ERASING RED LINES

PART 2 - SYSTEMS THINKING FOR SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Patterns of spatial inequality get locked into place by the feedback effects that operate in complex systems. Feedback effects are the forces responsible for the so-called “virtuous” and “vicious” cycles that can be observed in some places. For example, in post-industrial cities across the globe, vicious cycles take on a familiar form. Specifically, regardless of which process starts first, the abridged story of many “shrinking cities” in the Global North reads something like:

- One or more major employers withdraws from the city, leaving scores of residents unemployed.
- The substantial void in local jobs created by the industry’s exit is not and cannot be immediately filled.
- Whether in search of work elsewhere or relocating for quality of life reasons, geographically mobile (especially white) residents move out of the city in large numbers, while less mobile residents (especially persons of color) remain in place.
- Stocks of vacant and abandoned properties soar.
- The city’s tax base, which depends heavily on property tax revenues, diminishes in light of rising vacancy and abandonment.
- Because the city has fewer resources with which to deliver services, the quality of public services (e.g., public school performance) suffers.
- Conditions of poverty and blight concentrate in areas where abandonment and outmigration occur most forcefully—typically, these are the spaces that were historically “redlined,” already experiencing distress, and, in most cases, home to low income households and persons of color. ¹
- Signs of distress and decline put downward pressure on both local quality of life and surrounding property values.
- Combined, the spread and influence of blighting conditions, diminishing quality of public services, ever-concentrating poverty, and related symptoms of decline spur additional outmigration.
- The process continues in a vicious cycle, an example of which is depicted graphically in Figure 1 below. ²

Part 1 of this series made the case that cities and their neighborhoods are complex systems. Part 2 provides readers with a tool and a case study for thinking about and effecting change in such systems. It aims to help readers better understand the supporting structures that give rise to patterns of spatial inequality, and the feedback effects that help lock those patterns into place.
In the language of systems science, the preceding story is one of self-reinforcing feedback effects: population shrinkage contributes to urban decline, which feeds back to contribute to more shrinkage over time, in a circular fashion. Part 1 of this series introduced evidence consistent with the argument that certain geographic areas in Buffalo, NY, might be stuck in this sort of a system trap. Namely, the same spaces that were infamously “redlined” in the 1930s, and said to be “definitely declining” or even “hazardous” at that time, ³ are still—more than 80 years later, in the twilight of the 2010s—comparatively more distressed than the rest of the City. And there are few signs that these patterns will become more balanced or equitable in the coming years. ⁴ ⁵

So, what, if anything, can be done to push back against persistently uneven geographies of opportunity in Buffalo and other post-industrial, shrinking cities? ⁶ And why the focus on systems science and its technical jargon?

A response to both of these questions is that vicious cycles and ways out of them cannot be fully apprehended without thinking about the systems in which they are produced—and systems thinking is rarely the default toolbox that policymakers⁷ and

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**FIGURE 1**

An example vicious cycle, or downward spiral, of shrinkage and decline.
community change organizations⁸ employ when defining and attempting to solve a social problem.⁹ As such, proposed “solutions” to complex social problems are often one-dimensional and aimed at single symptoms rather than root causes.¹⁰

On that backdrop, the remainder of this brief report describes and applies a tool for systems thinking in community economic development. Notably, the tool comes from the systems science literature,¹¹ meaning that it is not new. Nor, importantly, is it alone. Numerous tools are available,¹² from a variety of sources,¹³ to bring systems thinking to bear on conversations and policy discourses related to social and community change.¹⁴ Readers are encouraged to engage with as many of these sources and tools as possible to become better systems thinkers. The point of highlighting just one resource here is that the selected tool—the iceberg model of systems thinking—is: (1) simple; (2) easy and effective for beginners to use to identify and think about leverage points in a system; and (3) a useful lens through which to view selected attempts to Erase Red Lines and push back against persistent uneven geographies of opportunity in Buffalo, NY. The next section introduces and unpacks the iceberg model. From there, a brief, Buffalo-based case study engages with the model for illustrative purposes. Together, the description of the model and the lessons from the case study inform a concluding section that offers optimism for affecting transformational change, and Erasing Red Lines, in disadvantaged communities.

**The Iceberg Model of Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking is an inquiry-based approach to explaining the relationships between the structures and behaviors of a system.¹⁵ Effective systems thinking requires one to ask probing questions about how the many parts of a system interact and influence one another, and how those part-level interactions have consequences at the level of the whole. In this way, systems thinking endeavors to go “below the surface” to uncover systemic (e.g., structural, cultural, and political) attributes that produce certain patterns and events. One tool for systems thinking is the popular iceberg model¹⁶ depicted in Figure 2.

