The Role of Institutions in Community Building: The Case of West Mt. Airy, Philadelphia

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The 1995 publication of Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” continues a long obsession among scholars with the loss of community. Early twentieth-century sociologists in Chicago detailed how urban life eroded the fabric of the kinship ties that formed the basis of community in rural society. Several decades later, students of urban life lamented the passing of ethnic neighborhoods, which they saw as the core of the urban community. Currently, we are told that rapid advances in technology have rendered place almost irrelevant in many circumstances. Complementing this is the research on social networks that has demonstrated the rich existence of spatial communities. Given these trends, the question facing us is, Can we have geographically based communities?

This chapter begins with the assumption that such community is possible and that it can be found in many instances. Moreover, there is growing evidence that spatial communities are desired by significant segments of the population. Numerous surveys have revealed that, given a choice between city, suburb, small town, or rural area, most people prefer to live in a small town. The reasons behind this choice are presumably the face-to-face contact, the informality, and the ability to know all of one’s neighbors. Trends in housing suggest an effort by some developers to respond to these desires. The new urbanism seeks to recreate the small town feel by combining residential development with a town center that serves as the social and commercial magnet for the residents. The largest and most well documented example of this trend is Disney’s Celebration in Kissimmee, Florida. Although
we are not optimistic about the new urbanism’s ability to create community, we do not discount the impact of spatial design on community. Our objections center more around the implicit assumption that community can be created instantaneously.

Community does not spring full blown from the mouth of Zeus. Rather, some mechanism is required to bring residents together in a meaningful way over a sustained period of time. In the absence of the primordial ties of kinship, as in the rural communities studied by the Chicago School sociologists, or the ties of ethnicity, as in the older urban communities, some entity must be present to create and sustain community. Increasingly that entity is neighborhood institutions. By performing critical functions, neighborhood institutions can maintain key ingredients of community, such as a sense of belonging; an identity; positive ways to interact with others; shared events and activities; common values; and loyalty.

This chapter examines the role of neighborhood organizations in performing community-building functions. The term “community building” is used to capture the dynamic quality that characterizes this phenomenon. Community building is not an end, but rather is an ongoing process that must be continually cultivated. We examine the role that neighborhood organizations have played in providing the following critical components of community building: furnishing opportunities for participation and collective action on a regular basis over a sustained period of time; creating social arenas; creating formal and informal networks; creating and sustaining community identity; creating bridging capital.

The examination is based on a case study of the Philadelphia neighborhood of West Mt. Airy, a neighborhood selected because of its rich institutional history and its reputation as a viable community with a strong sense of community identification. Although West Mt. Airy, because of its relatively affluent and racially diverse population, is not representative of most neighborhoods, it provides a rich empirical base from which to examine the role of institutions in community building. The lessons learned from this case study can inform institutional development and community-building efforts in other neighborhoods. The analysis is based on a series of semistructured interviews with personnel from numerous institutions in and near West Mt. Airy and community activists; a review of organizational materials, files, and literature; and a review of news clippings from local and citywide papers.

THE SETTING: WEST MT. AIRY

West Mt. Airy, a neighborhood in the northwest section of Philadelphia, has achieved national acclaim for its long-standing racial diversity. Although one of the authors explored that aspect in another article, the focus here is on community and the role that institutions play in community
building (Ferman, Singleton, and DeMarco 1998). Obviously, some of these organizations were critical players in West Mt. Airy’s ability to remain a racially diverse community. Thus, on the most fundamental level—community preservation—these organizations played a pivotal role. To the extent that these organizations have helped to shape and reinforce a specific identity for West Mt. Airy, they continue to play a significant role in community building.

As is evident from the data in Table 5.1, West Mt. Airy is not representative of most urban neighborhoods. Data on the critical indicators of education, income, and home ownership levels reveal that West Mt. Airy is a community whose socioeconomic status is significantly higher than the median for Philadelphia and for the nation as a whole. Home to many doctors, lawyers, elected officials, and academics, the base of West Mt. Airy’s affluence is strongly rooted in professional occupations. And, these are occupations that tend to attract a disproportionate number of individuals with liberal political leanings. Consequently, our findings regarding institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.1</th>
<th>Selected Characteristics for West Mt. Airy, Philadelphia, and the United States, 1990</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West Mt. Airy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>13,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%African American</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%White</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>%Latino</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>%HS graduate or higher</td>
<td>73.6–97.9%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%BA or higher</td>
<td>36.0–71.9%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (in 1989)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Median Household</td>
<td>$31,482–72,087*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Family</td>
<td>$41,186–84,130*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Persons below poverty</td>
<td>7.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%Owner-occupied</td>
<td>41.3–95.9%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Value of owner-occupied</td>
<td>$86,000–195,000*</td>
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</tbody>
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*These two figures represent the lowest (census tracts) to the highest.

Source: 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing.
are not necessarily generalizable, but that is not the intention here. Rather, this case represents an exploration into how institutions can contribute to community building and community maintenance. We purposely chose West Mt. Airy because of its richness of institutions and its reputation for being an active and viable neighborhood. It is active in that the opportunities for participation are plentiful, and they are opportunities that are enjoyed by large segments of the population. It is viable in the sense of having a strong and active housing market and a very positive reputation within the city, and even beyond the city's formal boundaries. Using a community like Mt. Airy for heuristic value allows us to identify some of the roles that institutions can and do play in community building. These findings can then be applied to other communities, with different demographic profiles, to see under what conditions institutions can play such roles. Part of our thinking along the lines of the heuristic value of such a case study is inspired by Leanne Rivlin's (1987) insightful and innovative comparison of the Lubavitch community and the homeless community, two extremes of cohesion.

Before proceeding with the analysis, some clarification regarding the precise role of community is warranted. This term, and all its iterations (community empowerment, local decisionmaking, individual choice, and the like), has been warmly embraced by liberals and conservatives alike, but for vastly different reasons. For liberals, it bespeaks notions of grassroots democracy, citizen participation, and empowerment of typically marginal groups in American society. For conservatives, the emphasis on community is often part of an overall assault on government. Community action becomes a justification for government retreat. We would like to clarify our position up front. We strongly believe in the need for government support. While there are tasks that are better performed by community organizations than by government bureaucracy, the assumption that these organizations can solve the vast problems that have gripped many of our inner-city neighborhoods is naive at best, and totally disingenuous at worst. Major problems require major solutions. Government, not community organizations, has the resources to address problems on such a grand scale. We see community institutions as supplementing, not supplanting, the work of government.

INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING: DEFINITIONS AND ROLES

In attempting to define "community" one is reminded of the wise sage's advice: "never discuss politics or religion." The number of perspectives, interpretations, and reinterpretations of community can be unmanageable at best, and extremely contentious at worst. Researching the sociological literature more than 40 years ago, George Hillery, Jr., identified 94 separate definitions of the term "community" (Hillery 1955). Rather than add still
another definition, we have drawn upon the rich body of literature in community studies to distill salient characteristics of community building.

