ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY BUILDING EFFORTS ON THE SOCIAL NETWORKS OF INNER CITY RESIDENTS

BY

DOUG. WATSON

A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Anthropology
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
*****
COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY BUILDING EFFORTS ON THE SOCIAL
NETWORKS OF INNER CITY RESIDENTS

BY

DOUG. WATSON

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of

Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree

Of

MASTER OF ARTS

Doug. Watson © 2004

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Tables

iv

List of Acronyms

WHFH – Winnipeg Habitat for Humanity

HFH – Habitat for Humanity

ESWP – Ed Schreyer Work Project

CFP – Community Fix-Up Project

NIP – Neighbourhood Improvement Program

RRAP – Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program

M/WCRP – Manitoba/Winnipeg Community Revitalization Program

CIP – Community Improvement Program

CAI – Core Area Initiative

NCERC – North End Community Renewal Corporation

WHHI – Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative

NEHP – North End Housing Project

CMA – Central Metropolitan Area

WW- William Whyte neighbourhood

LICO – Low Income Cutoff figures

WDA – Winnipeg Development Agreement

WWRA – William Whyte Residents Association

CH. 1 - INTRODUCTION

When I heard that Winnipeg Habitat for Humanity was attempting to initiate a project targeting a neighbourhood in need of help – William Whyte – I leapt at the opportunity to get involved and offered my services as a researcher. My first observations in this Winnipeg neighbourhood included several homes in disrepair (peeling paint, rotting wood, broken windows, etc.), litter on the streets including shopping carts, graffiti, empty lots and condemned notices on boarded-up houses[1]. I knew the area had problems.

Located on the northern edge of Winnipeg's inner city, the William Whyte neighbourhood has been marked by a steadily decreasing population, economic decline, physical deterioration and a relatively high crime rate over the last thirty to forty years. As a result, the area has experienced a large portion of its existing housing stock being converted to rental units, a significant number of vacant lots and several abandoned or condemned houses dotting its streets.

These are symptoms of an important issue facing Winnipeg at the turn of the millennium: urban decay. An emigration of population, arson and other criminal activities, an aging housing stock, among other factors, have all contributed to the current state of affairs present in Winnipeg's inner city residential neighbourhoods.

As residents who can afford to, move away and sell their homes, often of older stock, the population for an area declines (Leo, Shaw et al. 1998). The remaining residents tend to be people who cannot afford to leave. Fewer people and a smaller tax base leads to aging infrastructure and decreased municipal services. Residential homes that are sold are often converted into cheap rental units leading to an increase in the

number of low-income renters. House maintenance often suffers under new landlords and residents who can no longer afford the cost of up-keep and repairs.

As the movements of new and short term residents in and out of the area becomes more frequent, the neighbourhood begins to transform into one in which neighbours are strangers and transitional. With this movement of residents, those individuals remaining become more wary of their neighbours and tend to withdraw socially, only keeping in contact with those people previously known (Merry 1981). Incidents of crime such as prostitution, drug use and juvenile delinquency increase. People no longer feel safe walking on area streets at night or alone (Ross and Mirowsky 1999).

The perceptions of urban danger/fear associated with residential mobility and urban decay often lead to social strategies of isolation. Social isolation signals a loss of social capital in an area, the web of protective networks between neighbours and local institutions. Social capital is often linked to the concept of neighbourhood stability.

The higher concentration of lower-income and more mobile people, and the attached stereotypes and perceptions, begin to change the image of the neighbourhood amongst residents and through the media.

To counter this growing problem of urban decay and its associated issues, Winnipeg has been the birthplace for several urban revitalization and renewal projects organized and funded on the municipal, provincial, and federal levels since the 1960's. Not all of these efforts have been confined to government initiatives, as local residents and the non-profit sector have initiated numerous projects. One such organization is Winnipeg Habitat for Humanity (WHFH), which has been building homes in Winnipeg since the early 1990's.

3

In the year 2000, under the leadership of former Executive Director Mary Williams, WHFH had the idea to help people declining neighbourhoods in the inner city. William Whyte fit the criteria.

