

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Community” is a modern watchword. Those who speak it call for new attachments, and they respond to a sense that things have come apart.

Social theorists worry that people live individualistically, seeing their actions as private, not informed by or related to any public concern or common good (Bellah et al. 1985; Etzioni 1993; Selznick 1992; Sullivan 1982). Conservatives and ethnic activists are distressed that people live as if they had no group history or obligations to a shared past (Bloom 1987; Lasch 1978, 1984, and 1995; Nisbet 1962; Stein and Hill 1977). Religious observers are concerned that both individuals and groups act without reference to transcendent principles (Bellah 1975; Bellah et al. 1991; Berger 1977; Buber 1958, 1992; Douglas and Tipton 1983). Political scientists are troubled that people do not see one another as citizens of the same polity, sharing common ground rules, committed to making decisions that reflect and create common interests (Barber 1984; Mansbridge 1983).¹

Although these observers do not agree on all points, they converge on ascribing social, political, and psychological virtues to communitarian attachments. Community, as they see it, can be a vehicle for enabling individuals to satisfy submerged longings for deep social attachments, revitalizing society, and restoring democracy.

People work at creating community in many ways. Much of the time they do so tacitly in their everyday affairs, making choices about whose views to consider in defining themselves and their desires, what to expect of others, and whom to associate with and how. Occasionally, people try more formally and explicitly to create community, through activities we call planning. Though intended to be more deliberate and rational, these efforts, as we shall see, always respond to ordinary wishes for and anxieties about attachments.

COMMUNITY AND THE CITY

This book is concerned with the loss and possibilities of community in contemporary cities. Traditionally, communities mediated between individuals and cities, to the benefit of both (Berger and Neuhaus 1977).

People have lived in cities through communities; their experience of the city has been that of the community. In cities of hundreds of thousands or millions of residents, communities have offered a focus for personal identity at a meaningful scale. In recent history most often framed in ethnic and/or religious terms, communities have helped individuals define who they are by offering a sense of identity more specific and special than one citizen among a multitude.

At the same time, local society has reinforced this identity by allowing members to be important and powerful. Community organizations and political institutions have enabled members to exercise control over not only the community but also part of the city. Communities and their institutions supplied the psychological and political conditions for transforming individuals into loyal citizens who had stakes in the city because they had stakes in their community. Thus, community organizations made cities governable: cities could be governed by governing communities.

However, conditions that once contributed to more or less coherent communities have changed. Social, economic, and geographic mobility, often part of a deliberate effort to assimilate into American society, has dissolved ethnically homogeneous, concentrated communities. Many metropolitan areas have become racial donuts, where whites who could afford to move departed for the suburbs, replaced in the center by African-Americans and other racial minorities. Older European ethnics and their descendants who remain, because they are too poor, too old, or too settled to move, encounter African-American neighbors with uncertainty about what they have in common. New immigrants still further mix the urban population. Not only do their encounters make people wonder whether they can form a community with many others at all, but cultural and linguistic differences often frustrate even the simplest of understandings.

Both cities and their residents have stakes in communities. Yet, because few act on behalf of cities, those most motivated to rediscover or create urban communities are individuals. Some turn to those with whom they share geography and problems, perhaps looking through these circumstances for a compelling positive collectivity. Some take strength from living near others who have similar jobs or occupy a similar moment in the life cycle. Some form communities whose members may be neighbors but whose attachment rests on more specific, and demanding, solidarity, such as religious or sexual orientation (FitzGerald 1987). Still others try to revitalize, redefine, or re-create communities that once gave comfort. They may reconsider the ethnic communities in which they grew up, looking for contemporary meanings and directions in old traditions.

These people struggle with the question of what shared identity could form a contemporary basis for community. They experiment with institutions and norms that may, by bringing psychological and social order to cities, make them meaningful and governable.

TWO COMMUNITIES

This book joins this exploration by examining the activities of two groups that have been communities and seek to articulate durable future identities. Both, through community organizations, have engaged in community planning to serve the needs of community members and to work through an identity that might sustain community. The stories of these groups address several questions. First, what principles, premises, purposes, or feelings attach significant numbers of people to one another today? What are viable bases for community? What do people who feel they are members of a community believe they are together to be or do? How do assumptions about community affect what members do when they organize to plan for themselves? And how do a community's premises shape relations with the city?