The iceberg model is a tool for contextualizing an observable problem or event (e.g., uneven geographies of opportunity) as part of a whole system (e.g., the political economy and prevailing cultural
norms of a shrinking city). Like an iceberg, the model imparts that what observers see on the ground is only a small fraction of the system that produces those outcomes. The majority of what change makers would like to see and know lies beneath the surface. **What holds an undesired outcome up from below?**

Immediately below the surface is where one might find patterns of behavior in space or time. These patterns or trends in behavior would suggest that the observable problem or event of interest might be part of some larger scope or longer-term tendency. For instance, as argued in Part 1 of this series, the current geographies of distress in Buffalo closely resemble patterns that were mapped in the 1930s during the practice of redlining. Why?

Well, underlying all patterns or trends is a structure or set of structures from which the observable patterns are generated. Structures include, among other components, institutions of government and governance, their interrelationships, laws and regulations, and, especially, the market-based allocation, production, and consumption mechanisms that prevail in developed nations. Uneven geographies of opportunity arise from inequities that are hardwired into these structural components.

Historic redlining is just one of countless examples of how discriminatory and uneven patterns of well-being are structurally produced within the U.S. political economy. Recall that 1930s-era redlining was a government-funded project “through which some neighborhoods [in U.S. cities], typically African American neighborhoods, were labeled undesirable for investment.
Consequently, banks would not make loans for homes or businesses in those neighborhoods...[which] caused people with more resources to leave...and invest elsewhere.”19 The individuals charged with assigning neighborhood grades, drawing red lines, and leaving discriminatory imprints on urban landscapes that can still be seen today were industry professionals—mortgage lenders, developers, and real estate appraisers. Community voices were effectively excluded from the process. Among other issues, privileging the interests of financial capital over community input in this way ensured that considerations of racial, social, and economic justice were left off the redlining agenda.20

To continue with the probing, systems thinking questions: Why? That is, why would a U.S. government-sponsored agency endow national financial interests with the power to influence patterns of investment into neighborhoods, while excluding local neighborhood interests? Why would those financial interests prioritize creating neighborhoods that were “occupied by the same social and racial classes”?21 Why were efforts to maintain racially homogenous neighborhoods accompanied by recommendations to direct investment away from neighborhoods occupied by “racialized groups of people,” especially African Americans?22 And why do the inequitable patterns that were partially generated by those decisions still exist today, long after the practice of redlining was formally outlawed?23

To ask and answer the preceding, specific questions, it is necessary to grapple with a much broader, overarching question. Namely, why do inequities in system structures (e.g., structural racialization24) remain in place, even after they are discovered? While answers to this question for specific inequities will be long, complex, path-dependent, and multidimensional, the short answer is that system structures—including their inequitable features—are held in place by mental models. Mental models are the “attitudes, beliefs, morals, expectations, and values that allow structures to continue functioning as they are”25—even when the way structures are functioning produces uneven and socially undesirable patterns and outcomes.

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In the United States, mental models that have guided policymaking and city planning for the past several decades include beliefs such as:

- Open and competitive markets that are characterized by capital mobility and well-defined property rights, but are otherwise unregulated, are ideal means for allocating resources in society;

- Market-based resource allocation leads to optimal outcomes that maximize the overall gains from economic activities (note: the concern here is with the size of the economic pie, not the distribution of it);

- Individuals are free to, and individually responsible for, using entrepreneurial skills to acquire their desired piece of the overall economic pie (note: a corollary of this belief is that all persons are equally capable and skilled market participants—a belief that is wildly untrue in a system characterized by structural racialization and uneven access to opportunity); and

- Government’s role in economic development should be limited to protecting property rights and supporting the creation and functioning of private markets.

In addition to these beliefs, the goals of growth and accumulation are prevailing mental models in the U.S. economic system. Like most individuals, cities tend to want to accumulate wealth and grow (both their populations and economies). When these goals interact with the beliefs described above, the result is something of a spatial competition. Neighborhoods and locations that contribute to growth are (re)invested in, and wealth in those areas accumulates; while struggling and distressed areas are left to continue their struggles mostly alone, and pick themselves up by their bootstraps. At bottom, these pro-growth, free-market mental models stigmatize declining neighborhoods.

