

Partners in Progress Case Study: BRIDGE Housing Corporation

Thu Banh stood in front of the auditorium holding a microphone in one hand, and a stack of certificates in the other. As she read the names on each Certificate of Achievement, she handed it to Uzuri Pease-Greene. Both work for BRIDGE Housing Corporation. Banh serves as the organization's Program Director and Pease-Greene is its Community Builder at Potrero, one of San Francisco's public housing complexes. Constructed in two phases beginning in 1941, Potrero Terrace and Annex (known also by the acronym PTA) is isolated from the surrounding neighborhood. The buildings are terraced into Potrero Hill's steep south-facing slope. On this December evening, BRIDGE Housing, the developer selected by the city to rebuild Potrero, was hosting a yearend dinner for the Community Building Group, which has been meeting bimonthly since 2009 when the city designated BRIDGE Housing to completely rebuild PTA. The group's meetings attract PTA residents and their neighbors on the prosperous north side of Potrero Hill, community organizations and other neighborhood stakeholders. Long banquet tables faced Banh and Pease-Greene in the Potrero Hill Neighborhood House auditorium. Each had holiday decorations. The room buzzed with young children playing with the decorations and with each other.

As their names were called, residents came forward to accept their certificate from Pease-Greene and to line up for a group photograph. The first twenty-one certificates recognized residents who had participated in at least 100 of BRIDGE's community-building activities during 2015. After distributing the certificates to the "100 Club," Banh next read the names of another fifteen residents, each of whom had become members of the "200 Club" because they had participated in at least 200 activities over the course of the year.

As each group took their places in front of the stage, Peter Linenthal, a longtime resident of Potrero Hill's north side, snapped photographs. Linenthal, a children's book illustrator and afterschool teacher at the nearby Daniel Webster Elementary School, directs the Potrero Hill Archives Project which chronicles the neighborhood's history through photographs and oral histories. "In the 30 years I lived here on Potrero Hill," Linenthal said in an online video interview, "I never even visited the public housing myself. The Hill is really divided in many ways." Then, reflecting on the BRIDGE Housing's redevelopment plan, Linenthal added, "But all that is about to change very dramatically in the next 12 years."

The most obvious change will be BRIDGE's demolition of the 606 units of public housing and its replacement with 1,600 units of mixed income housing, including units for all of PTA's current public housing residents. Another noteworthy change, however, is BRIDGE's community building activities, like those being recognized at the dinner. Among other notable characteristics of its community-building work has been BRIDGE's inclusion

of residents living on both sides of the Hill. Both the physical plan and BRIDGE's community-building activities are designed to reunite the north and south sides of Potrero Hill into a single well-functioning mixed-income neighborhood, an effort launched years before the first demolition and construction crews descend on the neighborhood.

Echoing Linenthal's comments, Pease-Greene, a public housing resident also observed that before BRIDGE began its community building work "people from North Potrero would never step foot in PTA." As the Community Building Group's yearend celebration dramatized, people from both sides of the Hill have begun to cross the economic border separating the two sides of the Hill. Breaking down the barriers between the two sides has been one of the objectives of BRIDGE's emerging community-building practice.

While the city designated BRIDGE Housing as the developer in 2008, a Citi Foundation Partners in Progress (PIP) grant in late 2013 provided the resources to approach the project more ambitiously as a "community quarterback." The PIP grant spurred BRIDGE to formalize its innovative approach to community building, invest more heavily in recruiting organizations to partner with it on the Potrero project, and enabled BRIDGE, one of the nation's largest and most successful nonprofit affordable housing developers, to figure out how to realize an intention articulated in its 2013-2017 strategic plan: to develop communities as well as housing.

Building Community

BRIDGE's effort to rebuild Potrero is part of a larger city-led initiative in San Francisco called HOPE SF. The city plans to redevelop four of the San Francisco's most distressed public housing developments into mixed income communities and, moreover, to do so without displacing any of the housing authority's current tenants. Not only does HOPE SF plan to rebuild affordable housing, create mixed-income neighborhoods and retain its current residents, it aims to spur resident participation in the planning and induce greater social mobility.

