Catalytic Communities in Rio: Virtual and Face-to-Face Communities in Developing Countries

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IN Rio de Janeiro some level of public Internet access has existed in as many as 70 of 750 *favelas* (shantytowns) since the beginning of 2000, the result of public and nonprofit investment in fighting the digital divide. Particularly aware of the usefulness of the Internet within these areas are the city's community leaders, those residents of low-income communities who voluntarily develop local programs to benefit their neighborhoods. They attend government and NGO events where Web site addresses are given out and where they hear of funding made available through applications online. These teasers attract curiosity regarding the Web.

Despite this, use of the Internet by community leaders—those residents most likely to use the Internet to benefit a collective group—is generally low. This is in part because leaders tend to be adults for whom information technology is not as intuitive as it might be for younger community residents. This is also because of the busy nature of the lives of community leaders, who are unlikely to use a new tool unless they have become convinced of its practical use. Community leaders are unlikely to visit a community Internet center as most community residents who access them do—to partake in the Web as a source of entertainment. On the other hand, community leaders have all heard of the Internet and understand in a general sense what

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it can do. They have heard of the Internet's capability as a mechanism for getting the word out about an event, for general communication, and for research.

It was for these reasons that in November 2002 Catalytic Communities (CatComm), the not-for-profit organization I founded in 2000, established the Casa do Gestor Catalisador* (Casa). The Casa occupies the top two floors of a centrally located three-story rowhouse, built in 1905 and located in a historic district of downtown Rio. It is rented for approximately US$300/month with funds CatComm acquires from individual donors in the United States. One floor of the Casa features a broadband Internet facility with seven computers and two additional meeting rooms for up to 30 community leaders. A small two-room office for the building and maintenance of CatComm's Web site occupies the top floor. The Casa is maintained by CatComm's staff in partnership with community leaders who also use the space.

Casa do Gestor Catalisador literally means "Catalytic (Community) Manager's House," named in recognition of the group of community leaders – the gestores comunitários (community managers) – with whom CatComm has the strongest partnership and friendship, and that provided invaluable insight into implementing CatComm as an organization.

Catalytic Communities (CatComm) is a not-for-profit entity whose mission is to "empower and engage low-income communities around the world to develop their own local improvements by providing a set of online tools to foster and strengthen leadership and innovation in their communities." The organization was planned as a purely Web-based, virtual initiative. The expectation was that this would keep costs low and allow for growth via a network of online volunteers.

"What We Do"

CatComm's main service is, therefore, online—its Community Solutions Database (CSD)—a database where low-income communities, regardless of geographic location, can document local projects and learn from the experiences of peer communities tackling similar problems. For a number of reasons, the pilot city for the development of this database was Rio de Janeiro, though the intention was to use Rio only as a starting point. Community-generated solutions shared in the CSD include local sewerage schemes, day care center projects, after-school programs, literacy programs, environmental and community planning initiatives.

Face-to-face interaction and trust-building are particularly relevant themes in Brazilian culture. The decision to move beyond the virtual came as a result of two years of observation of meetings among community leaders and discussions with them in light of CatComm's goals and resources. It also came following the realization that to adequately meet our mission within our pilot city, a physical space such as this would be important.

Now that the Casa is being implemented a new set of questions emerge. How will community leaders who have known of Catalytic

Communities' Web site for months or even years change in their use of the organization's online resources now that it is establishing a physical space with Internet access for leaders? What changes occur to the organization that CatComm could not have predicted? How does the Casa affect the organization's staff? How does a physical presence change the dynamics of this virtual organization?

Broader questions also emerge. How does the natural evolution of CatComm compare with the evolution of e-commerce from simple "clicks" to "bricks and clicks?"* In line with Flyvbjerg's call for phronetic social science research, this essay aims to describe one experience in order to educate future debate. Planners can gather clues from the experience of this particular case in order to better handle future efforts of non-for-profit organizations interested in blending virtual and physical elements.

Data sources are, for the most part, primary and include: seven one-on-one interviews and one larger focus group with thirteen community leaders, all of whom had contact with Catalytic Communities both before and after the launch of the physical space under study. Also employed in this study are data from the database of visitors maintained at the Casa as well as staff interviews. Finally, many of my own reflections, as a central figure in the process of building the organization and implementing the Casa, are also included—some from a field journal kept over the previous three years, others current.

This study comprises a chapter in my doctoral dissertation entitled *Catalytic Communities: The Evolution of a Dot Org*, a now half-completed dissertation focusing on the case study of this organization I idealized and set in motion. Though my unique, three-prong position—as (1) an informer for this essay, (2) the founder and executive director of the organization being described, and (3) a doctoral student presenting this essay as a research study—makes for a seemingly complicated bias, I would like to assert that this position and my attempt to maintain a clear perspective on the events contained herein allow for subtleties to surface that an outside researcher would be unlikely to uncover.

Catalytic Communities, a Virtual Non-Governmental Organization

In September of 2000, I founded Catalytic Communities as a mainly virtual initiative. Though I imagined that CatComm would have a central office, and even what at the time I called a computer "library"

*Phronesis, *akin to prudence, was one of three intellectual virtues described by Aristotle. Flyvbjerg, therefore, define for us that the* "phronetic approach (to research) is to carry out analysis and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at commentary and social action, i.e.,* praxis. *The point of departure for classical phronetic research can be summarized in...three value-rational questions: (1) Where are we going? (2) Is this desirable? (3) What should be done?" (60).*
Flyvbjerg

for community members to visit and obtain information, in little time I realized that the efficiency introduced by a virtual organization would allow CatComm to function with little if any overhead. This would also allow the program-to-administration ratio of CatComm's services to be quite high, something attractive to funders.