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To the extent that declining neighborhoods are often home to racialized and low income groups of people, the stigma attached to such places feeds directly into (and both fuels and holds in place) the structural inequities and structural racialization that exist in the prevailing economic and social systems. From those inequitable structures rise uneven and racially discriminatory patterns of opportunity.

Clearly, the story that has been developed to this point is oversimplified. The value in it lies not in its historical or sociological depth, but in its illustration of how the iceberg model can aid users...
in thinking systemically about complex issues. By doing so, the iceberg model equips users with at least some capacity to identify leverage points in the system under investigation. Leverage points are places to intervene in the system, where making some sort of strategic modification could nudge the system toward a different, preferably more desirable state.\textsuperscript{30} Two generic types of leverage points and interventions implicated by the iceberg model are: (1) redesigning the structure(s) of the system; and (2) transforming mental model(s) in the system.\textsuperscript{31}

The following miniature case study briefly describes an institution in Buffalo whose activities disrupted (and, in turn, partially redesigned) the structure of the prevailing economic development system; and whose organizing efforts and successes have helped to, and are continuing to help, transform mental models on the City’s West Side. The cumulative effect of these interventions to date has been to transform a compact neighborhood that was labeled “definitely declining” by 1930s redliners into Buffalo’s “greenest neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{32}

**Case Study: People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH)**

PUSH Buffalo is quite popular, both among residents in its West Side neighborhood of Buffalo, NY\textsuperscript{33} and among scholars and researchers studying community economic development, affordable housing, urban greening, energy democracy, and everything in between.\textsuperscript{34} One of the reasons for the nonprofit’s already high profile and growing reputation is that its spatially-concentrated, holistic approach to community development and revitalization in a high-poverty area of Buffalo has cut squarely against the grain of much empirical and anecdotal evidence\textsuperscript{35} to show that “environmentally sustainable development can benefit low-income residents.”\textsuperscript{36} More explicitly, PUSH’s activities in its focal 25-block Green Development Zone (GDZ) have made the GDZ arguably Buffalo’s most environmentally sustainable neighborhood,\textsuperscript{37} all while the area has largely resisted the gentrifying and displacing forces that tend to accompany successful sustainable community development initiatives.\textsuperscript{38} How has PUSH been able to succeed where so many others have failed? What is different about the PUSH GDZ model? Or, to use an iceberg model analogy, what lies below the surface of PUSH’s much-praised GDZ initiative?
Fortunately, answers to these questions—as well accounts of PUSH’s history and organizational structure—are readily available in the expanding body of research on PUSH and its GDZ. Accordingly, what follows are not new observations. Rather, existing observations are synthesized and unpacked relative to the iceberg model to illustrate how PUSH’s work has affected the structure of and transformed mental models within the economic development system in Buffalo, NY. The report concludes by arguing that understanding PUSH’s strategies and tactics in terms of systems-change is crucial for understanding why, unlike so many others, the organization has experienced success in Erasing Red Lines of persistent urban decline in a shrinking city.

What is the PUSH GDZ? An Overview

PUSH Buffalo was co-founded by two community leaders in 2005 to “create strong neighborhoods with quality affordable housing; decrease the rate of housing abandonment by reclaiming empty houses from neglectful public and private owners and redeveloping them for occupancy by low-income residents; and develop neighborhood leaders capable of gaining community control over the development process and planning for the future of the neighborhood.” The institution is formally a nonprofit, membership-based community organization that “combines organizing [direct action] and advocacy with community development.”

PUSH came into the spotlight after its co-founders spearheaded a comprehensive door-to-door campaign on Buffalo’s West Side aimed at understanding residents’ perceptions of their neighborhood’s
challenges and priorities. The two principal issues uncovered in that campaign were (1) the prevalence of vacant and abandoned properties in the neighborhood; and (2) the high costs of utilities, especially energy. After conducting thorough background research, PUSH discovered that the first priority—the clustered pattern of vacant and abandoned houses in the neighborhood—was at least partially being produced by the existing structure of government and its relationship with financial interests. Specifically, and notwithstanding the neighborhood’s location in an area classified as “definitely declining” by early 20th Century financial interests, PUSH found that an obscure subsidiary of the New York State Housing Finance Agency “controlled about 1,500 tax-delinquent properties in the city, with 200 [properties] located on the West Side.” That subsidiary, operating much like “a Wall Street investment bank,” packaged the abandoned properties “into securities and sold the debt to investors...but didn’t bother to collect the back taxes or repair the homes.” The outcome was that nearly all of the 200 vacant properties were allowed to detract from, if not define, the West Side’s housing landscape: the high density of disinvestment “reinforced the area’s reputation as a blighted, crime-filled neighborhood.”