Redevelopment of distressed public housing has been successfully completed since the early 1990s through the HOPE VI program. The Obama Administration replaced that program with Choice Neighborhood grants that require cities to marshal local resources, such as nonprofit organizations, the public school system, and the police, to address the challenges in the surrounding neighborhood. HOPE SF has made a point of engaging residents as one of the resources it must mobilize to transform these neighborhoods. For example, construction will be phased so as to dramatically reduce the possibility that residents will need to move off site temporarily during construction. Off-site relocation makes return much less likely and it enhances the likelihood that resident will become and remain engaged. Also, to enable residents to effectively participate in deliberations about the projects, including the design, permitting and finance, HOPE SF established a Leadership Academy. The city rewarded residents who successfully completed the Academy with a discount on their rent for the month.

Although HOPE SF requires the developers to focus on “community building,” the term has been ill-defined. When Emily Weinstein joined the BRIDGE team in 2010 as director of Rebuild Potrero, BRIDGE was “doing outreach and involving residents in a master planning process.” It created the Community Building Group as a vehicle for resident participation. To engage more substantively with the public housing residents BRIDGE decided to hire a community builder. Weinstein and others at BRIDGE had noticed Uzuri Pease-Greene. She is “a natural born community organizer,” Weinstein observes, as well as a graduate of HOPE SF’s Leadership Academy. BRIDGE hired Pease-Greene. As the community builder she served as BRIDGE’s full-time representative at the development. The bulk of her time is spent planning and overseeing activities designed to prepare residents for both the disruptions that will accompany the construction phase and the opportunity to improve their economic circumstances and the quality of life. The first step involved strengthening the fabric of community on the Hill.

With Pease-Greene on the team, BRIDGE re-launched its community-building effort with small community get-togethers. “We’d get a host who could invite five to ten of their family and friends,” Weinstein explained. These were “listening sessions. We met with over one hundred residents in a one month period,” she continued. Noting that “it takes a lot to get people out,” these “little parties were the hook: a way to engage the community and identify other leaders and to build a distribution list.” At these get togethers residents described a very loosely connected community. Public safety is an issue that discourages people from going out more. Many residents have disabilities. Living on a low income is stressful and demanding. Like many of the other PIP grantees the Bridge team also encountered a skeptical population accustomed to grandiose plans that either don’t materialize or live up to the promises. Typical of this skepticism are a PTA resident’s comments in a short on-line video about the plans for Potrero Hill:

We want our house rebuilt. We want it to be beautiful. We want a new home. Once it is built, we don't want to have to worry about whether we are going to have a home or not. We were promised a lot. Will you keep your promise or will you lie to us like the rest... We trusted people and they took over our other home and now here we go again... All I can do is pray and hope that it all falls into place and everything will work out and we don't have to worry.

BRIDGE realized it needed a different approach in order to build trust, engage residents in the planning, respond to the cumulative effects of concentrated poverty and nurture a resilient community out of the social isolation that often settles over those living in distressed public housing.

The Birth of a New Community Building Practice

As they worked to build trust and nurture a resilient community, members of BRIDGE’s Rebuild Potrero team began to incubate methods “that take into account residents’ emotional needs” which time-honored “models of community building may ignore or exacerbate.”

Uncertainty about the future, the disruptions associated with even a temporary relocation within PTA, and other stressful changes that will accompany the physical redevelopment were likely to aggravate, rather than mitigate, the day-to-day hardships of poverty.

The team immediately began to apply this insight. The team launched a walking club as its first activity. Walking is a health-promoting activity and it is an inexpensive one to organize. Weinstein, however, saw other benefits:

We needed something different and visible to show that change was happening. Walking is an equal opportunity activity. It meets people where they are. People joining are a symbol of change. Walking with a group also brings a sense of safety. Everyone knows about the walking club now even if they don't participate. They can't deny that people are participating in something different.

The Walking Club exhibited the characteristics BRIDGE wanted to achieve with its community-building activities. They had to feel different from typical programs and services for public housing tenants. Too frequently such programs and services are deficit-driven and have restrictions that become barriers to participation. “We wanted activities that would invite people and create a fun environment.”

In addition to the Walking Club, Bridge now runs several other “Healthy Living” activities including a monthly cooking workshop, a weekly sober living support group, and twice weekly meditation and Zumba classes. Importantly, BRIDGE distributes the monthly calendar of activities to North Potrero residents as well to the public housing tenants on the south side of the hill. Reflecting on the historically low levels of interaction between North and South Potrero residents, Pease-Greene observed that these Healthy Living activities “have broken down some of those barriers.” One particularly noteworthy example is Zumba. “It is like a rainbow,” she explained, “you wouldn’t know who lives at PTA and who doesn’t.” She estimates as many participants come from the north side as the south side of the Hill.

