

# Building Community in Place: **Limitations and Promise**

by Bill Traynor April 2007\*



In past decades, the emerging interest in community building at the local level has challenged community-based organizations such as CDCs to broaden their efforts and reconnect with residents, and to retool and reexamine their relationship with, and role within, the communities they serve.

Practitioners, funders, and policy experts in our field have been exploring a broader approach to community redevelopment which includes an aggressive effort to redevelop the civic and social

infrastructure alongside the physical infrastructure.

But this work has not proven easy to grasp or to practice well, and today it remains only sporadically resourced by foundations, in part because its impact is hard to measure. Moreover, most of the work that has been supported has been limited to encouraging CDCs and others to engage residents in *their* work – *a supply-side strategy* – popularized through the Comprehensive Community Initiative (CCI) era of the 90's.

- Rather than investing in building new community infrastructure so that residents can better connect with each other (an essential component of social capital development) the CCI era invested in large, well established community-based organizations.
- Rather than investing in new thinking and practice, this era saw efforts to adapt traditional community organizing practice to a new setting.

The result was 'community organizing-lite', a largely undisciplined and under-resourced approach to community-building that has proven un-equal to the task.

More recently, community building is emerging in a different light - being seen as an important (some would say essential) activity which stands on its own as a field of practice. Today, there is a growing recognition by practitioners that a fundamental condition consistently undercuts all our efforts to rebuild struggling communities – *chronic disengagement*. In many communities, civic life – from the city council chambers to the block club meeting room -- can be a foreign, even hostile environment for the average person, ruled by cynicism and division, and dominated by entrenched habits of isolation and detachment.

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The causes of this disengagement could be argued, but it is enough to say that *a community needs a functional civic infrastructure in order to shape and sustain physical and economic development of any kind*. This is particularly true of urban areas that have now seen four or five decades of decline, and have endured historic demographic shifts from ‘old timer’ to newcomer populations. The degradation of the civic habits and institutions that supported public life in these places has been dramatic if not complete. New habits and institutions have not been built to accommodate new populations or to address the mobility and diversity of city life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The unique hallmark of community development is that – in the information age and the global economy – it remains steadfastly place-based. *Place – we would maintain – is still important*, especially for those who cannot afford to purchase another place when this one gets too run down. So it has been worth it to try to fuse community building into community development infrastructure.

But while our field is engineered to build the physical things place-based communities need – the new homes, community centers, small businesses, and increasingly to engage residents in those efforts, we have been not engineered - or resourced - to build the infrastructure of relationships and conditions needed to re-weave a strong community fabric in place; that is, connecting people to each other and removing the barriers to engagement in public life.

The fact is that as powerful and effective as community development efforts have been over past decades, we have never really embraced the possibility that our principal challenge now, maybe nothing short of *creating newly functional civic environments and finding a way to entice people to step back into public life in a way that feels safe, fun and productive*. New thinking and practice is needed which is based, not in the traditions of community in the past, but in the pace and flow of the new economy and the age of connectivity.

## Part 1: The Emergence of Community Building Practice and **‘Organizing-Lite’ in the CCI Era**

Community building emerged as a community development approach in the early 90’s as a supply side strategy, fostered first by foundations and others frustrated with the pace of change represented by the “bricks and mortar” CDC approach. Their goal? To use the same delivery system that was created to deliver bricks and mortar to deliver “community building” – essentially to reform the supply-side institutions to be more engaged and responsive to residents.

Many of the earliest CDCs, born from community organizing and driven by a local constituency, routinely packaged efforts like youth development, community organizing, and adult education with their real estate development work. For many years, however, biases among funders of community efforts, and among community development

practitioners themselves, toward a housing production agenda made sustaining these broad, activist approaches extremely difficult. Eventually, by the early 80's, the CDC movement became synonymous with affordable housing development. At best, the major funders of CDCs viewed community building work as ancillary to the principal real estate development work of the CDC. Alternatively, the few dollars available for community organizing flowed toward so-called "pure" organizing groups. Despite the paucity of interest and funding, a small minority of CDCs continued to mount broad efforts.

