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# Idle, No More:

Defining a planner's role when civic protest erupts

By Jason Syvixay

## SUMMARY

In Winnipeg, Indigenous activists are finding and/or creating new opportunities to meet in public space to discuss civic issues like safety, inclusion, and the right to land. Through physical resistance (i.e., occupying public space through blockades, protest, and public demonstrations), Indigenous activists have begun to make known their varying political, economic, and social struggles, in many cases rallying both public and media support to affect and create neighbourhood change.

This article summarizes findings from Syvixay's thesis, "Where They Meet: Indigenous Activism and City Planning in Winnipeg, Manitoba," with lessons for planners and others. Instead of maintaining a critical distance from these demonstrations, which can often create feelings of alienation within the Indigenous community, planners, and others could view these public actions as offering opportunities for feedback, dialogue, and change.

## RÉSUMÉ

Des militants autochtones de Winnipeg trouvent ou créent de nouvelles occasions de se rassembler sur des places publiques pour discuter d'enjeux citoyens comme la sécurité, l'inclusion et les droits fonciers. Par des gestes de résistance physique (c. à d. des militants autochtones qui monopolisent des espaces publics par des barrages routiers ou des manifestations, ces militants ont commencé à exprimer leurs difficultés sur le plan politique, économique et social. Bien souvent, ils gagnent à leur cause des appuis du public et des médias qui ont une incidence et amènent des transformations des quartiers.

Cet article résume les constatations de la thèse de Syvixay sous le titre « Where They Meet: Indigenous Activism and City Planning in Winnipeg, Manitoba » qui comporte des suggestions pour les urbanistes et autres professionnels. Plutôt que de se tenir à prudente distance de ces manifestations, ce qui peut souvent inspirer aux groupes Autochtones des sentiments d'aliénation, les urbanistes et autres professionnels pourraient voir en ces actions publiques une occasion d'échanges, de dialogue et de changement.

Every Friday at 6 p.m. in Winnipeg's north end, at the corner of Selkirk Avenue and Powers Street, the sound of a bell reverberates boisterously, signalling that the area is being watched over.

Behind the clamour is a group of Indigenous youth, who have created an opportunity for area residents to meet and discuss civic issues like safety, inclusion, and the right to land. Through their weekly demonstrations, this small group is bringing about awareness of the political, economic, and social struggles and experiences of people in the neighbourhood. Their gathering, aptly entitled, "Meet Me at The Bell Tower," was initiated in 2011, as a way to pay tribute to the death of one of their own. Their intention: to make their community safe again. A single tweet promoting their inaugural 'meet-up' motivated dozens of elders, a dormant Neighbourhood Watch, and non-Indigenous citizens to stand in support.

Activism around missing and murdered Indigenous women, loss of sovereignty, environmental protection, safety, and housing, have and continue to be advanced by Indigenous people throughout Canada, through protest, art, marches, and vigils. Meet Me at The Bell Tower is among those efforts that have garnered significant media attention for their advocacy.

When participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower gathered for the first time, they realized they needed a symbol for their demonstration. According to one group member, "We needed something loud, like a bell. We needed something safe, something we could make safe, like a vacated community-gathering place. We needed a symbol that could be visible and shareable."

But ringing the bell was not as easy as they thought it would be – not everyone wanted to hear the bell rung. Using what they could

find in the underutilized plaza where they assembled, they eventually extended the bell cord. The day after, the cord was cut. This only motivated them to continue their efforts. They proudly state, “Despite efforts to calm or silence the bell, it was this, ‘We’ve arrived, this is our community.’”

As part of my master of city planning thesis, I had the privilege to work with Meet Me at The Bell Tower, to explore Indigenous activism as an important, bottom-up, community-based approach to neighbourhood renewal. The research explores how planners may work collaboratively with activists, protest groups and grassroots initiatives – bringing their voices and perspectives to the debate of cities, looking at protest as an opportunity for public engagement. My research acknowledges Indigenous resistance as an ongoing activity since 1869, starting with the Red River Resistance, and more recently, through movements such as Idle No More and Meet Me at The Bell Tower.

Protest is about citizens taking matters and issues impacting their livelihood and neighbourhoods in their own hands. It is a form of resistance that sheds light on important community issues. It appropriates land, drawing attention to whom space belongs. Protest also empowers citizens to realize and claim their right to the city, defending access to what already exists in a community and influencing future decision-making.