As part of its plans to help reverse urban decay in the neighbourhood, Winnipeg Habitat for Humanity initiated its Millennium Project in late 2000, culminating in July 2001 when 10 houses were built on three different residential blocks in William Whyte (Ruperts, Kapusko and Chickney avenues) through its Ed Schreyer Work Project (ESWP)[2]. The ESWP was the second construction project to be undertaken under the umbrella of the Millennium Project. The objective of the now-defunct Millennium Project was to build fifty Habitat homes in one neighbourhood over a five-year period. Focusing on the north end neighbourhood of William Whyte, Winnipeg Habitat for Humanity (WHFH) wanted to help reverse the prevalence of urban decay in the area by improving the local housing stock, promoting a stronger sense of community among residents and by introducing more home ownership opportunities to local renters (WHFH Millennium Project Proposal, 2000: 2).

A subtle, but pointed, difference between the ESWP and previous construction blitzes was the pre-construction canvassing and public information awareness campaign carried out by Habitat volunteers among residents of the three affected blocks and the introduction of the Community Fix-Up Project (CFP). Canvassing was introduced to provide local residents with information about Habitat for Humanity and the changes about to take place on their block. The hope was to disseminate information about the organization and its aims in order to lessen local residents' fears that Habitat Homeowners would have a negative effect on the neighbourhood. To increase the levels

of acceptance, Winnipeg Habitat introduced the CFP. The plan was to initiate contact and interaction between the organization, current residents, and new homeowners through renovations of existing homes and beautification efforts (park clean-ups and painting, garbage pick-ups and grass cutting on boulevards, etc.) on the three affected blocks.

At the core of these efforts appears to be concern with the local perception of danger stemming from introducing new Habitat homeowners into the neighbourhood. Past experience had shown that building Habitat homes and moving families into new areas had often been met with misunderstanding and problems. Misperceptions of the new homeowners as being in receipt of social assistance led to disharmony amongst neighbours. Local residents, usually renters, wondered why such people received a new home while they did not. Local homeowners, on the other hand were apprehensive about the kinds of people their new neighbours would be. This misperception was often the basis for problems with Habitat homeowners integrating into their new neighbourhood and being accepted (Mary Williams – personal communication #1, 2000). Community building became an issue for the organization as a result of the aforementioned problems with previous construction projects. The organization began to realize that the success of placing Habitat homeowners in new homes, and sometimes new neighbourhoods, required paying more attention to the issues involved in the social integration with local residents.

The concept of the Community Fix-Up Project included strengthening ties between local residents while building new connections between them and the new homeowners. Instead of merely building a physical neighbourhood, WHFH embarked on building a community in a social sense. Concentrating on home renovations, Habitat's

objective was to give residents additional support and resources by encouraging neighbours to help one another, thereby mitigating the levels of fear. In attacking the prospect of the unknown, the project hoped to achieve personal connections between neighbours that would extend beyond the project itself.

By focusing significant attention on the affected residents and improving their local social ties, revitalization projects in inner city neighbourhoods are apt to be more successful in establishing greater neighbourhood stability than those projects with a focus solely on physical and/or cosmetic improvements. By strengthening and increasing the number of relationships between neighbours, more knowledge about the people living in the area is gained and trust can then develop. Knowing one's neighbours mitigates the fear of the unknown. Less fear often leads to more local involvement and involvement in an area supports a greater sense of belonging among residents. Involvement, personal investment and a sense of belonging help create vibrant neighbourhoods. A sense of belonging, local involvement, communication between residents, and personal investment creates and maintains local social capital.

This research attempts to assess the process and degree to which Habitat homeowners were integrated into their new neighbourhood and the reasons for their level of acceptance. The social networks (intimate and place-based) of participants were examined to determine the process of integration and acceptance using the following methodological techniques: survey/census, two formal interviews of Habitat homeowners conducted before and after their move-in dates, a formal interview with locally established homeowners conducted after Habitat homeowners moved into the neighbourhood, participant observation of Habitat construction and CFP activities and

general observation of Habitat meetings regarding the ESWP.

Intimate and place-based network information was collected to allow for an analysis of how the issues of residential mobility and urban danger/fear may have affected the integration process over time. Researchers such as Merry (1981), Sampson (1997) and Thomese and Tilburg (2000) have shown that mobility and fear affect the amount and types of interaction in a neighbourhood.

