5th City: The Rebirth of Community

Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago pushed his prepared speech aside. His address finished, his hands grasping the podium, the Mayor was visibly moved as he faced an achievement as significant as that of the 5th City Community.

On the platform with his Honer at 5th City's "Decade of Miracles" celebration and in the audience were seven hundred 5th citizens. Very few compared to the three million constituents he deals with each day. But these few are the grassroots architects of an urban renewal project with models of community care to use in any neighborhood of his great city.

"We hope," said the Mayor, departing from his prepared text, "that what you are doing here will be emulated and imitated and repeated in every neighborhood of our city... When we improve the neighborhood and we improve the communities, then we improve the city: And there's no reason why we can't do what you've done in ten years, in the next ten years to remove every slum and every blight in Chicago."

One simple set of statistics speaks volumes about Chicago's West Side, the location of the 5th City community. Chicago's area data book records that in 1952, eighteen percent of the community was Black; by 1962, seventy percent; and by 1972, a staggering ninety eight percent. The resentment and discontent of Blacks who could not afford to move to the suburbs simmered here in the inner city and exploded in the long hot summer of 1968 that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King.

The story of 5th City began over a decade ago, when a small group of Black residents began to talk with staff members of the Ecumenical Institute. The Institute, a research and training group concerned with the reformation of community had recently moved into the campus of a former seminary in the neighborhood. Together, concerned residents, Black and White, asked each other, "What really needs to happen in this community?"

Gradually, the problems of life on the West Side came into focus: the critical collapse of public services, massive unemployment, deteriorating housing uncared for by absentee landlords, poor schools, the disintegration of the family, a lack of any organized local leadership, unresponsive political representatives -- and a myriad of others which have become familiar over the past decade to every American. Out of these early conversations, a comprehensive list was composed of every problem which had been identified as blocking the kind of human community that was needed. The XXXXX problems on the list added up to a staggering 9,000.

A core of local leadership began to emerge, determined to find a way, to build a plan for tackling what seemed like an overwhelming task, --reversing in the very heart of the fast black ghetto, the crumbling of urban life. In long hot meetings, the group made decisions which were to have far-reaching implications.
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No one quite remembers when this inner city community first began to call itself 5th City. But everyone can tell you the unique meaning of that name. These grassroots architects of 5th City intentionally designed a community model which could be transplanted to any neighborhood in the world. In studying sociology to prepare for their task, these community catalysts found that their city did not fit the definition of any of the four "Cities" (downtown, inner city, neighborhood, or suburb), of the modern urban complex. It was a "5th City" grounded not in geography, but on decision; built not with a map but with a model.

Powerful methods and principles were essential to affect that decision. In the mid-sixties, 5th Citizens named the FIVE PRESUPOSITIONS OF COMMUNITY REFORMULATION, which furnished their community with a common ground of unity and discipline, recognized and adhered to through a difficult decade.

Their presuppositions were:

LIMITED AREA

The project was helped by the creation of a "grid" defining the area marked for reformulation. Bounded by 5th Avenue, Kedzie and Congress Parkway, the community is not only in the heart of Chicago's trouble-torn West Side, but also an entity in itself. Clear bounedaries made possible community identity and an in-depth attack on a maze of problems.

The next steps were typically practical as the 16 block area was divided into five units, or "stakes." Stake leaders represent individual families. Through regular visits to each home, specific block issues are dealt with and potential leaders discovered.

The shape of the grid has come to symbolize the community. When an elderly woman approached the welfare office for aid recently, the case worker was stymied; the woman was unable to give data on her address or eligibility. But she could identify her community. Grabbing an envelope, the elder drew the 5th City grid. The caseworker recognized the sign and put through a call to the Community Center where she got the required information. The old woman quickly received her benefits.

"Marking the boundaries was a radical decision," recalls Mrs. Lela Moseley, Chairman of the 5th City Board of Managers. "It's tough to tell friends up on Madison Avenue that their kids can't go to our preschool. If we hadn't we would have been swamped by the whole West Side. Fortunately, in the past two years, we've been able to expand the boundaries to include forty blocks. The new grid includes the "flip" with another fifteen thousand people. Both grids have a circle around them representing the globe. We are self-consciously doing this community reformulation on behalf of every community in the world."

ALL THE PROBLEMS

To achieve successful reformulation, the group ascertained that the educational, economic, political, social and cultural problems had to be resolved together. Through stake meetings, people in the community aired their problems. A surprising list of 9,000 interrelated problems was compiled and grouped into 600 areas. After many hours of stewing and workshopping the community named the twenty structures that would care for the 600 problem areas. People were assigned responsibility in each of the structures. In this way the 5th City Social Model was initiated, a daring comprehensive
plan wrought by local caring people.

One of the most pressing and obvious problems of the inner city was housing. Exorbitant rents, rat-infested apartments, poor heat and plumbing added up to a major area of unrest and discontent. The 5th City Redevelopment Corporation was the structure named to care for that particular arena.

