

Building Neighborhoods Block By Block: Ten Lessons We've Learned on Dudley Street

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DSNI MISSION STATEMENT

To empower Dudley residents to organize, plan for, create and control a vibrant, high quality and diverse neighborhood in collaboration with community partners.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is celebrating its 15th anniversary in 1999. Over the years residents have made tremendous gains in revitalizing what was once a nearly devastated neighborhood. Along the way they have learned numerous lessons about what it takes to build community – literally from the ground up. I will be sharing some of those lessons with you this morning. The following by no means represents an exhaustive list of lessons. Some might argue as to whether they are even the most important lessons that have emerged as a result of the Dudley community's remarkable renaissance. However, I feel they do represent some of the things we've learned that are relevant to and replicable in other communities.

This is my personal list. I have compiled it in part from my knowledge of the community's rich history gleaned from conversations and readings and in part from my own personal experiences during my three-and-a-half-year tenure as executive director. The order in which the "lessons" are presented is, for the most part, irrelevant. As I hope to show, these ideas and concepts interweave with one another in a nonlinear way that resembles the community building process itself.

Background

The Dudley neighborhood of Roxbury/North Dorchester is located less than two miles from downtown Boston. This area, once a vibrant commercial and residential district, was virtually laid waste by three decades of disinvestment, abandonment, red-lining, and arson fires. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was created in response to these conditions. It was established as a resident-led community collaboration with the goal of organizing this diverse community to plan and realize a vibrant urban village.

This neighborhood of 24,000 is comprised of approximately 37% African Americans, 29% Latinos, 25% Cape Verdeans, and 7% whites. It is a youthful community, with nearly 36% of its residents under 18 years old. According to the 1990 census, the median income is half that of Boston's as a whole; 35% live below the poverty level. The unemployment rate is approximately 16%.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was created in 1984 in response to the near-devastation of the neighborhood. Not a typical community development corporation, DSNI focuses its activities on **organizing and planning**.

- *Urban planning in neighborhoods of color during the 50s and 60s was driven by a number of political and economic motives*

"Planners are trained to understand and represent the world in certain ways, ways that are necessarily selective and partial but that help produce acceptable representations of reality."

Helen Liggett & David Perry. Spatial Practices.

Modern city planning offers us functional urban designs without human values and rationally organized space without civic content.

Murray Bookchin. The Limits Of the City

Don't be fooled by those who downplay the importance of planning. It has been said that "power and planning are different ways of looking at the same events, namely attempts to influence behaviors for specific ends." [Mumford, Foucault?]

The urban planning profession flourished after the end of World War II. Its primary goal was to address the myriad of challenges that were facing scores of American central cities including inadequate housing, poverty and crime. Politicians' desire to shape African American residential patterns greatly influenced public housing, urban renewal policies and financial institutions at this time. These policies were clearly (if not openly) designed to confine blacks in restricted areas of the city.

Residents of the Dudley area learned this lesson first hand when practices ranging from "white flight" and disinvestment to redlining and arson for profit reduced what was once a thriving blue collar community to a wasteland of 1,300 burned-out, abandoned, vacant lots.

The plans for rebuilding the Dudley area crafted by professionals contained little, if any, input from residents. The official Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) Plan, developed in 1984, called for hotels, office towers, light manufacturing, housing and historical parks. It was clear that if their plans were implemented, the result would be gentrification and the concomitant displacement of the current residents.

Dudley residents organized to challenge and change these racist planning practices by putting resident voices and control at the center of neighborhood revitalization -- be it for the entire neighborhood or a portion of it (a park, community center, etc.)

It is worth noting that many of the individuals who have informed our approach to planning like Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford and Buckminster Fuller were considered iconoclasts -- independent thinkers who challenged the status quo and did not fit neatly into any particular discipline or professional niche.

- ***A decision-making structure based on resident self-governance is key to empowering the community and bringing about meaningful and lasting change***

Of, by and for the people

Creating a vehicle for resident self-governance that would guide the revitalization of the Dudley neighborhood has been one of the keys to the sustainability of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

An all local, 29-member board of directors, elected in highly competitive races every two years, reflects the neighborhood's diversity and ethnicity. Residents control a total of 15 seats. Representatives from area agencies, community development corporations, churches and businesses round out the board.

Committees, chaired by board members wrestle with pressing issues in targeted program areas (as identified in our annual workplan) and forward recommendations for action to the entire DSNI board. Key committees include Leadership Development, Sustainable Development, Human Development and Nubian Roots (youth leadership).

Residents make major policy decisions that have neighborhood-wide implications at community meetings held periodically throughout the year as deemed necessary by DSNI board, committee members and staff.