Attitudes shifted in the 90's and community building practices emerged into the mainstream of the CDC movement. Most major national foundations, and many regional and community foundations, sponsored their own versions of Comprehensive Community Building initiatives (CCI's), experiments in the fusion of community building practice and community development. Technical assistance organizations, consultants, and intermediary groups also got involved in this work in large numbers. In addition, a number of national alliances formed to support this work. Most notable of these was the National Community Building Network (NCBN), an alliance of funders of "locally driven urban initiatives" formed in 1993 to influence public policy and provide forums to discuss community building initiatives, and the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Revitalization.

The “CCI era”, driven by funding from powerful national and regional private foundations, touched most of the major metropolitan areas of the country at one time or another in the decade of the 90s. Though these initiatives differed in many ways, the essential premise was the same: provide multi-year funding and technical support to existing CBOs to take on the challenge of comprehensive community change. These initiatives saw some success in reforming CBOs to take on new work. A 25-year-old CDC in Boston retools to conduct a resident-driven planning process for the first time in 2 decades. A Denver organization expands its work to major efforts in community organizing and cultural development. A Washington, DC, development corporation fields a team of four community organizers to build resident leaders and shape a community agenda. A St. Paul economic development groups begin a major youth leadership effort.



In the mid to late 90's funders and policy people were far more exuberant and clear about the potential for community building than the practitioners – the staff and leaders of the CBOs who were called on to carry out this work. The CCI era was decidedly ‘funder driven’ and in fact many of the foundations which sponsored CCI's were shifting their practice as well, as Foundation staff were getting intensively involved in the operations of the initiative. For CBOs, this shift by funders to the CCI approach came after years of accumulating a real estate development portfolio, and at a time when organizations were embattled by budget cuts and worsening local conditions. Moreover, for the previous

decade, CBO Executive Directors and Board Leaders had built their organizational capacity around a funding environment that really only valued a narrow real estate production-oriented agenda. The rules were changing and there were few organizations with the energy and capacity to take on the kind of organizational challenges which this work posed.

But CBO's enthusiastically participated in these efforts when invited by foundations. Many saw it as a source of core operating or "soft" program money that they could use as flexible revenue to fill gaps in staffing. Some CDCs, recognizing that the future would hold fewer housing resources, were searching for another important role to play in the community. Others, recognizing the limitations of real estate based strategies, were trying to address the "human development" needs of their residents. Still others, who have gotten away from or never developed the ability to organize and mobilize their constituency, felt the need to develop more political clout in an age of dwindling resources. .

## Retooling the CBO; Limits and Challenges

Because many of the groups participating in community building initiatives principally work in real estate development, they sometimes had a difficult time adapting to community building approaches. Their real estate work tends to be structured, disciplined, and outcome oriented. Yet, curiously, this same level of discipline and structure often did not extend to the newer community building work. First, community-based groups remained preoccupied with a real estate development agenda, which is still viewed as the bread and butter of the organization. Second, a strong bias remains, reflected in the labeling of real estate related work as "hard" and non-real estate related work as "soft", that this work could not be effectively measured or managed. Ultimately, this "soft" work was viewed as work that was hard to define, can be accomplished in the margins, and that just about anyone can do. As a CDC line of business, this work carried with it a) a lower level of expectations, a) a healthy measure of ambivalence, and c) a lack operational clarity.

Because the quality and outcomes of this work can be more difficult to measure than, for instance, housing production, it is hard to distinguish between excellence and mediocrity, between a group that is going through the motions and a group with real ambition and ability. Because measures of quality were elusive, and because the details of the work were usually ill-defined at the point of funding, sponsoring foundations spend millions on "technical assistance" to assist the host CBO's in implementing the community building work. But much of this TA was seen by CBO's, rightly, as a form of quality control.

## The Emergence of “Community Organizing-Lite”

Ultimately, the principal community building tool of the CCI era has been a weak derivative of the traditional Alinsky style of community organizing, sometimes referred to as “*community organizing-lite*.” Genuine Alinsky-legacy organizers don’t recognize this practice as “organizing” and are loathe to consider the ‘community builders’ of the CCI era as “organizers” at all. And it’s true that depending on the circumstances, organizing-lite can veer wildly and easily into advocacy, social services, and civic engagement work or even more hard-to-define forms of ‘soft’ community work. Suffice to say that because the practice was built as a “supply side” intervention – to connect existing groups to the community – the quality and the approaches that have been used are as different as the intentions of the host organizations.