The description of how Catalytic Communities would handle its physical presence therefore evolved over time. The initial idea was predictable. I assumed that it would be necessary for the organization to have a central office. I also addressed the lack of access of communities to the Internet in a very predictable way: we would have a few computers available, somewhere central, where residents interested in consulting the CSD but who did not have Internet access could come and talk with a "librarian" who would assist them. This approach assumed the least possible of a visitor. They could be illiterate or computer illiterate. We would even give them bus fare. And for those who could not make it downtown or preferred not to do so, they would consult the CSD through a toll-free hotline.

This idea was turned on its head as I confronted the very real problem of acquiring funding for an organization such as this—an organization with inexperienced management and several other barriers to acquiring funding. As Ami Dar, the Founder of Action Without Borders, the NGO whose central service is the very successful Web site *www.idealist.org* told me on October 5, 2001, initiatives like ours have several things working against them. First, Web-based NGOs are young organizationally, often with inexperienced management but always with inexperienced managers in terms of running a virtual initiative with the little experience acquired to date in that area. Secondly, being Internet-based appears to funders as if our services are "virtual, not real." Thirdly, the Web-based work of Action without Borders, as that of CatComm, does not fall into specific thematic or issue areas, and foundations tend to focus on specific areas (like health or education). Finally, Web-based initiatives are by their nature not normally region-specific or, at least, one of the most promising aspects of them is that they need not be.

Because Catalytic Communities was intended to serve communities around the world through cyberspace, even though I was physically located in Rio, working with and documenting initiatives of community leaders there, it seemed best to keep the organization "virtual." I took it for granted from the beginning of 2001 through the end of 2002 that there would be no need for an office or computer "library" as I had originally conceived of them. The feeling during this "no-budget period" was that a physical presence and all that is associated with it (e.g., finances, bureaucracy, maintenance, and the

philosophical effect that would have) would be useless and perhaps even detrimental to the organization as it was being conceived. Our apparent success in finding virtual volunteers to operate from their homes in different places also made it seem feasible to develop a full organization in cyberspace.*

In June 2002, Catalytic Communities acquired its first grant of $10,000 that came with a promise of matching funds through the following June. This grant allowed the organization to hire a much-needed programmer to complete automating the Community Solutions Database (CSD) and, following that, a staff of four.

As fundraising became more viable towards the end of 2002, an idea planted as a seed in the middle of 2000 began germinating. At that point, I was already regularly attending CONGESCO (Community Managers' Council of Rio de Janeiro) meetings. CONGESCO is a coalition of leaders from over 30 of Rio's *favelas* who get together monthly to exchange ideas, publicize events, discuss city policy, and otherwise let out their frustration and console one another regarding the difficulties of the work they do. Each of CONGESCO's members has his or her own community program to attend to—soccer with youth, literacy for the elderly, HIV prevention. CONGESCO leaders are among those who have most helped inform CatComm's development since 2000, and today CONGESCO constitute's CatComm's primary organizational partner (and vice versa). I have been attending CONGESCO's monthly meetings since 2000 and am today a part of their commission, being the only non-*favela* participant of this group of 12 leaders.

Since I began attending CONGESCO meetings in July 2000, before the founding of CatComm, its members regularly expressed their frustration over the lack of meeting space. They traditionally relied on the willingness of large NGOs or the government to provide meeting spaces, often without being able to depend on this support over the long term. Though I did not imagine doing anything about this right at the beginning, it did occur to me during 2001 that a downtown community center might constitute a service CatComm could eventually provide. I soon became turned off to the idea, however, due to the bureaucracy I found as I tried to legalize Catalytic Communities in Brazil. In addition, with the difficulties we had had acquiring funding, looking for support to maintain a space and the staff that it would require seemed extravagant. Finally, with our increasingly virtual-only nature, the idea of a community center in physical space in one city seemed peripheral and costly given our ultimate objective: to build a borderless online community.

Catalytic Communities® is a virtual not-for-profit organization catering to low-income community leaders and residents worldwide. We document the collective intelligence of community innovators around the world, enlisting the added value of the Internet for information storage, access, and exchange. Rarely do such communities have a way of finding out what has been successful in communities just a few miles away, let alone across the world. We provide an online space where, by utilizing any of a variety of services, they can exchange their innovations and provide one another with insight, in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Community leaders use this space to publicize and call attention to the projects they develop locally. They also consult the site when a new problem arises in their community.

Through a highly qualified volunteer staff, organizational partners and corporate software donations, Catalytic Communities has accomplished much to date with virtually no monetary investment. Volunteers are managed through a trust-based system over the Internet. The organization's decentralized, "virtual" framework accentuates cost savings, diversity, and our ability to perform effective outreach. From four continents, our volunteers have set up a framework on which to build a vibrant, healthy organization...

From CatComm's first business plan, June 2002

But in late 2002, Catalytic Communities found itself in a new situation: there was money in the bank, a new dynamic database on the Web site (ready to welcome community projects *en masse*), and a small staff operating on the ground. Staff meetings were held weekly in my apartment and otherwise each staff member would be out in the field working to document projects and translate content on the Web site. During this same period, a Rio-based worker's cooperative called Estruturar lent CatComm a small office. This provided a location where staff and volunteers without computer access could go to document projects or access the Internet. The space at Estruturar also made monthly CONGESCO meetings less difficult to organize than they had been at prior institutions, as CatComm could schedule and be responsible at each of these meetings.

