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**People United for Sustainable Housing: A Case Study in Capital**

Originally, this paper was supposed to be about credit unions, and the concept of ethical investing. This still interests me, but lacks any particular relevance for myself and many of my peers. As students, we tend not to have a lot of money to invest. Further, the market we will graduate into may prove trying for many of us, and it may be, with a little luck, a few years before we need to think about where we are putting our expendable income. With this in mind, I began casting about for a slightly more relevant type of organization to examine. It was this grassroots, ground- up approach that caught my attention when I first heard about the PUSH (People United for Sustainable Housing) project. While not technically a business, PUSH has arguably done more to create employment in Buffalo than any single business (or many combined). In fact, “long-term, structural unemployment” in the Buffalo area was the foremost motivating factor in the creation of PUSH (Bartley, 2011, p. 10). Aaron Bartley, the co-founder of PUSH, describes the impetus thusly:

Given the absence of any coherent national strategy for addressing the economic crisis and the fixation on job destroying neoliberal policies by growth machine leaders … community driven models of sustainable economic development are sorely needed, especially in communities where the desperation of long-term unemployment has created a humanitarian crisis with escalating levels of violence and rapidly declining public health and education indicators. (Bartley, 2011, p. 10)

I found the success of the PUSH movement to be really inspiring, and I hope you will too. This paper will now examine the growth and direction of the movement with a specific focus on the different forms of capital embedded and grown within it. We will spend the most time on human and social capital, but also touch on the physical, natural, and financial capacity building before looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, as well as any lessons we can learn from it.

**Background**

The city of Buffalo, New York, sits upon the shore of Lake Erie at the head of the Niagara River. The second largest city in New York, it makes up a part of what is colloquially known as the “Rust Belt,” a group of American cities hit hard by the thinning of that country’s manufacturing sector. Today Buffalo has strong health care and education sectors, but much of the city is still in decline. In 2009, the American census bureau reported that Buffalo, New York was the third poorest city in the United States (Bui, 2010, para. 1). It was also the home to Bartley, a Harvard trained lawyer and social activist. The social activist in Bartley has deep roots; during his time at Harvard, Bartley co-founded the Harvard Living Wage campaign, which won wage increases for support staff, and then he went on to successfully organize the 2002 Justice for Janitors strike. When Bartley returned to Buffalo, he brought that consciousness with him. Everywhere he turned houses were being foreclosed upon, and entire neighbourhoods were being abandoned. This was the inspiration for PUSH, a multi-faceted “community growth machine” and really great example of creating and growing capital.

PUSH was founded in 2005, to be, as Bartley describes it, “a community organization dedicated to building a base of resident leaders capable of leading public campaigns to address the lack of jobs and rapidly declining neighborhood conditions, including widespread housing abandonment” (2011, Bartley, p. 10). In the six years since its inception, PUSH has rocketed onto the scene in Buffalo, creating numerous partnerships with non-profits and local building companies, organizing direct action political campaigns, and establishing a GDZ, or “green development zone,” spanning 25 blocks on Buffalo’s West Side. A map of the area can be found here: <http://g.co/maps/4zj5y>.

In 2005, PUSH published a list of goals for the GDZ. They include: “creating a forum for articulating a sustainable development plan,” developing “networks of neighbourhood leaders,” building community assets, promoting a “triple bottom line,” encouraging “community control over public resources, investing in green building, creating “pathways to employment for neighbourhood residents,” using “leverage gained … to pool capital … for social enterprise and small business creation,” and finally, to encourage “networks of community leaders to run public campaigns for systemic policy reforms” (Bartley, 2011, p. 13). In doing so, the movement has specifically targeted the human, social, natural, physical, cultural, and financial capital within community.

**Human Capital**

An interesting consideration to keep in mind here is the human capital that Bartley himself brings to the table. Trained in law at a prestigious American university and an experienced labour organizer, Bartley was a fundamental part of the inception of PUSH. One of the interesting questions I have been exploring while researching PUSH and similar movements revolves around how integral specific leaders are to movements. Would the PUSH movement have emerged without Bartley? Was it just a matter of time, or was Bartley the key?

