Intentional Community Building:
The Development of the Whitneyville Cultural Commons

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Although historically intolerance was an identifying characteristic of communities, can modern urban communities nurture inclusion and diversity? This paper takes a qualitative case study approach to analyzing the development of a community organization in an urban setting. As a non-profit, the Whitneyville Cultural Commons (WCC) serves as an example of an intentional civil society organization designed to serve the community of the surrounding neighborhood. By interviewing the leaders and members of the WCC community, I address the techniques this organization has used to strengthen itself and support the surrounding community in inclusive ways.

Keywords: intentional communities, community building, social capital, civil society organizations, civic organizations

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, political scientist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone* to much acclaim for his insights regarding a decades-long decline in participation in civic organizations within the U.S. The book popularized the concept of *social capital*—a concept parallel to material capital and human capital describing resources available to individuals, organizations, and communities in achieving goals. Where material capital results from physical resources and human capital results from skills, social capital is defined as the resources available because of interpersonal connections. Soon social capital was being studied in fields as diverse as international development (e.g. Abom, 2004), urban planning (e.g. Mouratidis, 2021), information science (e.g. De Reuver, 2018), marketing (e.g. Sheth, 2020), and public health (e.g. Elgar, Stefaniak, & Wohl 2020).

Because civic engagement and social capital are intertwined, Putnam argued that the decline of social capital threatened the very foundation of society. Democracy demands a citizenry willing and able to be involved in civic discourse and action. While the literature is clear that social capital is central to societal health, left unaddressed is *how to develop social capital*. How do civil society organizations form? What does it take to foster the trust, sense of belonging, and social connections so central to the development of social capital? How do we go about building a community?

This article answers these questions through a case study of a local community organization, the Whitneyville Cultural Commons (WCC). As one civic organization (a local church) passed away with its aging congregants, another took over the physical space with a similar priority of providing the local community a place to come together. Given the decline of civil society organizations over the previous decades (as documented by Putnam) one of the primary concerns of the WCC has been how to create a

structure that can last beyond its founders. But even with their preoccupation with survival, the organizers were focused on key elements of community building: common norms and values, a collective identity, and a common purpose.

While the literature on community building largely occurs within sociology, its connection to social capital makes it an interesting topic for political scientists and other scholars. Putnam's (2000) narrative traces the growth of U.S. organizations in the 1950s and 1960s followed by their decline beginning in the 1970s. In response, he argues for the re-creation of structures and policies to restore social capital. Beyond calling for "leaders and activists in every sphere of American life…[to] seek innovative ways to respond to the eroding effectiveness of the civic institutions and practices that we inherited" (2000, 403), Putnam does not address precisely how institutions can overcome American disengagement. By studying a modern civil society organization, I seek to fill that gap.

SOCIAL CAPITAL, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND COMMUNITY

Although the term "social capital" was used colloquially as early as a century ago (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009) to emphasize the importance of social networks for healthy communities, it gained academic credibility in the 1980s with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James S. Coleman (1988). Both scholars placed social capital in the company of other types of capital as a resource that yields benefits. Where Bourdieu focused on instrumental benefits in the context of class conflict, Coleman focused on the functionality of connections within a social structure to provide public goods.

Both Bourdieu and Coleman discussed social capital in terms of social networks, which has led other scholars to pull network theory into their understanding of social capital. For example, Aguilera and Massey (2003) addressed the impact of social capital on Mexican migrant workers by showing the connection between the size of their social networks with their employment and wages in the United States. In this context, social capital *cum* social network is a feature of individuals and benefits accrue to individuals. Similarly, one thread of the literature borrows terms from the network theory literature and distinguishes between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (e.g. Woolcock, 2001) as sources of different kinds of economic outcomes to individuals based on the expansiveness of their social network.

This focus on the individual obscures the *collective* aspect of the concept of social capital. Indeed, Coleman's (1988) goal in analyzing the concept was to provide a way to merge the individualistic approach of rational choice theory with the collectivist approach of theories of socialization. Thus, while Coleman used the language of network theory in describing closed and open networks, he did so in order to show how the structure of networks influences the norms, information flow, and trust that are actually the features of social capital. Putnam incorporated that collective aspect of social capital into his work. "Social capital refers to the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." As a political scientist, the connection to civic virtue seemed clear. "'Social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations" (Putnam, 2000 p. 19).

