

# Organizational Capacity Building Through Empowerment Planning: Lessons from East St Louis, Memphis, and Sicily



# Session Participants

- Vicke Forby Kimmel  
CEO, EPDC, (ESL, IL)
- Katherine L. Pennington  
Associate Professor  
University of Memphis
- Antonio Raciti  
Assistant Professor  
University of Memphis
- Kenneth Reardon  
Professor  
UMass Boston





# East St. Louis, Illinois





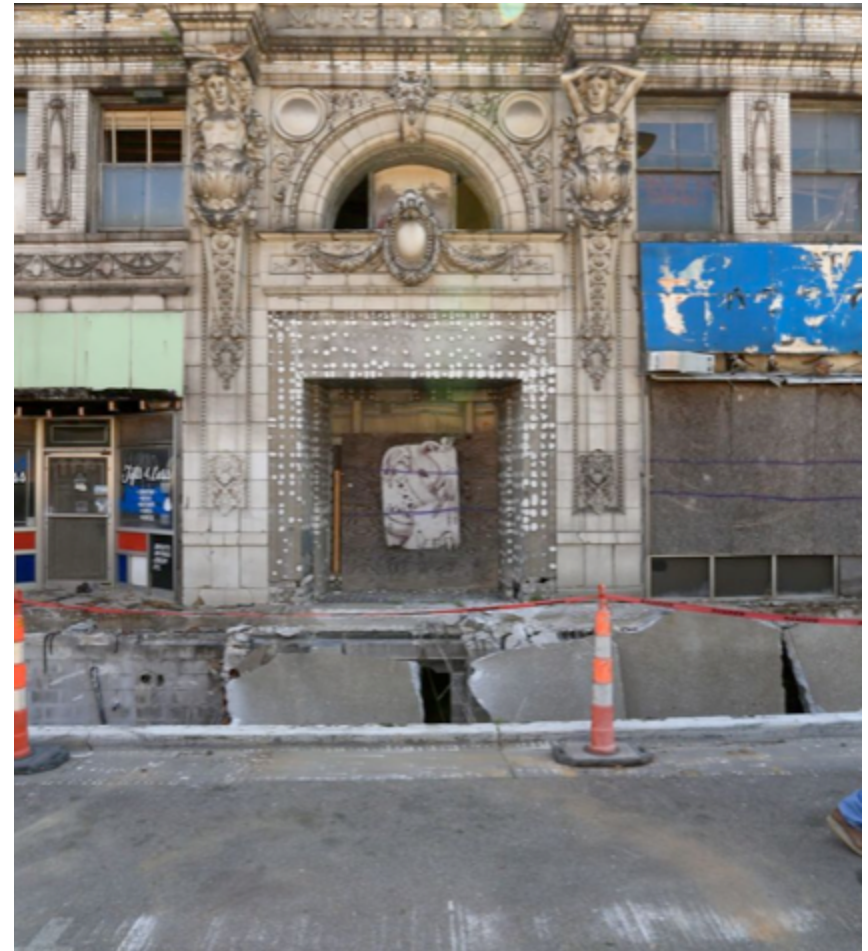
# From All-American City to Beirut by the River

- In 1959, ESL was designated an All-American City by NML and Look Magazine
- Between 1960 and 1980, the city's lost 3/4s of its businesses – 12,000 well-paid industrial jobs
- By 1990, unemployment was 31%, poverty was 42% , and ESL had the highest violent crime rate in the US
- Prompting a HUD Official to refer to ESL as “America’s Soweto”



# Just Another “Rust Belt City”

- Devastated by a combination of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and public and private disinvestment
- Whose residents suffered from what William J. Wilson called a new and more virulent form of American poverty
- Dominant urban policy approach towards severely distressed communities was Roger Starr’s “urban triage” or “planned shrinkage” – withdrawing resources from communities thought to represent “terminal cases” of urban decline (Necropolis)



**“Wherever human beings are concerned, trend is not destiny.”**

***Rene Dubos***

# Birth of the East St Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP)

- Emerson Park women decided to transform the area surrounding their children's child care center – Result: Shugue Park
- Undertook the development of a comprehensive plan that won an AICP National Award but generated no local investment
- Residents and students launch volunteer cleanup of illegal dump sites without funding
- Moved on to organize volunteer scrape-up, paint-up of elders' homes
- Established a linked deposit program to support moderate rehab of "at risk" homes





# Building Upon Initial Successes

- Formed a Habitat-like “infill housing” initiative
- Established the ESL Farmers Market
- Secured an extension of the Metrolink into East St. Louis
- Completed the Parsons Place Development Project
- Established Youth Build Charter School and Neighborhood College
- Re-opened the Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities





# Citizen Participation Techniques

- Formed a representative Steering Committee of local stakeholders
- Initiated an aggressive community media campaign
- Undertook several physical conditions surveys
- Conducted movers and shakers interviews
- Pursued door to door interviews with residents
- Organized monthly data analysis meetings
- Culminating in a well-attended Neighborhood Summit



# Social Inventions for Citizen Participation/Empowerment

Adoption of “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach to community planning – undertaking meaningful action projects throughout the planning process to overcome residents’ skepticism regarding the possibilities of change



**Paint-up, scrape-up work weekends**



**Construction of Illinois Avenue Playground**





**Development of the ESL Farmers Market**

# Establishment of the ESL Neighborhood College

- We are not even the flea on the tail of this dog – *Richard Settle, EPDC*
- We want similar training as your graduate students are receiving
- Decision to create the neighborhood college
- 200 ESL residents complete 8 non-credit courses on the fundamentals of bottom-up, bottom-sideways planning
- Classes cover community organizing, non-profit management, grantsmanship, resident-led crime prevention



**First class on direct action  
organizing – 15 expected, 35 attend.**

# Key Outcomes of this Social Invention

- \$40 million in improvements
- Ended population and income losses
- Encouraged organizing in other East St. Louis neighborhoods
- Popularized “empowerment approach” to resident-led revitalization planning
- Led to successful replication in other severely distressed urban communities
- Provided a transformative professional education for hundreds of planning and design students who have gone on to become key “opinion leaders” in the fields of affordable housing and community development

