Healing Narratives:
the story of a community-based participatory action project
in Syracuse’s Near Eastside Neighborhood

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A B S T R A C T
Heather Brubaker
May 2005
Healing Narratives: a community-based participatory action project
in Syracuse’s Near Eastside Neighborhood

In response to the trend of declining participation in community-based participatory design projects undertaken within a specific academic-community partnership, this capstone project set out to answer the following question: How does incorporating a series of smaller-scale participatory action projects affect participation in a larger academic-based community design project? A research team comprised of three community members and a student researcher developed a process for engaging neighborhood residents that first provided a forum for neighborhood stories to be shared and then used those stories to guide the development of a design project. The process also incorporated smaller, hands-on activities within a series of community events as a way to provide visible results over the course of the longer-term design process. Participation did not increase in breadth over the course of the project due to challenges in getting people involved in the project from its beginning and it is unclear if the process that was implemented had any impact on participation throughout the course of the project. The process did, however, revealed four key components of an effective academic-community partnership. The project also showed the value of using narratives as a way to engage people in community-based design projects.
INTRODUCTION

This capstone project occurred within on-going partnership between Eastside Neighbors in Partnership (ENIP), a non-profit neighborhood organization in Syracuse’s Near Eastside Neighborhood\(^1\) and the SUNY ESF Center for Community Design Research (CCDR). Understanding contextual information about the partnership and previous planning and design project undertaken in the Near Eastside as part of this partnership helps frame the development of the research question.

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\(^1\) ENIP is a non-profit neighborhood organization that was founded in July 1987. The organization’s focus has been to address economic development, cultural development, and housing with special emphasis on empowering and improving the lives of young people. Working with neighborhood and community wide organizations, local businesses, and neighbors in the three main areas: Neighborhood Development and Environmental Work; Arts, Cultural, and Technology Development; and Anti-Violence.
Project Background

Since 1999 the CCDR has been working with ENIP to undertake a variety of community-based planning and design projects ranging from neighborhood-wide vacant land studies to design proposals for specific sites, all of which were developed and undertaken as a partnership between ENIP and ESF. ENIP staff was responsible for community outreach, including getting community members to come to the meetings and workshops associated with each project. ESF faculty and students were responsible for designing and running these events and then developing planning and design proposals that they then summarized for ENIP to use to seek funding and move projects towards implementation.

ENIP staff and ESF faculty involved in early projects recall that they were met with enthusiasm and support from the community. In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable decline in community participation\(^2\). It has become more difficult to both get people from the neighborhood involved in the project and to keep those who to participate involved throughout the course of the project. The exact reasons for this decline are complex and may have been the result of a variety of factors. One hypothesis is that people are not becoming involved in current projects because they have not seen results from the previous

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\(^2\) While there is no measurable documentation of this decline in participation, Cheryl Doble (ESF professor and CCDR director) and Jim Dessauer (executive director of ENIP), both of whom were involved in early projects, indicated in separate interviews that they have been aware of this trend in more recent projects undertaken by this partnership.
ones. Community members and organizers feel that this lack of immediate change within the neighborhood has led to feelings of disappointment and apathy felt by those directly involved in the various processes and by others throughout the broader community\(^3\). In response to these issues, it was recognized that a different approach to community-based planning and design should be developed as a way to engage community members in new ways. One of the more recent projects developed within the partnership – the Healing Garden\(^4\) – provided the opportunity to test out a new way of working with community.

**Problem Statement**

In response to the trend of declining participation in community design projects within Syracuse’s Near Eastside Neighborhood, this capstone project set out to answer the following question: How does incorporating a series of smaller-scale participatory action projects affect participation in a larger academic-based community design project? A research team of three community members and a student researcher developed a process for engaging neighborhood residents that first provided a forum for neighborhood stories to be shared and then used those stories to guide the development of a design project. The process was also designed to include a series of smaller, hands-on activities that were intended to provide visible results over the course a longer-term design process.

\(^3\) This sentiment was expressed by a neighborhood resident during interviews conducted as part of this research project.

\(^4\) The idea for a Healing Garden was initiated by people within the neighborhood as a way to commemorate victims of street violence and to use the process of creating the garden as a way to initiate dialogue and healing. The garden was initially located in Lexington Park; however, the uses and activities that currently take place in that space and are included in the park master plan do not support the personal, contemplative use intended for the Healing Garden. Discussions in the early stages of the project identified sites owned by ENIP throughout the Near Eastside Neighborhood as other potential locations. Eventually the space to the west of the Community Action Center was decided upon as the most suitable site for the Healing Garden.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Research from a variety of fields helps to frame and support this problem statement by providing support for the importance of community participation, revealing some of the challenges of doing community design work in an academic setting, and presenting ideas for alternative processes.

Participatory Research

Participatory research has been described as “people’s research” because it directly addresses problems that people have identified and then actively involves them in the development of solutions (Park 1997, Sanoff 2000). Participatory research has been conducted in a variety of fields, ranging from public health (Barnsley and Ellis 1992) to design and planning (Sanoff 2000). This type of research is initiated by a group of community members and facilitated by researchers or practitioners who then help the community decide its course of action (Sanoff 2000).

Public participation in design and planning processes allows for collective action in the development and execution of projects that community members themselves have identified in such a way that seeks to improve the quality of life of the people living in a particular community (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995). Participatory design has often focused on communities typically underserved by design professions (Bell 2004) and often incorporates other areas of focus such as:

- designing community spaces and everyday environments
- offering design assistance to a diverse client base, including disadvantaged communities
• empowering people and communities through economic development and the creation of new local leaders
• striving for environmental justice through ongoing self-help projects and processes (Hester 1989:130)

Design solutions, then, are often developed as ways to build community, in both the physical and social sense, in a process that encourages people to work collectively from their individual and collective strengths and assets (Kingsley, McNeely, Gibson 1997).

Strategies for Increasing Community Participation

Participation is an essential component of participatory research. The research methods used in participatory research projects should encourage and promote community participation. In some communities, getting people to participate in projects can be a significant challenge. The four strategies to encourage participation discussed below come from research conducted in a variety of fields, ranging from design to social sciences, and provide some suggestions developing participatory processes that encourage greater community participation.