This is democracy operating in its purest form -- at the grassroots level. We believe that informed residents, guided by a shared vision, will make decisions that, more often than not, prove to be in the best interest of the entire community. That has been our experience over the past fifteen years.

- ***Local residents are the most reliable source of information with regard to neighborhood needs and opportunities***

The collective wisdom of communities is an invaluable repository of information -- much of which can not be found anywhere else. We constantly acknowledge and respect this fact and continue to seek new ways to tap this priceless resource.

Historian and cultural critic Lewis Mumford viewed planning as a form of *communal education* -- a civic action in which small groups, contributing their labor voluntarily, and assisted in their work by "experts," would learn about their habitat and then appropriately act upon this knowledge. He viewed planning as a form of human liberation.

Planning as a form of human liberation. That's certainly not a reflection of the conventional wisdom. However, we *have* witnessed this time and again in the Dudley neighborhood....

[By way of example, the degree to which public spaces and facilities actually fulfill their intended purposes depends a great deal on where they are sited. Professional planners are capable of taking into account all of the technical considerations surrounding a siting decision. However, they may not be aware of subtle cultural, historical or psychological factors that can greatly influence the "best-use" of a site.]

We often remind residents that the services of outside experts are not necessary to help them articulate their needs and wishes.

- ***The struggle for power is critical, inevitable and unavoidable in community building efforts***

*no one is free to choose peace, but anyone can
impose upon all the necessity for power*

Andrew Bard Schmoekler. Parable of the Tribes

Power is required to achieve meaningful social change. It has invariably been defined as the:

capacity to achieve one's goals against the will of others
ability to effect change in the environment
capacity for self-realization that flows from agreement

Wisdom and insight have helped residents discover critical points of leverage in the systems that affect their lives. Power gives communities the ability to apply the leverage necessary to bring about necessary reform. The residents of the Dudley neighborhood acquired significant power as a result of aggressive, effective organizing.

Residents transformed their organizing power into the tangible power of eminent domain authority over the abandoned vacant parcels of land in their neighborhood. That, in turn, provided the community with considerable leverage in its dealings with city officials and with developers. Before this, developers and city officials held virtually every advantage.

DSNI is currently working with city officials to hammer out a process that will ensure that Dudley residents will have decision making power over the disposition of vacant land that lies outside the area under the influence of its eminent domain authority. The City is considering adopting the process in other Boston neighborhoods where residents are concerned about the manner in which vacant land is disposed and used.

- ***Different organizing techniques may be needed to address specific challenges and opportunities***

There is no cookie-cutter approach to community organizing. Different situations may call for different organizing strategies. Consequently DSNI has developed and/or adopted a variety of approaches to community organizing during its fifteen year history.

Early on, when residents were battling the operation of illegal trash transfer stations that littered the landscape, protest marches and pickets were organized with great success. Some of the more blatantly illegal stations were closed and padlocked. We have organized around voter education and registration to encourage residents to participate in the electoral political process. We have also organized around issues of education and welfare reform.

Since the creation of DSNI's Comprehensive Plan for Neighborhood Revitalization, our efforts have focused primarily on organizing around the positive vision to create a vibrant multicultural urban village. Residents are encouraged to mobilize around the vision as opposed to seeking out enemies or issues to organize *against*. We are fully aware that as we take steps towards reaching that vision, many who are threatened by our progress will emerge and attempt to place obstacles in our path. If that happens, we will adapt our organizing strategy accordingly.

- ***Investing (whatever it takes) up-front in planning process(es) that lead to a shared community vision pays huge long-term dividends***

Out of such shared values comes trust, and trust ... has a large and measurable economic value.

Francis Fukuyama. Trust

DSNI's two primary activities are organizing and planning. One of the first projects undertaken by DSNI involved facilitating a process by which residents came up with a positive shared vision of their neighborhood and a comprehensive plan for realizing that vision. That plan has served as the community's compass and has guided the development of our neighborhood ever since.

The planning process sought to maximize resident participation as a way to achieve the highest possible degree of community buy-in. It was important to provide as much room as possible for expansive thinking and to give residents opportunities to be creative and comprehensive.

From DSNI's perspective, planning is not an academic exercise. Rather, we consider planning as one of the first crucial steps resident must take leading to the creation and control of their futures. Consequently, it has evolved into an extremely powerful and empowering tool for residents.

- ***Systems thinking is key to developing a viable comprehensive community plan***

*People know what they do;
they frequently know why they do what they do;
but what they don't know is what what they do does*

Michel Foucault

Once residents arrived at an agreed-upon shared vision, they sought to determine what it would take to bring it to fruition. Developing tools that helped residents "see" their community as a dynamic whole system was key to making this possible.

