**Self-Organizing Institutions and the Development of Citizenship Culture**

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*Editor’s note:* *Dr. Dan Friedman is artistic director of the Castillo Theatre, the Associate Dean of UX, and a faculty member at the East Side Institute. The following is a keynote presentation he delivered in October 2016, in Bogotá at the biennial conference of Corpovisionarios por Colombia and addressing the conference theme: “Another Way Out – Addressing Violence Through Culture.”*

Citizenship can be defined legalistically, from the top down, as a set of responsibilities and rights inherent for members of a particular polis. The citizenship culture we are exploring at this conference, while it has a relation to the legalistic understanding of citizenship, is, as I understand it, something qualitatively different. The citizenship culture we are discussing involves initiating and nurturing an active and creative connection between individuals, families and communities to the larger scope of activities and networks that make up nations and the world. Citizenship culture, I think we agree, cannot be legislated or imposed from the top down; it can only be created and sustained by the citizens themselves, horizontally not hierarchically. Citizenship, in this sense, is fundamentally a cultural activity with powerful potential to transform politics and economics, which are fundamentally cultural constructs as well.

One important means of generating citizenship culture, I believe, is to be found in groups of people creating and running their own organizations. By their “own” organizations, I mean groups and activities that they want or need and that depend for their existence on the people building them. They are not dependent on the government, NGOs or corporate foundations to fund them or to define their agendas. Colin Ward, the British anarchist writer and social historian, noted, “Anyone can see that there are at least two kinds of organization. There is the kind that is forced on you, the kind which is run from above, and there is the kind which runs from below, which can’t *force* you to do anything, and which you are free to join or free to leave alone.” The first kind of organization stifles citizenship culture, fosters resentment and anger and results in an identity of being oppressed. The other kind of organization, the one in which people freely come together to build something for themselves and their communities, fosters connectivity and responsibility and results, I believe, in an identity of what we here are calling citizenship. I have found that when groups of people are engaged in the activity of creating and sustaining organizations that address their interests and concerns, they grow and develop through the process. Part of what they develop is a sense of their own collective power, their creativity and their connection to each other and the larger world.

These observations are based on 35 years of working to generate and nurture self-organizing and self-sustaining groups involving a variety of communities in New York City. While I will touch on an array of such organizations, I will focus on two—the Castillo Theatre and UX. Castillo, named after the Guatemalan poet and revolutionary Otto René Castillo, is a community-based, socially engaged theatre, which I helped to found in 1983, and where I serve as artistic director. UX, now starting its sixth year, is a free university-style school of continuing development for people of all ages. Its student body is composed of 85% adults, 15% teenagers, primarily from poor working class communities of color in New York City. I helped to launch UX in 2010 and have functioned as its associate dean from the start.

What Castillo and UX have in common and what I believe connects each to the process of creating citizenship culture is not *what* they do. Castillo is a theatre; it puts on plays. [SLIDE 1] UX is a school; it offers classes, workshops and cultural outings of various sorts. [SLIDE 2] There are plenty of theatres and plenty of schools in the world that do little or nothing to foster citizenship culture. What’s important about Castillo and UX, I think, is *how* they do what they do. Both Castillo and UX have been created and are being sustained by those who make use of them and they are funded entirely by individuals and groups who are organized to support their activities. I believe that the collective activity of building a theatre and a school free of top down or outside control is what creates an environment in which what we are calling citizenship culture has been able to emerge and flourish.

I want to make it clear that I’m not arguing that this is the only way to generate citizenship culture. As Antanas Mockus has demonstrated so creatively here in Colombia, a university president, a mayor and others in positions of authority can have tremendous and widespread impact by sparking events, situations, and performances that inspire many other to embrace an activist citizenship culture.

What I am urging us to consider is how the activity of organizing and sustaining grassroots organizations results in the builders developing themselves and each other. There’s something very special about belonging to group that you are a part of creating, that didn’t exist before, that got built through you and others working and playing together. You not only have the group you’ve created, you also have new kinds of relationships with you fellow builders, relationships nurtured and supported by the very organization, the community, you’ve built. Put another way, the building of such organizations is simultaneously a tool for generating citizenship culture and the result of that culture being generated.

Before I share the specifics of our experience in New York, I want to clarify two other dynamics that we have come to see as important in the work of creating citizenship culture.

