

Transformative Planning for Community Development

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I am honored to be giving this talk for the Mel King Institute, especially because Mel King has influenced my approach to community development more than anyone else. I've been privileged to work with Mel in a number of settings, enjoyed and learned from long conversations with him about what we call "Planners without a Plan" and been friends for many years with Mel and Joyce. Through his example and teaching, Mel opened up for me and many others a vision of how to work with communities across divisions in a way that is not based on the superficial pasting together of short-lived, issue-specific coalitions, but is based on transforming relations between groups. Mel's approach to doing this, which I have tried to emulate, is to confront the issues that divide us from a perspective of respect and love—or, as he has often put it, to move from the love of power to the power of love in our work to build a just society.

Introduction

In my talk today, I'm going to focus on something I call transformative community planning, a term I use to highlight the importance of transforming relations through our work in community development—that is to say, participatory planning which empowers the community to act in its own interests.

If we believe in participatory democracy, it's not enough to work in disadvantaged communities, it's important *how* we work in communities. For me, it comes down to a belief that in order to create positive social change in the face of pretty big challenges, we need to unleash the creative energies of ordinary people. We planners have a particular responsibility to do so and we need to develop ways of working that do this.

In my remarks, I'll briefly outline a definition of community development that makes sense to me, take a quick look at the historical roots of today's community-oriented planning, contrast transformative planning with advocacy planning, give a thumbnail sketch of lessons I've learned, talk a bit about the importance of our approach to the education of community development professionals and close with an example of a fairly recent project I was involved with in Tlaxcala, Mexico, combining education and community development planning.

Community development

In my view, genuine community development combines material development with the development of people, increasing a community's capacity for taking control of its own development—building within the community critical thinking and planning abilities so

that development projects and planning processes can be replicated by community members in the future. A good planning project should leave a community not just with more immediate “products”—e.g., more housing—but also with an increased capacity to meet future needs. In other words, a quality and sustainable product depends on a quality and sustainable process.

Unfortunately, public policy and planning practices often do not reflect this understanding of community development. Perhaps that’s why we have so little of it.

Too often success is measured solely by the numbers—the number of houses built, clients served, jobs created, etc. These are important outcomes, but outcomes insufficient for community development. And, if we measure success by the numbers alone, no matter how laudable our long-range goals, we’re going to frame our planning practice and lend our support to policies and strategies that we think are going to be successful in terms of those numbers. If we don’t include less measurable goals (or at least currently less measured goals) in our criteria for success—goals that have to do with empowerment—we’re likely to meet our goals while our communities are increasingly underdeveloped.

On the other hand, if community development as I’ve defined it is our goal, in addition to looking at concrete “products”, we will be interested in evaluating how successful a planning process has been in “lifting all the voices”, in bringing previously marginalized voices into the discussion, in organizing the unorganized to participate. In the planning process, how many people moved from being objects of planning to being subjects? How successful are we as planners in framing a process that is comfortable and encourages the participation of people who are not used to speaking in public, not facile at articulating their concerns and visions? How culturally sensitive are we to different forms of expression and self-organization? Are we able to successfully confront dynamics of racism, classism, sexism, and other exclusionary patterns of behavior that block full participation by various groups? What practical accommodations do we make to reduce the barriers to participation for groups that have been left out? Overall, how successful are we at nurturing well-informed, genuinely democratic politics and discourse, dialogue about options and about the “values” and “interests by which those options for policy and design can be evaluated.

Success measured in this way requires a transformative approach to community planning.

It’s an approach that has evolved from the advocacy planning that was connected to the social movements of the 60s and 70s.

Advocacy Planning

In those years, advocacy planning began to successfully challenge the notion of planning as a “neutral science”, as apolitical. Today, here in the US, advocacy planning has been institutionalized in some limited spaces—it is a recognized paradigm taught in planning schools and it’s the approach of many community-based organizations.

Advocacy planning can also take credit for institutionalizing community participation in planning, particularly in the public sphere. Of course, this is a two-edged sword: On the one hand, mandated forums for participation can offer a foothold for struggle. On the other hand, participation today is frequently structured into a win-win framework—if we just hear from all the stakeholders, we can figure out what’s best for all. By ignoring power disparities, participation becomes a smokescreen behind which real decisions are made by those who always made the decisions.