• Strategy 1: Direct Involvement in Action-based Projects

Research has documented benefits gained from participating in activities that call for direct community involvement. In one such study, Francis, Cashdan, and Paxton (1984) identified the following consequences of hands-on involvement in community gardening projects: people felt a sense of accomplishment, gained confidence and skills, became more realistic about how much work is involved, developed a “sense of belonging” within a larger
group, and began other projects within the neighborhood. Another consequence identified was that people felt discouraged when projects required too much time and effort (Francis, Cashdan, Paxton 1984). In another study conducted by social psychologists focusing more generally on benefits experienced by volunteers, researchers summarized that volunteers report experiencing an “affirmation of the values of participating, boosts in self-esteem, the acquisition of new skills and competencies, the making of new friends and acquaintances and so on” (Clary and Snyder 2002: 584).

Researchers also recognize that participatory planning and community building are long, ongoing, and continually evolving processes and emphasize the importance of undertaking smaller, achievable projects as targets within a larger process (Putman 2003). By ensuring that these smaller projects are able to be accomplished by community members themselves helps make these targets more achievable (Kaplan and Kaplan 1982).

- **Strategy 2: Shorter-term involvement**

Researchers have also found that while people tend to initially participate in ways that are least demanding of their time, once people begin, they are more likely to participate in their communities in other ways as well (Clary and Snyder 2002). Based on data gathered from a random phone survey about arts participation, researchers at the Urban Institute summarized their findings in the framework of a “ladder of commitment” comprised of three basic steps, the first and broadest being participation that requires minimal investments of time, money, or skill (Walker, Fleming, and Sherwood 2003). Once people are involved in this broad base of participation, however, longer-term commitment to a project is more likely (Clary and Snyder 2002).
• **Strategy 3: Mutually Beneficial Partnerships**

Achieving a mutually beneficial relationship between community members and designers is an important criterion for participatory research (Axel-Lute 2000) and one that can be a challenge to accomplish, especially when projects are undertaken as academic service learning projects, a practice in which students learn by participating in community service projects (Forsyth, Lu, and McGirr 1999). Social psychologists caution, that student involvement in service-learning projects can “take away control from citizens . . . [and] can undermine citizens’ perceptions of competency” (Werner et al 2002: 1), creating feelings of powerlessness among the recipients of assistance (Clary and Snyder 2002). The development an equal partnership between academic and university partners, however, is an especially important step in processes that are intended develop the local leadership needed to sustain longer-term projects.

• **Strategy 4: Community Narratives**

The use of narratives, the telling of stories, is one strategy that has been used by a wide range of people to communicate about places (Potteiger and Purinton 1998, Harper et al 2004) and about healing (Particola-McNiff 2003). Stories help people understand their past (Harper et al 2004) as well as shape new futures by allowing familiar elements of daily live to be seen in unfamiliar and “usefully disruptive” ways (Eckstein 2004: 24). Creating what Schnakecloth and Shibley (1995) refer to as dialogic space, a place for open and ongoing conversation, encourages the telling of stories, and through the telling of stories, community
members can have a greater sense of ownership and decision-making power throughout the design process (Potteiger and Purinton 1998).

Narratives also provide an easy, comfortable, and accessible way for people to express experiences and memories about place. When allowed to express in their own words how they have experienced a place, people can develop a broader, mutual understanding of issues (Harper et al 2004, Park 1997) and can help create a common vision for a community (Beauregard 2004).

Evaluating Participatory Methods

Many of the sources cited above describe and discuss the outcomes of participatory processes rather than prove the effectiveness of the process. The nature of community-based participatory research makes it difficult to establish such causal relationships because the research is designed to assist communities rather than to test a method against a control group. Therefore, it is important that participatory research projects include the development of evaluation criteria to determine if the community succeeded in what it originally set out to do (Park 1997). As more and more researchers document and describe their experiences, patterns of outcomes begin to appear, that may provide more general criteria upon which outcomes can be measured and evaluated.

One such framework for evaluation developed by Sherry Arnstein examines different levels of participation based on the metaphor of an eight-rung ladder representing the ratio of participation and control between those in power and the traditionally unempowered. The levels she describes are, from bottom to top: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control (Arnstein 1969 in LeGates and
Stout 2003). An evaluation framework developed by UNICEF\(^5\) provides a more focused method for evaluating participatory processes by using indicators of involvement to determine the levels of participation throughout the project (Wyss \textit{et al.} 1998). Both approaches can help researchers develop strategies for evaluating participatory processes and better understand the correlation between various aspects of a participatory process and the levels of participation that resulted.

\(^5\) This framework is illustrated in Appendix C of this report.
GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The goals and objectives for this research project developed from conversations between the student researcher and the project team.

Goal 1: To initiate community healing project.
- Create project team with ESF students and ENIP employees to organize and facilitate project meetings
- Begin dialogue with project participants to develop common understanding of project intent
- Explore strategies for implementable action projects
- Create project team for continuation of project

Goal 2: To use narratives as the participatory community design strategy for involving community members in the project, for understanding the community’s experiences, values, and concerns, and for designing and creating a healing landscape.
- Initiate dialogue with the broader community about community healing
- Gather stories about community and healing
- Develop a design for a healing landscape that incorporates and expresses the narratives
- Develop strategies for undertaking participatory action project(s)

Goal 3: To document and describe the processes of undertaking participatory action projects and designing the healing landscape.
- Document and describe the organization of the participatory processes and projects
• Document and describe participants’ expectations and experiences throughout the process.

• Document and describe the effect of the action projects on participation in the design process.

• Reflect on and critique the effectiveness of the projects and overall process.

