CITY BUILDING THROUGH EMPATHY:

TACKLING NIMBYISM THROUGH CREATIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Winnipeg is known for friendly people, good restaurants, the human rights museum, winter activities, long river trails and more. The city is also known for less admirable qualities like racism and poverty.

"I used to tell myself I wouldn't live to see my sweet 16, I was sure I was going to die before then. Both my sisters committed suicide when we were growing up. Four of my closest friends have also died by suicide. One hung herself in an alley using her dog's leash. She was 11. My mom put me to work in the sex trade before my 10th birthday. I ran away at 11, then bounced between the street and a long list of foster homes. One was a crack house. Two friends were stabbed to death in front of me, one with a machete. This is a North End childhood." (Jena Wirch – Maclean's)

This is an excerpt from a 2015 Maclean's article titled "Welcome to Winnipeg: Where Canada's racism problem is at its worst." This news spread like wild fire across the city and quickly spurred responses either strongly agreeing or disagreeing with the article, from "it's about time someone said something" to "I am really insulted by this article, you have no right to call us racist". There was little middle ground.

Many urban centers are plagued with negative social disparity often because of how the city and its systems are built. In every city, one is bound to find people that have different opinions of what social issues like racism or poverty look like in their city. The purpose of highlighting this Maclean's article is to show how people living in the same city can be completely oblivious to what is going on within the city and how it affects others not typically in their vicinity. Such is the case of awareness of poverty and its effects, as can be seen in the results of poverty simulations run by the United Way called Living on the Edge: Taking a Look at Poverty.

Our urban planning systems have contributed to city dwellers' unequal right to the city. For example through NIMBYism in community engagement, communities can resist affordable housing and transportation options, contributing to poverty (Elliott, 2008). This case in point highlights the work that United Way Winnipeg is doing to address poverty in Winnipeg, through a poverty simulation called Living on the Edge. It proposes that the poverty simulation model could provide an example of how urban planners can tackle NIMBYism through empathy building community engagement, and create cities that work better for everyone.

Figure 1: Winnipeg

Chinese proverb:
"Tell me, I'll forget.
Show me, I'll remember.
Involve me,
I'll understand."

Figure 2: United Way

BACKGROUND

The United Way Winnipeg was established in 1965 to raise money in the community and distribute it to social service agencies throughout the city. In the early 1990s, Winnipeg was rapidly growing and the needs of its citizens were changing. To continue meeting the needs of the city, United Way went through a transformational change community engagement process that revised the organization's structure, mission and vision. This change was also influenced by external factors like the early 1990s, Canadian governments restructures, that pushed the majority of responsibility for social services down to the community level. At around this time, Winnipeg was experiencing an increase in social issues like poverty (Lederman and Lewis, 2003).

United Way believes, for a community to be great, it has to be great for everyone. The organization encourages all citizens, city-wide local agency partners, all levels of government, special partnerships, caring workplaces, donors and volunteers, to make Winnipeg a better place for everyone living in the city. The organization has programs that work to improve the quality of life for everyone, especially children, address poverty and build strong communities. One of United Way's initiatives to track how the city is doing is a community indicator system called Peg. Peg measures changes in Winnipeg through 60 indicators of wellbeing, everything from how much water we use to how many of our kids graduate high school. Tracking how well Winnipeg is doing helps inspire change by letting the city know where their efforts will make a difference.

This case in point focuses on poverty in Winnipeg. The statistics in the next section show how urgent the issue of poverty is in the city of Winnipeg.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

FACTS OF THE CASE

1700 people
are homeless in our city on any given night

50%+
said low income is a barrier to finding housing

1 in 10
Winnipeggers lives in poverty, including 1 in 4 children

Almost 1/2
of homeless people spent time in care as a child

Figure 6

Living on the Edge is a poverty simulation to gain insight into the complexity of poverty in Winnipeg. This simulation is a unique experiential learning process designed to provide a glimpse into what it might be like to live on a low income while trying to survive from month to month. During the simulation participants take on a new persona and are placed in households, each with a story that describes their financial situation. The one-hour simulation is divided into four short "weeks", representing a month in total. Each week, the family needs to perform day-to-day tasks including sending their children to school (or childcare), getting to or finding work, paying bills, visiting social services or other community agencies, buying groceries, cashing their cheques, and more. Following the simulation, participants debrief and learn more about the role United Way Winnipeg is playing in addressing poverty. Any workplace can arrange to have this simulation brought to them by contacting United Way. Minimums of 40 participants are required and the simulation accommodates a maximum of 80 participants.

The poverty simulation kit used by United Way was designed by Missouri Community Action Network. The Poverty Simulation was originally conceived of by two reverends, Don Barnes and Mary Webster, who were affiliated with the group ROWEL (Reform Organization for Welfare). This group's mission was to advocate for legislative and administrative changes to the US welfare system that would benefit people in poverty. It was a tool they used internally to shore up the political will necessary to make those changes. This group disbanded in the late 1990s and wanted to find a new home for their simulation. Missouri CAN (then Missouri Association for Community Action) then purchased the copyright and related materials from ROWEL. After making updates to the Poverty Simulation to reflect the contemporary realities of Community Action clients, Missouri CAN named it the Community Action Poverty Simulation and began distributing kits to its 19 Community Action Agencies in Missouri. By 2004, Missouri CAN had a manufacturer for the kit and began selling copyright licenses and kits to organizations regionally, then nationally, and even internationally. There are well over 1000 kits in distribution in nearly every US state, Canada, Singapore, Columbia and New Zealand.

