

Community Development as Improvisational Performance: A new Framework for Understanding and Reshaping Practice

by Esther Farmer

Abstract

Improvisational performance is a useful tool to help us reshape our understanding of community development practice. This reshaping can have a dramatic effect on community building. The performance framework supports community members and community developers to create new “stages” (or environments) on which to perform new un-scripted plays which build on positive improvisational processes. These processes open up the possibility of new relationships even among former antagonists. In this approach the community is seen as an improvisational performance ensemble that is always growing, always changing, and always engaged in discovering new ways to perform relationships without a commitment to a pre-conceived outcome or product. Similarly, community development professionals are more akin to theatre directors who help to set the stage so that community members can work together to be open, to welcome the unexpected, and to discover new ways to build and create together. In this case study, the author describes the community development process that took place in a large housing project in New York. The improvisational performance approach helped to re-ignite the creative capacity of the community to end the widespread violence that was destroying it.

Community building is about putting people together in such a way that they can create new conversations, new alliances and new possibilities. As theorists and practitioners we must constantly challenge our assumptions that we know before this process what the possibilities for effective action will look like. This “lack of knowingness” is increasingly recognized in the literature on complexity theory and social relations, but we have not learned to utilize the discoveries of the unexpected and unplanned for in community development practice. New possibilities that present themselves can be utilized beneficially by framing community building as improvisational performance. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how reshaping community development practice, as improvisational performance can dramatically impact even the most challenging of community development situations.

Conceptualizing community development as improvisational performance allows development professionals to step outside their official roles and function as “performance directors.” In this capacity they can improvise together with community members and create a new community “stage.” Actors, who might

never otherwise work together, can engage in meaningful conversations by improvising on this new stage where the outcome is to be discovered. Unique solutions emerge from everything they have to give including their willingness to go beyond themselves and learn new ways of building relationships that derive from their deep cultural knowledge of the community.

Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya (2005, p.34) defined community development as “solidarity” and “agency” where solidarity is broadly defined as human connectedness and agency is the capacity of human beings to act and change their environment. This view is useful and reflects the values in this paper. The important issue for this author and indeed all development practitioners is how to advance the continuous creation of solidarity and agency.

The improvisational method described in this paper is based on the theoretical and practical work, developed over the last 30 years at the East Side Institute for Group and Short term Psychotherapy. The Institute is an international training center for new approaches to community building. The cultural/performatory approach that has been developed at the Institute is the basis for

several large-scale adult and youth development projects nationally including my community development work in a large housing project in Brooklyn, New York. The project, like many in urban areas, was riddled with violence, most often associated with gangs competing for control of drug markets. The project was known for the frequent murders that devastated families and the community at large.

This paper tells the story of the improvisational performances and extraordinary conversations that developed among unlikely allies, the truce that was negotiated, and how the conflict declined. These accomplishments did not happen because of any one person, but were the result of creating a context in which all the participants could improvise a new performance without knowing what the outcome would be. The value of improvisational performance is that professionals, community members and activists can create an environment to work together to be open, to welcome the unexpected, and to lead without a commitment to a particular pre-conceived product or outcome. This paper first tells the story based on my personal experience, then explores the theoretical underpinnings of the community development tool of improvisational performance, and finally elaborates it with a series of vignettes that illustrate some of the different components of the approach in this specific context. The paper concludes with an overview of the methodology.

Even the Pizza Man Delivers

From 1993 to 1999 I was the manager of Maple Houses. (Fictional name) Maple is a large housing project of 30 buildings and about 4000 residents in a very poor part of Brooklyn, New York. Like many New York projects since the 1970s, Maple was plagued with violence due to the competition among gangs over the drug trade. Shootouts were all too common. In order to work in the project, contractors and maintenance personnel had to develop an uneasy truce with young people involved in the drug trade. It was

joked that when the police heard shooting coming from Maple they mysteriously disappeared. Parents were afraid to let their children play in project playgrounds.