**Goal 4: To evaluate and summarize the overall process undertaken for this capstone project.**

• Determine criteria for evaluation and analyze data gathered in Goal 3

• Prepare summary document of process and findings

• Prepare a list of suggested next steps and/or modifications to the process to serve as a reference for other projects in the Near Eastside and other communities in which the CCDR will work.
METHODS

A variety of primarily qualitative methods were used throughout the course of this project to initiate, document, and assess the process that was developed. Because this project was designed as a participatory action project, some of the specific strategies for the methods discussed below were developed in response to findings from previous steps in the process.

Step 1: Project Organization and Initiation

Healing Garden Project: Starting the Process

The student researcher had worked on several of the previous design projects that had been undertaken within the Near Eastside Neighborhood and was familiar with the challenges of working in the neighborhood. Her interest in and preliminary background research about design-build projects undertaken within academic-community partnerships helped in the selection of the Healing Garden Project as one of the projects to be developed by a team of ESF students and an ENIP employee within a graduate-level design studio. Throughout the fall semester, the student researcher worked alongside the project team to assist in the planning and organization of done work for the studio course.

The team worked together to organize and conduct a series of six workshops throughout the Fall 2004 semester. The students planned and facilitated the activities for the meetings and the ENIP employee conducted community outreach, a model that was used throughout this project. The workshops were originally intended to involve people within the neighborhood who had been directly affected by street violence in a facilitated dialogue about healing. Based on these conversations, the students developed ideas and strategies for small intervention projects that expressed the participants’ ideas of healing.
The discussions, organization, and activities conducted throughout the Fall 2004 semester, formed the foundation for this research project, allowing for the continuation and further development of both the working relationship with ENIP and the conversation about healing. Additionally, a group of three ENIP employees who participated in the workshops throughout the fall formed the project team, continuing to work with the student researcher throughout this research project.

**Step 2: Community Process**

*Framework Overview*

The methods used for engaging community members in this research project involved conducting two types of community gatherings. The project team began by meeting with smaller groups of community members in a series of story circles, a type of focus group meeting, to allow for open dialogue on the subject of healing. Participants of these smaller meetings were then invited to attend a series of larger events that brought the individual groups together to take part in a series of facilitated activities that allowed for further discussion and the development of the design project. Central to each of the larger events was the creation of a physical project, something tangible that relates to the overall design project being conducted throughout this process.

*Project Team: Developing the Partnership*

The specific methods for the community process were developed by members of the research team, which consisted of the student research and three women who were all neighborhood residents and employees at ENIP. The organization of these methods required
a close working relationship within the research team and clear, open communication. Continuing the pattern of frequent meetings that began in the Fall 2004 semester, members of the research team continued to meet on a bi-monthly basis throughout much of the Spring 2005 semester. These meetings, which were held at ENIP’s offices, allowed for group dialogue to plan and then assess the various events that occurred throughout the course of this research project.

*Story Circles: Sharing Neighborhood Experiences*

The first phase of community engagement consisted of a series of story circles as a way to gather neighborhood stories and to initiate a community-wide dialogue about healing. Using contacts within the project team, story circles were planned with the following six groups, with 6-8 people at each session: Youth ACTION teens, neighbors, seniors, True Christian study group, P.E.A.C.E. Neighborhood Advisory Council, and families of victims of street violence. The sessions were to be held in locations throughout the neighborhood, such as homes, churches and other community centers. The story circles were to follow the same format: sitting in a circle, each person is given the opportunity to respond to a series of open-ended questions. Each session was to be facilitated by a member of the project team, using a list of questions to be developed by the project team.

With the written consent of all participants, the story circles were recorded. Complete transcriptions of these recordings were type, analyzed, coded, and summarized for use in later stages of this project.

*Community Healing Events: Developing New Understandings*
The project team planned a series of four community events to bring people who had participated in the story circles together in a larger forum to continue their dialogue and move the design project towards implementation. Analysis of the stories and experiences shared during the story circles informed the development of specific activities undertaken during these events.

The specific objectives and content of each of the events was developed in response to what was learned in the preceding stages of the project. The agendas and other materials that were developed for each event are included in the Project Notebook and discussed in more detail in the next section of this report.

**Step 3: Process Document and Assessment**

*Sign-in Sheets: Documenting Participation*

Sign-in sheets were used to record the number of participants at each event and to determine the regularity of participation throughout the course of the project. Participants at each event were asked to sign in. This list was typed and used to track the total number of participants at each event and the frequency with which individual attended throughout the course of the project.

*Post-event Assessments: Documenting Experiences*

At the end of each event post-event assessments forms were given to participants to document their experiences and get feedback about the effectiveness of the activities. (include in appendix). Information was transcribed, analyzed, and used to monitor and modify the process as it was underway.
Interviews: Documenting Reflections

A series of interviews were planned over the course of the project. Pre-project interviews were held to provide an understanding of the context in which the project would be occurring, specifically in terms of experiences with past project and expectations for the current one. Mid-way through the project, the same series of questions was to be asked of other participants who had become involved throughout the course of the project. Finally, at the end of the project, all interviewees were to be interviewed again to understand people’s experiences and thoughts after having participated in the project. All interviews were audio taped with the written consent of the interviewees, transcribed, analyzed, coded and summarized for use in the project evaluation.

Three individuals were identified for the pre-project interviews based on their relationship to the project - Jim Dessauer (executive director at ENIP) and Cheryl Doble (faculty member at SUNY ESF and director of the CCDR) as process observers, and Tina Romain (ENIP employee) as a neighborhood resident.

Project Notebook: Recording the Process

A project notebook containing copies of all documents that were prepared for events throughout the project (such as agendas, data transcriptions, and meeting summaries) serves as a record of the process used to undertake this capstone project. The notebook is a separate document that accompanies this final report.
A project journal containing reflections, questions, and critiques of the process has been kept and serves to supplement the information contained in the project notebook.

**Step 4: Evaluation and Summary**

*Evaluation Framework: Determining Levels of Participation*

Using the information gathered from the methods describe above, the following framework was designed to determine the levels of participation that were achieved throughout this project.

