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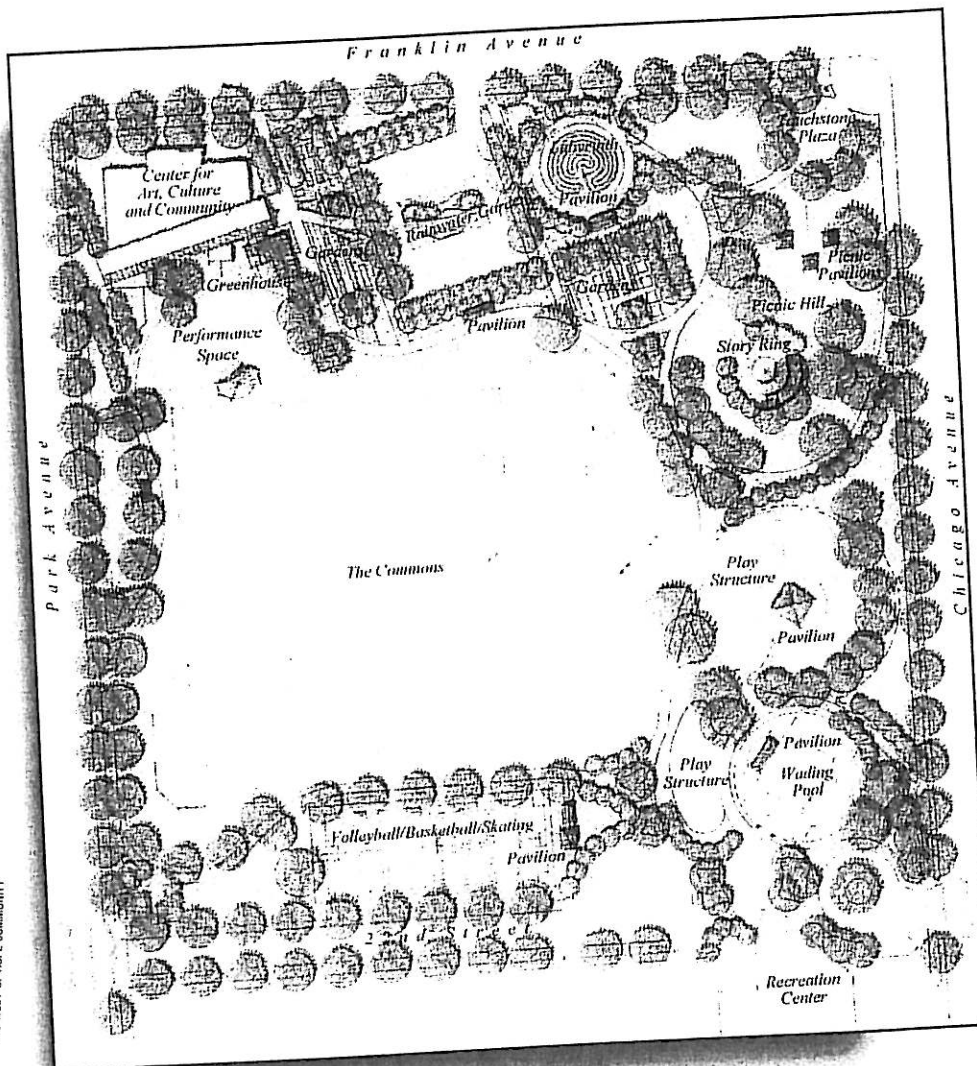
Listening to the Community:

A Park Designed Through Dialogue

By Mary Keefe

The early housing development work in the 1990s of Hope Community, Inc., a CDC based in a neighborhood south of downtown Minneapolis, began on what we now call the Hope Block – a square block where we began to acquire and revitalize houses one by one, challenging the hopelessness of a drug epidemic and disinvestment. As we worked on the block, we learned from neighborhood residents that houses don't restore hope when they're surrounded by fences. People wanted something more: places to gather in their community. We responded by taking down fences and building playgrounds, a picnic pavilion and an indoor community space among the restored houses.

