

CAN SOCIAL CAPITAL LAST? LESSONS FROM BOSTON'S VILLA VICTORIA HOUSING COMPLEX

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For poor rural Latin Americans with few years of education and almost no marketable skills, immigration to an American city with a dwindling manufacturing sector is rarely a recipe for success. Even less is to be expected when the immigrants speak no English, when the city has a reputation for antagonism against outsiders, and when they come to a neighborhood known as the city's "Skid Row." Yet success — spectacular success, by one, albeit collective, measure — was precisely the fate of the 2,000 Puerto Ricans living in the late 1960s in Parcel 19 of Boston's South End.

They succeeded not at surpassing educational expectations or obtaining high-paying jobs. Their success was the creation, against all odds, of Villa Victoria, a self-managed, aesthetically pleasing, architecturally sophisticated housing complex in the heart of what is now one of Boston's most exclusive neighborhoods. They created a neighborhood, and, along with it, the security of a guaranteed home for the rest of their lives and the comfort of a community of compatriots in a foreign land.

The Villa, as its residents often call it, is now a small treasure among New England Puerto Ricans, a testament to the power of grassroots mobilization.

In *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio* (2004 Chicago: University of Chicago Press), I recount the events that led to the creation of this enclave. More importantly, I discuss what happened next. And what happened, I suggest, offers an important lesson for both scholars and practitioners: even under the best structural conditions, community participation is unlikely to sustain itself over time without intervention.

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FROM SLUM TO SPECTACULAR SUCCESS

The story of Villa Victoria’s creation is a how-to manual of grassroots political activism, at least as activism seemed plausible in the late 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. The 2,000 residents of Villa Victoria initially lived in dilapidated brownstones and townhouses approaching their first century of existence. The South End in general, and their portion of land in particular, “Parcel 19,” was known to many as “Skid Row.” The residents lived among rats and junkyards, in structurally unsound cold-water flats whose Victorian charm had receded as quickly as the rust had grown on their cast iron gates and their walls and floors had rotted and begun to crumble. Outsiders rarely ventured into the South End. Even the elevated train that rumbled across the neighborhood did not stop in the neighborhood, only before and after it.

In 1965, the South End, including the 20-acre Parcel 19, was designated a redevelopment zone by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), which meant the buildings on the site would be razed and replaced with luxury housing. Consequently, those currently living on the site would have to move, displacing and spreading throughout the city a close-knit community. Such large-scale displacement of lower-income residents had occurred in a large scale at least once previously, in the redevelopment of the West End, as chronicled in Herbert Gans’ classic *Urban Villagers*.

By the mid-1960s, there was growing resistance to such plans in Boston and other cities around the country. In the South End, the residents Parcel 19, with logistical support from Latino and non-Latino activists, priests and seminarians, architects, other professionals, and fi-

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nancial support from local ministries and ecumenical organizations, began to organize against the BRA’s plan. The group argued, wrote letters, negotiated, and picketed City Hall until late at night. With the help of young Boston architects, they designed an alternative redevelopment plan for the site that called for low- and middle-income housing for the parcel’s current residents. They appealed to local political groups and won the support of wider South End organizations. Finally, in 1969, the city and the BRA gave the group, which now called itself the Emergency Tenants’ Council (ETC) Development Corporation, the right to redevelop the land, contingent on its ability to raise needed funds in a very short time.

ETC succeeded and with the aid of volunteer planners and architects moved forward with designing the new housing. The

result of these efforts was Villa Victoria (literally Victory Village) – an award-winning complex of three-story houses with pitched roofs and high stoops, community gardens, and a central plaza surrounded by a cobblestone-layered *paseo*. In addition to the small parks and many gathering areas in the neighborhood, the houses were built with large living room windows so residents could easily look out onto the street, contributing to the “eyes on the street” that social organization sociologists have argued help keep crime down and community interaction up. Several units were built with three or four bedrooms to accommodate large families, which further contributed to the sense of neighborhood kinship. After the project was built, ETC split into two entities. One, still called ETC, managed the project. The other, called Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA – Puerto Rican Tenants in Action), aimed to foster community participation among residents of the new development.