Through their activism, those involved with Meet Me at The Bell Tower have mobilized the voices of Indigenous peoples to create and shape a set of recommendations for Winnipeg’s north end. Through their protest, they are asserting their right to participate and appropriate in the city and in their neighbourhood. Their work is important for this neighbourhood, as many planning interventions undertaken previously have failed to revive what was once a thriving destination for thousands of immigrant families during Winnipeg’s 19th and 20th century. Decay and decline in the neighbourhood is being addressed through Meet Me at The Bell Tower, as participants mobilize community support and create visibility for the area, showing elected officials and decision-makers that they care about their community and want to make it better.

Their efforts have helped to set in motion a revived compassion and excitement for

the neighbourhood. My research points to five positive outcomes resulting from the Meet Me at The Bell Tower movement: (1) neighbourhood change; (2) working together; (3) community growth; (4) social participation; and (5) systems change. These themes, described in further detail in **Figure 1**, emerged through interviews with Indigenous participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower. Their commentary offered insights on the strengths, constraints, opportunities, and threats for Indigenous public activism, as well as ideas for change along Selkirk Avenue.

**“Through their activism, those involved with Meet Me at The Bell Tower have mobilized the voices of Indigenous peoples to create and shape a set of recommendations for Winnipeg’s north end.”**

## NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE

*“I think definitely that we brought back the spirit and ownership of the community. Meet Me at The Bell Tower empowered us to say that our voice matters, and ownership like you said, and that we need to take back this community.” (Meet Me at The Bell Tower participant)*

Meet Me at The Bell Tower has helped to generate: a welcoming and inclusive environment; a safe space; built environment changes; reductions of poverty, social exclusion, and urban violence; a reclaiming of the neighbourhood; a shared vision; a sense of hope.

For example, as participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower noted, they were more willing and likely to speak freely and openly about community people issues when they felt included, comfortable, and safe.

The built environment along Selkirk Ave. has also changed for the better, occurring around the same time Meet Me at The Bell Tower began. Participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower note how streetscape elements



Figure 1.

like banners, sidewalk improvements, and plazas were installed when they became more visible in the community, when they began to show to others that their community mattered to them. Meet Me at The Bell Tower also encouraged many residents to participate in the cleanliness of their community, by organizing and taking part in weekly clean-ups.

Statistics have shown how crime has declined since the inception of Meet Me at The Bell Tower. Interviewees of this study noted how perceptions of safety in the neighbourhood have improved. The resurgence of a neighbourhood watch, the Bear Clan Patrol, was prompted as elders and adults did not want youth participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower to be outside alone.

**WORKING TOGETHER**

Meet Me at The Bell Tower gathers people of all backgrounds to advocate and raise awareness on issues related to the community. The success of the weekly activist gathering is founded on its coalition building efforts, mobilization of all demographics, and collaboration with public and private sector.

With no external funding, organizers work with area businesses and not-profit organizations to supply activists with food, supplies, donations, and meeting space. Activists of Meet Me at The Bell Tower believe that building relationships is key to growing their movement, to expanding their networks and to further canvassing their message. They regularly attend other protests and rallies to build partnerships and coalitions with other social movements.

Participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower work together in a collaborative fashion, encouraging participants to contribute in the way that they feel comfortable, whether they support the group with communications, youth engagement inspiration, policy development, or art. They welcome support from people from all neighbourhoods.

**COMMUNITY GROWTH**

Activist and protest movements help build personal and group capacity, support Indigenous leadership, and enhance knowledge capital. They also support social capital, networks, people, and organizations interested in seeing their community advance.

Meet Me at The Bell Tower has empowered

individuals to create solutions for themselves and to see themselves as solutions. Participants note how the weekly gathering has improved their personal and professional capacity (e.g., public speaking, knowledge of community issues), and how they have become more engaged at the local level to participate in political process whether through running for office or participating in workshops and open house forums.

