use less gas, shop local." In a final touch, further representative of just how much Target was willing to change its image to appeal to community sensibilities, the corporation whose advertising strategy has long revolved almost entirely around the color red released a full arsenal of bright green campaign materials declaring "go green," and featuring only a small target logo in white imprinted on a green leaf (see Figure 1 below). In Baker's words, "the fact that their branding department let us do that is huge."

Playing the growth "statesmen" role expected of the press (Logan and Molotch



FIGURE 1

All green ink "Go Green... Yes on Measure K" lawn sign

[1987] 2007:70–72), the *Davis Enterprise* endorsed the Target plan, as did the much larger *Sacramento Bee* and the university's *California Aggie*. The *Davis Enterprise* (2006) did so explicitly in the terms of the community's cultural identity, arguing that "Davis has a reputation for environmental leadership, and Target is stepping up to fit that reputation." At the same time, however, an "anti-growth machine" of sorts went into action as well—coalitions of alternative institutions to their pro-growth parallels. For example, though the Chamber of Commerce was in favor of Target, many members of the distinct Downtown Business Association were opposed (and the association itself remained neutral). Likewise, the local alternative press—particularly the quarterly *Flatlander* newspaper and numerous local blogs—were passionately opposed to the measure.

Nonetheless, by October, at least according to a number of pro-Target community members writing in the *Enterprise*, there was "widespread community support" for the store: "We've heard from third-generation Davisites, long-time downtown business owners, seniors, teachers, students, moms, dads and kids who want to shop more in town" (Annon-Lovering et al. 2006). Though the *Enterprise* was considered a biased source of information by many of those opposed to Measure K, this summation proved accurate when Measure K passed in November 2006 by the narrow margin of 700 votes, with a high 66 percentage of voter turnout.

In examining this case, we can see how local cultural expectations were manifested and how the components of the urban growth machine adapted to meet them. Yet there is still the argument to be made that Target essentially did what multinational corporations do best—outspend their opposition and "overcome resistance." The local growth machine did act largely as the model would predict: a City Council majority came out in favor, as did the Chamber of Commerce and all mainstream local and regional media. In addition to the "anti-growth machine" institutions described above, notable exceptions to this included a number of local business owners, older social and political elites, and some other traditional power brokers who were vocally opposed to Target; their loss may be seen as a sign of their declining influence. ("It's no longer businesses in town that have a say in the Chamber of Commerce, it's the real-estate community," observed Eileen, the leader of an anti-corporate citizens' group that opposed the development.) Also, despite the fact that the final decision was left to the voters, the City Council's endorsement was more than just a symbolic gesture. A perspective among some of those interviewed was that their demand for a say in the matter should be viewed as a response to government's failure to adequately regulate growth on its own. Nancy, another local organizer who opposed the project, contended that the City Council neglected its responsibility to be the voice of its constituents and challenge incompatible developments. By allowing a public referendum, the Council could claim it was letting democracy take its course when, in Nancy's view, at that point democracy became "a sham" anyway because of the huge amounts of money being poured into the campaign by the developers.

Without the availability of contemporaneous exit polling or large-*n* public opinion research in Davis, one is left to speculate about the relative impact of various explanations for Target's success. Certainly the company's culturally sensitive efforts cannot be said to wholly explain the outcome; what is important is that *the corporation made the effort at all*, and that cultural considerations were clearly at play.

In other words, base political-economic factors are necessary but not sufficient for success in Davis, and community members and development organizations alike operate under the assumption that cultural sensitivity is important.

A central component of Target's campaign strategy from the beginning was to appeal to Davis voters as a unique store that fit with local culture and identity. The company made a concerted effort to present itself not only as a store that the people of Davis could use, but also as a unique landmark for the city as the "greenest Target ever built." In this sense, the cultural sensitivity of the project may in itself be tantamount to a use value for residents. The eco-friendly compromises made the proposed Target more culturally sensitive both in terms of the expectation of environmental leadership and as a potentially very unique "Davis-y" landmark. Christina seemed to speak for many of those interviewed and described in press accounts when she explained that "it appealed to me that it's going to be special and different. I thought it would bring focus to Davis in that, 'oh wow, Davis has this really cool Target that nobody else has.'" Or, at the very least, "Davis can tolerate a special Target," she said.

