

Reinforcing the Values of the Village in Urban Settings

By

Helmut E. Reinhardt

INTRODUCTION

A significant demographic change observed in developed societies over a number of decades is the aging of the population-- that is, people in these societies are living longer on average. About 14.1 percent, or one in every seven of the U. S. population, is an older American. On January 1, 2016, the oldest baby boomers born in the U. S. reached 70 years old. Statistics also indicate that Americans who reach age 65 have an average additional life expectancy of 19.3 years, with the average life expectancy for women of 20.5 years (or a total life expectancy of 85.5 years) being 2.6 years higher than the average additional life expectancy for men (17.9 years or a total life expectancy of 82.9 years). (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, http://www.aoa.acl.gov/aging_statistics/Profile/2014/2.aspx). Reaching the age of 100 is no longer a rare event. Although they make up less than one percent of the population, in 2013, just over 67 thousand people in the U. S. had reached 100 years old or more (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, http://www.aoa.acl.gov/aging_statistics/Profile/2014/2.aspx).

Many older people continue to remain in the workforce, either on a full-time or a part-time basis even after they reach retirement age. There are many positive reasons why people continue to work after

reaching age 66. One major reason is financial need: many are still employed because they have not saved enough to sustain a comfortable standard of living at their current ages. Ideally, older people get to stay in their own home in the community where they have lived, although, perhaps, in a smaller home or as a tenant in an apartment. Increasing numbers of older people suffer from illnesses that make them unable to live completely or even partially independently. Those with income reserves are entering assisted-living or independent living facilities which are money draining and very expensive for those who pay out of pocket. The ill elderly with no reserves enter nursing homes.

A second important demographic trend occurred in 2008, when, for the first time, a larger percentage of the global population lived in cities than in rural areas (Totty 2016: R1). By 2050, the United Nations projects that nearly two thirds of the world's population will live in cities (Totty 2016: R1).

MY POINT OF VIEW

There should be better and different ways to spend one's "golden" years. An idea which is not entirely new, but one which is worth investigating, is reinforcing the values of the village in contemporary urban settings. My inspiration for this article came from my visits to

my parents' hometown of Eutingen (now Pforzheim-Eutingen) in the German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. On my first visit as a child in 1960, Eutingen was still a small village outside Pforzheim and had basically one main street (Hauptstrasse) and some connecting streets to the north and to the east. There was a wooded area to the south which was for the most part orchards and parkland. Most of the residents lived on the Hauptstrasse in row houses with small backyards.

To the north side of the Hauptstrasse lay the main Bundesbahn (state railroad) line from Karlsruhe to Muehlacker, which ran in the backyards of those houses on the Hauptstrasse.

The streets were cobblestone with high sidewalks. There were no telephone poles or utility wires. Bakeries, a butcher shop, several clothing stores, and a flower shop lined the street. A village pharmacy, a photo shop, and a hair salon share some buildings with each other. The Realschule (elementary school), where my parents went to school, loomed over the Hauptstrasse across from the main hotel/inn Hotel Stadt Pforzheim. There was a walking path to a neighboring village of Niefern, passing under the Autobahn Number 10 (Karlsruhe to Muenchen). Many residents would take that path to visit friends and relatives in Niefern. To the north, there was also a road that passed under the Autobahn to the overlooking hill called the Enzbuehle, filled with garden plots owned by the townspeople in Enzberg and Niefern. The people in all these villages knew each other, primarily because they were all related to each other. For many years Eutingen was anchored by one church, the Evangelische Kirche on the Hauptstrasse.

When I first visited in 1960, I did not know that Eutingen was founded by my mother's ancestors in 1450, and that her family, on the whole, had lived since then. Since 1450, generations of brothers migrated to surrounding villages and settled those villages. The old cemetery (now a playground) had a plaque on the entrance commemorating the falling veterans of both world wars. Many were distant relatives of my mother's family. In 1960, as a 9 year old, I did not fully understand the significance of that plaque, but with each subsequent visit (1973, 1981, 1983, and 2001), I began to feel the connectivity of the community. The family home at Hauptstrasse 151 felt like a home away from home. In 1960, my maternal grandmother and two of my dear aunts lived in the house, which was built after

my mother's birth in 1911. There, my mother and her nine siblings ran the household, despite my maternal grandfather being stationed as a naval officer in northern Germany in the early part of the 20th century. After the first world war, my Opa (grandfather) became the tax collector for the city of Pforzheim and later, after World War II, he became the militia commander for the village. Even though Opa never was the Buergermeister (mayor) of Eutingen, he was well known throughout the town until he passed five years before my first visit.