In the CCI era, “community organizers” embedded in CDCs and other non “organizing-only” CBOs often complained of a lack of support and direction from their boards or staff supervisors. When new organizers were brought into the organization, they rarely had the support and guidance they need to succeed. In many cases there was no culture of organizing in the CBO, and the executive director was not oriented enough to the work to



provide adequate support to the organizer. Sometimes, because of past history, key staff or board members were skeptical or fearful of community organizing. By and large the community organizing strategy was not sufficiently clear or well understood. Under these conditions, the organizer’s work inevitably becomes more and more disjointed. The organizer becomes seen as a kind of utility outreach/event specialist whose job is to service the other “line staff” in the organization. This situation can be extremely frustrating for the organizer. It was not unusual, in many of the CCI’s to see 2-3 “organizers” come and go in a year or two. Minimally, the new organizer is under-utilized and the community building effort suffers.

If the organizer is dynamic and successful, despite a lack of organizational support and direction, the situation can become even more hazardous. In some cases, organizers successfully built new constituencies (task forces, committees, etc.) among residents, only to then meet resistance as they attempted to integrate these new people into the organization. The new constituents inevitably challenge the existing leadership seeking a role in redefining the organization or shifting its programmatic emphasis. The friction that this dynamic causes between the CBO and emerging groups of resident leaders can ultimately be productive, but, if handled haphazardly, it could also be very damaging to the CBO and the community renewal effort.

The limitations of grafting community building onto a complex and fast moving CBO, and the ineffectuality of “community-organizing lite” proved daunting and led to questions about whether the the CCI era impact has been worth the investment. In this

environment, even the best organizer supported by the best CBO had trouble breaking through the levels of disinterest, distrust and disenfranchisement that they found in many urban neighborhoods. Ultimately, these community builders were practicing a set of approaches developed at another time, for another reason, on behalf of community institutions that, for the most part, were at least ambivalent about the role and purpose of community building. All at a time when cynicism and the habits of detachment have never been more entrenched.

## Part 2: Building Community in Place, Rethinking Our View and Our Practice

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

### Community Organizing is Not Community Building

*A major lesson of the CCI Era is that community organizing, “lite” or not, is probably not the right tool for the job of rebuilding community.* Community organizing – at least the Alinsky-legacy form that is the most widely practiced and upon which organizing-lite practice has been loosely based – is a specific, tactical and highly structured approach to power building and to confronting entrenched interests. It is fundamentally a *political form* which trades on ideological and didactic notions of connectivity, affiliation and belonging designed to recruit and mobilize a small subset of the population. It is a form that was shaped by the ideological warfare of political parties and the labor movement in the beginning of the last century and further shaped and molded by the cold war and then later on by the civil rights movement. Today, the modern version of the best of Alinsky-legacy organizing has rooted itself in faith based institutions with “faith” serving as a proxy for weakened political and class-based ideology. Nonetheless, the paradigm of “belonging” in these groups – whether fueled by faith or political ideology -- calls for levels of commitment, loyalty, time and belligerence that have never been for everyone and increasingly stand out as in-organic to the experience of most people.

This in-organic quality of Alinsky-legacy organizing is not, as some claim, due solely to the call to confrontation – which is admittedly a difficult leap for many people and an

extraordinary leap for most CDCs. More troublesome for community building purposes, is that the processes and habits that we are left with, even in a barely derivative organizing- lite approach, are still highly structured and mostly tactical. The practice focuses on winnowing “leaders” from the pack, claiming those leaders as its own, engaging those leaders in fairly narrow and formal leadership roles, and encasing those leaders in rigid and ideological structures which are at least partly designed to give the institution legitimacy. Some elements of this, such as formal, semi-permanent leadership roles, rigid and hierarchical “committee” structures, and the perpetuation of leadership styles focused on “speaking for the group” or “leading the meeting” are today, simply habits of organization that are artifacts of a political organizing form.