As Christina's remark reminds us, however, cultural framing is a two-way street. The successes of a developer's efforts at cultural sensitivity are contingent upon voters' acceptance of them as *sincere*. In Davis, even development proposals with considerable concessions to local expectations have been hindered by the failure to appear culturally sincere. The shorter case that follows further develops this tension, demonstrating the additional, inseparable importance of cultural sincerity to a developer's ability to win voter approval—something the Covell Village residential development failed to accomplish. Returning to the Target case at the end, I highlight the ways in which Target learned from its predecessors to effectively project cultural sincerity.

COVELL VILLAGE

The developers of the proposed Covell Village subdivision also made a concerted effort to project cultural sensitivity in both their project's design and in the publicity surrounding it. Indeed, while there were certainly issues with the project that raised concerns, people I spoke with were surprised that the subdivision had not proved *more* palatable to the community than the Target store. For instance, a local real-estate developer and partner in the team behind Covell Village described his take on Davis's vocal activist community as follows: "If you look at their credo, which is kind of anti-big box, you know that gets much more to the base of who they are: anti-materialistic, anti-consumer [sic], all those kinds of things." In his opinion, Target was "a much more important issue for these people than really Covell Village would be from any visceral or ideological sense." Nevertheless, the subdivision was overwhelmingly defeated just a year before the Target store was approved. This was due in part to popular perceptions of insincerity behind its otherwise lofty attempts at cultural sensitivity.

Covell Village began as a proposal from a group of local developers for a 383-acre pocket of little-used agricultural land between two other subdivisions to the north of Central Davis. It was planned to have 1,884 units varying from apartments and low-income housing to large market rate homes, as well as a

commercial development, a city fire station and public school, and 43 acres of parks, bike paths, and other greenspace (C.V. Partners 2005a). The development team, Covell Village Partners (CVP), heavily emphasized Village Homes creator Mike Corbett's involvement as designer of the project and his green credentials (its website noted he was also named a "Hero of the Planet" by *Time* magazine in 1999). Press accounts show that, among all the project's backers, Corbett was by far the most public face of its campaign. Long-time Davis resident Clyde remembered: "He was on our local cable TV, he was in the paper, he was in front of the grocery store. [...] Their strategy was 'Mike's Mister Village Homes, Mike's Mister Eco-Friendly, Mike has an international reputation, he can make it happen for us.'" In keeping with the strategy of "farmer-developers" documented by Rudel (1989) and others, the homegrown roots and environmental commitment of the rest of the team were played up as well. They included John Whitcombe (described on the group's website as the "son of a local agricultural family [...] elected senior class president of Davis High School" who "built the nation's first solar apartment complex"), Dave Schulze (whose "family has been farming in the Davis area since the 1860s"), and six others (mostly members of Whitcombe's development company) with local involvement dating to at least the mid-1970s (C.V. Partners 2005b).

CVP also explicitly tried to appeal to local culture, including the penchant for unique and environmentally progressive landmarks. "We did everything," explained one of the would-be developers, "we passed our plan to every major land planner, avant-garde land-planner in the United States and every one of them said it was the best thing they'd ever seen. What we had would have brought people from all over the country through Davis."

The City Council approved the proposal—triggering a public referendum under the Measure J requirements mentioned above—but from the beginning there were those who were wary of the developers' claims. For one, in a town with a proud history of leadership in sustainable development and a thirty-year tradition of slow-growth sentiments, the project that would simultaneously "set a new standard for solar energy and energy conservation" and be the largest subdivision ever built in Davis was a strange contradiction (C.V. Partners 2005a; Wagstaff et al. 2005). And it must be emphasized that the project had other problems: the environmental impact report received over a thousand critical comments and the City's Planning, Open Space, and Budget and Finance Committees all questioned or offered negative appraisals of the project's impact in their respective areas; the potential effect on traffic, for instance, became a major concern. Before Covell Village had even received Council approval and become ballot Measure X, opposition groups like Citizens for Responsible Planning (CRP) had formed to fight it. Still, the question of cultural sincerity clearly played a role in the debate, as CRP made its case around the idea that Covell Village was not the model of "innovative" planning it claimed to be and argued among other things that it was lacking in affordable housing and based on "exaggerated solar claims" (Citizens for Responsible Planning 2005).

