

# The Bright Future of Community Building

by Bill Traynor

We have not embraced the fact that our principal challenge now may be nothing short of creating newly functional civic environments and finding a way to entice people to step back into public life in a way that feels safe, fun, and productive.

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**I**N PAST DECADES, THE EMERGING INTEREST IN community building at the local level has challenged community-based organizations such as community development corporations (CDCs) to broaden their efforts and reconnect with residents and to retool and reexamine their relationship with, and role within, the communities they serve. Practitioners, funders, and policy experts have explored a broader approach to community redevelopment that includes an aggressive effort to redevelop the civic and social infrastructure alongside the physical infrastructure.

But while the field has been engineered to build the physical things place-based communities need—the new homes, community centers, small businesses—and, increasingly, to engage residents in those efforts, we have not created the resources to build the infrastructure of relationships and conditions to reweave a strong community by connecting people to one another

and removing the barriers to engagement in public life.

As powerful and effective as community development efforts have been in the past, we have not embraced the fact that our principal challenge now may be nothing short of creating newly functional civic environments and finding a way to entice people to step back into public life in a way that feels safe, fun, and productive. We need new thinking and practice that is based not in the traditions of community in the past but in the pace and flow of the new economy and the age of connectivity.

## Emergence of Community-Building Practice and "Community Organizing-Lite"

During the early 1990s, community building emerged as a supply-side strategy, fostered by foundations and others frustrated with the pace of change represented by the brick-and-mortar CDC approach. The goal: to use the same system that delivered bricks and mortar to deliver "community building." The idea was to reform supply-side institutions to become more responsive to residents.

Born from community organizing and driven

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by a local constituency, many of the early CDCs routinely packaged efforts like youth development, community organizing, and adult education within their real estate development work. For many years, however, biases among funders of community efforts, and among community development practitioners themselves, toward a housing production agenda made sustaining broad, activist approaches difficult. By the early 1980s, however, the CDC movement had become synonymous with affordable-housing development. At best, the major funders of CDCs viewed community-building work as ancillary to the real estate development work of CDCs. Alternatively, the few dollars available for community organizing flowed toward so-called pure organizing groups.

During the 1990s, attitudes shifted, and community-building practices became part of the mainstream CDC movement. Most major national foundations, and many regional and community foundations, sponsored their own versions of comprehensive community-building initiatives (CCIs), experiments in the fusion of community-building practice and community development. Many technical assistance organizations, consultants, and intermediary groups also got involved in this work in large numbers.

Driven by funding from powerful national and regional private foundations, the “CCI era” of the 1990s touched most of the country’s major metropolitan areas at one time or another. Though these initiatives differed in many ways, the essential premise was the same: to provide multiyear funding and technical support to existing community-based organizations (CBOs) to create comprehensive community change. These initiatives were somewhat successful in reforming CBOs to take on new work but also severely limited.

First, community-based groups remained preoccupied with a real estate development agenda, which is still viewed as these organizations’ bread and butter. The rules were changing and there were few organizations with the energy and capacity to take on the kind of organizational challenges which the community building work posed.

Second, a strong bias persisted, reflected in the labeling of real estate-related work as “hard” and non-real estate-related work as “soft,” in that the latter could not be effectively measured or

managed. Third, the principal community-building tool of the CCI era was a weak derivative of the traditional Alinsky style of community organizing, sometimes referred to as “community organizing-lite.” Genuine Alinsky-legacy organizers don’t recognize this practice as “organizing” and were loath to consider the community builders of the CCI era as organizers at all. CDC organizers often complained of a lack of support, direction, and understanding of the work within CDCs, leading to disjointed work and high turnover among organizers in the field.

The limitations of grafting community building onto a complex and fast-moving CBO and the ineffectuality of community organizing-lite proved daunting and led to questions about whether the CCI-era impact was worth the investment. In such an environment, even the best organizer supported by the best CBO had trouble breaking through the disinterest, distrust, and disenfranchisement of many urban neighborhoods. Ultimately, these community builders practiced approaches developed at another time on behalf of community institutions that were ambivalent about the role and purpose of community building. And their efforts took place when cynicism and the habits of detachment had never been more entrenched.

### Building Community in Place: Rethinking Views and Practice

An effective approach requires a clear view of the problem, and our principal failure as community builders over the past decade is that we have not fully come to terms with the depth and breadth of the problems faced in community building. Even those efforts that have recognized the importance of rebuilding civic infrastructure have launched strategies that assume a level of civic functioning that simply does not exist. Even community-organizing approaches, whose goal is to effect forms of collective action and representative democracy, depend on some functional level of community infrastructure that is hard to come by. That’s not to say that there aren’t motivated community members at work or functional institutions at the community level. Even if you can manage to marshal episodes of collective action and get “representative” voices on a board or task force, a disconnected array of individuals and institutions does not equal a functional community.