Sensing it was on to something, BRIDGE began to build on this new model. It added two community gardens to the programmatic mix, including family workdays twice a week, an apprenticeship program, monthly children’s workdays and adult gardening classes. Weinstein helped conceive and launch the Healthy Generations Project, a peer-to-peer program focused on protecting children birth to age 5 from toxic stress frequently experienced by children raised in the midst of concentrated poverty. Healthy Generations Project recruits Community Health Leaders from among PTA’s tenants, trains and pays them to run parent workshops, parent-child activities and the daily “walking school buses” to two elementary schools.

The monthly calendar lists all these activities (in English, Spanish and Cantonese) as well as meetings of the Community Building Group and various community-wide events BRIDGE organizes several times a year. As Weinstein notes, tenants “are getting the calendar and know stuff is happening whether or not they are participating.” So in addition to improving participants’ physical health and their sense of belonging, the activities demonstrate to even non-participants that things are changing for the better and that BRIDGE and

HOPE SF can be trusted to follow-through with their commitment to transform the quality of life for PTA residents.

In addition to the immediate health benefits, skill acquisition and social connections they generate, BRIDGE’s staff describes the cumulative outcome of its community-building as “readiness for change.” What does that mean? It means that residents have the resilience and hopefulness required to assist in, cope with and ultimately benefit from the challenges they will face during and after the coming years of construction. Readiness for change means that they will be able to take advantage of the transformational opportunities that come with living in well-maintaining housing, in a safe community with neighborhood amenities and improved public services, and with the myriad blessings associated with living in an economically integrated community.

In trying to figure out BRIDGE’s role as a community builder, Weinstein had been doing a great deal of reading. She found the field of public health influencing her program development work at Potrero. Then Jessica Wolin, a member of the faculty at San Francisco State University’s Health Equity Institute and a member of a HOPE SF task force with Weinstein, remarked, “You have developed a new model in your head. You should put it down on paper.” Shortly thereafter the two began to pool their experiences: Wolin as an academic and Weinstein as a practitioner. The exchange of perspectives gave Weinstein a label to apply to what she was functionally doing: trauma informed community building (TICB). The two of them, working with Sharon Rose, a writer with a public health background, wrote *Trauma Informed Community Building: A Model for Strengthening Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods*.¹

As this white paper was being printed, Susan Neufeld, who directs BRIDGE’s recently established Community Development and Programs Department, attended a convening of PIP grantees in Los Angeles. She made a passing reference to the forthcoming publication. The concept of TICB instantly resonated with the grantees. Their reaction seemed to confirm the prediction Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Risa Lavizzo-Mourey’s made in her essay for *Investing in What Works*: “We are likely to look back at this time and wonder why community development and health were ever separate industries.” Trauma informed community building sits in the middle of the intersection where those two fields meet.

A Community-Building Partnership

TICB became a significant factor in BRIDGE’s choice of partner organizations. As a quarterback, TICB has also helped the organization conceive of the structure its emerging partnerships was taking. BRIDGE graphically depicts its partnership as a Venn diagram. It displays the organizations that have committed to participating in BRIDGE’s holistic vision of community change. At the center of the diagram are the partners that have fully embraced

1 Emily Weinstein, Jessica Wolin, and Sharon Rose. *Trauma Informed Community Building: A Model for Strengthening Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods*. San Francisco: BRIDGE Housing and Health Equity Institute, 2014.

BRIDGE's core strategy to accomplish that change. That vision is the product of three types of investment:

- Housing and infrastructure partners are those focused primarily on the physical capital investment portion of the rebuilding. Some are contractors, such as the architect. Among the other housing and infrastructure partners is the city's Planning Department, which helps BRIDGE navigate the environmental and land use requirements and the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, which provides the majority of the project's funding and designated BRIDGE as the developer for Potrero.
- Program and services partners are those organizations that provide human capital investments. Urban Services YMCA, for example, provides job training, readiness, and placement services, youth programming and other services. These are all services to individuals and families.
- Trauma informed community-building involves social capital capacity building investments BRIDGE makes through Zumba, the walking club and other activities that strengthen the bonds between people and strengthens the ability of neighborhood institutions to meet residents' needs. While individuals benefit personally from their participation in these activities, the larger purpose is to strengthen the community by creating a more trusting and dependable social environment where residents are more likely to know and have positive interactions with their neighbors, and are better prepared to engage with the programs and services that will help improve their long term outcomes.