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<th>Levels of Participation</th>
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| Level 1: initial involvement in project | • Do people show up to events?  
• What is their response immediately after event?  
• Are they likely to come to next event? | • Sign in sheets  
• Post-event evaluations |
| Level 2: acceptance of project | • Are there repeat attendees?  
• What are reasons for coming back?  
• Are people more engaged in activities? | • Sign in sheets  
• Post-event evaluations |
| Level 3: commitment to project | • Are people more willing to take on additional responsibilities?  
• Are people more likely to stay involved in the project after researcher’s involvement has ended? | • Post-project interviews  
• Surveys |

*Project Report: Summarizing the Project*

This report serves as the summary document for this project. In addition to describing what took place, the document also includes suggestions for future community design projects undertaken by the CCDR, both within the Near Eastside or other neighborhoods.
FINDINGS

Each phase of this project led to new understandings about the neighborhood. These new understandings then led to the development of specific actions that allowed the project to address, respond to, and incorporate the information that was shared by community members.

Starting the Process

The process that was undertaken by this studio is summarized in a separate document prepared by the students. There are several outcomes, however, that influenced this capstone project. First, due to the limited success in involving the intended participants, those directly affected by street violence, this first phase of the project relied on the participation of ENIP employees. Three women from the neighborhood played an particularly important role throughout the Fall 2004 semester and became members of the project team that developed for the project’s continuation in the Spring 2005 semester.

Another significant outcome from the dialogues that occurred during the Fall 2004 project was a shift of the project scope. In discussions that occurred during the early workshops, ENIP participants expressed their belief that the process of healing should be broadened to include the whole community – a Community Healing Project – rather than focusing only on those directly impacted by street violence. Based on the design research presented by the students at a later workshop, participants developed a plan for a two-phased campaign to make the Community Healing Project more visible in the neighborhood. First, the students developed a design ribbons to be displayed throughout the neighborhood as a way for individuals to show their support for the project. Second, a Healing Walk and
Candlelight Vigil was held in Lexington Park on November 8, 2004 where the ribbons were distributed and people from throughout the neighborhood were able to come together in a show of solidarity for the Community Healing Project. Using photographs from this event, the students designed a poster that marked this event and was used for publicity about the Community Healing Project.

**Story Circles**

Members of the project team were able to organize two story circles, the first with eight teens from ENIP’S Youth ACTION program and the second with three seniors who live in the neighborhood. Both sessions were held at ENIP’s facilities. The questions asked at both story circles were developed by members of the project team and primarily included direct questions that focused specifically on the issue of neighborhood violence.

**Analysis**

The stories shared by the teens and seniors during the story circles revealed two key understandings. First, the contrast between the remembrances of the neighborhood’s past as safe, quiet and with a strong sense of community compared against more recent experiences reveals just how much the neighborhood has changed. Participants in both groups talked about increasing levels of street violence have impacted how they use and perceive the neighborhood, limiting

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6 Sample stories are located in Appendix D. The full transcripts of both stories circles are located in the Project Notebook.
when and where they go outside. The similarities between current experiences described by both groups indicate that they are not just limited to one demographic group within the neighborhood but may be more commonplace.

A second understanding that was uncovered through these dialogues is the strong belief by all participants in the need for the community to take a unified stand against the negative activities that have been occurring throughout the neighborhood.

Community Healing Events

**Event #1: “Sharing Our Stories”**  
*Community Action Center, February 17, 2005*

**Activities**

- **Sharing of neighborhood stories:** Participants shared stories and experiences about the neighborhood.
- **Mapping community sacred places:** Participants identified places in the neighborhood where they feel safe, located those places on an aerial photograph of the neighborhood, and talked about the
characteristics of the places that made them feel safe.

- Drawing the ideal neighborhood: Participants drew images to illustrate their ideas for the characteristics of their ideal neighborhood.

- Community Sacred Places Exhibit: Building on the discussion during the mapping exercise, teens were asked to prepare exhibits to be presented at the next event to illustrate why the places listed during the mapping exercise are significant to the neighborhood.

Analysis

The mapping activity provided important information about places where people feel safe within the neighborhood because they discussed why they felt safe in the places that they had identified on the map\(^7\). Through activity, it was revealed that people feel most safe in places that are privately owned such as in homes and churches and in places that have a critical density of use, such as at events organized by ENIP in Lexington Park. Participants talked about how both types of places have a certain level of oversight that creates a common understanding of what behaviors are acceptable and allows for unacceptable behavior to be removed or not even to occur. Without this level of oversight, public spaces such as Lexington Park are deemed uncontrollable and unpredictable and as a result, people from the

\(^7\) A summary map of these findings is included in Appendix E.
neighborhood who want to use the park as a community gathering space are too fearful to do so.

After the event, further study of the most frequently cited safe places revealed that none of these places have access to open space of any significant size to allow for larger gatherings. Other community spaces within the neighborhood such as the Boys and Girls Club and other churches, though not specifically identified during the discussion but that do serve as community space for the neighborhood, also do not have space available to accommodate more public events or functions on their property. Lexington Park is the only space currently available within the neighborhood that has the potential to serve as a significant community gathering space, but in addition to the issue of safety mentioned above, the existing park, does not support the uses or activities desired by neighborhood residents. The one place in the neighborhood that has the greatest potential to become a significant community space is ENIP’s Community Action Center and the adjacent corner lot, which is also owned by the organization.

Next Steps

Out of this analysis came the understanding that the neighborhood has a strong need for a community space that provides a safe place that can be programmed for a variety of neighborhood uses and activities. This understanding shifted the basic project scope away from designing a healing garden to focusing instead on the corner property to determine how the space could be function as a significant community gathering space.

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8 Since 2002 the CCDR has been working with ENIP and the City of Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation, and Youth Services to develop a new master plan for the park that incorporates the community’s vision for this significant space in their neighborhood.
Event #2: “Creating a Community Place”  
Eastside P.E.A.C.E., March 5, 2005

Activities

- Community Sacred Places Exhibit: This activity did not take place because the exhibits were never prepared and none of the teens were at the event.
- Creating a Community Place: Participants discussed the concept of “community practices” and brainstormed ideas for practices that could take place at the Community Action Center and surrounding site. During this activity, participants also discussed how design can help create a sense of safety.
- Celebrating Community People: Participants identified people whom they believe have had a positive impact on the neighborhood.