These communities' stories focus on their organizations' efforts to plan for the future. In "planning for a community," an organization does everything this ambiguous phrase implies. It provides a service to an existing community, and it creates the community anew. Every act of planning embodies assumptions about a community and relationships in it. Each planful act enacts a community. Thus, even though the formal planning processes of community organizations are only a small part of a community's life, they reveal a great deal about a community. Planning offers a pragmatic view of a community in action.

The two communities presented here do not exhaust the possibilities for contemporary urban communities, but they illustrate significant variations. The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore is an organization of Jews in the Baltimore, Maryland metropolitan area. It has much in common with other American Jewish communities. More than that, even though its members speak in Jewish and often religious language, it resembles many other communities that traditionally defined themselves ethnically or religiously and ponder whether they are still a community.

Although there are poor people in this community, many of its members are well-to-do. In this respect, the community is similar to others that are professional and upper-middle-class. Many families and the community as a whole are socially and economically self-sufficient. They have the freedom to separate themselves from the city, and many are turned

toward the suburbs. Geographically and psychologically poised on the city boundary, they confront basic choices about whether to participate in and re-create the city.

The South East Community Organization (SECO) represents Southeast Baltimore, a heterogeneous area where residents, their parents, or their grandparents immigrated from Europe. Ethnicity and religion once defined a number of communities, whose families shared a connection to work in local industries. However, ethnicity and religion have lost salience, and many blue-collar jobs are gone. When SECO helped organize a Southeast Planning Council, it confronted a question many in American cities face: What could hold together tenuously working-class descendants of white ethnics whose neighbors include a growing number of African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans?

Southeast residents have limited income and formal education. Individually and collectively, they have difficulty supporting themselves. They depend on outsiders—government, developers, firms, and foundations. Many choose to stay in the only place they have lived. Some who can move to the suburbs for schools that work and more consistent feelings of security. Others remain because they must.

It would do violence to the stories of these communities to link them to single views of community, but each sits close to a particular perspective. The Associated encourages Baltimore Jews to act on the principles Bellah and his colleagues (1985) espouse. The organization nurtures Jews in feeling they are part of a single, deep community. Many work, attend school, pray, and/or socialize with one another, and The Associated urges them to see their relations as expressions of a shared tradition and a commitment to a common future. The organization encourages and reinforces philanthropy and volunteerism as expressions of community members' caring about and for one another. Drawing on a rich religious tradition, The Associated promulgates what Bellah and his colleagues call a "second language" of community reciprocity and responsibility.

Southeast activists do not deny the value of such social attachments, but many participate in SECO and the Planning Council for more immediate reasons. Gans (1988) argues that "middle Americans" live and want to live differently than Bellah advocates. They are individualistic, and they find intimacy and identity in family, friendships, and informal proximate relations, rather than the broader, more heterogeneous groupings Bellah urges. What they need is not more extensive social involvement, but political power and economic security. More useful than recruiting working-class individualists to participate in societal institutions, Gans argues, is reforming institutions to fit middle Americans' limited tastes for participation and to produce employment and income.

In this view, the attachments that matter are not so much cultural and emotional as political. People should form a political community, in which they organize to act collectively. Sometimes they will promote common interests; other times, they will simply support a vehicle through which participants can satisfy individual interests. Consistently, SECO has framed the community identity largely in political and economic terms, while leaving social and cultural concerns to other organizations.

The debate between Bellah and Gans is a disagreement about America and Americans. Bellah and his colleagues argue that early American communitarian concerns place a moral obligation on contemporary Americans to live and act together. Moreover, they believe these communitarian impulses survive in a collective unconscious. If people could recover the language to articulate these yearnings, they would attach themselves to their contemporaries and reconnect with the past.

Gans emphasizes the opposite strand in American intellectual and emotional history, what Tocqueville (1945 [1862]) first called "individualism." Whether it has moral priority or not, through ideas and institutions it has, as Bellah and his colleagues concede (1991), effectively shaped Americans' desires and practices. To call these wishes a misunderstanding is to misunderstand them. For better or worse, many Americans have fewer communitarian tastes than Bellah and his colleagues would prefer. At the least, Gans asserts in drawing a class line, working-class Americans are likely to live in a world that is more individualistic and more local than that of upper-middle-class professionals and businesspeople.