In searching this literature, we were guided more by sociological and anthropological conceptualizations than by strictly political, geographic, or institutional definitions. Thus, the existence of ward boundaries does not, in our minds, automatically translate into community. Similarly, the drawing of service delivery boundary lines by governmental entities no more creates community than does a child's playful drawing on a map. These artifacts of politics and government may influence how communities form and function, and indeed they do, but, by themselves, they lack any significant meaning for community. Rather, it is what occurs, or fails to occur, within those externally imposed boundaries that constitutes community. Thus, community implies, at a minimum, a dynamic quality that is lacking in the above configurations.

This dynamic quality of community has been well captured in the works of many leading urban scholars. Albert Hunter suggested that communities had three fundamental dimensions, two of which—symbolic and social—clearly contain this dynamic feature. His notion that communities are units of "patterned social interaction" brings a strong behavioral component into the equation (Hunter 1974). For Roland Warren, the term "community" implied a psychological as well as a geographical component. Within the psychological realm, community meant "shared interests, characteristics, or association" (Warren 1973, 6). In developing his typology of neighborhoods, Warren identified three dimensions on which the types varied: interaction, identity, and connections (Warren 1971). This relational aspect of community is also prominent in the work of Herbert Gans. The social attachments that individuals formed were, in Gans's conceptualization, much more important than where these individuals were geographically located. Moreover, these attachments did not necessarily correlate to dwelling patterns (Gans 1962). A more recent and more systematic development of this concept of a-spatial communities can be found in the work of network theorists Barry Wellman, Barry Leighton, and Claude Fischer. In responding to the whether the community literature, Wellman and Leighton argue for a clear delineation between neighborhood and community. Neighborhoods are purely geographic entities that may or may not contain communities. Communities, on the other hand, are characterized by an expansive assortment of social interactions that may or may not be geographically rooted. Increasingly, they argue, these networks are a-spatial (Wellman and Leighton 1979).

While these scholars vary in terms of which factors they emphasize and the breadth of their investigations, there exists enough overlap and complementarity from which to deduce a list of critical components of community. It is clear, for instance, that any definition of community will rest on a dynamic conception that includes at least the following components: a sense of
attachment and belonging; a sense of identity; the existence of regular social interactions; shared activities, values, and events; some continuity regarding values and norms; and formal and informal networks. In fact, of the 94 definitions of community uncovered by Hillery (1955), 69 included the common characteristics of “common ties” and “social interaction” (Lyon 1987). The question now becomes, What activates these components of community in a given geographic area? What creates the opportunities for participation, for the formation of identities, for the development of networks, for the creation of social arenas? Institutions, we contend, can be a major impetus for these occurrences. Using West Mt. Airy as our case study, we examine how institutions can perform these roles and, in so doing, play a critical role in community building.

INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING: THE CASE OF WEST MT. AIRY

West Mt. Airy has benefited from a plethora of institutions. Secular and religious in nature, these institutions have helped to shape, nurture, and maintain a strong community. The sheer number of institutions and the diversity of activities and orientations they represent, have provided a wealth of opportunities for participation among residents and contributed to West Mt. Airy’s image as an activist, liberal, diverse, and tolerant community. The image has a self-perpetuating quality in that it helps to attract home buyers and renters who share the values represented by the image. The overlapping memberships in organizations and on organizational boards has created a density of both formal and informal networks that strengthens the relational aspect of the community. The activities of many institutions have stimulated the development of a wide array of vibrant social arenas. Finally, the external ties of many of these institutions, in particular, the religious ones, have provided the bridging capital that links the community to the larger political, social, and economic universes.

Participation

Participation is the fundamental hallmark of a democratic society. Political theorists from Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill to contemporary communitarians have focused on the “redemptive” aspect of participation. According to Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) this “redemptive” aspect manifests itself in three distinct ways. First, participation “nourishes democracy” by educating individuals in how to become good citizens. Second, participation contributes to community building by linking the individual to the state. Finally, participation forces institutions to be more responsive thereby enhancing the overall democratic nature of the government (Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993).
Although Americans enjoyed universal suffrage earlier than other democratic nations, voter registration and turn-out rates, the conventional measures of citizen participation, are appallingly low. Some scholars have argued, however, that we need to pay attention to other indicators of participation such as involvement in institutions. The argument maintains that this type of participation is more meaningful in terms of the redemptive aspects outlined above. Voting is a solitary activity whereas participation in institutions forces face-to-face interaction, which in turn helps to impart skills of deliberation, compromise, and cooperation. Unfortunately, the evidence for this type of participation is equally dismal. In the oft-cited piece, “Bowling Alone,” Robert Putnam (1995) lamented the overall decline in civic engagement in American society. Using citizen participation in local institutions as one indicator of civic engagement, Putnam produced his alarming conclusions. Efforts to explain this phenomenon of declining participation, by Putnam and others, have focused on a variety of factors, including political—an increasing distrust in government and, by extension, any form of public life; cultural—the strong privatistic attitude of Americans that deters such participation; and sociological—the changing lifestyle of Americans, which features a diminishing amount of free or leisure time—ones. When these factors interact, the results for civic engagement can be quite bleak.

While these observations are certainly valid, absent from the above list is the role of institutions themselves. Institutions can and do play a role in encouraging participation. Moreover, institutions vary in the degree to which they encourage, or discourage, participation. Social service-oriented institutions, for instance, often establish a “patron-client” relationship in which participation is not even a relevant consideration. While the services provided by such institutions are often critical, the relationship that is established does not contribute to civic engagement or community building. In other cases, institutions may be comprised of individuals from outside the community, thereby diminishing the institution’s role as a channel for community participation. Finally, the internal structure of an organization may be such that it is dominated by a small circle of elites, and this does not provide avenues for participation beyond that small circle.

In addition to type and internal structure of the individual organization, the overall mix of organizations found within a community is an important determinant of levels and breadth of participation. This is particularly important in more diverse communities. The more the opportunities for participation mirror the diversity within the community, the broader and more extensive the participation is likely to be.

In short, neighborhood organizations can play a critical role in encouraging participation. However, their effectiveness in this role will depend on numerous factors, including the total number of organizations; the overall mix of organizational types; and the internal structure of individual organizations. One can see these factors at work in West Mt. Airy.
West Mt. Airy has a large number of organizations reflecting a wide array of interests. As one community resident observed, "West Mt. Airy is an incubator for organizations. Anyone can come up with an idea and within a few days they have a group of people together to start an organization" (Interview). While this observation may be a bit of an exaggeration, data on the number and type of organizations within the community confirm the spirit in which the observation was made. In an ongoing study of arts and cultural organizations in West Mt. Airy, Stern and Seifert (1998) identified between 85 and 100 organizations in the community. A cursory examination of their list revealed an extraordinary breadth of organizations: religious; local library; home and school association; recreation/athletic group; neighborhood improvement; cooperative; business association; social service; continuing education; social, political, or special interest group; garden, park, or nature; and arts, cultural, or historic group. Moreover, each of these categories can be further subdivided, revealing the rich diversity of organizations that exist within the community. For instance, the category of religious institutions includes both major denominations and less mainstream ones such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and Oromo, an Ethiopian congregation (Stern and Seifert 1998).