In early work, Putnam (1993) latched onto the concept of social capital initially to describe the role of citizen engagement in the efficacy of local governments in Italy, but soon realized the implications of the concept in American democracy (Putnam, 1995). Building off Coleman's work, Putnam defined social capital as "the features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (1995 pp. 664-65). Years earlier, Almond and Verba (1963) had argued that stable democracies require cultures with widespread participation in social organizations. Within the field of international relations, it is a commonplace that civil society organizations assist the process of democratization (c.f. Pinckney, Butcher & Braithwaite, 2022). In that context, it seems natural that Putnam would make the leap from social capital as membership in a social network to membership in civil society organizations.

By the time he published *Bowling Alone*, Putnam had collected data from a wide variety of sources (organizational membership records, time budget surveys, American National Election Studies, General Social Survey, among many others) documenting the decline of civic connections in the United States. In

tracing the decline of these measures of social capital, he addressed several possible causes, ruling out many of them and finally settling on four—two minor and two major. The two minor causes are pressures of time (connected to two-career families) and burdens of space (connected to suburban sprawl). The two major causes are technology (e.g. time spent with television and videogames) and generational change (the replacement of "the greatest generation" with their less involved children and grandchildren).

Putnam's historical account is reminiscent of an account of social change given by sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies a century earlier. As the industrial revolution encouraged workers to move to cities, Tönnies saw increasing isolation among members of society. Traditionally, communities occurred in agrarian villages people became close-knit out of necessity to provide for common needs and security (Murdock, 1949). In industrial times the emergence of large cities prompted sociologists to distinguish the workings of cities with those of traditional villages. Tönnies termed the dynamics of the traditional villages *gemeinschaft*, or community, and the dynamics of cities *gesellschaft*, or society. *Gemeinschaft* emerges out of the personal interactions of a group with familial relationships and a collective identity based on common sentiment and values. In contrast, *gesellschaft* allows more "rational" relationships to develop by choice within the marketplace, with a view to preserving an individual's identity through the protection of individual rights (Tönnies, [1887] 2002). For Tönnies, communities had the decided disadvantage of imposing rigid control over their members through the watchful eyes of friends and family members. Societies, in contrast, have the advantage of allowing the maintenance of individual choice and the pursuit of self-interest. Writing six years later, Emil Durkheim looked at the same phenomena and described them in terms of the strength of the ties holding them together: Communities are held together by "mechanical solidarity" because the means of production are homogenous and any one member is easily replaceable; societies, by "organic solidarity" because the means of production are complex and each member is dependent on others (Durkheim, [1893] 1984). Coming at the pinnacle of social Darwinism, both Tönnies and Durkheim saw the move toward *gesellschaft* and organic solidarity, respectively, as a natural step in the march of progress.

But looking at society within cities from a 20th century perspective, social scientists were not so sure if this step was either inevitable or desirable. The Kitty Genovese incident stood out as a case in point of the danger posed by urban life. The report, later discredited, was that Genovese was stabbed outside her apartment while her neighbors silently watched. Subsequently, the concept of the "bystander effect" emerged and fit into a broader discussion of the paradox of an increased sense of isolation in areas of high population density. Where Durkheim had originally applied the term *anomie* to mechanical societies in describing how norms breakdown as traditional societies fail to adapt, *anomie* increasingly became used to describe life in modern urban societies along with their attendant social isolation, apathy, and alienation.

In response, social scientists turned to the concept of community as a response. Community has been defined has having two elements: first, social ties that form an interconnected and mutually reinforcing web of relationships; second, a common commitment to shared norms and values (Etzioni, 1996). Scholars like Amitai Etzioni began promoting communitarianism as a way to offset the isolation imposed by urban life. In response to criticism that this approach was insufficiently respectful of individual rights, the thread of responsive communitarianism emerged in the 1990s to seek a balance between the ability of deep social ties to provide social order and responsibility and the individualist respect for liberty and individual rights (c.f. "The Communitarian Network," 2020). The communitarian movement has given birth to many intentional communities with the goal of providing residents access to systems of shared values. But the notion of community has implications beyond the lifestyles of communitarians.

