

The Influence of Community Structure in American Cities

Compared to other cities around the world, American cities are relatively young. In just over 100 years most metropolitan areas in the Western United States have been developed (Fishman, 4). With unlimited availability of land and easy access to the automobile, Metropolitan regions have spread out over thousands of square miles. In the relatively small amount of time that these cities have been developed, key factors associated with healthy urban environments have been left out of the equation. Communities need cultural, social, and economic development. However, after World War II, the mass exodus into suburban America left behind the cultural, social, and economic development needed to build community.

Sixty years ago, the urbanist Lewis Mumford said, “The city is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community,” (Gause, 2). However, shortly after this observation, upper and middle class Americans began fleeing to the suburbs in search for a better life. This left the lower class to become an isolated group that remained in the city. Today, housing trends are changing, and the middle and upper classes are either moving back into the city or farther out into the suburbs. It is often the high crime rates, failing schools, and falling property values that often drive middle class families to new neighborhoods (Rusk, 15). This continuous pattern of push and pull often leaves communities without the necessary concentrations of cultural, social, or economic activity.

Suburban communities are physically fragmented from the rest of the urban fabric. Separation leads to a social polarization, causing a lack of cultural, social, and economic opportunities. Research done around the peripheral communes in Paris show the greatest social disconnect is present in communities without any commercial and civic centers nearby (O’Loughlin, 68). However, other communities on the periphery that are well connected to these services have developed into dynamic suburban environments. Often times, locations that grow too rapidly have to deal with the consequence of insufficient social integration (O’Loughlin, 68). Unlike Paris where problems of rapid peripheral growth are limited, the majority of

American metropolises have experienced rapid peripheral growth on a much larger scale further isolating the different social classes.

Among many characteristics needed, a dynamic urban community should not have segregated pockets of poverty. Disparity between the rich and poor continues to expand economically and geographically throughout our cities. As Robert Fishman notes, “The perpetuation of concentrated urban poverty into the 21st century has grave implications not only for those who are trapped in declining areas but also for the rest of the metropolitan region” (Fishman, 4). Fishman views Camden, New Jersey, what was once a great industrial center at the turn of the 20th century is now among America’s poorest cities. This transformation from an industrial city that symbolized the rise of American industry is now the center of depopulation, deindustrialization, crime, social disorganization, failing public services, and environmental pollution (Fishman, 4). Regions like this with high concentration of poverty suffer from a lack of cultural, social, and economic development. Without opportunities for cultural social and economic development, Camden will only become further isolated from the surrounding metropolitan area of Philadelphia.

In the next 50 years, there will be many influences upon the development of community in America. Among these influences are; the perpetual “underclass” in central cities and inner suburbs, smart growth initiatives that limit urban sprawl and promote infill, and racial integration as part of the increasing diversity in cities and suburbs (Fishman, 6). In a vibrant urban community, such as Copenhagen, Denmark, the upper, middle, and lower classes are able to coexist. However, in regions where there are pockets of isolated poverty like in Philadelphia, the crisis of the inner city will likely spill into the “first ring suburbs (Fishman, 6). As long as there is continuous development at the outer ring, it seems safe to assume that disinvestment, abandoned industrial buildings, outdated malls, declining schools, and overworked social services will continue to follow. Smart growth initiatives will limit urban sprawl and combined with a resurgence of activity going on in most American downtowns will bring stability to the urban structure and promote the racial diversity need to build strong community. If the fundamental shift from urban sprawl to urban infill is initiated, then our communities will be forced to deal with the lack racial and

economic diversity that defines the areas that we live. “The great task of the 21st century may prove to be “re-urbanism,” the inventive “reknitting” of the frayed urban fabric...” (Fishman, 12).

Although urban growth boundaries will help to control urban sprawl, current size of our cities is so large that community development needs to be concentrated around defined regional hubs. Outer edges of urban regions exist as clusters of density; fragments of landscapes or agricultural lands; and an overlapping web of jurisdictional boundaries. “In reaction to both the isolation caused by sprawl and the ubiquity of electronic communication, a search for “community” and “place” is underway” (Krieger, 43). Life in the suburbs can be socially fatiguing. In an environment that’s in a constant state of change, people are likely to become detached from their surroundings and become less involved in community affairs.

One of the few institutions that members of the suburban community are involved with is the school. People may have little awareness as to what the city council does or be oblivious to the presence of public welfare agencies, but the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the community is closely related to how they feel about the schools (Wuthnow, 95). Having children in school seems to push parents into becoming more active in the community. It has been proven in national studies that participation in school events can be a significant contributor to the feeling of connection to ones community. For example, “a study of parents of twelfth-graders found that 88 percent of those who often went with their son or daughter to school events felt involved in their neighborhood, whereas this figure dropped to 63 percent among those who did not attend school activities. It is likely that school involvement reinforces community attachment and vice versa” (Wuthnow, 95). Although the impacts of parent involvement have highly positive impacts on the development of a community, parent participation has been declining in recent years. Many high school principals report that less than a quarter of parents were members of the PTA and even fewer of those parents participate (Wuthnow, 95). Often, people claim that they don’t have enough time or feel burned out with other daily responsibilities. It leads one to question if the long commutes and decentralized structure of our suburban environment contribute to the dysfunction of social activity.