Before and after interviews of the Habitat homeowners involved in the ESWP were used to compile baseline data. This baseline compared the changes in neighbourhood/place-based networks, neighbourhood involvement and interaction, and the general sense of belonging. Essentially, this baseline compared the experiences and actions of Habitat families as they made the transition from being renters (prospective Habitat homeowners 'before' interviews) to being homeowners (new Habitat homeowners 'after' interviews). The comparisons of these interviews allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding changes in the group's intimate and place-based networks.

This research had four main objectives. They were: 1) to present existing neighbourhood conditions using standard social indicators (based on census data from Statistics Canada and this project's survey/census) and to use pre-build surveys of the affected blocks to gauge the perceptions of local residents (renters and homeowners alike) regarding where they live; 2) to illustrate the existing neighbourhood social networks (a formal interview of selected locally established homeowners) and patterns of social interaction (pre-build WHFH Residential Survey); 3) examine the process and impact of the Ed Schreyer Work Project on the existing social organization in the

neighbourhood using information gathered through informal interviews with the CFP Coordinator and two WHFH Executive Directors, the CFP Coordinator's Project Report, participant observation notes and the pre-build canvassing survey; 4) assess the level of integration and acceptance of the Habitat homeowners into their new neighbourhoods by analysing the formal interviews with homeowners (Habitat and local), Habitat managers' interviews and reports, and participant observation. Also, an evaluation of the effects of homeownership on the intimate and place-based networks of the Habitat families is carried out.

To this point a general outline of the main issues surrounding this research and its target location have been provided. What follows is a discussion of how these issues will be addressed and approached in order to evaluate Habitat's efforts.

Urban decay, residential mobility, poverty, urban danger/fear, the development cycle of families and revitalization efforts are all major concepts that will be addressed in more detail to show their interrelations in chapters two and three of this thesis.

A discussion of the methods employed in collecting the information used in this research and an operationalization of terms will be presented in the third chapter. Existing neighbourhood conditions will be presented and placed within the larger context of the Winnipeg Central Metropolitan Area (CMA) in chapter four. Habitat for Humanity's construction experiences in Winnipeg and the process and impact of the Ed Schreyer Work Project on existing neighbourhood social ties will be examined in the fifth chapter.

The sixth, seventh and eighth chapters summarize the responses provided by locally established homeowners, prospective and new Habitat homeowners during interviews. Chapter seven compares and analyzes the interview data provided by

prospective Habitat homeowners and locally established homeowners. This comparison revealed similarities and differences in the two groups' intimate and place-based networks, as well as their patterns of social interaction in their neighbourhoods. Chapter eight dealt with the transition from prospective to new Habitat homeowners. This chapter tracked the changes in their intimate and place-based networks as well as their patterns of neighbourhood social interaction. The similarities and differences between new Habitat and established homeowners were evaluated to assess the effects of homeownership. That is to say, to gain insight into the possibility that the intimate and place-based networks of new homeowners begin to take on the form and function of established homeowners. Chapter nine ties the issues and data presented in this thesis together to assess two objectives: 1) assess the level of integration of Habitat families into their new neighbourhoods; and 2) evaluate the notion that homeownership increases personal and neighbourhood stability.

CH. 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The National Crime Prevention Council of Canada (1997:4) stated that social capital is the:

> "...protective network of supportive and positive relationships among children, parents and families, social institutions, and all community members. When these relationships are strong and working effectively, they improve the ability of a community to meet the material, emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual needs of all its members. ...When these relationships are weak or ineffective, they limit the ability of communications and social institutions to reduce risk factors, isolations, and vulnerability in families and youths."

The above statement brings together many of the ideas presented in this chapter. Stable and socially interactive neighbourhoods require residents who choose to stay in one place for an extended period of time and who know, or at least talk informally to, one another. Through prolonged exposure this process of communication paves the way for trust and mutual concern to develop between neighbours. Concern and trust are often developed during conversation, but also through such activities as trading personal property and exchanging child-care. A sense of belonging and attachment to an area depend on these types of relationships among neighbours.