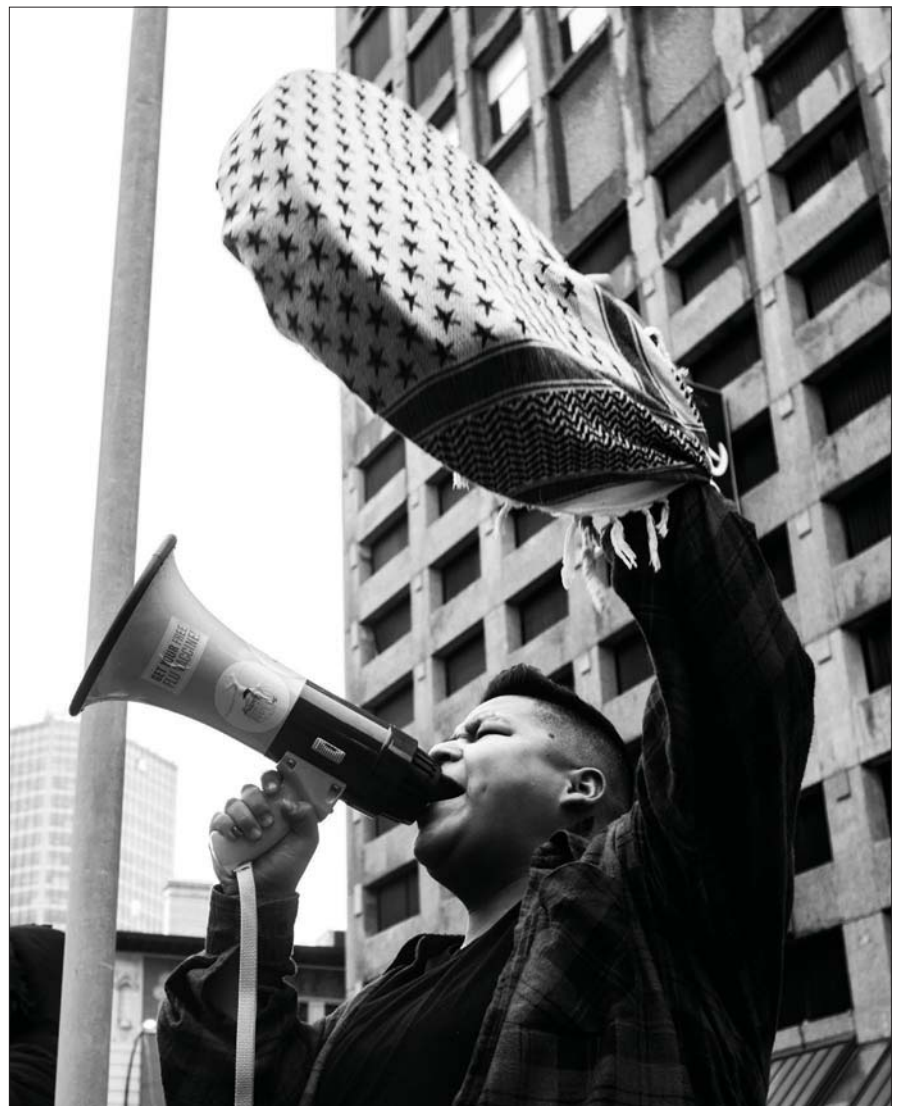
***“Now we always see the hearing notices! We never used to! But now we get so excited.”***  
**(Meet Me at The Bell Tower participant)**

*“Now we always see the hearing notices! We never used to! But now we get so excited.”*  
*(Meet Me at The Bell Tower participant)*

Meet Me at The Bell Tower has inspired Indigenous youth to contribute to the redevelopment efforts of their community. Participants have become more knowledgeable and well-versed on civic planning processes through the informative sessions led by Meet Me at The Bell Tower. Thus, they have the confidence to take part in planning exercises led by the city.

**SOCIAL PARTICIPATION**

Meet Me at The Bell Tower and activist movements are effective when they employ creative communication tactics to engage with various publics to participate. A consistent advocacy message communicated through various platforms is



a critical ingredient to a protest movement's success. Members of the public participate in protest because they feel included and welcome, and they see these as

opportunities to speak candidly about issues of importance to them.

Participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower identified various stakeholder

groups that could show up and participate in their weekly gathering: elected officials, city planners, and civic administration. They argue that decision-makers often forget to take into consideration the very people they are elected and hired to serve.

Since Meet Me at The Bell Tower is not externally funded, participants contend that their advocacy represents the genuine interests of a community. Perhaps city planners can look to groups like Meet Me at The Bell Tower as an unencumbered, candid, and non-bureaucratic source of community feedback.

The Meet Me at the Bell Tower initiative employs storytelling through various online communication tools to inspire others to participate. In addition, they use it to hold elected officials accountable. Using Twitter and other social media accounts, they are able to put pressure on elected officials. Meet Me at The Bell Tower participants also note how social media has given them the opportunity to reframe the narrative of Indigenous experience, breaking down stereotypes and focusing on the positive.