Either way, the very first thing that PUSH focused on was expanding human capital within the community. The first step was to train community members in “organizing and principles of leadership (Bartley, 2011, 10). These newly minted “leaders” then went door to door in the community. This capacity building exercise demonstrates an investment in human capital, as does PUSH’s later efforts at creating training programs and jobs in the retro-fitting/green building sector for un-employed community members.

As noted above, the PUSH community had been facing “long term, structural unemployment” (Bartley, 2011, p. 10). This troubled economy has been a blight on urban neighbourhoods for three decades now with very limited recovery since the industrial collapse of the early 1980s. In a study on the effects of poverty in American cities, Roger C. Mills found that “[m]any residents of poor, inner-city communities feel disenfranchised, hopeless about their lives, and cynical about change, ‘victims’ whose motivation and psychological health are adversely affected as a result” (2005, p.9). This focus on emotional health is understood to be important to the concept of human capital. Mills goes on to note that a strategy that empowers residents to become leaders, and to discover agency in their own lives goes much farther in fostering emotional well-being than the arguably more traditional route of professional organizers organizing on behalf of, or “for” residents (2005, p.9-16). While I would be careful characterizing any group of people as “victims,” I believe that Mills is right that people without much agency often have a harder time making positive change. This is likely due, at least in part, to the sheer number of setbacks they encounter, but also to the fact that, as Mills suggests, poverty encourages depression and a “negative” (perhaps realistic) outlook that hampers a person’s ability to create change for her or his self (2005, p.9). In focusing on the training of community leaders and real empowerment, PUSH has also, according to Mills’ theory, fostered improved emotional health in the community, as well as building community knowledge and skills, thereby enhancing human capital.

**Social** **Capital**

The knowledge and skills that benefit a community’s human capital can also strengthen that community’s social capital. In the case of PUSH, the organizing of community leaders facilitated a high level of cooperation in the community. In 2005, shortly after PUSH’s inception the group staged a “militant, direct action campaign” targeting state officials, in which community members boarded up state controlled vacant homes and stenciled pictures of the Governor of New York on them (Bartley, 2011, p. 10-11). This campaign worked, and PUSH entered into dialogue with officials that resulted in $2.1 million in funding for housing renovations. According to Bartley, the state also “agreed to relinquish control of 1,499 vacant lots and houses, some of which have been transferred to PUSH for development” (2011, p. 11).

The fact that the first campaign was such a rousing success probably helped to encourage more community cooperation, and PUSH blossomed into a broad organization that enhanced social capital in a number of ways. Community leaders become resources for their neighbours, members were invested with a new sense of agency, and many more cooperative campaigns came about as a result. This bonding capital happened within the community, and further bridging and linking capital grew as PUSH expanded its agenda. They partnered with other organizations, including MAP (Massachusetts Avenue Project [community gardens], numerous community based contractors, LUINA (Laborers International Union), and the Center for Working Families. Individuals were encouraged to travel and network, attending fundraisers, conferences, and working groups, often in Washington, which they would likely not have otherwise attended. Linking opportunities were also realized. The Sustainable Neighbourhoods Program (SNP) was arguably the best example of linking in PUSH’s early years. The SNP came out of a collaboration between PUSH, then Governor David Paterson, and New York State’s housing agencies, and it supports housing renovations with the same goals as PUSH, but on a much larger scale.

Further, as we will touch upon in the next section, community members gained stability and safety as they became tenants of newly renovated PUSH properties through the Housing Cooperative.