Most of those in Eutingen attended the church for social and religious reasons. Also, for those who were fortunate, some townspeople had a garden plot along the Enz river, where they could plant their own vegetables and flowers. My grandparents had a sizeable plot, which was passed down to the children over the years. For entertainment, there was a Kleine Tiere Halle ("small animal" social club) and a Turn-Halle (a gymnastics hall), which were also built along the Enz. Many of my mother's family were involved with these groups.

In 1960, Eutingen, had a deep sense of community, known as *Gemeinschaft*, the term used in the title of the original publication of Ferdinand Toennies book first when he published it in 1887 as *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*). As sociologists point out, in communal societies relationships among members are defined and regulated by traditional social rules. People in communal societies have direct face-to-face interactions and relationships with one another. Ideally, these interactions involve knowing a lot about the total person. In contrast, *Gesellschaft* is best illustrated by modern, urban-based, socially-diverse societies in which governments and other formal organizations can be described as bureaucracies. In bureaucracies, people play roles in a division of labor and interact mainly on the basis of the behavior their role performance entails in that status. In *Gesellschaft*, rational self-interest and means-to-end interaction serve to weaken the traditional bonds of family, kinship, and religion that characterize the *Gemeinschaft's* structure. In the *Gesellschaft*, human relations are more impersonal and indirect, being rationally constructed in the interest of efficiency or of other economic and/or political considerations. Toennies intended the contrasting social structures of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to be viewed as ideal types. Therefore, real communities could be located anywhere along the continuum between the two extremes.

Today, Pforzheim-Eutingen has been transformed from a social structure which was more like a *Gemeinschaft* to one more like a *Gesellschaft*. Eutingen is now part of the municipality of Pforzheim and the train and commercial traffic starts very early in the morning. There are “big-box” stores on the outskirts of town and all the small stores and shops along the Hauptstrasse are struggling to survive. Pforzheim, also, is not the same place as it was before the fire-bombing of 23 February 1945. Altstadt (“old city”) Pforzheim, before the bombing, was a bustling city dedicated to the gold industry and watch making. Pforzheim had a deep sense of community. Gold workers all knew each other. Watchmakers knew each other. Jewish and Christian families before the war lived in harmony and many cases, inter-married. Pforzheim had a number of small villages, such as Broetzingen and Wuerm, which retained the sense of *Gemuetlichkeit* (defined as comfortableness, kindness, and good naturedness). Pforzheim, after the Second War and the destruction of the old city, became very modern and somewhat impersonal. Many non-Germans migrated from southern countries to Germany and to Pforzheim, in particular. Many immigrants came after the war and stayed on and became part of the “Bundesrepublik” (federal republic). Gone were the old familiar families and eventually the old trades, such as watch making and gold jewelry manufacturing. Gone, too, was the close-knit community along with traditional customs and values.

In 1960, many residents in both Pforzheim and Eutingen had no automobiles, more had motorcycles, however. Many people used either the local trains or local bus service. Now, fewer residents use buses or trains for transportation. Most residents have automobiles.

Last, most residents in Pforzheim or Eutingen in 1960 went to some kind of house of worship (Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, even a Muslim mosque). Today, fewer residents in Pforzheim (and Eutingen) attend religious services. Europe, in general, and Germany, in particular, has become very secular.

Communities in the United States have also changed from the small towns and mill villages of the Industrial Age in New England, for example, to the sprawling megalopolis of Boston-Providence-New York-Washington to northern Virginia. Many towns and villages in Rhode Island still have remnants of the

mill row houses connected to the loom mills, which operated on the banks of rivers. These row houses were maintained and owned by the owners of the mills and housed the workers of those mills. With the advent of modern equipment and new modes of transportation and exportation of jobs, mills stopped making their trade. Gone, too, is the close-knit villages and enclaves. People moved either to the city (such as Providence or Boston) or to the suburbs. Gone, too, is the personal feeling of knowing your neighbor well. Rhode Island, once a predominantly Catholic state, is now a state with many religions and far fewer Catholics.

As the U.S.’s population ages, the lives of more older people are hindered by a number of issues and concerns. One major issue centers around isolation. Family size has decreased among middle-class, white ethnics. More people are staying single. Therefore, fewer older people have family on whom to count. With younger family members moving elsewhere to find jobs, seniors who do have adult children are downsizing to a smaller apartment or condo or relocating to move in with a daughter or son and her/his family. A second major concern for seniors is losing one’s sense of independence. A third is the reversal of roles that follow when senior “parents” become more dependent on their “children” for their day-to-day activities and their wellbeing. Sometimes dire consequences follow these changes.