It also must be said that Maple (and in fact all NYCHA projects) has a stable population. This is different than public housing in many other U.S. cities whose population is much more transient. Most residents have lived in Maple for many years. The population includes people on welfare, working poor, working stable, and fixed income retirees. Maple residents go to work in the morning, come home at night, raise children and go shopping. Approximately 25% of the project residents received public assistance (this was a little higher than other projects in the city). There was and continues to be a long waiting list to get an apartment at Maple despite the violence. Still, the project was known as one of the most challenging in the huge New York City public housing community of 345 projects and when I arrived the urgency for doing something about the violence was pressing.

At the end of 1994 it appeared that the violence ended suddenly. It actually was not sudden in any sense; the relative peace was hard won and the result of a complicated, uneven and messy process. This process took nearly two years, and involved virtually all elements of the housing project: residents, staff, police, area churches, merchants, local gangs, local schools, local elected officials. But by the end of 1994 the environment was so strikingly different; the experience to many was that it occurred overnight. What actually happened was that over the preceding two years a new stage was created on which a new improvisational play took place; a play that had no script and no pre-ordained result. Community members began to engage each other without knowing what the outcome would be. It was within this process that the warring gangs found a way to have conversations that ended the conflict.

The story of this cooperation is important to explore. The agreement between the gangs came out of a community building process of cre-

ating new conversations among diverse elements of the neighborhood. Many of the key actors in this truce would formerly not even be in the same room together, much less having a conversation. The conversations involved the community at large demanding that the gangs stop the violence, which at that time was taking so many lives that it became intolerable to everyone, including the young people involved. The gangs responded to the community's 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. This was an important aspect of why the leadership of the gangs respected the leadership of the tenants. For the first time they were performing on the stage they created, together.

Imagine this kind of conversation: The head of the Tenant Patrol approaches a former gang leader who is just out of prison and is 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. She tells him she is interested in helping in any way she can to facilitate more of these discussions.

These kinds of conversations were the ordinary and extraordinary performances that changed everything at Maple. They were the origin of the pact between the gangs. The conversations were the result of inclusive improvisations that led to new relationships created and performed on a new stage that was constantly being built and rebuilt by the participants. The Tenants Association and the Tenant Patrol brokered a meeting of rival gangs through several contacts they had, like this young man. The gangs agreed to stop the violence and to not deal drugs in the project. A tenant patrol was organized in every building. The violence ended. Children were

back in the playgrounds. Residents came outside on project grounds to talk to neighbors. The city started investing in the area again, including the construction of a new playground and the initiation of a program called Operation Commitment. The major media printed stories about the changes. The Maple community was able to create the conditions to express their collective power by drastically reducing the violence in their community. Where once no one would deliver pizza at Maple, as one newspaper reported, "Even the Pizza Man Delivered." (Elliot, NYC Housing Authority Journal, 2/98)

Improvisational Performances in Community Development Practice

In my experience community development professionals in the field are often encouraged to downplay their role and to value community members as the real experts. The intention is to address the problem of professional arrogance and to support professionals to work towards capacity-building, as opposed to imposing top-down solutions. The implication here is that what the professional doesn't know, the members of the community do. While there is no doubt that members of the community know all kinds of things about their community that a newly hired consultant (or assigned manager) can't possibly know, clearly what they don't know is what to do about the problems in their neighborhood. So from the start, both community members and professionals are in a similar box, i.e. they "don't know". Far from being a problem that needs to be covered up, a "not knowing" posture is exactly what is needed to create something new.

The Russian developmental and educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky was most explicit in showing that children learn and develop by doing what they don't know how to do. (Vygotsky, 1978 p.89; 1987, pp.177-212) Vygotsky showed that children learn by being supported to perform ahead of themselves. (1987, p.213) For example, they learn to speak in the social environment created with their parents in

which their parents relate to them as speakers before they (children) even know what speaking is. In like manner when adults learn something new we have to go a little beyond ourselves to learn it. More precisely we have to create environments with others - what Vygotsky called “zones of proximal development” (ZPDs) – that make such performing and development possible. These ZPD’s are the environments in which people experience the social nature of their existence and the power of collective creative activity. (1987, pp 208-9). The tool of performance helps us create these developmental environments.