There is no reason to bind each of these communities to one side in this debate, but the argument alerts us to look for certain themes in the juxtaposition of the stories. The Associated may be considered to have a more ambitious communitarian program, while the Southeast Planning Council program may be seen as more individualistic. Still, it should be kept in mind that the Planning Council is a coalition of community organizations that themselves carry burdens of cohesion in the Southeast. At the least, we ought to read the stories of The Associated and the Baltimore Jewish community with an eye to the ways individualism limits community. And we ought to look in the stories of SECO and the Southeast for indications of the ties necessary for even individualistic communities to act.

Further, class matters. Wealth brings an ability to control parts of the world and muster remedies for problems. It also lends confidence that one can with little risk extend oneself and connect to others who are different. It is not in itself sufficient for community, but it provides emotional, social, and economic resources that support community and organization. It would be reductionistic to see the two communities as different only in class; significantly, the Southeast is more diverse as well. Nevertheless, one

ought to examine the stories for what they reveal about the effects of class on desires for and possibilities of community.

In addition to telling us about contemporary beliefs and feelings about community, the stories show how the dynamics of real communities shape their organizations. The Associated and the Southeast Planning Council are different not simply because they inherit different organizational traditions—Jewish federations and grassroots community organizations, respectively—but also because they respond to different interests in and impulses toward community action.

The persistence of these organizations indicates they fit their communities, and yet the interesting questions concern how they fit, where they do not fit very well, and how the nature of the fit affects the actions of the organizations. Community dynamics—relations among groups within a community—influence, for example, which issues come to a community planning agenda, how the issues are addressed, and what is decided. Thus, the stories can be read for models or, at least, principles of community organization that fit different types of communities.

Finally, these episodes in community planning offer lessons for designing planning processes that accommodate community dynamics. Planning is the pretentious effort to shape human events with deliberate concern about the future. It is an attempt to impose a rationality of choices upon the turbulent sea of human activities. The stories repeatedly show how planners rationalized the course the sea set for itself. At the same time, the stories suggest what planners must know and do about social and psychological dynamics to plan with a community—to be blunt, to plan at all.

LISTENING TO COMMUNITIES

This book focuses on two planning processes: The Associated's strategic planning and the Southeast Planning Council's community planning for Southeast Baltimore. I became interested in these projects because they were deliberate efforts to plan for communities, and they seemed likely to reveal something about how people think about community. I began with general questions about how beliefs and feelings about community influence planning efforts.

In proceeding, I had to learn to listen to a community. Literally, of course, a community does not speak. However, individuals may give voice to broadly shared sentiments, and an observer must learn to whom and when to listen for these expressions. Further, as the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Anthropologists in particular have sought to identify formal rituals or informal patterns of activity that say

something about a community. Even conflicts within a community, divisions that might suggest nothing holds people together, can represent shared concerns.

I have been doubly challenged to understand what people in these communities have said. First, I have tried to understand what they mean by what they say. For example, people in both speak of “community” but do not necessarily mean something specific or unambiguous. They may use the term to describe current social relations, but they may just as well utter it to express a wish that people lived more intimately and supportively than they do.

The word may also designate several groups simultaneously. For instance, during my first months at The Associated, I assumed “community” meant for speakers what it would have meant for me: all 92,000 Baltimore area Jews. In fact, people often reserved the term for a much smaller group: those contributing to, volunteering with, or working for The Associated or its agencies. Still, my confusion partly reflected ambiguous usage of the word to refer to the activists and the 92,000, both designating the activists an essential group and expressing the ambition of bringing all 92,000 into the fold.

Entering Southeast after a year in the Baltimore Jewish community, I mistakenly assumed “community” would mean in the second community much of what it meant in the first. Around The Associated, “community” connoted social and emotional intimacy, and people in Southeast seemed to be using the term inaccurately, to describe less intricate, more distant relations. Instead, while sharing some Associated wishes for closeness, the speakers often thought and spoke in terms of common political interests.

My efforts to understand the word “community” were prototypical of my attempt to learn two new languages. One other example illustrates the complexity of this project. At The Associated “fundraising” refers to members’ financial investment in the organization, but it also measures how much people invest emotionally in the community. In Southeast Baltimore, homeowners have economic stakes in a place and are likely to stay there for a while, but “homeownership” also signifies community stability. “Fundraising” and “homeownership” have no etymological relationship, but they are cognates in referring to individual commitments to communities.