Analysis

This event also led to significant understandings that impacted the overall direction of this capstone project. In response to questions about community practices, participants agreed that the idea of opening a coffee house, a program already planned by ENIP to be held at the Community Action Center, was a good way to initiate more positive and active community use of the site.

Discussions about creating a safe environment led to an understanding of how participants believe that design can help create and promote safety. The participants strongly felt that activating the site – being able to see people using the space throughout the day – would greatly increase feelings of safety. They expressed their opinions that because the building is dark and empty in the evenings and on weekends, negative behaviors occur on the
property. When asked about building fences or gates to help control or limit pedestrian and vehicular movement through the site, people were strongly opposed to the idea. They do not want to create the appearance of deliberately preventing access to the site. While they did understand the role of creating boundaries to delineate space, people felt that greenery is a more appropriate material and could also be used to create a comfortable setting. Some ideas that were expressed were planting low hedges along the street edges, having perennials and other flowers, shade trees, and benches. Other ideas that were suggested to help secure the site include installing motion lights that automatically come on at dusk, installing an alarm system, and installing smoke detectors in the building. Outreach and communication were also suggested as a way to create safety on the site. By letting people know about the project – specific events and how they can become involved – was seen as a way to make people feel more comfortable and safe.

Next Steps

Based on these understandings, the project proceeded along two parallel tracks – the planning and opening the coffee house as a way to begin activating the site and the development of design studies for the site that incorporated ideas and information shared at this event.
Activities

- Grand Opening of Community Coffee House: The event began with activities to celebrate the opening of the coffee house – brief speeches, singing, and a potluck lunch.
- Site Analysis and Discussion: The student researcher gave a brief overview of the site based on preliminary site analysis and discussed the need for the space to transition between the open, public space of the street and the closed, private space of the community building.
- Marking the Site: Participants helped stake out ideas for the location and size of different spaces that could be included in the design proposal for the site.

Analysis

During discussions about the potential design, participants communicated several factors that they felt were important to include in the final design: the building and site should be accessible (i.e. ADA compliant), activity needs to occur at the front of the
building, and a front porch structure would allow for activities to be held inside and outside of the building.

**Next Steps**

Based on these understandings, a series of design studies were developed and refined, which led to the creation of the final design proposal, which is discussed in more detail in the next section of this report. Additionally, ENIP began to prepare for the final event of this phase of the Community Healing Project – a groundbreaking and celebration of what took place since the project was initiated.
The design proposal is a direct response to issues raised and discussion that occurred throughout the course of the project, which revealed the need for the site to first be activated as a community gathering space, a place where neighborhood residents can come together in a safe setting.

Site Plan (not to scale)

Site information and photographs are included in Appendix A
Design Description

The site is designed to accommodate a range of uses that encourage the practice of community gathering and activates the space for a variety of neighborhood functions throughout the day. The design divides the space into a series of different spaces that transition from the public space of the adjacent streets to the private space of the Community Action Center. Larger public spaces are located closer to East Fayette Street and Columbus Avenue in order to make the activities occurring in them more visible within the neighborhood while smaller activity spaces are located closer to the building and allow open views into the public space of the site.
The Gathering Circle is the central community space of the site and is located directly in front of the Community Action Center and provides space for activities such as events, performances, or large gatherings. The central area within this space is defined by seating walls and a shade canopy structure. A barbecue pit is located underneath this structure and faces out towards the street to make it more visible to passers-by. The space beyond the circle can accommodate large crowds and provides areas for picnic tables. Set into the ground at the center of the Gathering Circle is a memorial, dedicated to the victims of street violence for whom this project was originally initiated.

The Market, located in the eastern half of the site where it is more visible from the adjacent intersection, is the other main public space of the site. Currently, this area is designed to be an open market place with tables and tents set up on a temporary basis. This space can also designed accommodate future expansion of the market, as proposed in earlier design studies, as a more permanent structure. When the market is not in use, this area is used as a small parking lot.

The Front Porch is a semi-public space that extends the usable space of the Community Action Center to a more visible position on the site. A seating area is provided at the front of the building that is approximately three feet higher than the main level of the Gathering Circle. This change in elevation both separates the seating area from the more public and active space below while also providing open views to the site and street. Moveable rocking chairs are placed along the front of the porch to provide a flexible seating area for neighborhood residents. A set of wide steps at the front edge of the porch connects this space to the Gathering Circle, creating an open relationship between these two spaces. These steps can also be used as a seating area.
The Front Porch also includes a paved space at the entrance to the Community Action Center that creates a more defined entrance area to the east of the building. Another seating area with tables and chairs is located closer to the entrance to the building, intended to be used by patrons of the coffee house. A ramp connects the porch to the main level of the site to ensure that the site is accessible to all. Another set of stairs connects the porch to the site of the future healing garden, located to the west of the building.

New entrances to the site are created along the adjacent sidewalks to provide more direct connections from the neighborhood. The main entrance is located along East Fayette Street, creating a direct connection with the entrance to the Community Action Center. An enlarged space along the sidewalk is defined by a seat wall, providing space for people to gather at the edge of the site. This path leads through a series of thresholds as it passes through the major spaces of the site. Each main threshold includes a seating area, providing the opportunity for these spaces to be used as informal gathering spaces. A second entrance to the site is created along Columbus Avenue, leading into the Gathering Circle. During times when the market is running, this path becomes the central corridor of the market.