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Because of these efforts, the Villa in the mid-to-late 1970s and early 1980s epitomized what researchers have variously called community social capital, social organization, and community participation. There were, for example, a wide array of activities such as summer field trips, after-school tutoring programs, and workshops on such topics as community gardening, cooking, and baton twirling. With the help of outside funders, the young residents of the neighborhood assembled a tile mural on a large wall facing the plaza. In the early 1980s, IBA launched the Villa's own Channel 6, a closed-circuit television station, run by one full-time worker and 20 volunteers. IBA itself was run by an elected board that had more than 20 resident members, including one from each of the Villa's eight "districts."

Did this last? For the student of community activism, of immigrant communities in the urban United States, and of subsidized housing complexes, the question is significant. If any community was destined to foster lasting participation, social organization, and community engagement, Villa Victoria was the one. It contained the crucial combination of social factors and spatial conditions: an ethnically homogeneous community with a common history living in a pleasant, community-friendly setting. This was not an ethnically heterogeneous community with inherent internal conflicts brewing beneath the surface; nor was it the impersonal high rises of Chicago's public housing projects with non-working elevators, few places to gather, and a built-in sense of alienation. Villa Victoria was designed the way it was "supposed" to be.

Nevertheless, much of it did not last, despite concerted efforts by IBA and professional community organizers. By the mid 1990s, IBA's board had dwindled to 14 members, the district system had been disbanded for insufficient support, and elections were held sporadically, rather than yearly. Although the yearly cultural festival continued, the dance classes, music instruction, community gardening, and mural making had ceased. Even Channel 6 had ceased to operate, leaving thousands of recorded tapes and video equipment collecting dust in a closet.

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UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGES

Certainly, we must ask why participation declined at the Villa. But a better question is whether it *could* have lasted—or more accurately, what would have been necessary for it to last? What should we have expected? Some social phenomena are self-regenerating: without outside intervention, they are likely to multiply or reproduce themselves over time, like sexually transmitted diseases among a group of peers, or new slang. Other phenomena are self-perpetuating but not self-regenerating: without external intervention or major crises they neither rise nor fall over time. An example is the percentage of voters in the last several presidential elections. But other phenomena are degenerative: without external intervention, they are likely to decline over time.

In the scholarly and policy community, we have often treated community participation as if it were self-perpetuating or self-regenerating. In fact, I suggest, it is a degenerative phenomenon. I do not believe community participation cannot be sustained; only that it is unlikely to sustain itself over time on its own. In this sense, the decline of participation in Villa Victoria is less a surprise to unravel than a *process* to understand, leading to lessons about how to prevent it in other communities.

The process was as follows: As one cohort of residents was replaced by another, the bulk of residents viewed their neighborhood through a changing set of perceptual categories: from categories that made community participation seem meaningful, justified, and important, to categories which did not. As the first cohort moved out, became elderly, or died, fewer and fewer residents “framed” the neighborhood through a set of categories that made participation seem important. The process, therefore, depended on two factors: the framing of the neighborhood and the replacement of cohorts.

The notion of framing is critical. Sociologists have suggested that we never perceive the world “as it is.” Rather, our perceptions are always filtered—or framed—through a set of categories that highlight some issues and not others. The issue is that how we frame the social world (or the neighborhood) affects our actions in it.

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The framing perspective has implications for community participation in low-income neighborhoods. Many people suppose that all residents of a given low-income neighborhood perceive the neighborhood the same way—as ugly, deteriorated, crime-ridden, or whatever its characteristics may be. That is, they suppose all residents perceive the reality of their neighborhood unfiltered. But everyone in Villa Victoria framed the neighborhood through a particular lens, and these lenses—these perceptual categories—varied dramatically among residents.

In particular, the perceptions varied dramatically among cohorts. A cohort is not necessarily a generation; it is a collection of residents who may be of different ages but who have experienced the neighborhood through roughly the same time period, and, thus, roughly the same circumstances. The first cohort of residents of Villa Victoria was composed of many of the people who witnessed or participated in the transformation of the neighborhood into a new housing complex. Members of this cohort tended to frame the neighborhood as a beautiful, historically important place. As one resident said to me in an interview (in Spanish):

They used to call this around here “the trap.” Look—behind [my apartment] here there used to be a huge ditch. The little houses used to lean over the water. When it rained hard, a spurt of water ran along [behind here] and the houses—and their balconies—were almost falling over. And people lived in these places! Holy Mary! The houses were falling apart. And I find myself dumbfounded at how beautiful this got afterward!