Performance as a developmental tool, while radical in its implications is not completely unprecedented. The anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1960), Victor Turner (1984) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1972) identified performance as an activity which could result in individual and social change. They called it “liminal” activity, that is, activity which passes through (or beyond) the threshold of traditional or conventional behavior. Turner expanded the concept of the liminal to explain what he called “social drama”, that is, the transformative activities of social groups, whether they be inter-clan disputes in tribes or revolutions in modern nation-states. Turner identified performance as that activity which allowed social groups to go beyond established relations and old ways of doing things. Sutton-Smith emphasized the inherent subversiveness of performance. He suggested that individuals and groups had much to learn from the “disorderliness” of performance, which he called “the source of new culture.” (1972, p.28)

The centrality of performance in everyday life was first pointed out by Nicolas Evreinoff, a Russian actor, director, playwright, composer, musician and theorist. In his book, *The Theatre in Life*, (1927, pp. 22-23), Evreinoff identified performance (which he called “theatricality”) as a human instinct that allowed for transformation. “Man has one instinct about which, in spite of its inexhaustible vitality, neither history nor psychology nor aesthetics have so far said a single word...I have in mind the instinct of transforma-

tion, the instinct of opposing to images received from without images arbitrarily created from within, the instinct of transmuting appearances found in nature into something else, an instinct which clearly reveals its essential character in the conception of what I call theatricality...The instinct of theatricalization which I claim the honor to have discovered may be best described as the desire to be ‘different’, to do something that is ‘different’, to imagine oneself in surroundings that are ‘different’ from the commonplace surroundings of our everyday life. It is one of the mainsprings of our existence, of that which we call progress, of change, evolution and development in all departments of life. We are all born with this feeling in our soul, we are all essentially theatrical beings.”

Best known to community developers is the work of Augusto Boal. Boal uses theatre in community development contexts focusing on the possibilities of theatre as a social change agent. Boal posits that we are all actors because we act and we are spectators because we observe. So we are all “spectators”. Boal uses theatricality to help people become more expressive and to grow emotionally. He uses theatre as a technique for a particular goal. He teaches participants, for example, to use theatricality and language for the purpose of learning to be more expressive in the way that professional actors are. (Boal, 1992, p.1) In an extension of Vygotsky’s language added by Newman and Holzman, this is “tool for result”. In the improvisational approach, we practice “tool and result” (Newman, Holzman, 1993, pp.127-132).

Tool and result is a unity. It is not instrumentalist. In the Maple example I did not say, “We are now going to do a play about Maple that will accomplish the following result”. I began to relate to the activity of people in the Maple community as a community performance. This perspective changed what was possible for us to do. Our activity was improvisational. It was process driven. Once you say, “Let’s do this to get a particular result” you limit possible outcomes. The

improvisational approach described in this paper allowed us to build with what we had without being defined by the result.

Actors, Performance, and Improvisation

The social therapeutic approach developed at the East Side Institute posits that our human capacity to perform is critical to our human capacity to grow. For us human activity is performance. When people think about performance they usually think about theatre. Most of us understand performance as what happens on stages when we go to a theatrical performance. This acting space or 'stage' is a particular kind of environment for performances. The social therapeutic approach envisions life as a series of these performance spaces or stages upon which ensembles (groups, teams, communities) create the millions of improvised scenes (and some scripted ones) of our lives. These scenes are created through performing, playing and improvising. Human beings have the capacity to create stages (environments) throughout life and we have the capacity to perform our lives on these stages and in these environments in new ways.

The language of the theatre does a better job than the language of psychology of capturing the fact that people are socially connected and always creating things together. In arguing for a new kind of psychology, Karl Scheibe says: "A psychology of everyday life should enable us to understand - if not predict and control - the unfolding dramas around us. Such a psychology, I propose must be enriched by the incorporation of the principles and the language of the theater." (Scheibe, 2000, p.9)

It is useful to envision the work of community building in a similar way to that of improvisational ensemble building. Every activity in the ensemble (community) has an impact on the overall development of the ensemble (community) and everyone involved has responsibility for strengthening the ensemble (community performance). Community building is a collective, creative ensemble process -people relating, conversing, performing and bringing new social units into existence and at the same time, sharing

a collective commitment to their sustainability; a sustainability that demands a commitment to continuous growth.