The terrain of struggle has changed greatly since the heyday of advocacy planning. Compared to the 60s and 70s, redevelopment (like everything else) is much more privatized. This means that—at least compared to things like urban renewal plans—redevelopment is much more piecemeal and the government role is secondary—supporting private developers rather than playing the organizing and coordinating role. The targets of advocacy planning are not as obvious. Development struggles are dispersed and there are fewer opportunities for broad discussions on development goals and strategies and less political pressure points.

While advocacy planning is an important thread of today’s transformative community planning, there were significant shortfalls in the vision. Debates among progressive planners today about what our practice should be are connected to these shortfalls. Unconnected to social movements and mostly practiced in the CBO world, advocacy planning today is often reduced to a technocratic practice that differs from traditional planning practice only in terms of who the client is. Dependent on funding sources which usually count success by the number of products produced, the practice of advocacy planning is primarily representative, rather than participatory.

A lot of progressive planning is stuck at this place. You can be progressive in many ways—hold progressive goals—and still fall into the trap of “thinking you know better” than the folks who are experiencing the problems being addressed, and that it’ll just be faster and more effective if you do it *for* people rather than *with* them.

Transformative community planning compared to advocacy planning

Today, there’s a spectrum of progressive planning practice—from what I am going to call an advocacy approach on one end to a transformative approach on the other end. While none of us probably works at either extreme end of this spectrum, in order to highlight differences, I’m going to characterize the extremes.

Although advocacy planners are concerned with economic justice, with redistributing wealth, they don’t seek, in the main part, to support organizing focused on the redistribution of *power* and don’t aim to cede control over planning decisions to oppressed people. The model assumes that the repository of knowledge is in the planners. It’s “we’ll figure out what’s best to do and do it for you,” not, “we’ll help you do it.” On the other hand,

transformative planners understand that successful redistribution of resources generally *follows* the redistribution of *control* of those resources.

Furthermore, although advocacy planners frequently have a critical analysis of the structural nature of social and urban problems, they will support organizing that focuses on issues that accept people's existing ideology rather than trying to take up hard (and potentially divisive) questions such as racism. In part this is because this kind of issue translates more readily into products that are recognizable as legitimate results of a planning process and they concentrate on products over process and on efficiency in reaching product-oriented goals over mobilization and empowerment.

Both advocacy and transformative planners would acknowledge that there is a political nature to all we do, that all of our work has implications for the distribution of power in society and that there is no such thing as a value-free social science. However, while the advocacy approach reserves this awareness to the planner, transformative planning requires the raising of political consciousness as a necessary corollary to any successful community development process.

The transformative planner

A successful transformative planner must actively listen and respect what people know; help people acknowledge what they already know; and help them back up this "common sense" and put it in a form that communicates convincingly to others. At the same time, it means challenging people on exclusionary, narrow-minded thinking; having enough respect for people to challenge them. In working in a racially divided city such as Los Angeles or Boston, this means not basing our work on the superficial pasting together of short-lived, issue-specific coalitions, but rather focusing our work on transforming relations between groups.

Successful transformative community planning also means planners who are willing to acknowledge that into each planning situation we bring with us our own attitudes and biases—biases that flow from our own class background and location, our own gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth. And, along with acknowledging the baggage we bring with us, we need to recognize that our preferences for certain planning and development outcomes are typically based, at least in part, on these biases and they're not always about being "right"—our preferences are just that, they're our preferences.

Successful transformative community planning means wielding our planning tools in a way that frames real alternatives; that elaborates the tradeoffs in making one or another choice—that puts real control in the hands of people most affected. It does not mean making everybody a professional planner—a possessor of the particular set of skills that planners have developed through professional education and practice. It does mean using our skills so that people can make informed decisions for themselves. And, it means including in the trade-offs the consequences of different decisions in terms of overarching community values.

Many community development professionals are working in a transformative way and by sharing our experiences, we can help each other to be more effective in lifting all the voices. I want to briefly share with you some of what I've learned from doing this work for over forty years.