The in-organic quality of community organizing puts it in alignment with a range of other community and political institutions whose ‘habits of organization’ fail to resonate today. In fact, data shows that over the past few decades, people of all classes and races are fleeing structured, high affiliation-level organizations of all kinds in great numbers. In their place, demonstrated by recent internet based *communities-of-connection* type movements, buttressed by a genuine information-technology revolution, is a new 21<sup>st</sup> century paradigm for ‘belonging; ‘one that has *market* rather than *political* roots. In this new market paradigm, ideology is replaced by value, and loyalty is trumped by choice. The “member” of the new millennium wants to be connected but not obliged; to be part of many, and owned by none, and to be surgical in his commitment of resources and time. Low-level affiliation (more akin to “club” membership than to vanguard membership), flexibility, provisionality and informality are the hallmarks of the new membership organization. In these groups, the evidence is not that people are getting involved less, but that they are getting involved in a different way.

A new form of organizing is needed which understands and capitalizes these changes in the nature of affiliation and which is explicitly designed to meet the challenges of building community infrastructure in place – still a critical environment for community for those who choose, or who are stuck in, struggling urban areas. In the community development world we are not building community in the ether – we are building it in specific places, presumably places where the presence of “community” is lacking and could be helpful if it were built. In today’s urban areas, marked by density, diversity, persistent poverty, ambiguous economic prospects and public institutions (like schools) suffering from a paralyzing level of dysfunction, it could be argued that effective community building that leads to a robust community infrastructure is the *only* pre-condition that can possibly impact these conditions. It also happens that it is the only pre-condition that those who live and work in these areas can take an active role in changing. In a global economy where places are connected only indirectly to the sweet spots of economic growth, a highly functional, efficient and active civic environment may be the most important competitive economic advantage of the age for those who are most dependent on place for opportunity. This new community organizing approach has to aspire – not just to getting poor people represented in the supply side – or to yielding episodic moments of collective action, but to building a functional civic infrastructure that optimizes the aggregate contribution of all residents and stakeholders toward making

that place work. In short, to building a “demand environment” for economic development and a functional civic sphere.

## An Alternative Approach – Building the “Demand Side” of Community Engagement

I would like to offer an alternative logic model for understanding placed based community building:

- At the cellular level, place based ‘community’ starts with a single relationship of trust and mutual benefit that one resident or stakeholder shares with another.
- It is the aggregate of those relationships - along with the loose connections that bind a diversity of them together - that forms, not community, but the *structural framework for community to exist*.
- It is the cumulative capacities for collective decision-making, problem solving, mutual support, collective action, information sharing, and most importantly, the creation and exchange of value (time, goods, services)-- *which this infrastructure facilitates* – that is ultimately “community.”

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

In short, the “demand-side” of community change and community development – the extent to which the aggregate actions and voices of people are driving change in community -- has been severely fractured and decimated over the decades. Fewer voices, fewer different voices, sporadic action, and the inability to generate genuine representative samples of both, constitutes a market failure in the classic sense.

Where there is no demand there can be no reasonable gauge of value. Where there is no reasonable gauge of value, there can be no effective supply or efficiency in delivery. In this environment, attempts by foundations, intermediaries, many CBOs and many municipal governments to improve the quality of life for poor and struggling families are a veritable ‘shot in the dark.’ Colored by decades of failed attempts at reform, it is no wonder that cynicism and distrust among residents for these well meaning institutional interventions continue to be pervasive.



To effectively attack the challenges of building genuine community, radically new

thinking and practice is needed, starting with an acknowledgment that there is no short cut to reaping the aggregate benefits of community without an aggressive investment in building genuine community at the cellular level. At a minimum this means investing in opportunities and space for peer-to-peer connections, allowing for new forms of community institutions to emerge based on more organic habits of connection and affiliation, and resourcing the information infrastructure – literally the roads and rails of opportunity today – that even the poorest residents need to get connected to civic and economic life. In short, this requires new efforts aimed at developing the “demand-side” of community, guided by a different paradigm of community and community building – one that sees community as a marketplace and community building as a market making strategy.

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

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

There are those, myself included, who see the formation of strong urban communities as a political act in an economic and political environment that would rather not hear from or respond to poor people, people of color and their communities. But for those who are doing the hard, day-to-day community building work of meeting neighbors, getting involved in schools, building block clubs, or organizing clean-ups, is a more simple matter of trying to *maximize the value of place for themselves and their families*. Our concern should be helping to support residents in this process as well as helping remove the barriers to this pursuit. A demand environment, full of people who are succeeding at this, will generate their own channels for political activism and invent their own institutions. An environment full of people who are failing at this will not even have that choice.