The diversity of organizations is conducive to high levels of participation. According to Stern and Seifert (1998), 87 percent of the residents they sampled had participated in at least one community event or activity in the prior year. While this figure does not provide any information on frequency of participation, it nevertheless suggests that a fairly large segment of the population has been reached by community organizations.

The internal structure of most of the institutions in West Mt. Airy further encourages participation. Unlike the "patron-client" relationship alluded to above, each of the organizations that we examined had a strong level of openness to input from community residents. This "participatory" model is a function of both the membership base of the organizations and the non-hierarchical structure of decision making that characterized these organizations.

The majority of organizations in West Mt. Airy draw their staff, board membership, and, where applicable, general membership from the community. West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN), created in 1959 and, for a long time, the "institutional voice" for the community, is a civic association whose total membership resides within the community. Most of Weavers Way Food Co-op's 42 paid staff persons live within one mile of the store while 14 of its 17 board members live in West Mt. Airy (Interview). Similarly, most of the board members of Mt. Airy Learning Tree (MALT), an organization providing an extensive array of adult education courses, live in the community. In the case of the Co-op and MALT, board members set policy for their respective organizations. MALT's board members also have significant input into programming decisions, course selection, and teacher
recruitment. The increase in MALT's class enrollments and course offerings over the years indicates some correlation between how the board members represent the community's educational interests and what the community wants. Approximately 35 percent of MALT's course registrants live in West Mt. Airy. Co-op staff and board members have conducted focus groups within the community in order to gauge the demand for different types of products. Input is encouraged through other channels as well, including suggestion boxes and word of mouth. As with MALT, the Co-op has experienced an increase in its overall membership. Current membership stands at 2,700 households, a 17 percent increase over membership rosters from 10 years ago (Interview). For both organizations, the increase in membership reinforces the sense of "community ownership" of these institutions, which, in turn, can potentially stimulate more participation.

This sense of "community ownership" of institutions is critical. Not only can it lead to increased participation for the individual organizations, but it lends an overall sense of participation to the entire organizational infrastructure and, by extension, the community. Even those organizations that draw on the larger Philadelphia area for participation, such as Allen's Lane Art Center, the Co-op, MALT, and Germantown Jewish Centre, are perceived as "Mt. Airy institutions."

The non-hierarchical, participatory demeanor of local organizations is reinforced by some of the religious institutions as well. The Germantown Jewish Centre accommodates several lay-led congregations. Moreover, its emphasis on the formation of minyanim (small fellowship groups) encourages participation by members in a broad range of activities. The Unitarian Society of Germantown became a "Welcoming Congregation" (it officially welcomes gay, lesbians, and transgender people) in response to a member's request to the minister. This request led to the formation of an ad hoc committee, a series of educational forums, and an eventual vote, favoring such designation, by the entire congregation (Interview).

The number, diversity, and internal structure of organizations in Mt. Airy facilitate participation among community residents. For those who want to participate, the opportunities are many and quite varied. Moreover, many institutions, such as WMAN and the Co-op, actively solicit participation from community members. Despite the existence of numerous and varied opportunities for participation, not all West Mt. Airy residents (not even a majority of residents) participate regularly in the institutional life of the community. However, this does not detract from the overall point of Mt. Airy being a community in which institutions provide many avenues for participation. As with the debates over participatory versus representative democracy, full participation, on a large scale, is neither possible nor, at times, desirable. Rather, there needs to be some "threshold" of participation below which the organization, or, in the case of a community, the civic infrastructure, ceases to be viable. This threshold has both practical and
symbolic components. On a practical level, a certain number of individuals are needed to tend to the basic duties/needs of an organization. Symbolically, a healthy threshold of participation creates an image of stability and viability that attracts others to participate in the organizational life of the community. In turn, this creates the energy for further organizational development. Thus, what is important is that the avenues for participation remain open, attractive, and viable.

Identity

Identity is important to community for a variety of reasons. According to Suttles, it is one of the two most fundamental elements of the urban community, the other one being boundaries (Suttles 1972). A community’s identity is critical in determining its overall marketability as a place to live. A community that is identified with high levels of crime and violence and falling property values will have a difficult time attracting new investment to the area. Identity can also influence the types of people who seek to live in a given community. An identity centered around family living, for instance, will probably not attract too many young single individuals. Conversely, a community whose identity is closely associated with the attributes of urban pioneering is less likely to attract families with children. Thus, in the aggregate, identity is bound up with the overall economic value of a community and its social complexion.

On a more individual level, identity provides residents with a common element, making them members of the same group or community. The sense of “belonging” to a larger group also reinforces the individual’s personal identity while providing a motivation for collective action (Chaskin 1995). Finally, a community’s identity sends a message to the outside community attracting those individuals who seek a similar identity. Operating as a de facto marketing tool, community identity becomes mutually reinforcing by attracting like-minded people to the area.

In his examination of the formation of such collective identities, Suttles suggested that they are typically developed through a process of contrast with other groups: “residential groups gain their identity by their most apparent differences from one another” (1972, 51). This being the case, one can speculate that the greater the differences, the stronger will be the identity. The case of West Mt. Airy seems to support this hypothesis. West Mt. Airy is viewed as a very distinct neighborhood within the city of Philadelphia. This distinction has reinforced its identity, making it an even more attractive neighborhood to a certain segment of the population.

West Mt. Airy has a distinct identity as a diverse, liberal, and tolerant community, with a very activist, friendly, and highly educated population. Much of this identity comes from the community’s early struggles with racial change and the subsequent institutional response. The institutional re-
sponse, in turn, created a legacy of institutional development within the community that, in terms of numbers and types of institutions, further reinforces the community's overall character.

When blacks first began moving into the area in the 1950s, there was the typical response of fear, panic selling, block busting, and the like. Alarmed by the prospects of wholesale resegregation, several of the religious institutions in the area joined together to form the Church Community Relations Council of Pelham. The members of the council conducted door-to-door campaigns, held community meetings, worked with the public schools, and used their congregations to persuade residents to remain in the community. One of the organizational developments that came out of these early efforts was the formation of West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN). Founded in 1959 by an interracial group of 50 families, WMAN exerted pressure on real estate agents to cease their destructive practices, successfully lobbied the city council for passage of several critical ordinances, used zoning tools to prevent the subdivision of large houses or their conversion to institutional usage, worked closely with the public schools and parents, and conducted the community forums. Over the years, WMAN has significantly expanded the scope of its activities, becoming deeply involved in business efforts and social activities (Ferman, Singleton, and DeMarco 1998). As a civic association, WMAN's early forceful activities in the area of race relations, combined with its interracial membership, contributed in no small part to the community's overall image of diversity, tolerance, and liberal-mindedness.