## Community Organizing Is Not Community Building

A major lesson of the CCI era is that whether or not it's community organizing-lite, it's probably not the right tool for the job of rebuilding community. Community organizing—at least the widespread Alinsky-legacy form—is a specific, tactical, and highly structured approach to building power and to confronting entrenched interests. It is fundamentally a political form designed to recruit and mobilize a small subset of the population to serve as a vanguard for change. This method of organizing was shaped by the ideological warfare of political parties and the labor movement in the beginning of the last century and further shaped by the cold war and, later, the civil-rights movement. Today, the best modern version of Alinsky-legacy organizing is entrenched in faith-based institutions, where “faith” serves as a proxy for weakened political and class-based ideology. But whether fueled by faith or ideology, the paradigm of “belonging” in these groups calls for levels of commitment, time, and belligerence for which many don't have the disposition and that many view as foreign to their experience.

This inorganic quality of Alinsky-legacy organizing is not, as some claim, solely because of its call for confrontation, which is admittedly a difficult leap for many people and an extraordinary leap for most CDCs. More troublesome is that the processes and habits we are left with, even in a barely derivative organizing-lite approach, are structured and tactical. The practice winnows “leaders” from the pack, engaging these leaders in narrow and formal leadership roles and encasing them in rigid and ideological structures that are designed to give the institution legitimacy.

Data shows that over the past few decades, people of all classes and races are fleeing structured, high affiliation-level organizations, as evidenced by the difficulty in getting traditional modes of organizing to take hold. In their place, Internet-based, communities-of-connection-type movements have emerged. This twenty-first-century paradigm for “belonging” has *market*-based rather than *political* roots: ideology is replaced by value, and loyalty is trumped by choice. The new kind of community “member” wants to be connected but not obliged, to be part of many but owned by none, and to commit care-

fully dispensed resources. Low-level affiliation (more akin to “club” membership than to vanguard membership), flexibility, provisionality, and informality are the hallmarks of the new membership organization. In these groups, the evidence doesn't suggest that people are less involved but that they are involved in a different way.

We need a new form of organizing that recognizes and capitalizes on the change in the nature of affiliation and that is designed to meet the challenges of building community infrastructure in place. This new community organizing approach has to aspire—not just to getting poor people represented in the supply side—or to yielding episodic moments of collective action, but to building a functional civic infrastructure that optimizes the aggregate contribution of all residents and stakeholders toward making that place work.

## Building the Demand Side of Community Engagement

I would like to offer an alternative logic model for understanding place-based community building. At the cellular level, place-based community begins with a single relationship of trust and mutual benefit in which one resident or stakeholder shares with another. It is the aggregate of those relationships—along with the loose connections that bind a diversity of them together—that forms, not community, but the *structural framework for community to exist*.

It is the cumulative capacity for collective decision making, problem solving, collective action, information sharing, and most important, the creation and exchange of value (e.g., time, goods, and services)—which this infrastructure facilitates—that ultimately constitutes a community.

At the cellular level in our communities today, fewer peer-to-peer connections exist than in the past. There are far fewer *organically grown* institutions that help these peer-to-peer connections form. And there are even fewer efforts explicitly designed to build the loose connections that help to weave peer-to-peer connections into a productive community infrastructure.

To take on the challenges that stand in the way of building genuine community, we need new thinking and practice. First, we must acknowledge that there is no shortcut to reaping the aggregate benefits of community without

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making an aggressive investment in building genuine community at the cellular level. At a minimum, this means investing in opportunities and space for peer-to-peer connections. It means enabling new forms of community institutions to emerge based on organic habits of connection and affiliation and exploiting the information infrastructure—the “roads and rails” of opportunity today—that even the poorest residents need to get connected to civic life. In short, this requires new efforts aimed at developing the “demand side” of community, guided by a different paradigm of community and community building—one that sees community as a marketplace and community building as a market-making strategy.

### Community Building as a Populist Economic Movement, Not a Political One

A good starting place is to view community—in even the most decimated places—as a latent marketplace of potential relationships and opportunities. It is governed, as marketplaces are, by the availability of value, choice, and access. In this way, community building can be attacked as a process of *popular economic mobilization* rather than as a vanguard political movement.

Some, including myself, see the formation of strong urban communities as a political act in an economic and political environment that would rather not hear from or respond to poor people, people of color, and their communities. But for those doing the day-to-day work of community building—meeting neighbors, getting involved in schools, or organizing cleanups—it is a simple matter of trying to *maximize the value of place for themselves and their families*. Our concern should be to support residents and remove the barriers to this process. A demand environment, full of people who are succeeding at this, will generate its own channels for political activism and invent its own institutions. In contrast, an environment full of those failing will not have this choice. Turning this latent marketplace into a potent one isn't easy. In today's urban communities, the process of “getting involved” is often difficult, boring, unproductive, and scary, especially for newcomers. So it's not surprising that most people don't and won't get involved. Community building needs to focus on changing this experience by reshaping the interface for thou-

sands of people—in a given place—to meet other people, build relationships of value, participate in civic life, and pursue individual and family economic goals. Simply put, community building has to build *habits of engagement* to replace the deeply embedded *habits of detachment* that dominate place.

