

Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis, by Kenneth M. Reardon, New Orleans, LA, Social Policy Press, 2019.

Ken Reardon, a professor of urban planning at UMass-Boston, teaches students how to revive poor neighborhoods and revive cities. He can make it seem simple: commit to social justice and apply hard work over a period of time. Reardon has done this now since the 1970s: as a community organizer in Hartford and New Jersey; graduate study at Hunter College and Cornell; assisting and leading “fieldwork” courses in Ithaca and New York City; ten years (1990-99) as a professor at the University of Illinois; ten at Cornell again; nine more at the University of Memphis, and now eight at UMass. In *Building Bridges* he recounts his first professorship -- at Illinois, mainly working in East St. Louis, describing how this can happen.

Reardon’s work entails a contrast. Professors come with students, signed up for classes. The normal thing is they read the assigned texts and listen to the professors’ advice how to turn what they learn – e.g. from lectures and reading – into some kind of product: text results or written assignments. Reardon and others doing similar work add the additional task: they are, together with professor and co-students, to work with a community solving a defined problem. *Building Bridges* is the step by step description of how this happened in East St Louis, from 1990 to 1998, in a succession of neighborhoods encompassing most of the city.

The process is best explained for the first neighborhood, Emerson Park. In 1990 the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) hired Reardon in the untenured and probationary position of assistant professor, to fill a need arising from an already funded outreach program designed to assist East St. Louis, already known for its urban problems as a “legacy city” alongside the likes Bridgeport, Buffalo, Camden, Detroit, Wilkes-Barre, Youngstown. Factories had closed, jobs gone with them, and the population had become largely minorities and poor. Police rode in vehicles without functioning radios. City government was pressed to provide services.

Moreover, the university research program did not seem to be working. Professors and students had done “research” on the city, but had not engaged the population in visible

actions that seemed like motion in any desired directions. Reardon had experience in similar places as a community organizer and in graduate school, and given students who wanted to help, saw ways to improve on current practices.

With the East St Louis assignment, Reardon and graduate assistant Ishaq Shafiq began a reconnaissance in the summer of 1990. In Emerson Park, they found a neighborhood that had begun working to improve itself. It had established the Emerson Park Development Corporation (EPDC) and Reardon and Shafiq quickly committed to attempt a project for that fall semester. They renamed their program the East St Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP). Eleven graduate and undergraduate students signed up for a class in September, and began the process aimed at a “neighborhood stabilization plan.” They interviewed residents in the area. They interviewed city officials. They read documents and surveys, and produced some themselves. On one visit, at Reardon’s urging the students, mostly white and middle class, attended area churches, mainly Black and Baptist. The locals were impressed. The students were transformed by the collective sense of purpose they saw in the church services.

The students, at first, were aghast at the amount of work that would be entailed. But they agreed to make overnight trips in alternate weeks, with Reardon and his assistant filing in for the other weeks, so that there was attention given every week through the 14 week semester. Proposals would emerge throughout, seemingly as much from the residents the UIUC group encountered as from themselves. By the end of the semester there were several components that comprised the main “deliverable,” the Stabilization Plan.

Reardon described the emergence of the sense of possibilities on the part of students as they discussed a visit on the long drive back from Emerson Park to the Illinois campus.

After considerable discussion, the students concluded that they could, with a great deal of effort and a bit of luck document Emerson Park's long history of resident-led revitalization. They also believed they could help EPDC expand its membership base and leadership group thereby enhancing its organizational capacity. Finally, they felt they could produce an evidence-based stabilization plan . . . they believed subsequent five-year plans co-produced by local residents

and other university planners could advance more ambitious citywide revitalization strategies.

At the end of the semester, they made the presentation where they proposed such steps as a mobilization of volunteers for a series of neighborhood-wide cleanups; a neighborhood watch and safety escort service; a scheme to make repairs to homes of low-income residents; formation of an African dance troupe for neighborhood youth; and the creation of a carpooling system to help persons get to distant living wage jobs.

Implementation remained. At semesters' end, a group of students went to Reardon's department chair Lew Hopkins requesting a follow up course to see about implementing the recommendations that had emerged. He supported them. The follow-up group sought funding by canvassing local sources, and then others around the region. Reardon and Shafiq did the same. By February 1991 – now in their their second semester, they were frustrated. The students reported their plans, but there was no progress getting funds to implement them. Reardon reported at the presentation meeting: Not one potential funder had responded positively.

The EPDC director, Ceola Davis, then responded: “What did you expect , a check?” Instead the residents proposed to generate local volunteers for the clean-up. A massive neighborhood clean-up campaign ensued as the residents undertook tasks the funders would not support. Little by little, the Emerson Park plan saw at least some implementation, and by the summer, additional requests came from other neighborhoods. Reardon reports: a special effort to enroll minority students at the University with work done in Landsdowne Park, immediately south of their recent work in Emerson Park. In 1991-92 UIUC began a full-blown effort in the nearby Winstanley/Industrial Park area, resulting in the creation of the Illinois Avenue Playground and over five years a successful farmers market. Success in these initial efforts led to other requests so that by 1998 – the tenth anniversary of UIUC's outreach effort in East St Louis, it had expanded its efforts to other neighborhoods – Olivette Park, Edgemont, Alta Sita and South End neighborhoods; and including such projects as the extension of a metropolitan light rail line to include a stop in Emerson Park, and attracting of a developer who created 140 units of housing as a “new town in-town” nearby.

The university was able to increase its capacity to undertake these projects by adding funding and personnel, and by helping the city do the same. At one point city residents surprised Reardon with a demand that the university recognize the imbalance in capacities between their students and staff – already trained and acculturated to the demands of city development – and their own deficits. The UIUC group then recalibrated. They created an “East St Louis Neighborhood College” with periodic seminars and other sessions.

The East St. Louis project seemed to have momentum. The project was ended for UIUC at the end of the 1990s – transferred to the University branch at nearby Edwardsville. But Reardon and his colleagues had been able to continue over a period of years. In conclusion, he notes changes that occurred in the city and in the University. Most striking were the students who went on to positions – some in East St Louis, most elsewhere.

In East St. Louis, Ishtaq Shafiq became an assistant in the Mayor’s office, then city manager; and as city and neighborhood organizations created positions, ESLARP students filled many of them. Others went on to positions elsewhere, some of them notable: a MacArthur grantee who became Chancellor of the City of Chicago Community Colleges; Another became a tenured professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she founded the Charlotte Action Research Project, modeled after ESLARP.

One can ask, how permanent are institutions like ESLARP, once their leadership leaves the scene? Universities like UIUC were not designed to give direct service to urban neighborhoods. ESLARP was rare, and benefitted from a rare energy and charismatic touch from Reardon. And it ended a few years after he left the university. Reardon at least showed what was possible, and we are fortunate now to have this record.

Pierre Clavel, Cornell University  
pc29@cornell.edu