But our few houses and common spaces were still surrounded by devastation, and few people inside or outside the neighborhood thought real change was possible. To challenge that thinking we created what we called an agitational vision, to make people see new possibilities. Six foot high architectural boards showed 16 blocks of our neighborhood with restored and infill housing and common space woven throughout. We called it the Children's Village vision, and it was truly agitational, getting reaction way beyond what we expected. The vision eventually led to a plan to transform an abandoned intersection at the end of the Hope Block with 300 units of housing and neighborhood business space.



The final park design, approved by the city Park Board in 2001.

Prominent on the Children's Village drawing was Peavey Park, a major community asset. There had been strong neighborhood focus on the park. A problematic liquor store was closed and the land added to the park; a large public art project was completed. Still, the park reflected what was happening in the neighborhood – drug dealing and tragic violence. The Superintendent of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board at the time, Mary Merrill Anderson, had learned about Hope and our Community Listening model. "I was convinced that we had to explore other models for public participation in our parks, especially in the inner city," she says. "We had to find a way to raise up voices that have been silent." She took the risk to collaborate with Hope, deviating from the Park Board's protocol by making the Community Listening an official city planning process.

This was the fourth of our Community Listening projects, through which more than 1,200 people have taken part in small dialogues about their community. The overriding goal of this work is to sustain the long-term residency of low-income people and diverse cultures in this neighborhood, engaging people who will play a strong leadership role.

Rapid Growth Brings Need for Accountability

Hope Community started in 1977 as a hospitality house and shelter for homeless women and children. In the early 1990s our mission changed from emergency shelter to community revitalization as we struggled with the surrounding desolation. At the same time, signs of gentrification were appearing everywhere around us. The neighborhood we are part of – almost 20,000 people – is about 70 percent people of color. It is a long-time American Indian and African American area, now with large populations of African and Latino immigrants. The median income is only one-third that of the overall metropolitan median.

In the early 1990s when our first units of housing and community space were built, we began in a very organic way to develop our vision of community engagement. We worked with our tenants and neighbors on police and safety issues that affected them daily – using these issues to teach about power and leadership. At the same time, we started to create opportunities for kids and families to come together.

Like many CDCs, we were small and community connected. But to make an impact we had to find a way to bring our vision to scale.

The tipping point for change in the neighborhood required large-scale development integrated with strategic community engagement.

The tipping point for change in the neighborhood required large-scale development integrated with strategic community engagement. We wanted to create a new vision for the future of this part of the city, bringing together organizers and community builders who would proactively engage many more people in the community.

We pursued Community Listening to hold ourselves accountable and engage deeply in the community. Bringing a few people together to represent the community was not good enough. Mailings and flyers inviting people to meetings wouldn't bring people out. Surveys and door knocking or encounters with people on the street, in buses or laundromats would keep people isolated. We wanted opportunities for people to come together for dialogue.

Now we have completed four major Community Listening projects, each including from 18 to more than 30 small dialogues and 240 to 360 adults and youth. Each of our projects has a theme. One focused on jobs and education; another was on the meanings, struggles, hopes and complexity people attach to neighborhoods and communities. Most recently a Community Listening gave input into our strategic planning process.

Because trust is critical we don't make promises we can't keep. We are honest about the long-term nature of community change. We don't promise that Hope will act on all the issues that were raised, but we invite people to be part of our effort to make a difference. Our intention is to make each individual dialogue a valuable experience in itself for those involved, as well as part of a larger bringing together of voices.

The Park Project

The Peavey Park listening project illustrates the many dimensions of our strategy. It takes good organizing to get people in the room and Hope organizers worked hard to make that happen. First the two organizers working on the project spent a couple of months immersing themselves in the area around the park.

They met with people at organizations in the area about the process and began to find those that would collaborate to make listening sessions happen. They were also looking for "everyday leaders."

The organizers invited 15 of these leaders together for a first listening session in January 2000, and then they invited them to be part of a Leadership Team for the project. There were people from storefront churches across from the park, staff from a nearby shelter, a youth worker and youth from a community center, and other residents. Most agreed to be on the team, and others signed on as the project moved forward. The Leadership Team participated in shaping and facilitating the dialogues, inviting others and bringing together a report and list of principles for the park. They continued to work through to the end of the project, including working with the architect and the Park Board.