In addition to WMAN, other institutions have played critical roles in promoting racial diversity as part of the community's overall identity. Allen's Lane Art Center, founded in 1953, was designed to bring people of different races together through the arts. An outgrowth of the Henry Home and School Association (the parent-teacher association), Allen's Lane Art Center was also seen as a mechanism for reducing racial tensions in the school. Allen's Lane sponsored the city's first interracial day camp, setting an important tone for subsequent efforts by other organizations. The Lutheran Seminary has been working with the public schools on issues of diversity. And, while most of the religious congregations remain segregated, there are several that have racially diverse memberships. Finally, the national and local media have been critical institutions in terms of reinforcing the community's image as a diverse place to live. The most oft-cited piece, "Mount Airy, Philadelphia," which appeared in U.S. News and World Report in 1991, chronicled the history of West Mt. Airy's successful efforts at preserving a racially integrated community. Locally, West Mt. Airy has been covered quite favorably in newspaper articles and Philadelphia Magazine feature stories (Ferman, Singleton, and DeMarco 1998). Within the community, the Mt. Airy Times Express displays the community's diversity through its profiles section. This section, which began in 1991, features a different resident...
and his/her accomplishments each issue. The underlying objective is to portray the diversity of individuals who comprise the larger community (Interview). Since many of these individuals are engaged in some type of progressive cause, it also reinforces West Mt. Airy's liberal and activist identity.

West Mt. Airy's image as a diverse community extends beyond race. Here again, numerous institutions have played major roles. During the 1970s, the Germantown Jewish Centre welcomed a number of alternative prayer groups and other fellowship groups from Mt. Airy. As a result, the Centre became host to three different congregations, two of which are lay-led. This practice of accommodating multiple congregations is rare for synagogues. As previously noted, the Unitarian Society of Germantown recently became a Welcoming Congregation, accepting gays, lesbians, and transgender people into the congregation.

The community's reputation for liberalism, tolerance, and diversity is further strengthened by a willingness, some would say desire, to experiment with alternative approaches to ordinary practices. The community boasts many different types of cooperative arrangements. The most well known, of course, is Weavers Way Food Cooperative whose membership includes roughly half of the households in West Mt. Airy (Interview). The Co-op's inventory, which includes organic foods, health foods, and items produced in third world countries, further reinforces the "alternative" image associated with shopping there. Project Learn is a K–8th grade school cooperative. Started 28 years ago by parents who were frustrated with the public schools, Project Learn takes a liberal and relatively unstructured approach to education. It is governed by a board comprised of the parents with all decisions reached through a consensual process. Cooperative arrangements also exist for daycare, pre-school, and baby-sitting activities. The community is also home to at least two credit unions. Finally, efforts are currently underway to set up a second food co-op in the neighborhood (Interview).

The liberal and activist image is further bolstered through the social justice mission of numerous institutions. The Northwest Interfaith Movement (NIM), which includes 35 congregations, grew out of the urban ministry movement of the 1960s. Founded in 1969, its mission is "to build a more just and sensitive community through advocacy and service" (NIM, Mission Statement). Similarly, the Unitarian Society of Germantown, through its social action committees, embodies a social justice mission.

These social justice missions have manifested themselves in concrete activities and programs that further reinforce the larger community's identity. NIM has directly and indirectly helped to develop several organizations, including Northwest Meals on Wheels (1974), Northwest Victims Service (1982), the Delaware Valley Community Reinvestment Fund (1984), and the Energy Coordinating Agency (1988). NIM, the Unitarian Society of Germantown, and the Germantown Jewish Centre all participate in the
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Northwest Interfaith Hospitality Network, providing shelter and services for homeless families on a rotational basis. The Unitarian Society of Germantown is also a member of the Interfaith Coalition for General Welfare, a group that advocates for people affected by welfare changes.

Although not integrated within the community in any meaningful way, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness of Philadelphia is also located in West Mt. Airy. Despite being relatively isolationist, the mere presence of this Hari Krishna group in West Mt. Airy reinforces the image of a tolerant, diverse community that is supportive of alternative life styles. Other organizations that would fall into this category include the Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America; Technology for Social Change; the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses; and the Japanese American Citizens League. 17

In sum, West Mt. Airy boasts a large number of organizations that, by virtue of their missions, demographic make-up, activities, and programs, reinforce the community's identity as one in which diversity is promoted, tolerance is practiced, and liberal political and social values dominate.

Networks

A community identity that is built around the active participation of residents in local institutions is likely to encourage the formation of formal and informal networks. Networks, according to Wellman and Wartley (1990, 359), create and build social support between individuals. These networks are important because the social support they build lies at the core of community. Moreover, network formation creates and expands social capital as networks facilitate trust and create norms among participants. On an individual level, networks are important for the social resources they contain. The more extensive and diverse one's networks are, the more access that individual will have to social resources. Indeed, Granovetter (1973) argues that "weak ties," that is, networks that form bridges outside of primary relationships, expand access to social resources.

West Mt. Airy contains an abundance of formal and informal networks. Formal networks are intentionally created through institutional mechanisms such as organizational bylaws, established coalitions, or formal arrangements between organizations. In general, formal networks are organizationally based and are created to address a specific purpose or concern. Informal networks exist between individuals, whether at work or in the community, and provide individuals with social support (Goode and Schneider 1994). These informal networks are often byproducts of an individual's participation in a formal network. Conversely, informal networks often give rise to formal networks. As noted above, residents often create new institutions in response to an idea, thereby formalizing a previously informal network. In addition, institutions create networks through organizational cooperation.
Organizational subcommittees, for example, work with other institutions with similar orientations. In these circumstances both formal and informal networks are created.

The high participation levels found in West Mt. Airy, both at the macro- or community-wide, level (i.e., institutional presence in the community) and at the micro-level (i.e., resident participation in individual organizations), contribute to the formation and sustainment of a rich array of networks. The number of community-based institutions, combined with the diversity of interests served by these institutions, has significantly bolstered this system of networks within the community. Although the source of this network formation is equally rich and varied, the discussion here is limited to just a few of the major sources: the sharing of building space and facilities; interlocking directorates of local organizations; institutional joint ventures; and community-wide activities.

