Giving Participation a Home:
Organizations with accessible buildings as incubators of civic participation

Reverend Messiah had been a well-respected pastor in Georgetown, Guyana for years, but in 2008 he decided he wanted more: to push Guyanese people to "realize their own individual purpose." He created an NGO within his church called Generation Next, providing resources and classes for citizens to develop employable skills.

The process didn't take long. All the organization's volunteers, as well as the experts who teach their workshops, were drawn from the congregation. They had access to "people from the banking sector, from the education sector, senior officers from the military," and so on. All funding comes from the weekly collection. Generation Next is now one of the most dynamic NGO's in the country.

Rev. Messiah was so quickly successful, in part, because he had access to a building and a congregation of hundreds already meeting there regularly. Their common identity could be reinforced, furthermore, by their shared ownership of the church, the symbolism on its walls, and the rituals they performed therein. They also had the habit of donating.

Religious institutions have been practicing the art of motivating group participation for millennia. Like bio-mimicry specialists benefit from eons of R&D provided by evolution, urban planners seeking to foster civic volunteerism can benefit from how faiths—and other traditional organizations, such as lodges and service clubs—employ a physical home for their group identity, socialization and work.

Few organizations now have such a home. Most civic groups tend to meet in borrowed or rented spaces, or do not meet in-person at all. We have replaced multi-faceted organizations that capture many aspects of people's volunteer and social lives with thousands of single-purpose groups, most of which are too small to justify the expense of a front door. On the other side of the spectrum, mail-in membership groups, such as UNICEF and Greenpeace, have international reach but most members never work together at all.

For the last two years, I have been interviewing organizations that provide an accessible home-base for their members and newcomers to meet and spend time. (Mostly in Canada, Guyana, and Trinidad, solely because I happened to be there). The hunch is that by linking space, identity and action, there is hope to foster a deeper level of civic participation than currently exists.

What can space be to an organization?

A source of funds

Buildings are not cheap. Neither are their ongoing bills and maintenance. All of that money could otherwise go to an organization's actual goals, such as feeding children or doing research. So how can the cost be justified?

Because buildings can be used to fund themselves, and there are at least three ways. First, rent space out: some lion's clubs are used for weddings and large events. Second, provide government-funded services, such as day-care. Third, run a business, or rent out a space to a partner company to run a business.

The most successful groups I encountered used these methods as both a source of funs and a way to activate their space. All three bring new people through the front door, meaning a constant exposure between an organization and residents. This combination of (semi) financial self-sufficiency and an opportunity to participate in the street-life of the city is a model that perhaps too few organizations take advantage of. Inaccessible offices may serve companies well, but for organizations who depend on social capital, not inviting people in is to waste an enormous opportunity.

A meeting place

If you ever visit Fernwood, in Victoria BC, the Cornerstone Café is likely the first thing you will notice. It is a small but beautiful, that local meeting place urban planners so often dream of. It is also owned by the community: the Fernwood Resource Group manages the café and uses the profits to support its community centre, social housing, and yearly local festivals.

Consider what this means: the place where people go to relax after work is also the place where they might get involved in organizing the next community event. (The Resource Group's office is next door).

In his 1989 book The Great Good Place, Oldenburg argues robust communities need a "third place": a spot to gather after work and home. Without a neutral meeting ground, new friendships are limited to those few cases where people are so enthusiastic that they are willing to invite near-strangers into their home.

For the same reason, a neutral meeting ground can make it easier to attract new members. The Cornerstore Cafe provides a space where visitors may, with no commitment, develop familiarity with the organization. After, showing up for a first meeting is much easier: the person already knows where

it is, has the habit of going and is familiar with people there. Far fewer residents would be willing, in contrast, to find a meeting and enter a room of strangers after only reading about an organization online.

Neutral third places make it possible for participation to progress naturally from informal connections to higher levels of involvement. Such places can be created in various ways: organizations I spoke with have daycares, counselling, workshops, free internet, libraries, social events, and even business-supply stores. But how can groups best take advantage of this exposure?

A pollinator

Alex Foster, winner of three Common Wealth Awards, may well be the most talented community developer you have ever heard of. The services offered by his organization's sixteen buildings are so comprehensive that they nearly constitute a second government in the eastern region of Guyana. Part of his success is owed to maximizing the potential of his buildings to connect with the public.