Enter PUSH. “After being rebuffed repeatedly by [New York State], PUSH’s first direct-action campaign was to have volunteers spray paint a portrait of then-Governor Pataki on the plywood boarding up [the] abandoned state-owned houses.” Put another way, PUSH employed the established “conflict model” of community development to: (1) raise awareness of how the structure of government was contributing to what was arguably the principal issue observed by members of the West Side community; (2) organize a grassroots pressure campaign against specific state agencies and decision-makers; and, by doing so, (3) disrupt systemic processes in a way that would ultimately lead to meaningful change. With respect to the latter, around a year after the start of PUSH’s campaign, the organization was invited by New York’s newly elected governor to discuss ways to “rebuild Buffalo’s troubled neighborhoods.” The state housing agency “worked with PUSH to design a new approach and then contributed over $2 million to the city for a pilot program to help non-profit groups renovate housing and create more green spaces.” Over 1,000 vacant and abandoned properties were transferred to the City of Buffalo, which, in turn, transferred many of the West Side properties directly to PUSH.
In addition to real property, PUSH received a sizeable amount of funding from the state’s pilot “Block by Block” program, which it used to renovate formerly vacant homes on a targeted neighborhood street. From there, PUSH leveraged its growing reputation, increasing membership and volunteer numbers, and ever-expanding sectoral knowledge to secure additional funding through philanthropic and related means. With this influx of financial capital, and following an inclusive participatory planning and design process, PUSH developed and began implementing a community-driven vision for its Green Development Zone (GDZ). Selection of the GDZ boundaries was influenced at least partially by the area’s “high concentration of vacant properties, the relatively low cost of...lots and homes, existing assets...and the proximity of gentrifying forces.”

Concerning gentrification, the GDZ is adjacent to the Elmwood Village, one of Buffalo’s most stable and successful neighborhoods. As Elmwood’s shadow and influence creep westward, PUSH and other West Side community members recognize(d) the potential for local property values to soar and attract the interest of outside investors.

To maintain affordability in the face of development pressures, PUSH aggressively acquires parcels in the GDZ boundaries. It aims for a minimum 20% critical mass ownership in the 25-block area—and, with more than 100 properties acquired to date, the organization is well on its way to meeting that goal. PUSH-owned vacant lots are redeveloped based on community input, and projects include clean-and-green activities, rain gardens, community gardens, and public art, among others. Derelict structures are rehabilitated using green building principles. Local laborers, many of whom live in the GDZ, are hired and trained by PUSH—and paid a living wage—to do the renovation work. Renovated properties are then retained in PUSH’s property portfolio and maintained as affordable rental units to ensure that any development in or around the GDZ—including PUSH’s own efforts—does not cause low income households to be displaced. Parcels that PUSH acquires but does not presently have funds to rehabilitate or convert are banked, or held and minimally serviced (e.g., lawn care, snow removal, trash and debris removal), until new redevelopment funds become available.

In short, PUSH’s model is designed to build local wealth that stays in and circulates through the community. From workforce development and hiring local labor, to paying living wages for green home renovations, weatherizing homes, and installing green infrastructure, and on to provisioning affordable housing units, PUSH’s approach to community development is comprehensive and multi-dimensional.
infrastructure, and on to provisioning affordable housing units, PUSH’s approach to community development is comprehensive and multi-dimensional. The organization’s founders and members see neither housing conditions nor sustainability as single issues in need of single solutions, but as a web of interconnected challenges that require multiple reinforcing programs and interventions.

What is more, for transformational change to occur, PUSH recognizes the importance of practicing community development in a well-defined geography. By concentrating resources in a compact spatial footprint, PUSH has so far avoided a common outcome in shrinking cities. Namely, revitalization dollars and resources often get sprinkled geographically throughout a city, leading to scattershot outcomes whereby “individual [parcels] get improved, but the neighborhood as a whole continues to decline.” In contrast, PUSH’s connected and mutually reinforcing strategies have been taking shape in a targeted 25-block area located “close to the strength and stability of the adjacent Elmwood Village district.” By “building westward from this corridor and [spatially] targeting resources, PUSH and its allies [have been able to] reverse the vicious cycle of disinvestment [in the GDZ] and replace it with [an upward] spiral of reinvestment, in which homeowners and rental property owners, seeing the progress made in fixing up the neighborhood, [feel] enough confidence to begin putting capital into their buildings again.” Or, to employ a phrase from the theme of this research brief series, it seems that PUSH has found a way to Erase Red Lines of persistent decline.