**Physical Capital**

These newly renovated properties contribute the bulk of PUSH’s ability to develop physical capital in the area. By 2007, PUSH had fully renovated six existing houses in the GDZ. The number of remediated houses in 2012 was not possible to attain (emails to PUSH’s website went unanswered), but one can bet it is a significantly higher number. Further, the new five year plan (examined on pages 13 & 14) calls for further renovations and redevelopment of abandoned properties within the GDZ. What we do know is that is that New York State gave up control of 1,499 houses after PUSH’s initial campaign, and that PUSH received some of those houses for the purpose of renovating them. Further examples of physical capital include, in Bartley’s words, “community based renewable energy projects, housing weatherization, green jobs training, and urban agriculture” (2011, p. 10). With repopulation also comes the cleaning up/revitalizing of neighbourhoods, which contributes as well to an investment in physical capital.

**Natural Capital**

As well as physical capital, natural capital is protected and invested in within the GDZ, through initiatives such as decreasing carbon emissions, extending the life of the homes, and urban gardening. Carbon emissions should be lower in buildings retrofitted with solar panels, better insulated, and better designed. By extending the life of old and abandoned homes, and matching them with new owners through the Housing Coop, PUSH protects natural capital by reducing the number of homes demolished and rebuilt, thereby reducing the demand for resources. The trend towards urban gardening and the partnership with MAP has also had a positive effect on the physical environment, both by increasing aesthetic appeal and by delivering ecosystem services. An excerpt on page 17 of ­*Community Growth Machine* reads:

“Twenty vacant lots owned by PUSH in the GDZ have been transformed into exemplars of sustainable landscaping. They have been repurposed as pocket farms producing hundreds of pounds of squash and beans , rain gardens diverting rainwater from antiquated combined sewer systems, pollinator lots that promote the regional bee population, and community gardens accessible to neighborhood residents and school children.” (Bartley, 2011, p.17)

**Cultural Capital**

PUSH located the GDZ on the West Side of Buffalo, a neighbourhood that, according to Bartley, is “exceptionally diverse in racial and ethnic terms” (2011, p.10). After World War II, he says, “the neighbourhood was populated primarily by Italian-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans. Over the last fifteen years, significant numbers of African American, Burmese, Somalis, and Sudanese have also come to call the West Side home” (Bartley, 2011, p. 10). This culturally diverse neighbourhood also happens to be “one of the most impoverished in the nation” (Bartley, 2011, p.10).

The development of the GDZ (West Side) as a “community growth machine” has fostered cultural capital through a sense of place, tighter community ties, and increased self-sufficiency through community gardens. Cultivating a strong sense of place, or “placemaking,” as Duxbury and Pepper name it, “is the process of transforming the physical environment into something culturally meaningful and collectively personal” (2006, p.5). PUSH has managed to do this in a variety of ways. The physical environment has been transformed, both through renovated and revitalized housing, and through landscaping and community gardens. Gardens and landscaped play areas feed people and provide a space for gathering and connecting. Reduced vacancy rates makes for a more vibrant community, while community organizing and activism make the entire endeavour “collectively personal” and the community as a whole experiences a new feeling of agency and teamwork.

**Financial Capital**

PUSH’s Housing Cooperative “provides tenants with a monthly equity payment of $75 per month to promote savings and self-sufficiency” (Bartley, 2011, p. 11). Further, through the Coop model, residents are often able to own, rather than rent, for the first time. PUSH has also created jobs and job training in the community, all of which results in more financial capital (assets, wages, savings) within the community. According to Bartley, “the core constituencies in the Zone have generated more than $6 million in direct community controlled investments over the last three years” (2011, p. 10). Keep in mind that this has happened in a neighbourhood with an approximate per capita income of $9,000. Coming full circle, this financial capital contributes to the well being and security of residents, thereby further enhancing human and social capital in a sort of self-fulfilling cycle.

**Strengths, Weaknesses, and Lessons**

In my opinion, the strengths of PUSH are numerous and largely self evident. The involvement and training of community members as organizers and leaders was, in my opinion, one of the organizations wisest moves. In “Sustainable Community Change,” Mills discusses the risk of burnout and the trouble with advocating *for* people, while suggesting that a system that focuses on empowerment and changing an individual’s outlook/agency within his or her situation is a much more sustainable one (2005, p.9). PUSH has been very adept at empowering community members and making sure that all the campaigns come from within the community.

