

Community Development as Improvised Performance: How a New York Housing Project Turned Around

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Community building is about building relationships. It is the activity of putting people together so they can create new conversations and activities. This is a story about the community building process in a large low-income housing project in Brooklyn, New York, where community development was framed and envisioned as “improvisational performance”.

This framework of improvisational performance helped turn around a project that was ridden with violence due to the competition between gangs over the drug trade. I worked for six years (1993-1999) as a manager of the project, Maple Houses in Brooklyn’s East New York.

Framing community development work as improvisational performance helps community members realize their capacity to create new environments or “stages” on which to perform new unscripted plays. Community development professionals are like theatre directors. Improvisation keeps them and community members focused on the creative process as opposed to the fixation on outcomes.

Even the Pizza Man Delivers By the end of 1994 the drug violence in Maple Houses appeared to be suddenly over. But it actually was not sudden. The relative peace was hard won and the result of a complicated, uneven and messy process.

One of the keys to the turnaround at Maple Houses was a truce between drug gangs. The Tenant Association (TA) brokered a meeting of rival gangs, who agreed to stop the drug dealing and violence in the project. A tenant patrol was organized in every building. Children could be seen in playgrounds. Residents went outside on project grounds to talk to neighbors. Where once the pizza man would never deliver at Maple, as one newspaper reported, “Even the Pizza Man Delivered.” The city started investing in the area again, built a new playground and started a program called Operation Commitment. The media printed stories about the changes.

To understand this process, imagine the following conversation. The head of the Tenant Patrol approaches a former gang leader who is just out of prison and attempting to get a job with the contractors working at Maple. She asks

him what he thinks of the recent death of a young man, the sixth death in several months. He says it's terrible, he knows the young man and his family, and he feels that something needs to be done. She asks him what he thinks is possible. He suggests that he talk to some of his people. She says great and asks him to let her know what comes out of this conversation and that she is interested in helping in any way she can to facilitate more of these discussions. This conversation was a new performance for the participants. No one had ever asked the young people to play the role of leader in this way before.

These kinds of conversations were the ordinary and extraordinary performances that changed everything at Maple. Many of the key actors in this truce would formerly not even be in the same room together, much less engaging in a conversation. The gangs responded to the demand to end the violence because the leadership of the community included them in the ongoing collective effort to create new ways of doing things at Maple.

Performance as a Tool for Development The Russian developmental and educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky taught us how children learn and develop by doing what they don't know how to do. His theories are the basis for the performance approach to community building. In this approach community building can be viewed as similar to improvisational ensemble building. Every activity in the ensemble (community) has an impact on the overall development of the ensemble, and everyone involved has responsibility for strengthening the ensemble. Community building is a collective, creative ensemble process—people conversing, performing and sharing a collective commitment to the ensemble they continuously create.

Too often, poor people in inner city communities are related to and also relate to themselves as “fixed” in the sense of lacking the capacity to develop. People see themselves as “broken” and in need of experts to “repair” them. Often young people, especially young people of color, are related to as an instance of a label or category. These categories often become so calcified and entrenched that they are seen as almost impossible to transcend.

Performance is one way out of this rigidified understanding. Performance helps people see their capacity to be other than who they think they are, other than who they have been and other than how they have been related to, all critical components if we are serious about empowerment. Performance is a powerful tool for communities to grow. When communities develop they do so by “becoming” or going beyond themselves. When a community discovers its power it discovers that it can do something it didn't know it could do. It discovers that there is such a thing as power and that the community can wield

it.

The role of expertise is to support community members and communities as they build environments in which it is possible for them to perform creatively. This is opposed to the traditional “expert” knowing and imposing solutions, fixing problems, or scrambling to do damage control. In fact, the improvisational framework does not attempt to solve problems. The approach starts from the premise that community development processes cannot be, nor should they be, controlled. The community must create their own processes from the bottom up.

Constructing Improvisational Performances Consider how professional actors are taught improvisational techniques. They are trained to relate to what the previous speaker says, and to build on that.

Now imagine the stage setting at Maple Houses. The Tenant Association leader has had many conversations with young people in gangs. They say they want to stop the violence but they can’t talk to each other. The TA leader, who is not part of the fight among the gangs, talks to some former gang leaders who are also not part of it and have credibility in the community. Together they set up a meeting. Here is a new stage setting never before attempted. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss how to do what everyone says they want: end the violence at Maple. Everyone is uncomfortable on this stage. You can feel the tension. No one knows what to do. What they have in common is their desire to end the violence. They are now creative partners in a new dialogue. When people are placed together in a new way on a new stage, there is no trust. It’s risky business. The environment is not necessarily safe. But neither safety nor trust is a precondition for improvisation. In this situation, the community was demanding a new performance from the young people. The young people were also asking for a new performance from the adult leaders. There was no agreement that the meeting was called to build trust. The stage was set so that people could perform differently. Participants learned that it was possible to do something new even with all the distrust, fear and antagonism.