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. As Lois Holzman states:

"The problematic we are dealing with in contemporary culture is that we tend to see experience and respond to people as products (identities, labels, and members of a category) rather than as ongoing process. We see ourselves and others as "who we are" (products) and not as simultaneously "who we are" and "who we are becoming". Yet, each one of us is, at every moment, both being and becoming". (Holzman, 2004, p.2)

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. As Denzin observes:

A performance is an instance of a politics of action, a circulation of power. A performance is a de-centering of agency and person through movement, disruption, action that incessantly contests, breaks, and remakes. Personal narrative and personhood are constituted in the moments of performance. Every performance becomes a way of questioning the status quo, and even as

performance reproduces the status quo, it does so in novel ways, in ways special to the performer. (2001 p.20)

It turns out that performing –being who we are and other than who we are- is vital to our emotional, social and intellectual lives.

The role of expertise (community development professionals) is to support community members and communities to create environments in which it is possible for them to perform creatively. This is quite different than the “expert” knowing and imposing solutions, fixing problems, or scrambling to do damage control. The improvisational framework is not a problem solving model. The approach begins from the premise that community development processes can not be, nor should they be controlled. In their community development work, Ronald Hustedde and Betty King (2002, p.37) discuss the way that emotions in community life are not controllable and how chaos and messiness are part and parcel of community life. The community must create their own processes from the bottom up. It’s a messy chaotic process. The performatory approach uses everything the community has; including the skills, anger, emotionality, pain, joy, playfulness, history, etc., in support of its creative growth.

Who is in control?

There is substantial difference between the imposition of authority such as a police action that rounds up drug dealers and criminals and temporarily reduces violence and an activated community empowered to collectively create the kind of community people want to live in. The imposition of authority is nothing new and while it may result in a welcome improvement, it is not particularly growthful. Nor is it a long-term solution. Everyone assumes the violence will be back. Solutions that are coerced by authority institutions, create the conditions for the community to be dependent on the police (or other authority institution), to take care of the problem. In addition,

as Michael Briand says: ...

“Coercion generally is a weak deterrent of undesirable behavior. It teaches a person only to avoid getting caught. The control that others exercise through (coercion) makes it unnecessary for the punished person himself to learn to evaluate his conduct accordingly. Coercion disposes him to behave similarly whenever he thinks he can get away with doing so.” (1999, p.166)

On the other hand, the reduction of violence that comes out of the collective activity of the community is an example of power that comes from the bottom up. It reflects a new kind of culture that grows out of a new kind of environment; - an environment in which the community performs its capacity to take responsibility for itself. It is an important shift from the sometimes victimized, activity, (or non-activity) of waiting for the government and/or other institution or “outside scriptwriter” to come to the rescue. The bottom-up collective activity of the community creates developmental conditions for everyone who participates. “Who is in control” as a question is transformed. The question becomes “What’s going to help develop the community”?

Constructing Improvisational Performances

Improvisational performance is dependent on context. The very nature of improvisation makes it impossible to generalize it in a formalistic way. The beauty of improvisation as a tool is that it never stops giving. Any small change in how things are done or what people do is an opportunity for a new improvisation. It is useful to understand how actors are taught improvisational skills. They are trained to relate to what the previous speaker says as a “good offer”. In other words, each speaker accepts what the previous speaker has said and builds with it. The key here is building. A good improviser uses everything to build upon.

Much has been written, particularly in social work and psychology, about the need to

create safety and trust when creating environments for people to take risks. In the performance framework and in my experience of its practice in community development settings; when people are placed together in a new way on a new stage, there is no trust. It's risky business from the start. The environment is not necessarily safe. Neither safety nor trust is a precondition for improvisation.

In the following sections I discuss several components of the Maple case that may be helpful to illustrate the methodology. The community development professional here is akin to a theatre director, helping to set the stage and putting performers together in new situations to create a performatory environment. The improvisational plot can not be known in advance, but when all the actors are on the stage and begin to talk in new ways, the plot thickens with new possibility. Imagine this stage setting: 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 among the young people 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 accomplish what everyone says they want; an end to the violence killing young people at Maple. Everyone is uncomfortable on this stage. It's a brand new environment. 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.

