

Building the Urban Village: The Social Function Model of Neighborhood Development (the final segment of a three-part essay)

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“Neighborhood effects research has demonstrated that neighborhoods can contribute to negative social outcomes, such as crime, drug abuse, poor schooling, obesity, and other health problems. On the flip side, neighborhoods can also provide the resources to support everyday life and culture and lower residents’ risk of socioeconomic and health problems.” (ADVANCE, 2008)

Neighborhoods are the most fundamental social unit in urban society, and they must function effectively if we want thriving, democratically-based living spaces that offer a high quality of life. Inner city neighborhoods must be highly organized communities that are imbued with the values of participatory democracy, cosmopolitanism, collaboration, reciprocity, and social justice, to provide this high quality of life. Thriving communities also require good housing and amenities, employment linkages to the regional economy, and a proper mix of people-centered organizations and institutions, such as block clubs, schools and health clinics.

Unless inner city neighborhoods are transformed into highly functional social units, they will remain breeding grounds for metropolitan instability that ultimately lead to premature death, needless imprisonment, generalized anger and discontent, and the sentencing of children to uncertain lives on the socioeconomic margin. The plight of distressed inner city neighborhoods, I should stress, is not the result of some fixed, preordained destiny. Public policy and an elite-centered strategy for building the urban metropolis led their development. Therefore, a shift in public policy and new people-centered strategies for building the urban metropolis can lead to their re-creation and development

into great places to live, work, play, and raise a family.

If people-centered strategies are not developed and applied, the problem of inner city distress will persist, becoming increasingly complex and difficult to resolve with the passage of time. Given its contribution to metropolitan instability, I believe that solving the inner-city neighborhood problem is one of our most urgent tasks.

Transforming distressed, inner city neighborhoods is not, however, just a matter spending money. While significant financial investments must be made, to succeed, the current model of neighborhood development must be changed. How do we solve this problem of inner-city distress and create, in reality, neighborhoods that socially function at a high level?

Solving this critical problem, I contend, requires embracing a regeneration strategy based on connecting public schooling, “brick and mortar” projects, economic development, social capital, and capacity building strategies to the broader goal of transforming distressed neighborhoods into democratic communities that are well organized and highly functional social units. Within this conceptual framework, social organization and development are the most urgent tasks as these will foster the key values of participation, cosmopolitanism, collaboration, reciprocity, and social justice.

On this point, I want to stress that social organization and development cannot happen in

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isolation from the quest to recreate and rebuild distressed inner city neighborhoods. The two activities are deeply interwoven, as people's beliefs and life changes are actually transformed through the process of building thriving, democratically-based, cosmopolitan communities. Struggle, then, is the midwife that delivers this new type of democratic, cosmopolitan and neighborly inner city community. Thus, to realize in practice this "new type of inner city community," neighborhood revitalization must be led by residents and stakeholders and must be driven by an 'authentic' approach to participatory democracy. The City, and government at all levels, should participate in this re-creation and renewal process, but it must be led by the residents and stakeholders themselves.

The point is this: process is as important as product in the revitalization of distressed inner city neighborhoods. Our goal is not simply to build neighborhoods that are clean, safe, healthy, pedestrian, bike friendly, accessible and thriving. Rather, our vision is to create neighborhoods, with the aforementioned characteristics, which are imbued with the values of participatory democracy, cosmopolitanism, collaboration, reciprocity and social justice. This is the secret to turning inner-city neighborhoods into resilient and sustainable living spaces.

Such a neighborhood can be realized in practice only if it is produced through a participatory, collaborative and democratic process. The reason is that residents and stakeholders are the force that animate and bring energy and life to neighborhoods. It is only an enlightened populace, united by a collective vision of the 'common good,' that possesses the capacity to transform the neighborhood place into an authentic community.

The type of democratic and participatory process needed to produce this 'new type of inner city community' will not happen automatically. It will occur only if there exists in the neighborhood a "community centered, conscious, advocacy-based catalytic institution," which operates democratically and has the capacity to unite all segments of the community into a collaborative, connected by a singular vision of what is "good" for the neighborhood.

This advocacy-based, catalytic neighborhood institution should work in a collaborative, interdisciplinary manner. Its goal is to make things happen and to drive the community building and neighborhood development process. It is best to think of this institution as a "community partnership," which brings groups together and works with them to make things happen in the community. The strategic plan is to build partnerships within the

community and between the community and significant public institutions throughout the region.

The community partnership (the catalytic neighborhood institution) works across sectors, rather than in any given sector, such as housing, economic development, health or urban education. It seeks to facilitate action by assisting the people, organizations, and institutions working in discrete areas. It brings groups together to engage in planning and working together and seeks to take the lead in problem solving and sustaining the neighborhood development effort. The central goal of the community partnership is to expand democracy in the community and to facilitate the development of a neighborhood vision of the "common good."

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The development of this vision of the "common good," it should be stressed, is not an event, but a process. It will evolve in an incremental, protracted manner. Neighborhood planning and visioning sessions are a good starting point, but it will take more than a few planning or visioning meetings to generate an authentic, neighborhood-centered notion of the "common good," one that is deeply rooted in the community. During the community development process, the vision of

the "common good" will deepen, and incrementally spread throughout the neighborhood, eventually becoming a guide – not a blueprint – to steer the community's social, economic, and physical development.