The preceding Cliff’s Notes version of PUSH’s story, and the research on which it was based, point to specific change-making strategies and tactics that PUSH has used and is using on Buffalo’s West Side—e.g., direct action, grassroots pressure campaigns, door-to-door canvassing, advocacy, property acquisition, workforce development, strategic partnerships, participatory planning, and spatially targeting resources. However, beneath the surface of these observable strategies and tactics arguably lies a more general recipe for Erasing Red Lines. PUSH’s careful selection of interventions speak to the need for deep-rooted, systems thinking, as opposed to the linear, one-dimensional, event-oriented thinking that plagues so many policy and program efforts in contemporary shrinking cities.
**Systems-Change, Part 1: Altering Structures**

As Dreier notes, in the existing political economic system, combining direct action and community economic development “is often fraught with tensions and contradictions,” insofar as the former “means grassroots mobilization and protest” while the latter necessitates specialized knowledge of and access to what might be thought of as insider information (e.g., public subsidies, zoning regulations, financing options, foundation grants, government gatekeepers, etc.). The tension arises because community development organizations tend to be “gun-shy about biting the hand that feeds them”—i.e., nonprofits engaged in development work are sometimes hesitant to protest or mount campaigns against agencies from which they might have received, or hope to receive, funding, approvals, or other favorable/enabling decisions.

In the type of system described above, government agencies set and enforce the rules of the game, private sector developers tend to master those rules and, in turn, become the driving force of urban growth, and nonprofits and other social change actors are left to chip away at the resulting inequitable outcomes and collateral damage. Within these interactions, public and private urban development interests tend to blend together and reinforce one another. Specifically, “place entrepreneurs form pro-growth coalitions with government and other economic interests to promote a pro-growth climate and an ideology of growth as a public good that benefits all.” These public-private growth coalitions come to see geographic space (i.e., neighborhoods) as individual units that have market values. As such, the spaces that offer the greatest potential for return on investment are invested in, while weak market and distressed neighborhoods spiral ever downward. Due to the complex interactions between processes of urban decline (refer to Part 1 of this series), these uneven patterns of growth and development become locked into place. Overwhelmingly, spaces that are home to low income households and persons of color suffer the greatest levels of disinvestment.

To the extent that social change organizations are substantially out-resourced by pro-growth coalitions, the latter tend to wield much greater “influence over politicians and the media” compared to the former. Indeed, pro-growth coalitions work with “assorted cultural institutions such as museums, schools, and cultural centers to deflect attention away from the negative consequences...spaces that are home to low income households and persons of color suffer the greatest levels of disinvestment.
of unchecked urban development while promoting a friendly pro-business climate.\textsuperscript{67} For nonprofits, pushing back against these powerful forces is therefore a daunting task, especially because nonprofits might depend financially on public sector members of growth coalitions.\textsuperscript{68} As a result, many nonprofits operate within, rather than challenge, existing development structures. They respond to government or foundation requests for proposals, secure grants, and use the hard-won resources to develop programs and deliver services in ways that match with official (government) definitions of problems.

In sum, the structure of decision-making processes in American urban development can be roughly described as:

- Public-private growth coalitions set the goals;
- Government sets and enforces rules in pursuit of those goals;
- The private sector, insofar as it can control land, guides development in search of profits, as the public sector functions as an enabler (or even champion) of the resulting development patterns;
- However, profit-seeking patterns of (re)investment are necessarily uneven, inequitable, and often discriminatory;
- Social change organizations attempt to improve quality of life in the communities that these "processes...do not successfully serve"\textsuperscript{69} but
- Many nonprofits depend on public funding and other external grants that frequently define problems (and desired solutions) in specific, narrow terms.\textsuperscript{70}

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PUSH Buffalo forcefully upended this structure on the City’s West Side. By going door-to-door to listen to residents’ perceptions of neighborhood concerns, PUSH amplified the collective voice of a community. The insights gained through canvassing helped West Side residents to set their own goals, rather than waiting for financial interests to determine their neighborhood’s future (i.e., in a manner reminiscent of historical redlining). Then, with its direct action campaign against a formal institution of government, PUSH demonstrated a clear and visible structural connection between public decision-making and development, undesirable patterns of vacancy that were negatively and universally affecting residents on the West Side. As pressure mounted on state officials, PUSH was eventually invited to help shape a new State program for reinvesting in Buffalo’s distressed neighborhoods. The State’s resulting “Block by Block” plan “followed PUSH’s strategy of concentrating resources to stabilize neighborhoods, one block at a time.” In other words, despite not being a formal governmental institution (see Box 1), PUSH played a major role in establishing the rules for (re)development in distressed communities. That role was extended even further when PUSH secured additional State funding for infrastructure improvements, and again when the City of Buffalo amended its budget to fund public space improvements in the GDZ at PUSH’s insistence.

