

The Loss of Community and Women's Space

By Cynthia Hamilton

Le présent article traite des relations entre la croissance spatiale, la planification urbaine et la pauvreté dans les villes des États-Unis. L'article constitue un avertissement pour le Canada. Il est vital de placer les idées que l'article explore dans le contexte des femmes pauvres des centres urbains du Canada. Étant donné qu'un nombre croissant de services sont privatisées à la suite des coupes sombres du gouvernement dans les programmes universels de soins, les rendant inaccessibles aux femmes pauvres ; étant donné que les milieux urbains sont de plus en plus désertés (surtout par les familles de la classe moyenne) au profit des banlieues et que les promoteurs immobiliers prennent leur relève en érigeant des aires promoteurs de stationnements devant d'autres édifices à bureaux ; étant donné que les zones « plus pauvres » s'embourgeoisent de plus en plus — le cœur des grands centres urbains est en train d'être laissé entre les mains de ceux qui n'ont ni choix, ni communauté. Il faut mettre fin au mode de développement que décrit Cynthia Hamilton si nous voulons sauvegarder les gens, leurs collectivités et les villes.

This article on the relationship between spatial growth, design, and poverty, is written from the perspective of urban situations in the United States. The article holds warning signals, however, to the situation in Canada. It is vital that the ideas it explores be considered in the context of women living in poverty in urban Canada. As more services become privatized as a consequence of government cuts in universal care, and therefore inaccessible to poor women; as more urban areas are abandoned (particularly by middle income families) in favour of the suburbs and developers take over to construct another downtown parking lot in front of another office tower; as gentrification of hitherto 'poorer' areas increases— cores of major centres are being left to those with no choices and no community. Although it is clear that the situation Dr. Hamilton describes is not yet here in Canada, the signs must be read. Canadians are sitting on a powder keg. Isolating poor people— most often single mothers—in public housing where they are further marginalized is not the answer. Development along the continuum that Dr. Hamilton describes must be stopped if people and their communities, and cities as we know them, are to survive.

The exponential growth of cities and the concentration of poverty in urban areas make it mandatory that we reconsider the relationship between spatial growth, design, and poverty. Spatial relations reproduce social relations. Often the manipulation of space may be brutal. In South Africa, "forced removals" are responsible for the relocation of millions to the remote homelands. In Guatemala, the government is building model villages which grew out of army efforts in the 1980s to control rural communities by displacing the population and forcing resettlement. These villages are organized, according to the government, "...to guarantee the adherence of the population and their support and participation with the Armed Institution against communist subversion." (Environmental Project on Central America, 9) In the U.S., we have our own version of forced removal and resettlement, our own overt manipulation of behaviour through spatial transformations. The form that this relocation and restructuring has taken is urban renewal and community development. The relocation and removal has had a very important consequence in the curtailing of political organization.

In the ghettos of the inner city, we see the reproduction of domination. But this was not always so. A century ago an equality between Black men and women prevailed. Angela Davis develops this idea in describing the slave quarters of the nineteenth century. (Davis, 18) The equality was a product of women's role in production and consumption. As bearers of culture, Black women assumed a dominant role (until recently), a role at the centre of community relations. Recent developments have deformed the community: autonomous institutions are gone, the bonds between neighbours shattered by fear, the cultural values are now dismissed as useless in the daily struggle for survival.

The spatial remains of the inner city present particular hardships for women. Everything from the dimensions of available housing to the lack of housing, the absence of services, conveniences, and necessities such as child care, health clinics, adequate water, gas, electricity, sanitation, transportation and security, contribute to oppressive conditions. But most significantly of all, the destruction of community has isolated women. Separated in increasingly insular units, women find that their individual household work increases. Community allowed women to break through the isolation of the private sphere. The destruction of community must therefore be seen as an effort to control and restrict women.

What is community and what does it mean to speak of its destruction or the fight for its survival? Community must be seen as an instrument, a tool, an aid to survival for those who have little or no access to other institutions in society. According to John Mollenkopf, community is embodied by the "bonds people build with one another which enable them to trust in and rely on each other... informal helping patterns are central." (Mollenkopf) These informal helping patterns have been most successfully developed and effectively used by women. However, the modern city is a revenue-generating machine, the antithesis of community. All decisions reflect the concern and objective of increasing the value of space. Open, public space has diminished. Affordable housing has been replaced by luxury housing. Inner city working class communities have been displaced by office towers and downtown expansion. With community gone, small groups

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of the poor have remained trapped in an inhospitable space where decay is insured by decisions based solely on exchange value.

Women and community

Communities, it is said, only take root when residents begin to envision a future. Women are the source of community. The presence of women, marriage, and children is decisive in the transformation of migrant labourers into permanent residents, and the establishment and maintenance of communities. (Golab) Men who are forced to migrate for work and then live in single-sex hostels tend to be less politically-motivated. They live from day to day. It is not surprising that countries like South Africa have enacted laws to consistently separate African families and prohibit family life. This characterized colonial policy throughout Africa and was a concern of early industrialists who recruited Black male labour from the South.

But in spite of such practices, strong Black communities evolved and flourished through the World Wars. After World War II, the last large migration from the South flooded northern and southern cities. Many say this new demographic arrangement may have been the spark for the civil rights movement. It is clear that the spatial configuration of that period was an asset to political organizing and protest. Greater concentration of the population strengthened community bonds and institutions and even provided the basis for electoral strength after the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Watts Rebellion in many ways was the last expression of the political potential which geographic concentration might produce. After 1965 the same tools that had been used to diffuse White workers' struggles were extended to Blacks: "open up the suburbs, promote low income and Black home ownership, improve access via the transport system...." (Harvey, 117) In the inner city, isolate the 'undeserving underclass.'