A defining characteristic of the PIP quarterback model is the integration of place-based development activities, which we associate with physical capital investments, and people-based approaches, which we think of as human capital programs. With its pioneering work in trauma informed community building BRIDGE has isolated a third strand that needs to be braided into comprehensive community development strategies: community-based social capital investments.

Its partners support BRIDGE's activities at Potrero in a variety of ways. Some, like the architect, operate in only the physical development sphere of the Venn diagram whereas Economic Opportunity Child Care resides exclusively in the human service circle. These are BRIDGE's "program partners." Their contributions complement the overall partnership goals. At the center of the Venn diagram are BRIDGE's "strategic partners." These are the partners at the intersection of all three dimensions of Rebuild Potrero because they share BRIDGE's comprehensive goals and its strategy of combining social, human and physical capital investments. HOPE SF is a strategic partner. So is the Campaign for HOPE SF, a public-private partnership between the city and several foundations to support the redevelopment of the city's public housing by leveraging financial resources that support HOPE SF's goals. HOPE SF developers such as BRIDGE are required to provide service connection services for residents, especially around relocation. Service connection normally sits in the program and services

sphere. BRIDGE, however, has partnered with the Shanti Project. Its highly successful family coaching/case management approach supported by its volunteer peer support model adds a measure of social capital to the traditional service delivery model. Shanti's volunteers supply consistent one-on-one emotional support and practical assistance. The Shanti staff leverages the existing community building activities and framework to develop relationships with residents and integrate themselves into the Healthy Generations Project, the program Weinstein started at Potrero along with Jennifer Dhillon, the program's executive director. Although Health Generations has since become independent, BRIDGE counts it as another one of its strategic partners because of the way it is embedded in the Potrero community, mimics its trauma informed community building approach and relies on developing and supporting peer leaders.

A few partners have feet planted in two of the circles -- the intersection between TICB and either housing and infrastructure or programs and services. In content, the Community Building Group, which BRIDGE convenes regularly to update residents and neighbors about the physical redevelopment plans, belongs in the housing and infrastructure sphere. From a process perspective, by bringing both sides of the Hill together, as was evident at the yearend dinner where Banh and Pease-Greene distributed the certificates of recognition, the Community Building Group also contributes to trauma informed community building. Similarly, Leah's Pantry is more than a service provider. With its monthly healthy-living cooking workshop and catering team for the Healthy Generations Projects's parent/child activities at Potrero it has become a valued partner for its contributions to BRIDGE's TICB Healthy Living program.

Lessons for Community Development Quarterbacks

BRIDGE issued three "learning briefs" during the course of the PIP funding. These were prepared with its evaluation consultant, Harder+Company. One of the briefs explores the challenge quarterbacks face in engaging residents as partners in the community building process. Not surprisingly, the most important lessons relate to the TICB model. "Developing and maintaining trust with residents are challenges faced by all quarterbacks, regardless of the community in which they work," according to the brief. "Quarterbacks working in highly impoverished communities are very likely to encounter residents who have experienced a lifetime of trauma." The brief identifies five trauma-related challenges to traditional community building practices:

- Lack of trust and social cohesion;
- Lack of stability, reliability and consistency in the lives of residents;
- Disempowerment and lack of sense of community ownership;
- Inability to vision the future, and
- Breadth and depth of community needs.

In the brief BRIDGE and its evaluation consultant make the case that "without the trauma informed lens even commonplace activities in the lifecycle of a project can shake trust and impede community building." Without this perspective, the brief continues, community quarterbacks "risk not truly engaging residents in the redevelopment process."

Despite its remarkable successes, the field of community development has fallen short of its transformational aspirations because it has failed to recognize and address the cumulative effects of poverty's persistent hardships, vulnerabilities and traumas on the social ecology and resilience of the community as a whole. In effect BRIDGE argues that the problem is not limited to the difficulty integrating people- and place-based framework – the physical and human capital strategies. Trauma informed community building is about rebuilding the fabric of community.