In this situation at Maple, the community was demanding a new performance from the young people; that they talk to each other to end the violence. The young people were also asking for a new performance from the adult leaders; that is, to include them. There was no agreement or hidden agenda that the meeting was called to build trust. People were asked to perform differently. The new performance was developmen-

tal. Participants learned that it was possible to do something new even with all the distrust, fear and antagonism.

The creative process at Maple was based on many, indeed hundreds of conversational performances that kept building one off of another. The vignettes that follow stand out in the process of the residents creating and re-creating the Maple community. They are not presented as steps or stages (as a temporal concept), but as examples of how to use the methodology of improvisational performance in the context of community development, given the conditions of this community.

Supporting Emergent Leadership

In the New York City Housing Authority, approximately 30% of the staff of 15,000 lives in public housing. There is a deep connection between the staff and the residents of the projects. Housing employees are looked up to, and a housing job is considered very desirable among the young people living in the projects. Yet, there is a pervasive culture of blame. The staff blames the tenants for vandalism and the tenants blame the staff for not doing their jobs, being lazy, and looking out for their own interests. When I arrived at Maple, the staff was demoralized, the residents were constantly fighting among themselves and the staff and the residents had a very tense relationship.

In addition, the Tenant Association (TA) was ineffectual and not functioning. Most of the "leaders" were the "usual suspects", tied to the local political machine. The environment was hostile to new ways of doing things and there was almost no participation at community meetings. There had not been a democratic election for TA in several years and the group that ran the TA was so corrupt that the local public housing administration took the unusual step of deposing them. As I began working at Maple and building relationships with the residents, staff, local police, and other community players, it became clear that there was a tremendous leadership vacuum and new leadership was needed. My task was

to be ready to jump on the opportunities that appeared at any moment. In improvisational performance work, everyone must carefully listen so that they can utilize all opportunities to build on what the performer said before them. It is the same principle in community development work. CD workers must be ready to hear and support any emergent leadership openings. The recognition, identification and support of emerging community leadership is one of the most important jobs of community development work, and the director needs to be ever attentive to supporting emerging leadership wherever and whenever it appears.

The two most important leaders that organically 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 assumed to be drug infighting. She came into my office one day angry about the lack of community participation and democracy in the TA. 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 was providing leadership on a daily basis in her building, which was considered the most drug infested in the project (although paradoxically one of the cleanest – an asset we were able to use.) 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. No one had tried this before in Maple. No one knew if it would work nor did we know what the outcome would be. We started with the appreciative process of asking questions about

our assets: Who was already providing leadership in each building? Who did the residents respect and listen to? Which members of the staff had the best relationships with the residents? In hundreds of similar settings we found that people were able to act if the community developer as director empowered them to improvise and helped them “cast” the actors and get the props they needed.

Preparing the Stage

Community developers continually create stages for action, but often these stages are not conducive to creative innovation. Improvisation is particularly powerful when people agree to be put together in a previously improbable or unthinkable situation. The situational context gives the participants the space to do something different and to experiment, explore and play with new kinds of conversations.

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 to keep her too near the employees. I gave her the space in the office because 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. If she were different or my staff were different, this might not have worked, but part of organizing environments (creating stages) is to use what you have, particularly the strengths of a situation, and this was one of the strengths. This type of strength based inquiry and activity was repeated at Maple over and over.

The TA President had to perform in a situation that required her to go beyond herself. She was developing 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, to create tenant programs, and she learned to appreciate the difficulty of the staff's roles. Both she and the staff were not only in the environment, they were constantly engaged in collectively creating the en-

vironment. This environment- building included some initial resistance on the part of some of the staff to her being in the office. As this changed, everyone became engaged in the activity of building the ensemble performance.

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. For example, when there were staff shortages, the TA President would use her clout to get staff for us.