It was during this period, in late 2002, that Catalytic Communities began to take a more human form. It was then that the relationship with community organizations began to mature and that the organization complemented its occupation of the virtual realm by establishing a physical space. The organization at that point became recognized in an actual space and not primarily virtually, specifically in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

I totally underestimated the importance of face-to-face interaction and team-building. It was during this period, when a staff came to be, that the virtual nature of the organization ceased to work. A volunteer network works well online, particularly for translation and outreach functions. But a full-time staff is better able to coordinate approaches, build organizational identity, and ensure effectiveness through a face-to-face working environment, even if virtual Web-based content is the objective.

As all of these transformations were taking place, one day I was introduced to a new neighborhood called Morro da Conceição, a historic area on a hillside at the edge of downtown Rio. This was one of the first hillsides inhabited in Rio by the Portuguese, and it was also known as the birthplace of the samba. The bay used to reach its edges and the slave trade occurred at its feet. Today, it is a charming, run-down, lower middle-class neighborhood perfectly located at the center of bus routes from throughout the 11 million-person metropolitan region. It is a reflection of how Rio could be: neighborliness and a real sense of community, unlike the city's wealthy areas, without the violence and despair found in the city's *favelas*. It occurred to me upon this first visit that a community center for the city's *favelas* should be developed *in this very place*, as a reflection of the world CatComm hopes to help build. And with only one bus, anyone from anywhere in the city and region would have access to the center.

A few weeks later, I began touring the neighborhood looking for a suitable location. When I discovered the rowhouse that would later become the community center, or Casa, I knew it was perfect. It needed work—painting, cleaning, installing the electric, telephone and Internet infrastructure—but it became the next project of Catalytic Communities. From December 2002 through February 2003, CatComm's main task was preparing the Casa for launch.

In his description of collaborative housing schemes in Denmark, Dorit Fromm explains how many of the positive effects of collaborative housing in Europe were not envisaged beforehand: "The early communities…were not built with the idea of organizing tasks efficiently….As the group members became well acquainted with each other, they began to realize this new possibility" *(18)*. Similarly, the Casa was a response to three factors: (1) the need for a space for communities to organize and work together in Rio; (2) the need for a space for community leaders to gain access to the Internet to benefit their programs and help build and inform our Web site; (3) the need to bring our staff together in a physical space so that we could work more efficiently. What else would come from it was unknown. The rest of this paper will discuss what, in the eyes of the house's users, has surfaced from the house in the short period of March-May 2003. Only time will tell of future successes and failures of the space.

A Step Back for Context: The Clicks-to-Bricks Debate

Between 1999 and 2001, when technology stocks began crumbling, a lively debate ensued between the proponents of "old economy bricks and mortar," and those who championed "new economy" ways of doing business. The consensus was that a healthy mixture of bricks and clicks would be the best approach for both Web-based and place-based businesses.

In late 1999, *Time* magazine wrote of the "retail-vs-e-tail battle" in describing whether Toys "R" Us would beat out eToys in online Christmas sales that year. The debate concluded, particularly in its early days, with the sentiment that "off-line players had no choice but to go cyber" *(26)*. The sense was that traditional companies that did not have a strong Web presence would lose out to new Web-based companies and it was, therefore, essential to invest in a strong Web presence.

What was seldom discussed at first, however, was the importance of "bricks" for those companies based on "clicks":

"Clicks and Bricks"

"Clicks and Bricks"

At least one e-tailer has cashed in on this off-line gold rush. CEO Soon-Chart Yu of health-products site Gazoontite.com…has opened an actual shop in San Francisco…Yu says having a bricks-and-mortar location lowers the Web site's customer-acquisition cost to one-fifth of what it costs virtually. Television and billboard ads are expensive. With a store, a customer walks in and acquires himself. Yu may be the first Internet entrepreneur to discover the sidewalk… he won't be the last.

There is one confusing by-product of the off-line store…'It's actually profitable.' Yu may have discovered the secret to steering his e-commerce company into the black: build a store *(26)*.

"Clicks and Bricks"

Similar phenomena were later observed in sectors ranging from the music industry to banking and education, where "'hybrid' courses—'bricks and clicks' together—exemplify the best of both worlds." Where online courses require more self-discipline on the part of students, they also teach professors to work as facilitators, rather than simply lecturers, favoring more student-centered approaches.

"Dusty Groove Cleans..." Trombly

Clicks vs. Bricks

So as with many new trends, a stabilizing influence eventually tiptoes in and supports a hybrid of old ways and new, taking the best of two worlds or building something new from the combination of diverse possibilities.

When Catalytic Communities decided to open a community center in downtown Rio, no reflection went on with regard to whether new trends indicated that Internet-only operations should go hybrid. In fact, it was a difficult psychological shift to move out of the Web-only world in which the organization had been developing and create a very real, human space to stimulate face-to-face interaction, network-building, and exchange among people of the most humble of origins. Perhaps it should have been obvious that it would take a physical presence for people from the sorts of backgrounds that CatComm was working with in Rio to fully grasp the organization's objectives.

But it had not previously been so clear. A history of poor public-sector involvement in and governance of *favelas* has left communities fending for themselves. There is a history in Brazil of generations of rural and, more recently, urban residents living by their wits, succeeding by making do and pulling resources together. For this reason, Brazil ranks number one in terms of "entrepreneurship by necessity." Fifty-five percent of Brazil's entrepreneurs are so because of lack of opportunity in the job market. When a new tool—like the Internet—comes along that might ameliorate some of their problems, or even just provide a new source of diversion, low-income residents are for

"Empreendedorismo no Brasil..."

the most part very open to it, similar to what Miller and Slater describe in Trinidad. For these reasons, I had presumed that community leaders, once having grasped the usefulness of CatComm's Web site, would search out the Internet access points that existed near them in order to make use of these resources.