The overriding themes in this thesis are the relation of neighbourhood interactions among residents and the factors affecting such behaviour. In this research, the probable factors influencing interactions between neighbours are urban decay and its associated trends of residential mobility and a sense of urban danger/fear. Neighbourhoods experiencing urban decay display specific social and physical symptoms. Some of these symptoms include social problems such as criminal activities, a significantly high school drop-out rate, neglected properties, and a lack of neighbourly interaction and concern for one another.

The task in this chapter is to discuss the concepts of urban decay, residential mobility, urban danger/fear and urban revitalization to better outline the approaches and definitions used here as well as to show the interrelationships of the concepts. This discussion will also show the relevance of these concepts to building social capital and/or social stability in decaying neighbourhoods.

Urban Decay

Inner cities in North America and around the World suffer from a popular media-created image depicting them as violent, crime-ridden, dangerous, and home to society's lowest members and lacking any sense of social control or sense of social unity. Several researchers agree that coverage by the media is disproportionate to the levels of violent crimes being committed overall and lends to the dismissal of the inner city by the general public (Flusty 1997; Glassner 1999; Low 2001; von Hoffman 2003). Low (2001) argued that a fear of this violence and crime leads to the desire to leave the inner city for suburbs and urban fringes.

As more and more residents have left the inner city, urban sprawl has been the result. The pattern known as 'urban sprawl' involves the relocation of commercial and residential development to an urban area's edges and bordering areas from its traditional sites in urban centres (Burgess 1929; Bradway Laska et al. 1982; Leo, Shaw et al. 1998; Gainsborough 2002). This pattern has resulted in a shifting of urban residents from inner city neighbourhoods to those in the suburbs, causing a decline in the number of people living in city centers and adjacent areas. Burgess (1929) noted that as business and industry were moving into areas adjacent to residential neighbourhoods, those people

with the financial means opted to move to the suburbs where it was less crowded. As municipal infrastructure was developed and transportation to peripheral areas continued to improve, the number of inner city residents moving into those areas increased. Gainsborough (2002) argued that sprawl not only diverts investment and people away from the inner city, but also siphons off local resources, such as municipal taxes and funding, to provide infrastructure development in the new areas.

According to Leo, Shaw et al. (1998), as the exodus of middle class residents and businesses continued, the inner city began to be perceived as an area good only for those people with no other options available to them. The population of the inner city declined, while at the same time the proportion of lower income people increased. This process served to isolate the lower income portion of society from other socio-economic classes.

In these areas of increasing isolation, social problems such as substance abuse, low education levels, gang activity, prostitution, juvenile delinquency and unemployment tend to be prevalent. More serious forms of crime (such as violence and theft) tend to result from a concentration of these social problems. The increasing prevalence of crime in a specific area forces normally law-abiding people to participate, flee or be victimized (Nettler 1974; Merry 1981). An area with increasing, or consistently high, crime rates is an indicator of high risk to insurance companies. These companies often start refusing to open policies regarding theft and/or fire. Similarly, bank loans become harder to attain for mortgages and home or business renovations (Leo, Shaw et al. 1998).

Douchant (1994) has argued that emigration from the inner city to the suburbs leaves the older housing stock behind to be filled by lower income households. However, older housing stock often requires more up-keep, and therefore more cash infusions

(Galster 1987). An influx of lower income residents essentially precludes investing in house and property maintenance, which adds to the deteriorating image of the area. Meanwhile, other houses are often bought and rented out by landlords seeking to earn a profit. In areas of declining property value, regular or needed property maintenance may be delayed as a result of the associated costs or as a result of landlords trying to maximize profitability. As area property values decrease, so too does the ability of homeowners to recoup investments in housing and property maintenance. It no longer becomes worth the money or effort for some homeowners to maintain their property. Houses and properties begin to fall into disrepair.

Over time, less comprehensive insurance policies and lower property values can result in owners abandoning houses and commercial structures to avoid paying property tax for dilapidated buildings. Houses are torn down and not replaced, leaving empty lots on the neighbourhood landscape. Abandoned and boarded-up houses symbolize the assumed attitudes of neglect and apathy present in neighbourhoods. These structures create an image that the area is dirty and unhealthy and, in some areas, dangerous. They serve as a visible daily reminder of the area's fortunes and inability to improve local conditions. Specifically, vacant or condemned houses as a result of acts of arson may be a very strong reminder of the potential for crime to occur in that area. While crimes committed against persons or personal property tends to be centred on, and largely visible only to, individuals experiencing them there are some actions that affect an entire neighbourhood. In particular, acts of arson resulting in abandoned or condemned structures may serve to keep local residents persistently aware of potential local dangers. Acts of arson may therefore have a longer-lasting impact on the wider neighbourhood, in

comparison to more personally experienced crimes.