In addition to changing who sets the goals and who makes the rules for (re)development, PUSH meaningfully affected who controls land and who does development in the GDZ. Recognizing the area’s vulnerability to gentrifying and displacing forces due to its proximity to the Elmwood Village, PUSH put its resources where its heart is and began acquiring distressed properties and began acquiring distressed properties

BOX 1. GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

While the terms government and governance are often used interchangeably in conversations about urban development, there is an important distinction between the two concepts. Government consists of the formal institutions, elections, and administrative structures that make binding public decisions on behalf of persons and entities located within a precisely defined set of spatial boundaries. These formal institutions are characterized by legitimacy—and accountability, i.e., they possess constitutional or legislative authority to make decisions on behalf of the persons and entities within their governing boundaries—and accountability, i.e., they are required to reveal, explain, and justify their actions to the publics for whom they are acting as decision-making agents. Alternatively, governance refers to the broader process by which diverse stakeholders make trade-offs between competing interests, in shared environments, for the purpose of protecting and enhancing the public realm. Governance thus extends beyond formal institutions to create a large and heterogeneous constellation of government and nongovernment decision-makers—e.g., municipal governments, voters in referenda, grant-making institutions, businesses, civic groups, and community and neighborhood associations, among others. Unlike formal institutions of government, informal institutions of governance are unlikely to have legitimacy and accountability. Consequently, such institutions tend not to make binding and authoritative public decisions. Instead, they regularly use their organizational capacities to influence and shape the public decisions made by formal institutions. In that sense, they are pivotal “players” in the institutional collective action “games” that are acted out in metropolitan regions.

The case of the PUSH Buffalo GDZ, while simplified above for facility of exposition (see the Notes section for additional information), illustrates the distinction between government and governance quite well. Namely, one action that led causally to the establishment of the GDZ was PUSH’s campaign against a state institution of government. This action made it such that an informal, nonprofit organization meaningfully perturbed the decision-making processes of a formal organization of government. By changing the structure of decision-making and development, PUSH changed the outcomes on the ground in the GDZ. Such cases are the essence of governance.

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in large numbers. Doing so “required a leap of faith by PUSH and its funders, with PUSH buying properties and mothballing them until it had the capital to renovate them.” 74 In that sense, PUSH again disrupted the existing structure of government by acting as a neighborhood-based land bank (see Box 2) roughly five years before New York State passed its enabling legislation allowing governmental units to establish nonprofit land banks. 75 This visionary, and risky, approach allowed PUSH to exert substantial control over the fate of the GDZ. By taking ownership of property before it fell into the hands of private developers, PUSH has been able to meet many of the aspirations and needs articulated by GDZ residents—from affordable housing, to installation of public space and green infrastructure, to lower energy bills and jobs that pay a living wage. Using the terminology of the iceberg model, redesigning the structure of the system from below has created new, more equitable outcomes that can be seen on the ground in an historically disadvantaged neighborhood of Buffalo, NY.

**Systems-Change, Part 2: Transforming Mental Models**

Recall that structures are held in place by the mental models—the goals, beliefs, attitudes, values, norms of behavior, etc.—that prevail in a system. In that sense, substantively affecting or redesigning the structure of a system requires change to existing mental models. Even in the abbreviated retelling of PUSH’s story above, it is clear that the organization transformed mental models in at least four important ways, at multiple scales.

First, PUSH organized and mobilized West Side residents around the goal of creating a “resilient

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**BOX 2. LAND BANKS**

Land banks are “public or nonprofit entities created by local governments to acquire, manage, maintain and repurpose vacant and foreclosed buildings and lots. [They] are not financial institutions; they are single-purpose entities charged with finding new and meaningful uses for abandoned properties.”

The broad techniques that land banks use toward these and related ends include: (1) taking title to tax delinquent properties; (2) working with municipal, county, and sometimes state agencies to “clean titles” by erasing liens; (3) planning for the long-term use of tax delinquent properties (i.e., coordinating the reuse of such properties toward a regional goal); (4) maintaining properties; and, ultimately, (5) transferring properties to approved owners who will use the properties in ways that comport with planned regional goals.

