

ICASP Think Piece

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Pedestrian Sundays and community well-being in Kensington Market, Toronto

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“Pedestrian Sundays don't permanently change the streets, but they forever change the way you perceive them” (P.S. Kensington 2013).

Improvisation incorporates a multitude of socially shared “meanings, behaviours, and practices” in which creation (product) and performance (process) are entwined in a dynamic relationship (Kenny and Gellrich 2002: 117). It is the loose structures that frame processes of improvisation, which give rise to a diversity of interchanges and communications generating wider “possibilities of group activity” (ibid: 128). From a social determinants of health framework, well-being is continuously (re)constructed over time in relationship with others. The structuring of well-being is a process “emerging through situated and relational effects that are dependent on the mobilization of resources within different social and spatial contexts” (Atkinson and Robson 2012: 1349). Such a definition of well-being extends beyond the level of the individual and includes social and cultural capital. However, the processes through which such capital is generated and, in turn, shapes well-being remains largely unknown. While encompassing a wide breadth of meaningful social practice, the role of improvisation in constructing community well-being requires further examination, giving rise to the following questions:

What is the role of improvised spaces in building more sustainable and livable communities? What processes occur within improvised performances that contribute towards community well-being?

These are important questions to consider, particularly from the vantage point of an urbanite residing in one of the most densely populated regions of Canada. The city, perhaps alienating and unresponsive in structures laid with concrete and steel, contains innumerable vibrant and active communities and there are common elements that sustain them. Throughout urban cities, spaces have been carved out for community building through creative processes including improvisation. One such space in which the role of improvisation can be examined as a catalyst for community well-being is Kensington Market in Toronto.

Kensington Market is an enclave in downtown Toronto, which encompasses several blocks and is bordered by four major roadways: Spadina Avenue, Bathurst Street, College Street and Dundas Street. Since the 1800s numerous immigrant communities have established a space for themselves in Kensington Market. After decades of transformation and revitalization, the neighbourhood today represents a multicultural arts and shopping district. Given the area's rich history as a marketplace, it has been recognized as a National Historic Site.

Pedestrian Sundays have been taking place in the market during the summer and fall months for 10 years as of October 2013. This monthly event was established through the efforts of a collective of community members and local business owners known as The Streets Are for People! The first Pedestrian Sunday was held through their improvised closing of neighbourhood streets via the buying out of parking meters and physical

occupation of parking spaces in efforts to reduce vehicular traffic, congestion and pollution in the market. The movement has grown as local musicians, artists and activists joined in, adding their own creative and playful expressions to the mix. Today, Pedestrian Sundays is an organized event that receives support and a small amount of funding from the City of Toronto. People come from across the GTA to participate in these afternoons of space reclamation; to socialize, shop, enjoy street performances, and learn more about groups and projects active in their neighbourhood. According to the event's website page:

By regularly reclaiming our streets from the mess of traffic and parking, our neighbourhood enjoys the opportunity to express its character. It's simple, we remove the automobile and the streets become a cultural playground – an expression of our community's diverse ethnicity, age and interests (P.S. Kensington 2013).

As an ensemble of creative acts within an improvised space, Pedestrian Sundays contribute to community vitality and well-being through the building and strengthening of social capital. Well-being is widely influenced through environmental factors including social engagement and sense of belonging to a community. Numerous theorists argue that social capital is an invaluable resource for individuals to establish and collectively share values, skills and practices that in turn contribute to individual and collective well-being (Matarasso 1997; Putland 2008). Following Robert Putnam's (2000) conceptualizations of bonding and bridging capital in *Bowling Alone*, Newman et al. (2008) found that shared practices including improvised performance during Pedestrian Sundays build social capital both between in-group members (bonding) and between groups (bridging). For example, the authors noted stronger connections between

community event organizers but also between strangers through their immersion in the improvised social spaces created through the pedestrian-only day.

Performance and improvisation shape well-being through the sharing of values and identities that create culture. Both culture and well-being are products of human experience and engagement. We create culture in our daily lives in much the same ways we build community and social capital through collective activity and engagement with a shared set of values and practices. However Kay (2000) and Shelemay (2011) argue that through processes of globalization, the meanings of community, culture and arts practice have become diluted, demanding a larger role for the arts, improvisation and playfulness in community identity and development. Crawford (2006) has similarly expressed concern that mainstream evaluations of health as determined through private individual action have undermined the value of social activities and shared spaces in contributing to our well-being. Citing Zygmunt Bauman's (1999) work *In Search of Politics*, he writes that the purpose and meaning derived from social collaborations, or *agora*, has been reduced in contemporary society. There is a large potential for improvisation as a tool for community building, strengthening social bonds and cultural values through collective social and cultural engagement.

Pedestrian Sundays provide an improvised community space in which this *agora* can flourish. A diversity of participants and performances from jazz to samba, buskers, vendors, spoken word poetry and interactive art fill the streets. At certain times of year such as Hallowe'en and the Summer and Winter Solstices, special celebrations and

parades work their way through the market streets, drawing large crowds of community members and visitors. In these performances, the line drawn between performer and participant itself is blurred, given the fluidity of these improvised roles in an open and inclusive space. According to the Pedestrian Sunday website:

From movement inspired yoga & capoeira, to cooking and drawing classes, culture comes from behind closed doors and out into the street, delightfully blurring the line between performer and audience. When we eat, dance, and play in the streets together we're sowing the seeds of community (P.S. Kensington 2013).

Pedestrian Sundays can be considered in the context of a liminal space created through improvisation. Victor Turner's concept of the liminal space is one created through cultural rituals of transformation involving the temporary suspension of day-to-day structures that generates an open and safe space for individuals to become free to explore and play. These creative engagements can generate new ways of knowing and experiencing the world along with a sense of trust and communal belonging, or *communitas* (Putland 2008). In this liminal space, new possibilities, fusions, and explorations of identity and community enable the reorientation of these categories in real time. Openness and anti-structure create moments for experiencing well-being through creative improvisation and other embodied expressions of social, political, environmental and cultural values.

During Pedestrian Sundays, this occurs through the temporary suspension of daily boundaries and their replacement by improvised spaces of creative performance and social engagement. Moments of groove develop "a sense of us" being in a shared time of

'*kairos*' or 'flow' with others, through improvisation and maintaining that space for longer than would otherwise be possible (Procter 2010; Solli 2008). In these liminal spaces created through improvisation, participants can create and experience new expressions of community through the temporary unification of diverse groups and individuals (Boyce-Tillman 2009; Higgins 2007; Oliver 2009; Elliot 2011; Atkinson and Robson 2012). According to Newman et al. (2008: 136):

Pedestrian Sundays bring together people of various ages and social groups experiencing art, music, and culture who would not necessarily have experienced it together had it not been presented to them in the street setting. Such events can promote development of a diversity of urban social and physical infrastructure and agency, an essential component of sustainable community development.

Through the temporary suspension of boundaries that curtail socialization in favour of traffic flow, improvised action becomes legitimized in these spaces. Pedestrian Sundays create ripe opportunities for the development and deepening of social bonds and community vitality. In the exchanges of values and practices within these improvised spaces and performances, culture as strictly defined within any sense of *habitus* becomes contested and new forms are constructed.

Exploring some of the processes through which improvised social space and performance contribute to well-being, this discussion raises further questions for investigation. For example, further exploration is needed of the processes of liminality and social capital creation and how these processes directly shape well-being. Under what conditions are improvised spaces created? How can improvised spaces and performances be used as tools for community building and well-being? Further understanding of the processes

entailed within acts of improvisation is needed to understand its capacity to shape well-being.

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