That may well have been the case *if* they had grasped the usefulness of the Web site. But later I discovered they had not totally grasped this. For frequent Web users, those who have developed an affinity for the Internet over time, it is easy to grasp the potential of what CatComm was building with its database. Those who have not yet developed an innate understanding of this technology, however, will have a much more difficult time grasping the usefulness of CatComm's site or the Web in general. Community leaders for the most part are adults for whom the Internet is not an instant attraction. For this particular group to seek out Internet access and spend money, already limited, on access, is much to ask.

So, as Soon-Chart Yu found when he created a physical store, customer acquisition becomes more feasible through the development of a physical space that attracts visitors, even for primarily online initiatives. Similarly, attracting visitors to the Casa turned out to be much simpler than undertaking the previous outreach process. Previously, outreach was conducted by visiting capacity-building programs and speaking with the leaders undergoing training, attending community meetings, and contacting specific community programs we heard about. Community leaders in these contexts were interested; many would seek out CatComm after its presentations. But the distance of the Internet to their *actual* world, that in which they live, was tremendous. Free access and a supportive, encouraging environment was missing.

Today, due to the installation of the Casa, CatComm's community outreach is conducted by word-of-mouth among community leaders. Between February 27 and June 13, 2003, over 170 different people visited the Casa, only 52 of whom had had any previous contact with the institution. The rest were new visitors, people who had heard of the house entirely through word-of-mouth (there had not yet been any intentional publicity related to the house). One hundred of these visitors were community leaders or managers of community programs from over 20 communities who work in or have contacts with dozens more. Six of the house's visitors were staff or volunteers. Thirty-one visitors over this period were representatives of Rio-based NGOs that provide various services to people from the *favelas*. Eleven visitors were university students or professors. And 22 other visitors were documented, including a local government representa-

tive, foundation representatives, foreigners interested in the space, journalists, and more. Dozens of new projects have entered the CSD.

Attracting visitors to the Casa where they can learn about its functions and then sit down at a computer for the first time and be similarly introduced to the functions of the Web site, is infinitely more inviting and fulfilling for those being served than the previous alternatives. Previously, contact with CatComm came solely in the form of documenting community initiatives, and included: (1) visiting communities and documenting their initiatives on paper, then returning to our home offices and typing them up; (2) distributing questionnaires and depending on community groups to fill them in and return them to us; or (3) inviting community leaders to CatComm's small office where they could sit at a computer with one staff person and spend hours filling in a fairly dry-sounding questionnaire.

Today, community leaders enter a comfortable setting—a house—and learn about the uses of the house for their work. Here they can hold meetings, picking up information brochures distributed by diverse NGOs and local groups. They can post notices to other leaders on a message board, organize workshops, or participate in workshops organized by their peers. They can take computer courses, dance courses, and project elaboration courses, all taught by volunteers who themselves are using the space to make a contribution to their city by supporting these leaders. The same functions that are available on the Web site are made available in the Casa, but in the setting of Casa, they are recognized more fully.

CatComm is a space-providing NGO, developing and administering spaces—online and off—where community leaders can find tools to help themselves, work together, and find networks of solidarity outside their communities to help them build their programs.

The Casa is a portal in itself—the missing link between the communities served and the online community being built to support them. The Casa provides community leaders with access to one another, to broad networks of solidarity within their own city, and a wider world of solidarity beyond.

Home Sweet Home

In his classic book, *A Casa e a Rua*, Roberto DaMatta, one of Brazil's foremost social anthropologists, discusses the relationship between the public (individualistic) world of the street and the private (personalistic) world of the house in Brazilian society. Rather than think of

*The "other" world refers to the
"space in which both moral
systems come together...(where)
all people...stand as individuals
before God and are judged on
their individual merits (14)..
Hess and DaMatta

DaMatta

street and house as geographical or physical places, he focuses on them as symbols of moral universes. In Brazil, it is normal that "the *house, street, and other world** strongly demarcate differences in attitude, gestures, clothes, topics, social roles, and the manner in which existence is perceived" *(53)*.

DaMatta also tells us that the dominant discourse across society is that of the street (the public world dictated by the elite). But the "talk of the subordinates is much more the talk of the 'house' and the family, and is therefore always overflowing with moral connotations and an

DaMatta

appeal to moral limits to social exploitation" *(24)*. In the Brazilian context, the space dictated by the house and the familiar environment represented therein is particularly distinct relative to the public world represented by the street. Underserved citizens feel most comfortable using the language and culture of home, relative to that of the street.

"I think the fact that we (now) have a physical space is important…Perhaps even speaking more metaphorically, because (a physical space) is a…piece of the Earth. We are not only in virtual space. We have a (point of) *reference*," Rose Franco commented to me. Other than myself, Franco is the only full-time staff person. She coordinates Catalytic Communities' Portuguese Web site and works out of the organization's offices above the Casa.

Neuza Nascimento is the member of CONGESCO who most uses the Casa. When I asked her what she thought of the space, she said, "The fact that I am there (so much) that there is nowhere left on the (presence) list to put my name (says it all)…I have a great relationship (with each of the staff members). It's like I am at home…I get there and don't need to ask you if you're busy, I don't need to ask anyone to get on the computer, to go to the kitchen and grab some water, to do anything. So I really feel like I'm at home."

The high degree of comfort of community leaders in the Casa is a key to the space's success and its attraction. As DaMatta makes clear, house is a very important domain, the one in which low-income community residents feel comfortable expressing and being themselves.

According to Clifford Geertz in his essay "Religion as a Cultural System," one of the reasons people seek religion is to explain things they do not understand, "In all probability, most men are unable to leave unclarified problems of analysis merely unclarified, just to look at the stranger features of the world's landscape in dumb astonishment or bland apathy without trying to develop, however fantastic, inconsistent, or simpleminded, some notions as to how such features might be reconciled with the more ordinary deliverances of experi-

Geertz

ence" *(100)*.