"It was another suburban-type community and the average home was over \$600,000," said CRP leader Eileen Sammitz, "and yet they were advertising it as

affordable housing." To one young resident I interviewed, "that is not what I would call an affordable house [...] it's just going to be this gentrified, boring stucco thing out there." And to Nancy, "all of the housing north of the little town common area that they talked about, all of that mostly was McMansions." Likewise, there was a wide difference in how the subdivision's environmental credentials were perceived. In the opinion of one member of Covell Village Partners, "it couldn't have been any greener," yet according to the one-time city council candidate Rob Roy, the green components were insubstantial and the proposal was "the first real attempt at greenwashing" in Davis.

Even Corbett's involvement did little to strengthen the project's perception as culturally sincere. Village Homes is a revered landmark and symbol of Davis that residents are generally quite proud of, and just like it, Covell Village was billed as an "innovative solar neighborhood" with Corbett at the helm (C.V. Partners 2005a). Yet the irony that a man who had fought against sprawl while mayor—"arguing that Davis should establish its ultimate boundaries" in the 1980s (Fitch 1998:ch. 4)—was now spearheading a subdivision on unincorporated land was not lost on the long-time residents with whom I spoke.

A related element of Covell Village's perceived lack of sincerity might be described as simply "overdoing it" in the effort to win skeptical Davis voters. The project's backers lobbied for support from influential community members, including teachers and local business owners, sometimes in a rather strong-arming fashion. "The thing that was interesting about Covell Village was that they gave you a carrot and a stick," explained Rodney, owner of a local athletic club, who experienced this first-hand:

"I wrote a letter to the paper for the Davis Athletic Club saying we oppose it. And it was a week later, Mike Corbett and Blaine Juchau [the proposed project's general manager] came to me and said, Here's the carrot and the stick. If we pass and you don't support it, we'll put in a 17,000 square foot health club. If you support us, we'll put in a mini-health club and you can run it. [...] About six weeks before the election, it occurred to me that we had made a horrendous mistake to support this thing."

There were also public allegations of unethical campaigning. In one egregious example, county election officials confirmed that proponents of Measure X illegally campaigned outside of a polling station near the UC Davis campus and offered students slices of pizza to encourage them to vote (California Aggie 2005).⁶

Measure X was defeated citywide in November 2005 by a margin of 59 to 41 percent. One of Covell Village's would-be developers conceded that his campaign had suffered from what he described as a general "ignorance" of the local political realities, despite legitimate local credentials. Other residents interviewed concurred that the campaign could have been run in a more Davis-friendly way. Among other things, the huge amount of money spent and the deluge of glossy campaign literature inundating everyone's mailboxes did not endear the developers to the community as friendly, small-town locals (even though they were far more local than the Minneapolis-based Target Corporation). As one local business owner put it, "it became known as a big corporate developer project," and Corbett was widely viewed as a front, which people resented. In hindsight, hiring outside

campaign staff might have been a mistake, conceded the developer. If they did it again, he explained, "rather than hire somebody from Sacramento to go knocking on doors and saying vote for Covell Village or whatever it is, we're gonna have Martha from down the street" appealing to the community as a neighbor. Nancy summed up her perception of Covell Village's insincerity as follows: "Mike Corbett, known for Village Homes, became the front man shill for a project that they tried to sell as new urbanism, but was really just another suburban development."

Again, this insincerity does not entirely explain the proposal's defeat, and a housing development of its size faced long odds from the outset in growth-wary Davis. But the implications of these views are that the proposal would have been more palatable had it been more unique and more straightforward in its campaign, things Target worked hard to achieve.⁷ In fact, the corporation immediately hired a local design firm to manage essentially all of its publicity in town and create its own campaign materials. The local firm, in turn, ran a totally different sort of campaign. As designer Jen Baker explained, "I looked at what happened with Covell Village and tried to do the opposite. [...] We really tried to just lay it out for people and let them make their own decisions, and we garnered as much grassroots support as possible." Some of Target's claims of environmental leadership were still challenged by many of the same people who fought to defeat Covell Village, yet the corporation avoided galvanizing the majority of residents into opposition. Their efforts to appear culturally sensitive through environmental leadership and the promise of a unique local landmark were not only apparently bold and unique enough, but seem to have been perceived as genuine by enough residents to win approval.