A critical piece of the project was shaping the content of the dialogue sessions. Most community dialogue happens in the midst of crisis or tension around an issue. People have experienced too many community meetings where everyone is angry and no one listens. We couldn't let that happen, yet there are real community issues that we couldn't ignore. We also wanted discussion about the specific aspects of the park to emerge from values and principles.

Each session started with a discussion about what community meant to the people in the room. They told stories about parks and community from their own lives. Then we turned the discussion to this community. First we asked people about how they thought outsiders driving by the park saw their neighborhood. Many people expressed their anger at general negative perceptions of them and their neighborhood, as well as their fear of gentrification pushing them out. They said, "People see what they want to see: crime, drugs, poverty, etc." But then we asked what *they* see in their neighborhood and heard stories about strength, pride, talent and possibility in neigh-



Students from a nearby elementary school work on the design for the park with Michael Schroeder, the park's architect.

borhood history, people and cultures.

When we asked what a strong Peavey Park would look like, the discussions were grounded in the community. At the center of the principles that emerged was the belief that the park must serve, welcome and reflect the broad diversity of cultures in the neighborhood. That belief was centered in people's desire to stay in the neighborhood. They wanted a renovated park to represent a public commitment and investment in their community as strong as in any other community in the city. One member of the Leadership Team, who lived in the neighborhood and worked at a shelter across the street, said the project was about more than the park. "We want to see improvement, not only for the park, but within the community itself," he said.

Hope organizers and the Leadership Team organized 18 dialogues about the park from January through July 2000, involving almost 200 people. Sessions in three languages were held at low-income and transitional housing programs, churches, an after-school program and the school behind the park. Latino volleyball players joined a session, as did young basketball players. Businesses and organizations throughout the area were invited to special sessions. Notes recorded at each session were analyzed by the Leadership Team, and the principles that would guide the park's development emerged.

What made it powerful and more than focus groups or mere public participation was the dialogue about the park as part of this community. People talked about the role of a park, and they talked about their neighborhood. Real community tensions were present in the dialogues. Residents' anger emerged as well as their hopes. In the end the dialogue was about their vision for the future of their community and their kids.

The next stage was to hold another set of dialogues about park design, beginning in the summer of 2000. The principles that emerged from the listening sessions were posted on all the walls of the room; a large aerial map of the park was on the table. The architect invited residents to participate in design. The design evolved from those sessions and more meetings with the Leadership Team. The team then decided to ask the Park Board to approve the residents' design as Peavey Park's master plan. That meant a summer of training sessions, strategizing and meetings with key Park Board members. Finally the team members enlisted 40 of their neighbors to attend a Park Board meeting in August 2001, where they cheered as their design was approved unanimously.

The park design maximizes use of the small park area to meet social, cultural, recreational and ecological purposes. An "active" zone close to the small recreation center al-

ready in place has basketball and volleyball courts. The commons is for baseball, softball, soccer and football, as well as powwows and festivals. The Center for Art, Culture and Community is the heart of the social zone with classrooms, administrative offices and a greenhouse. Rainwater gardens recycle water from the building and parking area. The park also has space for picnics, walking, playgrounds and even a "story ring," an outdoor room framed by benches and trees for small gatherings. Touchstone Plaza is public art that has been in place in the park for several years; in the future art that represents cultures in the neighborhood will be added.

The park is a much more active, community engaged place than it was when all this began. And the major street where the park is located has changed drastically, with neighborhood business development and significant affordable housing. Progress has been slow on implementing the park's master plan because of economic conditions. But slowly changes are happening. Hope, along with many others in the neighborhood, is committed to making the Peavey Park vision a reality. The development of hundreds of new housing units by Hope and others within blocks of the park makes implementing the park plan a necessity.

A Commitment to Listen

Our Community Listening concept has become a demonstration of Hope's commitment to deep community connections. The credibility that comes from those connections and the number of people involved translate to political power as we work to leverage investment in this neighborhood. For example, we were able to convince funders of the last 40-unit housing development we built that it should be 100 percent affordable when most other developments in the city are less than 25 percent affordable.