Turning this latent environment into a potent one will not be easy. In today’s urban communities, this process – the process of “getting involved” is, for the most part, difficult, boring, nonproductive and often scary, especially for newcomer populations. An environment marked by these characteristics is the last place any of us would want to spend time, so it’s not surprising that most people don’t and won’t. *Community building* needs to focus on changing this experience, by re-shaping the fundamental interface for thousands of people -- in a given place -- to meet other people, build relationships of value, participate in civic life, and pursue individual and family economic goals. Simply put, community building has to build *habits of engagement* to replace the deeply embedded *habits of detachment* that dominate place.

## The Network Organizing Form; Advantages for Community Building

Community as a marketplace does not solely depend on small groups of people, acting in consort through carefully orchestrated episodes of collective action – the community organizing lite approach. *More importantly, it depends on the probability that the net aggregate, cumulative impact of their actions and decisions will lead to a functional and accountable civic sphere – which includes opportunities to act collectively.* But how to create an environment that actually encourages civic engagement? Some activists, like myself, who have been struggling with how to shape a strategy designed to shape a new place-based environment have turned to network theory for direction.

A network is best understood as *an environment of connectivity* rather than an organization in the traditional sense. At its best, it is an environment that is *value* driven and self-generating, where control and decision-making is dispersed and where ‘being well connected’ is the optimal state for any participant. Networks are established in order to create efficiency and optimum value for its participants – with only as much infrastructure as is needed to create effective connectivity. For instance, I would describe our network in Lawrence, Massachusetts, not as an organization, but as a *bundle of thinking, language, habits, value propositions, space and practice – all designed to comprise an environment that more effectively meets people where they are and offers myriad opportunities and levels of engagement.* The network form is attractive for community-building precisely because it relies on and fosters a robust, active demand environment through the aggregate the pursuit of value and exercise of choice. It is also desirable for community building because it’s fundamental characteristics; low-level affiliation, value and choice driven, flexibility, informality, responsiveness, etc, are more organic to the experiences of most people and therefore more accessible as a form of belonging.

As community builders, we can’t control all aspects of the civic environment or guarantee that we can enact a wholesale shift in habits. But we can be intentional about the kinds of environments that we are part of creating, and funders can do a better job of resourcing creative, new approaches focused on shaping the demand-side. The network form, adapted to the community-building task, provides clear clues for shaping a new form of organizing, and increasingly practitioners are recognizing some common characteristics of this form:



### Fun First

First, the environment has to be welcoming, friendly and fun. Community building is not all business, its not even mostly business. It is relationship building and the business flows from the strength and the patterns of relationships that

are built. In this way, relationships are the “*roads and rails*” for progress and positive change at the community level. With this infrastructure much can happen, without it much will fail. Therefore community building does not start in meetings. It starts – typically -- with eating and talking. Abundant opportunities for people to people connections have to be programmed into the life of the network.

### Low-Level Affiliation

Unlike traditional organizing which formally or culturally challenges you to be all in or all out, the network seeks an explicitly “low level of affiliation” and assumes that this is but one of the many things you are choosing to be a part of. It is a layer of engagement that fully accommodates the members’ other interests in life; family, church, work, block club, book club etc. This is a more organic life condition for most people and much more in sync with the kind of transactional affiliation that is the norm of most people in the information age. Instead of loyalty, ideology, or guilt, the network relies on value – through specific value propositions and new relationships -- to attract members.

### Form Follows Function

The forms of organization that dominate the network environment have to be informal, flexible and action-oriented. A network has to be vigilantly responsive and therefore has to be a ‘shape shifter’ in order to move capacity to the places it is needed. The semi-permanent forms of traditional community building; standing committees, formal leadership positions etc., are not helpful in a network environment because they are not easily dismantled. In a network organizing environment, two important principals shape what form a certain activity should take – whether that is a sewing class, a city budget reform effort, or a program ‘committee.’ The first is “form follows function.”; a habit in the network where the group will always ask itself this question – “what form best suits this function.” The upshot of this habit is that, by and large, network members are organized in very informal, provisional and flexible groups where positional leadership titles are de-emphasized, leaders change often and the group is decidedly next-step focused. The other principal is “open architecture is best.” Again emphasizing informality and provisionality, the groups embrace the idea that people will come and go and therefore they work hard to keep the group perpetually accessible to new people. This is accomplished with simple facilitation techniques designed to hold onto the institutional memory of the group while making the work and the deliberations accessible to new voices.