One good reason for taking the transformative approach is that even in defining what the problem *is*, the official experts only have part of the answer, and sometimes they don't have a clue. In Havana, Cuba, when Mel, Miren Uriarte and I were doing a mini-course at the university, researchers there assured me that there was no problem of drugs or domestic violence in Cuba, but when we visited Regla Barbon, the director of the Atares community workshop in Havana, she immediately identified these as two of the biggest issues in Atares and she told us of the creative ways in which they were addressing these problems. Closer to home, adult leaders in a Cambridge neighborhood invited me to do a project with the neighborhood youth, and confidently stated that the biggest problem was lack of jobs for teenagers. But when my students and I met with the young people, they were very clear that the biggest problem was a lack of appropriate role models.

At the same time, we need to understand how our own expertise and know-how *can* be helpful. In a workshop I ran in Indonesia, there was a big argument between a social worker who was working for agribusiness interests on the island of Papua who complained that the natives were lazy and didn't want to improve their lives, and an indigenous leader who angrily retorted that of course they wanted better lives, but that the 60 hour work week and bulldozed landscape being brought by palm oil plantations was destroying the things they valued most, their natural environment and time to create art and music and socialize with others. I was able to bring to the table the fact that this kind of issue comes up all over the world with indigenous peoples, and that we've learned from centuries of disastrous development plans that identity and culture are often the most precious things a community has.

Unleashing those creative energies means recognizing that the people best equipped to come up with solutions are often the people who *have* the problems. Some people said we were nuts when, in partnership with the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development, we brought a group of recently homeless women into the College of Public and Community Service at UMass Boston as students and had them lead a participatory research project on the issues of women and homelessness. Well, there were times when I thought maybe we *were* nuts, but at the end of the process these women went to the state house to present a set of recommendations to the legislature and social service agencies based on the first large-scale survey of homeless women in Massachusetts. They really made a difference—for example, their recommendations led to changes in shelter regulations and policies for assigning housing and their success gave hope and a renewed sense of self-respect to currently homeless women.

At the same time we have to be aware that plenty of ordinary people have attitudes that cut against democracy and equality, in fact it's very common for people to try to defend their little scrap of privilege against people who have less. So we also have to be guided by our

own values. The mostly white members of a neighborhood association adjacent to a large public housing development asked my students and me to do a project addressing the frictions that were coming up with all the new immigrants moving into the development from everywhere from Haiti and Central America to Vietnam. So we met with the neighborhood association and with an immigrant-based social service agency. Pretty soon we realized that the neighborhood association was not willing for the immigrants to have a voice in the solutions. We made our choice, and from then on we just worked with the immigrant-based organization.

In fact, we often have to make special efforts to hear the voices of those who have less power and prestige in a situation. When, Melvyn Colon, Kathryn Kasch, Andrea Nagel and I did a community needs assessment on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, we realized very early on that if we just held community-wide meetings, only the men would speak. So we held separate meetings with women and with young people, and discovered they had their own ideas about what was needed.

Professional education and transformative community development

I want to now turn briefly to the education of planners. How we educate planners has a lot to do with whether they can and will work in a way that supports transformative community development. Too often, both in this country, but also in the several other countries where I have worked, planners are educated to plan *for* people, not *with* people.

The difficulties of this approach were highlighted in attempts to introduce participatory planning in Cuba. In the late '80s, an extraordinary group of architects and sociologists established neighborhood comprehensive planning workshops in 12 Havana neighborhoods, with the goal of better integrating physical and social planning and vesting planning decisions in the people of the neighborhood, breaking with the centralized planning of the past. But problems arose from the very beginning, problems associated with how professionals were trained to be technocratic "experts." Mario Coyula, one of the founders of the workshops lamented that, "now some of the decisions are no longer being made by the central government, but they're being made by the staffs of the workshops, not by the people living in the neighborhood." These professionals—architects, engineers, sociologists and community organizers—had been trained to "fix" things for people. At Coyula's request, Merri Ansara arranged for Mel and me to facilitate a participatory planning workshop. We arrived in the depths of the economic problems following the collapse of the Soviet Union and professionals, who had been accustomed to working with adequate resources could no longer "fix" everything. So, we started the seminar saying, "You're going to love this approach, because it's going to get you off the hook. You can't fix everything and this approach acknowledges that. It's about sharing responsibility for decision-making, getting all the people involved in problem-solving, in taking responsibility for prioritizing the resources you do have." Regla Barbon, whom I mentioned before, was a participant in that early seminar and in her work in Atares she has far outstripped anything we imagined to be possible as she continues to develop innovative ways of involving and

empowering residents of her community. In fact, the next time we facilitated a seminar in Havana, we had Regla co-lead it with us.