In this sense, Target may even have benefited from being an outsider in comparison with the local developers. Though some land-use scholars expect local "farmer-developers" to take "advantage of their 'old timer' status and well-established political and social connections" to get their way (see Logan and Molotch [1987] 2007:118–19), Davisites may have had higher expectations of Corbett and his partners because of their roots—expectations they could not meet, particularly once their neighborliness was seen as a front and their efforts as insincere. Meanwhile, Target's unexpected local sensitivity may help explain its ability to win over some skeptical locals.

A final difference in the projects' perceived sensitivity to local norms can be seen in the locations of the proposed developments. Election records show both projects were more strongly opposed in the precincts closest to their sites, but local development history as well as my own conversations with Davisites suggest that sites in the center of town or on long-undeveloped areas are likely to have more sentimental value to residents, making their development inherently more controversial. The proposed site of the Target development had few such idiosyncrasies (despite, or even because of, the aforementioned "God and Gas" stigma). In a location along a freeway actually zoned for light industrial use in a mostly newer part of Davis, Target was dealing with a space that guaranteed little nostalgia from the community. On the other hand, the pocket of fallow fields surrounding an oak tree and an all-but-abandoned barn on which Covell Village was proposed held such sentimental value these symbols were employed in "No on Measure X" campaign

literature; a stylized image of the barn and oak even became the logo of the effort. In the words of Anna, a young resident who grew up in Davis, “we think of [that area] almost as off limits.” Of the Target location, she said bluntly, “we don’t care so much what our freeway space looks like.” In Nancy’s words, “the location was just ideal for Target,” or to another resident, Clyde, “if you’re gonna do it in Davis, that’s the place to do it.”

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In examining the processes through which developers, politicians, and the community negotiated the Target and Covell Village proposals, I have shown how local sentiments, values, and expectations can be very much at play in the politics of urban development. I have also shown how adapting to better fit these expectations can aid developers in their efforts to win approval even from communities where their prospects may at first have seemed dim. The two projects do not lend themselves to easy side-by-side comparison, and again many factors undoubtedly explain the outcomes, but it is clear from the cases that both developers understood the importance of appealing to the cultural expectations of Davisites in designing their proposals and waging their campaigns. And while it is difficult to say just *how much* of a difference any one Davis-friendly concession or campaign tactic made, our understanding of the mechanisms at work in the development process here would be incomplete without an appreciation of these efforts at cultural sensitivity, and their reception or rejection as sincere. Again, the simple fact that developers operate with an assumption that cultural sensitivity matters is significant in itself.

Community cultural expectations not only forced the two projects to popular referendum in the first place, but also impacted how the proposals were designed, presented, and implemented in an effort to win support. Both projects were intended from the outset to represent the sort of leadership in environmental sustainability and consistency with the idea of a unique small town that Davisites project as desirable. Covell Village lost credibility with voters by appearing insincere in these claims and misappropriating valued community symbols, from Village Homes and its popular creator, Corbett, to the relatively hallowed ground on which they proposed to build. The insincerity became a source of “moral outrage,” stirring emotions and mobilizing more opposition (see Jasper 1997:106–108). Target instead went back to the community, and back to the drawing board, several times to include popular features with little to do with the actual store, all at considerable cost and even putting its own branding (temporarily) on the backburner. My findings suggest that part of the company’s success where others had failed came from reading local expectations more accurately or addressing them more effectively.

Davis is idiosyncratic in many respects, but lest one think it is the only community that can inspire such efforts, we need only turn to Target’s other unique stores—locally conscious architecture in Miami, Minneapolis, and Bloomfield, Michigan, or the stylized “Bullseye Bodegas” that briefly occupied Manhattan corner stores in 2008—to see the extent to which the corporation has made cultural sensitivity part of its culture of production. Starbucks Coffee, long-dependent on