*"... We need to be our own media, we need to tell our own stories, because you ain't going to depict, and paint me with a brush that I'm an Aboriginal woman, that I'm all these hopeless things, that like, I don't feel this way."* (Meet Me at The Bell Tower participant)

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(Meet Me at The Bell Tower participant)***



Before



After



Patsy Healey notes that while societies are increasingly fragmented, there are “new tools that foster communication and collaborative action.” The megaphone is a communication tool used by participants of Meet Me at The Bell Tower. They contend that the megaphone needs to be (a) solutions-oriented, (b) positive, (c) respectful, (d) democratic, and (e) loud (Figure 2). When these rules were not adhered to, relationships with the community became strained.

**SYSTEMS CHANGE**

Meet Me at The Bell Tower places a priority on supporting their participants with a foundation of information on governance systems like policy, planning, and decision-making, so that they are able to advocate and navigate those systems more strategically. Indigenous activism and protest challenge power structures, providing a greater voice to residents and community members. Meet Me at The Bell Tower and initiatives like it challenge policy and work towards equity.

*“It depends on the level of government, and the areas of jurisdiction they are related to. Because we’re so system-literate at this point, we’re extremely understanding about how little elected officials can actually do. So we try to be targeted and super specific when elected people come so that we can focus on what two or three things in their jurisdiction they can pay attention to. And if they don’t, we are sure to let them know that it would be political suicide.” (Meet Me at The Bell Tower participant)*

Meet Me at The Bell Tower works towards system literacy by ensuring its participants are well-informed citizens who know about their rights and needs. As participants become more aware about their right to the city, they can actively participate in planning and decision-making processes. Planners, then, do not necessarily have to engage in action, they can provide knowledge and support to guide transformative actions in a community.

Meet Me at The Bell Tower redistributes power by placing their volunteers and participants at a higher level than elected officials:

*“It’s really important for us to treat them [politicians] like normal people. Often, elected folk will come to the Bell Tower and we’ll wait for the moment, and we sync them up to make a speech. Then we’ll say, ‘We have special guests with us here tonight...’*

*and then I name the Bell Tower family in front of everyone. ‘Give it up to all of the great helpers here with us tonight! Give it up to those ones!’ It’s important for elected officials to clap for Food Not Bombs, for Bear Clan, and for helpers.”*

**“Meet Me at The Bell Tower also hosts weekly discussions around community issues, raising awareness about how to go about taking action.”**

Meet Me at The Bell Tower also hosts weekly discussions around community issues, raising awareness about how to go about taking action. Participants regularly present their ideas and perspectives to media, on panels and forums, and through stakeholder engagement – as they have become known as a key voice on issues impacting the neighbourhood. They cite how planners need to involve the community from the outset of

a study, not at the end, and to be genuine in their goal of soliciting feedback:

*“Don’t show up with the plan already made, show up and tell the community, ‘I want to make something with you!’”*

Winnipeg is a colonial site with a colonial history, and Indigenous people have not accepted this colonization and have been actively resisting (and continue to do so) at all times.

When protest erupts, there is a constant bargaining among various actors: activists, members of the general public, planners, municipal officials, and representatives of other levels of government. As Erin Canty, in an article for Upworthy, asserts, “when you don’t have a seat at the table, it usually means you’re on the menu.” Activists are often required to demonstrate in public space because their voices are muted or unheard in the normative discourse around city issues. Thus, as David Harvey theorizes in “The Political Economy of Public Space,” protests can represent “a challenge to the reigning model of urban governance.” My research explored protest as a way to advocate for those who are marginalized, those who lack a voice.