Network forms are part of a new wave of thinking about engagement and connectivity in many environments. In marketing, national and state politics, and international movement building, the principles of network forms are taking hold and proving potent. These principles can be applied to place-based community building and create the following habits of engagement.

*Fun first.* The environment has to be welcoming, friendly, and fun. Community building is not all or even mostly business. It starts not with meetings but with activities like talking and eating. It is relationship building, and the business flows from the strength and the patterns of relationships that are built, creating the *roads and rails* for positive change at the community level.

*Low-level affiliation.* Unlike traditional organizing that challenges you to be all in or all out, the network seeks an explicitly low level of affiliation and assumes that this activity is but one of the many things you choose to be a part of. It accommodates members' other interests in life: family, faith, work, book clubs, and so on. The approach is more organic and in sync with the affiliation that now marks the information age. Instead of loyalty, ideology, or guilt, the network relies on value to attract members.

*Form follows function.* The forms of organization that dominate the network environment have to be informal, flexible, and action oriented. A network has to be responsive enough to move capacity where needed. In a network-organizing environment, two important principles shape the form an activity should take. The first is *form follows function*, where the group always asks itself, “What form best suits this function?” The upshot of this habit is that network members are organized in informal, provisional, and flexible groups where positional leadership titles are deemphasized, leaders change often, and the group is decidedly next-step focused. The second principle is *open architecture is best*. The groups embrace the idea that people will come and go, so the group should be perpetually acces-

sible to newcomers by holding onto a group's institutional memory while making the work and the deliberation accessible to new voices.

*The connector as leader.* In the network environment, leadership focuses more on being a connector than a spokesperson or even a facilitator; the connections mean everything. The more connected you are to other people, information, and opportunities, the more value you can extract from the environment. So in this context, there is no more valuable role than helping others to form and find those connections. Increasingly, members are trained to be "weavers," where a weaver has an honored and acknowledged leadership role in the network environment.

*Information-rich.* Self-navigation, peer support and exchange, and viral marketing are hallmarks of an effective network environment. For these attributes to be present, the environment must be information-rich. Access to good, timely information is one of the primary value propositions of membership in the network. Building a network environment therefore requires early and significant investment in communication and information technology and the reinforcement of member behavior focused on the dissemination of information. Effective network members are not relationship brokers but transmission nodes.

*Interactive spaces.* In a network approach, building place-based community shapes new places and forums for "bumping up" time. In a network, you want to create as many opportunities for people to bump up against one another as possible. This is advantageous to information sharing and relationship building. The problem is that opportunities that are too contrived or controlled diminish our critical ability to choose. But we can redesign the spaces and interactions that exist to be more conducive to peer-to-peer connections. Informal time can be programmed into meetings and events. Spaces can be redesigned to encourage intimacy. In many ways, the stoop, the sidewalk, the street, the alley, the next corner are the toughest frontiers for community building in dense urban areas.

*Diversity of people and choice.* In a network environment, the power of connection is directly related to the diversity of its membership and choice. The network organizer intentionally launches such connections through

diverse activities—programs, issues, projects—to attract a variety of people and offer a range of choice for involvement. Organizers also intentionally shape many levels of engagement, enabling and encouraging members to get only as involved as they want to be at any given time.

*Using collective and aggregate power.* A network environment exploits two kinds of accountability and mobilization mechanisms in order to (1) decide what is valuable to the members, (2) establish values and norms, and (3) articulate demand and move to collective action. Most CBOs and community-building activities rely on the deliberation of small numbers of people to establish credibility and make decisions. The network allows for that to happen as well but creates another dimension: the aggregate articulation of demand. As in a market environment, the network looks at the decisions (i.e., choices) that members make in order to understand what is valuable and what is needed moving forward. Also, the network can act like a consumer collective and use collective demand to shape the services that are available to struggling families. A network community-building approach invests in ways to "listen" to the network effectively to see and hear what members are doing with their time and energy and to understand what members want and value. An effective ability to track network activity is necessary to wield aggregate power.

There is latent power and effectiveness in urban communities that can be unleashed by the potency of robust networks of relationships. New thinking and practices must embrace rather than fear or ignore the challenge of rebuilding civic life. While cellular-level relationships are indeed built one by one, networks of relationships can grow exponentially if community builders and their allies stop worrying about defining the community and get busy in building it.

Have you observed these new community-building principles at work or used them in your own practice? Share your experience with the editors at [feedback@npqmag.org](mailto:feedback@npqmag.org). Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150105.

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