The sharing of facilities leads to the formation of formal networks while creating the opportunity for informal networks to develop as well. On a formal level, the sharing of space necessitates a process of negotiation and formal agreements between two or more organizations that might not otherwise interact. The negotiation process, to the extent that it involves individual members of the respective organizations, creates the possibility for informal network development. Moreover, the physical act of sharing space brings individuals who are working on different projects into close proximity. Such an environment serves as a natural incubator for a sharing of ideas, a discussion of issues, and, eventually, the formation of formal and informal networks. WMAN, EMAN (East Mt. Airy Neighbors), and MALT, for instance, are located in the same building where they share office facilities. This spatial dimension has facilitated the development of many joint ventures, particularly between WMAN and EMAN.

The sharing of facilities is quite common in West Mt. Airy. Many organizations with large buildings allow others to use their space at a discounted price or, in some instances, for free. Summit Presbyterian Church, for instance, provides space to many organizations, including secular ones, at reduced rates. Many organizations go beyond their institutional mission, for instance, religion, to form networks with organizations geared toward community building. The Germantown Jewish Centre permits the Weavers Way Food Cooperative to use its building space for membership meetings. Again, not only is the use of facilities important, but the diversity of users is also.

This sharing of facilities is not limited to established organizations. The Mt. Airy Learning Tree, for instance, which conducts classes throughout Northwest Philadelphia, has held classes in individuals' houses. MALT board members, teachers, students, and other community members have either volunteered their own space for classes or have helped to secure it elsewhere. In the process of securing space elsewhere, these individuals indirectly contributed to the expansion of MALT's networks. This process of
unaffiliated "third parties" contributing space underscores the importance of "weak ties," a commodity in strong supply in West Mt. Airy.

A second major source of network formation is interlocking directorates. Organizational boards in West Mt. Airy contain significant overlap, with individuals simultaneously serving on three or more organization boards. These networks, in turn, help to create an institutional coherence, as information about institutions and their activities is easily transmitted across these networks.

The existence of interlocking directorates, combined with the sharing of physical space, facilitates joint ventures between organizations. As noted above, WMAN and EMAN have undertaken many joint ventures over the years. The two most publicized are Mt. Airy Day and Art Jam, community-wide celebrations that enlist the efforts of nearly all the organizations and many residents as well. These highly visible joint ventures have been supplemented by many other types of activities, including those concerned with education, crime and safety, and business revitalization. Many of these joint ventures have been accomplished through the committee structure of the two organizations. WMAN and EMAN have one education committee that has worked closely with the public schools in the community and with the Home and School Associations of the various schools. In the process, additional networks, both formal and informal, have been created. The beautification committee, also a joint venture of WMAN and EMAN, has worked with the Mt. Airy Business Association and Mt. Airy USA (the community development corporation—CDC—for Mt. Airy) on issues pertaining to the revitalization of Germantown Avenue, the major commercial strip in the community.

Participatory community institutions promote network formation, and, concomitantly, contribute to, and sustain, community building. Local institutions promote formal networks through their various committees, joint ventures, and sharing of physical space. They also create informal networks through the sponsorship of community-wide events that bring individuals together to work on achieving common goals. Both types of networks are built on and reinforce a larger community identity based on civic engagement.

Social Arenas

While related to networks, social arenas have a spatial component and often precede, as well as facilitate, the development of networks. As used here, the term refers to the physical coming together of a segment of the community around a specific event or interest. This segment may be very small or it may be the entire community. Typically, it is a subset of the larger community. The event is the catalyst, drawing together people who share an interest in the particular event or activity. Social arenas also differ from
formal organizations in that the latter draw people together on the basis of obligation (e.g., attendance at regularly scheduled board or membership meetings) whereas social arenas are voluntary in nature. They are held together by a commonality of interest, shared values, a sense of belonging, and a desire for interaction with others of similar interests and values. To the extent that these characteristics mimic those of communities, social arenas can be viewed as mini-communities within the larger community.

The existence of social arenas, in and of itself, is neither a positive nor a negative attribute. If the interests and values around which different social arenas form are varied and contradictory, they could lead to a very balkanized community. If, on the other hand, the fundamental values around which different social arenas coalesce are similar or complementary, they can strengthen the overall community by reinforcing the values of the larger community and the qualities that go into community building such as participation and identity formation.

West Mt. Airy is home to a vast array of social arenas. Although these social arenas have coalesced around a variety of interests (educational, cultural and artistic, religious, and political), they each tend to support one or more of the underlying values of the community—diversity, tolerance, liberalism, social activism.

In the educational realm, West Mt. Airy has developed a comprehensive and well-respected system of adult education that draws people from all over the city as well as from nearby suburbs. The majority of students who take these classes, however, are from Mt. Airy and the adjacent communities in the northwest area (Germantown, Chestnut Hill, Roxborough, and Manayunk). The principal institutions providing adult education courses are the Mt. Airy Learning Tree, Allen's Lane Art Center, Germantown Jewish Centre, and the Unitarian Society of Germantown. Most of the courses offered by the Germantown Jewish Centre have a religious orientation, while those at Allen's Lane Art Center tend to be geared toward the arts and cultural world. The Mt. Airy Learning Tree probably offers the most diverse menu of courses and the largest number. Moreover, its origins and its orientation clearly reflect the overall progressive bent of West Mt. Airy.

The Mt. Airy Learning Tree (MALT) was founded in 1980 by several individuals who were active in WMAN and EMAN. The real brainchild behind MALT was its first executive director, Barbara Bloom, who had a background in the "free university" movement of the 1960s. She envisioned an entity that would use education as a tool for community building (Interview). This function would be performed by having "neighbors teach neighbors" in an open and inviting environment. In selecting courses and teachers, considerations of diversity and broad appeal were, and continue to be, paramount. Beginning with only a handful of courses, MALT registered slightly more than 100 people in its first term (Mt Airy Learning Tree Anniversary Celebration, October 18–19, 1996). Since then, MALT has
grown significantly, offering more than 100 classes in each of its three annual sessions and registering in excess of 3,000 people per year. The diverse array of course offerings includes topics such as Pearl and Bead Stringing; Communicating with the Other Sex; Yoga for Pregnancy; African Basket Weaving; Songs of Biblical Women; Jazz Workshop; and Chair Caning. These offerings are complemented by the more traditional type of classes including those in language instruction, exercise, nutrition, musical instruction, and computer skills.

For the cultural and artistic minded, of which there are many in West Mt. Airy, there are a number of important social arenas. Allen’s Lane Art Center, which was founded in 1952, was developed as a mechanism for bringing Mt. Airy residents together through programs promoting the arts. The Center houses a prominent community theater that showcases the talents of community residents and plays host to professional performances as well (Ferman, Singleton, and DeMarco 1998). In addition to being a major community asset, Allen’s Lane draws on the entire region for its audiences. Both the Mt. Airy Arts Alliance and the Artists League of Mt. Airy serve as focal points for artists living in the community, of which there are a significant number. The recently renovated Sedgwick Theater, now operating as the Sedgwick Cultural Center, is seeking to be an anchor for arts and cultural groups and events within the larger community. It was founded by two individuals whose vision was to use arts for community building. The Center seeks to showcase the diversity of local talent through performance, lectures, exhibits, and other displays. Moreover, the renovation of the Sedgwick has also given fuel to larger economic development plans that call for revitalizing part of Germantown Avenue with a major emphasis on the arts and culture.