The concept of community is at the heart of discussions about democracy and political efficacy. For example, Putnam's (2000) discussion of social capital focused on the need for social groups to build the personal resources necessary to be good citizens. Similarly, community organizers have become increasingly active in transforming a neighborhood's personal connections into networks supporting political action. The question for this research project is how to strengthen communities and empower their members. Tönnies identified intolerance as a negative factor of *gemeinschaft*, but his findings were based on looking at historically and geographically limited examples of communities. If we looked at urban

communities, would we find that they are actually capable of being tolerant? Is it possible that they could nurture inclusion and diversity?

METHODS

This is a qualitative case study of a single organization, Whitneyville Cultural Commons (WCC), to describe its approach to community building. Although eventually I will be conducting similar case studies of other community organizations in order to develop a comparative case study, the task of this paper to report on the dynamics of the creation and management of WCC in particular.

In the fall of 2023, I collected data through a series of open-ended interviews of leaders involved in the development of the WCC. In selecting informants, I first interviewed the founder of the organization and used snowballing sampling to identify other informants (Goodman, 1961). I interviewed the informants using Douglas' (1985) approach of interviewer as "handmaid" in relationship to the informant's role as "goddess" in order to encourage trust, openness, and honesty in the conversation. These informants shared the history of the organization along with their own perceptions of the elements of strong communities as related to WCC's persistence. As informants, these leaders are valuable in providing structural information regarding the organization (Seidler, 1974). Although the leaders were well-known to each other, each performed a different function for the WCC. As a result, their perceptions varied, allowing me to triangulate their responses and minimize individual biases.

I recorded and transcribed the interviews, storing them on my password protected laptop in order to assure confidentiality. Using a grounded theoretical approach, I analyzed the results using methods of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, [1967] 2009) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1988). The process was exploratory and qualitative. I sought broad thematic agreement and saturation in order to generate broad themes for analysis.

CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF WCC

The Whitneyville Cultural Commons (WCC) is in Hamden, Connecticut, two and a half miles up the road from the New Haven Green, in facilities originally built by the Whitneyville United Church of Christ (UCC), founded in 1834. Consistent with the principles of the UCC, that congregation had a long history of community outreach. For example, it sponsored a nursery school that was open to community members. It sponsored Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops for the community. It had an annual pancake breakfast for the community. It had seasonal festivals for the community. It hosted AA meetings. During WWII, it had bandage wrapping parties for the military.

In recent years, as the congregation aged and shrank, it was left without the membership to staff the community events and the financial wherewithal to maintain the structures. Jennifer Brosious had grown up in the congregation. Her mother had run the daycare; her father took control of maintaining the facilities; her brother was the treasurer. When she and her husband, Tamberlaine "Laine" Harris, returned to Connecticut, she reclaimed her seat in the congregation.

Harris was not a member, but as he saw the impact of the aging membership, he became concerned about the future of both the congregation and the buildings. The property is on Whitney Avenue—a major thoroughfare between New Haven and Hamden, Connecticut. He envisaged it being purchased by a business such as Dunkin as a potentially valuable commercial location. Alternatively, its view over Lake Whitney (the second-largest reservoir in the water authority's system) would make it a prime location for luxury condominiums. Harris saw neither alternative as conducive to the good of the surrounding Whitneyville neighborhood. And either option would mean the demolition of the historic buildings.

Harris set about building a relationship with the congregation as he considered ways to preserve the buildings for community use. He started attending services regularly to become better acquainted with the congregants. He built relationships of trust with them as he began to care for the building (even changing the lightbulbs!) and its members (running a soup and bread get together each week).

At the same time, Harris strategized alternatives purchasing the building. He had experience in real estate and construction, so he was familiar with the requirements both of purchasing the building and renovating the structures. He knew it would not be easy—there was no way he could get a bank loan for this project. But he did have equity in his home, his 401K, some personal IRAs, and some IRAs of his mother-in-law. The most viable plan was to have the church, rather than a bank, hold the mortgage. The congregation could continue to use the church building for weekly services; his monthly payments on the loan would cover their monthly expenses; and they could use the down payment to cover potential emergencies and any other congregation expenses, such as attending retreats.