The Director Supports Emergent Leadership The community development professional, like the theatre director, can help to set the stage and help people to perform in ways that support relationship building. When I got to Maple, the staff was demoralized, the residents were constantly fighting among themselves and the staff and the residents had a very tense relationship. The Tenant Association was ineffectual. The environment was hostile to new ways of doing things and there was almost no participation at community meetings. As I began building relationships with the residents, staff, local police, and

other community players, it became clear that there was a tremendous leadership vacuum. My task was to be ready to jump on the opportunities for new leadership that could appear at any moment. The recognition, identification and support of emerging community leadership is one of the most important jobs of community development work.

The most important leaders that came forward were two long-time woman residents. One was rumored to be a “troublemaker” by the previous administration. Her son was murdered a few years before in what was supposed to be drug gang infighting. She came into my office one day angry about the lack of community participation and democracy in the Tenant Association. I agreed with her and asked her what, if anything, she wanted to do about it. I could not “fix” this problem. From the beginning of our relationship, I related to her as an agent of change.

The other woman who came forward to play a leading role was providing leadership on a daily basis in her building, one of the worst in the project. She came to me with several other residents and told me that she wanted to set up a 24-hour tenant patrol. I said great and asked her what she needed from me. We immediately got to work. She organized the building, set up the patrol and enlisted the help of former gang leaders who were interested in doing something new in the community.

I introduced these two important actors to each other and together we made plans to expand the patrol to the rest of the development. This was a creative activity, a community improvisation. We started by asking the question, “who was already providing leadership in each building?” In hundreds of similar settings we found that people were able to act if the community developer as director empowered them to improvise, helped them “cast” the actors, and get the props they needed.

Tenants and Staff – A Creative Partnership Improvisation is most powerful when people agree to be put together in a work environment in previously improbable or unthinkable situations. The situational context gives the participants the space to do something different and to experiment with goals of improving things for the community as a whole.

After the TA election I gave the TA president space in the management office for her to work. This was quite controversial. While it is customary to give the TA President space, it is not considered good practice in this traditional institution to keep her near the employees. But I wanted her to see the kinds of issues that the staff dealt with every day. And I wanted the staff to see how hard she worked on behalf of Maple.

The TA President was put in a situation that required her to perform beyond

herself. She developed her own capacity by virtue of having access to a professional management environment where she was invited and expected to succeed. She learned to write grants and create tenant programs, and she learned to appreciate how difficult the staff's job was. Both she and the staff were not only in the environment, they were constantly engaged in collectively creating the environment.

Both the office staff and the TA president learned a tremendous amount from seeing each other work every day. They began to rely on each other for their strengths and for the ways in which they could help each other. The staff learned how powerful it was to have a tenant leader on their side. She could advocate for resources the staff could not get, by virtue of their location within the institution. For example, when there were staff shortages, the TA president would use her clout to get new staff for us.

Expand the Plot: Young People as Community Builders Although there is general agreement on the importance of inclusion in community work, there is also a certain not-so-subtle bias, particularly in traditional institutions, that there are some people who are simply not acceptable to work with. The script is written so that certain people are acceptable to talk to and others are not. At Maple, we broke these barriers. New conversations were possible because there was no litmus test for participation.

The "good/bad" dichotomy that is so prevalent in our culture, often prevents communities from organizing all of their strengths and is a barrier to change. If you start from the premise that drug users and dealers are all "bad," and you should only work with people who are "good" or "squeaky clean," you severely limit the possibilities. The new leaders emerging were not 100% clean. How clean can anyone be in a very poor neighborhood?

The culture that promotes the dichotomy of the "evil drug dealers" vs. the "good people" is not effective, because human beings living in communities, particularly communities where the drug trade touches everyone, are simply not one or the other.

Unusual Bedfellows: The Police and the Community Another important relationship was cultivated between a very effective community police officer and the TA president. I worked to find ways for them to work together, without knowing what the outcome would be. The relationship was delicate because the TA was working with kids who were in and out of the drug trade. This officer was respected (and respectful) and young people avoided doing anything illegal on his beat, so as not to force him into a compromising situation.

At one meeting to plan for a bike race, the officer came up with the idea to ask the FUJI bike company to donate parts, and then he organized his co-workers

from the local police precinct to volunteer to fix bikes. FUJI and the police responded in a way we never thought possible. Before the race, we had hundreds of kids backed up for ten blocks, some of them had two unconnected wheels and the cops built them a bike. The police stayed till after midnight until every kid that was on that line had a bike for the race.

Many of the youth at Maple had never seen a police officer doing anything nice for them. Activities began to snowball. We organized bike rides, talent shows, after school centers. Agencies such as local Health Maintenance Organizations asked us what they could do to participate. Local small business owners began coming to meetings.

The Importance of Conceptualizing the Process Conceptualizing the community building process as performance is useful to understanding and shaping community practice. People at Maple were supported to put themselves in situations that were “beyond” themselves so they could perform in new ways. The work of getting beyond the traditional barriers to inclusion created the environment for new improvisations and developmental processes. Everyone advanced beyond themselves through the activity of talking to people not traditionally regarded as friends. The young people and the police, the tenants and the workers, all engaged in these unusual improvisations and collectively participated in creating new forms of community life.

New “improvisational scenes” were constantly tried with little commitment to a pre-conceived outcome. Improvisational performance is particularly useful in conceptualizing this work because the very nature of improvisation keeps the focus on the process and eliminates the tendency towards fixation on the outcome.