What is a liveable solution to this dilemma? One type of community I am envisioning is not just for seniors, but would involve people across generations and ages. This type of liveable community would exist in urban and sub-urban settings on blocks being renovated in cities or sizeable tracts of land being built in suburbs. This model would require smaller houses or townhouses. Existing large, empty large structures, like former factories and mills, could be rehabilitated into units with a sliding range of month rent based on residents’ incomes. After laying empty for decades, new life is being breathed into the old mills in Rhode Island in the form of varying size apartments, offices, and sites for community services.

Streets would be lined with sidewalks to encourage walking. Ideally, in newly-built areas, streets would have no utility wires obstructing the view and would be well-lit with fashionable light poles. Bus transportation and/or trolley, trains, or subways will be available within

walking distance of these communities. Bike paths would be built and auto traffic lessened or re-routed.

Houses would be joined closely together on small lots. In the center of the community, there would be a common-area for gatherings like a gazebo or a band stand. Local businesses, such as bakeries, butcher shops, grocery stores (once called convenience stores), hair salons, shoe stores and cobblers, clothing stores along with weavers and seamstresses, and hardware stores, along with restaurants and cafes, would be nearby and within walking distance from the houses. Small buildings could house a post office annex and a police substation. Hospitals could be regional, but doctors' offices would be nearby. Parks and recreation facilities would also be nearby for residents to use and enjoy. One would only need auto transportation to travel outside the immediate area.

Housing units could be occupied by a full-range of people: young, middle-age, older, relatives and non-relatives. Many roles would be available to residents. For example, older residents could be available for storytelling, babysitting, helping students with homework, and mentoring in work ethic. Younger people could be helpful to older people for socializing, providing instructions in getting up to speed with changing media, and for tasks involved with maintenance of houses and yards. Diverse ethnic and religious affiliations may present some issues but not necessarily. A lot depends on the willingness of neighbors to develop bridges to people different from themselves as well as bonds with people similar to themselves. Based on the *Gemeinschaft* model, I think that a homogenous religious and ethnic community would likely work best at the beginning.

Each community would have an appointed leader, such a town manager along with roving lawyers and judges. Members in the community would also have access to small garden plots and small business opportunities. Communities will be connected, not isolated. Places of worship and social gathering places, such as the Lion's Club, Mason's, Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club, along with various ethnic clubs will be the common thread linking communities together. A multi-purpose community center would be a meeting place, just like the churches of old. Specialized senior centers would no longer be necessary because the community center would provide services and resources for all ages. These

are the places for everyone to share their ideas and new concepts along with entertainment and socializing.

Public transportation would link these mini-communities to each other and to the larger cities. Walking and bicycle paths would also link the communities. There would be a de-emphasis on the automobile, which would only be used for long-distance travel and on rare occasion. Before there was an automobile, there were "tighter" communities. But life was simpler and not as hectic and stressful as today.

Security of these mini-communities would be the responsibility of both the local police and the residents themselves. Many communities in this country now have local neighborhood watches, manned by neighborhood volunteers. These crime watches can be expanded to assist the local police force.

Schools would have to be re-structured. Because of the re-introduction of various trades, such as bakeries, butcher shops, shoemakers, garden and flower shops, children would be offered the opportunity to learn these trades during their elementary school years. Students who wish to advance to a higher level of education or skills can go on to specialized high schools and some continue through college. As adults, these residents would become the leaders of the mini-communities as well as in the cities.

CONCLUSION

Liveable communities of the future can be re-imagined from the old village concept of the past and re-purposed to cities and towns in the United States and elsewhere. Conceived in the early 1970s, Columbia, Maryland was an example of this new village-type concept. New liveable communities, similar to Columbia, MD would require a complete change in town planning and a complete change in lifestyle for families and individuals. Furthermore, they would bring back the old village *Gemeinschaft* concept.

LITERATURE CITED

- Totty, Michael. 2016. "Five Innovative Cities to Watch." *The Wall Street Journal* (Monday, April 25, R1-2).
- Toennies, Ferdinand. 2001. Ed.: Jose Harris. *Community and Civil Society*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Community Living, Administration on Aging (AoA) Highlights http://www.aoa.acl.gov/aging_statistics/Profile/2014/2.aspx, p.1.

About the Author: Helmut E. Reinhardt is a first generation German-American who grew up in continual contact with his relatives in Germany. He is an educator with an M.A. in Counselor Education, a B.A. in Geology, and an A.S. in Business Management. For the last 12 years, the author has been a volunteer instructor for AARP in the Smart Driver Program.