

Socially Equitable Community Planning: Including Individuals with Disabilities in the Democratic Association of Place

Keith M. Christensen, MLA

Utah State University

Abstract: Individuals with disabilities need opportunities for socially equitable association, where interactions are not premised on relational social qualifications, to realize community membership. Communities of location, defined by “place” rather than “people,” are a mechanism to avoid and an avenue to address the relational boundaries of communities of organization and culture for individuals with disabilities. The democratic associations of place supported by communities of location may be a significant factor in individuals with disabilities gaining membership in other types of social communities and being equal members of the community.

Key Words: equality, community, planning

People naturally come together in communities. Communities are social organizations that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1993). These benefits are diverse but generally include security, economy, and affiliation. In particular, a strong affiliation to a community may lead to a greater sense of purpose and perceived control in dealing with an external threat (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985).

Communities are fostered through networks of organizations (e.g., family or political affiliation), culture or identity (e.g., ethnic group, disability), and location (e.g., neighborhood or region). Individuals are generally members of multiple communities, both temporarily and permanently, as a function of their perceived commonalities. Communities of organization or culture are considered to be “relational” or concerned with how similar or different an individual is to another, a sense of personal relatedness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Communities of location, on the other hand, are geographically defined or defined by “place,” not by people. As relational and place-based community identities are not fundamentally competitive, communities of location are often nested with or within communities of organization or culture (Tropman, Erlich, & Rothman, 2006). Indeed, a community of location may support a stronger sense of community within organization or culture (e.g., Utah Democrats, an ethnic neighborhood such as “Chinatown,” or the “projects”). In addition, communities of location often cross communities of organizations or cultures. For example, residents of a neighborhood may be ethnically diverse but identify themselves as from “the neighborhood” and work closely with one another to protect the integrity of their neighborhood from a threat such as a proposed highway, big box store, or natural disaster.

The propensity of communities of location to support and cross communities of organization or culture is due in part to the difference in boundaries. All communities

have membership boundaries which define who is in and who is out (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). These boundaries provide community members who are “in” with the emotional safety necessary to develop social connections (Thibaut & Kelley, 1986). As alluded to previously, the boundaries of communities of organization or culture are defined by perceptions of how similar or different individuals are to each other. Communities of organization or culture often identify deviants, individuals who depart markedly from the perceived norm, to establish strong boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This process may be psychologically harmful for those who are so identified.

Communities of location, however, are defined not by the relatedness of the individuals but by perceived differences in places. These differences may be distinct (e.g., architectural style or natural feature) or often subtle as to be recognizable only by the residents themselves (e.g., proximity to a public park or named development). As the boundaries are defined by differences external to the individuals, defining community membership by place rather than individuals’ inherent characteristics has fewer negative social affects. Further, membership in a community of location also carries very strong social role and value messages (Wolfensberger, 2000). The messages conveyed by socially valued environments have a significantly positive effect by alleviating perceived relational differences between individuals (Allen, 1997). For example, living in the “Oaks,” an aesthetically pleasant upper income residential family neighborhood, carries socially valued messages. Whereas, living in the “projects” carries a socially devalued message.

Communities of location are particularly valuable for individuals with disabilities. For individuals with disabilities, social integration means, in part, increasing identification with groups not defined by disability (Ware, Hopper, Tugenberg, Dickey, & Fisher, 2007). Membership in a community of location is a mechanism to avoid, and an avenue to address, the relational boundaries of communities of organization and culture for individuals with disabilities. However, while numerous efforts have been made to facilitate individuals with disabilities living independently in the general community, comparatively little focus has been paid to understanding the communities of location which exist within the general community. Thus, even though many individuals with disabilities are now located physically within the general community, they may often still not be socially a part of their community (Ware, Hopper, Tugenberg, Dickey, & Fisher, 2007; Salzberg & Langford, 1981; Meyers, Ager, Kerr, & Myles, 1998).

When not carefully addressed, the qualities of communities of location that are especially valuable for individuals with disabilities are also those which may contribute to individuals with disabilities being “in the community, but not of it” (Ware, Hopper, Tugenberg, Dickey, & Fisher, 2007). Highly defined communities of location, which carry socially valued messages, are naturally less welcoming and tolerant toward perceived disruptions to the community definition, such as supported housing for individuals with disabilities. Opposition is typically concerned with perceived threats to property values, personal security, and neighborhood quality (Dear, 1992). These reflect members concerns for the emotional safety derived from membership in the community, and the capacity of the neighborhood to maintain those qualities by which the community

is defined and perpetuated. In response to this opposition, individuals with disabilities and their advocates have tended to adopt avoidance strategies, seeking places of less resistance (Bostock & Gleeson, 2004). These “places of least resistance” are frequently either highly defined communities of location that carry socially devalued messages (e.g., low-income or declining neighborhoods) or places with less defined communities of location (e.g., residential sprawl). Either is detrimental to the social integration of individuals with disabilities.