Simply put, people find it important and comforting to understand the world around them. For people who live in Brazil's *favelas*, not only do they understand the social context of what happens in the home, as DaMatta explained, but they also have a deep understanding of house, in the physical sense, and suffer from a corresponding lack of understanding related to larger urban structures, those that require extensive engineering. Developing the CatComm community center in a house, making reference to it being a house in naming the space, and treating it as such has added to the comfort level of its users.

When visitors arrive at the Casa for the first time, they are "received," as Franco put it. Coffee is served, they are taken on a tour of the physical and virtual components of CatComm. Visitors are treated as they would be when they arrive at someone's home, rather than office. The door is left open. There are lockers to leave their things—a space for their possessions to stay safe.

The personal nature of the environment created at the Casa contrasts sharply with the nature of traditional institutions and is more amenable to trust-building. Community leaders have, unfortunately, grown accustomed to closed doors, false promises, and lack of integrity among those in power who occupy offices in traditional, large-scale institutions.

Welcome to Cyberspace

In her 1999 essay on community computing,* Anne Beamish speaks of the successes and failures of past community computing projects. The project category Catalytic Communities first belonged to was strictly that of content provision. "Without engaging and relevant content," the proponents of this approach believe, "low-income groups would have little reason to use this technology" *(361)*. On the other hand, I would add, based on what CatComm is observing with its Casa, without a certain degree of contact with the technology, low-income groups will not fully grasp the usefulness of content.

Angelo da Silva is a resident of Jardim América and a representative of the CONGESCO coalition who also works two days a week at the Casa, providing support to community groups preparing funding proposals, introducing them to the Casa, and building networks among leaders. During our interview, da Silva provided a summary of his reflections:

Before the Casa, CatComm was you and a Web site** and the
possibility that we (community leaders) had of accessing a

"Community computing projects...are most frequently involved in providing hardware and training, and information. Less often, they provide the network infrastructure or online access, and rarely are they involved in developing software, hardware, or public policy" (353). Beamish

**Before launching the Casa, CatComm had already had a staff of four for four months, but the nature of the organization before the launch of the community center was such that contact with community leaders was always made in my presence, so it appears that leaders perceived my presence as more central than they currently do—a positive sign with regard to the organization's growth.*

network of partners by passing our projects on to you for you to post on the site, so that others could access them.

With the Casa, this work was amplified in various ways. First, the direct relationship between us and the actual site, of us being able to access it, change it, open it, and not just virtually but physically. As if the Casa was a part of the Web site. When you go into the Casa, it's like you are navigating the site. We run into a colleague, sometimes in the corridor. Sometimes our group meets here….We speak not just with those who modify the site, with those who have projects on the site, those who plan to put projects on the site, partners from other communities, but also with foreigners, with potential funders. Everyone ends up running into everyone else, and we also meet on the Web, because we end up also using e-mail and accessing the site….We end up with a much better vision of what CatComm proposes.

For us in the beginning it was quite complicated. Even I had a hard time understanding what CatComm proposed to do. "What's the deal, just grab our project and post it to the site, is that it?" And since we almost didn't coexist with the Internet, for us there was a question, "Does this really make sense? Will people see it? What weight does it have to publicize a project online?" When we come to the Casa…we start coexisting with this, and then we start to perceive the importance of (the Internet). It's not just the site, not just putting a project on the site, not just using the Internet. When we send an e-mail to a person and schedule a meeting here at the Casa, and then are able to meet face-to-face, the Web site comes alive.

I asked six of the community leaders interviewed in Rio de Janeiro to tell me about the first time they accessed the Internet. For three of these respondents, their first access was at the Casa, between April and May, 2003. "I heard about the Internet more than two years ago…when I took a basic computer course," Henrique Monteiro told me. There was public Internet access in his community, Jacarezinho, installed by the city government. But Monteiro did not make use of it. He found he was too busy to take the time. A community artist, Monteiro now visits the Casa weekly for a computer workshop and downloads art photographs from museum Web sites onto diskette to show to his art students in the community where he now lives. Since the space opened in February, he has created an e-mail account, sold art exhibited in the Casa's rotating community art exhibit to interna-

tional visitors, enrolled in a volunteer-organized computer workshop taking place in the space, prepared pamphlets describing his work, attended CONGESCO meetings, and even received an offer to paint a mural in a private home, all based on his use of the Casa.

The computer workshop Monteiro is enrolled in is being organized by Rogério Navarro, a young engineer who earned his undergraduate degree and then spent time living abroad, primarily in Germany. Navarro returned to Rio wanting to contribute to empowering the people in the city's *favelas*. He discovered CatComm online, enrolled himself as a volunteer through the Web site, and visited the Casa. During his visit with CatComm staff, he began brainstorming a computer course he could offer, free of charge, to community leaders. His course is a hit. Paulino Santos, also from Jardim América, runs an HIV prevention program in that community. He has taken several computer courses before, but said this one "stimulates a much deeper comprehension" than do others, that Navarro has a way of teaching that allows those participating in his workshop to understand how the computer and its components work, rather than just teaching the superficial aspects of utilizing a handful of computer programs. "He talks with us as equals," da Silva adds.

Da Silva is the one community leader who acquired Internet access for his community group before the Casa's launch. His community group, CIADS, has been connected to the Internet since 2002. Their experience reveals some of the enormous barriers to connectivity among Rio's community-based organizations:

> (We got online in order to) facilitate our work, though being online quickly turned into an endless source of expenses…I received a disk from a 'free ISP' and installed it to receive one month's worth of free access, then the bills started arriving. I have memberships with UOL, AOL, but we weren't able to keep paying. So they cut us off. I'm not even sure if my name has been sent (to the credit agency) because of this.