brand identity for its international success, has even responded to demands for local cultural sensitivity by opening cafés with locally specific names like “Roy Street Coffee and Tea” that abandon brand identity almost entirely (Strand 2009). Most recently, the New York drug store chain Duane Reade overcame local resistance to opening a store on Brooklyn’s hip Bedford Avenue (right across from a smaller pharmacy) by opening a craft beer bar inside. “We knew we would have a little bit of a battle to try to bring Duane Reade into this community, because they really don’t like a chain store,” one of the company’s executives is quoted saying in *The New York Times* (Clifford 2011:B1), echoing Target’s initial concerns in Davis. Another executive goes on to explain the beer bar: “It’s really a young hipster community, so we thought it would work out well.” As part of what the *Times* reports to be a “larger effort to recognize—and capitalize on—the fierce identity and local needs” of different communities, this is cultural sensitivity at work (Clifford 2011:B1). Without consideration for local character, we would miss this important tension in the growth process in which communities and developers are engaged.

For Logan and Molotch ([1987] 2007:14), a community’s avoidance of or resistance to value-free development is dependent on its strategic, free-market utility to the growth machine: “Neighborhoods whose obliteration would better serve growth goals are subject to the strongest pressure.” Yet in this case we have seen that profit-maximizing organizations *will* compromise to meet local expectations, even at no small cost and when no law directly forces them to do so.⁸ Indeed, through strongly held values for what acceptable development looks like, combined with the power to resist that comes with relative affluence and involvement as discussed in existing growth machine literature, some communities may exert more pressure on development than vice versa, casting a considerable shadow over the cultures of production of even large corporations. Subsequent compromises can pay off for developers and communities alike.

That said, in spite of even the most engaged and powerful communities—of which this analysis contends Davis is one—the growth machine proves relentless. These cases show a growth machine as powerful as ever, but more complex than the basic theorizing in which local businesses and the “downtown business elite” are paramount (Harding 1995; Stone 1989). They suggest that while local business owners may be relatively powerless in the face of major corporations or larger growth interests, at the same time a local, community-friendly approach is instrumental to developer success. Ultimately, in any city, controversial developments will come along and opponents will, as the saying goes, win some and lose some: Schneider (1992) found that growth agendas can be undermined by the practical economic rationales of businesses and residents when growth is not seen as a financial benefit. Others mentioned above demonstrate that a community’s social status or the activation of local organizations can impact its ability to wage resistance. This study contributes to this literature by showing how less tangible cultural considerations can impact growth decisions as well, adding to these other models evidence of the importance of perceived cultural sensitivity and cultural sincerity among developers.

These findings also speak to broader issues in sociology and urban studies. Most basically, they demonstrate the value of connecting qualitative individual- and local-level cultural research with macro-theories of urban political economy.

Literature on neighborhood identity, organizations, social movement mobilization, and constructivist theories of emotion are validated in the observed motivations of community members rallying around values and meanings of place, as well as the decision-making of development organizations acting within a socially constructed context. The finding that these realities are acting in conjunction to impact project outcomes presents new considerations for the sociological study of urban development. Heretofore largely lacking in more subtle cultural analysis, this literature can benefit from considering the cultural characteristics of communities and the unique sentiments and expectations that may act as *de facto* guidelines for urban policy, planning, and development.

That development organizations can exhibit a sort of cultural rationality (if not quite economic irrationality), while citizens demonstrate an ability to demand and evaluate sensitivity to local expectations from developers, may also have practical implications for both sets of actors across a variety of situations. Communities as different as Chicago, Illinois and Culpeper, Virginia could benefit from such an understanding as they negotiate with big-box retail giants, and so could New Yorkers seeking a voice in the development process through the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure. At the same time, of course, developers have as much (if not more) to gain from successfully reading and demonstrating cultural sensitivities as the communities in which they hope to build. From bicycle parking to beer bars, the difference between "sincere" efforts at cultural sensitivity and the more cynical cooptation or "symbolic inclusion" (Mele 2000) of characteristics identified with the authenticity of certain areas as part of the gentrification process may be little more than one of perception. Again, both are strategies of a cunning and powerful growth machine effectively recognizing a path of less resistance and perhaps greater profit. Yet cultural sensitivity can also manifest itself in "community supportive" design for public or civic projects that broaden local support and positively contribute to local identity (Douglas 2010). A greater understanding of these dynamics among communities and policy makers can help them to emphasize the latter, even with commercial developments. Further research might investigate what accounts for variations in sensitivity across developers and projects, and for variations in the perception of sincerity across communities. It might also illuminate the tipping points for successful cultural sensitivity, and whether there are some developments (or, from a developer's perspective, some communities) for which no amount of cultural sensitivity will be enough.

