

Introduction: Understanding Civic Activism and City Life

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On any given night, the local evening news in Chicago more than likely begins with a story about a disaster, a crime tragedy, or a corruption scandal. Indeed, any stranger looking at Chicago through this lens will hardly be able to sense the dynamic pulse of change coursing through the city, but will rather see only the static portrait of urban malaise—a portrait we all feel comfortable with because it fits our assumptions of what city life should be. Ever since the great French and American sociologists of the late 19th century and early 20th century began to study the burgeoning phenomenon of urbanism, both scholarly literature and popular culture have tended to view city life as the opposite of rural life: rural life was about community, safety, idyllic landscapes; city life, in contrast, was about alienation, danger, the “concrete jungle.” Even the attractions of the city—art, “culture,” architecture—are imagined as tinged with risk or transgressing the norm. Yet this all too simple dichotomy prevents us from seeing the whole picture, which brings out the complexity of the interconnections between urban and rural, and the growing dominance of urban life in the global village.

In this special volume, which we hope will be the first of an occasional series on urban anthropology from The Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC) at The Field Museum, we attempt to paint a different portrait from that seen on the local news, one that while still far from complete, offers an alternative vision of the city and its social life. The articles published here are based on research conducted by undergraduate and graduate students who participated in the Internship Program of the Urban Research Initiative (URI), begun in 1998 by CCUC, with major sponsorship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

While on the surface it may seem odd that a major natural history museum, more traditionally associated with “dinosaurs and mummies,” would undertake an examination of urban life, there are good reasons why we believe we should do so. First, major portions of The Field Museum’s collections are local: from the Midwest and the Plains environment. Yet, our research programs in recent years have



tended to be located elsewhere. More compelling, perhaps, is that we have come to recognize that many of the people whose heritage the Museum’s collections represent have long histories of residence here in Chicago. Thus if we are to follow their stories, if we are to understand how their current life ways are linked to the heritage and history represented in the collections, we must begin to understand contemporary Chicago. Finally, through this initiative the Museum has an unparalleled opportunity to bring together all facets of what makes us a unique learning center: research, informal education and public outreach. In this way we are contributing to the changing role of museums in public life. Once considered temples for contemplation

of civilization's progress, museums today are changing into more open and inclusive public spaces.

The Urban Research Initiative aims to combine research and public education to contribute to efforts for improving the quality of life in Chicago. Its genesis stemmed from the efforts of the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change to incorporate diverse community voices into the development of public programs at the Museum. Through such efforts as the Nuveen Forum: Conversations on Culture and Identity in America (held in 1996 and 1997) and the Living Together exhibit and education project (a permanent exhibit which opened in 1997, also accessible online through the Museum's Web site at www.fieldmuseum.org), CCUC reached out to community organizations and civic activists.

As we worked with these groups and individuals, it became clear that the work they were doing was fundamental to addressing pressing social problems and that in the process of doing this work, these organizations and activists were crossing both geographic and social boundaries to create new kinds of communities in Chicago. We felt that their work held clues to understanding the direction of social change. Yet, the work appeared to be going unnoticed both by scholars and the public at large. While Chicago has been the site of much of the early research on the nature of social life in urban centers, there has been little current research on the impact of the massive economic and social shifts resulting from the transition from an industrial based economy to an information based economy. There is also little understanding of the role being played by community organizations or civic activists in the development of strategies to cope with the economic shift. As a result, the changes occurring in the city are not being documented, nor are the organizations easily able to put their work in a larger context.

Over the following year, from the summer of 1997, staff at CCUC engaged in an ongoing dialogue with many organizations and individuals, starting with those who had worked with us on exhibits and public programs, and moving on to others throughout the city. We began to compile a list of questions and problems that needed to be addressed; thus the beginnings of a research agenda for the city generated from the real work and experiences of those on the front line for social change. But who would do the research? Clearly there were large constraints on the community organizations—many of them with small staff, or

with little time for the “luxury” of research, which was outside the parameters of their ongoing work. It was then that we initiated the internship program. Models for urban research internships existed in Chicago, such as the Policy Research Action Group (PRAG) program at Loyola University and the Urban Studies internships at Northwestern University. Building on existing practice, we added a new dimension by incorporating a training program for the students on how to effectively communicate research findings to diverse public audiences. In this way, the internship program benefits both the organizations who receive research results and the students who are being trained to be public anthropologists.

In the summer of 1998, we piloted the program, bringing together eight students with eight organizations. The research problems that the students would investigate were developed jointly by the student researcher, CCUC staff and the organization's staff. Each problem (or research question) was shaped so that it could be addressed within the nine-week time frame of the program, and still provide useful information for the organization. All of the students had had some training in qualitative research methods and/or prior field research experience. While most came from Chicago, we were also able to bring in students from other places. The interns attended a weekly seminar where they discussed their research, heard guest lecturers (including urban anthropologists, civic activists, and museum exhibit developers and educators), and developed proposals for public dissemination of their findings. The second summer, in 1999, we expanded the program slightly, bringing on 15 students who worked with 10 organizations (thus 10 of the students worked in pairs).

The problems that the students worked on, as well as the organizations they worked for, were diverse in scope and scale. Organizations included: the Chicago Housing Authority, The Field Museum's Office of Environmental and Conservation Programs, The Korean American Community Services, Mid-South Planning and Development Commission, Youth Service Project, Erie Neighborhood House, Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the North River Commission. The research questions covered topics such as: “the impact of gentrification in West Town,” “the basis of neighborhood identity,” “the difficulties facing

new women immigrants,” “effective marketing strategies for homeless gardeners,” and “the social networks of environmental activists” (a complete list of students and their projects is included at the end of the volume).