Realizing that any attack on the housing problem would require the full participation of the residents, this community opted for substantial rehabilitation of buildings they controlled rather than patchwork repairs by absentee landlords or the demolition-reconstruction method offered by the government. Ideally, apartment buildings in the community were stately red brick structures built at the turn of the century. Designed to last for generations, the exteriors of these buildings were still sound, although successive generations of Jewish, Italian, Spanish and Black communities had progressively witnessed the deterioration of the insides. The existing apartments were two to five bedroom units, perfect for the families of the community.

"Rehab, not repair," was the cry. Struggling with the monumental task, organizers repeatedly coordinated plans with architects, bankers, and contractors. "What impressed the people downtown," recalls Carrie Neff, director of the 5th City Redevelopment Corporation, "was 5th City's willingness to do our own planning and working of details—over and over again, till our plans worked."

"It took five years to complete the first two million dollar package. Watching the success, H.U.D. officials wanted more details about our housing program. We had to remind them that we didn't have a housing program, we had a total social model with housing as one part. Slowly but surely the whole fabric started to move and work together. The housing worked with the credit union, the health clinic, the preschool. They were all related."

With the model, 5th City could work within the system. When a demolition crew arrived in the community with incorrect orders to tear down a building which 5th City was negotiating, a crowd stood them off until corrected orders arrived. When City Hall decided in December of 1968 to build a police station covering four blocks of 5th City, a citizens' delegation took downtown the community's proposal for those blocks. "A comprehensive plan helped us fight plans which conflicted with ours, and win."

Both incidents could have erupted into violence but didn't. There was a different attitude in the community. Between 1968 and 1972, the number of felonies in District 11 (which includes 5th City) dropped from 1,233 crimes to 878, the sharpest decline in the Chicago Overall Crime Index for that year in any district in Chicago.
The new life in those historic old apartments has given people new hope for the future. By 1972, 259 housing units had been rehabilitated. People had begun to settle down in 5th City. In 1968, 31% of the families surveyed had lived at their present address less than one year; in 1972, only 16% were less-than-one-year residents. The number of abandoned units dropped from 210 to 48. Homeowner loans rose from 12 to 163, and the number of homes occupied by owners rose from 8% to 18%. While business in the community rose from 11 separate companies to 23, the number of businesses owned by residents rose from 2 to 22.

In most urban communities, families are still fleeing to the suburbs. In contrast, there is a long list of people waiting to return to 5th City as soon as housing becomes available. Carrie Neff nods to herself. "No matter how much we accomplish, we still can't do enough."

ALL AGES
Ever as inner city problems tend to reinforce each other, so do the beliefs and actions of one generation influence all others. Only a social model which includes programs for infants through elders ensures that one generation will not undo the advances made by another. A striking example of the creation involvement of all age levels in community programs was the Black Heritage Course.

This seminar recovered the lost roots of the Black community from the first known men in Nairobi (6,000,000 years ago) through the great civilizations of Africa; tribalism, slavery, emancipation, and the Civil Rights Movement. Study papers by Thomas Merton, Mohammed Ali, Artre and Baldwin trace the power and promise of the Black Man.

This seminar was offered to the community at large, and particularly for elders. The enthusiastic response of the elders led them to create a black heritage course for children at Lief Erickson Elementary School. Both youth and elders exuded a recovered pride in their roots.

5th City Community staff workers estimate that 85% of the families in the community participate directly or indirectly in programs ranging from preschool to the Community Congress or town meeting. Recognizing the unique power of this inclusive approach to rebuilding community, the Assistant Secretary of H.E.W., William J. Sahlein, commented in 1969, "The 5th City project is an outstanding example of what a comprehensive community-developed program can do in solving urban problems. It provides some striking contrasts to the piecemeal approach. . . . What is most impressive is the total involvement of the community."

DEPTH HUMAN PROBLEM
5th City's renewal would not have happened without the discovery and attack on the deep human problem which prevented the black inner city resident from moving creatively into life and community. Society in general and the citizens themselves saw inner city residents as helpless victims of overwhelming social problems. Such a picture says "You aren't important. Nothing you do will ever count. Life in the city is impossible."

5th Citizens are delivering a death blow to that "victim" image. Establishing a preschool was one of the first tactics in this campaign. Mrs.
Ruth Carter, present director of the preschool, started out as a visiting mother. She recalls an incident typical of 5th City's approach to education: "Halfway through a work period, Joel put his head down on his hands and cried, 'I can't fold this paper right.' Jon Moseley, one of our team teachers, reached for the brown paper bag mask on top of the piano. The sign on it reads "The I Can't Man." Everyone stopped work to watch him shuffle around the room, drooping shoulders, mumbling, 'I can't color. I can't fold. I can't do nothing right. I can't live my life and neither can you.' Before long Joel shouted back, 'Yes I can. I can build the community. I can build the world.' You should have seen him, tongue on lip in concentration, gluing the flap to the fold. And heard the sigh of relief and satisfaction as his blue basket began to emerge."

Joel's small triumph is an example of imaginal education—a key tool in the hands of the builders of 5th City. Through it, they dramatize for each other images of their importance as human beings, images of pride in their blackness, and images of their existence as global citizens. Imaginal education is out to motivate free, responsible and intelligent involvement in society. It is foundational to the rebirth the community is experiencing.