My second challenge in understanding what people said was to determine when they spoke for themselves and when they spoke for a community. This is more than a matter of learning who has knowledge of what many people think and thus makes a good informant. It involves, as well, discerning when someone’s actions consciously or, often, unconsciously represent, give voice to, an opinion, emotion, or interest shared

by many people by virtue of their being members of a community.

The most striking example was the years of seemingly endless debate I heard about and saw at The Associated regarding Jewish education. For a long time I wondered how people could speak of a single Jewish community when heated conflict between Orthodox and non-Orthodox not only divided people but blocked planning. Some I talked with offered a definitional answer, and one describing their experience: all Jews, whatever their differences, are one people, one community. Still, I wanted a more encompassing sociological or psychological explanation.

At some point, I “flipped” my interpretation of the years of planning stalemate. In addition to seeing it as a failure in coming to agreement, I saw it as a success of sorts in keeping Orthodox and non-Orthodox together. They related through conflict. As I listened to how the parties talked about their relationship, I came to attend more to the *persistence* of the conflict than the persistence of the *conflict*. I looked more at how the conflict expressed mutual dependencies between Orthodox and non-Orthodox and how these relations reflected and defined the community. And I learned how many impassioned arguments about education planning expressed community anxiety about whether it could survive.

TELLING STORIES OF COMMUNITIES PLANNING

The story of a planning process may be told in various ways. The usual approach is chronological, beginning when the idea of planning emerged and continuing through efforts to implement plans.² This narrative seems logical. It assumes that what precedes causes what follows and that the meanings of later events derive from what has gone before. However, certain characteristics of planning would lead in the opposite direction.

On the one hand, problematic experiences motivate people to plan, and these experiences may be said to cause or give meaning to planning. But planning is the effort to create unanticipated, even unlikely, futures by imagining desired states and designing strategies to bring them about. In this frame, the end gives cause and meaning to actions that precede it, although, strictly speaking, contemporary thoughts and feelings about a possible future motivate and give reason to actions to realize it.

And yet planning, like other human experience, is more complicated than even this version. Even if a past problem motivated planning to enact a more desirable future, more often than not, formulating the alternative helps define the problem and leads to redefining it. In other words, today’s efforts to solve the problem that bothered us yesterday cause us to rethink the meaning of the problem. It would be fair to say today’s planning activities caused yesterday’s problem in the sense of creating a defi-

nition of the problem that now motivates us to respond.

More generally, planning processes have a characteristic some have likened to a "garbage can" (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; Cohen and March 1986). Planning activities, whatever motivated them, become a "container" into which people may place problems that concern them and programs they want implemented. These additional problems and possibilities become available for redefining the original condition and reconsidering solutions for it. Deliberations and actions may continue more or less coherently, but their focus may shift markedly over time.

We may say later that at last we understand the problem that first bothered us, or we may comment that we had to play with several designs before we could figure out what we really needed. Although planning documents may be clear and compelling, they only vaguely reflect the thinking and interactions that preceded them. They offer a version of things that is true at the time of writing, but other truths preceded that, and, presumably, others will follow.

In short, situations have no single "objective" definition. People define and redefine them. Although convention tells us a problem is solved when it is eliminated in the external world, in fact, a problem is solved when we believe it is solved. We may decide the world has changed, or we may simply have reconceived it. This does not mean external realities do not matter, but, rather, they matter in ways we assign to them.

In short, the intuitive argument for telling a planning story chronologically is not decisive. Indeed, it might make more sense to begin with the final events, and then tell what preceded them, now understood in terms of where they ended up.

Even if one were to try to construct a chronological version, there remains the historian's prototypical problem: Which events should be included? How does one decide whether something is relevant to the story? The answer depends partly on one's conceptual framework. For example, an economic determinist would assume economic forces are the most powerful influences on whatever happens, whereas a cultural determinist would assume beliefs most strongly affect social conditions.

The economist and the culturalist would each consider different events relevant to any story. They would disagree about what a planning process is "about." Is it about money? about culture? We could ask whether the story might not be about both, but this would force us to consider, then, how many things the story could be about. Is it also about personalities? political power? And if we decide several influences or meanings are important, how do we decide their relative importance, and how do we decide when something is sufficiently unimportant as not to warrant attention? The economist and the culturalist might disagree even about when the story started and when it is over. Our frameworks

guide what we see, consider important, and accept as explanation.