A variety of plant material is used throughout the site. The outer edge of the site is defined by a row of street trees and low shrubs, framing the space within. Rows of low shrubs are also used to define various spaces within site, such as the Gathering Circle and the Market. Planted berms wrap around the sides of the Front Porch, extending the ground plane around the building and grounding this structure to the site. Small planting areas are also included throughout the site and provide the opportunity for neighborhood residents to take part in the planting and care of flower beds.
Another important aspect of the site design is that the construction and installation of many elements throughout the design can be done by community volunteers. The memorial circle within the Gathering Circle is intended to be a community-build project, thus allowing neighborhood residents to personalize and take ownership of the space. Other ways that community members might be involved in the creation of specific elements throughout the site include making sculptural elements to be placed throughout the site, writing stories in the concrete paths and pads, creating site signage, and helping with the installation and upkeep of garden areas.
ASSESSMENT

Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback throughout the duration of this project. Their input, comments, and reflections provide additional information to use in assessing the overall process.

Documenting Participation

Together, the sign-in sheets and post-event assessments revealed an unexpected pattern of participation throughout the course of this project. Overall participation in this project was low from its beginning. When planning the story circles, the project team identified six separate groups with which to hold these sessions. In the end, only two were held and involved a total of eleven people – eight teens and three elders. As the project progressed, the majority of story circle participants did not attend future events.

Of the twelve people attending the first community event, the only repeat attendees were four teens. The majority of participants were ENIP employees. There were no story circle participants at the second event. Even thought it was planned to have some of the teenagers conduct one of the activities at the event, none of them attended. Of the eleven people at the second event, seven were repeat ENIP attendees. Turnout at the third event was significantly higher because it was combined with the opening of the coffee house. Nearly thirty people attended this event, many of whom had not attended prior events. Again, the majority of attendees were people directly associated with ENIP.

The inability to get neighborhood residents involved in this project began to raise questions about the relationship between ENIP and people who live in the neighborhood. While outreach efforts continued throughout the course of the project, it became apparent
that ENIP staff were going to be the ones primarily responsible for moving the project forward.

**Documenting Reflections**

The pre-project interview included the following questions:

- What Eastside planning projects have you been involved with?
- What do you think were the benefits of those projects?
- What do you think were some of the obstacles or challenges of those projects?
- How did you learn about the healing project?
- Why did you decide to participate in the healing project?
- What do you see the as the potentials for the healing project?

The issues brought up during these interviews, summarized in the tables below, provide a framework for understanding the benefits and challenges from previous design projects as well as for potentials for the Healing Garden Project.

### Benefits of Previous Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Creation of a heightened awareness of the community’s needs and of the issues facing the neighborhood in terms of general deterioration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Identification and prioritization of projects within the neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Creation of connection between arts and community development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implementation of projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Students have opportunity to work collaboratively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students have opportunity to work in challenged, urban neighborhood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Challenges of Previous Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Organizational| • Lack of funds  
• Political issues between organization and City  
• Varying levels of knowledge and experience within organization |
| Community     | • Apathy among residents because of prior disappointments  
• Difficulty in engaging people in the “tedious” process of design  
• Declining community participation |
| Educational   | • Difficulty in getting students to work collaboratively                      |
| Partnership   | • Different styles between partners in terms of the role of planning versus doing  
• Different time schedules – academic versus year round  
• Questioning of partnership as an effective way to bring about change in the neighborhood |
| Design        | • Not all projects flexible enough to accommodate realities of the neighborhood  
• Difficulty in creating designs that respond to realities of the neighborhood  
• Not producing “marketable” materials to help in organizational fundraising |

### Potentials of Current Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Potentials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Community     | • To create an understanding in the community that people can do something about the conditions in their neighborhood  
• To create an understanding in the community about the process that must be gone through to bring about changes  
• To address the gap that exists between community development efforts and people’s reaction to disinvestment in the community |
| Partnership   | • To develop a more effective way of working in the Near Eastside Neighborhood that can take a project from design to implementation |
As the project progressed and it became apparent that participation was not broadening, the methods as outline for this project shifted. Rather than conducting mid-project interviews with new participants, a group interview was scheduled with members of the project team to reflect on and discuss what had taken place up to the mid-point of the project. This interview revealed interesting insights into how members of the project team viewed the success of the project.

When asked to reflect on what was the most successful part of the project the women stated that the teen story circle was most effective. The women observed that the teens seemed to be more fully engaged in the dialogue and seemed to benefit from the discussion about their thoughts and experiences with violence in the neighborhood. They also felt that two Community Healing Events that had taken place up to that point were indeed successful – the first one because people seemed more willing to talk and were able to express themselves in a creative way and the second, even though it did not achieve the goals set out at the start of the project to increase community participation, because it lead to productive outcomes in terms of developing ideas for starting the coffee house.

Discussion about the less successful parts of the project provided some insight into why participation was lower than expected from the start. The women all thought that the story circles were not as successful as they could have been. This was due, they thought, to the fact that the project was too rushed in the beginning, preventing them from successfully contacting and organizing the number of story circles that the team originally planned. There was a general frustration on their part with people saying that they would attend a story circle and then not showing up. The group also agreed that the main reason for such low turnout during the Community Healing Events was due to ineffective outreach. There appeared to be
some confusion about who was supposed to be at these events – just people who had attended the story circles or other people in the neighborhood as well. It was also recognized that the connection between the story circles and the community events was not made clearly enough to those participating in the story circles. Other reasons that team members thought contributed to low turnout for the events was the weather (too sunny) and the time (Saturdays are already too busy for people).

When asked about how they see their own participation continuing throughout the rest of the project, all three women expressed their firm commitment to the project, stating the need to really “market” the overall concept of the Community Healing Project in order to get others in the community to see their vision of the project and understand how they personally will benefit from being involved. By providing a variety of ways to involve people in the broader Community Healing Project, the women believe that there will be a cumulative healing effect throughout the broader neighborhood. The women’s dedication to the project was reinforced when two of the three stated that they are willing to stay involved in the project regardless of their affiliation with ENIP.

Due to time constraints, the post-project interviews were not conducted with the three individuals interviewed at the beginning of this project. Based on the findings of this report, however, a group discussion between these individuals would be helpful to better understand the workings of the partnership and the way community design projects are organized within the neighborhood.
Evaluation

Levels of participation as defined by the evaluation framework could not be determined throughout the process because of the inability to involve community members in the project. Therefore, the evaluation framework cannot be completed at this stage in the project. As work continues in the months to come, however, there is still the opportunity to use the framework.
DISCUSSION

This project set out to determine what affect the integration of small action projects had on community participation in a larger design process. Because of challenges in involving neighborhood residents from the beginning of the project, it is unclear what affect the process had any on participation by community members throughout the course of the project. The process did, however, reveal new insights about working within an academic-community partnership and revealed the value of narratives within a community-design process.