I'm going to end with one final example in somewhat more detail—an imperfect example, imperfection being our lot in the real world... Although in Mexico, the situation isn't that different from many we face here—a divided community, no organized community-based group to lead, a failing economic base, a failing education system, few social services, and a large proportion of the adult men gone from the community, in this case gone as undocumented workers to the U.S.

San Miguel Analco

IN 2007, along with my husband Chris Tilly, and a Mexican colleague, Mercedes Arce, I coordinated a participatory planning course through which doctoral students at the Colegio de Tlaxcala worked in a strategic planning process with the residents of San Miguel Analco, a small, low-income, rural community in the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico.

We sought to demonstrate that: 1) participatory planning is an effective tool for community development; and 2) structured “hands-on” projects are essential in linking theory and practice in professional education.

Right from the beginning, the Analco project differed in several problematic respects from most of my previous projects with students and community groups. The community, which had historic divisions within it, hadn't defined the project, nor even asked for our help, the students, who were starting work on their dissertations, had little time for a “hands-on” project and had no a-priori interest or experience in participatory planning. Both the Colegio administration and the students saw graduate education as strictly theory-based. Finally, the project was to be compressed into one semester instead of the two semester framework that I strongly prefer. Not an ideal situation. On the other hand, this was a resource-rich course—3 professors for only 8 students and my Fulbright grant to pay for expenses.

We mostly followed a series of steps that I have typically used in field projects and that I learned from and developed with Michael Stone and others at CPCS years ago.

- 1) The first step involves outside planners getting in touch with their own impressions of the community, so they can set aside their preconceptions and prejudices in order to be open to actively listening to community residents;
- 2) gathering background information, both current and historical, so as to have a rough idea of the “facts” of the community, how it developed to be what it is today and what, without intervention, the trend for the future is;
- 3) identifying and interviewing key informants, in order to get a fix on what influential members of the community see as community needs and resources and how they envision the future;
- 4) facilitating focus groups, designed so as to “hear all the voices,” that is, to have discussions with youth separate from adults, women separate from men, day laborers separate from land owners, etc.;
- 5) gathering the whole community together, with an idea

of building consensus on goals for the future and identifying community volunteers who will move the process forward; 6) working with a planning team made of community members to develop strategies and action plans; 7) carrying out the action plans; 8) designing and implementing a participatory evaluation.

This is a somewhat idealized version of the process of our Analco project. In practice, various stages were overlapping, we weren't able to get all the key informant interviews or focus groups that we planned, and we never undertook an evaluation at all. Perhaps most critically, given the lack of pre-existing community organization in Analco, divisions within the community, and reliance on patronage relationships, we were not able to turn over leadership of the planning team to community members until after we had brought the community together in a community-wide assembly a couple of months into the project.

In fact, in Analco, we confronted deep skepticism on the part of both students and residents that anything good could come from a so-called participatory process. It seems that in Mexico, participation has a bad name, having been attached to gatherings organized by politicians in which, in order to garner votes, promises are made which are promptly forgotten after the election. Furthermore, to get folks to attend these meetings, the political party gives everyone a gift—a sack of cement, a blanket, or maybe just a t-shirt. We had nothing to give except our energy and skills and we weren't about to promise anything specific, just that we would carefully listen to the community and help them transform their ideas into action and that we would not impose our own preferences.

We constantly had to pull our students back from leaping too soon to specific solutions to problems and we had to divert the community from seeing petitioning the government as the only viable strategy. Instead, we helped folks focus on their visions of what a better community would be and on what resources there were within the community to achieve their vision, rather than focusing on problems and on getting the government to solve them.

