



A Note from the Field: Using Community Psychology to Reclaim Urban Green Space

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Conflicts between the community, local and national governments, and private companies are common in urban development. Professional architects, urban planners, engineers,



Figure 1 Photograph by YLAI Network. Public Domain.

and developers tend to not know what to do in the face of conflicts. Embarking on local public projects without community buy-in can create mistrust and a sense of helplessness within the community.

“Communities are complex, requiring the independent evaluator, who chooses to work in them, to possess a unique set of personal qualities and professional competencies.”

The project was developed by a private company and the City Hall in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2017. The company wanted to transform a green area – one of the only ones in the neighborhood – into a shopping center. I led the community to use informal spaces of participation such as protests, social media campaigns, and space usage analyses. In the end, we assured our green space and the shopping center plans were abandoned.

Highlights

A controversial urban project in Sao Paulo, Brazil was re-located through community-based power.

The community found its power through the creation of safe spaces for active listening and participation.

With support, communities can influence public decisions.

Methods

To build trust, I communicated with community stakeholders at least once every week, created workshops and presentations to translate complex architecture/engineering concepts to the community, and had individual and group meetings to understand priorities. At the conclusion of my project, I collected quantitative and qualitative data from leaders from community organizations and neighbors in the surroundings of the green area.

In the workshops and community discussions that I facilitated, I provided spaces for sharing stories and active listening. I also taught the community members

some of the ways that they could claim their green space. I explained the role of the press and social media to give visibility to their cause; translated complex urban planning and policy terms, so that they could understand what was happening; explained the public processes of community participation (such as public hearings and public meetings); and created a shared calendar with public events, public hearings, and other spaces of participation.

Results

More than two-thirds of the community stakeholders recognized the green space as important to their quality of life. Seniors mentioned that they used the area every day. One person told me stories about how the neighborhood transformed through time, remembering that two nearby avenues were streams. Others mentioned that the area was one of the last remnants of their childhood. Additionally, some community members recognized the areas as important cultural heritage. One person said that *“this is a historic area of the city, and it is here for more than 50 years.”* Another participant linked the area to the history of public health in the city, since it is located adjacent to a hospital. Neighbors also told me that they increased their own usage of the green area in the months before the project approval, in the hope that the city employees and decision-makers could see it and recognize the importance of the place.

As a result of this project, community members started to actively participate in public meetings, understand legal and technical terms, be empowered to argue, and know what tools they could use to advocate for their rights. They also asked the media to write about the topic and created social media campaigns to give visibility to their cause.

- **Empowerment:** Community members felt empowered. I received positive feedback mentioning that community groups understood what was being said in public documents (such as meeting minutes or public resolutions), what policies were in place, and what

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

The Community Psychology perspective enabled me to provide a deeper understanding of community needs and dynamics. I used a Community Psychology framework to facilitate the creation of consciousness regarding development, power, community organizing, collective empowerment, and relationship building.

tools they could use to advocate for their rights. As a result, 29 people testified in a public meeting, and openly gave their opinion about the project. Community groups also started to be present in other public meetings, such as the landmarks committee meeting, and openly asked questions and gave their opinions.

- **Education:** Community members understood what formal mechanisms they could use to advocate for their rights (e.g. participation in public hearings, press releases, and lawsuits). This resulted in news articles, such as the one linked at the end of this document. Community members found their power and combined it with their new skills to sue the developers and stop the shopping center project.
- **Trust:** Community members did not trust the city before the project. One of the project's outcomes was the regaining of public trust, accomplished by constant communication and openness. After the finalization of this project, I worked for the city on a different project in the same neighborhood. I noted that neighbors had a different relationship with the city. Community members were more open and willing to collaborate.

What Does This Mean For Practice?

Our success shows that it is possible to solve conflicts through active listening, understanding, and enabling spaces of participation. It shows the importance of translating concepts to enable understanding by different stakeholders. It finally shows the role of community-building to create community power.

Related newspaper article describing the case: G1. (2017, July 4). Justiça proíbe obras em terreno da Cruz Vermelha, na Zona Sul de SP. <https://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/justica-proibe-obras-em-terreno-da-cruz-vermelha-na-zona-sul-de-sp.ghtml>

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