The loss of community in the process of suburbanization has been particularly costly for women, as it was always community that provided a basis for challenging the gendered division of labour. In the community, the division between the private and public spheres was blurred, so that the traditional division of responsibilities which relegated women to the private sphere could be broken down. According to the authors of *Women in Cities*:

(Suburban housing)...reinforced women's subordinate position in the domestic sphere. Not only does this separation (of home and work) coupled with the problems of mobility, act to restrict women's employment opportunities, but it extends the time required for them to perform domestic work. (Little et al., 15)

For middle class Black and White women, reaction to the subordination reinforced by suburbia would spark the women's movement. For poor women, and particularly women of colour, city life was transformed with the exodus of jobs to the suburbs and new urban policies in the 1950s. No longer was community the source of security and support; community was dismantled, and cooperation turned into dissension. Jobs were no longer available in the city's centre. This had an adverse effect on families: increasing unemployment was coupled with a rise in single female heads of household.

The new jobs in the city were in the expanding service sector. Black women after 1965 were able to break away, for the first time, from domestic labour. There was jubilation, of sorts. However, the increase in these new positions in the labour force—far from being liberating—simply added a new dimension of oppression. Women in the workforce fuelled the growth of services, as well as the production of new consumer goods like convenience foods and automatic washing machines. But for poor women, wages did not always ensure 'consumer independence.' (Little et al., 27)

Women organizing

Women bring to political experience the skills and tools of their gender socialization: among other things, informal organization, and an opposition to bureaucracy. Women have forged unity on the basis of informality, respect, spontaneity, and decentralization. These alternative organizing perspectives have proven to be very useful in grassroots organizing addressing local issues—everything from new planning proposals to new waste disposal methods.

There is no question that poor and inadequate housing serves a political function. It reinforces segregation and acts as a control mechanism by imposing dehumanizing conditions. Rents are highest in the ghetto, where there are also large numbers of vacant units. Poor housing imposes a special burden on women who care for children. Inadequate plumbing, heating, and sanitation make care work more difficult, and greatly increase the amount of work necessary to accomplish simple tasks. Needless to say, these conditions lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Another urban condition with a disproportionate impact on Black women is the decline in blue-collar (traditionally male) work. Families are broken up when men cannot find work. The increase in crime associated with rising unemployment and poverty not only produces fear, but increasingly finds women as its target. Low wage jobs in manufacturing and the service sector pose a special threat to women. Working conditions often include exposures to toxins and other hazards.

The hardships which these conditions impose have been the

basis for political efforts by poor women. In Black communities, efforts to oppose displacement, rally for affordable housing, and organize against 'growth' policies, have been initiated and led by women. They have no choice.

The response is often swift and oppressive. When the potential power of community action to attack corporate capital manifests itself, America responds in kind. The attack on community was escalated in the 1960s and the obsession with police and security became manifest in physical design as well as budgetary decision. The idea of "defensible space" has been translated into new designs—buildings without windows, isolation of affluent communities by walls, security police and surveillance equipment, mini shopping malls in the inner city surrounded by metal fences, elimination of public space, and isolation of the new 'criminalized poor,' while old neighbourhoods are bulldozed to make room for the expanding central business districts.

Spatial configurations and the political role of women

Women who experience the home and the community as places of work tend to be more concerned than men with their local residential environment. According to researchers, "women are more likely to be provoked to campaign in their communities for better and more equitably located services, for better home maintenance, for housing construction and neighbourhood design that meet their needs." (Little *et al.*, 33)

There are other reasons why women may be in the forefront of community struggles, particularly in poor communities. Spatial organization can diminish women's access to services. In those areas where the residents are poor Blacks and Hispanics, the problem is most often a complete lack of services. At the same time, poverty and a polluted environment produce increased health risks, a higher infant mortality rate, and higher incidence of death from certain types of cancer.

It is not surprising that these conditions produce anti-social behaviour. It is increasingly important that we begin to recognize the relationship between urban space and behaviour. Cities have been organized to maximize the influence and accommodate the needs of some, and to ignore and marginalize others. The organization of not only industry and politics, but also housing, roads, and public space (or the lack of it) reinforces certain actions and undermines others. According to one writer, the city "exists for one particular kind of citizen: the adult, male, white collar, out of town car user." (Short)

The causes of crime and violence must be linked to decision-making based on exchange value and its consequences for land use. The response to urban violence has produced a climate ripe for extending police powers at the expense of civil liberties. Public dollars are spent not on solutions to social ills, but on police and prisons, while legislation is directed at 'poor parenting.' Never has there been any suggestion that the spatial conditions in which we live might be contributing to victimization and 'criminalization.' Even a hint that the police might not be able to solve the problem cannot be permitted. To do so would be to admit that community action is essential for security and survival and that it is the lack of community which has made order impossible.

The modern use of space in what has come to be known as the

corporate city creates anti-social behaviour because it destroys any notion of the 'common good.' Public space is gone, community is destroyed, and everything is privatized. To collectivize is to break the law. City space is anti-children, anti-adults with children, anti-female.

We must oppose the model of the corporate city. Our salvation is bound to that of our communities, and we cannot sit by while they are replaced by office towers.

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