One interesting relationship that emerged during this process was between the TA President and the project's Superintendent who was a working class Italian American man. Under normal circumstances they might never have spoken. She had a history as a Black militant; he was from Howard Beach, a neighborhood that had been rocked by allegations of violence against young Black people. They weren't "supposed" to be close, yet their relationship blossomed to one of respect and support. She took the opportunity to praise him at every tenant meeting and in her dealings with the "higher ups" in the agency. For his part, he often sought her advice and counsel on difficult situations.

I helped create a variety of stages where joint activity between the tenants and the workers could emerge. I set up a series of building meetings, to discuss what the building caretakers needed from the tenants and what the tenants needed from the caretakers. At first I attended the meetings so that the caretaker would not get beaten up. Sometimes the tenants were protective of the caretakers, particularly the skilled ones. In these cases the antagonism was among the tenants themselves who were often angry with each other about destructive tenants. After the initial round of meetings, I trained the supervisors of the caretakers and they went to the meetings. My goal was to build the relationship between the tenants and workers so that I was not needed

as the intermediary. We worked at our staff supervisory meetings on how to deal with difficult situations that came up at these meetings. As the TA President and the Tenant Patrol supervisor got closer to the workers, they began to go to the meetings in place of the supervisors. The workers felt supported at tenant meetings by the tenant leadership. This was a substantial change in the culture; it was a new script, created by community participants themselves.

The Ensemble of all: An Inclusionary Perspective

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. There are unspoken rules that stipulate 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.

When people starting seeing these new conversations, they began to sense that something new was going on. The "usual suspects" were not able to stifle every new thought; there was an extended dialogue that was occurring between management and the tenants. The staff of the project and the workers began to do joint activities, and young people were brought into a

process in the community. There were conversations going on that never occurred before with people that formerly wouldn't even be seen together.

New Relationships –Jobs, Contractors, Residents

The construction industry in New York is mostly white due to historical discrimination in the building trades while the residents of Maple (and other projects) are mostly Black and Hispanic. A common sight in projects is an all Black or Hispanic tenant body and mostly white workers doing major contract work. In order to integrate the trades, Black and Hispanic workers organized into "Coalitions" beginning in the 1970s to force contractors to hire Black and Hispanic workers. Their tactic was to show up at major job sites and physically prevent the mostly white crew from working until the contractors agreed to hire some of their members.

Coalitions are familiar organizations in projects where large construction is occurring. There were many modernization contracts going on during my time in Maple such as new roofs, new steam pipes, a new community center and new grounds landscaping. The Coalitions were at the project every morning to stop work from proceeding. This resulted in tension between the Coalitions and the project tenants because needed work was getting delayed. In addition, Coalitions demanded that their own people be hired and project youth were sometimes not members. The competition for jobs was intense and caused a lot of conflict. When the Coalitions first appeared at Maple, the TA President had no idea what to do with these "outsiders" threatening violence. She was in a situation that was "way beyond her." She didn't know the history of Coalitions or of construction issues. All she knew was that young people in the project were desperate for jobs.

This "scene" – with the actors being the Coalition, project youth, tenants, contractors and management, is common in housing projects. It usually gets dealt with coercively. Police take action against the Coalitions that often results in

more conflict. Typically, one group of Black and Hispanics represent the Coalitions while another group of Black and Hispanics would represent young people from the projects who also were seeking jobs. At the same time the tenants were demanding that the much needed work be done. In this adversarial and tense "drama" people have gotten hurt.

The tenant leadership was in a situation they had no idea how to handle and it was from this "unknowing" condition that a new community performance was created. I had many years experience working in NY projects and had dealt with Coalitions before. I pointed out that the reason for the Coalition's existence was to support young Black and Hispanics to get into the trades. Some of coalition members knew local youth, and I suggested that they be brought into the process.

I proposed that the Tenant Association include the Coalitions as a partner of the community. We came up with a new tactic whereby the TA and some project young people would talk to the Coalition leaders to build a relationship and get their support to hire project youth. This was unusual. Coalitions are some of those "unacceptable" groups considered "dangerous" and not to be included. No one knew what these new conversations (performances) would produce, if anything. It was a new improvisation. It involved skills such as negotiation, compromise and listening. The TA leaders engaged in this process that was beyond them and they learned what they needed to know in order to become more savvy, more sophisticated and skilled leaders. After several conversations with the leaders of the Coalitions, a bond was formed. Coalition leaders agreed to work with the tenants.