As mentioned above, PUSH began effectively acting as a community-scale (as opposed to a more common regional) land bank as early as 2007; and it continues to perform these functions today.


and regenerative” community that values “people and planet over profit.” More precisely, PUSH championed a goal of building local wealth that remains local. The intent is to improve community quality of life for existing residents and their environment, rather than to entice new businesses or residents to move into the community. In other words, PUSH “decoupled growth and development.”

Prior to PUSH’s door-to-door canvassing and subsequent campaigns, it is reasonable to suggest that the entrenched pro-growth mental model (see above) played a major role in shaping outcomes on the West Side. Because the neighborhood had such a long history of distress, and because decline and shrinkage had reinforced one another in ways that created a visible landscape of blight and decay, much of the West Side had little appeal to outside investors (i.e., private sector developers). Rather than intervening in a concentrated way, then, the public sector allowed conditions to deteriorate by taking ownership of nearly 1,500 distressed properties for what were speculative purposes. The State’s belief that “reap[ing] a windfall” from selling property debts to private investors would be a win-win—viz., profit for the state plus growth for affected neighborhoods once private developers took on the properties—was highly consistent with the misguided, but still widely held, free-market mental model that a “rising tide lifts all boats.”

PUSH helped replace these pro-growth mental models, both in the GDZ community and in some corners of State agencies, with beliefs, values, and goals oriented toward building sustainable community wealth for existing residents.

Second, there is an increasing belief, backed up by ample research, that pro-growth interests “tend to dominate [private-sector led sustainable development], reinforce existing power relations, and deliver little to the marginalized and vulnerable populations who would benefit the most from a sustainable future - and who have long fought for increased access to environmental goods and services.” Put another way, scholars, practitioners, and, especially, disadvantaged community members have become quite skeptical that “sustainable” or “green” local development initiatives can ever benefit marginalized populations. Rather, such interventions are seen to disproportionately benefit affluent, typically white,
PUSH's work is transforming this mental model as it is demonstrating that "environmentally sustainable development can benefit low-income residents."

Third, government agencies tend to, beneficently but often problematically, believe that it is fair to distribute resources evenly (geographically speaking) throughout a city or region. For example, when the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Inspector General (IG) audited the City of Buffalo’s use of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars a number of years ago, the IG lamented that:

“public improvement projects like street paving and sidewalk repairs were not based on a plan which established goals and needs of the community. Instead of determining the City’s overall infrastructure needs, the City...distributed...CDBG infrastructure funds equally to the City's nine Common Council districts. City Councilmembers at their discretion directed what streets the Department of Public Works should pave in their district. The Inspector General concern is that perhaps the need in one Council district was greater than another.”

Speaking more generally, while attempting "to distribute resources evenly...might feel fair in the short-term [it] will do little to influence desired outcomes" in the long-run. PUSH helped transform the mental model behind the “equal resource allocation by political district” practice when it convinced the New York State Housing Finance Agency to fund and incentivize a “Block-by-Block” approach to neighborhood redevelopment that "concentrat[ed] resources to stabilize neighborhoods, one block at a time.”

In replacing a norm of scattered resource allocation with a commitment to focused reinvestment, PUSH anticipated later policy recommendations for Buffalo to “concentrate resources, energy, and attention in ways that will...build confidence.”

Finally, by changing the development structure in ways that produced tangible new, more equitable and sustainable outcomes in the GDZ, PUSH’s work has fed back to affect person-level mental models of community members. Whereas apathy and feelings of disempowerment were cultivated by years of neglect and inequitable outcomes, GDZ “residents can [now] see policy victories coming to life and tangibly improving their lives: a strong incentive
to get involved." Resident disaffectedness is being replaced by confidence and civic engagement. In short, People United for Sustainable Housing in Buffalo is truly a movement of people who have come together to be the change that they want to see in their community.