> Then at the end of March, a colleague of mine installed IG that is free. I thought that would benefit us, but it does not because the telephone bill cries with IG. Then it took these months for me to discover this. I'm going to cut the Internet connection this month (June, 2003).

When the truly free Internet Service Provider (ISP), a company in Brazil known as IG, was installed, the slow connection speeds made for enormous telephone bills, as even local calls in Brazil are charged per pulse. In the case of CIADS, the access provided by the

Casa has made it possible for this organization to continue using the Internet—a tool that they already recognized as valuable and that they had become dependent on—but without accumulating debts they could not afford to pay.

In her essay, Beamish discusses the current problems with community computing. She emphasizes that content providing initiatives often start well, but, "Ironically, (though they) have the greatest potential, they often suffer from a fatal flaw—a lack of content…(C)reating and maintaining a Web site takes a tremendous amount of work and energy that they cannot always sustain" (366). For this and other obvious reasons, it is important that content provision programs for these communities "ensure that users are producers of information as much as consumers" (366) . The Casa was the missing link between CatComm's Web site in cyberspace and its work on the ground in the communities of Rio. Through the Casa, community leaders now contribute content to the Web site, empowering themselves and improving the quality of CatComm's ability to serve these and other communities. Of the members of the CONGESCO community coalition, only one of the eight community projects by its members currently in the CSD on CatComm's site was there before the launch of the Casa. The others have been entered by these leaders as they have gained access to the technology and gained understanding into the usefulness of posting content to CatComm's site.

The Casa appears to be uncovering an advantage over both traditional content-providing community computing initiatives and access-providing telecenter initiatives ("telecenter" is the term used internationally for a community technology center, where community residents can acquire Internet access). Content providers, as Beamish explained, often fail in attracting relevant content in part because they lack a dedication to or a mechanism for the production of online content by the communities served. Telecenter initiatives, on the other hand, tend to be open to broad segments. All the residents of a low-income community with a given telecenter generally do (and should!) have access to it.

Setting up community telecenters in all neighborhoods across a city or region is an intimidating proposition for most public officials. They may start with a handful and move beyond that or they may simply choose not to provide this service because of the high set up and maintenance costs involved with such a program as it grows. In addition, the experience with community telecenters in Rio shows a tendency for users to use the Internet for entertainment purposes—cartoons for children, chat rooms among teens, and pornography among adults, for example.

An investment such as that which CatComm has undertaken provides a targeted approach that reduces the intimidation of a large multiple telecenter scheme and encourages uses that are more in line with the objectives of public budgets. The result is a downtown telecenter that attracts a specific group of low-income community residents—those developing community projects for collective benefit—and provides them with a set of spaces and services to help them make viable their community betterment initiatives. The useful characteristics of this space include: a Web site through which community leaders can access networks of support; a space that is inviting and comforting in which they feel both a sense of ownership and support; spaces in which to set up meetings with one another; other leaders at their side struggling with similar problems and exchanging approaches as discussions emerge; a small staff to assist them with online research, setting up e-mail accounts, general brainstorming, and documenting their projects in the CSD; a network of community-based and outside volunteers who offer workshops through the space; and the production and exchange of written materials. In this environment, surrounded by their peers, the tendency is that community projects will be strengthened through a sense of common purpose, recognition, and exchanges made that bring new (primarily in-kind) resources to these programs.

As a result of launching the Casa and observing the effects it has had on our operations, CatComm is now thinking about the importance of the implementation of similar centers elsewhere. For CatComm to truly make its Web site global, providing a source of empowering Internet content to community innovators around the world, it will be important to multiply the concept of the Casa. Through partnerships with NGOs and local governments in different cities, the hope is that an international network of similar downtown telecenters will emerge, bringing leaders from each city-region together in physical space and then providing them an outlet, through CatComm's Web site, to share their work with their peers around the globe.

The Organization's Staff, Product, and Philosophy

Now we have seen how the introduction of the Casa brought with it a new understanding of Catalytic Communities as an organization in the eyes of the community leaders we work with. We have seen how this space has kindled an interest in a tool—the Internet—that Rio's community leaders for the most part had only garnered a superficial understanding of. We have noticed that the thought that goes into all

aspects of CatComm's work with the communities it serves also went into the Casa. Once inside, community leaders feel at home, as if they have found one place where their initiatives are supported in a deeper sense. "Much more than the money, than CatComm being an NGO that passes on money, which it isn't, it provides us with…a nudge, giving us an opportunity to build on our projects," da Silva explains. The Casa has transformed CatComm, the organization. The organization's staff, product, and philosophy have been modified.

The relationship of CatComm's staff to the tasks they perform has been altered. Responsible for the content of the Portuguese Web site, Franco has found that despite having generally made her work more efficient, the Casa also divides her attention from her primary task. Her primary role in the organization is to document community projects to the CSD and manage the Web site's content. Before the Casa, she would do this by visiting community programs, returning with the information obtained to a computer, and sitting down to document what she had uncovered. Today Franco finds herself distracted from her primary task by visitors, old and new, who visit the Casa and want to talk with her. Some of what they want to discuss cannot be applied as content to the Web site. On the other hand, new visitors who arrive without any outreach save her precious time contacting and recruiting projects. Those who come to the Casa for a second or third visit may bring with them notice of events to post on the CatComm Mural, and keep us up-to-date on their initiatives so as to facilitate network-building. They also provide necessary feedback as to the ways in which the Web site and the Casa are serving them, something very difficult to guarantee in a solely virtual initiative.