Research has shown that more crimes tend to be committed within the area immediately surrounding abandoned houses (Brown University – website #14, 2004). These crimes include vandalism, graffiti and drug use. Therefore, boarded up houses and uncared for properties affect crime prevention and local perceptions of safety and danger (Accordino and Johnson 2000).

Various social agencies and the three levels of government in Canada have employed demographic measures to track the symptoms of urban decay. Some of these social indicators are:

- Physical signs of disorder such as - older housing stock, derelict or abandoned buildings, empty lots, properties in disrepair (Brownlee 1995; Ross et al. 2000);

- High proportions of - renters, low-income households, lone-parent families, unemployment and social assistance-dependency;

- Low proportions of formal educational attainment,

- Decreasing populations.

It is difficult to say how the chain of urban decay begins exactly, but each of the social indicators listed above interrelates directly or indirectly with each other. To summarize the information on urban decay briefly: Low-income individuals generally display certain characteristics that help to explain the low annual income their household earns, or their lack of disposable income. For example, people with low-incomes tend to have lower levels of formal education that often serves to limit career opportunities to

low-paying jobs. Unemployment and a reliance on government assistance are also common among this group, as is a propensity for non-traditional family structures. Married couples, while still significant, give way to higher percentages of common-law couples and lone parent families. Statistically, these non-traditional families tend to earn lower annual incomes than married couple families (Statistics Canada website #10a, 2004). A significant proportion of low-income households tend to have children, many of whom are young, which essentially means less disposable household income. In general, ethnic minority households, particularly immigrants, may be more prone to earning low annual incomes than the society majority. This trend may be due, in part, to recent immigration or a lack of familiarity with the English language and culture of the host society.

Entrepreneurs buy relatively inexpensive older houses to make a profit by renting them out to tenants at relatively low rates. These suites attract low-income households, simultaneously increasing a neighbourhood's proportion of renters. Earning low-income increases a household's vulnerability to fluctuations in rental rates, often leading to a propensity for mobility.

Residential Mobility

Residential mobility affects the ability and willingness of neighbours to create and maintain social relationships. Relationships between neighbours require trust and a reason for personal investment in them. One such reason is the expectation that an individual plans to live at a specific address for the foreseeable future. If new neighbours are apt to move away within a relatively short period of time after moving into an area,

people tend to be cautious in extending friendship.

According to Rohe and Stewart (1996), neighbourhoods with lower resident turnover rates are more likely to have higher resident satisfaction, more local friendship ties, and more confidence in the future of the area. Jacobson (1971 in Merry 1981) proposed that the development of relationships with an expectation of continuity is crucial to creating trusting relationships within urban settings. Sampson et al. (1997) continued this idea by suggesting that mobility diminished the ability of neighbours to develop and maintain informal social relationships and created obstacles for neighbours to work together to enforce local social control, thus increasing the likelihood that neighbours would remain strangers. Thomese and Tilburg (2000) furthered this line of thought when they argued that greater mobility in a neighbourhood is connected to including fewer neighbour's in one's personal network.

However, Merry (1981) cautions that long-term co-residence in a neighbourhood does not necessarily guarantee harmony and goes on to suggest that close proximity may even escalate hostility in a neighbourhood if inconsiderate behaviour by one's neighbours is interpreted in ethnic terms. In relation to this point, Leo, Shaw et al. (1998) bring attention to the detail that ethnic minorities tend to be represented in higher proportions in inner city neighbourhoods, such as William Whyte. Therefore, the possibility that such interpretation could occur increases. Racism and ethnic stereotypes/prejudices can affect relations between neighbours, particularly short-term residents. The opportunity to become familiar with these frequently mobile residents is fleeting at best.

Pérez (2002) suggests that people may develop "supportive, place-based networks" with merchants, neighbours and local institutions such as schools. This leads