Two events designed to engage the entire community, Mt. Airy Day and Art Jam, occur on an annual basis. Mt. Airy Day, which was first organized as “Community Day” in 1968 through the collaborative efforts of WMAN and EMAN, is an effort to celebrate the strength, unity, and diversity of the community. Featuring art exhibits, cultural displays, games, and numerous other activities designed to appeal to a broad spectrum of the community, Mt. Airy Day has typically attracted large numbers of residents to the annual event. Art Jam, designed to display the cultural diversity and talents of local residents, also appeals to large segments of the community.

The religious institutions play a critical role in creating social arenas separate from their more formal worship services and prayer groups. The Germantown Jewish Centre sponsors numerous activities, including a dinner series and a cafe, that are intended to reach out to interfaith families and younger members of the Jewish community, respectively. According to interviews, these undertakings have been successful, leading in some cases to the formation of Havurahs (fellowship groups).

One of the most important social arenas created by the Germantown Jewish Centre was the Havurah, or minyan. The Havurah movement in
Judaism was launched in Boston in 1968 by Jews who wanted to worship without all the formal trappings of large services, rabbis, cantors, and the like. In essence, they sought a more intimate setting in which community and fellowship could be more deeply felt and experienced. Typically, Jewish individuals who sought out this type of service were younger, more socially conscious, and influenced by the counterculture movements of the 1960s. In 1974, the Germantown Jewish Centre held its first Havurah service as an alternative to its more traditional form of service (Schwartz n.d.). It soon became known as the Germantown Minyan. Quickly becoming the home of the Havurah movement, Philadelphia and, more importantly, West Mt. Airy, attracted liberal Jews who had a strong community orientation.

This combination of a liberal population and a more intimate and community-oriented type of service had important ramifications for West Mt. Airy as a whole. The establishment of Havurahs was not limited to religious worship service. Rather, Havurahs have been formed around a variety of issues and interests, including social concerns, archaeological study, pre-school concerns, and travel. These groups meet on a regular basis, creating community through their shared interests. Although confined largely to the Jewish community, these Havurahs have greatly expanded the scope of social arenas in West Mt. Airy.

Religious institutions have also helped to create social arenas for residents seeking political engagement. Through its social action committee, the Unitarian Society of Germantown has provided opportunities for congregation members to get involved in numerous advocacy issues, including literacy campaigns, environmental issues, and AIDS education and awareness. The church has even taken a proactive role toward participation, seeking to identify projects that would encourage involvement from a larger number of congregation members (Interview).

Another institution critical in the formation of social arenas, is the Co-op. Incorporated in 1974, the Weavers Way Food Cooperative serves as a crucial information and social link in the West Mt. Airy community. In addition to serving the food-shopping needs of the residents, the Co-op, through its work requirements and communal spirit, fosters a sense of “neighboring” that is usually not found in conventional supermarkets and is often lacking in neighborhoods as well (Ferman, Singleton, and DeMarco 1998). The work requirement (six hours per year), while fairly minimal, is symbolically important since it reinforces the collective ownership component. Not all cooperatives have such work requirements. Moreover, some are so large that they resemble ordinary supermarkets. This combination (lack of work requirements and size) removes any sense of collective ownership.

While by no means exhaustive, this brief foray into social arenas in West Mt. Airy demonstrates the role that institutions have played in developing these critical components of community. Operating as additional channels for participation and interaction, social arenas strengthen the sense of, and
commitment to, the idea of community in general. The relative congruence between the values contained in the various social arenas and those that characterize West Mt. Airy strengthen the attachment to this particular community.

**Bridging Capital**

The discussion thus far has focused on organizational attributes within the community, each of which is important to the development of an overall civic infrastructure. However, communities are not autonomous, self-sufficient entities that can survive in isolation. Romanticized notions of the past notwithstanding, communities never were self-sufficient and, with the globalization of economies, technologies, and cultures, communities are perhaps more dependent than ever on external connections. Thus, mechanisms that link the community to the external world are crucial. We use the term "bridging capital" to refer to the connections that institutions within the community have to resources and organizations outside of the community.

The importance of these linkages or bridging capital has been observed in a variety of scholarly analyses. Granovetter’s work on the “strength of weak ties” promoted the somewhat counter-intuitive notion that weak ties are more beneficial than strong ties. Since there is an inverse relationship between the “strength” of a tie and the number of ties, those with the strongest ties are those individuals with the fewest number of ties. The fewer the number of ties, the more limited is one’s structure of opportunity. Weak ties, on the other hand, are more diffuse, creating more linkages between groups and, thus, increasing one’s opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). Granovetter’s distinction between strong and weak ties is analogous to the difference between internal networks and bridging capital.

Granovetter’s conceptual exploration has been confirmed through empirical studies of poor communities. Countering the notion that poor communities lack networks and, therefore, suffer from high degrees of individual alienation and anomie, many researchers have demonstrated just the opposite. Poor communities contain many networks. The problem, however, is that these networks are all internal to the community and, thus, reinforce the community’s separation from outside resources. Massey and Denton (1996) and William Julius Wilson (1996; 1987) suggest that one of the critical factors that distinguishes truly poor communities from all other communities is this separation between the truly poor community and the larger community that exists beyond its borders. In a refinement of this thesis, Xavier de Souza Briggs distinguished between social support and social leverage. Social support is comprised of the informal networks of support that enabled individuals to “get by.” Included in his list are items like getting a ride from a friend, borrowing small amounts of money, and confiding in another individual. Social leverage, on the other hand, helps one “get ahead.” It is about “access
to clout and influence” (Briggs 1998, 178). Given the distinction between social support and social leverage, we can see why the latter is crucial to and, at the same time, lacking in truly poor communities.

A final observation we wish to make before proceeding to the discussion of West Mt. Airy has to do with the a-spatial nature of bridging capital. Many scholars have pointed to the increasing existence of a-spatial networks as evidence of the loss of geographic community and, even worse, of the inability to have, and hence, futility of discussing, such types of community. We could not disagree more. First, we believe that geographic communities do exist. Although our examination here is based on a single community, West Mt. Airy is by no means unique in that dimension. Second, while a-spatial networks certainly contain the potential to undermine geographic community, they do not necessarily do that. Again, we believe West Mt. Airy provides evidence to support our assertion. Finally, a-spatial networks are often treated as relatively recent phenomena, and the concomitant loss of community is portrayed against the backdrop of the historic, tightly knit neighborhood that presumably has been torn asunder by these a-spatial networks. However, in a painstaking analysis of mid-nineteenth-century neighborhood life in New York City, Kenneth Scherzer found the existence of many a-spatial networks. These external ties existed alongside internal ties (Scherzer 1992). Scherzer's examination provides a corrective to two longstanding conceptions of neighborhood life. First, these tightly knit ethnic neighborhoods were more geographically fluid than conventional portrayals suggest. Second, a-spatial networks are not a recent phenomenon. Thus, to the extent that they are a potential threat to geographic community, this threat is at least 150 years old.

