

What We Owe To One Another: A Reflection on My Leadership in Action (LiA) Project

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I arrived in New York City on a cool evening in May. My family is from Buffalo, New York where I spent a lot of time as a kid, however New York City may as well have been San Francisco or Paris as I stepped out of the train station: everything felt different. I wandered through the Port Authority looking for the exit, while men with camouflaged jumpsuits and large guns strapped over their shoulders stared, unfriendly, at me. This was definitely not Buffalo.

When I arrived in New York City, my LiA supervisor was still finishing up his classes, so he was more busy than usual. This meant that I started off my work with very little structure and a lot of leeway to explore. I got into a routine of working at Columbia University every day from 9-5 and then getting to know New York City in the evening. I got to know the rhythms of the bustling people, the cars honking, and the hurrying cyclists. There is an anonymity and solitude to being amid all the chaos.

On my first Friday, I joined the Fridays for Future protest. It was here that I met some of my closest friends in New York. I learned a lot about leadership and comradery from them. There is a sense that everything is commercialized and catering to its most wealthy tourists and inhabitants. The city is extremely hostile towards low-income and unhoused people within the city. Yet, the activist I met refused to live by the capitalist logics of the city; willing to be generous and welcoming in the midst of an affordability and housing crisis. They showed me around, taught me about the long tradition of organizing in the city, and welcomed me to gatherings.

The activists I met in New York City embodied the values of the Laidlaw Scholars program. They had big dreams for what New York city could be, and what we could be to each other, and they worked for their dreams; willing to innovate along the way and never succumb to despair, no matter how long the odds were.



Figure 1: A lively road in Brooklyn after we blockaded the intersection to protest Chuck Schumer greenlighting oil and gas expansion projects as part of a deal to raise the debt ceiling. Photo taken by me.

Power in Community: The Lower East Side.

In the middle of a tight row of old tenement building, there is a red brick apartment with a fire ladder going down the front. It is unremarkable from the other tenements on the street except for a sign on the balcony reading: *This Land is Ours, Not For Sale.*



Figure 2: The balcony above the Museum for Reclaimed Urban Space. Photo taken by me.



Figure 3: Entrance to the Museum for Reclaimed Urban Space. Photo taken by me.

The building was once a squat in the 1970s, a site of many of the largest conflicts in the last half century and now a museum to remember the activists who built the neighbourhood and whose bold vision helped define the future of New York. Throughout the 1960s, many residents and landowners left the neighbourhood, leaving their homes abandoned and unmaintained. The city entered a fiscal crisis in the 1970s. Buried in mountains of debt, they cut off all municipal services from the Lower East Side, including garbage collection and firefighting services, leaving the area to collapse out of sight.

The President of the United States at that time, Gerald Ford, gave a famous speech blaming New York City's financial problems on high wages, pensions, welfare administration, and the city-run hospital system. He said, its "day of reckoning" had come, and he would "veto any bill that has as its purpose a bailout of New York City to prevent a default." The next day the famous New York Daily Newspaper read in giant letters: "Ford to New York: Drop Dead". The paper had the highest circulation in New York history and many still erroneously attribute the "Drop Dead" quote to Ford and to his never-ending anger.

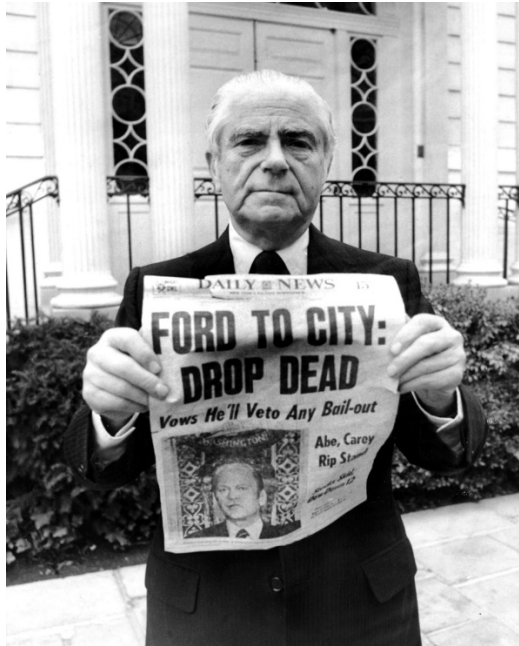


Figure 4: Mayor Abe Beame holding the famous New York Daily News issue. Photograph: New York Daily News Archive/Getty Images

As the Lower East Side was left abandoned by the city, young activists, anarchists, and unhoused people began to move into the abandoned buildings. They refurbished the homes and built back the community together. They planted community gardens in abandoned lots where buildings had collapsed, using the bricks from the buildings to create paths.

Spending time in the community gardens still maintained and fought for by its residents reminded me why we fight for justice and the positive vision of community that we can have. For the last half century, there has been an endless stream of attacks on the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. The city wanted to move the squatters and gardens to make room for luxury skyrises and developments. Under Rudy Giuliani, police raids were prolific. He announced in 2000 that he wanted to destroy every single community garden. The police would come in the night and destroy gardens, forcibly move squatters from their homes and public spaces. And each time, the community re-built. One time, dozens of tanks were sent in, turning the Lower East Side into a *de facto* war zone.



Figure 5: One of many community gardens in the Lower East Side. Photo taken by me.

To me, the Lower East Side represents the generous, ambitious, and extraordinary activists I met in New York City, willing to give everything to fight for the city they love. I protested with them every Friday for climate justice. I marched with them against police violence. I was constantly struck by the vision they have for New York City. They bravely fight each day for the New York City they dare to imagine: one defined by our care for each other, the community, and the land we live on. They refuse to the capitalist logics wherein poverty and exploitation are considered necessary to live a good life. Most radically of all, they reimagine what we owe to each other: creating spaces where we put the interests of others and the community above ourselves.

Living in New York City, I also saw an alternate view of how the world could be. It is city mired in inequality, where a few wealthy families owning the vast majority of the wealth and people on Wall Street chose the interest of shareholders over their own community. It struck me how impoverished the capitalist and conservative view of relationships are. We are supposed to value our relationships for what they can give *us*: jobs, recommendations, clients, etc. Succeeding and avoiding falling into poverty is a personal responsibility. We owe each other absolutely nothing. This world view thinks so little of us: our capacity for kindness, compassion, and to care for one another even when it does not benefit us. I experienced so much kindness and generosity from

working class people while I was in New York City. Many of them were living paycheque to paycheque, and yet they would still offer share their lunch.

I learned that my greatest strengths are the communities that claim me.