This was not always, or even often, easy. Some focus groups were poorly attended—the one scheduled for day laborers attracted only one couple and when we went to the fields to try to get others to come, before declining to come, the first man we approached immediately asked, “What are you going to give me?” It was also difficult to get a discussion going in the focus groups—mostly, people responded to questions posed by the facilitator. Getting a sizable attendance at a community-wide assembly required basic organizing work—leafleting people as they left mass, door-knocking at every house and sending a sound truck around on the day of the event and promising food to follow. But, in the end, it was worth it—the assembly marked a turning point in the project and produced a committed task force of volunteers who worked to develop strategies and action plans and have continued to work on developing their community.

What made the difference? In my opinion, there were several factors, most of which will be familiar to you: In the assembly 1) we provided childcare; 2) we focused on visions for the future rather than on problems; 3) we adapted our methods to accommodate those who could not read or write by expressing visions visually and having color signified voting; 3)

we concentrated on utilizing resources within the community to start moving toward realizing high priority goals; and 4) using fairly simple methods—different colored dots on nametags to assign people to workshops—we got people who hadn't been talking to each other for years to start working together to prioritize goals. In fact the same three goals were prioritized in each of 5 workshops and residents found that they had overall consensus about what they wanted their community to be. As a consequence, people became enthusiastic about the possibilities for the future. (I'm not sure what we would have done had we not had this rather wonderful outcome!)

So, what's the evidence for our two central propositions that 1) transformative planning enhances community development, and that 2) hands-on involvement with communities enhances professional education?

Results for community development

In terms of community development: By focusing on resources within the community, immediate projects happened as a result of the task force work on the three goals prioritized in the assembly: For the first goal—a healthy population—they were able to receive equipment and a part time doctor for the health center from DIF (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia), now that they had a functioning committee that could manage the program; for the second goal—adequate water and sanitation—a volunteer team borrowed a back hoe and cleaned out the septic that was overflowing into the agricultural fields; and for the third goal—more opportunities for education—arrangements were made for students at a nearby teachers' college to provide after school mentoring to the *tele-secundaria* students, who had been dropping out at an alarming rate.

As these plans were realized, an interesting thing happened—the community undertook additional projects. For example, the *jornaleros* who would never come to a focus group voluntarily cleaned all the streets of the town, another group of volunteers painted the health center. The elected community leader told us: “We were stuck in a pothole. You helped us finally get out of it.” With the community in motion, suddenly, the government came through with a number of resources that had previously been promised, but never provided, such as a long-needed sewage treatment plant, help with various productive projects, such as greenhouses and an on-ramp to the highway to Puebla, the nearest big city, where many workers from Analco, no longer able to make a living from the land, had construction and domestic jobs.

Results for the students and the Colegio

Students expressed enthusiasm after the very first exercise, saying that this was the first opportunity they had had to reflect on their own practice and experiences related to theoretical concepts. Although they were initially skeptical about the value of residents participating in problem definition and goal setting, by the mid-semester course evaluation, all eight students felt that learning and applying participatory approaches to community development planning would be very useful in doctoral studies and in their profession. At the end of the class, one student spoke for the group in saying, “This class was a very good experience, because [in our graduate education] we've spent a lot of time on theory, but it's very different to go out in the community and try to engage in practice”.

In the end, three of the students changed their dissertation topics in order to continue to work in Analco.

And, the Colegio has made a participatory planning “hands-on” course a regular part of the curriculum of both the masters and doctoral programs. Finally, the state government has requested that Colegio de Tlaxcala students and faculty work with other relatively marginal communities on community development, utilizing the same participatory approach.

Conclusion

What I’ve learned after close to 40 years of working as a progressive planner is that every community, like those I’ve touched on in this talk, have a combination of promise and peril. Every community has experiences and traditions of working collectively, of listening to what the most humble and marginalized have to say, of imagining a better world. Every community also has external pressures to conform and compete within the status quo, and internal cynicism, self-interest and despair that undermine efforts to work together.

The challenge is to build on the positive, and to find creative ways to overcome the negative. The challenge is to constantly expand ordinary people’s self confidence, their trust in each other, their ability to understand and strategize about their situation, and through this their *control* over that situation.

Meeting this challenge is what I call transformative community planning.