As a community, West Mt. Airy certainly benefits from the high socioeconomic status of its population. Home to many attorneys, foundation officials, city employees, academics, and other professionals, West Mt. Airy has a wealth of critical connections on which it can depend. On an organizational level, there also exists a large amount of bridging capital.

By virtue of their overall organizational structure, most of the religious institutions within West Mt. Airy have connections to affiliates outside of the community. These connections are critical in providing an array of resources, including expertise, staff, information, and volunteers. In the case of Germantown Jewish Centre, external networks are used to recruit Jews from other parts of the country to live in West Mt. Airy. Their efforts are aided by the existence of other Jewish institutions, most notably P'Nai Or and the Shefa Fund. P'Nai Or is a national religious movement. As part of the Jewish Renewal movement, it has tended to attract more politically liberal Jews. The Shefa Fund does national fund raising to support social justice projects. Collectively, these institutions have created a strong liberal Jewish presence in West Mt. Airy that is used as a marketing tool to recruit other Jews of similar persuasion to live in the area.
The Northwest Interfaith Movement (NIM), a coalition of 35 congregations from the northwest part of the city, serves as a natural bridge between many of the religious institutions in the four communities that comprise this section of Philadelphia. The number of congregation members represented by these institutions has strengthened NIM's advocacy efforts on a whole series of issues. It has also provided NIM with a large pool of volunteers who assist on many NIM projects. Through its stewardship of the Neighborhood Child Care Resource Program, NIM has developed linkages with Beaver and Wheelock colleges, both of which have lent their expertise in education and child care to NIM's programmatic efforts. A related program run by NIM, the Philadelphia Early Childhood Collaborative, has helped to create linkages with child care providers throughout the city. NIM's external linkages have also proved instrumental in fund-raising activities, particularly in the foundation world. Between 1993 and 1997, the amount of money that NIM received from foundations increased by a factor of 5.6.20

An organization located in Mt. Airy with strong national connections is Jack and Jill of America, Inc. Founded in 1928 by several African-American parents in Philadelphia, Jack and Jill of America, Inc., is a social organization whose primary focus is on children and young adults. The membership of this organization is drawn from the elite of African-American society. As a relatively tight-knit group, the organization can draw on resources on a national basis. Also located in West Mt. Airy is Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, a black sorority that was founded in 1920. Like Jack and Jill of America, this sorority has a strong elite base.

The existence of bridging capital is also evident in the institutionally based activities that attract people from outside the community. Continuing education is a major source of this attraction with the Mt. Airy Learning Tree drawing approximately 65% of its registrants from outside of the community and Germantown Jewish Centre attracting roughly half of its class participants from outside the community (Interviews). The Allen's Lane Art Center, particularly through its well-known and respected theater, also attracts many people to the community. The Weavers Way Food Cooperative serves as yet another magnet for outsiders. While the majority of Co-op members are from Mt. Airy, there are also many members who live in the neighborhoods of Germantown, Roxborough, and Chestnut Hill and in the suburban communities of Flourtown, Glenside, and Bala Cynwyd. The community's ability to attract residents from other neighborhoods and even from the suburbs serves at least two critical functions. First, it helps to bring money into the neighborhood. In the literature on poor communities, a major theme is the community's inability to attract or retain capital. Second, it helps to reinforce the image of West Mt. Airy as a viable and desirable neighborhood, which has a whole series of positive ramifications.

This description of some of the external linkages of West Mt. Airy's institutions suggests that it is a community characterized by the "strength of
weak ties.” It appears to have a wealth of bridging capital that helps to leverage resources, in the form of information, expertise, and foundation funding, as well as capital. While somewhat less tangible, but equally important, this bridging capital indirectly fortifies West Mt. Airy’s image as a viable and desirable community. The source of this bridging capital is both the institutions themselves and the individuals who comprise them.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by asserting our belief in the existence of spatially based communities. West Mt. Airy is but one among many examples. The increasing growth in what Brian Godfrey (1988) termed “non-conformist” communities (gay and lesbian communities, artists’ communities, and the like), coupled with the repopulation of New York City’s Harlem, Cleveland’s Hough District, and significant parts of Chicago’s South Side by the black middle classes is further evidence of the possibilities for geographic communities. The recent wave of immigration from Latin American and Pacific Rim countries as well as from India, has resulted in the creation of many ethnically based geographic communities in cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Miami. The persistence of certain religious-based geographic communities such as the Hasidic Jewish communities in Rockland County, New York, and in the Crown Heights, Boro Park, Williamsburg, and Midwood sections of Brooklyn, as well as the Amish and Mennonite communities in Lancaster, Berks, and Lehigh counties of Pennsylvania, further demonstrate the existence of spatially based community. A recent HUD study of nine U.S. cities demonstrated the existence of community in 14 racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods (Cityscape 1998).

This potpourri of examples suggests that geographically based community can exist under a variety of conditions including those where some of the more natural ties, such as ethnicity, are present and those that are lacking in any obvious integrative mechanisms. Although West Mt. Airy is not representative of most communities, and is certainly not representative of the low-income communities to which much national and foundation attention has been focused, the experience in West Mt. Airy contains numerous lessons for community building in general.

Perhaps most important is the counter it provides to the notion that a-spatial networks undermine geographic community. West Mt. Airy is a community rich in both. Moreover, as Roger Ahlbrandt (1984) uncovered in an earlier study of neighborhood life in Pittsburgh, neighborhoods with few external ties can have weak communal attachment while neighborhoods with many external ties can have a strong communal sense. The key variable that Ahlbrandt’s research identified was inducements for involvement. Those neighborhoods that offered strong inducements for involvement
tended to exhibit strong communal feelings. Conversely, neighborhoods lacking in such incentives were characterized by relatively weak communal feelings (Ahlbrandt 1984). Ahlbrandt’s findings, coupled with our examination here, strongly suggest that viable spatial communities are those with well-developed internal civic structures and significant bridging capital.