If individuals with disabilities are to benefit from membership in communities of location, these places of greater resistance, carrying socially valued messages, should not be avoided but carefully sought. An initial disruption, evidenced by some opposition, initiates a process where the social sense of community is maintained but not without accepting the membership of individuals with disabilities (Wilton, 1998). Prolonged proximity challenges peoples’ perceptions of their personal relatedness with others (Dear, Wilton, Gaber, Takahashi, 1997).

However, to be successful this process must be thoughtfully undertaken based on an understanding of how communities of location develop. Some communities of location naturally develop over time as peoples’ perception of the place becomes endowed with meaning through experience. Natural features, continuous development patterns, and local establishments may serve as a sustaining catalyst for this “sense of place.” These places are identifiable by, and identified with, the “locals” who are members of a particularly strong community of location. This shared experience with a place supports democratic association, or interactions, which are not premised on relational social qualifications (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1980).

Other communities of location are developed through careful planning of the environment by professionals in the planning fields. The goal of planning professionals is the creation of communities where sharing, bonding, and learning can occur in a safe yet stimulating environment (Lynch & Hack, 1984). Often these efforts are intended to create the same catalysts, which sustain historic communities of location. The community planner will plan for opportunities to share experiences by providing places that support purposeful behavior and affiliation (e.g., the neighborhood pub, skatepark, community center, or playground). Further, the community planner will plan environments that support social mobility, or places with opportunities to expand social boundaries through democratic associations (e.g., parks, pedestrian-friendly streets, residential neighborhoods with a mix of housing types, or a community gathering place). Ideally, to support democratic associations these places must equitably assess the costs in individual expenditures of time, resources, and energy necessary for social participation for each participant. Particularly for individuals with disabilities, the cost of social participation is often not equitably assessed by the environment (Hahn, 1985).

Historically, community planning efforts pertaining to equality focused on race, ethnicity, and economic issues. Issues with respect to individuals with disabilities were undertaken as a subsidiary aspect of community health and not necessarily a matter of equality (So & Getzels, 1988). This emphasis leads to practices where the needs of

individuals with disabilities are addressed during the detail design and construction processes (e.g. curb-cuts or sidewalk widths) as reasonable accommodations. Under reasonable accommodation the intent, at least in practice, is to minimize the costs in time, resources, and energy to provide a minimal level of access for individuals with disabilities. Whether the level of access is considered reasonable is generally determined by the cost, resulting in a proportional system of separate but equal. In essence, some of the capital costs for development are transferred as social costs to the individual with a disability. This practice creates situations where it is disproportionately expensive socially for individuals with disabilities to participate in the democratic associations of communities of location. Such planning practices are untenable in terms of equality of access where the intent is to equitably assess the cost in individual expenditures of time, resources, and energy to participate in the community. Fairness in the planning process requires that steps be taken to redress the imbalance (So & Getzels, 1988) so the social cost is equal to the expenditure of other individuals. However, only relatively recently has the planning profession begun to more widely recognize and address individuals with disabilities in terms of social equality.

To include individuals with disabilities as equal members of the community, this shift must continue. An important step toward socially equitable community planning practices is the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the process at the policy level.

In addition to advocating for a continued shift toward socially equitable planning practices, which include individuals with disabilities, both individuals with disabilities and advocates need to give greater attention to communities of location. While often taken for granted, communities of location are especially important for individuals with disabilities to be equal members of the community. Membership in the community does not result from merely being present in the physical community. Physical exposure is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to create a sense of community, and may instead create a sense of alienation (Cummins & Lau, 2003). Great care must be taken to recognize the various communities of location and the places, which support them.

For example, is the neighborhood primarily defined by place (e.g., the “woods” or the “cottages”) or is the neighborhood defined primarily by the homogeneous characteristics of the residents (e.g., the wealthy neighborhood)? The latter is a community of identity where democratic association is unlikely to occur. Is the available housing for individuals with disabilities located in areas of residential “sprawl,” which are characterized by undifferentiated housing without a sense of neighborhood or community? Is the neighborhood hangout, where democratic association takes place, physically accessible without significant effort on the part of the individual with disabilities? Are the places where individuals with disabilities are employed found within the general community’s employment places? Are the organizations that provide services for individuals with disabilities found with the organizations that provide services for community members in general?

Recognizing and understanding the communities of location that exist in the physical community is complex. There are ample opportunities for greater advocacy,

research, and emphasis in the disability and planning fields. The democratic associations of place, which support communities of location, may be a significant factor in individuals with disabilities gaining membership in other types of social communities and being equal members of the community. Not only does familiarity tend to increase acceptance, but connectedness with members through one community may facilitate acceptance in additional communities through shared affiliations. Indeed, for individuals with disabilities to realize community membership, there needs to be opportunities for socially equitable democratic association. For individuals with disabilities, the benefits of the democratic association of place through communities of location may be significant and should not be taken for granted.

Keith Christensen, MLA, is an assistant professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, and a senior research scientist with the Center for Persons with Disabilities, at Utah State University. Keith's research emphasizes the planning and design of socially inclusive environments.

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