First, no theatre, no school, no single organization, no matter how dynamic, no matter how grassroots or non-hierarchical can create citizenship culture for a city or a nation or the world by itself. Such organizations, we believe, are essential building blocks and energy sources but they need to be constantly interfacing and connecting with other such organizations if they are to transform the culture. They need to be part of creating something bigger and deeper, what we in the U.S. have come to call a “development community.” A dynamic community, an inclusive, ever-evolving network of organizations and activities is necessary, we believe, to transform a culture of victimhood into a culture of active citizenship on a national and international level.

Second, when I talk about self-organizing, self-sustaining groups, I don’t mean that such organizations happen spontaneously. That does happen sometimes, but for the most part, especially for organizations that sustain themselves over a long period of time, a group of activists is needed to spark, lead and nurture the process. I’m not talking about a political party or any organization fighting for authority within the confines of society and culture-as-it-is. I mean of a group of cultural activists, play revolutionaries, if you will, people who see their mission in this world as transforming it through developing new ways of relating to each other and the world. I’m talking about people like you who are active with Corpovisionarios or those of us in New York City who have banded together under various names since the 1970s.

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The Castillo Theatre is a 32-year-old self-organizing, self-sustaining cultural activity. It was sparked by cultural activists, myself among them, in 1983. Castillo is part of a broad network of other grassroots organizations engaged in culture change, which we call our development community. You’ve already learned about It from my colleague, Lois Holzman. To review, it Includes: the All Stars Talent Show Network; Youth Onstage’ the Development School for Youth; Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids, (all free after school development programs of the All Stars Project); UX, a free school of continuing development for adults, which I will talk about in more detail later; and the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Therapy, a grassroots thinks tank and international training center in the performance based approach to social change. We are also linked to similar groups in other cities in the U.S., and with the international conference and network known as Performing the World, which Lois has shared with you.

Today the Castillo Theatre is located in a 31,000 square foot cultural facility that it shares with the four performance-based youth programs of the All Stars Project. [SLIDE 3] It’s located a few blocks from Times Square on the edge of New York City’s commercial theatre district. It has three performance spaces, rehearsal rooms and dressing rooms, set and costume shops.

There are many theaters in New York with bigger budgets, larger audiences and more space. And while the content of Castillo’s plays is always progressive, and its aesthetic often experimental, what most distinguishes Castillo from other theatres is neither the content nor the form of its plays; it is *how* it was built and *who* is building it. What makes it possible for Castillo to produce four to nine plays and other performance events each year are two overlapping groups of people engaged in two interwoven activities—its volunteer workers and its volunteer donors.

Relative to its donors, Castillo has steered clear of the state. It has never taken government or corporate foundation money. Its operating budget is raised almost entirely from individuals—696 who gave directly to Castillo in 2015—and others who give to the All Stars Project’s general fund.

Castillo began putting on plays and raising the money to put on plays simultaneously. It was launched by a small group of progressive community activists who met each other organizing in the poor communities of New York City. We were already part of a network of progressive grassroots organizations, many now gone, which provided an environment in which launching a theatre as part of our organizing efforts seemed a possibility. We weren’t sure how, but the first step, it seemed to us, was to see if the people we were organizing and hoping to organize in New York City’s communities were interested in, or could be organized to support, a theatre.

To find out, we took to the streets. [SLIDE 4] We set up card tables, held clipboards and started talking to passers-byes. We soon expanded our outreach to include door-to-door canvassing. People gave a dollar or five or ten—and eventually we found people who would contribute a lot more. Some of the people we met on the street and some of the people who came to see our plays asked how, in addition to giving money or seeing a show, they might help. [SLIDE 5] They were given concrete and creative work to do in the theatre and on the street. Castillo’s handful of organizers grew by the mid-1990s to scores of people deployed to the streets on a regular basis. Thus Castillo’s independent funding base, audience, and pool volunteer activists were created simultaneously, dollar-by-dollar, conversation-by-conversation. That process, itself an exercise in citizenship, shaped the theatre as an institution.

It allowed us to maintain our financial (and hence, political) independence. Due to our organizing in a wide variety of neighborhoods, Castillo has one of the most diverse audiences, both in terms of ethnicity and social class, in New York. Our constant community outreach created a broad network of volunteers who run the theatre. Currently less time is spent on the street, more on the phones and at fund raising events, [SLIDE 6] but the organizing of donors and volunteers never stops. Castillo’s very existence depends on and, in turn, generates, cooperation, creativity and responsibility, key elements, I think, of citizenship.