Throughout the fall and winter of 1999 and spring of 2000, we have continued to dialogue with the participant community organizations in a more formal manner, holding a series of roundtable discussions to assess the gains made in the initiative, and set future directions. The roundtables highlighted the importance of a participatory approach to research design and implementation. While much has been written about the need for participatory research (research that is built on a partnership between the subjects of research and those doing the research), less is known about effective practices that combine strong research design with community-driven agendas. Our experience in museum practice with community collaboration taught us that participatory work entails extended dialogue and conversation among the participants in order to arrive at mutually satisfactory paths of action. It appears that the process of dialogue is as valid as any particular outcome. As discussions ensued, we reached a consensus that the research is revealing powerful themes which connect the different projects and provide insights into the nature of social change in Chicago.

A central theme centers on the meaning of community. From the beginning, the URI questioned traditional definitions of community based on geographical units (so for example, “the village,” the town, or “the neighborhood”). Recent anthropological research pointed to the need to go beyond geography and look at the ways in which peoples’ actions and changing social relationships lead to the creation of new forms of community. The theoretical framework that guided the URI, based on over three decades of anthropological research in urban regions, contends that people even under the most difficult circumstances have organizational capacities that draw on the strengths of local institutions, cultural practices and social relationships (see for example, the classic work of Ulf Hannerz, Carol Stack, and Bettylou Valentine, as well as work by Anderson, Mullings, Sanjek, Scharff, Susser, and Williams, among others). The analysis we did during the roundtable discussions advanced this formulation by pointing to the specific mechanisms through which people are constructing community in Chicago. While there has been considerable discussion around the values of this type of

asset-based approach for urban policy, the actual nature of community assets and the ways in which people nurture or build on those assets still remains relatively unexplored. Students working in the URI documented community and organization assets, including social networks, voluntary associations, artistic practices, economic strategies, self-help techniques, and creative uses of public space.

A second theme points to the central importance of place in city life and community activist strategies. We discovered that place is about much more than neighborhood boundaries. Rather, the research seemed to reveal that even as old neighborhood limits and settlement patterns were rapidly shifting (impelled by the forces of the global economy), people were instilling places—both public and domestic— with values and meaning derived from the role these places played in the maintenance of social relationships. Public places can have multiple uses beyond the designated function. This too has implications for urban policy. Currently in Chicago, for example, the tendency is toward centralizing control of place (through legislation regulating behavior in public places— i.e. anti-loitering measures, park curfews and the like), which while ostensibly enhancing safety, may be undercutting an important resource for community building. These policies could be reexamined or new ones designed to allow people to use places creatively.

A final theme grapples with the central issues surrounding the construction of American identity. This theme recognizes that in the past twenty-five years, patterns of immigration and settlement have had a profound impact on Chicago’s social life. New immigrants arrive and settle in the city under circumstances very different from the conditions that greeted the early 20th century immigrants who helped build the metropolis. While there has been much more freedom to settle in different parts of the city, and language and cultural distinctions are easier to maintain, there are still difficulties related to economic mobility and social inequality. The students’ research indicates that today, immigrants to the city (both those who come from other countries as well as those from other parts of the United States) facing these different sets of constraints make different choices that affect the character of pluralism and national identity. Community organizations and service agencies need to understand the complexities of being “American” in order to work more effectively.

In this first volume, four papers illustrate the salience of these themes. Mario Longoni, who worked with the Childcare Services Department of the Chicago Housing Authority, analyzes the difficulties faced by women forced to relocate from public housing scheduled for demolition. Longoni demonstrates that women actively construct community through maintaining support networks and that this process is severely impacted by the regulations governing relocation. Seemingly logical choices (i.e., moving to a “nice suburb”) turn out to be unsuitable options when considered from the perspective of community building. Christine Dunford, whose research for The Openlands Project focused on the meaning of vacant lot gardens, turns our attention to the processes through which people invest in place and the ways contesting visions of place can affect the character of neighborhoods. She demonstrates that peoples’ experience of changing neighborhood conditions shapes their use of available resources. The third paper, by Victoria Hegner, examines the different paths that elderly Russian Jews recently arrived in Chicago take to adjust to their new home. Hegner worked with the Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation which serves this population. Her work points to the complexity created by the interaction between religion, nationality (as both remembered place and new place) and economic conditions in shaping identity construction. Finally, Gabe Culbert, who examined after-school art programs for youth, illustrates that identity formation for young people is also governed by the interaction of larger structural constraints and the youths’ own creativity. Culbert profiled three efforts for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, each of which reveals a different

facet of the power of art to strengthen development, identity and social bonds for young people.

The research done under the auspices of the URI thus paints a picture of a city whose people are tackling large problems in creative ways in order to redefine the social character of their communities. It reveals the deep vibrancy of city life and the processes which are impelling change. The research is already providing organizations with insights into how to improve their efforts, build on successful practices and develop new strategies. The Openlands Project, for example, worked with Christine Dunford to develop banners for the gardens that showcase their identity and creativity; the Childcare Services division of the Chicago Housing Authority worked with Mario Longoni to create a “mobility game” that they intended to use with CHA officials to make them understand the difficulties faced by public housing residents; The Agudas Achim Congregation would like to pursue Victoria Hegner’s project of having their members photograph the special places in their neighborhood; and the MacArthur Foundation invited the Crucial Dancers, profiled by Gabe Culbert, to perform at a national conference for grant makers in the arts.

In future issues of this occasional papers series, in addition to reports of URI research findings, we hope to include reports from community organizations about their work, as well as essays from scholars and activists on the nature of city life. We look forward to receiving your comments and contributions.

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