Academic-Community Partnerships

Based on the experiences of the student researcher throughout this project, four key components of an effective academic-community partnership have been identified as contributing to its outcome: working with people who are committed to the project, getting to know the members of the project team, maintaining open lines of communication, and providing sufficient time to develop the process. Further reflection and study of these components may help in the development of future projects undertaken by such partnerships to help ensure that students and community members develop effective working relationships.

1. Working with people who are committed to the project

This project ended up heavily relying on members of the project team for decision making and actions throughout the year; therefore, it was very important to develop and sustain a partnership with individuals who were committed to the project and its overall
goals. The project team that formed in the Fall 2004 semester comprised of three women, all of whom were neighborhood residents and were deeply committed both to their neighborhood and to their neighbors. The passion with which they spoke when describing their vision for the future of the neighborhood, was a constant source of motivation and inspiration throughout the course of this project. Without this energy, the project would have been more susceptible to the frustrations and challenges experienced throughout the process.

While the involvement of a student researcher and the need to complete a project as part of course requirements does play a role in keeping projects moving forward, the involvement of neighborhood residents and other community members who are committed to a project have an even greater role in ensuring that regard. Therefore, it is important that projects undertaken by academic-community partnerships are not fueled solely on the energy of the student(s), but from within the community as well. Finding those leaders, getting them involved, and ensuring that they are active members of the team becomes the challenge within such projects.

2. **Getting to know members of the project team**

Another important component of academic-community partnerships is ensuring that members of the project team, especially students and community members, have the opportunity to get to know each other. Interactions between the student researcher and other members of the project team took place in a variety of forums throughout the academic year which allowed for people to better understand each individual’s personality. For this project, such instances included participating in the ribbon making workshop in the Fall 2004 semester, an unstructured workshop during which participants were able to talk freely while
collectively working on the task of making the ribbons. There were also several instances in which discussions took place after workshops ended that allowed for unstructured dialogue between the student researcher and individual members of the project team. While these conversations were not directly about the project, they did help develop an understanding of some of the other issues and challenges faced by members of the project team in other aspects of their work and had an impact on their involvement in the current project.

Cultivating this type of relationship, however, takes time that may sometimes be considered out of the project scope. However, from the perspective of a student researcher, these interactions provided a better understanding of the human resources within the project team that could be used in developing activities and responding to the inevitable twists and turns within the process. And on a more personal level, I found working with and getting to know the members of the project team to be one of the most rewarding and inspiring parts of this project.

3. Maintaining open lines of communication

Developing a successful partnership between students and community members also requires maintaining open lines of communication. For this project, a series of regular meetings were held every other week, though sometimes more often. These meetings, which served a variety of purposes ranging from practicing testing activities planned for upcoming events to post-event critiques and discussions, helped ensure that the members of the project team and others involved in the project were kept abreast of what was going on and were directly involved in the decision making process. In the interim, an email listserv was
established between members of the project team that, in addition to phone calls, provided additional means of communication.

The number of students working on a project impacts level of communication that occurs with community members. As a single student researcher, however, maintaining open and frequent lines of communication with members of the project team provided a level of flexibility within the overall process as it developed throughout the academic year.

4. Providing sufficient time to develop the process

Working within the time constraints of an academic calendar year and full calendar year of community organizations continues to be a challenge for academic-community partnerships. A balance must be achieved in order to both meet the academic requirement for students and to develop a process that community partners understand and are comfortable with. This requires doing work in advance of an actual design or planning project to ensure that the project can be conducted within a specified time frame. In the case of this project, much of that planning was done in the Fall 2004 semester and communicated to the project team in a series of planning meetings. However, it was revealed mid-way through that some members of the project team were unclear about the basic framework for community engagement that was developed at the beginning of the project. Additionally, observations by members of the project team that the project seemed rushed in the beginning may have also contributed to this confusion and prevented them from being able to do effective community outreach at the outset.

While this project was designed to and did allow for dialogue between the student researcher and members of the project team during the development of the process, these
experiences reinforce the importance of conducting this planning step early enough in the process to ensure that the subsequent steps are carried out to achieve the goals of the overall project.

The Value of Narratives in the Community Design Process

This project also revealed the value of using narratives within a community design process to both develop new understandings of place and to create a more responsive design. By first providing a forum for unstructured dialogue, during which community members spoke openly about their experiences in the Near Eastside Neighborhood, this process led to realizations and understandings about the neighborhood, most specifically in terms of basic safety, which had not come up in the more structured dialogues associated with previous design studies. These new realizations allowed for the scope of the project to shift and lead to the development of a design that not only addresses comments and concerns but also attempts to incorporate the spirit and vision of the individuals whose stories and experiences helped shape the process. As a designer, this is a challenging way to work, but one that has significant potential to create places that do more than just fulfill programmatic requirements but that are inspiring, meaningful to the specific community.
CONCLUSION

Working in the context of the continual challenge of involving other people from the Near Eastside Neighborhood throughout the course of this project raises new questions about patterns of participation in community design projects. Past projects, including this one, have sought to broaden participation by trying to increase the number of people involved throughout the project. What this process has begun to uncover is that perhaps this is not the appropriate approach for this neighborhood. Perhaps instead of broadening participation, community design projects first need to focus on deepening participation and developing a process that can most effectively involve people who have a long-term commitment to both their community and to a project. And even through all of the goals of this project were not achieved, the opportunity exists to track levels of participation as the project continues to evolve and ENIP begins to implement the design recommendations.