Put another way, the Castillo Theatre is made possible by the active participation of hundreds of people, who fund it, who run it, who create its plays and fill its seats. It has only three full-time employees—a managing director, a technical director and a sales director. Some 200 volunteers from neighborhoods all over the city keep it going and growing. They work on the production team, the tech staff, as house managers and house staff, box office staff, in the costume and set shops, on the sales team, the outreach team (which does street outreach and makes phone calls), and on the stage.

Castillo’s productions most often include a mix of trained actors and community people, many of them from poor working class communities who are performing on stage for the first time. [SLIDE 7] That mix is important to Castillo being a theatre not simply *for* ordinary people, but *by* them. It also allows Castillo to function beyond being an educational or propaganda theatre to being, primarily, a creative and developmental experience through which people learn to be a part of, build and lead ensembles.

The roles people perform at Castillo are fluid. Someone you see on stage in one production may be an usher taking your ticket in the next, or running lights the third time you attend a show. When people build a theatre (or anything) together, with their money and their labor, they have a very different relationship to the product, in this case the performance, than when they simply exchange money for a ticket. The play they come to see is not a commodity offered for sale on the marketplace; it is a social and political activity of their community—and it’s their co-creation. [SLIDE 8]

The pride and camaraderie, the sense of citizenship culture, thus engendered is palpable to both those directly involved and to those new to experiencing Castillo. G.S. Bowen began her review of a Castillo production in 2004, like this, “When I first walked into the All Stars [Castillo] Theater, I was immediately struck by the professionalism of their theater staff. I thought perhaps I was in the wrong place. But I wasn't. [Castillo] … is producing off-off Broadway theater, but the caliber of their staff is the highest that I have experienced at any theater - including Broadway theaters. I was immediately welcomed upon entering the building and there were very friendly people everywhere to point me through the process of getting my tickets, finding refreshments, and eventually finding my seat in the theater.  I don't think I've ever experienced such a high quality level of professionalism from a theater staff.”

Of course, they weren’t professionals at all; they were amateurs in the best sense of that word; amateur evolves from the Latin “amator” meaning “lover,” an amateur is one who loves her or his work. Castillo’s builders are volunteers taking pride in their creation. That, indeed, might be a good working definition of our concept of citizenship, volunteers creating their community, their city, their nation, their world and taking pride in their creation.

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UX is another example of amateurs creating an organization to further the development of themselves and their communities, and, in the process, generating what we are calling a culture of citizenship. [SLIDE 9] UX is a free university-like school of continuing development for people of all ages and all educational backgrounds. It has no grades and offers no degrees. Its teachers are all volunteers and its classes are all offered on weekends or weekday nights, so that people who work during the day can attend. Its student body is about 85% adult, 15% teenagers and is overwhelmingly drawn from poor working class communities of color in the city.

UX grew out of the 40-year-old network of grassroots organizations that we call our development community. In particular, it emerged in 2010 from the All Stars Project, which for the previous three decades had concentrated on building free, after-school development programs with young people from poor communities. [SLIDE 10] Repeatedly over the years, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and the older siblings of young people involved in All Stars programs would, say things like: “I don’t know what you did with my kid, but he wants to live again;” or, “I wish I had found the All Stars when I was young.” There was clearly a hunger to learn and develop in the poor communities, so we decided to see if people were willing and able to generate an activity, build an organization, create an environment, to promote that learning and development.

It was originally called University X, with the X standing for the unknown. However, we quickly learned that in New York State you are not allowed to call yourself a university unless you are certified by the state. We clearly were not going to meet their definition of a university and were not, in any event, interested in legitimatization by the state, hence the name UX. UX is now starting its sixth year and has had little more than 5,000 distinct students.

Its courses range from the performing arts:

* Improv for Everyone;
* Acting for Everyone;
* Public Speaking;
* Our Lives in Poetry; [SLIDE 11]
* Playwriting;
* Hip-Hop Dance; [SLIDE 12]
* Community Circle Singing.

Practical courses like:

* Resume Writing;
* How to Write an Essay;
* Financial Literacy;
* How to Navigate the New York City transit system).

Classes in history and politics:

* How New York City Works;
* Why the Government Doesn’t Work;
* Black History as American History;
* Workshops on the relations between African Americans and Latino immigrants;
* Diagnosis and Mental Illness.