This resident, like many who were part of the first cohort of Villa residents, believes he is fortunate to live in the Villa, because his perception (framing) of the neighborhood is filtered through the experience of the deteriorated brownstones that once occupied that section of the South End. Members of this cohort generally see Villa Victoria as a beautiful, historically significant place, and, thus, a place in which participation was not only justified but also was necessary.

But over time this cohort was replaced by a new group of residents with a collectively different set of experiences vis-à-vis the neighborhood. This second cohort—the children of the first and the new immigrants who started to inhabit the neighborhood in the late 1980s and 1990s—did not live in the neighborhood when it was known as “Skid Row.” They had no direct experience of Parcel 19 before Villa Victoria—as such, it is not a major part of how they frame or perceive the Villa.

Moreover, they perceived a radically different neighborhood. For them, the Villa's once-beautiful new townhouses and parks had decayed structurally over 15 to 20 years. Bushes had grown, paints had peeled, mold had accumulated, iron fences had bent out of shape, garbage was strewn about, and rodents had rediscovered the streets and sidewalks. When compared to the surrounding South End, now one of the city's upper middle class neighborhoods—a quaint assortment of row houses and brownstones meticulously restored and carefully manicured by a new population of young professionals—the Villa certainly did not resemble the symbol of hope it appeared to be in the 1970s.

This new cohort sees the same neighborhood but, filtered through its own experiences, essentially sees a ghetto. Tellingly, members of this cohort frequently use the word “project” to describe the Villa, while members of the first cohort almost never do. Some first-cohort residents even take offense when the Villa is described as a “project.” A history of struggle, so critical to the first cohort's perception of the neighborhood, plays no role in the second cohort's perceptions. For the latter group, the neighborhood was not something to participate in—why should they?—but, in fact, something from which to escape.

Structural and cultural conditions, however, did make it possible for some forms of participation, such as the yearly festival, to continue. The key structural factors include: the continued presence of IBA, which served as a logistical and financial base for sustaining activities; the relatively low residential turnover, which allowed some of the history of the neighborhood to be passed from generation to generation; and the Villa's physical configuration, which, through a combination of parks, plazas, and structurally attractive housing, encourages, rather than discourages community interaction, and, thus, participation.

The critical cultural factor is that members of the first cohort have worked hard to make participation endure, often by mobilizing their children to participate in these activities. For such efforts to succeed, members of the first cohort must change how the newer cohort frames the neighborhood. Otherwise, they will continuously face young residents like Tommy, who, when asked why he did not get involved, responded the way many of his cohort might: “What for?!”

KEY LESSONS

Sustaining community participation over time on a collective scale requires a justification rooted in how residents perceive their neighborhood. For the residents of the Villa's first cohort, that justification was rooted in a collective experience during the late 1960s. Those of the second did not have it and they had nothing that could replace it. This strongly suggests that community participation is unlikely to last over extended periods without deliberate intervention. Such intervention needs structural and cultural support. Structurally, it requires:

- A viable and stable community organization
- A high level of residential stability

To learn more about Professor Small's research see:

- Mario Luis Small, *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*. University of Chicago Press
- Mario Luis Small, “Culture, Cohorts, and Social Organization Theory: Understanding Local Participation in a Latino Housing Project.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 108, (1): 1-54.

- An architectural design that encourages—or, at a minimum—does not discourage social interaction

The intervention also requires mobilization from *within* the community. In particular, mobilization should:

- Focus on how residents perceive their neighborhood, not merely on “getting people involved”
- Address why thinking about the neighborhood a given way justifies participation in it

The last issue is critical. I have written as if community participation is an unqualified good. Certainly, the benefits of participation have been demonstrated repeatedly—less crime, stronger social support systems, and greater ability to accomplish common neighborhood goals, among others. However, community participation produces attachment to neighborhoods. In a low-income housing complex, that attachment encourages individuals to stay in the neighborhood rather than move out. For residents to frame a neighborhood as a place to be involved, they must imagine it as an important element of their current and future life.

This raises an important paradox. Do we want individuals to remain attached to their communities, even if they are subsidized housing complexes? Or do we want to encourage upward mobility, which suggests that they leave subsidized housing and become homeowners elsewhere in the city or region? This puzzle is likely to lie at the heart of any effort to increase community participation in low-income neighborhoods.

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