At the same time as the tenants were talking to the Coalitions, I invited the TA President and Vice President to meetings with the contractors and supported the tenant's insistence that contractors hire Maple youth. According to the law (Section 3 of the building code), contractors were required to hire project residents, but the law was poorly understood and enforced. I en-

couraged the TA and the contractors to meet and set up a hiring procedure that went through the tenants. The contractors claimed they couldn't work with the tenants because they were under pressure from the Coalitions to hire their people. They were quite surprised to discover that the issue had disappeared due to the community building we had accomplished with the Coalitions. They were used to the "script" of either paying off or hiring a few Coalition people. They were not used to this new "scene" of working in an organized way with the Tenants Association. The TA was able to work with the contractors directly, and the contractors had no more excuses for not hiring project youth.

Expand the plot: Young People as Community Builders

Many of the young people were involved in the drug trade because that was what there was to be involved in. The Section 3 issue was so important because young people wanted real jobs and they were demanding them. In the interest of continuing to create new kinds of conversations I decided to meet with the young people to discuss the implementation of the "Section 3" law.

While the media was invested in demonizing "drug dealers", these young people were the sons and daughters of the tenants at Maple. The activity of meeting with the young people was an example of putting people together in a new way to see what could be created, to develop a new performance. When I decided to do this, I had no idea what would happen. I only knew it would create a new conversation. The value of the meeting was not in the content of what we discussed, although that might have been helpful to those present, but in the fact that we did it. The young people were angry about the lack of jobs, they were tired of the violence and they were tired of seeing their friends die.

In my opinion, the young people were just waiting for leadership that did not impose their own ideas or threaten them with police action but instead included them in the process.

The tenant leaders let the young people lead by encouraging them to organize their friends. The young people were asked to perform beyond themselves and become community organizers. Together, the tenant leadership and the young people created the environment that made the pact between the gangs possible.

The new TA Board became staunch supporters of the young people's demand for jobs from the contractors. I helped them as much as possible within the limitations of my role as manager. I was direct with the TA leadership and the young people about those limitations, which helped build credibility and trust. I didn't tell them what to do, I didn't insist that I "knew better" but because of the ongoing process of building our relationship, I taught them everything I knew about community organizing. They wanted my opinion. Sometimes they took my advice, sometimes they didn't and vice versa. The content and outcome of the advice was not of prime importance. It was the performance of our relationship that had such an impact on the community.

Unusual Bedfellows: The Police and the Community

Another important relationship was cultivated between a very effective community police officer and the TA president. I created opportunities 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 against violence, the officer came up with the idea to ask 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 10 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. The community was touched. Fuji promised to sponsor a race every year and assigned a staff member to outreach doing a race at other projects. We got some media attention. Activities began to snowball. We organized bike rides, talent shows, after school centers, all kinds of community building activities. We began having agencies such as local Health Maintenance Organizations with space asking us what they could do to participate. Local small business owners began coming to meetings.

Creating new conversations with people you never previously talked to is not easy. It places the demand on everyone to be more open, to listen, and to not respond reactively. Think about the change in the culture that has to take place before a group of project kids can be in the same place as police officers and both groups are cordial and respectful. Or imagine the “scene” of a community meeting between housing management and young men angry about jobs. The manager is there to inform young people about their rights under the law and to discuss what she needs from them in order to support them. It’s a very different environment than anyone is used to and it requires a very different performance from everyone.

Conclusion

The story of the change at Maple is a story of cultural change. It is the story of people discovering their capacity to perform as community builders. It is the story of how solidarity and agency was created in this poor community in Brooklyn. The building process that emerged was reflected in new kinds of conversations and relationships. These new conversations/relationships could not happen in any environment. Just as a play needs the stage to be set, so the environment has to be created for these conversations/relationships to take place. At the same time, the dialectic of

this process was such that the new conversations helped to continuously create the developmental environment. Another way of expressing this is that to build community people need to develop and to develop people need to build community. Improvisational performance is an important tool in this community building 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 ways that focused on who they were “becoming”. New stages for performance had to be created. The tenants developed as leaders by working in the staff office. The young people functioned as community organizers by organizing their friends to stop the drug war, the staff became more tenant oriented by collectively working with the tenants in the management of office.