I am sure PUSH has more than one weakness, but the only one that has concerned me is the focus on growth as the ultimate goal. The word “growth” is incorporated into the very underpinning of PUSH, with a “community growth machine” being the label PUSH has chosen for what they are doing. It is my hope that this issue is largely semantics, and that, as Bartley seems to suggest, it is simply a new lens for looking at old issues. He claims:

“While the term ‘growth machine,’ as developed by Logon and Molotoch evokes the impersonal and socially destructive forces of corporate materialism and elite control, a ‘community growth machine’ builds an alternative materialist inertia by setting in motion a more virtuous cycle of organized low-income constituencies, investments, and opportunity. (Bartley, 2011, p. 10)

Daly and Farley would likely argue that growth, whether community controlled or otherwise, is still going to become a problem if left unchecked. They claim that “[g]rowth, yesterday’s panacea, is rapidly becoming today’s pandemic” (p.264). With limited resources, green renovation still needs to focus on using less of everything, not just energy. I would love to see a relabeling, where the name became community re-investment machine, or community sustainability machine, as many of the stated goals (community gardens, green building, etc.) feel congruent with the idea of less growth, or potentially even a strategy of de-growth like the one proposed by the De-Growth Party that ran candidates in Vancouver’s last municipal party.

De-growth advocates would agree that building is never truly “green.” There are greener ways of building, but at its core it will always require resources and always result in throughput, where resources end up waste products. It is exemplary to attempt green building practices, but there needs to be a focus on using less as well. Daly and Farley would have us employ the microeconomic concept of optimal scale, which is reached when the marginal costs are equal to the marginal benefits. Any growth beyond this becomes uneconomical and thus undesired (2011, p. 16-17).

The biggest lesson to be learned from PUSH’s near immediate success is simply the difference that a dedicated and well organized group of people can make. They experienced significant success in their first campaign against the State of New York, and have continued to make considerable gains ever since. PUSH began in 2005, and now in 2012 they are involved in myriad different endeavours. The poster above is for a new planning project that is about to begin, and the website, [pushbuffalo.org](http://www.pushbuffalo.org/), outlines many new partnerships and undertakings, and also a continued effort to improve and clarify their efforts, with a focus on becoming more relevant and democratic (Our strategic priorities, n.d.).

Another lesson is that there really is strength in numbers. Even within an individualistic society, people will work together for a greater good, but times perhaps need to be hard enough before that happens. Cooperation has been integral to the kinds of success PUSH has had, and hopefully will continue to have, and to inspire elsewhere. This is in fact a part of PUSH’s goals. The website lists as a goal the ability to “[c]reate a replicable model of grassroots neighborhood organizing and redevelopment, which can be employed in other low-income neighborhoods throughout the Rust Belt” (web)

**Conclusion**

This paper has left me with more questions than I started with, which a sure sign of a great topic. A few of them are: How key to a movement is the leader or leadership? Bartley was obviously a driving force behind PUSH, but I wonder if the movement would have happened eventually without him. The idea that people will come together over a common goal only once things are bad enough has also left me with some questions. I wonder if recessions have the ability to create community; if so, then can wealth, by extension, destroy it? These questions are not foreign to geographers, who have long debated whether suburbs, a relative extension of wealth, have a negative impact on community health, but I find the idea that recessions may create and bolster strong and vibrant communities an interesting one.

Regardless, PUSH is clearly a successful organization on all fronts, and one that holds firm to the triple bottom line. As Bartley describes it, PUSH is a project that encompasses “environment, equity, and economy” (2011, p. 13), and strives to be a model for other communities to follow. With a new five year plan that encompasses increasing democracy and action within the organization, as well as property ownership and house reclamation, PUSH will likely continue to build capital within Buffalo communities (Our strategic priorities, n.d.).

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