Not all communities have the same political clout or share the same dominant concerns (they are by definition culturally specific). Yet in any place one would expect to find emotionally charged sentiments and shared expectations that can play a role in development politics if given the chance. That Davis is probably ahead of the curve in its environmentalism and defense of local character makes the city all the more valuable a laboratory in which to conduct such research, as these particular concerns are of growing visibility in communities throughout the United States (see Fisher, Sonn, and Bishop 2002; Portney and Stavins 2000; Sinclair and Stohr 2008, among others). Environmental leadership and the preservation of local character show no sign of disappearing as dearly held expectations in Davis

and elsewhere. If corporate retail or other popularly resisted forms of growth are to continue to find success in communities like Davis, they will likely have to take cultural expectations sincerely into account.

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NOTES

1. The lack of any exit polling, large-*n* public opinion research, or other contemporaneous survey data available for Davis would make a more quantified or statistical analysis of the election results impossible. This study makes use of more plentiful qualitative data to demonstrate that cultural considerations played a substantial role in the processes, which a different approach might have missed.
2. One stand-out exception is Čapek and Gilderbloom's (1992) study of "community versus commodity" in Santa Monica's tenants' rights movement, in which local identity and other cultural factors were shown to have an impact (if sometimes a limited one) on development politics. Mele's (2000) work on the gentrification of New York's East Village and Gendron and Domhoff's (2009) book on local politics in Santa Cruz also provide admirable examples, as do studies of the actions of individual developers (e.g., Fainstein 2001). Molotch and Logan (1990:88-91) do perhaps the most to address cultural context themselves in their eloquent discussion of the importance of "sentiment" in urban social movements, though again only in quite general terms.
3. Jasper builds here from the constructivist approach to emotions, as well represented by the writings of Averill (1980) and Harré (1986), who explicitly tie emotional responses to localized social norms. The classical sociological writing on norms provides some useful general language for our understanding as well: To Parsons (1937), a norm is essentially a socially understood description of desirable and expected behavior. Gibbs (1965:589) reviews nearly a dozen scholars before concluding the key definitional features of a norm are collective evaluation of what behavior should be, collective expectation of what it will be, and reactions to behavior "including attempts to apply sanctions or otherwise induce a particular kind of conduct."
4. See also Ellickson (1991), who describes the "order without law" of California cattle ranchers in their socially and culturally codified dispute resolution expectations.
5. These interviews are intended to supplement the archival research with first-hand accounts and to provide unique insights about the internal thinking and decision making of the development organizations, city offices, or opposition groups in question. I contacted and interviewed these individuals sequentially as it became apparent that talking to them would contribute to my investigation. I also reached out to a handful of other people in the community with the intention of capturing a modest range of additional perspectives among Davisites who had followed both campaigns: a college student, two business owners, a young worker who grew up in the community, and several long-time residents employed as lawyers, teachers, and university employees. Their opinions are their own (and more interviews or large surveys could only improve our knowledge), but they help to articulate the sentiments, norms, and other cultural expectations that

- my research and other accounts confirm are common among Davis voters. For more on the sequential interviewing method, see Small (2009); on the usefulness of “convenience samples” for unique insights, supplementary data, and corroboration of other accounts in qualitative research, see Weiss (1994).
6. Student turnout can be assumed to have ultimately been relatively inconsequential regardless. Election results show that several precincts with high student populations did tend to be slightly more supportive of the proposal than other areas, but not enough so to affect the outcome (see Yolo Elections Office 2005).
 7. As a Davis city planner put it, “at this point in time, I am not sure even the most innovative project would be able to gain the popular vote in Davis [...] I do know that for a project to even have a chance it would have to provide ample parks, greenbelts, affordable housing, schools, environmentally sensitive features and a coffee shop.”
 8. Environmental sensitivity is not unheard of as part of capitalist enterprise of course, and as Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins (1999) have chronicled, many such instances of “natural capitalism” are financially beneficial. Governments and pragmatic activists have also seen the potential in what Anderson and Leal (1991) term “free market environmentalism” for successfully addressing environmental concerns without precluding the possibility of economic competitiveness.

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