We also offer playful courses on math and science. [SLIDE 13] UX has special events such as a lecture demonstration by hip-hop pioneer Grand Master Flash or a talk on “How I Got My Show to Broadway” by Hugh Ryan Mackey, an All Stars donor whose play, *A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder* won the 2014 Tony Award for Best Musical. UX has an ongoing Book Club, where students read short stories and novels out loud together and discuss them, as well as a Saturday Morning Drawing Club. [SLIDE 14] In five years UX has held hundreds of courses, workshop and outings. Classes are generated by student interest, teachers who come forward with subjects they’re interested in sharing, and ideas that emerge from previous classes. If something proves popular, we do it again.

Another feature of UX is its development coach operation. [SLIDE 15] UX coaches are most often well-to-do, well-educated, and culturally sophisticated professionals, trained by Dr. Lenora Fulani, a developmental psychologist and long-time community activist, who now serves as UX Dean. They do short coaching sessions with UX students at the beginning of each semester. In those sessions, they talk about the student’s hopes and dreams and are encouraged to discuss things they’d like to try that they’ve never done. Then, a week for two after this conversation, the coaches take the group of individuals they talked with on free cultural outings to museums, concerts, parks or galleries around the city. [SLIDE 16]

From the perspective of citizen culture, the key thing to grasp about UX is that all of its students, teachers and coaches are volunteers. They all donate their time, energy and skills to bringing the school into existence. It helps, of course, that the All Stars provides space, rent-free, for the classes at the facility it shares with Castillo on 42nd Street. (Sharing resources is one of the benefits of independent grassroots groups evolving as a community.) However, all the space in the world would mean nothing without the self-organizing of the UX students and teachers. Student volunteers produce the classes and the development coach trainings. They run the tech for the teachers, input student data into the UX data base, go out the streets and get on the phones to organize hundreds of people to attend the Opening Day event that marks the beginning of each trimester. Perhaps most vitally, UX students get on the phones and call other students to remind them of upcoming classes that they’ve registered for. Five thousand students don’t just show up; they’re organized to do so by their fellow students.

When UX students talk about their experience they talk about the impact of the classes, the value of being exposed to new kinds of people and cultural activities, and, most relevant to our conversation here, of the growth that comes from building the school together. Here’s Bernadene Weekes, a retired office manager for a construction firm:

“First of all, it’s very educational. In one class I learned the history of New York City. In another I learned how to get my finances together. I learned about our grand jury and justice system in a class taught by two leading civil rights attorneys. I took a class in “Acting for Everyone” and another in “Public Speaking,” which is helping me in talking to people on the street when I do UX street outreach. …

“UX is also culturally developmental. We’re afforded the opportunity to attend plays at the Castillo Theatre, poetry recitals by UX students, visiting dancers from Brazil, and a lot more. … Just meeting and socializing with the wide variety of people you meet … raises the quality of my life.

“I’ve also been able to contribute my skills to the building of UX. I worked for many years as an administrative office professional and now, as a UX volunteer, I use those skills to help … produce the UX Opening Day Development Coaching Operation. This it gives me something positive to fill my days and helps me keep my skills active and sharp.” (Bernadene Weekes, remarks at the “After School City” fundraising reception, June 2, 2015)

Theresa Chaney, who spent most of her life as a hospital worker, says of herself, “Growing up on the lower east side of Manhattan was tough. The poverty, crime and lack of resources – especially in our schools - did not nurture me or support my dreams. I have had good jobs and have been able to live comfortably in my adult life but the effects of poverty are hard to break. I have always struggled to fit in and always felt rejected by society. And I had been blaming myself and beating up on myself for feeling this way. That all changed when I walked through the doors here [at UX].” Theresa has been a student and volunteer with UX since its first semester in the fall of 2010. Along with the classes and cultural events, she cites her work as a volunteer builder of UX as key element in her development:

“As a part of our UX phone room team, I talk with so many different members of our bigger community - from other volunteer organizers to fundraisers to youth in our programs before, after and during the organizing shifts. These conversations ‘in the cracks’ are a big part of my development. Along with my UX classes and my work as a leader organizing for UX, I have been inspired to attend Borough of Manhattan Community College, where I organized an advocacy group for senior students and am now pursuing a one-year pilot nursing program. (Theresa Chaney, remarks at the “After School City” fundraising reception, June 13, 2016)