**CONCLUSION: THE PUSH FOR SYSTEMS-CHANGE**

PUSH Buffalo's successes are known far and wide, and their strategies and tactics are being used as models by communities around the United States. While the preceding case study therefore did not present new information, it did attempt to present known information in a new way. Drawing on a popular tool for systems thinking, the case study showed why PUSH's achievements might be replicable. Explicitly, PUSH was able to Erase Red Lines of persistent urban decline by intervening at two key, generic leverage points in the prevailing urban development system. The organization pushed an agenda that: (1) transformed longstanding pro-growth mental models; and, by doing so, (2) redesigned the structure of that system. As argued above, those two interventions reinforced one another in ways that built community confidence and capacity, and increased local civic engagement. These latter changes continue to feedback to sustain the progress being made in the GDZ and to keep the community on its envisioned trajectory. The cumulative outcomes of all of these changes are now clearly visible at the surface level, and the bottom of the iceberg on which the GDZ rests is finally moving, even if at a glacial pace, into more equitable and sustainable waters. Indeed, the GDZ initiative has “reverse[d] the vicious cycle of disinvestment and replace[d] it with [an upward] spiral of reinvestment” on Buffalo's West Side. And its lesson for other distressed communities is that they can achieve similar results, so long as they PUSH for systems-change. Calling back to Part 1 of this series, PUSH has demonstrated that communities can build systems in which growth and development are decoupled; High Road interventions invest in people while revitalizing targeted places; and decision-making processes are inclusive, collaborative, respectful, and patient.
Notes


2 For a recent primer on urban shrinkage and decline in the United States, and the feedbacks between the two phenomena, see: Weaver, Russell, Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen, Jason Knight, and Amy E. Frazier. Shrinking cities: Understanding urban decline in the United States. Routledge, 2016.


5 Identical observations have been made in cities throughout the United States. For additional examples, see: Powell, John A., Connie Cagampang Heller, and Fayza Bundalli. "Systems thinking and race: Workshop summary." (2011); and Huggins.

6 Crucially, uneven geographies of opportunity are found almost everywhere. Such patterns are certainly not exclusive to shrinking cities (see Weaver et al.).


10 Powell et al., p. 12.


12 http://donellameadows.org/systems-thinking-resources/

13 https://www.racialequitytools.org/fundamentals/core-concepts/structural-racism

14 Stroh.

15 Meadows.


17 Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.

18 Weaver and Knight, "Can Shrinking Cities...".

19 Powell et al., pp. 15-16.


22 Powell et al.

23 Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.

24 Powell et al.


26 Powell et al.

27 Weaver, Russell C., and Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen. "Evolutionary analysis of neighborhood decline using..."


29 Powell et al.

30 Meadows.

31 Northwest Institute.


33 https://nextcity.org/features/view/gentrification-rust-belt-recovery-buffalo-new-york


36 Hart and Magavern, p. 1.

37 Magavern and Bartley, p. 251.

38 Hart and Magavern.

39 Refer to the citations in note 33.

40 https://www.pushbuffalo.org/mission/


42 Magavern and Barney, p. 245.

43 ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.

44 Bhatt and Dubb, p. 95.

45 Dreier, p. 102.

46 Ibid.

47 Hart and Magavern, p. 30.


49 Dreier, p. 102.

50 Hart and Magavern, p. 1.

51 Magavern and Bartley, p. 249.

52 See, for example: https://www.planning.org/greatplaces/neighborhoods/2007/elmwoodvillage.htm

53 Magavern and Bartley.

54 Hart and Magavern.

55 See: Magavern and Barney; Hart and Magavern.

56 Crucially, the Cliff’s Notes version of the PUSH story provided here does not even get into PUSH’s related ventures, such as its PUSH Green social enterprise that promotes home weatherization, its green building and sustainable energy initiatives, or its PUSH Blue green infrastructure and landscaping
enterprise. In that sense, if anything the abbreviated description in this section undersells the level of systems thinking apparent in the PUSH model.

58 Magavern and Bartley, p. 248.
60 See note 33.
61 E.g.: Weaver and Knight, "Can Shrinking Cities...".
63 Ibid.
67 Lang and Rothenberg, p. 1747.
68 Dreier.
69 Hart and Magavern, p. 1.
71 ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.
72 Dreier, 102.
73 Hart and Magavern; Dreier; Weaver et al.; Magavern and Bartley.
74 Magavern and Bartley, p. 249.
75 Hart and Magavern, p. 4.
77 Hart and Magavern, p. 1.
78 ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.
79 Dreier, p. 102.
80 Weaver et al.
83 Bhatt and Dubb.
84 Hart and Magavern, p. 1.
85 https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/the-politics-of-repairing-streets-and-sidewalks/
88 Dreier, p. 102.
89 Czb LLC, p. 33.
90 Magavern and Bartley, p. 254.
91 Bhatt and Dubb; also see: Mathie and Gaventa; Owley and Lewis; Weaver et al.; Albro; and Hess.
93 Magavern and Barley, p. 249.
94 ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.
WHERE THE HIGH ROAD WORKS