This approach to neighborhood development posits that community organization is the single most important dimension of community development. It also states that the dominant model of neighborhood development, which emphasizes housing and the physical development, while minimizing social organization and development, will have only limited success.

The social function model of neighborhood development stresses the social, physical, and economic development of communities. It differs from the physical development model in that it not only recognizes but emphasizes the critical role that residents must play in the re-creation and development of the physical neighborhood. Most important, the social function model stresses that the ultimate goal of community revitalization is to produce neighborhoods with a high quality of life, which are imbued with the values of participation, collaboration, cosmopolitanism, reciprocity, and social justice. It theorizes that only neighborhoods that socially function at a high level will be thriving, resilient, healthy, and sustainable.

Jersey Boys- Recreating A Lost Era in the Life of the American Working Class

By Mark Naison

Last night (March 22, 2008), my wife Liz and I saw "Jersey Boys" and we were not only moved by how well the show recreated the songs the Four Seasons did- all of which we knew and loved- but by the window the show offered into a vanished moment in working class life in America when tough white kids in city neighborhoods could dream of rock and roll stardom without the twin specters of war and racial upheaval turning their lives and their neighborhoods inside out and upside down.

The Four Seasons were an anomaly, an Italian American doo wop group whose greatest success came in the early Sixties rather than the Fifties. Produced by a black owned record company, Vee Jay, and marketed on the R and B charts as well as the pop charts, the Four Seasons produced hit after hit between 1962 and 1965 and then quickly turned into a nostalgia act for those left behind by the social movements of the of the late Sixties, none of which were rooted in the white, ethnic working class neighborhoods of eastern and mid-western cities



You could argue that the Four Seasons were the last example of an era when white working teenagers, especially Italian Americans, were cultural pace setters for America's youth, creating styles of dress and carriage and speech, as well as music, which even middle class kids wanted to emulate. They took elements of black urban style, in dress and carriage as well as music, and made them broadly accessible, by fusing them with a white working class sensibility and projecting a concept of urban cool that reflected an unspoken adherence to racial boundaries that governed dating and sociability even in multiracial cities. They came of age in a time when cultural exchange across the color line had not yet been infused with Civil Rights rhetoric and adopted black musical forms as their own without guile or affect. The result was music of breathtaking beauty and a simplicity that could not be sustained as America entered an era of Troubled Times.

When the Four Seasons broke up in the mid 60's, never again would a white working class singing group from the Northeast or the Midwest dominate the pop charts, and never again would white working class teenagers and young men be marketed in popular music as the embodiment of cool. As race riots, white flight and an unpopular war destroyed the stability of working class neighborhoods and left a legacy of bitterness, there were no longer urban spaces where the hopeful simplicity of the Four Seasons music could be recreated on street corners and in hallways.

When the show ended, I felt tremendous sadness, not only for the tragedies that befell individual members of the group- which included bad marriages, gambling debts, and near fatal run ins with the Mob- but for the passing of the world I grew up in and the Working Class America that I was part of, albeit briefly, which had a sensibility and a way of living which once set the pace for the entire nation.

I am not sure that the World we are living in now is a much better place.

Four Neighborhoods, One Community

By Kari Bonaro, Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus

What improvements would you most like to see in the Fruit Belt? That's the question being asked of community members in a partnership between the City of Buffalo, the Fruit Belt neighborhoods residents and business owners, and the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus (BNMC). This partnership, called Four Neighborhoods, One Community, is designed to help integrate planning efforts within Fruit Belt, Allentown, and Downtown neighborhoods with those on the BNMC to work toward a common vision of a city which is clean, safe, healthy, pedestrian and bike-friendly, accessible, and thriving. Consultants who have helped other cities achieve similar results are helping guide this process.

At two forums this spring community members gathered to talk about the changes they want to see in the Fruit Belt. Thank you to the residents, business owners, and community leaders who have participated in these

forums and provided valuable insight. Things mentioned include: more retail on High Street and other major thoroughfares; improved streetscape and infrastructure; better connections to jobs and workforce training; and a community center that builds on the many assets that already exist in the neighborhood.

The goal is to help craft a plan that can be used to make these changes and improvements really happen. Specific actions will be accompanied by an implementation strategy that identifies the 'who' and the 'how' this will all be achieved. The consultants will return later this summer to present to the community ideas for how to make this change a reality. In the meantime, if you have questions about the forums or would like an update on this process, please contact Mike Ball at (716) 881-8922 or email mball@bnmc.org or Allita Steward at (716) 851-5035 or asteward@city-buffalo.com.

St. John Baptist/Hospice Buffalo House Now Open

Submitted by Gina Maramag, Hospice Buffalo



St. John Baptist Church and Hospice Buffalo are pleased to announce that the St. John Baptist/Hospice Buffalo House opened July 8. The project is the nation's first residence for seriously ill patients developed jointly by a hospice program and a spiritual organization. Located at 111 Maple Street in Buffalo, the Hospice provides comfort and dignity for hospice patients who are unable to remain at home.



The 10,000 square foot Hospice House is a unique home-like setting. The House has 8 spacious private rooms, and a kitchen with a dining area where family members may cook special meals and dine together, and a family lounge. For more information, please call (716) 686-8000 or to schedule a private tour, please call (716) 819-2300.