This process, however, did allow for the development of new understandings of how to develop an effective academic-community partnership in Syracuse’s Near Eastside Neighborhood that may be generalized to determine the applicability to future community design projects:

- Students and community team members should be involved the project throughout a full academic year
- Students should have more intensive involvement (in duration and frequency) with both with members of a project team as well as in the community
- The process should allow adequate time in its beginning to initiate dialogues and to develop a more thorough understanding of the issues and scope of the project.
REFERENCES


Barnsley, Jan and Ellis, Diana. 1992. Research for Change: participatory action research for community groups. In What is Participatory Research and Why Does it Matter? St. Albans, VT: National Community Forest Center, 5-17


Appendix A: Site Information

Syracuse’s Near Eastside Neighborhood (outlined in fig. 1), is an example of an urban neighborhood struggling to implement community-building efforts. Characterized by a relatively young, minority (African American) population, this neighborhood shows signs of increasing neglect in both its physical and social structures.
One of the more significant intersections within the neighborhood is at E. Fayette Street and Columbus Avenue, a road that connects to Erie Boulevard and I-690. One of the corners of this intersection is a vacant lot and small concrete block structure – Eastside Commons - owned by ENIP (fig. 4a, 4b). The land to the west of this small building has been selected by project organizers as the site of the healing landscape (indicated by red star in fig 1; fig 5a, 5b). This site was selected because of its proximity to the Eastside Commons building and the vacant lot. ENIP has plans to redevelop both of these areas as a community garden, gathering space, and market.
Fig 4a  View to west at intersection of East Fayette Street and Columbus Avenue. The green lot in the left of the photograph is the vacant lot that ENIP hopes to use as a community market.

Fig 5a  View of the Eastside Commons building.

Fig. 4b  View to north at intersection of East Fayette Street and Columbus Avenue, towards intersection of Erie Boulevard.
### Appendix B: UNICEF Framework

Four levels of Inquiry for the VIPP process evaluation (Wyss et al 1998: 366)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Question</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Sources of Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Level 1: initial involvement in project**  
Did the participants respond favourably to the delivery of the content and process of VIPP TOF event held in Zambia? | • Final evaluation of VIPP TOF  
• Participants’ feedback on factors contributing to success or failure of VIPP TOF event | • VIPP TOF photo reports  
• Notes for the Record at UNICEF  
• Feedback from participants at VIPP TOF Level 2 |
| **Level 2: acceptance of project**  
Did the participants who learned how to facilitate events using VIPP apply the techniques? | • Number of trained VIPP facilitators  
• Number of VIPP events and activities organized by trained facilitators  
• Variety of applications of VIPP methods | • UNICEF Zambia directory of VIPP facilitators  
• UNICEF Section reports on VIPP  
• Letters, notes for the record |
| **Level 3: commitment to project**  
Did the participants change their behaviour back on the job to incorporate VIPP? | • Recognition of opportunities to effectively use VIPP  
• Participation in VIPPnet  
• Amount of budget support for VIPP activities  
• Incorporation and adaptation of VIPP into institutional training programmes | • UNICEF Section reports on VIPP  
• Notes for the record on VIPPnet, VIPPnet proposal  
• Financial documentation at UNICEF  
• Notes for the record, field trip reports |
| **Level 4: impact of project**  
Did the participants’ behavior positively impact the programme’s or organization’s effectiveness? | • Degree to which programmatic and organizational environments are more participatory  
• Cost effectiveness compared to conventional methods | • Case study reports  
• UNICEF section reports on VIPP |
Appendix C: Sample Post-Event Assessment Form

THE HEALING PROJECT
Evaluation and Feedback

Name: ___________________________ Age: ______

How long have you lived in the Near Eastside neighborhood? _____ years Not a resident

Have you participated in other ENIP events or projects? Yes No

1. Please select the box that best reflects your feelings about the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The overall project was clearly explained</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. I think that this project will have a positive impact on the neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. I felt more comfortable participating in the story circle than I would in a larger community gathering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. I will participate in other events or activities related to this project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What three words would you use to describe your experience of this event?

____________________  ________________  __________________

3. What changes do you think should be made to improve the story circle?

4. What types of activities, events, or other ideas do you think should be included as part of this project in order to get more people involved?
Appendix D: Sample stories from Story Circles

- “Yeah, I feel safe enough to sit out on my front porch, but at a certain time. You know that when a lot of people come outside that hangs on the corner, you know to go in, don’t get into that trouble.” -teen

- “I don’t feel safe where I live. Because, like, when you walk down the street, on my block it kinda quiet, but like when you go to the next block, it’s like, people hanging out. It’s a park and people, like, hang out and kids can’t go play in the park because they scared that somebody gonna start shooting and the kids gonna get shot. So, there’s not really nothing to do in my neighborhood because it’s a lot of violence out there and I don’t want to be exposed to that.” -teen

- “Well, I don’t go out a night, I can tell you that. When the sun go down I go in. I don’t go out at night.” -elder

- “I don’t feel safe and I do because, I mean, wherever you go, bullets don’t have an aim, so wherever you at, if a bullet hits you, it’s because you there. So I try to stay inside the house because of the violence around my area. . . . . But that don’t mean I want to stay in my house all the time.” -teen

- “When I first moved there, it was fifty-five years ago and it was like I told you. I can talk about it because you could go to the store, walk to the store and get what you want and come back and leave your door open, your windows up and nothing was wrong.” -elder

- “I can remember when I moved up on Bruce Street 18 years ago, . . . three blocks over we would get together, we would send out invitations to all of the people in the neighborhood and they would just come. They would block the streets off and they would just have fun for just a whole day. You know. People would just go to the store and buy food and set their grills up in the street and everybody would have fun in their yard or whatever. And I can remember people having beautiful yards with flowers and gardens in the backyard. You know, just sitting out in their lawns or whatever.” -elder

- “I think we should advertise how to have fun without like doing violence and stuff, like showing people it’s not all about trying to be cool and be ganster or whatever and show that there’s another way of having fun without acting that way.” -teen

- “I think that there should be a group where all of the youth of the community could get together and find out one thing about them that they didn’t know, get to know them so you can reduce the violence in the community.” -teen
Appendix E: Community Map Summary