When a newcomer walks through a door, he explains, "the first thing that they have to do, whether they like it or not, is to have a conducted tour." In this way they see all the work done in that facility as well as photos and news articles on the walls about all the organization's other work. Each visitor therefore becomes an "ambassador" for the organization.

Many things organizations wish to accomplish depend on people knowing about their work: finding volunteers, impressing donors, informing service users, influencing government, etc. A group's connections with the public can be thought of as surface-area in a chemical reaction: the more interaction with random strangers exists, the quicker things happen. Exposing a visitor to multiple aspects of an organization with each visit expands that surface area, maximizing that crucial familiarity that organizations depends on.

That exposure can also be used to upgrade people's level of involvement. A location where members working on different things cross paths, or where cues exist to start conversations about other initiatives, increases the potential for someone who arrives for one reason to get involved in something else. A visitor becomes a volunteer; a volunteer on one project becomes a volunteer on another; a volunteer becomes a member. Foster therefore combines multiple services under one roof and designs spaces that encourage people to linger and chat. In this way, a well-designed space can become an incubator of civic participation, subtly and constantly encouraging additional forms of involvement.

A Showcase

The Trinidad government had been working for three years on a community centre in Beatham and, like too many projects, ran out of initiative. It sat half-finished until local community activist and school teacher, Wayne Jordan, got fed up and decided to open the place himself. He broke the lock and announced on the radio that the building was now open as a community centre and school.

The students now had a place for their education, but it wasn't easy the first few years: the toilet was a bucket Jordan would have to empty himself. Two decades later, however, the school is one of three that Jordan runs, all in excellent condition and with stable funding.

How did he stop the government from evicting him as an illegal squatter? Because when they walked in and saw the vibrant space he had created with almost no support, they were impressed enough to let him legally take over. Jordan tells me it would have been impossible to establish this kind of trust without a space to demonstrate his competence. And it is for the same reason, he says, that he has secured a series of international donors.

Alex Foster has over 150 employees without having to fundraise. In addition to the organization's businesses and small fees, he maintains a steady flow of government and donor funding by creating impressive spaces: "If you do a project, do it so absolutely fantastic that it is your fundraising activity."

The impressiveness of a space is equally important for local visitors. Foster explains that buildings must be at once comfortable, so that visitors feel welcome to enter and stay, and professional and beautiful, so that they will trust the organization: "Space helps to establish that, you know what, I'm in the right place, at the right time, talking to the right people because this is how their building looks, then they can help me."

A Connector

People who have similar goals and complimentary capabilities, but who don't know each other, are the social capital equivalent of money on the table. Providing a venue for such encounters is a way of putting a group in the way of good grace. In 2008, the City Club of Portland was able to give its report on the initiative system real power because a lobbyist for the Oregon Business Association and a state legislator happened to meet each other at the announcement. They agreed on key aspects of the

report, and so with an apparently unbiased 3rd party report in hand, they were able to effect substantial change to the system.

There are many ways to use a building to network. Organizations offer their space as a free venue for other groups to meet, host stake holder negotiations, or set up issue-specific coalitions that meet regularly. The City Club of Portland is compelling in that they have built relationships with influential local actors over decades, meaning that a chance meeting may truly make things happen.

A Motivator and a Home

Montreal's NDG Food Depot does not view its clients as only service-receivers: "We engage (them) in forging solutions with us, as opposed to us middle class people providing services in this old charitable model." Their inclusive approach has physically transformed their space: art from members and clients hang on the walls and from the ceiling, gardens surround the entrance, a giant mural adorns the outer walls.

Volunteers go to the Depot not only to get a job done, but to see people they like in a place they like to be in. Many community leaders I interviewed stressed the primacy of companionship as a motivator for their work. That motivation can only be stronger when volunteers have a place to call their own, merging the need for a social "third place" with a way to make a solid contribution.

For clients, creating the space they use changes what it means to seek help there: it's their place too, not just somewhere they're allowed into. That psychological shift contributes to the organization's goal of helping residents develop strategies to break out of poverty. Having a place where both volunteers and clients feel comfortable allows those conversations to happen.