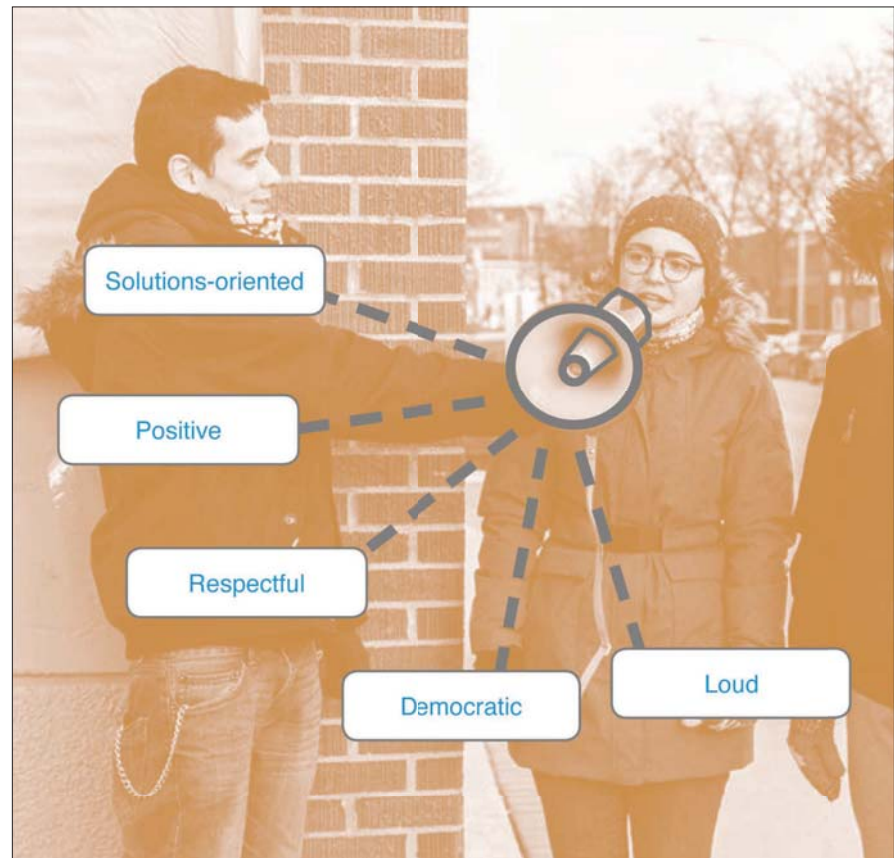


Figure 2.

From my research findings, a series of ideas, recommendations, and actions emerged for planners to consider when dealing with protest. They include working with activists directly and/or employing lessons learned from activist demonstrations.

- Gain trust through relationship-building with vulnerable populations.
- Activism can help planners sort and understand neighbourhood problems.
- Create safe, comfortable spaces for people – it encourages candid feedback.
- Protest creates a “strength in numbers” and undeniable presence, a visual beacon of the issues and places needing renewal and support.
- Bring people of different backgrounds and perspectives together to articulate a shared vision.
- Build partnership and coalitions with social movements, and other networks, to expand network and further canvas message.
- Small-wins become generative catalysts for further action.
- Collaboration is key.
- Protest can be a user group for neighbourhood renewal and local knowledge an idea bank for design and planning strategies.
- Build community capacity – they become the greatest stewards and champions for their neighbourhood (e.g., Neighbourhood Watch, community cleanup).
- Attend protest gatherings to provide knowledge on the planning profession. This improves system literacy and policy processes. Ensures citizens are well informed about their rights and needs.
- Encourage storytelling through online communication tools.
- Facilitate public engagement like Meet Me at The Bell Tower’s megaphone: solutions-oriented, positive, respectful, democratic, and loud!
- Remember the four F’s – free, food, family, and fun – for public engagement and community consultation.
- Work towards creating equity throughout planning processes.

Ali Tayebi, in his article, “Planning activism: Using Social Media to claim marginalized citizens’ right to the city,” contends how urban social movements “are a response to the question of how the right to the city can be granted or claimed through planning and decision-making processes.” In Winnipeg, Indigenous activists are realizing their right

to participate in decisions that affect where they live through occupation and taking up of spaces. As explored in my research, initiatives like Meet Me at The Bell Tower could be supported, not pushed away. They are, in many cases, doing the work that many planning professionals dream of doing: sparking interest and passion for places, and taking steps to make change happen. Perhaps we can find a way to meet in the middle to work together, or perhaps simply, Meet at the Bell Tower.

**Jason Syvixay** holds a Master of City Planning from the University of Manitoba, and is a principal planner at the City of Edmonton. Born-and-raised in Winnipeg, he has a passion for people and place — having worked as Managing Director of the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ, and more recently a planner with HTFC Planning & Design. His research interests include downtown renewal, Indigenous activism and capacity building, creative community engagement, pedestrian and cycle accommodation, tourism infrastructure planning, and wayfinding. For more information, visit [www.jasonsylvixay.com](http://www.jasonsylvixay.com).

\*To view the entire document on which this article is based, please see <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/handle/1993/32552>.

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