I have tried to write the stories of these communities planning in ways that reflect the meanings to participants. This does not mean I have told the same stories they would have written (for those, see Giloth 1993, 1994; Levin and Bernstein 1991). Rather, I have aimed to understand planning activities as an expression of community dynamics. Further, I have tried to understand these dynamics in terms of both their explicit meanings to community members and their tacit, often unconscious meanings.

I have begun each history with a chronology of planning events, but the accounts do not always follow sequentially. One reason concerns the planning processes, where several parallel groups met simultaneously, some starting or ending before others, and where, consequently, a purely chronological narrative would distort the conduct of work. The other reason is that meanings and reasons neither conform to organizational structures nor follow the calendar. I have organized the histories in terms of basic challenges communities confront, and I have examined the medley of responses in relation to each.

As a result, the stories do not provide a complete record of planning activities. Nor do they give a full account of the outcomes. For one thing, not all proposals are equally important. Moreover, the formal outcomes of planning processes are often not really the end of planning, and an evaluation must move toward later, often less definitely formed events. Finally, I have focused on matters that concern community. As a result, some activities in which people invested much time and energy get less than proportionate attention.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

I studied both community planning processes as an observer. I approached the director of community planning and budgeting at The Associated and the executive director of the South East Community Organization and asked each if I could study their planning process. I explained I was interested in the issues of community I have described here and wanted to look at planning as a situation where community members talked with one another about their community. I wanted to attend meetings, read documents, and interview participants.

I had no prior relationship with The Associated, though a former student was assistant to the planning director. The planning director and another staff member interviewed me about my interests, and the planning director asked for a formal proposal, including provisions for protecting confidentiality. After he consulted the president and talked with

me again several times, he offered entry with a generous willingness to help. He was proud of his work and wanted recognition for it.

At SECO, I had begun to get to know the executive director at the time he was starting a community planning process, and I asked if I could observe. I offered an outline of research questions, but with little formality he simply invited me to come to meetings. Our initial relationship, as well as his openness to questioning and publicity, influenced his decision.

I began at The Associated in the summer of 1991. By this time, strategic planning participants had produced a plan, and task forces had taken steps to implement recommendations. I set out to reconstruct a history of planning to that point by reading meeting minutes and other archival documents and interviewing a sample of participants. I began to sit in on meetings of the Commission on Jewish Education and, later, the Joint Commission on Associated-Synagogue Relations. I continued to attend Joint Commission meetings until its cessation near the end of 1993, and I stayed with the Commission on Jewish Education and its successor, the Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education, through the spring of 1994. I have developed an account of the core strategic planning process from others' reports and records, while observing firsthand planning for Jewish education and relations between synagogues and the federation. I have written more generally of issues and interests with respect to the first part, while I have used meeting discussions more specifically to understand ways of addressing issues in the second part.

I began studying Southeast planning when the process started in the spring of 1992. I attended meetings, examined documents, and interviewed a sample of participants about past history and contemporary events. I have attended meetings of the Planning Council, its Coordinating Committee, and work groups since then. Thus, the account of the Southeast, which goes through the fall of 1995, is based on the firsthand observations that characterize the second period of Associated planning.

Associated staff allowed me to study strategic planning on the condition that I not identify participants by name or in other ways. Consistently, I have used pseudonyms for speakers at meetings, and I have characterized others generally as staff members, rabbis, or community leaders. No such condition was discussed in connection with my entry into Southeast community planning, but I have followed the same convention there, largely for consistency, but partly also to protect certain individuals who probably would not want to be named.

The result, perhaps especially in the more open Southeast culture, is sometimes awkward. In fact, several staff and community members played essential planning roles in each case, and this version obscures their

responsibility. On the other hand, the cases are meant to tell the stories of two communities, where individuals are less important than the dynamics they represent. The convention serves that purpose.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Part 1 introduces issues and the settings and provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the case studies.

The next four parts each focus on a specific task communities and their organizations must manage. These sections juxtapose the case studies, creating a tacit dialogue between the communities. In each case, the material first analyzes community dynamics with respect to the focal task and then examines how those dynamics influenced planning. The parts conclude with generalizations from the communities.

Part 2 looks at how the communities set their boundaries. Part 3 examines how they defined good community membership. Part 4 analyzes how they managed resources. Part 5 looks at how the communities tried to continue themselves.

Part 6 draws conclusions about community identities, community organizations, planning for communities, and cities.