Simultaneously, he began connecting with the neighborhood community to flesh out his plan for using the space. He envisioned transforming the space into some kind of community center. But that required discerning the kind of space needed and desired by the neighborhood. Harris had previously been involved with the neighborhood Whitneyville Civic Association (WCA) and knew various community leaders from there. He persuaded WCA leaders to host meetings in their homes with a wide-ranging group of neighbors to solicit feedback on how best to use the space to be an asset to the neighborhood. These meetings moved from homes to local businesses to space within the church as expanded beyond the Civic Association to include various local businesses and residents who were invested in the community. Harris' goal in these meetings was to cultivate immediate personal support and open the door to future financial support. All participants were interested in community building; all were interested in sustainability. Some were more focused on economic justice; some, on ecological sustainability; some, on social justice. It was a wide net, but they were all committed to nurturing the local community and Harris made them feel like shareholders in the future of the space.

One of the issues that he addressed was how to make the enterprise financially sustainable. Since he was committing his retirement funds to the purchase, he needed a return on that investment. WCC also needed regular income to cover the expenses connected with running and maintaining the space in perpetuity. Part of the brainstorming sessions addressed that issue. Additionally, Harris was inspired by a co-working space in New Haven called The Grove. At the time, he was unaware that it was sustained by grants, rather than the rents paid by the co-workers, and so his original plan included setting up co-working space in the former Parish House, now called "1253" for its address on Whitney Avenue. Harris was involved in music and dance groups, so he also envisioned using the collective spaces for cultural events.

Eventually the plan came together and the congregation got to the emotional and financial point where they realized that they needed to do something with the space—they could no longer continue as they were. After many meetings, they agreed to the plan to finance the purchase of their building in exchange for continued access to it for at least ten years. Thus, the Whitneyville Cultural Common came into being— initially under Harris's ownership and then under the ownership of WCC as a nonprofit organization established in 2015.

In the years since then, Harris's vision of the buildings as a community center has been refined. Although Harris initially envisioned the collective spaces being used for performances and dances, they are currently used for a wide variety of individual and group events and frequently get used to host gatherings of ethnic and racial groups that do not have their own physical spaces. In Harris's original vision, he saw the groups to which he was a member coming together in the space as what he called a "Venn diagram of communities." While his personal Venn diagram helped flesh out the initial plan for the community center, a whole new group of communities has actually come together in occupying and living out his vision of a community of community groups.

Ultimately, the co-working space proved not to be economically viable. That phase of development ended when a single computer programming business took over the entirety of the space. When that company became big enough and financially stable enough to find their own office space, WCC pivoted to provide defined office spaces for different organizations. These organizations rent the public event spaces as needed for their programming, rather than being charged for it in their regular rent, as would be the case in more standard office rentals. Such a strategy leaves the common space available to other groups to rent on an ad hoc basis. Given the success of the current model, the leaders of WCC are now working in and

with other communities to see whether their preservation of an historic space can be repeated elsewhere in building other community resource centers.

DISCUSSION

Among the leaders I interviewed, all had a special connection to the concept of community. Decades earlier, Harris had attended classes with Landmark Education (now Landmark Forum), an outgrowth of Warner Earhart's est program focused on businesses. The training stylizes itself as transformative in inculcating a sense of the possible. It encourages participants to see clearly what matters most to themselves about their personal, professional, and community relationships. For Harris, this included the understanding that what matters most to him is strengthening the communities in which he was embedded. In encouraging Harris to look at the overlapping communities to which he belonged, Landmark focused on the "originating circle," or those people who you interact with extensively every 30 days, who may well not be family members. Harris had taken what he learned in this training to heart. For several years he worked as a consultant using the principles to help business leaders achieve their goals. Once he moved to Connecticut, one of the communities to which he and Brosious belonged was a local yoga studio. When the owner wanted to retire to Colorado, Harris did not want to lose that community and so he worked out a way to purchase it and keep it running without the charismatic owner/instructor who had held it together previously. All of this is to say that coming into the decline of the church, community building was central to Harris' self-identity.

Other leaders displayed a similar commitment to community building. One leader stylized himself a communist with an interest in the development of third spaces—places other than home and work where people come together (Oldenberg, 1991). When Harris began working on transforming the church into a community center, this leader was traveling the country trying to figure out how to transform public libraries into community centers. The opportunity to work on WCC fit naturally into that desire. Another leader had grown up in a family that was active in a non-religious Jewish Cultural Society. She grew up valuing the strength of the inter-generational community. In her perspective, cultural organizations have the potential of compensating for the decline of religious institutions in combatting social isolation. A common thread between the leaders of WCC is the value they place on community and their commitment to building it locally.