### The Connector as Leader

Leadership in the network environment is focused more on being a connector than a spokesperson or even a facilitator. In a network environment the connections are all. The more connected you are to other people, information and opportunity the more value you can extract from the environment. So in this context there is no more valuable a role than helping others to form and find those connections. Increasingly, members are trained to be “weavers” and the “weaver” is an honored and acknowledge leadership role in the network environment.

## Information Rich

Self navigation, peer support/exchange and viral marketing are hallmarks of an effective network environment. For these things to happen, the environment must be ‘information rich’. In fact, access to good, timely information is one of the primary value propositions of membership in the network. Building a network environment therefore requires early and significant investments in communications and information technology, and the reinforcement of member behavior focused on dissemination of information. Effective network members are not brokers of relationships or information, they are transmission nodes.

## Interactive Spaces

Building place-based community using a network approach has the added characteristic of shaping new places and forums for “bumping-up” time. In a network, you want to create as many opportunities for people to bump up against other people as possible. This is advantageous to information sharing and relationship building. The problem is that opportunities that are too contrived or controlled will diminish the sense of choice that is so critical to all of us. We can however, try to re-design the spaces and interactions that already exist so that they are more conducive to peer-to-peer connections. Informal time can be programmed into meetings and events. Spaces can be re-designed to encourage intimacy and comfortability. Organizing activities that encourages residents to meet and interact on their stoops or in their homes is critical toward developing the doorstep-level connections that help people feel connected on the street and block. In many ways, the stoop, the sidewalk, the street, the alley, the next corner; this is the toughest frontier for community building in dense urban areas.

## Diversity of People and Choices

The power of being connected in a network environment is directly related to how diverse its membership and its choices. The network organizer is intentional in starting and connecting a variety of activities – programs, issues, projects, that would attract a variety of people to the network and offer a range of choices for doing different things. They are also intentional about shaping many levels of engagement which meet the needs of a wider range of people, allowing for and encouraging members to get only as involved as they want to be at any given time. An important part of the choice environment is also the choice to create something that you think is important for the network to invest in. A healthy network environment is designed to support the development of a myriad of small, short term activities that resonate with members.

## Using Collective *and* Aggregate Power

A network environment takes advantage of two kinds of accountability and mobilization mechanisms in order to a) decide what is valuable to the members, b) establish values and norms, and c) articulate demand and move to collective action. Most of our CBOs and community building work relies on the deliberation of small numbers of people in order to establish credibility and make decisions. The network allows for that to happen as well. But it allows for another dimension – the aggregate articulation of demand. Like a market environment, the network looks at the decisions (choices) that members are making in order to understand what is valuable and what is needed moving forward.

Also, the network can act like a consumer collective and use its collective demand to shape the services that are available to struggling families. A network community building approach, investments in ways to “listen” to the network – effectively to see and hear what members are doing with their time and energy. An effective ability to track network activity is necessary to wielding aggregate power.

Network forms are only a part of a new wave of thinking about engagement and connectivity. In marketing, in national and state politics, in national and international movement building, the principals of network forms are taking hold and proving potent. These principals can be applied to place based community building as well. In low income communities, as in the rest of the world, groups that offer an affiliation that is more transactional and more provisional, will earn engagement from a busy and discriminating public. Groups that build an infrastructure that provides a range of value that is responsive to rapid change - will be able to sustain engagement. And groups that demonstrate a genuine interest in and infrastructure for, listening and responding to their members - will build powerful constituencies.

There is latent power and effectiveness in urban communities which can be unleashed by the potency of robust networks of relationships. New thinking and practice is needed which embraces, rather than fears or ignores the challenge of rebuilding civic life. While its true that, at the cellular level, relationships are built one by one, networks of relationships can grow exponentially if community builders and their allies stop worrying about defining “it” and get a lot busier building “it.”