Community Listening has also had a major impact on Hope as an organization. It can be challenging for organizers who want to bring people together, talk with them about their problems and act. A longer-term approach like spending many months organizing a listening project can seem like putting off what is important. But every organizer who has worked on these projects becomes convinced of their value. The level of intentional investment we have made in the strategy has paid off on many levels. Each time we reach out we deep-

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perienced during the Washington administration or in the early years of the Daley administration. For CANDO, its own declining relationship with DPD and city hall meant that it was not on good terms with its single largest funder – which accounted for at least 35 to 40 percent of CANDO's \$1 million budget. Some officials were vexed that an organization funded by the city at such a substantial level was criticizing the city and its leadership. Despite a significant reliance on city funding, CANDO continued its adversarial relationship, and in 1999 and 2000, CANDO lost two large contracts with the City of Chicago. A major philanthropic funder also pulled out. This loss of funding devastated the organization's budget. After several efforts to restructure and trim programs, which achieved only partial success, the organization's membership voted to dissolve.

The Struggle to Retain Power and Remain Effective

CANDO's demise can be partially attributed to drifting from its core mission, excessive program growth and dependence on city contracts. More importantly, CANDO neglected to build its members' own political capital – particularly in their own wards – instead choosing to manage a number of narrow programmatic initiatives that did not build the power of its members or of the movement more generally.

This, in turn, made the organization more vulnerable to changes in political climate and ultimately less valuable to its membership.

In CANDO's early days, advocacy victories proved the worth of the organization to members more clearly and produced a greater feeling of solidarity. A continual struggle within the organization over how adversarial to be in its policy work reflected the changing relationship between the CBDO movement and city hall. In its later years, after the relationship between CANDO and city hall soured, CANDO's ability to influence policy through friendly means declined. Internally, some members argued that, in fact, receiving city funding had a negative effect on the appetite of CBDOs for advocacy.

Although the struggle for power and the desire to remain in the city's favor may have steered many CBDOs away from confrontational advocacy, changes in CBDO staff may have also played a role. As some CBDO leaders who had been trained in the tradition of the confrontational organizer Saul Alinsky moved on, they were replaced with executive directors who had more "professional" backgrounds and less connection to community organizing. With little political power and mixed support from its membership, CANDO was no longer able to advocate effectively.

Positive political receptivity and financial support from city hall or other powerful establishments should not be allowed to lull a movement into complacency or cooptation. Strong ties to such entities can

lead to subtle yet significant ideological influence on an organization and its leaders. The needs of CBDOs vis-à-vis city power go beyond funding, and the task of maintaining some independence is not a simple one. Certainly, neighborhood development would be an easier endeavor in the short run if CBDOs always cooperated with the local elected officials. In the long run, however, CBDO influence also depends on developing a base of power independent of such officials.

The power of the neighborhood development movement is not a static product predicted only by some longstanding political culture of a city. Rather, the movement's power is affected by changes in political climate and the ability of the movement to adapt and respond to such changes. When CBDO-city relationships are characterized by patronage is when building a viable and powerful coalition becomes the most challenging. It is also when such a coalition is most needed. ♦

Dan Immergluck is associate professor of City and Regional Planning at Georgia Institute of Technology. A longer version of this article is scheduled to appear in Economic Development Quarterly later this year.

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en our relationships in the community – both with organizations and individuals. Many of the organizations that have worked with us on listening projects have become partners in other ways. The listening projects have been opportunities for people in the community to take on leadership and learn about a public process.

The assumption is that community development organizations are community connected as small organizations, but as they grow they will be distracted by all the demands of real estate development. Hope Community's commitment to the vision of com-

munity engagement integrated with real estate development is unshakable, not just because it is right, but because it is what works.

A few months after the Peavey Park plan was approved, we asked members of the Leadership Team about what it meant to them and about what challenge they had for Hope Community. One member said, "Hope has to, at all cost, continue to organize these opportunities for people to come together and meet each other. Hope has the capacity to help make space for those voices so that they can take strength from each other and have more of an impact on the larger world." ♦

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