Many times visitors to the Casa use the space's resources in other ways and do not contribute directly to Franco's job in providing content to the Web site. This is what concerns her with regard to meeting her objectives of developing online content. On the other hand, she admits that before the Casa, "It took much longer" to document projects, having to visit them individually. Franco concludes that, in actuality, what the Casa did with regard to her job was make it easier to do outreach and maintain contact with new projects, though she has had to "develop a certain internal savvy…be more practical," and develop better discipline with regard to structuring time.

Michael Niedermeier, Catalytic Communities' Fulbright Fellow who spent nine months translating and developing English content for the Web site, as well as documenting health programs, called attention to what concerns him about the Casa's effect on staff. As an outsider whose introduction to community work took place once he entered the organization, the visits that CatComm's team

regularly made to community initiatives in Rio's *favelas* was vital to his understanding of the context in which CatComm worked and the objectives of the organization. "I think that," Niedermeier explains, "the Casa provides a central location for the community leaders to go…whereas before I was having more experience actually going and seeing the community projects and being exposed to their situations at a more personal level…For newcomers to CatComm at this point (the Casa) could mean that they will have less of an understanding."

Niedermeier's observation is crucial for two reasons. First of all, it implies that staff members are less likely to schedule community visits given the convenience of using the Casa as a meeting space. Secondly, it reminds us of the importance of maintaining a certain level of exposure to community projects on-the-ground as a requirement for work in the organization, so that those who are involved in the organization have a deeper understanding of the context the Casa's visitors and the Web site's users experience day-to-day. Both of these, in turn, call attention to the importance of maintaining community visits as a core component of staff activities, particularly for newcomers.

Despite his observation, however, Niedermeier also said the following about the Casa:

> It makes (CatComm) more real to people if you have a space they can go to that makes them feel like their efforts to document their projects are going to something that's tangible or something that has a physical manifestation that they can pursue. It's not just ephemeral out there—you know, this electronic Web— and I think that's an important mental aspect of the work. You give people positive reinforcement seeing that they are a part of this structure. Seeing that it's not just an idea of a network but it's actually the physical—you've got thirty people downstairs in the room and they're all talking to each other and they've never met before. They're discussing projects in areas ranging from education to health to providing proper nutrition. These are people who finally have an opportunity to interact with one another that they wouldn't have had,….They're not going to be sitting online at home using a chat room to discuss things with one another. It's just not realistic.

Catalytic Communities' product has also changed as a function of the Casa. The original intention of developing the Casa was to support network- and movement-building among isolated community leaders across the Rio de Janeiro landscape by responding to a

stated need of community leaders across the city: space. The idea was to join the need for meeting spaces stated by diverse leaders, respond to the lack of awareness of one another's projects, and provide high-speed Internet access that would allow them to link to the outside world and use the CatComm Web site.

But at that point it had not crossed our minds that the Casa would make it significantly easier: to develop content for the Web site, thus increasing the efficiency of the organization with regard to outreach and content-building; for workshops to be developed by community leaders, in addition to outside volunteers, in order to build local capacity; for community groups to become engaged in informing the Web site's content, encouraging us to add/alter content and asking for clarification; to have community participation on the Casa's staff, making it possible to do successful proposal-writing on behalf of community projects; to retain volunteers in the city of Rio due to the attractiveness of working in the Casa environment with the energy inherent in face-to-face dialogue; to increase the sense of urgency of our developing the Web site because we see, on a daily basis, community leaders searching for information on the site and looking to see what new items have been incorporated; and for community groups who feel ownership in the space and in CatComm to take responsibility for developing new approaches to deal with emerging problems, as CONGESCO is doing in developing the "CONGESCO Seal," which will be introduced in the next section.

More ideas are now surfacing. For example, at some point in the coming year, CatComm will add a blog feature to its Web site. A "blog" is a "Web Log," an Internet feature created to allow people to update and post personal accounts to the Internet for others to view. Blogs can be indexed so that individuals can quickly view entries into other people's blogs that feature similar themes. The idea to include a blog feature on the CatComm site resulted from listening to the stories of community leaders visiting the Casa and discussing their daily realities, shortly after learning about this technology.

In *Collective Intelligence*, Pierre Lévy makes clear that in using the Internet to produce spaces for collective intelligence, the central-ization of intellectual resources produces social effects beyond a one-to-one relation. The Casa has shown that this is also true in physical space, that it may be a consequence of networking in general. "The most collective result of the Casa," Franco commented to me, "is its role in…bring(ing) these (community) projects together, valu(ing) them, and…put(ting) these people in touch one with the other, increasing the value of the network of people who develop projects to improve the condition of these people."

Concerns to Consider

Before concluding, it is important to take time to call attention to a number of concerns that have surfaced with regard to the Casa and which should be considered by others attempting to build on this experience. Five concerns, some more serious than others, have surfaced for the organization—Catalytic Communities—around the implementation of this space.

First, as the management guru Peter Drucker puts it: "It is not enough for non-profits to say 'We serve a need.' The really good ones create a *want*" *(108)*. The Casa has established various demands that did not previously exist, or that at least had not been expressed as such. Though this is emblematic, as Drucker says, of an effective organization, it also creates new needs for the communities served, and which should be considered—bus tokens to arrive at the space, access to a telephone to set up a meeting at the Casa, time to visit and make use of the space to participate in a workshop.

A second concern that surfaced with the implementation of the Casa is the effect its launch had on the psyche of CONGESCO members. Da Silva described the frustration of the group when we met for our interview. He told me that they began questioning the value of their own work:

> Why do NGOs, institutions, and movements like CatComm seem in such a short period to take off, and we who are so many years on the street (working at building our community organizations) don't succeed? When you and CatComm arrived, we had already spent years battling it out on the road, right? And battling for the same goal. And you had an ideal but didn't have anything (resources, etc. You were) like us. And you succeeded, but we stayed behind. The same thing with (other institutions we know about)…They went ahead and we stayed behind. We ask ourselves, "Why does everyone move forward, and we stay?" And this, at times, I feel like the older leaders feel this way too, when we arrive at the Casa, it hurts us a little bit. Not against CatComm. But the question hurts. Why don't we go forward, why don't we succeed? Is it because we don't have a college education? Is it because our work is of less value? Is it because we don't know how to speak (well)? Is it because we don't know how to sell (our work)?