Applying a TICB frame alters the affordable housing development process. Traditionally, real estate development begins with a gestational period that can take years, depending on the complexity of the proposed project. During this predevelopment phase the developer acquires site control, prepares the physical design and cost estimates, secures public approvals, conducts environmental tests and assembles construction and permanent financing. In some cases, residents are consulted during this phase. But because of the backdrop of trauma, residents are unlikely to participate meaningfully or trust that they can influence the proposed project. For BRIDGE, TICB is a parallel and contemporaneous with the traditional predevelopment tasks. They are, moreover, as essential to the project's ultimate success if, by success, one means that existing residents avoid displacement and the damage done to the community's social fabric as a result of years of neglect and persistent and concentrated poverty is mitigated. Even if they accepted BRIDGE's community building premise, few developers could afford to do it. BRIDGE, however, recognized the intrinsic value of community building to its redevelopment goals for Potrero. Consequently it worked with HOPE SF to treat the initial community building expenses as a routine predevelopment outlay: Now the cost of community building staff is funded through a combination of City of SF Community Development Block Grant Funds and private foundation grants.

The hope is that with consistent, non-judgmental relationship building among residents and between the developer, its partners and the residents, the Potrero Hill tenants will be more receptive to the promise of a safe, stable and affordable mixed-income neighborhood; one in which they will be less socially isolated and better able to take advantage of the opportunities such a community makes available to them. Those opportunities are described in a companion plan BRIDGE developed with Potrero's existing public housing tenants: the "PARADISE Plan." PARADISE stands for Practical And Realistic And Desirable Ideas for Social Enrichment. It describes "positive, real and desirable strategies for achieving a range of social outcomes" in education, economic security, health and wellness, and public safety. The plan outlines the next variable in BRIDGE's community building equation. As explained in the PARADISE Plan:

Trauma Informed Community Building is... both a precursor to a successful Rebuild Potrero transformation effort and a practice that runs through the life of the project. TICB is not a discrete activity, program, or service; rather, it is a framework that reflects a value for engaging the community throughout the transformation of South Potrero in a way that acknowledges cumulative effects of stress and trauma on individual, family, and community functioning.

BRIDGE has also learned that it is difficult to maintain residents' and partners' levels of engagement in the face of unpredictable setbacks and changes in plans, personnel and timelines. Every significant project inevitably encounters hurdles like these. BRIDGE has discovered that burden for maintaining the motivation of its partners and residents falls to the quarterback as the party that is ultimately responsible for holding the long term vision.

BRIDGE also brought a different and useful perspective concerning the structure of its cross-sector partnership. Not every partner is or needs to be committed to the totality of the vision and TICB practices as the strategic partners are. Program partners make significant contributions to the ultimate outcome. Moreover, partners need not be either program or strategic partners. Some fall in between and could eventually evolve into strategic partners as the inter-organizational relationships mature.

The Promise of Working in an Integrated Way

Trauma informed community building is not turf belonging to any established discipline. In Potrero, it has become a core practice embraced by BRIDGE's strategic partners. It is a tool that has helped these partners align their efforts without the quarterback's day-to-day coordination. It is noteworthy that the city's HOPE SF initiative and the philanthropically-driven Campaign for HOPE SF have embraced TICB. Based on two early evaluations of TICB, there are encouraging signs that the TICB-driven Healthy Living activities are already showing signs that they increased the level of social cohesion.

The partnership has also made important progress in removing the economic class divide separating North and South Potrero. Residents on both sides of the Hill participate in BRIDGE's Healthy Living activities and participate in the Community Building Group, which provides a forum for monitoring progress and continued dialogue about Potrero Hill's future, and community wide events.

Finally, because of BRIDGE's expansive approach and its disciplined commitment to TICB, it has found new and unlikely partners. For example, the Shanti Project developed a unique volunteer-driven service that provides emotional support and an on-going link to case management services for clients living with chronic diseases. It became most well known during the height of the AIDS crisis. Thus, Shanti operated outside of the orbit of typical program partners delivering services to low-income households. Yet Shanti's peer-support model adhered to a set of principles reflective of trauma informed practices. As Weinstein explained, "You could say that the TICB activities provide a platform for Shanti to engage with residents and that therefore the services Shanti provides are likely to be more effective."

In its work in Potrero Terrace and Annex, BRIDGE has piloted a major paradigm shift in how affordable housing developers conceive of their role, their goals, their partners, and their engagement with the communities in and near the housing development. In the original paradigm, BRIDGE's role was primarily the physical development of affordable housing, with the goal of creating safe, attractive and affordable housings units that meet the needs of the current residents and other individuals qualifying for affordable housing. In the

new paradigm, BRIDGE's community development role includes both physical development and community building, with the goal of both creating safe and attractive affordable housing units as well as deeply engaging long-term residents in and near the public housing in a vibrant community. In its new role, BRIDGE has engaged a wider variety of partners, and engaged them more deeply, than a traditional housing developer would.

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