OUTCOMES

"Everybody should experience this simulation, a lot of people don't have a clue what it means to live in poverty and this gives just a taste of it."

"Fantastic. I hope many organizations and businesses do this."

"Taught me that the stereotypes are not always true and there are many people working hard with circumstances working against them…being a part of the simulation opened my eyes to that and to the importance of people getting involved and being a social influence."

"I don't think you can really understand deeply what it's like to live this life and make a lot of assumptions and a lot of judgements."

"We are much more conscious of the barriers that we may inadvertently contribute to in our programming."

LESSONS AND APPLICATION

Studies have been done to understand whether participation in poverty simulation influences attitudes and fosters social empathy for people in poverty. The findings of these studies often indicate greater empathy after participating in simulations and a softening of opinions regarding structural aspects related to poverty (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011). Most people are not aware that removal of barriers such as education, transportation and health barriers is one of the most effective strategies for improving the lives of people living in poverty. Teaching social empathy throughout society can expand understanding among all citizens (Segal, 2007; Nickols & Nielsen, 2011).

The main lesson from this simulation for urban planning is that many people are unaware of how others are living in the city and perhaps urban planners can use these findings to inspire creative empathy building community engagement tools. An example of when this can be used is to encourage transit and density. Many people do not think long about public transit except if it involves them paying extra fees or tax to cover transit costs. If one primarily gets around by vehicle, unless they care about the environmental impact of vehicles, they will not bother with the issue of whether or not to invest in transit. If, however, a bigger picture is shared with people and they are put into a simulation in which they are perhaps old, cannot drive anymore and live in a suburb that has no or minimal transit service, they might then ask questions like, "how do I get around, how much does it cost to get around, what activities are easily and quickly accessible?" Such questions that people don't take the time to think about can be brought to light through simulations such as Living on the Edge.
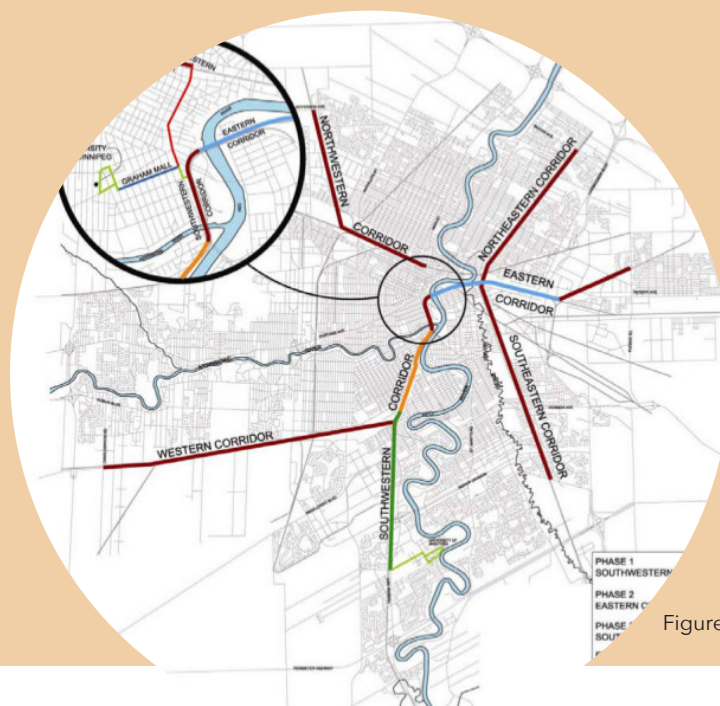

Figure 7

Figure 8

CONCLUSION AND CRITIQUES

"Planning has been critiqued for neglecting to account for its use as a tool of social control (Yiftachel, 1998)."

This is normally quoted in a negative context highlighting that planning has played a part in oppression of people. Indigenous scholars have argued that if their people have been planned into oppression, they can be planned out of it (Matunga, 2013). The same argument holds regarding the issue of poverty. The planning profession could take an active role in encouraging an equal right to the city, through creative community engagement. This understandably lands in tricky ground where community engagement through simulation is critiqued for coming in with a predetermined agenda instead of allowing residents to freely inform the process and express their opinions. But is it not the role of the planner to influence planning positively "for the greater good?"

There are several limitations to consider when developing social empathy through poverty simulation such as age and ethnicity of participants and because this is a monitored group exercise, socially desirable responses are more likely to result. However, since studies confirm the effectiveness of poverty simulations, to not do anything even after the opportunity is made

Figure 9

available, would be a disservice to city dwellers. Everyone in the city deserves to be more aware of the complete story of the city and the planner can play a role in the telling of this story. Poverty simulation can be looked at like storytelling and story can be used as a catalyst for change.

…this "organizing of hope" is one of our fundamental tasks as planners, and one of our weapons in that battle is the use of success stories, and the ability to tell those stories well, meaningfully, in a way that does indeed inspire others to act.
(Sandercock, 2010)

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