There were some significant growing pains that went into setting up the Casa and sensing a potential resentment on the part of some

community leaders whom I have watched struggle since the early days of CatComm in the year 2000. Fortunately, the Casa is doing as was hoped for and is helping to level the playing field. In June 2003, five projects, for which members of CONGESCO had written proposals, were approved for funding. The proposals were written by da Silva using the time and resources made available through his work at Casa.

Third, and also brought to CatComm's attention through its close relationship with CONGESCO, is the risk of pressing for quantity over quality. It is clear, through observations of other Rio-based NGOs, that CatComm, in hoping to maintain its empowerment philosophy, cannot fall into the trap of worrying primarily about the quantity of projects on its Web site, of users of its Casa, and so on, over quality. Da Silva summarized the concern well, when he told me:

> The Casa is very enticing. Just like we (CONGESCO) have discovered that it is possible to derive a thousand benefits, and that has made us interested (in the space), I think it will attract the interest of a lot of the wrong people (too). We know that there are a lot of people involved in (community) movements who are doing everything wrong….Who work with the drug traffic…or with a partisan politician who is buying that community.

> I am worried that these groups will approach the Casa…and take advantage of this space as they do with others. Thank goodness we haven't seen this here yet. The Casa (currently) counts among its participants a good number of good people…A number of people that is good for the institution…I think *this* is important. Sometimes it is better for you to have 30 leaders (visit) in a week who really do (good) work, and who get involved (with the Casa), rather than having 200 here who are going to leech and not multiply.

Da Silva's call to pay attention to the importance of quality is what inspired CONGESCO to develop the CONGESCO Seal, a seal that they hope will encourage groups that make use of the Casa to also take part in CONGESCO's monthly meetings, through which CONGESCO can judge the effectiveness and ethical fiber of those involved. As is the case now, all projects that meet CatComm's three basic criteria* will be eligible to enter the CSD on its Web site, regardless of their legal status or some other sort of verification by CatComm of validity,** but CONGESCO will be responsible for providing an imprimatur to those groups that would like to benefit from a seal of legitimacy in Rio de Janeiro.

Williamson

*These three criteria are: (1) The project is helping to solve at least one community problem (in the eyes of community members). (2) The project was begun by a member of his/her own community, or, if not, by a member who comes from an experience that could realistically serve as a model for members of a low-income community. (3) The project serves as a positive and ethical example for other communities. This last one is left undefined so as to facilitate culturally-specific application should the need arise.

**CatComm provides a disclaimer on its site saying that the validity of projects listed in the Community Solutions Database is not confirmed by the organization, though an authentication note allows readers to gauge some level of authenticity related to the project. This is a way of building on the potential of a Web site where visitors can document their initiatives to share from anywhere on Earth. It is also a way of ensuring that those projects that most need support with outreach – those without formal status or publicity – are able to post their work to the site. Finally, it allows visitors to the site from humble backgrounds, those the site is being built for, to research among projects that have been successful despite minimal structure, the projects that are most likely to help them feel empowered to make a difference.

The final two concerns have to do more with the organizational dynamics, and less with the communities served. First is the concern of individual staff members of the effect of the Casa on their individual productivity, as was described in the previous section.

Finally, appropriate staffing becomes much more critical as the face of the organization is concentrated in one physical space. And getting a sense for the ideal qualities to be represented in those staff members takes some time. Individuals with the philosophy of a non-hierarchical, network-based NGO, but with the empathy and practical know-how of a place-based NGO are required.

Conclusion

Creators of institutions rarely have the chance to look their creations in the eye. Having known that I would be writing a doctoral dissertation about the founding and construction of Catalytic Communities, I viewed it much of the time as an experiment. This essay, more than any other in my dissertation, shows how this opportunity can be invaluable. Writing it has allowed me to step away from what appeared, on paper, to be a viable and ideal objective—of creating a Web-based entity that would provide empowering online tools for low-income communities—to see that that objective could be best met by incorporating a physical space (and in doing so significantly altering the main concept). CatComm's Web site needs the Casa, just as the Casa needs CatComm's Web site. One needs a healthy combination of bricks and clicks. "The Casa is part of the site," da Silva has told me. And vice versa.

The Casa has proven itself strategic with regard to meeting the objectives of Catalytic Communities both at the micro and macro scales. At the micro scale, the Casa inspires the natural development of content for the Web site by the community leaders using the space, and therefore the Web site, and who in that way develop an interest in contributing to the Web site.

At the macro scale, the Casa is strategic because it serves as a model for similar telecenters in other locations. A network of such centers, linked together around the globe, would allow community leaders who previously worked in isolation to network with others from their own region and strengthen one another's initiatives face-to-face, while allowing them to build confidence in using the Internet and consequently working within a broader network of their peers online to learn from one another and exchange at a larger scale. This could potentially be the first time a *practical* means was developed through

which communities could network in this way. Using a Web site alone, communities could *in theory* develop such a network. But, as this essay highlights, many barriers—technological, financial, cultural, and educational—exist that can only be surmounted through the preparation of a physical space, the *practical* way.

My hope is that this essay and future updates will allow those interested in establishing similar centers in other parts of the world to absorb the wisdom of the community leaders who have informed our work and incorporate their comments into those approaches.

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