In addition to being committed to community building, WCC leaders explicitly value diversity and social justice. For example, the non-profit's board of directors envisages the buildings' spaces as filling a gap in the needs of community organizations (especially diverse organizations) for physical infrastructure. Where privileged organizations might take for granted access to physical space to pursue their mission, less privileged groups frequently lack such space. As enunciated by its vision statement, "We envision a future where every community has valuable resources preserved for perpetual public use, with just and equitable access to enhance the quality of life for all" ("Our Story," n.d.). After the software firm left, the office space filled with social justice organizations from the area. These organizations have access to the collective spaces for their programming. The implementation of this refined vision aligns with the values articulated by the WCC board. In particular, the WCC upholds developing social capital as a key value as it seeks to "Nurture communal relationships as host to diverse civic forums, public and private social events, and spiritual and cultural traditions" ("Our Story," n.d.). WCC conceives of itself as a prototype of a community resource center. It sees itself as a central location where diverse groups and individuals from the surrounding neighborhood can go to find the space, tools, and information they need organize.

The last question raised by the interviews was my use of the word "intentional" in describing the community. One of the leaders was adamant that WCC is not an intentional community. For him, intentional communities could include book groups or, more likely, online groups, such as Discord, that form among and between already known associates with a specific goal in mind. He pointed out that that none of the groups that Harris identified in his Venn diagram of groups became regular patrons of WCC's resources. Instead, happenstance seemed a driving force. Initially people would see the work on the structures and stop by to see what was happening. Then, as those people used the facilities for their events, attendees

would see the potential in the space as filling a personal need for space for a wedding, party, or event planned by an organization to which they belonged. As WCC hosted more events, more participants became aware of it as a resource. Quite naturally, those most likely to find an attraction to the space were those who did not have space already easily available to them. This highlights an aspect of community that is not normally discussed within the social capital literature. The social networks, themselves, are not sufficient. Organizations need physical space to pursue their objectives. As a matter of equity, this means that community spaces have the potential of empowering under privileged groups.

In the case of WCC, Harris' outreach to the neighborhood did end up being useful in dealing with the town. Initially, the neighborhood support greased bureaucratic hurdles in handling legal issues. For example, when Harris discovered that the building sat on two different lots, he was able to get them joined because of the good-will he had already built. Later, that good will was essential for survival when the noise made by late night events became an issue. In particular, one night the facilities were being used for dance, which went too late and made too much noise. After WCC ejected the partiers, two participants engaged in a conflict that ended with gunshots. Unhappy neighbors called the police to end the altercation and then turned to city hall to place restrictions on activities at WCC. Harris was able to leverage the good will he had built with neighborhood leaders to intervene in the situation and soothe things over with city officials.

CONCLUSION

WCC explicitly presents itself as a community center with the goal of building social capital within the neighboring community. In contrast to Tönnies' depiction of the homogeneity of traditional gemeinschaft, WCC explicitly embraces supporting the needs of diverse community members in order to work toward social equity. A primary resource that they offer is physical space. From the perspective of community groups, the space allows their own members to organize and work together in bonding networks. But from the perspective of WCC, the space also allows the groups to bump into each other serendipitously—building bridging networks of people and ideas. This building of communities of communities reflects the value of social capital held by WCC, portraying it as a collective resource—the magnitude of which is much more than the sum of its parts.

This article is a case study of one community organization, which focused on space as a characteristic of community that supports the development of social capital. In the future I will be examining other community organizations with a focus on other characteristics of social capital, such as trust, norms, and values. With such a comparative case study, I hope to develop a better-rounded account of how communities form and how they support the development of social capital.

In the wake of the pandemic, the current case study shines a light on the need for physical spaces for community members to interact. Although it is possible to design digital spaces in which individuals interact and develop relationships, the serendipity of physical spaces is hard to replicate remotely. As leaders seek to strengthen their organizational communities, they would be well served by considering how to establish spaces for members to interact informally. Further, when considering how to engage diverse communities in public decision-making, it behooves political leaders to recognize that out-groups do not have ready access to space. An inclusive community requires a conscious commitment to overcome that disparity.

The current political polarization of the United States has bred disunity within and between communities. It has fostered disfunction within the bodies of government. It teaches an "us vs. them" mentality that sows discord everywhere. The prospect of intentionally diverse communities provides a potential response to that discord. Even if we are different, as we find common values, we can find space in which we can work together to solve social problems.

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