How does the pride and camaraderie extend beyond the specifics of building UX to a more active and extensive culture of citizenship? One way is reaching out to and involving other family and community members. Mary Hall a 68-year-old grandmother from Harlem, says, “I have been able to bring what I have learned to my family. I especially love sharing this with my ten-year-old granddaughter.  I bring her to a lot of the UX events. She’s exposed to live theater, taking classes, and going on field trips in New York City.” (Mary Hall, OX Opening Day remarks, October 8, 2016)

Another result of building UX for some is in developing a sense of being part of and taking responsibility for a bigger world. Janetta King, an 18-year-old high school student, put it this way, “My time here is a big deal because I live in a poor community and there’s a lot of anger and violence. It’s easy where I live to get stuck without hope. What goes on here is so different than my school and my neighborhood because at UX people care about me and my development. And I’ve had the chance to try new things. I never would have been in plays or traveled to conferences in other cities—these are things I didn’t even think about a year ago!” (Janetta King, remarks at Fulani Reception, April 11, 2014).

Over the last few years, UX has nurtured a new organization called the Committee for Independent Community Action (CICA). It was initially made up of UX students who wanted to work with Dean Fulani, who has been a respected independent community leader for 40 years, to engage political and economic issues confronting the poor in New York. [SLIDE 17] When the Committee for Independent Community Action began to challenge the ongoing attempts to privatize some of New York’s City’s publically owned, subsidized housing for the poor, its numbers grew rapidly. Gwen Dow-Chance, a pre-school teacher says, “One highlight [of my UX experience] was marching in the Harlem Day Parade in the UX contingent in opposition to attempts to privatize some our public housing.” (Gwen-Dow Chance, UX Opening Day remarks, October 8, 2016), and Mary Hall adds that, “Working on gathering signatures to prevent the privatization of New York City Housing Authority housing for low-income families has increased my desire to make a change.” (Hall 2016)

The 19th Century anarchist theorist Errico Malatesta wrote that, [SLIDE 18] “Organization, far from creating authority, is the only cure for it and the only means whereby each one of us will get used to taking an active and conscious part in the collective work, and cease being passive instruments in the hands of leaders. … And it is by cooperation with our fellow human beings that we find the means to express our activity and our power of initiative.” (Errico Malatesta,“Anarchism and Organization,”1897) That sums up the lived experience of UX and, I think, points the way towards, a way forward to an active, creative, and cooperative culture of citizenship.

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The Castillo Theatre and UX are being created by ever expanding groups of diverse people coming together and funding themselves independently of the state. They are being built in response to the failures of institutions in society—in the case of UX, an educational system that is failing poor people and in the case of Castillo a corporate culture that leaves little or no room for the articulation of the experiences and perspectives of many in society. They are new kinds of organizations that, in the words of my colleague Lois Holzman, “in their very design and activity challenge the foundations of their traditional ‘counterparts.’”

In concluding, it’s worth reflecting on the nature of that challenge. Neither the Castillo Theatre nor UX are primarily advocacy groups. Although, as the emergence of the Committees for Independent Committee Action indicate, they, at times, do advocate for particular social policy. However, the version of citizenship culture that they are generating is not primarily based on antagonism and conflict. As a theatre and a school, they are both efforts at understanding and interfacing with the world in new ways, and the overriding method employed by both is to have people of diverse backgrounds working and playing together, not to argue or agitate, but to create new experiences—plays, workshops, classes, cultural outings and conversations—that would not otherwise happen. They both are, in this sense, about generating new possibilities. Among those possibilities, our experience has taught us, is the development of those doing the building.

When considering the creation of citizenship culture, we need to ask: What kind of culture and what kind of citizen? The prevailing model of the citizen for the last few hundred years has been someone engaged with the issues of her or his community, city, nation, world and fighting for the “right” things. We—both in Colombia and the United States—have grown up with that model, and. I dare say, we are not happy with the results. Picking sides is, when you think about it, a conservatizing move. It accepts that the conflicts, polarities, antagonisms and limitations of society are set and unchangeable except by struggling/fighting/smashing the Other. We have seen over and over where that leads.

What if, instead of fighting for the “right” side, we bring together people of differing backgrounds, political views and economic interests to create environments within which they nurture each other and play with new possibilities? That is what’s going on at Castillo, UX and the other independent, self-organizing activities of its extended development community. I believe, that if this kind of self-organizing and development spreads, we will bring into being a very different kind of citizen— one who is more creative, playful and relational—than we have in the past, citizens who are engaged in playing and creating new possibilities rather than fighting to impose old ideas on each other.