In addition, 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 tenants and the Coalition leaders, 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.

References

- Bhattacharyya, Jnanabrata (2005) *Theorizing Community Development*, *Journal of the Community Development Society*,
- Boal, Augusto (1992) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, London:Routledge
- Briand, Michael, (1999) *Practical Politics*, University of Illinois Press

- Denzin, Norman (2001) *Interpretive Interactionism*, Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications
- Evreinoff, Nicolas (1927) *The Theatre in Life*, Trans. Alexander I. Nazarov: New York: Brentano's
- Elliot, Eileen (1998, February) *Cypress Hills transformation – You have to move forward NYCHA Journal*
- Holzman, L. and Newman, F. (2002) *All Power to the Developing*, in *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*
- Holzman, L. (2004) *Lev Vygotsky and the New Performative Psychology: Implications for Business and Organizations* – To appear in Hosking, DM and McNamee, S., *Organization Behavior: Social Constructionist Approaches*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Hood (Holzman), L. and Newman, F. (1979) *The Practice of Method: An Introduction to the Foundations of Social Therapy*. New York: NY Institute for Social Therapy and Research
- Hustedde, Ronald and King, Betty, (2002) – *Rituals: Emotions, Community Faith in Soul and the Messiness of Life*, *Journal of the Community Development Society*
- Newman, F. and Holzman, L. (1997) *The End of Knowing: A New Developmental Way of Learning*. London: Routledge
- Newman, F. and Holzman, L. (1993) *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist*. London: Routledge
- Newman, F. and Holzman, L. (1996) *Unscientific Psychology: A Cultural-Performatory Approach to Understanding Human Life*. Westport, Ct: Praeger
- Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Sutton-Smith, B., (1972) *Games of Order and Disorder*, paper presented to the Symposium "Forms of Symbolic Inversion" at the APA, Toronto, 12/1/72
- Turner, Victor (1957) *Schism and Continuity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Turner, Victor (1984) - *From Ritual to Theatre – NY: Performing Arts Journal Publications*
- Van Gennep, Arnold (1960) *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. M.B. Vizedon and G.L. Caffee. Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1987) *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 1* New York: Plenum

Endnotes

1. Thanks to Wendy Carter and Thomas Agular (University of California Davis MS Students) who assisted in the literature search and editing of this paper.
2. The most well known of these programs is the All Stars Project, a youth development program involving 20,000 young people annually.
3. New York City's public housing community has a population of approximately 500,000. It is the largest in the US and despite its problems is known as the best managed, with a waiting list of 150,000 families. Overall, working families account for 41.2% of NYCHA families. 17.7% of NYCHA families are on public assistance and 41.1% are on social security or other pension benefits. – Retrieved October 25, 2005 from www.nyc.gov/nycha/pdf/factsheet
4. Operation Commitment put police, social

services and other resources in Maple for about a year and then was withdrawn as another community was seen as needing the resources more.

5. Coalitions have had some success in integrating the building trades. Over the years, some of

them (by all means not all) have turned into extortion rackets, accepting money from contractors in return for leaving contractors alone. Coalition leaders point out that the trades are ripe with corruption with or without the Coalitions.

Esther Farmer

Esther Farmer is on the staff of the East Side Institute for Group and Short term Psychotherapy where she has contributed to the development of a performance-based approach to human development. She has long been associated with the New York City based All Stars Project which utilizes this community building approach in their many youth development programs. She has also been a New York City public housing Manager and staff developer where she achieved national recognition for her creative public housing management work, transforming some of the largest and most challenging housing projects in New York City. For five years she was the Ombudsman for the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) where she developed the first public housing Ombudsman program in the US. Her articles have appeared in *Progressive Planning Magazine* and the *Journal of the Community Development Society*.