Giving people control over space is a powerful way to foster a sense of ownership, especially for young people, who are too often treated like conditional visitors. Many organizations also post evidence of their mutual accomplishments with newspaper clippings and photos. Lion's clubs create a sense of their long, venerable history with banners and plaques. There are many ways to leverage a space to foster a sense of identity, but there must first be a space.

A place to imagine

Picture a church. Now, picture the Sierra Club of Canada. Which was easier? Which do you still have in your mind's eye?

We humans are physical creatures. We remember an immense amount of what is in a room after scanning it briefly, but we struggle to remember seven-digit phone numbers. Residents of NDG, Montreal, know the Food Depot is a serious organization, and know what kind of work they do, because they can visit it. In contrast, it can be baffling to sort through the thousands of organizations that exist only in name, website and action.

A lot of uncertainty can be clarified by looking at a room: Is the group large or small? Professional or laid-back? Is it grass-roots? Left-wing? Right-wing? Old? New? Is anyone welcome or only people with certain interests? Is it OK to linger and chat? Is edgy humour appropriate? Is there a hierarchy? Are there clear norms? Can I trust them? And to whom should I ask questions?

More fundamentally—I suspect—a location means an organization can exist as a thing with tangible meaning to a person, in a way that groups without one perhaps never can.

Lessons

An attractive and accessible building, that offers incentives for diverse groups to enter and linger, does not simply reduce barriers to entry; it changes the relationship between an organization and its city. Buildings can be incubators of participation, setting up the conditions to make it easy for people to decide to take part, and then nurturing that budding, fragile lifestyle of volunteerism, exposing them to yet other ways to be involved in a place where they want to continue passing time. Buildings can be an organization's mental image, its presence on the street, its advertising, its spokes-person, its identity. A building means an organization is part of a neighbourhood, rather than something that happens within it.

Urban planners often express the somewhat intangible hope that the design of spaces can foster a more engaged and connected city. Spaces specifically associated with an organization provide an avenue for those hopes to be translated into concrete action.

Which leads to two questions. First, how can more groups have spaces?

To have a building, an organization must first be big enough to justify the investment. Maintaining that scale means we need to discourage the tendency to create single-purpose groups for every issue that emerges. Wherever possible, new initiatives should expand on the work of existing organizations, as has always been done in churches, lodges and service clubs.

High-quality, accessible buildings do not only benefit the groups that own them; as an incubator of civic participation, they can benefit the whole city. If this is true, subsidies, permits and workshops should facilitate the acquisition of such spaces for as many groups as possible. Quantitative research would be prudent, however, to substantiate claims I have made: a business can attract more volunteers, volunteers are more motivated when they identify with a home-base, the community is more aware of organizations that have accessible local space, etc.

Second, how can more spaces have groups?

We need far greater experimentation with the synergy between a store-front business and non-profit organizations. A social business that is only a social business is a waste: a curious visitor has no further way to get involved! While it may be too risky or time-consuming for many organizations to start their own enterprise, organizations should consider new models of partnerships that may not yet exist.

Our public spaces could also be connected with specific groups. Why not rename one Big Brothers and Sisters Park? A person could go there to have an ice cream and maybe find out how to volunteer—and this approach contributes more than naming parks after dead people.

Planners seeking to promote participatory planning should consider partnerships with existing organizations that use space effectively, so that discussion can benefit from their networks' existing habits of attendance. Planners can also create their own spaces, by establishing a design centre or a similar project. To maximize exposure, such centres should be partnered with other reasons people might walk through the front door and linger. Planners must also consider how someone motivated can graduate to higher levels of involvement. Does an organization exist in the city that facilitates discussion on urban issues? Should one be created?

Finally, we need new language to describe the interplay between a civic group, a space, and a set of norms, traditions, and practices attached to it. Churches, lodges, many service clubs, and the organizations I have interviewed are of a kind, but their similarities and benefits are overlooked for lack of a word. I propose "civic incubators." If we are to reignite volunteerism and participation in our cities, we need to better understand the nature of these civic incubators far beyond what this short article is capable. But take note: there are practical reasons that mass takes place in a church, and not a rented auditorium.