Systems thinking is a holistic approach to planning. It brings the task of developing a comprehensive community plan within reach of residents by creating a framework for organizing and managing large amounts of information. It is unparalleled as a tool for uncovering interrelationships, and revealing potential synergies and points of leverage. The concept of synergy is one of the basic principles of whole systems. Synergy is the behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of its constituent parts. It is a fundamental organizing principle -- operative in both nature and society. An understanding this principle is critical to the successful development of a comprehensive approach to revitalization.

Residents and DSNI staff and board also developed a *scenario planning tool* and used it to craft our economic power strategy. Scenario planning can help residents arrive at a "resilient" plan that will remain viable if and when significant changes in the social, political, economic and/or environmental landscape occur. The factors or "elements" that contribute to the creation of a resilient plan become the basis for developing community standards to guide future development.

- ***In order to be credible and earn the ongoing support of residents, a long-range plan must also be sensitive to the day-to-day needs of residents***

We are constantly struggling to balance our time and resources between fulfilling our long-term revitalization objectives and addressing the immediate needs of the community. Needless to say, it would difficult to get residents to continue participating on efforts whose results may be years off if they are having problems getting trash picked up, abandoned cars removed from the streets or sidewalks in front of their homes repaired.

We are developing something called the Resident Development Institute (RDI) -- a grassroots college without walls" if you will -- as a way of building capacity throughout the community to deal with these kinds of issues.

- ***Partnerships/collaborations are messy, tension-filled, time-consuming, frustrating and absolutely necessary***

The founders of DSNI made a conscious decision that we would be an organizing and planning entity, and as such would not be the developer of projects nor a direct provider of services to the community. This decision allows DSNI to assume and maintain an objective perspective on projects proposed for the neighborhood and serve as an objective facilitator of the necessary community processes to review such proposals.

We rely on our community partners to take the plans developed by the community and develop the houses, parks, playgrounds, etc. and provide the services requested. Effective partnerships provide tremendous synergetic benefits, i.e. creating wholes that are much greater than the sum of its parts (social capital). In order for this to work, however, our partners must truly honor the community process and accept the input of residents. They must be willing to be led.

Partnerships must ultimately be based on *trust*. Trust is a form of social capital that emerges from a commitment to work towards a shared goal or vision and increases as the social networks within a community are expanded and strengthened.

- ***Always be prepared to challenge “conventional wisdom” and develop new tools and explore new approaches to development***

how shall we ever conceive [or] express a new idea if we are bound by the categorization that delivered our problem to us in the first place?”

Stafford Beer

“Dare to be naive.”

Buckminster Fuller

It was clear that it would not make sense for DSNI to employ the same tools and strategies that the professional planners developed to restrict the sustainable development of minority neighborhoods in its comprehensive revitalization effort. Consequently, DSNI residents, board and staff were constantly challenging the powers-to-be and the assumptions underlying their approaches to development.

Successfully accepting such a challenge creates the need to research and compile as exhaustive an inventory of alternatives as possible. It also called for summoning the courage to pursue those alternatives that make sense for the community.

The results have been exciting and fruitful: DSNI became the first and (to-date) the only community-based nonprofit organization in the country to be granted the power of eminent domain; the community has established urban agriculture as one of the “legs” of its economic power strategy; we are exploring the feasibility of creating a local currency as a way of circulating dollars within the community.

Perhaps the most important pillar of conventional wisdom that residents challenged was the one that assumes that community planning is the exclusive domain of experts. It's clear that what distinguishes DSNI's approach to planning from traditional approaches is its comprehensiveness. Architect Christopher Alexander believes that the best planning

emanates from the bottom up. In his seminal book entitled *The Timeless Way of Building* he argues that a major flaw in the current approaches to architecture and planning is that they fail to view the *neighborhood as a whole*

- *Youth involvement is key to keeping the mission and vision alive*

Ours is a youthful community. Nearly 36% of Dudley residents are under 18 years. These young people are among the Dudley community's most valuable renewable resources. In 1996 the DSNI Board of Directors amended the bylaws of the organization to create two designated youth seats. This commitment to youth involvement in the neighborhood revitalization effort is one of the most important investments the community has ever made.

Sustainable development is an approach to economic revitalization that attempts to meet the needs of current residents in ways that ensure that future generations will also be able to meet theirs. DSNI embraces this approach to development. Virtually every aspect of DSNI's revitalization plan places a premium on the concerns and interests of our young people. Our return on this investment will be a cadre of young residents who will enthusiastically perpetuate the vision and further the goals of our urban village.

- *Community Building resembles art more than science.*
- *Chaos reins more often than order*

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