Communities suffer when a lack of diversity leads to fewer social opportunities and organizations for people to become involved in. Often time in the suburbs, neighborhood organizations and community interaction is quite high right after the initial development period. However, people in this type of community are all in a similar situation, families are raising children and a lot of their social efforts are focused around school. As a result, a single generation into the future leaves many of the households with empty nesters who no longer have a reason to be involved. This lack of diversity in the suburban infrastructure starts to show signs of decay. In an American suburban neighborhood discussed by author Robert Wuthnow, he focuses on common conditions that neighborhoods often face once the first generation of children are raised. “Despite the population’s relative affluence, streets are sometimes in poor repair, shopping has mostly moved to mega malls in another township, and the public schools have deteriorated just enough to encourage an increase in the proportion of residents who send their children to private academies” (Wuthnow, 96). Unlike an urban environment, it is very hard for a suburban community to stand the test of time when the constituents all have the same needs and values. The intergenerational relationships in an urban community sustain participation by the very nature of their environment.

Communities thrive from the prosperity of economic development. However, the civic minded spirit that was once a source of prosperity and economic development has since been lost. Economic growth is a complicated process that evolves from the interweaving fabric of community. “Long-run growth requires a series of gradually accumulating changes in the organizational and institutional fabric of society, taking place over perhaps half a century” (Florida, 16). Changes are the result of transformations in human behavior and social organization. Economic prosperity is not developed from technology, but rather the result of social and cultural interaction.

Successful communities need a creative climate that will feed off people and business to help generate economic growth. “As the great Jane Jacobs pointed out long ago, successful places are multidimensional and diverse – they don’t just cater to a single industry or a single demographic group; they are full of stimulation and creative interplay” (Florida, 6). Cities like Seattle, San, Francisco, Austin, Toronto

and Dublin recognize the importance of this multidimensional relationship needed to generate economic growth. However, communities that don't have strong multidimensional relationship like Grand Rapids, Buffalo, Memphis, and Louisville will be find it hard to survive without the creative climate (Florida, 6).

Community structure has shifted and it is uncommon for people to stay in one place over the course of a career. In today's world our relationships with co-workers, family, and friends are constantly changing. Therefore people seek out communities where we can easily transfer from job to job and seek out new relationships. "Where people once found themselves bound together by social institutions and formed their identities in groups, a fundamental characteristic in life today is that we strive to create our own identities" (Florida, 7). It is no longer the places we work, clubs, or community organizations that define who we are. Rather, we seek to define our own identity through the products we consume, different forms of leisure, and the places we live.

In the past century particularly in the second half, our country has seen an outburst of creativity. As the information age has continued to make communications an integral part of our lives. The ease in which we can transfer information has enabled communities to become decentralized and void of any urban density. However, economic development is more than just having the ease of proficient communications; the creative economy needs to be open to all forms of artistic, cultural, and technological development. The creative scene provides the underlying eco-system or habitat in which the multidimensional forms of creativity take root and flourish (Florida, 55). A community that has an ability to support a cutting edge music or arts scene will be more likely to attract and stimulate economic development through business and technology. These types of relationships are likely to develop in an urban environment where social integration and community involvement are an unavoidable part of life.

There is a strong relationship between the geographic place and the organizational matrix that matches people with jobs (Florida, 6.) Developing urban environments that are outside the city center is not a task of geography, but rather a task of identity. People gravitate to certain types of communities, the Left bank in Paris or New

York's Greenwich Village both stimulates diversity and other experiences that embrace community. It is not the physical location that is attractive, but rather a social environment that is open to new ideas and experiences. In order for metropolitan suburban networks to be centralized into smaller more livable communities, the fundamental values of the community need to embrace the creative population. Ideally, such a place would reinforce our identity as creative people, allow us to pursue the kind of work we choose, and have ready access to a wide range of lifestyle amenities (Florida, 15). People prefer places of distinctive character, in order to embrace an environment there needs to be a unique quality associated with that place.

As American cities continue to grow over the course of the 21st century, community development will either keep sprawling, or we will invert our development efforts and face the growing pains. With over half of humanity living in or around cities, an urban awareness becomes essential. Being urbane means having a sophisticated awareness of the environment and ones impact upon it; being more civil and responsive towards others; acting on behalf of others; using technology to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources; and being less tolerant of waste and redundancy (Krieger, 50). Successful communities need cultural, social, and economic development. Whether we choose to focus on these characteristics, will establish the value of communities in which we live.

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