Our analysis suggests that well-developed internal civic structures rely on numerous and diverse opportunities for participation, supplemented by a system of formal and informal networks and the existence of social arenas. The diversity of opportunities is particularly important in more heterogeneous communities. While a 100 percent resident participation rate will never be achieved, the likelihood for participation can be increased by offering opportunities that appeal to a wide segment of the population. Further, these opportunities must provide for meaningful participation within the organization. Mere attendance at a meeting does not suffice nor will it sustain participation over the long haul. Rather, community residents must feel that they have a real voice in the direction of the organizations in which they are participating. The less hierarchically structured an organization is, the more likely such voice will be realized. Finally, the more that residents perceive an institution to be part of the fabric of the community, the more likely they are to participate in its activities.

While we are reluctant to offer any precise number, there are thresholds of participation below which an organization ceases to function. Conversely, the more an organization or institutional infrastructure exceeds the threshold of participation, the greater the likelihood that it will attract still more participants. In short, above a certain level, participation breeds contagion.21 Thus, it is important to develop a critical mass of participants within the community, a factor that underscores the importance of organizational inducements for participation.

There also appears to be a positive correlation between breadth and scope of participation and the formation of formal and informal networks. The existence of these networks and the existence of social arenas also reinforce the attachment to community that people feel, making them more likely candidates for collective action.

The focus on a community’s institutional infrastructure should not overshadow the importance of bridging capital to a community’s overall viability. In the same way that the various organs comprising the human body must be connected to the larger body in order to function properly, communities must be connected to the larger social, political, and economic body to operate in a healthy manner. This is particularly important in low-income communities, which are often devoid of these external linkages. Many of the national funding initiatives, in particular those referred to as “comprehensive community initiatives,” are moving in the direction of community building. A central component of these undertakings is their focus on strengthening a neighborhood’s institutional infrastructure.22 However,
building civic infrastructures without any attention to linkages with the larger society will merely build even thicker walls around poverty-impacted communities.

In the case of West Mt. Airy, bridging capital is in abundant supply. While much of this is attributable to the demographics of the population and their professional and social ties, the institutions have also played a crucial role in developing this bridging capital. Through their participation in broader coalitions or their particular activities, which draw on a broad constituent base, as in the case of cultural and educational organizations, West Mt. Airy institutions formed critical linkages with other institutions that, in turn, became a source of resources for the community. Noting again the unrepresentative nature of West Mt. Airy, there is one type of institution in West Mt. Airy that exists in almost all communities—religious institutions. Religious institutions are, almost without exception, part of larger networks that can provide access to resources such as expertise, staff, volunteers, and capital. Moreover, as religious institutions have become more prominent actors in urban environments, their networks have expanded to include major interests within the region such as corporations, philanthropic institutions, elected officials, educational establishments, and the media.

Religious institutions are by no means the only such avenues for developing external linkages. However, their existence in poor communities, combined with their access to wider networks, makes them likely candidates for the tasks at hand. Individual schools can play a similar role. Like religious institutions, they are found in every community, and they are part of a larger network that contains resources. The point is to identify those institutions that can connect a community to the larger economic, social, and political worlds. A healthy community is one in which a well-developed civic structure plays the dual role of connecting individuals within the community and of connecting the community to the larger society. It is a community that is built on the “strength of weak ties” (Granovetter 1973).

NOTES

1. The following are merely some of the works that detail such communities: Ahlbrandt, Neighborhoods, People, and Community; Brower, Good Neighborhoods; Ferman, Challenging the Growth Machine; Godfrey, Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco’s Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities; Goode and Schneider, Reshaping Ethnic and Racial Relations in Philadelphia; Gregory, Black Corona; Berry, Portney, Thomson, The Rebirth of Urban Democracy.

2. Admittedly, these desires often exist alongside potentially counterdesires for privacy, large lots, and the like.

3. West Mt. Airy has been a racially diverse community for over 30 years.

4. Hillery identified a third common element as well—“area.” Since this chapter is about the possibility of community in a geographic space, we did not include that in the text.
5. The focus of their study is actually the entire Philadelphia region. However, they have produced case studies of several neighborhoods in Philadelphia, one of which is West Mt. Airy. We also want to emphasize that their study is ongoing and, therefore, some of the numbers cited are not definitive. Nevertheless, they provide a very close approximation.

6. This figure excludes regular religious activities.

7. We are reluctant to put any figure on this threshold since there are too many variables that would influence what the precise number or proportion should be. Thresholds are similar to core groups in organizations. Core groups are a subset of the whole that typically perform the functions and provide the energy necessary for the organization to survive.

8. There are other diverse neighborhoods within Philadelphia, but West Mt. Airy has received the lion’s share of celebratory media attention.

9. There were many individuals who were quite instrumental during this time period as well, including Rabbi Elias Charry of Germantown Jewish Centre and George Schermer of the Human Relations Council. However, the focus here is on the role of institutions.

10. The Church Community Relations Council was comprised of religious and lay leaders from the Church of the Epiphany, the Unitarian Society of Germantown, and the Germantown Jewish Centre. It was formed in 1956. Faith Presbyterian and St. Michael’s Lutheran churches joined later on.

11. A group calling itself West Mt. Airy Neighbors actually began meeting as early as 1954. In 1958 it was organized as an umbrella group to speak on behalf of the entire community. WMAN became an official organization in 1959 and still exists as a civic association.

12. WMAN got the city council to pass ordinances banning realtor solicitations and sold signs, and restricting the number of “for sale” signs per block.

13. Although NIM includes congregations from the entire northwest portion of the city, it is physically located in West Mt. Airy. Its offices are in Summit Presbyterian Church.

14. The church is located in West Mt. Airy. When it was founded in 1865, Mt. Airy was still part of Germantown.

15. The Delaware Valley Community Reinvestment Fund (DVCRF) is a community development financial institution that lends money for commercial and residential development in low-income and minority neighborhoods in the Delaware Valley, which includes the cities of Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. It recently changed its name to the Reinvestment Fund.

16. This agency, which grew out of earlier efforts of the Coalition on the Utility Crisis, seeks to provide affordable energy to low-income residents. The Coalition on the Utility Crisis also is a NIM initiative.

17. The only similarities we imply between these organizations are that they can be viewed as alternatives to more mainstream practices and they are not integrated into the community in the way the other organizations we discussed are. We included the Japanese American Citizens League here because the Japanese population in West Mt. Airy and in Philadelphia as a whole is negligible.

18. Germantown Avenue is the major commercial strip that runs through Mt. Airy. The Sedgwick Cultural Center is located on Germantown Avenue. Under the direction of Mt. Airy USA and the Mt. Airy Business Association, several plans for
revitalizing the commercial strip have been developed and discussed. A focus on the arts and on cultural institutions is a major part of these plans.


21. This is a takeoff on E.E. Schattschneider’s dictum that “conflict breeds contagion.”

22. These initiatives include the National Community Building Network (NCBN), the Neighborhood Initiative (Pew Charitable Trusts), and some of the work of the Anne E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation, among others.

REFERENCES


Role of Institutions in Community Building


